

# **'Guidos, Guidettes and Grenades: Interrogating the representation of Italian American Identity in MTV's Jersey Shore'**

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## ***Abstract:***

Jersey Shore is an American reality television series that aired on MTV from December 2009-2012. The show documents the escapades of eight housemates as they spend their summer in the seaside resort 'Seaside Heights,' situated in the state of New Jersey. Uniquely the show's protagonists are all Italian American. The show was originally pitched to MTV as an 'Italian life style' show, intended to appeal to the country's large Italian population (an estimated 17.6 Million people,) however the show has received much criticism and caused controversy for its perpetuation of negative ethnic stereotypes, particularly the concepts of the 'Guido' and 'Guidette.' With the shows conclusion still fresh in the memory it seems a poignant time to analyse the complexity and double coding evident in the shows notorious first season that premiered in 2009. I argue that the 'Guido' and 'Guidette' ethnic stereotypes position the cast simultaneously as objects of fascination, envy and disgust but also as characters that can be seen to challenge cultural hierarchies only for MTV to reassert negative stereotypes more vigorously in the audience's consciousness.

## ***Introduction***

It really makes me bummed out knowing that I will try to live my life, not being a douchbag, and trying to be intelligent and better myself, and I will never make as much money as someone with a fake tan, low double digit IQ, and no useful worldly skills. Fuck this planet. Most celebrities are useless but these people are next level shit ('Bobxdown' Bridge Nine Message Board 2012)

Jersey Shore is a reality television series that premiered on MTV in 2009, VH1 producer Anthony Beltempo, responsible for the shows inception, nurtured it as a pseudo-documentary, interrogating the communal dynamics of Italian American families. The 2006 census estimated that there were 17.6 million people of Italian heritage living in The United States, constitutive of 6% of the population, an under represented market that was potentially lucrative (Verso 2009.) Kraszewski (2010) hypothesises that before the economic global recession, reality television promoted middle class aspirational consumption, 'telling you to spend lots of money. Buy expensive real estate. Better yourself in search of the good life.' However, with the economic downturn, he suggests that television producers were forced to change their strategies to identify with audiences, economically disenfranchised from depictions of 'the good life'. It is in this context that Beltempo pitched his Italian life style show, with an emphasis on community values and strong relationships. MTV's Network president Van Toffler acknowledged the marketing potential of the show, however he was sceptical about the 'old fashioned and stereotypical' portrayal of the Italian family dynamic, fearing that the proposal was incongruent with MTV's 'loud, young,

bold and sexy image.’ (Schneider 2011:10-11) I argue that the show is microcosmic of its production process, combustible and chaotic, a multifaceted text and the product of competing discourses that are evident within the show’s first season.

Evans (2005:12-13) suggests that there are two central arguments surrounding contemporary celebrity culture that I believe to be relevant to an analysis of Jersey Shore. She suggests that celebrity culture can be lamented as a debased uncritical populism, indicative of the ‘dumbing down’ of contemporary culture as suggested by the ellipses, or conversely as a celebration of hedonism, the demise of elitist systems of cultural empowerment and cultural invisibility. Conducting an intertextual analysis of the first season of Jersey Shore, focusing on media reaction to the show and reactions from online fan communities, I refer to Evans’s (2005) theoretical juxtaposition, illustrating its complexity as a text. As the ellipses suggest the show is regarded with great distain and MTV has received fierce criticism from Italian American action groups for its perceived exploitative representation of Italian culture, particularly its manipulation of the ‘Guido’ stereotype, an ideologically loaded concept that refers to the émigré status of Italian Americans. I start the paper by considering the ways in which the show approaches the ‘Guido’ stereotype and frames the cast, assessing the ways in which Italian cultural critics lambaste the show as cultural exploitation, drawing on Evans’s (2005) definition of celebrity culture as ‘uncritical populism.’ However, despite the controversy caused by the show, Toffler describes it as a ‘cultural phenomenon,’ vindicated by the fact that it holds the record for *MTV*’s most viewed show (Gorman 2011.) Taking this into account the second half of the paper considers the show in terms of a carnivalesque celebration of hedonisms. The cast of the show have been significantly remunerated both with financial and cultural capital for their performances within the show, something that contradicts the traditional status of the Italian émigré on which the show seems to pivot. Subsequently I argue that it is possible to read the performances of the cast as self-aware celebrations of their Italian heritage indicative of Evans’s (2005) second definition of celebrity culture, challenging the elitist systems of cultural empowerment and cultural invisibility that the Italian critics argue are reinforced by the show.

### *Contextualising the Tension.*

New Jersey consistently registers as one of America’s wealthiest states and has one of the highest property taxes in the country. Modest properties have a starting price of over \$300,000 with yearly taxes between \$7,000 and \$17,000, while a house indicative of a middle class lifestyles: four-bedrooms, garage, sizable lawn, the type eulogized in American life style television cost between \$500,000 and \$1,000,000 (Krazewski 2010.) Consequently with the economic downturn, Jersey has experienced a mass exodus, losing large numbers of inhabitants each year. While it has always had high costs of living, many in the area speculate that the region is becoming privatized, and exclusionary (Krazewski 2010.) In this context *Snooki’s* (Polizzi 2012) (one of the female protagonists) excited declaration in episode one that, ‘I’m going to the Jersey Shore Bitch,’ has poignancy. While the majority of reality television manipulated its content in correlation with the recession, MTV created a show that celebrated the frivolity and hedonism of youthful consumption (of goods, alcohol, bodily fluids,) a hyper manifestation of the ‘good life.’ While reality television

traditionally promoted aspirational models of embourgeoisment, Jersey Shore seems to mark a new era of television that antagonizes its audience with images of impossible hedonism, of a lifestyle incongruent with reality. Complimentarily Tyler and Bennett (2010:275) hypothesize that ‘celebrities have been depicted increasingly as exploitative, aspirational, parvenus whose public performance, we should respond to not with desire, admiration or benign interest, but rather with a pleasurable blend of contempt, envy, skepticism and prurience.’ Like Evans, (2005) Tyler and Bennett (2010) suggest that audiences have a complex and contradictory relationship with celebrities. It is with this tension in mind that I offer my analysis. The cast of *Jersey Shore* are likely to be envied and lambasted for their frivolous excessive life style, however it could be argued that the text provides the audience with escapism from established cultural hierarchies and financial prohibitions.

### *‘Guido’ Culture.*

This tension is complicated by the ethnicity of the participants, accentuated by to the excessive use of the term ‘Guido’ in the shows marketing campaign. *Pauly D* (Delvechio 2012) describes Guido culture with the acronym G.T.L, ‘to be a Guido you gotta gym, tan, laundry; you gotta look fresh to death. Im a king Guido I got a tan bed in my place.’ Behind his celebration of narcissism, is a history of ethnic subordination and stereotyping. Guthmann (1997) stipulates that the term derives from the Italian verb ‘guidare’ to drive, alluding to the foreign origin and ‘otherness’ of the Italian émigré. He suggests that the term invokes liminality, indicative of a low economic status and minimal social stake, a proposition that he suggests, Guido’s mythically attempt to combat with displays of violence and hyper consumption (of goods and sexual partners,) attempts to acquire cultural capital and cultural centrality Guthmann (1997). As Cook (2000:107) stipulates, ‘imitation comes from the desire to emulate what is felt to be superior,’ or in this case, the excessive attempts to conform to the norms of American consumer society. As *Ronnie* (Ortiz-Magro 2012) muses in episode one: ‘First impressions are everything. Your bank account can be low, but you always have to look fresh, you’ve gotta get that fresh hair cut, you’ve gotta cop them new sneakers.’ *Ronnie’s* quotation conforms to Guthmann’s (1997) hypothesis, despite economic restrictions he attempts to assert his status by acts of consumption, making excessive aesthetic displays. However as Bourdieu (1984:2) theorises, ‘the manner in which culture has been acquired lives on in the manner of using it,’ and thus ‘it classifies, and it classifies the classifier’ Bourdieu (1984:6.) Acts of excessive consumption and violence position the stereotypical Guido, similarly to the Chav, as totems of bad taste. Guido culture in the show is mobilised to depict hedonistic excess, indicative of Evans’s (2005) definition of celebrity culture as banal frivolity, a notion exemplified by *Sammi* (Giancola 2012) in Episode 2 ‘we club it up, we take care of our selves. I get tanned, get my fake nails on, get made up, put my hottest heels on and then I rock it, and If anyone has a problem, get the fuck outta’ my face.’

In episode one *The Situation* (Sorrentino 2011) arrogantly suggests that, ‘everyone loves a Guido, babies, cougars especially the ladies,’ but MTV and the characters of the show have been the recipient of scathing criticism for their exploitation of the Guido stereotype. Prior to the shows premier, UNICO, the largest Italian American organisation in the United States, requested that MTV cancel the show after receiving complaints about its advertising campaign (Kaufman 2009). The adverts stated that

the show ‘followed eight of the hottest, tannest, craziest, Guidos,’ (MTV 2009) directly perpetuating the derogatory stereotype, that Stasi (2001) describes as a ‘deliberate cartoonish exploitation.’ Describing the opening credits of the show as a ‘Guido pantomime’ (Stasi 2001.) The advertisements accompanying the series were similarly problematic claiming that ‘the show exposes one the tri-states most misunderstood species...GUIDOS’ (MTV 2009.) The word ‘species’ alludes to the animalistic nature of the cast, emphasising the Guido’s liminality, while the word ‘exposes’ perpetuates a sense of danger and mystique surrounding the culture, exemplifying MTV’s attempts to conform to its ‘sexy, young and bold’ image by offering its audience an exclusive risqué expose. UNICO branded the show as a ‘direct, deliberate, disgraceful, attack on Italian Americans,’ (Adams 2009) that is enacted by the explicit cultural appropriation of Italian stereotypes.

As previously suggested the stereotypical Guido life style embodies the tropes of brand MTV, a fusion of youthful party culture, with a style that has the aggression of working class street culture, a fusion exemplified by the casts trademark dance ‘Beating up the beat,’ ‘the bass is so heavy its like the beat is hitting us so we beat up the beat, we fight back’ (Guadagninia 2012.) I argue that *MTV* appropriates Guido culture in an attempt to appeal to its young audience, as the liminal status of the Guido embodies a struggle for recognition and respect, a plight applicable to the young adults that construct their target audience (12-34 year olds,) an age fraction that privileges consumption, hedonistic revolt and rebellious excess. As a result *Snooki* (Polizzi 2012) can be regarded as the perfect spokeswoman letting the audience know ‘the parties here bitches.’ By appropriating the Guido stereotype. I argue that MTV actively mobilizes Evans’s (2005) second rhetoric of celebrity culture, its hedonistic challenge to authority. This formula has been utilized to great success, with season one consistently received the highest ratings against all cable competition among the 12-34-age range, with a season average of 2.7 million viewers per episode, making it one of MTV’s most successful debut series (Seidman 2010.) However, problematically it is the cast’s frivolous hedonism, embodied by their Guido personas that secured their role on the show, ironically implying that their liberation and cultural centrality is a product of their cultural entrapment.

*The Situation* (Sorrentino 2012) surmises that the only ‘shit we (Guido’s) care about is getting girls and going the gym,’ an attitude that is evidently embraced by large (white?) sections of MTV’s target audience, however the same cannot be said for the Italian critics. In a statement that evokes Evans’s (2005) critique of celebrity culture, UNICO issued a statement suggesting that ‘People used to go to the circus to see the freak show - that is what this will be...It will not only hurt Italians but all Americans... Their outrageous, reprehensible behaviour will make us look like buffoons and bimbos’ (Del Bove, 2011.) Similarly forum poster ‘Jerkstore,’ (Bridge Nine Message Board 2011) laments the show for its caricature depiction of Italian culture; ‘those idiots with the blowouts (slick hair like *Pauly D*) and their lip gloss, they aren’t Guido’s they’re retards.’ Evans’s (2005:14) critique of celebrity culture, denounces the ‘erosion of social and cultural values enacted by the market,’ and this is the major criticism of the show, from the Italian community, enraged by the damaging reduction of Italian Culture to stereotypical signifiers: ‘gold chains, Diamante shirts, hair gel, tan beds,’ (Delvechio 2012.) As Del Bove (2011) theorises ‘the show’s ‘stars’ embody the worst stereotypes of Italians, multiplied by thousands and Americanized.’ Couldry

(2000:101) states that ‘the function of the media is to externalise ideas, images, and information for public consumption which otherwise would be available only privately,’ and MTV’s cultural salience ensures that their commodified guise of Italian culture maintains prominence. Richard Dyer (1977:28) argues that stereotyping is fundamental to comprehension, informing our rationale by reference to people, objects and events in terms of mass cultural recognition. As an audience we ‘know’ an identity by thinking of the roles they perform, stratified by forms of property, such as hyper sexuality, aggression and quirks like G.T.L. It is this intense classification of the cast that ensures that the audience comprehend their depicted social type; a type that I argue is particularly attractive to brand MTV. Italian commentators argue that MTV actively perpetuate the Guido stereotype to create a vivid, memorable, and widely recognizable caricature in which few derogatory traits are accentuated while ‘authentic’ tropes of Italian identity are ignored.

### *Exploiting ‘Guido’ Culture?*

While Jersey Shore presents its target audience with fantastical images of rebellious hedonism, it dually evokes outrage illustrated by an Italian online poster hyperbolically suggesting that watching the show ‘makes me wonder whether Bin Laden had a point,’ (Pisa 2012.) This quotation explicitly validates UNICO’s warning that the show is potentially harmful to wider American society, evoking alarming attitudes of large-scale intolerance. The scale of this anger seems provoked by the overall negative and highly limited value placed upon Italian culture, shrouding the Guido with negative cultural capital. Evidently class discourse permeates the show, to present the cast in a way that Orsi (1992:4) describes as similar to stereotypical depictions of African American’s ‘lazy, criminal, sexually irresponsible and emotionally volatile,’ labels endemic of their status as social and ethnic ‘others.’ The tropes that Orsi identifies as markers of ‘low status’ are evident throughout the show; *Snooki* (Polizzi 2012) regularly stays in bed until the middle of the afternoon, and in episode 9 is only awoken by prospect of ‘hot guerrilla juice heads’ (macho Italian men) congregating on the beach, a notion that also emphasises her uncontrollable lust. Similarly *Angelina* (Privarnick 2012) in episode 3 refuses to work at the ‘Shore Store’ T-shirt shop that has been set up for them, promptly telling ‘the boss’ to ‘go fuck yourself.’ Presumably large numbers of the audience would like to do this to their nagging bosses, yet unlike *Angelina*, few would have the financial luxury to do so, emphasising the way in which the show engenders both envy and animosity towards the cast. Violence and criminality are also prevalent themes within the series. In episode 8 *Ronnie* is told to ‘go back where you fucking came from,’ (Jersey Shore 2012) accentuating the traditionally liminal status of the Italian émigré, a proposition that he combats by assaulting his tormentor, asserting his masculinity but dually his ‘dangerous status.’

Baker and Vitullo (2001:214) hypothesise that Hollywood cinema of the 70’s and 80’s similarly profited from exploiting Italian stereotypes, particularly the criminal image of the male Mafioso, a stereotype that translates smoothly from their émigré status. They cite the *Godfather trilogy* as examples, in which *Michael Corlone’s* Heroic WWII service is subverted by his incursion into the family ‘business’ raging a war against *Sollozzo* a drug lord who threatens the status of his family. As well as emphasising the innate aggression of Italian culture, this plot development emphasises

the fixity of Italian identity as *Michael's* heroic national service is usurped by his acts of violence. Like the *Godfather*, violence in *Jersey Shore* is used as a marketable trope. *Ronnie* (Ortiz-Magro 2012) celebrates his knock out punch 'one shot kid, one shot.' Alarming this quotation is used as a title for the episode, emphasising *MTV's* role in the perpetuation of the Guido stereotypes. *Ronnie* (Ortiz-Magro 2012) subsequently informs the audience that he has no regrets about his actions, only the fact that he got caught, a line so cliché that it could have been directly taken from the *Godfather*, accentuating the fixity of Italian stereotypes as well as his contempt for law enforcement. Complexly while his actions are deplorable, he is depicted as a carefree rebel, making his character attractive to brand *MTV*, again emphasising the contradictory discourses operating within the text.

Violence and criminality is not only associated with the male characters, it is foundational to the series. In episode 4 *Snooki* is punched in the face and knocked unconscious by Brad Farro a 24-year-old schoolteacher, a position associated with high levels of cultural capital. *MTV* were strongly encouraged to omit the incident from exhibition, yet problematically the incident was emphasised and given priority in a new advertisement campaign accentuating the shows 'dangerous' notoriety. *Vinny* (Guadagninia 2012) is disgusted by the incident; 'who the fuck hits a girl I have never seen anything like that before.' Alarming this level of shock created by the incident, seems to be *MTV's* motivation for its inclusion in the series, the attack against *Snooki*, like Guido culture in general, used as a trope to market the show. Surely as UNICO suggests this is damaging content to wider American society. Alarming it could be suggested that *MTV* not only sanctioned this action but also indirectly encouraged it, via their constant damaging depiction of the cast. This notion is supported by responses to the incident by online posters; 'samtasia69' (IMDB Message Board 2010) suggesting, 'she deserved it the annoying bitch,' while 'ZolfWang' (Bridge Nine Message Board 2011.) suggests 'that put her in her place.' These reactions are clearly the product of animosity and disgust, feeling that Ahmed (2004:84) suggests are fostered 'by constant images of bad taste,' images that the critics suggest *MTV* purposefully circulate. Taking the Cultural position (a teacher) and ethnicity of the attacker into account, the episode can be interpreted as a direct attack on the lifestyle of the cast, particularly their damaging challenges to established cultural hierarchies. The action of Farro and the vindication of his action by online posters alludes to Little's (1973:84) theory that celebrity narratives are like the staging of a class pantomime, through which the establishment of social hierarchies and processes of social abjection (punishment for sexual and social transgression – such as excessive sexuality and aggression enacted by the Guido's) are acted out figuratively. The blow that knocked *Snooki* to the ground can subsequently be interpreted macrocosmically as a racialized class attack, retaliation by consensual society particularly by those like Farro with traditional levels of cultural capital, fighting to maintain a 'legitimate' social order.

Ahmed (2004:84) suggests that: 'when thinking about how people become objects of disgust, we can see that disgust is crucial to power relations...disgust at that which is below, functions to maintain the power relations between above and below, through which 'aboveness' and 'belowness' become of particular bodies, objects and spaces.' It would appear that the constantly negative depiction of Guido culture has desensitised the audience to such blatant attacks and the exploitation of Italian culture,

as Bourdieu (1984:6) suggests naturalising distinction. This distinction enables *MTV* to create feelings of shock and animosity, contempt and envy, contradictory reactions that create an addictive fascination with the show, as online poster ‘Samzongb’ (About New Jersey Message Board 2010) suggests, ‘the show is trash, the characters are some of the worst scumbags I have ever seen, but it is so addictive.’

### *Creating Distinction*

While it seems apparent that *MTV* perpetuates the ‘bad taste’ of Guido culture to create a marketable distinction, I argue that critics of the show employ similar methods of distinction to perpetuate the difference between Guido and ‘authentic’ Italian culture. Bourdieu (1984:63) suggests that those with legitimate taste are ‘required to express a status-induced familiarity with legitimate culture,’ therefore critics positioning themselves in opposition to the show, seem to be making attempts to emphasise their ‘legitimate taste.’ This idea is emphasised by Stasi, (2009) who writing for the *New York Post* vehemently defends ‘authentic’ Italian culture:

‘We Italian-Americans are not untrained house pets that exist for the amusement of others. My daughter is a cum laude graduate of Wellesley College, award-winning CEO of her own tech company and a blogger for the Huffington Post; my brother is a scientist and engineer; my cousin was the active-duty, career Army officer who brought all the troops into Ground Zero on 9/11. We do not say ‘fuhgeddaboutdit’ nor are we in waste management. We are, however, very much a typical Italian-American family with not a gel-haired thug for miles around.’

Bourdieu (1984:66) suggests that ‘symbolic goods, especially those regarded as the attributes of excellence are.... the ideal weapons in strategies of distinction,’ and by juxtaposing her family to the shows cast, Stasi (2009) attempts to accentuate their cultural legitimacy. She initially subverts the animalistic ‘othering’ of the Guido depicted in the advertising campaigns, via acts of domestication that challenges the way in which liminal ‘dangerous’ stereotypes are mobilised in the show. She also accentuates the intellectual capital of her daughter and brother, a proposition that alludes to their economic status, challenging the ellipses that lambastes the Guido’s ‘double digit IQ’. Similarly the reference to the status of her cousin as a 9/11 hero combats the stereotypical depictions of Guido’s as ‘lazy,’ without a social stake, working oppositionally to the way in which *Michael* is depicted in *The Godfather*. Stasi (2009) describing her cousin as a national hero, fighting to maintain consensus rather than directly threaten it. I argue that part of the appeal of *Jersey Shore* is the way in which it creates an opposition between the Guido and the audience, as Tyler and Bennett (2010:375) suggest, evoking contradictory emotions that create a complex fascination with the show. By emphasising the distinction between the ‘bad taste’ of the Guido and the ‘legitimate culture’ of her Italian Family, Stasi (2009) dispels the myth of *MTV*’s depiction of Italian culture, yet ironically helps to create a feeling of animosity towards the cast that can only be harmful to the wider Italian population.

### *Celebrating Hedonism*

Despite the criticism directed at the show, I maintain that *Jersey Shore* is a complex, contradictory text, as Krazewski (2010) suggests ‘*Snooki* and *The Situation* make me both laugh and roll my eyes at the same time.’ Thus far I have predominantly <http://jrdsjournal.wixsite.com/humanities-cultural>

focussed on Evans's (2005) critique of celebrity culture as a 'dumbing down' of society enacted by *MTV's* stereotypical appropriation of Italian culture, yet it is similarly possible to interpret *Jersey Shore*, as a celebration of hedonism. Despite the way in which Guido culture is used as a marketable trope, the show directly challenges the traditional cultural invisibility of the Italian émigré giving the cast cultural saliency. Defending the show, Toffler suggests, 'the cast takes pride in their ethnicity. In fact, it is a key driver of how they bond with each other and self-identify. They refer to themselves as 'guidos' in a positive manner' (Adams 2009.) Taking this into account it is possible to suggest that alternatively, *Jersey Shore* can be interpreted as a carnivalesque celebration of a traditionally subordinated culture. Rowe (1995:32) describes the carnivalesque as the social and literary tradition, which, more than any other, expresses the dynamic nature of language and the relativity of power. In this context the cast's use of the word 'Guido' can be interpreted as creative cultural appropriation, similar to the way in which Jacobs (2002:15) suggest that African Americans have appropriated the word 'ni\*\*er.' While I think that it is difficult to ignore the cultural and historical discourses associated with each term, it is conceivable that the show has added a new level of context and depth to the Guido discourse, particularly giving the culture mainstream representation, which combats its traditional liminality. Rowe (1995:33) suggests that the carnivalesque 'challenges the institutions and structures of authority, through inversion, mockery and other forms of travesty.' If as Toffler (Cited Adams 2009) suggests, the characters have appropriated the stereotype for their own empowerment, then it is possible to interpret their caricature performances as self-aware celebrations of their traditional liminality.

As Bakhtin (1984:251) theorises the carnival is the place for working out 'in a concretely sensuous, half-real and *half-play acted* (my emphasis) form, a new mode of interrelationship,' a proposition that gives the cast creativity, rather than depicting them as corporate dupes. Toffler (Cited Schneider 2011:10-11) suggests that he looked for 'candour, boldness, and a chaotic and combustible mess,' in the shows auditioning process, implying that the casts adherence to their Guido stereotype was integral to their selection. Taking this into account it is possible to regard Guido culture, a culture traditionally shrouded in negative culture capital, as the vector of the cast's empowerment, giving the disenfranchised community the salience that Beltempo traditionally envisaged. Bakhtin (1984:123) theorises that the carnivalesque 'combines the sacred with the profane,' in relation to the show, the sacred: cultural centrality and economic capital is procured via adherence to a profane performances. The audience growth for the show ensured that the cast recieved significant economic rewards antithetical to their Guido status. With earnings for public appearances, and money for his role in *Jersey Shore* Season 3 (rumoured to be \$60,000 an episode) *The Daily Mail* suggests that *The Situation* amassed an individual fortune of \$5 Million in 2010, a figure subsequently eclipsed after the cast were given a pay rise to \$100,000 an episode from 2011. Taking this into account it seems feasible to suggest that *Jersey Shore* is as much a 'populist utopian vision of the world seen from below...a festive inversion of hierarchy,' (Stallybrass & White 2002: 294) as the banal populism inferred by Evans (2005.) Indeed Salazar (2011) celebrates the show as the manifestation of the American Dream: 'America – the land of opportunity. No where else in the world could a 4'9" troll named 'Snooki' who uses inordinate amounts of hairspray and tanning spray become a millionaire doing absolutely nothing.' Perhaps the most obvious example of the shows carnivalesque suspension of hierarchal rank is

the fact the *Snooki* was recently paid \$2,000 dollars more than Nobel Prize winning author *Toni Morrison* to speak at Rutgers University, an event that provided a challenge to the established order from below but also signifies a relaxation of social barricades, in which a individual of 'bad taste' and low levels of cultural capital was actively encouraged to lecture at an institution of high culture.

It is apparent that other elements of the show are being embraced by mainstream society, particularly 'shoreisms' catchphrases and words popularised by the cast. While the show presents the phrases as innate properties of Guido culture, I suggest that they demonstrate the casts carnivalesque self-awareness and creativity, as the terms they use stereotypically compliment their enacted personas. *Mike (The Situation)* *Vinny* and *Pauly* refer to themselves as '*M.V.P*' an abbreviation of the term 'most valuable players,' mobilising the stereotype of the Italian lothario. Accordingly, *M.V.P* have a scale for rating women; and as season 1 suggests, if woman are perceived to be (semi) attractive they are invariably asked if they are '*D.T.F*': 'Down to 'Fornicate'.' This is a sport for *M.V.P* and the rivalry is comically epitomised in episode 9 when *Situation* boasts that he gets girls home every night, a proposition challenged with the accusation that he 'would fuck a Gatorade bottle' (Guadagninia 2012.) *Vinny* (Guadagninia 2012) suggests, much to *Situation's* dismay that the majority of his conquests are '*grenades*', a term used to describe unattractive women, an accusation that *Situation* (Sorrentino 2012) rebukes by suggesting that *Vinny's* conquests have been '*grenade launchers*,' unattractive fat girls. The terms used by *M.V.P* allude to warfare and violence, epitomised by a conversation between *Situation* and *Pauly* in episode 6 in which *Pauly* is asked to 'take a grenade for the general' (Sorrentino 2012,) distracting the unattractive friend so *Situation* (Sorrentino 2012,) can 'smoosh smoosh.' Evidently the language of warfare mobilises the aggressive stereotypes associated with Guido culture, yet the casts seem to perpetuate it with self-awareness. Rather than describing them as dupes of the culture industry, I suggest that they knowingly perpetuate their stereotypical personas to create marketable spectacle, attempts to procure 'sacred' properties from 'profane' performance. Like *Snooki's* invitation to Rutgers, the popular use of 'shoreisms' indicated by there wide use online, accentuates the extent to which the culture challenges established hierarchies, as Guido slang permeates into everyday conversation, exemplified by poster 'Maztax' (Sound Opinions Message Board 2011) decrying the amount of 'grenades in Virginia.'

#### '*Guidettes*'

While the male characters express a carnivalesque lexical creativity, I argue that the female characters challenge established gender roles with their carnivalesque performances of Italian Feminity. McDonald (2002:155) describes the stereotypical *Guidette*, as sexually overt, comic fools, defined by their 'big hair, pantsuits, gold jewellery and thick Brooklyn accents,' a description that explicitly applies to the entire female cast. In episode 6 *Snooki* is mocked for her choice of outfit; 'what the hell are you doing wearing a Halloween costume?' (Jersey Shore 2012.) Emphasising her bad taste as a source of humour. However Bennett (2005:95) suggests that 'fashion is a new means of forging new collective identities,' alluding to its ability to provide the individual with creativity methods of self-invention. In this context I believe that the casts collective adherence to the *Guidette* image can be interpreted as

a carnivalesque ‘half-real and half-play acted’ celebration of their cultural liminality, that challenges both their ethnic subordination, and macrocosmically the role of middle class women. Rowe (1995:32) in her analysis of *Miss Piggy* suggests that the carnivalesque woman ‘shows the cultural ideals of femininity to be both artificial and comical through her exaggerated performance of them,’ a premise that I believe is applicable to the Guidettes. She stipulates that *Miss Piggy’s* performance revolves around the precariously combined qualities of ‘excessive femininity and a wicked right hook,’ (Rowe 1995:30) sexuality and aggression, the vectors of empowerment used by *M.V.P.* The combination is exemplified by *Sammi* (Giancola 2012) who describes herself as ‘the sweetest bitch you will ever meet,’ and *Jwow* (Farley 2012) who in episode 2 suggests ‘after I have sex with a guy I rip their heads off,’ emphasising her lust and physical threat. The fact that both sexes utilise the same character tropes, alludes to the falsity of innate gender roles, but also that both sexes act with self-awareness in mobilising the stereotypes of their Italian culture. Like *M.V.P.* the Guidettes actively hunt for sexual partners, with *Snooki* (Polizzi 2012,) in episode 3 standing on a podium at a club demanding all of the ‘hot Guido’s to come and get me.’ As *Pauly* (Delvechio 2012) suggests ‘Guido girls act like they have pots of gold in their draws and they wanna share.’

While the Guidettes seem to enact the role of the carnivalesque women, alluding to the falsity of middle class feminine ideals, the roles that they perform are still highly regulated. The Guidettes can be interpreted as the ultimate post feminists; revelling in the gains of second wave feminism, yet post feminism, like *Jersey Shore*, is a contested contradictory topic, that Taker (2006:411) suggests, describes ‘gender within the terms of both liberation and celebration on the one hand, regression and backlash on the other.’ While the characters revel in their sexual autonomy, contradictorily it could be suggested that not only are they perpetuating their Guidette stereotype but also the ultimate male fantasy. *Jwow* particularly, has become an online sex symbol, with many posters expressing their desire to ‘smoosh’ her, creating fan art in which she is placed in various sexual scenarios. It could be suggested that in some respects this is empowering, due to her ability to control the male gaze, enhancing both her cultural centrality and financial status; (she is rumoured to have been offered \$1 million to appear in *Playboy*) however she is still objectified as a sexual object for the male gaze, dispossessed of the creativity and strength associated with the carnivalesque woman. McRobbie (2007:27) suggests that post feminism dupes women into thinking that they can become powerful via adherence to a theatrically signified sexuality, while leaving them passive, less able to address the operations of power that leave them subjugated in wider society. I argue that this notion is applicable to the cast; the female characters have significantly improved their individual circumstances by emphasising their Guidette performance, yet it could be suggested that their performance not only perpetuates negative cultural stereotypes but is harmful to women in general.

### ***Conclusion***

Using intertextual analysis, I have looked to highlight the complex double coding of *Jersey Shore* and its reception. I argue that the Guido and Guidette ethnic stereotypes perpetuated by the show position the cast simultaneously as objects of fascination, envy and disgust but also as characters that can be seen to challenge cultural

hierarchies only for *MTV* to reassert these hierarchies and stereotypes more vigorously in the audience's consciousness.

As I have suggested a carnivalesque reading of the show would indicate that the cast embrace their Guido roles, utilising the platform provided by *MTV* to stage a performance in which they challenge both economic and cultural hierarchies, antithetical to the stereotypical status of the Italian émigré. However, as McRobbie (2007:27) suggests with post feminism, it is important to remember that the autonomy afford to the cast is a sanctioned transgression, that in this case fundamentally benefits brand *MTV*. As Stallybrass and White (2002:295) suggest, complexly the carnivalesque humiliates and mortifies, but also rewards, a duality that Bakhtin (1984:124) suggests is encapsulated by 'the primary carnivalesque act, the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king.' Like this ambivalent carnival image, I argue that *Jersey Shore* is a complex and multifaceted text that can be regarded as both banal exploitative populism and a carnivalesque celebration, in which the cast experience both reward and humiliation, 'crowning' and 'decrowning.' It is the multifaceted nature of the show that I believe makes it so popular engendering a complex fascination with its audience, enabling it to be analysed in relation to both of Evans's (2005) double coding of celebrity culture. While a carnivalesque reading of the show alludes to the creativity of the cast, as Bakhtin (1984:125) stipulates carnival 'absolutises nothing, but rather proclaims the joyful relativity of everything.' Taking this into account I argue that the show only provides the cast with a guise of freedom while facilitating the continuation of social orthodoxy, as indicated by much of the response from online message boards, in which the liminal status of the Italian émigré is upheld. Fundamentally *MTV* maintains economic supremacy despite the individual gains of the cast, which in this context can be regarded as the product of hegemonic concessions. Ironically it is the joyful relativity perpetuated as an innate quality of Guido culture the makes the show marketable, as I have suggested, ironically positioning the cast's cultural liberation as a product of their entrapment. *That* is the real situation.

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