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## Discussing That Word That Prompts Either a Fist Pump or a Scowl

By [PATRICIA COHEN](#)

For most followers of [MTV](#)'s reality series "Jersey Shore," the big news on Thursday was the on-screen breakup of the summer sweethearts Ronnie Magro and Sammi Giancola during the cast's late-night reunion show.

But the 100 or so people who showed up earlier that day at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute of [Queens College](#), in Midtown Manhattan, were much more concerned about a different issue: the "Guido culture" that the show's drinking, hot-tubbing and brawling stars proudly embrace.

Some Italian-Americans consider "Guido" a slur and have vehemently protested not only the show but also the use of the term. But others, mostly younger Italian-Americans, use it affectionately to refer to a particular life style, making it a label akin to preppy, punk, Deadhead and rapper. Or, as the show's Pauly D put it: "I was born and raised a Guido. It's just a lifestyle, it's being Italian, it's representing family, friends, tanning, gel, everything."

The attendees were probably not among MTV's usual demographic. There were scholars, elected officials, representatives from Italian-American organizations and the Consulate General of Italy, though there was a sprinkling of people who proudly called themselves Guidos and Guidettes.

The invitation announced that the main speakers would be Donald Tricarico, a sociologist from Queensborough Community College, and John DeCarlo, a freelance writer, caterer and self-professed Guido from New Jersey, initially raising the question of whether the Institute was presenting a version of Margaret Mead and one of the Samoans.

But the speakers and subject were handled with respect. Wearing wire-rimmed glasses, a sober gray suit and a tie, Professor Tricarico was the anti-MTV and visibly uncomfortable lecturing into a microphone before an audience.

His talk demonstrated, however, that just as Jersey Shore denizens have their own lingo, so do academics — a scholarly version of "Yo, bro" and a fist pump. This "urban youth subculture," he

said, is “associated with late capitalism,” a second generation that “consumes commodified leisure styles,” and has created “a bricolage of symbols.”

In other words, they are a result of the rising fortunes of young Italian-Americans. Having finally attained leisure time and money, a new generation has carved out a niche for itself in the popular culture.

As New York State Senator Diane J. Savino, a Democrat who represents Staten Island and parts of Brooklyn, explained, “Guido was never a pejorative.” It grew out of the 1950s greaser look, she said, and became a way for Italian-Americans who did not fit the larger culture’s definition of beauty to take pride in their own heritage and define “cool” for themselves.

When she was growing up, everybody listened to rock; girls were supposed to be skinny, with straight blond hair (like Marcia Brady on “The Brady Bunch”); guys had ripped jeans, sneakers and straggly hair.

Then in 1977 “Saturday Night Fever” was released. “It changed the image for all of us,” Ms. Savino said. As Tony Manero, [John Travolta](#) wore a white suit, had slicked-back short hair, liked disco music and was hot. “It was a way we could develop our own standard of beauty,” she added.

Indeed, Professor Tricarico calls “Saturday Night Fever” the “origin myth” for “Guidos.” Think of Tony Manero as their Adam.

Young Italian-Americans, he said, did what other immigrant groups before have done: take a symbol of derision, own it and redefine it their own way. Young African-Americans did that with the “n word,” he added, much to the consternation of their elders, and gay people did the same by proudly using the word “queer.”

He also noted that “Guido” had been used to sting previously, as when it surfaced in the mainstream press in a menacing way, in 1989, after a group of Italian-American youths murdered Yusuf Hawkins, a black 16-year-old, in their Bensonhurst neighborhood. As for “Jersey Shore,” what Ms. Savino — and pretty much everyone else who spoke — objected to is the way the subculture has “been exploited by MTV,” Professor Tricarico said. Joseph Sciamè, the president of the Italian Heritage & Culture Committee, said the problem was that no matter how many other positive depictions of Italian-Americans there are, “one showing of a program like ‘Jersey Shore,’ and that’s what people think all Italian-Americans are like.” His group, as well as others including the New Jersey Italian American Legislative Caucus, Unico National, the Order of the Sons of Italy in America, the National Italian-American Foundation, the Jersey Shore Convention and Visitors Bureau and the Borough of Seaside Heights, N.J., (where the show was filmed) have protested to MTV. As another speaker said, “We have a responsibility to make sure people know that’s not us.”

Mr. DeCarlo, who turns 29 this year, auditioned for “Jersey Shore” and made it to the final tryouts. He wore a black leather jacket, large gold cross around his neck and a pinky ring. His hair was spiked with gel. As the audition process went along, he said it became clear that MTV was more interested in “shocking reality TV mayhem instead of a family culture.”

The controversy was briefly raised during the reunion show. All the cast members rejected the notion that there was anything shameful about being a Guido. “I don’t represent all Italians,” Pauly D (Paul Delvecchio) said. “I only represent myself.”

After the producers ambushed Mr. Magro and Ms. Giancola with embarrassing previously unseen footage that led to their breakup, however, the cast members, too, may be wondering how they had been manipulated by MTV.

To Mr. DeCarlo, Guido refers to a culture of family, food, wine, cigars, coffee, gold chains, Cadillacs and a dialect that gives “ fuhgeddaboutit” some panache. Neither his style nor his fondness for clubbing means that “I’m looking for a fight,” he said.

“A true Guido is someone with dreams, aspirations and goals,” he said. Tony Manero “was very flawed, but you rooted for him because you knew he wanted to do something with his life.”

The 1992 movie “My Cousin Vinny” is the perfect representation, Mr. DeCarlo said. In the film [Joe Pesci](#) as Vinny wears a black leather jacket and a big gold chain, and speaks in Brooklyn slang. But it turns out that he is very smart and a good lawyer.

During question-and-answer time, Mario Fratti, a playwright, said he was truly puzzled. He pointed out that the protagonist of the Fellini film “8 1/2,” on which the musical “Nine” is based, is named Guido.

“I kept the name for the musical and for the movie,” he said. “Keeping the name Guido is a symbol of sophistication. It is a badge of honor in Italy.”

Later, Mr. Fratti confessed that he had not watched “Jersey Shore.” “MTV — what is that?” he said. “I’ve never seen it.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: January 26, 2010

An article on Saturday about a colloquium at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute of Queens College on the MTV reality show “Jersey Shore” misstated the contribution of the playwright Mario Fratti to the Broadway musical “Nine.” Mr. Fratti, who took part in a question and answer session, is credited with the adaptation from the Italian version he wrote; Arthur

Kopit, not Mr. Fratti, wrote the musical's book.

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