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## **Abstract**

The article discusses the role of online food practices and narratives in the formation of transnational identities and communities. Data has been collected in the framework of a doctoral research project undertaken by the author between 2009 and 2012 with a follow-up in 2014. **The working hypothesis of this paper is that the way Italians talk about food online and offline, the importance they give to ‘authentic’ food, and the way they share their love for Italian food with other members of the same diaspora reveal original insights into migrants’ personal and collective identities, sense of belonging to the transnational community, and processes of adjustment to a new place. Findings suggest that online culinary narratives and practices shape the Italian diaspora in unique ways, through the development of forms of virtual commensality and online mealtime socialisation on Skype, and by affecting intra and out-group relationships, thus working as elements of cultural identification and differentiation.**

**Keywords:** Italian diaspora, virtual commensality, food socialisation, transnational community, cultural differentiation.

## **Introduction**

Contemporary forms of migration are increasingly shaped and characterised by processes of technological convergence that allow migrants to simultaneously engage in cultural, political and economic practices stretching across multiple nation states (Zappettini, 2016; Baubock and Faist, 2010; Vertovec, 2009; Sheller and Urry, 2006; Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004). Transnational migrants are said to be the emblematic figures of our time as they connect, communicate, and form new ways of being and belonging across borders, while cultural patterns and experiences enter into dialogue, adapt and change in relation to the new life abroad (Glick Schiller et al., 1995; Faist, 2000 and 2006). In the process of migrating to and settling in a foreign environment, practices and traditions from home affect migrants' adaptation by providing them with a sense of familiarity, comfort, and stability (Philipp and Ho, 2010; Kershen, 2002; Petridou, 2001).

As literature has shown, migrants' construction of a new life abroad is an ongoing negotiation of belongings and attachments to multiple spaces, the space of home – which remains vivid in the imaginary of migrants – and the new space of destination, to which migrants need to adjust (Ehrkamp, 2005). During these negotiations, the maintenance of well-known routines, the use and presence of familiar objects, the preservation of food artifacts and practices act as stabilisers providing a sense of

stability against migrants' feelings of estrangement, disruption and dislocation (Philipp and Ho, 2010; Gvion, 2009; Kershen, 2002; Petridou, 2001). Food is therefore central to practices of identity formation and cultural belonging of migrants (Naidu and Nzuza, 2013), as it reveals insights into who migrants are, how they perceive themselves in relation to others, how they shape their identity and define their membership to both members of the same diasporas and members of the host community (Koc and Welsh, 2002:46).

The connection between food and migration has been central to many studies on migration, diaspora, and transnationalism. Food has been described as an element of identification (Marte, 2007; Zontini, 2004), a marker of cultural identity and a defining element of migrants' practices and discourses (Brulotte and Di Giovine, 2014; Cinotto, 2013; Gabaccia, 1998). Food plays a central role within migrants' memories (Vallianatos and Raine, 2008), their transnational relationships (Chapman and Beagan, 2013) and within processes of community building (Marte, 2007). Brah (1996) described food as a lived experience within migrants' home-making experiences, a response to the sense of discontinuity that migrants often experience when settling in a new country (Philipp and Ho, 2010; Bhugra and Decker, 2005).

Longing for familiar tastes, smells and products characterise the unique relationship between migrants and their food (Locker et al., 2005; Petridou, 2001), as "familiar tastes and smells can help create new visceral associations between their country of

origin and their new country” (Longhurst et al., 2009, in Philipp and Ho, 2010:83). Cultural experiences of food are never static nor fixed. On the contrary, as Fonseca in her study on Hispanic/Latino food has argued, food practices “travel and change within transnational communities, which experience and reproduce their cultural heritage far from their homeland” (2016:164). Migrants combine, mix and match tradition with novelty, home routines and new attachments, thus providing evidence for the fact that identities and foodways are never encapsulated within a certain tradition, but are fluid and malleable resources that breathe change and innovation (Lawton et al., 2008; Vallianatos and Raine, 2008; Satia et al., 2002; Varghese and Moore-Orr, 2002).

This article situates within these creative practices of mixing and matching involving not just buying and consuming food, but also taking into account a myriad of other actions including buying the right ingredients, sharing a meal with other members of the same diaspora, adapting recipes, and conversations about food. The complexity and malleability of migrant foodways as a useful research lens to examine migration-related processes is a starting point of this paper (Morasso and Zittoun, 2014; Hale and De Abreu, 2010). The research, however, brings another element to the relationship between food and migration, which is its online reconfiguration. Transnational migrants are not only living across multiple spaces; they do it simultaneously, on a bigger scale and at a faster pace (Baldassar et al., 2016; Madianou and Miller, 2012; Oiarzabal and Reips, 2012; Navarrete and Huerta, 2006; Faist, 2000). They are always connected

(Diminescu, 2008) and always online. As my previous work has demonstrated, online communities speaking Italian in London create important webs of solidarity and support that enhance migrants' self-awareness as members of a transnational community, while providing a sense of stability, comfort and continuity against social isolation and alienation (2015, a, b). In bringing together research about migration and food with research on online diasporas, this paper addresses how engagements around food on social media can advance our understanding of the role of food practices in migrant communities. The working hypothesis of this paper is that the way Italians talk about food online and offline, the importance they give to 'authentic' food, and the way they share their love for Italian food with other members of the same diaspora reveals original insights into migrants' sense of identity, community, and adjustments to a new place. The observation identified the following practices as characterising the relationship between Italian migrants and their food: first, the development of forms of virtual commensality and online mealtime socialisation through Skype, which connects home and host localities by enabling simultaneous co-presence; and second, the centrality of food for intra-group and out-group relationships or, in other words, its centrality within practices of identification and cultural differentiation.

The research thus contributes to existing literature on food, migration and identity on the one hand, and on food, migration and community building/bonding on the other hand, while highlighting the impact of networked technologies in sustaining such

practices, and their usefulness as research lens in the examination of such an important aspect of material culture.

## **Research design**

The paper draws on findings from the author's doctoral research, which was conducted between 2009 and 2012, involved a follow-up in 2014 that mainly looked at social networks (Facebook in particular) and combined traditional anthropological methods (participant observation, in-depth interviews) with online ethnography with the aim of investigating the characteristics of contemporary Italian diaspora in London. The research identified seven online communities as main objects of investigation: Italians of London, Italians in London, The London link, The London Web, Sognando Londra, Qui Londra and Italiani a Londra (author, 2009; 2015, a, b).

The research involved a digital ethnographic study of three online fora (Italians of London; The London Link; Italiani a Londra), which were selected by virtue of their popularity among users (frequency of access) and relevance of posts. The qualitative corpus consisted of publicly viewable posts that were analysed with text-mining techniques. Transcripts of forum discussions were manually inserted into a dataset containing information about the user, the topic of the post, and its content. The dataset was then transferred and analysed using NVivo software, which allowed a more

sophisticated interpretation of recurring patterns of conversation. A total of 300 posts was collected during the observation. For the purposes of this paper, only posts collected within the community *Italians of London* will be utilised, as the theme of food emerged with more frequency here. Furthermore, the community, which was founded by Giancarlo Pelati in 1997, stood out as the largest network of Italians in the UK, counting more than 24.000 users of the forum and more than 30.000 members on Facebook (at the time of writing).

Data was also collected through non-structured interviews with members of the community *Italians of London*, which the author met at some of the offline events organised by the administrator Giancarlo Pelati, first face to face and then, if needed, via Skype. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, they were recorded with an audio recorder or with an MP3 Skype recorder and then transcribed. All interviews were conducted in Italian to facilitate the conversation and increase trust with my respondents, who felt more comfortable discussing their experience knowing that the author was herself a migrant living in London.

### **The community**

The *Italians of London* community is only one example of a complex and variegated scenario involving interactive websites, web forums, and social networking sites (SNSs)



through which the Italian diaspora is imagined and recreated in London. As I have referred elsewhere (author, 2015), the use of online media has shaped the migration of young Italians to London since the late 1990s. According to recent data, there were 12,135 registered Italian students in the UK in 2015-2016, with an increase of roughly 2000 units compared to the previous year (source: UKCISA). The number of Italians registered with AIRE in the London Consular Constituency in December 2014 was 234,084 (53% males and 47% females), with around 52% of these resident in the Greater London area. According to statistics, 74% of Italians are under 34 years and coming from the North of Italy (55%), with Lombardy and Veneto as the most representative regions. Among these, 89% of Italians have a high school diploma, 58% hold a degree, and one in five holds a doctoral degree (source: AIRE; see author, 2015). The Italians I interviewed and observed for the research reflect similar demographics; they are young, highly skilled and extremely motivated migrants who decided to move to London in search for better career and study opportunities. Italy's political and economic instability, its stagnation and the lack of meritocracy stood out as the main reasons why my respondents decided to build a new life abroad, as also highlighted by King et al. (2014). Within this landscape, the online community *Italians of London* was created with the scope of facilitating the development of personal and professional relationships among these young professionals. Its goal is to promote the dynamism, style and creativity characterising Italians abroad through the organisation of activities

centered around the valorization of Italian culture. The community has a web forum, a Facebook page and a Twitter profile, all administered by Giancarlo Pelati and his team. The community regularly organises events such as aperitifs, celebrations of typical Italian festivities, sport matches, book launches and so on. All events are open to the general public, Italian and non-Italian guests, and they usually take place inside Italian cafes, restaurants and book stores.

### **Food, personal identity, migration**

A consolidated corpus of sociological and anthropological literature has identified the topic of food and how it pertains to a person's social and cultural identity as a target of scholarly research. Goody (1982) described food as an important resource in the construction of individual and collective identities. In his *Physiology of taste* (1825), French gastronome Brillat-Savarin made the famous remark "Tell me what kind of food you eat, and I will tell you what kind of man you are". Eating has been variously interpreted as a personal act and as a deeply personal matter "in that any given human individual is constructed, biologically, psychologically and socially by the foods he/she chooses to incorporate" (Fischler, 1988:275), but also as central in processes of cultural identity formation, as what we eat communicates to others our beliefs, cultural and social backgrounds, norms, and experiences. Semiotics has linked food to culture and

language. Roland Barthes suggested that “when he (modern consumer) buys an item of food, consumes it, or services it, modern man does not manipulate a simple object in a purely transitive fashion; this item of foods sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies” (1961/2013:24). Anthropologists Claude Lévi-Strauss (1978) and Mary Douglas (1972) addressed the meanings of food as a language and system of practices expressing social structures, national cultures and cultural cuisines. Hale and De Abreu (2010) asserted that cultural identities develop through the use of symbolic resources such as food. Fischler (1988) among others recognised that the absorption of a food incorporates the eater into a culinary system and therefore into the group which practices it, unless it irremediably excludes him. [...] Man eats, so to speak, within a culture, and this culture orders the world in a way that is specific to itself. It operates a kind of generalized implicit taxonomy, in which food classifications have an important place (280-281).

Food is not only central to someone’s sense of self, but more importantly for the present research to someone’s sense of social identity (Tajfel, 1981), which involves membership in a social group and participation to common values and beliefs (Gone, Miller and Rappoport, 1999), which in turn provide a sense of continuity and stable frames of reference (Hall, 1996).

The way diasporic identities relate to and construct their sense of personal and cultural identity through food reflects the centrality of food as a medium of cultural symbolism and as a token of homeland, which affects migrant's identity and sense of belonging (Koc and Welsh, 2002). Psychologists, sociologists of culture and anthropologists have argued how moving from one country to another has several implications for migrants, including the loss of what was once familiar, the routines, values, structures and support networks that are central to self and identity (Naidu and Nzuzza, 2013; Bhugra and Becker, 2005). Within these processes of adaptation to a new place and new lifestyles, food becomes an element of stability (Sutton, 2001), it supports sense-making and transnational identity dynamics (Gillespie and Zittoun, 2010), it sustains migrants' inclusion and self-identification (Gvion, 2009).

The case study here observed opened up original insights into the use of networked technologies to achieve that sense of stability and continuity that is deemed as crucial to successful integration and adjustment to the host environment within migration literature. The first aspect I would like to discuss in more detail now is what I call *virtual commensality*, which Italians seem to experience mainly via Skype, as the following quote demonstrates:

What's wrong with that? Yes, sometimes I use Skype to see my family and to have lunch with them. It might seem ridiculous, but actually it does help. It's better than

nothing. I feel at home, again, somehow. (G.O. male, Italians of London discussion forum, October 2012).

The quote reported above provides evidence of how past and present are reintegrated to achieve a sense of totality (Gvion, 2009). Well known routines such as dining with the family, which are by definition a fundamental aspects of Italians' food culture (Cinotto, 2013; Ochs and Shohet, 2006), are re-enacted by means of a creative use of technologies such as Skype. Philipp and Ho (2010) argue that eating together helps to re-territorialise a sense of space by recreating powerful memories of home. Home is evoked every time migrants call their parents and switch on the video camera during specific times of the day or the week (festivities, birthdays, Sunday lunches) to renew a familiar sense of being together, which reminds migrants of 'whom they are' (Counihan and Van Esterik, 1997). This is similar to what scholars recognised as a common pattern among first and second generations of migrants in the UK and in the USA (Sprio, 2013; Fortier, 2000; Gabaccia, 1998). Commensality, and the Sunday lunch in particular, are part of a cultural tradition in Italy that all my respondents, despite the historical gap, confirmed as central to their everyday routines. Sunday was, and still is, the occasion for family celebration and gatherings; it reinforces family dynamics, it strengthens intimate bonds within the family, it help migrants to cope with the experience of migration in a less traumatic way (Sprio, 2013; Cinotto, 2013).

Virtual commensality strengthens migrants' sense of self and of personal identity, which is "linked to family relationships and to home spaces" (Mintz and Du Bois, 2002: 198). Thus, replicating familiar routines – however only virtually – seems to affect migrants' adjustment to a new place by giving them a sense of normalcy, which is crucial for deterritorialised identities that are deprived of strong reference points (La Barbera, 2015). Furthermore, it allows Italians to maintain a sense of continuity with the past (Hale and De Abreau, 2010; Zittoun, 2006; Zittoun et al., 2003) as the following quote demonstrates:

Sometimes I video-call just before dinner to see my family preparing the kitchen table, my mum still cooking or yelling at dad because he's not doing anything. Its like being at home again, being present with them, living the same dynamics I used to live just a while ago, participate (T., female, 31 years old, from Umbria, interview with the author)

Skype is used to re-enact well known rituals such as dining or preparing the table, thus confirming the link made by Georgiou between sharing routines and common activities online, and the enhanced sense of belonging as a result of sharing (2006). This is made possible as networked technologies allow what Baldassar et al. (2016) define as co-presence, which enables the formation of a new type of connected family that fits migrants' desire to re-experience face to face interactions that were once common. The

following respondent clearly emphasised how Skype opens a window into a place that is considered safe and familiar, in contrast with the challenges of living abroad with strangers:

It was a complete shock when I moved here. I used to have lunch and dinner with my family no matter what, but here is completely different. I can't tell you how many times I had dinners in my bedroom completely alone because there was no dining room in the apartment, or because it was a sort of tacit rule among the flat mates that everyone had to deal with it. Sometimes it is actually nice to have people around, eat something together, and have a chance to talk about how the day went, as I did with my family back home' (P., 27 years old, researcher from Emilia Romagna)

The present research thus seems to confirm the widespread consideration of the importance that commensality has for certain cultural groups such as the Italian; as Ochs and Shohet pointed out,

mealtimes can be regarded as pregnant arenas for the production of sociality, morality, and local understandings of the world. Mealtimes are both vehicles for and end points of culture. As vehicles, mealtimes constitute universal occasions for members not only to

engage in the activities of feeding and eating but also to forge relationships that reinforce or modify the social order (2006:35-36).

Morasso and Zittoun (2014:32) further pinpoint this argument by stating that “practices of commensality may be adapted according to migration practices and transnational geographies”. In this particular case study, virtual commensality affects both migrants and their families’ routines; both agents must consider the time lag and make sure that everything is ready when the connection starts. It is, therefore, a re-adjustments to long distance relationships (Madianou, 2016) that also indicates the extent to which Italians become active agents of their transnational experience.

Food is a malleable resource and a complex construct that not only involves the material act of eating, but calls into question multi-faceted processes and activities including sharing recipes and discussing a particular dish. Research confirmed that Italians also use Skype during the preparation of complicated dishes, or family recipes, as it allows parents to participate, to give practical recommendations and to oversee the cooking process. I define these performances as example of *online mealtime socialisation* that seems to emerge as a unique aspect of Italians’ migration experience, as the following quote clarifies:



I did not have much interest in cooking with my parents, or learning how a specific dish was made. I had stuff to do, you know? But since I moved to London, I can see that I actually cherish these moments and appreciate every single moment I get to spend with my family. Now cooking together, or calling my mum to ask her how I should prepare something, and knowing that she is with me, listening to her voice, asking for help, it is so so important. (S., 32 years old, interview with the author)

As Madianou and Miller (2012) point out, communication via webcam facilitates the experience of real-time practices enabling a sense of co-participation that is of particular relevance within long-distance relationships. At the same time, my research suggests that the way Italians use Skype to dine and cook in co-presence challenges the limits of the technology, bringing its potential for interactivity and simultaneity to a whole new level. Furthermore, the fact that Italians use Skype not just during special occasions but almost everyday opens up new questions of sociality and intimacy as technology brings migrants fragments of their home culture (Imilan, 2015). Virtual co-presence allows migrants to experience what Longhurst et al. (2009) defined as ‘visceral experiences of food’ through which migrants feel at home, miss home, and build a bridge to a new home. Practically, the new space of home in London and the familiar spaces such as the home kitchen enter a dialogue that is made of (virtual) smells, familiar objects, activities and routines that help Italians to cope with the sense of displacement and alienation,

especially during the first stages of adaptation to a foreign land. Clearly, communication via webcam – as Madianou and Miller (2012) recognised – cannot fully substitute the emotional depth of other forms of communication; in fact, many respondents felt very strongly about the fact that Skype generates an illusion of co-presence, perhaps even more painful as it reminds them of their separation from home. However, research suggests that video chat services can become very effective especially as they create a sense of *transnational domestic space* where new social and emotional ties can be developed between families and individuals. The transnational domestic space thus helps migrants to maintain a continuity of the self in unfamiliar surroundings as they feel and see familiar faces and voices; this provides comfort and helps Italian to anchor their sense of self to strong reference points.

Moving further, the relationship between food and migration not only affects migrants' sense of self and personal identity, but also calls into question their cultural and collective identity. Among others, Mintz and Du Bois (2002:109) have argued that “food serves both to solidify group membership and set groups apart”, to reinforce the sense of belonging to a group, and to underline cultural differentiation. This aspect also emerged during my digital ethnographic observation of online fora, where conversations about food seemed to reinforce Italians' sense of belonging to the diasporic community, and their differentiation from the host culture.

## **Food, collective and cultural identity, migration**

Food as a cultural element is often mobilised while interacting with someone else, in this case a broader community network, thus confirming what Morasso and Zittoun argued in their study on international mothers adjusting to life in London (2014). The authors reflected on how the presence of others who recognise the value and relevance of eating good and authentic food is a necessary component of migrants' cultural and collective identity (also Fonseca, 2016). This is further reinstated by Naidu and Nzuzi (2013) in their study on Sierra Leone migrants in Durban, for whom food not only 'marks' who they are, but also who they are not. Identity, in this respect, is not only personal but also social; it is constructed and maintained through processes of identification and the sharing of values and propositions that define group membership and sustain social cohesion. Greene and Cramer pointed out that food works as a "socialising mechanism by which we come to understand our cultures, our societies, and the groups to which we belong" (2011, p. xii; see also Ichijo and Ranta, 2016). Fischler (1988) emphasised the extent to which food and cuisine are at the centre of migrants' sense of collective belonging as they "mark their membership of a culture or a group by asserting the specificity of what they eat, or more precisely - but it amounts to the same thing - by defining the otherness, the difference of others" (:280). Consider the

following narrative as exemplary of how food narratives reveal episodes of in-group identification and of out-group differentiation:

The way we love our food is just different. Being at home, taking the time to prepare dinner rather than eating pre-packed meals or sandwiches, using fresh and non processed ingredients, this is what I'm talking about! It is something more spiritual, if you want, it is ingrained in our culture. I think Italians care more about food, as it reminds them of family, home. (S., female, student from Calabria, interview with the author).

Another respondent strongly emphasised that 'If you are not Italian, you simply cannot understand the variety of food we have. I'm from the South of Italy, and food is in my DNA. Think about soppressata (a dry salami), or mozzarella di bufala (buffalo mozzarella) for example. The variety, the genuinity of ingredients, its simplicity, it's just the best' (male, artist from Naples, interview with the author).

Interestingly, both online ethnography and interviews suggested that this sense of in-group membership appears stronger when confronted with the host community. Within the community, Italians manifest their culinary diversity as they appreciate Italy's culinary breadth and regional cuisines; every migrant is, in this respect, extremely

aware that recipes and ingredients vary from region to region, and that there is no such thing as a national cuisine. However, they do recognise themselves as members of a community of individuals who similarly love the genuinity of Italian food, the freshness of ingredients, the simplicity of dishes, and the centrality of proper food in response to and against the host culture, who simply cannot understand the relevance that food has for Italians, and how important it is to cook homemade, healthy meals. This argument reinforces what scholars have said about identity as being constituted by and in relation with difference (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). Here, food is a symbolic element where Italians' national distinctiveness from the host society is performed (Imilan, 2015; Gvion, 2009). In other words, food operates as a key cultural sign that structures migrants' identities and idealization of the other, but also as a 'biological essence' that belongs to Italians, and to Italians only. For Italians, Italian food tastes better, it is synonym of care, freshness, and quality; it is bounded to a particular context, to migrants' *saperi* (knowledge) and *sapori* (tastes, flavors).

Building from Naidu and Nzuza's research again, it seems that going through this collective 'awareness' of what Italians feel is lacking in the host country helps them to "bring the 'spirit of home' to their host spaces" (2013:196).

This is clear if we look at the centrality of food as a pattern of conversation among my respondents: there is nothing that attracts more opinionated feedback and comments within the online forum as food and foodways, whether it is in the form of suggesting

places where authentic Italian food can be bought or consumed; or in the form of promoting ‘foodie’ festivals and events, or as reference to the industry where many Italians work, especially at the beginning of their migration experience. **Italians share common longings for home food, tastes, smells and products that cannot possibly be replicated in London, where fresh ingredients seem impossible to find, or extremely expensive, thus mirroring similar experiences researched by Petridou in relation to Greek migrants (2001).**

It is here suggested that sharing memories about the food that was eaten back home, complaining about the price, freshness and genuinity of Italian ingredients in local supermarkets, Italians find a common linguistic code that I believe reinforces their sense of membership and belonging to the transnational community. As scholars have shown, food – and its ethnic and cultural symbolism – works as ‘an aesthetic, cultural and semiotic code’ in defining and strengthening group membership (Grew, 1999, in Ichijo and Ranta, 2016).

The symbolic and material power of food is also evident every time Italians gather together on culturally significant days such as *Ferragosto*, a national holiday that marks the feast of the Assumption and that is celebrated on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August. For Italians, this is the most important summer holiday, and every year the *Italians of London* community organises popular outdoors or indoor events where typical food such as pizza is served. In this respect, the food-based events organised by the community

throughout the year are exemplary of the extent to which food becomes a driver of socialisation and intimacy among migrants, who seem to renew their sense of collective and cultural identity every time ‘proper’ food is involved. The community is particularly active when it comes to organising events in newly opened Italian restaurants or places that have a distinct regional identity, such as Sicilian or Venetian restaurants. However, my research suggests that it does not particularly matter what kind of food is served; of course, for those migrants who come from the region ‘involved’ in the event is even more important, from an emotional point of view, to eat food that reminds them of home. That said, eating Italian food is sufficient to create a sense of belonging and attachment to the community – both online and offline - as the attendance (always hundreds of participants) to such events demonstrates. In fact, it is as for migrants food provides “a sense of self and familiarity, when encountering the vulnerabilities and uncertainties of a foreign host society” (Naidu and Nzuzza, 2013: 193).

What my research also suggests is that online interactions allow migrants, as members of the transnational community, to become active protagonists of what I call a *culinary transnational territory*, which complements the role that parents have when suggesting migrants how to prepare a dish in the traditional way, the way that it is ‘cooked at home’. It happens very often that certain dishes cannot be prepared, or do not have the same taste and smell as the ‘original’ because of the lack of traditional ingredients, or

because local ingredients do not have the same texture, smell and taste of the ones grown and bought back home. This is also recognised by Petridou (2001) in her research on Greek migrants, who similarly affirm that only ‘authentic’ ingredients can make a traditional recipe tasting like the original. The community then seems to work as a network of culinary support suggesting how to reinvent dishes by using local ingredients, thus contributing a “reservoir of practical knowledge and integration of that knowledge within the boundaries of the community” (Gvion, 2009:394).

One of my respondents explains this activity quite well:

I use double cream instead of panna da cucina, cheddar instead of mozzarella as it melts equally well, or chorizo instead of salame as the latter is quite expensive. I know it’s not ideal, but it works (G., male, kitchen porter from Milan).

It has to be said that not all Italians agree that this is a reasonable alternative to using fresh and authentic ingredients pertaining to Italian food culture, but this quote seems to provide evidence that food is a malleable resource where tradition and innovation can be mixed when convenient, and that the relationship between food and identity can also be understood through processes of hybridisation (see Kalcik, 1984; Bell and Gill, 1997). During their process of integration in a foreign environment, Italians become creative agents and narrators, adapting and negotiating traditions and affects.



Food practices are also fundamental to building social capital. Drawing from Portes' conceptualization of social capital as a resource (information or assistance) that migrants access through their social ties to other migrants (1998), I argue that food can not only become a resource of community building around food-based events and performances of cultural differentiation, but also a resource of community bonding. This is evident in the following quote:

Sometimes you feel alone, and there is nothing you can do because everyone lives so far away from you. So, I go online, and ask the community whether there is anyone living near me that wants to go out for a pizza, or to come over for a spaghetтата (L., male, student, online forum)

Food becomes an element of socialisation among identities that share or have gone through conditions of alienation and displacement, thus providing the ground for the development of offline friendships and acquaintances. This was described by Sprio (2013) and Fortier (2000) among others as a typical characteristic of the Italian migration before and after the Second World War. However, my research suggests that bonding with other members of the same diaspora is now facilitated by the use of online spaces, which allow a faster and more immediate sense of presence.

To conclude this section on the role of food for community building and bonding, I would like to now turn the attention to another typical aspect of international migration, which is the circulation of food parcels and remittances. Fonseca (2016) describes food remittances as critical to sustaining social networks for migrants and their families, as they contribute to the circulation of social capital and the mobilisation of material and symbolic resources (:168). On the one hand, food parcels can be understood as a form of transnational care circulation that connects home and host spaces while providing comfort and reasserting migrants' membership to a global network of reciprocity and support (Baldassar et al., 2016). Social capital is here performed as a web of norms, trust and obligations (Coleman, 1990) that follows transnational trajectories and flows (Zontini, 2004, 2006; Portes et al., 1999). Migrants' families are at the centre of these 'intra-familial care exchange' circuits as the food that is sent does not only have a practical sense, but also an emotional and symbolic impacts, allowing the transnational distribution of care and love across countries, "something that is particularly valuable for individuals confronted with a moving, unstable social context" (Finch, 1989 in Merla and Baldassar, 2016:280).

Interestingly, my research suggests that the circulation of care does not end once arrived in the migrant's home, but is reconstituted as intra-group care and belonging every time migrants invite other members of the community to share and eat together the food from home.

I've got some squaquerone (Italian fresh cream cheese typical of the Emilia Romagna region), lonza (cured pork loin) and prosciutto di parma. I was planning to prepare some piadina (a flatbread typical of the Emilia Romagna region) this weekend, who wants to come along to my place? Feel free to bring food and drinks. (S., from Emilia Romagna, forum)

I'm in! I'll bring my salsiccia al finocchio (fennel sausage) and some cheese as well. Can't wait! (G. from Sicily, online forum)

The quote demonstrates that consuming food is not only a practical matter that relates to migrants' sense of self, but becomes a reference for collective identities that recognise themselves as members of the same group, an emotional and symbolic vector that transfers its 'care potential' (Baldassar and Merla, 2014) from the family to the migrant, and from the migrant to the community he or she thinks they belong to. This statement reflects what Faist argued about food circuits and transnational communities, as they are 'connected by dense and strong social and symbolic ties over time across space to patterns of networks and circuits in two countries – based upon solidarity' (2000:196). Sutton emphasises this point further by arguing that parcels restore the world of migrants through the "sensory totality of the world at home" (2001:89). By

connecting home and host conditions of migration, Italians reassert their personal, cultural and collective identity through the consumption of traditional food artifacts (Fonseca, 2016:173)

## **Conclusions**

Food talks, practices of consumption and associated material activities through the Web are key factors in the reproduction of migrants' personal and collective identities. The article has suggested that food practices and narratives shape Italian diaspora in unique ways, affecting migrants' sense of self, their belonging to the transnational community of migrants, and facilitating their process of adjustment to the new place.

On the one hand, migrants' sense of self, which can experience episodes of alienation and displacement due to the loss of social structures that were once familiar, is stabilized through the technological re-enactment of well-known routines and habits including commensality and food preparation via Skype. On the other hand, the process of adjustment to a new place is facilitated by practices of community building and bonding around food-based offline events organised by the community *Italians of London* or by migrants themselves, and around online conversations where food emerges as an element of (trans)national identification and of cultural differentiation. The creation of a culinary transnational territory where migrants exchange crucial

information including where to source and buy ingredients, how to mix and match local flavors with original *saperi* and *sapori*, provide migrants with a collective identity, a place in the social structure, and a ground for handling their daily lives. The circulation of care, social capital, material and symbolic support online and offline represent interesting avenues for discussions on the relationship between food, migration, culture and identity. The article also intended to emphasise how engagements around food on social media can advance our understanding of the role of food practices in migrant communities. Further research is needed on the role of food as a site for online and offline community development and on immigrant food network. The consideration of networked technologies is and will be essential to an holistic and comprehensive overview of who contemporary migrants are, what they do on a daily basis, how they communicate and form global, local and transnational relationships.

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