The White Lotus TV Series Season 2: Deconstructing Italians Stereotypes

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Abstract

Modern mass media serve as both a "magic window" into the world and a "door" to new ideas. It is important to look at how the steady growth of media affects the way racial and cultural stereotypes are pushed forward. Stereotypes themselves can influence how people view facts and social events and one of many examples of stereotypes is Italian stereotypes. This study analyzes HBO's popular series, The White Lotus season two, employing Fairclough's model critical discourse analysis to deconstruct Italian stereotypes through the characters' portrayals. This study also examines the sociocultural aspect and physical appearances of the Italian characters portrayed by American television. The findings of this study show the physical portrayal of Italians mostly they have the same features and are known for their fashion sense and attention to appearance. Moreover, Italian characters are portrayed with speak loudly and having the urge to cause some disturbance. The last stereotype is quite expected but debatable, which is the portrayal of Italians being middle-class workers and mafia. This stereotype had some audience feeling disappointed and others pleased enough. Western films' mafia stereotypes could affect how people learn about the culture, and think all Italians are dangerous, poor, and do drugs. Mafias exist and should not define Italian identity, especially in mainstream media.

Keywords

critical discourse analysis
Italian stereotypes
The White Lotus season two

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Introduction

In this globalization era, television series as a part of the mass media hold a considerable amount of sway over people's perception of reality and significantly impact social life. The media's influence transcends the shaping of opinions and behavior patterns and encompasses aspects such as language, national culture, and the way individuals perceive reality. With its extensive reach, widespread accessibility, and high level of credibility among audiences, it can be inferred that the media holds a substantial power to mold the recipients' perception of reality (Ndiayea & Ndiayea, 2014). According to Thomas Harris (2003) in Ndiayea's study, modern mass media are both a "magic window" and a "door" that introduces new ideas to us. Thus, media growth along with ethnic and cultural stereotypes must be studied.

Stereotypes are the assumption that members of a group—such as those of the same gender, employment, racial or ethnic origin, or background—share one or more features or behaviors (Kay et al., 2015). Stereotypes can shape how people view facts and social events. People stereotype homogeneous outgroups more than heterogeneous ones (Ratliff & Nosek, 2011). Stereotypic attributions can also be affected by negativity bias (Baumeister et al., 2001). Italian stereotypes are one of many stereotypes in television and mass media.

Previous studies showed that there are still negative stereotypes of Italians on American-produced television (Brizzolara, 1980; Piersanti, 2019). Past media portrayals of Italians could negatively affect future generations' understanding of Italian culture. Italian stereotypes in 20th-century television series were yet unstudied. Today's generation needs current knowledge as the world evolves. Thus, this study deconstructed the portrayal of Italians in an American television series to determine if it still reflects reality or reflects new preconceptions. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) could achieve this goal since media influence takes over Italian image production. This study uses Norman Fairclough's CDA technique. CDA examines how society uses language and communication (Fairclough, 2013). There are three parts of analysis, which include text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice analysis.

The deconstruction of Italian stereotypes using Fairclough's CDA model is expected to present strong and accurate answers about Hollywood media's portrayal of Italian stereotypes and what happens in the real world, especially through The White Lotus season two. The second season of The White Lotus by HBO was chosen due to its engaging storyline and graphics, which contrasted different races and their people's (Italians and Americans) interactions and their issues set in the fictional White Lotus five-star resort chain in Sicily, Italy. Thus, this study revealed what The White Lotus season two portrayed as Italian stereotypes through fictitious characters living in the present day and whether they existed in actual life.

Method

The research being conducted was qualitative descriptive. Qualitative descriptive methods use qualitative data to describe a phenomenon in depth, according to Neergaard et al. (2009). This research initiative will collect textual data from The White Lotus' excerpt of characters' conversations iand images of Italian characters' appearances. The series' Italian character stereotypes were deconstructed using Fairclough's CDA.

The talks between the characters in The White Lotus, especially with Italians or when the White Lotus' guests brought up the subject of Italians, were transcribed. This is where the data came from. The information gathered from all seven episodes of season two of The White Lotus is easy to find on HBO GO or HBO MAX. Since this study used Fairclough's CDA for sociocultural practice analysis, there was also data from The White Lotus season two viewers' comments and media reviewers' critiques on the Rotten Tomatoes website. The data were displayed in the form of pictures.

The first step was to watch all of season two of The White Lotus all the way through. During this process, notes (Best and Kahn, 1998 in Muswazi and Nhamo, 2013) were taken on specific conversations and scenes that involved Italians and their explicit and implicit stereotypes. These conversations and scenes were listed in order so that Fairclough's model of critical discourse analysis could be used to study them later. In addition to books, news stories, academic journals, and online resources, there was a lot of information about the parts of the film being analyzed that were the focus. This helped the data collection process.

The study utilized Jones' characterization theory (1968) and Pickering and Hoeper's approach (1981) to evaluate physical features and characteristics, such as nose shape, hair color, and eyebrows. It also assessed the character's fashion taste, emphasizing the significance of outward appearances and outfit choices in conveying attributes and attitudes. Fairclough's model of CDA (2013) was used, examining text (spoken or written), discourse practice, and sociocultural practice. The study focused on production and consumption variables, analyzing scriptwriters, series directors, and audience feedback on online platforms and social media Twitter. Sociocultural practice was also examined, focusing on intertextual and interdiscursive elements. The research aimed to provide an overview of diverse Italian life and its people.

Results

Physical Appearances of Italian Characters Portrayed in The White Lotus 2

There are six Italian characters of The White Lotus season two; Valentina (the hotel manager), Lucia Greco and Mia (locals/sex workers), Isabella and Rocco (the resort concierge), and lastly, Giuseppe (the lounge singer and pianist). Below are pictures of some Italian characters in the series to show their physical features and appeareances.

Figure 1. Valentina's physical appearances

Italians share Valentina's big eyebrows, sharp nose, black hair, and light skin. Valentina, a five-star hotel executive, dresses professionally in a suit and matching in-shirt. Valentina's long hair and makeup make her The White Lotus's representative.

Figure 2. Lucia Greco's appearances

Lucia's short black hair characterizes her. Lucia, unlike Valentina, wore lots of cosmetics to attract wealthy White Lotus guests. To show off her form, Lucia wore short, exposing clothes. Lucia's shopping visits with Mia after work showed her confidence and knowledge of luxury brands.

Figure 3. Rocco's and Giuseppe's appearances

Rocco, like many Western males, had a tall, muscular physique that suited his job in the hospitality industry, as did Giuseppe. As a hotel concierge, Rocco wore formal attire consisting of uniform colors and a variety of suit ensembles with coordinating undershirts. In addition to wearing suits, Giuseppe sometimes accessorizes with patterned scarves.

Characteristics of The Italians in The White Lotus 2

Text Analysis

This section analyzes vocabulary and grammar in text data, including dialogue transcripts. This analysis contains 37 dialogues from The White Lotus's second season. Characters' Italian stereotypes were used to examine the dialogue. Simpson et al. (2019) word choice and metaphorical usage theory support this investigation.

Italian characters are stereotyped as doing low-wage jobs with little flexibility and little power in the language. These characters often believe in the "American Dream," which holds that working in the US makes one successful. This dialogue below referenced that stereotype.

1. Vocabulary Analysis

This technique relies on word analysis to reveal ideological positioning, social practice context, and most importantly, preconceptions and bias. This examination could reveal Italian stereotypes and how The White Lotus represented Italians in season two.

The conversation began when two local best friends, Lucia and Mia, sneaked into the luxury resort through the lobby but were immediately halted by Valentina, the resort manager who happened to be at the front desk.

> Valentina: **(1)** “Excuse me, girls? Hey!” **(2)** “Can I help you?”
>
> Lucia: **(3) “We’re here to meet a guest.”**
>
> Valentina: **(4)** “What’s the name?”
>
> Lucia: **(5)** “He’s American.”
>
> Valentina: **(6)** “We have many Americans here… name?”
>
> Lucia: **(7)** “His name is Tom Cruise.”
>
> Valentina: **(8) “The hotel is for guests only.” (9)** “So please Antonio… escort these ladies out.” **(10) “I know you… I know why you’re here.” (11)** “Not in my hotel.”
>
> Lucia: **(12)** “Jealous?” **(13)** “You don’t know what pleasure is.” **(14)** “It’s written on your face!”
>
> Valentina: **(15)** “At least I don’t have sex for money.”
>
> Lucia: **(16)** “Who’d pay money to have sex with you?” **(17)** “Uptight, ugly bitch!”

Lucia and Mia were denied entry to the five-star resort because Valentina and the hotel personnel recognized them. Valentina's "The hotel is for guests only" implied that only registered guests paid for the hotel's room and facilities. Valentina spoke to Lucia and Mia with a straightened upper body, both arms folded in front of her

chest, glaring, and a serious expression, implying she was powerful and demanding. Lucia and Mia, who were slouching and covering their faces, looked suspicious. Valentina quickly concluded that Lucia and Mia were "intruders" who were trying to do something improper and would likely annoy other hotel guests. The two girls avoided eye contact with her, hesitated to answer Valentina's inquiry about the American guest they wished to meet, and lied by naming the most famous American actor, hoping Valentina would believe them.

> After Lucia sneaked into Dominic Di Grasso's hotel room, they had another dialogue that stereotyped the Italian character's poor employment.
>
> Lucia: **(18)** “I went down to the dock when your boat arrived.” **(19)** “I wanted to see what you looked like.”
>
> Dominic: **(20)** “What'd you think?”
>
> Lucia: **(21)** “Very handsome.”
>
> Dominic: **(22)** “Thank you.
>
> Lucia: **(23)** “And you're from Los Angeles.” **(24) “It's amazing. I always dreamt of going to Los Angeles.” (25)** “It is my dream.” **(26)** “Uh, I mean...”
>
> Dominic: **(27)** “You should go.”
>
> Lucia: **(28)** “I don't have the money.”

The discussion regarding Lucia's desire to move to Los Angeles demonstrated that the United States is viewed as a country with everything, a location that can provide a promising job, among other things. As a result, many citizens of other nations migrate to their native countries to improve their living conditions. Lucia, who desired to relocate to Los Angeles, may have believed that her current location lacked the resources necessary to meet her needs and provide her with a fulfilling existence. Unemployment was/is a prevalent social and economic issue in her neighborhood. The term "dream" in "It's unbelievable. Lucia's statement, "I've always dreamed of going to Los Angeles," implies that going to Los Angeles or America is such an improbable desire that it has a low probability of occurring. Then, Lucia expressed sadness that she lacked the necessary funds. She already knew and understood the factors, so she responded accordingly. One of these factors is her heritage and the circumstances of the area where she grew up, where unemployment has always existed. The Italians there are required to work regardless of their occupation, as it is more important to consider and remember that they must provide for their families in any manner possible. Despite her limitations, Lucia engaged in prostitution but continued to work.

2. Grammar Analysis

Grammar analysis helps CDA vocabulary analysis by revealing how language is ordered to convey meaning and power. Vocabulary and grammar can be used to analyze the intricate ways language influences conversation and sustains or challenges power dynamics and ideologies (Fairclough, 1992). Grammatical

analysis covers various topics. This section analyzes The White Lotus season two's transitivity, mood (mode), and modality of Italian stereotypes.

In transitivity analysis, there were three instances that were found and looked at as transitive sentences. Sentence (3) "**We're here to meet a guest**." is an example of transitive data and (10) "**I know you...I know what brought you here**." Even though the second sentence is more complicated because the direct object is a subordinate clause, the first two sentences have the same structure: an agent or actor and a transitive verb followed by a direct object. There are four data sentences identified as being intransitive. One of the data discovered and classified as intransitive is sentence number (1), spoken by Valentina: "**Excuse me, ladies? Hey!**". The interjection "Excuse me" is used to politely obtain attention or ask forgiveness. There is no transitive verb here. Lastly, there are zero data categorized as ditransitive. As mentioned by Fairclough, this transitivity analysis emphasizes agency, which refers to who is responsible for actions, causality, and responsibility. This TV series made agency, causality, and responsibility explicit for important activities.

Mood in English refers to a variety of syntactic and semantic distinctions conveyed through various verb paradigms, including the indicative (the default form), subjunctive, and imperative. There are 12 indicatives, zero subjunctives, and one imperative after analysis. There are several examples of indicative sentences in sentence (24) "**It's incredible. I've always wanted to visit Los Angeles.**" and in sentence (28) "**I don't have the money.**" In the meantime, the imperative data are contained in a single sentence: "**So please Antonio… escort these ladies out**." Even when expressing aspirations or imagining future events, Italians prioritize factual communication, as evidenced by their frequent use of indicative sentences.

According to Fairclough (1992), modality reveals the perspective of the speaker, indicating their viewpoint on the veracity of a statement or the morality of a proposal. There is one data result categorized as modality for the phrase (2) "**Can I help you?**" The modal verb "can" express the capacity or permission to do something. It indicates the speaker's willingness or capacity to assist. The modal verb "can" imply the ability or capacity of the speaker (Valentina) to offer assistance to the arriving guests (Lucia and Mia).

The presence of the modal auxiliary "can" imply a decision-making process. The meaning of "can" relates to the assessment of one's capabilities or the practicability of an action.

Discourse Practice Analysis

The production aspect analysis examined director-writer Mike White's background and first thoughts. Mike White is a 20-year entertainment veteran. He created School of Rock (2003), Year of the Dog (2007), Enlightened (2011-2013), and his most recent accomplishment, The White Lotus (2021-) (IMDb, n.d.). Mike White is known for his humor, drama, and social criticism. He wrote character-driven stories about complex emotions and social issues.

Mike White wrote season one of The White Lotus about class, wealth, privilege, and race. In season two, Mike explored adult intimacy and sexual politics. In 2022, he described to NPR why he developed the first original notion, which was about power and "player" in business. After inspecting the hotel in Taormina, Italy, he decided the issues were inappropriate.

> "I felt that perhaps we ought to refrain from repeating the same concept and that sex remains such a rich topic to look into," he said. I was motivated by the location." (Gross, 2022).

Italy is a popular romantic destination because it is so historic. Italy's outstanding reputation comes from its renowned history and culture, scenic landscapes, and romantic legends like Romeo and Juliet (EasyMilano, 2023). Mike White probably considered these elements before blaming the plot on Italy's romantic reputation.

The director's casting of Italian characters, such as hotel staff and villagers, was similarly simpler than that of American characters, who dominate all episodes. The Italian actors were unfamiliar to viewers because the second season featured new characters. Mike White did not want the audience to see a similarity between the parts played by Italian actors and actresses in his movie and those in their past efforts, or simply to introduce fresh Italian characters. This Western TV network and streaming site aired his series; therefore, his intended audience was mostly Americans. Audiences were intended to focus on character relationships, the series' social messages, and the actors' acting. For The White Lotus season two, Mike White played stereotypical Italian characters. This series showed Italy's prejudices. They also knew Mike White directed and wrote The White Lotus, which examines American social behavior.

Consumption is the second perspective. On Rotten Tomatoes, viewers' thoughts and opinions of Italian characters and their characteristics in the scenes can be seen. The site has *Top Critic* and *All Audience* reviews. *Top Critic* ones are usually affiliated with recognized publications, websites, or broadcast channels that affect the cinema industry and public opinion of movies. Some *Top Critics* noted the compelling TV experiences from the second season of The White Lotus, the perfect cast, especially the Italians and their character development in each episode, and the funny dark plot story with its twists written and directed by Mike White in beautiful Sicily, Italy. These indicate that *Top Critic* viewers overlooked Italian cultural and racial preconceptions (Figure 4). Mediaversity Reviews' writer also expresses unhappiness with the Italian character writing in The White Lotus season two (Figure 5). From season one in Hawaii to season two in Sicily, director Mike White has skillfully wrapped the series with stunning cinematography. The story's focus on American hotel guests' relationships made it easier for viewers to miss the series' Italian stereotypes.

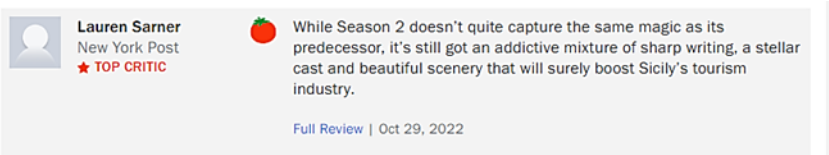

Figure 4. New York Post review on Rotten Tomatoes

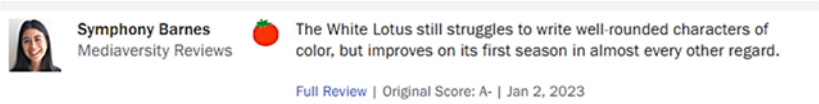

Figure 5. Mediadiversity review on Rotten Tomatoes

Sociocultural Analysis Related to The Current Condition

This analysis examined the film's stereotypical Italian roles, including lower middle-class employees and mafia members, predominantly men. Even though the series is about rich American guests' holiday in Italy, the Italian characters' presence throughout the season and one Italian character's brief mafia link (Niccolò) cannot be ignored. The media's portrayal of criminals and gangsters has led to the belief that entire ethnic communities are linked to organized crime, particularly the mafia. It's important to note that such depictions don't fully reflect these communities' diversity.

Popular media caricatures Italian-American men as gangsters or street toughs. Italian-American women are often characterized as seductive and strong or controlling Italian mamas. These misconceptions have shaped society's view of Italians and reinforced stereotypes (Reich, 2011). He said that being Italian does not make a person, especially a lady, loud, obnoxious, or argumentative. Films have perpetuated this prejudice by showing female characters acting this way.

Discussion

The Italian characters in The White Lotus season two look alike. Dark hair, sharp nose, and heavy eyebrows. Rocco and Giuseppe have tall bodies and big shoulders, while Valentina, Lucia, Mia, and Isabella have styled hair and lots of cosmetics. Piersanti (2019) found a pattern that Italian women in American films sometimes wear tight dresses, high heels, accessories, large hair, and cosmetics. Lucia and Mia are outstanding examples of this. Valentina and Isabella, however, were well-dressed, and wore heels, jewelry, and makeup. Rocco and Giuseppe choose serious style with a variety of suit colors, casual polished shoes, and accessories like patterned scarves, especially Giuseppe. The White Lotus season two's Italian men's and women's clothes generally reflect their occupation and personality.

Piersanti's (2019) and Brizzolara's (1980) study matches the series' Italian characters' personalities. In this series' vocabulary study, the Italian characters' first meeting was loud and attracted attention. Valentina's power to expel Lucia and Mia from the hotel suggests they're troublemakers. Valentina first admonished them since she observed their attire and was suspicious of their behavior upon entering the hotel. All the Italian characters, notably the hotel employee, are middle-class workers, therefore they are uptight and serious but presentable. Lucia and Mia, prostitutes, are considered lower-class laborers. Thus, the many clothes they had to wear to impress the wealthy American hotel guests. This study continues to discuss Italian fashion because Harper and Daphne were amazed by the pants Italian men still wear. Italian characters are always careful to dress well and seem good in public. Europe is renowned as "the Mecca" for fashion trends and huge companies, especially in Paris, London, and Milan, which may encourage Italians to dress well as self-expression. These cities become fashion leaders through creating fashion houses, couturiers, and luxury brands. Europeans have also valued their

appearance. "Dressing for the occasion" is strongly ingrained in European culture, reflecting status, behavior, and cultural norms. European (and other) countries and social groups have different fashion tastes. The above factors have shaped Europe's fashion image. Finally, The White Lotus season two's Italian characters' mafia ties. Since the 1970s, American films have given Italian-American characters a mafia flavor. Mafia repentance has acquired a negative caricature. According to Brazzolara (1980), this mafia caricature in media and cinema led consumers to believe that Italians are immature, hypersensitive, and willfully promoting illegal activities. He stated the media portrays many Italian Americans as being persuaded, lured, or blackmailed into crime. Italian mafia characteristics are dangerous, arrogant, confrontational, and violent (Piersanti, 2019). The one Italian character (Niccolo) who had a contact with mafia groups only appeared in the last two episodes, which was unexpected but inevitable because the series is set in Sicily, Italy. In the series, Niccolo supplied an exclusive party with drugs and carried a gun. This series' mafia character doesn't wear all-black or leather jackets, coats, or suits. Niccolo wore a bright shirt and black jacket, making it hard to discern if he was a criminal or a local.

Fairclough's model (2013) and Halliday's theory investigate transitivity, mood, and modality in grammatical analysis. Major and Crystal (2008) define transitivity as include intransitive verbs. They said that language's three main moods are indicative, imperative, and subjunctive, and modals like may, might, will, should, can, and can't are employed to indicate modal distinctions. Fairclough does not categorize vocabulary. Simpson et al. (2019) say phrasing and metaphorical use can evaluate vocabulary. Due to the writer's perspective and interpretation, vocabulary analysis might be open-ended. Italian characters in The White Lotus season two prefer intransitive statements to transitive ones. Four intransitive and three transitives were classified from dialogues. Fairclough (1992) and Halliday's grammar theory agree that intransitive clauses without a direct object don't need to describe the recipient of the action. Thus, including more intransitive clauses may minimize the focus on the actors. People's language may emphasize events rather than agents' responsibilities. Fausey and Boroditsky (2008) found that language affects causality. English speakers employed more agentive language than Spanish speakers and remembered unintentional event agents better. Fausey and Boroditsky again argued that Spanish speakers had a poorer memory than English speakers since they recognized the agents of planned occurrences (for which their language would define the agent) exactly as well. The analysis of textual data from The White Lotus's second season's character talks supports Fausey and Boroditsky's views. Italian and Spanish speakers in the TV series used more intransitive verbs than transitive verbs.

Italian characters utilized 12 extra indicatives and one imperative mood data in their dialogue. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) found that the indicative mood, rather than the subjunctive or imperative moods, is used to directly convey information or ask questions. Italians convey their opinions in a matter-of-fact manner without using hypotheticals or conditional statements. In the series, Italians used modality with one data. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), this modality analysis indicates Valentina's willingness to help and request for consent. To conclude, language choices may indicate major differences in how content, role relationships, and information flow are created in different settings due to distinct registers. Each of Halliday's grammar's linguistic systems allows an in-depth examination of a specific area of meaning in the language, while measuring the linguistic decisions that express various meanings discloses something about how the text implies what it does and how it engages in social life. In this context, we identify the communication differences between Italians and non-Italians.

The director-writer, Mike White, intends to focus season two on adult intimacy and complex relationships, as revealed through discourse practice. When Mike White came to view and schedule the shoot, the hotel had a romantic aura, therefore he had to choose that plot. Italy has traditionally been connected with romance. Rotten Tomatoes audiences evaluated The White Lotus season two well. The director's capture and presentation of Sicily's spectacular natural views may enhance tourism in Italy, especially Sicily and the surrounding regions. Unfortunately, certain online audiences were disappointed by the bad portrayal of Italian characters, which perpetuates negative stereotypes.

The sociocultural analysis studied Italian-American films' mafia depictions. Present-day filmmakers can use mafia themes without alteration because real-life mafia groups operate in particular places. The local government's efforts to reduce mafia-related crime are hampered by the mass media's frequent presentation of Italian characters. Additionally, apprehending mafia gangsters is difficult for law police. Their actions make society feel uneasy and insecure, raising fears about the spread of crime. Today, audiences actively discourage Western filmmakers from promoting unfavorable stereotypes of specific nationalities, such as Italian people and culture. This involvement promotes inclusive narratives that appropriately depict diverse races. As children and future generations consume more media depicting characters from diverse ethnic groups, this phenomenon can dramatically affect their mental processes and cultural understanding.

Conclusion

The White Lotus season two was analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine ethical and racial portrayal. Character looks, traits, and societal elements were examined. The major goal was to determine if American films from this era depict Italian stereotypes through characters.The Italian characters in The White Lotus season two have dark hair, sharp noses, thick eyebrows, lofty height, and strong shoulders. They are middle-class employees, outspoken, forthright, and passionate about their appearance. The series features Italy's oldest and most notorious mafia gang. Some viewers were upset with these clichés, and sociocultural variables relating to the characters' portrayal could have been more diversified. Italian mafia groups' lengthy history and broad network have impacted vintage Italian-American films, including The White Lotus season two. Western cinematic preconceptions of Italians as mafia, dangerous, and involved in drugs and gambling may hurt how people learn about the culture. It's vital to assess if these preconceptions survive or if new ones emerge, as some have since the 1970s.

This study advises readers to advocate for media portrayals of underrepresented communities. Communicate with media producers, directors, and authors about stereotypes and promote more varied and authentic portrayals. Since this study had difficulties in the aspect formation of discourse practice analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in Italian stereotypes analysis is suggested for further research. Industry analysis, such as assessing customer preferences, manufacturing hurdles, and creative judgments that affect Italian depiction, is an appealing research field. Another interesting method is to compare the series' portrayal of Italians to Italian and foreign media.

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