

Exploring Croatian-American Cultural Identity and Participation

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Abstract

Cultural identity and participation play a critical role in the maintenance of cultural heritage. This convergent mixed-method study examines how Croatian Americans perceive their Croatian cultural identity and participate in Croatian culture. Exploring these dimensions offers insight into how culture shapes and sustains communities. Participants included 32 self-identified Croatian Americans. Data included a closed- and open-ended survey on Croatian cultural identity and cultural participation. Closed-ended responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and open-ended responses through content analysis. Among later generations, language use, religious practice, and holiday customs were reported less frequently, while food, music, and genealogy remained common forms of participation. The analysis revealed three major themes: ancestral roots and historical narratives, symbolic ethnicity and cultural distinctiveness, and family and community. The findings highlight pathways for sustaining and revitalizing Croatian-American cultural engagement.

Keywords

Croatian American, Croatian values, Croatian culture, cultural participation, cultural identity, ancestry, genealogy

Introduction

The United States was a popular destination for many Croatians who sought to emigrate to other countries, especially in the late 1800s and early 1900s due to economic, social, and political issues.¹ There was a large wave of Croatian immigrants in the United States in the late 1890s until the beginning of World War I.² Croatian immigrants shared some experiences and cultural characteristics with other Slavic groups, but they also had distinct traditions, religious rituals, and other cultural practices. For descendants of these immigrants, Croatian identity and cultural participation may be expressed differently than for their first or even second-generation ancestors.

Despite the growing body of literature on diaspora and ethnic identity, gaps remain in understanding the specific dynamics of smaller groups like Croatian Americans. The majority of existing scholarship on Croatian migration has centered on earlier waves of immigrants (pre-WWII and post-WWII cohorts). These studies center on settlement in ethnic communities where immigrants preserved cultural traditions, religion, and social life even while living in the dominant society. Additionally, studies on migration often focus on how the immigrant population engages in the host culture or community.³ Immigrant or diaspora groups can have identities that include both traditions from their homeland as well as influences from their new country.⁴ According to Levy, “Ultimately, the study of diasporas provides a critical lens through which to explore broader questions of religious identity, belonging, and cultural continuity.”⁵ Research has also focused specifically on the Croatian language among the Croatian diaspora.⁶ Examining the Croatian-American diaspora provides a unique opportunity to focus on a distinct cultural group, especially in comparison to larger more extensively researched immigrant groups in America.

This study addresses these gaps by qualitatively examining Croatian identity and participation as well as quantitative data on cultural activities among self-identified Croatian

¹ Central State Office for Croats Abroad, *Croatian Diaspora in the United States of America* (2025).

² Richard T. Schaefer, “Croatian Americans,” in *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society* (Sage Publications, 2008).

³ Luis Eduardo Guarnizo, Alejandro Portes, and William J. Haller, “Assimilation and Transnationalism: Determinants of Transnational Political Action among Contemporary Migrants,” *American Journal of Sociology* 108, no. 6 (2003): 1211–1248, <https://doi.org/10.1086/375195>.

⁴ Elan Ben-Lulu, “Celebrating Fifty Years of Jewish Pride: An Autoethnographic View on Queerness, Diaspora and Homeland in an American Gay Synagogue,” *Religions* 15, no. 5 (2024).

⁵ Ariella Levy, “Diasporas and Religious Identities: Insights from Anthropological Perspectives,” *Religions* 15, no. 11 (2024): 1381.

⁶ Jim Hlavac and Diana Stolac, eds., *Diaspora Language Contact: The Speech of Croatian Speakers Abroad* (Walter de Gruyter, 2021).

Americans. By exploring the experiences of Croatian Americans through a mixed-methods lens, this study provides valuable insights into how cultural identity and participation are maintained across generations. Various aspects of Croatian culture participation are explored (e.g., genealogical research, heritage travel, consumption of food, music, etc.). Furthermore, this study examines the practical importance of Croatian cultural experiences and identity that may be beneficial to Croatian cultural groups, scholars of diaspora and immigrant studies, and educators of Croatian language and culture.

Data were collected via a survey comprising open-ended questions on cultural identity and values, and closed-ended questions on participation frequency and demographics. Findings add to the body of literature on Croatian American identity and broader diaspora studies by highlighting how cultural practices sustain heritage in a globalized context. The purpose of this mixed-methods study is to explore how Croatian Americans perceive their Croatian cultural identity and how they describe their engagement in Croatian culture. Moreover, it seeks to examine the most common forms of Croatian cultural participation among Croatian Americans.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do Croatian Americans describe their Croatian cultural identity in terms of personal meaning and connection to their heritage?
2. What aspects of Croatian culture do Croatian Americans value the most?
3. What are the most common forms of Croatian cultural participation among Croatian Americans, and how frequently are these activities engaged in annually?

Literature Review

Croatian Emigration

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the United States witnessed a large wave of immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. According to Mlinarić et al., 350,000 to 450,000 Croats immigrated to the United States between the 1880s and the beginning of World War I.⁷ There were myriad push and pull factors that contributed to their departure. Croatia was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. There was also a reduction in agricultural and industrial output, increasing debt, and political as well as religious tensions.⁸

⁷ Dubravka Mlinarić et al., "Croatian Migration History and the Challenges of Migrations To- day," Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies, January 2014.

⁸ Ivan Čizmić, "Emigration and Emigrants from Croatia between 1880 and 1980," *GeoJournal* 38, no. 4 (1996): 431–436.

Major pull factors on the U.S. side included rapid industrialization and more abundant opportunities for financial growth. After World War I, Croatian immigration continued but gradually reduced over time. By the start of World War II, the United States was no longer the primary immigration destination for Croatians.

In the early years of immigration, many young men traveled to the United States alone to pay off debts and support their families back at home.⁹ Common forms of employment included mining, factory work, and shipyard work. As time progressed, more women and extended family members joined the men. Croatian communities started to rise in large, industrial cities including Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Chicago;¹⁰ additionally, the state of Pennsylvania attracted many Croatians due to the opportunities in coal mining, steel mills, and manufacturing.¹¹

Support organizations, especially fraternal unions, helped Croatians develop a sense of community support in the United States. Croatians also created fraternal unions to provide financial support and host Croatian cultural events to better preserve the culture; there was also a focus on improving ethnic solidarity.¹² Many were devout Catholics; thus, religion played a crucial role in creating cultural unity and brought Croatians together. This was also a way to distinguish Croatians from other Slavic ethnic groups.¹³ Civic and religious organizations played a central role in the lives of many Croatians living in the United States. Furthermore, family bonds have played a critical role in Croatian diaspora groups.¹⁴ Slavic immigrants were often portrayed as inferior compared to Western Europeans.¹⁵ The education system in the United States further perpetuated these biases.¹⁶

Although Croatian immigrants built valuable support systems, they still faced myriad challenges. Many could not read and write, which resulted in many working in unskilled labor

⁹ Čizmić, "Emigration and Emigrants."

¹⁰ Susan Carter, "The Geopolitics of Diaspora," *Area* 37, no. 1 (2005): 54–63.

¹¹ Scott N. Duryea, "Genuinely American: Croatian-American Race, Manhood, and Nationalism in Postwar Pittsburgh," *Studies in Ethnicity Nationalism* 13, no. 2 (2013): 138–157.

¹² Ivan Čizmić, *History of the Croatian Fraternal Union of America, 1894–1994* (Golden Market- ing, 1994); George J. Prpić, *Croatian Immigrants in America* (Philosophic Library, 1971).

¹³ Val Colic-Peisker, *The Croatian Diaspora: Transnationalism, Class, and Identity* (University of Illinois Press, 2008); Ivana Djuric, "The Croatian Diaspora in North America: Identity, Ethnic Solidarity, and the Formation of a 'Transnational National Community,'" *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 17, no. 1 (2003): 113–129.

¹⁴ Jasna Čapo, "Croatian Migrant Families: Local Incorporation, Culture, and Identity," *Geneal- ogy* 6, no. 2 (2022): 51.

¹⁵ Joseph S. Roucek, "The Image of the Slav in U.S. History and in Immigration Policy," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 28, no. 1 (1969): 29–48.

¹⁶ Roucek, "Image of the Slav."

jobs.¹⁷ Slavic immigrants often faced severe discrimination and were pressured to assimilate into the mainstream American culture. Immigration declined significantly after World War I, due to restrictive U.S. laws like the National Origins Act of 1924.¹⁸ Many Croatian Americans endeavored to show their loyalty to the new homeland, America.¹⁹ According to Tomo Mrkonja (Tom Murphy), a Croatian immigrant, who shared his experiences in an interview about his life as a coal miner in Southwestern Pennsylvania:

*We lived in 26 different places while I was growing up. Pap sometimes felt that it would be easier someplace else. It didn't cost anything to move. The new company you went to was glad to get a man. Workers were needed so bad. The companies were desperate. That's the reason we moved so often.*²⁰

Tomo also mentioned working with other ethnic groups and usually six days per week.²¹ Tomo was given an American name “Tom” to better assimilate into the mainstream American culture. Although every Croatian immigrant had their own stories to tell, many were filled with hardship and resilience, which was evident in Tomo’s interviews. The Croatian American Cultural Center established an oral history project to document the experiences of Croatian Americans.²² These stories, like those of Tomo, focus on the experiences of Croats in the homeland and other countries including the United States.

Cultural Participation

Cultural participation has been broadly defined as involvement in activities that expand cultural knowledge, support identity, and provide opportunities for self-expression.²³ Participation in cultural activities offers personal and social benefits, including the development of collective cultural values.²⁴ Such participation may take both active forms and more passive forms.²⁵ Eurobarometer includes a list of cultural activities including visiting the theater, painting, singing, listening to music, and dancing.²⁶ Determining what counts as cultural participation is

¹⁷ Schaefer, “Croatian Americans.”

¹⁸ United States House of Representatives, “The Immigration Act of 1924,” February 2, 2020.

¹⁹ Duryea, “Genuinely American.”

²⁰ Phil Ruth and Kenneth J. Basalik, *Discovering Dunlap: An Archaeological Investigation of a Short-Lived Coal-and-Coke Company Town in Fayette County, Pennsylvania* (Cultural Heritage Research Services, Inc., 2008), 34.

²¹ Ruth and Basalik, *Discovering Dunlap*.

²² Croatian American Cultural Center, *Oral Histories* (2025).

²³ UNESCO, *Measuring Cultural Participation: Framework for Cultural Statistics Handbook 2* (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012).

²⁴ Council of Europe, *Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe*, 20th ed. (Council of Europe Publishing, 2017).

²⁵ UNESCO, *Measuring Cultural Participation*.

²⁶ Eurobarometer, *Cultural Access and Participation* (2013).

not always straightforward, since the definition of relevant activities can differ across groups and contexts.²⁷

Morrone emphasizes that surveys of cultural participation should be adapted to reflect the specific practices of the cultural group being studied.²⁸ For diaspora populations in particular, cultural practices often include language use, food traditions, holiday celebrations, music, or connections to ancestral homelands. In the Croatian American culture, participation may involve cooking traditional foods, learning about Croatian history, displaying symbols, or attending festivals organized by Croatian fraternal or cultural organizations. Tailoring survey questions to these culturally specific activities allows for a more accurate assessment of how Croatian Americans maintain and express their cultural heritage. A cultural expert was consulted when constructing questions for this particular study on Croatian-American cultural participation and identity.

Cultural Identity

Identity is a person's concept of self.²⁹ Cultural identity refers to how individuals understand themselves in relation to a cultural group. Moreover, it can include the impact of values, practices, and shared heritage.³⁰ It may function as both a personal identity marker and a form of group belonging.³¹ Heritage, family traditions, and intergenerational transmission play important roles in shaping cultural identity, particularly for diaspora populations.³²

Individuals may also have more than one identity and can be connected to various groups.³³ A term similar to cultural identity is ethnic identity, which centers on the sense of belonging within a specific ethnic group.³⁴ Prior research also highlighted the importance of

²⁷ Catherine Murray, "Making Sense of Cultural Participation," *Cultural Trends* 14, no. 2 (2005): 105–120.

²⁸ Annalisa Morrone, *Guidelines for Measuring Cultural Participation* (2006).

²⁹ George A. Akerlof and Rachel E. Kranton, "Economics and Identity," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 115, no. 3 (2000): 715–753.

³⁰ Seth J. Schwartz, Byron L. Zamboanga, and Robert S. Weisskirch, "Broadening the Study of the Self: Integrating the Study of Personal Identity and Cultural Identity," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2, no. 2 (2008): 635–651.

³¹ Dora S. Dien, "The Evolving Nature of Self-Identity across Four Levels of History," *Human Development* 43, no. 5–6 (2000): 290–310.

³² Marshall H. Segall, *Human Behavior in Global Perspective: An Introduction to Cross-Cultural Psychology* (Pergamon Press, 1986).

³³ Daniel Naujoks, "Diasporic Identities: Reflections on Transnational Belonging," *Diaspora Studies* 3, no. 1 (2010): 1–21.

³⁴ Gilad S. Epstein and Odelia Heizler, "Ethnic Identity: A Theoretical Framework," *IZA Journal of Migration* 4, no. 1 (2015): 9.

various factors in the formation of cultural identity including acculturation, collectivism versus individualism, and family or community networks.³⁵

Over the centuries, Croatia was influenced by various external powers, including the Roman Empire, the Venetian Republic, periods of Ottoman occupation in inland regions, and the Habsburg Monarchy.³⁶ The country is also divided into distinct regions; these include Dalmatia, Istria, Slavonia, and Zagorje. They each have unique traditions, dialects, cuisines, and practices that contribute to its cultural richness. Ethnologists often describe Croatia as a “meeting point” of different cultures with overlapping layers of influence. As Čapo explains,

*In a cultural sense, the location at the meeting point resulted in the openness and inclusiveness of Croatian culture and society. Namely, ethnographic data shows that Croatian regional cultures interacted with broader European and other cultural regions, and received, integrated and transferred influences – which was enriching for all cultures included. Therefore, regardless of the origin of an aspect of Croatian culture, everything that citizens of Croatia practise today – regardless of their ethnicity (whether they are Croats or members of an ethnic minority such as Serbian, Roma, Slovak, Czech, Hungarian, and German) makes up the Croatian culture.*³⁷

Within the Croatian national context, cultural identity can be complex, especially in light of recent ethnic tensions in the Balkans. According to Goulding and Domic,

*An intense sense of history is deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the Croatian people. War, ethnic rivalries and the fight for identity have made it so. In societies that have undergone such turmoil the reification of history and its symbolic meaning goes beyond national identification, it permeates the very essence of selfhood and cannot be divorced from the prevailing economic, political and social conditions.*³⁸

For Croatian Americans who have long been separated from the homeland of their ancestors, these deeper and more complicated ascended aspects of culture may not be as transparent. However, these complexities need to be factored in when discussing Croatian cultural identity.

There are an estimated 1,200,000 Croats and their descendants presently living in the United States. Several American cities have sizeable Croatian populations including Chicago,

³⁵ Schwartz, Zamboanga, and Weisskirch, “Broadening the Study of the Self.”

³⁶ Jasna Čapo, “Croatian Migrant Families: Local Incorporation, Culture, and Identity,” *Genealogy* 6, no. 2 (2022): 51.

³⁷ Čapo, “Croatian Migrant Families,” 51.

³⁸ Christina Goulding and Dino Domic, “Heritage, Identity and Ideological Manipulation: The Case of Croatia,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 36, no. 1 (2009): 85–102.

St. Louis, Detroit, San Pedro, and San Jose; furthermore, there is a large presence of Croatians in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Furthermore, there are distinct Croatian communities in other parts of the United States including Strawberry Hills, Kansas,³⁹ and Hoboken, New Jersey.⁴⁰

Within the Croatian context, cultural identity has historically been influenced by immigration, adaptation, and preservation of traditions across generations. Earlier waves of immigrants often relied on Catholic parishes, community organizations, and language retention as key markers of identity.⁴¹ Today, Croatian American identity may be expressed in a variety of ways, from practicing customs such as music, food, and religious traditions to honoring ancestral stories and maintaining transnational ties to Croatia. For later generations, identity may not always be tied to fluency in the Croatian language, but cultural belonging continues to be reinforced through symbolic practices, intergenerational narratives, and community participation. Figure 1 is a map of counties in the United States based on Croatian Ancestry.

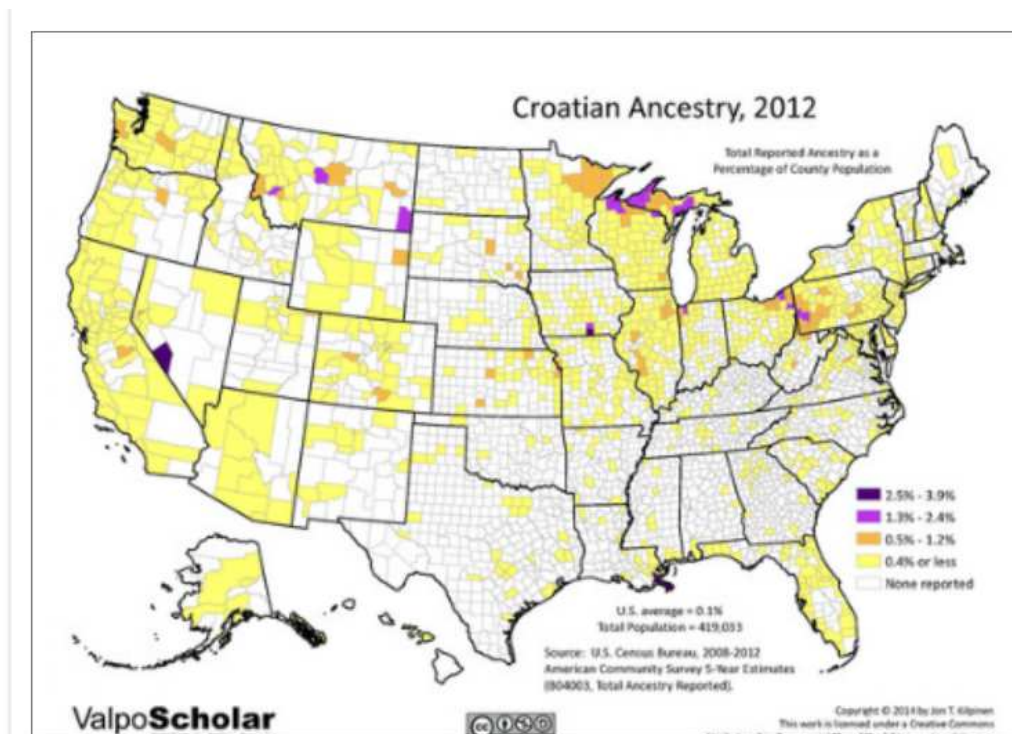


Figure 1. Map of Counties in the United States Based on Croatian Ancestry. *Note.* Adapted from “Croatian Ancestry, 2012,” by J. T. Kilpinen, 2014, United States Map Gallery. (<http://scholar.valpo.edu/usmaps/78>).

³⁹ Holly H. Glasgow, “Croatian Language and Cultural Maintenance in the Slavic-American Community of Strawberry Hill, Kansas City, Kansas,” University of Kansas, November 2, 2019.

⁴⁰ Čapo, “Croatian Migrant Families.”

⁴¹ Prpić, *Croatian Immigrants in America*.

Ethnic Identity and Symbolic Ethnicity

Ethnic identity theory centers on the concept of identity formation taking various forms and changing over time.⁴² There are three primary stages of ethnic identity theory, which include: (1) unexamined ethnic identity, (2) ethnic identity search, and (3) ethnic identity achievement.⁴³ For example, a younger fourth-generation Croatian American raised in a predominantly mainstream U.S. environment may initially have limited awareness of their Croatian cultural heritage. Over time, they may begin to learn more about their ancestors and develop a greater appreciation for Croatian culture. This individual may develop stronger ties to Croatian culture over time. This could involve participating in Croatian language lessons, attending a Croatian Catholic church, or engaging in Croatian organizational activities. Phinney and Ong also emphasize that ethnic identity must be understood in relation to the dominant culture.⁴⁴ Croatian Americans who have a deeper awareness of their Croatian cultural identity, like many other diasporic groups, may connect with both the U.S. culture and the Croatian culture. In addition, many Americans have multiple ethnicities. They may also develop an appreciation for other ethnic groups. These identities can shape how they view, maintain, and express their cultural identities.

Gans' theory of symbolic ethnicity also influences research pertaining to cultural identity. Symbolic ethnicity centers on the expression of cultural pride or connections. Gans found that although ethnic ties often decrease across generations, later generations still identify with specific ethnicities. This may just be through symbolic practices such as the display of cultural symbols, eating traditional foods, or celebrating through holiday rituals associated with the culture. According to Gans, "While ethnic ties continue to wane for the third generation, people of this generation continue to perceive themselves as ethnics, whether they define ethnicity in sacred or secular terms."⁴⁵ This framework holds relevance for this study on Croatian Americans. Many may be third, fourth, or even fifth generation. Earlier generations of Croatian Americans may have lived in distinct ethnic neighborhoods and had stronger ties to Croatian culture, whereas later generations may not have those distinct connections.

⁴² Jean S. Phinney, "Stages of Ethnic Identity Development in Minority Group Adolescents," *Journal of Early Adolescence* 9, no. 1–2 (1989): 34–49; Jean S. Phinney and Anthony D. Ong, "Conceptualization and Measurement of Ethnic Identity: Current Status and Future Directions," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 54, no. 3 (2007): 271–281.

⁴³ Phinney, "Stages of Ethnic Identity."

⁴⁴ Phinney and Ong, "Conceptualization and Measurement."

⁴⁵ Herbert J. Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2, no. 1 (1979): 1–20.

Additionally, as the level of ancestor distance increases, there are likely more ethnic groups. In this study, the researcher aimed to explore potential differences in cultural participation and identity based on generational differences. With later generations, cultural participation may decrease over time.

Methodology

Data Collection

The study utilized a convergent mixed-methods survey comprising 15 closed-ended and 3 open-ended questions designed to explore Croatian cultural participation and identity among Croatian Americans. The convergent mixed-methods design allows for the comparison of qualitative and quantitative data to examine areas of convergence and divergence.⁴⁶ This design was most appropriate for this study since the quantitative data identified the frequency of Croatian cultural practices, and the qualitative data provided deeper insight into their meaning and significance. The survey was administered using Google Forms in the fall of 2022.

Closed-ended questions included multiple-choice and checkbox formats. The closed-ended questions included demographic information (e.g., age, gender, generational status, Croatian language proficiency) and questions pertaining to participation in Croatian cultural activities (e.g., listening to Croatian music, cooking Croatian food, visiting Croatia). Open-ended questions centered on participants' perceptions of cultural identity, what they value most about Croatian culture; an additional question was provided to gather further insights into their Croatian cultural experiences that had not been previously mentioned.

The researcher developed the survey and had experience creating a similar survey for another distinct cultural group. An expert on Croatian culture and a statistician were consulted on the survey questions. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants in social media groups that centered on Croatian or Croatian-American culture, history, genealogy, and heritage; furthermore, snowball sampling was used. Purposive sampling centers on the intentional selection of participants based on a certain characteristic, experience, or perception related to the study, while snowball sampling involves participants recommending other potential participants who meet the study's participation requirements.⁴⁷ Participants were

⁴⁶ John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed. (Sage, 2018); John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 3rd ed. (Sage, 2018).

⁴⁷ Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design*; Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods*.

asked to identify potential additional survey takers. The survey was open for approximately 3 months. Additionally, this study received Institutional Review Board approval. All participants read an informed consent document located on the Google Form survey and checked their agreement to participate before proceeding with the survey. They were informed about the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and the potential benefits of participating. Responses were anonymous.

Participants

Participants included 32 self-identified Croatian Americans who live in various U.S. states with the majority living in the northeast, Midwest, and southeastern regions. The study included 14 males, 16 females, and 2 participants who did not disclose their gender. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 84. Most participants indicated being in the following age groups: 35–44 ($n=9$), 45–54 ($n=7$), 55–64 ($n=6$), and 65–74 ($n=5$). Fewer participants were aged 25–34 ($n=4$), 18–24 ($n=2$), and 75–84 ($n=2$). In terms of Croatian language proficiency, 15 participants ($n=15$) reported no ability to speak Croatian. Among the participants ($n=17$) who spoke Croatian, the levels included beginner ($n=5$), intermediate ($n=6$), advanced ($n=2$), to native fluency ($n=4$). Family contact with relatives in Croatia was reported by 19 participants. Generational status ranged from first to fifth generation Croatian Americans. The generational representation included first generation ($n=5$), second generation ($n=8$), third generation ($n=12$), fourth generation ($n=5$), and fifth generation ($n=2$). Table 1 provides a further breakdown of demographic data.

Table 1. Demographic Data

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	14	43.8%
	Female	16	50.0%
	Not disclosed	2	6.3%
Age	18–24	2	6.3%
	25–34	4	12.5%
	35–44	9	28.1%
	45–54	7	21.9%
	55–64	6	18.8%

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Generation	65–74	5	15.6%
	75–84	2	6.3%
	1 st	5	15.6%
	2 nd	8	25.0%
	3 rd	12	37.5%
	4 th	5	15.6%
	5 th	2	6.3%

Positionality

Positionality centers on a researcher's perspective and frame of reference.⁴⁸ I am a fourth-generation Croatian American who grew up in Southwestern Pennsylvania, which is very ethnically diverse due to industrial immigration to work in the coal mines and steel mills. My ancestors came from various countries. In the early 1900s, my maternal great grandfather emigrated from Croatia with his mother. He faced a wide range of challenges in the United States and worked in one of the most dangerous and life-threatening jobs as a coal miner. He wrote an autobiography about his life as a coal miner in the United States. He frequently praised the United States and referred to it as the land of opportunity. He also strongly believed in the need to assimilate to the mainstream American culture, due to family and societal pressures. My Croatian great grandfather, Tomo Mrkonja, who was referenced above, passed away in his nineties. I had the chance to talk to him even when I was in my twenties. He grew up in a “patch town” with people of varying languages and cultures.

I am passionate about studying genealogy, and I have also completed DNA testing to try to gain a more holistic understanding of my family history. I am still learning about the experiences of my ancestors through family stories, pictures, archived newspaper articles, and other genealogical resources. I want to connect more with my ancestral roots, which has led me to visits to Croatia, Ukraine, and other locations where my ancestors lived. I aim to continue my pursuit to learn about my ancestors; according to Nicolson, “Knowledge of our ancestors provides valid information because these individuals are the means and the reason we are alive

⁴⁸ Roni Berger, “Now I See It, Now I Don’t: Researcher’s Position and Reflexivity in Qualitative Research,” *Qualitative Research* 15, no. 2 (2015): 219–234; P. R. Goundar, “Researcher Positionality: Ways to Include It in a Qualitative Research Design,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 24 (2025): 1–12.

and in the place (in every sense) that we find our self.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, by learning more about the experiences of these individuals, we can get a better glimpse into our identities and remnants of their cultures that may have been passed down over the generations. I strive to learn as much as I can about my ancestors who hail from Croatia and many other countries. It saddens me that my great grandparents had to abandon their Croatian culture in pursuit of Americanization; however, I also understand that they did it largely out of necessity to communicate and engage with the many other cultures making up the melting pot of small “patch towns” in Southwestern Pennsylvania.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative and mixed-methods research, trustworthiness centers on the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of findings.⁵⁰ To improve trustworthiness, methodological triangulation was employed to examine quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously. An audit trail was maintained throughout the research to document the major steps of the research process. I also kept a researcher notebook to engage in reflexive journaling, especially in relation to how my positionality as a Croatian American could impact the research process. Trustworthiness was further strengthened through consultation with a Croatian cultural expert and a statistician.

Data Analysis

Closed-ended survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for each reported cultural activity for (a) lifetime participation (ever) and (b) annual participation (within the past year). Content analysis was used to analyze open-ended responses.

This approach is helpful for analyzing text-based data into themes and patterns.⁵¹ Open-ended survey responses were reviewed multiple times to ensure that I fully grasped the meaning and depth of the data. Initial codes were developed inductively and then grouped into broader categories and final themes. Finally, because this is a convergent mixed-methods study, I examined both the closed and open-ended survey responses to examine areas that converged and diverged.

⁴⁹ Patricia Nicolson, *Genealogy, Psychology, and Identity* (Routledge, 2016), 101.

⁵⁰ Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Sage, 1985).

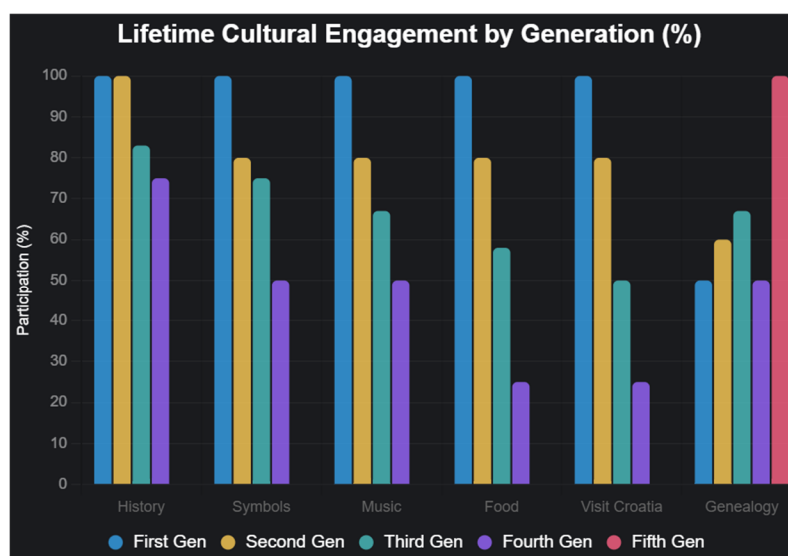
⁵¹ Satu Elo and Helvi Kyngas, “The Qualitative Content Analysis Process,” *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 62, no. 1 (2008): 107–115; Margrit Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice* (Sage, 2012).

Results

Quantitative Results

The majority of participants engaged in at least some form of Croatian cultural activities at least once in their lifetime. The highest forms of cultural engagement reported include learning about Croatian history (80%), displaying or wearing Croatian symbols (76.7%), and listening to, playing, or singing Croatian music (73.3%). Additionally, over half of the participants reported cooking or eating Croatian food (63.3%), visiting Croatia (63.3%), and studying genealogy (66.7%). Patterns were similar for activities engaged in annually but with reduced engagement with the following breakdowns: participants listening to, playing, or singing, Croatian music (63.3%), displaying Croatian symbols (60%), cooking Croatian food (53.3%), and watching Croatian sports (53.3%). In both survey questions, participating in holiday customs, reading Croatian authors, playing traditional games, watching Croatian films or television shows, and participating in a Croatian cultural or fraternal organization were the least reported. The small sample size ($n = 33$) limits the use of inferential statistics, it is still valuable to explore generational differences in Croatian-American lifetime cultural participation. Table 2 reveals distinct patterns across generations. First and second generations show broad and more frequent cultural participation (80–100%). Third and fourth generations participate less frequently (50–83%), and the fifth generation respondents focused on genealogy (100%). These trends highlight varying levels of cultural participation across generations.

Table 2. Lifetime Cultural Engagement by Generation



Qualitative Results

The following section presents the qualitative findings from the open-ended survey responses. These questions explored participants' perceptions of cultural identity and the aspects of Croatian culture they value most. Three main themes emerged from the data: (1) ancestral roots and historical narratives, (2) symbolic ethnicity and cultural distinctiveness, and (3) family and community.

Ancestral Roots and Historical Narratives

Participants describe their cultural identity as rooted in connections to their ancestors. Responses centered on the value of family history and immigration narratives; moreover, participants discussed the resilience of their ancestors in the face of hardships. One participant highlighted the importance of historical and ancestral connections by stating that Croatian cultural identity provides “A connection to my family, past and present, and a connection to one of the most beautiful places in the world” (Female, 35–44, Third generation). Another participant indicated “how much my ancestors struggled to make ends meet.

They were unbelievably poor and worked long hours in the packing plants” (Female, 55–64, Fourth generation). Participants emphasized the sacrifices of their ancestors. For example, one stated, “I am proud of my ancestors for immigrating to the US to seek a better life” (Female, 35–44, Third generation). In addition, participants connected these ancestral ties to a sense of national pride and belonging to “the Old Country.” These responses show that Croatian-American identity is influenced by ancestral roots and immigration narratives.

Symbolic Ethnicity and Cultural Distinctiveness

Participants mentioned the distinctiveness of Croatian culture, especially in comparison to mainstream American culture. Participants stated that they value cultural traditions such as food, music, and language. These serve as links to their heritage and are integral to cultural continuity. Participants mentioned specific cultural practices, such as “Tamburica music cuisine” (Male, 65–74, Third generation) and “My dialect in Istra is important to keep going” (Female, 55–64, First generation). Others emphasized the importance of language retention more broadly, stating that “the language and the traditions” are central to their cultural identity.

They mentioned Croatia's beauty and slower-paced lifestyle. One participant noted that Croatian culture “has been a big part of my life and my understanding of myself... I felt unique

in that I knew exactly where my family came from to be here” (Gender not specified, 25–34, Third generation).

Similarly, a participant discussed the authenticity and relaxed pace of Croatian culture. He stated, “I like that Croatian culture is not as fast paced as the American culture and people take the time to slow down appreciate being with friends and enjoying the little things in life” (Male, 45–54, Second generation). Another participant valued “It’s beauty” (Female, 65–74, Second generation).

Some participants also connected their cultural values to faith; for example, one described a “love of family, national identity, [and] belief in Jesus Christ.” These responses suggest that Croatian Americans view their heritage as distinctive from mainstream American culture and appreciate its unique values.

Family and Community

Participants mentioned the role of family and community bonds, especially in terms of closeness, generosity, and camaraderie. One experience indicated, “My experience is that Croatians are very generous, even when resources are low... who would band together to set up a new neighbor’s house” (Female, 45–54, Third generation). Another emphasized, “Strong belief family comes first and the importance of tradition” (Female, 35–44, Third generation). Participants also discussed the practice of keeping with Croatian holiday customs, especially with family, which indicates some degree of intergenerational transmission of ancestral values. For some, Catholic faith was also mentioned as part of family and community life. This reflected how religion continues to serve as a cultural anchor. These responses show how family, faith, and community bonds play an important role in Croatian American identity.

Discussion

The results of this mixed-methods study provide insights into how Croatian Americans maintain cultural identity through everyday practices and deeper symbolic connections. Quantitative findings indicated that the most commonly practiced activities were learning about Croatian history (80%), displaying or wearing Croatian symbols (76.7%), and listening to Croatian music (73.3%).

Over half also reported cooking Croatian food (63.3%), visiting Croatia (63.3%), and studying genealogy (66.7%). In contrast, fewer reported following Croatian holiday customs

(33.3%), playing traditional games (20%), or belonging to a Croatian cultural or fraternal organization (20%).

Qualitative data supplemented the quantitative findings by indicating that everyday practices serve as direct links to culture. However, a deeper understanding of Croatian identity comes from ancestral stories, the unique distinction of Croatian culture, as well as family, community, and religious bonds. For example, participants discussed the struggles of Croatian immigrants and family sacrifices during their journey of adaptation in America.

First and second generations indicated that they participated in Croatian culture more broadly and had more frequent cultural participation, while later generations (e.g. third, fourth, and fifth generations), participated less. These trends highlight varying levels of cultural participation across generations. The results largely connect to Gans' (1979) concept of symbolic ethnicity. Identity among later generations (e.g., third, fourth, and fifth generations) is maintained primarily through symbolic practices unlike earlier generations (e.g., first and second generations) which are more inclined to be engaged through Croatian community membership and language use.

As a mixed-methods study, it is critical to examine how the qualitative and quantitative data converge and diverge. Everyday cultural activities such as music, food, and symbols emerged as the most frequent forms of cultural participation. Participants highlighted the importance of music and food that especially connect them to their families and culture. While only half of participants reported using the Croatian language (50%) or following Catholic traditions (50%), the qualitative data revealed that these practices carry some degree of significance in their lives. Participants described language and faith as central to symbolic ethnicity and cultural distinctiveness. Although only 10% of participants indicated visiting Croatia annually, nearly two-thirds (63.3%) had visited at least once. Qualitative responses described Croatia's beauty and slower pace of life as impactful experiences.

It is also important to note that although the quantitative data reveals relatively low engagement in language use (50% ever, 43.3% annually) and Catholic traditions (50% ever, 36.7% annually), the qualitative data highlight the importance of religion and language in cultural distinctiveness. This infers that even though Catholicism and language are not regularly practiced in daily life, they still maintain value in terms of cultural symbolism and identity. They still play a critical role in defining Croatian culture, even though they are not engaging in these activities as frequently as they are consuming Croatian food or music.

Prpić and Dugandžić-Pašić explored how earlier generations of Croatian immigrants relied on fraternal organizations, Catholic churches, and community clubs to sustain culture.⁵² However, this study indicated generally low participation in traditional Croatian cultural organizations. There was a greater focus instead on consumption of food, studying genealogy, and engaging in symbolic practices. Djuric noted that the cultural identity of the Croatian diaspora is often maintained less through formal organizations.⁵³

Additionally, participants' emphasis on ancestral stories and the distinction of Croatian culture connects with research germane to cultural memory and identity formation. Pavlakovic and Paukovic highlight how narratives of history and symbolic practices (e.g., religion, rituals, stories) continue to provide examples of cultural engagement even with extended generations.⁵⁴ Furthermore, more regional studies, such as Croatians in California, have explored the role of food, music, and family in Croatian's cultural experiences.

Overall, these findings suggest that Croatian-American identity and cultural heritage is maintained not only through regular practices such as consuming Croatian food and music but also by preserving ancestral stories and family traditions, even as formal organizational involvement declines.

Conclusion

This convergent mixed-methods study provides valuable insights into the cultural participation and cultural identity of Croatian Americans. This study was delimited to individuals who self-identified as Croatian Americans. It was also delimited to self-reported survey data. In addition, there were only 32 participants which limits generalizability to the broader Croatian-American population or other Croatian diaspora groups. There may also be self-reported bias in terms of participation in cultural activities or Croatian language ability. Since participants were recruited primarily through snowball sampling and social media sites that focus on Croatian culture, participants may be more culturally engaged than the general Croatian-American population. Due to the limited sample size, inferential statistical analyses were not conducted; furthermore, while qualitative responses provided valuable insights, the depth of these responses was limited.

⁵² Prpić, *Croatian Immigrants in America*; Marina Dugandžić-Pašić, *Croatians of Chicagoland* (Arcadia Publishing, April 19, 2010).

⁵³ Djuric, "The Croatian Diaspora in North America."

⁵⁴ Vjeran Pavlakovic and Davor Paukovic, "Memory Politics and Identity in the Croatian Diaspora," *Political Science Review* 56, no. 2 (2019): 123–145.

Furthermore, stories that are shared through the generations may not always be accurate. There must be caution when relying on stories from past generations.

Participants reported higher rates of some forms of cultural participation including listening to Croatian music, eating Croatian foods, and participating in Croatian holiday customs. These findings may be beneficial for Croatian cultural groups seeking deeper insights into Croatian cultural participation and activities that Croatian Americans may want to engage more in such as Croatian holiday customs, genealogical research, or general cultural activities. Implementing targeted educational activities (e.g., Croatian culture, history, and language lessons) to improve engagement in specific aspects of Croatian culture could be impactful as well. Helping individuals learn about their ancestry can also be helpful for those who are unaware of their family history or only have limited awareness. Practical examples include online workshops on traditional Croatian cooking or music, virtual heritage tours of Croatia, and short online language courses that focus on basic phrases. For those not close to local Croatian organizations or fraternal unions, virtual activities, language courses, or heritage tours in Croatia could be beneficial. The relatively lower regular use of the Croatian language indicates a possible need for community language classes or online opportunities to practice language to promote language maintenance and cultural maintenance.

Future studies should include a larger and more geographically diverse sample of Croatian Americans to enhance the generalizability of findings and capture regional variations in cultural participation. Studies could also be conducted in the parts of the United States with distinct Croatian-American communities to gather rich insights. However, this leaves out a large portion of Croatian Americans who may not have direct ties to the culture. Conducting longitudinal research would also help track changes in cultural engagement over time. Moreover, qualitative data, such as in-depth interviews, could provide richer insights into the personal meanings, motivations, and challenges related to maintaining Croatian cultural identity. Conducting interviews with Croatian Americans of varying generations could be insightful. In order to gain deeper insights, it would be beneficial though to research only participants who are engaged in Croatian cultural activities. It is also valuable to explore how Croatian cultural and fraternal organizations contribute to sustaining cultural practices over time.

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