

Motivation, L2 Selves, and Experience of University Students of Italian in the United States

Tania Ferronato 

University of South Florida, United States

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ABSTRACT

As a critical learner factor, motivation influences L2 learning processes and outcomes. Despite the consistent body of L2 motivational studies, languages other than English (LOTEs) are understudied. However, they should be prioritized so that motivational research can better align with the multilingual turn taken by the SLA field (Henry, 2017) and contribute to university enrollments in world languages courses, which are constantly declining in the United States (U.S.) (Lusin et al., 2023). Over the last twenty years, European languages have lost enrollments, with the greatest decline in Italian (Looney et al., 2016). This study explores the motivation of 211 learners to study Italian in U.S. universities through an online open-ended survey. Drawing on Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS), descriptive statistics and thematic analysis describe what reasons motivate students to learn Italian, students' L2 selves, and learning experience. Findings revealed a dominant ideal self in students' motivation. The multilingual self (Henry, 2017; Ushioda, 2017) also appears, supporting the latest reconceptualization of the L2MSS and prompting future research directions. The presence of heritage language learners also highlights the need to enrich classroom diversity. Pedagogical implications are discussed and serve as a reflective tool for LOTEs practitioners.

Keywords: motivation, L2MSS, Italian language, L2 selves, learning experience

INTRODUCTION

Motivation is one of the most discussed individual factors among scholars in the field of second language acquisition as it plays a fundamental role in the language learning process (Thompson & Vásquez, 2015). Unsurprisingly, the consistent body of motivational research has mostly focused on learners of Global English in different settings (Boo et al., 2015), with few studies investigating motivation in learning languages other than English (LOTEs), thus contributing to an established research gap (Thompson, 2017). The need for more motivational research in LOTEs is an ongoing call for scholars in the field, which becomes even more urgent in today's globalized world (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017). Specifically, in Anglophone countries such as the United States (U.S.), where most of the population is English monolingual and LOTEs learning is not strongly encouraged in higher education (Thompson, 2017), understanding what motivates learners of LOTEs can be beneficial to better tailor language curricula, meet students' needs, and contrast the recent decline in world language university enrollment faced by U.S. universities (Lusin et al., 2023). According to the 2021 Modern Language Association report of LOTEs enrollments in U.S. higher educational institutions, the choice of university students to study some historically popular European languages, for instance, has seen a loss of around 20%, with the greatest decline in Italian language (Looney et al., 2016; Lusin et al., 2023). This can be surprising if we think that Italian is oftentimes formally learned in higher education settings as an expression of strong linguistic and cultural identity across Italian Americans, the fourth largest ethnic group in the U.S. (Alessandria et al., 2016).

Motivational research specifically in Italian as a Foreign Language (IFL) is scarce, with a few studies limited to learners' motivation to study Italian in the university context of Australia (D'Orazi & Hajek, 2021; Palmieri, 2018) and Croatia (Mardešić et al., 2020). However, to my knowledge, there are no studies that have shed light on the North American context, where Italian has only been investigated among other LOTEs (Thompson, 2017; Thompson & Vásquez, 2015) but was not the primary focus of the investigation. Therefore, to expand the existing literature of motivational research in

IFL and in LOTEs within the United States, the present study explores the reasons that motivate students to learn Italian across different U.S. universities. Drawing on the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) framework (Dörnyei, 2005) and following the recent qualitative methodological trends (Iguchi, 2017; Thompson & Vásquez, 2015), this study further investigates the expressions of learners' L2 ideal self, ought-to self, and learning experience.

This study holds significant implications for educators and curriculum designers, as findings can be beneficial to rethink the IFL curriculum in terms of course objectives, class materials, and types of assessment, based on students' needs, and can be extended to other LOTEs. This would contribute, for instance, to better preparing students for using Italian or another foreign language for their working or studying abroad goals. Fulfilling students' expectations and enhancing their motivation to pursue language learning impacts their enrollment in world languages courses, and therefore, directors of LOTEs programs will find the findings of the present study advantageous as well.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Motivation in Second Language Learning Research

Motivation can be viewed as the reason why we do something, how much effort we put into it, and how persistent we are (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). In second or foreign language (L2 or FL) learning, motivation is generally interpreted as the desire to start learning the language along with the effort to maintain the learning process (Ortega, 2008). Motivation has long been seen as the key aspect to success in language learning, and nowadays, motivational research is one of the most well-established and independent second language acquisition research fields (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Ortega, 2008). The theoretical development of the L2 motivation construct evolved through three historical phases, starting at the beginning of 1990 (i.e., the social-psychological period, the cognitive-situated period, and the process-oriented period),

which led to the current socio-dynamic approach (Dörnyei, 2009). Initiated by Dörnyei's (2005) proposal of the L2MSS, a theoretical and analytical framework to L2 learner motivation, the current approach represents a major reformation from previous phases as it builds on Gardner's (1985) integrativeness theory and Higgins's (1987) self-discrepancy theory by adding the dynamic component of motivation, that is, how it changes during a course of study or across a lifetime (Dörnyei, 2005). Most importantly, the L2MSS model allows a deeper understanding of the complex construct of motivation by taking into account the imagery component and the concept of learners' identity, both described and systematized within the model. Indeed, at the base of the L2MSS is Markus and Nurius' (1986) idea of 'possible selves,' intended as a vision of the self in a future condition. With reference to the psychological theory of the self, the 'selves' are intended as representations of people's ideas about what they might (or might not) become or would like (or would not like) to become; thus, 'selves' entail hopes, wishes, and imagination, which reflect the dynamicity of how a person moves from the present to the future (Dörnyei, 2009). To exemplify these abstract concepts, Dörnyei (2005, 2009) articulated the L2MSS model in three components: the ideal L2 self (i.e., the L2 speakers one desires to become), the ought-to L2 self (i.e., the L2 speaker one should become to meet others' expectations), and the L2 learning experience (i.e., the environment where one's L2 learning takes place). Specifically, while different in their conceptualization, the ideal and the ought-to L2 selves can be seen as closely related to the two classical concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation from Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory, which describes intrinsic motivation as engaging with an activity because of a true interest in it (e.g., learning a language because one enjoys it or is curious about it) and extrinsic motivation as engaging in a specific activity because of its outcome (e.g., learning a language because one needs to get a passing grade) (Takahashi & Im, 2020; Teimouri, 2017).

Being a versatile model that can accommodate different theories and methods, as well as offering new insights, the L2MSS gained popularity among scholars and is the dominant paradigm in L2 motivational research (Boo et al., 2015). The model has been

empirically validated by several quantitative studies that showed its effectiveness in a range of English as a foreign language contexts including China, Iran, and Japan (Taguchi et al., 2009), Chile (Kormos et al., 2011), Hungary (Csizér & Kormos, 2009), Indonesia (Lamb, 2012) and Pakistan (Islam et al., 2013). More recently, Al-Hoorie's (2018) first meta-analysis of 32 L2 motivational studies confirmed that the correlation between the three components of the model significantly predicts learners' intended efforts. However, differences among the correlation values of each component also highlight the interplay of other individual factors (e.g., age, gender, language environment) and the influence of the methodology employed by a study. The L2MSS model has been further validated by few qualitative studies, such as Kim's (2006) research on Korean English as a foreign language learners, whose findings supported the notion of the ideal L2 self as the strongest component of the model and further contributed to the framework's validation through the development of an interview template for motivational research based on the L2MSS. In a longitudinal case study, Miyahara (2012) also used qualitative interviews to better understand the dynamicity of identity constructions entailed in learners' L2 ideal self, the role played by emotions, and the negotiation of the L2 learning environment.

Several studies have also targeted the criterion measures used for each component of the L2MSS model, as well as the impact that contextual elements can have on the components (see Csizér, 2019 for an overview of empirical research respectively on the ideal self, the ought-to self, and the L2 learning experience). The influence of contextual factors is particularly important in today's globalized and multilingual world, where motivational research predominantly focused on English language needs to be extended to investigations in LOTEs (Ushioda, 2017; Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2017). While most L2 motivational research in the twenty-first century has employed the L2MSS to investigate learners of English, a globally dominant language, the motivational paradigm requires extension to LOTEs to reach a complete and balanced view of L2 motivation (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017).

Motivational Research in Languages Other Than English (LOTEs)

In response to the call for more motivational research in LOTEs (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2017), scholars have investigated it in both Anglophone and non-Anglophone countries. This distinction is necessary given the status of English as a global lingua franca, which can impact the motivation of L1 and L2 English speakers in learning LOTEs, for instance, by threatening L1 English speakers' motivation to learn a LOTE given their proficiency in a worldwide lingua franca. For the purpose of the present study, this review only focuses on studies conducted in Anglophone contexts (e.g., the United Kingdom, U.S., Australia, and Canada), where L1 English-speaking students usually choose to study a LOTE as their L2 (Howard & Oakes, 2024).

In her state-of-the-art review of L2 motivational research in the United Kingdom, Lanvers (2017a) reported strong ought-to and ideal self in British university students' motivation to study LOTEs, together with an emphasis on their positive L2 learning experience. A closer look at selected studies reveals the dynamic nature of the motivational construct and highlights the influence of various contributing factors. For instance, Oakes (2013) surveyed 378 Spanish and French university learners in London and found a complementary source of motivation to the L2MSS components, consisting of LOTEs learners' awareness of the downsides and limitations of an English monolingual mindset. The same awareness was also found by Lanvers (2017b), who surveyed 701 LOTEs learners across British universities and reported the emergence of a "rebellious attitude" and the predominance of the ideal self rather than the ought-to self, which she reports being more prominent in lower educational levels. The predominance of the ideal self over the ought-to self was also confirmed by Busse and Williams (2010), who explored the motivation of 142 university learners of German in the UK. In an attempt to account for the multilingual nature of certain countries, Henry (2017) and Ushioda (2017) advanced the hypothesis of a "multilingual self", which refers to learners' desire to become multilingual. A further factor conceptualized as part of the dynamic nature of motivation was the "rooted self", proposed by MacIntyre et al. (2017), which emerged from the motivational

investigation specifically of heritage language learners in contexts with a strong heritage community influence.

A similar motivational construct to Lanver's (2017b) "rebellious attitude" was also found in LOTEs' learners within the U.S. context. First conceptualized by Thompson and Vásquez (2015), the anti-ought-to self represents learners' opposition to the external expectations (i.e., the ought-to self) and was found in learners of Chinese, German, and Italian in the U.S. (Thompson and Vásquez, 2015). In her investigation of 195 U.S. undergraduate learners of LOTEs aimed at investigating the relationship between motivation, multilingualism, and language choice, Thompson (2017) further found that the anti-ought-to self can predict students' language choice, as those who chose Spanish, for instance, showed a weaker anti-ought-to self. Similar challenges to Dörnyei's L2MSS model have been advanced by other motivational research in the U.S.

Integrations of Dörnyei's (2005) model have also been advanced by LOTEs' motivational studies in the Australian context. For instance, D'Orazzi (2020) and D'Orazzi and Hajek (2021) combine the L2MSS with a three-level (meso, micro, and macro) model of analysis to address the dynamic complexity of motivation, such as the psychology of the language learner and the socio-cultural environment, respectively, in learners of French (D'Orazzi, 2020) and Italian (D'Orazzi & Hajek, 2021). For the purpose of the present study, a closer look at the study from D'Orazzi and Hajek (2021) is necessary. Findings from their qualitative investigation on 154 Australian learners of Italian confirmed the prevalence of the ideal self as their strongest motivators and highlighted their desire of heritage language learners to reconnect and communicate with their relatives. The ought-to self also emerged when Italian was identified as useful for academic and social success and opportunities, and the influence of the L2 learning environment was seen in a social and pleasant classroom environment that boosts students' motivation. The authors based their study on Palmieri (2018), who employed the L2MSS to investigate the identity trajectories of adult learners of Italian in Australia. Assuming that language learning is

a process that reshapes one's identity (particularly evident for Italian learners in Australia, where there is a well-established community of Italian migrants), Palmieri's (2018) mixed-method investigation found that Dörnyei's component of the L2 learning environment outside the classroom also plays a fundamental role in learners' motivation. Her findings also brought evidence that a positive attitude towards Italian people and the desire to belong to a community of Italian speakers were among the strongest motivating factors, along with previous exposure to Italian culture, which triggered participants' positive attitude towards the Italian language and culture.

Overall, this review of selected literature showed the predominance of the L2MSS as a reference model in motivational research, as well as the most validated motivational framework to date. For this reason, it was also chosen as the theoretical framework for the present research. Although its validation has been established in the context of English language learning, several reconceptualizations have emerged in the model's application to LOTE learning, which are more exploratory in nature. Therefore, while this research employs Dörnyei's L2MSS original model, its latest challenges are also critically considered (especially those arisen in the U.S. context, where this research is also set) in the interpretation of the findings, as the qualitative methodology allowed to identify emerging themes that seem to align with the multilingual self. These can offer a foundation for future studies and contribute to the ongoing refinement and validation of the L2MSS for LOTE learning.

RESEARCH METHODS

The Current Study

The overall scarcity of L2 motivational research in LOTEs is identified as one of the main research gaps in the field. To address it, this study sheds light on the motivation to learn one specific LOTE, Italian, in the U.S. academic context. Besides being a theoretical contribution to the existing literature on LOTE motivation, this study has larger pedagogical implications. Understanding learners' motivations is indeed the foundation for developing strategies to incentivize enrollment in world language

courses at the university level, which can be useful for those languages that have seen a drastic loss, such as Italian.

The research questions guiding the present study are:

RQ1: What motivates university students to learn Italian in the United States?

RQ2: How are the ideal self, the ought-to self, and the learning experience expressed in learners' short responses?

Participants

This study involved 237 students of Italian students who completed an online survey. However, the final sample used for data analysis amounts to a total of 211 participants, as incomplete responses ($n = 26$) were excluded. Participants included in the study identified as female (62.5%, $n = 132$), male (36%, $n = 76$), other, or preferred not to say (1.5%, $n = 3$). They were mainly young adults (age range 19 - 72 years old, $M = 21$, $SD = 6.35$) sampled from 7 different universities ($n = 6$ public, $n = 1$ private) within the United States. At the time of the study, they were all enrolled in classes for different proficiency levels, and they self-identified as beginner (81.9%, $n = 173$), intermediate (13.3%, $n = 28$), and advanced (4.8%, $n = 10$). Over half of the participants (66.4%, $n = 140$) stated having no Italian family connections (i.e., not being a heritage learner), but a considerable amount of the sample (33.6%, $n = 71$) reported having Italian heritage (i.e., having Italian grandparents, great-grandparents, or parents). This data relates to the language(s) used by participants at home: English only (81.5%, $n = 172$), English and one other additional language (11.8%, $n = 25$), and languages other than English (8%, $n = 17$). Participants' linguistic background was further explored by looking at the foreign languages they previously studied at school. Only a few (2.8%, $n = 6$) had never studied a foreign language before. Spanish was the most widely studied language by more than half of the participants ($n = 144$), followed by French ($n = 40$). Interestingly, three other romance languages emerged as the linguistic background of some participants: Latin ($n = 17$), Italian ($n = 15$), and Portuguese ($n =$

2). Non-romance languages such as American Sign Language ($n = 8$), Chinese ($n = 3$), German ($n = 12$), Greek ($n = 5$), Japanese ($n = 3$), Korean ($n = 4$), Taiwanese and Hebrew ($n = 1$ each) were also found in a few participants' linguistic backgrounds. Table 1 below reports a summary of the participants' features.

Table 1. *Summary of Participants' Characteristics*

Characteristics	Category	<i>n</i>
Proficiency levels	Beginner	173
	Intermediate	28
	Advanced	10
Gender	Female	132
	Male	76
	Other/Prefer not to say	3
Heritage status	No	140
	Yes	71
Linguistic background*	Romance languages	218
	Non-romance languages	37
	No additional languages	6

Notes. *The sum of these values does not match the total number of participants, as almost all of them mentioned more than one language.

Data Collection and Instruments

Data were collected through an online open-ended questionnaire (Appendix A) designed and distributed through the platform Qualtrics.com. After receiving approval from the researcher's Institutional Review Board, a total of 20 recruitment emails were sent to the heads of the Italian departments of U.S. universities with an Italian program. Institutions were identified either through the researchers' personal familiarity or via web searches, thus combining convenience and purposeful sampling strategies. For each of the seven positive replies received, the Qualtrics link to the questionnaire and further instructions for its completion were sent so that teachers could share it with their students. When student volunteers clicked on the link, they had to read and agree to the informed consent to access the survey. Participants were also informed that their participation was voluntary, that it would not have impacted their performance in the Italian class, and that responses were anonymous.

To design the instrument of this study, survey items served as a starting point to formulate the open-ended questions, as quantitative surveys in motivational research are predominant (Sudina, 2021). However, this study follows the methodological trends that encourage the inclusion of qualitative instruments in motivational studies, allowing researchers to gain a better understanding of in-depth dynamic processes and the participants to communicate their sense of selves better (Thompson & Vasquez, 2015). Therefore, the open-ended questions in this study's survey were re-adapted from previous research that investigated L2 motivation through interviews (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009; Iguchi, 2017; Kim, 2006).

The finalized questionnaire for the present study comprised a total of 24 questions, which were organized into five sets of questions, each corresponding to a Qualtrics page. The first section consisted of eight questions aimed at collecting participants' demographic information, the second section contained four questions aimed at explicitly investigating the reasons that motivate students to learn Italian in the U.S., the third section included four questions targeting participants' L2 ideal selves, the fourth section presented four questions related to their L2 ought-to selves, and the fifth section had three questions inquiring about the participants' L2 learning experiences. The sets of questions were designed according to the L2MSS categories and each set aimed at answering the research questions guiding the present study: the aspects motivating students to learn Italian (RQ1), how participants' L2 selves and learning experiences are expressed in their short responses (RQ2). To assess the instrument's validity, all the questions were reviewed by an expert in the field (an experienced professor in second language acquisition), who commented on their relevance and acceptability for the present study. Based on the feedback received, the questions were adjusted and finalized. To ensure the feasibility of the data collection procedures, the survey was also piloted with a group of students taking an IFL class taught by the researcher, who also served as an Italian instructor in the semester before the actual data collection took place. Students were informed of both the operational piloting's purpose and the disregard of their responses in the actual data collection/analysis and subsequent publication.

Data Management and Analysis

Data collected through the surveys was exported from Qualtrics.com to Excel, and it was then manually cleaned to delete the incomplete responses. The finalized master dataset contained 5,064 short responses. A second Excel file was used to create the codebook (Appendix B).

The data analysis followed a qualitative approach, and a thematic analysis was conducted on all the short responses using an inductive coding approach (Saldaña, 2016). The first round of coding served to identify and label the salient codes to create the codebook. In the second round of coding, the initial labels were revisited, and their number was reduced by merging and/or separating two or more codes or renaming them. After several rounds of coding and reviews of the codebook, a total of 32 codes were finalized. These codes were then deductively grouped into four categories, labeled after the L2MSS categories.

Given the analysis' qualitative nature, the researcher played a subjective role and acknowledged that the interpretation of the data was filtered through her perspective. Therefore, to minimize any biases and ensure the validity of the analysis, 10% of the responses were selected randomly, and an intercoder reliability was conducted with an expert in the field. An agreement of 84% was reached, which is considered almost perfect (Landis & Koch, 1977).

FINDINGS

The following sections present the findings for each research question. Specifically, the first section reports the motivational aspects emerged from participants' responses to the first set of questions (RQ1), and the second section describes how the participants' L2 selves emerged from the responses and their relation with the L2 learning experience (RQ2).

Aspects That Motivate Students to Learn Italian in the U.S.

In the selected U.S. universities, students chose to learn Italian at the university level for several reasons. Eight themes emerged from participants' short responses to the second set of questions ($n = 844$) and are listed in Table 2 below, from the most to the least recurring. As more than one theme was mentioned in multiple responses (which is not surprising as they are strongly interrelated by nature), the frequency numbers reported in the table below are representative of the distribution of each motivational element rather than corresponding to the total number of responses.

Table 2. *Students' Motivation to Learn Italian in the U.S.*

Themes	<i>n</i>	%
1. Desire to go to Italy	223	34.9 %
2. Positive attitude toward Italian language and culture	135	21.1 %
3. Italian heritage	124	19.4 %
4. Fluent communication with native speakers	111	17.3 %
5. University language requirement	102	15.9 %
6. Romance linguistic background	85	13.3 %
7. Affective component	42	6.5 %
8. Additional linguistic and cultural knowledge	29	4.5 %

When asked what initially motivated them to learn Italian and why Italian was specifically chosen over other languages, participants' most frequent motivation was their desire to go to Italy for pleasure, study, or living. Exemplary short responses are "I want to study abroad," "I also really want to travel to Italy in the near future," and "I want to live in Italy at some point." A positive attitude towards both the Italian language and culture appears as the second most frequent theme and is expressed by participants in terms of love and beauty: "I have always been a huge fan of Italian culture, especially art in the form of music and film," "I have always thought that Italy and the Italian language were both beautiful and because of this, I decided to study the language," and "I love Italian culture and the sound of the Italian language." Respondents' mentions of their Italian heritage is the third most frequent reason to study Italian. Excerpts such as "My family being Italian", "Wanted to get closer to my roots", and "I want to go to the town where my family came from" show the consistent

presence of an Italian identity among participants, who express their willingness to reconnect with their relatives.

The fourth theme in order of frequency emerged when participants were asked about their long-term goals, which highlighted their willingness to be fluent enough to communicate with Italian L1 speakers, possibly in Italy, thus recalling the main reason for studying Italian. In fact, it is not surprising that going abroad, being fluent, and being able to communicate with Italian L1 speakers often recurred together in the same response, as the following instances exemplify: “I want to be able to fluently speak Italian, and go to Italy,” “I hope to be fluent in the language so that I may one day comfortably reside and work in Italy” and “Being able to speak fluently to native Italian speakers.” As the fifth most frequent motivational factor, students choose Italian because they have to fulfill a language requirement for their degree. Comments such as “I needed to take a foreign language for my major” and “I needed credit for graduation” explicitly refer to a more instrumental reason to start learning Italian.

The sixth theme that inspired IFL learners considered in this study was their linguistic background and in particular, their previous knowledge of one or more romance languages: “I wanted to stick to a Latin-based language because I studied Spanish,” “My previous exposure to it [Italian] in high school caused me to continue with it,” and “because I have prior knowledge of both Latin and Spanish.” The similarity of Italian with Spanish, in particular, emerged among the responses collected: “I [...] heard that it was similar to Spanish and I have been taking Spanish since elementary” and “It is very similar to Spanish, so it seemed like a more approachable language option.” A further affective component plays a key role in learners’ motivation as well, representing the seventh motivational factor that emerged from the first set of responses. Friends, partners, and acquired relatives are indeed often mentioned as a reason to start learning Italian: “My best friend is from Rome,” “My sister in law is Italian,” “I have multiple friends who are Italian,” and “My mom’s best friends are Italian.” Family and loved ones are also the people for whom participants are studying Italian

(respectively included as the themes number 3 and 7 in Table 1) but interestingly, almost all the participants stated that they were "...learning it [Italian] for myself."

Finally, the last aspect that emerged as a motivator for participants to learn Italian is their willingness to learn and better understand the Italian language, as expressed in the following examples "Develop a decent understanding of Italian," "To develop a second language," "Knowing grammar rules," and "Learn most common phrases and understand most of Italian speech and writing." Within these themes, the desire to learn and/or become fluent in more than one language is also included "I want to add that to the list of languages I know," "to develop a second language" and "becoming fluent, having Italian as my third language."

Learners' L2 Selves and Learning Experience

The Ideal L2 Self

The second set of questions was formulated with specific reference to the ideal L2 self by using the phrases "you imagine" and "do you see yourself," thus including the *imagery* component. More than half of the participants envisioned themselves traveling to Italy in the near or far future to work, study, or live there. Imagining themselves as advanced speakers, they would use Italian for "living in Italy" or "enjoying travel in Italy," as well as for "working a few years in Italy" or "studying in Italy." The envision of going abroad aligns with the key motivator for learning Italian. Participants' working perspectives emerged as a prominent theme not only within Italy itself but also in terms of using the Italian language as a tool that enhances their career plans: "I would like to be able to use it to communicate with others within my future career that may not speak English. I think it would be an asset as far as finding a job." Communication with Italian L1 speakers is the third most frequent theme that was found in participants' idealizations, mostly embedded in the theme of going and working abroad. Interestingly, it also occurred in learners' images of reading books in Italian or watching media, for example, thus revealing a fourth theme of leisure.

Projected advanced speakers, who would use the language for both living and working abroad and for leisure, imagined the context of language use to be Italy and countries outside the U.S., generally defining them as “abroad.” More specifically, workplaces were mentioned as a setting where participants see themselves using Italian. Using the Italian language in a family setting and within a community of friends or other speakers of Italian also appeared as a recurrent (but minor) theme.

There are multiple reasons why participants would use Italian in these situations, for instance, to communicate on a superficial level with other people when traveling or working and connect on a deeper and personal level with them (e.g., “I would use it in Italy to connect better with the people and culture,” “to better understand the community around me,” “asking questions, making friends”). Italian is also seen as a facilitator or a necessity, which brought some participants to reveal that one of the reasons why they would use it is due to an external factor. For example, they would use Italian because “people in these situations speak Italian.” The few participants who saw themselves using Italian outside Italy have a unique purpose for using the language, helping people who do not speak English to communicate successfully. It must be noticed that not all the participants describe a pragmatic purpose for using Italian in the context, rather they would use it to enrich their linguistic background knowledge or keep pursuing their passion for learning, as in the mention of “I love learning new languages.”

For all the contexts of language use described above, participants mainly imagined themselves communicating with either Italian L1 speakers (including family members) or other L2 speakers of Italian (including friends). Communication with coworkers and professors or classmates also emerged. It is also interesting to notice that the majority of the participants have a high desire to emulate L1 Italian speakers both in terms of language and culture, thus contributing to their motivation. However, when looking into the specific responses given, the willingness to be L1 speaker-like resides more in the language rather than the culture. This is revealed by the use of different terminology,

like the verb ‘*emulate*’ when referring to the Italian accent and the verbs ‘*experience*’ or ‘*connect*’ when referring to the culture.

The Ought-to L2 Self

In the third set of questions, some participants consider “*important*” or “*very important*” to master the Italian language for their prospects, mostly related to work, but also considered important as a personal goal to achieve. As expected, this theme aligns with the ideal image that the same respondents had of themselves using the language in their future workplace. However, the majority of the responses revealed various degrees of importance of mastering Italian, from “*not that important*” and “it is not too important, it is my side part of learning” to “*somewhat important*” and “it is just a hobby, so it would not be crucial for me.” The leisurely nature of learning Italian, highlighted by this last comment, emerged too, with some participants specifying that learning Italian is more important and enriching for themselves and not necessarily for their future careers. Italian is frequently considered a tool that has the potential to open career paths, but there is a general level of uncertainty about how realizable this will be.

To better understand participants’ expressions of their ought-to L2 selves, they further commented on the role played by their teachers’ attitudes and test scores in their language learning process. Except for a few responses, teachers’ attitudes emerged to have a great influence on learners’ desire to study Italian. Teachers’ “*great*” and “*positive*” attitudes, along with their enthusiasm and excitement for teaching the Italian language, have a positive impact on the way participants learn. They report feeling more motivated, encouraged, and supported: “my teacher’s attitude makes me even more excited to learn Italian and to continue learning it,” and “my teacher’s attitude is what makes me come to class every day and try to learn the language.”

Along with teachers’ influence, test scores also resulted in having an important impact on the desire to learn Italian in more than half of the participants. However, the importance of getting a good or bad grade cannot be generalized as an influencing factor for the majority of participants, as teachers’ influence is. Indeed, about one-third

of the responses reported that grades are “*not really important*” and that getting good scores is a plus for sure, but that also getting bad scores does not change their desire to keep learning. The variety of responses concerning the role that scores play (or do not play) in the desire to learn Italian is reflected in the impact that the absence of a test would make. When the following scenario was presented “If the teacher were to state that there will be no tests, how would this impact your desire to study Italian?”, responses were equally divided between having a positive impact, a negative impact, and no effect. On one hand, positive impact was often associated with decreased stress, anxiety, and pressure of a good performance, less worrying about grades, which would make the participants more willing to try, confident, and inclined to learn, for instance. On the other hand, the absence of a test could also lower the effort put into learning, the time dedicated to study, and the feedback received, thus having a possible negative impact.

L2 Learning Experience

This last motivational component included aspects such as the school context and the teacher, and how learners engage with them (Dörnyei, 2019). Participants’ learning experiences of the Italian language emerged to be overall positive. The in-class learning activities were described as “*very engaging*” and “*helpful*” and comments generally emphasized the collaborative, interactive, and communicative nature of the Italian lessons, which was highly appreciated by participants. In line with this, the atmosphere in class was also described with good connotations, such as “positive,” “constructive,” “fun,” “encouraging,” “uplifting,” and “welcoming.” Yet, it was also found to be “challenging,” possibly because of the nature of the language learning process itself. Finally, the extent of teachers’ influence on participants’ desire to study Italian was included in this final section of the questionnaire related to the L2 learning experience. Teachers seemed to impact students’ desire to study Italian, although with different degrees, ranging from “a lot,” and “very heavily” to “somewhat,” and “helps a little.” While a few participants reported that the teachers do not influence their learning, the majority of responses reported teachers’ influences as positive, as emerged from comments like the following: “She influences me a lot. She keeps me going and

understands when I need help,” “My teacher makes me love to study Italian. She is constantly encouraging and makes it seem achievable rather than just something that is very out of reach,” and sometimes a decisive influence in students’ enrollment in the Italian class “A lot, I probably would have quit if I didn’t like my teacher and how he runs the class,” and “My professors greatly influence my desire to study Italian and they are one of the main reasons that I am continuing with my studies.”

Overall, the main themes emerged from the analysis of students’ motivation for learning Italian based on Dörnyei’s (2009) L2MSS recurred in the expression of their ideal and ought-to L2 selves followed by their L2 learning experiences as summarized in Table 3 below. Rather than accounting for the whole sample as in Table 2, the percentages below are derived from different numbers of items, as each theme emerged from different questions across the questionnaire’s sets three, four and five. Specifically, themes 1, 2, and 3 are derived from three items ($n = 633$ responses), themes 4 and 7 are derived from four items ($n = 844$ responses), themes 5 and 10 are derived from two items ($n = 422$ responses), themes 6, 8, 9, 11, and 12 are derived from one item ($n = 211$ responses). Percentages must therefore be interpreted accordingly.

Table 2. *Elements Contributing to Students’ Motivation Interpreted Through the L2MSS Components*

Themes	%	L2MSS component
1. Desire to go to abroad / Italy	52.8%	Ideal L2 Self
2. Heritage (reconnect with Italian relatives)	19.3%	
3. Personal or cultural interest	12.3%	
4. Communication with L1/L2 Italian speakers	45.3%	
5. Socializing and building interpersonal connection	9%	
6. Willingness to emulate L1 speakers	78.2%	
7. Working in Italy and communicating with Italian coworkers	20.6%	
8. Influence of teachers’ attitude	90.5%	Ought-to L2 Self
9. Importance of mastering the Italian language	89.6%	
10. Influence of test and test scores	58.3%	
11. Engaging activities	93.4%	L2 Learning Environment
12. Positive classroom atmosphere	89.1%	

Notes. L1 – first language, L2 – second language, L2MSS – L2 motivational self system.

DISCUSSION

Findings from the present study revealed that what motivates students to learn Italian in the U.S. is their desire to go to Italy, their passion for the Italian culture, their Italian heritage, their willingness to be fluent and communicate in Italian, the need to fulfill a language requirement, the desire to reconnect with loved ones, and the desire to extend their linguistic and background (RQ1). Most of these themes also emerged as expressions of participants' ideal L2 self in the short responses, while their ought-to L2 self-emerged in connection with the importance of mastering the language to succeed professionally, the influence of test scores, and teachers' attitudes. Specifically, these last ones resulted to be closely related to participants' L2 learning experiences, which overall appeared to be positive, both in terms of classroom atmosphere and activities (RQ2).

Overall, these results highlighted the role played by the ideal L2 self as the main motivator to learn Italian, as in D'Orazi and Hajek (2021) and Palmieri (2018). The motivational dimensions that emerged from the present study also align with the motivators for Australian learners also in terms of the intention to go to Italy and communicate with native speakers, the perception of the Italian language and culture as attractive, and students' consideration of Italian as an easy subject because of its similarity with other familiar romance languages. Another finding in line with D'Orazi and Hajek (2021) is learners' consideration of the Italian language as a strength for their future careers and thus judge it essential to master. Interestingly, 33.6% of the participants in the present study were heritage language learners of Italian and mostly wished to learn the language to reconnect and communicate with their relatives. While the motivation of Australian IFL learners is triggered by contact with a larger Italian local community (D'Orazi & Hajek, 2021; Palmieri, 2018), the social context outside the classroom and engagement with a local community do not emerge as a motivational aspect within the present study. However, when it comes to the classroom learning environment, a positive and engaging learning experience enhances students' motivation, as found for the Australian learners.

Zooming out from the Italian-focused motivational research and looking at the literature on LOTEs in general, some findings of the present study relate to the newer implementations of the L2MSS and can be situated in the discussion around motivation for LOTEs learners in multilingual settings. Specifically, while investigating participants' long-term goals for learning Italian, the last theme emerged from the analysis "additional linguistic and cultural knowledge" can reveal the emergence of a multilingual self (Henry, 2017; Ushioda, 2017). Responses such as "I want to add that to the list of languages I know" and "becoming fluent, having Italian as my 3rd language" can "reflect a deeper feeling and personal value attached to being/becoming multilingual" (Henry, 2017, p. 559). This same motif of personal value for learning a language also emerged when some participants were asked how important they considered mastering Italian for their future prospects and responded "I consider it to be pretty essential (...) I also have a desire to expand my language knowledge beyond Italian because of my love for writing and language itself" and "I consider it to be very important to me personally because I'd like to be fluent in another language." The possible emergence of a multilingual self in questions related to different constructs of the L2MSS could also be considered as evidence of the overlaps and dynamic interaction of the selves. While these interpretations can be promising in supporting not only the newest re-conceptualization in L2 motivational research but also the latest multilingual and dynamic turn that the field of second language acquisition is taking, the small number of responses collected in this study supporting these theories may not be sufficient for further stronger claims. Future research could replicate the present study by adjusting the instrument to properly investigate the multilingual self and adding a set of questions targeting specifically this construct. If using the instrument of the present study as it is to explore other LOTEs or contexts, researchers may also adjust the set of questions related to the ought-to self to discern them more clearly from the L2 learning experience.

Although the findings of the present study generally align with previous research and contribute to the motivational research in LOTEs with new data, there are certain limitations to keep in mind that can be addressed by future research. First, the L2

learning experience in this study focuses only on the classroom formal setting. Besides expanding the study's context outside the classroom and considering, for instance, the influence of local communities as in D'Orazzi and Hajek (2021), future research could also explore the motivation for learning Italian in online settings by surveying learners of Italian on specific online communities such as Facebook groups or Reddit. Second, future research could include some of the recent implementations of the L2MSS model, such as the anti-ought-to L2 Self as suggested by Thompson and Vásquez (2015) or design survey questions aimed at investigating more deeply participants' multilingual self (Henry, 2017; Ushioda, 2017), therefore contributing to the validation of these new constructs while also aligning with the more recent multilingual turn (Henry, 2017). In U.S. contexts with a substantial presence of Italian heritage communities, such as New York City, the heritage language learners' rooted self (MacIntyre et al., 2017) would also be another future interesting research direction to pursue. Finally, the one-time data collection of the present study does not fully shed light on the dynamic nature of motivation in terms of its change over time, and therefore, more longitudinal studies as would be beneficial for this purpose (also suggested by D'Orazzi & Hajek, 2021; Sudina, 2021).

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

While acknowledging that LOTEs learning and enrollment is oftentimes hindered by several variables external to learners, such as sociopolitical factors, as well as university degree programs requirements, advising, and funding options (Morgan & Thompson, 2022; Thompson, 2017), there are meaningful actions that practitioners and curriculum designers can take to enhance LOTEs' student motivation aimed not only at encouraging enrollments, but also at supporting the well-documented cognitive, educational, and economical benefits associated with knowing multiple languages (Thompson, 2017).

Findings from the present studies can be beneficial in informing specifically teachers and curriculum designers of Italian in the United States but can also be

extended to practitioners of other foreign languages. As career-focused learning approaches have been recognized as a strength of university language programs (Lusin et al., 2023), teachers can consider including specific lexicon and formal style practice in the course materials to give learners the tools that they will need when working in countries where the target language is spoken and communicating with coworkers using that language. Next, teachers are invited to reflect on their current assessment practices. As test scores, anxiety, and stress emerged as both positively and negatively impacted learners' motivation, more personalized testing procedures or formats (e.g., multimodal projects, portfolios, or journals) could be employed to maximize learners' motivation. Including formal or informal students' needs analysis can also help to tailor the assessment and the content of the course as much as possible to students' needs. This would also help teachers to get to know their students better, set the base for a positive learning environment and teacher-student relationships, which enhance motivation. Teachers' success in enhancing learners' motivation, fulfilling their class expectations, and facilitating the realization of learners' projections as speakers of LOTEs can lead to lower rates of dropping the class and continuing the study of the language at the advanced levels.

As students' motivation can affect enrollment rates, directors of LOTEs programs are also invited to consider the findings from the present study to offer opportunities that can help the enrollment rates of any foreign language program in need. For instance, they could include awards and celebrations for LOTEs' students and build relationships with other institutions/organizations to increase the support for LOTEs programs in terms of funding and scholarships. Creating these types of connections would also be a possibility to provide a wider range of cultural and career opportunities for students, such as study abroad experiences and language exchange programs. With specific reference to Italian, adding certificates, majors, or double majors where possible, for instance, would also help to attract students and give them more flexibility in designing their degrees (Lusin et al., 2023). Lastly, the considerable presence of Italian-American heritage language learners among the participants of this study should not be underestimated, as it is a valuable insight that can encourage teachers

to value the contribution they can bring in the classroom, thanks to the distinct nature of their cultural values together with their history as a marginalized group as an ethnic group (Alessandria et al., 2016).

CONCLUSION

The present study explored the motivation of learners to study Italian language in the university context in the United States. With reference to Dörnyei's L2MSS, the ideal L2 emerged as the most influential motivational dimension. The dominant themes were participants' image of being a fluent Italian speaker in Italy for traveling, studying, or working purposes, their positive attitude toward Italian language and culture, and the desire to reconnect to Italian roots expressed by a significant percentage of heritage language learners. The additional desire to extend their linguistic background in participants' responses also reveals the possible emergence of a multilingual self. An engaging learning environment also boosts participants' motivation.

Overall, this study suggests that supporting students' motivation entails more attention to pedagogical strategies that increase participants' enjoyment and engagement in class, such as communicative strategies. Topics might be tailored to students' future professional goals, and heritage language learners could be considered as a great cultural resource. Given the narrow learning context considered, there is ample space for additional research and analysis to develop an understanding of what motivates students to learn Italian in the United States. Specifically, future research could take a longitudinal approach, explore learning settings outside the classroom, and implement some of the reconceptualization of the L2MSS found in the literature. This research's ultimate goal is also to highlight the importance of a student-centered approach that has learners' motivation as the starting point. When we center students' needs and motivation in the classroom, we accomplish our role as teachers and educators.

Authors' Contributions

The author designed the study, completed the data collection, analyzed and interpreted the data, and wrote the manuscript.

Ethics Approval & Consent to Participate

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of South Florida (study no. 006171). All participants provided informed consent before participating in the study.

Declaration of GenAI and AI-Assisted Technologies

In the preparation of this work, the author used Grammarly for language editing to enhance the readability of the text. The service was used to a limited extent.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A. Questionnaire.

1. Demographics
 - a. Name of your current institutions
 - b. How old are you?
 - c. Gender: male / female / other / prefer not to say
 - d. What language(s) do you speak at home?
 - e. What language(s) do you speak other than English and Italian?
 - f. Is your family from Italy? No / Yes, my mum and / or dad is / are / Yes, my grandparents are / Other (if 'other', please explain)
 - g. What other languages have you studied in school?
 - h. What level of Italian classes are you taking?
2. Motivation (adapted from Kim, 2006; Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009)
 - a. What initially inspired you to start learning Italian?
 - b. What specific factors led you to choose Italian over other languages?
 - c. What are your long-term goals for studying Italian?
 - d. Who are you learning Italian for (yourself, family, someone else)?
3. Ideal L2 self (adapted from Kim, 2006; Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009)
 - a. When you imagine yourself as an advanced Italian speaker, what do you see yourself doing with the language?
 - b. In what contexts do you see yourself using Italian (different countries, institutions...)?
 - c. Can you describe why you would use Italian in these situations?
 - d. With whom do you see yourself communicating in Italian?
 - e. How much do you want to emulate native Italian speakers in terms of language use and cultural practices?
4. Ought-to L2 self (re-adapted from Iguchi, 2017)
 - a. How important do you consider mastering Italian to be for your future prospects?
 - b. To what extent does your teacher's attitude influence your desire to study Italian?
 - c. Do test scores play a role in your desire to study Italian?
 - d. If the teacher were to state that there would be no tests, how would this impact your desire to study Italian?
5. L2 learning experience (adapted from Iguchi, 2017)
 - a. How engaging do you find the in-class learning activities for learning Italian?
 - b. To what extent does your teacher influence your desire to study Italian?
 - c. Can you describe the atmosphere in your Italian class (e.g., positive, supportive, challenging...)?

APPENDIX B. Codebook.

Category	Code	Description
Motivation	Heritage	having Italian heritage and want to reconnect by communicating with their Italian family
	Love language and culture	learners' positive attitude towards Italian language and culture
	Language requirement	learning Italian is a language requirement fulfillment
	Linguistic knowledge	background familiarity and similarity with another romantic language motivates students to choose Italian
	Personal learning	students learn Italian for their personal knowledge and growth
	Fluency	expressed the desire to be fluent in Italian
Motivation, ideal self	Communication with L1 speakers	learners have the final aim to be able to communicate with L1 Italian speakers
	Communication	learners have the general goal of being able to communicate
	Affect	loved ones motivate learners to study Italian
	Going abroad	desire to go abroad and/or specifically to Italy to study, work, live, or on holiday. Also include past trips to Italy
	Career	learners study Italian for future career opportunities
Ideal self	Leisure	learners learn Italian to know the culture, read books, watch movies, etc.
	Socialize	learners want to use Italian to make friends and create interpersonal connections with people
	Help	learners wish to help others by speaking their language
	Communicate with colleagues	learners see themselves using Italian to communicate with coworkers in the workplace, peers and teachers in class.
	Communicate with family	learners see themselves using Italian to communicate with family members in their household
	Communicate with L1 speakers	learners see themselves using Italian to communicate with L1 speakers
	Communicate with affects	learners see themselves using Italian to communicate with friends or non-blood-related loved ones
	Communicate with others	learners see themselves using Italian to communicate with other speakers of Italian (not necessarily L1 speakers) or strangers in the US or Italy
	Want to emulate L1 speakers	the extent to which the learners want to be L1 speaker like
	Non-emulation of L1 speakers	learners are not sure, or they don't want to be L1 speaker like

	Emulate language only	learners want to emulate L1 speaker language, not culture
	Master for jobs	mastering Italian is important for future job
	Master hobby	mastering Italian for themselves, for fun, as a hobby
	Master for self	mastering Italian is important for themselves
	No master	mastering Italian is not too/that important
Ought-to self	Influence of test scores	test scores impact the desire to learn Italian
	Non-influence of test scores	test scores do not impact the desire to learn Italian
	Positive teachers' influence	positive influence of teachers and their attitude on language learning desire
	Negative or absent teachers' influence	negative influence of teachers and their attitude on language learning desire
L2 learning experience	Positive classroom atmosphere	positive description of the classroom atmosphere
	Engagement in-class activities	how engaging are the in-class activities
