

Dutch and Flemish language, culture, and identity in North America

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Modeled after Moquin and Wolf's (2020) survey on North American Icelandic, this study adds to a growing body of work examining the relationship between language use and cultural identity in postvernacular communities (e.g., Moquin & Wolf 2020, Brown & Hietpas 2019). Through 635 responses to an online survey collected as of February 2022, we present initial quantitative and qualitative findings on the relationship between language and culture among Dutch/Flemish immigrants to North America and their descendants. Our results show that strong Dutch cultural identification among a portion of this group does not necessarily correlate with Dutch language proficiency, especially after the first and second generation. The study further finds that respondents find the maintenance of Dutch language and culture only moderately important, although with slightly higher scores for culture and traditions shown in responses referencing Dutch holiday traditions and foods. These views, which come from arguably some of the most engaged members of these communities as respondents to this optional survey, bear important consequences for the future of Dutch in North America. However, initial analysis suggests that Dutch hotspots, especially those which latch onto "Dutchness" for festivals and tourism purposes, experience more successful maintenance. While the number of responses collected here helps to expand our understanding of the roles of language and cultural identity in heritage communities, future research into these "hotspots" and contrasting them with isolated responses will provide further insight into how the community itself shapes these identities.

Keywords: Dutch, Flemish, North America, cultural identity, postvernacular communities

1. Introduction¹

In this paper, we present initial results from our internet survey on Dutch language and culture in North America. Through this survey, first launched in March of 2021 and still receiving responses at press time, we aim to map the presence of Dutch and Flemish (heritage) culture and understand connections between cultural identity and language ideology and use. This fits within a growing body of literature examining sociolinguistic aspects of heritage communities. We crucially build on

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the work of Moquin and Wolf (2020, 2021) on Icelandic, which demonstrates the effectiveness of survey-based research in heritage language sociolinguistics and serves as a model for the present study, along with related studies currently being conducted on other heritage communities including Pennsylvania Dutch (Fisher 2021) and East Frisian (Rocker 2021), both presented at the 12th Workshop on Immigrant Languages in the Americas.

For the purpose of this study, we consider any person living in North America who self-identifies as being of Dutch or Flemish heritage or descent, or as having Dutchness as a part of their cultural identity, to be of interest. According to the 2020 American Community Survey, approximately 3.7 million Americans claimed partial Dutch heritage (U.S. Census Bureau 2020). In most cases, participants in the study belong to the Dutch or Flemish heritage community in the narrowest sense, i.e., they or their ancestors migrated to North America from the Netherlands or Flanders. The survey has also attracted participants who do not claim any Dutch lineage, however, including spouses of people with Dutch heritage and people who live in one of the hotspots of Dutch-American culture, most notably Holland, Michigan, Little Chute, Wisconsin, or Pella, Iowa. All these responses are included in the results presented here, except where we directly address distance from immigration (i.e. immigrant “generations”). The biographical information collected opens virtually endless opportunities for continued discussion and study. Note that we are targeting both Dutch (from the present-day Netherlands) and Flemish (from the Dutch-speaking part of present-day Belgium) heritage in this study. As the vast majority of respondents report only Dutch affiliation, meaning a connection to the present-day Netherlands, and only a handful report Flemish affiliation, we do not have enough data to reliably make distinctions between the two, although we may do so in the future.

In the study of heritage language, we draw heavily on the notion of postvernacularity (Shandler 2008), which signifies a shift in value of a heritage language from the communicative to the symbolic. Brown and Hietpas (2019) previously sketched postvernacular use of Dutch in their case study of Little Chute, where the historically Dutch population has completely shifted to English for communication, and yet the Dutch language retains a visible presence within the community in words, phrases, business names and person names as a bearer of group cultural identity. This phenomenon is further explored on a much larger scale within the context of this study.

In Section 2, we describe the composition and distribution of the survey. Section 3 contains information regarding the general population and biographical information. In Section 4, we begin to interpret quantitative data and supplement qualitative data. We conclude in Section 5.

2. Methods

Our survey consisted of 42 questions, of which 9 provided non-identifying demographic information and 33 consisted of multiple-choice and short-answer questions with ample opportunity for elaboration. The short answer questions were targeted at each participant's past and current experiences with both the Dutch/Flemish language and culture. The majority of the questions from Moquin and Wolf's (2020) survey were kept to optimize comparison between the two studies. However, we did add further questions about cultural identity and practices, domains of language use, and the role of religion in language maintenance.

Participants had the option to either complete the survey online via Qualtrics or print and mail back a completed hardcopy. The survey link with study description was distributed via the authors' personal social media accounts as well as Dutch/Flemish-American culturally-associated social media pages and groups after receiving page or group administrator permission. Additionally, the survey was also sent to the Dutch instructors of the United States listserv as well as public libraries in known Dutch/Flemish areas.

The results presented reflect responses received between March 22, 2021, and February 1, 2022. Responses where the participant did not complete the majority of the demographic questions were excluded from further analysis, giving a total of 635 responses. The majority of respondents were female (71%, 435; 29% male, 180) with 1 respondent self-identifying as non-binary. The vast majority of respondents also self-identified as being of Dutch descent, with only 2 respondents identifying as only Flemish descent, 20 of both Flemish and Dutch descent, and 17 respondents reported being of neither Flemish nor Dutch descent. Consequently, because of the small proportion of respondents who identified as only Flemish or both Dutch and Flemish, all respondents who identified as either or both Dutch/Flemish are analyzed together here. Those respondents who reported being of neither Flemish nor Dutch descent were excluded from further analysis. However, a future study which takes a closer look at these respondents and why they chose to complete the survey and how they came to have a connection with either or both the Dutch language or culture may also provide interesting insights. No statistical testing has been conducted at this stage, as this study provides an initial analysis of the data from a largely qualitative angle.

3. Results

A note should first be made about the response bias found in surveys such as these. Participation in this survey and in surveys like it is completely voluntary. Our survey also was expected to take longer than half an hour to complete if time was taken in filling out the short answer sections. Consequently, the results presented here should be interpreted with some caution as it is likely that they only reflect a population with enough interest in their heritage and culture to take the time to

complete the survey. This is somewhat reflected in the responses we received to the question “Which of these best describes your cultural identity?” 61.1% of respondents said they “strongly identify with Dutch culture” (388), 37.5% said they “somewhat identify with Dutch culture” (238), and only 2.8% said they “did not identify with Dutch culture” (18) (2 respondents of the 635 did not answer this question). Therefore, the results are skewed towards people who at least somewhat identify with the culture. However, while we note this as a limitation of our study and studies such as these, we still believe that much can be learned from this type of data about both language maintenance and identity.

We received responses from 41 states and 8 Canadian provinces. Of the states, Michigan, Iowa, Wisconsin, and California had the most responses with 101, 80, 53, and 41 responses, respectively. The most represented states in our study, Michigan, Iowa and Wisconsin, match up well with areas of known historical Dutch settlement (Swierenga & Krabbendam 2012). Of the Canadian provinces, we received the most responses from Ontario (44), British Columbia (13), and Alberta (10). While specific comparisons between regions are not made here, comparing these Dutch “hotspots”, or known areas of concentrated Dutch immigration, to the responses from lone immigrants and less-concentrated areas is a direction of future interest to us.

The survey received a good number of responses across generations. First generation was listed as “I immigrated to North America as an adult”, 2nd generation as “my parents immigrated to North America as adults and/or I immigrated as a child when I was less than 12 years old”, 3rd generation as “my grandparents immigrated to North America as adults”, 4th generation as “my great-grandparents immigrated to North America as adults”, and 5th+ generation as “my great-great-grandparents or even earlier ancestors of mine immigrated to North America as adults”. Participants were additionally given the option to provide information to help place them in the proper generation if they were unsure where they belonged. This gave us a total of 169 respondents of 1st generation (27%), 156 respondents of 2nd generation (25%), 124 respondents of 3rd generation (20%), 96 respondents of 4th generation (16%), and 72 respondents who were of 5th or later generation (12%).

The generations differed in how strongly they identify with Dutch culture (Table 1). The first generation had the highest percentage of respondents who said they strongly identify with the culture. Each subsequent generation decreased in this category. However, even the 5th+ generation had 41.7% of respondents say they strongly identify with the culture. Additionally, a large proportion of each generation also indicated that they only somewhat identify with Dutch culture. The 5th+ generation also had the highest percentage of respondents who said they do not identify with Dutch culture. It is the only generation with a percentage in the double digits with 11.1%. Thus, although this survey is still subject to response bias,

the split of respondents especially between strongly and somewhat identifying with Dutch culture allows for interesting comparisons.

Examining speaking ability by cultural identification (Table 2), we also find differences between generations. Participants responded to the questions “Which of these best describes your cultural identity?” and “How do you describe your current level of speaking Dutch?”. As expected, the 1st generation (n=128) had the highest

Table 1: Level of identification with Dutch culture by generation

	Do Not Identify	Somewhat Identify	Strongly Identify
1st	0.6%	19.6%	79.8%
2nd	1.3%	37.4%	61.3%
3rd	1.6%	46%	52.4%
4th	2.1%	47.9%	50%
5th+	11.1%	47.2%	41.7%

percentage of fluent speakers as well as a high percentage of respondents who strongly identify with the culture. This leads to the highest density of responses in the lower right corner of the table with the header “1st Generation.” Second generation respondents (n=142) were much more varied in their speaking abilities. This leads to there not being one clear highest density area of the table headed with “2nd generation.” This differs from the 3rd (n=122), 4th (n=95), and 5th+ (n=70) generations, which have the highest densities around non-existent speaking abilities and somewhat or strongly identifying with the culture. These tables seem to indicate that cultural identity is not necessarily linked to language ability, as, although every generation had a high percentage of respondents that strongly identify with Dutch culture, especially the 3rd-5th+ generations have a low percentage of respondents with any proficiency in speaking Dutch. If speaking ability and cultural identity in each generation were correlated, we would instead expect each generation to look like the first generation, with the highest density of responses in the bottom right corner. This would indicate a positive correlation between speaking ability and cultural identity. We instead see no clear correlation between speaking ability and cultural identification for the 2nd generation, as high fluency did not mean a strong identification with the culture. Additionally, the 3rd–5th+ generations likewise do not display a positive correlation between speaking ability and cultural

Table 2: Relationship between cultural identity and speaking ability in Dutch

	1st Generation			2nd Generation		
	Do Not	Somewhat	Strongly	Do not	Somewhat	Strongly
Non-existent	0%	0%	0.8%	1.4%	16.2%	10.6%
Limited	0%	0.8%	1.6%	0%	9.2%	7.8%
Fair	0%	2.3%	3.1%	0%	6.3%	19%
Near Fluent	0.8%	1.6%	8.6%	0%	4.2%	14.8%
Fluent	0%	18%	62.5%	0%	1.4%	9.2%

	3rd Generation			4th Generation		
	Do not	Somewhat	Strongly	Do not	Somewhat	Strongly
Non-existent	0.8%	41%	37.7%	2.1%	46.3%	37.9%
Limited	0%	4.1%	9%	0%	2.1%	9.5%
Fair	0%	0.8%	4.1%	0%	0%	2.1%
Near Fluent	0%	0%	1.64%	0%	0%	0%
Fluent	0%	0%	0.82%	0%	0%	0%

	5th+ Generation		
	Do not	Somewhat	Strongly
Non-existent	11.4%	44.3%	30%
Limited	0%	2.9%	7.1%
Fair	0%	0%	2.9%
Near Fluent	0%	0%	0%
Fluent	0%	0%	1.4%

identification, as many respondents with non-existent speaking abilities still strongly identified with the culture.

We were also interested in which domains of language use respondents would report using Dutch. Figure 1 displays the responses to the question “Are there certain aspects of language or communication for which you use Dutch?” The greatest number of respondents said that they use Dutch for counting (115) and for singing songs (104). That the highest number of responses to this question was for counting is of interest, since Dutch has a different order for expressing numbers above twenty than English. That singing songs is the second highest response is not surprising based on previous interviews with participants who reported knowing and singing Dutch songs, especially Sinterklaas and Christmas songs (Brown & Hietpas 2019). Additionally, there were a high number of responses for nursery rhymes/stories (69) and conversations related to the household (61). The low number of responses for talking about farming (12) was somewhat surprising as many Dutch immigrants to North America farmed as their livelihood (Swierenga & Krabbendam 2012). Participants were also given the option to add aspects which were not a part of the given list. Notable additions were swear words and exclamations (12), using Dutch as a secret language between family members (7), using Dutch greetings (10), using Dutch sayings or expressions (8), and using Dutch to research family history (8).

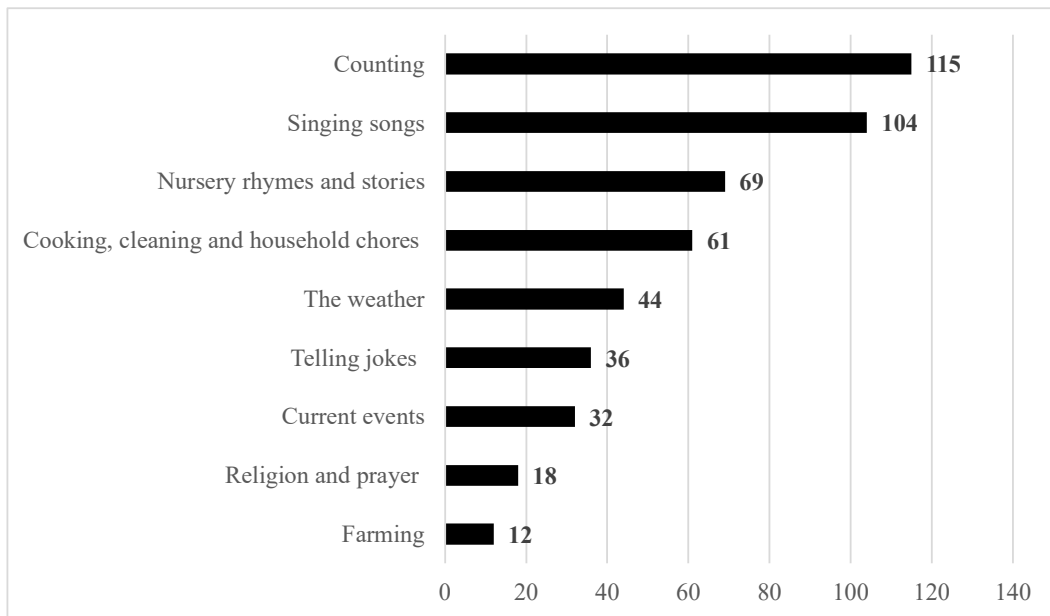


Figure 1: Number of responses for various domains of Dutch language use

Another aspect of the survey was to investigate what factors may have influenced and may still be influencing the maintenance of both the language and the culture. One question addressed “How important a role has religion and/or church activities played in maintaining the use of the Dutch language within your family or community” (Figure 2). The majority of respondents (68.4%) selected that religion

and church has been “Not at all important” in the maintenance of the Dutch language. This is somewhat surprising as several Dutch communities were formed around the basis of a church or religion (e.g., Catholicism in Little Chute, Wisconsin, and Dutch Calvinism/Reformed in Pella, Iowa (Swierenga & Krabbendam 2012). However, this finding does match up well with the responses received to the domains of language question (see Figure 1), in which religion and prayer was the option with the second fewest responses (n=18).

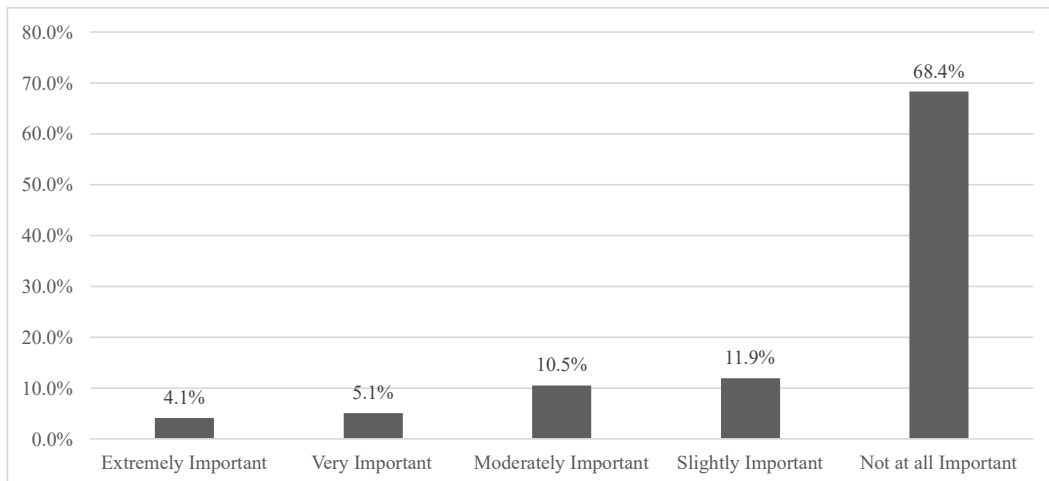


Figure 2: Importance of religion and/or church activities in the maintenance of the Dutch language

Lastly, we were interested in how important respondents thought maintaining the language versus the culture and traditions was in North America. Figure 3 displays the results of the two questions “How important is it to you that Dutch be maintained as a heritage language in North America?” and “How important is it to you that Dutch culture is maintained in North America?” The majority of responses to both questions was that it is moderately important to maintain the language and the culture, and fewer respondents selected the strongly negative or positive options. This may be due to the general tendency of respondents to choose a neutral or middle option (Bishop 1987, Johns 2005, Kalton et al. 1980). However, based on the responses to the role of religion, which had the majority of responses for the more extreme “Not at all Important” option, this seems unlikely to be the case. Consequently, it appears that respondents believe it is only moderately important to maintain both the language and the culture in North America. It is also worth noting that there are more responses on the left side of the graph for culture and traditions than for language. This indicates that respondents put more importance on maintaining culture and traditions than on maintaining the language. The attitude that this finding indicates is likely to have important consequences for the future of Dutch in North America.

4. Discussion

One surface-level difference between our study and related studies is the dominance of first-generation immigrants among the respondents: the first generation is the largest single group at over one quarter of all completed surveys. This is very different from Moquin and Wolf's (2020) study, which yielded a strong preponderance of third generation Icelandic immigrants in its results. Inherent to an open internet survey is that its distribution is to some extent outside of the control of the researchers, and so any skewing of the population may be due to chance. However, the large number of first-generation immigrants in this survey suggests that there may be more continued or recent influx, which sets the Dutch heritage

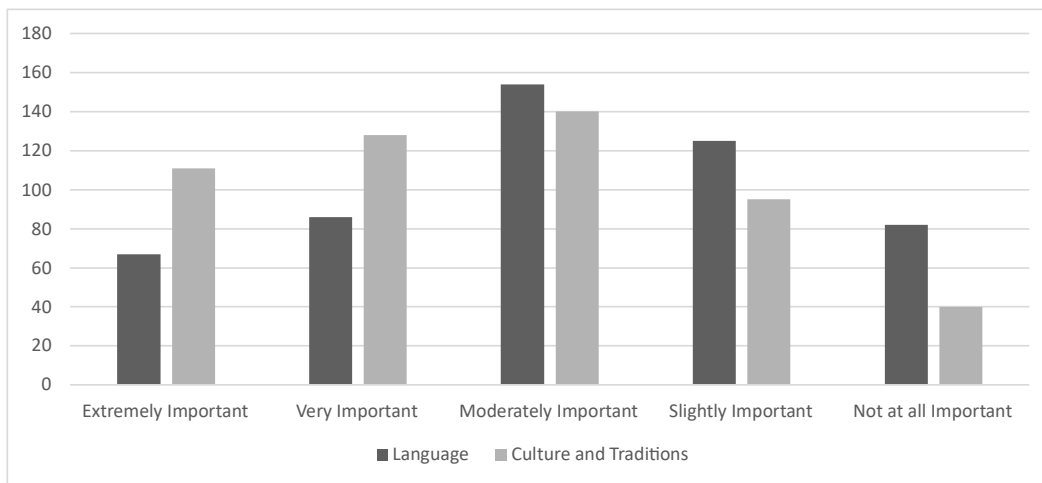


Figure 3: Importance of maintaining the Dutch language versus Dutch culture and traditions in North America

communities apart from other communities that have recently been studied using these methods. In addition, we find less compelling evidence for Hansen's Law, or the phenomenon that heritage community members of the third generation feel a stronger emotional connection to the heritage culture than their parents (Hansen 1938). In our data, third generation respondents do not report markedly stronger connections to Dutch culture than the second generation. Cultural identification is strong across all groups. What we do see, is that the third generation is where heritage language attrition is almost complete, and so there exists a disconnect between linguistic ability (severely weakened) and cultural identification (strong).

Despite the obvious conclusion that heritage language maintenance is not essential to cultural identification, responses to open-ended survey questions frequently reveal feelings of loss, regret, responsibility, and guilt. Consider the following quotes.

- (1) I wish I would have tried harder to learn while my grandparents were alive. (36 F, 3rd gen., Iowa)

- (2) My family did not [take an active role in maintaining Dutch language within the community]. My grandfather insisted that they were in America and must speak English so grandma could learn. (42 F, 1st gen., Wisconsin)
- (3) I regret the fact that I was unable to instill permanent Dutch pride in my son. He [...] speaks only English with us [...] and makes no effort to share this heritage with his two children. So it goes. (66 F, 1st gen., Wisconsin)
- (4) In our community there is no effort made to maintain the Dutch language. When I was head miller on Little Chute Windmill I tried to teach the other millers the Dutch names of various important parts of the windmill but they all refused to try and learn anything Dutch. (75 M, 1st gen., Wisconsin)

Regret over missed opportunities as in (1), references to language ideologies that discouraged the learning of Dutch, as in (2), and frustration with younger generations or members of the community as in (3) and (4) were all recurring themes in the survey responses. Conversely, many respondents explicitly report attaching more importance to, or having an easier time maintaining culture and traditions. Among the most enduring traditions are Sinterklaas and a select number of Dutch foods, including *oliebollen* ‘fried dough balls’, *kroket* ‘meat croquette’, *hutsepot* ‘potato and vegetable mash’, *erwtensop* ‘pea soup,’ etc. These were mentioned very frequently and seem almost universal to the Dutch heritage community regardless of location or distance from immigration.

- (5) The language will probably not get passed on to our kids but some of the tradition will. (52 M, 1st gen., Nebraska)
- (6) I used to wish more people spoke Dutch / passed it down but now I don’t think it’s as important as maintaining heritage. (21 F, 5+ gen., Iowa)
- (7) We still celebrate ‘Sinterklaas’ and make various Dutch foods and snacks as stampot from Kale, sauerkraut, carrot and onions, nasi goreng, and kroketten and fricandel as snacks. (73 M, 1st gen., WI)

While a more in-depth look at differences across communities and locations is still underway, some places seem considerably more successful at maintaining Dutch culture than others. On the one hand, a small number of hotspots with a large heritage Dutch concentration unsurprisingly hold on to the heritage culture more strongly than those families and individuals who live more spread out without the support of a large community. On the other hand, some differences between the typical Dutch communities that have similar immigration histories may be related to how well communities succeed in marketing “Dutchness” for tourism purposes. Examples (8)–(10) came from the communities of Pella, Iowa, and Holland,

Michigan, which each boast Dutch-themed open-air museums, a working windmill and a springtime tulip festival.

- (8) Pella [Iowa] requires all business to have a Dutch front, even McDonalds and Walmart. *(58 F, 3rd gen., Iowa)*
- (9) Tulip Time in Pella is three days of Dutch music, dancing, and food - and over 300,000 tulips blooming. I've been involved with Dutch dancing since 6th grade, I was a Dutchess in high school, and I was on the Tulip Court my senior year of high school. We eat foods like stropwafels, poffertjes, banket, oliebollen, frikandels, frites, etc. A lot of these foods are available year round at different restaurants and bakeries around town. *(24 F, 5+ gen., Iowa)*
- (10) Tulip time, pigs in the blanket, stropwaffles, dancing in wooden shoes, anis flavored milk, things that are in place in Holland michigan. *(35 F, 5+ gen., Michigan)*

From these and many other responses citing Dutch festivals in these communities, we conclude that these initiatives are very effective at bringing the community together and foregrounding Dutch heritage. Conversely, people reporting from parts of southern Ontario which also have a sizable population of Dutch descent, more frequently report cultural attrition, as in example (11).

- (11) There seems to be less and less in the community as the first generation immigrants pass away. *(55 F, 3rd gen., Ontario)*

The impact of historical societies, and local festivals that foreground and promote local Dutch history is likely considerable and worthy of much further discussion.

5. Conclusion

This ongoing study is the largest survey-based study on a single heritage language to our knowledge, having yielded over 600 responses to date. While we must keep in mind the participation bias this method of data collection is inevitably prone to, it has proven to be invaluable in reaching large numbers of people with limited time and resources and collecting a wealth of quantitative and qualitative information. Furthermore, the format of this study allows for straightforward comparison between different heritage communities and the identification of universal tendencies and phenomena across different heritage communities.

Continued and future research will include a more in-depth look at the aforementioned 'hotspots' (especially Pella, Iowa; Little Chute, Wisconsin; and Holland, Michigan) of Dutch immigrant culture, contrasting the attitudes reported in these localities with other places across North America that do not have a strong local Dutch identity. In addition, the adoption of aspects of a Dutch cultural identity

by people who do not have a connection to old country Dutch is a phenomenon that warrants further discussion.

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