

## Where the streets have names

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**Abstract:** The subject of street names can be interesting to understand a country's history. The choice of a street name testifies to a country's interest towards a topic: as, for instance, naming the high street after a renowned patriot, a war hero or a scientist. Over the years various countries renamed streets or squares to make a statement in favour or against a particular historical period. This paper seeks to study the toponymy of Italian streets. By analysing the toponymy database published by Istat, it aims to: rank street names from most to least frequent (by municipality); classify them according to broad categories (*e.g.* geographical names, politicians, scientists, saints, etc.); georeference them by municipality. This work allows the author to consider the ranking of streets and the reasons behind it. First, the ranking shows the relative importance of a street name. It highlights Italy's young history: an emphasis on the capital cities, on the *Risorgimento*, on the Italian language. Secondly, the classification shows the recurrence of some themes: the most important categories are cities, politicians, WWI references, and *literati*. Lastly, showing the location of street names on a map also allows to make a geographical analysis of Italian toponymy: some names could be more frequent in specific regions than in others due to the influence of local traditions, to political reasons, etc.

**Keywords:** street names; location; categories; history

### Introduction

Street names define a country's identity. As a subject, toponymy is interesting in that it helps to understand a country's history. This article seeks to describe the toponymy of Italian streets, both by reflecting on the frequency of names and categories, and by showing and analysing their location. After a short look at the state of the art, it exposes the methodology and goes on to discuss the result of the research. The discussion opens with the first 100 street names ordered by occurrence. This is followed by the description of the various overlapping categories according to which the first 100 street names can be classified. A look at the first 20 names in each region concludes the discussion. Some concluding remarks and suggestions for further development close the article.

### State of the art

This work draws on an article published by the German newspaper *Zeit* (Biermann *et al.*, 2018), which studies the street names in Germany. The authors, together with a service provider, worked on data harvested from the OpenStreetMap open-source database. They programmed a searchable database of the over 450,000 street names in Germany, which anyone can research on their website or download for free. In doing so, they noticed some interesting patterns on the

distribution of street names. Some of them are located only in specific parts of the country, such as in former East Germany. The most common street names refer to abstract concepts, such as *school*, *garden* and *main* street.

This result is different from what happens in Italy, where the most common street names refer to a person, a place, a significant date, etc. Azaryahu (1996) states that commemorative street names have a role “in substantiating the ruling socio-political order and its particular ‘theory of the world’ in the cityscape” (p. 312). This is in contrast with places like the United States where street names are simply alphanumerical. In the past, street names were chosen with regard to local history and topography. The use of other non-local names started in France in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and diffused in the rest of Europe after the French Revolution and the reign of Napoleon, during which many streets were renamed.

In terms of renaming streets, Drozdowski (2014), looks at how the street of Kraków, Poland, changed their names across the 20<sup>th</sup> century, under three powers: Nazi, Soviet and Polish. In particular it looked at street name changes in the city centre in 1934 (Polish), 1943 (Nazi), 1964, 1985 (Soviet) and 1996 (Polish). It concludes that, through the years, “the street names in Kraków have provided visible, distinctive, and daily reminders of the historical and socio-political intentions of those governing that space” (p. 76).

An article by Oto-Peralías focuses on street names as socio-cultural data and shows the example of Spain with regard to religiosity. Instead of looking at single street names, the author elaborates an indicator of religiosity. It concludes that “street names actually reflect the local community’s social and cultural values” (p. 18).

Therefore, it can be safe to assume that toponymy is an interesting field. General studies are common but in-depth studies on a country, city or topic can shed new light on unexplored fields. Bearing this in mind, one can proceed with the analysis of the Italian case.

## Methodology

This article, similarly to Biermann *et al.* (2018), aims to study the toponymy of Italian streets. In 2015, the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat) published toponymy data that derive from their data elaboration and control activities for the 15<sup>th</sup> Population Census (Istat, 2015) and which include, along with the names and codes for region, province, municipality, locality:

- the street type designation (*e.g.* via, viale, piazza, strada);
- the street name;
- the house number.

Unfortunately, this data is provisional, as it only includes 7456 municipalities (92%) out of 8092<sup>1</sup> and two-thirds of the house numbers. Moreover, not all street names are standardised: for

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<sup>1</sup> This was the number of municipalities as of the 2011 census. Since 2012, a rising number of municipalities have been merging with one another. As a result, at the time of writing, the number of municipalities is 7914.

instance the street name *Giuseppe Garibaldi* may appear as the full name, as an abbreviation or as a surname only, either *G. Garibaldi* or *Garibaldi*.

Therefore, an extensive work of standardisation was carried out for the most common street names, that is, those occurring in at least 10% of the Italian municipalities (around 750). A further standardisation was necessary for the names occurring in at least 10% of each region's municipalities to take into account specific names in Italian regions.

In the case of some street names some generalisations were made, such as:

- *Santa Maria* contains all the denominations of Saint Mary, including *Addolorata, Annunziata, Beata Vergine, Immacolata*, etc.; by counting all the street names, Santa Maria would have reached first place, but when counting one occurrence per municipality it moved to the sixth;
- *Sant'Antonio* refers to the most popular saint Anthony in Italy, known as Sant'Antonio da Padova, and includes all the unspecified *Sant'Antonio*;
- *San Giovanni Battista*, being the most popular Saint John in Italian religious culture, includes all the unspecified *San Giovanni*;
- *Martiri della Libertà* includes all the denominations related to martyrs and fallen for the sake of freedom (including, for example, *Caduti della Libertà*);

The street name data was elaborated with the SAS (version 9.4) statistics software, which helped to extract, standardise and rank street names. The first 100 street names were extracted, together with their one-time occurrence in each municipality and ranking. This data was joined to the geographic municipality data (point-shaped data) with the open-source GIS software QGIS (version 3.4), to create maps showing the location of street names.

## Discussion

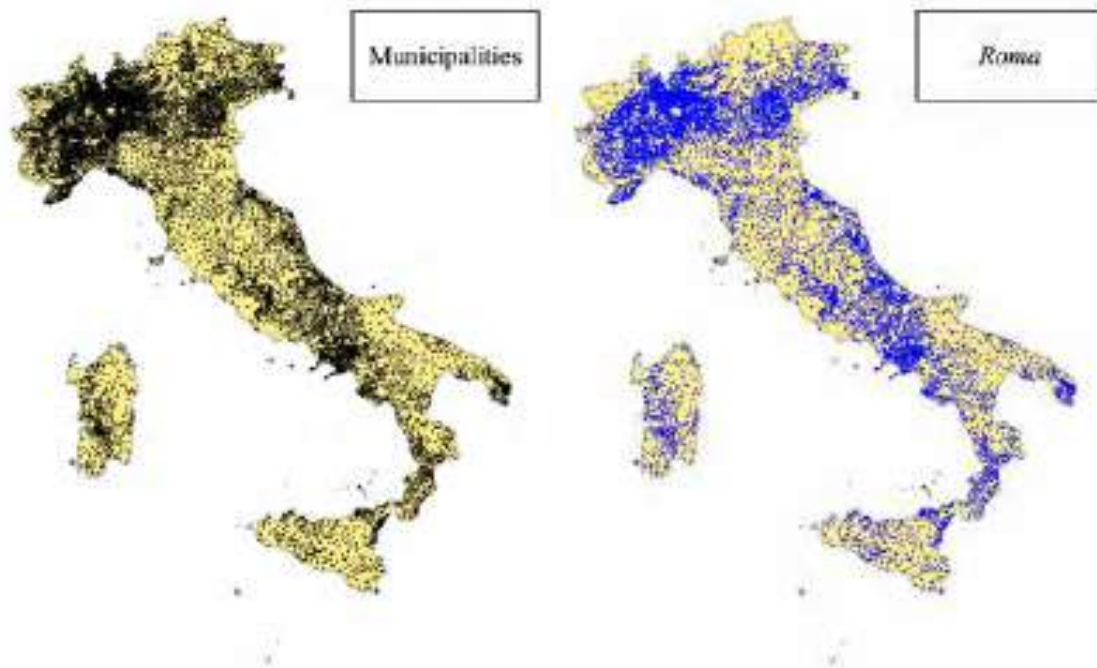
The following table (Table 1) shows a list of the first 100 street names by occurrence in Italian municipalities (each street name appears only once in each municipality: e.g. *Via Roma* and *Piazza Roma* count as one occurrence).

Rank	Street Name	%	Rank	Street Name	%	Rank	Street Name	%
1	Roma	76,92	35	Ugo Foscolo	20,24	68	Raffaello Sanzio	12,53
2	Guglielmo Marconi	55,43	36	Alessandro Volta	20,17	69	Martiri Della Libertà	12,49
3	Giuseppe Garibaldi	53,66	37	Vittorio Emanuele II	20,04	70	Isonzo	12,39
4	Giuseppe Mazzini	44,38	38	Galileo Galilei	19,98	71	San Giuseppe	12,38
5	Dante Alighieri	43,54	39	Giacomo Puccini	19,97	72	Pietro Mascagni	12,20
6	Santa Maria	40,50	40	Cristoforo Colombo	19,90	73	Giuseppe Di Vittorio	12,16
7	Giuseppe Verdi	39,18	41	Gioachino Rossini	19,89	74	Vittorio Alfieri	11,99
8	Giacomo Matteotti	37,93	42	Monte Grappa	18,37	75	Pace	11,94
9	Camillo Cavour	37,41	43	Sant'Antonio	18,31	76	Gorizia	11,86
10	IV Novembre	35,53	44	Repubblica	17,92	77	Filippo Turati	11,84
11	Papa Giovanni XXIII	34,51	45	XX Settembre	17,74	78	Pietro Nenni	11,82
12	Alessandro Manzoni	32,31	46	San Martino	17,29	79	San Giovanni Bosco	11,71

Rank	Street Name	%	Rank	Street Name	%	Rank	Street Name	%
13	Aldo Moro	32,12	47	Sandro Pertini	17,01	80	Fratelli Cervi	11,61
14	Antonio Gramsci	30,74	48	Vincenzo Bellini	16,38	81	Giotto	11,25
15	Cesare Battisti	29,75	49	Michelangelo Buonarroti	16,28	82	Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa	11,17
16	Alcide De Gasperi	28,80	50	Francesco Petrarca	16,24	83	Fiume	11,16
17	Piave	28,51	51	Risorgimento	16,11	84	Goffredo Mameli	11,05
18	Vittorio Veneto	27,36	52	San Giovanni Battista	15,81	85	Grazia Deledda	10,80
19	XXV Aprile	26,84	53	Silvio Pellico	15,33	86	Firenze	10,74
20	Chiesa	25,62	54	Armando Diaz	15,28	86	Fratelli Rosselli	10,74
21	Giacomo Leopardi	25,30	55	Torino	14,90	88	San Michele	10,47
22	Giosuè Carducci	24,95	55	Belvedere	14,90	89	Fratelli Bandiera	10,45
23	Umberto I	24,26	57	San Pietro	14,79	90	Giovanni Falcone	10,39
24	Trieste	24,02	58	Milano	14,78	91	Palmiro Togliatti	10,34
25	Trento	23,28	59	Nazario Sauro	14,48	92	Gabriele D'Annunzio	10,23
26	Giovanni Pascoli	22,91	60	Don Giovanni Minzoni	14,22	93	Santa Lucia	10,21
27	Leonardo Da Vinci	22,72	61	John Fitzgerald Kennedy	14,07	94	Nino Bixio	10,11
28	Europa	21,51	62	Salvo d'Acquisto	13,36	95	Luigi Pirandello	9,98
29	San Francesco d'Assisi	21,45	63	Italia	13,18	96	Amerigo Vespucci	9,90
30	Libertà	21,14	64	XXIV Maggio	13,14	97	Antonio Vivaldi	9,76
31	Enrico Fermi	21,11	65	Don Luigi Sturzo	13,10	98	Giovanni Verga	9,71
32	Castello	20,72	66	Venezia	13,02	99	Napoli	9,68
33	I Maggio	20,40	67	Gaetano Donizetti	12,73	100	Guglielmo Oberdan	9,64
34	San Rocco	20,28						

There is a variety of categories within the first 100 street names. For the purposes of this article the broad categories are, in no particular order: gender, places, scientists, patriots, politicians, artists, literati, seafarers, priests and religious people, significant dates, military people, heads of state (both kings and presidents), World War I and II, and victims of Mafia. It is worth noting that some street names fall into more than one category. For instance, *Monte Grappa* (#42) refers both to a place and to the setting of one of the final battles of World War I in the Italian front.

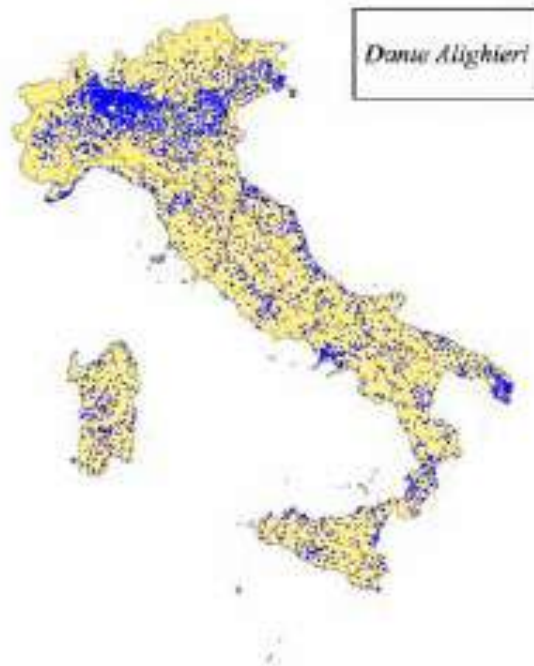
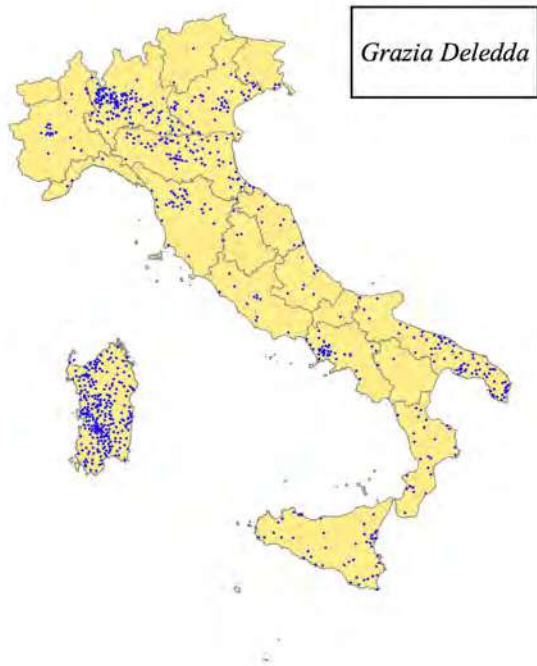
*Roma*, the capital city for almost 150 years, ranks first (77% of municipalities), as the comparison between figures 1 (municipalities) and 2 (*Roma* street name) shows. The name of the capital city is less frequent in *Valle d'Aosta* and in *Trentino-Alto Adige*, two autonomous regions where the main languages are French and German (mainly in the province of *Bolzano-Bozen*) respectively, and therefore have a different toponymy based on local names. The other two former capital cities of Italy are in lower positions. *Torino* (#55) was the capital of the Kingdom of Sardinia and then became the first capital of the new country in 1861. Five years later the capital was moved to *Firenze* (#86). *Roma* became part of Italy in 1870 and was made the capital the following year.



What is striking in terms of gender is the large majority of male figures – 68% – and subsequently the very small presence of women, which are only three among the first hundred: *Santa Maria*, a widely followed saint and religious figure, is in sixth position. The second woman, ranked 85, is *Grazia Deledda*. She was a Sardinian writer who lived between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1926, the second Italian writer and the only woman to do so. Lastly, a few positions down is *Santa Lucia* (93), a martyr known for protecting the blind, who lived in Siracusa in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. Another 29 street names are not related to people and therefore are gender neutral.

As expected, *Grazia Deledda* street names (figure 3) are mostly located in Sardinia, her home region. In comparison the most frequent literate, *Dante Alighieri* (figure 4), is present in most of the country and is ranked fifth. The category of the literati contains 14 names among which the most important are: *Alessandro Manzoni* (#11), *Giacomo Leopardi* (#21), *Giosuè Carducci* (#22) and *Giovanni Pascoli* (#26). The former is famous for his novel *I promessi sposi*, but also wrote poems, which is what the other three writers are mainly known for.





Place names represent another highly frequent category, with 19 occurrences. Other than the capital cities, frequent place names are *Chiesa* (#20, figure 5), which highlights the importance of Catholicism in this country, *Europa* (#28), which refers to the continent, and *Castello* (#32), which emphasises the presence of castles, fortresses and towers in many towns. Among the cities, it is worth noting *Venezia* (#66, figure 6), highly concentrated in the north-east of Italy.



Many place names overlap with another important category: street names relating to World War I. Other than *Monte Grappa*, cited above, these are *Piave* (#17) and *Isonzo* (#70), two rivers upon which many battles were fought, *Vittorio Veneto* (#18), a town named after the final victory of the war, *Trieste* (#24), *Trento* (#25), *Gorizia* (#76) and *Fiume* (#83), four major Italian cities that were part of Austria-Hungary until the end of the war. The World War I street name category has

13 occurrences, among which the most notable are: *IV Novembre* (#10) and *XXIV Maggio* (#64), the dates marking the end, in 1918, and the beginning, in 1915, of the conflict respectively; *Cesare Battisti* (#15) an Italian patriot born in Trento, at the time in Austria-Hungary, who fought with the Italian army and died during the war; *Nazario Sauro* (#59), born in Istria, followed a similar fate; *Armando Diaz* (#54), the general who led Italy to victory after the defeat in Caporetto. On the other hand, World War II plays a smaller role in Italian toponymy, with only three occurrences. The most notable is *XXV Aprile* (#19), the day of Italy's liberation from German occupation, marking the end of the war for the country.

The category of politicians plays an important role, with 16 occurrences. The ones which are among the first ten positions are related to the *Risorgimento* period, roughly 1848-1870: *Giuseppe Garibaldi* (#4), *Giuseppe Mazzini* (#5), *Camillo Cavour* (#9). They all contributed in different ways to the unification of Italy, which eventually took place in 1861. *Giacomo Matteotti* (#8) and *Antonio Gramsci* (#14) were both opponents and victims of Fascism. *Aldo Moro* (#13) and *Alcide De Gasperi* (#16) are influential figures of the Republican era, the former killed by the *Brigate Rosse*.

In a strongly catholic country, it is not surprising to find saints and religious people among the street names. Apart from those already cited above, some notable names are: *Papa Giovanni XXIII* (#11), one of the most popular popes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *San Francesco d'Assisi* (#29), the saint patron of Italy, *Don Giovanni Minzoni* (#60), an antifascist priest who was killed at the beginning of the regime.

The category of artists contains 12 street names, with the composer *Giuseppe Verdi* (#7) at the top of the list. Other important figures are the polymath *Leonardo da Vinci* (#27), the composer *Giacomo Puccini* (#39), the sculptor, painter, architect and poet *Michelangelo Buonarroti* (#49).

The "patriots" category partly overlaps with the politicians and the World War I ones. The first patriots that were neither politicians, nor war heroes, are the *Fratelli Rosselli* (#87), two antifascist brothers who were killed in the vicinities of Paris. They are followed by another set of brothers, *Fratelli Bandiera* (#89), heroes of the *Risorgimento*: Venetians, they attempted a revolution in Calabria, but were captured and executed.

The most significant dates have already been covered between the two world wars, apart from *I Maggio* (#33), May Day, and *XX Settembre* (#45), the date when Rome was seized from the Papal States and became part of Italy.

Although with only five occurrences, the category of scientists contains street names among the first half. *Guglielmo Marconi*, the pioneer of radio communications, is in second place, while *Leonardo da Vinci* is already covered among the artists. The other three scientists are the physicist *Enrico Fermi* (#31), the chemist and physicist *Alessandro Volta* (#36) and the astronomer *Galileo Galilei* (#38).

Some street names are devoted to what could be called abstract concepts: *Libertà* (#30), which is freedom, and those who died for it, *Martiri della Libertà* (#69); *Repubblica* (#45), the form of government that Italy chose after the end of WWII; *Risorgimento* (#51), the age of change that brought about the unification of Italy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; *Pace* (#75), which likely conveys the desire for peace after two world wars.



Heads of state, be they kings or presidents, are the next category. At the top, we find *Umberto I* (#23) and *Vittorio Emanuele II* (#37). The latter was the first king of Italy but chose to keep the number he had as king of Sardinia. The former, his son, was assassinated by an anarchist in 1900. *Sandro Pertini* (#47) was the most popular president of the Republic of Italy. He is followed by another popular president, albeit a foreign one: *John Fitzgerald Kennedy* (#61), the US president who was assassinated in 1963.

People from the military form another category, containing, apart from World War I generals and patriots: *Salvo D'Acquisto* (#62), a *carabiniere* who traded his life for that of twenty civilians who were about to be killed by the German army during the occupation of Italy; *Carlo Alberto dalla Chiesa*, a general who was killed by the Sicilian Mafia for his work against organized crime. Another victim of Mafia is the judge *Giovanni Falcone* (#90), who presided over one of the largest trials against the Sicilian Mafia and was killed for it.

The last category in terms of occurrences is that of seafarers: *Cristoforo Colombo* (#40), is the Genoan explorer who first set off to discover America. The continent was named after *Amerigo Vespucci* (#96) who realised that the discovered land was a new continent, not part of Asia as previously assumed.

It is also interesting to look at regional differences in the frequency of street names. Table 2 below illustrates the tag clouds of the 20 most frequent names for Italy as a whole and the 20 regions.





1-Piemonte	2-Valle d'Aosta	3-Lombardia	4-Trentino-Alto Adige
5-Veneto	6-Friuli-Venezia Giulia	7-Liguria	8-Emilia-Romagna
9-Toscana	10-Umbria	11-Marche	12-Lazio
13-Abruzzo	14-Molise	15-Campania	16-Puglia
17-Basilicata	18-Calabria	19-Sicilia	20-Sardegna

Roma is still the most frequent street name in the majority of regions. A notable exception is Valle d'Aosta, where local names are more frequent. In some regions new names that did not make it to the national top 100 show up. It is the case in Trentino-Alto Adige for *Damiano Chiesa*, a patriot who, just like *Cesare Battisti* and *Nazario Sauro* was executed for treason by the Austrian military. Similarly, Veneto celebrates the *Alpini* military corps, who fought on the Austro-Italian front. Friuli-Venezia Giulia features among its first twenty street names *Ippolito Nievo*, a local writer who strongly believed in a united Italy and wrote a novel about it. The seven *Fratelli Cervi* were part of the *Partigiani* in Emilia and were executed by the Nazi. *Gabriele D'Annunzio*, a famous writer born in Pescara is featured in Abruzzo. *Giustino Fortunato*, included in the twenty most frequent names in Basilicata, was a politician who advocated for the development of the south of Italy. Moreover, the 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher *Tommaso Campanella* hailed from south Calabria. Sardegna remembers many local notables, among which it is worth mentioning *Eleonora d'Arborea*, a local leader in the 14<sup>th</sup> century who updated the main group of laws of the region.

## Analysis

By looking at street names in Italy, it is possible to interpret how Italy sees itself as a country. Since street names can only be given to people who died at least ten years before (PARLAMENTO, 1927), it is obvious that toponymy nods to the past. Another reason is that cities and towns do not expand as much as they did, for instance, after WWII, so there are fewer streets to be named. Italy places a lot of emphasis on its patriots and politicians, those people who helped shape the country through ages such as the *Risorgimento*, the world wars and the birth of the Republic. Places, cities, rivers and countries are also often honoured with a street name.

There is a lot of emphasis on the world wars period, mainly the first, likely because it was fought on Italian soil and led to the annexation of Trentino-Alto Adige and Venezia Giulia. The emphasis on WWII is caused by the importance of the *Resistenza* from 1943 to 1945, when the war was formally over but most of Italy was occupied by the Nazi forces and gradually liberated by the Allies, while the *Partigiani* resisted to the occupation.

In a strongly catholic country, saints, popes and religious people in general are also widely featured among street names. In opposition, scientists get a comparatively smaller recognition. The Italian language served as a uniting factor for a country that is only 150 years old: this is why literati are largely celebrated in roads and squares. Artists and musicians are also largely featured, highlighting the prominent role of Italians in art in the past centuries.

## Concluding remarks and future developments

This article sought to analyse street names. It looked at the first 100 street names by occurrence in Italy and discussed their various and overlapping categories. It also observed the differences among regions for the first 20 street names. The analysis tried to summarise the themes emerging from the discussion.

The study of street names in Italy proved to be a very interesting topic. There is scope for further analysis, for instance at the municipal level in larger cities. It could be interesting to associate the street name to the actual position of the street instead of the municipality as a whole, similarly to what was done by Biermann *et al.* In this way one could observe whether street names are located near street names of the same category (*e.g.* a neighborhood in Rome features street names of European cities) or if the most significant street names are located in the town or city centre (*e.g.* street names such as Roma and Garibaldi are often given to the high street or the main square). Moreover, a further strand of research at the municipal level could be the analysis of name changes over time, for instance to substitute controversial street names after the end of Fascism or to allocate a street to a local notable who died recently.

The data provided by ISTAT proved really useful and easy to associate with the location data of each municipality. It would be even better if it was better standardised and associated with the actual position of the street. OpenStreetMap, being an open-source database, could be an useful starting point for an in-depth study of the street names of a city. In terms of standardisation, a future update of the existing data or a new release after the next census data is published should be expected.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the working group behind this article: Alessandra Reale (Istat) for the great help in retrieving and analysing the data; Giovanni Alfredo Barbieri (Istat) for sparking the idea of this work; Federico Benassi, Marianna Mantuano and Maria Rosaria Prisco (Istat) for the fruitful discussions.

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