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Psychological and Educational Challenges of Immigrant Adolescents in Italy: Exploring Mental Health, Life Satisfaction, Student–Teacher Relationship, and Academic Disparities

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Abstract: Adolescence is a critical stage marked by identity formation and social challenges, especially for adolescents with migratory backgrounds who must reconcile their ethnic identities with the dominant culture. This study explores the mental health, life satisfaction, student–teacher relationship, and academic achievement of Italian-born, second-generation, and first-generation immigrants. The sample of 680 adolescents (M = 382; F = 280; Prefer not to say = 18; Mean age = 16.77 years) includes native-born Italians ($n = 244$), second-generation immigrants ($n = 210$), and first-generation immigrants ($n = 226$). Data were collected using self-report measures for mental health, life satisfaction, student–teacher relationship, and school achievement. A Multivariate Analysis of Variance identified significant group differences, followed by post-hoc tests to further explore differences between the groups. Second-generation immigrants reported significantly lower emotional well-being compared to their Italian-born peers. Both first- and second-generation immigrants exhibited lower life satisfaction, particularly in peer relationships. In terms of student–teacher relationship, second-generation immigrants perceived higher levels of school danger compared to Italian-born adolescents, possibly driven by discrimination. Academic outcomes revealed significant disparities, with Italian-born students outperforming second-generation immigrants, highlighting the impact of acculturative and bicultural stress. The findings highlight the unique challenges second-generation immigrants face in Italy in balancing cultural integration with preserving their heritage.

Keywords: mental health; life satisfaction; student–teacher relationship; academic achievement; first-generation immigrants; second-generation immigrants; immigrant paradox; migratory background; acculturative stress; bicultural stress



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1. Introduction

Adolescence is considered a critical developmental stage, defined by the formation of identity and the navigation of significant developmental challenges [1,2]. During this time, self-identity is shaped by individual exploration and social perceptions from peers, family, and broader societal influences [3,4]. Migration is a defining feature of modern societies, with increasing numbers of adolescents growing up in multicultural environments [5]. For adolescents with migratory backgrounds, defined as individuals who have immigrated themselves or are born to parents who have immigrated to a different country, this process is further complicated by the need to reconcile their ethnic identity with the dominant culture of the host society. Ethnic identity, reflecting a sense of belonging to one’s ethnic group, involves an ongoing negotiation between heritage and host cultures [6]. This includes understanding group membership, emotional significance, and commitment to cultural values [7,8].

The tension between adhering to traditional cultural values and adapting to the often-contrasting expectations of the host society can lead to unresolved identity conflicts, resulting in psychological distress [9]. These conflicts elevate the risk of mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal [5,10].

First-generation immigrants, born abroad and later migrating to a new host society, and second-generation immigrants, born in the host country to immigrant parents, may both perceive the host society as unwelcoming or discriminatory. This perception can amplify feelings of marginalization and heighten interpersonal conflicts with native-born peers. Such experiences of exclusion disrupt their psychological adjustment, making them more vulnerable to mental health challenges [11].

The pressure to conform to the dominant culture may lead to disconnection from their cultural roots, intensifying identity confusion and emotional strain [12]. Immigrant adolescents may feel torn between two worlds, heightening risks to their mental health as they struggle to balance integration into the host society with the preservation of their cultural heritage [13].

Adolescence is also a vulnerable period for the onset of mental health disorders, and their prevalence has been increasing in recent years [14,15]. For immigrant adolescents, particularly those from minority groups, these challenges are often exacerbated by factors such as lower family income, greater social exclusion, and the emotional demands of acculturation [10]. Immigrant youth face the challenge of maintaining connections to their cultural roots while adapting to the norms of the host society, which puts them at greater risk for negative developmental outcomes compared to their native-born peers [16].

Research has increasingly highlighted the link between life satisfaction and mental health, particularly among adolescents with immigrant backgrounds [17]. Life satisfaction, defined as an overall assessment of one's quality of life based on personal criteria, is associated with better adaptive functioning in school [14,18]. Life satisfaction among immigrant and native adolescents is influenced not only by cultural and social factors but also by the economic progress of the host country and the equitable distribution of resources and support systems, which shape social inclusion, opportunities, and overall well-being. Adolescents with higher life satisfaction exhibit stronger self-efficacy, higher self-esteem, greater engagement, better academic performance, and healthier peer relationships while reporting lower rates of absenteeism, school dropout, and behavioural problems [19]. Conversely, lower life satisfaction is linked to internalizing problems such as anxiety and depression, and externalizing behaviours such as social stress and substance abuse [20,21]. Ullman and Tatar [22] identified a significant gap in life satisfaction between immigrant and native adolescents in Israel, and Phinney and Ong [23] reported comparable findings in the United States. Immigrant adolescents frequently experience cultural dissonance, marginalization, and acculturative stress, which are associated with reduced levels of life satisfaction [24,25]. Adolescents with lower life satisfaction are more likely to experience academic disengagement, peer rejection, and behavioural problems, which can further complicate their adjustment to the host culture [26].

School plays a pivotal role in adolescent development, influencing social, emotional, and academic growth [27,28]. Given the substantial time adolescents spend in school, the quality of their interactions, particularly with teachers, is critical for fostering healthy development [29]. The positive teacher–student relationship is significant for immigrant adolescents, as this interaction significantly shapes their overall school experience. Research shows that immigrant adolescents who receive social support from teachers and peers tend to report higher levels of life satisfaction, even when facing the challenges of acculturation stress [30]. In contrast, those who experience discrimination or cultural disconnection report lower life satisfaction, which can contribute to both academic struggles and psychological distress. Immigrant students, especially second-generation immigrants, often find it difficult to establish strong relationships with teachers, which are critical for academic success and well-being. Many immigrant adolescents perceive the school environment as less supportive or even hostile, which hinders their academic engagement [31]. For

example, second-generation immigrants in Italy tend to report heightened perceptions of insecurity and mistrust in their school settings, which correlate with lower academic performance [9]. Experience of discrimination and perceived cultural threats in the school context can foster feelings of inferiority and rejection, further heightening the challenges these adolescents face in both social integration and academic achievement.

These dynamics extend beyond mental health and may directly impact academic performance. Immigrant adolescents facing high levels of acculturation stress often exhibit lower academic achievement, particularly when they perceive a disconnection between their cultural background and the expectations of the school system [32]. Adolescent immigrants often face heightened academic pressure from both their families and educational institutions, which can intensify academic challenges and result in decreased performance. First-generation immigrants typically display resilience and a strong drive for academic success, viewing it as a means of upward mobility. In contrast, second-generation immigrants tend to experience more pronounced difficulties, stemming from the compounded effects of acculturation stress and identity conflicts [33]. As such, adolescents from immigrant backgrounds often contend with significant stressors, such as navigating cultural dissonance, managing discrimination, and coping with limited socioeconomic resources. These factors place them at an elevated risk for psychological distress, social marginalization, and academic underperformance. Unaddressed, these challenges can lead to long-term repercussions, including diminished life satisfaction, limited career opportunities, and persistent identity conflicts, ultimately hindering their integration into the host society.

International studies have consistently documented lower mental health and higher acculturation stress and psychological difficulties among immigrant adolescents compared to their native peers [22,23]. However, much of this research has treated immigrant youth as a homogeneous group, overlooking the distinct experiences of first- and second-generation adolescents. Moreover, in Italy, research on second-generation immigrants is particularly scarce, despite their growing representation in the population and the unique challenges they face in balancing their cultural heritage with integration into the host society [9].

Aims of Research

The present study aims to address this gap by pursuing the following research objectives: (1) to explore variations in mental health outcomes among Italian-born adolescents, first-generation immigrants, and second-generation immigrants, with a specific focus on emotional, social, and psychological well-being; (2) to analyse disparities in life satisfaction across the three groups, with an emphasis on key domains such as family relationships, peer connections, school environment, self-perception, and living environment; (3) to assess differences in the quality of student–teacher relationship—including dimensions such as perceived affiliation, school bonding, dissatisfaction with teachers, and perceptions of school as a dangerous environment—among the three groups; (4) to investigate variations in academic achievement among Italian-born adolescents, first-generation immigrants, and second-generation immigrants.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants and Procedure

Twelve higher secondary schools located in the Lombardy and Piedmont regions of Northern Italy were contacted via email or phone to inform head teachers about the study's aims and research procedures. Eleven schools agreed to participate. A briefing letter was distributed to the students' parents, and informed consent, along with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) consent, was obtained from both the students and their parents. Data collection was conducted anonymously, and students could withdraw at any point during the administration of the questionnaires. Students completed a series of online questionnaires in their classrooms during regular school hours. The entire set of instruments took approximately 10 min to complete, with the questionnaires presented in random order to minimise potential measurement errors [34]. Data collection was managed by three

researchers, who explained the study's objectives to the students before administering the questionnaires. The final sample consisted of 680 adolescents (M = 382, F = 280, Prefer not to say = 18; Mean age = 16.77 years, range 14–22 years) enrolled in both public and private schools. Noteworthy, in the Italian educational system, public and private schools follow the same national curriculum. Of the participants, 35.9% ($n = 244$) were native-born Italians, 33.2% ($n = 226$) were first-generation immigrants (born abroad and migrated to Italy), and 30.9% ($n = 210$) were second-generation immigrants (born in Italy to foreign parents). In terms of educational pathways, 38.2% ($n = 260$) attended lyceums (academic track), 31.6% ($n = 215$) were enrolled in professional institutes, and 30.1% ($n = 205$) attended technical schools (vocational track). In the Italian educational system, lyceums primarily focus on theoretical knowledge and university preparation, while professional and technical schools emphasize practical skills and direct career training.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Demographics

Participants were asked to provide information regarding their age, gender, and nationality. For nationality, students responded using categorical options, indicating whether they were Italian, second-generation immigrants, or first-generation immigrants. Specific information about their country of origin was not collected. This decision was in line with the standard practices of the Italian educational system, which acknowledges the sensitivity of such data in schools, and ensured that students were not placed in an uncomfortable position regarding their migratory background.

2.2.2. Mental Health

The Italian version of the Mental Health Continuum–Short Form (MHC–SF) was used to measure mental health [35,36]. The instrument consists of 14 items divided into 3 subscales: emotional well-being (e.g., “During the past month, how often did you feel satisfied with life?”); social well-being (e.g., “During the past month, how often did you feel that you belonged to a community, like a social group, or your neighbourhood?”) and psychological well-being (e.g., “During the past month, how often did you feel that you had warm and trusting relationships with others?”). The MHC–SF asks individuals how much of the time they functioned in a specific manner, from 0 (none of the time) to 5 (all of the time). The study by Petrillo et al. [36] showed that the total MHC–SF scale yielded a high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.86$). Specifically, the psychological well-being subscale had the next highest measure of internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.81$), followed by the subscale of emotional well-being ($\alpha = 0.75$), and the social well-being scale had a relatively high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.70$). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha values are as follows: emotional well-being ($\alpha = 0.80$), psychological well-being ($\alpha = 0.78$), and social well-being ($\alpha = 0.85$).

2.2.3. Life Satisfaction

The Italian translation of the abbreviated Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS) was used to assess life satisfaction [37,38]. The MSLSS is a 30-item self-report questionnaire that measures life satisfaction across five subscales: family (e.g., “I enjoy being at home with my family”), friends (e.g., “My friends treat me well”), school (e.g., “I look forward to going to school”), self (e.g., “Most people like me”), and living environment (e.g., “My family's house is nice”). Participants rate each item on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Previous studies with adolescent samples have shown acceptable validity and reliability, with Cronbach's alphas ranging from 0.71 to 0.91 across the five domains [14,37,38]. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha values were as follows: family ($\alpha = 0.88$), friends ($\alpha = 0.86$), environment ($\alpha = 0.77$), self ($\alpha = 0.74$), and school ($\alpha = 0.78$).

2.2.4. Student–Teacher Relationship

Students' perceptions of their relationship with teachers and their connection to the school were assessed using the Italian version of the Student–Teacher Relationship Questionnaire (STRQ), developed by Tonci et al. [39], which is based on the original version by Murray and Greenberg [40]. The STRQ consists of 22 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (almost never or never true) to 4 (almost always or always true). The questionnaire assesses the quality of students' relationship with their teachers and their perceptions of the school environment across four subscales: affiliation with teacher (e.g., "My teachers pay a lot of attention to me"), bonds with school (e.g., "I feel safe at my school"), dissatisfaction with teachers (e.g., "I feel angry with my teacher"), and school dangerousness (e.g., "My school is a dangerous place to be"). Previous studies have found reliable results, with Cronbach's alphas ranging from 0.66 to 0.88 [14,40]. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha values were as follows: affiliation ($\alpha = 0.83$), bonds ($\alpha = 0.73$), dissatisfaction ($\alpha = 0.72$), and dangerousness ($\alpha = 0.67$).

2.2.5. School Achievement

Academic achievement was assessed by asking students to report their average grades across all school subjects, following the national grading system used in Italian schools. This system is based on a 10-point scale, with 6 indicating a passing grade, and represents the standard approach to evaluating student performance.

3. Results

The analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 29). A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was performed to examine significant differences among the three groups across the dependent variables: adolescents' mental health, life satisfaction, student–teacher relationship, and school achievement. Follow-up post-hoc analyses were then carried out using the Least Significant Difference (LSD) method to explore further and clarify specific intergroup differences, providing a more detailed interpretation of how each group varied on the measured outcomes [41]. Post hoc comparisons were performed for all variables, including those that were not significant in the multivariate test. While post-hoc tests are traditionally conducted on variables that show significant multivariate results [42], we opted to explore potential differences across all study variables to detect any group differences that the overall MANOVA might not have captured. This approach aligns with the exploratory nature of the study, as multivariate tests can mask significant differences at the univariate level [41].

Table 1 presents the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) for each variable, as well as the results of the analysis of the MANOVA examining differences between the three groups (i.e., Italian-born, second-generation immigrants, and first-generation immigrants). All variables were assessed using a significance threshold of $p < 0.05$ to determine the presence of statistically significant effects.

The MANOVA results indicated significant differences among the groups for two subscales of the life satisfaction measure (friends and school), as well as for school achievement. Specifically for the friends subscale, there was a significant effect of group membership, $F(2, 677) = 4.49$, $p = 0.01$, with an effect size of $\eta^2 = 0.01$, indicating notable differences in mean scores between the groups. The school subscale also showed a significant effect, $F(2, 677) = 3.54$, $p = 0.03$, with $\eta^2 = 0.01$, suggesting meaningful differences across groups. Additionally, school achievement revealed a significant effect of group membership, $F(2, 677) = 2.88$, $p = 0.05$, with an effect size of $\eta^2 = 0.01$, indicating significant differences in mean scores among the groups. Follow-up post-hoc comparisons were conducted to further examine pairwise differences among the three groups (Table 2).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and MANOVA results for Mental Health, Life Satisfaction, Student–Teacher Relationship, and School Achievement.

Variables and Subscales	Italian-Born (<i>n</i> = 244) M(SD)	Second-Generation Immigrants (<i>n</i> = 210) M(SD)	First-Generation Immigrants (<i>n</i> = 226) M(SD)	F(2, 677)	<i>p</i>
Mental Health					
MH-EW	13.12(3.15)	12.4(3.52)	12.81(3.69)	2.47	0.08
MH-SW	15.56(5.78)	15.49(5.86)	15.82(6.5)	0.18	0.83
MH-PW	26.45(6.32)	25.33(6.38)	26.15(6.72)	1.75	0.17
Life Satisfaction					
LS-FA	20.38(5.02)	19.58(5.5)	20.41(5.34)	1.71	0.18
LS-FR	20.26(3.16)	19.64(3.21)	19.35(3.75)	4.49	0.01
LS-SC	12.02(5.02)	12.38(5.51)	12.86(5.34)	3.54	0.03
LS-EN	13.74(3.58)	13.48(3.61)	13.63(3.65)	0.27	0.76
LS-SE	20.86(3.45)	20.97(3.75)	21.27(3.97)	0.77	0.46
Student–Teacher Relationship					
STR-AF	21.65(4.53)	21.10(4.53)	21.57(4.99)	0.88	0.41
STR-BS	22.89(3.65)	22.48(4.2)	23.01(4.2)	1.05	0.35
STR-DT	6.37(1.94)	6.49(1.73)	6.30(1.97)	0.54	0.58
STR-SD	4.52(1.45)	4.86(1.70)	4.72(1.84)	2.50	0.08
School Achievement					
	6.74(1.2)	6.51(1.01)	6.70(1.01)	2.88	0.05

Note: M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; MH = Mental Health; EW = Emotional Well-being; SW = Social Well-being; PW = Psychological Well-being; LS = Life Satisfaction; FA = Family; FR = Friends; SC = School; EN = Environment; SE = Self; STR = Student–Teacher Relationship; AF = Affiliation with Teacher; BS = Bonds with School; DT = Dissatisfaction with Teachers; SD = School Dangerousness; SA = School Achievement. The statistically significant values are highlighted in bold.

For mental health, significant differences were detected in the emotional well-being subscale, where Italian-born individuals demonstrated higher levels compared to their second-generation immigrant peers ($p = 0.03$). Additionally, Italian-born individuals exhibited higher levels of psychological well-being compared to second-generation immigrants; however, this difference did not reach statistical significance ($p = 0.06$).

For life satisfaction, significant differences were found in the friends subscale, with Italian-born adolescents scoring significantly higher than both second-generation immigrants ($p = 0.05$) and first-generation immigrants ($p = 0.004$). Additionally, Italian-born adolescents demonstrated significantly lower scores in the school subscale than first-generation immigrants ($p = 0.008$).

Table 2. Post-hoc test results for Mental Health, Life Satisfaction, Student–Teacher Relationship, and Academic Achievement.

Variables and Subscales	Nationality (Group 1)	Nationality (Group 2)	Mean Difference (Group 1–Group 2)	Std. Error	Sig.
Mental Health					
MH-EW	Italian-born	Second-generation immigrants	0.72 *	0.325	0.03
	Italian-born	First-generation immigrants	0.31	0.32	0.33
MH-SW	First-generation	Second-generation immigrants	0.41	0.33	0.22
	Italian-born	Second-generation immigrants	0.07	0.57	0.90
	Italian-born	First-generation immigrants	−0.26	0.56	0.64
MH-PW	First-generation	Second-generation immigrants	0.33	0.58	0.57
	Italian-born	Second-generation immigrants	1.11	0.61	0.06
	Italian-born	First-generation immigrants	0.3	0.6	0.62
	First-generation	Second-generation immigrants	0.82	0.62	0.19

Table 2. Cont.

Variables and Subscales	Nationality (Group 1)	Nationality (Group 2)	Mean Difference (Group 1–Group 2)	Std. Error	Sig.
Life Satisfaction					
LS-FA	Italian-born	Second-generation immigrants	0.8	0.5	0.11
	Italian-born	First-generation immigrants	−0.03	0.49	0.95
LS-FR	First-generation	Second-generation immigrants	0.82	0.51	0.1
	Italian-born	Second-generation immigrants	0.62 *	0.32	0.05
	Italian-born	First-generation immigrants	0.91 *	0.31	<0.01
LS-SC	First-generation	Second-generation immigrants	−0.29	0.32	0.37
	Italian-born	Second-generation immigrants	−0.36	0.32	0.27
	Italian-born	First-generation immigrants	−0.83 *	−0.31	<0.01
LS-EN	First-generation	Second-generation immigrants	0.48	0.32	0.14
	Italian-born	Second-generation immigrants	0.25	0.33	0.46
	Italian-born	First-generation immigrants	0.11	0.33	0.74
LS-SE	First-generation	Second-generation immigrants	0.14	0.35	0.68
	Italian-born	Second-generation immigrants	−0.11	0.35	0.76
	Italian-born	First-generation immigrants	−0.41	0.34	0.23
First-generation	Second-generation immigrants	0.31	0.36	0.39	
Student–Teacher Relationship					
STR-AF	Italian-born	Second-generation immigrants	0.55	0.44	0.21
	Italian-born	First-generation immigrants	0.08	0.43	0.85
	First-generation	Second-generation immigrants	0.47	0.45	0.3
STR-BS	Italian-born	Second-generation immigrants	0.41	0.38	0.27
	Italian-born	First-generation immigrants	−0.12	0.37	0.75
	First-generation	Second-generation immigrants	0.53	0.38	0.17
STR-DT	Italian-born	Second-generation immigrants	−0.12	0.18	0.5
	Italian-born	First-generation immigrants	0.06	0.17	0.72
	First-generation	Second-generation immigrants	−0.18	0.18	0.31
STR-SD	Italian-born	Second-generation immigrants	−0.35 *	0.16	0.03
	Italian-born	First-generation immigrants	−0.21	0.15	0.17
	First-generation	Second-generation immigrants	−0.14	0.16	0.39
School Achievement					
	Italian-born	Second-generation immigrants	0.22 *	0.01	0.02
	Italian-born	First-generation immigrants	0.04	0.01	0.69
	First-generation	Second-generation immigrants	0.18	0.10	0.06

Note: MH = Mental Health; EW = Emotional Well-being; SW = Social Well-being; PW = Psychological Well-being; LS = Life Satisfaction; FA = Family; FR = Friends; SC = School; EN = Environment; SE = Self; STR = Student–Teacher Relationship; AF = Affiliation with Teacher; BS = Bonds with School; DT = Dissatisfaction with Teachers; SD = School Dangerousness; SA = School Achievement. * The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level. The statistically significant values are highlighted in bold.

For the student–teacher relationship, significant differences were found in the school dangerousness factor, with Italian-born adolescents scoring lower levels compared to their second-generation immigrant peers ($p = 0.028$).

In terms of school achievement, significant differences emerged, with Italian-born adolescents scoring higher than second-generation immigrants ($p = 0.023$). Although second-generation immigrants scored lower than first-generation immigrants, this difference did not reach statistical significance ($p = 0.06$).

4. Discussion

In this section, we will analyse the study outcomes concerning each key variable: mental health, life satisfaction, student–teacher relationship, and school achievement.

4.1. Mental Health

The findings of this study underscore a significant disparity in mental health outcomes, particularly in emotional well-being, between Italian-born adolescents and their second-generation immigrant peers. According to Keyes' model [35], emotional well-being is a

core component of mental health that encompasses the frequency of positive affect and a general sense of life satisfaction. This aspect of well-being focuses on how often individuals experience positive emotions like joy, interest, and contentment, as well as their overall assessment of life as meaningful and fulfilling. Other studies have examined mental health among individuals with migratory backgrounds, revealing that immigrant populations, particularly adolescents, often report lower levels of emotional well-being compared to their native-born counterparts. Specifically, immigrant youth reported significantly higher levels of anxiety, emotional distress, and even suicide attempts with reported feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, and low self-esteem, than their native peers [43]. This was related to the cultural distance and the need for larger cultural adjustment, such as learning a new language, adapting to new academic structures, discrimination and social exclusion [44].

It is often assumed that second-generation immigrants, who were born and raised in the host country, would experience fewer adjustment challenges than first-generation immigrants. However, this study found that second-generation adolescents reported significantly lower levels of emotional well-being and nearly significantly lower levels of psychological well-being. This phenomenon, referred to as the “immigrant paradox” [45], has been observed across diverse contexts, where second-generation immigrants often experience worse mental health outcomes than their first-generation counterparts [46,47]. While first-generation immigrants tend to display higher levels of adaptation, second-generation immigrants may exhibit adaptation levels similar to or even lower than those of native-born individuals. These findings are consistent with global research on the psychosocial and educational experiences of immigrant adolescents. For example, studies in the United States have repeatedly shown that second-generation immigrant youth frequently face more pronounced mental health and academic challenges than first-generation immigrants, despite being more culturally integrated [48]. Research from Scandinavian countries further underlines the understanding of mental health among immigrant adolescents. A study by Oppedal and Røysamb [49] in Norway revealed that immigrant adolescents reported greater psychological distress and lower levels of social support compared to their native peers.

This difference can be attributed to several psychological factors. First-generation immigrants typically maintain stronger connections to their heritage culture and possess a heightened motivation for upward mobility, which serves as a buffer against the stressors of acculturation [17]. Their challenges are often framed in external terms, such as language barriers or economic difficulties, rather than personal shortcomings. This external attribution fosters resilience, as first-generation immigrants view their difficulties as situational and temporary, thus protecting their self-esteem and encouraging perseverance [50]. In contrast, second-generation immigrants face more intense pressures to assimilate, combined with greater exposure to societal discrimination [51]. Having grown up in the host society, they may feel caught between the cultural expectations of their family and those of the broader society, leading to increased cultural dissonance and identity conflicts. This bidirectional pull can result in feelings of not fully belonging to either culture, contributing to a sense of alienation and marginalization [10,52].

4.2. Life Satisfaction

In terms of life satisfaction, Italian-born adolescents reported significantly higher scores on the friends scale compared to both first- and second-generation immigrant peers. Adolescents who maintain strong friendships typically report higher levels of life satisfaction, as social connectedness is critical to mental health and overall adjustment during this developmental stage [14]. These findings align with previous research emphasizing the central role of peer relationships in shaping overall life satisfaction during adolescence [37,53]. For immigrant adolescents, however, forming close friendships may be more challenging due to cultural differences, language barriers, and experiences of social exclusion. These factors can inhibit their ability to develop meaningful peer relationships, resulting in a

diminished sense of belonging in social settings [25]. Immigrant youth, particularly those who struggle with acculturation, may feel socially marginalized, which negatively impacts their life satisfaction, especially concerning friendships. The experience of social exclusion or the feeling of being different from their native-born peers can create emotional barriers that limit their ability to integrate into social groups, further reducing their overall sense of well-being [10].

It is also important to consider the influence of Italian societal norms on these findings. Peer relationships in Italian culture are deeply rooted in community and social cohesion, which are often more easily accessible to native-born adolescents. Immigrant adolescents, however, may face barriers to forming such relationships due to cultural stereotypes or biases [12]. These barriers can result in reduced life satisfaction, particularly in the domain of friendships, as immigrant adolescents may feel excluded from the tightly knit social structures that native-born adolescents benefit from. Similarly, European research has demonstrated that the experiences of immigrant adolescents are heavily influenced by the socio-political climate and inclusivity of the host country. For instance, a cross-national study by Stevens et al. [54] found that immigrant adolescents in countries with equitable educational policies and robust social support systems report higher life satisfaction and better academic performance compared to those in less inclusive environments. These findings underscore the critical role of systemic factors, such as equitable access to education and anti-discrimination policies, in shaping immigrant adolescents' outcomes.

Italian-born adolescents also demonstrated significantly lower scores on the school subscale of life satisfaction compared to first-generation immigrants. This finding, while somewhat counterintuitive, is consistent with the literature suggesting that first-generation immigrant youth often exhibit higher levels of school satisfaction and motivation than their native-born peers [55]. A plausible explanation for this finding is rooted in the "immigrant optimism hypothesis", which proposes that first-generation immigrant adolescents may perceive education as a vital means of achieving upward mobility and future success within their new societal context, leading to a more positive perception of the school environment [56]. For these adolescents, education may be seen to overcome adversity, which could explain their greater satisfaction with school compared to their Italian-born counterparts. Additionally, first-generation immigrants may have stronger family encouragement to succeed academically, given the sacrifices their families may have made to migrate, reinforcing a more positive outlook on education [57]. In contrast, Italian-born adolescents may not perceive the same level of urgency or value in school as a pathway to success, potentially contributing to lower satisfaction in this domain.

4.3. Student–Teacher Relationship

The study found significant differences in the perception of school dangerousness between Italian-born adolescents and second-generation immigrant students, with the latter reporting higher levels of perceived danger. This aligns with previous research suggesting that immigrant students often perceive their school environment as less supportive and more hostile due to experiences of discrimination or bias from teachers and peers [58]. Second-generation immigrants, despite being born in the host country, may still face challenges related to social exclusion, which can heighten their sensitivity to negative social cues within the school setting. These adolescents often encounter discrimination, both overt and subtle, leading them to perceive their school environment as unsafe or threatening, particularly when compared to their native-born peers [59].

The perception of school dangerousness among immigrant adolescents may also be shaped by broader cultural dynamics within the Italian education system. Italian schools traditionally operate within a hierarchical teacher–student framework, which, while offering structure and clarity, may inadvertently make immigrant students feel excluded or unsupported. This is especially true for those already experiencing cultural dissonance or language barriers. For students from immigrant backgrounds, such a hierarchical dynamic can amplify feelings of marginalization, as they may perceive fewer opportunities to build

trusting, open relationships with teachers or to express their concerns within the school environment [39].

Interestingly, no significant differences were found in the student–teacher relationship between Italian-born adolescents and first-generation immigrants. This may be explained by the resilience and external attribution strategies often displayed by first-generation immigrant students [31]. First-generation immigrants, though they face language barriers and cultural adjustment challenges, may attribute their difficulties to external factors such as the newness of their environment or temporary cultural differences, rather than internalizing negative experiences [33]. This mindset may allow them to perceive the school environment as less threatening, as they are more likely to view any negative interactions as part of the broader adaptation process. In contrast, second-generation immigrants, who are more embedded in the host culture and often expected to navigate the cultural expectations of both cultures seamlessly, may feel a heightened sense of identity conflict and discrimination within their school environment. They may also experience more implicit biases from teachers and peers, leading to a stronger perception of danger or hostility in school [58]. Additionally, studies have shown that immigrant youth, especially second-generation immigrants, are more likely to experience bullying and social exclusion in school, further reinforcing their negative perception of the school environment [59,60].

4.4. School Achievement

The study findings revealed that Italian-born adolescents achieved significantly higher academic scores than their second-generation immigrant peers. This result is consistent with the existing literature that highlights lower academic performance among immigrant students, often attributed to factors such as socioeconomic disadvantages, language barriers, and limited access to educational resources [61]. Although second-generation immigrants scored lower than first-generation immigrants, the difference was not statistically significant. This trend may suggest that, despite their greater familiarity with the host culture and language, second-generation students continue to face systemic challenges that hinder their academic progress [62]. The academic differences between first- and second-generation immigrants can be explained through psychological resilience and the impact of acculturative and bicultural stress, which refers to the stress of negotiating two cultural frameworks simultaneously [6,10]. First-generation immigrants often exhibit higher levels of resilience, driven by a strong sense of purpose and motivation for upward mobility [45]. This resilience acts as a buffer against the challenges of acculturation, allowing them to better manage the psychological demands of adapting to a new environment [33]. In contrast, second-generation immigrants, while more integrated into the host culture, experience greater pressure to assimilate and conform to societal expectations. These pressures, combined with conflicting cultural identities and experiences of perceived discrimination, can create internal tensions that negatively impact their academic performance [10].

One key concept explaining this difference is acculturative stress, which refers to the psychological burden that arises from balancing the expectations of both the host and heritage cultures. For second-generation immigrants, this balancing act can lead to feelings of confusion, alienation, and identity conflict, all of which can hinder their overall adjustment and success in academic settings [52]. Additionally, second-generation adolescents often face heightened academic expectations from both their families and schools. The pressure to excel academically and integrate seamlessly into the host society can exacerbate stress levels, making it more difficult to perform academically [63]. Furthermore, second-generation immigrants may also experience bicultural stress managing the values, norms, and expectations of both the heritage and host cultures [64]. Bicultural stress can add another layer of complexity, further impeding academic performance by increasing psychological strain and creating internal conflicts between the desire to maintain one's cultural identity and the pressure to conform to the dominant culture. The combination of acculturative stress and bicultural stress may explain why second-generation immigrants,

despite their cultural and linguistic familiarity, continue to struggle academically compared to both first-generation immigrants and their native-born peers.

These academic disparities may also stem from systemic characteristics of the Italian education system, which guides students into distinct educational pathways—academic, technical, or vocational. This process can disadvantage immigrant students, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who are often directed toward vocational tracks with limited academic opportunities [58]. Although this study did not specifically analyse differences among these pathways, their distinct educational objectives and preparation methods likely influence students' experiences and outcomes. Future research should explore how these pathways affect the mental health, life satisfaction, and academic performance of immigrant adolescents.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, while data were collected from schools offering various educational pathways—such as academic high schools, technical institutes, and vocational schools—the distinct educational objectives and the diverse professional and academic opportunities these tracks prepare students for may have influenced the findings. These curriculum variations should be carefully considered when interpreting the results. Second, socio-economic status was not directly assessed due to ethical considerations and standard practices in psychological research in Italy. Collecting such data could have caused discomfort or embarrassment for students. While this decision was made to prioritize student well-being, the lack of this variable limited our ability to analyse its potential impact on the findings. Future studies should consider alternative, less intrusive methods for assessing socio-economic status to better account for its influence. Another limitation of this study is that we did not account for how long first-generation immigrants had been in Italy, nor we examined the students' or their parents' nationality or country of origin. These factors could have impacted our findings, as nationality may significantly influence mental health and academic success. Certain ethnic groups may be more vulnerable to discrimination, which can intensify challenges related to social integration and well-being. Furthermore, this study did not specifically investigate the influence of the host country's economic progress or the equitable distribution of resources on life satisfaction. Future research may incorporate these variables to better understand the diverse experiences within immigrant populations and how they affect outcomes. Additionally, the data were collected exclusively in Northern Italy, limiting the generalizability of the results to other contexts or immigrant populations in different countries. The unique cultural, social, and educational environments in Italy may differ from those in other regions, meaning the experiences of immigrant adolescents in such areas may not fully represent those in other settings. Future studies should include cross-national comparisons to gain a broader understanding of how different contexts influence the experiences and outcomes of immigrant students.

5. Conclusions

This study advances the understanding of immigrant adolescents' experiences by showing the specific vulnerabilities of second-generation immigrants within the Italian context. Unlike prior studies that often homogenize immigrant youth, this research reveals distinct patterns of mental health, life satisfaction, and academic performance, underscoring the critical role of acculturative and bicultural stress. More specifically, this study highlights significant differences in mental health, life satisfaction, student–teacher relationships, and academic performance between Italian-born adolescents and their first- and second-generation immigrant peers. Notably, second-generation immigrants, despite being more integrated into the host society, often reported poorer outcomes than both Italian-born and first-generation immigrants. First-generation immigrants may benefit from strong connections to their heritage culture and greater psychological resilience, while second-generation adolescents face heightened pressures to assimilate, resulting in acculturative stress and mental health difficulties [10]. These challenges may stem from intergenerational cultural conflicts, where second-generation adolescents experience more intense demands

to conform to the dominant culture [58]. In contrast, first-generation immigrants may view such challenges as part of the natural adaptation process [33].

This study offers novel insights into the differentiated experiences of first- and second-generation immigrant adolescents in Italy, a context that remains underexplored in the European and international literature. By focusing on adolescence—a critical developmental period characterized by identity formation and social adjustment—this research highlights the psychological and educational challenges immigrant youth face. Specifically, the findings reveal that second-generation immigrants in Italy encounter distinct challenges compared to both first-generation immigrants and their Italian-born peers. Additionally, this study uncovers disparities in life satisfaction, particularly in peer relationships, providing a deeper understanding of how migration-related stressors may impact diverse aspects of adolescent development. These contributions extend the growing body of literature on the ‘immigrant paradox’ and address critical gaps in understanding the complexities of migration in an increasingly diverse and multicultural society [1,2,4].

The findings also emphasize the need for social policies to extend beyond addressing the immediate needs of first-generation immigrants, recognizing the distinct psychological and social challenges faced by second-generation adolescents. Despite being born in the host country, second-generation adolescents often experience heightened identity conflicts and acculturative stress, which require targeted support [65].

Conducted within the school context, this study provides valuable evidence to inform educational policies that foster the holistic development and successful integration of both first- and second-generation immigrant students. The results highlight the importance of designing interventions tailored to the specific needs of these adolescents, ensuring that schools become environments where they can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally [65].

The implications for educational and mental health interventions are significant. Teacher training programs should incorporate strategies to build positive student–teacher relationships and create inclusive and supportive school environments. These measures are critical for addressing the challenges faced by immigrant students and promoting their sense of belonging. Furthermore, culturally sensitive counselling programs are essential in mitigating the effects of acculturative and bicultural stress, particularly for second-generation students, thereby enhancing their psychological well-being and academic performance [16,23]. Finally, the study emphasizes the critical role of implementing targeted school-based interventions, including peer support groups and community engagement initiatives. Research from the American context has similarly demonstrated that fostering peer support networks enhances students’ sense of belonging and academic engagement [63]. While the Italian context presents its unique characteristics, the challenges faced by immigrant adolescents reflect broader global patterns influenced by systemic, cultural, and individual factors. These initiatives are essential for mitigating social isolation and discrimination, fostering integration, and addressing disparities within diverse educational environments [54,60].

To conclude, our findings reveal that second-generation immigrants report lower emotional well-being, life satisfaction, and academic performance compared to both their first-generation immigrants and their Italian-born peers. These disparities may also be influenced by acculturative and bicultural stress, as well as perceived discrimination within the school environment. These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions, including teacher training to foster inclusive relationships, culturally sensitive counselling programs to address acculturative stress, and school-based initiatives to promote social integration and reduce disparities. By addressing these challenges, schools can play a key role in supporting the holistic development and inclusion of immigrant adolescents.

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