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## Engagement of young immigrants: The impact of prosocial and recreational activities

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### ABSTRACT

The participation of immigrants in the host community is recognized in the literature as an important protective factor of integration and well-being. Research suggests that there are psychological and social benefits to community engagement, but also differences among forms of participation. The first aim is to compare levels of Sense of Community and Self-esteem in engaged and not engaged immigrant youth. Within the subgroup of engaged youth, the second and the third aims are to identify the differences in self-esteem, sense of community (aim 2), motivations, and barriers (aim 3), of those engaged in prosocial activities and in recreational ones. Participants are 510 Italian immigrant youth aged from 19 to 29 ( $M=23.75$ ,  $SD=2.92$ ). ANOVA results show that (1) engaged immigrant youths report higher levels of both Sense of Community and Self-Esteem than not engaged ones; (2) for engaged youth, recreational activities better support these outcomes than prosocial; (3) immigrants youths engaged in prosocial activities reported higher levels of prosocial values than those engaged in recreation activities. These last perceive as barriers the difficulty in the Italian language, not having enough information regarding the volunteer and fear of conflicts more than other groups; those engaged in prosocial activities report health-related problems.

### KEYWORDS

Immigrants; participation; prosocial activities; sense of community; sports activities; young

## Introduction

### *The participation of young immigrants in the promotion of psychosocial outcomes*

Literature supports the relevance of community participation for many psychosocial outcomes, both individual and social. Indeed, community participation is one of the greatest sources of human well-being (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). In recent years, literature focused on immigrants found that their participation in the host community is an important protective factor for integration, well-being,

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and sense of community (Alfieri, Marzana, & Cipresso, 2019; Di Napoli, Procentese, & Arcidiacono, 2020; Gilster, 2012; Marzana, Alfieri, & Marta, 2016; Marzana, Alfieri, Marta, & Paloma, 2020; Sanchez & Gozzoli, 2010; Stoll & Wong, 2007).

Extending the concept of participation to immigrants means considering them not only in the position of “users” and receivers of services, but also as activators of interventions and protagonists in solidarity movements (Marzana, Alfieri, & Marta, 2020). Sonn (2002) found that associations provided immigrants with the opportunity to participate in the new society and gave them a social role that allowed them to feel part of the community, generating a greater sense of community (Arcidiacono, Natale, Carbone, & Procentese, 2017). Participation stimulates a positive self-view and the chance to increase one’s self-efficacy and self-esteem (Sonn, 2002).

Many studies (Born, Marzana, Alfieri, & Gavray, 2015; Clary et al., 1998; Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer, & Snyder, 1998; Pozzi, Marta, Marzana, Gozzoli, & Ruggieri, 2014; Yates & Youniss, 1996) have emphasized the role of community participation, especially for supporting the transition to adulthood for young people, highlighting how it promotes self-esteem, agency, social relatedness, and sense of community (Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo, & Sheblanova, 2010; Procentese & Gatti, 2019).

However, there is a lack of studies about the relationship between young immigrants’ participation in the host community and the outcomes of well-being, integration, and sense of community. In this domain, diverse dimensions and variables are still under-researched. For instance, we do not know whether and how various typologies of participation impact different outcomes; motivation for participation (for an exception, see Alfieri, Marzana, & Martinez Damia, 2019) and barriers to participation are unexplored too.

### ***Diverse types of activities in community participation***

A diverse set of studies suggest that there are psychological and social benefits linked to community participation but also show that there are differences between forms of participation (Gilster, 2012). There is no agreement about the classification of participation activities in the literature; researchers agree that participation in prosocial and recreational activities contributes to self-esteem, wellbeing, and sense of community and suggest that the relationship between these variables is complex (e.g., Iwasaki, 2007; Leung & Lee, 2005; Lloyd & Auld, 2002; Marzana, Marta, & Pozzi, 2012; Nimrod & Adoni, 2006; Rodriguez et al., 2007).

When talking about “participation,” the definition of this concept should be broad and include diverse forms of commitment within the community.

The latter may include volunteerism, civic and political engagement, and recreational activities that allow people to join groups and carry out shared projects (Pozzi, Pistoni, & Alfieri, 2017; Procentese, De Carlo, & Gatti, 2019; Procentese, Gatti, & Falanga, 2019). There are no studies related to diverse forms of participation outcomes: for instance, differences in prosocial and recreational activities.

Participation in recreational activities includes culture and art, leisure and sports activities, and play an important role in communities. These activities are those that intentionally give people pleasure and reward them with a greater relational network (Aksoy, Çankaya, & Taşmektepligil, 2017). A major part of people's relational network might derive from participation in prosocial activities (such as volunteerism and helping activities to those in need) and recreational activities (such as sport and artistic and musical activities). This is even more true for young people. From both developmental and social theory perspectives (Crosnoe, 2000), participation in such activities might be expected to play an important role in the socialization process (Livi et al., 2020). Membership facilitates social development by increasing self-esteem; promoting friendships within groups; strengthening the relationship between individual and community; exposing one to other world views; enabling young people to develop skills such as acting co-operatively and adopting different perspectives (McGee, Williams, Howden-Chapman, Martin, & Kawachi, 2006).

Prosocial behavior refers to “*voluntary actions that are intended to help or benefit another individual or group of individuals*” (Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989, p. 3). These behaviors include a broad range of activities: sharing, comforting, rescuing, and helping.

Starting from the assumptions of Uslaner (2004), it is possible to hypothesize that prosocial and recreational activities can differ as regards the following characteristics: (a) the amount of effort in the act and the intended consequence (some forms of engagement are simply more demanding than others); (b) the social ties (individual versus group activities); (c) the short and long term results (prosocial activities, which are often implemented with vulnerable or marginalized people, require participant's long-term involvement in order to see the result of their actions whereas recreational activities require participant's short-term involvement in order to see the same result); (d) involved emotions (pro-social activities are often marked by negative emotions whereas this is not the case for recreational activities, where feelings of leisure and fun are prominent).

In this vein, there is the need to study the differences in self-esteem and sense of community among the group of young immigrants who participate in diverse types of community activities (prosocial versus recreational activities).

### ***Motivation and barriers to participation in young immigrants***

Although studies on immigrants' community participation have increased significantly, motivations and barriers to participation are still under searched (see Martinez Damia et al., 2020). Because community participation has been found to be a resource for young people (Hart, 2013), some studies have investigated the motivations which push immigrants to engage as well as what sustains their participation over time (Suárez-Orozco, Hernández, & Casanova, 2015; Taurini, Paloma, García-Ramírez, Marzana, & Marta, 2017). Alongside "classical" motivations identified by Omoto and Snyder (1995) in the Volunteer Process Model, value, understanding, social, career, protective, self-enhancement, and community concern motivations—others that are specifically cultural appeared (Alfieri, Marzana, et al., 2019; Marzana, Martinez Damia, Alfieri, & Marta, 2019). However, the inquiry into immigrants' community participation is still quite limited and not yet systematized. The theories adopted to describe the rationales that leverage people's motivation in participation are rooted in either the utilitarian or the moral/value-based perspective (Wilson, 2000).

Studies on barriers that limit immigrants' participation in the community of arrival have been limited too. Barriers to community participation were defined as the perceived elements that hinder immigrants from participating in the social life of the country in which they live. Some authors highlighted that contextual factors were more influential than dispositional ones in driving immigrant volunteering (Greenspan, Walk, & Handy, 2018). In literature, scholars have studied the structural obstacles to immigrant community participation. First, priority is given to paid work (Cappelletti & Valtolina, 2015; González, Martín, & de Castro Cardoso, 2011), which limits the time and energy to invest in community participation. The fulfillment of more urgent needs, such as finding housing or regularizing one's legal status, acquiring citizenship (Jensen, 2008), linguistic issues, cultural differences, and the constraints of everyday life have been detected as barriers for immigrants (Chareka, Nyemah, & Manguvo, 2010; Couton & Gaudet, 2008; Handy & Greenspan, 2009). Finally, according to some empirical studies, some obstacles to immigrants' participation are linked to a lack of information about associations (Gele & Harsløf, 2012). We still know little about motivations and barriers, and how the latter is influenced by the type of participation activity implemented.

### ***The present study***

Although in Italy immigrants have significantly increased in the last decade, the building of a multi-ethnic society is still difficult to realize. According to data from Eurispes (2018), in Italy, the climate of suspicion and fear

toward immigrants has drastically increased in recent years. This is due not only to the increased number of immigrants disembarking on Italian shores, but also to the political climate, which is mainly focused on security, risk of terrorism, and violence carried out by young foreigners. For these reasons, Italy is a “fertile ground” for research on immigrants’ participation.

The first aim of this work is to compare a group of immigrants who participate with a group that does not participate, in order to explore the levels of sense of community and self-esteem in both groups. In light of the aforementioned literature, our hypothesis (h1) is that the immigrants who commit themselves will report higher levels of both senses of community and self-esteem.

The second aim is to compare, within the group of committed immigrants, any differences in sense of community and self-esteem between those who engage in prosocial and recreational associations. There is no empirical evidence reporting differences between diverse types of community participation activity; however, it is possible to hypothesize that involvement in prosocial activities (activities to help others) requires specific competencies and may lead to different psycho-social outcomes if compared to recreational activities (related to the arts, music, and sport) (h2).

Finally, the third aim is to explore the differences in motivation and perceived barriers among those who participate in prosocial activities and those who take part in recreational ones. As the literature on this topic is scarce, no hypotheses have been formulated for aims two and three.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

The participants were 510 immigrant youths, aged between 19 and 29 years ( $M = 23.75$ ;  $SD = 2.92$ ). 55% and 3% of participants were engaged: 37.3% were active in sports and 62.8% in prosocial activities. The engaged young immigrants were recruited through contacting over one hundred Italian and ethnic associations present in Italy; the unengaged young immigrants were recruited in recreational places, workplaces, universities, etc. We also asked for help from both engaged and unengaged young immigrants to help recruit others (snowball recruitment).

### ***Young immigrants engaged in the community***

Females were 51%, and the remaining 49% were males. 20.4% had completed elementary or middle school, 56.8% had completed high school,

16.7% had a bachelor's degree, and 6.1% a specialized degree. Some participants (33.7%) reported being students, while 25.3% combined studying with odd jobs, 15.3% claimed to be employed-students, and 25.7% only employed. Regarding the country of birth, 39.0% were born in Africa, 19.0% in Europe, 12.3% in Asia, 7.7% in South America, and 22.0% in Italy (second generation).

### ***Young immigrants not engaged in the community***

Males were 45.7%, and 54.3% were females. 23.9% completed elementary or middle school, 52.7% graduated from high school, 11.9% had a bachelor's degree, and 11.4% had a specialized degree. Some of the participants (29.0%) reported being students, 17.5% employed-students (odd jobs), 9.3% employed-students, and 44.3% employed. As to place of birth, 34.0% were born in Africa, 21.8% in Europe, 17.0% in Asia, 9.7% in South America, and 17.5% in Italy (second generation).

### ***Measures***

The instrument used was a self-report questionnaire. In addition to socio-demographic variables (gender, age, education level, occupation, marital status, country of birth, etc.), it contained the following measures:

#### ***Participation***

To investigate the community participation of immigrants involved in this research, an item with a yes/no-type answer was created ad hoc ("Do you actively take part in some associations (such as social, cultural, sports, recreational, etc.)?"). Furthermore, we asked the people who had claimed to be engaged in an organization what type of activity they carried out, and we identified two categories: (1) prosocial activities (helping others through formal service organizations and programs or individually); (2) recreational activities (like participating in sports organizations).

#### ***Self-esteem***

The Italian validation (Prezza, Trombaccia, & Armento, 1997) of Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) was used. It includes 10-item (for example: "I think I am worth at least as much as others") on a 5-step scale (from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree). Cronbach's Alpha: .70.

### ***Sense of community***

Sense of community was investigated through Prezza, Zampatti, Pacilli, and Paoliello's (2008) questionnaire consisting of 19 items (e.g., "I feel I belong to this community"). People could rate each item on a scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1 = *Not at all important* to 5 = *Very important*). It is composed of five dimensions of the SOC: belonging, received help, satisfaction, giving a contribution, and relationships. Cronbach's Alpha: .83.

### ***Motivations for civic participation***

Seven items adapted from Collom (2011) measured participants' motivation to become civically engaged. The items were scored on a 5-point scale (from 1 = *Not at all* to 5 = *To a great extent*). The items measure seven different motivations: (1) I participate if I feel strongly involved in a problem (Involvement in the problem); (2) I participate if I feel that it is possible to learn new things (Understanding); (3) I participate if I feel that it is possible to influence people or things (Personal influence); (4) I participate because I love helping others (Prosocial value); (5) I participate if I feel that there is the possibility to meet new people (Social); (6) I participate because I feel that this can contribute to building a better society (Community concern); (7) I participate because it allows me to be acknowledged as someone who is important (self-enhancement). Cronbach's Alpha: .88.

### ***Barriers to civic participation***

There were four items adapted from Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley (2003) measuring some barriers that people provided to explain their lack of civic engagement (e.g., "I don't get involved in political causes because I'm too young") on a 4-point scale (ranging from 1 = *Not at all* to 5 = *To a great extent*). Barriers refer to health conditions, language, lack of information related to the association, and conflicts with the association. Cronbach's Alpha: .80.

### ***Analysis***

In order to respond to the research aims, we conducted some Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to compare the average of self-esteem and sense of community between the immigrants who participate and the ones who do not participate in the community. Then, we compared the ones who participate in prosocial with the ones involved in recreational activities.



**Table 1.** Mean, SDs, ranges and correlation for the dependent variables on all the participants.

|                        | Min. | Max. | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1 | 2     | 3     | 4     | 5     | 6     |
|------------------------|------|------|----------|-----------|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. Self-esteem a       | 1.70 | 5.00 | 3.83     | .69       |   | .26** | .18** | .19** | .18** | .34** |
| 2. SOC belonging b     | 1.00 | 4.00 | 2.78     | .68       |   | –     | .41** | .44** | .61** | .65** |
| 3. SOC received help b | 1.00 | 4.00 | 2.65     | .55       |   |       | –     | .46** | .41** | .44** |
| 4. SOC satisfaction b  | 1.00 | 4.00 | 2.68     | .57       |   |       |       | –     | .40** | .49** |
| 5. SOC contribution b  | 1.00 | 4.00 | 2.64     | .63       |   |       |       |       | –     | .54** |
| 6. SOC relationship b  | 1.25 | 4.00 | 2.91     | .62       |   |       |       |       |       | –     |
| 7. SOC total b         | 1.22 | 4.00 | 2.73     | .47       |   |       |       |       |       |       |

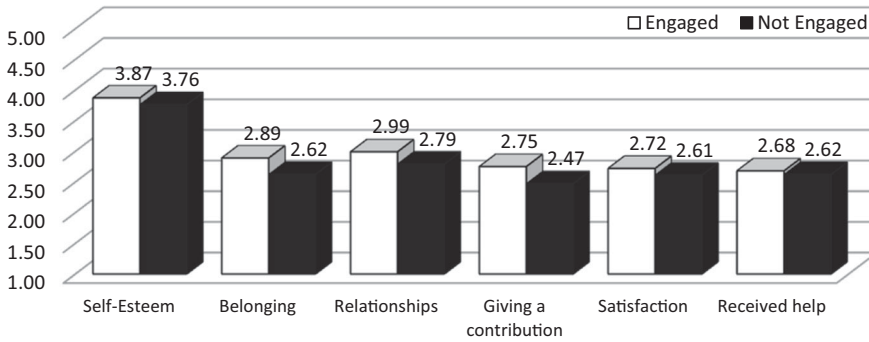
Note. \*\* $p < .01$ ; a, Range 1–5; b, Range 1–4.

## Results

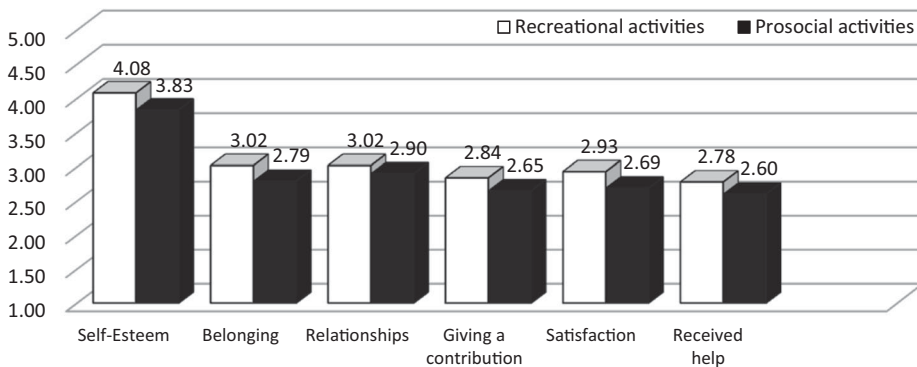
Table 1 shows Mean, SDs, ranges and correlation for the dependent variables on all the participants. As regards the first aim, the immigrants engaged have significantly higher means than those not engaged in all the considered variables, with the exception of the SOC dimension received help,  $F(1, 490) = 1.19$ ,  $p = .276$  (Figure 1): Self-esteem,  $F(1, 494) = 3.10$ ,  $p < .05$ ; SOC belonging,  $F(1, 490) = 20.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ; SOC relationship,  $F(1, 490) = 11.94$ ,  $p < .001$ ; SOC satisfaction,  $F(1, 490) = 4.72$ ,  $p < .05$ ; SOC contribution,  $F(1, 490) = 22.58$ ,  $p < .001$ .

As concerns the second aim, with reference to the subgroup of those who participate, the two groups (immigrants engaged in prosocial activities and immigrants engaged in sport activities) are significantly different for all the considered outcomes except for relationships,  $F(1, 187) = 1.44$ ,  $p = .232$ . In all the other cases, the average scores are higher for those who engage in recreational activities (Figure 2): Self-esteem:  $F(1, 184) = 4.73$ ,  $p < .005$ ; SOC belonging:  $F(1, 187) = 3.92$ ,  $p < .05$ ; SOC help:  $F(1, 187) = 3.84$ ,  $p < .05$ ; SOC satisfaction:  $F(1, 187) = 6.59$ ,  $p < .05$ ; SOC contribution:  $F(1, 187) = 3.72$ ,  $p < .05$ .

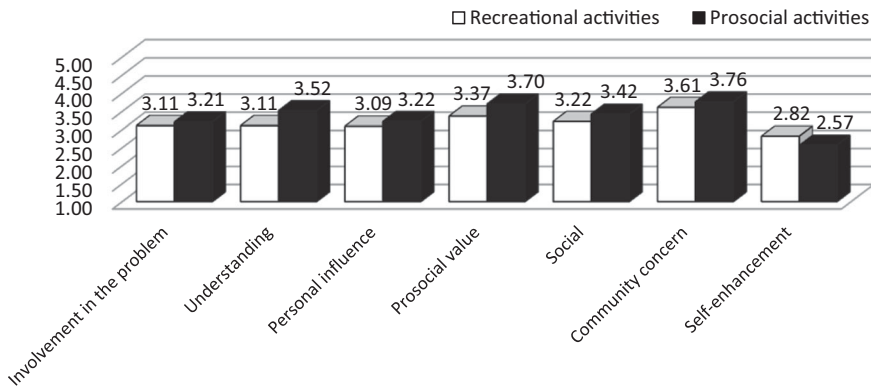
As concerns the third aim, the most relevant motivations are: Community Concern, related to participating in order to contribute to creating a better society ( $M = 3.72$ ;  $SD = 1.26$ ), Prosocial value, with reference to the pleasure of helping others ( $M = 3.59$ ;  $SD = 1.22$ ), and Understanding, which refers to the possibility of learning new things ( $M = 3.39$ ;  $SD = 1.23$ ). The less frequently cited motivation is Self-enhancement, related to being acknowledged as an important person ( $M = 2.65$ ;  $SD = 1.28$ ). Statistically significant differences emerge between the two groups only for the motivation related to the pleasure of helping others (Prosocial value), which is higher among those who engage in prosocial activities (Figure 3),  $F(1, 185) = 4.35$ ,  $p < .05$ . The other motivations do not differ between the two groups: Involvement in the problem:  $F(1, 183) = 0.10$ ,  $p = .659$ ; Personal influence:  $F(1, 182) = 0.458$ ,  $p = .499$ ; Prosocial value:  $F(1, 181) = 2.82$ ,  $p = .095$ ; Social:  $F(1, 183) = 1.50$ ,  $p = .221$ ; Community concern:  $F(1, 183) = .553$ ,  $p = .458$ ; Self-enhancement:  $F(1, 185) = 1.50$ ,  $p = .221$ .



**Figure 1.** Means of self-esteem and the SOC dimensions in the two groups of engaged and not engaged.

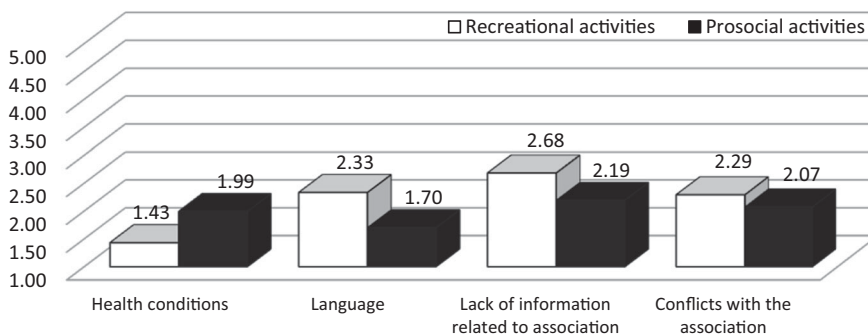


**Figure 2.** Means of self-esteem and the SOC dimensions in the two groups considered.



**Figure 3.** Means of motivations in the two considered groups.

As to perceived barriers, all the average scores of the variables are rather low. The perception about not having enough information regarding the volunteer association is the most cited ( $M = 2.34$ ;  $SD = 1.31$ ), followed by fear of conflicts ( $M = 2.14$ ;  $SD = 1.26$ ), difficulty in the Italian language ( $M = 1.90$ ;  $SD = 1.19$ ), and, finally, feeling of not being in good health



**Figure 4.** Means of perceived barriers in the two groups.

( $M = 1.82$ ;  $SD = 1.36$ ). With regard to the differences between the two groups, statistical differences emerge for all the barriers considered (Figure 4), except for the fear of conflicts,  $F(1, 177) = 1.12$ ,  $p = .290$ . Health:  $F(1, 175) = 6.38$ ,  $p < .05$ ; Language:  $F(1, 175) = 10.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Information:  $F(1, 176) = 1.12$ ,  $p < .05$ .

## Discussion

The results of the present work open the door to the idea that community participation supports self-esteem and a sense of community. It is interesting to note how different forms of participation may bring about differences in the levels of self-esteem and sense of community, and in both motivations and barriers. The current study highlights that immigrants who participate in prosocial and those who participate in recreational activities significantly differ with reference to all the variables related to the sense of community. This can be explained considering several factors that emerge in the literature. Recreational activities provide a context where people develop a sense of belonging to a group, whether it is a sports group or a team engaged in organizing artistic, musical, or sports events or competitions.

As recreational activities in the current study mainly included sports. Their role needs to be more deeply explored to understand its contribution to immigrants' experience of community engagement (Nowy, Feiler, & Breuer, 2020; Spracklen, Long, & Hylton, 2015). Many studies highlighted the positive benefits of practicing sports, which range from health outcomes to wider benefits related to individuals' well-being (Hitchings & Latham, 2017; Kumar, Manoli, Hodgkinson, & Downward, 2018). For instance, people that practice sport generally experiences lower stress or depressive symptoms compared to those who do not have an active lifestyle (Ruseski, Humphreys, Hallman, Wicker, & Breuer, 2014).

At the community level, sport also provides opportunities for social interaction, social capital, and social inclusion enhancement (Edwards, 2015; Gozzoli, D'Angelo, & Confalonieri, 2013; Sanchèz, Gozzoli, & D'Angelo, 2013; Scotto di Luzio, Procentese, & Guillet-Descas, 2019). As reported by Bailey (2008), recreational activities provide participants with a cross-community environment. These features might explain the differences in the variables related to received help, contribution, and belonging. Furthermore, the recreational activity involves people in an all-encompassing, enjoyable experience, and this might explain the differences in the variable of satisfaction.

Thus, the current research suggests the positive role practicing a sport plays in immigrants' community engagement, but further research should be implemented to highlight the dynamics occurring between the two variables. Sport can even be a positive tool to cope with the negative emotion and trauma related to migration as well as to promote individual well-being (Marzana, Martinez Damia, Atallah, & Loreto Martinez, 2019; Stone, Krueger, Stiglitz, Fitoussi, & Durand, 2018). This type of participation in the community has been explored at a local level by analyzing the participation of young immigrants in the bottom-up practices of urban sport (D'Angelo et al., 2019). However, these studies are exploratory ones and need deeper analysis to understand the value of community engagement.

With regard to motivations, it is not surprising that the two groups of young immigrants differ significantly in the motivation to help others, which is stronger in those involved in prosocial activities. Helping others is the prominent feature of prosocial activities and constitutes its essence. In fact, prosocial behavior refers to helping which, in turn, means understanding the needs of the recipient and making a sincere effort to fulfill them (Knickerbocke, 2003). Nevertheless, when considering motivations related to the desire for acknowledgment, the desire to expand the friendship network, and the motivation to improve society, they are the basis of participation as reported by several studies on volunteerism (see, for example, Alfieri, Guiddi, Marta, & Saturni, 2016; Omoto & Snyder, 1995; Snyder & Omoto, 2007, 2008).

Furthermore, results related to the perception of barriers are interesting and useful for planning future interventions. First of all, lack of information and language barriers may be perceived as a limitation in accessing recreational activities because, generally, entering these contexts is informal and based on networking. Instead, pro-social activities are more structured as concerns the access requirements and the type of involvement asked of volunteers. In this domain, young immigrants may still be actively building their own well-being (in terms of health, livelihoods, and housing); thus, they do not feel ready yet to be engaged in structured activities where one

is required to take care of the other. These elements suggest the importance of activating connection across diverse associations. For all these reasons, future studies should explore this applicative context, which is quite innovative in the field of community psychology.

The study presents some limitations that should be considered. First, the number of participants is small, and we cannot generalize the results. A greater number of participants would allow creating subgroups in the sample, distinguishing, for example, by gender, country of origin, and religion. Second, an exclusively quantitative approach was used. A mixed-methods approach would have provided more details about the reasons why these results were obtained, especially given the limited literature on this topic.

Accordingly, and unsurprisingly, policymakers have long known that volunteering is a governance tool in increasingly diverse societies. Given the many positive effects of volunteering, both for the individual and the cohesiveness of pluralistic societies, many Western governments have sought to encourage and support immigrants and ethnoreligious minorities in becoming actively involved in voluntary civil society organizations through a range of initiatives (Wang & Wong, 2014). The UK government even considered introducing immigrants' volunteering as a non-mandatory requirement within its "earned citizenship" based naturalization process in the late 2000s. This could be an aspect to contemplate for the Italian Government.

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