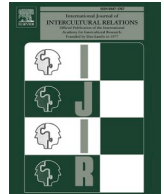




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## The influence of social support on the wellbeing of immigrants residing in Italy: Sources and functions as predictive factors for life satisfaction levels, sense of community and resilience

C. Novara <sup>a,1</sup>, M.J. Martos-Méndez <sup>b,\*</sup>, L. Gómez-Jacinto <sup>c,3</sup>,  
I. Hombrados-Mendieta <sup>b,4</sup>, L. Varveri <sup>a</sup>, C. Polizzi <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology, Educational Science and Human Movement, University of Palermo, viale delle Scienze, building n. 15, 90124 Palermo, Italy

<sup>b</sup> Department of Social Psychology, Social Work and Social Services and Social Anthropology, Faculty of Psychology, University of Málaga, 29071 Málaga, Spain

<sup>c</sup> Department of Social Psychology, Social Work and Social Services and Social Anthropology, Faculty of Social and Labour Studies, University of Málaga, 29071 Málaga, Spain

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## ABSTRACT

Moving from one country to another involves not only separation from the country of origin, but also the tiring process of integration into a new physical, institutional, and sociocultural context, which may expose migrants to acculturation stress. The loss of former support networks, or at the very least their transformation, presents immigrants with the need to rebuild their social support systems in the host country, involving an active search for support. Therefore, the aim of study is to analyze the structure of informal social support and its capacity to predict immigrants' sense of community, resilience, and satisfaction with life. The results confirm that social support predicts satisfaction with life, sense of community, and resilience. Our findings highlight the way sources and frequency of support, and the satisfaction with which they are associated, have different degrees of predictive value on the dependent variables under investigation. In this study, it can be concluded that social support is an important factor in the well-being of migrants and their integration into the host community. The results have an important practical value in promoting interventions that improve immigrants' support networks and, consequently, increase their satisfaction with life, sense of community, and resilience.

### The role of social support in the migratory process

The migratory experience can be seen as a process of ecological transition giving rise to important changes in the life context of the

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [cinzia.novara@unipa.it](mailto:cinzia.novara@unipa.it) (C. Novara), [mjmartos@uma.es](mailto:mjmartos@uma.es) (M.J. Martos-Méndez), [jacinto@uma.es](mailto:jacinto@uma.es) (L. Gómez-Jacinto), [mihombrados@uma.es](mailto:mihombrados@uma.es) (I. Hombrados-Mendieta), [loredana.varveri@unipa.it](mailto:loredana.varveri@unipa.it) (L. Varveri), [conchetta.polizzi@unipa.it](mailto:conchetta.polizzi@unipa.it) (C. Polizzi).

<sup>1</sup> ORCID: 0000-0002-6001-205X.

<sup>2</sup> ORCID: 0000-0002-7823-5964.

<sup>3</sup> ORCID: 0000-0002-0270-5405.

<sup>4</sup> ORCID: 0000-0001-7288-1589.

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individual (García Martín et al., 2016). Moving from one country to another involves not only separation from the country of origin, but also the tiring process of integration into a new physical, institutional, and sociocultural context, which may expose migrants to acculturation stress. Particularly since 2000, given Italy's geographical position as the Mediterranean gateway, the country has faced a considerable increase in waves of immigration (ESS-8, 2020). In 2018, the immigrant population registered in Italy represents the 8.8 % of the inhabitants (5.3 million residents). The 50.2 % (over 2.6 million) are Europeans (of which 1.6 million are from EU countries), the 21.7 % are from African states, mainly from North and West African countries (1.1 million) and the 20.8 % are from Asia (1.1 million) (EpiCentro, 2019).

Italian policy has pursued few integration strategies that favor the needs of immigrant populations across several life domains (i.e., education, employment, social services, and health and housing to meet the needs of the immigrant population), and these have mainly been implemented at regional and local levels. It must be said that immigration policy is a highly politicized issue (Geddes & Petrachin, 2020), with emphasis on limiting migrant flows and on securitization. In fact, as reported by EpiCentro (2019), the *Statistical dossier on immigration in Italy* (2019) showed that, according to data collected by the European agency Frontex, the number of irregular border crossings in 2018 reached its lowest level in the last five years, also as a result of the agreements between Italy and Libya.

Overall, together with Greece, Portugal, and Spain, Italy is included in the "southern European model of immigration" because these countries have recently changed from being emigration to immigration countries. They count large numbers of undocumented foreign-born people who do not have any valid immigration document, as well as any regular employment contract, being often involved in the ingrained unregistered hidden economies of the mentioned host countries; also, the lack of stable integration policies determines the introduction of regularization policies by governments to legalize the status of undocumented immigrants (Ambrosetti & Papparuso, 2021). As for public attitudes toward immigrants and immigration, recent data from the European Social Survey Round 8 (ESS, 2020) reported a rise of anti-immigrant sentiments in Italy, where the fear of "others" has increased, especially the fear of immigrants who are viewed as a serious threat to national economic wealth (Verbena et al., 2021). After Italy, Austria registers a significant increase in the 'Rejection Index', results that express attitudes of closure and rejection towards immigrants (Messing & Ságvári, 2019). In this difficult socio-political context, the present study appears to have an even more specific scientific value.

In fact, the numerous stressors facing immigrants include adaptation to a new culture and its social norms, language barriers, changes in their working and economic conditions, problems relating to their legal status in the host country, and the loss of their former social support network (Berry, 1997; Garcini et al., 2016; Hernández et al., 2005; Hombrados-Mendieta et al., 2019). This social support, which is of such importance in the migratory process, has been largely neglected by research in this field (Leduc & Proulx, 2004). Social support has a protective function for both mental health (Buechegger-Traxler & Sirsch, 2012; Chadwick & Collins, 2015; Kitchen et al., 2015; Tran et al., 2014) and psychological well-being in migrant populations (Arcidiacono & Procentese, 2005; Hernández et al., 2004; Hombrados-Mendieta et al., 2019; Mui, 2001; Siedlecki et al., 2014). It serves to prevent depression (Martínez et al., 1999; Matthew et al., 2001) and increase levels of satisfaction with life (Arpino & de Valk, 2018; Ojeda et al., 2008), thereby helping migrants to avoid feelings of isolation and social exclusion, as well as increasing their sense of community (Caycho-Rodríguez et al., 2018; Hernández et al., 2005). A study by Toselli and Gualdi-Russo (2006) on life satisfaction among immigrants in Italy showed that Tunisians were significantly more stressed than Senegalese, Pakistanis and Roma. Additionally, they state that there is not much information available on the physical and mental health status of immigrants in Italy and further studies should be conducted. The loss of former support networks, or at the very least their transformation, presents immigrants with the need to rebuild their social support systems in the host country (Hernández et al., 2005). This involves an active search for support, with evaluation of the support received shaping the migrants' responses to the complexities of adaptation required by being a migrant (Sonn, 1991).

According to Gottlieb and Bergen (2010), social support consists of the availability of help from a network of relationships with other individuals, groups, and the community in general, whether real or perceived, whenever required. The stress-buffering model (Cohen & Wills, 1985) maintains that social relations, and thus the support these relations provide, are especially useful during periods of heightened stress, because they can ameliorate the potentially damaging effects of stressful events. Social networks (i.e., all of the relationships from which people obtain such support) can provide three types of help, which may be instrumental, informative, or emotive (House, 1981; House & Kahn, 1985). Instrumental help is of the material kind, such as economic assistance and help with everyday activities, whereas the informative, as the name suggests, provides information that helps a person overcome problems through advice and suggestions. Finally, emotive resources involve affection, interest, care, reassurance, esteem, and trust. Lin et al. (1986) explored these ideas further, highlighting the way that support, be it real or perceived, is multiscalar in nature, deriving from the community, social networks, and more intimate relationships. Community is the most external level and contributes a sense of belonging and social identity. In contrast, social networks are composed of family-, friendship, and work-based relationships, whereas the level of intimate personal relationships is the one in which the individual feels close to others and from which they gain feelings of commitment to them and responsibility for their well-being (Hombrados-Mendieta et al., 2012). Social support can thus be defined in terms of both its source and its nature (Laireiter & Baumann, 1992).

Research on immigrants has revealed that the main source of support is their informal social networks, including family members, friends, neighbors, and colleagues (Hernández, 2003; Hernández et al., 2004; Martínez et al., 1996; 1999). These informal networks play a crucial role in particular during the phase of adapting to a new life in the host country (Hernández, 2003; Hernández et al., 2004; Martínez et al., 1996, 1999), serving as a bridge towards the new social context (Zhou, 1997). For instance, in a cross-national study comparing the settling experience of immigrants residing in Italy and the United States (Buckingham et al., 2018), participants settling in Italy perceived larger relational communities (e.g., family, friends, and acquaintances) as significant sources of social support, but they perceived institutions as unsupportive. Informal networks help immigrants to satisfy their most urgent needs for employment, housing, and social integration. A study conducted in Italy showed that immigrants who have not been living in a host country for long use informal channels, whereas being settled involves increasingly frequent recourse to governmental and professional services, or in

other words, formal networks (Monaci et al., 2010). Some studies have found very limited use of formal support services among immigrants (Aroian et al., 2005; Hernández et al., 2004). This seems to be because formal networks are less accessible, more bound up in red tape, and more expensive and stigmatizing (Hernández Plaza et al., 2005). However, scientific research has not always distinguished between the sources and nature of support (Cheng, 1998; Chen & Feeley, 2012; Lee et al., 2020; Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Morey et al., 2021), with very few studies focusing on the differences between the various subcategories, or between the differing sources of such support (Clark-Lempers et al., 1991; Procidiano & Heller, 1983). Others have analyzed the differences in the quantity of support received and the degree of satisfaction derived from it (Cohen & Syme, 1985; Gottlieb, 1981).

The aim of this study is to determine the extent to which informal social support increases sense of community, satisfaction with life, and resilience as a function of different types and sources of support and the satisfaction derived from them. Hence, having a supportive network may lead to immigrants having increased resources available to them to deal with new situations, functioning as a shock absorber by ameliorating the negative effects of immigration (Díaz López, 2003). Given that there is no specific research into these issues in the literature, reference will be made here to empirical evidence on the relationship between general social support and certain indicators of well-being in immigrant populations.

### The relationship between social support and life satisfaction levels, sense of community, and resilience

Various studies have found a positive correlation between social support and the well-being of immigrants, identifying support resources as predictive factors (Amit, 2010; McMichael & Manderson, 2004; Pretty et al., 2006; Zhou & Lin, 2016). Although satisfaction with life is only one of the factors that define a wider construct of subjective well-being, it has typically been used as a measure of well-being in numerous research studies. Certain studies have suggested that social support acts as a protective factor in promoting life satisfaction in immigrant populations (Fernández et al., 2015; Salinero-Fort et al., 2015). Some of these studies have highlighted the effect that social support can have on life satisfaction levels amongst immigrants as a function of its source and other structural characteristics such as the extent of their network of relationships (Kuo & Tsai, 1986), the presence of family members (Ayón & Naddy, 2013; Furnham & Shiekh, 1993; Guo et al., 2019), and friendships (Klein et al., 1989) and the support they provide (Vega et al., 1991), as well as the number of people from the host country included in an immigrant's system of interpersonal relationships (Hernández et al., 2005).

Recent research in this field has confirmed the centrality of the role played by perceived social support from family and friends in encouraging a sense of community and the integration of immigrants into the local community. Studies have shown that people are attracted to ethnic groups with origins similar to their own and that such groups are vital to an immigrant's process of adaptation (Cox, 1989; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Apart from offering support and facilitating adaptation, these groups also provide a context in which people can rebuild and reformulate notions of group identity and a conception of community. These support systems thus also provide a sense of community (Sonn & Fisher, 1996). Informal networks, by promoting connections between people through emotional help and material assistance, help to reinforce the feeling of belonging to a community (Hombrados-Mendieta et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2016). Additionally, a study comparing Moroccan immigrant youth in Italy and the Netherlands proved that sense of community was particularly important, regardless of the host country (Fusco et al., 2020).

These findings confirm the correlation between social support and sense of community. Social support systems provide a context for a feeling of belonging and identification (Soon, 2002). Social support has been found to be of crucial importance in an immigrant's process of integrating into their new setting, promoting participation and a sense of community (Adams et al., 2011; Tang et al., 2017). The latter, in turn, is a predictive factor for the social and psychological well-being of individuals and groups (Hombrados-Mendieta et al., 2013; Sagy et al., 1996; Sonn, 2002). Moreover, integration into the community is associated with effective interactions with residents from the local community, and thus with the development of local sources of social support (Carpentier & de la Sablonnière, 2013).

Searle and Ward (1990) underlined that the presence of locals in immigrants' social networks and their satisfaction with spontaneous ties with members of the host community facilitate their adaptation. Indeed, positive relationships with the locals from the host country make immigrants feel integrated and accepted by their new community, thereby increasing perceived support and life satisfaction levels (Dominguez-Fuentes & Hombrados-Mendieta, 2012). A well-functioning society is conceived of as a system of support transactions (Felton & Shinn, 1992), even if one does not have personal relationships with every single member thereof.

A feeling of community involves a process in which members interact, define identity, provide social support, and make their individual contribution to the common good (Bess et al., 2002; Obst et al., 2002). Social support can be seen as an individual construct in which the subject relates to wider society, whereas a sense of community is an extraindividual construct, characterized by a perception of similarity and of interdependence with others, and thus by a sense of belonging and of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Sarason, 1974). As Omoto and Snyder (2002) suggested, the human connection is a vital factor in encouraging and maintaining an attitude of responsibility towards those we know personally, as well as in the development of resilience (DiFulvio, 2011).

Resilience (i.e., the capacity to overcome stress and adversity) is a multidimensional construct that includes individual capacity as well as social and environmental support (Connor & Davidson, 2003). Apart from personal resources, such a construct involves all of the other resources available from the environment that help people to adapt to "collisions," no matter what difficulties they face. Positive adaptation in adverse circumstances and under unfavorable conditions therefore depends on both individual and psychosocial protective factors. The literature has highlighted the importance of resilience and of relational resources, such as relationships with caregivers and colleagues (Güngör & Perdu, 2017; Masten et al., 2009). Furthermore, it has emerged from various studies on the phenomenon of immigration that social support from family members and friends is one of the main factors in promoting resilience amongst immigrants (Lemus-Way & Johansson, 2019; Simich et al., 2012). Resilience is also correlated with better health and an

elevated level of mental well-being (Wu et al., 2018). Both resilience and social support from family members and locals are counted amongst the best predictors of immigrants' satisfaction with life (García-Cid et al., 2017).

According to Cohen and McKay (1984) theory of specificity, social support becomes more effective the closer it comes to the problem with which one is dealing. In the context of immigration, this is particularly relevant because support may or may not be useful depending on how specific it is and on the extent to which it is in line with the needs of the person receiving it at the time. It is therefore essential to analyze the differential effects of social support as a function of their source and nature to understand their effect on the subjective well-being of immigrants and to avoid generalized interventions that might waste resources without benefit for those whose needs are very real.

## Present study

As all of the above-mentioned research has shown, adequate informal social support can have a beneficial effect on indicators of positive adaptation in the lives of immigrants. Hence, the aim of the study, which focuses on immigrants residing in Italy, is to analyze the structure of informal social support and its capacity to predict a sense of community, resilience, and satisfaction with life.

The innovative aspect of this research lies in the multidimensional conception of informal social support, looking into its effects as a function of the following variables:

1. Source (family, friends, and neighbors)
2. Function (informative, emotional, and instrumental)
3. Frequency and perceived satisfaction

We tested the three hypotheses listed below, taking social support as an independent variable, whereas the dependent variables were satisfaction with life, sense of community, and resilience.

**Hypothesis 1.** Informal social support predicts satisfaction with life, sense of community, and resilience. Thus, the greater the social support, the higher the levels of the three dependent variables will be.

**Hypothesis 2.** The effects of social support on the three dependent variables differ as a function of their source (family, native friends, migrant friends, and neighbors) and of the nature of the support received (informative, emotional, or instrumental).

**Hypothesis 3.** The effects of social support on the three dependent variables differ as a function of the frequency of the support received and of perceived satisfaction with it.

## Method

### Participants

The sample was first broken down according to ethnic origin and gender, as defined by the official Italian National Institute of Statistics. The sample included 726 immigrants, 375 male and 339 female (12 did not answer gender), aged between 18 and 70 ( $M = 32.5$ ;  $SD = 11.12$ ), who were residents in Italy for an average of 7.7 years ( $SD = 3.7$ ). The participants were from Africa (55.4 %), Asia (27 %), and Eastern Europe (17.6 %), in line with the proportions of immigrants found in the most recent Italian census in 2017. As regards their reasons for emigrating, 54.3 % of the interviewees reported wanting to improve their economic situation, whereas 14.5 % wanted to join their families. Another 10.9 % gave as their reason the political situation in their country, involving persecution, instability, and so forth. Of the sample, 4.8 % emigrated for the purpose of studying, whereas 1.1 % cited sexual orientation as the motivating force. The remaining participants did not answer this question. As for their socioeconomic conditions, 50.2 % of the participants were unemployed, whereas 49.8 % worked. Only 42.7 % were in a stable relationship.

### Procedure

This study is part of a wider international program of research whose ethical standards have been approved by the ethics commission of the University of Malaga.

This study presents data from an exclusively Italian context, with participants being selected using random sampling in the Sicilian region where 90 % of Mediterranean migrants arrive (Petrelli et al., 2017). Trained interviewers administered the questionnaires in Italian and, if an immigrant interviewed had problems understanding the language, a version in the language they understood best (English, French, or Arabic) was provided. Responses were recorded on the Italian questionnaire. The English, French, and Arabic versions of the questionnaire were translated into their language of origin by native speakers ("the translator") who were fluent in Italian. To match the two languages (Italian, and English or French or Arabic), the translator read the questions and made sure that the objective of each section was understood. The interviews were conducted in various locations, such as immigrant associations, workplaces, and centers run by social services. Immigrants took part on a voluntary basis, signing an informed consent form and without receiving any material incentives.

## Measures

### Social support

The original version of the questionnaire on the Frequency of Social Support and Satisfaction was employed (Garcia-Martin et al., 2016). This questionnaire assesses the frequency of and satisfaction with (a) emotional support (e.g., “give you love and affection and listen to you when you want to talk and express your feelings”); (b) instrumental support (e.g., “willing to do you a favor or do specific things for you”); and (c) informative support (e.g., “give you useful advice and information to resolve doubts, problems, or things you have to do on a daily basis”). Support included that supplied (a) by family (family in the host country and the country of origin), (b) native friends (those who are native-born residents of the new host country), (c) immigrant friends (those who have also immigrated to the new host country), and (d) neighbors (those who live nearby in the same neighborhood). Thus, each participant was assessed in relation to support networks, the type of support provided (emotional, instrumental, or informational), and the frequency with which each type of support was received, along with the degree of their satisfaction with it. The questionnaire includes 24 items, which are answered on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *rarely*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *quite often*, 4 = *almost always*, 5 = *always*). Satisfaction with the support received was also measured using a 5-item Likert-type scale (1 = *unsatisfied*, 2 = *barely satisfied*, 3 = *fairly satisfied*, 4 = *quite satisfied*, 5 = *very satisfied*).

Internal consistency was good for the family support frequency items with the scale having a Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.86$ . Family support satisfaction has Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.86$ . The results for the support provided by immigrant friends are also good. Frequency of support items showed a Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ . For satisfaction, Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.87$ . Results of frequency of support provided by Italian friends showed a Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.85$ . Results of satisfaction of support provided by Italian friends indicated a Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.87$ . Results of frequency of support provided by neighbors indicated a Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.86$ . Results of satisfaction with support provided by neighbors concluded a Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.89$ .

A multivariate analysis of variance was performed to observe the differences between the three immigrant groups (Africans, Eastern Europeans, and Asians) in their response to the social support frequency items. The three groups were found to differ significantly ( $F = 2.50$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .045$ ), but exclusively on emotional ( $M_{Africa} = 3.54$ ,  $M_{Europe} = 3.89$ ,  $M_{Asia} = 3.72$ ), instrumental ( $M_{Africa} = 3.07$ ,  $M_{Europe} = 3.45$ ,  $M_{Asia} = 3.36$ ), and informational ( $M_{Africa} = 3.36$ ,  $M_{Europe} = 3.81$ ,  $M_{Asia} = 3.39$ ) family support. This difference took the form that the family of European immigrants provided more emotional, material, and informational support than that of Africans.

Regarding satisfaction with social support, no differences were found between the three immigrant groups in the three functions of support provided by the four sources ( $F = 1.377$ ,  $p = .106$ ,  $\eta^2 = .027$ ).

### Satisfaction with life

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Pavot & Diener, 1993) was used to assess life satisfaction, seen as the cognitive component of well-being. The items are answered on a 7-point scale that ranges from 1 = *completely unsatisfied* to 7 = *completely satisfied* (e.g., “I am satisfied with my life”). Di Fabio and Gori (2016) confirmed the unidimensional nature of the construct of the current Italian version. However, other versions of the scale can be downloaded from the authors' website (<https://eddiener.com/scales/7>). Internal consistency was good, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .092$ .

### Sense of community

The Sense of Community Index (SCI-2) was employed here (Chavis et al., 2008). The SCI-2 is a very reliable measure and it has been used in various cultures. This instrument is based on the four components of McMillan and Chavis's (1986) SOC (sense of community) model; namely, needs fulfilment, group membership, influence, and emotional connection. The SCI-2 Global Index was calculated by summing the 24 items (six for each dimension), measured on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *somewhat*, 3 = *mostly*, 4 = *completely*; e.g., “I get important needs of mine met because I am part of this community”). The respondents referred to the neighborhood where they resided to respond to the scale. The scale has been employed in other research involving the immigrant population residing in Italy and has scored highly on the reliability index (Millán-Franco et al. (2019)). Results of sense of community: Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.96$ .

### Resilience

The 10-item version of the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale was employed here (e.g., “Stress makes me stronger”). In the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, resilience is considered a mediating element in recovery processes following various kinds of harm. Such toughness promotes better adaptation to life challenges and thus helps maintain confidence in the face of hostile circumstances. Resilience also implies having clear objectives and high levels of perceived cognitive and emotional self-control. It plays a role in modulating negative emotions and acts as a protective factor against stressful stimuli. The scale ranges from 1 to 5, where 1 equals *never* and 5 means *almost always*. Results of resilience: Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.93$ .

To analyze the cultural differences between these three questionnaires, a multivariate analysis of variance was performed with origin as the independent variable (Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe). Statistically significant differences ( $F = 6.684$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .020$ ) were only found in resilience ( $M_{Africa} = 3.46$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ;  $M_{Eastern Europe} = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ;  $M_{Asia} = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ), and, specifically, between Europeans and Asians. In life satisfaction and sense of community, there were no significant differences.

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics and the correlation matrix between all the variables (frequency of social support received - lower diagonal; satisfaction with social support received - upper diagonal).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	M <sub>frequency</sub>	SD <sub>frequency</sub>
<b>Family</b>																	
1. Emotional support	1	.643**	.697**	.244**	.202**	.253**	.339**	.241**	.312**	.181**	.128**	.162**	.206**	.186**	.079*	3.62	1.36
2. Instrumental support	.635**	1	.703**	.319**	.292**	.320**	.244**	.310**	.293**	.163**	.167**	.165**	.217**	.201**	.155**	3.21	1.47
3. Informational support	.716**	.686**	1	.262**	.267**	.327**	.240**	.254**	.310**	.186**	.158**	.161**	.200**	.207**	.159**	3.43	1.41
<b>Italian Friends</b>																	
4. Emotional support	.298**	.249**	.239**	1	.652**	.764**	.334**	.333**	.280**	.316**	.281**	.343**	.259**	.219**	.250**	3.23	1.28
5. Instrumental support	.206**	.315**	.266**	.595**	1	.652**	.256**	.431**	.262**	.359**	.447**	.339**	.252**	.156**	.241**	2.58	1.34
6. Informational support	.310**	.293**	.332**	.719**	.615**	1	.324**	.332**	.350**	.374**	.320**	.414**	.236**	.220**	.260**	3.07	1.28
<b>Immigrant Friends</b>																	
7. Emotional support	.272**	.311**	.290**	.252**	.241**	.209**	1	.662**	.745**	.308**	.272**	.297**	.105**	.106**	.144**	2.89	1.28
8. Instrumental support	.198**	.314**	.253**	.218**	.373**	.153**	.620**	1	.678**	.315**	.410**	.285**	.100**	.107**	.144**	2.37	1.31
9. Informational support	.316**	.347**	.377**	.279**	.275**	.275**	.747**	.573**	1	.284**	.265**	.327**	.038	.082*	.163**	2.90	1.32
<b>Neighbors</b>																	
10. Emotional support	.164**	.165**	.160**	.281**	.272**	.248**	.333**	.310**	.370**	1	.710**	.777**	.186**	.123**	.366**	2.45	1.23
11. Instrumental support	.064	.151**	.100**	.262**	.410**	.183**	.254**	.407**	.270**	.647**	1	.703**	.179**	.083*	.349**	2.03	1.21
12. Informational support	.156**	.174**	.174**	.251**	.280**	.279**	.320**	.256**	.420**	.705**	.643**	1	.159**	.159**	.376**	2.51	1.25
13. Satisfaction with life	.217**	.255**	.210**	.054	.087*	.055	.269**	.247**	.262**	.162**	.162**	.128**	1	.313**	.270**	3.63	1.48
14. Resilience	.181**	.168**	.219**	.128**	.114**	.131**	.244**	.110**	.210**	.141**	.081*	.165**	.313**	1	.289**	3.47	.73
15. Sense of community	.056	.121**	.138**	.175**	.157**	.154**	.222**	.216**	.248**	.370**	.315**	.375**	.270**	.289**	1	2.18	.53
M <sub>satisfaction</sub>	3.80	3.48	3.61	3.12	2.69	3.11	3.43	2.92	3.32	2.62	2.25	2.70	3.63	3.47	2.18		
SD <sub>satisfaction</sub>	1.26	1.40	1.34	1.30	1.37	1.32	1.27	1.38	1.26	1.29	1.29	1.29	1.48	.73	.53		

\* p < .05; \*\* p < .01.



Statistical analyses

Pearson correlations and multiple regression analysis was performed to evaluate the predictive capacity of frequency and satisfaction for the four sources of support (family, Italian friends, immigrant friends, and neighbors) and for the three types of support (emotional, instrumental, and informative) on the three dependent variables (satisfaction with life, sense of community, and resilience). Then, two structural equation models were run, one for the frequency of social support and the other for satisfaction with social support. The 12 support variables (source and type) are the independent variables, and resilience, sense of community and life satisfaction are the dependent variables. The two models were analyzed using the partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) technique. The SmartPLS 4 software was used for this purpose. The process of full bootstrapping (5000 samples), Bias-Corrected and Accelerated Bootstrap, the two-tailed test, and the level of significance of 5 % were used.

Results

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and the correlation matrix between all the variables (frequency of social support received, lower diagonal; satisfaction with social support received, upper diagonal) and serves as the basis for the multiple regression analysis. It is observed that the correlations are moderate and statistically significant between the different functions of social support from each of the sources. The intercorrelations between the sources and the functions of support that they provide are also moderate. Weaker are the relationships of social support (sources and functions) with life satisfaction, resilience, and sense of community. This pattern is similar when it comes to frequency of social support or perceived satisfaction.

Table 2 shows the results from the structural model, with frequency and satisfaction related to the four sources of social support and

Table 2

Path model coefficients for sources and type of social support (frequency and satisfaction) as predictive factors for resilience, sense of community and satisfaction with life. Statistically significant coefficients are shown in bold.

	Frequency of received support					Satisfaction for received support				
	Coeff.	T	p	2.5 %CI	97.5 %CI	Coeff.	T	p	2.5 %CI	97.5 %CI
<i>Family Social Support</i>										
Emotional → Resilience	0.016	0.266	0.790	-0.099	0.128	0.048	0.822	0.411	-0.071	0.160
Emotional → Sense of Community	<b>-0.147</b>	<b>2.567</b>	<b>0.010</b>	<b>-0.256</b>	<b>-0.031</b>	<b>-0.128</b>	<b>2.115</b>	<b>0.035</b>	<b>-0.245</b>	<b>-0.008</b>
Emotional → Satisfaction with Life	0.089	1.349	0.178	-0.041	0.213	0.082	1.251	0.211	-0.051	0.208
Informational → Resilience	<b>0.148</b>	<b>2.458</b>	<b>0.014</b>	<b>0.031</b>	<b>0.266</b>	0.094	1.673	0.094	-0.019	0.205
Informational → Sense of Community	<b>0.125</b>	<b>2.102</b>	<b>0.036</b>	<b>0.006</b>	<b>0.240</b>	0.103	1.711	0.087	-0.016	0.217
Informational → Satisfaction with Life	-0.009	0.134	0.893	-0.135	0.124	0.037	0.598	0.550	-0.079	0.158
Instrumental → Resilience	-0.011	0.215	0.830	-0.112	0.089	0.045	0.939	0.348	-0.048	0.139
Instrumental → Sense of Community	0.020	0.413	0.680	-0.076	0.118	0.069	1.339	0.180	-0.035	0.166
Instrumental → Satisfaction with Life	<b>0.141</b>	<b>2.355</b>	<b>0.019</b>	<b>0.024</b>	<b>0.258</b>	0.082	1.392	0.164	-0.033	0.197
<i>Italian Friends Social Support</i>										
Emotional → Resilience	<b>0.229</b>	<b>3.966</b>	<b>0.000</b>	<b>0.114</b>	<b>0.338</b>	0.101	1.620	0.105	-0.022	0.225
Emotional → Sense of Community	0.031	0.496	0.620	-0.095	0.151	0.100	1.601	0.109	-0.023	0.220
Emotional → Satisfaction with Life	0.107	1.587	0.112	-0.026	0.238	0.113	1.679	0.093	-0.019	0.247
Informational → Resilience	-0.020	0.297	0.767	-0.153	0.111	0.072	1.071	0.284	-0.063	0.198
Informational → Sense of Community	0.023	0.331	0.741	-0.113	0.157	0.007	0.100	0.921	-0.124	0.140
Informational → Satisfaction with Life	0.087	1.288	0.198	-0.044	0.218	0.024	0.370	0.711	-0.107	0.151
Instrumental → Resilience	-0.088	1.552	0.121	-0.198	0.027	-0.018	0.345	0.730	-0.123	0.087
Instrumental → Sense of Community	0.061	1.052	0.293	-0.052	0.174	0.024	0.396	0.692	-0.095	0.143
Instrumental → Satisfaction with Life	0.062	1.104	0.270	-0.049	0.172	0.105	1.773	0.076	-0.008	0.230
<i>Immigrant Friends Social Support</i>										
Emotional → Resilience	0.026	0.408	0.683	-0.100	0.152	0.024	0.354	0.723	-0.107	0.153
Emotional → Sense of Community	0.078	1.297	0.195	-0.041	0.199	0.011	0.174	0.862	-0.109	0.128
Emotional → Satisfaction with Life	-0.068	1.169	0.243	-0.184	0.046	0.082	1.249	0.212	-0.048	0.211
Informational → Resilience	-0.015	0.220	0.826	-0.144	0.118	-0.106	1.615	0.106	-0.226	0.028
Informational → Sense of Community	0.006	0.088	0.930	-0.120	0.129	0.055	0.873	0.383	-0.068	0.182
Informational → Satisfaction with Life	-0.006	0.082	0.935	-0.137	0.127	<b>-0.162</b>	<b>2.323</b>	<b>0.020</b>	<b>-0.299</b>	<b>-0.025</b>
Instrumental → Resilience	0.035	0.622	0.534	-0.077	0.145	0.060	0.973	0.331	-0.065	0.175
Instrumental → Sense of Community	-0.053	0.910	0.363	-0.167	0.062	-0.097	1.486	0.137	-0.226	0.031
Instrumental → Satisfaction with Life	-0.040	0.685	0.493	-0.153	0.072	-0.030	0.485	0.628	-0.153	0.095
<i>Neighbors Social Support</i>										
Emotional → Resilience	0.024	0.385	0.700	-0.100	0.151	-0.017	0.254	0.799	-0.145	0.112
Emotional → Sense of Community	<b>0.162</b>	<b>2.889</b>	<b>0.004</b>	<b>0.052</b>	<b>0.272</b>	0.129	1.722	0.085	-0.019	0.277
Emotional → Satisfaction with Life	0.048	0.882	0.378	-0.054	0.156	0.069	1.088	0.277	-0.050	0.197
Informational → Resilience	0.092	1.453	0.146	-0.036	0.213	<b>0.151</b>	<b>2.282</b>	<b>0.023</b>	<b>0.015</b>	<b>0.276</b>
Informational → Sense of Community	<b>0.188</b>	<b>3.130</b>	<b>0.002</b>	<b>0.073</b>	<b>0.306</b>	0.137	1.831	0.067	-0.006	0.286
Informational → Satisfaction with Life	-0.071	1.199	0.231	-0.190	0.042	-0.015	0.219	0.827	-0.151	0.112
Instrumental → Resilience	-0.045	0.723	0.470	-0.161	0.079	-0.088	1.262	0.207	-0.221	0.050
Instrumental → Sense of Community	0.042	0.717	0.474	-0.070	0.159	<b>0.127</b>	<b>1.942</b>	<b>0.052</b>	<b>-0.002</b>	<b>0.253</b>
Instrumental → Satisfaction with Life	0.110	1.813	0.070	-0.007	0.229	0.056	0.803	0.422	-0.078	0.193

the three types of support received as predictive variables for resilience, sense of community and satisfaction with life. The model for frequency of social support has good values of explained variance. The values for resilience are  $R^2 = 0.094$ ,  $t = 3.95$ ,  $p = .00001$ , 95 % CI [0.070, 0.163]; those for sense of community,  $R^2 = 0.185$ ,  $t = 5.61$ ,  $p = .00001$ , 95 % CI [0.141, 0.270]; and those for life satisfaction,  $R^2 = 0.130$ ,  $t = 4.56$ ,  $p = .00001$ , 95 % CI [0.097, 0.208]. Standardized root mean square residual, SRMR = 0.033, indicates a good fit as it is well below the cut-off value of 0.08.

The frequency of family emotional support was only negatively related to sense of community. The frequency of informational support is positively related to resilience and sense of community. Instrumental support is positively related to life satisfaction. A higher frequency of emotional support from Italian friends corresponds with greater resilience. There is no significant relationship in the rest of the variables, nor in the rest of the support provided by Italian friends or by immigrant friends. There are two significant positive relationships in the case of the frequency of support provided by neighbours. Emotional support and instrumental support correspond with more sense of community.

The model for satisfaction with social support has  $R^2$  values like the previous model. The values for resilience are  $R^2 = 0.085$ ,  $t = 3.57$ ,  $p = .00001$ , 95 % CI [0.035, 0.115]; those for sense of community,  $R^2 = 0.187$ ,  $t = 5.73$ ,  $p = .00001$ , 95 % CI [0.111, 0.236]; and those for life satisfaction,  $R^2 = 0.124$ ,  $t = 4.51$ ,  $p = .00001$ , 95 % CI [0.068, 0.160]. Standardized root mean square residual, SRMR = 0.032, indicates a good fit. As in the previous model, satisfaction with family emotional support is only related to sense of community, negatively. There are no more significant relationships of family support, and not by Italian friends. Satisfaction with informational support from immigrant friends corresponds with a decrease in life satisfaction. Satisfaction with informational support from neighbours is positively related to resilience. Finally, at the limit of statistical significance, is the positive relationship between satisfaction with instrumental support from neighbours and sense of community.

## Discussion

The present study focuses on the Italian context in a historical period characterised by an increase in incoming migratory flows and a growth of anti-immigrant attitudes (ESS, 2020) that mirror government policies. In 2018 the Italian cabinet approved the so-called 'Salvini Security Decrees' on migration, establishing restrictive criteria for humanitarian protection and reorganising the reception system (ECRE, 2018). This decree led to a significant increase in legally irregular immigrants, as it reduced the possibility of permit renewal (Dossier Statistico Immigrazione, 2019). It therefore appears to be a phenomenon of irregularisation of people, rather than irregular people, which has caused an increase in vulnerability and marginalisation among immigrants in Italy.

In line with previous research, this study has demonstrated that social support is an important factor in the well-being of migrants and their integration into the host community, but, as highlighted in several works, further research in Italy is needed (Toselli & Gualdi-Russo, 2006). The results reported here confirm Hypothesis 1, which states social support predicts satisfaction with life, sense of community, and resilience. Beyond this, there was a focus on analyzing the relationships between different types of social support, namely the instrumental, emotional, and informative, both in terms of source, be it family, friends, or neighbors, and in terms of frequency and satisfaction obtained. Our findings highlight the way sources and frequency of support—as well as the satisfaction with which they are associated—have varying degrees of predictive value on the dependent variables under investigation, thereby confirming the validity of Hypotheses 2 and 3 (see the section The Role of Social Support in the Migratory Process above).

It turns out that obtaining material forms of support from family members with a certain frequency raises the satisfaction with life experienced by immigrants. As various studies have shown, once the migrating family member arrives in the host country and finds work, he or she is held responsible for looking after the family at a distance (Berger Cardoso & Thompson, 2010; Jasso et al., 2004; Kwak, 2003). However, to begin with, that same family invests their limited material resources to ensure the realization of this project. Furthermore, material support comes to have value beyond its obvious economic significance, symbolizing the persistence of affective ties (Aranda, 2003) as well as a sense of responsibility towards family members that takes the form of providing their migrating relatives with the means for bettering their lives. Moreover, the family that migrants create in the context of settlement also has an important influence on their lives and helps them feel more integrated in the host country, thereby also increasing their life satisfaction (Dominguez-Fuentes & Hombrados-Mendieta, 2012; Hombrados-Mendieta et al., 2019). In addition, the findings of a research study aimed at examining factors affecting psychological distress in a multi-ethnic sample of immigrants residing in Portugal emphasized the importance of family ties in the host country for the psycho-physical well-being and health of foreign-born people, beside labor market integration (Teixeira and Sónia (2018)).

On the other hand, migrants need to be careful that they do not limit their chances of obtaining useful information from their network of migrant friends if they want to make the best of life in their new environment. The data show that as satisfaction with informative support received increases, satisfaction with life falls off. For this type of resource, satisfaction with life is unlikely to benefit from a homogenous social network whose sources of information may well be impoverished, limited in scope, or out of date, given that migrant friends may have arrived in the host country at different times. These findings may also be explained by looking at the effects of obtaining information from others who are somewhat ill-informed. One thinks, for instance, of the negative effect on the use of medical services and the consequences it has for migrants' health (Stewart et al., 2010). In addition, it is well-known that friendships can sometimes play a negative role in ensuring the well-being of others for a variety of reasons (Amati et al., 2018), because some friends may be troublesome and thus have a deleterious effect on others (Halpern, 2005). For example, such friends may encourage unhealthy behaviors (Huang et al., 2014; Schaefer et al., 2012), which ultimately reduces satisfaction with life. Hence, although satisfied with the informative support received from migrant friends, satisfaction with life is compromised.

As far as sense of community is concerned, the predictive roles of the frequency of informative support familial is upheld, as Virruel-Fuentes and Schulz (2009) suggested. In contrast, the frequency of the emotional support from family and the satisfaction with



the support are negatively correlated with sense of community. This reinforces the notion that for immigrants, the bond with family members can create tension between old ties and the drive to establish new ones in the host community (Núñez and Heyman (2007); Melendez et al., 2019).

Alternatively, predictors of sense of community include frequency of emotional support from neighbors, as well as frequency of informative support and satisfaction with instrumental support from the neighborhood. Immigrants' housing and neighborhood choices have consequences for their well-being and their ability to respond positively to the stress involved in settling in and integrating into their new environment (Thomas, 2013). Support from neighbors reduces feelings of social isolation and helps people to deal with daily life (Murayama et al., 2015). In line with this, a series of related social factors, including cohesion and satisfaction with neighbors, influence sense of community (Lindblad et al., 2013).

Frequency of informative support from family members and the satisfaction of the same kind of support from neighbors have been shown to be predictive for resilience. In this case, family and new neighbors seem to work together to increase resilience. Native-born friends, however, constitute an resource for building knowledge and the sociocultural skills required for adaptation to the host community (Aberson et al., 2004; Titzmann et al., 2015; Titzmann et al., 2010), so much so that emotional support from native Italian-born friends have a positive relationship with resilience among immigrants. As various studies have suggested, intergroup friendships between immigrants and native-born residents lower anxiety levels, which reduces negative prejudices amongst people from the host country (Binder et al., 2009; Swart et al., 2011). It is interesting that both Italian friends and neighbors are predictive for resilience, considering that it is not just a state, but also a process in which the subject seeks to incorporate the old and the new. New relationships can therefore be a source of inner growth and not necessarily a source of stress. To sum up, it is worth highlighting a result that emerged from this research, namely the effect of social support from the neighborhood on the variables under investigation. First, material support from neighbors was found to play an important role in determining sense of community, on which acts emotional and informative support from neighbors as well. Finally, the informative support of neighbors raises immigrants' resilience.

This is in line with literature that has underlined the importance of interactions in public spaces such as neighborhoods, both in terms of transferring information that is useful in determining which resources are needed and in encouraging a sense of belonging (Shulman, 2009). Communal spaces in a neighborhood are places in which to build on community as characterized by social ties, which may be functional, cultural, and circumstantial (Chaskin, 1997). As in other research, the factor of proximity has proven to be the primary vector of social support to the benefit of sense of community and other relational exchanges (Burns et al., 2012; Henning & Lieberg, 1996).

### Limitations

The present study was conducted using a purely quantitative methodology, so it would make sense to integrate this work with qualitative approaches to complete the picture. These might include thorough interviews relating to the immigrants' back stories. Moreover, the present investigation was performed exclusively in Italy. Although it is true that this country has a considerable number of immigrants and that the sample in this study was extensive, it would nevertheless be interesting to replicate this study in other countries, employing immigrants with a different ethnic background to see whether similar results would be obtained. Moreover, the expressions and meanings of social support were not analyzed separately for each ethnic group involved in the study, although they have been shown to be culturally specific. Intercultural differences in the effects of social support have been identified as a function of type of support (Maton et al., 1996), source (Abraido-Lanza et al., 1996), and the way it is evaluated (Moon-Park & Dimigen, 1994). The meanings of social support can also vary with local context and the length of residence, variables that deserve to be included in future studies. It might thus be worthwhile to widen the scope of this work to analyze possible ethnic differences in relation to the structure of social support and of its effect on resilience, sense of community, and satisfaction with life.

Finally, given the importance attached to neighbourhood for the variables investigated here, it might be interesting to look into its composition. Research has demonstrated that certain ethnic groups, such as people from the Philippines and Ghana, tend to settle in a city or a neighborhood already inhabited by friends, family members, and other social contacts (Owusu, 1999; Thomas, 2013), whereas other ethnic groups prefer communities that are more diverse (Agrawal, 2008; Teixeira, 2008). This pattern suggests more specific analyses with regard to the profile of participants. Further research may therefore consider the ethnic group of belonging and not only the continent of origin, as the present study, because the homogeneity or inhomogeneity of rooting in neighbourhoods may vary.

### Recommendations for future research

As this study demonstrates, social support is a good predictor of satisfaction with life, sense of community, and resilience among immigrants, in line with a considerable body of research (Arpino & de Valk, 2018; Hombrados-Mendieta et al., 2019; Lemus-Way & Johansson, 2019; Ojeda et al., 2008; Simich et al., 2012). Social support and sense of community are crucial (Trickett & Buchanan, 2001). The findings show how ties with members of the host community positively related perceived support and life satisfaction levels, mirroring the limited use of formal support services among immigrants and emphasizing the value of cultural diversity to which informal social support responds.

Social relationships favorably influence immigrants' health, with familial relationships, support from friends and family, and neighborhood cohesion all being indicators of optimal states of health (Zhang & Ta, 2009). Moreover, social support can mediate the negative experience of discrimination that immigrants encounter, promoting the quest for medical help in the community, as well as self-treatment. However, given health constitutes another important indicator of well-being, further work is needed to analyze in more

detail the protective effects that the various types and sources of social support have on the health of immigrants in Italy, including their effects on specific illnesses.

Research in this field might also extend to an analysis of the effect of social support as a function of gender, age, and length of residence in the host country, as well as an immigrant's educational and socioeconomic background. These sociodemographic factors may well mediate the relationships between differing types and sources of support and satisfaction with life, resilience, and sense of community. In parallel, an in-depth study on the effects of formal support services on the well-being of immigrants residing in Italy may contribute to the improvement of immigrant integration policies and thus foster higher levels of social inclusion among foreign-born people.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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