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Cultural Identity And Job Satisfaction: Evidence From Immigrants In The Italian Labour Market

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Abstract

This article examines how cultural identity is linked to job satisfaction among first-generation immigrants in Italy, a central dimension of migrant integration. Using the nationally representative SCIF 2011-2012 survey and an Ethnosizer-inspired multidimensional measure of cultural and ethnic identity, we estimate Heckman sample-selection ordered probit models for employment and job satisfaction. Results show a clear gradient: integrated and assimilated immigrants report similarly high job satisfaction, whereas separated and especially marginalised immigrants are less likely to be employed and, when employed, evaluate their jobs more negatively. We find no evidence that a strong origin identity reduces job satisfaction, provided it is combined with strong identification with Italy, highlighting the benefits of dual identities. Gender-specific analyses indicate that penalties for separation and marginalisation are concentrated among men, while among women the main disadvantage concerns marginalised identities. The findings challenge assimilationist perspectives and underline the importance of job quality for immigrants' subjective well-being.

Keywords: *Cultural identity; job satisfaction; immigrants in Italy; migrant integration.*

Introduction

Job satisfaction has gained growing prominence as a key outcome in labour economics and social policy. It reflects both intrinsic and extrinsic features of work and is closely linked to motivation, productivity, absenteeism, turnover and life satisfaction, underlining job quality as a central component of overall well-being (Judge & Watanabe, 1993). For migrants as well as native workers, job satisfaction therefore offers a concise yet informative lens on how individuals experience and evaluate their position in the labour market.

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Studies of immigrant workers point to complex patterns. Marked disadvantages in wages, stability and occupational status often coexist with heterogeneous levels of job satisfaction, which may reflect adaptive preferences, segmented labour markets and different expectations across origin groups and genders (Wang & Jing, 2018; Ambrosetti & Paparusso, 2020). Job satisfaction is closely tied to broader life satisfaction and subjective well-being, and Italian evidence shows that work and employment conditions are among the main determinants of overall well-being, underscoring the central role of job quality in how migrants evaluate their position in society (Ambrosetti & Paparusso, 2020; Fullin & Reyneri, 2011). Italian evidence on foreign-born women in domestic and care work shows that relatively high reported job satisfaction can coexist with low pay, irregular contracts and limited mobility (Barbiano di Belgiojoso & Ortensi, 2019).

These issues are particularly salient in Italy, where immigration has grown sharply and migrants are now a structural component of the labour force, especially in low-paid service, care and manual jobs (Strozza & De Santis, 2017; Benassi et al., 2024). Research shows that this has taken place in a context of relatively low unemployment but widespread job insecurity and segmentation, with immigrants over-represented in low-status, low-wage and unstable positions and facing occupational downgrading, limited upward mobility and sizeable employment and occupational gaps compared to natives (Fellini et al., 2018).

Within this context, cultural identity has attracted attention as one of the factors shaping migrants' labour-market outcomes. Empirical studies show that identity is associated with employment, wages and related outcomes (Constant et al., 2006, 2009; Constant & Zimmermann, 2008; Delaporte, 2019; Nekby & Rödin, 2010; Piracha et al., 2023). Italian research is more recent but indicates that migrants with clearly defined, especially dual, identities fare better in employment than those with weak or marginalised identities (Carillo et al., 2023; Buonomo et al., 2025).

Despite these advances, most existing studies in Italy and elsewhere continue to focus on objective labour-market outcomes such as employment, unemployment and earnings. Only a limited number of contributions consider job satisfaction or related indicators of job quality (Piracha et al., 2023). In Italy, research on job satisfaction among immigrants remains scarce and is often confined to specific groups, with little attention to the role of cultural identity.

The present study addresses this gap by using the nationally representative SCIF 2011-2012 survey and an Ethnosizer-inspired multidimensional measure of cultural identity to examine how different identity profiles are associated with overall job satisfaction among first-generation immigrants, explicitly correcting for the non-random selection into employment. We also ask whether these associations differ by gender. In this way, the article places job satisfaction at the centre of debates linking identity to economic outcomes and provides new evidence on how subjective evaluations of work reflect the interplay between cultural identity and labour-market structures in a Southern European immigration country.

International and national evidence on identity and economic outcomes

Cultural identity has long been recognised as a central dimension of migrants' inclusion, with implications that extend beyond the socio-psychological sphere into economic behaviour and labour-market outcomes. Building on acculturation theory and social identity approaches (Berry, 1980; Ashmore et al., 2004; Phinney & Ong, 2007), recent research conceptualises identity as a multidimensional construct capturing individuals' sense of belonging to origin and destination societies, cultural orientations and perceived distance from the native majority.

A substantial empirical literature has examined how identity configurations relate to labour-market integration. Pioneering work for Germany using Ethnosizer-type measures shows

that distinct identity profiles (integration, assimilation, separation and marginalisation) are associated with different probabilities of employment, participation and pay (Constant et al., 2006; Constant & Zimmermann, 2008). In these studies, dual identity and, to some extent, strong majority identity tend to exhibit more favourable outcomes, whereas marginalised individuals fare worst, with separated immigrants (strong minority identity) occupying intermediate positions. Similar patterns of relative advantage for dual identities, and disadvantage for weak or marginalised profiles, emerge in other settings, including Canada and Australia (Pendakur & Pendakur, 2005; Delaporte, 2019; Piracha et al., 2023; Epstein & Heizler-Cohen, 2015).

At the same time, several contributions underline that these associations are strongly context- and gender-dependent. Studies for Germany and Sweden using alternative identity measures highlight marked gender differences, with majority or dual identities improving men's economic outcomes but having weaker or even negative associations for women (Casey & Dustmann, 2010; Nekby & Rödin, 2010). Other work points to weak or inconsistent effects for immigrants overall, with stronger associations confined to specific subgroups, such as first-generation migrants (Islam & Raschky, 2015). Taken together, cross-national studies suggest three broad patterns: profiles combining high identification with both origin and destination are often associated with relatively favourable labour-market trajectories; there is substantial heterogeneity by gender, cohort and institutional context; and, overall, the evidence remains far from uniform, with differences in measurement strategies and in migrant populations and outcomes considered leading to non-comparable and sometimes contradictory results (Constant & Zimmermann, 2008; Islam & Raschky, 2015).

Compared with other European countries, empirical research on identity and economic outcomes in Italy is still relatively limited. Much of the Italian literature has focused on describing the socio-economic integration of migrants and the impact of the economic crisis on their labour-market position, documenting low unemployment but widespread segmentation, occupational downgrading and limited upward mobility (Fellini et al., 2018; Ambrosetti & Paparusso, 2020; Barbiano di Belgiojoso & Ortensi, 2019). These disadvantages vary across origin groups and regions, reflecting Italy's pronounced North-South divide in economic structure and labour demand (Ambrosini & Panichella, 2016; Strozza & De Santis, 2017).

Only recently Italian research has begun to incorporate explicit measures of identity. Using the 2009 ISMU survey, Carillo, Lombardo and Venittelli (2023) classify immigrants into four acculturation-type identity states and show that having a defined identity (either dual or mono) is associated with higher employment probabilities than having no clear sense of belonging; dual identities display the most favourable outcomes, while marginalised individuals are most disadvantaged. Building on this line of work, Buonomo et al. (2025) use the nationally representative SCIF 2011-2012 survey and an Ethnosizer-inspired, multidimensional measure of cultural identity to examine whether identity influences employment probabilities during the post-2008 economic crisis. Their Probit estimates indicate that immigrants with an integrated identity have the highest likelihood of being employed, marginalised individuals face the lowest chances, and assimilated (strong majority identity) and separated (strong minority identity) profiles occupy intermediate positions, with assimilation appearing more advantageous than separation. Both studies thus confirm that identity matters systematically for labour-market integration in Italy and suggest that the pay-offs to specific identity profiles are shaped by regional context and gender (Ambrosini, 2020; Buonomo et al., 2025).

Despite these contributions, most existing work in Italy and elsewhere continues to focus on objective outcomes such as employment, unemployment and earnings. To the best of our knowledge, there are no studies that systematically examine how multidimensional cultural identity profiles are associated with job satisfaction among immigrants in Italy.

This article addresses this gap by analysing whether and how identity configurations are linked to overall job satisfaction among first-generation immigrants, and whether such associations differ by gender.

Data and methods

The empirical analysis draws on the Survey on Social Conditions and Integration of Foreign Citizens (SCIF), conducted by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) in 2011-2012, which is the only nationally representative survey specifically targeting foreign citizens in Italy and remains the principal source on their living conditions. The original sample includes more than 25,000 individual respondents.

We focus on adults aged 18-64 who are not enrolled in education or training at the time of the interview. Since information on cultural identity is collected only for foreign citizens, Italian nationals are excluded. In line with previous research, migrants from more developed countries are omitted to concentrate on groups facing typical integration challenges. We further restrict the sample to first-generation immigrants (those who arrived in Italy after age 18), as the other migratory generations are not numerous enough to support robust separate estimates. The resulting analytic sample consists of 11,344 unweighted observations; all estimates use the normalised survey weights provided by ISTAT to restore representativeness.

Job satisfaction is observed only for respondents in employment. To account for this non-random restriction of the outcome to workers, we estimate a Heckman-type ordered response model with two equations. The selection equation models the probability of being employed, while the outcome equation models overall job satisfaction on the 0-10 scale as an ordered response. The aim is to correct for potential selection bias arising from observing job satisfaction only among the employed.

The central explanatory variable is cultural identity, understood in a multidimensional perspective that emphasises individuals' sense of belonging to origin and destination societies and the salience of group membership in different life domains (Phinney & Ong, 2007; Constant et al., 2006). Much empirical work has operationalised identity using two self-identification items distinguishing between identification with the origin and destination countries (Casey & Dustmann, 2010; Nekby & Rödin, 2010), but this approach has been criticised for reducing identity to a single self-report dimension and neglecting its behavioural and contextual aspects (Delaporte, 2019). In response, a growing body of research combines self-perceptions with behavioural and attitudinal indicators to capture identity more robustly (Constant et al., 2006; Piracha et al., 2023).

One of the most influential measures of cultural identity is the Ethnosizer, developed by Constant, Gataullina, and Zimmermann (2006), which is often used as a benchmark measure of cultural identity (Constant et al., 2009; Delaporte, 2019). Building on this framework, we construct an adapted cultural identity index based on five dimensions: language (e.g. proficiency in Italian and the origin language), cultural practices (e.g. following Italian versus origin-country media), ethnic self-identification (e.g. feeling mainly Italian, mainly foreign or both), social interaction (e.g. composition of close friendship networks) and migration-related preferences (e.g. desire to remain in Italy or return to the origin country) (Constant et al., 2006; Buonomo et al., 2025). For each dimension we distinguish, separately for minority (origin-related) and majority (Italy-related) identity, between strong and weak attachment, using parallel items for origin and destination.

Following Berry's (1980) acculturation framework, we combine, for each dimension, the minority and majority indicators into four identity profiles (Table 1): integration (strong minority and strong majority), assimilation (weak minority and strong majority), separation (strong minority and weak majority) and marginalisation (weak in both). Identities are

allowed to vary across dimensions. We then summarise the five-dimensional information by counting, for each respondent, how many times they are classified as integrated, assimilated, separated or marginalised across the five domains, yielding four summary variables ranging from 0 to 5 whose sum is always equal to 5. To avoid perfect multicollinearity (Constant et al., 2006), assimilation is omitted from the set of predictors and coefficients on integration, separation and marginalisation are interpreted relative to this residual category.

Table 1. Framework for classifying four cultural identity states

	Strong majority identity	**Weak majority identity**
Strong minority identity	Integrated	Separated
Weak minority identity	Assimilated	Marginalised

In both (selection and outcome) equations we include the cultural identity profiles together with standard socio-demographic controls: sex, age and age squared, highest educational attainment, years since migration and its square, and a categorical indicator of area of citizenship.

The outcome equation for job satisfaction further controls for usual weekly working hours (in broad categories), employment status (employee vs self-employed/other independent workers), a five-category economic sector (agriculture; industry and construction; trade, transport, and hospitality; financial, real-estate and business services; public, education, health and other personal services), and a 0-10 measure of overall life satisfaction[2].

The selection equation for employment includes the same identity indicators and socio-demographic controls, but instead of job characteristics adds partnership status (living in a couple vs not) and number of children, which are assumed to affect labour supply and the probability of being employed rather than job satisfaction conditional on working. In addition to the full-sample model, we estimate separate Heckman ordered probit models by gender. All specifications use survey weights and robust standard errors.

Results

The full-sample Heckman sample-selection ordered probit model reveals a clear gradient in both employment probabilities and job satisfaction across cultural identity profiles (Table 2). Using assimilated immigrants as the reference group, integrated individuals display a slightly higher probability of being employed, but their overall job satisfaction does not differ significantly. By contrast, separated and marginalised immigrants are significantly less likely to be employed and, conditional on working, report lower levels of job satisfaction. The penalty is strongest for marginalised immigrants, who combine the weakest labour-market attachment with the most negative job evaluations. Separated immigrants also exhibit significantly lower employment probabilities and job satisfaction than assimilated immigrants, although the magnitude of the disadvantage is smaller than for the marginalised profile.

Among job-related covariates, working moderate or standard full-time hours is associated with higher job satisfaction than very short hours, whereas self-employed and independent workers report lower satisfaction than employees. Job satisfaction also varies across sectors, with higher levels in industry, trade/transport/hospitality and public/education/health than in agriculture, and no significant difference in finance and

[2] As a robustness check, we re-estimated all models excluding overall life satisfaction from the specification; the pattern and magnitude of the coefficients on cultural identity profiles and other covariates remained similar.

business services. As expected, overall life satisfaction is strongly and positively associated with job satisfaction, indicating that respondents who evaluate their lives more favourably also tend to report more positive assessments of their jobs.

In the full-sample model, the estimated correlation between the unobserved components of the selection and outcome equations (rho) is negative but small and not statistically significant. This suggests that selection bias due to observing job satisfaction only for the employed is limited in the full-sample specification. Nevertheless, we retain the Heckman framework to ensure formal comparability across specifications and to benefit from the explicit check provided by the selection model[3].

Table 2. Heckman sample-selection ordered probit model: being employed (selection equation) and job satisfaction level (outcome equation).

Variables	Probability of being employed		Job satisfaction level	
	a1. Selection		b1. Outcome	
	Coef.	p-val.	Coef.	p-val.
Identity (Ref. Assimilated)				
Integrated	0.064	**	-0.009	
Separated	-0.058	***	-0.088	***
Marginalised	-0.081	***	-0.146	***
Average weekly working hours (Ref. <25)				
25-39 hours			0.253	***
40-54 hours			0.323	***
55 hours or more			0.099	
Don't know			0.079	
Job type (Ref. Employee)				
Self-employed/independent			-0.144	***
Economic sector (Ref. Agriculture)				
Industry and construction			0.174	***
Trade, transport and hospitality			0.121	**
Finance and business services			-0.108	
Public, education and health			0.187	***
Overall life satisfaction (0 to 10)			0.317	***
N total	11,344			
N Censored	3,329			
N Uncensored	8,015			
Rho	-0.107 p=0.135			
Wald test of independent equations (rho= 0)	2.230 p=0.136			

Notes: The selection equation for the probability of being employed includes gender, age and age squared, educational attainment, area of citizenship, years since migration and its square, partnership status and number of children (coefficients not shown). The outcome equation for the job satisfaction level includes the same socio-demographic controls, household characteristics are excluded, plus weekly working hours (categories), job type (employee vs self-employed/independent), economic sector and overall life satisfaction. Statistical significance: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.
Source: Authors' calculations using SCIF data.

Gender-specific estimates (Table 3) reveal important differences in how cultural identity profiles are linked to employment and job satisfaction. Relative to assimilated men, those with separated identities face significantly lower probabilities of being employed and, when

[3] Robustness checks using standard probit models yield similar results.

employed, report substantially lower job satisfaction. Men with marginalised identities experience the largest penalties, with strong negative associations for both employment and job satisfaction. In contrast, integrated male immigrants do not differ significantly from their assimilated counterparts in either the likelihood of being employed or their job evaluations.

Table 3. Heckman sample-selection ordered probit model by gender: being employed (selection equation) and job satisfaction level (outcome equation).

Variables	Probability of being employed		Job satisfaction level	
	a1. Selection		b1. Outcome	
		Men		
	Coef.	p-val.	Coef.	p-val.
Identity (Ref. Assimilated)				
Integrated	0.013		-0.054	
Separated	-0.085	**	-0.135	***
Marginalised	-0.121	***	-0.153	***
N total		4,793		
N Censored		708		
N Uncensored		4,085		
Rho		0.517 p=0.008		
Wald test of independent equations (rho = 0)		6.980 p=0.008		
		Women		
	Coef.	p-val.	Coef.	p-val.
Identity (Ref. Assimilated)				
Integrated	0.097	***	0.042	
Separated	-0.015		-0.051	
Marginalised	-0.027		-0.159	***
N total		6,551		
N Censored		2,621		
N Uncensored		3,930		
Rho		-0.185 p=0.022		
Wald test of independent equations (rho = 0)		5.280 p=0.022		

Notes*:* Control variables and model specification as in Table 2.
Source: Authors' calculations using SCIF data.

For women, the association between identity and labour-market outcomes is more nuanced. In the selection equation, an integrated identity is associated with a significantly higher likelihood of being employed compared with assimilation, suggesting that maintaining strong ties to both origin and destination may facilitate access to jobs for foreign-born women. However, this advantage does not translate into higher job satisfaction once they are in employment: integrated women do not differ significantly from assimilated women in their overall evaluation of work. Separated and marginalised identities are not significantly associated with employment probabilities for women, but the outcome equation shows that marginalised women exhibit significantly lower job satisfaction than assimilated women, even after controlling for job characteristics and life satisfaction. For separated women, the estimated coefficient on job satisfaction is negative but not statistically significant.

Overall, gender-specific models indicate that separated and marginalised identities are strongly penalised among men in both employment and job satisfaction, whereas among women the main disadvantage concerns the subjective evaluation of work for those with marginalised identities, while integration appears beneficial primarily for access to employment. The Heckman diagnostics indicate that correcting for selection is especially important in the gender-specific models. For men, rho is positive and significant, implying that unobserved factors that raise the probability of being employed are also associated with higher job satisfaction; for women, rho is negative and significant, suggesting that the factors that select them into employment are associated with lower job satisfaction. In both cases the Wald test rejects the null of independent equations, so we rely on the selection- adjusted Heckman estimates to interpret the associations between identity and job satisfaction by gender.

Conclusions

The findings show that cultural identity profiles are systematically linked to immigrants' position in the Italian labour market, both in terms of access to employment and in how jobs are evaluated once obtained. Integrated and assimilated immigrants display similarly high levels of job satisfaction, whereas separated and especially marginalised immigrants are less likely to be employed and, when working, report markedly lower job satisfaction. Crucially, we find no evidence that a strong origin identity harms immigrants' job satisfaction when it is combined with strong identification with Italy: dual identities are not penalised, while disadvantages emerge where ties to the host society are weak.

These patterns are strongly gendered. Among men, separation and marginalisation are associated with clear penalties in both employment and job satisfaction, likely because weak connections to the host society limit access to information and good-quality jobs, leaving those with little or no Italian identification concentrated in more precarious and less rewarding positions. Among women, the main disadvantage concerns marginalised identities, while integration appears particularly important for access to work: many migrant women are employed in domestic and care jobs that rely on both co-ethnic networks and trust from Italian families (Baldacci et al., 1999), so those who are well connected to both communities are more likely to enter employment, whereas marginalised women, lacking strong networks in either sphere, tend to access poorer-quality jobs and therefore report lower satisfaction.

Overall, the results argue against assimilationist approaches that implicitly treat origin identities as an obstacle to integration. They instead support strategies that simultaneously promote strong Italian-language skills, stable and rights-based employment and equal opportunities, while recognising and valuing immigrants' cultural ties to their countries of origin. Reducing job insecurity and occupational downgrading, enforcing labour standards and combating discrimination, through gender-sensitive and context-specific measures, is crucial to prevent identity-related disadvantages from crystallising into persistent inequalities in job satisfaction and labour-market integration.

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