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# Contact with migrants and perceived school climate as correlates of bullying toward migrants classmates

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**Abstract**
This study investigates whether the quantity and quality of contact with migrants and perceiving that cultural diversity is accepted at school (as a dimension of the perceived school climate) are associated with perpetrating bullying toward migrant classmates. Quantity and quality of contact are also examined as moderators of the association between perceived cultural acceptance at school and bullying toward migrant students. One hundred and sixty-six adolescents ($M_{age} = 16.26$; $SD = 1.53$) belonging to the societal majority group answered a battery of self-report measures. Bullying migrant peers was associated with more negative quality of the contact. Bullying migrants was also associated with lower perceived acceptance of cultural diversity at school for the adolescents reporting higher levels of contact with migrants at school. The role of contact in explaining bullying toward migrant peers is also discussed in light of possible interventions.

**KEYWORDS**
adolescence, bullying toward migrant peers, cultural acceptance, inter-ethnic contact, intergroup bullying, school climate

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In recent years, issues around migration have regained the center of the political agenda in Europe, following the significant increase in the number of migrants entering Western

countries (Cesareo, 2020). Geo-political upheavals in the Middle-East and the areas close to the European Union and the persecution of religious minorities have pushed individuals and families to migrate. These migratory floods, emphasized by high media coverage, have caused a significant change in the European attitudes toward migration, further exacerbating an attitude of closure highlighted following the world economic crisis of 2008 (Valtolina, 2016).

Thus, one of the most critical challenges that the European society has to face is the integration of migrants, starting from the youngest of them: children and adolescents with a migratory background. Supporting a positive integration of migrants seems extremely relevant during adolescence, as this life phase is particularly critical for the development of social and ethnic identity (Brown & Larson, 2009). Furthermore, adolescents are more susceptible to the influences and the messages received within their peer network (Brown & Larson, 2009). The increase of migratory entries has produced a rise of multiculturality in schools, and among the significant challenges for adolescents' integration fronted by multicultural school classes, there is a new phenomenon spreading in Europe during the last years: bullying toward peers with a migratory background (Elamè, 2013).

To develop effective interventions against this type of bullying, we need to identify the factors increasing the risk of this behavior. Previous studies indicate that this behavior may be linked to more general risk factors related to traditional bullying and risk factors specific of this type of bullying (Atwal & Wang, 2019; Caravita et al., 2020; Papotti & Caravita, 2020).

Regarding risk factors shared with bullying in general, there is some evidence that general bullying and bullying toward migrant peers are influenced by contextual variables. One of the most important contextual factors associated with increased levels of general bullying is the high visibility status among peers as perceived popular (e.g., de Bruyn, Cillessen, & Wissink, 2009). Some recent literature suggests that, among adolescents attending high school, the popularity status is associated with bullying migrant peers, too (Papotti & Caravita, 2020). Besides peer status, school climate, and how students perceive it, is likely to affect the bullying toward migrants. For instance, Özdemir, Sun, Korol, Özdemir, and Stattin (2018) found that in adolescence negative attitudes toward migrants shared within the classroom were associated with higher levels of individual's ethnic harassment. Moreover, individual negative attitudes were associated more strongly with ethnic harassment in the most multicultural classrooms, that is, classrooms where the chances to have contact with migrant peers were higher. Özdemir and Özdemir (2020) found that engagement in ethnic victimization was associated with individual perceptions of inter-ethnic climate and that the individual level of tolerance toward migrants moderated the association between perpetrating ethnic victimization and perceived contextual factors (the perception that teachers have no reactions to ethnic victimization).

Regarding specific risk factors for bullying migrants, having prejudices is associated with higher levels of this type of bullying in adolescence (Atwal & Wang, 2019; Papotti & Caravita, 2020). Furthermore, during adolescence prejudices seem be more influential in explaining bullying migrants than having a high perceived popularity status: the positive association between perceived popularity and bullying migrants has been found to become non-significant when the role of prejudices is taken into account (Caravita et al., 2020). Regarding prejudices, it has also been hypothesized that, under some conditions, contact with outgroup members can reduce these biased attitudes (Allport, 1954).

Based on the literature (e.g., Özdemir & Özdemir, 2020), and according to the socio-ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), we can, therefore, hypothesize that the perpetration of bullying toward peers with a migratory background is the result of a complex interplay of factors related to individual attitudes, perceptions of the school context,

and experiences (i.e., contact) with people of other ethnic groups and having a migratory background. The role of contact, however, is still unclear. In this study, we aim at contributing to clarify this interplay by examining, in a sample of adolescents belonging to the ethnic majority group in the society, whether and to what extent the perpetration of bullying toward peers with a migratory background is associated with perceived school climate, operationalized as a perception of acceptance of cultural diversity at school, and with quantity (e.g., frequency) and quality (evaluation of interaction) of the contact with ethnic outgroup people having a migratory background. Quantity and quality of contact with migrant people were also explored as possible moderators of the association between the perceived school climate and bullying toward migrant peers.

## 1.1 | Bullying toward migrant peers

Recent literature has been devoting increased attention to bullying affecting youths belonging to minority groups of the society, including youths having a migratory background (Caravita et al., 2019; Fandrem, Strohmeier, Caravita, & Stefanek, 2021 - in press; Russell et al., 2012; Strohmeier, Kärnä, & Salmivalli, 2011, 2019). Due to migrants' different origins compared to their native peers, bullying toward migrants overlaps with other types of bullying, particularly racial (based on physical differences, such as skin color) and ethnic (based on cultural differences) bullying. The studies do not always differentiate these three overlapping forms of bullying, as shown by a recent systematic review (Xu, Macrynikola, Waseem, & Miranda, 2020). In this study, we focus on bullying migrant peers, which we conceptualized as the type of bullying in which the bully is a native-born in society, while the victim has an immigrant background and belongs to a different ethnic group.

Data collected in Europe has provided some evidence that young people with migratory backgrounds are at higher risk to be bullied than their native peers (Caravita, Donghi, Banfi, & Meneghini, 2016; Elamè, 2013; Palumbo & Manna, 2019; Strohmeier et al., 2011). In a European survey carried out in 10 European countries, 60–67% of young people with migratory background reported being bullied at school (Elamè, 2013), and in a study with an Italian adolescent sample, 17.9% of the students with a migratory background, as compared with the 11.4% of the native peers, were bullied (Caravita et al., 2016). Notwithstanding these differences in rates, bullying toward peers with migratory backgrounds has the same distinctive characteristics of traditional bullying (Xu et al., 2020): It consists of intentional attacks reiterated over time, characterized by a power imbalance. In the case of bullying toward migrants, the imbalance of power is also accentuated since the victim belongs to a minority ethnic group in society. As a subtype of general bullying, bullying toward migrant peers is an ecological phenomenon, influenced by contextual factors, like traditional bullying.

## 1.2 | Bullying migrant peers and the school context

As it happens for general bullying, the literature on ethnic bullying indicates that contextual factors at the classroom (Waasdorp, Baker, Paskewich, & Leff, 2013) and school (Albdour, Lewin, Kavanaugh, Hong, & Wilson, 2017) level support this type of aggression. Due to the overlaps of bullying migrant peers with general bullying and ethnic bullying, these context dimensions are likely to affect bullying migrant peers as well.

The literature is consistent in showing that perceived popularity within the peer group is associated with higher levels of bullying in general (e.g., de Bruyn et al., 2009; Sentse,

Kretschmer, & Salmivalli, 2015). Some recent studies involving middle/late adolescents (age 14–21 years) indicate that perceived popularity plays a role in explaining bullying migrant peers as well. Papotti and Caravita (2020) found that higher levels of self-assessed perceived popularity characterize the profile of both general bullies and bullies of peers with a migratory background. In another study, Caravita et al. (2020) revealed that being perceived popular among peers was associated with general bullying and bullying migrant peers. Still, the association with bullying migrants became non-significant when the predictive effect of having prejudices was taken into account. If this result suggests that the weight of the visibility peer status can be less relevant in explaining bullying migrant peers than general bullying, the effect of perceived popularity needs, however, to be taken into account to provide more accurate estimations of the role played by other risk factors.

Another contextual factor that needs to be examined in relation to bullying migrant peers is the school climate, which refers to the quality of school life that is both a group phenomenon and an individual experience (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). This construct includes several components such as school belongingness, support by peers, support by teachers, perceived cultural acceptance, social and civic learning, the conditions of construction and cleanliness, and safety perception (Salle, P., Zabek, & Meyers, 2016). A positive and supportive school climate is associated with less general bullying (Thornberg, Wänström, & Pozzoli, 2017), racial discrimination (Wright & Wachs, 2019), and ethnic bullying (Larochette, Murphy, & Craig, 2010; Wright & Wachs, 2019). Wright and Wachs (2019) also showed that rates of racial discrimination were lower when students perceived teachers' support, and the ethnic origin of staff was more heterogeneous. Larochette et al. (2010) found that, among the perceived school climate dimensions, perceived school support was associated with lower levels of ethnic bullying. Concerning the perceived cultural acceptance, as already mentioned, Bayram Özdemir and Özdemir (2020) found that the students' perceptions of the inter-ethnic climate and the students' perceptions of teachers' reactions to ethnic victimization were associated with involvement in ethnic victimization. The individual tolerance toward migrants moderated the latter association. Studies examining school climate in association with bullying migrants, however, are few and provide unclear results. In particular, in a study on adolescents and using a mixed-method design, Caravita et al. (2020) found that perceiving higher levels of acceptance of cultural diversity at school was associated with lower perpetration of racial bullying involving migrant peers. Still, when other dimensions were taken into account, this association was non-significant.

Considering these findings suggesting that a perceived negative climate at school might be a risk factor for bullying, racial discrimination, and ethnic bullying, we need more studies to confirm or refute this hypothesis concerning bullying migrant peers. Furthermore, Bayram Özdemir and Özdemir (2020) have provided some evidence that individual biases can moderate the effect of the perception of contextual dimensions on ethnic discrimination. The study results by Caravita et al. (2020) indicate that other factors' effects can affect the relationship between the perceived school climate and bullying toward migrant peers.

Based on this theoretical background, this study aims to shed some further light on the association between the perceived school climate and the perpetration of bullying toward migrants. Data were collected in a sample of adolescents belonging to the majority ethnic group to understand better the associations regarding bullying migrant peers *versus* ethnic bullying (migrant youths can also perpetrate that). We hypothesized that higher perpetration of bullying toward migrants is associated with lower perceived cultural acceptance at school (perceived school climate). We also hypothesized that individual dimensions could moderate this association. To test this last hypothesis, we focused on risk factors that may be specific for bullying migrant peers: the quality and the quantity of contact with people of other ethnic groups, as dimensions connected with prejudices.

## 1.3 | Prejudices and contact with the ethnic outgroup

Graham, Bellmore, Nishina, and Juvonen (2009) have provided some evidence that prejudice against the ethnic background can be the basis of victimization. Consistent with this result, Özdemir et al. (2018) and Caravita et al. (2020) found that prejudices against immigrants are associated with higher perpetration of bullying toward peers with a migratory background. Prejudice is an attitude that has been conceptualized as consisting of three components (Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960). The first component is cognitive and derives from having beliefs and stereotypes toward members of a social group (outgroup) other than their group. A second component is emotional and consists of feeling negative emotions toward those who belong to the outgroup. Finally, the behavioral part consists of engaging in negative and discriminatory behaviors toward members of the outgroup. The first, cognitive, component of prejudices reflect a categorical/stereotypical thinking about the outgroup. This biased thinking has been hypothesized to stem from a lack of knowledge of the outgroup, which, subsequently, under some conditions can be reduced by increasing the direct contact with the outgroup members (Allport, 1954).

In a recent study, Papotti and Caravita (2020) have tried to delineate risk profiles of adolescents belonging to the majority ethnic group and take the bully role during incidents of migrant bullying. They found that, among adolescents of the majority ethnic group, the emotional component of prejudice is the dimension that mainly differentiates the adolescents who attack migrant peers from traditional bullies. Consistently, Özdemir et al. (2020) found that lower positive attitudes toward migrants are characteristics of ethnic victimizers. Another dimension that could be relevant in explaining bullying toward peers with migratory backgrounds emerged from a study by Williams and Peguero (2013) showing that adolescents belonging to ethnic minority groups were more likely to be bullied when they did not adapt to cultural stereotypes referred to their ethnicity. The authors argued that the victimization was strictly connected with their ethnicity for these youths, and it could be a repercussion against those who break racial and ethnic stereotypes (Williams & Peguero, 2013). Consistently, Mazzone, Thornberg, Stefanelli, Cadei, and Caravita (2018) showed that adolescents explain bullying as the outcome of deviance of the victim from peers' expectations and normative standards. When the bullying targets peers with a migratory background, this deviance lies in the victim's cultural and physical diversity from the majority ethnic group.

Altogether this literature indicates that bullying toward migrant peers is influenced by specific dimensions, which can be even more influential than the risk factors already individuated for the traditional bullying. These specific factors are mainly related to prejudices and negative attitudes against the other ethnic groups.

Allport (1954) was one of the first researchers who studied how to decrease prejudices among groups. He stated that under some circumstances (e.g., sharing a common goal), creating opportunities for contact/relationship among groups can reduce intergroup prejudicial attitudes. Pettigrew (1997; Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011) further supplemented this hypothesis on the contact by stating that, to minimize biases against the outgroup, the encounter with the outgroup members should be perceived as emotionally *positive*, being evaluated, for instance, as friendly (Pettigrew et al., 2011). Accordingly, researchers have tried to investigate which specific conditions can make contact between ingroup and outgroup effective to this aim (Schofield, 1986; Schofield & Eurich-Fulcer, 2004).

To our knowledge, no studies have examined the association between the quantity of contact with the ethnic outgroup directly, as reported by the subjects of this experience, and bullying migrant peers. However, the studies on bullying in multicultural contexts

provide mixed indications about the effects of opportunities for contact, often operationalized by assessing the rates of different ethnic groups/outgroup members in the context. Regarding the quantity of contact at school, in a study on Swedish adolescents (attending ninth grade), Özdemir, Özdemir, and Stattin (2016) did not find that ethnic harassment varied in association with different rates of non-Swedish students in the classrooms. Nevertheless, Vervoort, Scholte, and Overbeek (2010) found that bullying episodes were more frequent in classrooms where there were higher opportunities for contact with the ethnic outgroup. Furthermore, results from a study by Walsh et al. (2016) indicate that higher opportunities of contact with migrants in the school contexts and lower perceived support from schoolmates at school are associated with higher perpetration of general bullying.

According to this theoretical background, this study explores whether the quantity and quality of contact with migrants (the outgroup) at school are associated with native adolescents' perpetration of bullying migrant peers. Even if some studies provided different results (Özdemir et al., 2016), part of the literature on bullying in multicultural contexts suggests that higher levels of bullying may be associated with higher opportunities for contact with the ethnic outgroup (e.g., Vervoort et al., 2010). Consistently, we hypothesized that higher quantity of contact with migrants at school might be associated with higher levels of bullying migrant peers, because higher contact levels with migrants at school can provide more possibilities to attack migrant schoolmates (opportunity effect; Peguero, Popp, & Koo, 2015). Moreover, the perpetration of bullying toward migrants is likely to be higher when the contact with migrants is perceived as less positive (i.e., friendly; Barlow et al., 2012; Hayward, Tropp, Hornsey, & Barlow, 2017) and more negative (i.e., hostile; Papotti & Caravita, 2020).

Lastly, some studies indicate that individual dimensions can moderate the association between perceived climate and ethnic victimization (Bayram Özdemir & Özdemir, 2020). To shed further light on the interplay among dimensions associated with bullying migrant peers, we also explored whether the individual experience of the contact with migrants at school, in both the dimensions of quantity and quality, moderates the association between this type of bullying and the perceived school climate, with a focus on cultural acceptance (Walsh et al., 2016). It is likely that perceiving the school climate negatively is associated more strongly with bullying migrants for the adolescents who have higher rates of contact with migrants at school, as they have more opportunities to bully migrant peers (*opportunity effect*; Peguero et al., 2015), and for the adolescents who evaluate their contact with migrants more negatively.

## 1.4 | The current study

In summary, based on the described theoretical background, this study aims at examining the associations of bullying migrant peers with the perceived cultural acceptance at school (perceived school climate) and the quality and quantity of contact with migrants.

Concerning the perceived school climate, based on previous literature on ethnic discrimination and ethnic bullying reporting a negative relation between bullying and the perceived school climate (e.g., Özdemir et al., 2020), we hypothesized (Hypothesis 1) that higher levels of ethnic bullying are associated with lower levels of perceived acceptance of cultural diversity at school (perceived school climate).

Then, we explored the role of contact with migrants at school in explaining bullying migrant peers. The quantity and the quality of the contact with migrants at school were operationalized as self-reported experiences of the participants, because also in multicultural schools where the chances of contact of migrants are higher, individuals vary in

the rate and quality of their interactions with migrants. Moreover, studies suggest that besides the opportunities for contact with migrant peers, also the opportunities of contact with school staff members with different ethnicity can affect discrimination (Wright & Wachs, 2019). Hence, participants were asked about their contact with migrants in general at school, not only about contact with migrant peers. Regarding the quantity of the contact, and in line with part of the literature on ethnic victimization (Vervoort et al., 2010), we hypothesized that higher rates of contact with migrants at school might be associated with higher levels of bullying migrant peers (Hypothesis 2), because of the opportunity effect (Peguero et al., 2015).

When considering the *quality* of the contact with migrants at school, we hypothesized (Hypothesis 3) that higher levels of bullying migrant peers are associated with lower levels of evaluating the contact with the ethnic outgroup as positive (friendly as opposed to hostile).

The literature also indicates that the association between the perceived school climate and ethnic bullying can be moderated by individual factors (Özdemir et al., 2020). Therefore, also in line with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model on the interaction of factors in explaining the individual behavior, we hypothesized that both quantity and quality of contact with migrants can moderate the negative association between perceived school climate and bullying migrant peers. Specifically, we hypothesized that the negative association between perceived school climate and bullying migrant peers is stronger at *higher* levels of the quantity of contact with migrants (Hypothesis 4), as when the school context is perceived not to accept cultural diversity higher rates of contact with migrants at school provide more opportunities to bully migrant peers. Lastly, we hypothesized that the negative association between perceived school climate and bullying migrant peers is stronger at *lower* levels of a positive evaluation of the experienced contact with migrants at school (Hypothesis 5).

These hypotheses were tested controlling for the effects of two known risk factors for bullying: the perceived popularity (Sentse et al., 2015) and gender since previous research has found that boys score higher than girls in bullying (for meta-analyses, see Cook et al., 2010; Mitsopoulou & Giovazolias, 2015).

## 2 | METHOD

## 2.1 | Participants

Participants were 166 adolescents (14–20 years; $M_{age} = 16.26$; $SD = 1.53$; 56.6% females and 43.4% males) from 16 different classrooms[1] of high schools in northern Italy. Participants were students in multiethnic classrooms and were selected as they had an ethnic Italian background (i.e., both they and their parents were born in Italy) and were, therefore, members of the ethnic majority group. Altogether, the multiethnic classroom students were 225, and the participants in this study represented the majority (73.8%) of the students in the classrooms. The remaining 59 (26.2%) students had a migratory background (i.e., they and/or their parents were born in countries other than Italy) and they were excluded from the current study.

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[1] We checked the quantity of the variance of bullying migrant peers among classrooms by computing the Intraclass Correlation (ICC) indices for the four forms of bullying we used as observed indicators of bullying migrant peers. The ICCs estimations were very low: physical bullying 0.050, verbal bullying 0.096, relational bullying 0.040, cyberbullying 0.012.

## 2.2 | Measures

### 2.2.1 | Perceived cultural acceptance at school

Perceiving that cultural diversity is accepted at school (a dimension of the perceived school climate) was assessed using the sub-scale Cultural Acceptance from the self-report questionnaire Georgia Student Health Survey 2.0 (Georgia Department of Education, La Salle et al., 2016). The Georgia Student Health Survey 2.0 is a scale developed to assess the school climate. The sub-scale Cultural Acceptance consists of five items (e.g., "Students at this school are treated fairly by other students regardless of race, ethnicity, or culture"). Per each item, the respondent is requested to indicate their grade of agreement on a 4-point scale (from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 4 = "completely agree").When performing a confirmatory factor analysis (MPlus 8.0, Muthèn & Muthèn, 1998–2017; estimator MLR) the model in which the errors of two items[2] was allowed to covary obtained a good fit: $\chi^2(4) = 1.974$, $p = .741$, CFI = 1.000, RMSEA = .000 (90% C.I. .000 .083), SRMR = .013. The standardized loadings ranged from 0.53 to 0.72 ($\alpha = .80$).

### 2.2.2 | Quantity and quality of contact with people with a migratory background

Quantity and quality of the contact with people with migratory backgrounds were assessed through two items (Buccoliero & Maggi, 2008) based on the classic contact studies (Islam & Hewstone, 1993). The contact quantity was assessed with one item that requested the Italian participants to report the frequency of time spent with migrant people at school ("Do you have contact with migrants at school?"). The respondent had to answer on a 5-point scale: from 0 = "never" to 5 = "very much." A second item assessed the quality of the contact as negative ("hostile") or positive ("friendly") by asking the Italian participants to answer this question: "Thinking about when you have contact with migrants, how do you value this contact?" The respondent evaluated the quality of their contact with migrants on a 5-point response scale (from 0 = "hostile" to 4 = "friendly"). Pettigrew et al. (2011) suggested the choice of semantic terms, who indicated that positive contact is a friendly contact.

### 2.2.3 | Self-perception of peer-group perceived popularity

One self-report item was used to assess the self-perception of perceived popularity among peers (Papotti & Caravita, 2020; adapted from Sweeting, West, Young, & Kelly, 2011). The respondent has to indicate the level of their status as perceived popular among their classmates, evaluating on a 10-point ladders scale: from 0 = "lowest status" to 10 = "highest status."

### 2.2.4 | Bullying toward peers with migratory background

To investigate bullying perpetrated toward peers with a migratory background the scale developed by Roland and Munthe (1997) was adapted. Participants of this study were asked

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[2] We correlated the errors of the following items: "Students in my classroom respect each other," "Students treat each other fairly." The correlation of errors was suggested by checking the modification indices, which provide estimations of the reduction of Chi-square when parameter restrictions are removed from the model.

to answer how often they bullied peers born in different countries in four ways: physical bullying, verbal bullying, relational bullying, and cyberbullying (e.g., "How often do you bully classmates from different countries with kicking, punching, shoving or damaging material?"). The response scale was a 5-point scale (from 1 = "never" to 5 = "very often"). In a confirmatory factor analysis the model obtained a good fit: $\chi^2(2) = 1.244$, $p = .741$, CFI = 1.000, RMSEA = .000 (90% C.I. .000 .134), SRMR = .020. The standardized loading ranged from 0.54 to 0.78 ($\alpha = .76$).

## 2.3 | Procedure

This study was part of a more extensive study on ethnic bullying that was authorized by the ethical committee of the Department of Psychology of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart (Milano, Italy). The data were collected during the first months of 2019. Measures were administered during school hours, in classroom sessions, using an online platform, under the supervision of a trained assistant researcher who answered possible questions from the participants. Written consent to participation in the study was obtained from parents or legal representatives of the participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the modalities of the data collection, and that they were allowed to leave the study at any time without having to give any kind of explanation or justification.

## 2.4 | Strategy of analysis

Descriptive analyses were obtained by computing means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables. The hypotheses on the relationships between the variables and moderations of contact dimensions on school climate were tested by running Structural Equation Modeling. Maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors (MLR) was used as an estimator to control for non-normal distribution of the data. Structural Equation Modeling was run through MPlus 8.0 (Muthèn & Muthèn, 1998–2017). A first model of main effects among the variables was tested. Bullying migrant peers (latent variable) was specified as predicted in its variance by perceived cultural acceptance at school (latent variable), quantity of contact with migrants at school, and quality of contact with migrants. Gender and self-perception of perceived popularity were also specified among the predictors of variance of bullying migrant peers to control for their effects. Then a second model was tested in which moderations by both the quantity and the quality of contact on the association between perception of cultural acceptance at school and bullying migrant peers were added among the predictors (interaction terms: cultural acceptance*quantity of contact; perceived cultural acceptance*quality of contact).

The goodness of fit of the model was evaluated by considering the value of the Chi-square ($\chi^2$) index of the model, retaining as acceptable models with a non-significant Chi-square value. As the Chi-square index is sensitive to the size of the sample and tends to become significant for large samples, also other indices of the goodness of fit were examined: CFI, with a value >.90 for an acceptable fit (Bollen, 1989) and >.95 for a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1995); RMSEA, and SRMR with a value <.08 for an acceptable fit and <.05 for a good fit. As in the moderation model moderations of a latent variable with observed variables were tested, the indices of the goodness of fit could not be computed. Therefore, adequateness of the model fit was evaluated in comparison to the main effect model, through the comparative indices Akaike information criterion (AIC; Akaike, 1974) and

**TABLE 1** Means, standard deviations and bivariate correlations of the manifest variables ($n = 166$)

| Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Gender (1 = Males, 2 = Females) | — | | | | | |
| 2. Quality of the contact | .20** | — | | | | |
| 3. Quantity of the contact | −.05 | .19* | — | | | |
| 4. Perceived popularity | −.06 | −.13 | .05 | — | | |
| 5. Cultural Acceptance | −.18* | .11 | .18* | −.06 | — | |
| 6. Bullying migrants | −.29*** | −.28*** | .06 | .19* | −.05 | — |
| M (SD) | 56.6% | 4.28 (0.81) | 3.16 (1.35) | 5.92 (2.57) | 2.81 (0.56) | 1.20 (0.38) |

*$p < .05$ (two tailed), **$p < .01$ (two tailed), ***$p < .001$ (two tailed).

Bayesian information criterion (BIC; Schwarz, 1978), with lower values of the two indices for the model with a better fit.

## 3 | Results

### 3.1 | Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations) of the manifest variables are reported in Table 1. Higher levels of bullying migrants were associated with being a male, lower levels of quality of the contact, and higher self-perceived popularity levels. The two dimensions of contact were positively interrelated, and higher levels of perceived cultural acceptance at school were associated with higher levels of contact with migrants at school. Males reported higher perceived cultural acceptance levels, whereas females reported contact with migrants at school as more positive.

### 3.2 | Main effect model

The main effect model (Figure 1) fitted the data adequately: $\chi^2(58) = 92.355$ $p = .003$, CFI = .916, RMSEA = .060 (90% CI .035 .082), SRMR = .065, AIC = 3625.416, BIC = 3762.343. Bullying migrant peers was predicted by being a male, perceiving themselves as popular and experiencing contact with migrants as less positive. Bullying migrant peers was neither significantly associated with quantity of the contact at school ($ß = .078$, $p = .402$) nor with climate of cultural acceptance ($ß = −.120$, $p = .229$).

### 3.3 | Moderation model

Results of the moderation model are displayed in Figure 2. The model fit was evaluated compared to the main effect model through the comparative indices: AIC = 3582.515, BIC = 3722.554. Values of both comparative indices were lower for this model than for the main effect model, thus providing evidence of its better fit. Bullying migrant peers was higher for males than females and increased for higher self-perceived popularity and more negative contact with migrants. Bullying migrant peers was not significantly associated with perceived cultural acceptance ($ß = −.18$, $p = .150$) and quantity of contact ($ß = .09$, $p = .390$). In this model in which its interaction term was included the negative association of quality of contact with bullying migrant peers became marginally significant ($p = .06$). Furthermore,
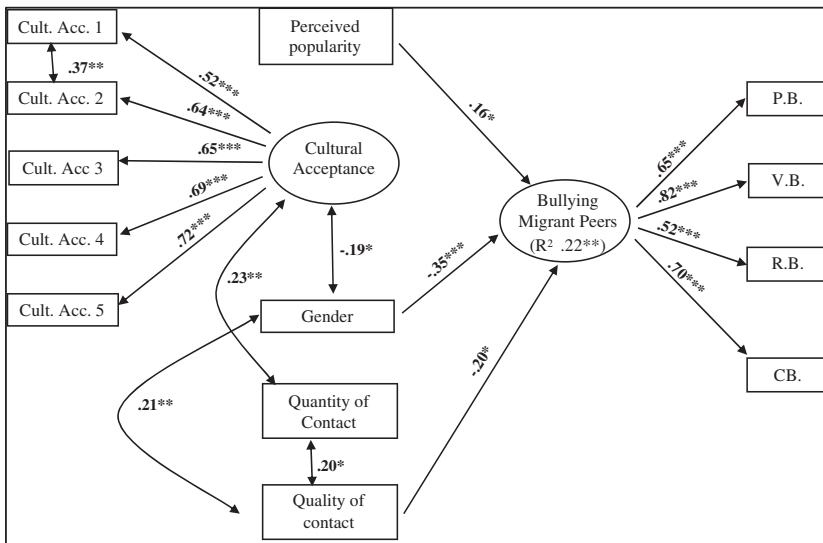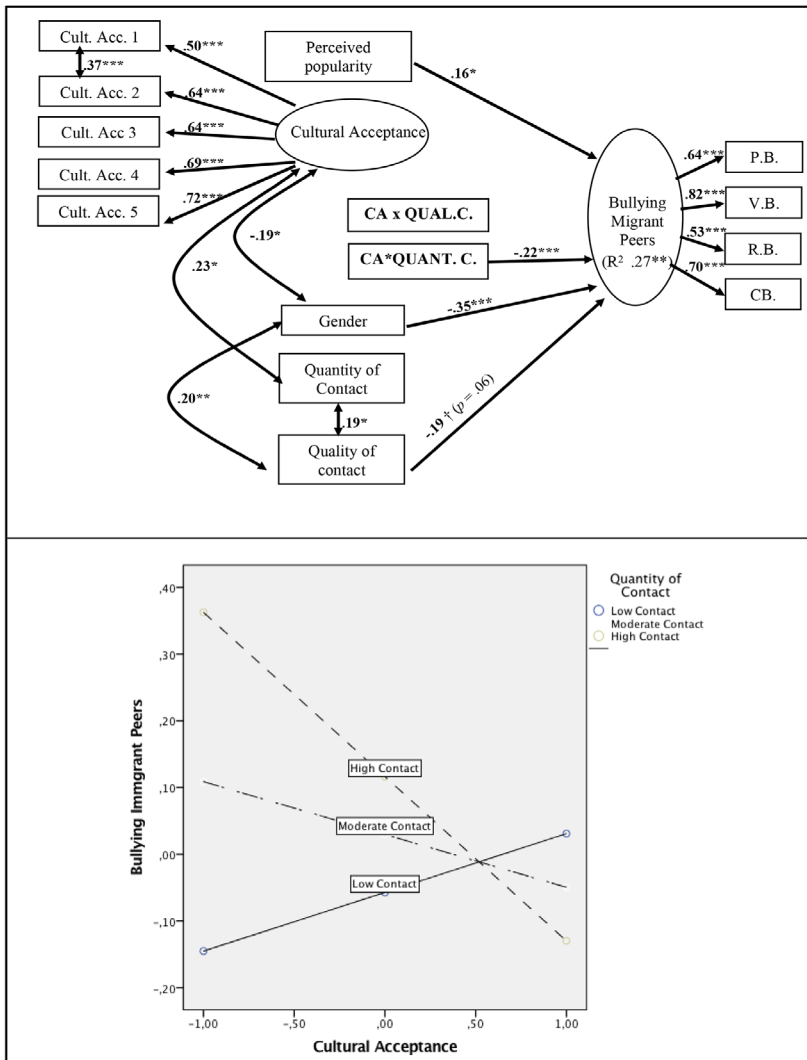
**FIGURE 1** Main effect model
*Note:* \*$p < .05$, \*\*$p < .01$, \*\*\* $p < .001$.
Standardized indices. Cult. Acc., cultural acceptance; P.B., physical bullying; V.B., verbal bullying; R.B., relational bullying; CB., cyberbullying

bullying migrant peers was non-significantly associated with the interaction term cultural acceptance\*quality of contact ($ß = .07$, $p = .502$). Still, it was negatively associated with the interaction term cultural acceptance\*quantity of contact: -.22, $p = .001$. Follow-up analyses were run (Aiken & West, 1991) to examine the association between bullying migrant peers and perceived cultural acceptance for low (−1 *SD*) and high levels (+1 *SD*) of quantity of contact. The negative association between the perceived cultural acceptance and bullying migrant peers was significant only for high levels of quantity of contact with migrants at school ($ß = −.40$, $p = .023$). In contrast, this association was lower and non-significant for low levels of contact with migrants at school ($ß = .05$ $p = .639$).

## 4 | DISCUSSION

The main novelty of this study is the contribution it provides regarding the role that the type of contact with migrant people may have in explaining bullying peers with a migratory background in middle/late adolescence. In this perspective, our results contribute to the literature on bullying toward migrants in two ways. First, they provide some evidence that in adolescence, among the majority group members, *quality* of contact with migrants belonging to the ethnic outgroup, that is, to what degree it is evaluated as positive (friendly in opposition to hostile), is directly associated with a lower risk of bullying peers with a migratory background. Second, among majority group adolescents, the *quantity* of contact with migrants at school moderates the association between perceived school climate of cultural acceptance and bullying migrant peers. In other words, perceiving that cultural diversity is less accepted at school becomes a risk factor for engaging in this type of bullying only for those adolescents who have more frequent contact with people with a migratory background at school. These results provide essential indications for developing interventions aimed to tackle this type of bullying.

**FIGURE 2** Moderation model and moderated effect of cultural acceptance on ethnic bullying
*Note*: *p < .05, **p < .01, *** p < .001.
Standardized indices. Cult. Acc., cultural acceptance; P.B., physical bullying; V.B., verbal bullying; R.B., relational bullying; CB., cyberbullying

## 4.1 | Perceived school climate, type of contact, and bullying migrant peers

Studies on ethnic bullying indicate that in schools where students perceive a warmer and more supportive relationship with teachers and where the ethnic origin is more heterogeneous, ethnic bullying incidents are fewer (Wright & Wachs, 2019). Also, the perpetration of bullying migrant peers is lower for adolescents who have a more robust perception that cultural diversity is accepted at school (Caravita et al., 2020). Therefore, the school climate appears to be an essential dimension influencing bullying migrant peers. In line with this interpretation, in this study perceiving that cultural diversity is poorly accepted at school emerged as increasing the risk of bullying migrant peers. Nevertheless this effect regarded

only the majority group members who reported higher rates of contact with migrants at school, so that our Hypothesis 1 was only partially confirmed.

The contact with migrants at school, in its quality and quantity resulted to be an even more important dimension to consider with regard to bullying migrant peers.

The literature indicates that bullying migrant peers is influenced by stereotypes and prejudices, whose effects can be stronger than the impact of other recognized risk factors for traditional bullying (Caravita et al., 2020). Assuming the developmental intergroup perspective (Killen & Rutland, 2011; Killen, Mulvey, & Hitti, 2013), bullying migrant peers is also a form of intergroup bullying (Rutland, Killen, & Abrams, 2010), as victims have a migratory background, and belong to an ethnic outgroup (Caravita et al., 2020). Thus, contact with outgroup members is likely to affect bullying migrant peers (Allport, 1954). Higher rates of direct contact (*quantity*) with the migrant outgroup may provide more opportunities to bullying the outgroup (opportunity effect; Peguero et al., 2015). Nevertheless, according to Allport's (1954) and Pettigrew's (1997) theories, having more chances of contact with migrant outgroup members might reduce bullying toward migrant peers when the contact is positive and emotionally significant (*contact quality*). In line with these theorizations, we explored the associations of bullying migrant peers with the *quantity* of contact with the migrant outgroup at school and the emotional *quality* of the contact with the migrant outgroup (Pettigrew et al., 2011). Our outcomes highlight that it is the quality of the contact and not the quantity of the time spent with outgroup at school that correlates with the perpetration of this type of bullying. Indeed, if Hypothesis 2 was not confirmed, Hypothesis 3 was. In adolescence, when the contact with migrants is evaluated more negatively than positively, the risk of bullying peers with a migratory background increases. Therefore, in multiethnic school settings, greater attention should be given to guarantee positive contacts between members of different ethnic groups in order to prevent and counteract bullying and migrants. Nevertheless, the quantity of contact (Hypothesis 4), and not the quality of contact (Hypothesis 5), was the contextual dimension moderating the effect of perceiving that the cultural diversity is accepted at school. Our results indicate that the perceived school climate can become a risk factor for bullying migrant peers particularly in schools where there are higher rates of students and adults with a migratory background. In these highly multicultural schools favoring as much as possible a positive climate characterized by reciprocal respect, a sense of belonging, and, above all, acceptance of cultural differences becomes a priority. Otherwise, the higher chances of contact with ethnic outgroup members, as in the many European schools with a high rate of students with a migratory background, increase the risk that adolescents native of the hosting country perpetrate bullying toward migrants.

## 4.2 | Limitations and future research

There are some limitations in this study that need to be mentioned. First, the sample size was, if adequate, on the small size. The size of the sample was further reduced by the choice of considering only students of multicultural classes who were native Italians. The small size of the sample may have reduced its representativeness and may have weakened the estimation of some associations, such as the association between quality of contact and bullying migrant peers. Second, all the data were self-reported, and the dimensions of contact were assessed using single items. Future studies could investigate further the associations among contact, perceived climate, and bullying migrants with multi-informant designs and larger samples. Third, the data were cross-sectional and did not examine the causal associations between the variables. Lastly, clusters (classrooms) were too few to control for the effect of clustering.

Notwithstanding these limitations, results from this study provide relevant insights for future research on bullying peers with a migratory background. Our outcomes shed some light on the necessity to investigate, in relation to this type of bullying, the quantity of contact with the ethnic outgroup, and the quality of this contact. This dimension refers to the type of experiences the person has with the outgroup members and how they are evaluated. However, it is possible that the evaluation of the ethnic outgroup does not depend only on their migratory status, but it also changes based on the specific ethnicity. This possibility was not investigated in the present study and should be further examined.

As a second main result, perceived school climate has been confirmed to play a role in bullying migrants. Still, its association with this behavior in terms of cultural acceptance was moderated by contextual factors (i.e., the quantity of the contact) that need to be taken into account to develop effective anti-bullying interventions. It should also be noticed that our main results regard middle/late *adolescent* members of the majority group in society. Adolescence (11–22 years; Brown & Larson, 2009) has been conceptualized as a particularly critical age for the integration processes. For this reason, we selected a sample of high-school students in the age of middle/late adolescence to investigate bullying migrants. Nevertheless, our results cannot be generalized to earlier ages, including late childhood and the years of early adolescence (11–13 years), corresponding to middle school years in several countries, such as Italy. We need more studies investigating bullying migrant peers at these age levels.

## 4.3 | Insights for interventions

With the increase of migratory influxes, the multiculturality of the European schools has quickly increased, and promoting the integration of youth with a migratory background has become a priority for European society. In this process, the school system is called to play a crucial role (Adams & Kirova, 2007) and to offer integrated tools useful to strengthen the school inclusion of all students (Santagati & Colussi, 2020). Among the challenges fronted by the schools, there is the need to implement interventions that are effective in preventing and counteracting bullying migrant peers. In this perspective, this study has allowed highlighting elements that need to be taken into consideration for the development of evidence-based interventions: the relevance of promoting a positive, more friendly, contact with people with a migratory background at school, and the relevance of favoring a climate of cultural acceptance, in particular for highly multicultural schools. These elements are essential for interventions addressing students who belong to the majority group in their country.

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