Nikola Vukasovic[1], Vasileios Chatzimpyros[1] iD

Identity Construction and Belonging: A Study of Second-Generation Bosnian Immigrants

Abstract

The study examines identity formation and the sense of belonging among second-generation Bosnian immigrants in Serbia and Montenegro, children of refugees displaced by the Bosnian War. Despite a shared cultural heritage across the Balkans, these individuals often navigate historical animosities and nationalist tensions in a post-conflict society. A qualitative approach, grounded in Social Identity Theory and based on semi-structured interviews, identified three central themes: rejection of national and ethnic distinctions in favour of a broader Balkan identity, the essential role of family in shaping values, and artistic expression as a means of self-exploration. The findings suggest identity among second-generation immigrants is fluid and continuously shaped by personal interactions rather than inherited divisions. These findings contribute to the existing literature by offering insight into how cultural heritage, familial dynamics, and creative expression shaped participants' identities.

Keywords

identity formation, second-generation immigrants, belonging, post-conflict societies, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Corresponding author

Nikola Vukasovic, Psychology Department, CITY College, University of York Europe Campus, Leontos Sofou 3, Thessaloniki 546 26, Greece; **e-mail**: vukasovicnikola01@gmail.com

[1] Psychology Department, CITY College, University of York Europe Campus, Leontos Sofou 3, Thessaloniki 546 26, Greece

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of identity has garnered increasing attention in the social sciences and public discourse. Individuals typically use categories such as culture, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and occupation to define themselves. While forming a stable self-concept can be challenging for many, second-generation immigrants may face additional hurdles influenced by a combination of cultural, social, and psychological factors. Born or raised in a country different from their parents' country of origin, many second-generation immigrants report grappling with dual or hyphenated identities and at times feeling foreign in their country of birth. This complexity arises from integrating their life experiences with an inherited past that may include the traumatic circumstances of their family's migration (Monscheuer 2023; Zhang et al. 2018). Understanding how second-generation immigrants negotiate these layered identities offers valuable insight into the broader dynamics of identity construction in increasingly multicultural societies. The dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s triggered a series of violent ethnic conflicts. The Bosnian War (1992–1995) involved conflict among three major ethnic groups: Serbs (Orthodox), Croats (Catholic), and Bosniaks (Muslim) (Bolton & Jeffrey 2008). The conflict was characterised by genocide and mass displacement, with the death toll ranging from 100,000 to 300,000 (Hayden 2007). Many first sought refuge within former Yugoslav republics before later relocating to countries such as the USA, Germany, Austria, and Sweden (Valenta & Ramet 2016). By 2011, at least 43% of Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) total population lived abroad (Kačapor-Džihić & Oruč 2012).

Serbia and Montenegro, then known as the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Jordan 2021), recorded approximately 297,000 refugees from BiH (Nenadić et al. 2005). Precise figures are difficult to determine due to unrecorded migration and variations in refugee classification. The war concluded with the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in December 1995, which established a tripartite presidency to ensure representation for each of the three constituent peoples (Nenadić et al. 2005). Decades later, the Western Balkan countries continue to face political instability and economic challenges (Kalemaj & Kalemaj 2022). Ethnic tensions persist in public discourse and political events, reflected in the continued use of derogatory terms rooted in historical conflicts.

Serbia was marked by nationalist narratives and unresolved wartime legacies, while post-2006 Montenegro pursued a more civic-oriented model of statehood (Džankić 2014). Both states implemented policies aimed at refugee integration; however, interethnic relations remained

shaped by enduring mistrust and ambiguous notions of national be-
longing (Bieber 2004). Despite formal commitments to inclusion, every-
day interactions often reflect persistent ethnic hierarchies, contested
victimhood narratives, and the maintenance of symbolic boundaries
(Jovanović & Bermúdez 2021).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Second-Generation Immigrants

Research on second-generation immigrants (hereafter SGIs) has largely
gained prominence over the past three decades, initially in the United
States and later in Europe (Crul & Vermeulen 2003). The definition of
second generation varies across contexts and lacks consistent applica-
tion. In some cases, the term refers to those born in a country with
at least one foreign-born parent, while in others it includes individuals
born abroad who have resided in the country for a specified period. Ad-
ditionally, some definitions differentiate based on whether one or both
parents are immigrants (Chimienti et al. 2021).

In this study, SGIs are defined as descendants of migrants without
direct migration experience (Brunello & De Paola 2016). Although born
and raised in the country, many SGIs report being perceived as foreign-
ers and may experience discrimination, sometimes exacerbated by legal
systems such as Serbia and Montenegro's principle of *jus sanguinis* (the
right of blood) (Džankic 2010). Under such systems, individuals born in
the country to foreign-born parents may not automatically receive citi-
zenship, which can limit access to public services.

2.2 Identity and Sense of Belonging

Identity construction entails both explicit and implicit meanings, as well
as the mental and social processes that shape and redefine it over time
(Schwartz 2001). Essentialist perspectives view identity as stable and
closely linked to well-being (Behtoui 2019), whereas non-essentialist
views, adopted here, conceptualise identity as fluid, shaped by social,
cultural, and psychological factors (Barkhuizen 2016). From this stand-
point, the identity of an individual only acquires meaning and signifi-
cance compared to other identities (Rattansi & Phoenix 2005).

As Jenkins (2014) argues, identity is not just perceived but actively
constructed by others. Furthermore, individuals exist within economic,
political, and social hierarchies that shape their access to resources and
social mobility. For SGIs, such structures may constrain participation in

mainstream society (Chimienti et al. 2019). Social Identity Theory (SIT) introduced by Tajfel and Turner (1979), suggests that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-concept from group membership, categorising themselves into ingroups and distinguishing from outgroups (Bochatay et al. 2019). SGIs may navigate multiple social identities based on ethnicity, nationality, and cultural expectations, continuously negotiating their sense of belonging within the local community. To build on this theoretical grounding, identity is treated as a multidimensional and culture-dependent construct (Ma et al. 2024), operationalised through group affiliations and experiences of inclusion and exclusion (IIchuck 2024). Belonging can be defined as the subjective sense of being an integral part of one's family, communities, and broader environments (Hagerty et al. 1992). This need is often understood as rooted in biology, given that human survival has historically depended on social bonds (Boyd & Richerson 2009). Research in educational contexts has linked a sense of belonging to a range of positive academic, health, and social outcomes (Allen et al. 2018; Faircloth & Hamm 2005; Zhang et al. 2018). Conversely, lack of belonging has been associated with depression, cognitive decline, and poor health (Allen et al. 2021; Hawkley & Capitanio 2015).

Belonging can also be seen as "an act of self-identification or identification by others" (Yuval-Davis 2006, 199). SIT highlights how individuals categorise themselves into subordinate and superordinate groups and may simultaneously belong to multiple levels within these groupings (Wenzel et al. 2008). Within a specific group, members often share a prototype, an ideal representation of what it means to belong, reflecting common goals, values, and traits (Oakes et al. 1998). In addition, individuals are also part of larger, more abstract groups, whose defining characteristics may not always fully align with their personal experiences. Within SIT, belonging is understood through processes of group categorisation, where individuals define themselves in relation to social groups that are often organised around shared prototypes (Froechlich et al. 2024). Using this framework, belonging extends beyond simply claiming an identity but also being accepted as a member of a group by others (Kohli et al. 2024). In post-conflict societies, ethnic categories and social boundaries are politically charged, making belonging especially complex for those positioned between groups (Henig et al. 2024). In former Yugoslav countries, shared cultural practices and value systems can blur personal identity lines, but they can also ease acculturation challenges (Milutinović 2013). Although research on Bosnian SGIs remains limited, literature shows that Bosnian refugees experience an

erosion in trust regarding their social reality's stability which results in an incomplete sense of belonging (Mijić 2022). Studies examining the acculturation experiences of 1.5-generation Bosnians in Western countries indicate identity struggles and a persistent sense of non-belonging (Vukojević 2019). Bosnian SGIs in the United States reported challenges in acculturation due to close identification with their heritage, with a strong need to preserve their family's narratives as part of their identity (Dikyurt 2023). Similarly, Bosnian SGIs in Switzerland reported that through family narratives, legacies of conflict continue to be a structural force for their identities and have significant repercussions to their sense of belonging (Müller-Suleymanova 2021). Eastmond (2006) argued that refugee return is often misunderstood as a singular event rather than open-ended and transnational as a physical return home does not guarantee social integration. This is relevant not only for returnees or refugees but also for Bosnian SGIs who never left yet live in fractured post-war environments with which they do not feel a strong sense of belonging. This calls for a broader understanding of identity and sense of belonging as fluid and negotiated, an approach relevant but underexplored in the context of Bosnian SGIs who have grown up in the post-war homeland itself. Within this context, the current study investigates how Bosnian SGIs in Serbia and Montenegro negotiate ethnic labels and broader regional identifications as well as how these identities are expressed to navigate their sense of belonging, in a sociopolitical environment shaped by both cultural continuity and historical division.

2.3 Research Gap

Despite research on Bosnian immigrants in Western Europe and the U.S., little attention has been given to SGIs in culturally similar neighbouring countries like Serbia and Montenegro (Karamehic-Oates & Karamehic-Muratovic 2021; Müller-Suleymanova 2021; Sichling & Karamehic-Muratovic 2020; Vukojević 2019). Despite cultural similarities, Bosnian immigrants in the Balkans are often perceived as foreigners due to lingering post-war tensions. SGIs navigate a context of both cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity, negotiating identities shaped by historical legacies and lived experience. This research addresses a gap in second-generation identity studies by using Social Identity Theory to examine how group affiliations, in-group dynamics, and ethnic category salience shape identity in post-conflict settings. While existing literature on SIT has examined identity construction among second-generation immigrants in Western multicultural societies, less attention has been paid

to how these processes unfold in societies shaped by ethnic conflict and forced displacement. The Balkan region remains underrepresented in migrant identity research, despite its complex socio-cultural context. It also offers a theoretical contribution by demonstrating how identity can function not only through in-group identification but also through dis-identification, ambivalence, and supra-ethnic affiliation, processes that extend SIT in contexts where ethnic categories are politicised and historically fraught. This study contributes to this underdeveloped area by exploring how second-generation Bosnian migrants negotiate social categories as they construct a sense of identity and belonging within these contested landscapes marked by collective memories of war, offering valuable insight into post-conflict identity development, collective memory, and reconciliation processes in the Western Balkans. By exploring how participants negotiate ethnic labels and broader regional identifications, as well as how these identities are expressed, this research contributes to debates on identity fluidity and the conceptualisation of selfhood in constrained socio-political spaces. This offers not only insight into Serbia and Montenegro but also highlights dynamics that are relevant to understanding of how second-generation identities are negotiated in terms of belonging in post-conflict settings. In particular, it shows how belonging can be enacted in ways that resist identity boundaries, offering perspectives on how social identity can be navigated in complex post-conflict settings.

2.4 Research Aim and Questions

This research aims to qualitatively explore how group affiliations, in-group/outgroup dynamics, family narratives, and the salience of ethnic categories shape identity formation and belonging among second-generation Bosnian immigrants, the children of war refugees, within a post-war socio-cultural landscape.

Research Questions:

— How do second-generation Bosnian immigrants negotiate social categories (ethnic, cultural, regional, and national) as they construct a sense of identity and belonging in the post-conflict context of Serbia and Montenegro?

— How do family narratives and traditions influence the salience of social identities and belonging?

— How do second-generation Bosnian immigrants actualise and express their social identities to navigate belonging in post-conflict Serbian and Montenegrin societies?

3. Methodology

3.1 Design

This study explored the subjective experiences of SGIs in the process of identity creation using semi-structured interviews to elicit flexible narratives (Morrow & Smith 2000; Mason 2002). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) was used to identify recurring themes in the qualitative data related to identity construction.

3.2 Participants

The study involved eight SGIs (four male, four female), aged 18–30. All had at least one parent who was a Bosnian War refugee and were residing in Serbia or Montenegro at the time of the study. A non-probability, snowball sampling method was used to access this relatively hard-to-reach population (Naderifar et al. 2017; Kirchherr & Charles 2018). This approach may facilitate more candid disclosure, potentially yielding more in-depth responses. The first participants were recruited through personal networks, while subsequent ones were identified through referrals. Participants received study information and consent forms via email. To ensure anonymity, numerical identifiers were assigned (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2).

3.3 Measures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in the Serbo-Croatian language. The interview guide included ten open-ended questions progressing from general to specific, focused on identity and belonging. Interviews were conducted via Google Meet (audio only) to enhance participant comfort, given the sensitive nature of the topic. This format also reduced the likelihood that non-verbal cues would influence participants' narratives. Interviews averaged 35 minutes and were transcribed and translated into English.

3.4 Procedure

After receiving ethics approval from the relevant institutional committee, interviews were conducted via Google Meet between March and July 2024. Participants were contacted by email, provided study information and consent forms, and scheduled interviews at their convenience. The researcher, also an SGI, disclosed their background to sup-

port rapport and foster a sense of safety in the interview setting (Abell et al. 2006). Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, translated into English, and stored securely. Participants were debriefed and provided with counselling resources; no distress was reported.

3.5 Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (1) familiarisation with data, (2) initial coding, (3) theme development, (4) theme review, (5) theme definition, and (6) report writing. Patterns were identified through an inductive approach, with particular attention to narratives related to belonging and identity construction (Maguire & Delahunt 2017). Belonging and identity were further operationalised by qualitative coding of narrative references to group identity, family influence, and identity expression.

Figure 1: Themes and subthemes from interviews with SGIs
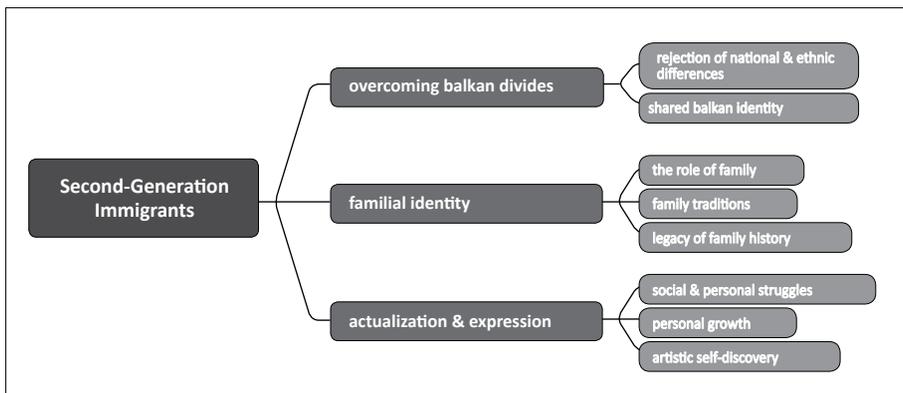
Source: Authors' Visualization.

3.6 Ethics

Ethics approval was granted by the relevant institutional committee.[1] Participants gave informed consent and were assured of confidentiality, with transcripts securely stored. They were also provided with information on counselling resources in case of emotional distress.[2]

3.7 Quality Criteria

This study followed Williams and Morrow's (2009) model to ensure research trustworthiness, focusing on credibility, transferability, depend-

ability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported through detailed documentation of data collection and analysis, including the rationale for key methodological choices. Transferability was addressed by outlining relevant cultural and historical context, allowing future researchers to assess potential relevance to other post-conflict populations. Dependability was enhanced by maintaining a clear research trail and careful attention to translation fidelity between Serbo-Croatian and English. Confirmability was supported by grounding interpretations in participant data and engaging in reflexive practices to reduce researcher bias. The researcher's shared background with participants enriched rapport but also required ongoing self-awareness to maintain objectivity. Although not generalisable, the study offers context-specific insights into SGI identity development. Limitations, including translation challenges, small sample size, and the interpretive nature of thematic analysis, were acknowledged through critical reflection.

4. Results

4.1 Overcoming Balkan Divides

Participants described a sense of belonging to the Balkans as a broader cultural space rather than identifying primarily with individual nation-states. While acknowledging socially reinforced national and ethnic distinctions, they often framed these as constructs shaped by older generations and dominant political narratives. Several participants came from mixed backgrounds and expressed dissatisfaction with rigid ethnic and national classifications. As one participant described:

> I didn't understand why it was important whether someone was Croatian, Montenegrin, Bosnian, or Serbian. I didn't get it because I understand those people; they look and talk just like me. I didn't understand what all the fuss was about regarding these national differences (P7).

Some participants emphasised individual character over categories such as nationality, ethnicity, or religion.

> It doesn't matter to me if someone is, as we say, a Serb, Bosnian, Albanian, Montenegrin, Croat, or anything, what religion they are, what race they are, what their sexual orientation is, it's irrelevant. For me, a person is a person, whether they are good or bad is another question, but they are a person (P4).

Participant 4 further links ethnic divisions to political manipulation:

> [...] politics have meddled in absolutely everything including nationality, sense of belonging, and religion. Politics now leads the way, unfortunately, it happens that people, even educated people, raise their children to hate people from a specific national group (P4).

These perspectives reflect aspects of Social Identity Theory, particularly the role of group membership in shaping self-concept and the influence of political discourse in reinforcing social boundaries (Harwood 2020). Participants more often used the term Balkans than individual country names, suggesting a supranational identity and shared cultural ground.

> At the end of the day, all the countries in the Balkans are very similar. We have the same language, culture, humour, and mentality. I'm glad that there is a difference between older generations, who hold on to traditional beliefs and arbitrary classifications, and us young people, who grew up with technology in the digital age and had the opportunity to see what exists beyond our views and cultures (P8).

Some participants framed this shift as generational, connecting it to broader exposure to digital communication and global cultural influences.

> I was in Germany and worked there for the past two summers, and I always look forward to coming home. By all parameters, it should be better, I mean, the standard of living is much better, and people are generally happy. Somehow, it's illogical that I want to come back here, but I still have this desire to return to the Balkans, because I think it's very much a part of our mentality. Because here, people live slower, we are not in such a rush. I think we value interpersonal relationships more (P5).

These reflections suggest that cultural familiarity, values, and emotional connection outweigh economic and convenience advantages, supporting the formation of a superordinate Balkan identity.

4.2 Familial Identity

Participants described family as central to identity, citing emotional support and values shaped during upbringing. Participant narratives highlight family's continued role in everyday support and its lasting influence on identity:

> My family has contributed a lot because I believe that family is the most important part of my life. Not just the immediate family, but the extended family as well, I see them as my best friends. No one wished me well as much as they do. They have influenced my life, and they continue to do so, in my decisions, in everything (P3).

> From a young age, they tell you "Take care of your sister, look after your sisters, look after this, look after that." Then you realise when you look at other people around you that everyone actually carries their identity right from home. […]. We're all somehow susceptible to it, so I have the values that my mother and my father have (P1).

These reflections underscore family as a blueprint for social relations. Walęcka-Matyja & Banach (2022) suggest specific family values predict adult relationship quality and long-term commitments. This may explain the strong influence of family on identity, as described by participants. Family traditions also anchored cultural continuity. Rituals such as *slava* (patron saint celebrations) were described as both spiritual and unifying:

> In our family, it's extremely important to respect the customs. It's like we have a rulebook; starting with the three candles, then the incense for the icon, the bread is turned three times, all that must be respected. I've known it since I was born, I know all that, and we recite The Lord's Prayer […]. If it has that family function of keeping us together, then it's great (P2).

Some participants point out the gradual erosion of family traditions through one's lifetime as well as on a generational level:

> We have that, let's say, tradition. On a daily or weekly level, it's usually lunch … But it seems to me that the older we get, the less we do that, somehow we become different, and it's normal as we, the children, become older and more independent, and everyone goes their own way (P5).

> That's how it goes with generations – tradition is passed down less and less, that's just how it is. But I would try to preserve the most beautiful things, the traditions, and pass them on to the next generation (P3).

Omole (2024) notes that individuals from culturally rooted immigrant families may feel increased pressure to preserve traditions, while others may lean toward integration. These dynamics may explain participants' ambivalence between preserving and adapting customs. While family customs shaped identity, participants also reflected on the absence of

open discussions about pre-war and wartime family history. Such narratives were often inaccessible:

> Regarding our history and their life there, very little is talked about, so I don't know much about it. Whether it's difficult for them to talk about it or something else, I don't want to delve into that, but that's how it was (P7).

> Especially when I was younger, it was somewhat of a taboo topic at home, particularly anything related to the family's history before I was born. All of that was somehow closed off and private. Now that I'm older, I can understand why. When I was born, that wartime period was still fresh (P8).

Despite limited knowledge of family history, several participants expressed pride in their family's resilience.

> I should be proud of my heritage and of the situations my family has previously gone through. To turn to my family with pride as they managed to cope with all the situations their history brought them [...]. If they manage to cope with those things, there's no reason why I can't integrate that into my personality (P8).

Participant 8's reflections illustrate how family history can shape self-understanding, even in the absence of full narrative continuity. One interpretation of this expressed pride could involve a desire to honour past resilience by striving toward the opportunities unavailable to prior generations.

4.3 Actualization & Expression

This theme explores how participants sought to express aspects of their identity through reflection, personal growth, and creative outlets. These efforts included working through societal perceptions, navigating shifting relationships, and engaging with the arts as a means of exploration and fulfilment. Five of the eight participants engaged in artistic expression, including creative writing (poetry, stories, essays), music (songwriting, playing instruments, digital production), and visual arts (photography). Several participants described experiences of feeling excluded or marked as different due to their heritage:

> People look at you differently. You can't avoid that. Here in the Balkans, when people see you, they always say, "Oh, he's the one whose parents fled from Sarajevo." And sometimes, when I was younger, it was maybe even

unpleasant, especially when those were pitying looks. I mean, why do you pity me, people? I was born here, there's nothing wrong with me, but on the other hand, you notice it, you just notice it and it makes you feel maybe even a bit uncomfortable in some situations. [...]. However, now, in the recent period, I've pretty much accepted it. Somehow, it's become okay. I mean, I know people don't have bad intentions. They just do it, practically, unintentionally. So, I don't blame anyone (P4).

I definitely felt quite different because I celebrated many holidays from my mother's side … Catholic Easter, Catholic Christmas … or different celebrations like Simundan … people would ask, "Who is that? What is that?" [...] I felt a certain amount of alienation … like a stranger in many ways (P6).

Both participants described feeling alienated by others' reactions to their background. Over time, they saw these reactions as stemming more from unfamiliarity than hostility, prompting reinterpretation and emotional adjustment. Alongside these challenges, many described personal growth. This growth was influenced by external circumstances as well as personal agency:

When I was in elementary school, I think whatever my parents told me to do, I did it half-heartedly and let it go. From physical to emotional things for someone to rely on you. I don't know how it happened that I realised in the meantime that I actually should be the person who will be a support to someone and that I should actually take things into my own hands and do them extremely well (P1).

Others recounted moments of social divergence as part of their developmental path:

A friend from childhood, we simply … At some point in life, you'll realise that you're just not … You're not going down the same paths anymore … You have nothing to talk about anymore. Literally, it came to that, and maybe the healthiest thing is to just end the relationship (P2).

Finally, participants showed growth concerning societal attitudes:

[...] Now I'm completely, completely confident in myself, full of self-confidence, I don't care about social attitudes, or what they say, except, of course, in a professional sense, but really, I'm no longer susceptible to what others think. [...] Somehow, you get to know yourself in a way by reflecting on other people. It somehow becomes clear to you what is different about you, whether it's good or not, and you are certainly on a positive outcome because

you can change if you don't like it or keep it if you do. You simply work on yourself (P4).

102 These accounts reflect an active identity process, not only adjusting to external views but also developing internal clarity over time. Artistic expression emerged as a meaningful dimension of self-actualisation. Several participants named art as a central element in their identity, describing it as both therapeutic and formative. Modalities included music, literature, poetry, drawing, and film:

> The closest element I would say is definitely art, specifically music because I've used it over the years to cope with any issues, including questions of identity. It's easiest for me to express myself through music, to concretise my feelings, and to understand exactly how I feel. I think that's what has helped my personality develop the most, to become who I am today, and to give me the value system and priorities I have. I think what meant the most to me was that I started engaging in art (P7).

> Writing has always been my escape and way of expression. As a child, I often wrote short stories and poems, which allowed me to explore aspects of my identity and find a voice through which I could communicate my experiences and emotions. [...]. Work can be unstable, even something we love can become an obligation. I'm happy that writing isn't my job because I'd be half the person I am now if I hadn't delved so much into the world of reading and writing. It's not just that I can sit and write a sentence or two, but it's actually a big part of me (P8).

Art was described as both therapeutic and formative, providing a private, uncensored space for participants to understand and assert themselves. For some, the fact that their creative work remained non-professional reinforced its freedom from external pressure.

5. Discussion

Participants' experiences reflected an interplay of cultural belonging, family history, and personal development. Their narratives suggest the emergence of a shared sense of Balkan identity that transcends national and ethnic boundaries. Family appeared central to participants' self-concepts through emotional support and the transmission of values and traditions. Several participants also described turning to artistic expression and introspection as a way to process their social position and articulate aspects of the self.

Participants often identified with the Balkans as a whole rather than with specific national or ethnic backgrounds. From a Social Identity Theory perspective, identifying with a superordinate group (e.g., the Balkans) can foster cohesion between subgroups when sufficient shared features and a recognisable group prototype are present (Wenzel et al. 2008). Unlike the regional familiarity emphasised by participants in this study, Bosnian SGIs in Western Europe often grow up in more culturally distant environments. Several studies highlight a recurring sense of being "in-between" cultures among SGIs in Germany, Switzerland, and Slovenia, as they navigate heritage within unfamiliar cultural settings (Müller-Suleymanova 2021; Sedmak 2018; Vukojević 2019). These experiences are shaped by context-specific pressures, such as Islamophobic discourse in Belgium, Germany, and Poland (Trupia 2025). While such dynamics differ in Serbia and Montenegro, they highlight how identity formation is shaped by socio-political context.

One possible explanation for this difference lies in generational exposure to globalisation and digital technologies, which may increase cultural exchange and foster cross-national connectedness. Unlike earlier generations shaped by direct war trauma, these participants approach identity from a more integrative lens. Findings from post-war BiH show that intergroup contact and identification with a superordinate "Bosnian" identity were linked to greater forgiveness between ethnic groups "Bosniak" and "Serb" (Cehajic et al. 2008). A comparison can be made regarding the use of superordinate group identification in post-war BiH. In contrast to examining different ethnicities within the higher-level "Bosnian" national group, this study's findings focus on participants' perceptions of various nationalities across the Balkans, emphasising their alignment with a broader "Balkan" identity.

While grounded in SGI experiences, identification with global culture may also reflect broader generational patterns. Cosmopolitan orientations have been observed among youth more generally, shaped by increasing digital connectivity and exposure to global media (Woodward et al. 2008). This raises the possibility that some expressions of openness are not exclusive to this population. At the same time, inclusive identifications are not always the norm. Studies on post-Yugoslav and minority youth in Europe show that SGIs may, in some contexts, draw firmer ethnic boundaries than their parents. Inherited trauma or experiences of marginalisation can reinforce in-group attachments and distance from others (Drewski & Tuppat 2021; Nandi & Platt 2020).

Most participants distanced themselves from rigid ethnic categories. Similar patterns appear elsewhere in the region. Zupančič et al. (2025)

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describe how, in the decades following the war, Serbs in multiethnic areas of Croatia, where overt Serb identity can carry social risk, often adopt supra-ethnic or Yugoslav identities to ease everyday tensions.[3] Petrov (2017) similarly shows how Yugonostalgic themes in media offer younger generations a sense of shared cultural ground transcending national lines. Although none explicitly identified as Yugoslav, references to shared culture, humour, and values suggest a move toward supra-ethnic belonging. These findings point to how identity work is shaped not only by family legacies but also by the wider social and political environment.

Participants described family as shaping identity through emotional support, values, and tradition. Family provides a template for relating, extending into adult social life. Family traditions were described as fostering belonging, though some participants noted their gradual fading due to personal or generational changes. Family histories involving hardship or conflict were often difficult to discuss, but participants still take pride in their families' resilience, incorporating these narratives into their identities.

As an innate ingroup, family played a formative role unlike opt-in social groups. Children learn identity through navigating overlapping roles (child, sibling, relative) within family expectations. These roles are interwoven, influencing broader identity construction. Previous research suggests that early family experiences shape later relationships through processes such as attachment styles and other developmental mechanisms (Scabini & Manzi 2011). Family rituals have also been conceptualised as symbolic and procedural activities that reinforce family bonds and strengthen a sense of belonging (Fiese et al. 2002). Studies confirm these traditions enhance identity, self-esteem, and well-being (Crespo et al. 2011; Yang & Wang 2023).

Family history taboos emerged as a prominent subtheme in several participants' accounts. From an SIT perspective, silence may serve as a protective mechanism preserving positive ingroup identity. When participants interact with other families who share similar histories, these groups help normalise emotional experiences and reinforce affiliation. Beyond the immediate family, connections with friends and broader social circles further solidify a sense of belonging. While familial relationships shaped the foundation of identity, participants emphasised that it continued to evolve through experiences in broader, more diverse communities.

Participants described moving toward self-actualisation by working through social challenges, reflecting on personal growth, and using artis-

tic expression as a form of communication. They gradually moved from feelings of alienation toward increased confidence. Artistic expression, through writing, music, or visual media, was described as important for understanding oneself and expressing complex emotions. Participants described experiences of othering   based on religious, cultural, or ethnic background, often involving stereotypes and subtle forms of exclusion that contributed to feelings of alienation. Some recall memories of confusion, not understanding the basis of their exclusion, highlighting their early difficulty in recognising social differences. Notably, some participants interpreted their exclusion as a subconscious process by the majority group, as supported by the literature (Abbink & Harris, 2019), rather than a personal attack or judgment. This framing appeared to help participants navigate these challenges more effectively, supporting a sense of internal locus of control and contributing to growing confidence and resilience over time.

An unexpected subtheme was the role of art in identity development, with more than half of participants emphasising its importance. For many SGIs, art served as a bridge for self-understanding, allowing them to articulate personal narratives in a more coherent and symbolic form. This process enabled the cathartic expression of emotions and the representation of multifaceted identities. As Emrali (2017, 117) states, "The uniqueness of individuals and artists lies underneath how they know their own cultural inheritance, as well as how they get acquainted with, accept and interpret other cultures' heritage and legacy". Beyond cultural representation, art was also described as offering therapeutic value. Art-making helps individuals reflect on their life narratives more holistically. Art facilitates the integration of the migration experience, encompassing both challenges and positive outcomes both directly experienced or inherited. These are integrated into a coherent life narrative that becomes part of one's identity without necessarily defining it, contributing to empowerment (Heller 2024).

Linesch et al. (2014) suggest that art-making can support meaning-making, communication, catharsis, and emotional regulation. Research with Latino immigrant women and youth has similarly found that art helps process emotions related to acculturation and discrimination, fostering confidence and perspective-taking. Although participants did not engage in formal art therapy, they pursued artistic activities independently and described experiencing similar benefits. Overall, these findings indicate that artistic expression may play a meaningful role in how immigrants and subsequent generations make sense of identity, culture, and emotional experience.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated how second-generation Bosnian immigrants, children of war refugees, construct their identities, develop a sense of belonging, and navigate life in Serbia and Montenegro. Three central themes emerged from participant narratives. The first reflected a shift away from national and ethnic divisions, with many participants expressing alignment with a shared Balkan identity grounded in cultural commonalities. This shift appears generational, influenced by globalisation, relative peace, and trends toward greater social cohesion. Families shaped participants' core identities, offering emotional support and preserving tradition, even when difficult histories remained unspoken. Finally, participants described artistic expression as a way to foster self-understanding and process social and emotional challenges. While the latter two themes are well-established in literature, this study identifies a potential generational movement away from rigid national and ethnic distinctions toward a broader Balkan identity. These expressions may reflect a wider generational shift and suggest the potential for new forms of post-conflict social cohesion that complicate dominant narratives of division.

6.1 Implications

This research contributes to understanding the long-term psychosocial effects of the Bosnian War by examining how SGIs construct identity and navigate belonging. As children of war refugees, they may face unique challenges, including alienation linked to family histories and broader socio-political context. Recognising these experiences may inform the development of targeted support, including culturally responsive education and counselling to address stigma and isolation. The findings may hold relevance for post-war reconciliation efforts in the Balkans. Identifying with broader social categories, such as regional or supraethnic identities, may support peacebuilding in post-conflict contexts. In contrast to older generations shaped by the violence of the Yugoslav wars, younger generations may be adopting a more fluid and inclusive sense of belonging to broader cultural groupings. These findings may inform efforts by educators and community leaders to promote cross-ethnic dialogue, fostering trust and cooperation among historically divided communities. Beyond the specific regional focus, this study advances theory by showing how social identity operates in constrained post-conflict contexts. It shows how individuals adapt or reconfigure

imposed identities through family and creative expression, offering a dynamic model of identity negotiation relevant to post-conflict societies.

6.2 Limitations

A key limitation is potential bias in data collection and interpretation, as the researcher shares the SGI background of participants. While this fostered rapport, it may have introduced interpretive bias. The single-researcher design also limited opportunities for intersubjective validation of the findings. Lack of triangulation further limits corroboration with objective measures. Reliance on retrospective self-reports introduces the possibility of selective recall or memory bias, which may influence how experiences were narrated. The small, homogeneous sample and snowball method limit representativeness, resulting in greater homogeneity. Another limitation is the small-N design. However, SGIs in Serbia and Montenegro form a historically and geographically distinct population whose experiences remain under-researched. The sensitivity of the topic, post-war identity and interethnic belonging, further limits access, supporting the use of a purposive, in-depth approach (Crouch & McKenzie 2006; Malterud et al. 2016). Given the sample's homogeneity and recurring themes, the study likely approached thematic saturation despite its limited size (Guest et al. 2006). As an exploratory study, the aim was not statistical inference but analytical generalisation, offering transferable insights grounded in context-specific narratives (Yin 2003, 109–116). Focusing solely on Serbia and Montenegro limits transferability to other former Yugoslav countries, despite their unique contexts. Taken together, these limitations underscore the importance of interpreting findings cautiously and situating them within their cultural and methodological context.

6.3 Future Research Suggestions

To address these limitations, future research should adopt strategies to enhance objectivity and applicability. Involving multiple researchers across stages may enhance interpretive rigor through diverse perspectives. Methodological triangulation (e.g., document analysis or surveys) could enrich narrative data. Although small-sample studies lack generalisability, larger samples could offer broader insights and enable focus on intersectionality. Future studies could explore how education, class, or religion shape identity and belonging. Expanding future research be-

yond Serbia and Montenegro to include participants from other former Yugoslav republics could offer comparative insights into how micro-cultural and historical contexts shape identity and belonging. Finally, designs could clarify how identity evolves over time and what factors shape it.

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Notes

1 Ethics clearance was granted by the CITY College, University of York Europe Campus Ethics Committee in February 2024.

2 Participants were informed about the study's aims, voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and confidentiality procedures. Explicit consent was obtained for audio recording and data use. Researcher contact information and details for CITY College Counseling Services were also provided in case of emotional discomfort.

3 In this example, such identities often serve as everyday caution in multiethnic settings. In this study, they seem more affirmatively chosen, as a way of stepping outside inherited categories, though the comparison should be read with care given the differing contexts.

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Oblikovanje identitete in občutek pripadnosti: študija druge generacije bosanskih priseljencev

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Izvleček

Študija proučuje oblikovanje identitete in občutek pripadnosti med drugo generacijo bosanskih priseljencev v Srbiji in Črni gori, tj. otroki beguncev, razseljenih zaradi vojne v Bosni in Hercegovini. Kljub skupni balkanski kulturni dediščini se ti posamezniki v povojni družbi pogosto soočajo z zgodovinskimi sovražnostmi in nacionalističnimi napetostmi. S kvalitativnim pristopom, utemeljenim na teoriji socialne identitete, so bile s pomočjo polstrukturiranih intervjujev opredeljene tri osrednje teme: zavračanje nacionalnih in etničnih razlik v korist širše balkanske identitete, bistvena vloga družine pri oblikovanju vrednot in umetniško izražanje kot sredstvo samospoznavanja. Ugotovitve kažejo, da je identiteta priseljencev druge generacije fluidna, saj jo bolj kot podedovane delitve oblikujejo osebne interakcije. Članek ponuja vpogled v vpliv kulturne dediščine, družinske dinamike in ustvarjalnega izražanja na identiteto posameznikov in tako dopolnjuje obstoječo strokovno literaturo.

Ključne besede

oblikovanje identitete, priseljenci druge generacije, občutek pripadnosti, povojne družbe, Bosna in Hercegovina