

Balancing Roots and Opportunity: Youth Negotiations of Language and Identity



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*Our languages do not **compete**,
they **complete** who we are and who we are
becoming.*



Overview



- Malta's bilingual context
- Theoretical framing
- Research design and participants
- Key findings
- Language use across domains
- Attitudes toward Maltese & English
- Language, identity, and aspirations
- Implications for education and policy
- Conclusions

Context: Malta's Bilingual Heritage



Malta: small island nation with **two official languages** – Maltese & English

Maltese – Semitic heritage, marker of identity and belonging

English – colonial legacy & global gateway

Increasing **migration and linguistic diversity** → shift from *bilingualism* → *multilingualism*

Tension between **heritage preservation** and **global mobility**

The Study

Draws on data from a **larger mixed-methods project** on youth multilingualism

Present analysis: **language use, attitudes, and identity** related to Maltese and English

Participants: **402 adolescents (ages 11–14)** from state, church, and private independent schools

Focus: how young people **negotiate bilingual identities** in contemporary Malta



Data Collection

Participants

402 adolescents, aged **11–14 (Years 7–9)**

The sample showed an even gender distribution:
55% female, 44.8% male, and 0.2% undisclosed.

From **2 state, 4 church, and 3 independent** schools

Broad representation across school sectors
(though slightly uneven)

Mostly Maltese-born (88%), with a small
number of international students

The sample was **predominantly bilingual (51.6%)** and **multilingual (48.4%),** with **no monolinguals,** indicating a highly linguistically diverse student population



Research Instrument

Online questionnaire distributed via participating schools

Developed by researchers; **face-validated** by two external experts

Included:

- Multiple-choice & Likert-scale items

- Open-ended prompts

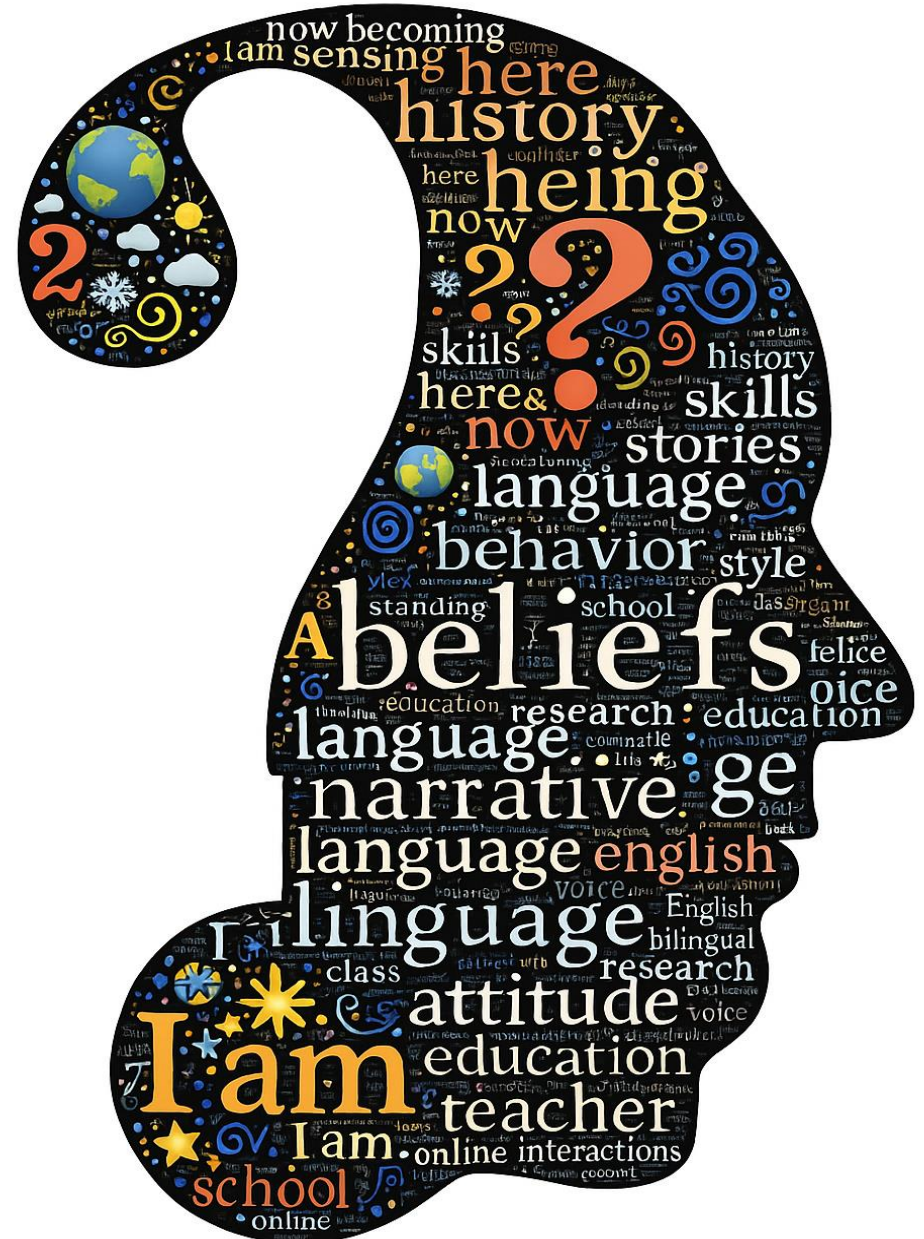


Focus areas

Language background & daily practices

Emotional connections to Maltese & English

Attitudes toward multilingualism in education and society



Data Analysis

Approach: Mixed-methods design (quantitative + qualitative integration)

Quantitative analysis

Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentages, means)

Chi-square tests and ANOVA for group comparisons

Regression analysis to explore relationship between number of languages known and perceived benefits of multilingualism

Reliability: McDonald's Omega ($\omega = 0.72$)

Qualitative analysis

Keyword/content analysis of open-ended responses

Focus on recurring concepts (e.g. fairness, identity, curiosity, confusion)

Identified dominant framing of multilingualism as functional and practical, rather than cultural or identity-based

Participant Distribution



Total Maltese students aged 10–14 in Malta: ≈14,161

State schools: 7,591

Church schools: 4,707

Independent schools: 1,863



Total participants aged 10–14 in this study * : ≈

Church schools: 189 participants

Independent schools: 136 participants

State schools: 77 participants **

**The sample represents about 2.84% of the national student population. The estimated margin of error is $\pm 4.89\%$ at a 95% confidence level, assuming maximum variability.*

***Church and Independent schools were slightly **overrepresented**, while **State schools were underrepresented** compared to their national distribution.*

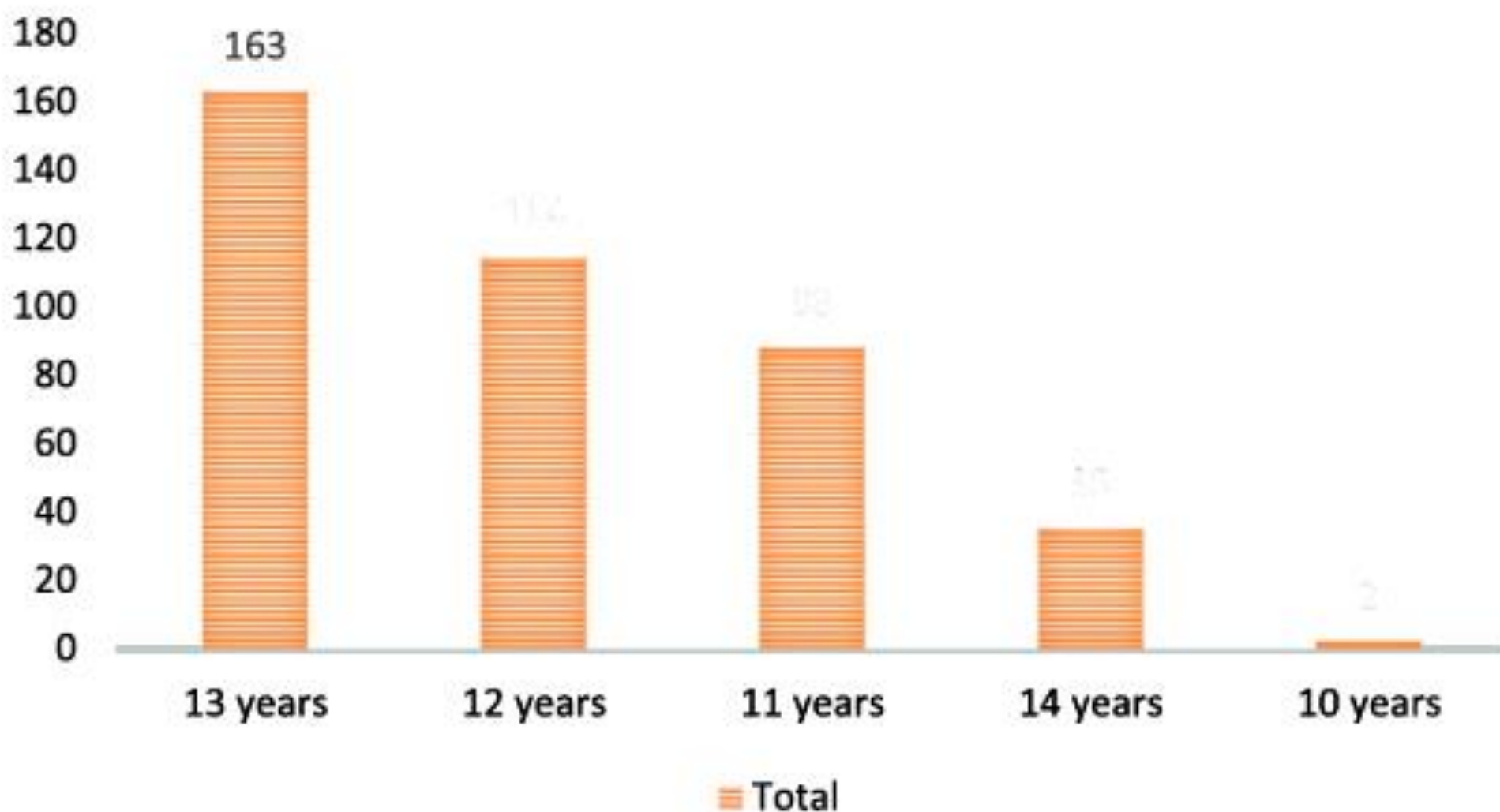


Figure 1. The age distribution of participants.

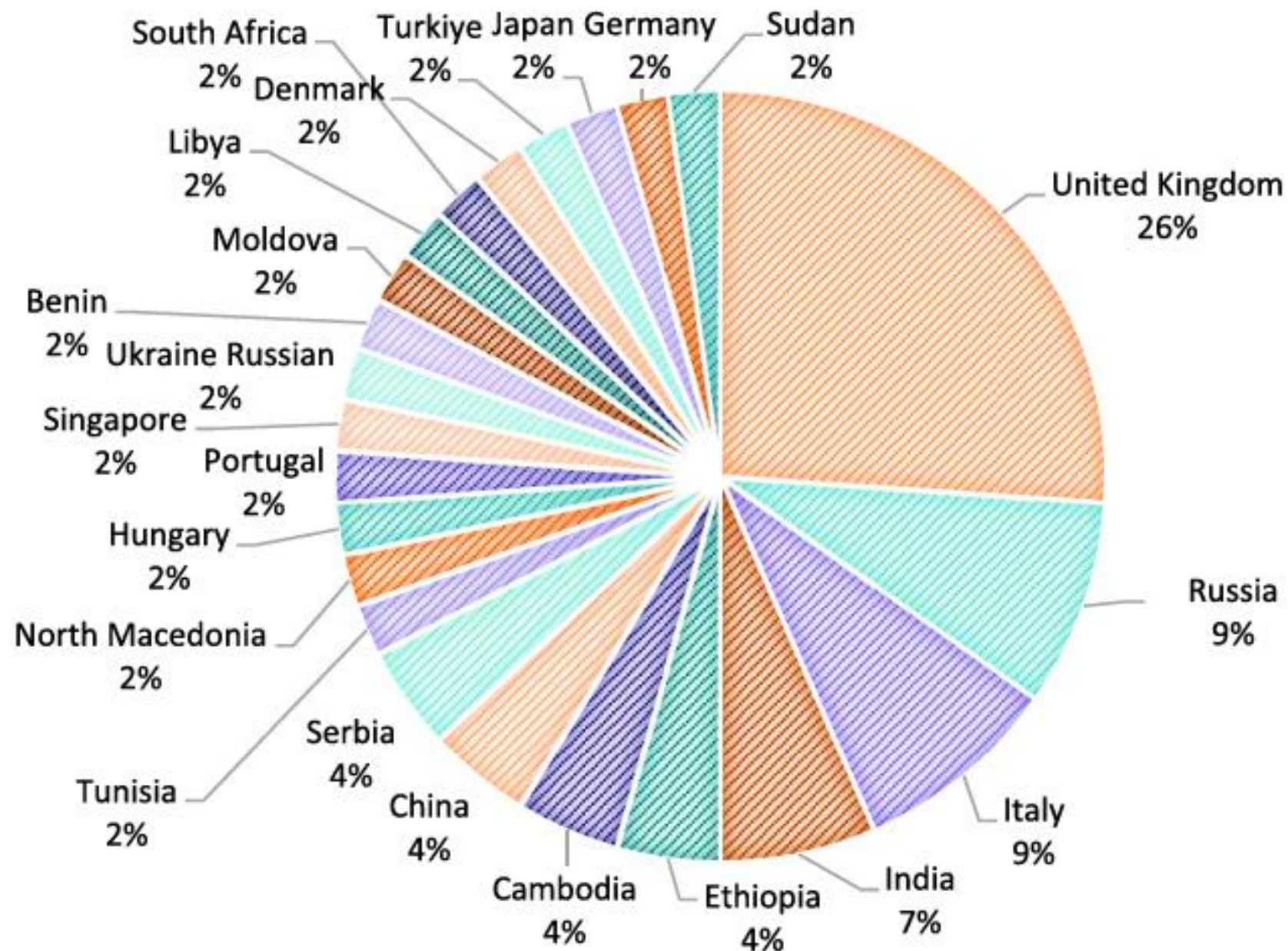


Figure 2. Country of birth of participants not born in Malta

DO YOU KNOW ANY OTHER LANGUAGES?

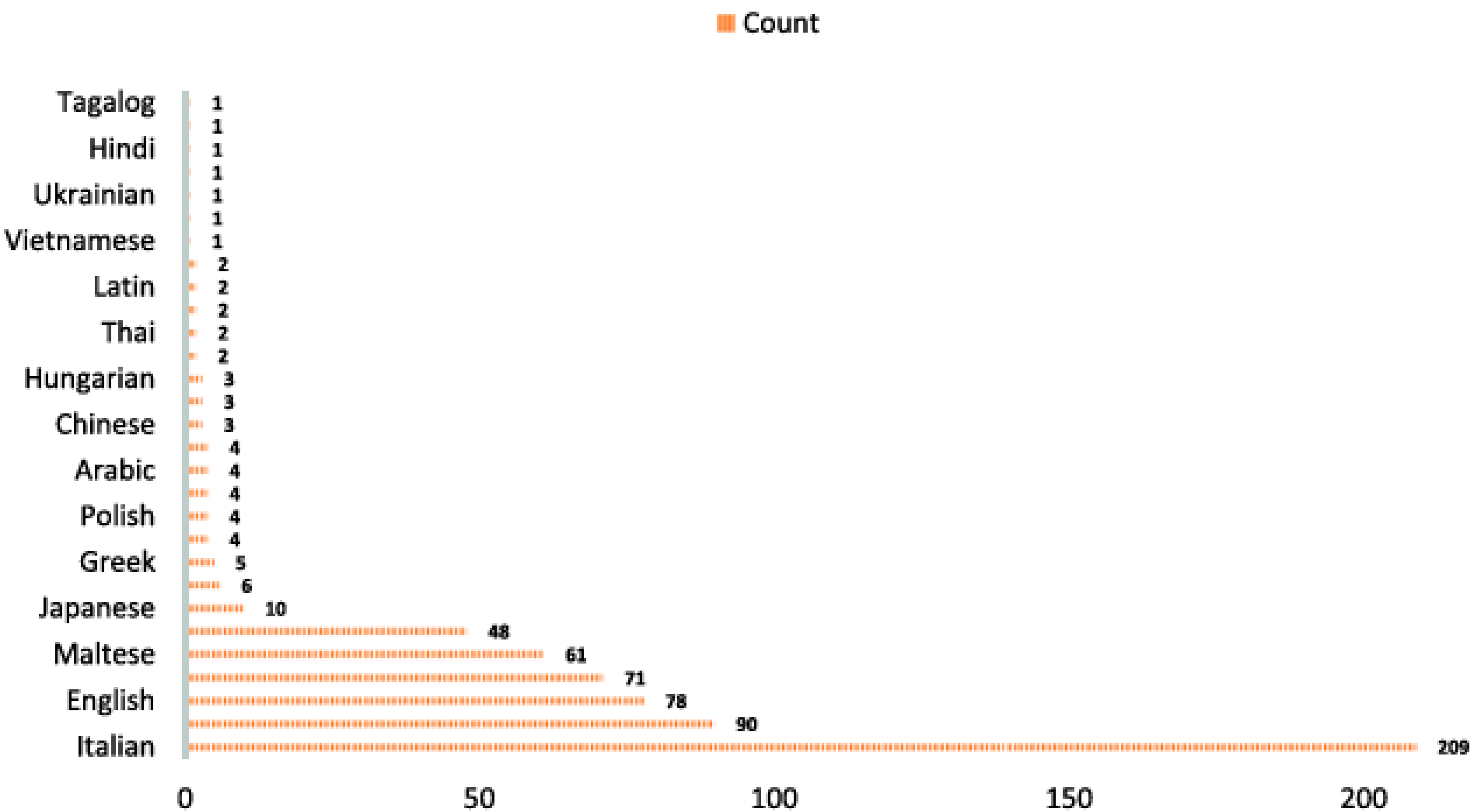


Figure 3. Knowledge of other languages.

Theoretical Grounding

Language ideology theory (Flores & Rosa, 2015): beliefs about correctness, utility, and value

Translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014): fluid, dynamic language use for meaning-making

Multilingual identity (Busse, 2017; Forbes et al., 2021): self-perception shaped by language, validation, and belonging

Functional bilingualism: context-driven, flexible, and pragmatic



Research Questions

1. How do adolescents use language across home, school, peer, and digital contexts?
2. What are their attitudes towards Maltese and English?
3. How does bilingualism shape their sense of identity and future aspirations?



Key Findings: Domains of Use

Maltese dominant in *home and family life* → emotional & cultural intimacy

English dominant in *school, digital spaces, and peer communication*

Translanguaging common (67% mix both languages) – socially natural and purposeful

Digital use: English most frequent (50%), Maltese-only rare (9%)

Strong **pride in Maltese** (92%) – symbol of heritage and belonging

English viewed as **instrumental and aspirational**

Youth articulate **dual loyalty**: heritage vs. opportunity

Emerging identity: “*rooted globally*” – connected to local culture yet open to global futures

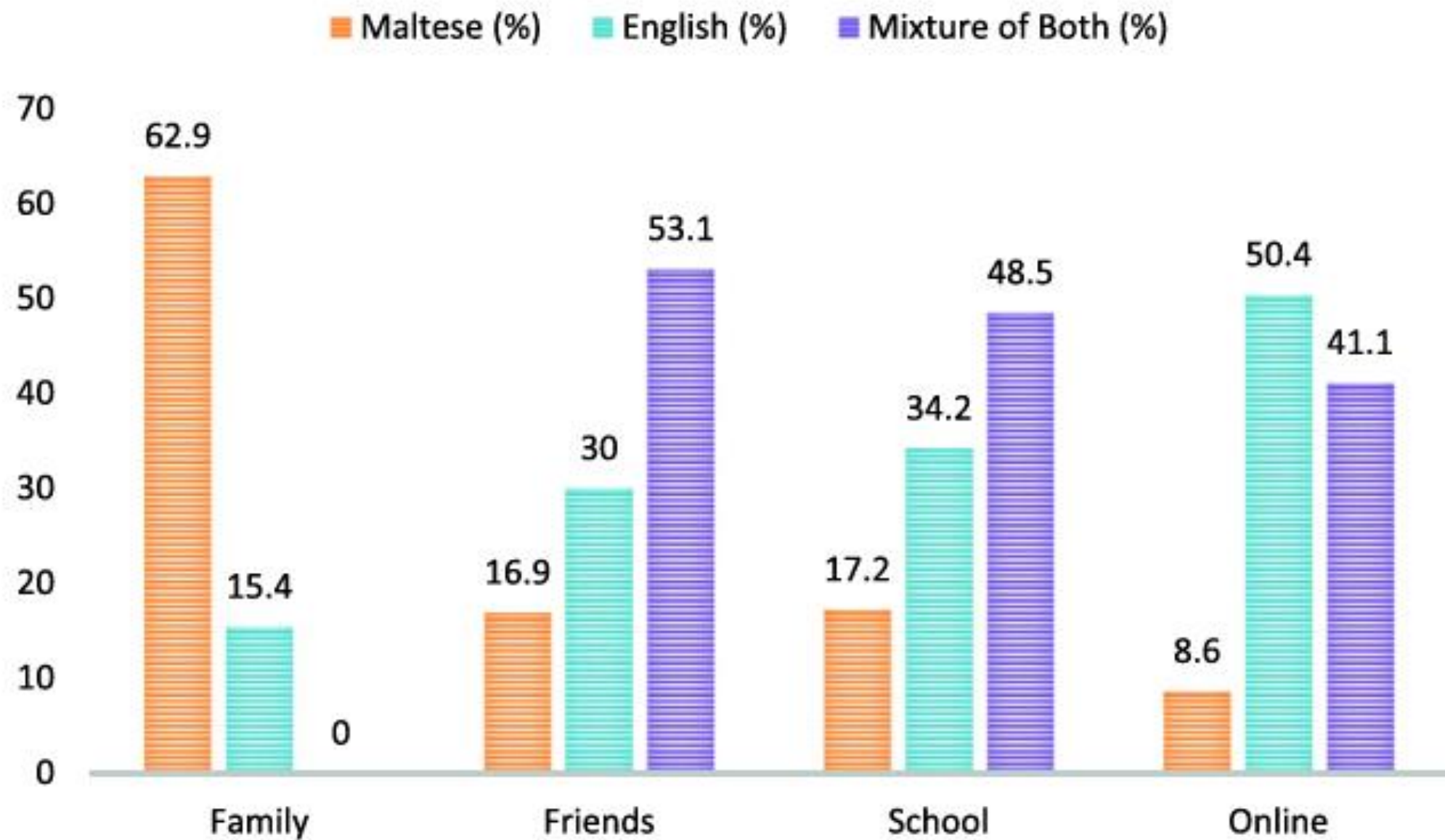


Figure 4. Language use in daily lives.

Balancing Roots and Mobility

Adolescents recognise **English** as key for **education and careers**

Yet many express concern about **Maltese language decline**

Desire for **balanced bilingualism** – maintaining Maltese while embracing English

Reflects a **negotiated identity**, not a divided one



Multilingualism as Resource

Students perceive multilingualism as:

Cognitive/academic asset
(enhances learning)

Social/empathic skill (fosters understanding)

Less focus on **economic value** – still seen as secondary

Multilingualism = *competence and flexibility*, not just cultural identity



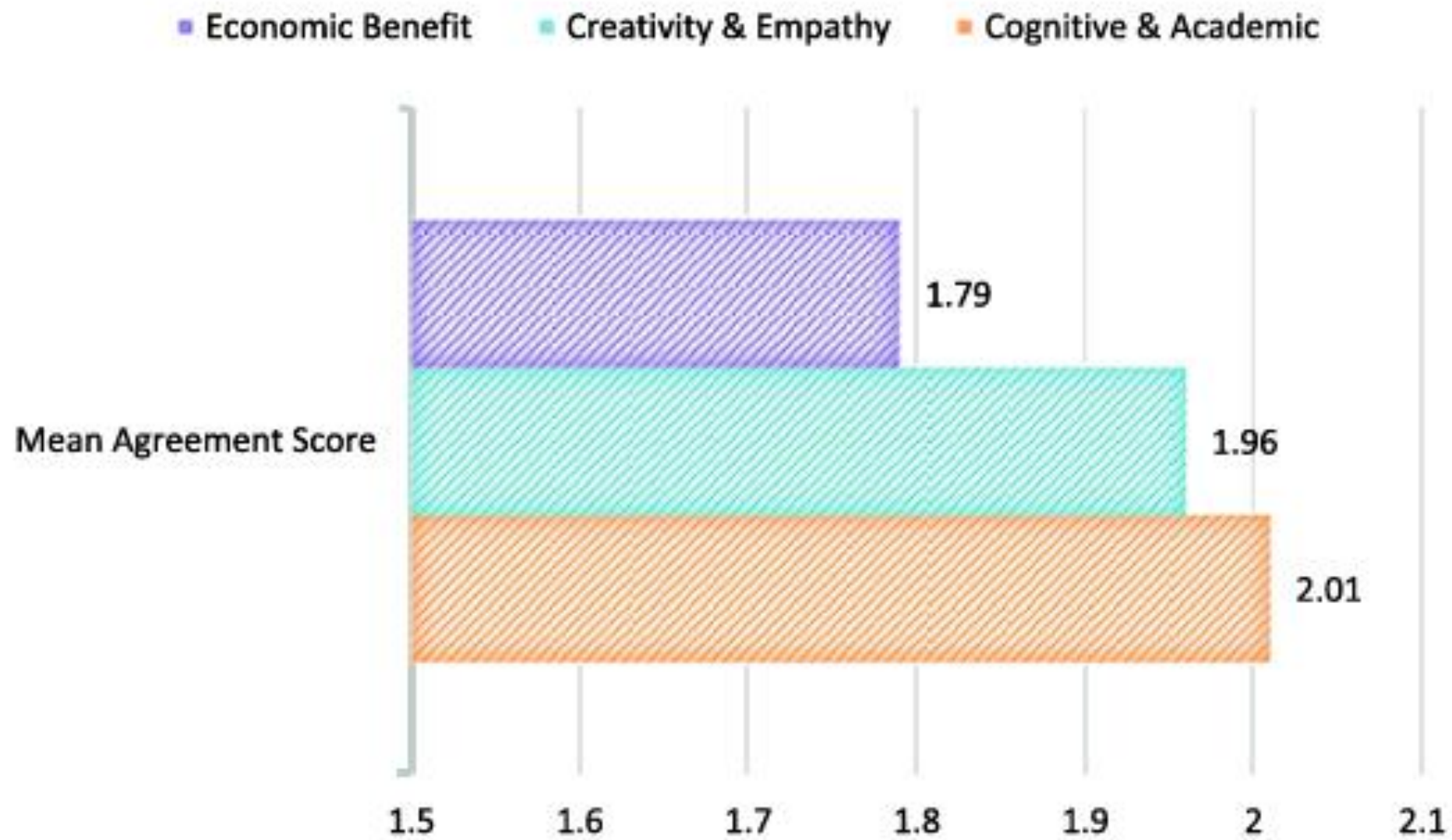


Figure 5. Economic or practical advantages.

Conclusions

Maltese adolescents **actively negotiate language and identity**

Heritage and pragmatism **coexist rather than conflict**

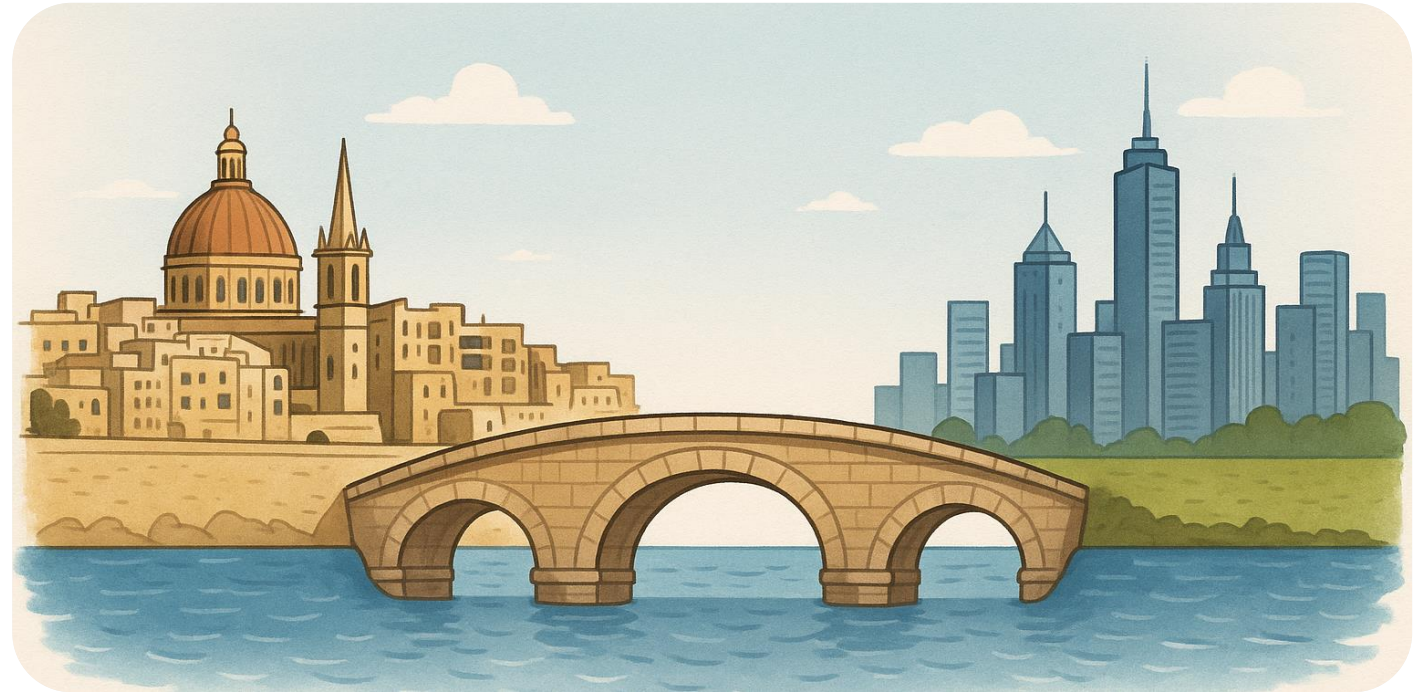
Identity formation is **dynamic, situational, and agentive**

Youth see themselves as **Maltese – but globally connected**

Bilingualism = *a bridge between belonging and becoming*



“For Maltese youth, language is not a boundary but a bridge ... a way to stay rooted while reaching out to the world.”



Thank you! Any Questions?



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