

Article

The Future Orientation of Italian Adolescents in Post-Pandemic Times: Associations with Self-Efficacy and Perceived Academic Achievement

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Abstract: Future orientation refers to an individual's conscious portrayal of upcoming events, encompassing thoughts, motivations, and emotions. Research on future orientation has primarily focused on adolescents due to their perceived necessity to prepare for adulthood. To investigate the hopes and fears of Italian adolescents in post-pandemic times, as well as age and gender differences and the associations between future orientation, self-efficacy, and perceived academic achievement, a survey was conducted with 388 Italian high school students. The Future Orientation and Life Course Prospective Questionnaires, along with the Problem-Solving Self-Efficacy Scale, were administered. Data analysis involved content analysis of hopes and fears, as well as statistical methods (*t*-tests, Pearson's correlation coefficients, and multiple regression analysis) were employed. A greater number of fears than hopes were mentioned. Age differences were marginal. Compared with males, females expressed a greater number of hopes and fears and provided more detailed insights into their fears within the domains of higher education, self, and the general existential category. As expected, positive and modest correlations were observed between future orientation, self-efficacy, and academic achievement. Notably, self-efficacy and work/career future orientation were found to predict academic achievement. The results are discussed in terms of their relevance for school educational programs.

Keywords: future orientation; adolescence; post-pandemic; COVID-19; self-efficacy; academic achievement



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1. Introduction

1.1. Future Orientation

In the psychological literature, the term “future orientation” has been used by different authors to describe people's conceptions of the future [1,2]. Specifically, this construct refers to an individual's conscious portrayal of upcoming events, encompassing thoughts, aspirations, plans, motivations, and emotions [3,4].

Various frameworks have been used to study, analyze, and measure how people conceptualize their future, including the Possible-Self Model [5], Future Time Perspective [6], and the Three-Component Model of Future Orientation [4,7]. In the context of self-studies, Markus and Nurius [5] theorized the “possible self” as a future-oriented self-concept or a mental representation of the self in the future. Individuals have more than one possible self, and these are domain-specific. This means that an individual can have a possible self in the area of marriage and family (e.g., being caring) and another in the area of work and career (e.g., being bold). Moreover, there are two types of possible selves: hoped-for selves and feared selves. Hoped-for selves represent our aspirations, embodying what we desire to become, while feared selves embody what we dread becoming. The theory posits that current behavioral patterns are influenced by the aspiration to actualize hoped-for selves and minimize the likelihood of realizing feared selves [8]. Notably, hoped-for selves may not always align with conventional societal notions of adaptability; for instance, an

adolescent may aspire to become a small-scale drug dealer while fearing the label of being a “talented student”.

Future Time Perspective refers to the integration of the anticipated future into the psychological present. This represents a cognitive–motivational personality construct that evolves within a motivational context and yields motivational consequences. Seginer [4] describes future time perspective as a thematic because future orientation is conceived as a generalized ability to think about the future and act accordingly, regardless of the content of the thought or surrounding contexts. Some proponents of this approach, including Zimbardo and Boyd [6], consider the inclination towards, or conversely, the aversion to, reflecting on the future as a variable of individual differences. Other scholars have investigated the interplay among future time perspective, personality traits, and social conditions such as delinquency [9,10].

On the contrary, the Three-Component Model of Future Orientation [4,7], like the Possible-Self Model, can be described as thematic because the future is not interpreted as an empty temporal space but is defined by images and content. The Three-Component Theory can also be defined as generic because it applies to different life domains [4]. In this model, a person’s future orientation is conceived as the result of the interaction of three components: motivation, cognitive representation, and behavior. The three components have a hierarchical relationship, where motivation plays a crucial role, directly impacting the cognitive representation and, both directly and indirectly through the cognitive component, influencing the behavioral component [4]. In the research adopting this theoretical perspective, future orientation is typically assessed by hopes and fears [11,12].

1.2. Future Orientation and Adolescence

Future orientation undergoes development throughout the entire lifespan [3], starting from childhood [13,14] and extending to old age [15]. However, the majority of research on future orientation has focused on adolescents due to their more advanced cognitive abilities compared with children, and their perceived necessity to prepare for adulthood [2]. During this phase of life, adolescents transition from concrete to more abstract thinking [16], enhancing their ability to contemplate hypothetical scenarios regarding how their future goals are linked to their current thoughts and behaviors [17]. Adolescents, by incorporating future considerations into their current behavior, have the capacity to formulate personal plans and aspirations, exhibit the ability to postpone immediate rewards for future benefits, and make strategic decisions that could prove advantageous in adulthood [2]. In fact, research indicated that aspirations of adolescents at the age of 16 predict their career aspirations during early adulthood [18].

Similarly to other human capabilities, the development of future orientation takes place within the frameworks of institutions, socioeconomic conditions, and cultural influences [3]; the norms dictating expectations for lifespan development, the thematic focus of interests, and planning approaches are largely acquired through social interactions with parents, siblings, peers, and educational institutions [2,4]. When asked about their future orientation, it is noteworthy that adolescents consistently reference common domains with minimal variation across different cultures [3]. Adolescents in Western societies often express interest in personal happiness, leisure, and future family plans, while those in more traditional societies tend to focus on concerns related to their families of origin, health, death, and marriage [2]. Research indicates that adolescents, regardless of cultural background, exhibit the greatest interest in future occupation and education, with family/marriage, leisure activities, and material aspects following closely. For instance, in a survey utilizing the Hopes and Fears Questionnaire, Nurmi [19] focused on a sample of Finnish adolescents and identified that future occupation and education were the most frequently mentioned domains. In addition, McCabe and Barnett [20] discovered that among younger adolescents, future orientations were notably more detailed within the career domain compared with the family or romantic relationship domains. Nurmi [2] reported that the most prevalent fears or concerns among adolescents revolved around the apprehension of not fulfilling

normative tasks. Study participants commonly mentioned global or societal threats, but these concerns did not appear to significantly alter planning behavior. This has been confirmed by the most recent studies. For instance, a survey conducted with Spanish, South American, and African students showed that adolescents aspire to have a fulfilling job and stable family and economic situations. They expressed concerns about various aspects, including their own health and the well-being of their family, the potential for precarious employment, the prospect of becoming isolated from their family of origin, and the possibility of not establishing a family of their own [21].

It is worth noting that findings on gender differences in the literature are inconsistent. Firstly, gender differences in adolescent future orientation are more pronounced in traditional societies than in Western ones. Boys seem to demonstrate a greater interest in material aspects, while girls seem more inclined towards familial aspects, such as marrying or having children [2]. Gjesme [22] found that Norwegian girls were higher than boys on general future orientation. In a study with Israeli and Arab adolescents, Seginer [23] found that gender differences in hopes and fears about the future were primarily observed in the Arab sample. There were no gender differences in specificity of hopes and fears for the Israeli Jewish sample. For the Israeli Arabs, girls expressed higher hopes regarding education and greater fears related to work and career. On the other hand, boys exhibited higher levels of fear concerning more collective issues, such as national and international politics. Regarding the specificity dimension, female adolescents were more specific about hopes concerning the education domain. They were also more specific about fears concerning work and career. In contrast, male students expressed greater specificity regarding their concerns related to political and economic issues. However, other studies have demonstrated that boys are more interested in education and career than girls [24]. In a study involving African-American high school students, Kerpelman and Mosher [25] observed that girls exhibited higher future orientation levels in both career and education compared with boys. In a study conducted in China, male adolescents reported a higher level of commitment to future education and a lower level of commitment concerning marriage and family than females [26]. Finally, a few studies have found no gender differences in adolescents' hopes and fears [20,27].

As for age differences in the adolescent period, Nurmi [19] found that levels of planning and knowledge concerning hopes increase with age. Dreams and desires related to education were cited more frequently at the age of 15 than at 11 years old. Seginer [28], examining a sample of female adolescents, found age difference only in the prospective life course domains (with young participants investing less in their future than older ones), and not for the existential domains pertaining to self, others, and collective issues. Nurmi [2] noted that older adolescents mentioned goals related to future education and family, and concerns about future education and property, more frequently than did younger ones.

The most recent research has depicted a complex picture of age difference related to future orientation. For instance, a study conducted on 380 Chilean high school students, aged from 12 to 19 years, showed that future orientation did not vary as a function of age in all life domains, with the exception of health, where older students scored higher than their younger counterparts [29]. A study conducted with Chinese students in late adolescence reported more exploration in all the three domains of future education, work and career, and marriage/family than students in middle adolescence. Students in middle adolescence reported greater commitment to future education than students in late adolescence, while students in late adolescence reported greater commitment to marriage/family than students in middle adolescence [26].

Future studies are essential to more clearly delineate the role of age in future orientation and to identify developmental milestones that also consider the influence of gender and cultural background. Understanding how age interacts with individual differences in future thinking can provide deeper insights into the processes that guide planning and anticipation across the lifespan. Moreover, incorporating considerations of gender and culture can illuminate how diverse social and environmental contexts shape the way individuals en-

vision their futures. This approach will enable researchers to develop more comprehensive models of future orientation that reflect the complexity of this human experience.

1.3. Future Orientation, Self-Efficacy, and Academic Achievement

Research has investigated the relationship between future orientation and various outcomes, contending that factors like self-efficacy may contribute to future orientation and influence current behavior [4]. The psychology literature regarding self-efficacy draws heavily from the insights of Albert Bandura [30]. He conceptualized self-efficacy as individuals' perceptions of their ability to plan and execute actions for specific performance objectives. Bandura provides a broader explanation of how self-efficacy impacts future orientation. He stated that "Perceived efficacy plays a key role in human functioning because it affects behavior not only directly, but by its impact on other determinants such as goals and aspirations, outcome expectations, affective proclivities, and perception of impediments and opportunities in the social environment [31] (p. 309)". In the field of educational psychology, the examination of self-efficacy stands out as a highly researched variable in the context of academic success, given its status as one of the most robust predictors of academic achievement [32]. Furthermore, problem-solving self-efficacy, defined as the sense of one's ability in addressing and solving problems creatively [33], is a form of self-efficacy more connected to future orientation in adolescence because, in this stage of life, making decisions about one's future can be interpreted as a normative problem-solving task [3]. In fact, research has demonstrated that future time perspective is correlated with creative problem-solving in adolescents and young adults [34].

Limited research has explored the connection between self-efficacy and future orientation. Bandura and associates [35] demonstrated that children's self-efficacy directly shapes the kinds of occupational activities they consider themselves capable of, both independently and by influencing their academic aspirations. Both a study focused on American adolescents [36] and a separate study centered on college students in Canada [37] revealed a positive correlation between self-efficacy and future orientation. A more recent study conducted on Egyptian high school students has confirmed the positive correlation between self-efficacy and future orientation [38].

Various studies have delved into future orientation in the academic context, particularly investigating students' future goals, academic achievement, and standing as a good student [39,40], as well as concerns related to these domains [41,42]. In a survey involving 3078 adolescent students in Hong Kong, the researchers observed that boys' hoped-for selves predominantly focused on the areas of education and career, while their feared selves developed around the realm of risky behaviors [43]. Moreover, it has been found that academic possible selves can help students effectively manage their motivation and academic behaviors to achieve better performance [40,44], being closely linked to an adaptive capacity for future orientation [41,45,46].

The ability to project oneself into the future has shown correlations with elevated academic motivation [47] and satisfactory academic outcomes [48,49], organizational and planning abilities [50,51], and an integrated sense of identity [52]. Specifically, future orientation has been linked by different scholars to academic achievement. Seginer [53], investigating a group of 135 Israeli adolescents, highlighted that students with high scores on motivational and behavioral scales reported higher positive expectations regarding their academic performance, exhibiting behaviors conducive to achieving their set goals. Namely, it has been demonstrated that future orientation related to work and career explained a higher percentage of the variance of academic achievement than does the relational domain (marriage/family) [4,54,55]. Hejazi and associates [56] explored future orientation concerning academic performance in 193 Iranian adolescents, finding a close association with the motivational and behavioral components of this construct. Participants with high scores on scales measuring these variables were characterized by a successful future orientation, particularly in the academic domain.

Based on these empirical findings, it appears that having a future-oriented mindset can have a positive influence on academic success by fostering increased commitment to learning activities. Consequently, the degree of effort dedicated to academic responsibilities, as predicted by future orientation, correlates with improved academic performance [57]. In fact, a very recent systematic review revealed a clear relationship between future-oriented thought and positive outcomes in the academic setting [58].

1.4. The Current Study

The COVID-19 pandemic has compelled individuals to confront an ambiguous and invisible threat, profoundly altering our way of life. In this post-pandemic era, people are urged to reconsider their approach to the world and re-evaluate their lifestyles and work, while grappling with the persistent presence of the virus and the potential for new health emergencies. These factors collectively shape our perception and vision of the future [59].

Research findings suggest that the pandemic has instilled a sense of uncertainty in the adolescent population, intensifying pre-existing concerns and disrupting the short- and long-term plans of youth regarding education and career prospects [17]. A recent survey conducted in Italy with a sizable sample of participants aged 18–36 concluded that six out of ten young people (62.1%) have altered their outlook on the future in the wake of the pandemic. Only 22.1% believe the future will be better, while 40% anticipate it will be worse, and 37.9% expect it to remain the same [60].

The present study is grounded in the Three-Component Model of Future Orientation [4,7] and its thematic approach. The author's interest lies in exploring the themes of hopes and fears among Italian adolescents in post-pandemic times. To the best of the author's knowledge, no recent research has delved into the hopes and fears of Italian adolescents, and this study aims to provide valuable insights for researchers, psychologists, educators, and teachers. It seeks to enhance their understanding of how teenagers presently perceive their future and how their future orientation correlates with self-efficacy and academic achievement. Building on the insights from previous studies on adolescents' future orientation, the study formulated four research questions and corresponding hypotheses:

R1. *What hopes and fears about the future do the adolescents in the sample have in these post-pandemic times?*

H1. *Drawing on the literature review [2,19,21], it is anticipated that prospective life course domains, specifically future education and occupation, and marriage and family, will be the most frequently cited themes of hopes and fears. Regarding concerns, it is hypothesized that new themes will surface, such as the fear of contracting COVID-19 or new viruses. Responses are expected to portray a scenario of uncertainty about the future, akin to findings in surveys conducted in Italy on young adults [60].*

R2. *Are there gender and age differences in the number and themes of hopes and fears reported by the sampled adolescents?*

H2. *Considering that Italian society adheres to Western cultural norms and acknowledging that gender differences are not consistently reported in the literature, there lacks a solid theoretical or empirical basis to anticipate the emergence of gender differences in the enumeration of hopes and fears, their distribution across different life domains, and their specificity (or level of detail).*

Any statistically significant differences, if present, are expected to be few and characterized by a low-magnitude effect size. Similarly, no theoretical or empirical reasons suggest significant differences in the number, density, and specificity of hopes and fears reported by older and younger adolescents in the sample. In the event of statistically significant differences, they are anticipated to be few and characterized by a small effect size.

R3. *Are there associations between the three dimensions of future orientation (future orientation related to work and career, future orientation related to family and work, and general future orientation), self-efficacy, and academic achievement?*

H3. Based on the literature review [4,32,37,38,54,55], positive correlations are expected between the three aforementioned dimensions of future orientation, perceived self-efficacy, and self-perceived academic achievement.

R4. Do self-efficacy and future orientation work/career future orientation predict academic achievement?

H4. Drawing on the available literature [4,37,38,54], it is hypothesized that both self-efficacy and future orientation related to work and career will predict academic achievement.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants and Procedure

A convenience sampling method was employed in the current study. The survey involved 388 Italian high school students, comprising 199 males and 289 females (Age $M = 16.49$; $SD = 0.96$). To address the second research question, participants were divided into two age groups. The first group included 219 mid-adolescents (101 males; 118 females) aged 15–16 years ($M = 15.79$; $SD = 0.40$), while the second group included 169 old-adolescents (98 males; 71 females) aged 17–19 years ($M = 17.04$; $SD = 0.67$).

Participants were recruited from four different high schools in a middle-sized town in northern Italy, representing diverse educational paths (scientific lyceum, artistic lyceum, technical school, and vocational school). Inclusion criteria were: (a) residing in Italy; (b) being a high school student; (c) proficient in speaking and understanding Italian; and (d) being surveyed voluntarily. Exclusion criteria were: (a) being an exchange student (not residing in Italy); (b) lacking proficiency in Italian; and (b) not completing the closed-ended questions of the survey entirely. No compensation was provided, and the participation rate was 87.7%.

Participants completed a self-report, paper-pencil, and anonymous questionnaire during a regular school day, regarding future orientation, self-efficacy, and academic achievement. Trained testers administered the questionnaire, and each session took approximately 40 min per class. Informed consent was obtained both from the students, as well as from the parents of any minors. The study was conducted in accordance with the Italian Psychological Association's guidelines on ethics and human subject research.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Socio-Demographic Measures

The socio-demographic measures collected from the participants included age, gender, and perceived social status. Perceived social status was assessed using the Italian translation of the Youth Version of McArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status [61]. This scale aims to gauge subjective social status by presenting a numbered stepladder image ranging from 1 to 10 steps.

2.2.2. Future Orientation

The study used two future orientation questionnaires based on the versions proposed by Seginer [4]. The first one was the Future Orientation Questionnaire, an open-ended survey prompting participants to think about their future and record all thoughts in two distinct sections related to hopes and fears. Each section had nine lines, but participants were given the freedom to note down as many hopes and fears they wished. Although participants could be instructed to specify the age range during which their aspirations or concerns were relevant, these questions were omitted in the current study as they did not align with any of the research questions.

The second instrument was the Prospective Life Course Questionnaire, a structured survey comprising Likert-type scales designed to assess all three components of future orientation: cognitive, motivational, and behavioral. The questionnaire features two separate scales: Work and Career (30 items) and Marriage and Family (32 items). Sample items include "I am making serious preparations to enter a specific career" and "I have a

clear picture about my marriage and family life". Responses are rated on a 5-point scale ranging from "Definitely does not describe" to "Definitely describes". The questionnaire, employed in various international studies, demonstrated construct validity according to Seginer and Mahajna [62]. In the current study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.89 for the Work and Career scale and 0.91 for the Marriage and Family scale.

The rigorous Back Translation and Target Language Test Method [63] was employed for each of the two future orientation questionnaires in a six-step process: (1) double translation by two professional translators; (2) collecting feedback from a translation committee and making revisions; (3) conducting a pilot study with 25 high school students; (4) revising questionnaires and obtaining feedback from both the translation committee and the adolescent feedback panel; (5) revising and completing a second pilot study with an additional 10 high school students; and (6) confirming the final version. The translation committee consisted of a professor of Psychology, a doctoral student in Human Sciences, and two licensed psychologists, offering valuable support in understanding the Three-Component Model of Future Orientation and ensuring language accuracy throughout the translation process. The adolescent feedback panel, composed of four adolescents (aged 15–17 years), offered insights on the questionnaire's clarity and layout from a youth perspective.

2.2.3. Perceived Self-Efficacy

To assess perceived problem-solving self-efficacy, the present study employed a scale that was already available in Italian, developed by Pastorelli and associates [33] for implementation with adolescents. The scale consisted of 14 items that measure adolescents' perceived belief about their ability to engage in problem-solving. Given that problem-solving ability is intertwined with future orientation—enabling individuals, for instance, to generate and evaluate alternative solutions before deciding or anticipate the possible consequences of a decision—the scale aligns with the aims of the study. Sample items include "Being a volcano of ideas" and "Generating and discussing solutions before making a decision". Participants rated the strength of their beliefs on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 ("Not at all capable") to 5 ("Fully capable"). The scale demonstrated a level of reliability meeting standard acceptability criteria, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87 and a corrected item–total–scale average correlation coefficient of 0.51 [33]. In the current study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.78.

2.2.4. Perceived Academic Achievement

The schools in the sample did not grant the researcher access to the grades reported on the students' cards due to privacy reasons. Consequently, similarly to other studies on adolescents [36], self-reported grades served as a metric to indicate the current level of academic achievement. The researcher acknowledged the potential for distortions between perceived academic achievement and actual academic achievement. However, very recent literature suggested that these distortions have a limited magnitude, allowing for the use in surveys [64].

In the sampled schools, the possible grades range from 0 to 10, with 6 representing the lowest passing grade and 10 the highest passing grade. Participants were requested to disclose their grades in response to the inquiry: "What were your grades on the last school report card?". The response options included: (1) Predominantly 6 or below; (2) Predominantly 6 and 7; (3) Predominantly 7; (4) Predominantly 7 and 8; (5) Predominantly 8; (6) Predominantly 8 and 9; (7) Predominantly 9 and 10.

2.3. Qualitative Analysis of the Open-Ended Questions

As an initial step, each narrative of the Future Orientation Questionnaire concerning hopes and fears was dissected into its smallest meaningful units or narrative units. Subsequently, each of these narrative units underwent coding based on its thematic content, which was categorized within eight life domains. These categories were derived from

the examination of future orientation narratives from adolescent samples and have been utilized in prior studies [12].

Two independent assessors, both trained psychologists and unaware of the research aims, performed a content analysis on the responses. They compared the results and mediated any disagreements (which accounted for less than 10% of the cases) through discussions. To ensure that agreements were not due to chance, Cohen's kappa coefficient was computed for each answer category, and the kappa values were always higher than random patterns ($p < 0.01$).

The eight themes corresponding to the life domain categories are as follows: (1) higher education; (2) work and career; (3) marriage and family (children); (4) self (comprising nonspecific hopes like "to be satisfied with my life" and fears like "to have regrets", illness, and death); (5) others (parents, friends, and peers, as well as intimate partners); (6) money and material goods; (7) leisure; and (8) collective issues (war and peace, and other political, social, and economic issues applicable to one's community or country, or the world). Two overarching categories were created: (1) prospective life course (comprising higher education, work and career, and marriage and family categories); and (2) existential area (comprising self, others, money and wealth, leisure, and collective issues).

Frequency and percentage for each category were calculated. Density and specificity scores were also calculated, following these rules: (1) "Density scores pertain to the number of domain specific narratives/the total number of narratives ratio for hopes and fears, respectively, for each domain and overarching category [i.e., prospective life course and existential domains] [4] (p. 49)". (2) "Specificity scores pertain to the mean of the specificity ratings for each domain. They are produced by assigning each narrative a score ranging from 1 (low specificity) to 3 (high specificity). To illustrate, "to get married" is scored 1, "to have a big wedding party" or "to get married and live happily" is scored 2, and "to get married and have three beautiful children" is scored 3" [4] (p. 49). The Spearman's coefficient was used to measure the accordance degree, and the reliability between the two assessors was deemed adequate ($r_s = 0.74$).

2.4. Quantitative Analysis Strategy

Quantitative analyses were performed using the SPSS Statistics 26.0 software. To detect age and gender differences in the means of the number of hopes and fears, and the density scores, both parametric (independent sample *t*-test) and non-parametric (Mann–Whitney U test) tests were employed based on whether the assumption of normality for the variable was met. The normality of the data was tested through the skewness and kurtosis indices. A Bonferroni-corrected *p*-value of 0.005 (0.05/10) was applied to control for multiple comparisons. The effect size was analyzed using Cohen's *d* for the *t*-test.

3. Results

3.1. The Content of Hopes and Fears of Sampled Adolescents

First of all, open-ended questions were answered by 335 participants. The number of hopes expressed ranged from 0 to 8, while the number of fears ranged from 1 to 9. Overall, the participants mentioned 1089 fears and 736 hopes. On average, participants reported more fears ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.63$) than hopes ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.64$). The categories (life domains), along with their frequencies and percentages, are presented in Table 1.

The majority of emphasized fears (61.2%) pertained to the non-fulfillment of normative tasks, such as "not passing the university entrance exam", "not continuing studies for some reason", "not finding employment", "not marrying", "not achieving economic independence from their family", and "not having children". Many expressed the fear of failure, with concerns like "remaining unemployed", "being laid off", "not succeeding", "divorcing", "ending up homeless", and "failing to meet the needs of their children".

Table 1. Frequencies and percentages of the categories of responses (life domains) for fears and hopes.

Domains	Fears (n = 1089)		Hopes (n = 736)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Higher education	229	21.0%	141	19.1%
Work and career	261	24.0%	211	28.7%
Marriage and family	177	16.2%	103	14.0%
Prospective life course domains (total)	667	61.2%	455	61.8%
Self	132	12.1%	97	13.2%
Others	104	9.5%	71	9.6%
Money and material goods	91	8.4%	57	7.7%
Leisure	19	1.7%	38	5.2%
Collective issues	76	7.0%	18	2.4%
Existential domains (total)	422	38.7%	281	38.2%

Also common was the fear of regret, articulated through sentiments like “regretting not having enjoyed life”, “regretting having worked too much”, and “realizing it is too late to change their life plans”. Furthermore, numerous fears related to existential domains (38.7%) emerged, such as “not realizing one’s dreams”, “not achieving success”, “feeling lonely”, “not finding the right path in one’s life”, “feeling trapped in life”, “realizing that life has swallowed them”, and “not being able to cope in life”. One adolescent expressed the fear of “ending up in prison due to a judicial error”, while others have mentioned the fear of “being arrested”. Among some girls, there was the fear of “experiencing gender-based violence”.

Also widely mentioned was the fear of falling ill or dying due to illness or a road accident, with details on specific concerns like COVID-19, new dangerous viruses, cancer, and Alzheimer’s disease. Fears concerning others were predominantly linked to the “illness of their parents”, “the loss of their loved ones”, or “disappointing their parents”. Collective issues were more prominently featured among fears (7%) than hopes (2.4%), including themes like “the outbreak of new pandemic”, “the outbreak of a world conflict”, “climate change”, and “finding oneself living in a world that is too technologically advanced”.

The majority of aspirations expressed by participants (61.8%) were closely tied to the prospective life course, with a particular focus on economic independence and mobility. For instance, desires such as “passing the graduation exam”, “entering university”, “completing studies”, “finding a stable and well-paying job”, “obtaining a driver’s license”, and “acquiring the car of one’s dreams” are recurrent.

A variety of perspectives on achieving financial success are evident: while some individuals embraced the idea of working hard to realize their dreams, others were drawn to the illusion of easy gains, as seen in expressions like “I would like to win Powerball”, “I hope to make money through gambling”, “I aspire to earn as an influencer or content creator on TikTok”, and “I would like to profit by opening an OnlyFans profile”. Relational aspects were equally central, with aspirations ranging from “finding a romantic partner” to “starting cohabitation”, “entering into a civil union”, “getting married”, and “forming a beautiful family”, all the way to the hope of “having children”.

The 38.2% of aspirations expressed by the participants were related to existential dimensions, wishing to “be happy”, “realize themselves in life”, “pursue a fulfilling career”, and “live meaningful experiences”. Those who mentioned others described more altruistic hopes, such as “staying close to their family”, “cultivating numerous friendships”, and “helping those in need”.

Regarding collective and social themes, some adolescents shared broader hopes, such as “hoping for world peace” and “wishing for a reduction in the cost of living”. In the realm of leisure time, aspirations related to personal entertainment emerge, such as “participating in all desired concerts” and “achieving success as a sports enthusiast”. The most common cited leisure activity was “traveling”.

3.2. Age and Gender Differences in the Hopes and Fears of Sampled Adolescents

The second research question aimed to determine whether there were differences in the themes of adolescents' hopes and fears based on to gender and age. Concerning gender differences, firstly, adolescent females expressed a greater number of fears ($M = 3.95, SD = 0.13$) than their male counterparts ($M = 3.12, SD = 1.42$), showing a statistically significant difference with a large effect size ($t_{333} = -4.79, p < 0.001, d = 0.82$). Likewise, girls expressed a greater number of hopes ($M = 2.71, SD = 1.80$) than boys ($M = 1.64, SD = 1.21$), and the difference was statistically significant with a medium-high effect size ($t_{304,525} = -6.33, p < 0.001, d = 0.70$).

Regarding density scores for hopes and fears, differences between male and female adolescents did not reach the corrected level for p -values ($p < 0.005$) in any case. Moreover, as reported in Table 2, on average, females scored higher than males only in the specificity of the fears concerning higher education, self, and the overarching category of existential domains, with a moderate effect size in any case (see Table 2 for statistical details).

Table 2. Means, standard deviations (or mean ranks), and statistical tests of specificity scores for males and females.

Domains	Males <i>M (SD)/MR</i>		Females <i>M (SD)/MR</i>		Statistical Tests	
	Hopes	Fears	Hopes	Fears	Hopes	Fears
Higher education	0.80 (0.98)	0.45 (0.86)	1.10 (1.03)	0.96 (1.15)	$t_{333} = -2.89$	$t_{318.450} = -4.63^*$ $d = 0.50$
Work and career	1.39 (0.88)	0.72 (0.91)	1.46 (0.95)	0.85 (0.94)	$t_{333} = -0.68$	$t_{296.192} = -1.28$
Marriage and family	0.46 (0.95)	165.2	0.63 (0.68)	170.59	$t_{324,668} = -2.58$	$U = 14,458.50$
Prospective life course domains	1.47 (0.71)	1.01 (0.89)	1.57 (0.74)	1.20 (1.03)	$t_{333} = -1.24$	$t_{329.318} = -1.83$
Self	0.47 (0.71)	0.54 (0.86)	0.70 (1.00)	1.21 (1.11)	$t_{311,508} = -2.43$	$t_{322.699} = -6.16^*$ $d = 0.70$
Others	172.48	0.21 (0.62)	163.85	0.34 (0.85)	$U = 13,285.50$	$t_{315.408} = -1.58$
Money and material goods	167.09	170.89	168.84	163.36	$U = 14,154.00$	$U = 13,219.50$
Leisures	0.23 (0.62)	167.00	0.30 (0.78)	168.93	$t_{333} = -0.92$	$U = 14,168.00$
Collective issues	168.08	170.24	167.93	165.93	$U = 29,219.00$	$U = 13,647.00$
Existential domains	0.30 (0.31)	0.79 (0.93)	0.28 (0.31)	1.40 (1.08)	$t_{333} = 0.45$	$t_{331.600} = -5.55^*$ $d = 0.61$

M = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *MR* = mean rank; * $p < 0.005$.

Regarding age differences, firstly, younger adolescents (15–16 years old) expressed, on average, a greater number of fears ($M = 3.78, SD = 1.70$) than their older (17–19 years old) counterparts ($M = 3.24, SD = 1.49$), and this showed a statistically significant difference but with a small effect size ($t_{333} = 2.98, p = 0.003, d = 0.33$). Similarly, younger adolescents wrote, on average, a greater number of hopes ($M = 2.33, SD = 1.71$) than older ones ($M = 2.01, SD = 1.51$), but this time, the difference did not reach a statistical significance ($t_{323,277} = 1.80, p = 0.07$).

Concerning density scores, younger and older adolescents did not show a statically significant difference for hopes, but only for fears in one domain with a small effect size. Specifically, regarding density scores for fears in the domain of marriage and family, younger adolescents ($M = 0.07, SD = 0.15$) scored higher than older adolescents ($M = 0.03, SD = 0.10$), and the difference was statistically significant with a small effect size ($t_{326.808} = 3.37, p = 0.001, d = 0.31$). Furthermore, on average, younger adolescents ($M = 0.36, SD = 0.78$) scored higher than older adolescents ($M = 0.11, SD = 0.43$) in the specificity scores of fears concern-

ing marriage and family, and the difference was statistically significant with a small effect size ($t_{333} = 3.43, p < 0.001, d = 0.40$).

3.3. Associations between Future Orientation, Self-Efficacy, and Academic Achievement

Before delving into the third research question, the range (minimum–maximum), means, and standard deviations for all quantitative variables of the study were calculated and examined (see Table 3).

Table 3. Range, means, and standard deviations of the study variables.

	Range Min-Max	M (SD)
1. General future orientation	112–279	191.67 (27.19)
2. Work and career future orientation	65–161	121.14 (16.76)
3 Marriage and family future orientation	32–146	98.48 (18.58)
6. Perceived social status	2–9	6.12 (0.95)
7. Self-efficacy	26–70	47.11 (6.31)
8. Academic achievement	1–7	3.54 (1.47)

Min = Minimum; Max = Maximum; M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

Overall, participants perceived that they held a slightly above-average social status. Their perceived academic achievement was medium (predominantly 7 grades) and their perceived self-efficacy was moderate. The adolescents in the sample reported moderate to high scores of general future orientation and of work and career, and marriage and family future orientation. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted, and it was found that gender, age, and perceived social status did not have a statistically significant effect on future orientation, self-efficacy, and academic achievement. Therefore, those demographic variables were excluded from the subsequent quantitative analyses.

The third research question addressed whether there were associations between the main variables of the study. Table 4 shows the correlational analysis that indicated that there were positive and modest correlations between the three forms of future orientations, self-efficacy, and academic achievement, with the exception of future orientation related to family and marriage, which did not show a statistically significant correlation with academic achievement.

Table 4. Correlations between the study variables.

	1	2	3	4	5
1. General future orientation	-				
2. Work and career future orientation	0.79 **	-			
3 Marriage and family future orientation	0.81 **	0.33 **	-		
4. Self-efficacy	0.35 **	0.36 **	0.23 **	-	
5. Academic achievement	0.13 **	0.22 **	0.79	0.27 **	-

** $p < 0.01$.

3.4. Self-Efficacy and Work/Career Future Orientation as Predictors of Academic Achievement

The fourth research question asked if—after examining the correlations among self-efficacy, future orientation related to work and career, and academic achievement—the latter two variables could predict the outcome variable of the study. Thus, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the fourth research question. In the first step, self-efficacy alone served as a significant predictor of academic achievement (Model 1). In the second step, work/career future orientation was added as predictor (Model 2). The results, reported in Table 5, showed that both self-efficacy and future orientation related to work and career predicted academic achievement. Since Model 2 remained significant, work and career future orientation uniquely predicted academic achievement even when controlling for self-efficacy.

Table 5. Regression results predicting academic achievement.

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>B</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	β	<i>SE</i>
Constant	0.66		0.54	−0.16		0.64
Self-efficacy	0.06	0.27 **	0.01	0.05	0.22 **	0.01
Work/Career future orientation				0.01	0.12 *	0.00
R^2	0.07			0.08		
ΔR^2				0.01 *		

Note. $n = 384$. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.001$.

4. Discussion

In these post-pandemic times, it appeared crucial to study how adolescents perceive their future in terms of hopes and fears and the association among future orientation, self-efficacy, and academic achievement. Generally, the study results supported the literature regarding the content of adolescents' hopes and fears and demonstrated associations between future orientation, self-efficacy, and perceived academic achievement.

4.1. The Hopes and Fears of Italian Adolescents

The first research question addressed the content of hopes and fears among the adolescents in the sample. Both qualitative and quantitative analyses supported the first hypothesis, aligning with previous studies [2,19,21]. The findings underscored that future occupation and education were the most frequently mentioned domains, both in the list of hopes and fears.

As predicted by the literature, the predominant apprehension was related to not fulfilling normative tasks, with concerns about various aspects such as the possibility of not finishing school or finding a good job and the prospect of not establishing a family as desired. However, new tendencies also emerged. Firstly, there was a perspective on easy gains, through activities like gambling or social networking sites. In terms of fears, specific concerns were mentioned, including the fear of contracting COVID-19 in the near future or developing Alzheimer's disease, as observed in the grandparents of many participants, albeit in a more distant future. It can be hypothesized that mass media plays a role in shaping fears related to COVID-19, as well as concerns about becoming victims of traffic accidents, legal proceedings, or gender-based violence, since news of this nature is reported daily by Italian television and online platforms. Adolescents, given their rapidly advancing physical and cognitive abilities [16], are susceptible to adopting a passive consumer role in relation to mass media, as noted by different authors [65,66].

Overall, the analysis of narratives on fears highlighted a future perceived as a dark and uncontrollable realm. On the other hand, the analysis of the content of adolescents' aspirations revealed a scenario in which the future is not perceived so much as rich in opportunities and possibilities, but rather as a temporal space to progress in one's life course, pursue happiness, and achieve self-realization.

Expressing more fears than hopes, participants seemed to see the future as full of uncertainties. According to the author, this can be interpreted as an effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has, in fact, highlighted that unpredictable events can occur, the dimensions and consequences of which surpass the ability of individuals to predict and intervene. The findings of the current study align with the picture that emerged from a recent survey conducted in Italy on young adults by a prestigious research institute [60]. According to this survey, if, before, many young people looked towards the future with optimism, today, the sentiment has decidedly changed, and youth do not seem to find adequate promises of improvement and well-being.

4.2. Age and Gender Differences in the Hopes and Fears of Italian Adolescents

The second research question investigated gender and age differences in the hopes and fears of participants. The formulated second hypothesis was only partially supported. Few age differences, with small effect sizes, were discovered, as posited, but there were also some gender differences, with medium and large effect sizes. Specifically, girls reported, on average, a greater number of both hopes and fears than boys, indicating their tendency to think more about the future than boys. Even if evidence on gender differences in the literature is inconsistent (due to the diversity of the measures used and the underlying operational definitions), findings from various research approaches indicate that females tend to pursue a wider range of goals compared with males [8] and tend to have a more developed future orientation [22]. This results likely mirrors the evolving roles of women in Western societies over the past few decades, which also affects the adolescent population [8]. While women still aspire to goals related to marriage and family, it has become increasingly common for them to also pursue objectives tied to work and career, and to existential domains, particularly in contemporary Western cultures. This interpretation is supported by the similarity in density scores for both hopes and fears between male and female participants, indicating that boys and girls are equally invested in the same future life domains. On the other hand, societal expectations for men's roles have undergone less dramatic changes, possibly contributing to the smaller number of hopes and fears reported by male participants of the current study.

Furthermore, girls were more detailed in describing their fears in certain fundamental life domains: higher education, self, and the overarching category of the existential domain. For example, a 16-year-old girl wrote: "My greatest fear is not passing the admission test for the University of Milan's medical school because, typically, boys excel more than girls in scientific subjects. Even if I succeed in the test, it's not guaranteed that I'll graduate or be admitted to the specialization in cardiac surgery". She previously stated her aspiration to become a cardiac surgeon. The greater levels of specificity in these crucial domains support the girls' more articulated orientation to the future, but may also reflect the persistence of negative gender stereotypes in Italian society, well documented by recent scientific research [67,68]. Due to gender stereotypes, girls might harbor more structured and specific fears compared with boys, concerning higher education, self, and existential themes in general.

The results of the current study supported the second hypothesis regarding the age differences, as these differences were few and consistently of small effect sizes. This finding may indicate that there are no significant changes in future orientations, in terms of hopes and fears, between middle adolescence (15–16 years) and late adolescence (17–19 years). This is consistent with some previous research findings [29] that did not find substantial differences in future orientation across adolescence.

4.3. Relationships between Future Orientation, Self-Efficacy, and Academic Achievement

The third research question investigated the associations between the three dimensions of future orientation (future orientation related to work and career, future orientation related to family and work, and general future orientation), self-efficacy, and academic achievement. As predicted by the third hypothesis, there were positive correlations, albeit

modest, between the aforementioned study variables, except for marriage and family future orientation, which did not significantly correlate with academic achievement.

This means that high levels of self-efficacy are associated with greater work and career and general future orientation. The more students develop these two types of future thinking and self-efficacy, the higher their level of academic achievement. This finding aligns with prior studies that have established positive associations between self-efficacy and academic achievement [69,70]. Moreover, the literature has consistently linked future orientation [53,58], and especially work and career future orientation [4,54,55], to academic achievement.

4.4. Self-Efficacy and Work/Career Future Orientation Predict Academic Achievement

The fourth research question explored whether academic achievement could be predicted by self-efficacy and work/career future orientation. As stated by the fourth hypothesis, both self-efficacy and work/career future orientation acted as significant predictors of academic achievement.

The study has shown that self-efficacy was the stronger predictor, with the largest absolute standardized β -value of 0.22, indicating that this was the most important variable in the study. If students have strong self-efficacy beliefs, then they also performed better academically. In addition, the positive correlation between work/career future orientation and academic achievement, even if modest, contributed to a predictive power of the former for the latter. The role of these two predictors is consistent with the studies that have demonstrated the crucial role of self-efficacy [71] and future orientation [58] in high school students' academic achievement.

4.5. Strengths and Limitations of the Study and Future Directions

Before delving into the implications of these findings, it is essential to acknowledge some limitations of the current study. Firstly, due to the absence of research funds, this study was constrained to a cross-sectional design employing convenient sampling, relying solely on self-reported data susceptible to recall and social desirability biases.

Secondly, future research with large and representative samples is necessary to examine the impact of future orientation and self-efficacy on academic achievement. Consequently, caution should be exercised when attempting to generalize the findings of this study. Future studies should also explore the mediating and moderating effects of variables on the relationships among future orientation, self-efficacy, and academic achievement.

Thirdly, the cross-sectional nature of the data establishes associations without asserting any causal assumptions. Some relationships may exhibit bidirectionality, rendering it inappropriate to make conclusive statements about the causal direction of observed effects. Future longitudinal and experimental studies would be instrumental in elucidating the directionality of these effects.

Despite these limitations, the outcomes of this study furnish valuable insights into the fears and hopes of today's teenagers. The study also explored the interplay between self-efficacy, future orientation, and academic achievement in the adolescent age, testing an Italian sample.

4.6. Practical Implications of the Study

The present study carries significant implications for the field of education. First of all, the revised literature suggests that the development of future orientation takes place at school, and that the school staff have an important role in promoting a positive view of the future in the students [3,8]. Teachers and educators, through specific training activities, can significantly contribute to students' psychological development by assisting them in envisioning diverse life paths, future goals, and possible selves. Additionally, they can help adolescents in recognizing the connections between their personality traits, dispositions, and talents, and their future goals.

As teenagers tend to harbor more fears than hopes about the future, educational interventions rooted in positive psychology can help young people develop a more optimistic outlook on the future [72]. Initial findings indicate that positive psychology interventions implemented in schools can positively influence adolescents' attitudes toward the future and well-being [73]. The goal is more than merely instructing students in positive psychology as an academic subject; it is aimed at assisting them in applying skills that research indicates will contribute to their overall well-being. In these conventional programs, students first acquire an understanding of positive psychology concepts and subsequently apply them to future orientation in real-life situations. This process is guided by school psychologists, trained teachers, or educators.

While gender differences in the hopes and fears of surveyed adolescents were limited, evidence suggests that gender stereotypes, present in the cultural context, can play a role in shaping adolescents' outlooks on the future. Hence, educational institutions have the potential to empower students to envision future selves free from gender-related stereotypes. Schools can achieve this by challenging stereotypes within students' envisioned future selves and concurrently nurturing realistic aspirations, enabling learners to formulate diverse goals across various domains. In the current post-pandemic era, it is crucial to help students, especially girls, in expressing and addressing their fears about the future.

Finally, educational staff should consider that self-efficacy and future orientation, especially when regarding work and career, are closely linked to academic achievement. This means that fostering students' self-efficacy and their orientation to their future work and career paths may also mean enhancing their academic success.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and the ethical code of the Italian Association of Psychology (AIP). Ethical approval was not deemed necessary, as the questionnaire was designed to be anonymous, preventing the linkage of answers to individual respondents.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study, as well from the parents of any minor.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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