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Cross-border friendships and collective European identity: A longitudinal study

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Abstract

Cross-border mobility has long been seen as a mechanism to promote a collective political identity; however, the results of empirical studies on young people have been inconsistent. The present work extends previous research on the effect of cross-border mobility by considering the effect of cross-border friendships drawing on the intergroup contact theory of Allport as well as the common ingroup identity model of Gaertner and Dovidio. This longitudinal study examines the role of cross-border friendships in the development of a sense of transnational political community that transcends national boundaries, i.e. the European Union. The results rely on a two-wave sample of 1294 Italian adolescents and young adults. Cross-border friendships significantly predicted identification as European, attitudes toward the European Union, political beliefs about the European Union, trust in the European Union, (negatively) political alienation, and political participation at the European level and intention to vote at the next European Parliament elections, even after including baseline levels of outcomes as well as relevant socio-demographic factors (i.e. gender, age, majority/minority status, educational qualification, parents' education level, family income, and socioeconomic status) in the model.

Keywords: Contact, cross-border friendships, European identity, participation, trust

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Introduction

Policy makers and social scientists are concerned about the apparent withdrawal of European citizens from democratic participation (Pontes et al., 2017). Their attention has often been focused on young people, whose levels of engagement in ‘conventional’ forms of political participation (like voting and volunteering for political parties) tend to be lower than previous youth generations (Henn and Foard, 2012; Sloam, 2014). However, studies have also revealed that young Europeans who are often attracted by informal/alternative modes of participation in political life (Barrett and Zani, 2015; Sloam, 2014), are also increasingly more inter-connected both through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Eurostat, 2017) and different forms of cross-border mobility (European Commission, 2015).

The next section presents the findings of existing theory and research on the impact of cross-border mobility on the development of a superordinate political identity. We show that the impact of cross-border mobility on the development of a European political identity is not consistent across studies because cross-border mobility per se does not necessarily guarantee meaningful interaction between people living in different countries. Drawing on the intergroup contact theory of Allport (1954) as well as the common ingroup identity model (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2000), we introduce the role of cross-border friendships in the development of a sense of transnational political community that transcends national boundaries, i.e. the European Union (EU). Friendships meet many of the optimal conditions of the contact theory of Allport (1954).

We argue that these models have been too rarely applied to the European identity and that they have been even more rarely tested through longitudinal designs. In this study, we examine the role of cross-border friendships using a longitudinal study with controls for baseline levels of outcomes (i.e. measures of outcome variables at Time 1) as well as relevant socio-demographic

factors (i.e. gender, age, majority/minority status, educational qualification, parents' education level, family income, and socioeconomic status). Our findings provide evidence that cross-border friendships predict a sense of transnational political community that transcends national boundaries. Based on these results, we finally argue that the development of a European political identity involves the experience of meaningful interaction between people living in different countries.

Theory

The inconsistent effects of cross-border mobility

An important precondition for the process of European integration and its legitimacy is the development of a sense of transnational political community that transcends national boundaries (Fuchs and Klingemann, 2011; Medrano and Gutiérrez, 2001; Postelnicescu, 2016; Stoeckel, 2016). Direct contact between people of different nationalities has been advocated, as a way to strengthen young people's commitment as European citizens (Fligstein, 2008). Sense of community can be considered as the main driver of the process of integration. Indeed, according to social communication theory (Deutsch, 1953), contact between people of different nationalities could make the formation of a superordinate identity and eventually of an integrated community of nations easier. Based on social communication theory, cross-border mobility has long been seen as a mechanism to promote a collective political identity and eventually the process of European integration (Llurda et al., 2016; Mazzoni et al., 2018; Mitchell, 2012; Mitchell, 2015; Sigalas, 2010; Stoeckel, 2016; Wilson, 2011). However, the results of empirical studies on young Europeans have been inconsistent. Four longitudinal studies did not find significant evidence for the impact of Erasmus participation on European identity (Llurda et al., 2016; Sigalas, 2010; Van Mol, 2018; Wilson, 2011), while a couple of longitudinal studies

revealed that participation in an Erasmus exchange program is significantly and positively associated with changes in both identification as European and identification with Europe (Mitchell, 2015; Stoeckel, 2016). In their cross-sectional survey among more than 10,000 young people from eight European countries, Mazzoni et al. (2018) found that cross-border mobility is associated with higher European identification, more positive attitudes toward the EU, and with engagement at the EU level. Findings from another cross-sectional survey involving over 2000 participants from 25 European countries revealed that the Erasmus experience is associated with higher levels of support for the EU and self-identification as European (Mitchell, 2012).

One of the reasons for the inconsistency in this literature is probably due to the quality of the contact that is promoted by cross-border mobility. For instance, Erasmus students may have superficial contact or even negative interactions with students from the host country or other Europeans. Such 'not optimal conditions' or actually 'negative' experiences of intergroup contact reflect the two theoretical approaches which focused on negativity in intergroup contact (e.g., Graf and Paolini, 2017). According to this, Stoeckel (2016) revealed that contact with other international students is more likely to contribute to a European identity than contact with hosts. Although cross-border mobility may play an important role in promoting a collective political identity (Mazzoni et al., 2018; Mitchell, 2015; Stoeckel, 2016), it does not mean that people automatically develop friendships or meaningful contact. In addition, according to the common ingroup identity model (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2000), the salience of a superordinate identity (i.e. European identity) is promoted by optimal conditions for contact.

The focus on the quality of relationship as key to structuring attitudes towards European integration has been investigated in two previous studies, showing that greater involvement in transnational networks and interactions is associated with positive attitudes towards European

integration among border residents (Kuhn, 2012a). Moreover, individuals are more likely to identify as European, if they are in European bi-national personal relationships - compared to uni-national couples (Van Mol et al., 2015). There is also evidence that cross-border practices or cross-border transactions contribute to a sense of transnational belonging or European identity (Favell and Guiraudon, 2009; Favell et al., 2011; Kuhn, 2012a; Kuhn, 2012b; Recchi, 2014; Recchi, 2015). Cross-border transactions encompass different types of activities such as travel, student exchange, cross-border trade and investment, migration flows, family ties, and friendships. However, to the best of our knowledge, the role of friendships with people living in other European countries in the development of a sense of transnational political community that transcends national boundaries has never been investigated.

Cross-border friendships as a form of intergroup contact

In his influential statement of intergroup contact theory, Allport (1954) maintained that meaningful contact (i.e. under optimal conditions) between members of different groups can improve intergroup relations. Specifically, optimal conditions require four features of the contact situation: (a) equal status between the groups; (b) common goals; (c) cooperative interaction; and (d) the support of institutional authorities. The idea that intergroup contact may be useful for improving intergroup relations in a variety of intergroup situations and contexts is supported by a large body of empirical data (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006).

However, subsequent investigations have considered positivity and negativity in intergroup contact (e.g., Graf and Paolini, 2017; Graf et al., 2018). More specifically, the subjective meaning of intergroup contact at both the individual and the group level (including contact valence and affective states) can explain the complexities of the dynamic interaction between the qualities of the contact experiences and its outcomes. In their meta-analysis of more

than 500 studies, Pettigrew and Tropp (2008) revealed that cross-group friendship may enable people to take the perspective of outgroup members and empathize with them, thereby contributing to improved intergroup attitudes. Therefore, the quality of intergroup contact can influence the outcomes of such experience (Paolini et al., 2004).

Cross-group friendships include many of the optimal conditions of the contact hypothesis and create a positive experience of intergroup contact (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008). For instance, it typically facilitates self-disclosure and intimacy and requires common goals, cooperation, and prolonged equal-status contact (Pettigrew, 1997; Pettigrew et al., 2011). One of the most interesting research on intergroup friendships derives from surveys involving probability samples of adults from France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and West Germany (Pettigrew, 1997; Pettigrew and Meertens, 1995). In all samples, Europeans with friends of another nationality reported lower prejudice toward members of that country. Compared to less intimate forms of intergroup contact, intergroup friendships are more likely to predict reduced prejudice and outgroup attitudes (Pettigrew, 1997; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Turner et al., 2007). The positive relationship between intergroup friendships and outgroup attitudes has been explained by lower levels of intergroup anxiety, self-disclosure, empathy, and intergroup trust (Turner et al., 2007). Intergroup friendships have been found to promote intergroup trust which is an important concept for conflict resolution and peace in post-conflict areas such as Northern Ireland (Tam et al., 2009).

According to the common ingroup identity model (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2000), Allport's optimal conditions for contact are likely to influence prejudice and outgroup attitudes, in part, because they change social categorization from *them* to *us*. Specifically, optimal conditions for contact promote the salience of a superordinate identity (e.g. pan-regional or pan-

national). This model received large support from the literature (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2000). For example, Capozza et al. (2013) tested a model, in which contact is associated with both decreased salience of intergroup boundaries and the adoption of a common identity. The hypotheses were supported in the context of different intergroup relations: Italians versus immigrants (Study 1); Northern Italians versus Southern Italians (Study 2). However, to our knowledge, this model has rarely been applied to a collective political identity such as the EU.

Previous studies on the effect of cross-border mobility focused mostly on the development of a European political identity (Mitchell, 2012; Mitchell, 2015; Sigalas, 2010; Stoeckel, 2016). However, self-identification as European may influence beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors which are fundamental for the development of a sense of transnational political community. According to social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), self-perceived membership in a social group affects perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Therefore, a sense of a superordinate political identity that transcends national borders should be associated with positive beliefs and attitudes toward the political identity, and engagement in behaviors that are in accord with the goals, norms, values, beliefs, and behaviors of such group membership. In line with the predictions of social identity theory, there is evidence that identification with a political entity influences beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Cicognani and Zani, 2015; Greene, 2002; Greene, 2004; Huddy, 2013; Huddy and Khatib, 2007).

The present study

The aim of this study is to investigate whether friendships (both offline and online) with people living in other European countries (henceforth referred to as cross-border friendships) among young Italians are associated with stronger European identification, more positive beliefs and attitudes toward the EU, and political participation at the European level. According to the

common ingroup identity model (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2000), we expect that cross-border friendships would predict a European identity. Moreover, according to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Turner et al., 1987), we expect that cross-border friendships, by enhancing the salience of a superordinate identity, would predict positive beliefs, and attitudes toward the EU, and participation at the EU level. The choice of focusing on such outcomes at the EU level is consistent with previous literature about the effects of cross-border mobility (e.g. Mazzoni et al., 2018).

Moreover, citizens' beliefs and attitudes toward the EU are important for the process of Europeanization (Borneman and Fowler, 1997). Nowadays, this process is facing political discontent and negative evaluations (e.g. Euroscepticism or Eurocynicism). According to the two-dimensional conceptualization provided by Krouwel and Abts (2007), popular discontent towards the EU can be conceptualized in terms of attitudes and beliefs towards the EU as well as in terms of political orientation including trust and political alienation. The present work extends previous research by considering not only the relationship between cross-border friendships and attitudes and identification but also the relationship between cross-border friendships and participation, trust and political alienation. Alienation and trust in the EU are a form of attitude underlying the perceived legitimacy of a particular political entity and are important for political participation (Hooghe and Marien, 2013). Social identification provides a sense of belonging which is a key aspect of the experience of low levels of alienation (Horton, 1996), while social identification could be conceptualized as a trust-generating mechanism (Ole Borgen, 2001). In addition, there is evidence that social identification is associated with lower levels of alienation and higher levels of trust (Hoffman et al., 2010).

Based on the theoretical framework developed here, we test the following hypothesis:

H1: Cross-border friendships are likely to lead to a stronger European identification, to foster positive attitudes and beliefs about the EU, to foster political participation at the European level, to reduce political alienation from the EU, and to increase trust in the EU.

Finally, to address the possibility that participants who had friends across borders may either be more pro-European as a result of these friendships or they were more pro-European already and as a result have friendship across borders, we carried out a longitudinal study with controls for baseline levels of outcomes. This approach has at least three advantages over cross-sectional studies: 1. the individual development of a sense of transnational political community over time can be related to the individual development of other variables; 2. in time (i.e. at Time 1 vs Time 2) the predictors preceded the outcome variables; 3) the risks of common method bias is reduced (Podsakoff et al., 2012).

Method

Participants

The examination draws on a sample of 1294 Italian adolescents and young adults who completed a questionnaire twice, after a one-year interval (i.e. 2016 and 2017)¹. Female participants constituted 61.1%, while male participants constituted 38.9% of the sample. The prevalence of female participants in the sample of young adults can be related to the high proportion of university students in the 20-30-year-old age-group, many of whom are female.² Indeed, for many years in Italy, women have represented the majority of university students and for 2014/15 they were 62.7%.³ Mean age at Time 1 was 19.21 years ($SD = 3.34$), ranging from

15 to 30. Most participants belonged to the national/ethnic majority (89.7%), similarly to the distribution of national/ethnic majority among the Italian population.

Measures

Participants were asked to report their age, gender, belonging to national/ethnic majority or minority, highest educational qualification, parents' education level, and family income. We assessed family income through the following question used in previous studies (e.g., Barrett and Zani, 2015; Mazzoni et al., 2018): 'Does the money your household has cover everything your family needs?'. Possible answers ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*fully*). Measures of self-reported economic difficulties have been previously used in a number of studies to measure subjective economic hardship and have shown significant associations with a variety of adverse outcomes (e.g., Ferrie et al., 2005; Laaksonen et al., 2011; Molarius et al., 2012; Silevntionen et al., 2001).

Similarly to previous studies investigating friendships within the framework of intergroup contact (Herek and Capitano, 1999; Wagner et al., 2003), cross-border friendships were measured by one item assessing the proportion of friends living in other European countries: 'How many of your friends live in other European countries?'. The response options ranged from 1 = *none* to 5 = *many*. This item was derived from an item, i.e. 'How many of your friends live in your neighborhood/this local area?', that has been extensively used to measure social ties in the place where a person lives (e.g., Carpiano, 2007; Homel et al., 1987; Wu et al., 2010).

To measure identification as European, we used the two-item scale of identification as European used in previous studies (e.g., Mazzoni et al., 2018; Parksepp, 2017): 'I feel strong ties toward Europe' and 'I am proud to be European'. Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The inter-item correlation was high both at Time 1 ($r = .66; p < .001$) and Time 2 ($r = .73; p < .001$).

Attitudes toward the EU were assessed using a semantic differential scale. Participants were asked to choose where their position lies, on a scale of five points, between each of the following bipolar adjectives: competent/incompetent, efficient/inefficient, warm/cold, friendly/unfriendly, just/unjust, and fair/unfair. Cronbach alpha was satisfactory both at Time 1 ($\alpha = .81$) and Time 2 ($\alpha = .82$). Semantic differential is one of the best-known multi-item direct measure of attitudes (e.g., Ajzen, 2005; Maio et al., 2014).

To assess political beliefs about the EU, we used the two-item scale of view of the EU applied in the study from Macek et al. (2018): ‘We should be happy that the European Union exists’ and ‘Life in my country would be better if there were no European Union’. Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The second item was reversed, with higher scoring referring to positive beliefs about the EU. The inter-item correlation was high both at Time 1 ($r = .58; p < .001$) and Time 2 ($r = .56; p < .001$).

We used one item (‘I trust the European Union’) derived from previous studies (e.g., Boomgaarden et al., 2011; Dahl et al., 2018; de Vreese et al., 2018) to assess trust in the EU. Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

We measured political alienation using two items (‘People like me do not have opportunities to influence the decisions of the European Union’, and ‘It does not matter who wins the European elections, the interests of ordinary people do not matter’) derived from previous studies (e.g., Dahl et al., 2018; Parksepp, 2017). Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The inter-item correlation was quite high both at Time 1 ($r = .51; p < .001$) and Time 2 ($r = .52; p < .001$).

To measure political participation at the EU level, we used the same set of items used in previous studies (Barrett and Zani, 2015; Mazzoni et al., 2018). Specifically, Mazzoni et al.

(2018) investigated participatory activity and intention to vote. Participants were asked whether they took part in at least one participatory activity on issues related to the EU in the last year. Examples of activities were sharing political content online, volunteering, donating money. If participants reported that none of the activities was related to the EU or that they did not participate at all, they were assigned the score of 0. If participants reported at least one activity related to the EU, they were assigned the score of 1. Moreover, we assessed participants' intentions to vote at the next EU parliamentary elections. Response options were *yes*, or *no/I don't know*. We considered voting intentions only in the sub-sample of participants aged 18 years or older (47.6% of the sample).

Procedure

At Time 1, we collected the questionnaires between September and December 2016 in paper-pencil (35.7%) and online (64.3%) versions. Participants were told that the study concerned young people's thoughts and feelings related to active citizenship.⁴ The sampling strategy was convenience sampling. We involved both high school students and young adults (the age range was 15-30 years).⁵

The sample of high school students comprises six upper secondary schools: one vocational school, three technical schools, and two lyceums. These schools are located in the Emilia-Romagna region (Northern Italy). To include a wide range of experiences and to not systematically exclude political, social and cultural views and minorities from marginal backgrounds, the identification of the schools and students reflected the broad variations of socioeconomic backgrounds, educational careers, and situations of life in the youth populations, including individuals with varying degrees of social and political engagement. At first, we contacted the headmaster and reference teachers, explaining the aims and the procedure of the

study. All the schools agreed to take part in the study and, after a formal agreement, the participation in the study was finally proposed to students. For minor participants, we collected both the consent from the participant and the written consent from parents. Questionnaires were completed under the supervision of a researcher and/or a teacher during a class hour.

Participation to the research was on a voluntary basis and no personal incentives were provided. None of the students, who accepted to take part in the study, interrupted the participation to the study, although it was possible.

The sample of young adults included university students contacted through one official university office (92.7%) and young workers (7.3%) contacted through youth organizations. This sample of young adults completed the online version of the questionnaire. The university office provided a list of 24,000 institutional email addresses of students. The list included the students attending one of the different courses of six Schools (Pharmacy, Biotechnology and Sport Sciences; Psychology and Education Sciences; Political Science; Law; Languages and Literature, Translation and Interpretation; Engineering and Architecture), and coming from different parts of Italy. We sent a message to the students' institutional email addresses, containing a short explanation of the project and the link to take part in the study. After approving the consent form, participants were automatically redirected to the online questionnaire. Around 10% of university students, who completed the consent form, did not complete the questionnaire. In this phase, 995 online questionnaires were thus collected from university students. The young workers were involved in the study with the support of the Italian Youth Forum, and their network of youth organizations. In this phase, 126 respondents took part in the study. Questionnaires with missing basic information (age, gender, or entire sections) were excluded.

At Time 2, young adults were offered a gadget of the maximum value of 5€ if they completed the questionnaire.

At Time 1, the final sample (including both high school students and young adults) under analysis consisted of 1732 respondents. At Time 2, data were collected one year later in the same period (between September and December 2017), using the same procedures and instruments. To contact young adults who had meanwhile left schools, we used their email addresses. Although their email addresses did not change as soon as they left school, participants may have checked the email address less frequently and this may explain attrition. Also, participants who were not recruited via schools at Time 1 were also contacted via email. To render Time 2 participation attractive, we used incentive systems (i.e. a small gadget). At time 2, we were able to involve 1294 participants, with an attrition rate of 25.3%.

The sample of high school students is well-balanced in terms of gender (50.9% female and 49.1% male respondents), while the sample of young adults over-represents females (72.9% female and 27.1% male respondents).

There were no statistically significant differences in major study variables (i.e. identification as European, attitudes toward the EU, political beliefs about the EU, trust in the EU, political alienation, and participatory activity) between those who dropped out and those who participated at Time 1 and Time 2. Respondents who participated at Time 1 and Time 2 were more likely to vote the next elections to the European Parliament compared to those who dropped out $b = 0.43$, $SE = 0.17$, $p = .012$, $OR = 1.53$ (95% CI = 1.10, 2.13).

Statistical analysis

We used multiple logistic regression analysis for outcome variables that were dichotomous. When the outcome variables were continuous (i.e. interval level of measurement),

we used the general linear model. To verify the assumption of linearity, we examined the scatter plots of standardized residuals against standardized predicted scores. We used both graphical (i.e. the residuals plotted against the fitted values) and non-graphical (i.e. Breusch-Pagan's test and Levene's test) methods for testing homoscedasticity/homogeneity of variance. If any correction was required for heteroscedasticity, we employed heteroskedasticity-consistent standard error estimators (Hayes and Cai, 2007). To plot the regression coefficients for each analysis, we used a simple scatterplot (see the Online appendix). Specifically, we plotted the unstandardized predicted values on the y-axis and cross-border friendships on the x-axis. Analyses were carried out controlling for gender, age, majority/minority status, socioeconomic status, respondents' educational attainment, and parent's educational attainment. Cohen (1992) suggested that $\eta^2 = 0.01$, 0.06, and 0.14 are small, medium, and large effect size, respectively. In addition, according to Rosenthal (1996), qualitative size categories for odds ratios are classified as follows: 1.5 to 1 = small effect, about 2.5 to 1 = medium, about 4 to 1 = large. We used IBM SPSS v.25 for the analysis.

Results

Table 1 displays the psychometric properties of the variables used in the analysis. Skewness and kurtosis were within acceptable ranges for all dependent variables. Concerning political participation at the EU level, the majority of participants (60.2% at T1 and 61.2% at T2) expressed an intention to vote at the next elections to the European Parliament, while a minority of participants (31.4% at T1 and 37.6% at T2) reported at least one participatory activity on issues related to the EU.

[insert Table 1 here]

Table 2 shows the results of the general linear model analyses predicting beliefs and attitudes toward the EU at Time 2. Controlling for baseline levels of outcomes as well as relevant socio-demographic factors (i.e. gender, age, majority/minority status, highest educational qualification, parents' education level and socioeconomic status), cross-border friendships at Time 1 significantly predicted identification as European, attitudes toward the EU, political beliefs about the EU, trust in the EU and political alienation at Time 2, thereby confirming most of the expected relationships. With regard to the relationship between socio-demographic factors and outcomes at Time 2, gender (male) predicted higher scores on political beliefs about and trust in the EU, after controlling for baseline levels of outcomes. Age was associated with higher identification as European, positive attitudes toward the EU, and political beliefs about the EU, and lower political alienation, after controlling for baseline levels of outcomes. A minority status was associated with lower scores on political beliefs about the EU, after controlling for baseline levels of outcomes. Finally, socioeconomic status was positively related to identification as European, attitudes toward the EU, political beliefs about the EU, and trust in the EU, and negatively related to political alienation, after controlling for baseline levels of outcomes. The effect size of cross-border friendships on these outcome measures was close to 0.1, indicating a small effect.

[insert Table 2 here]

Table 3 reports the results from two multiple logistic regression analyses predicting Time 2 involvement in participatory activity on issues related to the EU and intention to vote at the next elections to the European Parliament. Controlling for baseline levels of outcomes as well as relevant socio-demographic factors, cross-border friendships at Time 1 predict higher political participation at Time 2. Cross-border friendships at Time 1 predict subsequent intention to vote

at the next elections to the European Parliament, after controlling for baseline levels of outcomes. Age predicts higher scores on involvement in participatory activity on issues related to the EU, while majority status predicts higher scores on intention to vote the next elections to the European Parliament, after controlling for baseline levels of outcomes. Based on qualitative size categories for odds ratios, the magnitude of the effect of cross-border friendships on participation can be classified as small.

[insert Table 3 here]

Discussion and conclusion

This article has investigated the impact of cross-border friendships on European identification, beliefs and attitudes toward the EU, and political participation at the European level. Our findings demonstrate that cross-border friendships predict a sense of community that transcends national borders. Specifically, the results revealed that cross-border friendships longitudinally predict a stronger identification as European, positive attitudes toward the EU, positive political beliefs about the EU, trust in the EU, lower political alienation, participatory activity on issues related to the EU, and intention to vote at the next elections to the European Parliament.

These findings are in line with the predictions of the common ingroup identity model (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2000) as well as social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Intergroup friendships have been found to influence the levels of intergroup anxiety, self-disclosure, empathy, and intergroup trust (Turner et al., 2007). This study extends our understanding of the favorable conditions under which contact with members of other countries predicts a superordinate identity of an integrated community of nations.

Drawing on social communication theory (Deutsch, 1953), Fligstein (2008) stated that direct contact between people of different nationalities has the potential to strengthen young people's commitment as European citizens. Indeed, according to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Turner et al., 1987), identification with a superordinate entity engenders people's commitment with the group's goals, norms, values, beliefs and behaviors. According to Cram (2012: 73), 'The concept of identification with the EU should not be confused with support for the regime or its policies'. Cram (2012) made a conceptual distinction between identification as, identification with and support for the EU. In our opinion, participation (e.g. through voting) does not mean that people support the regime or its policies. Yet, identification as a European does not mean that people are totally indifferent to EU as a legitimate political authority. The findings of the present study seem to suggest that cross-border friendships are associated with these three distinct, albeit related, processes (i.e. identification as, identification with and support for the EU).

The results of the present study also suggest that cross-border mobility may have an effect on the formation of a collective European identity provided that contact with members of other countries is meaningful (e.g. associated with the formation of friendship relationships). Therefore, direct (personal) contact through cross-border mobility is important but it is not necessarily sufficient nor positive (Graf and Paolini, 2017). Cross-border friendships represent meaningful experiences of transnational contact because they require intimacy, empathy, perspective taking, repeated equal-status contact, as well as cooperation and common goals or interests. Contact in the form of cross-border friendships or structured under Allport's (1954) optimal conditions (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006) can promote a sense of community that transcends national borders.

We should consider that young citizens can find other options to form and maintain contact with international friends, including the usage of social media. We claim that the diffusion of information and communications technology (e.g. computer-mediated communication) can contribute to develop and maintain friendships and, thus, both virtual interactions and face-to-face interactions that require cross-border mobility may be important. There is evidence that domestic transnationalism — i.e. transnational experiences conducted in the home country without physical border crossing — are likely to influence positive attitudes towards the European project (Fernández et al., 2016). Examples of such experiences are watching television in a foreign language; Internet communications; using ICTs to socialize with people from other European countries. Specifically, Fernández et al. (2016) demonstrated that domestic transnational activities are positively associated with pro-European sentiments and this effect is stronger among citizens with lower levels of education.

Our findings also raise questions which deserve further research. In this study, we did not assess how young people are forming and maintaining their cross-border friendships. Much social interaction among Europeans does not necessarily entail friendship or meaningful contact. Future studies using qualitative and quantitative methods may investigate the contexts and the conditions that favor the development and sustainment of cross-border friendships or meaningful contact among Europeans.

One of the novelties of the current study is that we were able to demonstrate that cross border friendships are longitudinally associated with participatory behaviors on issues related to the EU and the intention to vote at the next European Parliament elections. These findings advance our understanding of previous research by demonstrating that optimal conditions for contact promote not only identification with a political identity but also people's commitment as

citizens. These findings have far-reaching implications for our understanding of the participatory citizenship of young people.

In the present study, we have found that age and socio-economic status predict most of our outcomes. We believe that, as age and socio-economic status increase, people will have greater resources for cross-border mobility as well as opportunities for social interactions with members of other countries (Mazzoni et al., 2018).

Although we used a convenience sample in our study, we do not believe that our sample represents a self-selected group of young people exhibiting a stronger or weaker association between cross-border friendships and collective European identity than those of young people not included in this study. Convenience sampling method is justified since the objective of this study was not to describe a representative sample of young people's pro-EU attitudes and behaviors, but to examine theoretical relationships between constructs. In addition, the sample was large, and it was diverse with regard to socioeconomic variables. Although the sample is not representative of young people, the sample presented some characteristics which they have in common with other young people. While it is important for these findings to be replicated using a representative sample and extended to other European countries, there is no theoretical reason or empirical support for the position that our sample was unique or that in other contexts different findings would be expected. Indeed, the results of the present investigation are consistent with the predictions of the intergroup contact theory of Allport (1954) and the common ingroup identity model (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2000). Another limit is represented by the longitudinal design of the research, which cannot support any causal claims. Although in our analysis we controlled for baseline levels of the dependent variables, we cannot rule out the possibility that other confounding variables may have influenced these results. Indeed, the model

cannot control for all the confounding factors and friendships explains only a small part of the variance in the dependent variables. Future experimental research can address the cause–effect relationship. The combined evidence from experimental studies (with strong internal validity) and longitudinal studies (with strong external validity) increases confidence in the evidence that cross-border friendships contribute to a sense of transnational political community.

In conclusion, the findings reported in this study add empirical evidence to the idea that contact or mobility per se may not be sufficient or strong enough to build a sense of European identity and ultimately European citizenship. The dynamics of cross-border friendships, their intensity and duration may be the key variables to strengthen young people’s commitment as European citizens. The focus on the quality of relationships as key to structuring attitudes towards European integration is supported by two previous studies (Kuhn, 2012a). The role of friendship in the development of a sense of transnational political community that transcends national boundaries is important since the last years were characterized by several threats to the European project, like the rise of nationalistic leaders and parties that demand less Europe and more power back to the nation states (Postelnicescu, 2016). Further research that focuses on the depth of friendship, the type and quality of interactions could offer considerable potential for furthering our understanding of how members of European countries think of themselves as citizens of a larger political community. In addition, future studies can compare the influence of online, offline, and mixed-mode friendships (e.g. friendships that originate offline and extend to online settings or vice versa). There is evidence that the differences in quality between mixed-mode and offline friendships are negligible (Antheunis et al., 2012), and that the differences in quality between online and offline friendships diminish over time (Chan and Cheng, 2004). Although the use of the Internet to communicate with friends has changed the way friendships

are developed and maintained, it is not clear whether the very essence of friendship has changed (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013).

As a practical implication, we suggest that it is important not only to promote experience of cross-border mobility, but also to create the opportunities (contexts and conditions) for meaningful interaction between people living in different countries. The promotion of physical mobility, like the Erasmus program, may be revised to strengthen individuals' investment in cross-border friendships and networks.

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Table 1

Psychometric Properties of the Major Study Variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range		Skewness	Kurtosis
			Potential	Actual		
Cross-border friendships (T1)	2.54	1.29	1-5	1.0-5.0	0.36	-1.10
Identification as European (T1)	3.60	0.89	1-5	1.0-5.0	-0.54	0.34
Political alienation from the EU (T1)	3.14	1.04	1-5	1.0-5.0	-0.13	-0.69
Trust in the EU (T1)	3.07	1.00	1-5	1.0-5.0	-0.29	-0.38
Political beliefs about the EU (T1)	3.72	0.85	1-5	1.0-5.0	-0.53	0.35
Attitudes toward the EU (T1)	3.05	0.63	1-5	1.0-5.0	-0.32	0.64
Identification as European (T2)	3.51	0.96	1-5	1.0-5.0	-0.50	0.01
Political alienation from the EU (T2)	3.18	1.00	1-5	1.0-5.0	-0.10	-0.56
Trust in the EU (T2)	3.07	0.97	1-5	1.0-5.0	-0.36	-0.24
Political beliefs about the EU (T2)	3.68	0.88	1-5	1.0-5.0	-0.47	0.28
Attitudes towards the EU (T2)	3.10	0.65	1-5	1.0-5.0	-0.34	0.71

Table 2

Bayesian Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Beliefs and Attitudes Toward EU at Time 2

Predictors (T1)	Identification with the EU			Attitudes towards the EU			Opinions about the EU			Trust in the EU			Political alienation from the EU		
	<i>B</i>	95% CI	η^2	<i>B</i>	95% CI	η^2	<i>B</i>	95% CI	η^2	<i>B</i>	95% CI	η^2	<i>B</i>	95% CI	η^2
	Gender ^a	-0.06	-0.15, 0.03	.002	0.00	-0.07, 0.07	.000	-0.09*	-0.17, -0.01	.004	-0.21*	-0.30, -0.11	.016	-0.06	-0.16, 0.04
Age ^b	-0.19	-0.60, 0.23	.001	-0.27	-0.59, 0.05	.002	-0.11	-0.48, 0.26	.000	-0.20	-0.67, 0.28	.001	0.19	-0.28, 0.65	.000
Majority/minority status ^c	0.02	-0.12, 0.17	.000	0.02	-0.09, 0.13	.000	-0.17*	-0.29, -0.04	.005	0.15	-0.01, 0.31	.003	0.11	-0.05, 0.27	.001
Socioeconomic status	0.08*	0.02, 0.14	.005	0.10	0.05, 0.15	.014	0.06*	0.00, 0.11	.003	0.13*	0.06, 0.20	.013	-0.09*	-0.15, -0.02	.005
Dependent T1	0.55*	0.50, 0.60	.272	0.48	0.42, 0.53	.207	0.54*	0.50, 0.59	.293	0.50*	0.45, 0.55	.256	0.46*	0.42, 0.51	.234
Cross-border friendships	0.05*	0.01, 0.09	.006	0.03	0.00, 0.06	.004	0.05*	0.02, 0.08	.007	0.04*	0.00, 0.07	.003	-0.07*	-0.11, -0.03	.008

Note. EU = European Union. 95% CI = confidence interval at 95%; * The 95% confidence interval did not include zero and

corresponds to the conventional $p < .05$ significance level. ^a Gender was coded as 1 = male and 2 = female; ^b age was coded as 1 =

lower than 18 years and 2 = equal or higher than 18 years; ^c majority/minority status was coded as 1 = majority and 2 = minority.

Analyses were carried out controlling for respondents' educational attainment, and parent's educational attainment (results not reported here).

Table 3

Multiple Logistic Regression Analyses Predicting Time 2 Involvement in Participatory Activity on Issues Related to the EU and Intention to Vote at the Next Elections to the European Parliament

Predictors (T1)	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>OR</i>	95% CI
Dependent: Participatory activity at T2					
Gender ^a	-0.01	0.11	.951	0.99	0.80, 1.24
Age ^b	-0.41	0.53	.444	0.67	0.23, 1.89
Majority/minority status ^c	-0.11	0.18	.527	0.89	0.63, 1.27
Socioeconomic status	0.00	0.07	.953	1.00	0.86, 1.15
Participatory activity at T1	0.85	0.11	.000	2.33	1.87, 2.91
Cross-border friendships	0.10	0.05	.034	1.10	1.01, 1.21
Dependent: Intention to vote at T2					
Gender ^a	0.41	0.28	.153	1.50	0.86, 2.61
Age	-0.02	0.07	.737	0.98	0.86, 1.12
Majority/minority status ^b	-0.92	0.34	.007	0.40	0.20, 0.78
Socioeconomic status	0.05	0.15	.753	1.05	0.78, 1.41
Intention to vote at T1	2.79	0.27	.000	16.22	9.49, 27.74
Cross-border friendships	0.21	0.10	.038	1.23	1.01, 1.50

Note. CI = confidence interval for odds ratio (*OR*); ^a Gender was coded as 1 = male and 2= female; ^b majority/minority status was coded as 1 = majority and 2= minority. Analyses were carried out controlling for respondents' educational attainment, and parent's educational attainment (results not reported here).

¹ Data used in this study are publicly available from AMS Acta Institutional Research Repository – University of Bologna (doi: 10.6092/unibo/amsacta/6166).

² Population by highest level of education, see the Youth.Stat database by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT): <http://dati-giovani.istat.it/?lang=en> (accessed 15 April 2018). Note: data is referred to age classes 15-24 years and 25-29 years (combined in the reported statistics); ISTAT (2016). Education and training. In Italian Statistical Yearbook 2016. Note: the rate of participation in the educational system is referred to the population of theoretical age corresponding to the scholastic level (i.e. upper secondary school).

³ Ministry of Education, University and Research: <http://ustat.miur.it>. Note: data is referred to all students enrolled in Italian universities (limited to 20-30 years old for the reported statistics).

⁴ In the presentation of the research, we did not mention pro-EU attitudes and behaviors.

⁵ We obtained ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of our Institution.