

UNVEILING THE SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF EUROPEAN IDENTITY AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN ITALY, PORTUGAL, AND SPAIN: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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This study analyses the social representations of European identity among Southern European youth from Italy, Spain, and Portugal using the Central Nucleus Theory (CNT). Participants, university students from prominent cities, responded to a European identity scale and a semi-structured questionnaire. Analyses reveal common elements like freedom, democracy, and privilege. However, distinct variations tied to contextual factors surfaced among the three countries, highlighting the intricate nature of European identity among these youths. The results highlighted some interesting issues that need to be addressed in order to develop higher levels of identification with the European Union.

Keywords: European Identity, Young People, Italy, Portugal, Spain

1. Introduction

1.1 Southern European countries and European identity

In recent years, the concept of European identity has gained increasing significance, particularly among young people (King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; Fligstein, 2008; Jacobone & Moro, 2015; Mazzoni et al., 2018; Romanovska, 2022). The idea of a shared European identity has the potential to bridge cultural, linguistic, and historical differences, fostering unity and a sense of belonging (Spohn, 2016). One of the key factors influencing the European identity of young people is the European Union (EU) and its policies promoting mobility and integration (Van Mol, 2013; Rachaniotis et al, 2013). EU membership has facilitated opportunities for young people to study, work, and travel across European borders (Van Mol et al., 2014). Through these experiences they encounter diverse cultures, languages, and perspectives which contribute to their understanding of a broader European identity (Lopez-Duarte et al., 2021). All European countries contribute to the construction of European identity and culture, collaborating in the formation of values, norms, and traditions. Nevertheless, in this paper we will focus mainly on Southern European. Southern European nations have played pivotal roles in shaping Europe's history and have distinctive cultural traditions that contribute to their unique identities. However, they also share commonalities, such as Mediterranean lifestyles, a strong sense of community, and a deep appreciation for art and cuisine (Proença & Soukiazis, 2008; Grosso & Galvano, 2016). In addition,

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language plays a crucial role in shaping identity and Southern Europe boasts a diverse linguistic landscape (Featherstone & Kazamias, 2000). While each country has its own language(s), English has emerged as a lingua franca among young people, facilitating cross-cultural communication and reinforcing a sense of European identity (Hülmbauer & Seidlhofer, 2013; Mocanu, 2022). Multilingualism in Southern Europe enhances intercultural understanding and promotes a shared European narrative (Seidlhofer, 2007; Gnutzmann et al., 2014). Despite the opportunities for European integration, Southern Europe has faced economic challenges in recent years, particularly during the Eurozone crisis (Serracant, 2015). This has led to increased youth unemployment rates and economic uncertainty (Ricucci, 2017). Therefore, Italy, Spain, and Portugal share striking similarities in terms of the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, the pandemic crisis, and recent inflation rates. As a consequence, these countries have witnessed alarmingly high youth unemployment rates with Italy at 29.7%, Portugal at 23.4%, and Spain at 34.8% (Simões, 2022; Marzana et al., 2023; Ellena et al., 2023). Concurrently, they are among the nations that report the highest average age for young people moving out of their parental homes in all of Europe (Simões, 2023). These factors underscore significant challenges faced by the young population in these countries. All this uncertainty and difficulty has led young people in Southern Europe to face challenges to their European identity. Nationalism, Euroscepticism, and the rise of populist movements can create divisions and hinder the development of a collective European identity (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Teperoglou & Belchior, 2020; Wang, 2021). Economic disparities among EU member states also pose challenges, as they can perpetuate feelings of inequality and undermine a shared sense of belonging (Dijkstra et al., 2020).

In sum, the European identity among young people in Southern Europe is a complex and dynamic concept shaped by historical, cultural, economic, and social factors. EU membership, mobility, shared experiences, language, and communication contribute to the formation of a European identity. However, challenges such as nationalism and economic disparities must be addressed to foster a stronger and more inclusive European identity. Nurturing a sense of belonging and solidarity among young individuals is crucial for building a united and diverse Europe for generations to come. Consequently, this paper aims to explore the differences in the social representation of being European among a group of young university students in Italy, Portugal, and Spain, in order to understand whether there is a common sense of identity or if being European is still perceived as something highly subjective and influenced by national boundaries. These three countries were selected for this study because, as outlined above, they share similar characteristics in terms of geography and culture, as well as the challenges encountered by their young populations.

1.2 European Identity: A complex concept

To begin with, it is important to clarify the distinction between identification and social identity. Identification refers to individual attitudes encompassing cognitive, emotional, and evaluative aspects related to belonging to a community, sharing a common destiny, and exhibiting behaviors of loyalty, trust, and solidarity (Martinelli & Cavalli, 2020; Pozzi et al., 2022). On the other hand, social identity pertains to a central core of values, symbols, and meanings that unite and motivate individuals, manifesting in norms of coexistence, political and social institutions, and life practices (Smith 1991). Identification involves subjective dispositions and behaviors of individuals, while social identity is a social phenomenon intertwined with institutional realities (Jetten et al., 2002; Miscenko & Day, 2016). These two concepts are interconnected in the sense that the content of identity forms the basis of the process of identification (Velleman, 2006). They delineate the

boundaries between those who belong to a community and those who do not, influencing how others perceive individuals. Simultaneously, the way in which community members recognize themselves as part of the collective modifies the content itself. Another approach to defining these concepts is by distinguishing between the subjects (who identifies with whom) and the objects or content of identification (values, meanings, symbols, norms, institutions) that allow us to define the sense of self (Martinelli & Cavalli, 2020).

In this sense, European identity is a multifaceted concept that encompasses a sense of belonging, shared values, and collective identification with the idea of Europe as a distinct cultural and political entity (Eder, 2009). It is a socially constructed phenomenon that emerges from interactions and collective experiences. Norms, values, and historical narratives play a crucial role in shaping the content of European identity. Shared symbols such as the European flag, anthem, and cultural heritage contribute to a collective sense of belonging (Kaelberer, 2004). European identity is not monolithic; it relates with multiple dimensions that reflect the diversity within the European community. It includes regional, national, and supranational identities, which interact and coexist in complex ways. Individuals may identify as European while maintaining their distinct national or regional affiliations (Medrano & Gutiérrez, 2001; Mannarini & Salvatore, 2019).

Most of the empirical research on European collective identity focuses on the first aspect, examining whether European citizens identify with the European Union as a community or with Europeans in general, to what extent, and for what reasons (Bergbauer, 2018; Martinelli & Cavalli, 2020). However, there are also some contributions that scrutinize the essence of European collective identity. This is deduced from philosophical arguments (such as the Enlightenment legacy), historical and sociological studies (on modernization), normative principles of constitutions, as well as content analysis of political and intellectual leaders' speeches, products of popular culture, and traditional and digital mass media (Martinelli & Cavalli, 2020). On the other hand, very few studies encompassed European identity content, trying to understand what people refer to when they claim to be European (Cores-Bilbao et al., 2020).

1.3 Social representation and European identity

According to Social Representations Theory (SRT), Social Representations (SRs) are cognitive and evaluative constructs developed by society that not only shape opinions, collective thinking, and behavior but also reconstruct the social context. They embody a social and emotional dimension, influencing the formation of values, norms, and traditions within communities (Moscovici, 2001; Abric & Tafani, 2009). They play a crucial role in forming social identities (Moscovici, 1961). According to the Central Nucleus Theory (CNT; Abric, 2001; Moliner & Abric, 2015) SRs are organized sets of beliefs about a social object, with a central nucleus representing the commonly shared perspective of the group and peripheral cognitions representing individual experiences and promoting group heterogeneity (Rateau & Lo Monaco, 2016). Furthermore, this posits that social representations consist of both content and structure. The content represents the shared information, opinions, and explanatory models concerning a specific social object, while the structure pertains to the organization of meanings attributed to that object. Hence, a comprehensive understanding necessitates an examination of both content and structure (Aresi et al., 2018; Pozzi et al., 2018). European identity can be considered a social representation constructed by individuals within their cultural context to position themselves in society. It is influenced by social categorization, which simplifies the social environment by grouping individuals into different social groups (Licata, 2007). Identity is a unique form of social representation that reflects one's relationship with others and is constructed and negotiated through social relationships (Andreouli & Chrysoschoou, 2015). It is both a process of self-

knowledge construction and self-positioning, shaping individuals' perspectives and guiding their actions. Identity construction and affirmation occur through communicative and social influence processes, which can be observed in political rhetoric and societal dynamics (Chrysoschoou, 2013). Therefore, developing self-knowledge is a social process involving negotiation and social interaction (Augoustinos & Penny, 2001).

1.4 The present research

This study aims to investigate how Southern European youth socially represent their European identity, specifically focusing on identifying both similarities and differences in the representations among Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese youth. The study employs the theoretical framework of Central Nucleus Theory (CNT; Abric, 1989), which has been described above. Abric (1989), in line with Moscovici (1976), argues that not all social objects can become the subject of social representation. For an object to be socially represented, it must hold social relevance, be a subject of social exchange, and relate to other social objects. Furthermore, it should encompass the norms and values shared by a particular group (Fattori et al., 2015; Pozzi et al., 2017). Moreover, Moliner (1993) highlighted additional criteria to clarify the concept further: the object in question should be polymorphic, representing a broad category; there must exist an intergroup context, where the object becomes a point of contention between at least two groups; and the object should be significant to the group, posing a threat to either their identity or their social cohesion. Within this framework, "being European" is undoubtedly an object of social representation. The research design employs mixed methods (Pozzi et al., 2018). Initially, a qualitative analysis is conducted to reconstruct the content of social representation. Subsequently, a mixed-methods analysis is employed to study its representational structure. This methodology allows for the generation of concise and easily comparable outcomes.

2. Materials and methods

2.1 Participants

In this study the aim was to investigate the differences and similarities in representation among young southern Europeans, analysing both the total sample and each country sample. The sampling criterion was being a young individual (18-34 year old) born and raised in a Southern European country: Italy, Portugal or Spain. The selection of these countries is influenced by various factors. Firstly, it is based on geographical considerations, as they are located in the Southern European region. Secondly, it takes into account the cultural aspect, as all three countries have a Catholic tradition and culture. The third factor is of an economic nature, as Italy, Portugal and, Spain face similar economic and social challenges, as explained above. The first group consisted of young Italians ($N = 30$; $M_{age} = 22.59$; $SD_{age} = 2.96$). The second group comprised young Portuguese individuals ($N = 30$; $M_{age} = 25.76$; $SD_{age} = 3.93$). Lastly, the third group included young Spanish ($N = 30$; mean age = 25.16; $SD = 6.36$). All three groups were recruited from university students residing in major urban centres of the respective countries: Milan for Italy, Lisbon for Portugal, and Malaga for Spain. In the context of the structural model of social representations, a sample size of 30 individuals is considered substantial. This model emphasizes the qualitative aspects of the data and focuses on the in-depth exploration of individual perspectives and experiences, thus a

relatively smaller sample size, like 30, is deemed sufficient for yielding meaningful insights (Galli et al., 2019; Fasanelli et al., 2020).

2.2 Instruments

The current study utilized the Qualtrics platform to administer an online questionnaire. Each questionnaire was administered in the participants' native language starting in March 24th and closing in May 1st 2022. In addition to gathering socio-demographic information, the questionnaire encompassed the following specific questions. In conducting this research, it was essential to ensure the utmost clarity and understanding for participants in each country. Therefore, the questionnaire was distributed in the native language of the respective countries: Italian for Italy, Portuguese for Portugal, and Spanish for Spain. In this respect, it is pertinent to highlight that the research team comprised two native speakers of Portuguese (one of whom possesses profound proficiency in Spanish), a native Spanish speaker (with exceptional command over Portuguese), an Italian native speaker, and a bilingual individual fluent in both Italian and Spanish. The questionnaire was originally crafted in Italian (Pozzi et al., 2022), thereafter translated into Spanish by the bilingual author, and its accuracy was confirmed by the native speaker of Spanish. It was then translated into Portuguese by the Spanish-speaking author and subsequently validated by the Portuguese-speaking contributors. The analyses were initially carried out in the original languages by the respective authors to maintain the accuracy and context of responses. Subsequently, the findings were back translated into English. This process was undertaken to allow for the comprehensive description and presentation of the research outcomes in this paper, while ensuring the preservation of the nuanced meanings embedded in the original languages. The research was conducted in agreement with the ethical norms laid down by each National Psychological Association.

European Identity. In order to explore the concept of European Identity, we utilized the measurement scale developed by La Barbera and Capone (2016). The Italian version was utilized as the base, which was then translated into the other two languages, adhering to the same methodology outlined in the preceding paragraph concerning the whole questionnaire. This scale consists of 10 items, each rated on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 indicates a minimal level of identification and 10 represents a strong sense of identification. As an example, one of the items in the scale is "I experience emotional attachment towards Europeans."

Social representation of European Identity. To examine the content and structure of the social representation of European identity, a semi-structured questionnaire was employed, consisting of two sections, as outlined by Abric (2003). The first section involved an open-ended question designed to explore the content of the social representation, specifically asking participants, "What does being European mean to you?" The second section incorporated a free association task utilizing the hierarchical evocations technique developed by Vergès (1992). Participants were requested to provide the first five nouns that came to mind when thinking about "Being European." They were then instructed to arrange these words in order of personal importance. Additionally, to ensure clarity and disambiguation during the analysis phase, participants were requested to briefly explain the rationale behind their word choices, with prompts such as "You wrote X, why?" (Fasanelli et al. 2005; Pozzi et al., 2014; Pozzi et al., 2022).

2.4 Analysis

A convergent parallel mixed-method design, as described by Pozzi et al. (2018), was employed to analyze the data. The analysis proceeded in two stages, beginning with a qualitative analysis to

reconstruct the content of the social representation, followed by a mixed-methods analysis to investigate its representational structure. In the following sections, the analyses will be elucidated in detail. For clarity, it is specified that content analysis will be applied exclusively to the open-ended questions, whereas prototypical analysis and similarity analysis will be conducted on the association tasks.

In order to describe the content of the social representation of “Being European,” a categorical-frequency content analysis technique was utilized, drawing on the works of Bardin (2003) and Fasanelli et al. (2020). The data collected from the free association task, along with the subsequent hierarchization and justification, formed a data matrix that underwent a two-step analytical process (prototypical and similarity). These two analyses were conducted using the software interface “Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires” (IRaMuTeQ), based on R, as described by Galli and Fasanelli (2020). Initially, a prototypical analysis was performed to establish preliminary assumptions regarding centrality. This analysis provided valuable insights into the initial central elements of the representation. Specifically, this analysis allows the analyzed terms to be organized into four quadrants based on their rank and frequency, namely Nucleus, First Periphery, Second Periphery, and Contrasting Elements. In the cell Nucleus, we find terms that are not only mentioned first but also frequently cited. These terms are considered the most salient and significant for the studied population (Vergès, 1994). This cell contains elements that have a high probability of belonging to the Nucleus, forming the organizing core of the representation (Dany et al., 2015). The First Periphery cell contains terms with high frequency and low rank, representing the terms that are more closely related to a behavioral sphere and act as a contrast to the core in explaining the representation. The Contrasting Elements cell contains terms with low frequency but high rank, identifying possible minorities within the group in terms of the meaning of the representation or representing elements of potential change. The Second Periphery cell contains the least and last-mentioned terms, representing the terms that are most likely to change.

Following this, a similarity analysis was conducted to confirm or disconfirm these hypotheses and uncover the actual interconnections between the constituent elements within the representative structure under investigation. For each subgroup, only nouns evoked by at least 10% of the participants were considered in the analysis. Previous studies utilizing hierarchical evocations have typically set a minimum frequency threshold of two for including terms in prototype analysis and similarities (Grize et al., 1987; Fasanelli et al., 2020). However, in this study, the decision was made to raise the threshold to include only terms with a higher level of shared responses, reducing the number of terms included in the analytical outputs.

To evaluate the strength of the semantic association between each structural component of the representation, the Russel and Rao index was employed. This index, known as a distance measure, has been used in previous studies (Chay, Lee, Lee et al., 2010; Hwang, Yang, Fitzgerald et al., 2001) and was selected to assess the degree of semantic link between the different elements within the representation (is a measurement index of co-occurrences).

3. Results

In this section, we will present the analyses of the representational structure, considering the entire sample of 90 participants without subdividing them by country. Subsequently, we will present the analyses divided by country, allowing for a comparative approach that highlights

common elements as well as differences across groups. The content analysis, on the other hand, will be conducted exclusively on separate samples by country.

Furthermore, considering the object of representation, the participants were administered a scale (La Barbera & Capone, 2016) to measure their level of identification as Europeans. The group of young Italians obtained an average score of 5.78 (SD = 1.82); the young Portuguese group scored an average of 6.67 (SD = 1.82), while the group of young Spanish had an average score of 6.05 (SD = 1.04). All three groups obtained scores above the median of the scale, indicating a sufficient level of identification to consider European identity as an object of representation. Nevertheless, the degree of identification is average, and considering the standard deviation indicates no particular polarisation of the groups.

3.1 Total sample (Italy, Portugal and Spain)

3.1.2 Analysis of the representational structure

3.1.2.1 Prototypicality analysis

The prototypicality analysis provides insights into the distribution of terms across four quadrants, reflecting the representational structure of the entire sample of 90 participants. To provide a more detailed description of the findings from the prototypicality analysis, a table will be presented and subsequently explained (Table 1).

Table 1. Analysis of noun prototypicality – Total sample

Nucleus			First Periphery		
	Frequency	Rank		Frequency	Rank
Nouns	≥ 9.96	≤ 2.71	Nouns	≥ 9.96	> 2.71
European Union	35	2.10	Euro	24	3.40
Freedom	23	1.80	Support	14	3.10
Democracy	14	2.00	Culture	14	2.80
Community	14	2.50	Development	10	2.80
Rights	11	1.90			
Contrast Elements			Second Periphery		
	Frequency	Rank		Frequency	Rank
Nouns	$F < 9.96$	≤ 2.71	Nouns	$F < 9.96$	> 2.71
Cooperation	9	2.70	Mobility	7	3.10
Peace	7	2.00	ECB	7	4.40
Equality	6	1.50	Countries	6	3.80
Brotherhood	6	2.70	Wealth	6	3.30
Education	5	2.40	Economy	6	4.20
Security	5	2.60	Group	5	3.80
Politics	5	2.60	Health	5	3.80
			European Parliament	5	2.80
			History	5	3.00
			Respect	5	4.40

In the **Nucleus**, located in the upper left quadrant, we find terms with both high frequency and low rank. These represent the most prototypical elements of the representation. In this case, the terms “European Union”, “Freedom”, “Democracy”, “Community”, and “Rights” are positioned here, signifying that they form the Nucleus of the social representation of the European identity. These terms reflect the key values and ideals associated with being Europeans in the minds of the participants.

The **First Periphery**, in the upper right quadrant, contains terms that are frequent but have a higher rank. These terms are still relevant to the representation but are less central compared to those in the core. Here, we find terms like “Euro”, “Support”, “Culture”, and “Development”. These terms represent aspects of being European that are important but perhaps not as strongly ingrained in the participants’ perception.

The **Second Periphery**, in the lower right quadrant, consists of terms with both low frequency and high rank, suggesting they are more peripheral to the social representation. These include “Mobility”, “ECB”, “Countries”, “Wealth”, “Economy”, “Group”, and others. These concepts, while still part of the overall representation, play a more marginal role in how participants view the European identity.

Finally, the **Contrasting Elements** quadrant, in the lower left, contains terms with low frequency but low rank. These terms reflect ideas that, although important to a subset of participants, are not widely shared across the entire sample. Among them are “Cooperation”, “Peace”, “Equality”, “Brotherhood”, “Education”, and others. These elements offer a more diverse or alternative view of the being Europeans that contrasts with the central core.

3.1.2.2 Similarity analysis

The similarity analysis, as illustrated in the Figure 1, reveals the conceptual links between terms based on their co-occurrence. The map displays five main clusters, each of which highlights different facets of the European Union as perceived by the participants. The co-occurrence coefficients (the numbers on the gray lines) indicate the strength of the relationships between the terms.

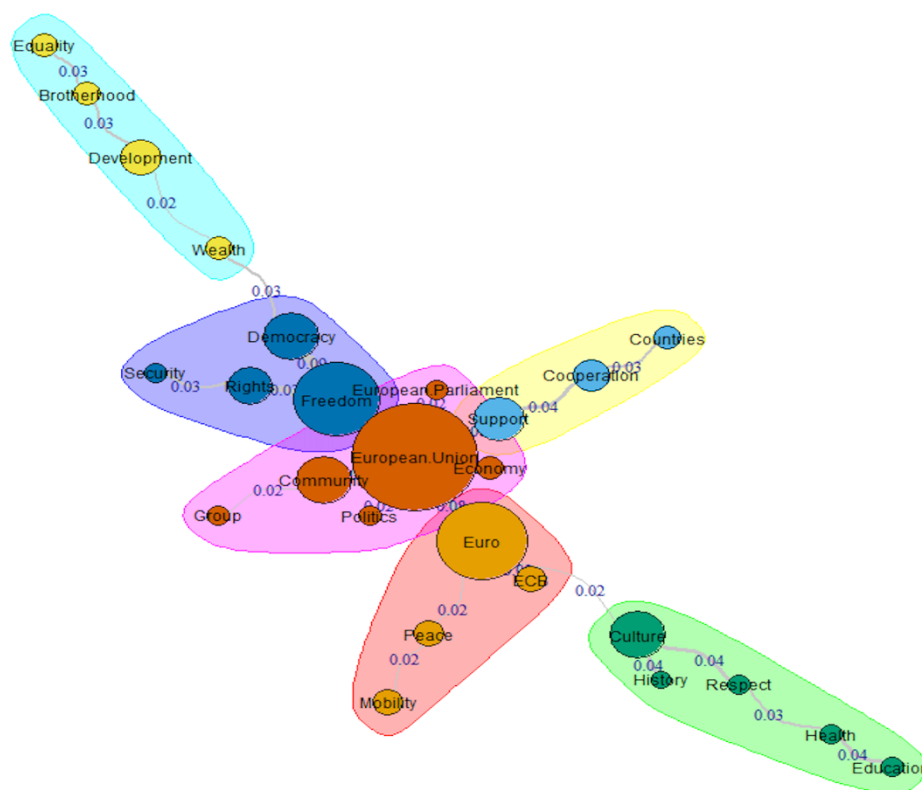


Figure 1. Noun Similarity Analysis – Total sample

Cluster 1 is centered around the terms “Freedom,” “Democracy,” “Rights”, and “Security.” “Freedom” is strongly connected to “Democracy” (0.03) and “Rights” (0.03), which in turn is connected with “Security”. This cluster portrays that being European is as a symbol of freedom, democracy, and security, central values in the participants’ perception of their identity. Cluster 2 includes terms such as “European Union”, “Community,” “Politics,” and “Group”, “Economy” and “European Parliament. Moreover, “Community” is connected to “Group” (0.02) and depicting the European Union as a political and economic entity organized around group dynamics and political governance. Cluster 3 focuses on terms like “Cooperation,” “Support,” and “Countries.” “Support” is a key term here, linking with “Cooperation” (0.03) that in turns is linked with “Countries” (0.03 each), reflecting the EU’s role in fostering collaboration and mutual support among its member states and its impact on European identity. Cluster 4 is oriented around cultural terms such as “Culture,” “History,” “Respect,” “Health” and “Education.” The strongest connection is between “Culture” and “History” (0.04), with “Culture” also linked to “Respect” (0.04), “Health” (0.04) and “Education” (0.03). This cluster underscores the cultural and historical dimensions of European identity. Cluster 5 refers to economic aspects, with terms like “Euro,” “ECB,” therefore “Peace” and “Mobility” illustrating the importance of the single currency and economic institutions in shaping the representation of the EU and allowing the maintenance of peace. Cluster 6 is centered around the terms “Wealth,” “Development,” “Brotherhood,” and “Equality.” This cluster represents an idealized vision of the European Union as a space promoting social equality, economic development, and solidarity. The emphasis on “Brotherhood” and “Equality” underscores the perceived values of unity and fairness within the EU, while “Wealth” and “Development” suggest a focus on economic prosperity and growth as key goals of the Union, key elements in defining the European identity. The similarity analysis of this sample reveals a complex and interconnected representation of European identity, where the central values of freedom and democracy are closely linked to the political, supportive, cultural, and economic dimensions represented by the other clusters. The co-occurrence coefficients help illustrate these connections, showing how different aspects of the European identity and therefore EU are interwoven into a cohesive social representation.

In the following sections, the analyses conducted on separate samples will be presented, considering the Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish participants individually.

3.2 Italian young people

3.2.1 Content analysis

The analysis conducted on this sample revealed a total of 49 codes (codes refer to the total number of categorizations within the text, which are subsequently grouped into related categories – level 1 and subcategories – level 2). The young Italian participants who responded to the questionnaire emphasized that, for them, being European primarily entails having *common elements* (15; 30.6% of the total analyzed codes; coding level-1). These common elements include, in order of frequency, *common values and ideals* (33.3% of level-1 codes; coding level-2), a *common history* (26.7%; coding level-2), *common traditions and culture* (20.0%; coding level-2), and *common interests and objectives* (20.0%; coding level-2). (Participant 8 expressed, “It means being part of a group with whom I share founding principles and values.” Participant 14 stated, “For me, being European means sharing a culture and a history that allow one to feel part of a group, both good and bad, and at any time or place.”). The participants in this study also affirmed that being European brings them *various benefits* (11; 22.5% of the total analyzed codes; coding level-1). The most highlighted benefit was *the freedom of movement of people* (63.3% at level-1

coding; level-2 coding), followed by the *presence of great opportunities* (18.2%; level-2 coding) in education and employment, and the *assurance of receiving protection* (18.2%; level-2 coding). (Participant 5 stated, “Being able to travel freely from one state to another,” while Participant 6 mentioned, “It makes me feel safe because, since Europe is very large and includes a large number of states, it does not suffer the hegemony of other continents but has an equal position with them.”). Moreover, the participants emphasized that being European also means *being part of a large supranational community* (10; 20.4% of the total analyzed codes; coding level-1) that includes many other states. (Participant 3 expressed, “For me, being European means being part of a big community,” while Participant 20 mentioned, “To be part of a bigger community than my country.”). An interesting reflection was made regarding the boundaries of this community. Participants affirmed the importance of *belonging* (7; 14.3% of the total analyzed codes; coding level-1), which, for some, specifically refers to the *European Union* (42.9%; coding level-2), while for others, it extends to the *European continent* (57.1%; coding level-2). (Participant 28 stated, “Living on the European continent,” while Participant 7 mentioned, “Having citizenship in one of the EU countries.”). Finally, participants indicated two distinct characteristics of Europeans. The first is *multiculturalism* (3; 6.1% of the total analyzed codes; coding level-1), with participants expressing that being European means living in a multicultural context and interacting with people from diverse cultures and traditions. The second characteristic is *solidarity* (3; 6.1% of the total analyzed codes; coding level-1), primarily understood as *mutual support between individuals and states* (Participant 2 stated, “Ethnic and cultural diversity, a multicultural flag” while Participant 23 mentioned, “Being part of a larger whole ready to help its members in case of need”).

3.2.2 Analysis of the representational structure

3.2.2.1 Prototypicality analysis

To provide a more detailed description of the findings from the prototypicality analysis, a table will be presented and subsequently explained (Table 2).

Table 2. Analysis of noun prototypicality – Italian young people

Nucleus			First Periphery		
	Frequency	Rank		Frequency	Rank
Nouns	≥ 5.75	≤ 2.84	Nouns	≥ 5.75	> 2.84
European Union	10	2.00	Euro	9	3.40
Freedom	8	1.50	Community	8	2.90
Contrast Elements			Second Periphery		
	Frequency	Rank		Frequency	Rank
Nouns	$F < 5.75$	≤ 2.84	Nouns	$F < 5.75$	> 2.84
Culture	5	2.40	Support	5	3.40
Democracy	4	2.50	Countries	5	3.60
			Group	4	4.00
			West	4	3.80
			Cooperation	4	3.00
			Politics	3	3.30

The nouns “*European Union*” and “*Freedom*” are placed in the upper left quadrant, representing the representational Nucleus due to their high rank and frequency. In the upper right-hand quadrant, we instead find the First Periphery, characterized by terms such as “*Euro*” and “*Community*,” which have high frequency but low rank. At the bottom right, we find terms

that constitute the Second Periphery, characterized by low rank and low frequency, including “Support,” “Countries,” “Group,” “West,” “Cooperation,” and “Politics.” Finally, in the Contrasting Elements quadrant, characterized by high rank but low frequency, we find the terms “Culture” and “Democracy.”

3.2.2.2 Similarity analysis.

The configurations depicted in the image below (Figure 1) proved valuable in identifying the interconnectedness among the constituent elements of the social representation structure of being European. The stronger the coefficients, the higher the percentage of times the two terms were evoked together.

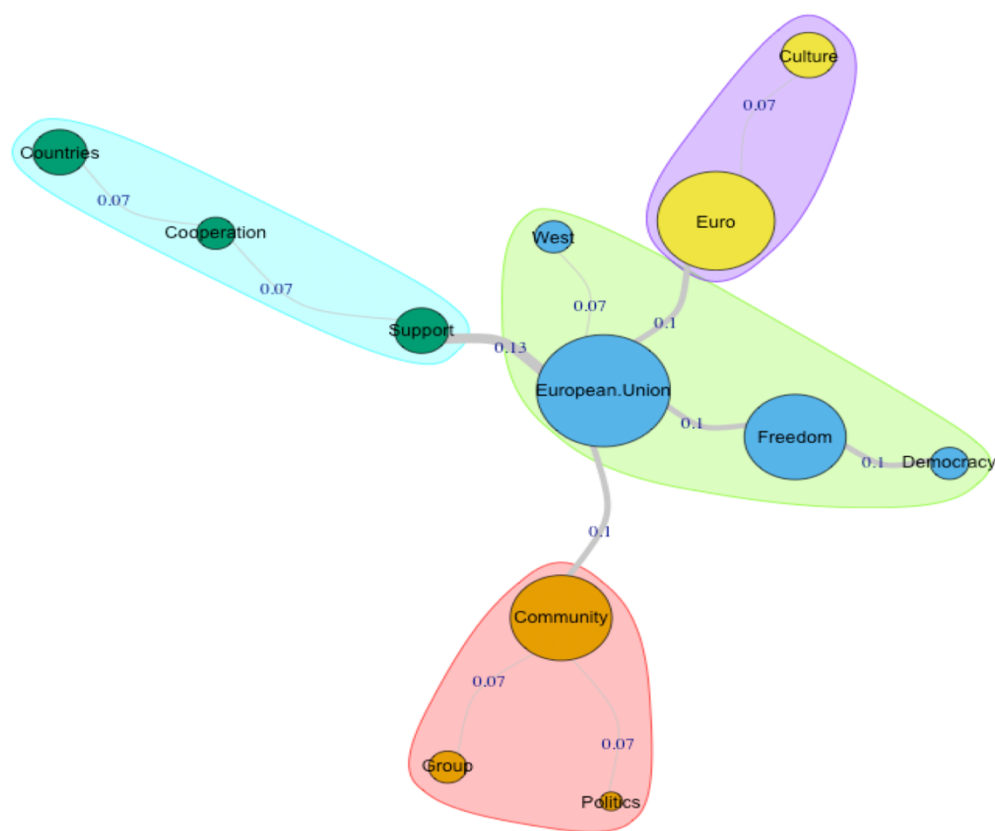


Figure 2. Noun Similarity Analysis – Italian young people

The similarity analysis in this sample revealed the emergence of four main clusters. Cluster 1 is characterized by the terms “European Union,” which is linked with “West” (0.07) and “Freedom” (0.10), and in turn, linked with “Democracy” (0.10). It emphasizes the main vision of a European Union that guarantees freedom and, consequently, democracy, representing the emblem of Western ideals. This cluster assumes a central role as the European Union connects with Cluster 2 through “Community” (0.10), with Cluster 3 through “Support” (0.13), and with Cluster 4 through “Euro” (0.10). Cluster 2 depicts “Community” connected with “Group” (0.07) and “Politics” (0.07), describing the European Union as a community characterized by a group with political characteristics. Cluster 3 shows “Support” connected with “Cooperation” (0.07), which is, in turn, connected with “Countries” (0.07), denoting the European Union as an entity characterized by

mutual support and cooperation between countries. Finally, Cluster 4 shows “Euro” connected with “Culture” (0.07). The single currency thus represents an important cultural element in defining the identity boundary of the European Union.

3.3 Portuguese young people

3.3.1 Content analysis

Analyses carried out on this sample revealed a total of 66 codes (codes refer to the total number of categorizations within the text, which are subsequently grouped into related categories – level 1 and subcategories – level 2). The Portuguese participants highlight that, for them, being European primarily means having *benefits* (22; 33.3% of the total codes analyzed; coding level-1). Among these, they emphasize the *free movement of people* the most (40.9% of the level-1 code; coding level-2), followed by the *presence of great educational and occupational opportunities* (18.2%; coding level-2), the *guarantee of rights* (18.2%; coding level-2), the use of the *single currency* (Euro) (13.6%; coding level-2), and finally, the enjoyment of *privileges* (9.1%; coding level-2) (Participant 4 states, “Having the freedom to travel in Europe.” Participant 27 says, “Access to opportunities that other countries and continents do not have.”). In addition to having benefits, being European primarily consists of having elements in common (21; 31.8% of the total codes analyzed; coding level-1). Among these, the most frequently mentioned are *common values and ideals* (57.1% of the level-1 code; coding level-2), including freedom, democracy, and peace, followed by *common history* (19.1%; coding level-2), *common traditions and culture* (14.3%; coding level-2), and *common interests and objectives* (9.5%; coding level-2) (Participant 14 explains, “Being European means being part of a specific civilization with deep historical roots.” Participant 7 states, “Yes, I consider myself European, and I consider being European as sharing a particular set of common beliefs and values among all European peoples.”).

The Portuguese participants also emphasize that being European means *being part of a large supranational community* (5; 7.6% of the total codes analyzed; coding level-1) that is supranational and includes many other states (Participant 22 expresses, “Being part of a community.” Participant 20 says, “Belonging to a wider community.”). The theme of *belonging* (12; 18.2% of the total codes analyzed; coding level-1) is particularly prominent in this sample. Some participants specifically associate being European with being part of the *European Union* (50.0%; coding level-2), while others extend the concept to the entire *European continent* (50.0%; coding level-2) (Participant 8 mentions, “Living in Europe.” Participant 12 states, “It means being part of the European Union.”). Once again, participants indicate two distinctive characteristics of Europeans. The first is *multiculturalism* (3; 4.5% of the total codes analyzed; coding level-1). Participants state that being European means living in a multicultural context and coming into contact with people who have different cultures and traditions. The second characteristic is *solidarity and brotherhood* (3; 4.5% of the total codes analyzed; coding level-1), primarily understood as mutual support both among people and between states (Participant 11 explains, “Being European means belonging to an area characterized by many countries with different languages and traditions.” Participant 5 states, “Being European means being brothers of all the countries that make up Europe.”).

3.3.2 Analysis of the representational structure

3.3.2.1 Prototypicality analysis

To provide a more detailed description of the findings from the prototypicality analysis, a table will be presented and subsequently explained (Table 3).

Table 3. Analysis of noun prototypicality – Portuguese young people

Nucleus			First Periphery		
	Frequency	Rank		Frequency	Rank
Nouns	≥ 4.53	≤ 2.56	Nouns	≥ 4.53	> 2.56
European Union	14	2.40	ECB	5	4.20
Freedom	9	1.60	Culture	5	2.80
Peace	5	2.40			
Contrast Elements			Second Periphery		
	Frequency	Rank		Frequency	Rank
Nouns	$F < 4.53$	≤ 2.56	Nouns	$F < 4.53$	> 2.56
Rights	4	2.00	Euro	4	3.50
European Parliament	4	2.50	European Commission	3	2.70
Support	3	2.00	Development	3	2.70
Democracy	3	1.00	NATO	3	2.70
Community	3	2.30	European Council	3	2.70
UN	3	2.30	European Court of Justice	3	5.00

In the upper right quadrant, we find the Nucleus of the representation, comprising terms with high rank and high frequency: “*European Union*,” “*Freedom*,” and “*Peace*.” Moving to the upper left quadrant, we encounter the First Periphery, where terms with high frequency but low rank are located, including “*ECB*” (European Central Bank) and “*Culture*.” Expanding further into the Second Periphery, we come across terms such as “*Euro*,” “*European Commission*,” “*Development*,” “*NATO*,” “*European Council*” and “*European Court of Justice*”. Lastly, within the Contrasting Elements, which are characterized by low frequency but high rank, we discover terms like “*Rights*,” “*European Parliament*,” “*Support*,” “*Democracy*,” “*Community*” and “*UN*” (United Nations).

3.3.2.2 Similarity analysis

The configurations represented in the image below (Figure 2) provided valuable insights into the interconnections among the constituent elements of the social representation structure associated with being European.

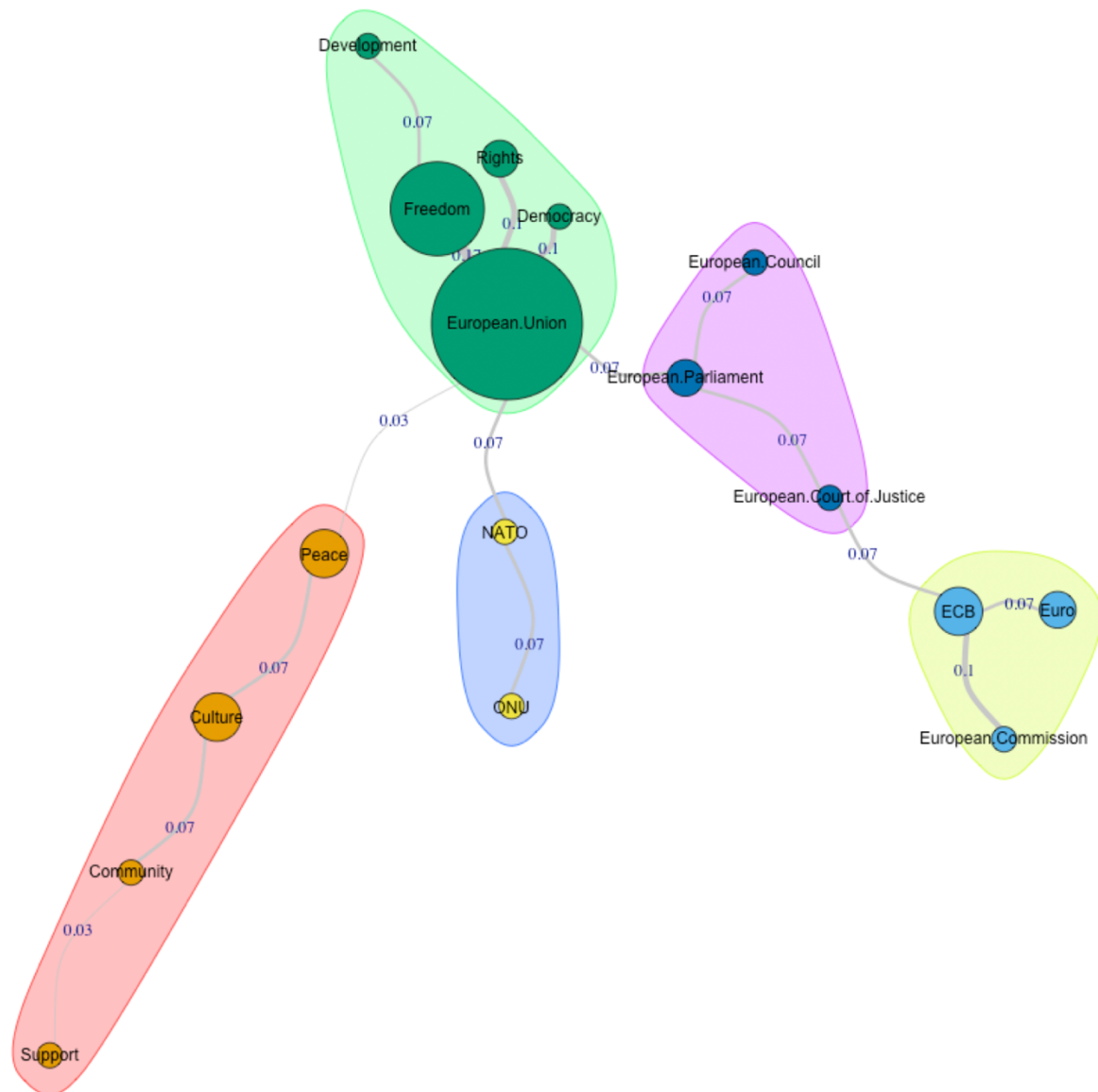


Figure 3. Noun Similarity Analysis – Portuguese young people

After conducting the analysis of similarities, five distinct clusters become evident. The prominence of Cluster 1 is particularly notable, where the term “*European Union*” is connected to Cluster 2 through “*European Parliament*” (0.07), to Cluster 3 through “*NATO*” (0.07), and ultimately to Cluster 4 through “*Peace*” (0.03). Cluster 2, in turn, is linked to Cluster 5 via “*ECB*” (European Central Bank; 0.07). Specifically, Cluster 1 reveals that “*European Union*” is associated with “*Democracy*” (0.10), “*Rights*” (0.10), and “*Freedom*” (0.17), which are further connected to “*Development*” (0.07). This cluster encapsulates the central role of the European Union in shaping the identity of Europeans, representing a place characterized by freedom, democracy, and rights. Cluster 2 represents the legislative and legal aspects of the European Union, represented by its institutional bodies such as “*European Parliament*” connected to “*European Council*” (0.07) and “*European Court of Justice*” (0.07). The latter term then leads to Cluster 5, which focuses on the economic and representative institutions, linked to “*ECB*” (0.07), subsequently connecting to “*Euro*” (0.07) and “*European Commission*” (0.10). Cluster 3 is characterized by the association between “*NATO*” and “*UN (ONU)*” (0.07), highlighting the similarity participants perceive between the functions of the European Union and those of other supranational organizations. Lastly,

Cluster 4 comprises terms associated with the community aspect of the European Union, with “Peace” linked to “Culture” (0.07), which in turn connects to “Community” (0.07) and ultimately concludes with “Support” (0.03).

3.4 Spanish young people

3.4.1 Content analysis

A total of 50 codes emerged from the analyses carried out on this sample (codes refer to the total number of categorizations within the text, which are subsequently grouped into related categories – level 1 and subcategories – level 2). The Spanish participants believe that being European primarily means having *benefits* (21; 42.0% of the total codes analyzed; coding level-1). Among these, they mainly emphasize *wealth* (19.1% on level-1 coding; level-2 coding), *free movement of people* (14.3% on level-1 coding; level-2 coding), followed by the *guarantee of rights* (14.3%; level-2 coding), strong *development and innovation* (14.3%; coding level-2), *economic benefits* (including the euro) (14.3%; coding level-2), enjoying *privileges* (9.5%; coding level-2), *environmental sustainability* (9.5%; coding level-2), and finally, the presence of *great opportunities in education and employment* (4.8%; coding level-2) (Participant 15: “Living on a continent with abundant wealth and well-being”; Participant 23: “It means being fortunate enough to enjoy the privileges offered to me on a daily basis”). Having *common elements* (13; 26.0% of the total codes analyzed; coding level-1) seems to be an important factor for Spanish participants. They highlight various types: *common values and ideals* (61.5% on level-1 coding; level-2 coding), primarily freedom, democracy, and equality; *common goals and objectives* (23.1%; level-2 coding); *common history* (7.7%; level-2 coding); *common traditions and culture* (7.7%; level-2 coding) (Participant 25: “It consists of being part of a social and economic group with common goals”; Participant 16: “For me, being European means belonging to the historical continent composed of countries that have shaped our current society, based on the values of democracy, welfare society, and human rights”). Although to a lesser extent than the other two samples, young Spanish also highlight how being European means *being part of a large supranational community* (3; 6.0% of the total codes analyzed; coding level-1) that includes many other states (Participant 27: “Being part of a big community where we all help each other”; Participant 2: “Being European creates a bond with other countries; it makes me feel part of a community”). For the Spanish participants, the concept of *belonging* (8; 16.0% of the total codes analyzed; coding level-1) is also debated. For some, being European specifically means being part of the *European Union* (37.5%; coding level-2), while for others, it is a concept extended to the *European continent* (62.5%; coding level-2) (Participant 14: “Belonging to a territorial unit defined mainly, but not only, by the EU”; Participant 6: “Belonging to the European Union. Being part of the group of countries that compose it”). The theme of *multiculturalism* (3; 6.0% of the total codes analyzed; coding level-1) also emerges here. Participants state that being European for them involves living in a multicultural context and coming into contact with people who have different cultures and traditions. It is worth noting that the value given by the respondents who filled in the questionnaire is entirely positive. Another theme is *solidarity* (2; 4.0% of the total codes analyzed; coding level-1), mainly understood as mutual support among individuals and states (Participant 8: “For me, being European means being part of a continent rich in cultural diversity”; Participant 27: “To be part of a big community where we all help each other”).

3.4.2 Analysis of the representational structure

3.4.2.1 Prototypicality analysis

To offer a comprehensive overview of the prototypicality analysis results, Table 4 will be presented, followed by a detailed explanation of its contents.

Table 4. Analysis of noun prototypicality – Spanish young people

Nucleus			First Periphery		
	Frequency	Rank		Frequency	Rank
Nouns	≥ 4.74	≤ 2.71	Nouns	≥ 4.74	> 2.71
European Union	11	1.80	Euro	11	3.40
Democracy	7	2.10	Support	6	3.30
Freedom	6	2.50			
Rights	5	1.60			

Contrast Elements			Second Periphery		
	Frequency	Rank		Frequency	Rank
Nouns	$F < 4.74$	≤ 2.71	Nouns	$F < 4.74$	> 2.71
Equality	4	1.00	Health	4	4.00
Regulation	4	2.30	Development Culture	4	3.50
Cooperation	3	2.30	Respect	4	3.20
Brotherhood	3	2.00	Prosperity	3	5.00
Community	3	1.70	Wealth	3	3.30
Education	3	1.70	Security	3	3.00

Within the Nucleus, which consists of elements characterized by high rank and frequency and is located in the upper left quadrant, we find terms such as “*European Union*,” “*Democracy*,” “*Freedom*,” and “*Rights*.” Moving to the upper right-hand quadrant, we encounter the terms “*Euro*” and “*Support*,” which possess high frequency but low rank, thus forming the First Periphery. In the Second Periphery, characterized by low frequency and low rank, we discover terms such as “*Health*,” “*Development*,” “*Culture*,” “*Respect*,” “*Prosperity*,” “*Wealth*,” and “*Security*.” Lastly, among the Contrasting Elements, which exhibit low frequency but high rank, we have “*Equality*,” “*Regulation*,” “*Cooperation*,” “*Brotherhood*,” “*Community*,” and “*Education*.”

3.4.2.2 Similarity analysis

The image below (Figure 3) showcases configurations that have offered valuable insights into how the constituent elements of the social representation structure associated with being European are interconnected.

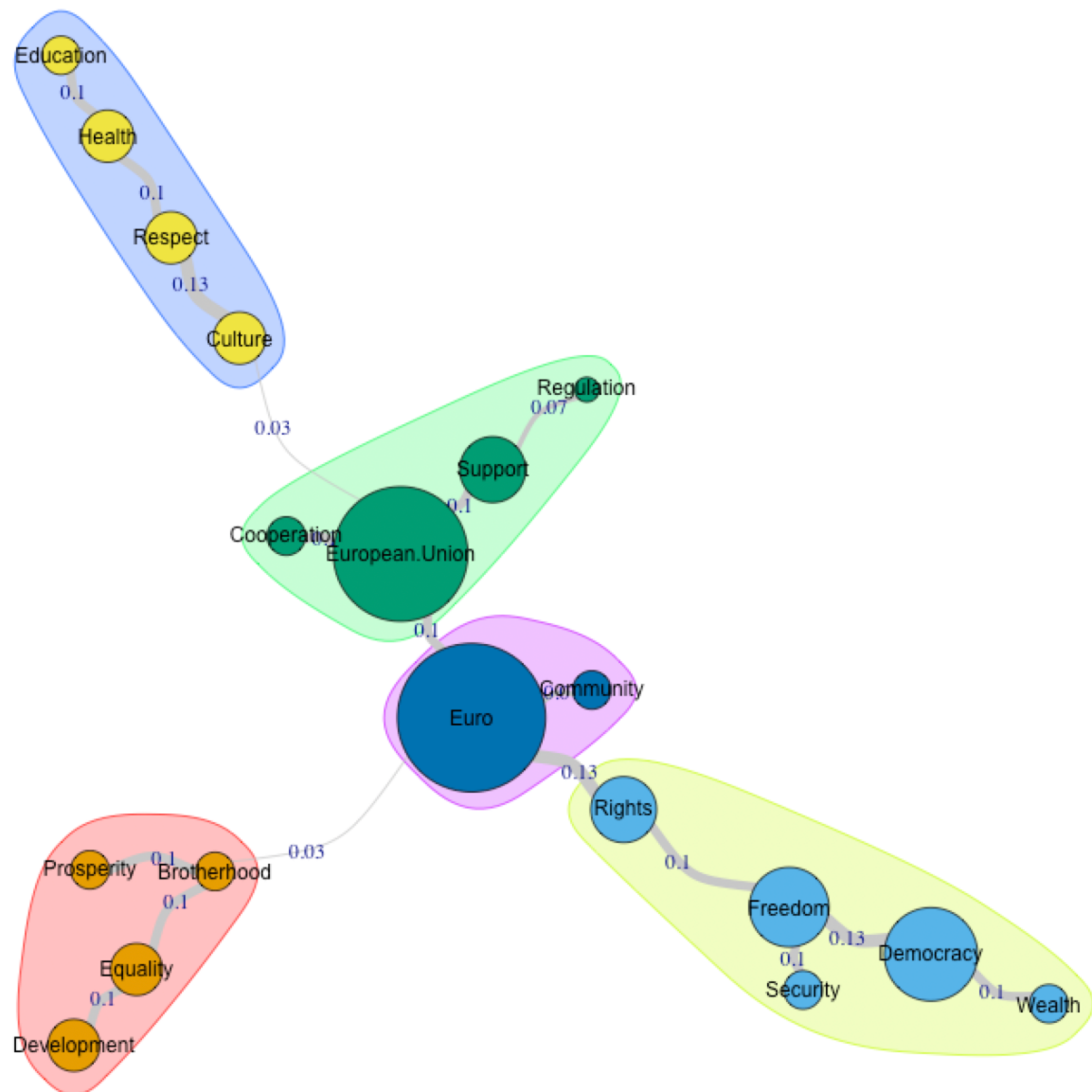


Figure 4. Noun Similarity Analysis – Spanish young people

From the similarity analysis, five clusters have emerged. Cluster 1 is centered around the “European Union,” which is connected to “Cooperation” (0.13) and “Support” (0.10). In turn, “Support” is linked to “Regulation” (0.07). Cluster 1 is also connected to Cluster 2 through the term “Culture” (0.03), which is further connected to “Respect” (0.13), “Health” (0.10), and “Education” (0.10). Additionally, Cluster 1 connects with Cluster 3 through “Euro” (0.10), which is linked to “Community” (0.07). Cluster 3, in turn, connects to Cluster 4 through “Rights” (0.13), which is further connected to “Freedom” (0.10), “Security” (0.10), and “Democracy” (0.13). “Democracy” is then linked to “Wealth” (0.10). Furthermore, Cluster 3 connects with Cluster 5 through “Brotherhood” (0.03), which is connected to “Prosperity” (0.10) and “Equality” (0.10). Finally, “Equality” is linked to “Development” (0.10). Thus, the centrality of the European Union in the characterization of European identity emerges once again. The European Union is characterized by various guarantees such as culture, health, and education. It is also a community that utilizes the euro and values rights, freedom, and democracy, which contribute to well-being and security.

Lastly, through brotherhood and fairness, countries achieve good levels of development and prosperity.

4. Discussion

4.1 Critical discussion of the results

This study examined the social representation of European identity among three distinct groups of young individuals based on their Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish nationalities. Despite the variations in national contexts, it appears that European identity is acquiring a homogeneous nature across different European countries. The results demonstrate a significant similarity among the three groups in terms of both content and structural analysis. All three groups indicated that Europeans share common characteristics, including ideals, history, culture (at least at the grassroots level), and goals. This is consistent with findings from several previous studies, which emphasized two common aspects of European identity: shared history/culture and shared goals/projects (Barbera & Cariota Ferrara, 2015). Furthermore, all three groups acknowledged a shared set of benefits as Europeans, which seemed to be relatively consistent among the groups. The responses regarding multiculturalism and solidarity also seemed to display considerable consistency. In terms of structural analysis across all three samples, the core elements were identified as the European Union and Freedom. This suggests that for the young individuals from Italy, Portugal and Spain, being European primarily entails living in the European Union and enjoying various freedoms, ranging from freedom of movement and expression to the movement of goods and currency. Delving deeper, it appears that knowledge and experiences associated with various forms of mobilities - including work, study, or exchanges - are instrumental in shaping this sense of identity (this is particularly true considering the nature of this study's sample). Such insights find resonance in the works of Van Mol (2013). Additionally, Cairns (2017) offers valuable perspectives on how tertiary educated youth navigate their mobility decisions, particularly in contexts marred by economic challenges. Moreover, young southern Europeans recognize that being European entails the enjoyment of democratic rights and protections.

At the same time, certain nuanced differences seemed to emerge within the groups. Italians place a notable emphasis on the community sphere characterized by cooperation and support among different countries. This could be attributed to the fact that Italy, as a founding country, has consistently incorporated the values of the European Union into its political and institutional discourse from its inception (Lucarelli, 2015). Young Portuguese participants placed greater emphasis on values related to peace and freedom. Moreover, they seem to strongly associate European identity with European institutions and other supranational organizations. Portuguese's identification as European is strongly linked to the pivotal role of democratic institutions. The country's political structure, which is highly centralized at the national level, amplifies the importance of these institutions, as Portugal does not have autonomous regions to decentralize power. This structure thus intensifies the significance of institutions, which embody the democratic values of the European Union, including peace, freedom, and rule of law. Furthermore, the importance that Portuguese society attaches to democratic principles is rooted in the relatively recent advent of its democratic life. It was only in 1974 that Portugal transitioned from the authoritarian rule of the Salazar regime, an era still very much present in contemporary political dialogues and public discourse. Consequently, it might be that the lingering shadow of the

past heightens the value placed on democratic institutions as a bulwark against returning to such autocratic rule. As a result, being European, for Portuguese people, seems to be intrinsically linked to upholding the democratic norms embodied in these institutions. On the other hand, young Spaniards appear to have a stronger connection to the economic sphere, with a significant emphasis on the welfare system (education, health, culture), which aligns with prosperity and economic well-being. The association between the European identity and economic and welfare aspects among young Spanish people might be influenced by the prevailing challenges in achieving economic independence and in building a secure future. The economy, with its inherent complexities and uncertainties, often presents formidable barriers to the younger generation as they strive for financial autonomy (Minguez, 2016). Notably, even prior to the 2008 financial crisis, the transition of Spanish youth to the labor market has been marred by distinct challenges. Historically, Spain has witnessed higher rates of youth unemployment and job precariousness compared to both Portugal and Italy. In fact, barring a few exceptions like Greece during its economic recession, Spain's youth unemployment has been consistently elevated relative to almost all other EU nations. Such longstanding economic disparities could underscore and amplify the significance of the freedoms and mobilities associated with European identity, particularly for Spanish youth (De la Rica & Rebollo-Sanz, 2017). Consequently, identifying as European, in this context, signifies an alignment with a broader collective that embodies the promise of economic stability and welfare support. The European Union, with its robust economies and comprehensive welfare systems, symbolizes a beacon of hope and an opportunity for growth. Its structures and policies provide both a safety net for those experiencing hardship, and a platform for those aspiring for upward mobility. Therefore, the notion of being European, for young Spaniards, seems to be intrinsically tied to the prospects of economic security and better welfare, reinforcing their affinity towards a shared European identity. Although not directly tied to institutions, when considering more value-based themes such as democracy and rights, young Spaniards too underscore the importance of being European as a guarantor of these values. Spain, like Portugal, has a relatively young democracy, having transitioned from the Franco regime only in 1975. This recent emergence from an autocratic past has instilled a deep appreciation for democratic principles and rights among the youth. Being European, in this context, may represent a commitment to upholding these cherished values, as the European Union is globally recognized for its steadfast dedication to democracy and human rights.

4.2 Limitations and implications

Despite the valuable insights garnered from this study, it is important to acknowledge several limitations. First, the sample size, though relatively small and drawn from a specific population, was chosen based on the premise that the methodology, as previously described, could be effectively applied. However, this limits the generalizability of our findings to broader contexts. Similarly, in terms of sample characterization, the sample is quite limited as it consists mainly of university students, and little attention has been given to describing specific characteristics such as experiences of mobility abroad and encounters with other Europeans. Furthermore, it is important to note that this study presents hypotheses regarding the structure of social representations; further research is needed to develop a solid and well-defined structure. Additionally, the study solely relied on cross-sectional data, which hinders the examination of changes in social representations over time. Future research endeavours could employ longitudinal designs to overcome this limitation and capture the dynamic nature of social representations. Furthermore, this study focused on a specific aspect of social representations and did not explore other dimensions or factors that may contribute to their formation and

maintenance. Incorporating also contextual factors into future studies would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the influences on social representations and in turn enhance the generalizability of the results.

Finally, based on the results of this paper, several community-level interventions can be suggested to help young people strengthen their European identity. These interventions could include civic engagement and social identity workshops, promoting discussions on shared values such as democracy, equality, and solidarity, as well as fostering a sense of belonging both at the national and European levels. Intercultural exchange programs can enhance cross-cultural understanding, building on the importance of mobility in shaping European identity. Additionally, community-based dialogues on European identity would provide a space for young people to express their experiences and challenges, promoting social cohesion. Furthermore, psychosocial support networks for individuals who have participated in international exchanges could help sustain the sense of European belonging. Lastly, initiatives on political literacy and participation could empower youth to engage more actively in European political processes, reducing Euroscepticism and strengthening their identification with Europe.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this paper elicit a series of intriguing reflections. Unquestionably, there are common elements shared among the three samples concerning the perception of being European. The youth from these nations have constructed a social representation that features similar and stable core elements, notably framing the European Union as a realm of freedom. However, the differences identified among these countries incite further contemplation. Drawing on Barro's hypothesis (2004), and the concept of nested identities as proposed by Castano (2004), one might infer that what is perceived to be lacking at a national level is often delegated to a broader social identity - in this case, the European identity. In Italy, the preservation of value-based principles is delegated to the European identity. In Portugal, the safeguard of democratic principles is attributed to the European Union, while in Spain, it is the aspects of welfare and economic security (along with democratic principles). Nevertheless, this study merely represents an exploration of this phenomenon, and further research is needed to better understand and delve deeper into this complex interaction of national and European identities.

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