

What does it mean to be European? How identity content shapes adolescent's views towards immigrants and support for the EU

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Abstract

Adolescents support Eurosceptic and far-right movements more and more. Since adolescents' years are a formative period for political orientations, it is important to promote a shared sense of belonging together among Europeans to counteract these tendencies. This could be achieved by fostering a European identity, however, only if its content is civically defined. We examined adolescents' understandings of being European, and how they relate to intolerance, EU support, and other predictors. Our sample included 1206 German adolescents (51% female, Age: $M = 14.4$, $SD = .6$, 27% ethnic minority adolescents). European identity was assessed via open answers and five closed questions. We conducted latent class analysis to identify identity classes. Three classes emerged: a *living-based* (47%), a *culture & value-based* (27%), and an *ancestry-based class* (26%). Classes did not differ regarding EU support, but regarding intolerance (highest: ancestry-based, lowest: culture & value-based). Our results indicate that German adolescents differed in their understanding of being European and that it is important to consider how youth define Europeanness to understand European identity's effect on their views. Furthermore, our study argues for assessing identity openly to capture nuances of identity content adequately.

KEYWORDS

adolescents, EU support, European identity, identity content, intolerance, latent class analysis, social identity theory

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Highlights

- Adolescents have different understandings of what it means to be European; while their understandings are not associated with their levels of EU support, they are associated with attitudes towards immigrants.
- Furthermore, the different understandings of being European were associated with understandings of being German and ethnic background.
- When teaching Europe and the EU, educational institutions and teachers should focus not only on increasing identification with Europe, but to also teach inclusive and civic contents of European identity.

INTRODUCTION

Across Europe, Eurosceptic and far-right political movements are on the rise with a sizeable share of young people supporting them (e.g., support for far-right populist parties 2022 in France; Bröning, 2022, or 2024 in Germany; Schnetzer et al., 2024). These tendencies are problematic, since adolescent years are a formative period for political orientations, which can display considerable stabilities well into adulthood (Sears & Levy, 2003). Against this backdrop, one important question is how to promote a shared sense of belonging together among young Europeans (i.e., a European identity). As a supposedly unifying social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1989), European identity was theorized to be relevant for creating a feeling of belonging together among ethnically diverse Europeans (Clycq, 2021) and the political legitimacy of the EU (Habermas, 2014). To become such a unifying social identity, the European identity needs to be understood in a certain way, i.e., referring to democratic, or cosmopolitan values. In other words, it is not only relevant how strongly one identifies with Europe, but the content of the identity is relevant as well.

Considering the importance of content, one would assume that research on European identity would examine its content quite frequently. However, research has often studied strength of individuals' identification with Europe (e.g., Jugert et al., 2021) but rarely the content individuals attribute to being European (cf. König, 2023). Studies that did include measures of content oftentimes assessed content as ratings of membership criteria (e.g., having European parents, being Christian) derived from theories on nation-building (e.g., civic-cultural framework; Bruter, 2003). As a result, research on individuals' European identity remains decontextualized and abstract.

Following social identity theory, the current study inductively examined what German adolescents understand being European means by using person-centered analysis. We focused on adolescents, because forming a political identity is an important task during adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Yates & Youniss, 1998). Furthermore, identity contents are likely stable once formed (Mader & Schoen, 2023). It is therefore of utmost importance to understand how adolescents, the future citizens of Europe, conceptualize a European identity. We coded open responses about "what it means to be European" and submitted our codes together with five closed items to latent class analysis. By building upon literature that distinguishes between civic and cultural definitions of political identities (Brubaker, 1996), our aim was to examine European identity content of German adolescents and how those contents relate differently to attitudinal outcomes, such as EU support and intolerance. Our study contributes to the ongoing research on the association between European identity and political attitudes and highlights the potential of openly assessing identity content for the field.

The European identity as social identity

For this study, we followed a social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) approach. Therefore, we understand European identity as a form of social identity, which is the subjective description or categorization of the self in terms of one or more social group memberships (e.g., European, nationality) together with the value and emotional significance attached to those (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The strength of identification can vary from person to person and is nonexclusive with other social identities. According to self-categorization theory (SCT; Turner et al., 1989) individuals cognitively refer to social groups as prototypes, which include subjective perceptions of defining group characteristics, e.g., real or imagined shared attributes. Prototypes can vary across persons, but groups of people can also share similar perceptions (Hornsey, 2008).

In the tradition of the social identity approach, a European identity was mostly examined using identification processes rather than its content (e.g., Agirdag et al., 2016; Brummer et al., 2022), thus revealing a gap in research on European identity. However, identity content is relevant for understanding European identity's associations with other variables. For example, according to SIT individuals categorize others into ingroup or outgroup members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), implying that associations between European identification and intolerance towards immigrants differ, depending on whether immigrants are included as ingroup members or not. Furthermore, political institutions can also be included in an identity (Sherrod et al., 2002), which is then associated with the support of the corresponding political institution.

Existing approaches on European identity content

Studies that included measures of European identity content oftentimes operationalized it as ratings of membership criteria that stemmed from theories on nation-building (Bruter, 2003). They typically asked participants to agree or disagree with a given content along a civic-cultural typology (Brubaker, 1996; e.g., Koos, 2012; Pichler, 2008), or a civic, cultural, and ethnic typology (Reijerse et al., 2013; e.g., Schlenker, 2013). In this line of research, civic European identity is assessed as a feeling to belong to the European political system, whose rules, laws, and rights affect one's daily life (Bruter, 2003). Cultural European identity is assessed as the perception that Europeans are more like each other in terms of cultural, social, or ethnic aspects than to non-Europeans. Research including an ethnic type of European identity separated references to ancestry (i.e., ethnic) from those to a common culture (i.e., cultural). Studies found evidence for civic, cultural, and ethnic components of European identity among adults, as well as mixed forms (cf. König, 2023), which also related differently to attitudinal outcomes (e.g., support for EU policies, Bauhr & Charron, 2020; intolerance, Wegscheider & Nezi, 2021).

While these studies provide valuable insights on European identity, the review of König (2023) also revealed methodological limitations. In particular, he noted that future research should try to overcome relying purely on items that rate pre-defined group criteria. If European identity is understood as a social identity, content is a subjective description of a group and can thus vary across individuals. Constraining participants' answers might not adequately assess those contents. One way to overcome this issue is to openly assess identity content in a qualitative or mixed approach. While qualitative studies already provide rich results on European identity (e.g., Bruter, 2004; Cores-Bilbao et al., 2020), associations between European identity and other variables could not be examined. A mixed approach, i.e., assessing content openly and quantifying codes (see for German identity Ditlmann & Kopf-Beck, 2019), would allow to assess diverse meanings, while still generating quantifiable results.

For the current study, we adapted a mixed approach to assess identity content by openly asking adolescents what being European means to them. Since we were interested in whether adolescents can be categorized in different European identity groups, we decided for a person-centered analysis. Based on studies using a civic-cultural typology, we assumed to find at least two European identity groups: one that is more civic and one that is more cultural. Considering results for German identity (Ditlmann & Kopf-Beck, 2019), we expected that more than two classes could emerge and that those contain mixed or not categorizable content (e.g., including ethnic and formal components).

What shapes European identity among adolescents?

Adolescence is believed to be a formative period for both the development of stable political orientations (Sears & Levy, 2003) and a political identity (Erikson, 1968; Yates & Youniss, 1998). Adolescents reach a stage, in which they are cognitively able to focus on social and political questions, and form own opinions. At the same time, schools increasingly include political content (e.g., political institutions) in their curricula (e.g., THILLM, 2022). Following cognitive mobilization theory (Ingelhart, 1970), increasing adolescents' knowledge is generally expected to improve their capability to deal with more distant and abstract concepts, which in specific can enable them to develop a sense of belonging to the European community. Arguably, one must know about the existence of a social group to categorize oneself as being part of that group. Studies that linked cognitive mobilization theory with European identity found a positive association between higher knowledge and strength of identification with Europe (e.g., Medrano & Gutiérrez, 2001; Verhaegen & Hooghe, 2015). However, they did not make predictions on the impact of knowledge on specific content of European identity. Considering German school curricula and their focus on EU institutions or geographical characteristics of Europe, we expected that adolescents with more knowledge about Europe and the EU would include more civic aspects in their European identity (e.g., EU institutions, laws) or rely more on geographical aspects (e.g., living on a continent) as those aspects might be more salient.

The European identity domain is only one out of many that adolescents can identify with. The various identifications can be perceived as competing or non-exclusionary depending on their content. Two social identities that might be particularly important for the European identity are national identity and ethnic group membership. National identity can be understood in a similar manner as European identity, except that the referred group are individuals from the same nation (e.g., Germans). European and national identity assessed in terms of identification processes were often positively associated (e.g., Jugert et al., 2021), which may be explained by overlapping identity content. Hence, we expected positive associations between German and European identity with similar content, i.e., a more civic European identity would be associated with a more civic German identity.

In European nations, national identity membership is often attached to an ethnic understanding that excludes other ethnic backgrounds (Alba & Foner, 2015). One strategy for ethnic minorities to still feel connected to ethnic majority members is to identify with a common in-group identity, such as a European identity. In this case, the European identity should be conceptualized as a civic identity to include ethnically diverse people. Past research on European identity in ethnic minority adolescents often theorized about them having a more civic conception, but did not test for it (e.g., Agirdag et al., 2016; Brummer et al., 2022). We wanted to address this gap and assumed that ethnic minority background would be associated with more civic or at least more inclusive content of European identity.

The present study

We asked 1206 German adolescents to provide open responses to the question “what does it mean for you to be European?” Afterwards, we coded the responses and submitted the codes together with five closed items that assessed cultural and civic dimensions to latent class analysis (LCA). This procedure allowed us to identify groups of participants who shared a common understanding of European identity and include covariates to predict adolescents' group membership. Our study adds to research on European identity by including participants' definitions on what being European means, thereby assessing content relevant for participants instead of pre-defined membership criteria. We selected adolescents since they are in a formative period for developing a political identity.

Based on existing studies on European identity, we expected at least two classes of European identity to emerge (i.e., civic versus cultural). A civic European identity was expected to be associated with higher levels of EU support (**H1**), lower levels of intolerance (**H2**), higher subjective knowledge about the EU and Europe (**H3**), and having an ethnic minority background (**H4**). Opposite associations were expected for a cultural European identity. Regarding mixed classes, the associations were expected to depend on the relative ethnic inclusiveness or civic-ness of the respective conception. Additionally, we expected similar classes for German identity to emerge and that those classes would relate positively to European identity classes with similar content (i.e., civic German and civic European; **H5**).

METHODS

Study hypotheses and statistical analysis were preregistered during data collection and before accessing the data (<https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/RUF5E>). Data, syntax, and supplementary material can be retrieved from the OSF project page: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/A56ES>.

Participants

This study was part of a larger study (*JUROP*) that aimed to assess behaviors and attitudes towards the EU and Europe and factors influencing those. *JUROP* stretched over one school year (2021/2022) and included a longitudinal paper-pencil questionnaire with two measurement points. This study uses data of the first measurement point ($n = 1206$) for establishing classes of European identity and data of the second measurement point ($n = 1041$) for sensitivity analyses (i.e., cross-validation of classes). Participants were from two German federal states, Thuringia and North-Rhine Westphalia (NRW). Thuringia, which was part of the former German Democratic Republic, has no international border, and can be characterized as mostly rural and ethnically homogenous. NRW and especially the Ruhr area, where data collection took place, is located in the Western part of Germany, borders on two European countries (Netherlands and Belgium), and can be characterized as being mostly urban and ethnically heterogeneous (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023).

Participants were on average 14.4 years old ($SD_{\text{age}} = .6$, $p_{\text{female}} = 52\%$, $p_{\text{male}} = 47\%$, $p_{\text{divers}} = 1\%$) and visited the 9th school grade. Most students were enrolled in college-bound high schools (58%, non-college-bound secondary schools: 16%, comprehensive schools: 25%). Most participants indicated that they and their parents were born in Germany (73%, *ethnic majority*, NRW: 57%, Thuringia: 88%).

Procedure

We contacted 219 schools via e-mail and telephone in NRW and Thuringia (NRW: 183, Thuringia: 36). If schools showed interest, we sent them information and pre-printed informed consents for students, students' parents and teachers. After receiving informed consent, research team members visited the schools and administered a paper-pencil questionnaire during school hours (T1: 1st September 2021 to 26th January 2022). All participating classes received 100€ for their class fund after completing the second measurement point (T2: 9th May 2022 to 11th July 2022). A total of 31 schools (14%) agreed to participate. This research was approved by the ethics committees of the University of Duisburg-Essen and the Friedrich-Schiller University Jena (FSV 21/047).

Material

Open question for European identity

To assess the content of European identity, we asked them the following open questions (adapted from Dittmann & Kopf-Beck, 2019):

People can have different attitudes towards the place they live in. They also differ in what it means to be European. What does it mean for you?

Please take your time and think about what it means to be European for you. Write as much or little as you want. Spelling or grammar are irrelevant. There are no right and wrong answers. Being European means for me:

Closed question for European identity

We included five closed questions about European identity (Introduction: *How important are for you the following characteristics to be defined as European: (1) being Christian, (2) being born and raised in Europe, (3) having at least one parent that was born in Europe, (4) to feel European, (5) to master a European language*) (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree; ISSP Research Group, 2015).

Intolerance

We assessed intolerance with four items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree): (1) *Refugees and people who recently migrated to Germany come here to exploit our welfare state*, (2) *Refugees and people who recently migrated to Germany take away the workplace of natives*, (3) *Refugees and people who recently migrated to Germany should at some point go back to their country of origin*, (4) *Refugees and people who recently migrated to Germany increase the crime rate* (Gniewosz & Noack, 2008) ($\omega = .84$; $M = 2.4$, $SD = 1.1$). Items were averaged to form a mean score with higher values indicated higher intolerance.

EU support

In order to capture EU support, participants rated three items on a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree): (1) *Should Germany stay in the EU?* (Strohmeier & Tenenbaum, 2019), (2) *We should be happy that the EU exists*, and (3) *I think that living in our*

country would be better, if there was no EU (reverse coded) (Noack & Macek, 2017). Items were averaged to form a single score with higher values indicating higher support for the EU ($\omega = .77$; $M = 4.4$, $SD = .7$).

Predictors

German identity

German identity was analogously assessed to European identity. Notably, open questions for German identity were presented before the open questions for European identity, and closed questions for German identity were presented before closed questions for European identity.

Ethnic background

For ethnic background participants had to indicate, if they, one of their parents or both of their parents were born in Germany or another country. If participants and both parents were born in Germany, they were labeled as *ethnic majority*. Otherwise, participants were labeled as *ethnic minority*.

Subjective knowledge about the EU and Europe

To assess participant's subjective knowledge about the EU and Europe, we asked them to rate on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), if they felt able to explain five EU and Europe-related topics (*I feel able to... 1) explain how and why the European unification was started, (2) explain the functions of central European institutions and their collaboration, (3) describe opportunities for political participation for EU citizens, (4) explain terms such as European Union, Eurozone, Schengen area and use them correctly and (5) name most EU countries with their capitals*). Ratings were averaged to form a single score with higher values indicating higher subjective knowledge ($\omega = .74$; $M = 3.3$, $SD = .8$).

Demographics

We further included gender (female=0, male=1, divers=coded as missing due to small number), federal state (NRW=0, Thuringia=1), and school type (contrast one: college-bound high school & comprehensive school=0, non-college-bound secondary school=1; contrast two: college-bound high school & non-college-bound secondary school=0, comprehensive school=1) as predictors for class membership.

Content coding

For content-coding, we used a theory-oriented approach starting deductively with pre-formed codes derived from Ditlmann and Kopf-Beck (2019) and adapting them inductively (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The original pre-formed codes were created by using an empirical inductive approach “without a particular focus, specific category types, or ideal number of categories in mind” (Ditlmann et al., 2011, p. 398), which were inductively modified for a German adult sample (Ditlmann & Kopf-Beck, 2019). Pre-formed codes can be differentiated in more civic (e.g., Democracy, Freedom), more ethnic (e.g., Nativism, Biology), more cultural (e.g., Culture, History), and neutral codes (e.g., Safety, Personality Traits). We chose the codes of Ditlmann and Kopf-Beck's (2019) study as a starting point, because they provided an exhaustive category system adapted for the German context. We accounted for adolescent specific or different codes with an inductive adaption of our codes.

The first author and two research assistants (one late-adult male psychology student, one young-adult female pre-service teacher) adapted the pre-formed codes by coding 80 open answers consensually and discussing necessary revisions. After revision, the research assistants continued coding consensually to ensure a more sensitive adaptation and differentiation of codes (Becker et al., 2019). Open answers had to be divided into theme units that expressed single ideas and aspects of identity. After that, theme units were coded. Double coding of a theme unit in two different codes was not allowed. Each code could only be assigned once per answer, meaning that research assistants coded whether a given code was present or absent in each answer. Research assistants met with the first author after they coded 200 open answers for discussing coding discrepancies and possible adaptations for the coding manual. This procedure was repeated until all open answers were coded.

All T1 European identity codes were coded consensually, and we therefore did not calculate Cohen's kappa (Cohen, 1960) for the coding scheme based on T1 data. During our coding of T2 European identity codes, we calculated Cohen's kappa to monitor interrater agreement. We report here Cohen's kappa for our coding scheme from the last coding round of our T2 coding ($n=754$). Code name, description, and examples can be seen in Table 1. For the procedure for German identity, see [supplemental material A](#).

Analytic strategy

To test whether adolescents' understanding of being European can be grouped in meaningful classes of European identity, latent class analysis (LCA) was conducted. Before analyzing, we excluded codes that were mentioned by less than 5% of all participants. This was done to ensure that codes represent a substantial part of the sample. As a result of this, for European identity, three codes (*Language*, *Meaningless*, *Knowledge*) had to be dropped for LCA. In total we included seven codes (0 = not present, 1 = present) and five polytomous items in LCA for European identity. LCA models classes in discrete data by assigning each participant to a class (e.g., ethnic understanding of being European) with a specific probability based on, in our case, the unique combination of codes and response patterns (Goodman, 2009; McCutcheon, 2011).

We used the three-step mixture model approach (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014; Vermunt & Magidson, 2021) implemented in *Mplus* 8.8 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017). In the first step of the modeling approach, only latent class indicators were used for model estimation. In the second step, the most likely class variable was created using latent class posterior distributions obtained during the first step. In the third step, classes were regressed via multinomial logistic regression on predictor variables taking misclassifications in the second step into account (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014). We included intolerance and EU support in the third step to characterize our class solution. We controlled for the multilevel structure of our data (level 1: $n=1206$ participants, level 2: $n=89$ school classes) by using *Mplus*' Type=COMPLEX MIXTURE function, which adjusts the standard errors and fit indices for clustering (i.e., students nested in classrooms).

To identify a meaningful class solution, we selected number of classes based on model fit, parsimony and theoretical considerations. For model fit, we used the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC, Schwarz, 1978) and the adjusted BIC (BIC_{adj}). Lower values signify a better model fit (Weller et al., 2020). We furthermore inspected entropy ($>.7$) and the likelihood ratio test. The latter tests whether a model with k classes compared to $k-1$ classes fits significantly better (Nylund et al., 2007). Our last criterion was that each class should be substantively meaningful, representing a sufficient number of students in the sample ($>5\%$) (Collins & Lanza, 2009). Because statistical criteria alone often do not help to identify the optimal class solution, we took parsimony and theoretical considerations into account, when deciding for the number of classes (Collins & Lanza, 2009).

TABLE 1 Content coding European identity (open question): Code name, % of mentions, description and typical example.

Code	% of mentions	Description category includes statements about	Example	Cohen's kappa
Biology	10%	(a) Being born in Europe	"Being born in a European country"	.89
		(b) One's ancestors being born in Europe	"Having parents or great parents from a European country"	
		(c) Having a European phenotype	"Light skin"	
Culture/s	8%	(a) Existence of a shared European culture	"Being culturally similar"	.81
		(b) Similarities between European countries	"Living together with people from many cultures"	
		(c) Different cultures that are part of Europe	"Feeling European"	
		(d) Feeling European		
Language	3%	(a) Speaking a European language or wanting to learn one	"Speaking a European language"	.96
Living	22%	(a) To live or grow up in a European country	"Living or growing up in Europe"	.91
		(b) Evaluating life in Europe	"Being happy to live here"	
European values & community	14%	(a) Having or referencing European values	"Having a union formed by many countries"	.84
		(b) Feeling part of a union or community	"Tolerance, modern"	
Governmental systems	9%	(a) Having certain governmental systems, participations, voting rights or institutions	"Sharing sovereignty between states"	.82
		(b) Fulfilling formal requirements for EU citizenship	"Having a European passport"	
		(c) Following EU laws	"Good Education"	
Freedom	10%	(a) Having rights and freedoms	"Having rights"	.90
			"Being able to say one's opinion freely"	
Economy & safety	10%	(a) Having financial or other securities	"Safety within the EU"	.81
		(b) Having economic privileges	"A rich and privileged area"	
Meaningless	3%	(a) Considering a European identity to be meaningless	"It means nothing for me"	.77
Knowledge	2%	(a) Knowing about Europe or the EU	"Knowing about Europe"	.83
		(b) Being interested in Europe or the EU	"Being interested in Europe"	

Note: Code frequencies are based on T1. Cohen's kappa for the coding scheme is based on the last coding round of our T2 coding ($n = 754$).

To examine associations between class membership and our predictors, we conducted multinomial logistic regressions including all predictors separately into the model and afterwards testing all previously significant predictors in a single model to examine unique effects of the predictors.

Deviations from the preregistration

We did not plan to include the five closed questions into model estimation, except if less than 300 open answers were fit for LCA. In that case, we planned to use the closed items instead and not complementary to the codes. Since 41% (493) of our participants stated nothing in their European identity open answers and the majority of those who stated something mentioned only one (34%, 405) or two codes (20%, 245), we decided to include the closed items into model estimation. We did so to ensure we would have enough indicators for LCA, while not losing the richness of meanings from our codes. Please see the supplemental material for results on only open answer classes. Furthermore, we originally planned to include ethnic self-identification instead of immigrant status, and classroom diversity based on ethnic self-identification as predictors for class membership. Due to the number of missing values ($n=452$; 38%) on ethnic self-identification, we decided to use immigrant status instead and not calculate classroom diversity.

RESULTS

Attrition analysis

To examine whether students who answered the open questions differed from students who did not, we conducted logistic regression analysis. Responding vs. non-responding (i.e., no code for European identity present) was regressed on age, gender, school type, federal state, intolerance towards refugees and people who recently migrated to Germany, EU support, subjective knowledge about the EU and Europe and European identity commitment. The results are presented in [Table S7](#) in the supplemental material. Non-responders were significantly more often in non-college-bound school tracks and from Thuringia compared to responders. Furthermore, non-responders showed lower levels of European identity commitment (attachment to Europe) compared to responders. Non-responders had significantly higher levels of subjective knowledge about the EU and Europe compared to responders.

Latent class analysis

We selected a model with three latent classes as the statistical criteria (see [Table 2](#) for model results), content and associations with our characterization items were meaningful. BIC was lowest for the three-class solution, while BIC_{adj} was lowest for the five-class solution. Since LRT indicated a three-class solution and a fourth for fifth class was not qualitatively different from the classes in the three classes solution, we followed the principle of parsimony and chose the three-class solution. For German identity, we selected a model with three classes (see [supplemental material A](#) for further details).

Class content

We labeled the largest class *living-based* (47% of participants) because *Living* (code) and the neutral answer options for being born and growing up in Europe, and one's parents being

born in Europe (polytomous items) had the highest probabilities in this class. We labeled the next biggest class *culture & value-based* (27%), because *EU values and community*, *Culture/s* (codes) and disagreement with having to be born or one's parents having to be born in Europe (polytomous items) had the highest probabilities in this class. We labeled the smallest class *ancestry-based* (26%) because *Biology*, *Living* (codes), and agreement with having to be born or one's parents having to be born in Europe (polytomous items) had the highest probabilities in this class (see Figure 1). For a detailed information on German identity class content please see the [supplemental material A](#).

Living-based European identity class (47% of participants)

The most frequently mentioned code for the *living-based class* in comparison to the other two classes was *Living* (.26), e.g., “Living or growing up in Europe.” Other frequent codes included *Biology* (.12), e.g., “Being born in Europe,” and *European values and community* (.13), e.g., “It means that I belong to something bigger than ‘my’ country.” Participants disagreed more likely with the statement that one had to be Christian to be European in comparison to the *ancestry-based class*, but agreed more likely in comparison to the *culture & value-based class*. They

TABLE 2 Goodness of fit statistics for European identity latent class analysis.

Classes	Loglikelihood	df	LRT	BIC	BIC _{adj}	Entropy
One class	-11,077	27	/	22,346	22,261	/
Two classes	-10,703	55	748.44***	21,796	21,622	.78
Three classes	-10,538	83	329.78*	21,665	21,402	.74
Four classes	-10,449	111	178.46	21,685	21,333	.74
Five classes	-10,378	139	141.89	21,742	21,301	.74
Six classes	-10,338	167	79.17	21,861	21,331	.73
Seven classes	-10,296	195	83.52	21,977	21,358	.72
Eight Classes	-10,258	223	75.33	22,100	21,392	.73

Note: Differences between the LRT of a model with k versus $k - 1$ classes were significant at *** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$.

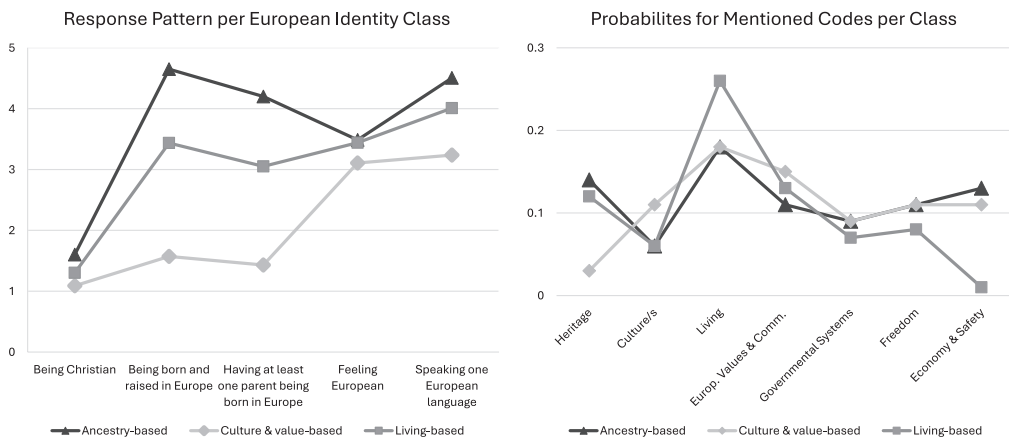


FIGURE 1 Response pattern and probabilities of mentioned codes per European identity class. Response patterns are given as average per class (scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Probabilities for codes range from .01 to .26.

tended to be neutral towards the statements that one had to be born and raised in Europe or that one's parents had to be born in Europe in order to be European. Participants agreed more likely with the statement that speaking a European language was important for being European, but to a lesser extent than participants in the *ancestry-based class*.

Culture and value-based European identity class (27% of participants)

The most frequently mentioned codes for this class in comparison to the other two classes were *Culturels* (.10), e.g., “Living together with people from many cultures” and *European values and community* (.15). Another frequent code was *Living* (.18). Participants disagreed more likely with the statements that someone had to be Christian, that one had to be born and raised in Europe or that one's parents had to be born in Europe in order to be European. They tended to be neutral towards the statement that one had to speak a European language.

Ancestry-based European identity class (26% of participants)

The most frequently mentioned code for this class in comparison to the other two classes was *Biology* (.14). Other frequent codes were *Living* (.18) and *Economy & safety* (.13). Participants in this class tended to be more neutral towards the statement that one has to be Christian to be European. They agreed more likely to the statements that one had to be born and raised in Europe and that one's parents had to be born in Europe in order to be European. Furthermore, participants agreed more likely to the statement that one had to speak a European language to be European.

Characterizations of classes: Intolerance and EU support

Class membership was not significantly associated with EU support (*ancestry*: $M=4.4$, $SD=.8$; *culture & value*: $M=4.5$, $SD=.7$; *living*: $M=4.4$, $SD=.7$). Membership in the *culture & value-based class* and the *living-based class* was significantly negatively associated with intolerance relative to an *ancestry-based class* (*ancestry*: $M=3.0$, $SD=1.2$; *culture & value*: $M=1.9$, $SD=1.0$; *living*: $M=2.4$, $SD=1.1$). Participants in the *ancestry-based class* had the highest mean intolerance, followed by participants in the *living-based class*. Participants in the *culture & value-based class* had lowest intolerance values (see Table 3).

Predictors of class membership

Using univariate logistic regressions, we screened for significant predictors of class membership. Significant predictors were then included in the final multivariate model (see Table 4). Subjective knowledge about the EU and Europe was not significantly associated with class membership and was therefore not included in the multivariate regression.

Belonging to the *culture & value-based class* was significantly positively associated with belonging to a *cultural- or civic-based German identity class*¹ compared to an *ancestry-based*

¹We found three-classes of German identity: *cultural-based* (47% of participants), *ethnic-based* (29%) and *civic-based* (24%).

Adolescents in the *cultural-based class* mentioned *Language*, *Freedom* frequently and were neutral towards ethnic heritage being important for being German. Adolescents in the *ethnic-based class* mentioned *Biology* frequently and agreed with ethnic heritage being important for being German. Adolescents in the *civic-based class* mentioned *Living*, *Freedom* frequently and disagreed with ethnic heritage being important for being German.

TABLE 3 Multinomial logistic regressions predicting membership in each identity class relative to ancestry-based European identity class (using Mplus: R3STEP).

Variable	Culture & value-based		Living-based	
	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE
EU Support	-.23	.17	-.14	.13
Intolerance	-1.09***	.13	-.54***	.11

Note: $N=1132$; $df=83$, $BIC=21,665$.

*** $p < .001$.

TABLE 4 Multinomial logistic regressions predicting membership in each identity class relative to ancestry-based class (using Mplus: R3STEP).

Variable	Culture & value-based class		Living-based class	
	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE
Federal state (0=NRW, 1=Thuringia)	-.39	.32	-.64*	.32
Gender (0=female, 1=male)	-.50	.29	-.78**	.29
Immigrant status (0=ethnic majority, 1=ethnic minority)	-1.14**	.37	-1.64***	.41
School type (ref: college-bound track)				
Vocational track	-.38	.37	-.20	.27
Comprehensive school	-.50	.37	-.63	.34
German identity class (ref: ethnic)				
Cultural	4.49***	.65	3.37***	.41
Civic	5.98***	.65	1.28**	.44

Note: $N=1188$, (LR) $\chi^2=3468$.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

class, and significantly negatively associated with immigrant status, i.e., ethnic majority students were more likely in the *culture & value-based class* than in the *ancestry-based class* compared to ethnic minority students. Membership in the *living-based class* was significantly negatively associated with federal state (students from NRW were more likely in the *living-based class* than in the *ancestry-based class* compared to students from Thuringia), gender (females were more likely in the *living-based class* than in the *ancestry-based class* compared to males), immigrant status (ethnic majority members were more likely in the *living-based class* than in the *ancestry-based class* compared to ethnic minority members), and significantly positively associated with a *cultural-* or *civic-based class* for German identity relative to an *ancestry-based class* (see Table 4).

EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS

Ethnic minority adolescents had a higher chance to be in the *ancestry-based European identity class* (29% of ethnic majority adolescents versus 23% of ethnic minority adolescents), while being on average less intolerant compared to ethnic majority adolescents. To investigate the unexpected association between ethnic minority background and the *ancestry-based class*, we examined one possible explanation: ethnic minority adolescents report what others think being European means without committing to that identity or even currently reconsidering it.

We ran exploratory analyses examining European identification by class and immigrant status. Tables and supporting information can be found in [supplemental material A](#).

Class membership was generally associated with European identity commitment (highest: *ancestry-based*, lowest: *culture & value-based*). Classes differed in levels of in-depth exploration only for ethnic majority adolescents, i.e., adolescents in the *culture & value-based class* showed significantly lower levels than participants in both other classes. Conversely, classes differed in levels of reconsideration of commitment only for ethnic minority adolescents, i.e., participants in the *ancestry-based class* showed significant higher levels of reconsideration than participants in the *culture & value-based class*. No interaction effect between ethnic background and class membership was significant.

SENSITIVITY ANALYSIS

To examine whether our European identity classes can be replicated, we examined whether the same or comparable classes of European identity emerged at the second measurement point of our study. The same European identity classes emerged. As at T1, most of our sample belonged to a *living-based class* (48%), followed by a *culture & value-based* (31%) and *ancestry-based class* (21%). Notably, slightly more participants had a *culture & value-based* understanding at the second measurement point (see [supplemental material A](#)). Furthermore, to examine the extent to which our classes were driven by the two data types (open versus closed responses), we ran LCAs for both data types separately. Compared to the LCA solutions including open and closed items, we found similar classes for LCAs using only open answers (*living-based*, *ancestry-based*, *values-based*) and different classes for LCAs including only closed answer (*ethnic*, *religious-ethnic*, *civic*). Results implied that combined LCA results were a bit more like the open items LCA results (for more details see [supplemental material A](#)). The combined approach seems to be adequate to ensure power for LCA and keep the richness of meanings from the codes.

DISCUSSION

A European identity could become a unifying social identity among young Europeans, but only if its content is conceptualized along democratic or cosmopolitan values. Despite the importance of identity content, research has often studied strength of identification with Europe (e.g., Jugert et al., 2021) but rarely its content (cf. König, 2023). Following social identity theory, the current study inductively examined what German adolescents understand being European means by using person-centered analysis. The study contributes to the ongoing research on European identity and its associations with political attitudes, and highlights the potential of openly assessing identity content next to closed items.

Three classes of European identity emerged: a *living-based* (47% of participants), a *culture & value-based* (27%) and an *ancestry-based European identity class* (26%). The *ancestry-* and *culture & value-based European identity class* corresponded most closely with ethnic and civic conceptions of being European, however, both classes were more heterogeneously understood. For example, the *ancestry-based class* also included agreement with the importance of speaking a European language to be European, which is usually attributed to civic conceptions of political identities (Bruter, 2003). Furthermore, the third class, the *living-based class*, included civic and ethnic aspects and cannot be categorized as one or the other. Our results are comparable to Ditlmann and Kopf-Beck's (2019) for German identity, in so far as that assessing identity content openly and, in our case, together with closed items added valuable nuances to content.

When examining emerging contents per data types, we found similar classes of European identity for open answers (*living-based*, *ancestry-based*, *values-based*), but different classes

for closed answers (*ethnic, religious-ethnic, civic*). The former more closely resembled the classes of the combined approach, while the latter were more in accordance with an ethnic-civic typology. This implies two things. First, an open assessment allows for more nuanced content. Second, providing participants with pre-defined categories for content shapes found content, i.e., unexpected contents might be overlooked by researchers, when only asking closed questions.

In line with our expectations, participants with a more civic European identity, the *culture & value-based class*, showed lowest levels of intolerance, while participants with a more ethnic European identity, the *ancestry-based class*, showed highest levels of intolerance. Our results indicated that a European identity can have positive effects on intolerance, but it matters how it is conceptualized. Contrary to our expectations, participants belonging to different classes of European identity did not differ in levels of EU support. We expected a more civic European identity to relate more strongly to EU support (Risse, 2015). Since EU related topics are only included in school curricula beginning from the 9th grade in Germany (e.g., QUA-LiS, 2022; THILLM, 2022), adolescents might not know enough yet about the EU to associate it with being European. This could also explain the non-significant association between subjective knowledge about the EU and Europe and any of the European identity classes. Future studies could research older samples to investigate the effect of knowledge on European identity.

European identity class membership was furthermore significantly and differently associated with membership in German identity classes and ethnic majority/minority membership. In line with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), adolescents showed content-wise compatible European and national identities, meaning that membership to a more civic German identity was significantly associated with a more civic European identity.

Contrary to our expectations, even though most ethnic minority adolescents belonged to a *culture & value-based* or *living-based class*, they more likely belonged to an *ancestry-based European identity* relative to majority adolescents. Notably, ethnic minority adolescents showed significant lower levels of intolerance compared to ethnic majority adolescents in total and per identity class. We expected that ethnic minority adolescents would identify relatively less likely with an *ancestry-based* European identity, since it could exclude their ethnic background (Agirdag et al., 2016; Brummer et al., 2022; Erisen, 2017). Exploratory analysis suggests that ethnic minority adolescents identify with an *ancestry-based* European identity, but reconsidered their commitment. Although ethnic minority adolescents in the *ancestry-based class* showed highest levels of commitment, they also showed highest levels of reconsideration relative to other ethnic minority adolescents.

A possible explanation could be that ethnic minority adolescents reported what they think others understand as being European, which could deteriorate their current identification with Europe. The majority of the minority sample indicated an identification with an EU member state or Türkiye, whose citizens also report feeling European (Agirdag et al., 2016). However, Turkish-origin or Muslim people are frequently constructed as outgroup members in the German discourse, which might contribute to adolescents' reconsideration of identity membership. Future studies could examine identity content along identity formation processes (e.g., Crocetti et al., 2008) separately for ethnic groups to disentangle identity construction in greater detail.

Limitations

Our study has several limitations. First, part of the association between German and European identity classes could be explained by sequence effects. All participants had to answer the open item about German identity directly followed by the open item about European identity, which might have made certain identity aspects more salient and therefore more likely to mention

than if we would have asked both identities separately. Future studies could split participants in three groups. One group could answer only the open question for German identity, another group for European identity and the last group for both identities. Comparing class frequencies across the three questionnaire groups would then allow to explain the association of national and European identity more accurately.

Second, another limitation regards the phrasing of our open identity question. As we asked participants, what they think being European means, our classes could represent their European identity that they commit to or a European identity they perceive to be present in their society while questioning or without identifying with its contents. With our data, we cannot distinguish between these options. However, we were not interested in participants self-identification as European. Researchers interested in European self-identification and construction should rephrase the item by adding a self-reference (e.g., “Do you see yourself as European? Please explain why you do or do not,” see for an example Langer, 2023).

Third, non-responder analysis revealed significant differences between responders and non-responders. Adolescents from Thuringia, vocational schools, with higher subjective knowledge, or lower European identity commitment were less likely to respond to open items. One explanation might be that those students have less opportunity to engage in Europe-related political participation (e.g., Erasmus, hierarchy-free discussions in class) due to curricular differences or European exchange programs due to lower SES in the different school tracks. Despite the differences, we cannot pinpoint what exactly caused the non-response, i.e., no associated meaning or unwillingness to verbalize it. Future studies could instruct participants to write down, if they do not associate meaning to an identity.

Lastly, we could show that region of residence is associated with different understandings of being European. However, since NRW and Thuringia differ in various aspects (urban vs. rural, ethnically heterogenous vs. ethnically homogenous), it is hard to pinpoint, which characteristic might be responsible for the significant association. Future studies could investigate effects of place of residency by including more fine-grained regional indicators, such as school or neighborhood ethnic diversity.

CONCLUSION

Our study highlights that being European can mean different things to different individuals and that capturing identity content openly can contribute to ongoing research on European identity. If researchers would like to include only closed items in their questionnaires, they could use a wider variety of pre-defined items to capture different nuances (e.g., Being European means having friends from different countries). To ensure that those are relevant for their sample, we would suggest reviewing qualitative studies beforehand. Furthermore, we found that not all European identities are defined in cosmopolitan ways. By implication, educational institutions could already focus on teaching ethnically inclusive national identities to foster a shared feeling of we-ness on the European level.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Study hypotheses and statistical analysis were preregistered during data collection and before accessing the data (<https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/RUF5E>). Data, syntax and supplementary material can be retrieved from the OSF project page: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/A56ES>.

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