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Students' University Identification: An Exploratory Study in the United States and Italy

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Abstract

Students' identification with schools or universities is associated with many positive outcomes, such as increased cooperation and completion of studies. This study is a qualitative investigation of university students' experiences concerning identification. Two hundred and eleven Italian students and 226 U.S. students wrote responses to open-ended questions about a time that they either felt connected (identified) or disconnected to (not identified) with their university. In Italy, students prompted to identify with the university focused their descriptions on didactical aspects such as academic training experiences. Italian students prompted not to identify with the university often described their experiences with the university's organizational and administrative aspects. U.S. students prompted to identify or not with the university focused on the social aspects of their university experience such as their involvement with fraternities and sororities. Italian and U.S. students rarely mentioned instrumental aspects of their university experience such as how much the university matters for professional training. This close analysis of students' experiences illustrates how diverse the sources of university identification can be across different countries. These qualitative results help to fully understand the contents of the experience of university students. Policies for enhancing students' motivation and engagement in higher education should reflect all the different domains of identification, to support the full range of students' experiences.

Keywords: university identification, qualitative methods, higher education, student belonging

La Identificación de los Estudiantes con la Universidad: un Estudio Exploratorio en Estados Unidos e Italia

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Resumen

La identificación de los estudiantes con las escuelas o universidades se asocia con muchos resultados positivos, como el aumento de la cooperación y la finalización de los estudios. Este estudio es una investigación cualitativa de las experiencias de los estudiantes universitarios en relación con la identificación. Más de 200 estudiantes en dos países (211 en Italia y 226 en Estados Unidos) fueron preguntados sobre un momento en el que se sintieron conectados (identificados) y uno en que se sintieron desconectados (no identificados) con su universidad. En Italia, los estudiantes a los que se les pidió que se identificaran con la universidad centraron sus descripciones en los aspectos didácticos, como las experiencias de formación académica. Los estudiantes italianos a los que se les pidió que no se identificaran con la universidad describieron a menudo sus experiencias con los aspectos organizativos y administrativos de la universidad. Los estudiantes estadounidenses a los que se les pidió que se identificaran o no con la universidad se centraron en los aspectos sociales de su experiencia universitaria, como su participación en fraternidades y hermandades. Los estudiantes italianos y estadounidenses rara vez mencionaron los aspectos instrumentales de su experiencia universitaria, como la evaluación de la importancia de la universidad para la formación profesional. Este análisis detallado de las experiencias de los estudiantes ilustra lo diversas que pueden ser las fuentes de identificación con la universidad en los distintos países. Estos resultados cualitativos ayudan a comprender plenamente el contenido de la experiencia de los estudiantes universitarios. Las políticas para mejorar la motivación y el compromiso de los estudiantes en la educación superior deberían reflejar todos los diferentes ámbitos de la identificación, para apoyar toda la gama de experiencias de los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: identificación universitaria, métodos cualitativos, educación superior, pertenencia de los estudiantes

The identification of students with the educational context (school or university) has been described with various terms (e.g.: school bonding, positive orientation towards school, connectedness, belonging, see Libbey, 2004; Strayhorn, 2018). It has been defined as the extent to which students feel connected to their academic institutions and the people within those institutions (Strayhorn, 2018), or as incorporating feelings of being valued, included and accepted by educational representatives (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Maunder, 2018; Pedler et al., 2021). Research studies show that students' university identification or belonging is associated with many positive academic outcomes, such as undergraduate students' motivation, effort, retention, and enjoyment in studies (Pedler et al., 2021; Strayhorn, 2018; Ulmanen et al. 2016).

Voelkl (1996) developed an instrument to measure students' identification with school comprised of two dimensions. One dimension assesses students' feelings of belonging to school as a sense of connection and inclusion as a part of one's self-definition (e.g.: "*I feel proud of being part of my school*", p. 763). The second dimension describes the students' assessment that school and school-related outcomes are important for one's future success (e.g.: "*Most of the things we learn in class are useless– Reverse scored*", p. 763). Following Voelkl's studies (1996; 2012), Mitchell et al. (2016) assumed the existence of a cognitive or instrumental aspect of identification tied to how education might facilitate individual goals, and an affective aspect that is tied to emotional connection to the school/university. The cognitive component includes evaluations that students make regarding the importance that schools and universities have for their personal growth, their future success in life and their integration into the world of work. This component emphasizes what the school or university experience allows students to obtain (e.g.: a prestigious and well-paid job). The affective component refers to the sense of attachment that students feel towards their school or university. This affective component derives, in large part, from the interpersonal relationships that students have with peers, professors and administrative staff of schools and universities (see also Forsyth et al., 2011; Gillen-O'Neel, 2019; Maunder 2018). For example,

van Gijn-Grosvenor and Huisman (2019) asked Australian university students what influenced their sense of belonging to the university. Results of their qualitative analyses showed that student friendship networks were most important to feelings of belonging, along with having places and opportunities to interact around campus, such as within clubs, societies and at campus events, where students felt that they could be themselves and interact with peers.

In a different study, British university students, reported that making new friends, being involved in courses and in some university groups, studying and living in the campus rather than going home helped them feel that they belonged at university (Meehan & Howells, 2018). These students cited academic staff (e.g., tutors) as central to the process of "belonging" because they could provide opportunities for students to develop peer relationships, engage in meaningful interactions, and link the students' emergent knowledge and confidence to their future career aspirations.

Despite the presence of numerous studies on identification with educational settings, few studies have compared the reasons that increase university students' sense of identification with the reasons that decrease it. Furthermore, the qualitative studies of university identification or belonging that we located are limited to single countries and education systems. In this study, we closely analyse university students' experiences of connection or disconnection in two different university contexts (i.e.: Italy and the U.S.).

The Identification of University Students in the U.S. and in Italy
In the United States, results from a laboratory study (Smith et al., 1998) and a longitudinal study (Smith et al., 2009) showed how students' identification with the university moderates the impact of the perception of justice, which professors communicate, on student cooperation, obedience to rules, self-esteem and performance. In a very similar way, Di Battista, Pivetti and Berti (2014) found that the identification of Italian university students moderates the impact of the perception of procedural justice, which the authority communicates, on the students' engagement. Conversely, students who did not identify with the university cooperated only in the presence of external motivations, such as rewards and punishments. However, a direct comparison of U.S. and Italian university students did not find evidence that students' identification moderated their willingness to support the university (Di Battista et al., 2014).

Although the quantitative results for both Italian and U.S students were similar, there was no close analysis of university students' qualitative experiences of their connection (or lack of connection) to the university. Given the differences between the two U.S. and Italian educational systems, these experiences could be quite different (Marrucci, 2010). For example, compared to the Italian university system which provides for a three-year plus a master's degree or a 5-year single-cycle master's degree, the U.S. Bachelor's Degree or Undergraduate Program lasts 4 years. U.S. college and university students start these degrees after a completion of a high school degree that isone year less than the Italian high school degree. U.S. undergraduate degrees are characterized by an initial common path of shared general education courses and flexible curriculum that allows university students to compose their own study plan independently, leaving them free and responsible for their training.

For instance, U.S. students can choose to acquire some professional skills, practical and operational skills, or be motivated by purely cultural interests (Marrucci, 2010). In contrast, Italian degree courses offer less flexibility. Given these differences, it is possible U.S. students are less interested than Italian students in how much different didactic and organizational aspects can influence their academic or future experiences. Finally, the number of social and extra-didactic activities (e.g., fraternities, university newspapers, sports teams, clubs) that U.S. universities offer is larger compared to those offered to Italian university students (Marrucci, 2010). Therefore, these social activities might influence the construction of U.S. students' identification to a greater extent compared to Italian students who are less likely to be involved in these types of activities.

The Present Study

The work presented here aims to ground the university identification in the perspective of the students, with a methodological approach that avoids restricting the collection of information to pre-existing theoretical categories. Specifically, this study is an analysis of qualitative data about undergraduate students' identification obtained in a quasi - experimental study conducted in the U.S. and Italy. Given how few cross-national studies of university identification there are and the differences between the U.S. and Italian university educational systems, a qualitative approach is particularly

important if we want to fully understand the contents of the experience of college and university students (Pascarella, 2006; Torres et al., 2004).

The research questions are built on the basis of the theoretical premises set out above:

1) What experiences do students recall when asked about university identification?

2) Are there any differences in the experiences reported by U.S. and Italian students primed to identify or not identify with their universities?

The first question is an opportunity to determine if a qualitative analysis could reveal identity content missing from previous theoretical conceptualizations of student belonging or identification. For instance, it could suggest whether university students distinguish between the two components of cognitive and affective student belonging or identification. The second question explores the differences in the Italian and the U.S. university contexts. On the one hand, we might expect Italian and U.S. undergraduates to report similar types of identification because research that used a quantitative measure of university identification revealed similar patterns of results (e.g., Di Battista et al., 2014; Smith et al., 1998; Smith et al., 2009), and for these two universities, the education mission is the same (e.g., to increase education access for more students). However, we also might expect Italian and U.S. undergraduates to report different types of identification given educational system and cultural differences.

This study was conducted within two university contexts: one in central-southern Italy (www.unich.it) and one in northern California (U.S.A.; www.sonoma.edu). The two institutions share a very similar mission and comparable status. They are both relatively "young" public universities, founded in the 1960s with the aim of offering broad public access to higher education. However, the Italian university has double the number of students compared to the U.S. university. The Italian students also do not have a campus with dedicated housing and have fewer social and recreational activities available compared to U.S. students. The U.S. campus is home to nearly half of its enrolled students. The U.S. University has a newspaper and over 100 clubs and organizations that cater to a wide range of student interests.

These differences reflect general comparisons between Italian universities and U.S. universities (Marrucci, 2010).

In this study, we randomly assigned students to think of time that they were connected or not with university. We did not select students to represent their preferred point of view, but used the experimental manipulation as an opportunity to generate a wider variety of university experiences. It also was a chance to see if results across universities in response to the same question were similar.

Method

Participants

Four hundred and ninety U.S. and Italian undergraduate students participated in this study. However, 14 U.S. and 39 Italian students did not answer the open-ended identification question or gave an ambiguous answer (e.g.: "I have no memories of this type") so they were excluded from the analyses. The remaining 437 participants included 226 U.S. students (177 females - 78.3% - and 49 males; M age = 21.56; SD = 6.51) and 211 Italian students (158 females - 74.9% - and 50 males; 3 missing by gender; M age = 23.29; SD = 3.29). One hundred and eight Italian participants (51.2%) and 115 U.S. participants (50.9%) were in the condition of high identification; the remaining participants were in the condition of low identification.

Procedures

The questionnaire was implemented using MacroMediaAuthorware 7.0 and administered during either the Fall 2010 or the Spring 2011 academic terms. The questionnaire took 30 minutes on average to complete. Participants were recruited by snowball sampling with the collaboration of researchers and professors. After reading a description of the study and indicating their willingness to participate in an informed consent form, each participant was randomly assigned to one of the two low or high university identification conditions (see Di Battista et al., 2020 for more details on measures and results). Respondents read a debriefing statement at the end of their contribution. No compensation was offered for the participation. All aspects of the U.S. study were approved by Sonoma State University institutional review board (IRB APP: # 2372). In the Italian university context, an ethics committee for psychological research was not present at the time of data

collection. However, the research complied with the Code of Research Ethics of the Italian Psychology Association (Associazione Italiana di Psicologia, http://www.aipass.org/node/11560).

Instruments

Students' Identification Manipulation. Participants were randomly assigned to either a high or low university identification prime. Participants assigned to the high university identification experimental condition read the following:

"Take a moment to remember a specific situation during the past two months, when you felt involved and connected to your university (for example, experiences with teams, clubs, student activities, department and administrative staff, study groups, and classes)".

Participants assigned to the low university identification experimental condition read the following:

"Take a moment to remember a specific situation during the past two months, when you did not feel involved and connected to your university (for example, experiences with teams, clubs, student activities, department and administrative staff, study groups, and classes)."

Identification Scale. To confirm the manipulation, all participants completed a university identification measure (Di Battista et al., 2014). This measure consists of 6 items evaluated on a Likert scale of 7 points (from 1 = completely disagree to 7 = completely agree; e.g.: "At that moment, I was proud to be a student at my university."). Higher scores corresponded to higher levels of student identification ($M = 4.57$; $SD = 1.36$; $\alpha = .84$).

Data Analysis

Quantitative analyses were conducted by using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 22.0). The qualitative analyses of the content were conducted following the procedures outlined by Cho and Lee (2014). After transferring all participants' answers (with Italian answers translated into English) to a Microsoft excel file, two judges independently read the students' answers to the open-ended university identification question.

The categorization was conducted with both a bottom-up approach (i.e.: the categories emerged directly from the data through inductive reasoning) and top-down approach (i.e.: the categories emerged from the analysis of the

relevant literature - deductive reasoning; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). In an initial phase, the scripts were read and re-read by the first author to obtain familiarity with them. Then, one post-graduate trainee in social psychology (third Author) and the lead researcher (first Author) went through the first 50 written productions independently (50% U.S. responses) and produced their own categorizations. One coder was an expert in the literature on social identification, whereas the other coder was naïve about this issue.

In this initial inductive coding procedures, independent coders closely reading the relevant texts to determine 1) the size and relevance of text units, and 2) extract different meaning categories. A simple phrase or a set of statements that referred to a single coherent idea was considered a text unit. The same student's responses could be grouped into two or more categories if coders thought that they conveyed two or more different meanings regarding identification. After this initial review, the two coders coded the entire corpus of data and compared their results with each other to discuss the classifications, their rationale in classifying particular text units within specific themes as well as the labels used for the categorization. The disagreement between the two coders was resolved after a discussion and the final categories were adopted. A third judge with expertise in qualitative methods resolved any disagreements between the two judges.

In the last phase, four diagrams that organized the categories into hierarchical structure were produced (one for low identified U.S. students; one for low identified Italian students; one for high identified U.S. students; one for high identified Italian students; see Figures 1-4 below).

Results

Manipulation Check. A 2 (condition: high vs. low university identification) x 2 (nation: Italy vs. U.S.) two-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed with university identification scores as the outcome. Results yielded a significant effect for the manipulation of identification ($F_{(1,436)} = 477.61$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2p = .53$), for nationality ($F_{(1,436)} = 5.46$; $p = .02$; $\eta^2p = .01$) but a non-significant interaction between the identification prime and nationality ($F_{(1,436)} = 1.23$; $p = .27$). Across both samples, undergraduate students who were invited to describe an episode of high identification reported higher identification scores (M = 5.53; SD = 0.91) compared to students invited to describe an episode of low identification (M = 3.56; SD =

0.99). U.S. students (M = 4.65; SD = 1.31) also identified slightly more strongly with their university in comparison to Italian students (M = 4.44; SD = 1.41).

Qualitative Contents

Each student wrote a text of up to 580 characters in response to the open-ended question. In total, students produced 755 text units (Italian students = 372 text units; U.S. students = 383 text units). Four main categories of content were extracted from the students' responses (see the Figures 1-4). Each figure shows the number of text units for low and high identified Italian and U.S. students that fall into one of the four main categories described below. The four categories were as follows:

1) "Didactic and University Regulation Aspects", in which the text units referred to the students' evaluation on aspects of lectures or evaluations of the administration or organizational aspects of particular courses (e.g., classroom management) or the larger university (e.g., financial aid regulations).

2) "Social Activities and Students' Political Participation" in which text units appears to capture students' experiences related to all social activities experienced by students in university groups (e.g. clubs) and as university representatives in public settings or to audiences outside the university in either formal student government roles or as part of protests.

3) "Relational Evaluations" in which text units represented evaluations that students made about the importance that university activities have to their relationships with peers, professors and university administrative staff, inside or outside the classroom;

4) "Instrumental Evaluations" in which text units has to do with the evaluation that students make regarding the importance that university activities have for their personal growth, their future success in life and their integration into the world of work.
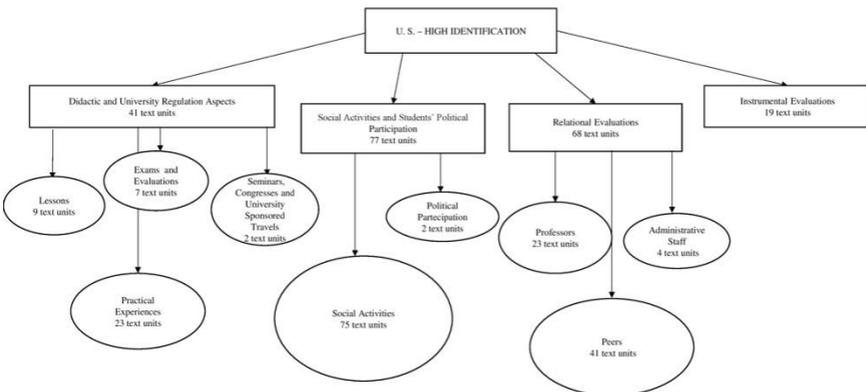
Figure 1
Concept map concerning U.S. students in the condition of low identification
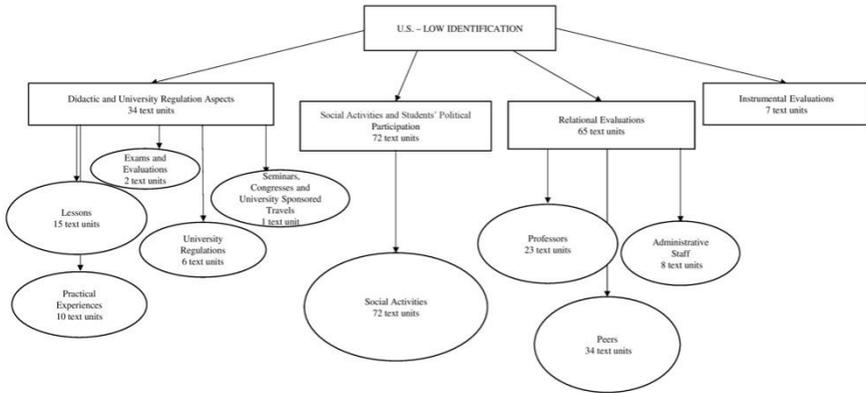
N = 111; text units =178

Figure 2
Concept map concerning U.S. students in the condition of high identification

N = 115; text units = 205

Figure 3
Concept map concerning Italian students in the condition of low identification
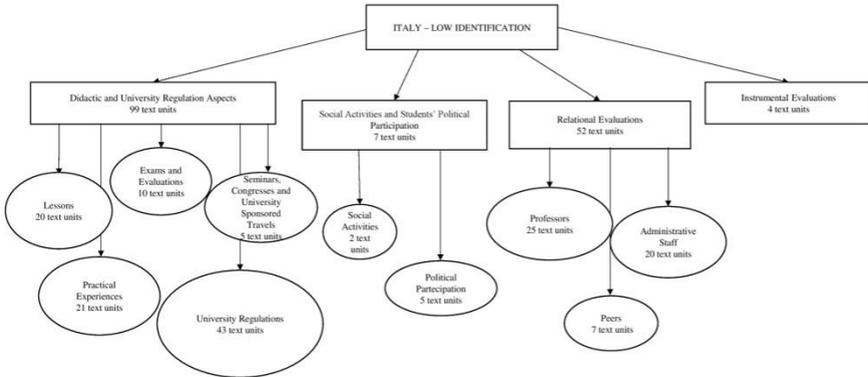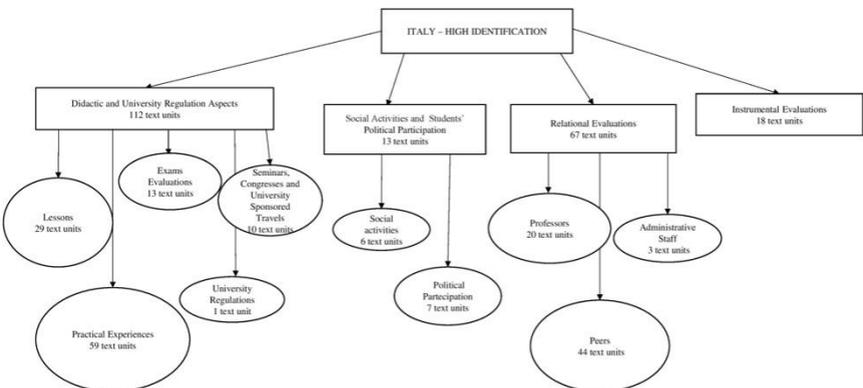N = 103; text units = 162

Figure 4
Concept map concerning Italian students in the condition of high identification

N = 108; text units = 210

Italian and U.S. students mentioned every main category in both experimental conditions (low vs. high identification). Within each of these four main categories, there are a number of sub-categories or themes that varied by experimental condition. For the first category (i.e.: Didactic and University Regulation Aspects) the students' answers were divided into the following themes:

"Lessons", in which students reported their personal experiences during the lectures held by professors:

-   A low identified Italian student reported as follows: "There are lessons of certain courses where [I didn't feel identified because][1] a student can only read some slides, and obviously this is no longer good for a fifth-year student [...]."
-   A high identified Italian student reported as follows: "During the lessons of the last semester I felt really involved, as during the lessons there were relevant interactions between students and the teacher, who also explained about the organization of the university."
-   A low identified U.S. student reported as follows: "There are so many classes where it is entirely a routine: Go to class, sit down, take notes while listening to the lecture, and then leave."
-   A high identified U.S. student reported as follows: "I felt very involved in my psychology course and almost all of my acting courses."

"Practical Experiences", in which students described experiences during university practical activities and groups (e.g. guided practical experiences, laboratories, internships and study groups):

-   A low identified Italian student reported as follows: "[I didn't feel identified] during the attendance of the guided practical experiences – EPGs [in Italian: Esperienze Pratiche Guidate – EPG] in psychobiology because the topics seemed uninteresting. I believe that EPGs should be used to make more practical and not theoretical experiences."
-   A high identified Italian student reported as follows: "An activity that made me feel very involved was a laboratory in the first week of the

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[1] The researchers' comments and / or parts of the speech that have not been included here, because of little relevance, are indicated by square brackets.

year; techniques and practical procedures were explained in detail and we had the opportunity to practice all together."

- A low identified U.S. student reported as follows: "Well, in one of my psych classes, I did not feel particularly connected to the team members while working on our group presentation […]."
- A high identified U.S. student reported as follows: "Last week I had a power-point presentation and three group members helped me with this project. Together we guided the class in a better understanding of a certain country. We brought food and answered questions after the presentation. During this time I felt very connected with my peers in my class along with my teacher […]."

"Exams and Evaluations" in which students' described all the exams and their evaluative experiences (e.g.: tests, exams, theses dissertations):

- A low identified Italian student reported as follows: "[I did not feel identified] during the last written exam. When the results came out, an incorrect vote was assigned to me. I only discovered this error after insisting on seeing my written assignment."
- A high identified Italian student reported as follows: "I remind one of the last experiences I had at the university, namely the thesis defence of my classmates."
- A low identified U.S. student reported as follows: "I felt not involved in my classes when […] I found out my GPA was not high enough to change my major to psychology. It was discouraging."
- A high identified U.S. student reported as follows: "I felt involved today as I was studying for a final exam with classmates."

"Seminars, Congresses and University Sponsored Travels" in which students' reported their experiences during congresses, seminars, and university trips:

- A low identified Italian student reported as follows: "My experience dates back to a visit of an important professional of the international scene. This person attended a meeting but even if I wanted to participate actively, this was not possible due to the fact that the conference was held in a very small room where only a few people could participate. On this occasion, I felt excluded from the activities of the university."

- A high identified Italian student reported as follows: "[I felt identified with my university] during the urban planning course. We carried out for an inspection of the earthquake areas of L'Aquila."
- A low identified U.S. student reported as follows: "I generally don't feel involved or connected, but a specific situation would be when I went on a fieldtrip with a class and felt like an outsider because I didn't have any friends or know anyone in the class."
- A high identified U.S. student reported as follows: "A moment when I felt involved and connected to my university was when I went on a trip […] to an organic farm. Everyone was really friendly and it made me feel welcome."

"University Regulations" in which students focused on university administrative and organizational aspects of their university experience (e.g. the organization of exam sessions, activation and bureaucracy regarding internships and other):

- A low identified Italian student reported as follows: "I generally don't feel involved during the research of information at the university offices and on the university online site."
- A high identified Italian student reported as follows: "This is my first year […] and until now I have had a positive impression of the university organization."
- A low identified U.S. student reported as follows: "When trying to register for classes for this semester, I found it difficult to get into the classes that I needed because they were all full. […]."
- High identified U.S. students: No answers.

As for the second category (i.e.: Social Activities and Students' Political Participation), students' words were mainly focused on the following themes:

"Social Activities" in which students described their experiences in university social groups (e.g. clubs, sports groups, fraternities or sororities, groups with artistic and leisure purposes and others):

- A low identified Italian student reported as follows: "[I did not feel identified during] the coffee concert, [because] it seems to me that students are banned to participate in the only social and non-educational event organized by the university."

- A high identified Italian student reported as follows: "For three years, I and about twenty other students from this university have formed a theatre company."
- A low identified U.S. student reported as follows: "[I did not feel identified] every time I walk through campus and see the cliques of fraternities and sororities and the way their members treat persons who are not one of them."
- A high identified U.S. student reported as follows: "Being a part of the Fall Dance Show, the Blue Barons Dance Crew and the theatre arts department made me feel connected to a big part of the university that I desire to be involved in. I feel like being around the majors in the department helps a lot with staying involved with the aspects of college that one would like to be a part of."

"Political Participation" in which students' described their experiences concerning participation in protest groups and groups protecting and representing students' interests:
- A low identified Italian student reported as follows: "I did not feel particularly involved in the university protest against the Gelmini's[2] decree."
- A high identified Italian student reported as follows: "I felt involved during the election of the student representatives; I always feel involved whenever there are problems concerning my faculty."
- Low identified U.S. students: No answers.
- A high identified U.S. student: "[I feel connected] taking part in occupying Salazar in a protest."

As for the third category (i.e.: Relational Evaluations), the students' answers were focused on their relationships with professors, peers and university staff:

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[2] The so-called Gelmini's reform (Italian: Riforrma Gelmini) refers to the set of acts of Italian Republic entered into force between 2008 and 2011 whose main purpose was to reform the entire Italian school system. Regarding universities, Law 240/2010, promulgated on 30 December of the same year, came into force on 1 January 2011.

"Professors"

- A low identified Italian student reported as follows: "I didn't feel identified with my university once when I had to wait my turn for an exam. […] I had to wait that the professor finished smoking cigarettes and finished chatting with his colleague! My turn came after an hour and a half."
- A high identified Italian student reported as follows: "I remind of one course I attended in genetics. I was dealing with a competent and polite professor. I felt free to express my perplexities or doubts regarding the contents of the course and I received all the clarifications I needed."
- A low identified U.S. student reported as follows: "I have been trying to contact one of my professors; however she has not returned any of my emails. I have been emailing her regarding a class I am taking with her."
- A high identified U.S. student reported as follows: "[I felt identified that time] I was thinking about which grad schools to apply to. Two teachers in particular have been very helpful while I figured out where I would like to apply and which field of psychology I wanted to study."

"Peers"

- A low identified Italian student reported as follows: "[I don't feel connected because] I have difficulty integrating with other students."
- A high identified Italian student reported as follows: "Once, I studied the same topic with another student of another faculty. I think this was a positive experience since there was the possibility of comparison and integration of knowledge between us."
- A low identified U.S. student reported as follows: "[…] there has been moments when I felt a disconnection between me and my peers. I felt like a lot of the student body from my freshman year were interested in partying, drinking and doing drugs. While I was involved with Village Council and Study Buddies, I struggled with relating to people because I was not interested in partying, drinking and doing drugs."

-   A high identified U.S. student reported as follows: "I went to the free pizza and comedy night with my roomies from the dorm […]. It was fun to hear the comedy and laugh with everyone."

"Administrative Staff"

-   A low identified Italian student reported as follows: "Recently, I asked for clarification in the central offices and I found some difficulties in interacting with some of the staff members."
-   A high identified Italian student reported as follows: "Every day I find myself collaborating with other students and staff of the departments. These experiences are interesting."
-   A high identified U.S. student reported as follows: "[…] I feel very connected with my Residential Life Staff. My advisor […] connects us in a way that we all trust one another and can count on one another. […]."
-   A low identified U.S. student reported as follows: "I did not feel connected on campus when I was not notified in certain classes or general social settings […]. I guess you could say staff."

As for the last category (i.e.: Instrumental Evaluations), the students' text units focused on the importance that university experience would have for their academic, personal and professional growth. For this category few text units were counted and did not emerge sub-categories:

-   A low identified Italian student reported as follows: "The moments in which I did not feel identified with my university are those in which I understand that the lack of university organization subtracts precious time in which students could have enriched their cultural baggage."
-   A high identified Italian student reported as follows: "In July, I met the professor with whom I will have to take the final exam. The interview was very interesting and very important for my future choices."
-   A low identified U.S. student reported as follows: "I interviewed for a job in the multicultural office and, unfortunately, was not offered the position."
-   A high identified U.S. student reported as follows: "This past semester I was involved in the English class Small Press Editing, in which students create the literary magazine Zaum. This class gave me

a chance to get some practical experience in the field of editing and publishing, which is the field I would like to get into as a future career […]."

Figures 1-4 provide diagrams or hierarchical structures showing the frequencies of text units for each category and sub-category in the two national contexts. Figures 1 and 2 show that both low and high identified U.S. students mainly focused their attention on social activities, such students' experiences in fraternities or sororities; single gender social organizations for college or university students usually designated by Greek letters. Figure 3 shows that low identified Italian students mainly focused their descriptions on aspects related to the organization and administration of the university. Figure 4 shows that high identified Italian students mainly described didactical practical experiences, such as experiences in laboratories and internships. Relational aspects were cited by all students whereas instrumental aspects were rarely mentioned

Discussion

This qualitative study explored the source of students' university identification in two different national contexts. We collected students' personal descriptions of a time that they felt connected or disconnected from the university. A close textual analysis of students' experiences revealed four main categories that include students' academic experiences, social activities and experiences, interpersonal relationships, and much less frequently, how their university experience could support their career goals.

In line with previous research (Gillen-O'Neel 2019; Maunder 2018), U.S. and Italian undergraduate students' feelings of being accepted, valued, and included by others (e.g., teachers and peers) are important elements of connection and disconnection. However, our study, in line with other studies (e.g., Masika & Jones, 2016) also indicates that there are limits to the impact of social activities on university identification, particularly if the broader socio-cultural context in which students are embedded does not support these opportunities. For instance, in our study, Italian students' responses to the open-ended questions were mainly focused on the didactic activities and university organization aspects of university life (e.g., positive or negative experiences during the lectures held by professors), both in the condition of high (112 text units) and low identification (99 text units). These aspects were

cited much less frequently by U.S. students (34 text units in low identification; and 41 text units in high identification). Within this category, the largest difference between U.S. and Italian students was for citations of practical experiences (e.g., internships and guided practical experiences) that were most frequently cited by high identified Italian students (59 text units). Aspects related to regulations and administration (e.g., the distribution of exam sessions in the academic calendar) were most frequently cited by low identified Italian students (43 text units). High identified U.S. students never cited these aspects.

U.S. students drew upon social activities for experiences of both low (72 text units) and high identification (75 text units). For instance, U.S. students focused on social experiences with clubs, and sports teams. These results are in line with some studies suggesting a positive association between students' participation in extra-curricular social activities and their sense of identification and belonging (Gieg et al., 2017; Davalos et al., 1999; Oliver, 1995; van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2019). For example, based on a survey of Australian undergraduates, Wilson et al. (2018) argued that university students considered clubs and other opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities as an important factor influencing their sense of connectedness to university. Indeed, these social activities allow many students to explore new interests and build relationships with peers that contribute to increasing their sense of belonging to their university (Spady, 1970; Wilson et al., 2018).

However, some studies have been shown that it is participation in some extracurricular activities (e.g. participation in sports teams), and not others (e.g. being part of a non-campus branded band), that is associated with school identification and study completion for U.S. students (Davalos et al., 1999; see also Zill et al., 1995). Our study results also suggest that social activities can contribute to both connection and disconnection. In line with these results, research found that hazing often occurs across a range of university student groups such as fraternities and sororities, club sports, performing arts organizations, and academic clubs (e.g., Allan & Madden, 2012;Campo et al., 2005;Owen et al., 2008). Hazing and other negative experiences can contribute to less university identification. In Italy, social organizations at colleges and universities are not completely absent. For instance, Goliarda – an ancient form of Greek letter organization – is still present in some Italian university campuses but currently, it is very rarely available, frequented and

known. Instead, Italian students primed to identify with the university wrote about practical academic practical experiences (e.g., internships and guided practical experiences).

Furthermore, we found that U.S. students (low identification: 65 text units; high identification: 68 text units) and Italian students (low identification: 52 text units; high identification: 67 text units) frequently focused their descriptions on relational evaluations including experiences with university authorities (e.g., professors or administrative staff) or peers. U.S. and Italian Students cited relational aspects as reasons for both connection and disconnection, but they rarely mentioned instrumental aspects. Peers, professors and university staff can play a fundamental role in academic motivation by creating a climate of respect, acceptance and opportunities (see Watson et al., 2010). Furthermore, in many studies, feeling respected and valued by teachers and staff are identified as important factors contributing to students' feeling that they belonged at university (van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2019; Wilson et al., 2018; Zumbrunn et al., 2014).

In summary, these study results provided an in-depth exploration of the students' university identification by considering experiences of both connection and disconnection with the university. By starting with student experiences that were randomly primed through an experimental manipulation, we could identify the categories that emerged from a broad range of students' original descriptions. The results reveal a multi-dimensional and contextualized description of university identification that can lay the foundation for a broader quantitative study on the meaning of university identification across national cultures.

Previous research documents the extent that students' identification is a fundamental element of academic motivation, typical of healthy educational contexts and associated with positive academic outcomes (Finn, 1989; Slaten et al., 2016). For example, middle and high school students who declare a strong sense of school belonging also show higher levels of cooperation and motivation to study, compared to students with low levels of belonging (Finn & Voelkl, 1993;Furrer& Skinner, 2003;Goodenow & Grady, 1993;Hagborg, 2003;Newmann, 1981;Ryan & Patrick, 2001;Voelkl, 1997). Similarly, in the university setting, students who identify more strongly with their institution also report higher levels of cooperation compared to less identified students (Jackson et al., 2011; Gillen-O'Neel, 2019). Furthermore, for at risk students, the sense of identification plays a vital role because it improves their

motivation to study and participate in academic life (Finn, 1989; Goodenow & Gray, 1993; Pedler et al., 2021).

Conversely, some studies observe that students who do not have a strong sense of belonging to their educational context show academic problems and poor academic achievement (Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Maunder, 2018; Osborne, 1995, 1997; Voelkl, 1996, 1997), problem behavior (Li & Lerner, 2011), and dropping out (Wang & Degol, 2014; Pedler et al., 2021).

The study has some important limitations that ought to be kept in mind when interpreting the results. We recognize that these samples are not representative samples of the student populations in Italy and the United States. Therefore, we should be cautious in generalizing these findings to all university and college students in either country. Future studies should extend a qualitative analysis of university identification to students in other university contexts. Furthermore, the U.S. and Italian study participants are mostly women. Female students report more positive school belonging compared to male students (Voelkl, 1997). Therefore, future research should explore identification experiences from the most diverse samples possible. However, we successfully manipulated low and high levels of students' identification and their responses shed light on cultural differences in university identification in line with previous studies (Marrucci, 2010).

This is the first study that closely examined the university students' identification content from two different nationalities with a prompt for experiences that either increased or decreased university identification. Understanding the sources of students' university identification is vital for improving the quality of university learning. In line with Baumeister and Leary's (2017) "belongingness hypothesis" that argues that belonging is a fundamental human motivation with relevant behavioural consequences (e.g. students' engagement), this study results shed light on some positive and negative aspects facilitating the construction of university-based belonging. When educational contexts meet students' identification and belonging needs, students show high academic engagement, motivation and achievement (Eccles et al., 1993).

These data confirm how important a qualitative analysis is to fully understand university students' identification (Pascarella, 2006; Torres et al., 2004). University students who identify strongly with their university context, but define this identification in social terms might be especially influenced or motivated by the quality of their relationships with peers and lecturers to study

hard in the classroom. For U.S. university students, it is what happens during social activities, in fraternities, in peer groups, that contributes most to their sense of belonging, both in positive and in negative ways. In contrast, for Italian university students, guided practical experiences and internships increase their sense of connection and belonging, whereas organizational and administrative difficulties play a negative role. This qualitative analysis enables a greater understanding of the university identification aspects that favour successful student persistence and retention.

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