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Civic and Political Participation of Children and Adolescents: A Lifestyle Analysis for Positive Youth Developmental Programs

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Social participation plays a key role in predicting positive youth development (PYD). As a previous step of this link, this research examined how children and adolescents' relational lifestyles influenced their participation in political and civic activities. This research provides a multi-dimensional approach to the study of children's social participation, based on six children's lifestyles factors (i.e. family dialogue, risky behaviours, cultural activities, civic values, family supervision and peer group relationships). Using data from an international survey that included 6130 participants (2198 Spanish, 3932 Italian, Mage = 13.8), this study's results show that relational lifestyles (especially family dialogue and out-of-school cultural activities) are positively related to political and civic participation among children and adolescents. On the contrary, some peer group relationships decreased their social participation in those key dimensions for PYD. Limitations of the current study, implications for future policy decisions and applications to children social programs are discussed. © 2015 John Wiley & Sons Ltd and National Children's Bureau

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Introduction

Social participation, which refers to one's degree of participation in a community or society, is associated with positive and healthy youth development (PYD), which is a strength-based view that focuses on positive characteristics and prevention rather than on negative and unhealthy outcomes (Zaff and others, 2003). Civic engagement plays a key role for individuals and societies in determining the level of democratic life, social capital and cohesion in a country (Hart, 1992; Putnam, 2000), influencing the resources offered by the context for personal thriving (Basarab, 2012) and increasing dialogue in the public sphere and political system legitimacy.

This study's main aim was to understand the factors associated with social participation among children. The work's novelty resides in its use of lifestyle theory to explore its influence on a relevant factor for PYD (i.e. civic engagement). This sociological approach to researching children and adolescents' participation, which consider relational individual lifestyles to capture the phenomenon's complexity in a broader manner, has been applied to studying children's political participation and other socially complex phenomena (Faggiano, 2007; Garcia Ruiz, 2010; Livingstone and others, 2012).

Social Participation and Positive Development

Although participation can adopt different forms, this research focuses on two of them, which are recognised to provide young people with the possibility to contribute in community

development and indicate their effective social engagement: civic (e.g. charity volunteering, non-governmental organisations [NGO], etc.) and political (e.g. political campaigns, political parties, social activism, advocating activities, etc.) participation (Lerner, 2004; Skelton and others, 2002). The former refers to a community's problem-solving behaviours, such as volunteering in a NGO (Zukin and others, 2006). The latter refers to behaviours adopted with the goal of influencing the political decision-making process, such as supporting a political campaign against violence (Verba and others, 1995).

Engagement in social activities as an indicator of social capital and personal sociability and empowerment, has been a long-standing topic of interest in political science, sociology and psychology (Foschi and Lauriola, 2014). Nowadays, particularly for European societies, understanding participation is important because children's average participation in and personal effort towards community well-being is low (Bermudez, 2012): fewer than 8 per cent participate in human rights or global development organisations, only 5 per cent are members of a political party or organisation and 12 per cent reported their involvement in other non-governmental organisations (Flash Barometer 375; European Commission, 2013).

Family and Peer groups

Previous literature has noted the importance of peer groups (Matsuba and others, 2007; Simpkins and others, 2008) and family relationships (Hart and others, 2004; Omoto and Snyder, 1995) in studying participation. Their importance on social participation is illustrated extensively by enquiries demonstrating that volunteers are usually recruited in those socialisation contexts (Independent Sector, 2001). However, it is unclear whether family is linearly related to participation or if it depends on a more complex type of relationship. For instance, Thomas (1971) found that the extent interaction in conservative families was negatively associated with male student political activism. The author argued that this negative relationship is driven by conservative families' lack of warmth, echoing other authors (e.g. Schiff, 1964). The study did not, however, offer proportionate evidence in favour of this hypothesis, as he did not measure authoritarian climate. Other authors have incorporated family as an important factor in determining civic participation in their models (e.g. Matsuba and others, 2007; Omoto and Snyder, 1995).

The family's impact on social participation can be analysed by dividing its internal processes into dimensions. Family supervision (i.e. control over children's behaviours and opinions) and family dialogue (i.e. the democratic interchange of opinions within a family) have been considered relevant to children's decisions (Hart and others, 2004; Omoto and Snyder, 1995). The former, however, could be negatively related to participation, as under certain conditions it may be expressed in an excessive manner. These conditions could be cultural in the case of Spain and Italy, where authoritarian parenting styles are still common compared to other European countries (e.g. Martínez and García, 2007). An authoritarian parenting style is characterised by excessive control over children, wherein parents are highly demanding and have low responsiveness (Steinberg and others, 1994), which, in turn, results in poor children's adjustment.

Cultural activities and civic values

In addition to family and peer groups relationships, the access to out-of-school resources and the possibility to participate in cultural activities facilitate children to explore and develop social interests and skills (Lerner and Silbereisen, 2007). Civic values are relevant factors related to social participation: for instance, benevolence is related to co-operative behaviour and universalism in relation to the promotion of social justice and environmental preservation is strongly and positively correlated with political activism (Bardi and Schwartz,

2003; Schwartz, 2007). The direct impact of cultural activities and values on behaviour, however, is not completely clear. Recently, some authors have pointed out that conformity and personal security are negatively correlated with public participation (Hackett, 2014; Roets and others, 2014).

Risky behaviours and participation

Previous research has shown that the study of risky behaviours might contribute towards understanding participation (Finlay and Flanagan, 2013; Vieno and others, 2007). Some authors have found a negative main effect of risky behaviours on participation (Mahoney and Stattin, 2000; Youniss and others, 1997), while others suggest that the relationship between the two is more complex and could lead to paradoxical outcomes (Fredricks and Eccles, 2006). For instance, Vieno and others (2007) found a U-shaped relationship between civic participation and behavioural problems such as alcohol and tobacco abuse, bullying, and physical fighting, but only for boys. This showed that many behavioural problems were associated to a high frequency of participation and that the contrary was true. They argued that these results might reflect a selection bias. Alternatively, they provided another explanation that is consistent with this research: frequent civic participation might introduce boys into a peer group, including problematic ones who are likelier to use drugs and alcohol, which may socially give them prestige among their peers.

Socio-demographic characteristics

Finally, some authors have argued that socio-demographic indicators are important in distinguishing volunteers and non-volunteers (e.g. Grube and Piliavin, 2000; Matsuba and others, 2007), whereas personality researchers have posited the contrary, that socio-demographic variables are empirically irrelevant in predicting volunteering (Omoto and Snyder, 1995). Other disagreements between authors have highlighted the controversy regarding how the factors linked to participation are influenced by socio-demographic variables (Grube and Piliavin, 2000; Omoto and Snyder, 2002).

In summary, there are several factors that have been proposed to affect participation while it is not yet clear the direction and the strength of the associations. This research seeks to shed some light on this controversial arena based on lifestyles theory, a multi-dimensional approach that has been used to study other complex, social phenomena. Furthermore, this study aims to provide researchers, decision makers and practitioners, who work with and for children and adolescents, with evidence to develop effective, targeted campaigns, thereby facilitating children's empowerment, participation and positive development.

Objective of the current research

The aim of the current research was to provide, from a relational sociological perspective, a contribution to the study of a relevant factor associated with PYD: social participation. Specifically, we tested whether lifestyle dimensions (family dialogue, out-of-school activities and peer group relationships) in two European countries (Spain and Italy) could predict participation frequency. On the basis of the literature review, we tested the following three hypotheses:

H^1: In addition to socio-demographic variables, lifestyles factors predict political participation.

H^2: In addition to socio-demographic variables, lifestyles factors predict civic participation.

H^3: Political and civic participation are not equally affected by lifestyle factors.

Moreover, as suggested in previous studies (Faggiano, 2007), it is useful to detect the differences between civic (e.g. volunteering and NGOs) and political participation (e.g. political

parties and ecological activism) to comprehend which lifestyle factors properly predict each type of participation. Thus, the design of interventions to tackle the lack of participation might be improved by understanding which factors are linked to lower or higher participation rates. This could also lead to segmentation designs that improve children and adolescent lifestyles through specific pro-participation campaigns.

Method

Participants and design

The 'Safe Social Media' project is an observational, cross-sectional study of the general children and adolescent population. Exactly, 6130 students participated anonymously (45.8 per cent male and 54.2 per cent female). Participants were selected from schools located in the main geographical areas of Spain (2198) and Italy (3932). Those countries' socioeconomic structures, welfare regimes, and children and adolescents' educational achievements are similar. School authorities and parents agreed to allow students to fill in a questionnaire during school hours. Their ages ranged from 12 to 19 (*Mage* = 13.82; *SD* = 1.66). A multi-stage stratified random cluster sampling strategy was used to select three regions in each country of residence (North, Central and South). Schools and classes were randomly selected within each of them. The actual sampling error (in the case of a simple random sample, with a confidence level of 95.5 per cent [two sigmas] and P = Q) is ± 1.3 per cent for the final sample.

Procedure

Data were collected between 29 November 2011 and 22 May 2012. The schools (34 in Italy and 23 in Spain) were randomly selected. Once informed consent was obtained from participating educational establishments and parents, selected students filled in the questionnaire anonymously and confidentially using computer terminals. It was agreed that it would be filled in during a compulsory attendance class to avoid the probability of incurring a self-selection bias. Data were collected regarding their family relationships, peer groups, values, risky behaviours and leisure activities. In addition, socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender and socioeconomic status were recorded. Surveys were completed in both Spanish and Italian respectively. Teachers and trainers were given some basic guidelines to enable them to administer the surveys, which were duly carried out during lesson time.

Predictor variables

Socio-demographic variables

Age was measured by asking participants 'How old are you?' Response options ranged from 12 to 18 years old. The gender variable was dummy coded. Males and females were assigned values of one and zero respectively. Socioeconomic status was inferred from the father's occupation and a five-point scale index was constructed ranging from 1 (Low socioeconomic status) to 5 (High socioeconomic status). Socio-cultural status was measured using a five-point scale ranging from 1 (Low socio-cultural status) to 5 (High socio-cultural status). Country of residence was also dummy coded (0 = Spain, 1 = Italy).

Lifestyles

Thirty-eight items measuring attitudes, behaviours and values were used as our lifestyle variables (examples of items are listed below). The response format ranged from 1 'Never' to 5 'Very much'. A parallel analysis was then conducted on those items to determine the number of factors that needed to be extracted. Previous investigation has shown that this method is more reliable for determining the number of factors to extract than, for example, Kaiser's rule

of eigenvalues greater than 1 (Zwick and Velicer, 1986). This procedure indicated that six factors needed extraction. Then, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the total sample ($N = 6130$). Regarding the theoretical framework, we selected an oblique rotation (oblimin) because a correlation between the factors is expected. The method to estimate the factors was maximum likelihood as skewness and kurtosis did not indicate strong deviation from normality (see Table 2). The results indicated that the six factors extracted accounted for 36.08 per cent of the variance of the test (for factor loadings, see Table 1). The internal consistency of the total scale was good ($\alpha = 0.83$). From the perspective of lifestyles, the six factors' structure is theoretically relevant and might be easily explained (Corcuera and others, 2010; Faggiano, 2007). The first factor, called 'Family dialogue', is composed of 11 items with high reliability ($\alpha = 0.91$). 'I have talked to my parents about the country's political and social situation' or 'I have talked to my parents about drugs and alcohol abuse' are two examples. The second factor, called 'Risky behaviours', consists of four items with high reliability ($\alpha = 0.78$). Item options included, 'When I hang out with my friends, I consume alcohol' or 'I smoke cigarettes'. The third factor, 'Cultural activities', has seven items with moderate reliability ($\alpha = 0.52$). There are no specific cut-offs for reliability and even relatively low (e.g. 0.50) levels of reliability do not seriously attenuate validity coefficients (Schmitt, 1996). For this reason, and because these subscales are central to lifestyles theory and alpha's value is dependent on the number of items in the scale, and increasing the number of items increases the value (Cronbach, 1951), in this study we maintained the scales which alpha's value is greater than 0.50. Examples of items in the 'cultural activities' subscale include: 'I have attended cultural activities such as going to museums and theatres' or 'I have participated in artistic activities such as choir singing or playing an instrument'. The fourth factor, labelled 'Civic values', is composed of four items with high reliability ($\alpha = 0.74$) that correspond to 2 of the 10 basic values analysed by Schwartz (2007): benevolence and conformity. 'It is important for me to do things to improve my town or community' or 'It is important for me to obey authority' are factor item examples. The fifth factor, called 'Family supervision', consists of eight items with high reliability ($\alpha = 0.80$). Item examples include: 'My parents know where I am going or what I am doing during my leisure time' or 'My parents know if I drink or smoke with my friends'. The sixth factor, named 'Peer group relationships', includes four items with moderate reliability ($\alpha = 0.57$). Item examples include: 'In my peer group, I can give my opinion without fear because others will respect me' or 'My peer group supports me regarding many topics that I disagree with my parents on'. The mean of each factor (i.e. family dialogue, risky behaviours, social activities, character values, family supervision and peer groups) was retained as six different predictor variables to be employed to compute Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions on two dependent variables.

Criterion variables

Political participation

Participants were asked to rate the frequency of their participation in ecological and political groups (Appendix 1). We considered social activism as related to political participation, in this case advocating for rights in an ecological group, because politics often implies advocating activities. These two items were significantly correlated ($r = 0.479$, $P < 0.001$), and thus were averaged to create a composite index of political participation.

Civic participation

To measure this variable, respondents were asked to rate the frequency of their participation in volunteer activities and in non-governmental organisations or charities (Appendix 1). These two items were also significantly correlated ($r = 0.487$, $P < 0.001$), and were averaged to create a composite index of civic participation.

Table 1: Items' factor loadings and correlations between factors

	Family dialogue	Risky behaviours	Cultural activities	Civic values	Family supervision	Peer group relationships
Diapol	**0.409**	0.010	0.034	0.168	0.015	0.199
Diadrug	**0.565**	0.082	−0.110	0.019	0.085	0.167
Diaplaces	**0.525**	−0.064	0.110	0.117	0.070	−0.019
Dianet	**0.598**	0.007	0.020	−0.019	0.176	−0.136
Diafashion	**0.497**	−0.001	−0.057	−0.080	0.088	0.111
Diareligion	**0.335**	−0.045	0.376	0.070	0.045	−0.057
Diaimp	**0.563**	0.071	0.025	−0.105	−0.070	0.017
Diasentim	**0.646**	0.018	−0.018	−0.048	0.028	−0.062
Diamovies	**0.488**	−0.102	0.091	0.073	0.069	−0.049
Diasociet	**0.486**	−0.041	0.155	0.285	−0.145	−0.086
Diaprof	**0.485**	−0.071	−0.040	0.131	0.040	0.072
Drug	−0.031	**0.801**	0.011	0.041	0.088	−0.121
Alcohol	0.023	**0.740**	−0.062	0.016	0.021	0.086
Smoke	0.027	**0.721**	−0.081	0.003	0.050	0.027
Sexting	−0.027	**0.513**	0.090	0.010	−0.062	−0.030
Stadium	0.050	0.131	**0.165**	−0.027	−0.106	0.110
Read	0.118	−0.113	**0.204**	0.079	0.113	0.017
Sport	0.002	−0.033	**0.155**	0.027	0.026	0.091
Church	−0.095	0.043	**0.728**	−0.014	0.077	−0.058
Form	−0.076	0.005	**0.676**	−0.029	0.075	−0.087
Culture	0.141	−0.022	**0.406**	0.005	−0.032	0.005
Religion	0.079	0.041	**0.272**	0.086	−0.041	**0.338**
Solid	−0.037	−0.021	−0.065	**0.508**	0.118	0.047
Peace	−0.014	−0.006	−0.076	**0.468**	0.117	0.176
Law	−0.002	0.030	0.036	**0.824**	−0.119	−0.079
Morality	−0.001	0.012	0.059	**0.719**	−0.024	−0.094
Sfreet	0.059	−0.106	−0.002	0.078	**0.549**	−0.039
Stime	−0.059	−0.019	0.099	−0.043	**0.559**	0.023
Sstud	0.083	0.017	−0.098	0.040	**0.580**	0.068
Swend	−0.054	0.001	−0.003	−0.011	**0.695**	0.134
Ssmoke	0.066	−0.005	0.051	0.032	**0.432**	−0.077
Sint	0.203	−0.001	−0.047	0.076	**0.543**	0.008
Smedia	0.099	−0.032	0.153	0.069	**0.412**	−0.155
Smediause	0.217	0.015	0.136	0.063	**0.444**	−0.149
Freedom	0.018	−0.018	−0.094	0.102	0.203	**0.395**
Disco	0.094	**0.304**	0.011	−0.090	−0.160	**0.294**
Infosex	0.014	0.067	−0.041	−0.082	−0.072	**0.694**
Infovs	0.022	0.004	0.032	−0.005	−0.010	**0.526**
Family dialogue		0.001	0.305	0.300	0.335	0.186
Risky behaviours			−0.034	−0.266	−0.342	0.216
Cultural activities				0.200	0.073	−0.012
Civic values					0.367	0.079
Family supervision						−0.007
Peer group relationships						

The variables that load in each factor are indicated with bold figures.

Results

Political participation

Multiple hierarchical OLS regressions, as recommended by Aiken and West (1991), were computed to test our hypotheses. In the first block, socio-demographic variables were entered as predictors. In the second block, lifestyles factors were entered (for means, SD, etc., see

Table 2: Mean, SD, kurtosis, skewness and SE for predictor variables

	Mean	SD	Kurtosis (SE)	Skewness (SE)
Socio-cultural Status	1.52	1.14	−0.74 (0.06)	0.21 (0.03)
Socioeconomic Status	1.34	1.30	−1.24 (0.06)	0.41 (0.03)
Age	13.82	1.66	0.82 (0.06)	1.04 (0.03)
Family dialogue	2.48	1.07	0.36 (0.06)	−0.68 (0.03)
Risky behaviours	1.35	0.75	8.39 (0.06)	2.82 (0.03)
Cultural activities	2.05	0.57	1.87 (0.06)	0.79 (0.03)
Civic values	3.69	0.80	0.67 (0.07)	−0.62 (0.03)
Family supervision	3.85	0.84	0.22 (0.07)	−0.73 (0.03)
Peer group relationships	2.89	0.82	−0.32 (0.06)	−0.06 (0.03)

Table 3: Prediction of political and civic participation

	Political participation (N = 5083)	Civic participation (N = 5086)
Block 1: Socio-demographics		
Socio-cultural status	0.022***	0.003
Socioeconomic status	−0.048***	−0.043***
Age	0.001	0.034***
Gender	0.131***	−.037†
Country	−0.006	0.13
R^2 (%)	0.031***	0.011***
Block 2: lifestyles factors		
Family dialogue	0.028**	0.054***
Risky behaviours	0.114***	0.096***
Cultural activities	0.411***	0.558***
Civic values	−0.050***	0.034**
Family supervision	−0.056***	−0.004
Peer group relationships	−0.031***	−0.046***
ΔR^2 (%)	0.216***	0.196***
Total R^2 (%)	0.247***	0.207***

*$P < 0.05$; **$P < 0.01$; ***$P < 0.001$; †$P < 0.1$.
Cell entries are non-standardised beta coefficients (β).

Table 2, and for coefficients, see Table 3). The first block explained 3.1 per cent of the total political participation variance ($R^2 = 0.031$, $P < 0.001$). The second block explained 24.7 per cent of the total criterion variance ($R^2 = 0.247$, $P < 0.001$). The change in R^2 between blocks was statistically significant ($\Delta R^2 = 0.216$, $P < 0.001$). Among the first block's socio-demographic variables, the regression analyses revealed a significant main effect of socio-cultural status, $\beta = 0.022$, $t(5083) = 3.341$, $P = 0.001$, indicating that political participation increases as socio-cultural status grows up. Conversely, political participation decreased as socioeconomic status increased, $\beta = -0.048$, $t(5083) = -8.594$, $P < 0.001$. A significant main effect of gender also emerged, $\beta = 0.131$, $t(5083) = 9.179$, $P < 0.001$, which indicated that political participation was greater for males ($M = 1.25$, $SD = 0.63$) than for females ($M = 1.12$, $SD = 0.38$). Neither age ($P = 0.860$) nor country of residence ($P = 0.663$) had a significant effect. As predicted, both countries had a similar value in criterion variable. Among the second block's lifestyles factors, 'family dialogue' significantly affected political participation, $\beta = 0.028$, $t(5083) = 3.012$, $P = 0.003$. 'Risky behaviours' also emerged as having a significant effect, $\beta = 0.114$, $t(5083) = 12.336$, $P < 0.001$. We also found a significant main effect for Cultural activities, $\beta = 0.411$, $t(5083) = 32.810$, $P < 0.001$. Conversely, civic values sig-

nificantly decreased political participation, $\beta = -0.050$, $t(5083) = -5.741$, $P < 0.001$. 'Family supervision' was also found to have a significant effect, $\beta = -0.056$, $t(5083) = -6.378$, $P < 0.001$. Finally, a significant main effect of Peer group relationships also emerged, $\beta = -0.031$, $t(5083) = -3.665$, $P < 0.001$.

Civic participation

The previous procedure was applied to compute multiple hierarchical OLS regression on civic participation. In the first block, socio-demographic variables were entered as predictors. In the second block, lifestyles factors were entered (see Table 3). The first block explained 1.1 per cent of the total variance in civic participation ($R^2 = 0.011$, $P < 0.001$). The second block explained 20.7 per cent of the criterion's total variance ($R^2 = 0.207$, $P < 0.001$). The change in R^2 between blocks was statistically significant ($\Delta R^2 = 0.196$, $P < 0.001$). Among the first block of socio-demographic variables, the regression analyses revealed a significant main effect of socioeconomic status, $\beta = -0.043$, $t(5\ 086) = -5.324$, $P = 0.001$, indicating that civic participation increased as socioeconomic status decreased. There was also a main effect of age, $\beta = 0.034$, $t(5\ 086) = 5.625$, $P < 0.001$). As respondents matured, their civic participation increased. Neither gender ($P = 0.072$) nor socio-cultural status ($P = 0.739$) nor country of residence ($P = 0.541$), however, significantly affected participation, as both countries are similar. Among the second block of lifestyles factors, a main effect of 'Family dialogue' was found, $\beta = 0.054$, $t(5086) = 3.943$, $P < 0.001$. A significant main effect of 'Risky behaviours' also emerged, $\beta = 0.096$, $t(5086) = 7.087$, $P < 0.001$. We also found a significant main effect for 'Cultural activities', $\beta = 0.558$, $t(5086) = 30.214$, $P < 0.001$. We also found a main effect for 'Civic values', $\beta = 0.34$, $t(5086) = 2.638$, $P = 0.008$. Finally, a significant main effect of Peer group relationship also emerged, $\beta = -0.046$, $t(5086) = -3.703$, $P < 0.001$. Nonetheless, we did not find a significant main effect of Family supervision ($P = 0.730$).

Discussion

The results tend to support our hypotheses (H^1 and H^2) that, in addition to socio-demographic variables, latent lifestyles factors predict social participation. We found that family dialogue, risky behaviours and cultural activities were positively associated with both political and civic participation, but civic values was negatively associated with political participation but positively associated with civic participation. Family supervision was only negatively associated with political participation, and peer group relationships was negatively associated with both political and civic participation.

According with PYD recent studies, relational lifestyle factors have been found to influence children's flourishing. Bowers and others (2014) showed that parenting profiles such as maternal warmth, parental school involvement and parental monitoring (similar to family dialogue and supervision in our study) have a profound impact on five PYD Cs factors (competence, confidence, connection, character and caring). Moreover, we also found that participation types are not equally affected by lifestyle factors, as suggested by the change in slope signs, the differences in slope magnitude and the difference in signification (H^3).

As previously shown by other authors (e.g. Hart and others, 2004; Putnam, 2000), this study found that family relationships are important predictors of social participation. We have divided this lifestyle factor into two important dimensions: dialogue with parents and family supervision. The former, as expected, has a significant positive impact on both political and civic participation. This might be interpreted following Faggiano (2007), who has posited that more dialogue leads to more information, and consequently more participation. Contrarily, family supervision has a negative impact on political participation. Although speculative, but based on previous studies (Donath and others, 2014) and approaches to PYD

(Lerner and Silbereisen, 2007), this latter outcome could be the result of excessive negative control (authoritarian parenting style) over children, leading to lesser creativity and freedom in the decision-making process, and consequently lower participation rates. It is therefore important to incorporate family dialogue and family supervision separately to develop proper participation promotion programs.

Risky behaviours are associated with higher rates of both political and civic participation. As noted in the introduction, other authors have found similar outcomes for this counter-intuitive relationship. A possible explanation of these results is that those who are involved in risky behaviours need to restore the balance by engaging in community service. In this way, they can maintain a positive self-image by compensating their risky activities. The correlational nature of this study does not permit to rule out neither this possibility nor the contrary: that those who are engaged in politics and charity are under high pressure and, as a result, they need to release this tension by engaging in compensatory activities.

In our research, we found that taking part in cultural activities is associated with a higher rate of participation. As stated before, people who access more information are in a better position to participate (Faggiano, 2007). Following this logic, culturally active people gain more information than those who do not and as a result, participate more. It was found that civic values, as an independent measure, produced different participation outcomes. While it led to lower levels of political participation, it increased civic participation.

Finally, although peer group relationships should facilitate participation (i.e. the higher the frequency of relationships within the peer group, the higher the participation level) (Matsuba and others, 2007; Simpkins and others, 2008), this study found the opposite, confirming previous research that provided evidence that the effect of social interactions on participation depends on those social networks characteristics and activities (McClurg, 2003).

Although the present study showed the influence of relational lifestyles on social participation, some of the coefficients were small. Although this might be reflecting a potential limitation of the predictive power of some factor, the variance of both civic and political participation explained by the six lifestyles factors, however, was around 20 per cent, which represents a considerable part of the variance.

Other limitation of this study is related to the dependent measures. We analysed only two ways of social participation and the political one is limited at an early age. The interviewees were teenagers from non-war zones, and previous research showed that exposure to war violence lead to greater political participation among young people (Blattman, 2009).

Apart from these limitations, further research should consider analysing the impact of social participation on individual strengths, to clarify how specific contextual assets promote positive relationships and positive bonds with parents and friends that reflect healthy and bidirectional exchanges between the adolescents and their closed social context.

In closing, this research confirms the importance of the European Commission's recommendations ('Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage') that highlights the relevance of children's opportunities to participate and use their rights to tackle social exclusion (European Commission, 2011). Although the importance of children's participation is stated in UNCRC's 'Article 12' (Child Rights Information Network, 2008), children and young people are still left out of public decisions (Leal, 2014): more evidence is needed for improving social programs and enforcing UNCRC internationally (Woodhouse, 2014). Finally, this study offers some insights on areas and dimensions (like family dialogue) that should be promoted to encourage children's participation, especially children and adolescents, who are entering a very important identity forming life stage: decision makers will find that this study offers important guidance towards interpreting the low social participation of children and adolescents, especially those from southern European Union countries.

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Appendix 1

Survey questions

	Never	Once a month or less	1 to 2 days per week	3 to 5 days per week	Almost every day
Participate in an ecological group					
Participate in political activities (students' assembly, political party, etc.)					
Collaborate in an NGO or charity					
Participate in volunteering activities with friends					

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