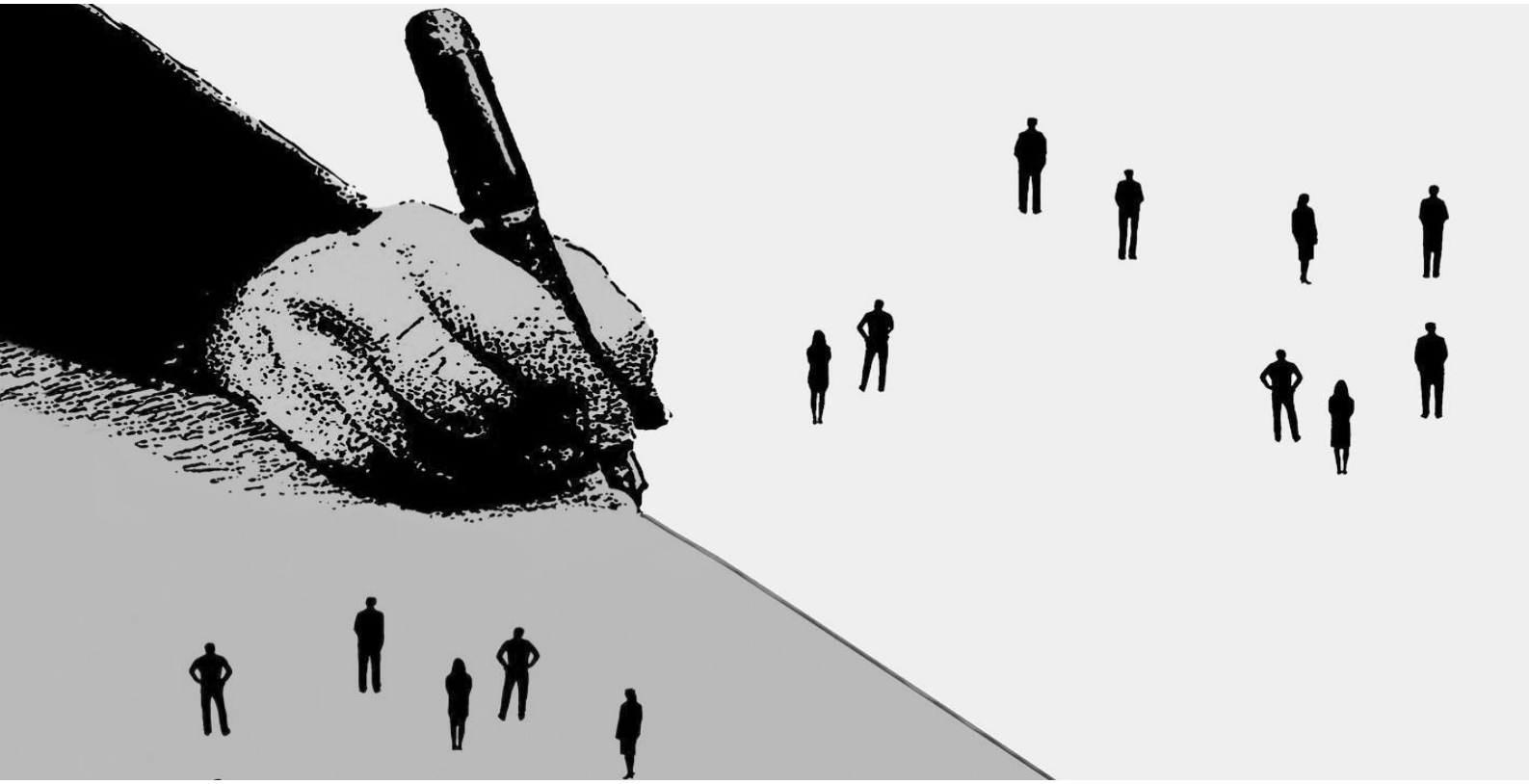
"*Europeanness*"

The Discursive Construction and Negotiation of European Identity in the Digital Sphere



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ABSTRACT

Defining what it means to be "European" is a complex task, as different lenses and methodological approaches yield varying results. This thesis explores the concept through the lens of discourse, recognizing its role in shaping identity. Specifically, it focuses on online discourse on TikTok, a platform selected for its decentralized, participatory nature, which contrasts with the more top-down narratives typical of traditional media. This approach enables a closer examination of how everyday users engage in constructing and negotiating European identity from the bottom up.

The research analyzes 54 TikToks created by American users that portray aspects of Europeanness, alongside the reactions of European commenters. The aim is to understand how European identity is externally constructed and how it is affirmed or debated by those being represented. Through qualitative content analysis, five key thematic categories emerged from the data: Work Life and Professional Culture, Social and Party Behavior, Food, Diet and Health Norms, Cultural Values and Social Norms, and Physical Space. These themes capture recurring contrasts between American and European lifestyles, values, and routines, and were further examined using discourse and sentiment analysis.

Guided by Social Identity Theory (SIT), the analysis demonstrates how social categorization, identification, and comparison are performed in this digital space. American creators often define Europeans through perceived group traits, while European users engage with these portrayals by either embracing or challenging them, often with strong emotional investment and expressions of in-group pride. Humorous portrayals tend to invite agreement and playful exaggeration, while more serious or critical content sparks defensive responses and efforts to introduce nuance. Generalizations are frequently questioned when they reflect negatively on Europeans, with commenters either calling for greater regional specificity or shifting the discussion to other dimensions. European identity is shown to be context-dependent, becoming salient when externally defined.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of European identity by highlighting how it is discursively constructed from the outside and interactively negotiated from within. European identity is not simply imposed or inherited, but actively shaped through discourse and interaction. The findings point to a

set of cultural traits, such as labor protections, public infrastructure, and food quality, that are consistently associated with pride in being European. These insights may offer potential entry points for future research or policy engagement that seeks to understand what resonates positively in the construction of supranational identities.

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Introduction

What does it mean to be European? Cultural, political, economic, and geographic attempts to define the term “European” each offer different criteria, which often results in conflicting or incompatible conclusions (Stock, 2017; Ruëll, 2024). Cultural definitions may focus on shared heritage, language, or values; political lenses might emphasize membership in the European Union or alignment with liberal democratic norms; economic definitions can hinge on levels of development or integration into EU markets; and geographic definitions aim to set physical boundaries, though these too are contested, as the eastern border is not unanimously placed, with countries like Russia and Turkey often positioned ambiguously between Europe and Asia (Nosov, 2014). These variations demonstrate that "Europeanness" is not a fixed or universally agreed-upon concept, but a context-dependent construct shaped by the lens through which it is viewed.

One key way to understand this evolving definition is through discourse as it has the power to both shape and reflect identity, providing a framework through which meanings are constructed, negotiated and challenged (Tiidenberg et al., 2017). We can look for definitions of the “European” in various forms of discourse such as political speeches, media representations, academic debates, and institutional narratives. All of these sources play a role in shaping this loose concept and have been individually analyzed in academia (Aleknonis, 2022; Özoflu, 2022).

However, discourse is not solely produced within Europe or by Europeans themselves. Identity is often constructed in contrast to an "Other", and outsiders play a significant role in shaping how a group is defined (Lüders et al., 2022). In the case of European identity, American discourse, particularly on social media, has become a key space where narratives about what it means to be European are produced and circulated. On platforms like TikTok, American users frequently comment on aspects of European culture, habits, and lifestyles, crafting a portrayal of "the European" based on observed contrasts with their own way of life. These portrayals highlight perceived differences, reinforcing an image of European identity that is shaped externally rather than from within.

Unlike traditional forms of discourse, which are often shaped by institutions or elites, social media allows for a more decentralized and spontaneous construction of identity (Ye et al., 2017). These portrayals are not dictated by governments, media outlets, or academic institutions but instead emerge from everyday users engaging with and sharing their perspectives. While this discourse may not always be historically or culturally precise, it nonetheless contributes to shaping perceptions of Europeanness in the digital age.

Focusing on this form of discourse offers another advantage: while institutional and formal narratives primarily reflect dominant perspectives, making it difficult to assess how they are received or contested, social media provides direct insight into the interactive process of identity formation (Ye et al., 2017; Tiidenberg et al., 2017). European identity is not simply imposed or passively absorbed, it is continuously shaped, contested, and redefined through engagement with these portrayals (Tajfel, 1978b). The American framing of Europeanness does not exist in isolation; it provokes agreement, resistance, and reinterpretation from European users, illustrating identity as a fluid and negotiated process rather than a fixed construct. Unlike traditional media, where audience reception is often indirect or difficult to dissect, social media offers real-time evidence of how individuals react to, challenge, or reinforce these portrayals. By examining these interactions, we can move beyond top-down definitions and explore European identity as a dynamic, participatory discourse shaped by everyday digital engagement.

The concentration of European identity feelings among young, educated, and middle-class individuals, particularly university students, has significantly shaped existing research and discussions on the topic (Henriques, 2021; Leith et al., 2019). Many academic studies, policy discussions, and institutional narratives focus on this demographic, often linking European identity to experiences such as Erasmus exchanges, higher education, and transnational mobility. As a result, European identity is frequently examined through the lens of those who actively engage with European institutions and benefit from integration policies, rather than the broader population. This has led to a focus on elite-driven or institutionally reinforced identity formation, potentially overlooking how European identity is perceived, constructed, or contested in everyday life by those who do not fit this profile.

Social media challenges this traditional scope by decentralizing the conversation and making portrayals of European identity more visible to a wider and more diverse audience (Ye et al., 2017; Tiidenberg et al., 2017). Instead of being confined to academic or policy-driven discussions, definitions of "Europeanness" circulate in everyday digital interactions, where people outside of elite or highly mobile circles can engage with, reinterpret, and contribute to the discourse. This shift provides an opportunity to analyze European identity beyond the conventional frameworks that dominate research.

Being “European” is commonly used interchangeably with being an EU citizen, but these concepts are not synonymous, as Europeanness extends beyond the political boundaries of the European Union. It is precisely because "Europeanness" is broader and more complex than EU membership that this thesis seeks to explore what being European actually means. Nevertheless, this social category holds particular significance for the EU, as a sense of European identity can influence both domestic and EU policies, shaping public attitudes toward integration, governance, and collective decision-making (Liargovas & Papageorgiou, 2024).

Many studies attempt to quantify feelings of Europeanness, often contrasting them with national identity and frequently assuming a competing relationship between the two (Leith et al., 2019). However, this thesis does not aim to measure the degree of European identification. Instead, it emphasizes the importance of a qualitative analysis, recognizing that it is not just *how much* someone feels European that matters, but also *what being European means*. The way this identity is constructed and understood can have tangible policy implications, influencing narratives, priorities, and political engagement at both national and supranational levels (Liargovas & Papageorgiou, 2024). Understanding what it truly means to be European, including incorporating broader and more diverse perspectives as I aim to do here, is crucial for fostering a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of European identity. This approach can help address ongoing issues of legitimacy and representation within the EU. If policies are shaped based on narrow, exclusionary views of European identity, there is a risk of alienating certain groups and deepening the disconnection between citizens and EU governance. Such an approach would only exacerbate the EU’s democratic deficit, where the gap between EU institutions and its citizens has long been a significant concern.

Given the significant role that discourse plays in shaping social identities, coupled with the influence of American discourse and the unique nature of social media as a platform for widespread and accessible communication, this thesis seeks to investigate how European identity is represented and contested in online spaces. American portrayals of Europeans on TikTok are not just passive reflections of societal views; they contribute to an external construction of "Europeanness" that may or may not align with the lived experiences and self-understanding of Europeans themselves. Social media platforms, particularly TikTok, allow for an interactive and dynamic process where identity is constantly negotiated. By examining both the portrayals of European identity from American TikTok users and the reactions from European viewers in the comments, this research aims to explore how these representations are accepted, resisted, or redefined.

To understand these representations and reception, the central question guiding this study is:

- What do Americans depict as European identity on TikTok, and how do Europeans respond to these portrayals?

To break this down further, the analysis will focus on two sub-questions:

- What common themes emerge in American portrayals of "Europeanness" on TikTok?
- How do European TikTok users engage with these portrayals in the comment sections- do they agree, challenge, or reinterpret them?

To answer and work on these questions, I will conduct a qualitative content analysis of 54 TikTok videos that surfaced when searching for the term “European” on the platform’s explore page. All videos were created by American users and were purposively selected to focus on external portrayals of European identity. Through qualitative content analysis, I identify recurring themes and categories that characterize how "Europeanness" is represented. Building on these themes, I apply discourse analysis to examine how European identity is constructed within each category. Additionally, I incorporate a qualitative sentiment analysis of the comment sections, focusing particularly on comments from users who self-identify as European. Comments are

analyzed to assess whether they express agreement, debate, or resistance toward the portrayals.

The rest of the thesis is structured as follows: first, I review the literature on European identity and then present Social Identity Theory (SIT) as the theoretical framework. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the methodology, including the methods used and the ontological and epistemological foundations of the study. The analysis chapter explores how American TikTok discourse constructs European identity, organized around five key themes identified through content analysis, along with a dedicated section examining how SIT processes manifest in the dataset. The thesis concludes with a discussion of broader insights that emerged during the analysis, followed by final reflections in the conclusion.

Literature Review: A Background on European Identity

Research on European identity grew alongside the creation and expansion of the European Union and its institutions. As the original economic community developed, debates emerged around two competing models of European integration: federalism vs. (neo)functionalism. These models not only proposed different approaches to political and economic integration but also carried distinct ideas of what it means to be European (Sassatelli, 2002).

Federalist perspectives, championed by figures such as Hayek (1948) and Spinelli (1957), envisioned a federal system as the ultimate goal of European integration (Reho, 2022). Although this vision never fully materialized, it was driven by the belief in a deeply rooted unity and a shared destiny among European nations. It drew on the idea of a historically pre-existing European identity shaped by the legacy of Hellenic rationality and aesthetics, Roman law and institutions, and ethical traditions. From this common historical foundation, Europe was seen as united by overarching values such as freedom, civilization, and scientific progress (Sassatelli, 2002).

An alternative to the idea of a singular, unified European identity is the perspective that emphasizes diversity as its defining feature, aligning with the neofunctionalist approach to integration. Neofunctionalists argue that European identity should not be framed around a shared cultural or historical heritage but rather around pragmatic economic and political cooperation. Scholars like Haas (1958) and George (1985) assert that integration occurs gradually through economic collaboration, triggering a "spill-over" effect that extends into other policy areas. From this perspective, Europe is not bound by a deep-rooted cultural unity but by growing interdependence in governance and institutions. As a result, neofunctionalism rejects the notion that European integration should be justified based on cultural commonalities. Instead, it promotes a pluralistic and evolving identity, where diversity is embraced within a civic framework. Rather than a fixed heritage, European identity is seen as flexible, shaped by shared democratic institutions and economic cooperation. It is believed that the emergence of a new political community leads to the emergence of a new national consciousness (Hass,1958).

A more nuanced perspective on European identity, identified by Sassatelli (2002) as the dominant one in both research and official discourse, combines elements of both

unity and diversity. European identity is perceived as unity in diversity, being inherently dialogic- a constant negotiation between different traditions, values, and perspectives that coexist without being homogenized. Instead of an obstacle, diversity is seen as a defining characteristic and a cultural trait in its own right (Derrida, 1991; Habermas, 1992).

At the same time, the neofunctionalist view of European identity was soon criticized as overly simplistic and naïve on identity matters. Notably, Haas (1958) assumed that public opinion on European integration was largely irrelevant to the process, arguing that integration would begin as a rational response to functional pressures and, over time, naturally foster a sense of European identity as an unintended consequence (the "spill-over effect"), a perspective that left little room for ordinary citizens to shape European integration (Kuhn, 2019). However, as the European project evolved from a purely economic cooperation framework into a broader political entity, expanding both in scope and membership, issues of identity became increasingly central.

This shift was reflected in the institutionalization of European identity within official discourse (Aleknonis, 2022). The 1973 Copenhagen Declaration was one of the first efforts to define a common European identity, emphasizing shared values, cultural diversity, democracy, and economic progress. This marked the beginning of a deliberate, though subtle, top-down process of identity-building. Subsequent EU enlargements, particularly the expansion into Eastern Europe, further intensified debates on identity. The post-communist accessions highlighted the tensions between the EU's economic foundations and its evolving political and cultural dimensions. The 1995 Lübeck Charter acknowledged that economic success alone was insufficient to create a European identity, calling instead for a "Community of Responsibility" grounded in legal, social, and environmental commitments.

European identity has long been a concern for the EU particularly due to its connection to the democratic deficit, a persistent challenge for the institution (Liargovas & Papageorgiou, 2024). The democratic deficit refers to the perceived disconnect between EU institutions and the citizens of its Member States. Many EU citizens feel that they have limited influence over EU decision-making, which in turn raises concerns about representation and accountability. Scholars have emphasized that a weak sense of European identity may reinforce this disconnect, making it more difficult for EU

institutions to cultivate legitimacy and deepen integration. Strengthening European identity is therefore not only a cultural or symbolic endeavor but also a strategic one, directly tied to the future effectiveness, stability, and democratic legitimacy of the European project. Understanding how European identity is formed, contested, and perceived thus has real implications for the EU's capacity to foster a stronger sense of belonging among its citizens and to bridge the gap between governance structures and the populations they represent.

An evidence of the EU's continued interest in European identity are the Eurobarometer surveys, its official polling instrument for tracking public opinion on EU-related issues, including attitudes toward European identity (European Commission, n.d.). Notably, as Aleknonis (2022) argues, the Eurobarometer itself can be analyzed as a tool that reflects the EU's official discourse and conceptualization of European identity.

Eurobarometer data consistently indicates that higher levels of education and wealth positively influence European identity (Leith et al., 2019). Individuals with greater educational levels and financial resources are more likely to identify as European, partly due to greater exposure to positive cross-border experiences and interactions, whether through travel, studying abroad, or professional interactions in other European countries (Henriques, 2021). European identity is also associated with cosmopolitanism, positive attitudes toward immigration, and left-leaning political views, whereas those with lower education, lower income, and nationalist perspectives are less likely to feel European (Leith et al., 2019). The interplay between income, education, and a sense of European identity is evident.

Beyond the EU's expanding scope in terms of membership and function, moments of crisis have intensified debates about identity and belonging. Events such as the migrant crisis, the Eurozone crisis, and Brexit have each shaped and tested European identity in different ways. The migrant crisis exposed varying interpretations of European identity, particularly in relation to the securitization of migration (Özoflu, 2023). The Eurozone crisis challenged the idea of a shared European identity by highlighting the differing levels of commitment among Member States and the fragility of a collective "we" (Lichtenstein & Eilders, 2018). Meanwhile, Brexit raised fundamental questions about the extent to which ordinary citizens feel a sense of common European identity and support for the EU (Leith et al., 2019).

Lastly, the rise of populism in Europe signals a profound challenge to the European project and the notion of a shared identity. In an era where global political dynamics suggest a shift back toward national priorities over international cooperation, the foundations of European identity are being tested as never before (Leith et al., 2019). Populist movements, with their emphasis on identity politics, raise critical questions about how European identity is shaped, contested, and negotiated in these times, and what implications this has for the future of European integration (Noury & Roland, 2020). As political and social movements increasingly mobilize around cultural, national, and ideological identities, European identity becomes both a battleground and a tool for political discourse. In this context, defining what it means to be "European" is far from being just a theoretical debate, but a pressing political issue with real consequences.

Ultimately, these moments of upheaval highlight that European identity is not a fixed concept but an evolving and dynamic construct, continuously reshaped by socio-political challenges.

Social Identity Theory

As explored so far, dissecting European identity is a complex task. The literature offers no clear consensus on how to approach its development, making it essential for any research on the topic to clearly define its theoretical framework before proceeding with analysis. Among the various perspectives on identity, I have chosen to apply Social Identity Theory (SIT), primarily developed by Henri Tajfel (1974, 1978a, 1978b, 1979). This framework has been previously used to examine European identity (see Ongur, 2010; Özoflu, 2022) and offers key strengths that make it a valuable choice, which I will highlight after I explain the main SIT arguments.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) emerged in the post-World War II period, as scholars sought to understand group dynamics and identity, particularly as an attempt to address the psychological mechanisms that contributed to the WWII mass genocide (Hogg & Abrams, 1999). Widely regarded as one of the most influential theories in social psychology, SIT distinguishes itself from other theories of intergroup relations by emphasizing the process of identity formation rather than focusing solely on individual self-concept.

The theory is structured around three key processes (social categorization, social identity, and social comparison) and three components that underpin them (cognitive, emotional, and evaluative). Together, these concepts explain how individuals define themselves through group membership, develop a sense of belonging, and evaluate their social identity, as well as intergroup dynamics.

1. Social categorization

According to SIT, social identity begins with the process of social categorization, which involves organizing the social environment into meaningful groupings that help individuals make sense of their surroundings (Turner, 1975). This process is primarily cognitive, as individuals recognize their membership within a group, answering the fundamental question of "Who am I?"- for example, "I am American" or "I am European". It is a crucial meaning-making mechanism that allows people to define things by understanding both what they are and what they are not.

Social categorization operates on two levels: first, individuals define themselves based on interpersonal comparisons within their own group (intra-group categorization); second, they classify themselves and others based on inter-group comparisons within broader social categories (Tajfel, 1978b). This process contributes to the transition from a personal identity to a social identity, as individuals perceive themselves and others through group distinctions. This categorization leads to a distinction between the in-group ("us") and the out-group ("them"), shaping perceptions of social belonging and differentiation within a given social context.

In-groups are typically categorized based on social, economic, and political factors that distinguish them from others/ “outgroups". However, SIT demonstrates that even the most minimal conditions can be enough to create a sense of group belonging. Simply perceiving oneself as a member of a group, without any deeper social connections or shared history, is sufficient to trigger in-group favoritism and intergroup discrimination- the minimal group paradigm of SIT (Billig & Tajfel, 1973). In other words, social categorization alone is enough to make individuals favor their own group over others, highlighting how easily group identities can be formed and how they influence social behavior (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel, 1978a).

2. Social identification

After social categorization, the next step in SIT is social identification, where individuals define themselves based on their group membership. Hogg et al. (1995) describe this process as a form of self-description derived from belonging to a particular group, whether based on occupation, nationality, race, gender, or other social categories. Through social identification, individuals internalize their group’s norms, values, and behaviors, leading to a collective perception of acting as a group rather than as separate individuals.

This process depersonalizes the self, meaning that individuals begin to see themselves and other group members as representatives of the ingroup rather than as unique individuals. As a result, members conform to the expectations associated with their group identity, following shared norms and practices (Turner, 1975). This also leads to self-stereotyping, where individuals adjust their beliefs and behaviors to align with the group’s prototype, the most representative or "ideal" ingroup member. Those on the

group's periphery may even try to enhance their status by adopting behaviors that strengthen their belonging (Tajfel et al., 1971).

Social identification thus has a strong emotional component, related to the affective attachment and sense of belonging individuals feel toward their in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). This emotional investment is crucial in one's social identity as it influences behaviors such as ingroup favoritism and intergroup bias.

3. Social Comparison

Once individuals categorize themselves into social groups and internalize their group membership, they begin to judge people based on group membership rather than personal characteristics, engaging in social comparison (Turner, 1975). This process has a strong evaluative component, as individuals develop positive or negative feelings about their group and others (Turner, 2010).

Social comparison plays a crucial role in shaping social identity, as people seek to establish a positive distinctiveness for their in-group. Tajfel and Turner (1979) emphasized that individuals are motivated to achieve a positive self-concept, which is closely tied to their group membership. As a result, they compare their in-group to relevant out-groups in a way that enhances the in-group's status and, by extension, their own social identity.

Social comparison often leads to in-group favoritism and out-group differentiation, reinforcing the perceived superiority of one's own group. This process is not purely cognitive; instead, it has an emotional component, as group members derive self-esteem from their social identity (Turner, 2010). The extent and nature of intergroup comparisons depend on three key conditions: individuals must strongly identify with their in-group, the out-group must be relevant for comparison, and the context must allow for intergroup differentiation. When these conditions are met, individuals are more likely to emphasize differences between their in-group and the out-group, leading to intensified group boundaries.

A key consequence of social comparison is psychological distinctiveness- the need for individuals to perceive their in-group as unique and positively distinct from out-groups, reinforcing a meaningful social identity. This process reinforces the perceived

uniqueness and value of the in-group, which is crucial for sustaining a positive social identity. However, when a group's social standing is perceived as unfavorable, individuals may respond in various ways, such as seeking social mobility, engaging in social competition, or redefining the dimensions of comparison to improve their group's image (Tajfel, 1979; Turner, 2010). This process highlights the dynamic nature of social identity and its dependence on external social structures, reinforcing the idea that identity is not static but shaped through ongoing intergroup interactions.

Summary table

Stage	Definition	Key Processes	Effects
Social categorization	The process of classifying individuals into social groups based on shared characteristics.	- Creation of ingroups and outgroups. - Formation of social prototypes (stereotypes). - Perceived group distinctions (accentuation effect).	- Simplifies the social world. - Establishes "us" vs. "them" divisions. - Triggers intergroup comparisons.
Social identification	The process of adopting the identity of an ingroup and internalizing its norms, values, and behaviors.	- Depersonalization (shifting self-concept from individual to group identity). - Self-stereotyping (conforming to group norms). - Salience (strength of identification depends on context).	- Strengthens ingroup cohesion. - Encourages ingroup favoritism. - Can lead to self-esteem boosts based on group status.
Social comparison	The process of evaluating one's group in relation to other groups to maintain a positive self-concept.	- Intergroup bias (ingroup favoritism and outgroup discrimination). - Strategies to improve group status (individual mobility, social creativity, or competition).	- Reinforces group boundaries. - Can lead to conflict or prejudice. - Influences social change and intergroup dynamics.

SIT applied to European identity research

When researching a contested concept like European identity, Social Identity Theory (SIT) provides a valuable flexible framework that shifts the focus from attempting to define European identity in an essentialist way focused on a shared history, culture and traditions, to understand it as a process that is formed, reinforced, and made salient through group membership and social comparison (Ongur, 2010). European identity is not a static or universally agreed-upon construct; rather, it is an ongoing and context-dependent social identity. Unlike nationalist, cultural, or ethnic approaches that often argue over the existence of a cohesive European identity, SIT asserts that even in the absence of a singular shared culture, history, or traditions, individuals can still form ingroups, constructing a social identity that becomes meaningful in specific contexts (Özoflu, 2022). These ingroups then engage in social comparisons with other groups, reinforcing distinctions and, in some cases, "othering" outsiders to solidify their own group boundaries.

In line with SIT's concepts of categorization and comparison, individuals classify themselves and others into social groups based on perceived similarities and differences. The analyzed TikToks illustrate this process in action, with Americans actively constructing a European category by emphasizing distinctions between Europeans and Americans. By doing so, they reinforce the perception of Europe as a cohesive social group. This external categorization not only shapes what it means to be European but also strengthens American identity by contrast. As Americans compare themselves to Europeans, they reinforce their own sense of belonging to the American category while simultaneously "othering" Europeans, framing them as a distinct and separate group.

This process also highlights the role of social identification- once individuals categorize themselves within a group, they tend to internalize its norms, values, and behaviors. By engaging in these TikTok discussions, Americans are reaffirming their membership in the American social group and may even reinforce their values and behaviors in response to the perceived contrast with Europeans. Likewise, Europeans who encounter these videos may also experience social identification, as they become more aware of how they are being categorized externally.

This resonates with another key advantage of SIT- its recognition that identity is context-dependent, meaning that different layers of identity can become more or less salient depending on the situation. European identity may not always be the dominant aspect of an individual's self-concept, but when it is explicitly discussed, such as in these TikToks, it becomes more prominent. By focusing on “Europeanness”, these TikToks actively shape and reinforce European identity, not only for the Americans constructing the category but also for Europeans who engage with the content and reflect on their own identity in response. This demonstrates how European identity is not simply a fixed attribute but rather a fluid and dynamic construct shaped by social interactions and external perceptions.

In short, SIT allows for a more flexible understanding of European identity through its minimal paradigm, and its processes of social identification, categorization and comparison are present both in the TikToks uploaded my American content creators, as well as in the comments section.

Methodology

Since Social Identity Theory (SIT) serves as the theoretical foundation of this research, my primary focus is on understanding how social identity, specifically, European identity, is constructed through interaction. SIT emphasizes that identity is not a static trait but a dynamic, context-dependent process shaped by social categorization, comparison, and identification. This perspective informs my research design, which centers on how European identity is both represented and negotiated in digital interactions.

In this section, I outline my approach to data selection, beginning with the criteria for data selection, specifically, the choice to analyze TikTok videos that reflect American discourse about European identity, and the rationale for focusing on TikTok as a platform. I then present the methodological approach, which combines three complementary methods: qualitative content analysis to identify recurring themes and categories; discourse analysis to explore how identity is constructed within each theme; and sentiment analysis to examine how European users respond to these portrayals in the comment sections.

This approach reflects my understanding that identity is not simply imposed but actively negotiated between different social actors. Moving beyond the idea of identity as a fixed, self-contained attribute, I focus on how it is continuously shaped through interaction. Since discourse is central to interaction, serving as the medium through which identity is constructed, reinforced, and contested, discourse analysis plays a crucial role in this study. In this regard, I draw on inspiration from Bamberg et al. (2010) approach to identity as a discursively constructed process.

Finally, this methodology carries important ontological and epistemological implications, which I will also discuss in this section to clarify the underlying assumptions that guide my research.

Data Selection

1.TikTok

The decision to focus on TikTok as a data source is grounded in both theoretical relevance and platform-specific affordances. Social media platforms are increasingly central to how individuals and groups construct, express, and negotiate identities in real time and in interaction with others (Gündüz, 2017; Lüders et al., 2022). Unlike traditional media, social media allows for horizontal communication that is interactive, decentralized, and continuous, creating dynamic spaces of meaning-making and community-building (Wodak, 2011).

TikTok is a short-form video-sharing platform launched globally in 2018 by the Chinese tech company ByteDance. While the platform now allows videos of up to 10 minutes, the vast majority of content still falls under 60 seconds (Shopify, 2024). These videos are often accompanied by music, filters, captions, and hashtags. What sets TikTok apart from other platforms is its algorithmically curated *For You Page* (FYP), which prioritizes content based on user engagement rather than pre-existing social connections. This makes it easier for content to "go viral" and reach broad, often unexpected audiences, fostering large-scale public discourse beyond traditional social circles (McCashin & Murphy, 2022; Kanthawala et al., 2022).

With over 1 billion monthly active users globally (Backlinko, 2025), TikTok has rapidly become one of the most influential social media platforms, especially among younger demographics. Despite facing political controversies, including temporary bans in India and the United States, where the government is currently considering a forced divestment or potential ban of the app, TikTok continues to expand its user base and cultural influence worldwide (Kanthawala et al., 2022; Milmo, 2025).This surge has led to a parallel rise in academic interest: although research on TikTok is still relatively recent, there has been a sharp increase in scholarly publications examining the platform's user culture, algorithmic structures, and social impacts since 2019. In particular, studies increasingly use content analysis to explore how identity, group affiliation, and political discourse emerge in TikTok videos and interactions (Kanthawala et al., 2022; Lüders et al., 2022).

These platform-specific features make TikTok particularly suitable for studying discursive identity construction. The format, short videos accompanied by public comment sections, enables users not only to represent cultural or national identities, but also to immediately engage with others' portrayals. As Lüders et al. (2022) argue, such affordances support the emergence of recursive dynamic identity systems, where categories like "European" are continuously shaped and negotiated through interaction. In line with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978b), this dual process of identity portrayal and response is central to understanding how external categorization can reinforce, be challenged by, or reshape group identities.

For this reason, the inclusion of comment sections, especially those posted by users who self-identify as European, is a critical part of the dataset. Unlike traditional media, where audience reception is often indirect or difficult to assess, TikTok enables researchers to directly observe how viewers respond to specific portrayals of identity in real time. This provides rare insight into the dialogical and contested nature of identity construction. Comments offer a window into how users accept, resist, or reinterpret externally imposed categorizations, thereby enriching the analysis by revealing identity not as a fixed or passive trait, but as an ongoing, interactive, and contested social process.

2. Data

The empirical foundation of this research consists of 54 TikTok videos that appeared when searching the term *"European"* on the platform's explore page. This choice of keyword was intentional, as it allowed access to a wide range of organically surfaced content that directly or indirectly engages with the concept of "Europeanness". By relying on TikTok's algorithmic sorting via the explore page, the data reflects content that is not only thematically relevant but also has a certain level of visibility and engagement within the platform, making it suitable for analyzing discourse that resonates with broader audiences.

All the selected videos were created by American TikTok users, a decision methodologically and theoretically motivated. Firstly, American creators constitute a particularly large and active group discussing and commenting on European culture and identity on the platform, which facilitates consistent and efficient data collection.

Secondly, and more importantly, Social Identity Theory (SIT), which underpins this study, emphasizes the role of external categorization and social comparison in the construction of group identities. Focusing on a relatively uniform group of content creators, in this case, American users, strengthens the analytical clarity of the project by allowing a more cohesive investigation into how a specific group (Americans) discursively constructs the "other" (Europeans).

Limiting the dataset to American creators also avoids the analytical complication of having to account for multiple, potentially contrasting cultural lenses. By narrowing the focus, the study is better positioned to identify recurring discursive patterns and facilitate a more systematic comparison that directly addresses the research question, which center on how Americans depict European identity.

Qualitative content analysis (QualCA)

Following the most commonly used methodological approach in TikTok research, this study adopts content analysis as its primary method to identify the dominant themes and categories that emerge from the data (Kanthawala et al., 2022). As highlighted in their systematic review, content analysis has become the most prevalent tool for studying TikTok, particularly when analyzing user behavior, platform culture, and discursive trends through hashtags, keywords, or video content. This approach has been adopted in studies such as the one led by Fowler et al. (2021), where they use content analysis to explore public health thematic patterns in TikTok videos.

In this project, content analysis is used specifically as a qualitative method. Unlike quantitative content analysis, which typically emphasizes the frequency of codes and statistical generalizability, qualitative content analysis (QualCA) seeks to uncover the meanings embedded in texts, images, and interactions through an interpretive, inductive process (Bryman, 2012; Parker et al., 2011; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This approach is especially well suited to the study of identity in digital environments, where meaning is often co-constructed through discourse, visuals, and context-specific cues. QualCA allows this research to identify not only the explicit content of the TikToks, but also the underlying themes and patterns that characterize how European identity is portrayed and interpreted on TikTok.

After viewing all of the 54 TikTok videos included in the dataset, which starts the analytical process, these will be grouped inductively into thematic categories based on recurring discursive features and representational patterns. These emergent categories will then form the analytical basis for the subsequent chapters under the Analysis section, with each theme explored in detail to better understand how "Europeanness" is being constructed from an external perspective.

As Parker et al. (2011) explain, qualitative content analysis typically involves purposive sampling, an iterative and inductive approach to coding, the drawing of descriptive conclusions, and the potential development of typologies. These features make it particularly appropriate for exploratory research like this, where the objective is to identify and interpret emerging portrayals rather than test pre-defined hypotheses. In this context, qualitative content analysis serves the goal of answering the first sub-question ("What common themes emerge in American portrayals of 'Europeanness' on TikTok?") while also laying the groundwork for exploring the main research question regarding the construction and reception of European identity on the platform.

As detailed in the Data Selection section, the sample consists of TikToks surfaced by the term "European" and created by American users. This purposive selection ensures thematic relevance and aligns with the study's interest in examining identity from an American external point of view.

The final two considerations of qualitative content analysis, as outlined by Parker et. Al (2011), concern the analysis and interpretation of content. These stages often benefit from the integration of additional complementary methods depending on the research context and goals. Accordingly, the interpretation phase of this study will be supported by discourse analysis, described in the following section. While qualitative content analysis structures the identification of recurring themes, discourse analysis complements this by unpacking how those themes are articulated.

Discourse analysis

To interpret the meaning of the thematic categories identified through qualitative content analysis, this study applies discourse analysis, understood specifically through the lens of small-d discourse, as conceptualized by Bamberg et al. (2010). Unlike critical discourse analysis, which focuses on institutional power structures and ideological formations - referred to as capital-D Discourse by the authors- this approach emphasizes the analysis of everyday language use and interaction in situated contexts. An example of a capital-D discourse analysis on European identity would be, between others, Alekonis (2022) research on the Eurobarometer as a tool of the EU's official discourse on the topic. This study, by contrast, follows a small-d discourse analysis by focusing on how identity is constructed and negotiated in informal, user-generated spaces like TikTok.

Small-d discourse analysis examines the local, moment-to-moment discursive practices through which meaning is constructed. It assumes that identity is not a static category, but something performed, negotiated, and adjusted through communication. Rather than treating identity as something individuals have, this approach treats it as something they do. As outlined in the previous section, this analysis follows the thematic structure developed through qualitative content analysis, focusing on how identity is constructed within each topic area, such as "Work Life and Professional Culture" or "Social and Party Behavior".

This approach aligns with Tiidenberg et al. (2017), who emphasize that identity is continuously negotiated through discourse, often in relation to others, drawing from and feeding into broader cultural discourses or "grand narratives". Everyday language use does not merely reflect identity, it actively constructs it. People test and perform labels, position themselves in relation to others, and either reproduce or resist social categories in interaction. This dynamic is particularly visible in TikTok comments, where European users engage with American portrayals of Europeanness, sometimes reinforcing, sometimes mocking or resisting them. The interactive layer of analysis allowed by TikTok reflects how identity is co-constructed in dialogic spaces, consistent with the symbolic interactionist view that identities emerge from social interaction and are shaped by their context.

Finally, this analysis is situated within a broader understanding of social media as a form of public discourse. Ye et al. (2017) note that social media enables decentralized, participatory, and low-barrier communication, creating digital public spheres where users engage in debate, respond to representations, and negotiate their place within collective identities. TikTok's comment sections, in this sense, operate as sites of everyday identity negotiation, where users participate not just by consuming content, but by contributing to its meaning.

Ultimately, this discourse analysis seeks to explore how ideas of "Europeanness" are co-constructed, circulated, and contested through everyday digital practices. By focusing on small-scale, decentralized discourse rather than institutional narratives, this method aligns with the participatory, informal, and highly contextual nature of TikTok, and supports the study's broader goal of understanding identity as a dynamic, socially situated process.

Sentiment Analysis

Because I recognize that external categorization does not necessarily lead to internal identification, I include sentiment analysis of the TikTok comment sections to assess how European users respond to portrayals of "Europeanness" constructed by American content creators. While qualitative content and discourse analysis allow for an exploration of the stereotypes within the videos themselves, this additional layer focuses on how these identity constructions are received, validated, contested, or reframed.

This study adopts a qualitative sentiment analysis approach, which departs from traditional computational methods that typically classify opinions into fixed categories such as positive, negative, or neutral (Mäntylä et al., 2018). While such polarity-based sentiment analysis has dominated earlier work, recent scholarship highlights its limitations in capturing context, irony, humor, or deeper affective nuance (Raisio et al., 2022). As Gaspar et al. (2016) argue, computer-based sentiment analysis often reveals only the visible part of the iceberg, and fails to capture the complex ways people make sense of social experiences through interaction.

Instead of relying on automated tools or computational scores, this study uses a human-centered, interpretive approach to assess sentiment in context. I organize comments into two broad distinct categories:

- Agreement: where users affirm or expand on the portrayals, often with humor, pride on their identity, or anecdotal confirmation.
- Debate: where users push back against the portrayals, challenge their accuracy, or offer alternative interpretations.

Within each category, notes are taken on the tone, style, rhetorical strategies, and discursive elements present in the comments- for example, whether agreement is expressed proudly or ironically, or whether disagreement is grounded in critique, clarification, or rejection. Attention is paid to how users position themselves, respond to others, and draw on broader narratives or personal anecdotes to justify their views. This interpretive process allows for a more nuanced understanding of how identity is not only emotionally received, but discursively negotiated in response to external categorization.

This approach builds on recent work that uses qualitative sentiment analysis to understand public attitudes and cultural responses on social media (Raisio et al., 2022). In doing so, it complements the broader analytical framework of this study by capturing not just how European identity is portrayed by outsiders, but how those portrayals are emotionally and socially received by the people being represented. The comment sections thus become a crucial site for exploring how digital audiences co-construct meaning, sentiment, and identity through ongoing discursive interaction.

Ontological and epistemological considerations

The theoretical and methodological choices outlined in this thesis are not neutral or incidental; rather, they reflect a specific understanding of what social reality is and how it can be studied. These assumptions are expressed through the study's ontological and epistemological positions, which shape how the research questions are posed, how the data is approached, and how meaning is derived from it.

In qualitative research, ontology refers to the nature of being (how we conceptualize reality and the entities that exist within it) while epistemology concerns the

nature and scope of knowledge (how we come to know, interpret, and validate that reality) (Moon & Blackman, 2017). Figure 1 below, highlights how qualitative approaches like the one adopted in this thesis differ from quantitative ones in these foundational respects. As shown, this thesis is positioned within the qualitative research tradition, which aligns with a constructionist ontological orientation and an interpretivist epistemological stance.

Fundamental differences between quantitative and qualitative research strategies

	Quantitative	Qualitative
Principal orientation to the role of theory in relation to research	Deductive; testing of theory	Inductive; generation of theory
Epistemological orientation	Natural science model, in particular positivism	Interpretivism
Ontological orientation	Objectivism	Constructionism

Figure 1 *Quantitative versus Qualitative Research (Bryman, 2012)*

Ontologically, constructionism assumes that reality is not a fixed or external structure, but is continuously shaped and reshaped through social processes, language, and shared cultural practices (Bryman, 2012; Moon & Blackman, 2017). Social phenomena such as identity and cultural belonging are understood to be created through interaction and communication. In the case of this research, European identity is not treated as a stable essence but as a dynamic social construct, that is negotiated and redefined through the discourse found in TikTok videos and comment interactions.

Epistemologically, the research takes an interpretivist approach, which views knowledge as situated, contextual, and constructed through meaning-making. Rather than seeking objective, universal truths, interpretivism emphasizes how people make sense of their experiences within specific social, cultural, and technological contexts (Al-Saadi, 2014) Knowledge, in this view, is produced through interaction, and shaped by the cultural norms, language, and symbolic practices available within a particular setting.

This understanding of knowledge also informs the role of language in this study. Language is not merely a channel for conveying information, but it is a central tool through which people construct, communicate, and sustain social reality (Gergen & Gergen, 1991; Berger & Luckmann, 1991). The power of language, especially in storytelling and representation, plays a critical role in shaping how individuals and groups see themselves and others. On platforms like TikTok, language and visual media combine to create narratives that circulate and transform understandings of "Europeanness".

These assumptions also align with the use of Social Identity Theory (SIT) in this thesis. SIT emphasizes that identity is shaped through processes of social categorization, identification, and comparison**,** all of which are deeply social and context-dependent. In this study, these processes are understood as discursively constructed- emerging through language, interaction, and engagement with others, particularly in digital environments. The way European identity is represented by American TikTok creators, and responded to by European commenters, reflects these ongoing dynamics of group positioning and identity negotiation.

Analysis

The analysis presented in this chapter is organized around five main categories identified through qualitative content analysis of the TikTok dataset: Work Life and Professional Culture; Social and Party Behavior; Food, Diet and Health Norms; Cultural Values and Social Norms; and Physical Space. These categories emerged inductively from the data, based on recurring patterns and themes in the portrayals of European identity. While they provide a useful framework for structuring the discussion, they are not rigid or mutually exclusive. Some videos and discursive elements naturally overlap across multiple categories, which is both expected and valuable. This overlap reflects the interconnected nature of cultural representations and highlights the complexity of identity construction, reinforcing the view that identity is dynamic and multifaceted. In addition to categories' analysis, this chapter concludes with a section dedicated to explore and articulate how SIT processes are visible in the dataset- a direct focus on articulating theory with data.

All TikToks analyzed in this chapter are drawn from the dataset compiled for this study (see Appendix 1: TikTok Dataset). Throughout the analysis, TikToks are referenced by their corresponding entry number in the dataset (e.g.: Entry #37). Each entry includes metadata such as the username, a description of the video content, and discourse notes, as well as notes on the comment sections, including the overall sentiment and the patterns of agreement or debate among users. This referencing system ensures transparency and allows for clear traceability while keeping the main text focused on the thematic and discursive analysis.

1. Work Life and Professional Culture

One of the frequently brought-up themes in American discourse on being European revolved around Work Life and Professional Culture, with comments on their understanding of a common European work culture and work-life balance. Out of the 54 TikToks analyzed, six of them approached this topic (entries #6, 7, 9, 13, 17, 34).

Across these portrayals, Europeans are consistently depicted as having a more relaxed, boundary-respecting attitude toward work compared to Americans. A recurring

theme is the strict adherence to clock-off hours: European workers are said to finish work precisely when their contract hours end, without the expectation of overtime or lingering at the office (entry #6). One TikTok humorously points out that if their contract says until 4 p.m., they leave at 4 p.m. -no questions asked (entry #7) emphasizing the cultural norm that personal time is protected from professional intrusion. In this framing, Europeans are constructed as upholding strong boundaries between work and personal life, resisting the culture of overwork often associated with the United States.

The pace and structure of the European workday is another major focus. TikToks describe European work culture as super relaxed (entry #9), even during working hours, with frequent breaks throughout the day and flexible starting and finishing times. This portrayal highlights a key contrast with American work culture, characterized by a constant sense of urgency, back-to-back scheduling, and longer working hours. The slower, more flexible European rhythm is described with surprise, and as a factor that makes working together hard at times, as American urgency is often not matched on the European side (entry #7). This difference is not framed negatively, rather pointed out as a big cultural difference that contrasts with the American understanding of productivity and efficiency.

An additional layer of this discourse revolves around morning routines and the general timing of daily life- the European attitude towards work has a clear impact on social routine. One particular TikTok (entry #13) points out that very few businesses are open early in the morning, noting that "Nothing is open before 7 a.m." and "Europe is not a place for morning people". This portrayal emphasizes that Europe's public life operates on a later schedule compared to the United States, where early opening times are more common. The creator connects this observation to personal experience, noting that recovering from depression and becoming an early riser revealed how European routines can feel misaligned with morning-oriented lifestyles. Here, the European lifestyle is framed not only as relaxed but as structured in a way that may seem inaccessible to those used to early productivity. Early productivity is so important to this American creator that is a key indicator for himself of mental health and wellbeing.

Post-work culture also features prominently. European workers are portrayed as socially active after working hours, frequently engaging in after-work drinks or snacks at

terraces with colleagues or friends (entry #17). This reinforces an image of work-life balance not only in terms of time management but also in terms of social integration and community engagement. Unlike in American portrayals, where post-work hours are often seen as time to commute home and have personal or family time, the European model emphasizes public social life after the workday ends.

Finally, several TikToks highlight the generous amount of vacation time Europeans enjoy compared to Americans, alongside cultural respect for personal boundaries when it comes to holiday periods. It is mentioned that Europeans have "a lot of holidays" (entry #34), and that it can be difficult for Americans to collaborate with Europeans because they fully respect their vacation times and are unavailable for work during these periods. This portrayal frames Europeans as prioritizing well-being, leisure, and rest over continuous availability or work-driven identity.

Overall, American TikToks construct an image of European work culture that emphasizes relaxation, strong personal boundaries, social engagement, and a structured separation between work and life. This construction is deeply relational: it defines Europeanness by contrasting it to American norms of overwork, urgency, and individualism. Through humor, admiration, and occasional critique, American creators contribute to an external discourse that frames European identity in part through the lens of work-life values and the cultural organization of time.

European commenters largely agreed with the American portrayals of European work culture, often responding with pride and personal examples that reinforced the importance of boundaries, personal time, and later morning starts. Many users emphasized that having breakfast or coffee at home is a cultural preference tied to maintaining a relaxed and balanced daily rhythm. Some users even directly pushed back against the American framing that early-morning service should be normalized, with comments like "Yes, we like to have personal lives... make your own morning coffee" (entry #13). This reflects a discursive resistance to American expectations of constant convenience and early productivity.

Commenters also strongly defended the legal protections for workers in Europe. For example, users cited how harassing an employee outside working hours could lead to

legal consequences in countries like Spain, or pointed out that American work practices would be illegal in Germany (entry #34). Such responses suggest that European users not only agreed with the portrayal but framed it as a point of superiority and legal-cultural advancement.

In terms of tone, many comments carried a sense of pride and even mild defensiveness, indicating that external American portrayals were largely received positively but still triggered cultural boundary-marking: reaffirming Europeanness as different, better protected, and socially valued. Nevertheless, some nuances were also visible. A few users mentioned that their own country or city does not fit perfectly into the late-start stereotype or such high respect for work-life balance, highlighting that there is variation within Europe itself, even if the broader pattern is accepted (entry #6).

Overall, the reactions to the portrayals strengthened the external construction of Europeans as valuing a healthy work-life balance, while actively resisting the American model of early rising, overwork, and constant availability as "Europeans work to live. Americans live to work" (entry #7).

2. Social and Party Behavior

The second emphasized theme I identified in the analyzed TikToks concerns social and party behavior, with 14 out of the 54 entries mentioning something related to this area (entries #5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 23, 26, 27, 28, 33, 35, 36, 39, 41, 46). These portrayals revolve around nightlife, public sociability, habits of drinking, smoking, and dressing, often constructing Europeans as collectively more socially liberal, stylish, and unrestrained compared to Americans.

A recurring notion is that Europeans begin partying earlier and more intensely, often starting in their teenage years and tapering off by early adulthood. Some videos exaggerate this comically, such as one suggesting that by age 20, Europeans are either "a normal adult or dead" (entry #11), capturing the intensity and precociousness of youth social life. Commenters largely agreed with this depiction, frequently reinforcing it with humor and personal anecdotes. Comments like "by 22 I've done everything and stopped" (entry #11) and "we stopped drinking at 21" (entry #5) appeared repeatedly. The overall

understanding is that while early heavy partying is indeed common, it is generally understood as a temporary, youthful phase, marked more by experimentation than deviance.

The American legal drinking age being 21 seems to be unanimously perceived as unusually late. Heavy drinking and partying are associated with a natural phase of experimentation and self-discovery during teen years. While seen as carefree and perhaps immature, this behavior is not judged negatively; rather, it is classified as a normal experience best encountered earlier in life.

Beyond alcohol, American TikToks also depict Europeans as being more culturally open to recreational drug use, particularly within clubbing contexts. Although often exaggerated for humor, these portrayals suggest a greater normalization of such behaviors compared to the U.S (entry #11). Rather than being framed as deviant, drug use appears alongside heavy drinking, frequent partying, and casual daytime alcohol consumption, such as people enjoying drinks in cafés or bars at virtually any hour (entry #23). Together, these elements construct an image of Europeans as significantly more relaxed and permissive in their relationship to substances, in contrast to more regulated or stigmatized American norms. European commenters largely echoed this framing, with many affirming these portrayals and presenting them not as concerning, but as part of everyday life, an accepted and often celebrated aspect of social culture.

In addition to intensity, the frequency of social activity was also highlighted. Weekday outings, whether for clubbing (entry #9) or for casual drinks after work (entry #23), were viewed with surprise and often linked to broader cultural values. These portrayals intersect directly with the previous theme on work life and professional culture: such social rhythms are only possible because of cultural prioritization of personal time. European users echoed this connection, framing social life not as indulgence but as something structurally enabled by respect for work boundaries. This contrasted strongly with U.S. habits, where socialization tends to be more home-centered and confined to weekends.

One last note on European partying, informed by the heavy partying lifestyle, is the musical taste and type of parties Europeans attend. European clubbing revolves around

techno, house, lyric-free dance tracks, or electronic remixes of classic European pop like ABBA. One video humorously critiques the emotional "flatness" of these genres, contrasting them with more lyrically driven American music (entry #8). Commenters largely responded with amusement and pride, reinforcing the stereotype and even exaggerating it further. Several users referenced forest raves, underground parties, and hyper-local events that would appear extreme to outsiders. One user joked that "American raves look like my average game night", underscoring the cultural contrast with a sense of superiority.

The theme of substance use extended into portrayals of smoking, which was mentioned in multiple entries (#6, 9, 11, 23). Users broadly agreed that Europeans smoke more than Americans. However, when one TikTok suggested that indoor smoking is still common in Europe (entry #23), it was met with notable disagreement. Commenters clarified that while smoking rates are higher overall, indoor smoking is now widely banned and socially discouraged across much of Europe. This reaction illustrates how portrayals that are generally accurate may still prompt corrections, regional distinctions, and boundary negotiations.

Another layer of this social behavior discourse involves portrayals of European dress codes. Several TikToks emphasize that Europeans tend to dress more formally and put-together than Americans, even in casual contexts such as grocery shopping or hiking (entries #26, 28, 33, 46). These portrayals were met with broad agreement in the comments. Rather than defending a more laid-back, athleisure-oriented aesthetic, European users largely affirmed the stereotype, often with pride. Comments like "we look good while doing it" (entry #28) reflect a shared cultural value placed on maintaining a polished appearance in public space.

One particular TikTok (entry #26) sparked more debate, as it generalized that European tourists all dress the same in the U.S., favoring Adidas, skinny jeans, and boots, even when such outfits might seem overly formal or contextually inappropriate. In response, commenters pushed back on the generalization, calling for greater regional specificity. Questions like "Why y'all acting like Europe is one country?" and remarks such as "That sounds more like Eastern Europe or Germany" were common. These reactions suggest that while the image of Europeans dressing well is widely accepted,

there is also a clear impulse to resist oversimplification. Continental identity is embraced, but only with cultural and national nuance, and what counts as "dressing well" or "too formal" can vary meaningfully across Europe.

These portrayals of appearance often connect subtly with depictions of walking culture. One TikTok, in particular, introduced the term "European walking shoe" (entry #36) to describe durable footwear suited to long walking distances in urban environments, contrasting this with the American context, where car-oriented infrastructure reduces the need for such shoes. Videos (entries #36 and 39) highlighted how walking is embedded in daily routines in Europe, not treated as leisure or exercise but as a natural means of commuting, running errands, or navigating the city. This framing was strongly affirmed in the comments, where European users shared humorous stories about American tourists being unprepared for short walks, or treating minor distances as major treks. One user remarked, "I saw American tourists with a walking stick and full hike gear just outside my apartment building in Paris" (entry #39). These anecdotes reinforce a broader cultural contrast in everyday mobility, linking behavioral habits to deeper differences in lifestyle, infrastructure, and spatial experience.

One TikTok also zoomed in on table manners and etiquette by jokingly showing how it is possible to identify the European eating at table full of Americans, as it will be the only one using both fork and knife when eating, in contrast to the American habit of using only a fork (entry #27). This portrayal sparked surprise among commenters, many of whom had not realized that using only a fork was common practice in the U.S. Others shifted the discussion toward environmental concerns, noting that Americans were eating with plastic utensils, "something literally banned in most parts of the EU", pivoting the discussion to environmental norms and reflecting how portrayals can trigger adjacent identity negotiations.

Finally, a TikTok claimed that Europeans do not understand "space bubbles", implying they tend to stand too close to others or disregard personal distance norms (entry #41). Unlike many other portrayals, this one was met with strong disagreement. Commenters argued that personal space expectations vary widely across Europe, with one asking, "Like bro where are you Bradford or Barcelona?" This pushback underscores how certain generalizations are quickly contested and regional differences reasserted,

revealing the limits of essentialist identity claims and reinforcing the idea of Europe as diverse, contextual, and locally grounded.

3. Food, Diet and Health Norms

Third on the identified themes, I encountered portrayals around food culture, dietary habits, and health norms in 13 entries (#12, 18, 19, 24, 25, 32, 37, 40, 42, 44, 47, 51, 52). Here, there is a depiction of Europeans as healthier, thinner, more disciplined, and fundamentally distinct from Americans in their approach to food, body image, and consumption, often with an emphasis on grocery practices and everyday routines.

A repeated claim is that food portions in Europe are smaller, which is paired with the observation that Americans tend to lose weight after spending some time there, even if they do not consciously change their habits or adopt a stricter diet (entries #12 and 25). Content creators report feeling "less bloated", despite their holiday-relaxed attitude towards dieting, which even usually involves more alcoholic beverages. European commenters, while surprised by the perception of small portion sizes, offered additional explanations for the weight loss. Many pointed to stricter food regulations across the EU, and others emphasized higher levels of incidental physical activity, particularly walking, an insight that connects to broader lifestyle differences and a less car centric space than the US. More than just debating the whys, these comments seem to carry a tone of pride, as "that's one of the reasons we don't have your obesity problem".

Another key theme is food quality, particularly around grocery shopping (entries #24, 37, 47, 51). TikToks mention that groceries in Europe expire more quickly due to fewer preservatives in food and the prevalence of fresher ingredients, highlighting structural differences in food systems and regulations. This is particularly true for vegetables and fruits that expire much faster, but also are visibly healthier, with one of the content creators surprisingly remarking how "my fruits smell like fruits" after buying strawberries in a European supermarket, which were also shockingly "red in the middle". This remark shocked Europeans in the comments, who did not realize strawberries could be any other color in the middle.

This freshness requires some adjustment for Americans, since groceries need to be done more frequently due to shorter expiration dates. Indeed, one of the remarks made on European grocery shop habits is how much more often they need to do this chore. In this regard, Europeans in the comment section contextualized the habit: better access to local shops and pedestrian-friendly urban planning allows for a quick grocery shop on your way home from work, making it easier to “build that into your routine”.

Additionally, they highlight different consumer mentalities in the US. As one commenter put it “everything is bigger in the US, cars, living spaces, shopping carts, distance to the supermarket, nudging you to shop more". Another added "in the US going grocery shopping is an event - coffee store at the entrance and enormous buildings. numerous items to look at, conditioning us to waste hours and money there" (entry #47). Differently than Americans, Europeans claim they prioritize quality over quantity, something they take pride in: "When I visited the US I was struck by all the overconsumption. There was so much more waste than I'm used to."; "you should take a moment to think. Vegetables and Fruit in Europe is smaller coz it's not pumped with chemicals that make them abnormally big" (entry #37). Pushback against American consumer habits also extended to product sizing, as Europeans noted that smaller packaging is common across not only food, but also items like hygiene products. For many, smaller sizes are associated with healthier consumption and environmental responsibility.

The topic of hygiene products, particularly deodorants, also emerged in the context of grocery shopping in Europe. Two TikToks (entries #40 and 42) remarked that European deodorants “don’t work”, with one going so far as to claim this is why “cities and public transport stink of sweat.” This portrayal was strongly contested in the comments, with users questioning where in Europe this claim applied and rejecting the idea that body odor is more prevalent. These responses reflect how identity portrayals, even when casually made, can provoke defensiveness and clarification, especially when tied to culturally sensitive topics like hygiene.

Back to dieting, comments were made on how Europeans “don’t drink water”, or at least not as much as Americans (entries #32, 44, and 52). Creators noted that they never see Europeans moving around carrying large water bottles, and when they do drink water,

it is often in small quantities and served at room temperature (entry #32). In the comment sections, European users tried to make sense of this perception and questioned whether they do, in fact, consume less water. Some pointed out that tap water is easily accessible (entry #44), which may explain the absence of large, store-bought bottles. In one TikTok (entry #32), commenters remarked on how strange it is from a European perspective to see Americans carrying around gallon-sized jugs of water or spending money on bottled water when tap water is freely available. One American even reported feeling less thirsty while in Europe, which could open the possibility for a de facto smaller water intake from Europeans, which prompted speculations around differences that could contribute to this. As one commenter suggested "salt, chemicals in your food, and all the air conditioning… Drys you out" (entry #52).

Caffeine culture also surfaced as a point of difference. One TikTok claimed that Europeans typically consume fewer shots of espressos in a single coffee, rather than large coffees with multiples shots like Americans (entry #19). This was met with a mix of disagreement and clarification, with people explaining that it is only natural that the way to drink and order coffee varies across countries and that we should never expect for it to be the same ("As a Norwegian I never assume that things are the same as in Norway when I travel"). There was an underlying frustration at the American assumption that their way of doing things is universal, reflecting a broader irritation with a perceived insular mentality.

Related to a healthier diet and lifestyle, one TikTok described European beauty standards as favoring thinness compared to those in the US (entry #18). This video too sparked debate in the comments. While some users agreed that body ideals vary between countries, others objected to the generalization or noted exceptions. As one commenter noted: "How lovely to stereotype 50 countries into 1." This reaction illustrates the limits of broad portrayals, especially when they touch on sensitive topics like body image. Nevertheless, others supported the claim, framing thinner beauty ideals as part of a healthier cultural mindset, and suggesting that Europeans are generally more health-conscious and mindful of food and body norms than their American counterparts.

Taken together, these portrayals construct a version of Europeans as people who eat better, shop more thoughtfully, and live by health-conscious standards that contrast

with a caricatured view of American overconsumption. Food culture, body image, and everyday consumption practices become symbolic markers in the TikToks, reinforcing a narrative of European superiority in discipline, moderation, and awareness. Yet, as with other themes, the responses from European commenters complicate this picture. While many affirm the portrayals with pride or humor, others challenge overgeneralizations and highlight intra-European diversity.

4. Cultural Values and Social Norms

Cultural Values and Social norms constitute the fourth theme spotted in the dataset, coming up in a total of 17 entries (#2, 3,4, 6, 9, 10, 14, 15, 16, 20, 23, 29, 30, 45, 48, 49, 50). This category deals more directly with attitudes, interpersonal conduct, and worldviews. In these TikToks, the discourse constructs a shared sense of what Europeans value socially and crucially, how those values contrast with American ones.

The most frequent observation and debate revolves around European perceptions and attitudes towards Americans. There is a wide understanding that anti-American sentiments are shared across Europeans, with many TikToks attempting to unpack what drives these attitudes and what exactly they entail (entries #3, 6, 10, 15, 30, 45). This negativity is framed as so apparent that Americans often report being recognized as such before even speaking, and this recognition is perceived as immediately diminishing the chance for a positive interaction (entries #30, 45). Commenters describe the cues that give Americans away: “jeans, backpacks, water bottle, smiling (why), randomly large belt, running trainers when ur not running”; “the water bottle, the smiling at strangers, plus you’re always the loudest ones in the room/ street”; “leggings pants, water bottles or coffee to go, styled hair, a lot of foundation, baseball caps”; “bleached teeth”. While many of these markers are aesthetic, others clearly point to social norms and interpersonal conduct, particularly Americans’ tendency to smile at strangers or speak loudly in public.

These perceived differences in emotional expression and communication also surface in related TikToks. Americans often note that Europeans seem to find their enthusiasm inauthentic, viewing friendliness as forced or exaggerated (entry #15). This is echoed in portrayals of Europeans as more reserved, even “grumpier” (entries #6, 9), and foreign to social practices like small talk, which are central to American socialization

(entry #14). Commenters largely agree, often sharing how American expressiveness feels uncomfortable or performative. As one sarcastically summarized: “Not to forget: Oh really? This is sooooo AMAAAAZING!!!”, highlighting how over-enthusiasm is interpreted as artificial or hypocritical.

Beyond social difference that makes it harder for the two groups to positively engage, negative stereotypes Europeans have about Americans are also identified as a driver for difficult interaction. Entry #3, for example, lists perceptions that Americans are “uncultured, have no manners, poorly educated, and loud and obnoxious”. Entry #50 adds further claims: “Americans are fat, don’t know geography, have a bad schooling system, bad healthcare, politics are laughable”. These portrayals are often discussed bluntly, with creators and commenters noting that Europeans have no issue expressing these stereotypes directly to Americans, sometimes bordering on rudeness. In the comment sections, users debated the extent to which these generalizations are fair. Some tried to explain where these ideas come from, while others dismissed them as a form of “European sense of humor”. Still, many comments reflected genuine frustration with perceived American insularity: “We want US citizens to wake up, too many are isolated with whichever narrative your leaders present. Censorship and propaganda. ‘Greatest nation in the world’ = superiority complex”. This frustration was further illustrated in entry #20, where an American content creator expressed genuine surprise that Europeans do not celebrate the 4th of July. The comment section reacted with disbelief and sarcasm, highlighting how such assumptions reinforce the perception of American inwardness. As one commenter put it, “It’s almost as if the 4th of July is only an American holiday”, while another added bluntly, “Ngl [Not Going to Lie] I hate American tourists”.

The intensity of this discourse was often striking. Several commenters framed anti-American sentiment as near-universal outside the US, with one noting that disliking Americans is “the one time the Europeans unite”. Longstanding tensions or rivalries between European countries are, in this framing, momentarily suspended in favor of shared critique of the U.S. and its cultural outlook.

At the same time, this critique is complicated by Europe’s consumption of American culture. One TikTok (entry #50) points out the irony of criticizing Americans while simultaneously consuming their media, sparking debate over the contradictions

within European attitudes. This theme is developed more deeply in entry #10, where an American creator reflects on how Europeans often grew up idealizing American life, only to become disillusioned as adults. In the comments, many European users agreed. One wrote: “I wanted to have the yellow bus, the lockers, the cheerleader squad etc. but then I met a bunch of them and the ‘American fever’ passed”. Another shared: “Another thing for me is how most places aren’t walkable and public transport is lacking and/ or looked down on. We definitely see the US as this great place but as we get older the illusion shatters!”. Others echoed this theme: “I used to be so jealous of people who lived in the US when I was a kid. Now? So glad I don’t. Why? Trump, healthcare and the education.”

These reflections reveal a process of disenchantment. While American aesthetics, often driven by pop culture, once symbolized freedom, fun, and possibility, they are increasingly perceived as hollow when contrasted with the structural shortcomings of US society, especially in areas like healthcare, education, infrastructure, and public welfare. As users age and learn more about political and social realities, the fantasy of the American lifestyle gives way to a more critical stance.

European different social norms and system of values are interestingly encapsulated and showcased in one setting: customer service. In entry #48, an American TikTok creator mocks Europeans by acting out a scenario in which a European customer orders something in the U.S., portraying them as overly direct with staff and openly displaying facial expressions of confusion and annoyance, a behavior the creator interprets as rude. Even more surprising to American viewers is the fact that Europeans generally do not tip, a practice that contrasts sharply with U.S. expectations. While the perceived rudeness or bluntness was debated in the comments, with several users noting that it varies by country, there was broader consensus around the norm of not tipping across much of Europe.

This portrayal sparked deeper discussions in the comment sections, particularly around labor rights and economic systems. European commenters explained that tipping is largely unnecessary because service workers are paid a living wage, and the expectation that workers should rely on tips is viewed as a sign of precarious employment structures. As one commenter stated, “Your employer should be paying your wages btw [by the way] while another added pointedly, “Laughing with 3 years paid maternity leave and free

healthcare and a lot cheaper universities". A similar conversation unfolded under another TikTok addressing the tipping culture (entry #29), where commenters again emphasized tipping as a choice rather than an obligation: "As we should, tips are optional, for a good service" and "like im sorry but im not responsible for your paycheck". In both cases, Europeans not only confirmed the portrayal but used the opportunity to assert a sense of pride in the welfare state and worker protections, contrasting them with what they see as systemic weaknesses in the American model.

A few additional portrayals in this category further illustrate how cultural values and norms are expressed and negotiated across everyday topics. In entry #16, an American creator expresses surprise at how many languages Europeans speak, and especially at how casually and humbly they do so. The TikTok notes that Europeans often speak fluent English without drawing attention to the fact that it is their second language. Commenters responded with clear pride, listing the languages they speak and explaining that their native language and English are often so normalized that they "don't count" when asked about foreign languages. This goes to show that multilingualism is not only common in Europe, but also culturally expected and normalized, unlike the prevalence of monolingualism in the US. Narratives from commentators let us know that this frequently results from moving to other countries to study or work, living in border regions or multilingual countries, or having parents from different linguistic backgrounds.

Entry #2 points out another cultural contrast through the lens of media censorship, particularly in relation to sex and nudity. The creator expresses surprise at how much less censored such scenes are in European broadcasting, interpreting this difference as a reflection of American "close minded" and "puritanical" tendencies. In the comments people are surprised to hear some of the censored media: "Titanic? That's a family movie lol". Overall, people seem to enjoy not having the media as censored and agree with a European depiction of open mindedness, particularly around themes of sexuality and bodily representation.

Lasty, entry #4 triggered heavy disagreement after the creator jokingly claimed that Europeans are not punctual. Users agreed that there is significant regional variation in this regard, explaining that while the stereotype may apply to Southern European

countries, it clearly does not hold across Europe as, for example, there is the well-known British punctuality.

5. Physical Space

The final theme emerging from the dataset concerns portrayals of Europe as a physical space (entries #15, 21, 22, 31, 36, 38 and 43). The discourse constructs Europe as a walkable place marked by architectural heritage, and with infrastructure differences from the US that shape everyday experience.

A central feature highlighted in multiple entries is Europe's historical depth. Many TikToks emphasize how old buildings and preserved landmarks are integrated into everyday life. Unlike in the U.S., where architecture is often modern, uniform, and relatively recent, European cities are seen as layered with visible history (entries #21, 31). American creators express surprise at how frequently they are reminded of the age and historical significance of their surroundings, whereas Europeans appear largely unfazed by it. As the TikToks suggest, this contrast points to a difference in historical awareness shaped by one's built environment. Commenters confirmed this, often sharing anecdotes about doing mundane tasks in buildings hundreds of years old without giving it much thought, a reflection of how normalized such spaces are in Europe.

This historical richness, however, is also seen by Americans as coming with trade-offs. Entries #15 and 43 observe that living in such old environments often means sacrificing modern comforts common in the US, such as widespread air conditioning, spacious homes, large cars, or simply more room in general. Entry #43 in particular sparked backlash by framing the lack of these amenities as deficiencies, with a tone of American pride. Commenters pushed back not by discussing infrastructure, but by defending broader European values: "In Europe, you can go to school without a bulletproof vest. Now that's a comfort that doesn't harm the planet," and "The video showed me once again how much I love being European." Here, the conversation shifted from physical differences to ideological ones, with pride in safety, simplicity, and sustainability overriding material comparisons.

Despite being an old place, Europe is consistently portrayed as more pedestrian-friendly and better connected through public infrastructure than the U.S. Entries #22 and 36 highlight how public transport systems and walkable city layouts support lifestyles less dependent on cars. Europeans in the comments responded with clear pride, emphasizing how they walk everywhere and find the American reliance on driving both impractical and alienating. Many shared stories of visiting the U.S. and being shocked by how hard it was to get around without a car, or how unsafe walking felt in some places, underscoring how urban design reflects broader social and cultural priorities.

Finally, not all portrayals were entirely positive. In entry #38, one American creator claimed that Europe "smells bad"- like urine and feces. However, this was overwhelmingly rejected in the comments, with many pointing out that such impressions are highly localized. As one user joked: "I just know he was in Paris". While humor was used to diffuse the critique, this response again shows how Europeans are quick to qualify or contest negative portrayals, especially when they feel these reflect ignorance or unfair generalizations.

European spatial features are more than visual markers; they embody ways of moving, interacting, and perceiving the world. In the comments, Europeans actively affirm these spatial narratives, often using them to distinguish their way of life from that of Americans, and to assert pride in a lifestyle that values history, sustainability, and every day public life.

6. Social Identity Theory on TikTok

As explored so far, there are a lot of components brought up by American content creators that discursively inform and construct the term "European". The way these categories come into play and are negotiated in the comments section perfectly showcase Social Identity Theory (SIT) processes in action. Across all five thematic categories, the SIT processes of social categorization, social identification, and social comparison are clearly visible and often actively constructed by users in both the videos and the comments.

The starting point of SIT, social categorization, is evident throughout the TikToks, as American creators consistently draw a line between "Americans" and "Europeans". This aligns with Turner's (1975) claim that social categorization helps individuals make sense of their social environment by organizing it into meaningful groups. Inter-group comparisons around the 5 topics help Americans cognitively categorize the "Other", through an exercise of organizing and interpreting cultural differences. This categorization, in turn, allows for the parallel construction of both "Europeanness" and "Americanness"- by defining what Europeans are like, American creators simultaneously reinforce what they are not, thus shaping their own group identity through contrast. Once these group boundaries are drawn, the ground is set for triggering in-group favoritism and intergroup comparison.

Indeed, once groups are defined, social identification follows, where individuals begin to internalize the traits and norms associated with their ingroup, leading to a collective perception of acting as a group rather than as separate individuals. Hence, TikToks serve as the catalyst for this process by presenting and reinforcing group boundaries. Users participating in these TikToks (both in the videos and comments) are positioned as either Americans or Europeans, and their participation reflects group-based behaviors and attitudes. Within this digital environment, individuals are prompted to speak not just as themselves, but as representatives of their group.

The emotional component of social identification is also clearly present. Many comments include proud declarations of group-specific behaviors, such as walking instead of driving, eating healthier, or dressing better. In some cases, users explicitly express affective attachment to their group identity: "This video showed me once again how much I love being European" (entry #43). The discussion goes beyond simply *doing* something better, to *being* better. These expressions are more than agreement; they demonstrate an emotional investment in social identity and reflect self-stereotyping, as users align themselves with an idealized group prototype, often leaning into exaggerated traits (e.g., "We stopped drinking at 21," "We look good while doing it"- entries #5 and 28).

It becomes evident that following the initial processes of social categorization and identification, the conditions give rise to a discursive battleground- one that can be playful

or confrontational- where the social comparison process takes hold. At this stage, Europeans in the comments begin evaluating Americans not on the basis of individual behavior, but through the lens of group characteristics, aligning with Turner's (2010) emphasis on the evaluative nature of intergroup dynamics.

This is particularly visible when discussions extend beyond the seemingly minor topics being portrayed. For instance, rather than simply responding to critiques about the lack of tipping culture with clarification or contextualization, commenters often escalate the comparison into broader moral or systemic territory: "In Europe, you can go to school without a bulletproof vest" (entry #43). Such responses reflect more than disagreement, they demonstrate an attempt to reframe the conversation around values, rights, and quality of life. Redefining the terms of comparison allows the group to maintain a positive self-image, turning traits depicted as "negative" into a virtue.

Moreover, this dynamic also helps explain the defensive reactions and pushback that occur when portrayals cross certain lines. Claims with negative connotations, such as that Europe "smells bad" (entry #38) or that Europeans do not respect "personal space bubbles" (entry #41), are often met with emotionally charged responses. These reactions go beyond factual disagreement; they reflect a perceived threat to group status or dignity, prompting efforts to protect the group's image. As Tajfel (1979) argues, when an ingroup's distinctiveness is challenged, members often respond by adopting strategies that maintain a positive self-concept. In the TikTok comment sections, this frequently takes the form of redefining the terms of comparison or questioning the generalization itself- for example, by asking the creator to specify which country they are referring to. This allows users to distance themselves from the negative trait, without rejecting the broader category of "Europeanness", thereby preserving the ingroup's perceived value.

TikTok's participatory nature makes it especially well-suited for observing processes outlined in Social Identity Theory- videos initiate external categorization, and comment sections become sites of interactive identification and comparison. The platform's design encourages reaction, irony, and direct response, amplifying both the creation of group boundaries and the negotiation of them. This format not only allows identity to be performed, but also makes it visible, participatory, and reflexive. Tiktok

highlights the dynamic nature of social identity, reinforcing how it is shaped through ongoing intergroup interactions.

Importantly, the TikToks analyzed show that European identity becomes salient in specific contexts- in line with SIT's claim that identity is context-dependent. While it is impossible to know how strongly commenters identify as "European" in their daily lives, or how this interacts with their national identity, it is evident that when confronted with external categorization (such as an American describing "European habits") this supranational identity becomes more prominent, triggering a process of active alignment or differentiation.

Three entries in the dataset (#53, #54 and #55) offer particularly clear illustrations of SIT's concepts of ingroup boundaries and intergroup dynamics. Entries #53 and 54 highlight how Europeans often express prejudice or rivalry toward neighboring countries, including national and regional stereotypes- sometimes having a troubled relationship with people from a town located just a five-minute drive away. This intragroup teasing and criticism suggest strong local or national identification that could indicate a low level of identification with a supranational identity of being "European", but a recent viral trend challenges this interpretation. In this trend, users repurpose the line "I don't wanna be friends" from Lady Gaga's Bad Romance to sound like "I don't wanna be French". Europeans use this sound to create humorous edits that showcase national pride- celebrating their country's food, culture, landscape, and others- framing them as superior to French identity. This French mockery is an internal, intragroup teasing that went viral across many European national contexts, from Portugal to Poland.

However, because TikTok is a global platform, some American creators joined the trend, using the same sound to suggest that the U.S. is superior to France- an approach that was not well received by Europeans. In one viral TikTok (entry #55, with over 1.2 million likes), a European user explains that when a European joins the trend, it is funny and fine, but when an American does it, Europeans come together to defend France. In this moment, national identities are temporarily set aside, and European identity becomes salient, activating a need to defend group boundaries.

This behavior encapsulates SIT dynamics of social distinctiveness and context dependency. First, it demonstrates positive distinctiveness as while Europeans may tease each other internally, external critique from an outgroup (Americans) is interpreted as a challenge to group integrity, prompting a unified defense. Second, it illustrates contextual salience, as European identity, which might otherwise be diffuse or secondary to national identity, becomes highly activated when faced with external evaluation or threat. Even in humorous or ironic formats, group boundaries are policed, and intergroup distinctions are reasserted.

Discussion

Beyond highlighting SIT concepts, the analysis of the dataset also revealed additional patterns and brought up other topics that merit discussion. Notably, as it is often the case with broad generalizations, the portrayals of "European" found in the discourse result in a flattened representation of the continent, overlooking important geographic and cultural variations. As explored, this limitation is frequently pointed out in the comment sections, especially when the portrayal in question is negative. For example, generalizations about punctuality, infrastructure, or social norms tend to reflect Northern or Western European standards, implicitly presenting them as representative of all Europe. In this process, regional variations, such as the ones arising from Eastern and Southern Europe, are frequently homogenized into a dominant narrative- Western European characteristics are presented as defining "Europeaness" as a whole. These portrayals likely stem from the fact that American cultural references and travel experiences tend to focus on Western European countries. Nevertheless, commenters can be quick to push back homogenization, asking for greater specificity and drawing attention to intra-European diversity.

Another pattern observed relates to the relationship between tone and audience engagement. When the tone of the TikTok is humorous or clearly satirical, as the ones highlighted in light blue in the dataset, there tends to be less intense debate or backlash in the comments. Viewers are more likely to respond with irony, exaggeration, or agreement, often expanding the joke. This suggests that tone plays a significant role in

how identity portrayals are received and negotiated, and that humor may serve as a buffer, allowing for ingroup/outgroup comparison without threatening social identity.

In contrast, when the tone is serious or evaluative, commenters are more likely to engage in debate, exploring the nuance in the stereotype presented and adding layers of interpretation. This is especially true when cultural differences are framed as deficiencies on the European side. In such cases, responses tend to be more defensive, with users actively protecting their ingroup by challenging the portrayal through clarification, providing counterexamples, reframing the discussion around core values, or shifting the parameters of comparison.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that, as with any social media platform, TikTok can present certain demographic and contextual limitations. The majority of users engaging with this content are likely younger audiences, and those whose "For You Page" surfaces videos about European identity or American–European contrasts are probably already interested in cross-cultural content. Given TikTok's algorithmic design, the visibility of such videos is often shaped by users' existing preferences and interactions. As such, those most exposed to these portrayals may already hold an affinity for, or curiosity about, European identity and its perceived contrast with American identity. Nevertheless, the reach and engagement of this discourse should not be underestimated. Many of these videos attract significant numbers of views, likes, and comments, indicating widespread interest, even among those who may not participate actively but who engage passively by watching and reading. The volume of interaction demonstrates that cultural identity remains a topic of high relevance and emotional investment, particularly in digital spaces where users shape and respond to discourse in real time.

Some content creators included in the dataset have built large platforms centered entirely on American–European cultural differences, with consistently high engagement. Notable examples include @samueljeffersonandres (1.8 million followers, 131.6 million likes) and @kaiserkrys (1.4 million followers, 158.3 million likes). The former became popular by performing a humorous character named Klaus, a stereotypical European man, through which he exaggerates and parodies various cultural traits. Because of the comedic tone, engagement in the comments is generally lighthearted and affirming rather than argumentative. His popularity has grown to the point where he now sells merchandise (T-shirts, hoodies, mugs, and water bottles) referencing a viral phrase from his videos

“Electro club dance party bonanza”- that he frequently uses to talk about European nightlife. In fact, his content was so prevalent in the initial search results for “European” on TikTok that only a limited number of his videos were included in the final dataset to avoid skewing the analysis. The latter, @kaiserkrys, rose to prominence by sharing her personal experiences of living in Europe, particularly in Germany. Her videos range from country-specific insights to broader reflections on European cultural norms. These creators illustrate that while identity discourse may emerge from niche interests, it can quickly achieve mainstream visibility and influence, shaping how national and supranational identities are understood on a global scale.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to explore how American TikTok users portray European identity and how these portrayals are received and contested by European users themselves. Grounded in Social Identity Theory (SIT), and through a combination of qualitative content analysis, discourse analysis, and sentiment analysis, the study demonstrated the importance of external categorization in the formation of group identity. The goal was to explore "Europeanness" in digital spaces, as they offer an opportunity to assess identity construction in a decentralized, dynamic and participatory way.

In American online discourse, Europeans are said to have strong work-life boundaries and balance and invest more in their social lives, integrating leisure into their daily lives or enjoying their sacred lengthy vacations. They will walk everywhere looking stylish, though not always with the most inviting facial expressions and postures. For longer distances, they can rely on public transportation and enjoy historical cityscapes on the ride or, just as often, overlook them due to their familiarity. Their diet is remarkably healthy, full of fresh and nutritious ingredients. Yet, when the occasion arises, they will take the opportunity to party hard, pairing their clean meals with substance abuse.

However, these portrayals do not go unchallenged. The comment sections reveal a much more complex and interactive process, where Europeans frequently step in to confirm, dispute, or reframe the narratives. This illustrates identity as something actively negotiated through discourse- fluid, at times emotional, and shaped by both internal and external voices. The participatory nature of TikTok offers a unique opportunity to observe this process in real time, offering insight into how abstract categories like "European" are continuously reshaped by ordinary users.

Crucially, these digital performances of identity also shed light on which aspects of "Europeanness" appear to generate a sense of pride, such as labor protections, food regulations, or walkable urban design. These reactions and the discourse analyzed may offer a glimpse into the kinds of policies that resonate positively in the public imagination. While not definitive, such insights could be valuable for policymakers, particularly within EU institutions, as they may point to areas of support or public interest- possibilities that

could inform strategies aimed at strengthening engagement and addressing the EU's democratic deficit.

These observations also suggest the broader relevance of discourse in shaping social identity from the bottom up. While institutional and elite narratives continue to influence identity formation, the findings here show to the potential of everyday digital interactions to play a meaningful role in that process. Platforms like TikTok may increasingly serve as informal arenas where cultural meanings and group boundaries are shaped. As such, future research might benefit from taking these spaces seriously, as complementary contexts where identity is performed and negotiated in real time. This could offer valuable insights into how collective identities like "Europeanness" continue to evolve in a participatory media environment.

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