

# Uncovering the relationship between community participation and socio-political control among the migrant population

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## Abstract

Prior research on psychological empowerment has found that community participation is associated with socio-political control, which takes place when people perceive control in their socio-political contexts. However, the process by which this relationship occurs remains an understudied area for migrants. This study aims to: (a) analyze the differences in socio-political control, critical thinking, and ethnic identity according to membership in migrant community-based organizations; and (b) propose a predictive model of socio-political control. A total of 239 first-generation migrants living in northern Italy completed a questionnaire (48.4% belonged to a migrant community-based organization). Members were found to have higher levels than nonmembers in all the variables. A moderated mediation model was proposed, whereby ethnic identity was a mediator between community participation and socio-political control, and critical thinking was a negative moderator between ethnic identity and socio-political control. Practical implications for enhancing socio-political control among migrants in receiving societies are discussed.

## KEYWORDS

community participation, critical thinking, ethnic identity, Italy, migrants, psychological empowerment, socio-political control

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In the current economic, ecological, and social crisis, migration from the poorest to the wealthiest countries is increasing worldwide. Migrants often face adversities in receiving societies based on multiple levels of oppression and their possibilities to respond to injustices (Buckingham et al., 2021). As they encounter many obstacles in receiving societies, they usually have limited opportunities to participate in actions oriented toward changing the oppressive system. Indeed, migrants' priority to ensure their economic livelihood may make participation a privilege, as there is no time for it (Martinez-Damia et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly, literature reported that migrants show lower community participation levels than locals (Riniolo & Ortensi, 2021; Valentova & Alieva, 2018). Despite this, migrants can develop resources to engage in actions to transform the contexts that harm their well-being (Watts & Serrano-García, 2003). Community participation has been defined as "involvement in any organized activity in which the individual participates without pay to achieve a common goal" (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988, p. 276). In the case of migrants, we will focus on participation within migrant community-based organizations (MCBOs), organizations funded and run by migrants to support themselves (Babis, 2016).

Psychological empowerment has been traditionally conceptualized as made up of three interrelated dimensions: (a) behavioral, which is community participation; (b) emotional, which is socio-political control; and (c) cognitive, which is critical thinking (Zimmerman, 1995). Research suggests that community participation can promote socio-political control both for the general population (Budziszewska & Głód, 2021; Christens et al., 2011; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988) and for migrants (Aceros et al., 2021; Becker et al., 2002; Peucker, 2020). Socio-political control—the active process by which migrants perceive control of their socio-political contexts—has been used as the main indicator of psychological empowerment (Christens & Lin, 2014; Christens et al., 2011; Zimmerman, 1990). Paloma et al. (2018) found that migrants' socio-political control increases when they live in a municipality where on average, many people participate in organizations. Psychological empowerment among migrants also refers to critical thinking about the oppressive conditions they suffer in receiving societies and the potential actions that can be performed through community participation to confront inequalities (García-Ramírez et al., 2011). Finally, psychological empowerment among migrants and ethnic minorities has been linked to the development of a strong ethnic identity (Gutierrez, 1988, 1995; Lardier, 2018), which is the sense of peoplehood within a group based on cultural norms and values specific to that ethnic group (Phinney & Ong, 2007).

Acknowledging migrants' disadvantaged position in host societies, we think finding ways to enhance their socio-political control is crucial. When migrants perceive control over their socio-political context, they can better affirm their existence in the face of discrimination and be better equipped to fight for social justice. Indeed, "promoting psychological empowerment among disadvantaged populations [...] is key to realizing the central goal of empowerment-oriented practice" (Christens & Lin, 2014, p. 221). By doing so, scholars would provide migrants with some support in navigating oppressive systems and potentially changing them. Thus, in this study, we aim to provide some evidence about the empowering role of MCBOs and to understand the mechanisms of psychological empowerment among migrants who are members of MCBOs settled in Northern Italy. We consider MCBOs the most suitable context for studying this aim, as the literature suggests they can act as empowering community settings (Maton, 2008). This means that within these organizations, there is a strength-based system where members share values and vision, meaningful relationships where the sense of community is nurtured, inspirational leadership, and many external linkages to continue activities within a changing environment. Moreover, MCBOs often act as mediating actors between migrants and the receiving society (Martinez-Damia et al., 2023).

In the following paragraphs, we introduce the theoretical background of the three dimensions of psychological empowerment: community participation, socio-political control, and critical thinking. We also present the relationship between ethnic identity and these dimensions. In our study, we are interested in understanding these components within specific community settings, that is, MCBOs. Next, we describe our cross-sectional quantitative study with migrants living in Northern Italy and the predictive model of socio-political control obtained. Finally, we discuss the study's main conclusions and implications for community-based research and practice.

## 1.1 | Socio-political control, critical thinking, and community participation

Socio-political control refers to how people think about themselves and includes perceived control, competence, and efficacy regarding their socio-political context. Critical thinking refers to people's understanding of their community and related socio-political issues and the knowledge of how to acquire and use the resources and power needed to achieve the desired goal (Kieffer, 1984; Zimmerman, 1995). It includes power through relationships, political functioning, and shaping ideology (Speer & Peterson, 2000). Finally, community participation is the behavioral mechanism through which the other two dimensions unfold (Holden et al., 2004). According to Peterson et al. (2002), the three components of empowerment "do not necessarily co-vary" (p. 346), suggesting that perhaps they should be studied separately.

Literature on the general population suggested a direct effect of community participation on socio-political control (Itzhaky & York, 2000; Zimmerman, 1990) and that socio-political control is "an outcome or byproduct rather than a precursor to participation" (Christens et al., 2011, p. 343). Speer et al. (2001) found that community residents who participated more scored significantly higher on socio-political control than community residents in both the medium and low-participation clusters. Moreover, Budziszewska and Głód (2021) found that participation can be an empowering experience, as it is a form of feeling agency and collective strength, finding one's voice, and learning new skills. When investigating community participation among migrants and ethnic minorities, scholars reported similar results (Aceros et al., 2021; Lardier et al., 2021; Peucker, 2020). Albeit not focusing specifically on MCBOs, according to Becker et al. (2002), membership in organizations "may be one way to distribute control and influence among those with lower [...] income statuses" (p. 709), such as migrants.

Regarding the relationship between community participation and critical thinking, Speer et al. (2001) found that, among the general population, those who participate at high and medium levels scored significantly higher on understanding power through relationships than those participating at the least. Other scholars reported that community participation brings a deeper understanding of how power is rooted in relationships (e.g., Budziszewska & Głód, 2021) and of overall cognitive empowerment (Petrovčič & Petrič, 2014), especially for people with low income (Speer et al., 2013). Nevertheless, in the case of ethnic minorities and migrants, there are some contrasting results. On the one hand, Peterson et al. (2002) found no significant relationship between community participation and critical thinking. On the other hand, scholars reported that community participation is associated with critical thinking, especially among those who have been involved for longer periods (Christens et al., 2021) both through ethnic identity and a social justice orientation (Lardier et al., 2021). Moreover, some qualitative studies reported that when migrants become involved in organizations, their participation strengthens their social ties and helps them become more politically interested and critical citizens (Aceros et al., 2021; Peucker, 2020).

Finally, regarding the relationship between critical thinking and socio-political control, Speer (2000) noted that "individuals' intellectual understandings of power and social change differ from one's sense of control and efficacy. That is, people may feel empowered without understanding how to act on that feeling to make changes in the conditions of their communities. Likewise, individuals may possess an understanding of the methods required to create social change but lack the sense of personal efficacy necessary to act on this understanding" (p. 59). Moreover, Peterson et al. (2002) highlighted the role of race in critical thinking. Indeed, they found that African Americans had a greater understanding of power through relationships and shaping ideology than Caucasians, so they suggested that "it is possible that, as African Americans have a more realistic perception of the power dynamics in the environment around them, this may negatively affect their emotional empowerment and their feelings of a sense of control over their lives and self-efficacy" (p. 347–348). This means that a more realistic understanding of the socio-political environment may be detrimental to socio-political control. Based on this literature, we used an exploratory approach to investigate the levels of critical thinking among migrant members and nonmembers of MCBOs without having a specific hypothesis regarding the role of critical thinking in the predictive model of socio-political control.

## 1.2 | Psychological empowerment and ethnic identity

Psychological empowerment among migrants and ethnic minorities has been linked to the development of a strong ethnic identity (Gutierrez, 1988, 1995; Lardier, 2018). Ethnic identity is one type of social-group-based identity that concerns self-identification, belongingness, and commitment to one's ethnic group (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Ethnic identity has been proven to be especially important for minority group members. In some interventions, researchers found that the psychological empowerment of minority youth increased when some programs and initiatives offered them opportunities to explore their ethnic identity (Diversi & Mecham, 2005; Hipolito-Delgado & Zion, 2017). Moreover, "individuals who are more immersed in their cultural group are more politicized" (Gutierrez, 1988, p. 11).

A line of inquiry informed of a strong relationship between community participation and ethnic identity (Campbell & McLean, 2002; Jensen, 2008; Marzana et al., 2020), albeit its direction is still being debated. On the one hand, scholars suggested that a strong ethnic identity facilitated ethnic community participation (Fish et al., 2021; Jensen, 2008; Seo & Moon, 2013; Szymanski & Lewis, 2015). On the other hand, participation was found to be predictive of an increase in ethnic identification (Cronin et al., 2012) because it promotes a re-evaluation and a re-claiming of ethnic identities that can be devalued in receiving societies (Marzana et al., 2020; Scandone, 2020). Finally, Park (2019) found a bi-directionality between the two.

In more recent years, the studies by Lardier and colleagues provided evidence of the relationship between ethnic identity, socio-political control, and critical thinking (Lardier et al., 2018, 2019, 2019, 2021; Opara et al., 2020). This corpus of research suggested that minority youth who perceived themselves as having control over their socio-political context also had a better understanding of power dynamics and higher levels of ethnic identity. Moreover, ethnic identity was found to be a mediator between community participation and socio-political control (Lardier, 2018).

Based on the aforementioned research, the present cross-sectional study was carried out with two specific objectives: (a) to analyze the differences in the levels of socio-political control, critical thinking, and ethnic identity among first-generation migrant members of MCBOs and nonmembers; and (b) to build a predictive model of socio-political control among migrant members of MCBOs, to focus on community participation as a predictor, and on critical thinking and ethnic identity as potential constructs involved. While some studies have been conducted on psychological empowerment, the relationship between community participation, socio-political control, critical thinking, and ethnic identity is still an understudied area of research, especially in the migrant population. Moreover, to our knowledge, psychological empowerment among this population has not been empirically studied within MCBOs, and this is the gap that our study intends to fill.

## 2 | METHOD

### 2.1 | Context of the study

In Italy, there are 1149 MCBOs (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, 2021). Most of them are settled in the north of the country, including Liguria, Lombardia, Piemonte, Valle d'Aosta, Emilia-Romagna, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Trentino-Alto Adige, and Veneto. MCBOs in Italy are usually run by volunteers, do not have paid staff, and are funded by member donations. They represent small-medium entities and conduct different activities: social service (e.g., language courses, legal and health assistance), cultural service (e.g., preservation of cultural heritage and traditions through arts), and advocacy (e.g., campaigns for migrants' rights). More information on MCBOs established in Northern Italy can be found in the paper by Martinez-Damia et al. (2023).

The present study is part of a larger project (<https://www.partecipazioneimmigrati.it/>) focused on MCBOs, which aimed to understand how community participation among migrants within these settings can influence both

their subjective well-being and psychological empowerment. In this article, we focus on presenting the results related to the proposed objectives.

## 2.2 | Participants

Out of a total of 285 participants who consented to participate in the study, 239 participants completed the questionnaires. The mean age was 43.45 years (standard deviation [SD] = 12.76, range = 19–75 years). Women represented 56.4% of the sample, and 48.4% of the participants belonged to an MCBO. All participants were from developing countries and were first-generation migrants residing in northern Italy at the time of the study. In terms of region of origin, most participants were from Latin America (42.3%), followed by sub-Saharan Africa (26.0%), eastern Europe (15.8%), Maghreb and Middle East (10.2%), and Asia (5.7%). Regarding the participants' level of education, 9.4% of the sample had no educational background, 3.6% had primary education, 47.8% had secondary education, and 39.2% had higher education. Most participants (77.4%) had been residing in Italy for more than 5 years. Regarding legal status, 34.1% of the participants had Italian nationality, 22.3% had a long-term residence permit, and 17.5% had a residence permit for work. A minority of the participants had international protection and asylum permits (9.2%), family reunion permits (7.9%), did not have valid documentation (5.2%), or study/tourism permit (3.9%). Table 1 shows the sample distribution in the above variables according to MCBO membership.

## 2.3 | Procedure

Ethical approval for the research was previously obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Catholic University of Milan (protocol number: 14-21). The recruitment of MCBOs started with an umbrella organization that was made up of different migration-related organizations. We contacted only migrant-run organizations that were still active and presented the research. A total of 30 MCBOs were involved in identifying members. Moreover, four Italian nonprofit entities—which provide migrants with assistance on work, health, legal documentation, and language—were involved in identifying nonmembers. All organizations collaborated in the study, presenting the research to their members/users, helping them complete the questionnaire, or providing personal contacts of potential participants to the research team. We also used snowball sampling as a complementary selection strategy, asking each participant to forward the questionnaire to a friend.

The study was carried out electronically through a survey manager ([www.qualtrics.com](http://www.qualtrics.com)). The total duration of the test was between 20 and 30 min. The participants had previously signed the consent to participate, which included the study's objective, the possibility of ceasing to participate at any time, and the absence of an economic incentive. Once they agreed to participate, socio-demographic data were collected, and then, the study measures were taken: MCBO membership, socio-political control, critical thinking, and ethnic identity. Later, the measure of community participation was taken only for the subsample composed of MCBO members. Although the predominant language was Italian, the instruments were made available in other languages (i.e., French, English, and Spanish, according to the migrants' origin). Validated scales were sought in each language, and a back translation was conducted with bilingual experts in cases where no adapted version was found.

**TABLE 1** Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample according to membership in a migrant community-based organization.

	Nonmember (n = 142)	Member (n = 124)
Sex	42.3%	45.2%
Male	57.7%	54.8%
Female		
Age	41.3%	14.3%
Young adulthood (18–34)		
Adulthood (35–54)	40.5%	61.0%
Midlife (55–64)	17.0%	20.0%
Old age (over 65)	0.8%	4.8%
Geographical area of origin		
Asia	8.5%	2.4%
Eastern Europe	19.7%	11.4%
Latin America	43.0%	41.5%
Maghreb and Middle East	11.3%	8.9%
Sub-Saharan Africa	17.6%	35.8%
Time in the host country		
Less than 1 year	2.1%	0.8%
1–3 years	12.0%	6.5%
3–5 years	15.5%	7.3%
More than 5 years	70.4%	85.5%
Educational background		
None	12.2%	5.9%
Primary education	5.7%	1.0%
Secondary education	39.8%	57.4%
Higher education	42.3%	35.6%
Legal status		
No valid documentation	5.0%	4.5%
International protection permit	10.5%	7.6%
Family reunion permit	7.3%	8.6%
Study or tourism permit	5.6%	1.9%
Work residence permit	21.0%	13.3%
Long-term residence permit	21.0%	23.8%
Italian citizenship	29.0%	40.0%

## 2.4 | Instruments

### 2.4.1 | Membership

To determine whether participants belonged to an MCBO, we asked, "Do you belong to a migrant organization?" (Yes/No). Adapting Babis' (2016) conceptualization, this question was accompanied by a definition of an MCBO as "an organization that has been founded by migrant citizens and that carries out activities that can involve either other migrant citizens or Italians."

### 2.4.2 | Community participation

For those participants who stated they were members of an MCBO, we administered five closed ad hoc items based on previous literature that highlighted the importance of considering quantity (duration and level of intensity) and quality of participation (subjective perception of being active, personal commitment to the organization, and leadership positions held) (see Holden et al., 2004; Huang, 2019; Lawton et al., 2021; Zimmerman & Rapport, 1988). The questions were: (a) How long have you been part of the organization? (*Less than two years/More than two years*); (b) Do you consider yourself an active member of the organization? (*Yes/No*); (c) Did you contribute to starting this organization? (*Yes/No*); (d) In the last 12 months, have you been a member of the organization's board of directors? (*Yes/No*); and (e) What is your level of active engagement in the organization? (*Low to medium/High*). The score of this indicator ranges from 0 to 5 points, obtained by the proportional sum of each of the five items (score per item: 0–1). The reliability of the scale was  $\alpha = 0.71$ .

### 2.4.3 | Socio-political control

This is evaluated as the Emotional Scale of Empowerment by Miguel et al. (2015), which consists of 17 items rated on a 5 Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). It refers to how people think about themselves and the perceived effectiveness of their abilities (e.g., "I am often a leader in groups"). The total score was obtained by the sum of the scores on each item (range: 17–85). The reliability of the scale in this study was  $\alpha = 0.86$ .

### 2.4.4 | Critical thinking

This is evaluated as the Cognitive Scale of Empowerment by Miguel et al. (2015) and consists of 14 items rated on a 5 Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). It concerns individual perceptions of how power functions in communities (e.g., "To improve my community, it is more effective to work with a group than as an individual"). The total score of the scale was obtained by summing the score of the items (range: 14–70). The reliability of the scale in this study was  $\alpha = 0.84$ .

### 2.4.5 | Ethnic identity

This variable was measured through the Italian (Marzana et al., 2020) and Spanish (Lara & Martinez-Molina, 2016) re-adaptation of Phinney and Ong's (2007) Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure-Revised scale. It consists of two subscales (Exploration and Commitment) and a total of six items rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1

(*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In this assessment, ethnic identity is conceptualized as a process of identity formation as a member of the ethnic community (e.g., "I understand pretty well what my ethnic group membership means to me"). The score was obtained by summing the score of the items (range: 6–30). The reliability of the scale in this study was  $\alpha = 0.93$ .

## 2.5 | Data analysis

SPSS Statistics (version 28) was used for the analyses. First, a matrix of bivariate correlations between socio-political control, critical thinking, community participation, and ethnic identity was analyzed. To meet the first aim, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was tested using Snedecor's  $F$  statistic to identify possible differences between socio-political control, critical thinking, and ethnic identity according to MCBO membership.

To meet the second aim, the subsample composed of MCBO members was considered. A three-value auxiliary variable was created according to the level of critical thinking: low, middle, and high. These three categories were employed to explore the relationship between ethnic identity and socio-political control at every level of critical thinking through a scatter plot. Finally, a path analysis was carried out considering community participation as a predictor and socio-political control as a criterion through PROCESS software (Hayes, 2018). The first model was a mediation model, in which ethnic identity was included as a mediator. The second model was a moderated mediation model, in which, in addition to considering ethnic identity as a mediator, critical thinking was included as a moderator between ethnic identity and socio-political control. The usefulness of both models was compared through the regression coefficients and explained variance results.

## 3 | RESULTS

### 3.1 | Descriptive results

Table 2 shows the correlations between the variables of interest in the study. The results revealed significant associations between community participation and socio-political control ( $p < 0.05$ ) and community participation and ethnic identity ( $p < 0.01$ ). In addition, ethnic identity was associated with socio-political control ( $p < 0.01$ ) and critical thinking ( $p < 0.05$ ). However, community participation was not associated with critical thinking.

**TABLE 2** Bivariate associations between the variables of interest.

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. CP	110	4.59	1.31	-	-	-	-
2. SPC	101	66.14	9.93	0.40**	-	-	-
3. CT	99	54.60	8.93	-0.05	0.38**	-	-
4. EI	110	25.76	3.97	0.34**	0.36**	0.15*	-

Abbreviations: CP, community participation; CT, critical thinking; EI, ethnic identity; SD, standard deviation; SPC, socio-political control.

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .



### 3.2 | Differences according to MCBO membership

One-way ANOVA yielded significant differences in socio-political control, critical thinking, and ethnic identity based on membership in an MCBO (see Table 3). Members had significantly higher means in these variables than nonmembers. These differences were significantly greater concerning ethnic identity and socio-political control ( $p < 0.001$ ) in comparison to critical thinking ( $p < 0.05$ ).

### 3.3 | Predictive model of socio-political control

Figure 1 shows the correlations between ethnic identity and socio-political control in three groups with different levels of critical thinking: *Low Critical Thinking* ( $r = 0.59, p < 0.01$ ), *Medium Critical Thinking* ( $r = 0.37, p < 0.05$ ), and *High Critical Thinking* ( $r = 0.24, p > 0.05$ ). The figure suggests that at different levels of critical thinking, the ethnic identity-socio-political control relationship was distinct. As critical thinking increases, the mean correlation between ethnic identity and socio-political control decreases. Because of the possible interaction effect of critical thinking in the ethnic identity-socio-political control association, critical thinking was considered in the subsequent mediation model.

Finally, to build a predictive model of socio-political control among migrants participating in MCBOs, we present the results of two models (*Model 1: mediation model* and *Model 2: moderated mediation model*). In both models, ethnic identity was included as a mediator. In the moderated mediation model (Model 2), critical thinking was added as a moderator of the relation between ethnic identity and socio-political control. As can be seen in Table 4, the explained variance of the moderated mediation model was significantly higher than that of the mediation model ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.15$ ), and all the coefficients of the moderated mediation model were significant: the association of community participation with ethnic identity ( $b = 0.86, p < 0.01$ ) and with socio-political control ( $b = 2.01, p < 0.001$ ), the association of the mediator ethnic identity with socio-political control ( $b = 3.86, p < 0.001$ ), and critical thinking as a moderator between ethnic identity and socio-political control ( $b = -0.06, p < 0.01$ ).

In this sense, the moderated mediation model (Model 2) showed that as critical thinking tends to higher levels, a negative moderation between ethnic identity (mediator) and socio-political control (criterion) is produced. Finally, Figure 2 displays the results of the coefficients of the moderated mediation model.

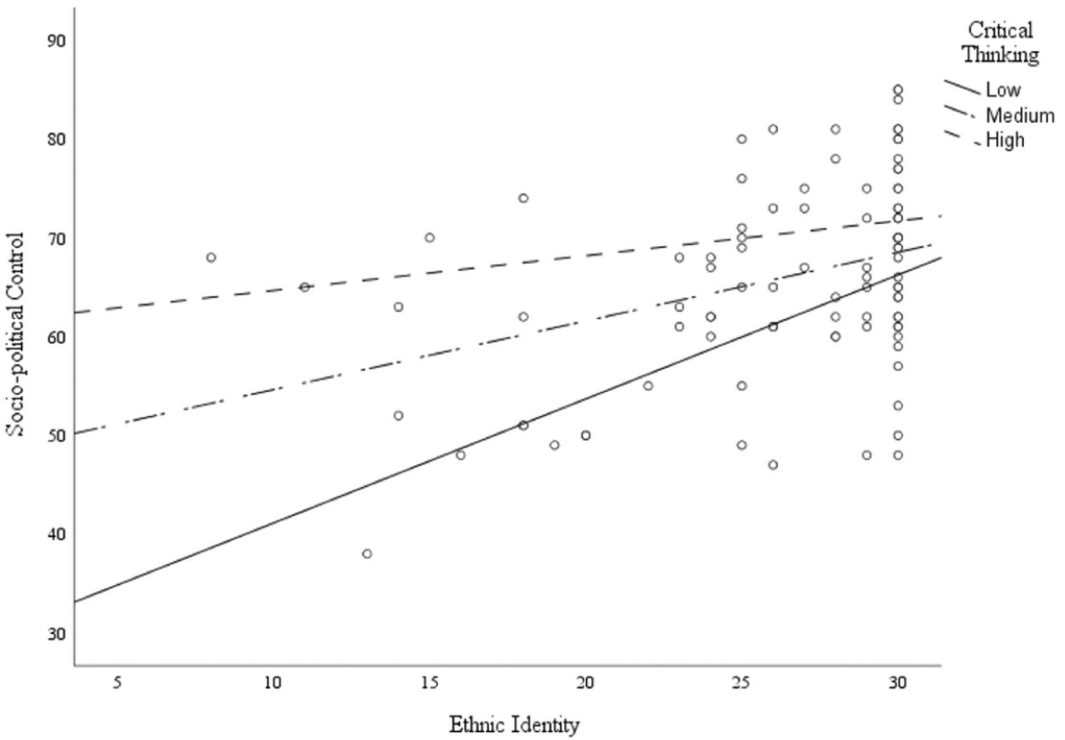
## 4 | DISCUSSION

Understanding the process through which community participation within MCBOs enhances socio-political control among the migrant population is very important to build an empowerment-oriented practice and thus provide migrants with some support to navigate oppressive systems and potentially change them.

**TABLE 3** One-way ANOVA of socio-political control, critical thinking, and ethnic identity according to membership in a migrant community-based organization.

	Nonmember			Member			Significance
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
SPC	137	59.79	10.31	103	65.92	10.64	$F = 21.20, p < 0.001$
CT	139	52.17	8.38	100	54.70	8.69	$F = 5.03, p < 0.05$
EI	143	19.24	4.85	108	22.13	4.15	$F = 24.68, p < 0.001$

Abbreviations: CT, critical thinking; EI, ethnic identity; SPC, socio-political control.



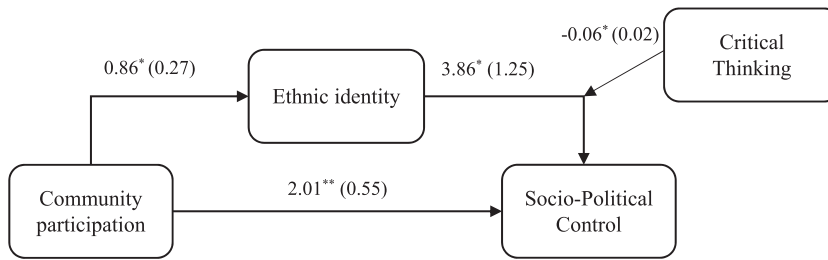
**FIGURE 1** Scatter plot between ethnic identity and socio-political control, considering three groups with different levels of critical thinking (low, medium, and high).

**TABLE 4** Comparison between the results of the mediation model and the moderated mediation model.

Model information						
	Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> (MSE)
Model 1: Mediation	CP → SPC	2.10	0.69	<0.001	[0.91–3.29]	0.22 (80.66)
	CP → EI	0.88	0.25	<0.001	[0.38–1.39]	
	EI → SPC	0.55	0.22	<0.05	[0.11–1.00]	
Model 2: Moderated mediation	CP → SPC	2.01	0.55	<0.001	[0.92–3.10]	0.37 (65.25)
	EI → SPC	3.86	1.25	<0.01	[1.37–6.35]	
	CT → SPC	1.66	0.51	<0.01	[0.64–2.68]	
	EI × CT → SPC	−0.06	0.02	<0.01	[−0.10 to −0.01]	
	CP → EI	0.86	0.27	<0.01	[0.33–1.39]	

Abbreviations: *b*, coefficients; CI, confidence Interval; CP, community participation; CT, critical thinking; EI, ethnic identity; MSE, mean square error; SE, standard deviation; SPC, socio-political control.

Regarding the first objective of the study, the results showed that the means obtained in the dimensions of socio-political control, as well as in ethnic identity, were significantly higher in MCBO members than in nonmembers, as supported by the previous literature (Christens et al., 2021; Gutierrez, 1988; Itzhaky & York, 2000; Marzana et al., 2020; Peucker, 2020; Speer et al., 2001; Zimmerman, 1990). Moreover, we found that migrant



**FIGURE 2** Coefficients for proposed moderated mediation model. \* $p < 0.01$ . \*\* $p < 0.001$ ,  $R^2 = 0.37$  (MSE = 65.25). MSE, mean square error.

members of an MCBO reported higher levels of critical thinking, indicating the relationships found by others both among the general population and ethnic minorities (Budziszewska & Głód, 2021; Christens et al., 2021; Lardier et al., 2021; Petrovčič & Petrič, 2014; Speer et al., 2013). These results suggested that participation in community settings such as MCBOs—where migrants can find a group of people with whom they can share the hardships of migration, as well as those of living in the new society, and with whom they can remember their traditions and culture—can be truly empowering (Maton, 2008).

According to the study's second objective, a moderated mediation model was proposed as the preferred model to explain socio-political control. Within this model, we found that community participation within MCBOs promotes socio-political control both directly and indirectly through ethnic identity. This means that the more migrants engage in their MCBO, the more their socio-political control increases, and this also occurs in part because community participation is associated with migrants' ethnic identity, which acts as a mediator (Lardier, 2018). With these findings, we expanded the literature that supports that participation may bring a re-evaluation and re-claiming of ethnic exploration and commitment (Cronin et al., 2012; Marzana et al., 2020; Scandone, 2020). Ethnic identity is shown to be an essential tool that MCBOs should guarantee and honor. Indeed, when community participation promotes ethnic expression, it operates as a strategy of recognition and respect for human diversity, especially in host countries—such as Italy—that have a hard time considering themselves as a multicultural and plural society and instead foster ethnocentric and assimilative policies (Allievi, 2010). Moreover, our finding about the strong link between ethnic identity and socio-political control is in line with the study by Gutierrez (1988), who found that individuals who are more immersed in their cultural group engage in the process of empowerment more easily and are more politicized. All this suggests that ethnic identity is a key variable to work on to promote socio-political control and social justice for the migrant population in host societies.

In addition, when adding the critical thinking moderator, the model provided incremental explained variance compared with the mediation model ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.15$ ). The role of critical thinking as a negative moderator of the relationship between ethnic identity and socio-political control is a novel result. This means that when migrants are highly aware of their socio-political environment and power dynamics, the positive effect of ethnic identity on socio-political control decreases. In contrast, when migrants have lower awareness of their socio-political environment, the positive effect of ethnic identity on socio-political control increases. These results lead to several considerations.

First, they provide empirical support for the thesis of Peterson et al. (2002) that “cognitive empowerment is a construct entirely distinct from emotional and behavioral empowerment rather than a subset of the larger construct” (p. 346). Second, the moderation effect suggests that a more realistic understanding of the socio-political environment may be detrimental to socio-political control among the migrant population. This could be because of the oppressive conditions that migrants often face in receiving societies, which may seem impossible to change once they acquire critical thinking. We support this interpretation, considering two different bases. First, Gutierrez (1995) found that ethnic consciousness (meaning the understanding of the differential status and power of ethnic

groups in society) can affect one's thinking about specific problems and strategies for change. Second, Peterson et al. (2002) found that a more realistic perception of power dynamics among minorities negatively affects their feelings of a sense of control. All this means that being critical of the power and the socio-political context leads to the risk of powerlessness instead of control among migrants.

This study is not without limitations. First, as we adopted a correlational design, we cannot make causal inferences. Therefore, community participation might also be promoted by ethnic identity (Fish et al., 2021; Jensen, 2008; Seo & Moon, 2013) and socio-political control (Chan & Mak, 2020). Second, the sample was not representative of the migrant population in Italy because it was limited to the north of the country, was not chosen randomly, and was mostly made up of long-term migrants. We tried to overcome the problem of representativeness by building trust before sampling with different communities (MCBOs and Italian nonprofit entities) and using some community leaders to present the research to the most possibly diverse sample. Nevertheless, future studies can explore psychological empowerment among migrants living in other geographical areas who have spent less time in the receiving countries. Third, we did not consider gender differences, albeit some authors reported that women carry out community activism in specific ways (Hatzidimitriadou & Çakir, 2009). Future research should investigate possible differences between migrant men and women participating in MCBOs. Fourth, we did not delve deeper into the ethnic identity construct to discern its potentially different effects on the dimensions of empowerment. We believe it would be worthwhile to study whether our presented model would work with different ethnic groups. In this sense, studies such as the one presented by Gutierrez (1988) can provide a basis for future studies. This author suggested that "immigrant Chicanos may develop a sense of ethnic identity more readily than native-born Chicanos. Therefore, they engage in the process of empowerment more easily" (p. 12). Finally, our study did not consider sense of community, even though previous research found a link between sense of community, critical thinking, and socio-political control (Speer, 2000). Specifically, in the case of minorities, sense of community has been identified as a significant predictor of empowerment (Lardier et al., 2021). Based on this and our results, we suggest that sense of community may function as a buffer among migrants with high levels of critical thinking. Speer (2000) stated that "sense of community might be a critical phenomenon at play in the development of psychological empowerment, at least in participatory community contexts" (p. 59). In this regard, the most recent conceptualization of empowerment recognizes it as a process contingent on interpersonal relationships (Christens, 2012) because transformative power is developed and exercised through relationships. Future studies could investigate whether this mechanism is really at play.

The moderated mediation model represents meaningful progress both at a theoretical and practical level within the psychological empowerment literature and interventions. Regarding the former, we provide data to underline how the three dimensions of psychological empowerment do not always co-vary among migrants. Moreover, we provide more evidence that MCBOs are empowering community settings (Maton, 2008), as migrants who participate in them have higher levels of socio-political control, critical thinking, and ethnic identity. Finally, we expand the knowledge regarding the mechanisms through which community participation is connected to socio-political control, identifying the mediation role of ethnic identity and the moderator role of critical thinking.

At a practical level, we suggest that host societies should support the community participation of migrants within MCBOs to avoid the rise of powerlessness among them. It is also crucial to create spaces where migrants can honor their heritage with fellow compatriots or share their traditions with people from different countries, as this could support their socio-political control. Finally, because socio-political control differs according to the different levels of critical thinking, such differences should be taken into account when planning interventions among the migrant population. For example, a way to decrease the negative effect of critical thinking on migrants with high levels of it could be to narrate successful histories of social improvements that occurred in similar contexts. This could create a more hopeful expectation for the future and decrease the negative impact of critical thinking. Another intervention could be training migrants as mentors for new arrivals, as this has been found to promote their socio-political control (Paloma et al., 2020).

The present study provides some evidence on the empowering role of MCBOs settled in Northern Italy and the fact that participation in them can promote socio-political control among migrants. Specifically, we argue that when migrants engage in activities together with others from the same countries they nurture their ethnic identity, which in turn is associated with an increased perception of being able to control the socio-political contexts in which migrants live. However, it is essential for community-based actions aimed at fighting for social justice to take into account that a very critical understanding of the socio-political environment can be detrimental to migrants' sense of being able to transform their challenging host environment.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

All the authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## PEER REVIEW

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