I love this game
The interplay between experience and background in role-playing simulations: insights from MUN participants in Italy and the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

1 In recent years a growing body of literature has widely investigated the impact of role-play simulations in teaching politics and international relations. While scholars agree that participating in simulations is helpful for the students in developing their skills, the evidence about benefits is more mixed. Moreover, the question if all students - regardless of their demographic or academic background - benefit similarly from simulations, remains largely unanswered. This article, based on a cross-national survey submitted to students from Italy and the Netherlands who have participated in the Model United Nations (MUN), provides an innovative contribution to the current literature by looking at views and opinions of students coming from different educational contexts. Our empirical results suggest that students perceive that MUN increases their skills regardless of their academic and socio-demographic background. The quantitative analysis, based on OLS regression models, reveals that the individual students' background does not influence their perceived benefit, nor their enjoyment of the experience. MUNs appear to be educational as well as fun for all students, regardless of their age, gender, field of study, seniority, and academic homeland.

INTRODUCTION

Model United Nations conferences are not just useful and fun (if they ever were). For participants, the conferences are "a full-fledged sport, with all the competitiveness and rowdiness that suggests" (Parrin, 2013). Today's major conferences attract thousands of participants: the largest university-level Model United Nations [2] conference – the National Model United Nations (MUN) – attracted over 6,300 students in 2019 alone (National Model UN, 2019). They run multi-million-dollar budgets (National MUN's annual budget is over 3.3 million USD), and attract dozens of sponsors. On their part, teachers laud it as a useful illustration of how international relations work (McIntosh, 2001).

The rising popularity of the Model United Nations among the students - and of simulations among the teachers - has not been matched by the sufficient scholarly attention to the usefulness of such simulations for students. While scholars agree that the participation in simulations is helpful for the students in developing their skills, the evidence about benefits is more mixed, especially when it comes to knowledge acquisition (Butcher 2012, Raymond 2010, Duchatelet 2018). Yet the scholarship has been plagued by the dearth of empirical scholarship and the underspecified relationship between individual characteristics of students (such as age and background) and the achieved outcomes. These shortcomings are not particular to the study of the Model United Nations, but are generally applicable to the scholarship on simulations in political science education.

In this article, we conduct one of the first cross-national studies amongst EU countries on the effects of the participation in the Model UN. We survey participants in Model UN from Italy and the Netherlands to study their perceptions of the Model UN as well as the perceived educational impact. Our results suggest that students perceive that their MUN participation increases their skills that they enjoy their participation in the Model UN *regardless* of their academic and socio-demographic background. These results, overall, show that students' national or educational background does not diminish their enjoyment of the experience.

The remainder of the article continues as follows. In the second section, we review the scholarship on simulations in political science pedagogy. The third section introduces the concept of MUN while the fourth describes the hypotheses guiding our analyses, presenting the dataset. The fifth section illustrates the results of our analyses before the conclusion.

ARTICLE'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE LITERATURE ON ROLE-PLAYING SIMULATIONS

In recent years a growing body of literature "has emerged surrounding the use of role-play simulations and games as a tool for political science pedagogy" (Toomey et

al 2019, 2).[1] The scholarly debate (Lantis 1998; McIntosh 2001; Asal 2005; Giovanello et al. 2013; Duchatelet et al 2018; Davesa and Piros 2019) has widely investigated features and consequences of role-play simulations in teaching politics.

The political science community "has generally begun to accept that simulations, if used correctly, can be effective tools in the classroom" (Asal and Kratoville 2013, 3 132).[2] Simulations "are very much appreciated by teachers and students because of the degree of 'realworld' experience they provide" (Duchatelet et al 2018, 602). In fact, simulations in international relations (IR) and other disciplines aim at "bringing students into the learning process and engaging their curiosity" (Crossley-Frolick 2010, 185), putting learning into practice by revealing the "tremendous complexities of the international system" (Starkey et al. 2015, 154).[3] By making students as decision-makers in the role of foreign governments or international diplomats, the role-play simulations recreate complex domestic and international political processes (Shannon 2019; Krain and Lantis 2006), becoming "an effective way to engage students in understanding the politics of international negotiations" (Orr and Buhr 2019, 3).

For all these reasons there is a "burgeoning literature acknowledging the potential of classroom simulations and role-playing exercises to promote active learning" (Davesa and Piros 2019, 536). Several studies[4] have investigated if, and to what extent, role-playing simulations provide benefits to students. For instance, Youde (2008) stresses how "active learning techniques like in-class simulations [...] encourage critical thinking in a fun, less formal manner than a traditional class lecture" (2008, 348). Relatedly, Taylor (2013) emphasized how simulations develop critical thinking skills, by fostering exercises in problem-definition and problem-solving, allowing for competing perspectives.[5] For Ehralnder and Boylan, simulations "bridge theory and practice together, improving learning outcomes" (2017, 5). Simulations seem to have positive effects for stimulating also students' interest and satisfaction about the courses (Weidenfeld and Fernandez 2017, Toomey et al 2019). Shannon (2019) illustrates how role-play simulations may foster even

1. For a clear distinction between simulations, role-plays, and games see: Duchatelet et al (2018). In line with the authors, "because students incorporate the role of a specific actor in a predefined situation, we define such [*as the Model United Nations - MUN*] simulations as role-play simulations" (2018, 602).
2. For a recent critical perspective on the still limited use of simulations in classroom, see: Kollars and Rosen (2016).
3. Scholars have also started to pay attention to students' attitudes and perceptions of teaching methods *before* and *after* simulations (Giovannello et al. 2013; Pettering et al. 2013, X and Y 2018), investigating how their views change across time.
4. For a broad review of the literature on simulations and IR, see, among others: Lantis (1998); Shellman and Turan (2006); Ripley et al. (2009), Brunazzo and Settembri (2012), Giovanello et al. (2013); Ehralnder and Boylan (2017), Y et al. (2019).
5. For a definition of critical thinking see Bok (2006). It is worth noticing how the improvement of students' critical thinking is one of the main goals of the Model United Nations. See: https://www.nmun.org

cross-national and cross-cultural understanding, contributing to change students' attitudes toward other countries. Finally, Crossley-Frolick (2010) emphasizes how simulations contribute to enhance also communication skills. On the whole, Glasgow highlights the widespread consensus on the value of simulation "in promotion of knowledge or skill acquisition" (2014, 526).

However, despite such extensive agreement on the benefits of simulations, some studies still questioning them, highlighting mixed results, especially regarding knowledge acquisition (Butcher 2012). For instance, Raymond (2010) reveals that students who participated in a simulation like the Model United Nations (MUN) did not perform better than those that did not in an IR course. Duchatelet et al affirm 4 that research results "are inconclusive regarding simulations' benefits" (2018, 602). Thus, scholars are still attempting to assess, with different methods and approaches, the supposed benefits of simulations and role-playing.

Relatedly, two main elements required to be better addressed by the literature: the types of empirical analyses on the effects of simulations and the relationship between the students' characteristics and the learning outcomes.[6]

First, the scholarly debate has generally adopted descriptive approaches to pedagogical innovations, without large empirical evidence on the effectiveness of simulation on student learning. Thus, "political science curricula demand more systematic knowledge about the effects of simulations on students' learning outcomes" (Duchatelet et al 2018, 602). Asal and Kratoville highlight the need for a "standardized, empirically tested baseline" (2013, 132) for evaluation *properly* the effects of simulations. For Baranowski and Weir, "the discipline needs to conduct a more rigorous assessment of learning outcomes to move beyond the 'Show and Tell' approach to evaluating simulations" (2015, 391).

Despite recent attempts[7] to address such gaps, most articles are generally based on specific case studies. In other words, the literature "that empirically tests the impact of simulations is still scarce and rather underdeveloped [while] many studies remain descriptive and anecdotal" (Duchatelet et al 2018, 602). From a broader perspective, Wunische illustrates also the methodological problems related to the ways through which the literature assesses the simulation, stressing how "many of the attempts to test the empirical results of simulations are insufficient and weak" (2019, 38). On the whole, Shannon has recently summarized the "many calls for

6. Duchatelet et al provide a useful review of the definitions of "learning outcomes" provided by education research. The authors mainly distinguish among cognitive outcomes (which are viewed as the "results of those thinking activities that directly lead to learning in terms of knowledge, understanding, skills and so on"), affective outcomes (which are defined as the "results of feelings that arise during learning", such as motivation), and finally regulative learning outcomes (which attain at "the ability to monitor the learning process", even by adjusting it to achieve specific goals) of a simulation (Duchatelet et al 2018, 603-604). On this point see also Vermunt and Vermetten (2004)
7. For an updated review of such attempts see: Davesa and Piros (2019) and Lohmann (2019).

'more systematic assessments of the effectiveness' of innovative education tools (2019, 5).

The existing article aims to address those calls, contributing to collect empirical evidence on role-play simulations. It provides an innovative contribution to the current literature by looking (thanks to specific surveys, *infra*) at views and opinions of students who have participated at the Model United Nations, coming from two different educational contexts: Italy and the Netherlands.

This allows also tackling the second element that deserves specific attention by the literature: the relationship between specific students' features (academic background, age, etc.) and the self-perceived effects of simulation. Indeed, apart from the overall debate on the benefits of active learning activities, few studies empirically investigate in detail if students with different demographic or academic backgrounds all benefit similarly from simulations. For instance, Duchatelet et al (2018) take into account student diversity revealing - on the one hand - that EU-students and US-students differ in their amount of interest and motivation, and – on the 5 other hand – how diverse learning outcomes depending on years of attendance in higher education. Slightly differently, Jones and Bursens have found only "mixed support" (2015, 263) for the claim that younger students (measured by age and year in school) will show greater gains in learning after simulation. More recently, also Davesa and Piros (2019) highlight dissimilar results between the perceptions by EU and non-EU students on their acquisition of learning outcomes.

All the above-mentioned authors encourage further studies on the relationship between heterogeneous groups of students - in terms of socio-demographic factors (e.g., age, academic and cultural background, etc.) – and different (or similar) learning outcomes and students' perceptions. While, as stated, a comparison between EU and non-EU students[8] has been recently made, an "intra-EU" analysis is still limited or even absent in the literature. By comparing students coming from different European countries we can fill this gap, examining how participants to simulations appreciate and benefit similarly (or not) from their involvement in role-playing activities, also investigating from a cross-national perspective issues such as the linguistic skills in role-playing simulation. Before presenting our research design in detail, the following section briefly describes the MUN experience.

THE MODEL UNITED NATIONS AS A ROLE-PLAYING SIMULATION

As stated above, "current research struggles to illuminate significant learning outcomes of role-play simulations, such Model United Nations" (Duchatelet et al 2018, 601). Indeed, the literature on role-playing simulation in IR has extensively

8. It is worth noticing how the literature on the use of simulations tends to be focused on Western classrooms. Some recent exceptions are Meschoulam et al (2019) and Toomey et al (2019).

examined the MUN. According to Obendorf and Randerson, "for IR educators, an assessed version of the MUN simulation provides an innovative way of both delivering disciplinary content and entrenching key student competencies" (2013, 361). The MUN is nowadays "a global phenomenon, delivered at almost all levels of teaching and learning, from primary and secondary schools and colleges through to undergraduate and postgraduate university settings" (Obendorf and Randerson 2013, 351). The first MUN simulation occurred in 1947. It is estimated that "there are more than 400 conferences annually in 35 countries" and that "more than 400,000 middle school, high school, and college / university students participate annually worldwide" (Crossley-Frolick 2010, 186). Model United Nations provides a realistic engagement in international politics, especially thanks to role play-based identification (McIntosh 2001; Taylor 2013). In fact, "students are assigned countries and topics to prepare for in a series of conference competitions, culminating in the National Model UN (NMUN) in New York in the spring" (Shannon 2019, 9). In other words, as well described by Obendorf and Randerson "conference participants are allocated specific roles as representatives of the UN member states or UN observer states/bodies. After researching their allocated countries, identifying key transnational and diplomatic issues of concern for that country and preparing policy documents and draft 6 resolutions, students are taught the rules of parliamentary-style debating procedure and familiarised with the practices of diplomacy and public speaking. They then participate in a simulation of the work of existing UN bodies" (2013, 351). Therefore, "the MUN requires several skills: from negotiation, communication, research, report writing to the capacity to interact with representatives of other countries and culture" (Y et al 2019).

The article aims to address if and how students from the Italian and the Dutch educational systems - despite diverse backgrounds and characteristics - appreciate and benefit similarly (or not) from their involvement in Model United Nations.

METHODS: ORIGINAL DATASET, RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESES

The data employed in this article comes from a survey submitted to bachelor and master students who in 2019 participated in three different Model United Nations: MUN Rome, MUN New York and WorldMUN (Harvard). The students attending the first two MUNs were enrolled in several universities located in Italy, while those participating in the latter two were enrolled in universities in the Netherlands.

This survey, prepared by the authors, investigates three main areas. The first one is represented by student's viewpoints on selected IR topics, such the prominence of conflict or cooperation in IR and of diplomacy or security means; the importance of government's investments in welfare state, security and defence, foreign policy, or development aid; the role played in IR by the International Organisations, the

European Union, and women. These viewpoints have been asked *before* and *after* the simulation. The second and the third areas of analysis are based on a questionnaire submitted *after* the simulation. In particular, the second set of questions examines students' attitudes towards the simulation as a learning method, i.e. if students consider MUN participation as a useful and fun experience, and whether they would suggest other students to take part to it in the future. The third part of the questionnaire aims at evaluating the MUN's impact on students' skills. This estimation is based on students' self-perception: students are asked to evaluate whether the participation in the MUN has increased (and to what extent) their general knowledge, negotiation skills, English proficiency, teamworking ability, literacy skills, critical thinking and self-confidence. In other terms, we measure improvement through the students' self-perception, rather than testing it through specific quizzes – well aware of the risk of self-evaluation biases deriving from this approach (see Dunning and Kruger 1999). However, as these authors explain, such biases seem to be particularly prominent in lowest quartiles students, arguably not the same sample of our MUNers. In addition to this, self-perception represents the most economical approach for the survey design. In other words, it seems reasonable – for an exploratory study such as the current one – to rely on skills improvement perception as a proxy for skills improvement. Finally, the survey collects information on some basic 7 socio-demographic characteristics and academic background of the students.[9] For the sake of this article, our analysis relies mostly on the second and the third areas of the survey, i.e. the ex-post evaluation by students on the MUN and the impact the MUN has had on students' personal skills.

In fact, recalling the scarcity of empirical evidence on 'innovative teaching' (Duchatelet et al 2018, Wunische 2019), our article aims at providing a relevant contribution to the current literature. Indeed, the involvement of students enrolled in both Italian and Dutch universities represents an important element of innovation. Practically, the article answers the following research question.

Do students - regardless of their demographic or academic background - benefit similarly from role-playing simulation?

Relying on the above-mentioned literature that illustrates how the whole MUN experience is innovative and beneficial for the students, our hypotheses are the following:

H1a: Students appreciate the simulation and its contents, by considering it useful, fun and suggesting the participation to other students.

9. The authors are available to provide additional information on the survey upon requests.

H1b: Students appreciate similarly the simulation and its contents, regardless their country of origin (Italy or the Netherlands), academic background (Political Science and International Relations or others), years of academic enrollment (Bachelor or Master), age, and gender.
H2a: Students benefit from the simulation in terms of perceived improvement of skills.
H2b: Students benefit similarly from the simulation in terms of perceived improvement of skills, regardless of the educational system they belong to (Italian or Dutch), academic background (Political Science and International Relations or others), years of enrollment (Bachelor or Master), age, and gender.

The article answers the RQ and assesses our hypotheses by looking at the questions on the second and the third part of our survey, i.e. where it illustrates the students' views about the MUN (fun/useful experience, etc.) and the perceived improvement of skills (general knowledge, negotiation, English proficiency, teamworking skills, etc.).

In the survey, the three questions on students' views on the MUN are all structured in the same way, on a classical 1 to 5 Likert-type scale. Practically, to the question whether 'Participating to the Model United Nations has been a useful/fun experience' or "I would suggest to other students to participate to the Model United Nations" students can answer with 1, which stands for 'Strongly agree', 2 for 'Somewhat agree, 3 for 'Neither agree nor disagree', 4 for 'Somewhat disagree', and 5 for 'Strongly disagree'. Therefore, in all these nine items, results 8 lower than 3 capture a positive evaluation by the students, and vice-versa, results higher than 3 capture a negative evaluation.

A similar kind of answering is used for the questions regarding students' self-evaluation on their skills' improvement. In details, to the questions 'The Model United Nations has improved my general knowledge / negotiation skills / English proficiency / teamworking ability / literacy skills / self-confidence', students can answer with a similar 1-5 points scale of answer.

Fig. 1 Sample distribution, academic, and socio-demographic characteristics

The sample can be divided according to the academic and socio-demographic characteristics (Italy or the Netherlands, enrolment in Political Science and International Relations or in other curricula, Bachelor or Master, age, and gender), which we employ as the independent variables for our analysis. Figure 1 shows the distribution of these characteristics.

First of all, our data are very well distributed for country of origin, being the sample equally divided between students enrolled in Italy as well as in the Netherlands. A similar equilibrium can be registered for the academic background of our students: those enrolled in political science or international relations courses are only lightly more than half of the sample. The situation is more unbalanced regarding seniority and gender of our student sample. In fact, these MUNs seem 9 to be overwhelmingly preferred by more junior participants, as the bachelor students represent around the 80% of all the participants; similarly, for what concerns gender, we observe that MUN students are largely women, exactly ¾ of all participants. A more complex distribution is that based on students' age, as shown in figure 2.

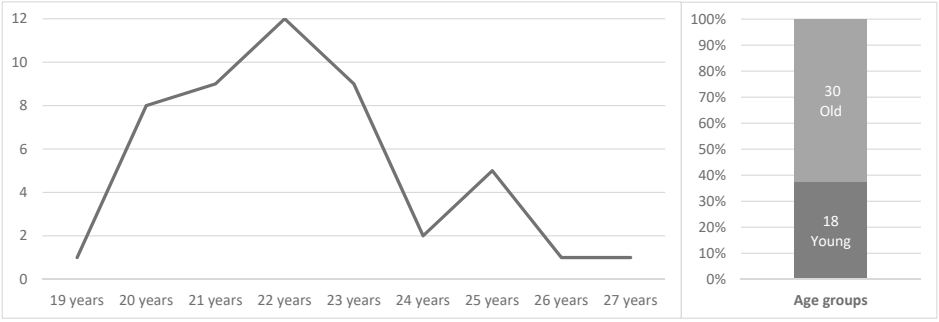

Fig. 2 Sample distribution, age, and age-groups

The youngest participant is 19 years-old while the oldest is 27; the mode is 22 years-old. In order to have the most balanced variance between a group of older students and another group of youngers, we have considered all those students older or equal to 21 years-old as the components of the younger group, while we have examined all those older or equal to 22 years-old as the older ones. The overall distribution between the two groups is quite well balanced.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS: ASSESSING MUN'S EVALUATION BY STUDENTS' BACKGROUND

The two tables below show how students' evaluation of the MUN's influence on their skills (Table 1) as well as their feedback (Table 2) are affected by a number of academic and socio-demographic characteristics we have collected in our

questionnaire. These are: country, background, academic seniority, age group, and gender. In order to assess the effects of these sub-group characteristics, we run a number of OLS regressions on our sample. Each observation corresponds to a student (N = 48); in 10 each of the nine models below, the dependent variable (DV) is the individual answer to the question regarding students' perceived benefit to skills (models 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 in Table 1) and feedbacks on the project (models 1, 2, 3 in Table 2). The independent variables (IVs) are dichotomous variables capturing in which country the student has experienced the MUN (0 = Italy, 1 = Netherlands), the background of study he or she is enrolled in (0 = Political Science, International relations or Public Administration[10], 1 = Other), their academic seniority (0 = Bachelor, 1 = Masters), age group (0 = aged between 18 and 21, 1 = over 21 years old) and gender (0 = female, 1 = male). In line with the hypotheses outlined in the previous paragraph, our expectations are that the answers to these questions are significantly skewed to the positive side of the Likert-type scale (*H1a*, *H2b*) and that none of the IVs are statistically significant, allowing for the generalization of the above result for the whole sample of students, regardless of their characteristics (*H1b*, *H2b*).

Given the limited number of observations, and to give additional robustness to our analysis, we do not limit ourselves to considering the default confidence intervals of 95%, 99% and 99.9% (usually indicated, respectively, by the asterisks *, ** 11 and ***), but also take into account coefficients statistically significant at 90% confidence interval (identified in the tables below by the symbol †).

As it can be seen from Table 1, the constants, representing the mean value of the given answer, confirm that the MUN has contributed very positively to students' perception of the skills they gained[11]: in all six cases, values are lower than 3 to a statistically significant extent. In more details, we see that students consider 'general knowledge' as having been boosted the most, consistently to the results of a similar survey (see Y et al. 2019), followed closely by negotiation skills (approximately 1.4 and 1.5, respectively). This experience is also seen as beneficial to an improvement of teamwork and self-confidence (both around 1.5) and literacy skills (1.6). Finally, English proficiency is the "least" improved of all six items (2.0); however, as already mentioned, this value too is significant to a statistical extent, as it can be easily seen by adding and subtracting two times the standard errors and noting that the results remain way below the central value 3 in our 1 to 5 Likert-type scale. Therefore, *H1a* is fully confirmed: in line with our expectations, students consider

10. The ratio behind grouping students is the following: students who are enrolled in courses that have in their curricula subjects and exams related to the themes tackled in the simulation (namely Political Science, International Relations and Public Administration) and students who are enrolled in courses that do not present such subjects and exams.
11. As explained in the previous paragraph, these variables refer to the students' self-perception of skills improvement, with a risk – albeit minimal, considering the students of our sample – of self-evaluation biases (Dunning and Kruger 1999).

Table 1. Students' perceived benefits to skills

	(1) knowledge	(2) negotiation	(3) English	(4) teamwork	(5) literacy	(6) self-conf.
country	-0.198	-0.218	-0.0174	-0.117	0.165	-0.586**
	(0.227)	(0.235)	(0.384)	(0.262)	(0.290)	(0.178)
background	0.279	0.169	-0.203	0.305	0.460	0.232
	(0.224)	(0.231)	(0.379)	(0.258)	(0.286)	(0.175)
seniority	-0.252	-0.102	-0.0519	0.0621	-0.318	0.479*
	(0.295)	(0.304)	(0.498)	(0.340)	(0.376)	(0.230)
age_group	-0.180	-0.0559	0.0891	-0.153	0.00516	-0.0271
	(0.238)	(0.245)	(0.401)	(0.274)	(0.303)	(0.186)
gender	0.247	0.470†	0.228	0.292	0.473	0.387†
	(0.255)	(0.263)	(0.431)	(0.294)	(0.325)	(0.200)
_cons	1.408***	1.491***	2.062***	1.574***	1.631***	1.548***
	(0.241)	(0.248)	(0.407)	(0.278)	(0.307)	(0.188)
r^2	0.122	0.114	0.0170	0.0709	0.0965	0.395
χ^2						
F	1.168	1.079	0.145	0.641	0.897	5.493
N	48	48	48	48	48	48

Standard errors in parentheses
† $p<0.1$, * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$

the MUN experience as 'increasing' all their personal skills, especially concerning knowledge and negotiation skills.

Turning our attention to the effects of the IVs capturing the academic and socio-demographic characteristics of our sample, we see that two variables (background and age group) are in no case statistically significant across our six models. This means that, from a statistical point of view, being under or over 21, and being enrolled in a course with or without MUN-related subjects, have no significant effect in improving our set of skills. In other words, all students benefit similarly from the MUN, no matter how old they are or their academic background. Country and seniority have similarly no statistically significant effects anywhere, except in model 6. Here, students who have participated to the Dutch MUN tend to perceive a substantially higher improvement in self-confidence and leadership in respect to their Italian counterparts (with 99% C.I.), and bachelor students tend to perceive such improvement more than their master colleagues (with 95% C.I.). While the second effect can be intuitively explained – it is just reasonable that "junior" students are more likely to perceive an improvement in this particular skill – the first effect is less straightforward. As for gender, the results are statistically significant at 90% level only for model 2 (DV: negotiation) and again for model 6, in both cases with positive coefficient, meaning that females tend to perceive this experience as more improving their negotiation and self-confidence/leadership in respect to their male colleagues. On overall, however, our hypothesis *H1b* can be considered

Table 2. Students' feedback on the project

	(1) suggest	(2) fun	(3) useful
country	-0.143	-0.142	-0.255
	(0.301)	(0.253)	(0.190)
background	0.279	0.574*	0.281
	(0.297)	(0.250)	(0.187)
seniority	-0.336	-0.217	-0.160
	(0.390)	(0.328)	(0.246)
age_group	-0.245	-0.0655	-0.133
	(0.315)	(0.266)	(0.199)
gender	0.316	-0.136	0.347
	(0.338)	(0.284)	(0.213)
_cons	1.483***	1.363***	1.257***
	(0.319)	(0.267)	(0.201)
r^2	0.0846	0.175	0.182
χ^2			
F	0.777	1.742	1.868
N	48	47	48

Standard errors in parentheses
† $p<0.1$, * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$

almost completely confirmed: the perceived improvement of the set of skills we have identified is, in general, independent of the academic and socio-demographic background, with very few[12] statistically significant exceptions.

12 Combining together *H1a* and *H1b*, students perceive the MUN as an experience that improves their entire set of perceived skills, and this improvement occurs regardless of their academic and socio-demographic background. In other words, all students benefit similarly from the innovation represented by a learning tool such as the MUN simulation.

As table 2 shows, students also offered a strong positive feedback on the project, as revealed by the high scores received for the statements 'I would suggest other students to participate to the MUN' and 'MUN is a fun/useful experience'. In sum, students would suggest it (1.5), consider it fun (1.4) and useful (1.3). In all three cases, the constants are statistically significant with 99.9% C.I., meaning that these values are lower than the median value 3 to a statistical extent and not as a result of random distribution. *H2a*, therefore, is fully confirmed.

As for the validation of the sub-hypothesis *H2b*, country, seniority, age group and gender are consistently not statistically significant in any of the three models.

12. If we consider the thirty coefficients identified by our five IVs in six models (6*5=30), it is fair to claim that only four statistically significant effects (of which, two at 90%, one at 95% and one at 99%) are not enough to falsify our hypothesis *H1b*.

Therefore, we can claim that all students, *no matter* the country where they have experienced the MUN, their seniority, age or gender, provide a positive feedback to this experience. The only statistically significant IV is background in model two (DV: fun), with a 95% C.I. and positive coefficient. This means that students with curricula closer to the themes addressed in the MUN tend to perceive the whole experience as more fun than their counterparts who are enrolled in other courses. This was not expected in any of our hypotheses, yet it is not counter-intuitive, and does not change the general picture. Indeed, we can claim that the overwhelming majority of students, regardless of their academic and socio-demographic background, generally give an extremely positive feedback of the MUN experience. Therefore, also *H2b* can be considered confirmed.

CONCLUSIONS

This article is set out to study whether all students, regardless of their demographic or academic background, benefit similarly from the role-playing simulations, using the case of MUNs. Our research stems from the work on the pedagogical usefulness of simulations in political science education, which has been historically found to be lacking empirical data and the relationship between student characteristics and the outcomes. In our analysis, based on a cross-national study of students from Italy and the Netherlands, we demonstrate that the individual students' background does not influence their perceived benefit, nor their enjoyment of the experience. In short, MUNs are perceived to be educational as well as fun for students regardless of what field they are, how old they are, and which country they come from. Save for a few exceptions, we demonstrate that, regardless of their background, students perceive their skills to be improved after participating in a MUN. Similarly, students consider the MUN experience fun, useful, and worthy of recommendation to others. It is worth stressing again that these findings are based on students' self-evaluation rather that notion-based tests.

Our article addresses some of the concerns that have existed in the literature about the broad usefulness of the simulations in political science in general, and of 13 the Model United Nations in particular (Butcher 2012, Raymond 2010, Duchatelet 2018). The article attempts to provide the first step towards a richer and more empirically-based analysis of participation in simulations in political science. Future researchers could expand comparative research to multiple countries, time-series analysis comparing pre- and post-treatment enjoyment, as well as more fine-grained analysis of the effect of particular aspects of simulations. Moreover, different and more objective approaches to measuring skills improvement, not related to students' self-perception, could be envisaged in future research designs. This would prove meaningful also as a 'robustness check' on the reliability of self-assessment survey design. Future scholarship might also begin to embed the research on Model

United Nations with work on broader pedagogy and activating methods in political science education. Only then we will see whether the fun and games at the Model UN actually improve the desired learning outcomes better than alternatives.

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