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Is Intergroup Contact Desired by Migrants? The Case of Unaccompanied Minors in Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

Intergroup contact has been shown to reduce prejudice and promote positive relationships between members of different groups, as in the case of the integration of migrants. Nevertheless, extant research has not explored the crucial question of whether members of the migrant group express a desire for contact with the host group. To explore this question, we collected and collated a rare set of data to create a substantial corpus of semi-structured interviews conducted with a specific migrant group, namely unaccompanied minors (UAMs) residing in Switzerland ($N = 49$). Qualitative analysis revealed UAMs' strong desire for intergroup contact. We identified four reasons for this desire for contact: bonding, support, knowledge and identity enhancement; and five barriers to contact: language, intercultural differences, network impermeability, mismatch and individual characteristics. These dimensions are discussed as avenues that may help facilitate the emergence of intergroup contact, contact whose positive potential is known.

1 | Introduction

Since Allport's (1954) pioneering work, numerous studies and meta-analyses have shown the importance of intergroup contact in creating positive relationships between majority and minority group members (Pettigrew 1998; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Pettigrew et al. 2011). This field of research has identified the conditions under which contact reduces intergroup prejudice and conflict, and has promoted a series of strategies to be implemented to make intergroup contact beneficial. This is the case for the integration of migrants, a topic on which lies the focus of this article. However, extant research is silent on a crucial question: do migrants, beyond the effectiveness of contact, actually desire contact with members of the host society? And, if so, how is this desire expressed?

In this qualitative study, we explore these issues by focusing on a particular group of migrants, namely unaccompanied minors (UAMs) living in Switzerland. In the years 2015–2016, Europe in general and Switzerland in particular have witnessed a peak in the influx of migrants and asylum seekers, including UAM. Many UAM continue to arrive each year in the Schengen area, and the current geopolitical and climatic situation does not augur an end to this phenomenon. Alone and generally aged between 12 and 17, UAM represent a very vulnerable population. Given their vulnerability, the use of intergroup contact is particularly relevant to foster their integration and is regularly recommended and implemented in asylum policies. However, is contact desired by UAM? This question is crucial because existing social policies aimed at promoting contact would be fated to fail if the target group turned out to be uninterested.

In this article, we study the desire for contact of UAM and its manifestations. We also discuss how this particular example can inspire research on the desire for contact by migrants and minority or stigmatised groups in general.

1.1 | Effectiveness of Intergroup Contact

Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis states that an effective way to reduce prejudice and foster positive intergroup relations is through intergroup contact. Four conditions are necessary for intergroup contact to have positive effects on intergroup relations: equal status (even if groups do not otherwise have equal status in society), common goal, intergroup support and institutional support. A fifth condition has been proposed in subsequent studies: the contact situation must provide participants with the opportunity to form friendships (Pettigrew 1998). Many studies and meta-analyses have brought empirical support to the intergroup contact hypothesis (Brown et al. 2007; Christ et al. 2014; Pettigrew 1998; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Pettigrew et al. 2011). As studies and meta-analyses have progressed, the four basic conditions necessary for effective intergroup contact have been reconsidered as facilitators rather than as *sine qua non* conditions (Pettigrew and Tropp 2011).

Scholars in this field have identified various factors influencing the effectiveness of intergroup contact, such as the need for a certain amount and quality of contact for the hypothesis to be confirmed (Brown et al. 2007; Islam and Hewstone 1993). Conversely, when contact is negative and more frequent, majority group prejudice towards the minority group increases, and more significantly than prejudice decreases with more positive contact (Barlow et al. 2012; Kotzur and Wagner 2021). The effect of positive intergroup contact on prejudice can be explained by a decrease in intergroup anxiety (Vezzali et al. 2010; Vezzali et al. 2023; Voci and Hewstone 2003), an increase in empathy for the outgroup (Stephan and Finlay 1999; Taylor and Glen 2020; Vezzali et al. 2010), as well as increased knowledge of outgroup members (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006).

Research has shown that indirect intergroup contact can also yield positive effects on intergroup attitudes, such as: *imagined contact*, which involves imagining positive interactions with an outgroup member (Crisp and Turner 2012, 2013; Stathi et al. 2014; Turner et al. 2007; Vezzali et al. 2012; Vrdoljak et al. 2024); or *extended contact*, which refers to knowing that an ingroup member has a close relationship with an outgroup member (Turner et al. 2008, 2013; Wright et al. 1997). In their meta-analysis, Lemmer and Wagner (2015) showed that both direct and indirect contact interventions conducted in real-world settings reduced intergroup bias.

In summary, this lively field of research has demonstrated the effectiveness of intergroup contact in reducing prejudice and improving intergroup relations. Accordingly, it has also recommended this tool for real-world interventions. However, one question remains unaddressed by scientific research, namely whether members of the minority group actually desire to engage in contact with the majority group.

1.2 | Desired Contact: Definition and Proxis

The question of desired contact in the context of intergroup relations between migrants and natives appears in few studies. In the field of acculturative stress, Zheng and Berry (1991) showed that migrants who had more desire for contact with the host population, more actual contact, as well as less incongruence (difference between desired and actual contact), showed better subjective adaptation. Ward and Rana-Deuba (2000) noted that incongruence was related to lower quality and quantity of intergroup contact, and that the quality of intergroup contact had a positive effect on migrants' psychological adjustment. These results underscore the role of desired contact in the psychological adaptation of migrants during acculturation, but they do not focus on desired contact per se.

A related concept to desired contact is willingness to engage in contact. This field of research studies the motivations that explain why individuals would be more or less willing to engage in intergroup contact (Ron et al. 2017). Different factors that promote willingness to engage in contact have been identified, such ascertain characteristics of the target group (warmth, competence; Awale et al. 2019), expression of a common identity (Gómez et al. 2008), perceived similarity (Stathi et al. 2014), emotions (Esses and Dovidio 2002) or self-extension (Kauff et al. 2021; Paolini et al. 2016).

Similarly to the majority of research on intergroup contact (Tropp and Pettigrew 2005), this smaller field most often focuses on the majority group. Paolini et al. (2018) presented a selection of 21 published studies that identified predictors of willingness to have intergroup contact. Of these studies, only one (5%) focused solely on an ethnic minority perspective (Glasford and Dovidio 2011), and four others (20%) focused on a minority perspective whilst also considering the majority perspective (Binder et al. 2009; Migacheva and Tropp 2013; Paolini et al. 2016; Ramiah et al. 2015).

Willingness to engage in contact reflects the degree to which individuals are inclined to engage in intergroup contact, it represents a behavioural intention, a propensity to contact and the research here is interested in the characteristics that will lead individuals to enter into intergroup contact. Thus, this concept is not equivalent to desired contact, that we define as the 'desire to engage in intergroup contact'. Desired contact is therefore a conceptual precursor of willingness to engage in intergroup contact. It is possible to conjecture that desired contact stems from the knowledge one has of one's position within the minority community and in relation to the majority. Desire may also stem from the needs that one identifies as a function of such position. Willingness to engage in intergroup contact, in turn, would stem from an assessment of the opportunities of contact that the situation affords. There is therefore a gap in scientific literature because the question of the minority group's desire for contact with the majority group has not been addressed. As Paolini et al. (2018) write, it is essential that research on intergroup contact 'goes back to the field, to analyze individuals' natural contact choices in unstructured and unmonitored contexts' (p. 7).

1.3 | Why Would UAM Desire Intergroup Contact?

What might be the reasons or levers that might motivate our target population, UAM, to desire contact with the host population? This question is fundamental because the motivation to make positive contact with the outgroup is a necessary element for intergroup contact to reduce prejudice (Halperin et al. 2012).

UAM represent a minority group in Switzerland. On a legal level, an UAM is defined as follows: a minor who enters the territory of the Member States unaccompanied by an adult who, under the law or practice of the Member State concerned, is responsible for him or her, and for as long as he or she is not effectively taken into the care of such an adult (Regulation (EU) No. 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of June 26, 2013 2013, art. 2, letter j). Under the Swiss Asylum Act, refugee status entitles the child to a residence permit and facilitation regarding social, professional and cultural integration (AsylA, art. 82, para. 5 1998). The vast majority of minors are between 13 and 17 years old when they arrive in Switzerland and apply for asylum; only 4% on average are under the age of 12, according to 2013–2019 figures (State Secretariat for Migration 2022). They are therefore legally children, as well as, in most cases, adolescents. According to the Conference of Cantonal Directors of Social Affairs recommendations (2016), under the age of 12 and wherever possible until the age of 14, minors should be placed with foster families. Above this age, they live in centres for UAM, in collective housing, or in social institutions, but the choice of accommodation also depends on availability in the cantons. If minors have relatives living in Switzerland, they can be placed with them.

At the psychosocial level, UAM are children who have arrived in Switzerland without their parents. First, they find themselves in a country where the culture and social norms differ from those of their country of origin and in which they will have to integrate. Second, they are alone and will need social and material support, which their family of origin cannot provide on a daily basis. Third, they are also adolescents who have comparable developmental needs to any other adolescent (Burkhart et al. 2025; Nakeyar et al. 2018; Vrdoljak et al. 2022). In the following, we will further explore what could potentially be related to a desire for intergroup contact for UAM in the three areas mentioned above: acculturation, social support and socialisation in adolescence.

1.3.1 | Acculturation

UAM arrive in Switzerland after an often long and stressful migration journey, but the journey does not end there. They then face the challenge of integrating into a new society whose norms are more or less distant from those of their culture of origin (Wehrle et al. 2018). According to Berry's (1997) and Bourhis et al.'s (1997) models, migrants can adopt various acculturation strategies. These strategies are organised along two orthogonal axes: the first involves maintaining their culture of origin; the second involves participation in (Berry 1997) or adoption of the host culture (Bourhis et al. 1997).

The preferred strategy of migrants is integration, which combines the maintenance of the culture of origin and the participation to the host society (e.g., Roblain et al. 2017; Zagefka and Brown 2002). It is also the most adaptive strategy regardless of the type of group and society in which the migrant is acculturated (Berry 1997). Importantly, Zagefka and Brown (2002) showed that migrants and host society members with a stronger preference for integration presented more favourable intergroup relations.

Thus, in light of this literature, we expect that UAM who arrive in Switzerland are more likely to choose an integration strategy, and consequently seek contact with members of the host population. It remains to be explored whether this desire is expressed and how.

1.3.2 | Social Support

Social support is considered a basic human need in various theories (Deci and Ryan 2000; Maslow 1970; Seligman 2011). Studies including migrant and refugee children demonstrated the importance of social support for their acculturation and well-being, as it favours their adoption of an integration strategy (Khawaja et al. 2018). In their literature review on the needs of refugee children, Nakeyar et al. (2018) identified social support as a fundamental need and highlighted three pillars: community, family and friends. The support, encouragement and guidance received from professionals (teachers, social workers, psychologists), peers and family allows youth to grow stronger (O'Toole Thommessen and Todd 2018). The social support provided by friendships prevents social isolation and loneliness and gives children a sense of belonging (Mohamed and Thomas 2017; Vrdoljak et al. 2022).

The above findings are echoed in Fazel et al.'s (2012) systematic review analysing protective and risk factors for mental health amongst refugee children in high-income countries. Amongst the protective factors, the authors highlight perceived acceptance in the host society and social support from friends. Two other findings from this review are specific to UAMs: being unaccompanied was identified as a risk factor for the mental health of refugee children, whilst conversely, family cohesion was recorded as a protective factor. These quantitative findings are parallel to qualitative studies giving voice to UAM. In Burkhart et al.'s (2025), UAM report great distress due to their lack of family and friends left behind in their home country. Social support from the community (host and of origin) becomes paramount for these youth.

In sum, the three pillars of social support identified by Nakeyar et al. (2018)—community, family and friends—are not available to UAM in the same way as for other refugee children. The results of the reviewed studies suggest that the absence of a family, and therefore the lack of the support that a family can give, would somehow orient UAM to seeking support from the host society and thus motivate their desire for intergroup contact.

1.3.3 | Socialisation During Adolescence

Adolescence is a developmental period during which young people must forge their identity (Erikson 1950). This challenge of identity construction does not occur in isolation, but rather with peer groups playing a role in the development of autonomy and identity construction of adolescents (Brown

et al. 1986; Erikson 1994). These groups are important because they address the need for support, companionship, sense of identity and experience with the opposite sex (Kovacev and Shute 2004). Building connections with peers is a particular challenge for UAM, as they have been cut off from their social network during flight and need to make a 'start over' and establish new friendships (Cheung and Phillimore 2013). One of the problems identified amongst UAM specifically is the loneliness and isolation associated with the loss of friends (Burkhart et al. 2025; Groark et al. 2011; Herz and Lalander 2017).

Studies of friendship in adolescence consistently show a preference for homophily (Titzmann et al. 2007); the individual factor that favours intra-ethnic friendships is perceived discrimination, whereas the factors that favour inter-ethnic friendships are greater language proficiency and an acculturation profile geared towards assimilation (detaching from the culture of origin and participating in the host society).

1.4 | The Present Study

The reviewed literature depicts intergroup contact as an effective tool for fostering positive intergroup relations, particularly between migrant groups and host populations. However, a gap in intergroup contact theory remains: it is not asked whether the minority group actually desires contact with the majority group. Yet, if there is no desire for contact, contact cannot produce its beneficial effects. Our study therefore aims to provide a look inside the minority group's desire for contact (or lack thereof), by studying the specific case of UAM living in Switzerland. Several theoretical reasons, related to integration, need for social support and developmental need for peer socialisation, may motivate UAM's desire for contact with the host population. To explore this general question, we chose an inductive qualitative approach by giving voice to UAM living in Switzerland. As such, the present study is based on three research questions: (1) do UAM living in Switzerland refer to intergroup contact in their discourses; (2) do UAM express a desire for intergroup contact; and (3) if so, in what terms do UAM express the desire for contact?

2 | Method

2.1 | Constitution of the Corpus

The project 'Integration of Unaccompanied Minors in Switzerland' (IMin) was built on the constitution of a corpus of rare secondary data. This corpus is a collection of interviews dating from 2013 to 2019. It consists of 19 research reports meeting three eligibility criteria: (i) the report focused on UAMs living in Switzerland and (ii) was based on an empirical study with semi-structured interviews; (iii) the interviews were conducted either with UAMs living in Switzerland or with professionals working with them. The interviews were conducted by students from different Swiss universities, both cantonal universities and universities of applied sciences, as part of their Master's or Bachelor's thesis on UAMs in Switzerland. A corpus of 71 interviews with a total of 73 participants ($N = 73$), from 10 different interviewers, was collected (two UAM and two professionals were interviewed together). Interviews with UAM represent two thirds of the corpus (48 interviews, 49 participants), whilst professionals working with UAM represent one third of the corpus (23 interviews, 24 participants).

2.2 | UAM Sample

In this study, only the UAM sample was used. The interviews were conducted by five different researchers in different locations and at different times (2013, 2016, 2017 and 2019). Each of them used a different grid to conduct the semi-structured interview; nevertheless, all of them addressed the topic of the situation of UAM living in Switzerland by interviewing the minors directly. All the researchers were already in contact with the interviewees before the interviews took place, as the recruitment of the participants was carried out during their internships or their professional engagement in institutions hosting the population of interest. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, their legal representative and the head of the centre they lived in (if relevant). The interviews were mostly carried out in French, with the exception of four interviews held in English, and two interviews held in an English-German mix. A further two interviews were conducted with the assistance of an interpreter and another two interviews with the support of a friend or family member as a translator. It should be noted that this corpus of data is the same as that used by Burkhart et al. (2025) on a different topic.

2.3 | Participants

The sample selected for the qualitative analysis consisted of 49 UAM. In this sample, we have 3 female and 46 male participants. Their age ranged from 13 to 20 at the time of the interview. Three of the participants were already of age at the time of the interview (but not at the time of their arrival). They were included in the sample because they were asked about their very recent experience as a UAM. Most of them were living in centres for UAM or in collective housing; only one was placed with relatives. Participants' origin ranged from West Africa, Central Africa, the Horn of Africa, Central Asia to South Asia. The interviews were conducted with participants living in the following cantons: Basel, Fribourg, Geneva, Jura, Lucerne, Valais, Vaud and Zurich. The UAM interviewed had been living in Switzerland for between 1 week and 4 years.

2.4 | Ethics

Consent for data sharing was obtained from all former students who collected the data and their supervisors. A 'Data Transfer and Use Agreement' was drafted with the help of a lawyer from the first author's university. The security of the data transfer and storage was guaranteed. In addition, to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all identifying information was removed from the transcripts and participants were identified by letters and number codes from B1 to J6. This study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the first author's institution.

2.5 | Coding and Data Analysis Procedure

We conducted a focused systematic analysis (Rädiker and Kuckartz 2020) using an inductive approach. Thematic analysis (TA) was chosen as it offers a robust and systematic framework for coding qualitative data: interesting features of the data relevant to the research question are systematically coded; codes are the 'building blocks' that are analysed and sorted to identify larger patterns of meaning across the dataset (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2014; Clarke and Braun 2016). This method enabled us to grasp the way UAMs expressed their desire for intergroup contact (if any).

The entire process of data coding and analysis was carried out by three researchers to reduce subjectivity bias. The principle of mutual agreement was applied at each stage to ensure consistency and quality of work. The data were analysed using the N-Vivo software, which allows working with category systems, multilevel coding processes, memo functions, as well as different forms of visualisation.

Seven steps were followed. (1) Data preparation and standardisation. (2) Data exploration. (3) Development of categories for basic coding. (4) First round of coding. The research team went through each interview and coded the passages where the UAM talked about intergroup contact, whether desired, unwanted or with no mention (when the UAM talked about intergroup contact without specifically mentioning desire or non-desire). Interview passages that were not related to intergroup contact were not coded. During the second phase of this cycle, we conducted a TA on the interview passages that related to the desire for intergroup contact. Through this iterative process, we adapted and extended our category system. (5) Second round of coding. Ensuring that the coding logic was the same for all codes from start to finish. Some passages that might be ambiguous were reread in the interview from which they came to ensure that the coding was consistent with the context of the passage. (6) Codes analysis and organising. We analysed our codes and considered how different codes may combine to form overarching themes and sub-themes. We used visual representations such as mind maps to help us find an organising concept to sort the different codes. (7) Results. Finally, we presented the result of our analysis describing each theme and sub-themes, adding some original passages from the interviews to illustrate them.

In summary, we focused on passages relevant to our research questions and used an inductive (bottom-up) approach to systematically code and analyse the data to finally identify themes that best represent how the UAM in our sample expressed themselves about intergroup contact and their desire for contact.

3 | Results

3.1 | Intergroup Contact

In the first phase of analysis, we sought to find out whether the theme of intergroup contact was addressed by the UAM in our sample. We defined intergroup contact as UAM's past, actual or imagined contact with a person who is not part of his or her family, the refugee group or who does not have the same origin as him or her. In analysing, the coders found many passages in which UAM expressed themselves about intergroup contact. Therefore, the first analysis brings a positive answer to our first research question: UAM do refer to intergroup contact in their narratives. In these passages, various members of the outgroup are mentioned: (i) the professionals who take care of them: educators, social workers, guardians, curators, teachers, doctors and psychologists; (ii) the adults of the host population: volunteers, godparents, foster families, neighbours, people they meet in public spaces; (iii) the peers and friends of the host population: schoolmates, sports friends, etc.

We then analysed the passages in which UAM talk about intergroup contact and classified them into three mutually exclusive themes: (1) desire for intergroup contact, (2) desire for no intergroup contact, (3) no mention (no information about desire for contact). Figure 1 illustrates the share of each of these themes, as well as the sub-themes that will be further developed later in this article. The larger the rectangle representing a theme, the more frequent the corresponding theme was discussed in the interviews. In Figure 1 we see that, on the left, desired contact occupies the largest share of intergroup contact. On the right, in the smaller areas, are represented interview passages in which UAM talk about intergroup contact in a negative way or without declaring if they wanted contact or not. Intergroup contact was discussed in every interview. Each UAM mentioned at least once a desire for contact with outgroup members, and about half of the sample mentioned at least once a desire for no contact. In other words, when UAM talk about intergroup contact, they more frequently express a desire for contact. This answers our second research question: UAM desire contact with members of the host society. This leads us to the next phase of our analysis.

3.2 | Desired Contact

In the second phase of the analyses, we focused on desired contact, looking for ways in which UAM expressed their desire for contact with outgroup members. The systematic TA of the passages in which the UAM express a desire for intergroup contact allowed us to organise the dataset relevant to our research question in two main themes: the reasons for the desire for intergroup contact and the barriers to this contact. The reasons occupy a greater place in the discourse of the UAM compared to the barriers (see relative size of the rectangles in Figure 1). These reasons for wanting contact brought together four sub-themes, which we have called: bonding, support, knowledge (gaining knowledge about the host society) and identity enhancement. Barriers to intergroup contact were made up of five sub-themes that we have named: language, intercultural differences, impermeable network, mismatch and individual characteristics. These themes and their hierarchy are represented in Figure 2. Their content and illustrative excerpts are presented in Data S1.

4 | Discussion

In this study, we looked at intergroup contact from the perspective of a migrant group in a host society group. The reviewed

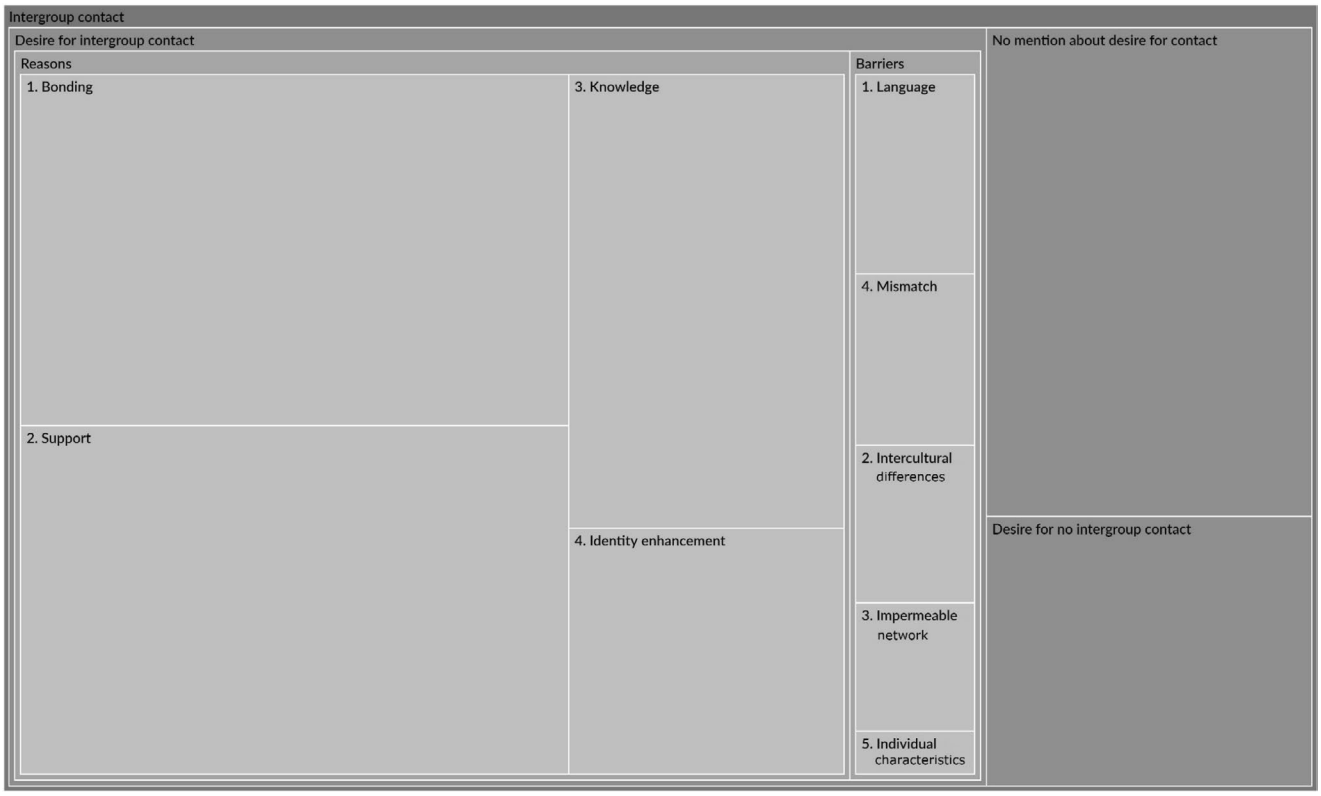

FIGURE 1 | Relative occurrence of themes and sub-themes of intergroup contact in UAMs' discourse. The area of the rectangles is related to the number of occurrences of the themes.

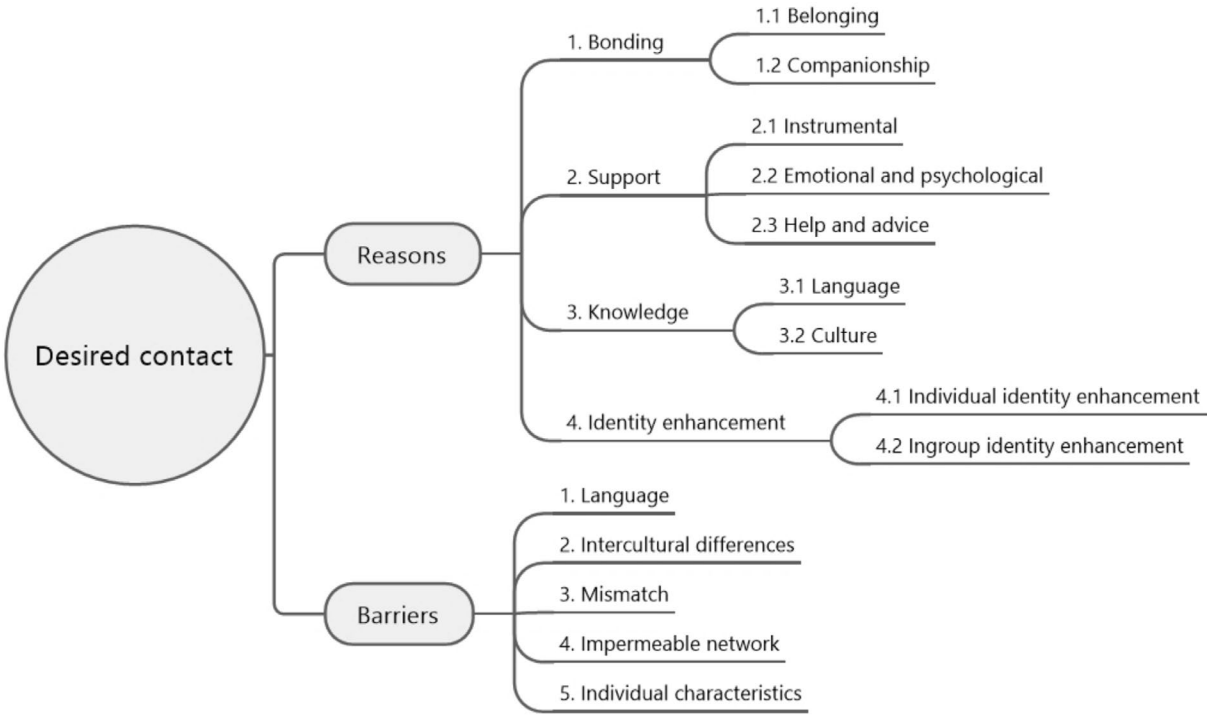

FIGURE 2 | Thematic tree of desired contact emerged from UAM's interviews.

literature shows that there is a wealth of research on the beneficial effect of intergroup contact, but the minority group's desire for contact is rarely addressed. We have therefore relayed the voice of a particularly vulnerable minority group that is little studied in the scientific literature, namely UAM. We collected 49 interviews with UAM available in Switzerland and analysed them, focusing on their contact with the host population. The analysis allowed us to answer our three research questions and

remark that (1) these young people talked about intergroup contact and (2) had a strong desire for intergroup contact. We were also able to (3) identify four reasons for their desire for intergroup contact: the desire to bond, to receive support, to gain knowledge and to enhance their identity. Despite this desire for contact, five barriers to contact were also identified: language, intercultural differences, network impermeability, mismatch and individual characteristics.

4.1 | Desired Contact for Integration

We have reviewed the literature on three sources of motivation that could lead the minority group of UAM to desire intergroup contact: acculturation, social support and socialisation during adolescence. These three driving forces are found, in a somewhat intertwined way, in the results of our study and refer to a desire for integration.

UAM desire to bond with members of the host population to gain knowledge and skills about the country, namely learning the language and culture. Like the refugees in Roblain et al.'s (2017) study, they show a strong desire to participate in the host society. They want to learn its codes and norms. They have an acculturation profile geared toward participation (Berry 1970) and adoption of the host culture (Bourhis et al. 1997). Individuals who consider themselves to have few communication skills show more apprehension at contact and less desire to engage in communication behaviour (Barraclough et al. 1988). However, we found that UAM in our sample show a desire to reach out to the Swiss people in order to help them improve their language skills and learn more about the Swiss way of life.

The desire for contact is also a call from UAM for support from the host society. Support is linked to the acculturation process. Successful integration requires mutual accommodation between migrants and the host society (Berry 1997). UAM desire contact for three types of support: instrumental, emotional and psychological support, as well as help and advice. These three types of support refer respectively to three dimensions of social support identified by Cutrona and Russell (1990): tangible support, emotional support and informational support. The resources of UAM often come from their culture of origin and may become obsolete in a new country like Switzerland. Their successful adaptation depends on their ability to retrieve the resources they had available before arriving, as well as to obtain new ones (Ryan et al. 2008). This work cannot be done without the support of the host society.

Family is one of the most important resources in terms of social support, as it can provide belonging, appreciation and love (Cohen 1992). Social support is a fundamental protective factor for refugee youth (Fazel et al. 2012; Mohamed and Thomas 2017; O'Toole Thommessen and Todd 2018). Nonetheless, UAM cannot benefit from this support, and it has been shown that those cut off from their families are at greater risk for mental health (Fazel et al. 2012; Heptinstall et al. 2004). Without a family, UAM seek support elsewhere. They may find it from their community of origin, peers and professionals, such as educators and teachers, for example (Sleijpen et al. 2016). These individuals can partially fill the gap of parents and provide an alternative means of socialisation (de Wal Pastoor 2013).

The desire to have a contact for help and advice can or could be fulfilled by a mentor, as in Raithelhuber's (2021) study on mentorship, where it was found that this mode of relationship allowed UAM to benefit from advice and assistance in solving their problems, whilst experiencing empathy, a feeling of being appreciated, as well as respect. However, seeking help remains difficult for some UAM, suggesting that there are still gaps in their care in terms of emotional and psychological support. In order to obtain support, it is also necessary for them to be able to establish links with people who can meet some of their needs.

UAM want to make contact with the host population because they wish to create significant bonds. Making connections with Swiss people can serve the dual function of feeling part of the Swiss group (belonging) and having one or more trusted people around (companionship). Whilst some are enthusiastic about their integration, for example because they are part of a host family or a sports club, others lament the fact that they have not been able to form stronger bonds with their peers, limiting their possibility of integration. Belonging to a group is an essential need that provides access to resources, protection by group members and transmission of group knowledge to group members as well as social support (Cutrona and Russell 1990; Deci and Ryan 2000). Therefore, belonging to a group provides access to more knowledge (e.g., language, norms), resources and security. Belonging to a group also increases their chances of achieving positive and successful integration.

UAM also desire relationships of a more intimate nature than those expressed in belonging and show a desire to establish strong relationships with a particular person. These relationships can be of a friendly or romantic nature, for example. Note that UAM do not, however, speak of the people with whom they wish to connect as attachment figures, as they would with their parents (Bowlby 1958), but rather as friends with whom they wish to create a more intimate and meaningful relationship. This resonates with the importance of socialisation in youth, which includes access to support, a sense of identity and experiences with the opposite sex (Brown et al. 1986; Erikson 1994; Kovacev and Shute 2004).

4.2 | Desired Contact for Activism

In addition to the above motivations, we discovered in our study an unexpected motivation: desired contact for activism. The minority group of UAM appears to desire contact with the majority group to enhance their identity. In this case, the purpose of contact is to make oneself known as a unique individual and recognised in the eyes of the outgroup members (individual enhancement), as well as to reduce the prejudice and stereotypes that are attributed to UAM (ingroup enhancement). Identity enhancement thus addresses their need for a positive self-esteem and social identity (Cutrona and Russell 1990).

The fact that enhancement concerns the group level as much as the individual level highlights two identity levels: personal identity and social identity. Personal identity is a representation

of oneself as a unique individual, different from others (Turner et al. 1994). In this respect, UAM desire to make contact with those who categorise him or her only as a 'refugee'. Social identity, on the other hand, is 'that part of an individual's self-concept that arises from his or her knowledge of his or her membership in a social group (or groups) as well as the emotional significance attached to that membership' (Tajfel 1974). The social identity of the UAM group can be threatened by negative stereotypes, which are a serious source of concern for UAM. In the face of this, we observed what appeared to be a belief in social change. It appeared that UAM voiced their intention to change the vision of the Swiss people that discriminate against their group (Tajfel and Turner 2001). Thus, many of them want people with negative stereotypes to come and see for themselves that UAM are good people by organising events to meet Swiss people and presenting themselves through medias. This may explain why, on both an individual and group level, UAM in our study show a desire to reach out to the host population, in order to prove to them that they are people of integrity and worth, rather than avoiding contact for fear of possible negative consequences. Whilst studies report that negative contact would lead to avoidance behaviours (Binder et al. 2009; Paolini et al. 2018; Stephan and Stephan 1985), and intergroup contact is related to less collective action (Reimer and Sengupta 2023) our results show instead that it can create a desire for contact, motivated by a belief in social change.

4.3 | Understanding Barriers to Intergroup Contact in Order to Lift Them

We have seen that in their desire for intergroup contact, UAM came up against barriers. Lack of language skills is mentioned as a major difficulty in making contact with the host society, to the point of not being able to make contact at all. Language is essential in the integration process, as it allows for interactions between migrants and locals, interactions in which their intercultural integration can take place (Perregaux 2001). Several studies have identified language as one of the main difficulties in the school integration of refugees (Vrdoljak et al. 2022) and for acculturation in general (Abouguendia and Noels 2001; Berry 1997; Herz and Lalander 2017).

Paradoxically, as mentioned above, learning the language is also approached by UAM as a reason to come into contact with the local population. Indeed, whilst some UAM want to master the language before contact, others want to meet local people to learn the language more quickly. More interestingly, when we analyse the data in detail, we can observe that these two attitudes can coexist in the same individual. However, Tip et al. (2019) tested the causal relationship between intergroup contact and language proficiency, and in a longitudinal study, they showed that higher language proficiency led to more contact with locals, whereas the opposite relationship was not observed.

Intercultural differences between Switzerland and UAM's country of origin were also mentioned as a hindrance to intergroup contact. Whilst in their country, social relations are described as fluid, organising a meeting with Swiss people seems to be no easy task for these young people. Communication norms vary from culture to culture (McCroskey and Richmond 1990), and these variations can lead to difficulties and frustration when trying to make contact with the host population. These results seem to support the idea that many acculturation difficulties amongst UAM occur during contact with the host population (Abouguendia and Noels 2001).

Another problem faced by the UAM in our study is the impermeable nature of friendship networks. UAM report being confronted with a certain closure on the part of the host population, preventing them from forming friendships or even making contact. They attribute this impermeability to intra-individual rather than cultural characteristics. These characteristics include fear of strangers, not knowing enough about each other, and being too busy. In Wernesjö's (2015) qualitative study, this barrier was notably observed amongst UAM in Sweden. UAM justified impermeability as being due to shyness, fear or not being used to migrants.

UAM also report a mismatch between themselves and their Swiss peers, and such a mismatch hinders contact. They carry out the majority of their activities (recreational, educational, etc.) in environments where they only meet other migrants. They therefore deplore not having the opportunity to meet Swiss peers. Some UAM report a 'different profile' compared to Swiss people. This difference in profile could be explained in particular by the level of school education that is not adapted to the actual age of UAM, implying that peers from the host society would be more difficult to find (Oppedal and Idsoe 2015). UAM also have a very different life experience (due to their migration journey) compared with their peers, due to their status (related to their residence permit) and their responsibilities. This discrepancy leads to a feeling of not being similar to others, prevents a sense of belonging and leads to disappointment regarding the possibility of establishing friendships (Bitzi and Landolt 2017).

Previous research has demonstrated positive associations between certain personality traits and future engagement in intergroup contact, such as openness to experience (Stürmer et al. 2013; Vezzali et al. 2018) and extraversion (Stürmer et al. 2013; Turner et al. 2014). Some UAM identified shyness and embarrassment as the reasons why contact may be difficult. Whilst some of them said that they were able to overcome their shyness or embarrassment, not all of them did.

Shyness has furthermore been named by UAM, in addition to difficulties in mastering the local language, as limiting their interactions with the host population (Wernesjö 2015). It is possible that the lack of proficiency in the local language, as well as the immersion in an unfamiliar environment where social norms differ from the known ones, could lead to a feeling of low communication competence amongst some UAM. This feeling would lead to a greater apprehension of communication, resulting in a lower desire to make contact (Barraclough et al. 1988).

4.4 | Limitations and Future Research

We collected and analysed a large sample of interviews with UAM from various studies. Despite the richness of the articulation of this rare data, these interviews were conducted by different

people with different guidelines. In addition, participants often responded in a language that was not their native tongue and that they did not master well. Even in the three cases in which the interviewers conducted the interviews in the respondents' mother tongue, the interpreters were not actual professionals but people of the same community who had been in Switzerland a little bit longer. In this respect, the increased potential fluency may not have affected the richness of the responses, and the analyses showed that it did not. To compensate for this situation, we were very careful in our analyses. We always considered a passage as a whole and sometimes went back to the entire interview to understand the meaning behind the words spoken. In the end, the strength of the cross-cutting themes we identified attests to a common experience that goes beyond differences in data collection protocols and language difficulties.

Our sample is predominantly male. This is neither a choice nor a coincidence, but it corresponds to the reality of the UAM population living in Switzerland, since boys who arrive unaccompanied are the vast majority compared to girls. The risk could be that our results represent a more masculine vision of the desire for contact between a minority group and the majority group. This risk is greatly minimised by the type of analysis we have chosen. Indeed, systematic TA (Braun and Clarke 2006) requires that each passage be taken into account and coded. Thus, even if minority positions were expressed, they would be represented in the final thematic organisation. It should be noted that we analysed the data completely blind to all UAM's characteristics (origin, canton, gender, time spent in Switzerland, etc.). However, following the suggestion of a reviewer, we re-analysed the data to look for a specific pattern. Nothing in the data indicated a different profile for the three girls in terms of their contribution to the various themes. There was also no particular theme or sub-theme that was driven by girls.

Beyond the UAM population, the minority group's desire for contact with the majority group remains an unexplored topic and it would be interesting to study this phenomenon with migrant children in general. With a quantitative approach and larger samples, it would be possible to measure which reasons underlying the desire for contact are more salient, which barriers to intergroup contact are more hindering, and how these interact. Thus, a better understanding of the relative weight of the elements at play in the desire for contact would allow for the implementation of adequate measures to encourage intergroup contact and, consequently, to promote the integration of migrant children.

Next, a possible avenue for stimulating intergroup contact for migrant children who exhibit low desire and/or anxiety to make contact with members of the host society would be to use imagined contact. It has been shown that students in a school who had previously imagined contact with refugees showed a greater tendency to make contact with them and less avoidance (Bagci et al. 2019; Stathi et al. 2014; Turner et al. 2013). We suggest, then, that imagined contact might also lead to a greater desire for contact with locals for migrant children.

5 | Conclusions

This study explored the uncharted territory of immigrant groups' desire for contact with the host population. It revealed a strong desire for contact by the minority population of UAM living in Switzerland. Their desire for contact responds to a need for integration through acquiring knowledge, seeking support and bonding. This desire also responds—a totally unexpected and innovative result—to a need for activism: UAM wish to make contact with the Swiss population in order to enhance their identity. Thus, paradoxically, barriers to intergroup contact were not mentioned to express an absence of desire for contact with the majority group; quite the contrary, which contrasts with the results of many research studies that predict an avoidance of contact.

These results may help professionals working with and/or for UAM to be aware of the different issues surrounding the relationship between UAM and the Swiss population. The need to integrate, the need for social support, the socialisation of young people, as well as their need for positive identity construction play an essential role in their development and well-being. Being cut off from their family and former social circle, it is important to provide them with all the necessary tools to promote their integration and to overcome the barriers that hinder their relations with the host population as much as possible.

Ethics Statement

This study received ethical approval from the ethics committee of the University of Lausanne, project number C_SSP_062021_00004, and has been carried out in line with the ethical standards of APA.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.