



# Return to the rural: Ambivalent place attachment among youth in rural Spain

Alba Carrasco-Cruz<sup>\*</sup>, Fátima Cruz-Souza<sup>id</sup>

Recognised Research Group on Psychosocial Analysis and Research, Department of Psychology, University of Valladolid, Spain

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## ABSTRACT

Although the Spanish rural areas continue to face significant challenges of depopulation and demographic imbalances due to the selective exodus of young people, there has been a recent increase in return migration, where these young people choose to return to their places of origin after training and living in urban environments. This study aims to explore these return processes, with a focus on the meanings of place that shape the affective ties to rural territories. A qualitative methodology, based on 16 semi-structured in-depth interviews, was employed in two study areas, corresponding to rural mountain regions in central and northern Spain. The results reveal important ambivalences in the attachment to place among young returnees. While they associate the return with positive meanings of rurality, primarily linked to the natural environment and the community fabric, they also describe negative meanings related to perceptions of deprivation. These meanings are framed within the symbolic hierarchy typical of urban normative societies and are accentuated in the case of returnees, due to the expectations generated during their time in urban environments.

## 1. Introduction

In Spain, rural areas are traversed by problems of depopulation and sociodemographic imbalances, such as the masculinization and over-aging of the population (Camarero and Sampedro, 2019; Cruz and García-Bengochea, 2020). As Camarero et al. (2023) argue, Spain's rural areas—characterized by particularly low population densities compared to the European context (Camarero et al., 2009)—remain in a subordinate position, one that cannot be understood without looking beyond the urban-centric perspective shaping current policies. It is therefore necessary to denaturalize depopulation and develop analyses that go beyond simply counting inhabitants, proposing instead solutions adapted to a reality of "low density and high mobility" (Camarero et al., 2023, p. 3).

At the root of depopulation is the massive emigration of young people, especially women (Camarero et al., 2023; Cruz, 2006; García-Arias et al., 2021). Studies in this regard in the Spanish context point to macrostructural aspects, such as the scarcity of skilled employment opportunities in rural areas or the concentration of higher education centers in cities as the main explanatory factors (Camarero et al., 2023; García-Arias et al., 2021; González-Fernández et al., 2023; Orduña et al., 2022), in line with trends identified in other European contexts

(Riethmuller et al., 2021; Simões et al., 2021; Turpeinen, 2019). Such conditioning factors constitute the tangible part of an urban normative sociocultural system (Fulkerson and Thomas, 2019), which associates the urban with personal development and self-realization and success, imposing on rural youth an imperative of mobility towards these spaces, which are taken as a comparative reference of their lifestyle and quality of life (Nartova and Krupets, 2019). These material and symbolic constraints directly influence young people's life projects—understood as the articulation between personal interests and the opportunities provided by a specific sociocultural context—and limit their agency in various personal and social spheres (Pereira and Cruz-Souza, 2020).

However, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in migration from cities to rural areas in Spain (Camarero, 2022, 2023). Specifically, part of these migrations involves return movements, defined as migratory processes led by individuals who, after extended periods of residence in urban areas—mostly for educational purposes—decide to return to their rural places of origin (Riethmuller et al., 2021). This phenomenon can be linked to a growing positive meaning of rural areas, based on values such as tranquility, community life, security, and contact with nature (Baylina et al., 2019; Berg, 2020), which give rural areas a symbolic function of refuge from global uncertainties (Camarero et al., 2023). Despite this, several studies

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author. University of Valladolid, Faculty of Education, Palencia, Avenida de Madrid, 44, Palencia, 34004, Spain.

E-mail addresses: [alba.carrasco@uva.es](mailto:alba.carrasco@uva.es) (A. Carrasco-Cruz), [fatimaregina.cruz@uva.es](mailto:fatimaregina.cruz@uva.es) (F. Cruz-Souza).

(Haartsen and Thissen, 2014; Matysiak, 2022; Pedersen and Therkelsen, 2022) highlight the existing difficulties in the return processes of these young people, due to factors such as depopulation, lack of economic and social dynamism, or the persistence of shared negative meanings about rural life (Cruz and García-Bengochea, 2020; Farrugia, 2016). On the other hand, the very condition of returnees may generate adaptation problems due to expectations of return and experiences lived in urban contexts (Matysiak, 2022; Pedersen and Therkelsen, 2022).

While rural youth migration has been increasingly studied, there is still a lack of in-depth research on how young returnees themselves interpret and experience their return, particularly in highly depopulated areas such as Extremadura and Castilla y León—two of the most affected regions in Spain and Europe in demographic terms (INE, 2023; Eurostat, 2022). Thus, this study aims to explore the return experiences of rural youth, examining the social meanings that shape urban-rural migrations and analyzing to what extent these meanings support the configuration of a consistent attachment to place towards rural territories. This perspective constitutes a contribution to the field of rural and youth studies, taking into account the emerging meanings of rurality and their translation into return intentions of young people (Berg, 2020; Haartsen and Thissen, 2014). On the other hand, the persistence of symbolic and structural hierarchies that shape urbanity will be explored, which may lead to difficulties in returning to the village or compromise its sustainability. The relevance of studying these processes lies in the fact that, although young returnees still do not quantitatively compensate for the demographic decline of rural areas, they constitute a qualitatively valuable population due to their key role as dynamizers of territories (Camarero and Sampedro, 2008; González-Fernández et al., 2023; Simões et al., 2020), which also allows for an essential generational replacement.

### 1.1. Place attachment and mobility

Social relations and the intersubjectivities that compose them are intrinsically spatial (Farrugia et al., 2015). They are shaped by the spaces they inhabit while simultaneously transforming those spaces into symbolically significant places (Cruz and García-Bengochea, 2020; Farrugia et al., 2015; Lewicka, 2011). It is through socially shared and constructed meanings of place (Low and Altman, 1992) that individuals develop their bonds to places (Stedman et al., 2014). These meanings are transmitted intergenerationally through narratives (Berroeta et al., 2017) and social practices, thereby influencing the processes of population attachment to or expulsion from specific territories. In this regard, global literature (Bernsen et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Díaz et al., 2022; Simões et al., 2021) highlight family and community ties as the main source of place attachment, often outweighing the economic opportunities offered by the territories themselves. Moreover, the effects of these social relationships go beyond the emotional sphere, with important practical and material implications. On this matter, the family often facilitates access to housing (Stockdale and Ferguson, 2020), a particularly relevant factor in the Spanish rural context, where rental housing is extremely limited (Morales-Prieto, 2017). These social ties also have specific implications for women, who, according to several studies (Simões et al., 2020; Sowl et al., 2022), show a greater tendency to return due to caregiving responsibilities within the family. Along these lines, Camarero et al. (2023) stress the need to rethink the conditions that enable a dignified life in rural areas beyond a strictly productivist or labour-centered perspective.

On the other hand, it is necessary to consider mobility itself as a constitutive element of place attachment (Devine-Wright et al., 2020; Di Masso et al., 2019), moving beyond traditional positivist and sedentary perspectives (Hidalgo and Hernández, 2001; Scannell and Gifford, 2010). Although various studies highlight the importance of social ties and the physical environment as sources of attachment for young people (Beckwith et al., 2023; Bernsen et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Díaz et al., 2022; Stockdale and Ferguson, 2020; Storie et al., 2019), the processes through

which meanings of place are constructed do not rely on the static qualities of spaces, but rather on the changing articulation of the symbolic, political, and material processes occurring within them (Berroeta et al., 2021). Furthermore, individuals may develop attachments to multiple places (Pedersen and Therkelsen, 2022) through processes of mobility (both physical and virtual) that transform these attachments as people move and create multi-localized social relationships, thereby forming a network of spatial meanings that extends beyond the internal qualities of individual places. In other words, the meanings attributed to a place necessarily emerge from its symbolic relationship with other spaces to which it is connected through mobility processes (Devine-Wright et al., 2020; Di Masso et al., 2019).

### 1.2. Urbanormativity and rural flight

In the case of urban-to-rural migrations, a rigorous analysis requires considering their embedding in urbanormative socio-cultural and economic frameworks (Castle and Grant, 2023; Fulkerson and Thomas, 2019). The concept of urbanormativity has been used to define the set of meanings that establish a dichotomous and hierarchical relationship between the rural and the urban, where the rural is relegated to a marginal status and the urban becomes the standard of development (Cruz, 2006; Farrugia, 2019; Nartova and Krupets, 2019). As Steel (2008) shows, this hierarchy has its roots in Western European history, where cities emerged as centers of power and culture while depending on rural hinterlands for food and resources. Over time, this material dependence was accompanied by a symbolic inversion that positioned the urban as the locus of progress and civilization, and the rural as backward or peripheral. Camarero et al. (2023) have studied the implications of urbanocentrism in the reality of rural Spain, highlighting the persistence of a significant urban-rural divide in the country. This divide manifests itself in the distancing of employment opportunities from rural territories and in the disparities in access to welfare state resources and services, driven by historical processes of demographic, economic, and symbolic capital concentration in urban areas (Camarero et al., 2023).

In this context, migration to the city still presents itself to young people as the main pathway to development and personal success. In this regard, the educational system plays a fundamental role, not only due to the concentration of higher education institutions in urban areas (González-Fernández et al., 2022; Pedersen and Gram, 2018; Simões et al., 2021) and the consequent need for rural youth to relocate, but also because of the conversations, practices, and content taught in rural schools, which tend to reinforce urban-centric ideals (Beach et al., 2019). In the Spanish context, this dynamic has resulted in a significant outflow of qualified individuals from rural areas—one of the groups with the greatest potential to drive local economic revitalization (Camarero et al., 2023). Moreover, access to leisure and culture has also been identified as a central aspect of urban-rural inequalities in Spain (Camarero et al., 2023). These deficiencies have specific implications for the retention of young populations, as the formation of youth identity in Western societies is closely linked to leisure consumption. As a result, young people who remain in rural areas are excluded from desirable youth identities (Castle and Grant, 2023; Farrugia, 2016), reinforcing the imperative to move to urban centers.

This need for mobility is exacerbated in the case of young women, who, although the trend has been reversed in recent years, continue to emigrate at significantly higher rates than their male counterparts (Camarero, 2020). This imbalance has its origins in the agrarian family structure, which limited women's life projects to caring and reproductive tasks. In response, academic training was the main means of fulfillment for women, as it implied migration to the city and distancing from the family nucleus (Camarero and Sampedro, 2008). Currently, although gendered mandates related to family reproduction affect women in a more subtle way, the focus of control has shifted to sexuality and physical appearance (Bartky, 2008). At this point, it is fundamental

to consider that these restrictions are not specific to rural spaces, but they can be especially coercive in spaces with a reduced social fabric, where intra-community social control is particularly effective (Crann, 2021; Dreby, 2008; Jóhannesdóttir and Skaptadóttir, 2023).

### 1.3. Affective ambivalence in returning to the rural world

Although previous ties in the territory make it easier to return (Camarero et al., 2023), this is conditioned by the same factors that originated emigration, such as depopulation, lack of economic dynamism (Orduña et al., 2022) or, in the case of women, patriarchal demands for care (Sowl et al., 2022). Moreover, to these factors are added others derived from the condition of the returnee itself, since the return to the countryside is not only a movement between geographical spaces but also between symbolic urban-normative hierarchies (Farrugia, 2019; Pedersen, 2018). That is, young people's subjectivities are influenced by their experiences in the city, which generate in them new expectations of cultural diversity and personal and professional fulfillment. In many cases, these expectations do not correspond to those of their local peers or cannot be fully met in the rural context (Haartsen and Thissen, 2014; Matysiak, 2022). Mobile behavior thus acts as a key form of symbolic capital in young people's biographies, associated with personal development and social mobility (Mærsk et al., 2023). By contrast, those who have not migrated are often perceived as socially left behind (Farrugia, 2019; Matysiak, 2022), within an urbanormative culture that devalues rurality and penalizes immobility (Pedersen and Gram, 2018; Cook and Cuervo, 2018). In this context, the experience of having left grants symbolic capital which, upon returning, may contribute to the reconfiguration of an advantageous social position, provided that the return is not interpreted as a sign of failure (Mærsk et al., 2023).

The role of formal education further reinforces these dynamics as a marker of social status. As Bourdieu (1984) suggests, academic classifications tend to create and reinforce social differences by fostering collectively recognized beliefs about these distinctions. In this way, returning to rural areas after studying in urban contexts often generates a distinction between returnees and those who remained, leading to processes of mutual alterization and the construction of an us-them division (Haartsen and Thissen, 2014; Matysiak, 2022). For returnees, this implies a process of adaptation to a new social reality, where interpersonal relations are configured differently after return. It then requires a negotiation of new social positions, both at a personal level, since returning to the village can generate mixed feelings, feelings of maladjustment, or even be perceived as a failure, and at a social level, in terms of the evaluation that other members of the group make of the return (Pedersen and Therkelsen, 2022). This notion of failure is closely linked to the possibilities of labor market insertion adapted to the educational level of young people, which are reduced by the limited and not very dynamic nature of rural labor markets (Orduña et al., 2022), which tends to generate situations of overqualification and underemployment (Green and Zhu, 2010; Rodríguez-Esteban and Vidal, 2020). This situation can lead to experiences of job dissatisfaction by problematizing the expectation that educational capital translates into upward social mobility (Bourdieu, 1997; Orduña et al., 2022).

Based on this, this study aims to explore, through qualitative research, the process of return experienced by rural youth in Spain, focusing on the meanings that shape their attachment to place. To this end, it explores the ambivalences, as well as those elements that favor consistent attachments to place and that can facilitate the permanence of returnees in the rural areas.

## 2. Methods

In order to explore the social meanings that shape young returnees' attachment to place in the rural environment, this study uses a qualitative methodology through semi-structured in-depth interviews (Kvale,

2011). This type of methodology, based on the analysis of the narratives of social actors, does not seek to generate generalizable knowledge through a representative sample (Cruz and García-Bengochea, 2020) but rather to generate in-depth knowledge of the meanings that participants attribute to the problem or phenomenon under study (Stake, 2005).

### 2.1. Study area

The research was carried out in two rural mountain areas of Spain: the region of La Vera, in Cáceres province of the Extremadura region, in the West of Spain, and the area corresponding to the Palencia Model Forest Initiative, in the Palencia province in the north of Castilla y León region (see Fig. 1). These regions exemplify Spain's demographic challenges, with Extremadura and Castilla y León consistently ranking among the country's least densely populated areas (below 26 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup> - less than a quarter of the EU average of 120/km<sup>2</sup>) (INE, 2023; Eurostat, 2022).

The territory of the Palencia Model Forest is characterized by scattered and small population centers, grouped in 92 municipalities. This area represents a critical case of rural depopulation, meeting Eurostat's (2023) threshold for "demographic deserts" (<12.5 hab/km<sup>2</sup> in some zones) and having lost 22 % of its population since 2001 (INE, 2023). More than 80 % of the population, almost 43,000 inhabitants, is concentrated in six villages, where educational, health, facilities and commercial centers are located. Geographically, it is a neo-forest region, with three natural parks in the north, a more mountainous area, and extensive cereal crops in the south. In the case of La Vera, it is a mountainous region with great natural wealth, as well as an important historical heritage, which makes tourism an important economic engine for the region. The region is made up of 19 municipalities. It has a population of nearly 24,000 inhabitants, significantly concentrated in five population centers. In both regions, the decline of agriculture and livestock has given way to an economy based mainly on services, in line with the general trend in rural Spain (Camarero, 2020). Finally, although milder in recent decades, both regions maintain the trend of loss of young population characteristic of rural areas of the country (Camarero and Sampedro, 2019; Cruz and García-Bengochea, 2020), with depopulation, aging, or lack of generational replacement being persistent problems in these regions.

### 2.2. Participants

The study included 16 participants (11 women and 5 men), eight from the Palencia Model Forest and seven from the La Vera region (see Table 1). The age of the participants ranged from 23 to 39 years. This reflects a broad notion of youth, justified by the high level of population ageing in rural areas of Spain (Camarero et al., 2023), as well as by previous research on rural youth in the European context (Monka et al., 2020; Pedersen and Therkelsen, 2022; Simões et al., 2021; Turpeinen, 2019). They all originated from the rural areas in question, having spent their childhood and adolescence there, and later migrated to an urban area to pursue higher education.

### 2.3. Data collection

In total, 13 interviews were conducted. Since some people presented similar profiles and discourses, more than one person was accepted to participate in two of the interviews; there was one interview with three participants in La Vera and another with two participants in the Palencia model forest area. The selection of participants was based on the technique known as snowballing (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981), whereby some contacts in both areas were asked to identify potential participants, who in turn provided the contact of other persons of interest. This technique allowed access to diverse profiles of young people, avoiding that they belonged to homogeneous social groups close to the researchers.



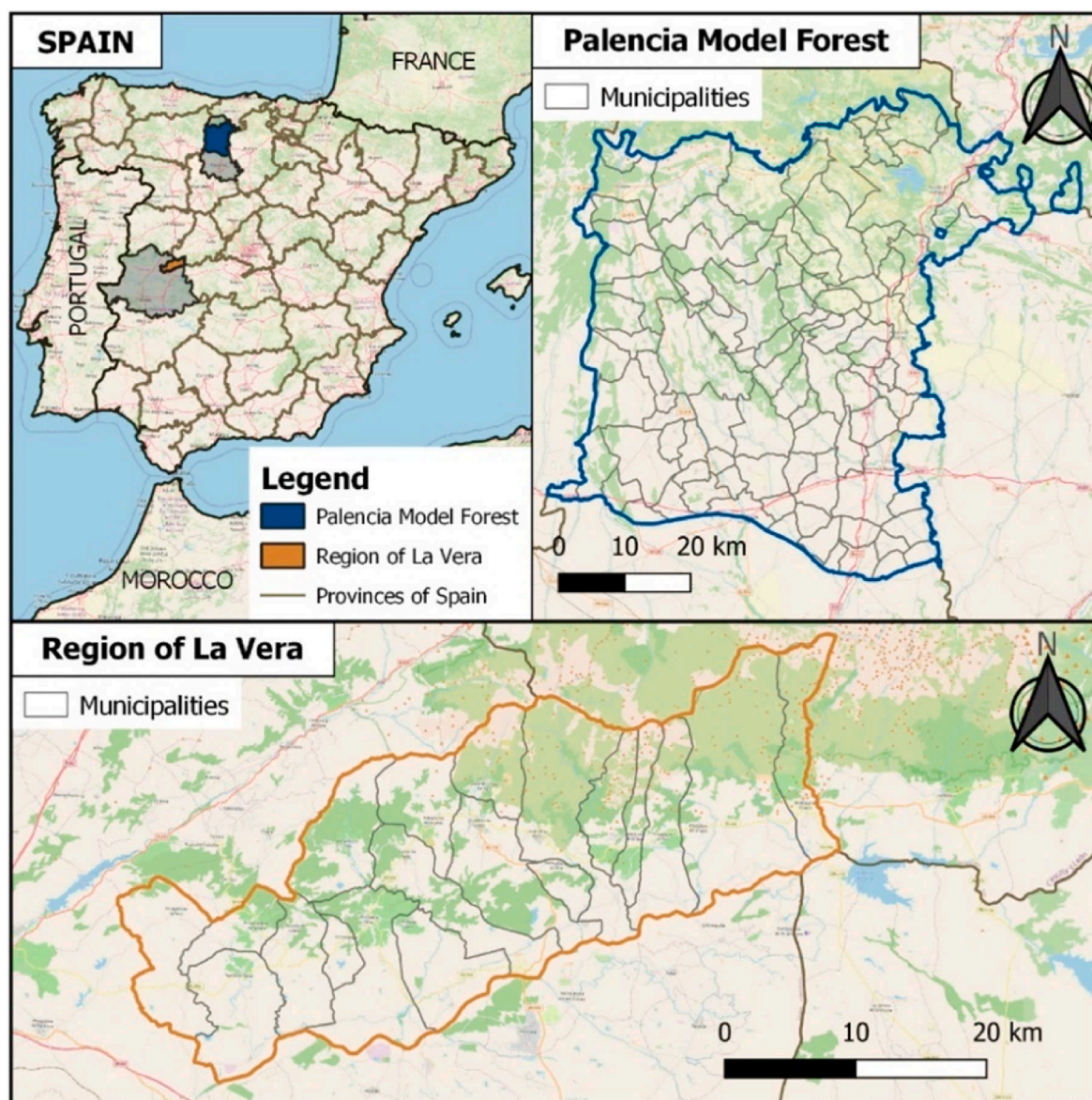


Fig. 1. Study area.

**Table 1**  
Participants in the interviews.

Palencia Model Forest		La Vera Region	
Name	Age	Name	Age
Sara	28	Rocío	27
Andrea	23	Pilar	31
Berta	27	Alba	33
Silvia	34	Carla	39
María	35	Irene	36
Fernando	30	Víctor	27
Marta	27	Sergio	25
José	27	Benito	35

The semi-structured interviews are based on a pre-established script, but at the same time they allow a certain flexibility in the topics addressed, adapting to the reality of each participant (Stake, 2005). In general, interviewees were asked about their motivations for migrating to the city and their experiences there, their expectations and motivations for returning, their social ties in the city, their relationship with the natural environment, the difficulties or opportunities they encountered

in returning, their current employment situation, and their future prospects. The interviews lasted between 30 and 80 min and were recorded and transcribed to facilitate later analysis of the data and increase the reliability of the research (Lincoln and Guba, 1986). The place and time of the interviews were chosen in order to promote the participants' comfort and the expression of open narratives.

The study was always conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. On this basis, an informed consent document was prepared and signed by the participants before data collection began. These data were then processed by the research team in accordance with the principles of respect, anonymity, and confidentiality that govern all social research, assigning a pseudonym to each participant. In turn, these practices comply with Organic Law 3/2018, of December 5, on the Protection of Personal Data and the Guarantee of Digital Rights.

#### 2.4. Data coding and analysis

The qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti was used for data analysis and coding. This program was used to facilitate thematic

content analysis (Libarkin and Kurdziel, 2002) based on the identification of patterns in the text. Thus, the transcribed discourse of the participants was first read in sequence by the researchers to analyze the content of the interviews. This allowed the identification of discursive patterns, which were later used to elaborate the categories and subcategories of analysis (see Fig. 2). Finally, fragments of the participants' discourse were selected as evidence for each category. The relevant evidence to illustrate these categories, which in turn allowed the elaboration of the research results and their discussion.

### 3. Results and discussion

Based on the categories established in the data analysis process, the results are organized around the following elements: (1) the meanings of place that form the basis of young people's affective ties to their territories, (2) the structural and symbolic urbanormative conditioning factors that underlie young people's mobility to urban areas, and (3) the ways in which return reconfigures the meanings of rurality and the affective ambivalences that can arise in the process.

#### 3.1. Place attachment and rurality: the village as a refuge

The analysis of the participants' narratives has revealed an important level of attachment to their rural localities. As found in previous studies (Berg, 2020; Bernsen et al., 2022), social relationships, especially those with family and friends, are reported as the main basis of returnees' place attachment:

*"Mostly I like to have people close to me, that is, people with whom I have a strong bond nearby, like my family and friends, most of whom are here"* (José, 27 years old).

*"Of all the things I value most about living in a town, it's like you always feel ... there being a lot more people in a city, I feel much more welcomed or protected here"* (Sara, 28 years old).

These relationships are a fundamental part of the return decision, justifying it despite economic factors (Simões et al., 2020), such as the scarce opportunities for skilled employment offered by the rural environment (Orduña et al., 2022). Thus, the family not only provides social and emotional benefits, but also offers significant material support. In a context characterized by the scarcity of rental housing (Morales-Prieto, 2017), the possibility of temporarily staying in the family home becomes a key factor in enabling return migration (Stockdale and Ferguson, 2020):

*"Once you come to the village, if you have a family house, it's much easier than having to rent a house ... It's the problematic issue in the villages, the issue of renting"* (Benito, 35 years old).

In this context, the idea of the village as a refuge emerges as a key narrative. Return is not only a geographical movement, but also a symbolic one, representing the search for emotional, social, and material security (Camarero et al., 2023). Mobility plays a central role in the construction of such meanings. These are not exclusively sustained by the internal qualities of the rural context (Devine-Wright et al., 2020; Di Masso et al., 2019; Gustafson, 2001) but are constituted in relation to the social meanings of the urban. In this case, the experiences lived in the countryside and the city are interpreted in a dichotomous key, associating the rural with security and stability and juxtaposing these meanings with the instability and vulnerability associated with the urban in the migration process (Turpeinen, 2019):

*"Yes, you do feel that sense of refuge, because your family is there, and you know that ... And on top of that, when you're in the city, you know you always have to make a living"* (Sergio, 25 years old).

On the other hand, in line with previous studies conducted in diverse rural contexts—such as Vietnam (Beckwith et al., 2023) and Chile (Rodríguez-Díaz et al., 2022)—the natural environment emerges as a fundamental component of young people's connection to rural areas. Specifically, participants' narratives associate nature with meanings such as tranquility and quality of life (Berg, 2020):

*"Nature also makes the environment more beautiful and makes you like it more .... When I go to a flat place, I feel strange"* (Carla, 39 years old).

*"When I go for a walk in the countryside, when I go out in a place that I really feel is nature, I feel that I really unload. I feel that I really disconnect"* (Sergio, 25 years old).

That is, the community and the landscape (Rodríguez-Díaz et al., 2022; Simões et al., 2020, 2021) become fundamental anchors for the young people of the territory, which together give shape to the notion of the village as a refuge, identified in these results as one of the core meanings most shared by the rural youth of both territories. On the other hand, the problems of the rural environment give rise to a series of material and symbolic conditioning factors that shape young people's bonds with the territory and influence their satisfaction with the return, as shown below.

#### 3.2. Mobility imperative and rural "nothingness"

Thus, factors generating ambivalences in the participants' place attachment are also identified. These should be analyzed as part of the urbanormative paradigm (Fulkerson and Thomas, 2019; Steel, 2008), in which there is not only a dichotomous but also a hierarchical relationship between the rural and the urban. In this context, the education system appears as the main lever for the displacement of rural youth, reproducing urbanormative values and the imperative of mobility (Farrugia, 2016):

*"It strikes me very much that a child here doesn't know how to differentiate a fig tree from an olive tree, or from an apple tree ... It's as if you are raised in a town with your back to the town ... So, I think it's very important to feel that living in a town doesn't make you inferior, but that the village has its own richness, which is different"* (Carla, 39 years old).

In this way, the educational system begins to generate a detachment of people from their territories from the very beginning of their education, prioritizing urban-centric knowledge that is alien to the local context (Beach et al., 2019). In addition, the very structure of the educational system generates a mobility imperative, due to the concentration of higher education centers in cities (Castle and Grant, 2023; González-Fernández et al., 2022). This factor appears in the interviews as the main trigger for rural-urban migration:

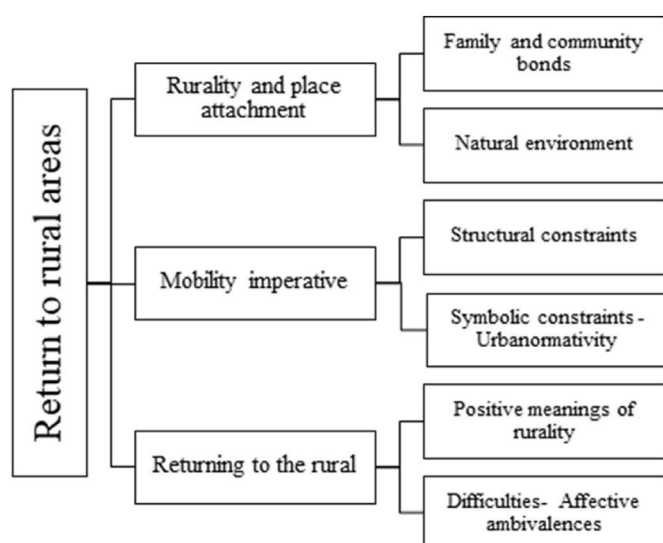


Fig. 2. Categories and subcategories of analysis.



*"Most of them went to study abroad and then found their jobs and so on and did not return to the village ... They have already made their lives; they come during vacation periods, but there are few who decide to stay and live in the village"* (Benito, 35 years old).

Once they have completed their studies, access to skilled employment is one of the main perceived difficulties for their return, due to the small size of rural labor markets (Orduña et al., 2022):

*"Most of them [left] when they finished studying. The thing is, here you've only got the same few options for work, so most of them left ... People my age, maybe there are 10 of us, and more than half have left [the village]"* (Irene, 36 years old).

But this perceived lack of opportunities is not only grounded in the socio-economic reality of rural areas (González-Fernández et al., 2023) but also in the meanings that link rurality with professional and personal failure (Castle and Grant, 2023; Nartova and Krupets, 2019). In other words, efforts to stay or return are challenged by the very notion of depopulation and the absence of opportunities. This gives rise to a second set of meanings that associate the village with the idea of nothingness, a theme that has been repeatedly reflected in the interviews:

*"I think there's sometimes this idea that we don't do anything here, like we're isolated"* (Sara, 28 years old).

*"Of course, you miss a lot of things. Especially because you go from having 'everything' to having nothing. In quotes, because my everything is here. But my 'nothing' is here too"* (Irene, 36 years old).

In line with Cruz's study (2006), the meanings attached to rurality remain heavily shaped by perceptions of scarcity, which obscure the existing opportunities and resources available to young people, who use urban lifestyle models as their point of comparison. These meanings contribute to a vicious cycle that perpetuates the structural and material challenges of rural areas: young people emigrate because they perceive rural life as limiting their personal growth (Haartsen and Thissen, 2014), which further exacerbates depopulation and hinders the emergence of new opportunities in these regions (González-Fernández et al., 2023). Moreover, the depopulation itself, along with the associated over-aging of the population, constitutes a significant part of the perceived shortcomings of rural life, negatively impacting young people's sense of place attachment. In this sense, the importance of social ties in shaping place attachment (Simões et al., 2021) has a double-edged effect. In socially depleted contexts caused by depopulation, the absence of friendships in the area heavily influences the lives of rural youth:

*"I think it's a social issue—if there's a group that stays, then in the end, those who want to stay will stay. But if you don't have that group, even if you want to stay, it becomes much harder ..."* (Fernando, 30 years old).

*"The biggest difficulties I face are personal, in the sense that my ... almost all of my group doesn't live here"* (Carla, 39 years old).

In this way, it is reiterated that social ties are a key component of place attachment (Bernsen et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Díaz et al., 2022), although in this case, it is confirmed by the absence of such ties. On the other hand, the results reveal a particularity in the case of women, as social ties, especially family ties, impose a series of demands on them related to the care of others:

*"When you leave, you create a new social circle and live your life the way you really want to. No one conditions you ... They're not going to tell you to help them with this or that"* (Irene, 36 years old).

*"When I come here, it's true that I'm ... quite an important pillar for both my mother and my father"* (Irene, 36 years old).

Thus, Irene's case illustrates a dual process, where women show a greater tendency to migrate to urban areas, partly due to the constraints of the patriarchal system (Camarero, 2022; Cruz, 2006; Jóhannesdóttir and Skaptadóttir, 2023), but also a greater tendency to return, due to

their responsibilities as family caregivers (Simões et al., 2020; Sowl et al., 2022).

### 3.3. Returning to the rural: challenges and ambivalences

On the other hand, the results highlight a variety of conditioning factors that derive specifically from the condition of returnees. In line with other studies (Matysiak, 2022; Pedersen and Therkelsen, 2022), the participants' discourse reflects a revision of the rural based on the experiences lived during their stay in urban contexts, which generates new lifestyle expectations. That is, by taking the city as a comparative referent (Cruz, 2006), perceptions of rural deficiencies are accentuated. These shortcomings refer primarily to the reduced social fabric in rural areas, which translates into difficulties in meeting new and different people, as well as greater social control than in the city:

*"I miss, well ... leaving home and not feeling like a thousand eyes are watching me ... the ease of meeting more people"* (Sergio, 25 years old).

In addition, participants highlight the lack of leisure alternatives as one of the main shortcomings for local youth. This becomes particularly important when considering that, as Castle and Grant (2023) note, youth is socially constructed as an essentially urban subjectivity in which the normative model of leisure based on consumption becomes a fundamental axis of youth social desirability:

*"She comes to see her mother and says, 'I lack that freedom, if I want sushi, if I want to go to the gym ...' as in saying, 'I feel like one thing, and I have it.' Here he doesn't have it. So, well, each one of us creates our own needs"* (Irene, 36 years old).

*"We have the idea that in the villages we don't have access [to leisure activities and services], that there is nothing here. And it is not true. Even where there is [in the city], do you use it? What good does it do you to have so many resources?"* (Carla, 39 years).

Thus, the interviewees report a series of needs perceived by rural youth that result from the urban-rural comparison and that translate into an idealization of urban life models and an undervaluation and invisibility of the opportunities that exist in the rural environment. Moreover, these meanings associated with rurality involve linking the return to the village with the idea of failure (Haartsen and Thissen, 2014). In this sense, participants express a "forced" reconfiguration of their life project (Pereira and Cruz-Souza, 2020), due to the impossibility of articulating personal interests with the opportunities offered by the city:

*"He decided to return because he started having problems with sick leave. He said, 'I'll go back and recover'"* (Sergio, 25 years old).

*"With the pandemic I decided to go back because I was fed up with bouncing around everywhere, moving all the time ... I knew that the emotional headquarters was in my village"* (Victor, 27 years old).

In this way, the idea of "emotional headquarters" expressed by Victor reinforces the concept of the village as a refuge (Camarero et al., 2023)—where factors such as health, emotional stability, and the desire for belonging play a decisive role—but also simultaneously reflects a prior failure in the expected trajectory within the urban context. As Pedersen and Therkelsen (2022) argue, the idea of returning to the village as a failure may imply a certain internal conflict as well as a renegotiation of their position in relation to other members of the community. This new position also derives from the effect of the city and formal studies as status assigners, which produce a certain social distinction between the young people who emigrated and those who remained in the village:

*"I have the feeling that the people in town who have not left here ... They have limited themselves and fallen behind a lot. It is very noticeable who has left and who hasn't"* (Marta, 27 years old).

“Yes, of course, I have lost friendships because of that. It’s ridiculous: “you’ve changed”, “you don’t come here as much”” (Berta, 27 years old).

Thus, a process of mutual alterization takes place in which young people who remained in the rural environment are perceived by returnees as bearers of inferior symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984) and are associated with more traditional or conservative ways of life. In turn, those who have returned may be seen as “less rural” due to their migratory experience and the partial internalization of urban values (Matysiak, 2022; Pedersen and Therkelsen, 2022). This identity ambivalence is shaped by the reference group and the context: while their rural identity is weakened in relation to those who never migrated, it tends to be reinforced in interaction with urban individuals. In other words, the place identity adopted by returning youth is not fixed (Devine-Wright et al., 2020; Di Masso et al., 2019), but shifts within the symbolic hierarchy between the urban and the rural. This tension is clearly expressed in the accounts of those who experienced stigmatization in urban contexts or by urban tourists within the rural setting:

“The thing about the city, I felt really overwhelmed ... And you come from a village, a mountain village, and you explain where you’re from, and you’re already a “cateta” [a Spanish derogatory term meaning a hick or unsophisticated person]” (Marta, 27 years old).

“And we see it here with people who come—kids or people who emigrated abroad, to the Basque Country or France—when they return to the village, there’s a ... they look down on you” (Carla, 39 years old).

This same defense of rural identity, present in most of the participants, articulates a discourse of resistance that narrates the return as a personal bet. Returning to the village is therefore a choice that is aware of the difficulties of rural life, such as the lack of skilled employment (Orduña et al., 2022), and that deserves to be recognized for its importance for the territory and for society as a whole:

“I don’t think my friends have doubted it either. They haven’t thought about going somewhere else to work in what they have studied; sometimes it’s surprising, but that’s how it is” (Sara, 28 years old).

“It is a personal bet, a life project ... The life project is to be able to have the career path you want, right? Not having to leave it, but at the same time harmonizing it with being able to live in your town” (Carla, 36 years old).

Thus, while some participants conceive return as something temporary, for others it represents a long-term life project. These projects are supported by the growing positive meanings associated with rurality, such as community, tranquility, security, or contact with nature (Berg, 2020; Haartsen and Thissen, 2014). From a gender perspective, this has specific implications for women, due to the identification of rural spaces as suitable environments for motherhood (Berg, 2020), which continues to play a more prominent role in women’s life projects (Pereira and Cruz-Souza, 2020):

“Of course, I would like to raise my children in a village ... I think it’s a much healthier lifestyle and much cooler ... I think the children grow up much happier, and you make stronger friendships” (Marta, 27 years old).

The discourse of the returnees interviewed is encouraging, as it not only identifies a growing positive meaning of the rural (Baylina et al., 2019; Berg, 2020) but also discourses that highlight their strengths and potential opportunities for engagement in the improvement of territories, as well as possible strengths and opportunities for the future of the rural environment:

“My town has given me the person I am now. I think the character of the people of my town is one of the nicest I have ever met. A people who are super open, super understanding, super progressive, a people who are not

afraid of change or evolution but who are very clear about their roots and value them and show them ... I am in love with my town” (Victor, 27 years old).

Thus, in line with other studies, attachment to place is positively related (Berroeta et al., 2017; Cruz and García-Bengochea, 2020; Storie et al., 2019) to attitudes of commitment to socioeconomic improvement and protection of the natural environment. In addition, the respondents identify important potentials in the territory, with a vision of the territory that, although aware of the difficulties and problems, holds some hope for the future.

#### 4. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to analyze the return experiences of rural youth, focusing on their affective ties to their territories, as well as the meanings of rurality that intersect and shape them. To this end, a qualitative methodology was applied, which, through in-depth interviews with 16 young people, made it possible to analyze the complexity of their attachment to place.

The findings highlight the central role of mobility (Di Masso et al., 2019) in shaping young people’s affective bonds with rural places, particularly through the interplay between urban and rural experiences. Rather than suggesting that meanings attributed to rurality are constructed solely in contrast to the city, the data show that urban experiences often act as a lens through which the benefits of rural life are recognized or revalued. This leads to the identification of a first core meaning: the village as refuge. This representation is based on the stability and emotional support provided by community ties, family networks, and the natural environment (Beckwith et al., 2023; Bernsen et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Díaz et al., 2022; Stockdale and Ferguson, 2020; Storie et al., 2019). Rather than being a reaction against the city, this positive evaluation of rural places often emerges during the time spent away. The emotional security and everyday wellbeing associated with rurality reveals a strong attachment to place among rural youth, increasingly sustained by positive and meaningful representations of rural life (Berg, 2020; Cruz and García-Bengochea, 2020).

At the same time, the study identifies ambivalent emotions toward the rural environment that are closely tied to the internalization of urban-centered norms and expectations, approached here through the lens of urban normativity (Fulkerson and Thomas, 2019). Structural inequalities—such as the metrocentric orientation of the education system (Beach et al., 2019; Castle and Grant, 2023), the scarcity of skilled employment (Orduña et al., 2022), or the limited availability of services and leisure (Camarero et al., 2023)—contribute to a second core meaning: rural nothingness. This symbolic association of the rural with absence (of facilities, services, opportunities, people, etc.) reinforces the imperative of mobility by linking personal development and success to the urban world. In this way, urban lifestyles are taken as a reference point, and the opportunities that do exist in rural areas are rendered invisible, weakening the conditions necessary for social and economic revitalization.

In addition, the analysis reveals specific ambivalences related to the return process. While returning is generally motivated by positive factors—such as health, emotional stability, or a desire for belonging—many returnees also experience tensions derived from the partial internalization of urban values during their time away. These tensions generate symbolic distinctions between returnees and those who never left, placing them within a fluid urban–rural hierarchy (Matysiak, 2022; Pedersen and Therkelsen, 2022). At the same time, rural identity can be reinforced in contrast to interactions with urban visitors, suggesting that these identities are dynamic and relational, shifting according to context and reference group (Devine-Wright et al., 2020; Di Masso et al., 2019).

Despite these complexities, most participants narrate their return as a conscious personal choice: a decision made in full awareness of the

challenges, but also of the value of contributing to the revitalization of rural areas. These narratives reflect not just individual strategies of adaptation, but also a discourse of resistance to urban-centered ideals. In doing so, they help re-signify rurality as a space of possibility, care, and resilience, reinforcing the growing presence of positive rural imaginaries (Berg, 2020; Cruz and García-Bengochea, 2020). This revaluation of return migration, understood as both a personal and political act, is encouraging. It suggests that rural youth are not merely reacting to structural limitations but are actively building meaningful futures in and for their communities. Future research should explore the long-term trajectories of these returnees, their role in community transformation, and the structural changes needed to support their aspirations.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Alba Carrasco-Cruz:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Fátima Cruz-Souza:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis.

### Ethical considerations and consent to participate

This study was conducted in full compliance with the ethical standards outlined in the World Medical Association's Declaration of Helsinki. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation, and their identities were anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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