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Descriptive Finding

**Leaving and returning to the parental home
during COVID times in France, Italy, Germany,
Spain, and the United Kingdom**

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Leaving and returning to the parental home during COVID times in France, Italy, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

During the first year of the COVID pandemic, many European young adults abandoned or delayed their plans to achieve housing autonomy, especially those facing vulnerable employment conditions and in contexts with limited welfare state provision for the young population.

OBJECTIVE

The present study contributes to this body of knowledge by examining plans and behaviours associated with leaving the parental home among young individuals (aged 18 to 34) in five European countries, more than one year after the onset of the epidemic at the beginning of 2020.

METHOD

Drawing on data from two waves of a cross-sectional survey conducted in May and November 2021 as part of the Youth Project, we investigate the various ways in which the living arrangements of young individuals, such as exiting or returning to the parental home, have evolved in response to the pandemic, in alignment with or in contrast to their pre-pandemic intentions. To achieve this, we employ both multinomial and logit models.

RESULTS

We find that the subjective perception of economic vulnerability during the ongoing recession continues to have a negative impact on the intention to obtain or maintain housing autonomy, especially in Italy and Spain.

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CONTRIBUTION

We demonstrate a persistent disadvantage in achieving housing autonomy during the COVID era among young people in Italy and Spain, and to a lesser extent in the United Kingdom, compared to their German and French counterparts. Our results, based on both intentions and behaviours, are more robust than those in previous studies. Additionally, we explore ‘boomerang’ trajectories, i.e., instances of returning to the parental home during the crisis.

1. Introduction

In affluent societies, the advance of the COVID-19 pandemic and the related social and economic crisis has affected the timing of the transition to adulthood. The effect has generally been negative, driven by the economic recession that arose due to containment measures negatively impacting life plans (e.g., Luppi and Rosina 2020). Regarding plans to leave the parental home, early evidence shows that expecting and experiencing economic hardship due to the recession are associated with a higher probability of suspending the pre-pandemic intention to leave, especially among young Italians (Luppi, Rosina, and Sironi 2021). Delays in wedding plans might have further accentuated the postponement of leaving behaviours, a trend that was already in place in the pre-COVID period, especially in southern Europe (e.g., Aassve, Cottini, and Vitali 2013; Sironi 2018; Sironi and Rosina 2016; Vignoli, Tocchioni, and Salvini 2016).

Our study builds on the results of Luppi, Rosina, and Sironi (2021). By using data from two waves of a cross-sectional survey of the Youth Project, conducted in May and November 2021, we explore the various ways in which the living configurations of young individuals changed between before the onset of the pandemic and more than one year later (i.e., moving to live alone or with a partner, moving back to the parental home, remaining in the pre-pandemic situation), in accordance with or despite pre-pandemic intentions. We explore whether matching pre-pandemic intentions with behaviours offers a unique insight into those who did not leave the parental home. This is a heterogeneous group where at least three categories converge: those who would not have left their parents’ house even in the absence of a pandemic; those who would have left in the absence of a pandemic, even if they had no plans to do so in 2020; and those who would have left if there had not been a pandemic because they had already decided to do so in 2020. The last two groups might be more similar in terms of vulnerability to the crisis. While we can only detect the latter, exploring the factors associated with the probability of abandoning the pre-pandemic intention to leave can shed light on the most exposed component of the young population, those who are financially vulnerable. Similarly,

those who decided to exit during the pandemic, even without having had a pre-COVID plan, might be qualitatively different – e.g., less financially vulnerable – than those who exited with a previous plan. Heterogeneity in these paths is explored based on the socioeconomic characteristics of the individuals, their occupational and financial vulnerabilities, and through a country-by-country comparison of Italian, French, German, Spanish, and British young populations. These five countries have different pre-pandemic backgrounds in terms of typical paths and timing towards the transition to adulthood (Schwanitz, Mulder, and Toulemon 2017). Heterogeneity across countries has been accentuated by the fact that the restrictions to contain the spread of the virus differed in strength and timing. Cross-country differences have already been found with respect to 2020, the year the COVID-19 pandemic began (Luppi, Rosina, and Sironi 2021): young people in Mediterranean countries and the United Kingdom were more prone to suspend the intention of leaving due to economic hardship. We explore whether intentions matched behaviours one year later and if they were associated with perceived or experienced economic and occupational vulnerability.

2. Data and sample distribution

We utilized data from two international surveys conducted by the Youth Project of the Toniolo Institute, carried out in April/May and October/November 2021. These surveys focused on quota samples of the young population aged 18 to 34 in Italy, France, Spain, Germany, and the United Kingdom. For each wave there were 2000 respondents in Italy and 1000 for each of the other countries. Quotas were calculated based on various sociodemographic characteristics, including gender, age group, occupational status, macro-region of residence, educational level, and size of municipality, ensuring that the sample is representative of the country young population. Corresponding weights were applied to all analyses.

To investigate leaving behaviours, we concentrated on two analytical subsamples:

1. Young people who had already left the parental home in the pre-pandemic period, allowing us to contrast those who remained living outside the family of origin during the COVID crisis with those who returned to the parental home.
2. Young people living with their family of origin in the pre-pandemic period, in order to study the likelihood of leaving the nest during the pandemic.

Leaving behaviour was indirectly determined using information about household composition in January 2020 and at the date of interview. Individuals declaring to be living with at least one of their parents (more rarely with grandparents, hence the

interchangeable use of ‘family of origin’ and ‘parental home’) were considered as living with the family of origin. Those living alone, with a partner, or with peers were considered as living outside the family of origin. The resulting four combinations are presented in Table 1. Notably, those leaving the parental home with a partner, either for marriage or cohabitation, constituted about one-third of those who left during the observation period (127 out of 365 cases).

Questions about pre-pandemic intentions to leave the family of origin were asked retrospectively, referring to plans in January 2020. Further questions were asked exclusively to those who indicated having had a plan to leave in the following 12 months (excluding those who stated they had no pre-pandemic plans to leave). These individuals were asked whether they had realized, postponed, or abandoned the original plan. This information was then cross-referenced with leaving behaviours. Among those who left the parental home (subsample 2 in Table 1), we distinguished between those who left according to a pre-pandemic plan and those who left without a pre-pandemic plan (i.e., those who first decided to leave during the pandemic). Among those who remained living with their family of origin, a similar distinction was made between those who abandoned or postponed their original plan (i.e., those who remained living with their family despite the pre-COVID intention to leave) and those who remained who had had no leaving plans in the pre-pandemic period. The ‘abandoning’ category included those who had originally planned to leave but had not realized it yet, effectively resulting in a postponement behaviour.

To identify patterns associated with different leaving behaviours, we considered both objective and subjective indicators of economic vulnerability, along with standard sociodemographic individual features. Regarding economic vulnerability, the subjective indicator is reflected in perceived financial vulnerability, assessed through the question: Looking to the future, do you think the current coronavirus emergency will have a positive or negative impact on your income? There are five possible answers, ranging from ‘very negative’ to ‘very positive’. The two negative responses were collapsed and contrasted with an alternative category summarizing the other three options, the neutral option and the two positive options. An objective indicator of vulnerability is represented by employment conditions at the time of interview, categorized as Students (in full-time education) and Neets (neither in employment nor in education, encompassing both unemployed and inactive individuals); Managers, Professionals, and Self-employed (subject to entrepreneurial risk); Employees (both fixed-term and permanent); Temporary and Casual workers (contracts with no specific end-time, generally more vulnerable to unemployment risk).

Other individual features considered include age (in three categories: 18–24, 25–29, 30–34), gender, and holding a tertiary education. Additionally, we controlled for the

survey wave, as the waves occurred under different pandemic circumstances, with more containment restrictions during the first wave and fewer during the second wave.

Table 1: Leaving behaviours and their accordance with pre-pandemic intentions to leave (frequencies are not weighted)

	Italy	UK	Germany	France	Spain	Total
Subsample 1 – People living outside the family of origin in pre-pandemic period: boomerang behaviour						
Remain outside family during pandemic	1,594	1,270	1,453	1,355	967	6,639
%	82.93	90.46	93.38	91.74	86.80	88.84
Return to family during pandemic	328	134	103	122	147	834
%	17.07	9.54	6.62	8.26	13.20	11.16
<i>Sub-total</i>	<i>1,922</i>	<i>1,404</i>	<i>1,556</i>	<i>1,477</i>	<i>1,114</i>	<i>7,473</i>
	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>
Subsample 2 – People living with family of origin in pre-pandemic period: leaving behaviours and pre-pandemic intentions						
Stay despite a pre-COVID plan to leave	732	165	116	186	298	1,497
%	35.21	27.68	26.13	35.56	33.63	33.06
Stay without a pre-COVID plan to leave	1,225	358	283	295	505	2,666
%	58.92	60.07	63.74	56.41	57	58.88
Exit according to pre-COVID plan to leave	58	37	10	20	49	174
%	2.79	6.21	2.25	3.82	5.53	3.84
Exit without a pre-COVID plan to leave	64	36	35	22	34	191
%	3.08	6.04	7.88	4.21	3.84	4.22
<i>Sub-total</i>	<i>2,079</i>	<i>596</i>	<i>444</i>	<i>523</i>	<i>886</i>	<i>4,528</i>
	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>
Total	4,001	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000	12,001

3. Method

Given the goal of portraying factors associated with young people's leaving plans and behaviours during the pandemic across countries, we conducted analyses using different analytical tools and sub-samples:

1. Multinomial logit models were run on subsample 2, contrasting those who realized their original plan (whether to leave or not) with those who did not leave, in accordance or not with their pre-pandemic intentions to leave, as presented in Table 1.

2. Regarding returning behaviour, we focused on subsample 1 and ran logit models to explore the chance of returning. Subjective and objective indicators of economic and occupational vulnerability, standard sociodemographic features, and the survey wave were included as covariates.

Due to small sample sizes in some countries, those who left (or intended to leave) alone or in a couple were considered together, always controlling for the presence of a partner. When the sample size allowed, the partnership variable was interacted with the main covariates. In such cases, results were commented on in the text, with full results available upon request to the authors. Given the cross-sectional nature of our data, results from regression models must be interpreted in terms of associations.

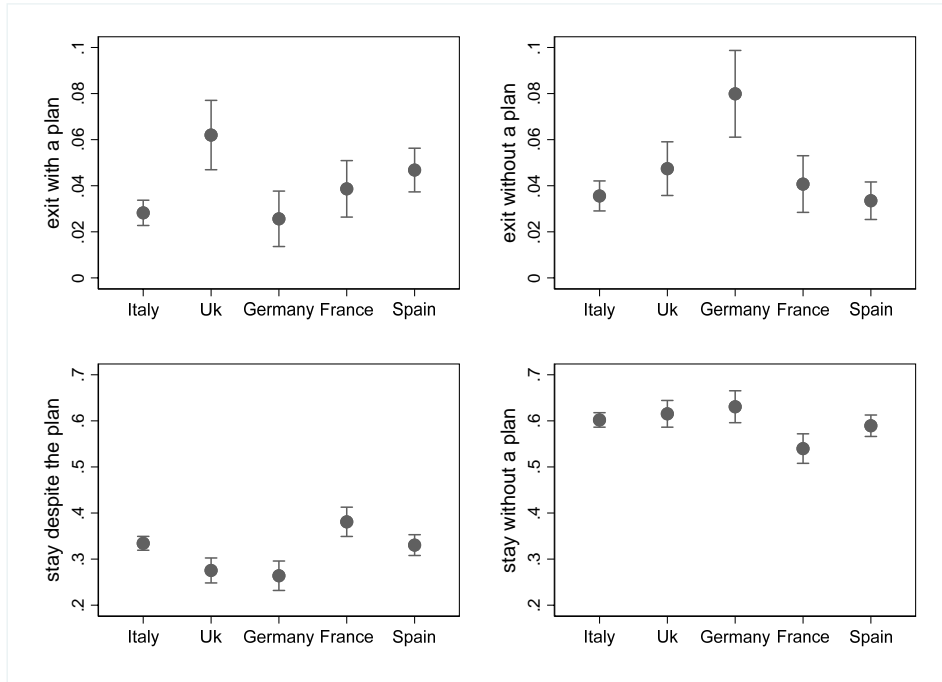
4. Results

4.1 Leaving behaviours and pre-pandemic intentions

The probability of leaving the parental home during 2021 in accordance with a pre-pandemic plan was higher in the United Kingdom (approximately 6%) than in all the other countries, and higher in Spain (4.5%) than in Italy (2.4%) and Germany (2.3%). In comparison with the other countries, Germans showed the highest probability of leaving without a pre-COVID plan (8%; Figure 1). The United Kingdom and Germany reported the lowest probability of having suspended a plan to leave, at 28% and 27% respectively, followed by 33% in Italy, 34% in Spain, and 40% in France. The probability of remaining with the family of origin without a previous plan to leave was similar across countries (around 60%), but lowest in France (55%).

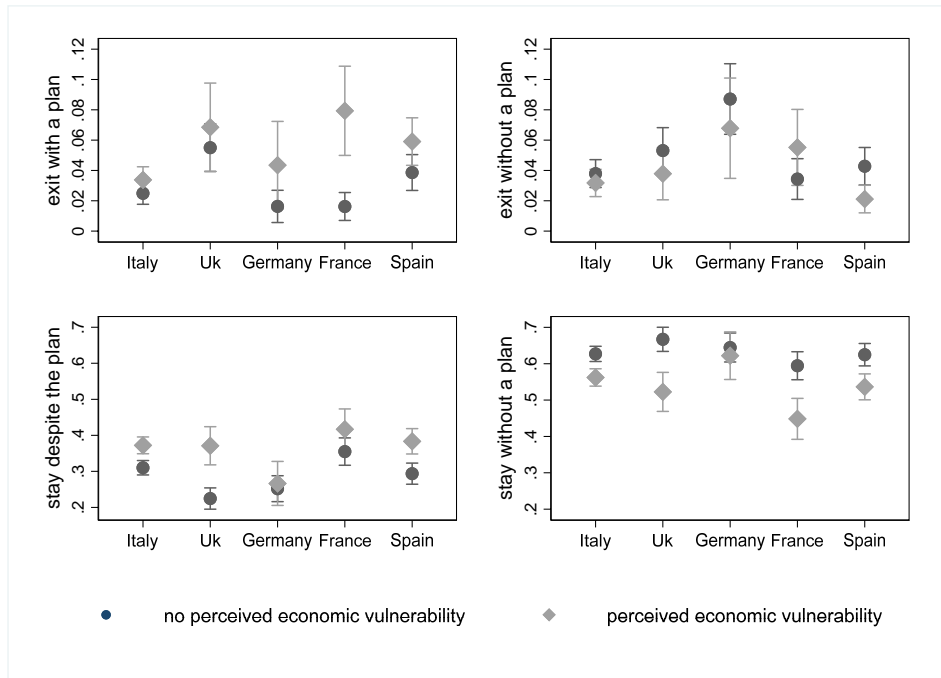
Our study reveals that perceiving economic vulnerability was associated with distinct patterns in leaving behaviour (see Figure 2). In the United Kingdom, Italy, and Spain, individuals who perceived economic vulnerability showed a higher probability (close to 40%) of remaining with their parents despite pre-pandemic plans, compared to those who did not perceive such vulnerability (about 30% in Italy and Spain, 23% in the United Kingdom). Conversely, in France, those reporting greater financial vulnerability had a higher probability of exiting according to a pre-pandemic plan than those who did not perceive financial vulnerability (8% vs. 2%).

Figure 1: Predicted probabilities of leaving the parental home by country (from multinomial logit model, controlling for age, gender, tertiary education, employment condition, romantic relationship, survey wave. Weights applied. Confidence intervals for pair-wise comparisons at the 5% significance level)



Note: The predicted probabilities are calculated averaging predictions obtained using observed values for the independent variables. Confidence intervals for pair-wise comparisons at an approximate 5% level are displayed (Goldstein and Healy 1995). A non-overlap of the confidence intervals indicates that the corresponding predictions are significantly different (MacGregor-Fors and Payton 2013).

Figure 2: Predicted probabilities of leaving the parental home for those perceiving or not perceiving economic vulnerability, by country (from multinomial logit model, controlling for age, gender, tertiary education, employment condition, romantic relationship, survey wave. Weights applied. Confidence intervals for pair-wise comparisons at the 5% significance level)



Note. The predicted probabilities are calculated averaging predictions obtained using observed values for the independent variables. Confidence intervals for pair-wise comparisons at an approximate 5% level are displayed (Goldstein and Healy 1995). A non-overlap of the confidence intervals indicates that the corresponding predictions are significantly different (MacGregor-Fors and Payton 2013).

No significant results were found for other covariates, except in Italy and the United Kingdom, where individuals in stable relationships had higher chances of exiting the family of origin – both with and without a plan – compared to those not in a partnership, with all control variables held constant.

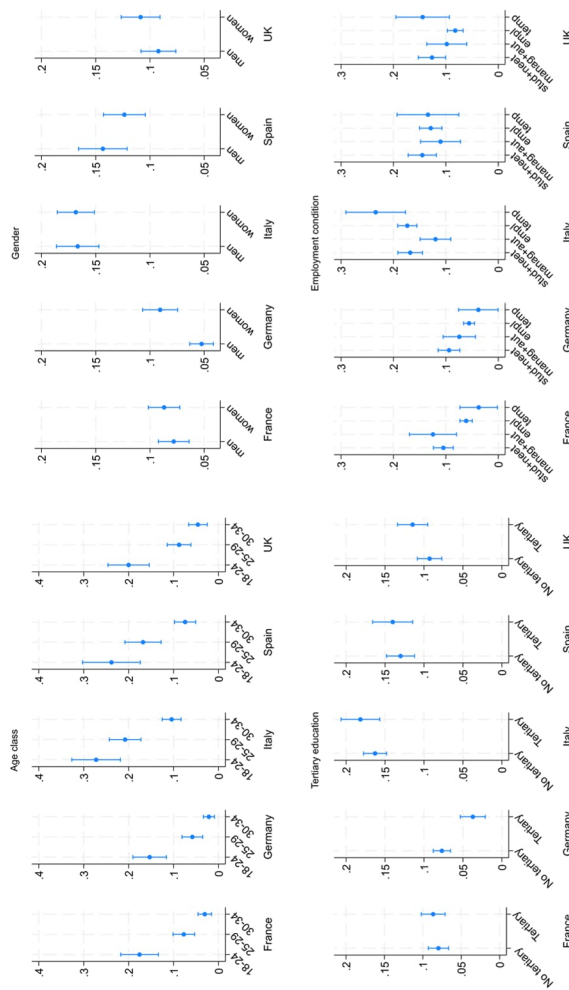
4.2 Returning to the parental home

In Italy, young people living alone before the pandemic had a 16% probability of returning to the family of origin during the first pandemic year, higher than in Spain (about 13%) and the United Kingdom (10%). In France and Germany the probability of returning to live in the family home was less than 10% (predicted probabilities from a logit model, confidence intervals at the 5% significance level).

As shown in Figure 3, the 18–24 age group had the highest probability of returning to the family home, while the 30–34 age group had the lowest. In Italy and Spain the probability of returning was higher in all age groups compared to the other countries. Those aged 25–29 had the same probability of returning as the youngest group in Italy and Spain, and as the oldest group in the other countries.

In Germany, women showed a higher probability of returning to the family of origin than men, and those holding a tertiary degree were more protected from the risk of a boomerang trajectory. Moreover, in Italy, the probability of returning was higher for temporary and casual workers, especially when compared with managers, professionals, and the self-employed. In France and Germany, students and Neets, plus autonomous workers in France, showed a higher probability of returning compared to all employees (with or without a permanent contract). In the United Kingdom, students, Neets, and temporary workers were at higher risk of returning than permanent employees. No association was found with perceiving economic vulnerability.

Figure 3: Predicted probabilities of returning to the parental home by age class, gender, having tertiary education, and employment condition, by country (from logit model, including gender, tertiary education, living with a partner, employment condition, survey wave. Weights applied. Confidence intervals for pair-wise comparisons at the 5% significance level)



Note: [1]. Labels adopted for the employment conditions: 'stud+neet' – students and neets; 'manag+aut' – managers and autonomous workers; 'empl' – employees; 'temp' – temporary and casual workers.
 [2]. The predicted probabilities are calculated by averaging predictions obtained using observed values for the independent variables. Confidence intervals for pair-wise comparisons at an approximate 5% level are displayed (Goldstein and Healy 1995). A non-overlap of the confidence intervals indicates that the corresponding predictions are significantly different (MacGregor-Fors and Payton 2013).

5. Discussion

Descriptive results from our study highlight the negative impact of the COVID crisis on leaving behaviours in 2021. Our results are more robust than those of Luppi, Rosina, and Sironi (2021), as they integrate analyses of both intentions and behaviours. Additionally, we explore ‘boomerang’ trajectories, i.e., young people returning to the parental home during the crisis. In the literature, the probability of returning has been associated with living in a country with a familialistic welfare regime (e.g., Arundel and Lennartz 2017), experiencing financial distress (e.g., Berngruber 2015), and/or a union disruption (e.g., Mazzotta and Parisi 2021).

In Mediterranean countries (including in France) the probability of both suspending leaving plans and returning to the home of the family of origin was higher than in the other countries. Although the cross-sectional nature of our data does not allow causal chain detection, the results suggest that perceived economic uncertainty was associated with suspending leaving behaviours, especially in Italy and Spain. In these countries the probability of returning to the family of origin was higher for those in the 18–24 and 25–29 age groups compared to the 30–34 group. Conversely, in other countries, only the 18–24 group reported a higher probability of a boomerang trajectory compared to the 30–34 group. Unstable positions in the labour market appear to have been associated with a higher probability of returning to the family of origin, especially in Italy, France, and the United Kingdom.

Further exploration using longitudinal data is necessary to determine whether the COVID crisis accentuated the typical postponement mechanisms behind the transition to adulthood, especially in southern European countries (Aassve, Cottini, and Vitali 2013; Sironi 2018). These sum up to the conditions that are traditionally associated with a lower propensity to undertake a full transition to adulthood; i.e., less protective transition regimes (i.e., from youth to adulthood) in terms of welfare state support and labour market performance (e.g., youth unemployment, proportion of Neets and precarious contracts) (Golsch 2003; Sironi and Rosina 2015; Vignoli, Tocchioni, and Salvini 2016). Moreover, leaving as part of a couple appears to offer some additional financial guarantees or to just be the premise for leaving the parental home *tout court* (see results for Italy and the United Kingdom).

Due to the lack of information on the number of other co-residents, further studies are needed to explore the role of the desire to escape from coresidence with many siblings or parents. Similarly, the absence of information on parents’ socioeconomic status prevents the disentanglement of its possible effects on a child’s leaving behaviours (Avery, Goldscheider, and Speare 1992; Billari, Hiekel, and Liefbroer 2019). Finally, the effect of certain factors associated with the decision to leave may have been

underestimated due to reliance on retrospective intentions, which suffer from adjustment bias (Lesthaeghe and Moors 2002). Longitudinal data might overcome this limitation.

In conclusion, our study provides evidence that the COVID crisis accentuated some vulnerabilities in acquiring autonomy from the family of origin, especially in southern European countries. This effect might add to the postponement mechanisms in the transition to adulthood that were already present in the pre-pandemic period.

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