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**Final Dissertation**

*What Makes People Stay: Exploring the Dynamic Relationship  
Between Place Attachment, Home, and Identity Among International  
Students in Padova*

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Background and context*

The UNESCO Institute of Statistics defines internationally mobile students as “individuals who have physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in the country of destination, where the country of destination of a given student is different from their country of origin” (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.). In the last two decades, the global number of international students has risen from 2 million in 2000 to over 6.4 million in 2021, with approximately 5 out of 7 students enrolled in educational programs in high-income countries (UIS, 2023). In a more localized context, the annual report provided by AlmaLaurea indicates that 13,876 international students graduated in Italy in 2023. These statistics highlight a relatively recent phenomenon within the long-standing context of migration. While these numbers are striking, there has been a notable lack of research addressing the experiences and challenges faced by this demographic.

The number of international students at the University of Padova is on the rise, as the offer of English-language courses increases. In 2022, I enrolled in a Master’s program at the University of Padova in Clinical, Social, and Intercultural Psychology. The course is conducted in English, and among the 50 students enrolled in my cohort, Italians could be counted on one hand. As my experience unfolded, many struggles were shared among students in the Psychology building – struggles to find housing, obtain residence permits, and feel welcomed, accepted, and integrated into the city. Over time, conversations shifted toward future aspirations and dream locations for living. Listening to my peers, I began to wonder about the relationships they had developed with Padova, the factors influencing these relationships, and how these could affect their intentions to stay or leave.

### *Research questions*

Defining a clear research question for this study proved challenging, as the themes explored are complex and intricately intertwined. The research centers on participants' relationships with space from various perspectives and examines how these relationships are influenced by migration. Specifically, the study draws from the concepts of home – what it means for participants to feel at home and the various locations they consider as such – and identity, including how space shapes identity and how, in turn, identity affects individuals'

interactions with their surroundings. This exploration seeks to understand how place attachment – defined as an emotional connection to a social and physical space – is developed. Furthermore, there is an intention to investigate the decision-making process underlying participants' intentions to stay in or leave their current residence. Consequently, two closely related research questions have emerged:

1. *In what ways do international students cultivate place attachment, and what factors influence this attachment?*
2. *How do international students determine whether to stay in or leave their current residence, particularly the location of their studies?*

### ***Structure and scope***

The thesis is organized into four chapters. The first chapter presents a literature review that defines key concepts used in the research – primarily place attachment, home, and identity – and situates the study within its theoretical and empirical context. The second chapter outlines the methodological foundations of the study, detailing the procedures and tools employed for data collection. In this context, the sample is described, along with the data collection process and the coding methods utilized.

The third and fourth chapters present the results derived from the data at three levels of complexity and abstraction. The third chapter begins with word frequency clouds, providing an initial analysis of the most prominent themes. Following this, co-occurrence analysis reveals early insights into the relationships between codes and themes, primarily based on numeric correlations. The fourth chapter introduces the resulting networks that illustrate the types of relationships characterizing the correlations previously identified. Throughout these analyses, extracts from interview transcripts are employed to add depth to the observations drawn from the data, and connections to the literature discussed in the first chapter are made to contextualize the study's results.

### ***Significance of the study***

This research is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the growing body of literature on international student migration, a phenomenon that has seen substantial growth in recent years. While the number of internationally mobile students has risen dramatically, there remains a scarcity of research focusing specifically on their experiences

and emotional connections to their host environments. Understanding how international students develop place attachment and navigate their identities in a new cultural context is crucial for educational institutions and policymakers aiming to enhance the support systems for these students.

Additionally, this study addresses the emotional challenges that accompany migration, offering insights into the psychological aspects of adapting to a new place. By exploring the factors that influence international students' decisions to stay or leave, the research can inform targeted interventions that foster a sense of belonging and facilitate smoother transitions for future cohorts.

Finally, the findings may serve as a valuable resource for researchers, educators, and practitioners in the fields of psychology, migration studies, and international education, ultimately contributing to the development of more inclusive and supportive academic environments for international students.

## **CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1.1 What Is the Role of Psychology in Migration Research?**

This section gives an introductory overview of the contributions and evolution of Psychology in the study of migration, highlighting key theories and approaches that have shaped the field, but also the disconnections and gaps that are nowadays present in the literature.

Migration is defined as “a permanent or semipermanent change of residence” (Lee, 1966, p. 49), or, more broadly, as the movement of a person from one location to another (Fawcett, 1985). These wide definitions include various forms of migration, regardless of the distance involved, the voluntary or involuntary nature of the move, and whether it occurs within the same country or across borders (Lee, 1966). According to Fawcett (1985), migration psychology has made significant contributions by focusing on the microlevel aspects of migration. Unlike traditional approaches, which emphasize the macroeconomy and the sociodemographic impacts of migration as an aggregate phenomenon, migration psychology centers on individual behavior and its underlying attitudes, values, perceptions and intentions. In this sense, migration psychology aims to study the relationship between the individual, the environment, and migration as a dynamic process rather than a particular event. Similarly, Schwartz (2019) describes Psychology as a middle-ground hub – a bridge between disciplines that “characterize the situation”, such as sociology and geography, which focus on broader contextual processes, and biomedical disciplines, which “treat the situation” by relying mainly on health outcomes, such as public health and social work. Psychology’s key position links linguistics, group behavior, and health, with a focus on both individuals and groups.

Now that we have briefly commented on what is the position Psychology has assumed in migrations studies, it is time to deepen our understanding of its historical contributions. Before migration was studied through the lens of social sciences, it was primarily analyzed through economic frameworks, particularly within the neoclassical economics model (Massey et al., 1993). The approach focuses on wage differentials and opportunities of employment across countries, explaining migration as a rational individual decision aimed at maximizing income. From this point of view, migration flows from low-wage to high-wage regions until wage differences equalize. At the individual level, migration is viewed as an investment in

human capital: people migrate to locations where the expected benefits, such as higher wages and job security, outweigh the costs. The likelihood and success of migration are influenced by factors like education, skills, and language abilities. However, Massey and colleagues (1993) challenge the neoclassical view by proposing the “new economics of migration”. This theory suggests that migration decisions are made by households rather than individuals. It is the family, as a unity, that weighs the benefits and costs of migration, focusing not only on higher wages but also on managing risks and assuring the family’s long term well-being.

While the neoclassical and “new economics of migration” models focus on individual or household decision making, other theories rather emphasize the structural factors that foster migration beyond personal economic interest. Dual labor market theory, developed by Michael Piore in 1979, claims migration to be primarily caused by pull factors in the receiving countries (Massey et al., 1993). In particular, it centers on the need to fill low-wage and low-status jobs which are avoided by natives in advanced industrial countries. Immigrants therefore meet employers’ demands, and the mechanism sustains ongoing migration flows. World systems theory furtherly develops the view, creating a link between migration and global economic integration. Introduced by Immanuel Wallerstein in 1974, it contends that capitalist expansion into developing countries creates a disruption in traditional economies, hence creating a mobile (forced) labor capital that migrates to wealthier nations as a consequence of globalization (Massey et al., 1993).

The economic perspective remains foundational, particularly in delineating labor flows and the broader impact of capitalism and globalization. While the field was evolving, moving beyond simplistic wage and individual-based (rational) choices to comprehend family dynamics, global market shifts and structural economic needs, these economic theories and models have laid the foundation for later psychological and social research, which take into consideration more complex motivations and outcomes. During the 1960s and 1970s, psychological perspectives started to emerge, primarily in the context of acculturation and adaptation. This line of thought, which strongly emphasizes the psychological adjustments of migrants, will be explored further in a later section on Migration and Identity. Following this shift, Psychology’s role in migration studies became more paramount, particularly with the rise of behavioral models in the 1980s. Among the most prominent scholars in the field, Fawcett (1985) suggests that the goals of migration psychology revolve around two key questions: the factors driving a person’s decision to migrate, and the psychological

consequences of settling in a new environment. The first question, in particular, leads to the exploration of motivational constructs and decision-making models.

Fawcett (1985) draws from Julian Wolpert's "Behavioral Aspects of the Decision to Migrate" (1965) to highlight the shift from macroeconomic to psychological models in migration research. Early migration studies largely lacked focus on individual motivations, and were unable to address changes in migration patterns, particularly in the US. Wolpert's influential paper introduced two key concepts: place utility, which refers to the subjective evaluation of different locations (a concept borrowed from behavioral economics), and field theory, which underscores the critical role of information in migration decisions (Lewin, 1951, as cited in Fawcett, 1985). Other scholars (e.g. Rossi, 1955, as cited in Fawcett, 1985) took a different approach by focusing on dissatisfaction as a motivator for migration, though this proposal has long been debated for its subjectivity and effectiveness.

Rossi (1955, as cited in Fawcett, 1985), along with researchers like Goldsmith and Beegle (1962, as cited in Fawcett, 1985) and Taylor (1969, as cited in Fawcett, 1985), proposed models that broke the migration decision process into stages. These studies were crucial in recognizing that the decision to move often results from deliberations over a prolonged period of time, where individuals weigh the costs and benefits of relocating. Here, migration begins to be seen as a process, rather than a particular event. Although there's a newly found interest in the individual, Taylor (1969, as cited in Fawcett, 1985) suggested that decisions should still be analyzed within a social and structural context, relating them to the existence of different types of migrants. In this frame, Ritchey (1976, as cited in Fawcett, 1985) argues that individual-level data, in particular values and attitudes, could complement the explanations provided by social-structural analyses alone. This shows an attempt to integrate multiple levels of analysis, bridging the gap between individual preferences and broader social structures – indeed the role of Psychology according to Fawcett (1985).

In his review, Fawcett (1985) also presents various psychological models. The Janis-Mann Conflict Model, applied by Haberkorn (1981, as cited in Fawcett, 1985), outlines the stages of decision-making, while Desbarats (1983, as cited in Fawcett, 1985) reflects on the constraints – both external and internal – that shape decision making. Desbarats emphasized the way objective features of the environment may restrict the influence of subjective preferences in spatial behavior. Finally, De Jong and Fawcett himself, in 1981, applied the Theory of Reasoned Action to highlight how subjective goals and the perceived

likelihood of achieving them in different places shape migration decisions, thus returning to the concept of expected utility (Fawcett, 1985).

Among the many authors mentioned, the unifying theme is the interest in decision making processes – specifically, how people choose whether to move or stay, and alternative destinations. The majority of the studies Fawcett (1985) presents use subjective data or concepts, such as attitudes, values, and intentions, distinguishing them from microeconomic decision models that would infer processes based on a posteriori observations. Interestingly enough, many of the scholars cited are not psychologists. However, the field of migration research shows a growing need to understand the role of personal preferences and lifestyle considerations, suggesting that psychologists have the potential to make important contributions to the interdisciplinary field (Fawcett, 1985).

The work of Wolpert (1965, as cited in Fawcett, 1985) changed the direction of migration research. In addition to place utility and field theory, he also introduced the life-cycle approach, which upholds that decisions about migration evolve over time as a function of life cycle stages and socio-economic factors. Therefore, the life stage where one is at in the adult development process impacts the choice to migrate. Migration itself can be understood as a life transition, influenced – positively or negatively – by numerous variables, including health, financial resources, and social support (Schlossberg, 1981, as cited in Robinson, 2020). In the field of adult development, the work of Jeffrey Arnett stands out. In 2000, Arnett introduced the life stage of emerging adulthood, which affects individuals aged between 18 and 30 years old, and is mainly found in affluent post-industrial countries as a result of social and demographic changes such as higher university participation rates, delayed marriage and delayed parenthood. As a result, young adults now have more options to explore and be “footloose” compared to previous generations, leading to increased opportunities for travel and migration (Robinson, 2020). Compared to economic approaches that focus on the practical, survival-based benefits of migration, such as financial stability and employment, the developmental perspective shifts attention to the psychological features that influence migration decisions. Emerging adulthood, although not specific to migrants, provides valuable insights into the psychological features of this life stage. Arnett (2014, as cited in Robinson, 2020), in particular, proposes five characteristics: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibility/optimism. Two of these characteristics, identity exploration and instability, are particularly relevant to migration. Identity exploration involves physical and mental autonomy, with many young adults choosing to travel as a means of

“finding themselves” through new life experiences. Instability, rooted in frequent changes to residence, relationships and career taking place prior to settling down, reflects the exploratory nature of this life stage. It is significant to note that the peak age for immigrants into the EU is 25 (Eurostat, 2019, as cited in Robinson, 2020), illustrating how young adults are often the ones making residential moves between countries.

Arnett’s (2014, as cited in Robinson, 2020) work, although vanguard, was developed in Western cultures, and even within those cultures, heterogeneity is a defining characteristic. Socioeconomic status and cultural background strongly influence attitudes towards adulthood and shape access to exploration and migration opportunities. Hendry and Kloep (2007, as cited in Robinson, 2020) identify this “ethnocentric specificity” as a major drawback in the theory, which is a common limitation in many developmental models based on middle-class Western samples. In response, Arnett (2014, as cited in Robinson, 2020) emphasizes the importance of contextualizing these models within their biopsychosocial context. He argues that life stages and transitions are fluid and responsive to historical and social changes, making them adaptable rather than universally fixed. Further supporting the idea that life stages are not universal, Neugarten, Moore and Lowe (1968, as cited in Robinson, 2020) observed a growing tendency in Western cultures for non-normative adult life course patterns. The shift toward more individualized paths foreshadowed the increasing role of individual choice in shaping adult development, beyond the constraints of traditional life stages.

In the previous paragraphs, the numerous theories, models and perspectives described showed the multiplicity of dimensions available to study migration. No single approach is superior to another, as each offers a unique and enriching perspective that has contributed to the development of the research field and, more specifically, to this project. We now turn to the last area of interest – emotions – described by Boccagni and Baldassar (2015) as an “emerging field”. The authors provide a deep analysis of the role of emotions in every step of the migration process, including the decision to migrate, the experience itself, and the subsequent phases of adaptation and integration in the destination country.

Boccagni and Baldassar (2015) describe the study of emotions in migration as a cross-disciplinary field of interest, intersecting psychology, sociology, anthropology and geography, similarly to what Schwartz (2019) later did. While defining emotions goes beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is crucial to underscore their relational nature; particularly, emotions are formed through relationships, whether intrapersonal (“corporeally embodied”)

or interpersonal (“socially embedded”) (Barbalet, 2002, as cited in Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015). In addition to these relational aspects, emotions are also a matter of culture, or, in other words, the embodiment of cultural ideas (De Leersnyder et al., 2011, as cited in Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015). What is considered an appropriate way of feeling and expressing them is determined by societal norms and traditions that are also culturally embedded (Peterson, 2006, as cited in Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015). Migrants inevitably encounter different emotional expressions throughout their lives, which, according to some dominant theories of adaptation and integration, may lead to a gradual loss of identification with the native culture in favor of the destination culture(s). As a result, identity and belonging fluctuate towards the destination culture orientation (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015). However, this binarism is intrinsically problematic as it oversimplifies the complexity of the migrant’s journey. Studying migration through the lens of emotions allows to “deliver a more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of immigrant integration” (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015, p. 76). Recognizing the simultaneous existence of different, and sometimes contradictory, emotional experiences is fundamental to understanding the migrant’s experience. Emotional ambivalence, described by Smelser (1997, p. 5, as cited in Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015) as the “coexistence of opposing affective orientations towards the same person, object or symbol”, is therefore an expected component of the migration process.

The relationship between the emotional and economic dimensions of migrations is also significant. May and King (2009, as cited in Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015) argue that separating the two leads to an incomplete understanding of migration, as both emotions and economic factors are deeply intertwined (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015). This highlights the importance of a mixed perspective, as migration decisions are often impacted by motivators that extend beyond mere practicality. Boccagni and Baldassar (2015, p. 76) add that “any degree of individual agency or choice must be tempered by the structural and cultural constraints of frequently oppressive and patriarchal gender regimes and relations”. Therefore, emotional and economic dimensions cannot be fully understood when isolated; they must be considered together. Furthermore, emotions are central to the political narratives surrounding immigration. They play a fundamental role in shaping political orientations towards immigration and the development of policies. From this perspective, emotions hold political significance, as they are reflected in divisive narratives that too often evolve into xenophobic political agendas. These narratives, in turn, influence everyday interethnic relations and attitudes towards migrants (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015).

Boccagni and Baldassar (2015), as mentioned above, describe the field of emotion and migration as an emerging area of research. Within this context, they use the expression “emotions on the move” to capture how migration is a powerful source of change in an individual’s emotional life. Emotions themselves, much like migrants, are “on the move”. From this perspective, the study of migration revolves around the spatiality and temporality of emotions (Bondi et al., 2007, as cited in Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015). Moreover, emotions are influenced by specific living conditions and, more concretely, by infrastructure. As Boccagni (2014a) suggests, immigrants’ emotions are often tied to a material basis, such as the “dwelling places” they inhabit, which may feel more or less like home. This leads us to a fundamental question: how do migrants establish a relationship with new environments, and how do emotional bonds with these spaces influence their concept of home? In the next section, we will explore the complex meanings embedded within the concept of home and examine how these meanings shape migrants’ experiences and identities.

## 1.2 Migration and Home

Defining home is challenging, especially when its field of research crosses many disciplines. In 2004, Mallett conducted a critical review of the literature on the concept of home, with the intention to foster communication across disciplines about its meaning and experience. What emerges the most is its multifaceted nature: home can be understood, to mention some, as a physical place, a relational space, or a feeling, and can be associated with other themes such as the ones of house, family, and identity (Mallett, 2004). The way home is experienced strongly relates to life histories. Home may be anything, from a singular place or state of being, to a country, city or town, where one's family lives or comes from. Each of these hold different symbolic meaning and salience (Ahmed, 1999).

In relation to home and migration, which is one of the focuses of the present study, the literature offers both sociological and psychological empirical research, which revolves around the core association between staying, leaving, journeying, and notions of home. In this context, journeys away from home help define the boundaries of home itself: leaving home fosters the delineation of what a home is, while, on the other hand, the experience of home can influence the meaning and significance of the journeys beyond it. In this sense, not any journey is equal to another: the conditions and motives underlying the decision to move, the journeys away from home and the destinations are all factors impacting the migrant's identity and understanding of home (Dovey, 1985, as cited in Mallett, 2004). Home, as a result of people's lived experience, is an ideological, discursive construct which relies, at least in part, on affect or feeling. Indeed, emotions like love, intimacy, anger, and depression delineate the permeable boundaries between the self, the home, and the away (Gurney, 1997, as cited in Mallett, 2004). As Heidegger (1971, as cited in Mallett, 2004) reflects, the concept of dwelling extends beyond physical residence to encompass a state of being "at peace" and "cared for". He notes that to dwell is to "remain in protection", underscoring the emotional core of what it means to call a place home. Supporting Heidegger's perspective, Tucker (1994, as cited in Mallett, 2004) describes home as a space where one feels at ease and can express their subjectivity in the world, thereby manifesting their unique personal identity.

The line of thought emerging from these authors is that home is an ideological construct shaped by, and in turn shaping, lived experience. Somerville (1992, as cited in Mallett, 2004) concurs with this perspective but emphasizes the role of cognition and intellectual construction in defining home. He argues that individuals may possess a sense of

home even without direct experience or memory of it, underscoring the need to understand “what home means to different people and to attempt to explain the range of different meanings that we find” (p. 115).

Building on the previous discussion, exploring how migration impacts one's sense of home offers valuable insights into the concept and its emotional and psychological dimensions. Casadei and Monti (2022) propose in this direction a crucial transcultural perspective. Their analysis follows from the foundational, above-mentioned ideas presented by Heidegger (1971, as cited in Mallett, 2004), emphasizing how home extends beyond mere physical space to encompass a sense of emotional security. In their analysis, Casadei and Monti (2022) incorporate Papadopoulos' (2002, as cited in Casadei and Monti, 2022) point of view, which posits that all migrants share a form of privation of home. This privation can manifest in the form of a loss for refugees and asylum seekers, or as the consequence of a voluntary departure for internationally mobile students. Papadopoulos (2002, as cited in Casadei and Monti, 2022) describes this experience as leading to what he terms “nostalgic disorientation” – an existential ache originating from the absence of a familiar home environment. The notion of nostalgic disorientation is echoed in literature, highlighting its role in the migration experience. This disorientation necessitates a process of reestablishing a sense of home in the destination country (Devereux, 2000, as cited in Casadei and Monti, 2022).

Recent studies have continued to explore and refine our understanding of the subjective meanings of home. Del Carmen Ernstberger and Adaawen (2023) conducted an in-depth analysis of the concept of home through the lens of generational family migration. Their research addresses a significant gap in the literature, by focusing on the emotional dimensions of home as experienced by three generations within one family. The peculiar approach of their study allows for a profound exploration of several key themes, including conflicting identities, varying degrees of place attachment, and the (re)conceptualization of home. The authors' theoretical approach sheds light on the dynamic nature of home, as its reconceptualization is deeply intertwined with pre- and post-migratory processes, emotional at nature. Del Carmen Ernstberger and Adaawen (2023) draw from multiple authors to define their framework, picturing home as a symbolic, emotional and relational concept that extends beyond the physical structure of a house (Morse and Mudgett, 2017, as cited in Del Carmen Ernstberger and Adaawen, 2023). Moreover, home assumes an experiential declination, defined as the space where one “feels-at-home”, which supports the emotional load of the

concept, as argued above, and connects it with feelings of place belonging, place attachment and the construction of place meaning (Blunt and Dowling, 2022, as cited in Del Carmen Ernstberger and Adaawen, 2023; Boccagni et al., 2021).

The results of the study highlight the persisting influence of past places on current notions of home. Although the place of family origins becomes more distant across generations, the findings underscore enduring similarities. Home is firstly found to coincide with the family: a safe and familiar haven that provides comfort and stability amid change. The family itself nurtures a sense of belonging that makes home correspond to the residence of the family, wherever it may be. In almost all cases, the location of the immediate family is synonymous with the interviewees' current place or country of residence, which they identify as home. On a different note, home is also defined through culture, specifically the retention of customs and cultural practices closely associated with the society in which the interviewee was raised. Migration to another country highlights the importance of shared cultural values, which foster the feeling of home and can create cultural dissonance when absent. In this sense, participants reported feeling like "a foreigner" and a "fish out of water". Finally, home is found to be an uncertain concept: the transnational emotional attachment to multiple places becomes a source of inner conflict, as does the ambiguity surrounding familial past and one's own identity. Developing a relationship with the new place of residence requires confronting the coexistence of multiple homes, and, consequently, the uncertainty of what home truly means. This study contributes to modern literature by providing a cross-generational perspective on the meaning of home. It ultimately demonstrates that home is an emotional concept, deeply intertwined with notions of belonging, attachment, and identity. The places of the past remain present and strongly influence one's current emotional landscapes, particularly when one is attempting to develop feelings of attachment or belongingness following migration (Del Carmen Ernstberger and Adaawen, 2023).

The following study complements the work of Del Carmen Ernstberger and Adaawen (2023) by focusing on the concept of psychological home, particularly in the context of migration. Cardinali et al. (2022) explored this idea through interviews with 17 young adult men who had experienced migration to Italy, examining the relationship between psychological home and the process of integration into a new country. Psychological home is described as a "dynamic process" in which individuals develop a sense of a "safe and secure environment" that extends beyond the borders of a structured dwelling. The process is reflective and communicates one's self-identity, aligning closely with the emotional

dimensions of home discussed earlier. The concept of psychological home builds on previous arguments by further emphasizing the emotional and relational aspects of home. Cardinali et al. (2022) highlight how the migration experience can either foster or hinder the development of this sense of home, which appears to be crucial for psychological adaptation.

Drawing from environmental psychology, the study notes how a radical change in the living space, as experienced during migration, can lead to confusion or disorder in personal identity. The loss of a physical home may result in feelings of belonging nowhere, as migrants often find themselves caught between two worlds, with a profound sense of homelessness. Papadopoulos' (2002, as cited in Casadei and Monti, 2022) nostalgic disorientation, and Del Carmen Ernstberger and Adaawen's (2023) results on cultural dissonance and home uncertainty both express similar concepts. In this light, the establishment of a psychological home becomes an ideal affective state, which contributes to the well-being of migrants. It translates into their psychological adaptation to a new culture, helping them navigate the complex emotional grounds of migration.

The choice of method in this study involved the use of semi structured interviews, focusing on the reasons why the interviewees decided to change countries and the places where they felt at home. Three main themes emerged from the data, each comprising distinct subthemes. The first theme revolves around the defining components of home, which include *feelings*, like easiness, quietness, safety, and the experience of missing home; *behaviors*, related to personalization and autonomy in particular; *cognition*, involving meanings, beliefs, memories and the concept of personal space; and *relations*, highlighting the importance of interactions with family members. Within the discussion of home, the researchers identified two key categories: factors that hinder or promote the development of psychological home. Hindering factors included frequent changes of residence, feelings of loneliness, feeling like a guest, experiences of discrimination, and language difficulties. Conversely, promoting factors included the passage of time, long-term family and work projects, and integration into the new environment. Across all categories, interviewees described a shift in their perception of the sense of home, now perceiving it as a process that can develop in multiple spaces over time. Based on their findings, Cardinali and colleagues (2022) conclude that the concept of home develops not only on an individual level but also through interpersonal and community-level factors. The main contribution of their work lies in its exploration of the profound impact that the loss of a sense of home, resulting from migration, has on a person's identity. Migrants face the challenge of refinding themselves after a process of loss and

deprivation, as well as finding a new sense of home. The conceptualization of the study confirms home to be a miscellaneous and evolving concept that transcends chronological and physical boundaries.

In summary, the concept of home is revealed to be a deeply emotional, multifaceted construct that extends far beyond the physical dwelling. Across various studies, home is seen as a dynamic process, shaped by individual experiences, interpersonal relationships, and broader connection on a community and cultural level. The psychological home, in particular, emerges as a critical space where identity is negotiated and reconstructed, especially in the context of migration. These insights naturally lead to the intricate relationship between migration and identity. As individuals navigate the loss of home and its reconstruction, they engage in a process of identity transformation. The following section will explore how migration impacts identity, drawing in particular on the concept of cultural identity as discussed in the context of home.

### 1.3 Migration and Identity

Identity is an intrinsic concept in the study of migration and cannot be overlooked. Timotijevic and Breakwell (2000), referring to immigrants from former Yugoslavia who had moved to Britain due to war, described their new status as follows: “they are exiles, they are foreigners, they have no home to which to return, their country had disappeared, they face new cultural experiences, they have often left family and friends behind...” (p. 360). Although this quote specifically refers to refugees, the themes of loss of home and loved ones, encountering new cultures, and the emotional consequences of these changes are common characteristics of migration, whether voluntary or forced. Therefore, it is crucial to explore the impact of this process on migrants’ identities, which often face diverse threats and undergo significant shifts as a result.

Identity itself is a difficult concept to define. According to Schwartz et al. (2006), identity, along with terms like acculturation and culture, represents an “abstraction” – a broad attempt to offer generalized insights into nuanced processes. Some scholars, such as Cooper (2000, as cited in Schwartz et al., 2006), argue that identity is more of an umbrella term for self-related phenomena rather than a fixed concept. Others, like Gergen (1991, as cited in Schwartz et al., 2006), propose that identity is dynamic and constantly shifting. While these perspectives highlight its fluid nature, they also make it challenging to use identity in practical, theoretical, or empirical work (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000, as cited in Schwartz et al., 2006). This is the reason why Schwartz et al. (2006) build on the work of Erikson (1950, as cited in Schwartz et al., 2006) to eventually define identity as the “organization of self-understandings that define one’s place in the world” (p. 5). While Erikson (1950, as cited in Schwartz et al., 2006) discerns between personal and social identities, Schwartz and colleagues (2006) add a third dimension of cultural identity, closely inglobated in one’s social context (Brown, 2000, as cited in Schwartz et al., 2006; Tajfel and Turner, 1986, as cited in Schwartz et al., 2006).

In migration contexts, identity is deeply intertwined with the process of acculturation. Berry’s (1997) theory of acculturation builds on the earlier definition by Redfield, Linton and Herskovits (1963, as cited in Berry, 1997), which describes acculturation as the set of changes that result from the interaction of groups with different cultural backgrounds, leading to shifts in the “original culture patterns” in at least one of the groups. Acculturation not only impacts

the group as a whole, but also the psychology of the individual – psychological acculturation, as it was named by Graves in 1967 (Berry, 1997). In these terms, acculturation links macro-level factors, related to the context, to migrants well-being (Schwartz, 2019).

Berry's main contribution is the development of a typology of acculturation strategies, which explains how migrants navigate their relationship with both their heritage culture and the destination culture. These strategies – integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization – are a function of two main dimensions: the extent to which individuals maintain their original culture, and their level of participation in the new culture. The strategies are not just shaped by personal choices, but are also heavily influenced by the societal context. Policies and public attitudes can either promote or hinder certain strategies, leading to a plethora of results. Particularly, Berry (1997) emphasizes that, for successful integration to be achieved, societies need to be explicitly multicultural, based on values of cultural diversity, and with low levels of prejudice, allowing both migrants and locals to form positive relationships. In other words, the result is dependent on the interaction between migrants' acculturation approaches and the expectations held by the destination culture. When a match is found, relations between migrants and locals are more likely to be "smooth and collaborative", as opposed to conflictual in the case of mismatches (Berry, 2006, as cited in Schwartz, 2019; Rohmann et al., 2008, as cited in Schwartz, 2019).

Acculturation has a profound impact on identity, often leading to what is known as acculturative stress (Berry, 1997). When migrants face discrimination, prejudice, or exclusion, it can create emotional strain and disrupt their identity formation. The difficulty of acculturation varies widely, depending on factors such as cultural distance – the perceived dissimilarity between the heritage and destination cultures – and the availability of social support systems, both in the native country and the destination society. The greater the cultural distance, the more challenging the adaptation process (Ward and Kennedy, 1992, as cited in Berry, 1997; Ward and Searle, 1991, as cited in Berry, 1997). Successful adaptation is a result of multiple factors, including personal coping mechanisms and the support available from both family and society (Motti-Stefanidi, Asendorpf, and Masten, 2012, as cited in Berry, 1997; Oppedal and Røysamb, 2007, as cited in Berry, 1997). However, even with strong individual strategies, the broader social context will heavily influence the outcomes of the acculturation process. In the long term, adaptation can be successful, resulting in positive behavioral shifts and well-being, or unsuccessful, leading to psychological distress and even pathology (Berry, 1997). Discrimination, isolation, and homesickness are common challenges,

and legal and political barriers can further exacerbate stress. Ultimately, the degree of difficulty in acculturation depends on both personal characteristics and the receptiveness of the dominant society (Berry, 1997).

Adding to the work of Berry (1997), Timotijevic and Breakwell (2000) offer a significant contribution through Breakwell's Identity Process Theory (IPT). The model provides a structural framework for understanding identity based on two dimensions: content and affect. The content dimension describes the characteristics that define a person's identity, which can carry positive or negative values. A notable departure from Erikson's model (and by extension, Berry's) is IPT's rejection of the distinction between social and personal identity. According to Breakwell (1986), social identity is bound to merge into personal identity, making the distinction a mere matter of time rather than substance. Where both models converge, however, is the dynamic nature of identity. IPT claims that identity is constantly regulated by processes of assimilation and accommodation, where new elements are incorporated into the identity structure, and existing ones are adjusted to find equilibrium. Identity formation is regulated by four core principles: continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. In Western industrialized societies, these principles form the basis for how individuals define and protect their sense of self. When assimilation and acculturation processes fail to satisfy these principles, an identity threat occurs, which can lead to significant changes in how individuals perceive themselves (Timotijevic and Breakwell, 2000).

In their study of former Yugoslavian refugees, Timotijevic and Breakwell (2000) explore how these migrants navigated the reconstruction of their identities after fleeing war. A key outcome was the re-establishment of continuity in their self-narratives. For many, their self-efficacy – the ability to control and predict one's life – was severely compromised by the disruption caused by their displacement. However, a notable coping mechanism emerged: some reframed their story, highlighting positive outcomes derived from their suffering and loss. This reframing process demonstrates how individuals can preserve self-efficacy and self-esteem even in the face of profound identity threats. Regarding distinctiveness, the study shows that being part of a minority can have a dual impact. On one hand, it may lead to over-recognition (becoming too easily identifiable as "the other"), while, on the other, it can diminish personal individuality. Following migration, individuals must deal with new labels, such as immigrant, refugee, foreigner, or stranger, which may alter how they see themselves and how they are seen by others (Timotijevic and Breakwell, 2000). There is a potential risk

that migrants might lose their unique cultural identities in the quest for belonging to the broader national group, thereby assimilating into a generalized “migrant” identity (La Cecla, 2000, as cited in Casadei and Monti, 2022). As a result, identity reconstruction is an ongoing process, and in many cases, the threats faced by one’s identity may become chronic, lasting well beyond the initial period of migration (Timotijevic and Breakwell, 2000).

As we move into the next section, which explores the emotional relationship between individuals and the spaces they occupy, it’s important to recognize how space itself can serve as an expression of identity. In the previous discussion, Del Carmen Ernstberger and Adaawen (2023) highlighted how the concept of home evolved across generations of a migrant family. They found that uncertainty regarding home was often linked to ambiguities surrounding familial past and personal identities, creating inner conflicts. The emotional attachment developed towards multiple places often resulted in what the authors describe as “too much, identity?” – a sense that multiple homes, resulting from attachment to multiple places, seem to lead to multiple identities. In this way, migration, particularly displacement, can represent a form of identity loss (Landau and Freemantle, 2009, as cited in Palmariy, 2018).

Albers et al. (2021) discuss Hallowell’s (1955) self-continuity as a key factor in bonding with new places. Self-continuity refers to the need to maintain a coherent self-narrative that links past and present experiences. This concept was later implemented into Breakwell’s (1986) IPT, where it plays a significant role in managing identity through the migration experience. Self-continuity allows individuals to form emotional ties to new places while remaining connected to past environments. Familiarity with the new environment is a significant factor in enhancing this bond, which often develops through place making – the process of making private and public spaces to reflect personal history, making them more like home (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2016, as cited in Albers et al., 2021). In this sense, places become extensions of identity, allowing individuals to express their past within their present surroundings.

Place identity, defined as the cognitive component of the relationship between a person and a place, helps define the individual’s broader identity alongside the personal and social components of it (Knez, 2005, as cited in Albers et al., 2021). Knez (2005, as cited in Albers et al., 2021) outlines five dimensions of place identity: distinctiveness, referent continuity, congruent continuity, self-esteem and self-efficacy – paralleling Breakwell’s (1986) IPT principles. These components are all predicted by place attachment, furtherly

highlighting the deep connection between identity and place. Lastly, Trałbka (2019, as cited in Albers et al., 2021) suggests that place identity is the third phase in the dynamic process of person-place bonding in the migration context, following place dependence and place discovered, and preceding place inherited. This phased progression shows how identity evolves through ongoing interaction with place.

#### **1.4 Place Attachment and Intentions to Stay**

In this final section, we delve into the empirical exploration of place attachment and its role in shaping migration decisions. Specifically, drawing from recent studies, and together with the concepts previously discussed, we will examine how emotional connections to place influence migrants' intentions to stay or leave the destination environment.

Place attachment has been defined as the “emotional bond between individuals and the social and material environment of a place” (He et al., 2023, p. 3). It is influenced by early life experiences and becomes stronger over time in a specific location (Fullilove, 1996, as cited in He et al., 2023). This definition highlights two key components: the social bonds formed in a place and the relationship with the physical environment, both emotional in nature. For a long time, place attachment has been seen as a product of the relationship with one location at a time, therefore diminishing following migration to another place. However, recent empirical studies have shown that people can form and maintain attachment to multiple destinations and communities at the same time (Jensen, 2009, as cited in He et al., 2023).

According to He et al. (2023), research on place attachment and migration has mainly focused on attachment to the destination country, overseeing the emotional bond with the native country and its impact on the migration experience as a whole. The authors addressed the research gap by studying place attachment to both the native and the destination place in migrants who moved from rural to urban areas. Particularly, they explored differences in place attachment between migrants who stayed in the destination area and those who returned to their rural hometowns. Their comparative analysis found that attachment to the native place was stronger than to the destination place for both migrants and returnees, especially in terms of belongingness. This suggests that the intensity of the emotional bonds to native and destination places are indeed different. The authors explain that migrants may struggle to develop deep attachments to the destination city due to experiences of discrimination and the status of being “second-class citizens”, which hinders integration into urban life. However, the scores also support that migrants can develop multiple attachments to different locations, confirming the flexibility of place attachment. Additionally, the study found differences between inter-province and intra-province migrants: inter-province migrants had stronger ties to their hometowns, which the authors attributed to greater cultural shifts and longer distances intensifying longing for the familiar cultural environment. Regarding the distinction between migrants and returnees, the former showed stronger attachment to their destination than those

who returned, suggesting that place attachment influences decisions to return or remain. This hypothesis was corroborated by other scholars (e.g, Riethmuller et al., 2021). While place attachment is important, the study also shows that some migrants chose to stay in locations where they did not develop strong attachments, indicating that place attachment is not the sole determinant in migration decisions.

In this context, Toruńczyk-Ruiz & Brunarska (2018) proposed place attachment as a key mechanism linking social integration with settlement intentions. Briefly, the authors argue that place attachment serves as an indicator of psychological integration, especially at the local level. Their findings indicate that ties with locals were not directly related to settlement intentions, whereas they were indirectly related through attachment to the city. Interestingly, the study found that the duration of residence did not significantly promote stronger attachment, emphasizing that place attachment is not simply a function of time, but is rather linked to the quality of social relationships that migrants form in the receiving country.

Following this focus on psychological integration, Riethmuller et al. (2021) further explore how place attachment shapes migration decisions, particularly among university students, adding a qualitative perspective to the understanding of place attachment in rural and urban contexts. The study defines place attachment as the “emotional connection and sense of belonging associated with place” (p. 1) and highlights how this attachment often becomes part of one's identity. The authors chose to investigate young migrants due to the lack of data on their intentions to return, using semi-structured interviews to explore themes such as feelings towards places, thoughts of returning, and perceptions of home. The study involved 11 participants currently living in Perth, Australia, and collected data on their time spent in both rural and urban areas, as well as the distance from their hometowns.

The results revealed two distinct trends. On one hand, participants maintained a connection to their native rural area primarily through relationships. Their hometowns were still perceived as home and as central to their sense of belonging, consistent with Rowles’ (1983, as cited in Zisakou et al., 2023) classification of place attachment, which emphasizes an autobiographical dimension where past relationships with places are significant; on the other hand, for some, attachment to the hometown was not sufficient to motivate them to return, as the new urban environment offered new relational bonds and economic opportunities. Over time, participants’ view of their rural communities shifted, resulting in feelings of separation and even alienation, as they began to feel like outsiders. In contrast, the

urban setting, mainly centered at the acquisition of new working skills, provided social ties that helped them settle. These skills, in turn, influenced their thoughts on returning home, as the decision was tied to whether their rural hometown could offer opportunities to apply those skills. The study also explored the connection between place attachment and the concept of home, though no clear consensus emerged on where home could be found. Many participants described home as the place where their family resided, suggesting that their attachment was more to family than to the specific location in which they were raised. The length of time participants had lived in different locations influenced their feelings of attachment, indicating that the longer they lived in one place, the more they identified it as home.

In conclusion, the results show that participants' relationship with their urban environment was primarily shaped by relational and economic factors, whereas attachment to their native rural area was more centered on relationships, sense of home, and feelings of connection and community. Despite migration and the distance from the native city, place attachment to it continues to play an important role in their experience.

Place attachment is often used as a measure of integration into new environments following migration. As seen in the research presented earlier, varying degrees of attachment impact migrants' lived experiences, relationships with places, and future intentions. However, an important question arises: how is place attachment actively built in order to facilitate integration? To explore this, Zisakou et al. (2023) conducted a study on refugee integration, drawing from critical social and political psychology literature. The researchers employed walking interviews, asking participants to describe the places, practices and networks they had developed relationships with in the urban spaces of Greece while walking through those areas. This methodological choice was significant, as it allowed participants to physically engage with the spaces they were discussing, highlighting the key role of place-making in integration.

The study adopts a political perspective on place attachment and urban citizenship, echoing Boccagni and Baldassar (2015) emphasis on the role of emotions in migration policies and attitudes towards "the other". In this view, every use of space becomes a political act, and place-making is understood as a response to the spatial segregation, exclusion, and alienation often experienced by migrants. Place attachment thus emerges as a tool for developing urban citizenship, which involves the exercise and active claim of rights in urban spaces (Isin and Wood, 1999, as cited in Zisakou et al., 2023). According to Isin (2000, as

cited in Zisakou et al., 2023), citizenship implies a “practice of articulating, claiming and renewing group rights in and through the appropriation and creation of spaces in the city” (pp. 14-15). In this sense, place attachment is deeply connected to belonging and the right to occupy a space, making it a political act of existence. Spatial integration and citizenship are also closely linked to the renegotiation of migrants’ (place) identities, as their sense of self evolves alongside their connection to new places. Through the process of place-making, migrants not only establish belonging, but also redefine their place identities within the new environment.

The results show how small, everyday activities contribute to place-making and foster attachment to the city. The local, urban place becomes the primary site of integration, replacing national identity with a more localized form of citizenship. Practices such as renaming public space or using squares serve as an act of place appropriation and of “performative citizenship”, which reconstructs collective identity while simultaneously deconstructioning power relations to actively claim spatial inclusion. Ultimately, place attachment is, as a whole, both a social and political process. Even the social aspects of place attachment – developing human bonds and relationships – are seen as part of a bottom-up collective effort to build connections in the city. These bonds, contextualized in space and time, help migrants develop a sense of home while connecting past and present, emphasizing the biographical component of place attachment as proposed by Rowles (1983, as cited in Zisakou et al., 2023).

On a conclusive note, it is important to briefly state the impact that place attachment has on migrants’ well-being. Attachment to a place one feels emotionally connected to can contribute to the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, and it has been found to improve self-esteem and to provide a sense of belonging and meaning in one’s life (Scannel and Gifford, 2017, as cited in Albers, 2021). This improved sense of well-being, in turn, has been found to promote successful resettlement, as migrants who develop stronger place attachment are more likely to feel emotionally secured and psychologically integrated in their new environments (Albers et al., 2021).

Together, these studies illustrate how place attachment shapes both emotional connections and political identities, influencing migrants' decisions to stay, return, or integrate into new environments. The diverse methodologies – ranging from quantitative to qualitative approaches – alongside varied demographic samples, revealed the nuanced role of place

attachment in shaping settlement decisions and quality of life in the destination country. Although not the sole determinant, place attachment emerges as a critical factor in migration, interacting with economic, social, cultural, and emotional dimensions in the collective shape of the migration experience.

These insights into home, place attachment, identity, and the emotional dimensions of migration provide a nuanced foundation for the research that follows. By examining how emotional bonds to places influence migrants' intentions, adaptation, and sense of belonging, this chapter has outlined the complex interplay between psychological, socio-economic, and cultural factors in shaping the migration experience. In the chapter ahead, we will explore the specific research methods employed to investigate these themes among international students at the University of Padova. This next section will detail the methodological approach used to capture the diverse experiences of students, bridging the theoretical foundations discussed here with the practical tools needed to gather and analyze meaningful data.

## **CHAPTER 2: THE RESEARCH**

### **2.1 Theoretical Background: Qualitative Research and Grounded Theory**

Qualitative research originally emerged in the realm of social sciences as a response to the limitations of quantitative research. At the beginning of their existence, social sciences, including Psychology, attempted to gain notoriety and scientific rigor by looking after natural sciences as models for the development of a method. Great importance was given to causality, operationalization of relations, quantifying measures, and, as a result, the ability to generalize the findings and to formulate general laws. The phenomena under study, and the conditions in which they exist, are meant to be controlled as much as possible. Moreover, objectivity is used as a measure of the quality of the research, which requires the individuals involved – researchers, observers, interviewers, and so on – to avoid influencing the research setting. While a large quantity of data would be collected, through the use of experimental designs built around standardized surveys, the results could not be applied to the real world, and neither were they taken into account by political and institutional figures. The findings, in fact, could only relate to the settings created, which were distant from daily issues and queries. On the top of that, results naturally led to the “disenchantment” of the ideals of objectivity promoted by the methodological standards, which could simply not be met (Flick, 2009).

Qualitative research was introduced as an answer to the issue of complexity, which is intrinsic not only to the subjects of social sciences, but also to a world that is increasingly globalized and pluralized. Allowing complexity its rightful existence, the objects under study are represented in their wholeness, and contextualized. Openness, rather than objectivity, becomes central to the research process, and exploration, as opposed to confirmation, is used to develop theories that are grounded in the data. Even more, the subjectivity of those involved becomes a structural component of the research process: impossible to eliminate, it becomes a foundational tool. Theories – better described as narratives – are versions of realities rooted in a specific and delimited time, space, and situation, and it is the goal of qualitative research to continuously construct those narratives (Flick, 2009).

As of today, the relation between qualitative and quantitative research is nuanced. Attempts to integrate and combine them are common, but difficult and often superficial. While different in methodological principles and goals, they can co-exist peacefully,

answering to different needs and contributing individually to the development of a more comprehensive analysis of reality. To the question of which one is the best approach, the answer can only be given in the specific context of the research question (Flick, 2009).

The present study's research questions center on exploring place attachment and its role in international students' decisions to remain in one place. The study aims to do so by investigating how place attachment, the meanings of home, and identity intersect in the migration process. Given the complexity inherent in migration, with its multiple personal, social, and emotional dimensions, a qualitative approach was the most suitable choice. This method not only aligns with the exploratory nature of the research but also allows for the nuanced exploration of deeply subjective experiences.

The diverse backgrounds and origins of the participants, who will be detailed in the following section, further highlighted the need for a qualitative approach. A quantitative questionnaire would have been limiting for such a diverse group, restricting the depth needed to investigate the complex themes of place attachment, home, and identity. The aim of the study is not to quantify or generalize these phenomena, but rather to deepen our understanding of how they manifest and evolve in individual lives. A qualitative approach allows the flexibility to adapt to the personal narratives and contexts of each participant, offering richer insights into these processes.

Moreover, while the research focuses on processes and concepts that might be considered universal, such as migration and identity, their meanings are highly individualized. These concepts take on unique significance depending on personal experience, cultural context, and life history. This subjective variation makes qualitative methods particularly valuable, as they allow participants to voice their own interpretations and understandings, offering a more authentic representation of their experiences.

In line with these considerations, Richards and Morse (2012) emphasize that the key factors in choosing a qualitative approach are its ability to capture the richness of human experience and its adaptability to the research context. In this case, the qualitative method was essential for facilitating a deep, detailed analysis of the themes that emerged, ensuring that the complexity of migration and its impact on place attachment, home, and identity was adequately addressed.

As mentioned before, the theories that emerge from research aim to be grounded in the data. Grounded theory approach was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967, as cited in Flick, 2009) and can be used as a guideline for the development of a research design and process. Beforehand, research exclusively moved from the theoretical knowledge that already existed in the literature and precedent empirical findings, leading to the formulation of hypotheses and their operationalization. These hypotheses are then tested in certain conditions of isolation and manipulation. Overall, the theories and the methods come before the object of the research itself. Contrariwise, in grounded theory the field under study and the data come first: theories are not applied from the literature, but rather discovered. Hence, although pre-existing theoretical knowledge is still used to develop research questions, its contribution to the formation of hypotheses is suspended. Hypotheses, indeed, should not emerge until the issue under study has emerged on its own. The goal is to follow the principle of openness and allow the researcher to explore the unknown without being influenced by what is already known.

One of the core features of grounded theory is the circular nature of the process, which forces researchers to constantly retrace their steps to evaluate the flow of the research process as a whole and how each phase fits in it. The circularity of the research enables continuous reformulation and deeper theoretical insights from the data, eventually leading to the emergence of theories and narratives that describe perspectives on the world. As the research process unfolds, these perspectives are constantly re-evaluated, leading to a greater “empirical grounding” in the object of the study. Grounded theory is designed to favor the exploratory and discovery-driven nature of qualitative research, aiming at studying – understanding from the “interior” (*verstehen*) – versions of reality as constructed by individuals. Over time, Glaser and Strauss’ model has been dissected, with its components independently utilized in methodological discussions on conducting qualitative research.

Following this brief methodological introduction, the next session will provide details on the present study, highlighting how the grounded theory approach was implemented in the research process, alongside research limitations and integrations from other methods.

## 2.2 Sampling Method and Research Participants

In qualitative research participants are selected based on their contribution to the research topic rather than to compose a sample that is representative of the general population. Particularly, the goal is to increase complexity by creating a sample as varied as possible (Flick, 2009). In order to do so, Glaser and Strauss (1967, as cited in Flick, 2009) developed the strategy of theoretical sampling, in which the sample is defined in parallel with data collection and analysis. Participants are selected based on their ability to contribute new insights to the developing theory, based on prior results. This process continues until theoretical saturation is reached – meaning that no new themes, categories, or concepts are emerging from the data, meaning that further data collection would likely provide fewer benefits (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, as cited in Flick, 2009). Saturation marks the point at which the research question has been thoroughly explored, and the emerging theory has been sufficiently developed. As the word “theoretical” might be confusing, it’s important to underline that it refers to the fact that the researcher is sampling to support the development of theory, not that the sampling is guided by pre-existing theory.

Mainly due to time constraints, the iterative nature of theoretical sampling and its aim to reach theoretical saturation could not be fully implemented in the present study. Instead, the structure of the sample was determined a priori, based on a critical review of commonly used criteria in previous publications. Hence, the selected demographic criteria are based on literature and abstract in nature, as they are not grounded in factual collected data. The key variables for participant selection were self-identified gender (Woman/Man) and region of origin (EU/non-EU). The 2024 Report by AlmaLaurea on the “Profile of 2023 Graduates” was used to guide the balancing of the sample. According to the report, women constituted the 60,0% of the total number of graduates in Italy in 2023. In terms of international students, AlmaLaurea distinguishes between foreign citizens and foreign graduates who specifically moved to Italy for university after completing their diploma abroad. European students account for 42,5% of the former category, and 30,4% of the latter. Although these numbers were used as a point of reference, it is important to stress that Europe and the European Union include a different number of countries. The report did not provide information on the exact percentage of students coming specifically from EU countries, as opposed to Europe as a whole.

The final sample was composed of 12 participants, all international students enrolled at the University of Padova. Seven participants were women (58,3%) and three interviewees came from EU countries (25,0%). All participants, except for two, moved to Italy to pursue their Master's degree. Of the remaining two, one is a Moldavian woman without legal citizenship who moved to Italy at the age of six, while the other one is a Venezuelan man who had already studied in Padova as part of a high school exchange program and later returned to pursue his Bachelor's degree.

Although the sample structure was determined a priori, the research design allowed for a certain degree of freedom in terms of cultural background of the participants. In alignment with purposive sampling, achieving "maximal variation" (Flick, 2009) was the goal of the sampling procedure, particularly concerning participants' countries of origin. Factors such as the continent of origin, distance from Padova, accessibility in terms of transportation, socio-economic and political situation of the country were all considered when selecting participants, beyond the simple EU/non-EU distinction. The goal was to ensure diversity in perspectives while acknowledging the limitations imposed by the research timeline. For example, WnEU2 was chosen for her long-term residence in Padova, with the belief that her experience would offer a unique perspective. Finally, since one of the aims of the study was to explore participants' intentions to remain in Padova and the factors influencing the decision, WnEU3 was selected due to her already known intention to stay.

The table below displays the main demographic variables collected, including gender, country of origin (and corresponding region), age, and length of stay. In order to ensure anonymity, each participant was assigned a code based on their gender and region of origin.

| <b>Participant code</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Country of origin</b> | <b>Region</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Length of stay</b> |
|-------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|---------------|------------|-----------------------|
| WnEU1                   | W             | Ecuador                  | Non-EU        | 29         | 22 months             |
| WnEU2                   | W             | Moldavia                 | Non-EU        | 21         | 15 years              |
| WnEU3                   | W             | Turkey                   | Non-EU        | 26         | 22 months             |
| MnEU1                   | M             | Chile                    | Non-EU        | 24         | 10 months             |
| MnEU2                   | M             | Venezuela                | Non-EU        | 21         | 6 months + 3 years    |
| WEU1                    | W             | Germany/UK               | EU            | 24         | 22 months             |
| MEU1                    | M             | France                   | EU            | 24         | 10 months             |
| MnEU3                   | M             | Pakistan                 | Non-EU        | 25         | 10 months             |
| WnEU4                   | W             | Ethiopia                 | Non-EU        | 26         | 10 months             |
| WnEU5                   | W             | Ethiopia                 | Non-EU        | 26         | 10 months             |
| MnEU4                   | M             | Uganda                   | Non-EU        | 27         | 22 months             |
| WEU2                    | W             | Greece                   | EU            | 30         | 10 months             |

Table 1 – *Sample characteristics*

This table presents participants' demographic data, including gender, country and region of origin, age, and length of stay. Each participant was assigned a code based on their gender (W/M) and region of origin (nEU/EU).

Six participants were direct contacts of the researcher, while the others were either recommended by previous interviewees or reached through flyers and WhatsApp groups. Each participant received an informed consent document, which was built from a model provided by the University of Padova, detailing the study's objectives, as well as the participants' rights. The informed consent document described the research question and methods. In particular, the participants were invited to take part in an interview, which would last between one and two hours and take place in a location of their choice.

In the next section, we will explore the choice of the interview as the method for data collection, as well as how it was structured and implemented to collect the data.

### **2.3 Semi-structured Interviews and Data Collection**

Before introducing the methods used for data collection and analysis in this research, it is important to define the concept of “subjective theories” – the idea that individuals, in their daily lives, create theories about how the world and their personal environments function. These subjective theories are continually tested and revised based on new information, in order to develop a more accurate representation of reality. The study of these subjective theories is central to symbolic interactionism, which seeks to analyze social realities by reconstructing how people perceive and interpret them, thereby creating meaning. Individuals are the subject under study, and the way they interact with each other – interactionism – provide the source of the symbolic meanings they ascribe to things (Flick, 2009).

Scheele and Groeben (1988, as cited in Flick, 2009) were pioneers in the development of a method to reconstruct subjective theories and explore how individuals attribute meaning to their world. In particular, they expanded on the use of semi-structured interviews to understand both the explicit and implicit assumptions individuals hold about a given topic. Their method involves three types of questions for each topical area of the research: open questions, theory-driven questions, and confrontational questions. Open questions directly address the interviewees’ explicit knowledge and assumptions, while theory-driven questions aim at uncovering more subtle, implicit assumptions. The last type of questions, not used in this study, typically generate competing alternatives to encourage participants to re-evaluate the theories and relations they have delineated up to that point. Semi-structured interviews, while partly rooted in the literature in terms of their structure and content, retain enough flexibility to allow researchers to pursue the broader goal of formulating grounded theories.

Once the semi-structured interview method was chosen, the development of an interview guide was informed by a review of the relevant literature. The interview was structured around five key areas: migration history, social relationships, the concept of home, identity and culture, and future intentions to stay or leave Padova. These themes were designed to link past experiences, present circumstances and future projects. A final section was included to collect demographic information, as presented in the table above.

Although place attachment is central in the study, it was not addressed explicitly in the questions. Instead, the interview was structured to allow this concept to emerge naturally in

relation to the other themes, particularly the participants' reflections on the places they had lived. By asking participants about their migration experiences, the idea of place attachment was intended to arise organically, without the need for direct questions about it. This approach allowed participants the freedom to express their associations with place in their own terms, revealing their attachment through narratives. If necessary, guidance was provided to help participants elaborate on their thoughts. This flexibility in the interview process was essential to achieve both depth and breadth in the data collected.

The design of the interview guide was informed by several key studies, all of which were included in the first chapter of the present dissertation. Cardinali et al. (2022) focused on the meaning of home in migration, using open-ended questions to elicit detailed responses. This influenced the inclusion of questions about participants' reasons for migrating, their support networks, and their sense of home. These questions were incorporated into the guide to explore how participants construct the notion of home across different contexts.

Riethmuller et al. (2021) investigated the relationship between place attachment and young people's intentions to stay in rural areas. This study contributed to the decision to expand on the concept of home by including questions about participants' emotional connections to the places they had lived, their thoughts on returning to their hometowns, and their sense of belonging to these locations.

Additionally, Zisakou et al. (2023) offered a perspective on the lived experience of space, emphasizing how migrants engage with their urban environments. This research highlighted the importance of social relationships and participation in the urban context, leading to the inclusion of questions about the development of participants' social networks in Padova and their relationships with people from their past.

These three studies were chosen as primary starting points also due to their recent design and publication, which offered an updated perspective on the literature and research design. However, additional questions, such as those addressing the impact of migration on participants' identities, were derived from more theoretical papers, hence complementing the empirical studies.

After outlining the development of the interview guide and the theoretical underpinnings drawn from recent empirical studies, the practical aspects of the data collection process will be described. All interviews took place between May and July 2024, in Padova,

with the exception of the last three interviews which were carried out online because either the interviewer or the participants were not in Padova. The interviews lasted an average of 1 hour and 10 minutes, ranging from 58 minutes to 1 hour and 40. The detailed list of participants and the corresponding duration of their interviews is provided in Table 2 below.

|                           |         |         |         |         |         |         |
|---------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| <b>Participant code</b>   | WnEU1   | WnEU2   | WnEU3   | MnEU1   | MnEU2   | WEU1    |
| <b>Interview duration</b> | 1:11:51 | 1:40:00 | 0:58:31 | 1:18:01 | 1:00:23 | 1:14:29 |
| <b>Average</b>            | MEU1    | MnEU3   | WnEU4   | WnEU5   | MnEU4   | WEU2    |
| <b>1:09:36</b>            | 1:04:00 | 1:02:04 | 1:01:31 | 1:11:16 | 1:04:07 | 1:09:34 |

Table 2 – *Participants and duration of interviews*

The participants were offered to choose their preferred language, with options being English, Italian, and Spanish, which are the languages spoken by the researcher. This approach was intended to allow participants to express themselves in a language they could feel confident in. Overall, there were no significant communication issues, except for one interview where the language barrier was more evident. In that case, in order to favor the flow of the conversation and reciprocal understanding, the interview was more guided in terms of number of questions and participation by the interviewer. All interviews were recorded, with prior consent, using a mobile device, and later transcribed via the MediaSpace platform, which is provided to students by the University of Padova. The transcriptions were then manually reviewed for errors or inaccuracies, and subsequently translated into English with the assistance of AI. These translations were also manually revised and sample-checked to ensure that the translations were not only literal, but also maintained the figurative and symbolic meanings of the words and concepts.

Once ready, the transcriptions were coded and analyzed with the software ATLAS.ti.

## 2.4 ATLAS.ti and Coding Procedure

ATLAS.ti, developed by Thomas Muhr and first released in 1993, is a software platform widely used for qualitative research, particularly in the analysis of textual and visual data (Muhr, 1991). In this study, ATLAS.ti was used to code the interview transcripts, allowing for the subsequent generation of descriptive statistics and network analyses, which will be presented in the third and fourth chapters.

The methodology underlying ATLAS.ti is rooted in grounded theory and content analysis. Grounded theory coding, used as the primary strategy in this study, is described by Flick (2009) as a family of methods developed by Glaser (1978), Strauss (1987), Strauss and Corbin (1990), and Charmaz (2006). Although these approaches differ, they share common elements that are central to the analysis process. The grounded theory approach emphasizes a circular process in which data interpretation guides both the selection of cases and the methods used for data collection (Flick, 2009). As a result, the first phase of coding, known as *open coding* (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, as cited in Flick, 2009), was conducted concurrently with the interviews. While the sample structure was determined a priori, as outlined in the sampling procedure, individual participants were selected based on their unique characteristics and the data collected from previous interviews.

Open coding is the initial stage of the process, where the data is broken down into units of meaning in the form of concepts. This analysis can be performed at various levels – single lines, longer sentences, whole paragraphs, or even the full text. The goal is to transform raw data into conceptual categories that reflect key aspects of the research question. Categories can either be constructed based on existing literature (*constructed codes*) or derived directly from participants' language (*in vivo codes*). These categories are further developed to reach higher levels of abstraction. As Flick (2009) explains, “the main goal is to break down and understand a text and to attach and develop categories and put them into an order in the course of time” (p. 309). Through this process, the participants' ideas are described, named, and classified.

As coding continues, a transition is made from open coding to more selective coding procedures, with the aim of identifying core concepts or variables. Through a gradual process of abstraction, a core category is eventually recognized and defined in terms of its features and dimensions. This core category is then linked to other categories within a conceptual

framework using a relationship paradigm. Relationships between categories can take various forms, such as cause/effect, means/end, or context/strategy. This phase adds specificity to the developing theory, associating fixed conditions with particular outcomes (Flick, 2009).

Grounded theory's strength lies in its "combination of open coding with increasingly focused procedures" (Flick, 2009, p. 317), which enables the development of a theory that is deeply rooted in the data. This approach allows for a flexible analysis, balancing inductive discovery with deductive refinement. In this study, this adaptability was crucial, enabling a responsive process where emerging insights from the interviews directly informed subsequent coding decisions. By combining theoretical sensitivity with empirical depth, the coding process allowed for the identification of patterns and the construction of meaning grounded in the participants' narratives.

Below is a list of the primary codes that emerged from this study, each accompanied by a brief description to clarify its meaning and relevance. In some instances, subcodes are also provided to further specify the concepts represented within each code.

List of codes:

- **adaptation and integration process**: this code captures the journey individuals go through as they adjust to and become integrated into their new environment. It includes both personal and social efforts to belong, such as learning the local language or customs, forming social networks, and participating in community life. The process can be seen in various stages, from initial adjustment to full integration;
- **barriers**: factors or conditions that hinder migrants' ability to effectively adapt to, integrate into, or form a strong emotional connection with their new environment. Also, factors or conditions that affect their quality of life – including freedom of movement – and their settlement decisions. These barriers can influence daily life, decision-making, and overall well-being. The main subcodes are bureaucratic barrier, cultural differences, economic barrier, linguistic barrier, and social attitudes;
- **being a migrant**: where migration meets identity – what it means to be a migrant, including feeling different, feeling a foreigner, feeling in between realities/cultures, and perceived attitudes. It also includes the idea that migration is a shared experience;
- **connection to the people**: relationships developed in Padova and other places different from the native environment. The code describes the role people have in the development of a relationship with a place, and the general meaning they have in our life;
- **cultural aspects**: relevant aspects that are determined by the cultural background of the participants, particularly customs and traditions, social norms, and values; it also involves cultural differences between the home country and the destination country(ies);
- **emotions**:
  - ***detachment and loneliness***: feelings related to a lack of connection with others or the environment, resulting in a sense of being alone or estranged. It comprises isolation and alienation;
  - ***ease and stability***: these emotions capture a sense of being settled, at ease, and secure in a particular environment. It includes comfort and groundedness;
  - ***emotional challenges of migration\****: primary emotional struggles and difficulties related to migration, which are crucial for understanding the migration experience and its psychological impacts. Examples are exhaustion, fear, feeling misunderstood, feeling overwhelmed and stressed, feeling lost;

- ***longing and loss***: feelings related to a yearning for home, the past, or missed opportunities, reflecting the emotional impact of separation and change due to migration. Nostalgia, homesickness, regret, and grief are some of the terms used by interviewees to describe these sensations;
- ***strength and resilience***: emotions related to the participants' capacity to cope with and overcome challenges during the migration process. This code captures feelings of determination, self-confidence, and inner strength, as well as moments when participants felt empowered or motivated by their experiences;

\*detachment and loneliness, and longing and loss also belong to the category of “emotional challenges of migration”, but they were coded on their own because of their high occurrences

- ***going back***: participants' intentions, thoughts and feelings related to the idea to return to their native country/city. The most frequent subcode is barriers – highlighting that often staying abroad was not a direct choice. Feelings of alienation for when participants had gone back were also mentioned;
- ***home***: it includes all the definitions of home that were provided. The code will be deepened in the next chapter;
- ***identity***: the code mainly focuses on the way migration has impacted the participants' identity. Personal growth is the subcode with the highest occurrences;
- ***inhabiting a space***: this code refers to how individuals engage with and shape their environments, beyond mere residence. It includes the active and dynamic process of creating connections with both the physical space and the community. Participants contribute to and influence the space around them through social participation, cultural engagement, and personal interactions, thereby fostering place attachment and a sense of belonging. It highlights the importance of being an active part of a place, which strengthens ties to the environment and supports a meaningful relationship with it;
- ***leaving***: participants' intentions to leave Padova and their reasons. The reasons that were mentioned the most were city characteristics, cultural and social factors, and job market;
- ***migration general***: a broad code collecting elements related to the migration experience that are not specific to Padova. It covers the participants' reflections on their general migration process, including motivations for migration, experiences of

adaptation to new realities, and the life stages during which they migrated. The main subcodes are:

- ***adult development***: how migration impacts individuals differently depending on their life stage; also, how migration is part of the development of an individual;
- ***experiencing new realities***, as an opportunity given by migration;
- ***migration as a process/journey***: how migration is perceived as an ongoing and multifaceted experience;
- **migration motivators**: why participants migrated to Padova. Particularly, in decrescent order for frequency: education, following opportunities, economic reasons, creating opportunities for the future, native country-related motivators;
- **native country**: any input related to the native country, including socio-political situation, emotional and psychological connection, attachment, social and community ties, non-belongingness/detachment;
- **Padova**: any input related to Padova. In particular, Padova as an international and student city, its lifestyle, the local community, and the difficulties encountered;
- **place attachment**: factors that contribute to the development of attachment towards a place. The main subcodes are:
  - ***(landscape) familiarity***: it refers to the psychological and emotional ease with which an individual can adapt to a new environment. This ease is influenced by the degree of similarity between the new environment's landscape and the individual's familiar or "home" landscape. The concept suggests that the more the new environment resembles the home landscape, the easier it is for individuals to feel comfortable, oriented, and integrated;
  - ***emotional and memory-based connection***: this refers to the emotional bonds individuals form with a place through personal experiences and memories;
  - ***feeling part of the city***: this code captures the sense of belonging and identification with the city. It involves feeling integrated into the social, cultural, and communal fabric of the place, as though one's presence and participation contribute to the life of the city. This code reflects the perception of being an active member of the city's community rather than an outsider;
  - ***lived, engaged experience***: it reflects the idea of developing a real connection and sense of belonging to a city through genuine, long-term engagement and

desire to be there. Knowing the city, the streets, the places; developing memories; having a purpose; as opposed to just being a tourist;

- ***social ties and relationships***: the impact that social relations have on the development of attachment to a place; people as mediators of that attachment;
- ***the city itself***: this code was used anytime participants talked about place attachment referring to a place on its own, without specifying intermediators;
- ***transience***: place attachment in relation to places that are perceived as transient; it also includes relationships with people and the impact that their departure can have on one's own relationship with the space and intentions to stay in that space;
- **social support**: any kind of social support received in the migration process. The support mainly comes from the people of the past, and the community found in Padova (classmates, other migrants coming from the same cultural background, people met through activism). The code also includes lack of support;
- **staying**: similarly but in opposition to "leaving", it includes the reasons why people intend to stay in Padova, and the efforts put in place in order to stay;
- **where to live**: last code, together with "going back", "leaving", and "staying", which refers to intentions for the future. It collects the factors that are being taken into consideration in the decision of where to live and settle, also in the long term.

Once the text was coded, an analysis of word frequencies and co-occurrences was conducted to further explore and deepen the understanding of the emerging categories and their interconnections.

Word clouds are a visual representation of text data, where the size of each word reflects its frequency or importance within a given dataset. They serve as an effective tool for summarizing large amounts of qualitative information, enabling researchers to quickly identify key themes and concepts that emerge from the data. They can help highlight dominant ideas, patterns, and trends in participants' responses, facilitating the initial exploration of themes and guiding subsequent in-depth analyses.

Co-occurrences refer to the simultaneous presence of multiple codes within qualitative data, highlighting the relationships between different concepts and themes. By examining how often specific codes appear together in the same segments of text, it is possible to uncover

insights into the interconnectedness of themes, which can inform the overall understanding of a study's subject matter. This approach allows for a more comprehensive analysis of qualitative data, facilitating the identification of patterns and relationships that may not be immediately evident through isolated coding, and word clouds.

The results of the analysis will now be presented.



The frequency of the verb "feel", in the context of migration, underscores the emotional nature of the migration experience. This supports the perspective of Boccagni and Baldassar (2015), who emphasize the significant role of emotions in the migration process. We will explore this emotional dimension further in the analysis of co-occurrences and network patterns.

Additionally, a cluster of frequently used words relates to physical spaces – such as "city" (411 occurrences), "place" (379), "Padova" (256), and "country" (168). This is consistent with the focus on place attachment, as migration inherently involves the movement between physical locations. Social connections also emerge as an important theme, as indicated by words like "people" (588 occurrences), "friend" (217), and "family" (202).

Interestingly, several words reference units of time, particularly "time" itself (313 occurrences), "now" (285), and "year" (252). This suggests a potential relationship between spatial movement and the temporal dimension of migration. Related to this is the consideration of decisions regarding future intentions, as reflected in words such as "live" (330 occurrences), "back" (231), "leave" (159), and "stay" (158), all of which point to choices about where to settle in the long term.

Other frequent words such as "study" (185 occurrences) and "work" (198) highlight common migration motivators, particularly for individuals seeking educational or professional opportunities abroad. While additional terms like "want", "see", "make", and "always" appear frequently, they do not hold as much thematic significance in the context of this analysis and are thus not discussed in depth. The word "home" (351 occurrences), a key theme in this study, will be explored in greater detail later, accompanied by its own dedicated word cloud to highlight its complex role in the migration experience.



and "together" (15). These words highlight the relational dimension of home, emphasizing that it is often a shared space with significant others. The following quotes illustrate this perspective. WnEU3, a Turkish woman who moved to Padova for her Master's, was joined by her boyfriend after some months. Here, she describes home as a shared experience with him, transcending the physical environment where they live. Home, then, is the love they share and the relationship they built.

“[Boyfriend] and I are here, just like, we're building this little life for ourselves. So like wherever we go, it's going to be our home. Even if it's a dump or it's a very nice place. So I guess it's the love, it's the relationship also, it makes it feel like it's home.”  
-WnEU3

Similarly, MnEU1, from Chile, recalls a conversation he had about home. He argues that it is the relationships, and not the physical place, that endure. Places, in fact, can stop existing, as happened to the house where he was raised:

“In fact, I remembered something, a conversation I had with some European girls. When I had just arrived here in Padova, they were talking about what home is, what their home was, and they talked about physical places. But I talked about people, how people and interactions are what endure. The place doesn't exist anymore, the physical space is there, but maintaining the connections is what makes a home.” -MnEU1

Finally, MnEU2's words highlight how family creates a sense of home. After seeing his family for the first time in three years, he realized that, for him, home – associated with comfort, calmness and protection – is where his family is:

“I think home for me is also tied to the concept of family. I think home is that place where there is a family or you are with your family, living and carrying out normal traditions of that home, and well, it's a place where you feel comfortable, you feel calm, you feel protected in one way or another” -MnEU2

His words confirm the positive emotional associations with home discussed earlier. Interestingly, the word "alone" (15 occurrences) contrasts with this relational perspective, suggesting that home might also be a solitary experience. This is precisely what participant MnEU3 expresses, as he feels that being with others is not a requirement for feeling at home:

“I can be alone, but still feel at home. It is not necessary to be surrounded by people.”  
-MnEU3

Similarly, WnEU5 reflects on finding home within herself, connecting it to an inner sense of peace:

“I found a little bit of peace within myself and I found home within me.” -WnEU5

This solitary perspective does not necessarily oppose the idea of relationships. Instead, it suggests that home can be rooted in a relationship with oneself, a form of internal connection. However, for others, solitude is incompatible with feeling at home. Participant WnEU4, for instance, emphasizes that home requires the presence of loved ones:

“If I am alone, I don't call this one home, because for me home is full of people, full of family, full of anyone who loves you and you love. Having a home alone or having a building alone is not home.” -WnEU4

Another prominent theme in the word cloud is the past, symbolized by the word “memory” (20 occurrences). In this context, words like “family”, “house”, and “mom” not only highlight their relational and physical significance but also evoke the sense of what has been left behind, carried forward through memories. Participant MEU1 emphasizes the power of memories in shaping one's emotional connection to a place. Specifically, memories help transform a space into a home, as the more memories one creates, the stronger the sense of belonging becomes:

“And then, by staying in a place, you build memories. I think the memories make you feel more and more like that is your home. The stronger the memories you build in the place or the more memories you build in the place, the more this space could feel like home.” -MEU1

Padova itself is mentioned 21 times, though participants expressed mixed feelings about whether it truly felt like home. These mixed feelings often relate to the amount of time spent in the city. For instance, Participant WEU2 reflects on how Padova does not yet feel like home, attributing this to the relatively short time she has lived there, which has hindered her ability to connect deeply with the city:

“I cannot say that I feel Padova is like a home. Because of the time, I think I didn't have the time, it's only one year now. So you didn't have time to connect so deeply with it, I don't feel like home. But for sure, I feel there is this potential.” -WEU2

On the other hand, participant WnEU3, who has been living in Padova for longer, associates home with comfort, warmth, and cooking. Reflecting on these feelings, she casually acknowledges that Padova now feels like her home:

“For me, home means comfy, like warm. It means cooking. I didn't realize I had that association, but it's like the place where the stove works and you make some nice smelling food. That's home. Here is my home.” -WnEU3

As time emerges as a crucial factor, the perception of Padova as a temporary and sometimes conditional space will be further examined in the section on co-occurrences.

### 3.1.3 Word cloud on Migration and Identity



Figure 3 – *Word cloud on migration and identity*: most frequent terms within the identity realm, with a close connection to movement, feelings (and feeling different in particular), migrants' origins, and language.

This word cloud, built on codes like “being a migrant” and “adaptation and integration process” (see chapter 2.4), reflects the realm of identity. The words that stand out the most are “feel”, with 138 occurrences, followed by “go” (124), “people” (124) and “different” (80). While the foster three terms have been mentioned earlier, the word “different” emerges strongly for the first time. As discussed in Timotijevic and Breakwell's (2000) work, the process of migration creates instability in the identity of migrants, who must reorient and re-establish continuity in their self-narratives. Individuals also face new labels, such as “immigrant”, “refugee”, “foreigner”, or “stranger”, which may alter how they view themselves and how others perceive them. Although these specific labels don’t appear explicitly in the word cloud, the word “different” seems to evoke both internal feelings and external attitudes. Migrants often feel different from others and from their former selves, while also being treated as different by those around them. WEU1 has been living in Padova for almost two years now, and while she is striving to make herself feel at home in the city, she still faces negative attitudes from people who remind her that she is a “straniera” (foreigner):

“I'm annoyed at being seen as different, [...] now I'm like, no, I actually just want to feel like this is my home and people constantly pointing out that you're not from here

makes it feel like it's less of my home. Even though for myself, I feel like it's fine, but then I have people telling me you're not from here, you're straniera. Yeah, that makes a difference.” -WEU1

This quote underscores how being labeled as "different" not only shapes migrants' self-perception and social interactions but also hinders their ability to feel at home, impacting their emotional experience of the new environment. The relationship between home and identity is further highlighted by the 45 mentions of "home" in the dataset.

Action verbs like “go” (124) and “come” (53) previously emerged in the analysis, reflecting both physical and metaphorical movement. These verbs may capture the migratory experience as tied into narratives of transition and change that are determinant in shaping identity. In connection with this, the term “place”, mentioned 61 times, suggests that the surrounding physical environment plays a role in identity formation. Participant MnEU1 reflects on how this influence can sometimes be involuntary, as his migration to Santiago shaped him in ways beyond his control:

“But yes, that's what I would say about my migration to Santiago, that it shaped me as a person, even if I didn't want it to.” -MnEU1

Similarly, MnEU2 describes the personal transformation he experienced during his first migration to Padova as part of an exchange program. This experience allowed him to discover new aspects of himself, as well as the world around him:

“I discovered a lot about myself. For example, I discovered what career I wanted to study, etc. when I came on the exchange. It was, I mean, it was more than just knowing things outside of me, it was also like knowing myself a lot. Because, well, I was in many situations alone and facing situations I had never been in, and that made me realize who I really am. And that has gradually been shaping a different character in me that obviously I didn't have when I was in Venezuela. [...] So yes, I think I have changed a lot. It has accelerated the process of change.” -MnEU2

WnEU1 echoes these sentiments, describing how her first experience abroad in Austria offered her the opportunity to redefine herself outside of the familiar bubble of her upbringing. Upon returning to Ecuador, those close to her struggled to fully recognize her, as the experience had significantly transformed her:

“Graz really also shaped who I was because it was a clean slate to develop who I wanted to be, because I had been in high school in this whole bubble and then I was like, okay, clean slate, who do I want to be in this new stage of my life? I started developing, maybe some, I wouldn't be able to pinpoint exactly, but then I know when I came back to Ecuador, I didn't feel my friends, my family fully recognized me, they noticed I had changed as well.” -WnEU1

Other key words like "culture" (44 occurrences) and "country" (39) emerge in the analysis. These terms, alongside "family" (53) and "parent" (21), likely reflect participants' connections to their origins, suggesting that identity is shaped by the environment where one is born and raised. Migrants often carry these foundational aspects of their identity with them as they navigate new spaces and experiences. MnEU2 reflects on the sense of familiarity and ease he feels when interacting with people who share his cultural background, describing how this connection makes him feel more authentically himself in a very short time:

“Obviously, the interaction is much smoother with South Americans and that, I feel more like who I really am in essence. And it's crazy because after three minutes you already have that perception, so it was quite, quite cool. I liked it.” -MnEU2

Words like "Padova" (21 occurrences) and "abroad" (18) signify a journey away from these original environments, reinforcing how migration reshapes identity. The appearance of "experience" (29 occurrences) points to the opportunities migration provides for individuals to explore new realities and grow. This transformation of identity is tied to not just leaving behind one's past but also adapting and expanding through new encounters and life experiences. The word “learn” (19) further supports this, indicating growth and adaptation, possibly linked to the process of forming a new identity of acquiring new skills and knowledge in a foreign environment. This may also reflect participants' resilience and efforts to integrate. WEU1, for example, reflects on how her first migration experience influenced her identity, allowing her to learn about the world and interact with diverse people. Interestingly, she contemplates the version of herself that might have existed had she not studied abroad:

“So I learned a lot about the world, I learned about LGBTQ rights, I met my first non binary people. I got to dance a lot, and there was much, there were just so many events that brought people together that really impacted how I see the world. And I'm pretty sure, like I would be a very different person if I wouldn't have gone. I think I'd still be

cool and a nice person, but like I'm really happy that I had that experience. I learned so much from being there.” -WEU1

Finally, "speak" (24 occurrences) and "language" (17 occurrences) highlight communication as a vital aspect of identity. Language barriers or language acquisition can shape migrants' sense of belonging or difference as they navigate new linguistic environments. After moving to Padova for an exchange, MnEU2 describes his determination to learn the language in order to fully participate in the dynamics of both his host household and school:

“It was like mandatory to have to speak Italian to communicate with my brother who is my age, and at school as well, because yes, well, at first many people talk to you, you are like the new person, so they speak to you in English, but then it’s a barrier, right, it’s like, interesting that you know English, but if you don’t speak Italian [...] you’re not part of the everyday dynamics one hundred percent. So both things led me to accelerate learning as much as possible.” -MnEU2

### 3.1.4 Word cloud on Place Attachment



Figure 4 – *Word cloud on place attachment*: the cloud shows the high frequencies of words associated with themes of movement, feelings, physical spaces, social relationships, migration's motivators and challenges.

This word cloud explores the theme of place attachment, emphasizing the centrality of space and social relationships in shaping individuals' connection to a location. Compared to the previous clouds, this one identifies space as the primary focus, illustrated by the prominence of terms such as "city" (180 occurrences), "place" (139), "Padova" (79), "back" (59), "country" (37), "Italy" (21), "Europe" (18), "space" (18), and "world" (17). These terms reflect participants' reflections on the physical and geographical dimensions of their migration experience, highlighting the importance of both local (Padova, Italy) and broader (Europe, world) spatial contexts in shaping their sense of attachment.

A strong secondary theme revolves around social relationships, with "people" (192 occurrences) being the most frequent word in the cloud. Other related terms include "friend" (61), "community" (34), "family" (29), "person" (21), "connect" (18), "group" (16), "relationship" (15), "interact" (14). These terms underscore the social dimension of place attachment, suggesting that one's connection to a location is often mediated by relationships with loved ones and the wider community. For example, MEU1 describes how people and relationships play a crucial role in discovering a place. For her, connections with others serve

as a means to familiarize herself with a new environment, ultimately shaping her sense of home:

“I think I can feel good in a lot of different places, I just need some time. I think there is this time of adaptation, of discovering a new place and bonding with new people. And I think what would make me feel good in a place, what I could call home, is definitely linked to the people I meet and the relationships I build, because I think it makes not much sense for me to be somewhere and staying alone in a way of just discovering a place alone. I think I really want to discover the place through people also.” -MEU1

In line with Lei et al.'s (2023) definition of place attachment as an “emotional bond between individuals and the social and material environment of a place” (p. 3), the word “feel” (frequent in previous word clouds as well) emerges once again with high prominence. This confirms that place attachment is not only a physical or social connection but also a deeply emotional experience.

The development of place attachment is also influenced by one's purpose in a specific space. Terms like “work” (50 occurrences), “job” (41), “student” (40), “study” (36), “opportunity” (20), “reason” (19), and “learn” (17) suggests that practical factors, such as professional or academic engagement, contribute to how individuals perceive and connect with their environment. Moreover, these words emphasize the practical side of why individuals choose to remain in a particular place and how their attachment may be linked to the ability to pursue personal goals. An interesting perspective on this is provided by MnEU1, who comes from Chile and describes how the culture of migration according to opportunities is common in his context of origin. He notes that this mindset can make it challenging to feel rooted in any physical space, as locations are often seen as temporary and contingent on available opportunities:

“So, that idea of moving according to opportunities is something quite common. I would say that at least in the context I come from, it is very difficult to feel rooted. That idea of being in one place, of feeling part of it, is difficult because that place is shaped by opportunities.” -MnEU1

Differently, participant WEU1 shares her experiences in Padova, particularly regarding her volunteering efforts, which have helped her feel more connected to the city. Her involvement

illustrates the role of personal engagement and goal-oriented activities in fostering a sense of place attachment:

“I think now, with doing the volunteer work, also it even helped me further, and now, this woman texted me again if I want to help with another group, and I'm looking forward to it because also it makes me feel like part of the city a bit more.” -WEU1

However, participants also highlighted the challenges they face in forming attachments to new places, often stemming from feelings of difference and difficulty. Words like "different" (42 occurrences), "leave" (36), "hard" (23), "language" (22), "culture" (21), and "difficult" (20) reflect the obstacles encountered while navigating a new cultural and linguistic landscape. These challenges can hinder the development of a positive relationship with their new environment. In the following extract, WnEU1 describes a series of challenges that significantly impacted her migration experience from Ecuador to Austria, making it “horrible”. She particularly highlights issues related to language barriers, loneliness, and identity development:

“The first time. It was horrible. It was horrible because language is really hard. I was 18, the first time living away from home. I was feeling very, very lonely. I was feeling very misunderstood. Because I was still a teenager, right? And suddenly, I was outside of my routine, outside of my family, and I was having trouble making friends in a different language. Also, I was in this whole identity crisis related to teenage years. It was a lot.” -WnEU1

Finally, the word cloud also reflects social support and the positive emotions that help foster attachment, as seen in words like "good" (58 occurrences), "love" (28), "nice" (28), "kind" (26), "ask" (17), "help" (17), and "happy" (14). These terms suggest that emotional and social support play a protective role in the migration process, helping migrants develop a sense of belonging despite difficulties. From a different perspective, they might also suggest that the development of place attachment promotes positive feelings and individual well-being.

## 3.2 Co-occurrences

Co-occurrences allow for a deeper level of analysis in the research process. Drawing from the themes emerging in the word clouds, co-occurrences were categorized into five key sections: emotions, barriers, place attachment, future intentions, and social support. By exploring these sections, the analysis aims to shed light on the complex web of relationships that characterize the migration experience, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of how these themes interact and influence one another.

### 3.2.1 Emotions

This section begins with an analysis of the role of emotions in the migration process. The code "emotions" is significantly correlated with most other codes, consistent with the high frequency of the word "feel" identified in the previous word clouds. The goal is to not only explore these relationships but also to clarify the specific emotions participants referred to. Two tables are provided: Table 3 – *Co-occurrences table on emotions and migration process* addresses general aspects of migration, focusing on adaptation and integration, barriers encountered, the meaning of being a migrant, the impact on identity, the concept of home, and an overview of migration in general. In contrast, Table 4 – *Co-occurrences table on emotions and relationship with spaces* examines the connection between emotions and spaces, particularly concerning the native country and the possibility of returning, Padova, and the development of place attachment. Each table will be discussed, supported by relevant quotations from the transcripts.

|                                                      |  | 🌱 adaptation and integration process<br>(1) 44 | 🌱 barriers<br>(1) 132 | 🌱 being a migrant<br>(1) 77 | 🌱 home<br>(1) 142 | 🌱 identity<br>(1) 59 | 🌱 migration general<br>(1) 95 |
|------------------------------------------------------|--|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|
| 🌱 emotions (1) 136                                   |  | 17                                             | 26                    | 22                          | 24                | 15                   | 28                            |
| 🌱 emotions: detachment and loneliness (1) 28         |  | 4                                              | 7                     | 7                           | 4                 | 2                    | 3                             |
| 🌱 emotions: ease and stability (1) 8                 |  | 1                                              |                       | 1                           | 4                 | 1                    | 2                             |
| 🌱 emotions: emotional challenges of migration (1) 37 |  | 3                                              | 10                    | 6                           | 7                 | 6                    | 9                             |
| 🌱 emotions: longing and loss (1) 35                  |  | 1                                              | 3                     | 5                           | 9                 | 1                    | 9                             |
| 🌱 emotions: pressure (1) 20                          |  | 4                                              | 6                     | 4                           | 1                 | 3                    | 1                             |
| 🌱 emotions: strength and resilience (1) 27           |  | 6                                              | 5                     | 3                           | 3                 | 6                    | 8                             |

Table 3 – *Co-occurrences table on emotions and migration process*: this table focuses on general aspects of the migration process, specifically addressing adaptation and integration, barriers encountered, the meaning of being a migrant and its impact on identity, the concept of home, and an overview of migration in general.

|                                                      |  | going back<br>11 53 | native country<br>11 125 | Padova<br>11 135 | place attachment<br>11 134 |
|------------------------------------------------------|--|---------------------|--------------------------|------------------|----------------------------|
| emotions<br>11 136                                   |  | 25                  | 28                       | 27               | 22                         |
| emotions: detachment and loneliness<br>11 28         |  | 4                   | 3                        | 12               | 7                          |
| emotions: ease and stability<br>11 8                 |  | 3                   | 3                        | 1                | 3                          |
| emotions: emotional challenges of migration<br>11 37 |  | 9                   | 11                       | 6                | 4                          |
| emotions: longing and loss<br>11 35                  |  | 12                  | 13                       | 3                | 4                          |
| emotions: pressure<br>11 20                          |  | 2                   | 3                        | 2                |                            |
| emotions: strength and resilience<br>11 27           |  | 3                   | 3                        | 6                | 6                          |

Table 4 – Co-occurrences table on emotions and relationship with spaces

This table shows the relationship between emotions and space, with a particular focus on the native country and the possibility to go back, Padova, and the development of place attachment.

To begin with, the code “adaptation and integration process”, with 39% of its quotes relating to emotions, is distributed relatively evenly across subcodes. This suggests that the process of adaptation is fundamentally emotional. Among the emotions, strength and resilience stand out, indicating that the struggles encountered during adaptation often lead to the development of positive emotional responses, such as increased resilience.

Almost 30% of the references within the “migration general” code are emotional, indicating a strong link between the migration process and emotions. Migration as a process is particularly associated with emotional challenges, specifically with feelings of longing and loss related to what has been left behind. This is further supported by Table 4, which highlights a strong correlation between longing and loss and references to the native country, as well as the intention to return (“going back” results to be the most emotional code overall, with 47% of its references being linked to emotions). One participant from Ethiopia, WnEU4, described how her first long-term migration experience led her to realize how much she longed for home, especially for the social relationships she had left behind. The quote highlights how the native country sometimes overlaps with the meaning of home, and how deeply intertwined the concepts of home and emotional connections are for many participants.

“If I'm at home, I can meet my family easily, my society, even the memories I had with my family in the desert. Because this one is like, coming to Padova is my first experience for me to stay a long period of time. Before that I spent one or two months in different cities. But for a long time, this one is the first for me. So really I missed home, and I can notice home is everything for me. Whether I'm happy or sad, home is home.” -WnEU4

As previously mentioned in the analysis of word clouds, home can carry various meanings, but when it comes to feelings of longing and loss, it is often tied to participants' pasts and places of origin.

The code "strength and resilience" also frequently surfaced in connection with migration, often appearing in the context of overcoming challenges. This suggests that the emotional strain of barriers encountered along the migration journey often leads to the development of resilience. The following quote by participant WEU1 shows how previous challenges made her better prepared for what to expect. In particular, she emphasizes the importance of investing in social relationships early in the migration process. Migration, in this case, is described as a learning process that enhances preparedness (and resilience) through experience:

"I think the first month, two months maybe, everything's very exciting and an investment. Again, having moved a bit, it was like, I know how this works. You have to invest a lot in social relationships at the beginning especially, because then it's going to pay off. But in the beginning, you need to go hard." -WEU1

Similarly, "identity" is closely linked to both "emotional challenges of migration" and "strength and resilience", furtherly suggesting these two aspects are intertwined. As participants face hardships, they develop specific traits – like adaptability and independence – that help them cope. For example, one interviewee, MnEU2, explained how migration allowed him to discover his strengths and weaknesses, which shaped his identity over time. He described how facing unfamiliar situations forced him to adapt, which led to both personal growth and changes in his character:

"I was in many situations alone and facing situations I had never been in, and that made me realize who I really am. And that has gradually been shaping a different character in me that obviously I didn't have when I was in Venezuela. And that, I mean, I think on the one hand it has done me a lot of good because it has made me a more cultured person, really, capable of adapting to more environments, and on the other hand, I've changed in the sense that I have also lived through difficult moments, but of change, in which I have modified my character, I have modified what I think are my strengths and weaknesses, and especially because of all the situations I have lived through." -MnEU2

While the theme of barriers will be explored more deeply in the following section, it is important to note their connection to emotional challenges like detachment and loneliness. The data shows that barriers are often linked to feelings of isolation, particularly in relation to both Padova and the migrant experience in general. As noted in the word cloud analysis, migrants often grapple with new identities, not just in how they perceive themselves, but also in how they are perceived by others. This external and internal labeling as "foreign" can lead to profound feelings of isolation and non-belongingness to the destination country and the local community. One female participant from Ecuador described her sense of disconnection while navigating the city of Padova. She detailed how the unfamiliar environment – the people, customs, and landscape – fueled a sense of alienation. Her experience illustrates the emotional weight of living in a place where one feels foreign, unseen, and disconnected from the social fabric.

“And I was walking and I felt, there's so many people, I walked with my headphones on because I started feeling overwhelmed. But then for me it's like I feel, and I felt, very alienated and very foreign, you know, because I think points of reference in a city and in a place are also how you recognize your own people, you know, how you recognize Latinos, Ecuadorians, how you see their faces. And like here, I just see Europeans and I don't feel part of it, yet, maybe ever, I don't know, but yet, no. For me, I was looking at people and thinking this is just rivers of people that mean nothing. Another point of reference is music, food, the landscape, all these things that you are used to and you recognize and here, even if I've been here for a year and a half, I don't feel, maybe I recognize them, but I don't feel connected to them.” -WnEU1

Finally, a relationship between emotions and place attachment emerges, consistent with the definition of place attachment as an emotional bond with a place (Lei et al., 2023). Of particular importance are the codes “detachment and loneliness” and “strength and resilience”. Place attachment refers to the emotional ties individuals form with a location, contributing to their sense of belonging and stability. However, as discussed, migrants often face challenges in establishing these connections, as cultural, social, or environmental barriers can hinder their ability to bond with their new surroundings (He et al., 2023). The struggle to develop place attachment frequently leads to feelings of detachment and loneliness. When migrants feel physically distanced from their home countries or socially excluded from the destination community, their ability to forge meaningful connections diminishes, leaving them in a state of emotional limbo. Strength and resilience may help them navigate the

complexities of their experiences. In accordance with the work of Berry (1997), some individuals manage to draw on personal resources or external support networks to overcome obstacles, enabling them to adapt to their new environment over time. In some cases, the adversities they face may even enhance their bond with the place, fostering a deeper sense of belonging and achievement as they successfully navigate challenges.

Thus, while feelings of detachment and loneliness may initially impede the development of place attachment, the resilience that emerges from overcoming these barriers can ultimately lead to a renewed connection with the place. This dynamic illustrates the complex, often nonlinear relationship between migrants' emotional experiences and their evolving sense of place attachment, as highlighted by the co-occurrence table.

### 3.2.2 Barriers

Given the significant impact of barriers on emotional experiences and their hypothesized relationships with specific themes, such as place attachment, the following section will offer a comprehensive analysis of the code “barriers” and its associated subcodes. This analysis will explore how barriers correlate with other critical codes identified in the research, shedding light on their role in shaping the emotional landscape of migrants' experiences.

|                                   | adaptation and integration process<br>44 | being a migrant<br>77 | leaving<br>48 | Padova<br>135 | place attachment<br>134 | region: EU<br>3 | region: non-EU<br>11 |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|---------------|-------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| barriers 132                      | 16                                       | 24                    | 14            | 35            | 13                      | 3               | 11                   |
| barriers: bureaucratic barrier 25 | 3                                        | 3                     | 3             | 6             | 3                       | 3               | 9                    |
| barriers: cultural differences 18 | 5                                        | 2                     | 4             | 8             | 4                       | 1               | 4                    |
| barriers: economic barrier 26     | 1                                        | 2                     | 2             | 4             |                         | 2               | 8                    |
| barriers: linguistic barrier 33   | 5                                        | 7                     | 6             | 11            | 5                       | 3               | 8                    |
| barriers: social attitudes 37     | 6                                        | 14                    | 8             | 18            | 2                       | 2               | 10                   |

Table 5 – *Co-occurrences table on barriers encountered in the migration process*: the table presents the different types of barriers encountered by the participants – bureaucratic barrier, cultural differences, economic barrier, linguistic barrier, and social attitudes – and their relationship with other main codes, namely “adaptation and integration process”, “being a migrant”, “leaving”, “Padova”, “place attachment”, and the demographic groups of non-EU and EU participants.

It is not surprising that barriers are generally correlated with what it means to be a migrant. The strongest correlation, however, is with a specific type of barrier: social attitudes. As we have seen in the previous section, barriers are also closely linked to the emotional challenges of migration. Together, this suggests that the greatest difficulties migrants face may not lie in structural issues such as bureaucracy, finances, or language, but rather in their interactions with people and their ability to feel accepted in the new society. Indeed, Berry (1997) underlined the importance of societies to be based on multicultural values – with low levels of prejudice in particular – in order for successful integration to be achieved. Cultural differences, while present, do not emerge as particularly problematic. While Berry (1997) had indicated cultural distance as a key impacting factor on the integration process, the participants in the study didn't perceive it as problematic. This may indicate that the barriers they encountered are less about misunderstandings or clashes between cultures and more about preconceived notions or biases towards them. These attitudes may reflect an underlying issue of "othering", where migrants are viewed as outsiders regardless of their attempts to

integrate. The issue is expressed by one participant, WEU1, who articulates her discomfort at being visibly categorized as "different" or "the other" by the local community. She observes that people in Padova possess a rigid classification system, which not only defines their identity but also imposes a label on migrants, isolating them further.

“But it's just weird to have that, to be seen and so obviously declared as a different, as an other, so explicitly. [...] So it feels to me like people here have a very strong categorization of who they are and who other people are. And I do feel like I am placed into the other category.” -WEU1

In the context of Padova, social attitudes and language barriers emerge as primary obstacles for migrants. Economic barriers are never mentioned, which might suggest that financial struggles are not as pervasive in this setting. The combination of social exclusion and language difficulties may contribute to migrants' feelings of isolation, as they encounter obstacles in both feeling integrated and connected to the local community. These factors could potentially lead some migrants to contemplate leaving Padova, as they find it challenging to feel a sense of belonging. When asked about whether she would like to remain in Padova, participant WEU1 answered negatively, explaining how, despite her language skills, it remains difficult to connect with locals, also due to their lack of intentionality in interacting with internationals. Additionally, she reports difficulties in understanding essential services, such as the healthcare system.

“No, I sadly don't. So while I've met some locals, I'm struggling to connect to locals and that plays a role. Even though I speak the language, right, but I think there's still probably some language barrier because I have to, like we have a German expression about it, like I have to get over myself to start a conversation, and then it works, but it's not made easier by how it is received, you know, because it's not like people approach me. It's hard. And then there are things that also, for example, with the medical system that I still struggle to figure out how it works, or access to nature.” -WEU1

In terms of place attachment, while barriers do not have a particularly strong correlation, they are still worth mentioning. Language barriers, in particular, play a subtle role in how migrants form connections to their new environment. The inability to communicate fluently may hinder not only social integration but also the deeper emotional connection that

defines place attachment. Moreover, given that place attachment is often driven by factors such as emotional connections and personal experiences, external barriers like social attitudes or bureaucracy may not directly shape one's sense of attachment to a place, but they can influence the process indirectly by affecting one's social life and ability to integrate.

Similarly, the adaptation and integration process is influenced by barriers, though the impact is not overwhelmingly significant. This might be because adaptation and integration are often long-term processes, shaped by a variety of factors, both emotional and practical.

Interestingly, this is the only instance where notable differences between demographic groups emerge. Participants from EU countries (3 participants) and non-EU countries (9 participants) reported different levels of negative social attitudes, with non-EU participants experiencing these challenges more acutely. This might reflect the privilege that often comes with European nationality, where even within a shared migration experience, certain groups may face fewer social obstacles. WEU2 highlights this contrast, noting how being European, white, and a woman eased her own integrating process, in stark contrast to the struggles faced by non-European migrants. While doing so, she stresses the importance of racial and gender backgrounds within these dynamics.

“I think Padova is an easy going city for migration, it is not that hard. If you haven't finished with the interviews, I can recommend you a friend that is from Gambia and for him, it was very difficult to integrate and everything was difficult. For me, that I'm European, white and a woman, it was easy I think, compared with other people that I know.” -WEU2

It is noteworthy, however, that all remarks highlighting the different treatment Europeans receive came from European participants themselves. The reasons behind this may be complex, and drawing hypotheses on the matter lies beyond the scope of this analysis.

### 3.2.3 Place Attachment

The following table presents the co-occurrences of one primary theme in this study: place attachment. While its connections with emotions and barriers have already been briefly discussed, the objective here is to highlight the more nuanced relationships that emerged from the data and to examine the most relevant links.

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |  barriers<br> 132 |  connection to the people<br> 37 |  home<br> 142 |  native country<br> 125 |  Padova<br> 135 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  connection to the people<br> 37                                | 5                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                    | 8                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                               | 14                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|  inhabiting a space<br> 36                                      | 3                                                                                                                                                                                   | 10                                                                                                                                                                                                 | 5                                                                                                                                                                                   | 1                                                                                                                                                                                             | 10                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|  place attachment<br> 134                                       | 12                                                                                                                                                                                  | 19                                                                                                                                                                                                 | 35                                                                                                                                                                                  | 24                                                                                                                                                                                            | 34                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|  place attachment: belongingness<br> 17                         | 2                                                                                                                                                                                   | 2                                                                                                                                                                                                  | 5                                                                                                                                                                                   | 6                                                                                                                                                                                             | 4                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|  place attachment: emotional and memory-based connection<br> 19 |                                                                                                                                                                                     | 1                                                                                                                                                                                                  | 8                                                                                                                                                                                   | 9                                                                                                                                                                                             | 1                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|  place attachment: feeling part of the city<br> 33              | 3                                                                                                                                                                                   | 8                                                                                                                                                                                                  | 7                                                                                                                                                                                   | 3                                                                                                                                                                                             | 14                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|  place attachment: lived, engaged experience<br> 29             | 3                                                                                                                                                                                   | 6                                                                                                                                                                                                  | 3                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                               | 10                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|  place attachment: social ties and relationships<br> 30         | 3                                                                                                                                                                                   | 9                                                                                                                                                                                                  | 12                                                                                                                                                                                  | 4                                                                                                                                                                                             | 7                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|  place attachment: the city itself<br> 15                       | 2                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                    | 6                                                                                                                                                                                   | 5                                                                                                                                                                                             | 4                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|  place attachment: transience<br> 29                            | 5                                                                                                                                                                                   | 6                                                                                                                                                                                                  | 3                                                                                                                                                                                   | 1                                                                                                                                                                                             | 10                                                                                                                                                                                    |

Table 6 – *Co-occurrences table on place attachment*: the table shows how different components of place attachment that emerged from the data – for example, “transience” – relate to the following main codes: “barriers”, “connection to the people”, “home”, “native country”, and “Padova”.

First, various "types" of place attachment can be observed – e.g. associated with a sense of belonging or developed through social relationships – each corresponding to different aspects of the terms identified in the word cloud (Figure 4). The specific ways in which these different types of attachment form and function will be further explored in a dedicated network in the next chapter.

In the earlier analysis, place attachment was found to co-occur modestly with "barriers" (10% of its occurrences), with the frequency spread evenly across the subcodes for barriers. However, this table shifts focus to examine how barriers interact with different types of place attachment. The highest co-occurrence is between "barriers" and "place attachment: transience", reflecting the challenge of developing attachment to a place perceived as temporary. While it is difficult to determine the exact direction of this relationship, it can be hypothesized that the presence of barriers reinforces the perception of a place as transitory, particularly when individuals enter a location with the intention of leaving. Barriers, then, may not only hinder the development of place attachment but also reinforce both a strained relationship with the space and an intention to move on.

Several examples from participant interviews illustrate this connection. Participant WnEU5 reflects on the conditional nature of her relationship with Padova, noting that her stay in the city is contingent on the state's approval. This example underscores how specific barriers – bureaucratic in this case – can shape and define one's attachment to a place:

“It's also complex, very complex, because you know you are in a contractual relationship with Padova, you are in Padova as long as you have your resident permit. If not, you're not here. It's between you and the state.” -WnEU5

In a different light, participant WEU1 explains how her initial intention to stay in Padova for only a limited period influenced her attachment to the city. While she describes her experience as safe, comfortable, and happy, she emphasizes that her mindset, coupled with the fact that her close friends are also leaving, has played a major role in her decision not to stay:

“These are three very random things, and the fact that all my friends are leaving, like my close friends are leaving. There's a lot of factors that just make it, it's been nice and I felt very comfortable and safe and happy here for this time, but I think I also came in with the mindset of only being here for a little while.” -WEU1

In the next extract participant MEU1 recalls his Erasmus experience in Germany, highlighting the transitory nature of such programs. While he felt connected to the group of fellow Erasmus students, he admits that this form of travel did not allow him to engage deeply with the city itself:

“Maybe in Erasmus not that much, because the Erasmus is a bit special, you don't feel very connected to the city as like a local. You feel, that's what I felt when I was in Germany, you feel more connected with the group of people you are studying with because you're all Erasmus. You make this big group of friends who are Erasmus and everything. So like, I mean, I was also very active with this group of friends, we were always doing things like traveling, visiting places around, but less active like in the sense of being involved in the city or what's going on in the city. Here there's really a lot to do.” -MEU1

The interplay between transience and the challenge of developing place attachment is also supported by the co-occurrences between "place attachment: transience" and "Padova". This suggests that international students often come to Padova with plans to stay only until their academic programs are complete. However, despite this temporary mindset, 18% of the

quotes related to Padova still reflect some form of attachment, suggesting that a connection to the city can develop, even within a limited timeframe. Participants highlighted this connection through feelings of belonging and engagement with the city, suggesting that active participation and social interactions can foster a sense of attachment. For example, participant WnEU2, who moved to Padova as a child, discusses how her relationship with the city evolved over time. She emphasizes how she now actively engages with Padova, not only by familiarizing herself with its streets but also by participating in social events to deepen her connection with both the people and the city:

“Well, first, I used to practically always stay at home, so there wasn't this relationship with this city like there is now. Now I try to make use of my time by doing activities, which maybe I didn't do before, I mean, I would like to do activities with my friends to feel at home with them, but also at home in the city, to actually understand, maybe just the streets, to recognize them. [...] So what helps me to understand is socializing, I mean, socializing with people, taking advantage of these social events that are created, and that's it.” -WnEU2

In more than half of the cases where participants mentioned their connection to other people, they were also referring to place attachment. This highlights how social ties can serve as a powerful mechanism for developing an emotional connection to a place, especially in relation to one's physical surroundings. The combination of social connections and active involvement suggests that developing a connection to a space often begins with building relationships with the people who inhabit it. Participant WEU2 exemplifies this dynamic in reverse, as she describes how difficulties in forming deep connections impacted her sense of belonging in Padova. Her reflection also reinforces the role of transience in this process:

“What you say, that everyone is leaving, is what affects me. I feel that I cannot make deep relations here because people are not staying. I search for deep relations in my life. I think Padova is not a place for this.” -WEU2

The perspective on place attachment in relation to participants' native countries offers a complementary view. In these cases, the type of connection described is fundamentally different, based on past experiences and memories. Participants expressed a stronger sense of belonging to their native country, which is sometimes lacking in Padova, as obstacles and the short duration of their stay limit their ability to create meaningful emotional ties to the city. The theme of transience fits in the literature on the relation between place attachment and

time. However, the consulted literature presents contrasting results. For example, we have seen how Riethmuller et al. (2021) study shows that the length of time participants had lived in an environment impacted their feelings of attachment, as time resulted to be necessary to develop a sense of connection with the space. On the contrary, Toruńczyk-Ruiz & Brunarska (2018) found that the duration of residence did not foster significantly stronger attachment. Perhaps, more research is needed to identify possible mediating mechanisms, such that the same amount of time spent in one place may or may not lead to the development of place attachment.

Lastly, "home" shows the strongest correlation with place attachment, with about 24% of the occurrences reflecting this relationship. A striking aspect of this connection is the role of social ties and relationships in shaping the sense of home, as shown by the co-occurrence with "connection to the people". The finding confirms the results by Toruńczyk-Ruiz & Brunarska (2018), who identified high quality social relationships as key in order to be able to feel at home in a space. Additionally, the modest overlap with emotional and memory-based attachment points to a link between home and participants' native countries, suggesting that "home" is often associated with places where family and friends reside.

In closing, it is important to highlight that individuals can maintain attachments to multiple places simultaneously. The data in Table 6 supports this notion, showing evidence of attachment to both the native country and Padova. However, this is likely an underestimation, as the analysis did not account for attachments to other places, due to the overwhelming complexity it would add. In this sense, the findings confirm the results obtained by He et al. (2023), who also found their participants' scores to be an expression of multiple attachments to different locations, native and destination countries in particular. Participant WnEU4 illustrates this duality well, expressing her strong attachment to Padova while also longing for her native country, particularly her family (reflecting a deeply emotional and memory-based form of attachment):

“For me, the city is good for studying, relaxing, doing different things. My attachment with the city is strong until now. Before I had a plan to know more about the city, and the places around the city in the summer, but I changed my mind and I have a plan to go back home because I miss my family. But my attachment to the city is strong.”  
-WnEU4

### 3.2.4 Future Intentions

The next table presents the factors influencing participants' future settlement intentions, explored during the final section of the interviews. Participants were asked about the elements they consider important when deciding where to live, with a particular focus on Padova. The table highlights key decision-making factors, along with potential choices and destinations: returning to the native country, staying in or leaving Padova, and general reflections on home and place attachment. The code "where to live" summarizes the factors interviewees would consider, irrespective of the specific location. Barriers and migration motivators also contribute to this overall discussion.

|                              |  | going back: barriers<br>⑩ 33 | home<br>⑩ 142 | leaving<br>⑩ 48 | place attachment<br>⑩ 134 | staying<br>⑩ 28 | where to live<br>⑩ 87 |
|------------------------------|--|------------------------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| barriers<br>⑩ 132            |  | 4                            | 5             | 14              | 13                        | 11              | 16                    |
| migration motivators<br>⑩ 89 |  | 11                           | 8             |                 | 5                         | 3               | 12                    |
| native country<br>⑩ 125      |  | 28                           | 27            | 4               | 24                        | 4               | 17                    |
| Padova<br>⑩ 135              |  | 2                            | 10            | 17              | 35                        | 8               | 10                    |
| place attachment<br>⑩ 134    |  | 4                            | 35            | 7               |                           | 5               | 13                    |

Table 7 – *Co-occurrences table on participants' future intentions*: this table presents the co-occurrences of codes relating to future intentions – “going back”, “leaving”, “staying” and “where to live” in particular – with codes relating to spaces – “native country”, “Padova” – and other relating ones, like “place attachment”.

Starting with the native country, the table shows strong correlations with three key codes: “going back: barriers”, “home”, and “place attachment”. These associations suggest that while participants express a strong attachment to their home country, viewing it as home, significant barriers prevent them from returning – barriers that, in many cases, initially motivated their migration. The medium correlation with "where to live" also indicates that some participants are contemplating a return in the future. In the following extract, participant WnEU1 expresses her love for Ecuador, and her frustration at being unable to return due to fundamental barriers, in particular regarding safety and job opportunities.

“Then if we talk about Ecuador, I would 100%, with no doubt, go back to Ecuador if I would feel safe, and I would feel there's job opportunities there. I don't mean like having a super hyper well paid job, no, but something that allows me to live well, you know, and a city where I can move safely. Ecuador is a paradise. If it had these two things, Ecuador is a paradise, because it has beautiful people, beautiful landscapes, good food, like perfect weather, and I cannot really explain how beautiful the nature is

in Ecuador, okay. So it's just like that. And I've cried many times bitterly about this topic because it feels like, because of violence, I'm forced to be outside of my country.” -WnEU1

When compared with Padova, an interesting contrast emerges: while “Padova” also shows a high correlation with place attachment, the co-occurrences are much lower with the concept of home. Additionally, it mildly correlates with the code “leaving”. This suggests that, although participants may feel attached to Padova, this attachment does not necessarily translate into seeing it as “home”. The lack of a deeper sense of belonging may be exacerbated by the numerous barriers migrants encounter, as highlighted in Table 5. Barriers are closely linked to both place attachment and intentions to leave, underscoring their influence on participants’ decisions. It becomes evident that place attachment alone does not suffice in determining whether someone chooses to remain. The missing piece seems to be a deeper, emotional connection – namely, the ability to truly perceive Padova as home. Interestingly, while place attachment is strongly linked to feelings of home, the findings suggest that this relationship is often asymmetric: perceiving a place as home often reflects strong attachment, but high place attachment does not directly lead to the perception of that place as home. In the case of Padova, strong place attachment alone does not seem sufficient to foster a true sense of home. Participant MnEU2 highlights this distinction, describing the significance of the memories created in Padova but noting that, despite this, he does not feel a sense of belonging and therefore does not perceive the city as home. Notably, the reference to “memories” resonates with the high frequency of this term in the word cloud on the concept of home. Bringing these elements together, it seems that while positive memories are important, they alone are not enough to make a place feel like home.

“I think it will have a very important place in me, it will bring back many memories and it will be fun to come back here, to relive what this city represented in my life, which is a lot, but I don’t feel it as a home, at least not now because I don’t feel like I “belong” to this place.” -MnEU2

In summary, a high level of place attachment still falls short of fostering that critical sense of belonging and home, further underscoring that place attachment, while significant, is not a sufficient condition for remaining. The presence of other factors, such as overcoming barriers and finding a sense of emotional belonging, is crucial.

### 3.2.5 Social Support

This final co-occurrence table examines the role of social support, an idea grounded in previous works on the importance of support systems in processes of adaptation, identity development, and settlement in a new environment (e.g. Berry, 1997; Schlossberg, 1981, as cited in Robinson, 2020).

|                                                |  | 📍 barriers<br>Ⓜ 132 | 📍 barriers: bureaucratic barrier<br>Ⓜ 24 | 📍 barriers: linguistic barrier<br>Ⓜ 33 | 📍 barriers: social attitudes<br>Ⓜ 37 | 📍 social support<br>Ⓜ 70 |
|------------------------------------------------|--|---------------------|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 📍 being a migrant<br>Ⓜ 77                      |  | 24                  | 3                                        | 7                                      | 14                                   | 19                       |
| 📍 being a migrant: a shared experience<br>Ⓜ 18 |  | 3                   |                                          | 1                                      | 1                                    | 12                       |
| 📍 emotions<br>Ⓜ 136                            |  | 26                  | 5                                        | 8                                      | 9                                    | 19                       |
| 📍 Padova<br>Ⓜ 135                              |  | 35                  | 6                                        | 11                                     | 18                                   | 17                       |
| 📍 place attachment<br>Ⓜ 134                    |  | 13                  | 3                                        | 5                                      | 2                                    | 12                       |

Table 8 – *Co-occurrences table on the role of social support*: the table shows the correlation between “social support” and “barriers”, highlighting for which codes this relationship emerges the most, namely “being a migrant”, “emotions”, “Padova”, and “place attachment”.

The code "social support", which appears in the last column of the table, co-occurs strongly with several codes on the left. The most significant insight from this table is that codes showing strong co-occurrences with "social support" also display similar patterns with "barriers". This suggests that social support becomes particularly crucial when migrants face obstacles, particularly in contexts such as “being a migrant”, aspects related to Padova, and the development of place attachment. Social support seems to play a crucial role when the barriers encountered are of social nature, mitigating the negative impact of exclusionary attitudes or behaviors toward migrants. In this sense, social networks act as a buffer, helping to counteract difficulties that arise in the social realm (Motti-Stefanidi, Asendorpf, and Masten, 2012, as cited in Berry, 1997; Oppedal and Røysamb, 2007, as cited in Berry, 1997).

In section 3.2.1, we discussed how participant WnEU1 felt alienated while walking through the streets of Padova, surrounded by locals. It's insightful to now consider what she mentioned afterward about her friends, who provides her with a sense of connection and grounding in the city:

“So what I do feel connected to is my friends. So I know if I was walking through that crowd with a friend, I would have felt maybe more grounded to it, grounded to it,

rather than just like this foreign floating through the mass. It was a very interesting experience, but not the first time that it happens here.” -WnEU1

This quote illustrates how friendships, and by extension social networks, act as crucial points of reference in a new, often overwhelming environment. In this regard, participant WnEU4 describes receiving support from locals, mentioning how one person, in particular, gave her practical advice about local customs and how to navigate the city:

“I met some guys from here, they were even born in Padova, and they're really nice to me. They're supportive, they're welcoming. And one guy also went to Ethiopia before, so he tried to share his experience here and also he tried to give different advice to me, especially the local one, the culture and other stuff, really supportive.” -WnEU4

With regard to the code “being a migrant: a shared experience”, the direction of this relationship may work in reverse – migrants often find greater support by forming or joining communities where shared experiences foster mutual understanding. After describing her interactions with locals, participant WnEU4 reflects on the role elders from Eritrean and Ethiopian communities have played in her integration process. Much like her experiences with locals, she found comfort and guidance from those who shared similar backgrounds:

“Most of the time, I meet my Ethiopian friends around the school, but for the locals who have lived for a long period of time here in Padova, I mean the Eritreans and the Ethiopians, they are working, they have family, they don't have time. So the only time we will meet is when we organize. When we meet, they give us advice. They share their experience. We play with their little kids and other stuff. At this time, I feel different, I feel home and I feel everything.” -WnEU4

This reinforces the idea that shared cultural backgrounds can help foster a sense of home and community in a foreign environment.

Participant WnEU5's words provide a particularly insightful reflection on the impact people can have on our perception of places. She emphasizes how social networks shape whether we love or hate a place:

“(I met) really an amazing set of people that really took care of me, introduced me to Italy, to its culture, to make sense of all the horrible things that we see in this world.

People make us centered, we make ourselves centered, but people also have this power to make you love or hate a place. I mean, social networks have a really huge power on how you see places, how you feel about the places. These people introduced me to, you know, feminist collectives in Italy. They went to meetings with me and translated what they were saying, because most of it is in Italian, it makes sense, right? They really are the kind of people that say, oh, it's Christmas, come, enjoy it in our house, or, it's something, come, or it can be also random walks or anything.” -WnEU5

Her statement also underscores how, in the case of language barriers, support is even more valuable when it comes from those proficient in the destination country's language, as it can further ease integration and overcome communication challenges. Participant WnEU1 shares another example of social support, this time from her sister, who assisted her during the initial stages of her move to Padova. Her sister not only helped her feel less isolated by picking her up from the airport but also assisted with bureaucratic processes due to her fluency in Italian. This early support was particularly important when facing people's negative attitudes, as WnEU1 struggled with difficult interactions and a lack of helpfulness from others:

“When I got here I remember I entered this apartment with my sister, my sister, she picked me up from the airport. That was a difference. My sister picked me up from the airport and we came together to Padova, and already by that I felt less lonely, you know, I arrived to the house, and I just saw my suitcases in the tiny room, which is like a big change for me, and I was like, fuck, you are across the Atlantic, in a foreign city, doing what? What did you do? So that was the first impression of it. Also at the beginning, I had to deal with a lot of bureaucracy, which was not easy, people were not nice, it was exhausting. Luckily, I had my sister who is fluent in Italian and she was able to ask and gather information because I was very lost in that sense. And then little by little, I went also connecting with the people, connecting with the city.” -WnEU1

This quote vividly conveys the importance of social support during the early stages of migration and its role in helping migrants navigate the emotional and practical challenges they face.

Lastly, participants also brought up a specific form of support – institutional support – or rather, the lack thereof. This observation is particularly significant as it may indicate a deeper structural issue that not only impacts the overall quality of the student experience in

Padova but also plays a role in shaping decisions about whether to remain in or leave the city and country. Participant WnEU3, for instance, emphasized the absence of the university as a reliable support system, particularly during critical challenges such as finding housing and navigating interactions with the Questura, the office responsible for issuing residence permits.

“But also the university wasn't very helpful in my opinion, like with the accommodation crisis, or when something wrong happened with the scholarships, or whatever, like with Questura.” -WnEU3

This critique of the lack of institutional support serves as a valuable point of reflection in the final discussion, pointing to areas where both research and practical interventions could focus in the future.

To conclude, the co-occurrence analysis has illustrated key relationships between individual codes, such as social support, barriers, and other aspects of the migration experience. However, this method is limited to examining connections between two codes at a time, offering only a partial view of the broader dynamics. The next chapter will introduce network analyses that integrate the elements explored thus far, providing a multilevel perspective on how they interact. This approach will offer a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between emotional, social, and environmental factors shaping the experiences of migrants in Padova.

## **CHAPTER 4: NETWORKS AND DISCUSSION**

Networks, in the context of qualitative analysis, are visual representations of the relationships and interactions among various codes or concepts identified in the data. Using tools like ATLAS.ti, researchers can construct visual networks that illustrate how different themes co-occur and influence each other. These networks allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the connections between various elements within the data, revealing intricate patterns that may not be apparent through co-occurrences tables. Networks allow to identify areas of overlap, interaction, and divergence, ultimately enhancing the depth and clarity of the analysis.

In the following chapter, three networks will be analyzed. The first one introduces the contextual factors that emerged in previous analyses on word clouds and co-occurrences. It focuses, in particular, on social support, barriers, and emotions. The second network, on the other hand, focuses on place attachment. The different types of place attachment encountered in Table 6 will be explored, as well as the factors that can contribute to their development. Finally, the last network explores the future intentions of the participants, and the elements involved in their decision-making process. Rather than the results, in fact, the focus will shift on the reasoning behind the decisions being made.

### **4.1 Social Support, Barriers and Emotions**

This first network lays the groundwork for understanding the intricate relationships between social support, barriers, and emotions in shaping the migration experience. It illustrates how these factors interact to influence the well-being of migrants as they navigate the challenges of adapting to a new environment.



"Social support" (green color, top left) emerges as a vital resource that helps migrants cope with both emotional and practical challenges during their migration journey. In fact, support networks often provide a buffer against the negative impact of various "barriers" by offering emotional reassurance and practical assistance. In doing so, they play a key role in facilitating integration into the new environment. This is consistent with Berry's (1997) acculturation theory, which emphasizes that social support mitigates acculturative stress and facilitates adaptation by providing emotional security during the transition.

While barriers and challenges can be overwhelming, participants expressed a sense of "strength and resilience" as they learned to navigate their new lives. This resilience is critical for overcoming emotional challenges, enabling migrants to manage feelings of isolation and longing for what they have left behind. As they continue striving for adaptation and integration, they foster an ongoing cycle of strength and resilience. Participant MnEU2 captured the complexity of this process by reflecting on the continual struggle of adaptation:

"No matter how much I've integrated into the culture, etc., it's never the same, it's never the same, you're always adapting, you don't know what's right, what's not right in the ways here." -MnEU2

Although his words highlight the challenges of migration, his continuous struggle to navigate them also suggests a strong resilience. Boccagni and Baldassar (2015) highlight how migration brings challenges that persist even after periods of adaptation, with migrants continually navigating emotional ambivalence. This ongoing adaptation process reflects the chronicity of difficulties migrants face, as emotional struggles may never completely disappear, even when they integrate into the new environment (Berry, 1997).

While social support is crucial, it doesn't necessarily lead to feeling completely at ease in the new environment, as migrants often face significant barriers that hinder their full integration. "Linguistic barriers" and "social attitudes" emerged as two primary obstacles that migrants regularly encounter. The difficulty of bridging cultural or linguistic divides, along with negative social attitudes, can contribute to feelings of emotional isolation, as represented by the code "detachment and loneliness", even for those who receive emotional support.

Particularly, language difficulties and negative social attitudes can reinforce migrants' isolation. Discriminatory behavior or subtle social exclusion can lead to feelings of inequality, further reinforced by migrants' self perceptions as foreigners and different from the local

community. For example, participant WEU2 describes the ambivalence of being socially integrated into a group of Italian friends while still feeling like an outsider due to language and nationality:

“Here in Padova, all my friends are Italians. This is good, on the one hand, because I felt immediately integrated somehow. But on the other hand, because I was the only one international among Italians, every time I was feeling not equal, because of the language, the nationality. I was feeling not part of it.” -WEU2

This quote highlights how, despite building a social network, the participant still experiences feelings of exclusion. The linguistic and cultural divides create a persistent sense of "otherness", making it difficult to fully integrate or feel at home. This ongoing challenge often leads to long-lasting emotional isolation, even within social groups. Seen under a different lens, these results show how identity can be impacted in the migration process. Timotijevic and Breakwell (2000) argue that navigating new social identities often leads to feelings of being an outsider, reinforcing the tension between integration and cultural distinctiveness. This resonates with WEU2's experience, as her participation in local networks still leaves her feeling like an outsider due to nationality and language differences.

Interestingly, while connecting with locals can help facilitate integration, the example of WEU2 suggests that it may also be essential for migrants to interact with others who share similar backgrounds. This idea is reflected in the node on top right, “being a migrant: a shared experience”, which emphasizes that sharing the hardships of migration can create a common ground for building a supportive community. Participant MnEU1 illustrates this point, describing an unspoken understanding he feels with his international classmates, despite the infrequent interactions he has with them:

“With my international classmates with whom I talk, there is more closeness, I mean, not so much closeness, I don't know how to explain it, there is not so much frequency of interaction, we don't talk so much, but we understand each other more, that we share the fact of being different, I would say.” -MnEU1

In this case, the shared experience of being a migrant fosters a sense of belonging that mitigates feelings of isolation. Having a community with a similar background helps migrants feel understood and supported, which is crucial for emotional stability and resilience. In support of this, Berry (1997) emphasizes that maintaining ties to one's heritage culture, along

with forging new connections, contributes to emotional stability during the adaptation process. Among the acculturation strategies he describes in his typology, the most balanced one – integration – results from combining the maintenance of the original culture with the participation in the new culture. Thus, in terms of social relationships, it seems fundamental to develop both a local network and a community that shares a similar cultural and experiential background.

Building this sense of community and emotional comfort – in the form of ease and stability – is also necessary for developing a deeper connection to the environment, such as “feeling part of the city”. Among the many aspects of place attachment that emerged, this one is most closely linked to a sense of belonging both to the space and the community. Participant WEU1 describes how her growing sense of closeness with others, particularly through activism, helped her feel more comfortable in the city:

“And then I think when summer came around, I felt like I had kind of found my people, like that's also when we met. That's when I became very close with E., or like way closer with E., and it's when I felt more comfortable and also the people that I was doing activism with, I felt more comfortable in that space.” -WEU1

This example highlights the importance of both social ties and active engagement with the environment in fostering place attachment. In particular, the participant’s activism in the city contributed to her sense of belonging and connection to the space. This is in line with He et al. (2023), who discuss how social ties and place-making activities contribute to migrants developing a sense of belonging.

In conclusion, while social support and emotional resilience help mitigate the impact of barriers, these factors alone do not necessarily lead to place attachment. As this network illustrates, social support is crucial in reducing emotional distress, but place attachment is a more complex process that requires not only emotional comfort but also a deeper connection to the environment. Place attachment will be explored in depth in the next network, where it will be examined as both a product of and a contributor to the migration experience.

## 4.2 Place Attachment

This network builds on the previous analysis by contextualizing place attachment within the framework established by the first network.

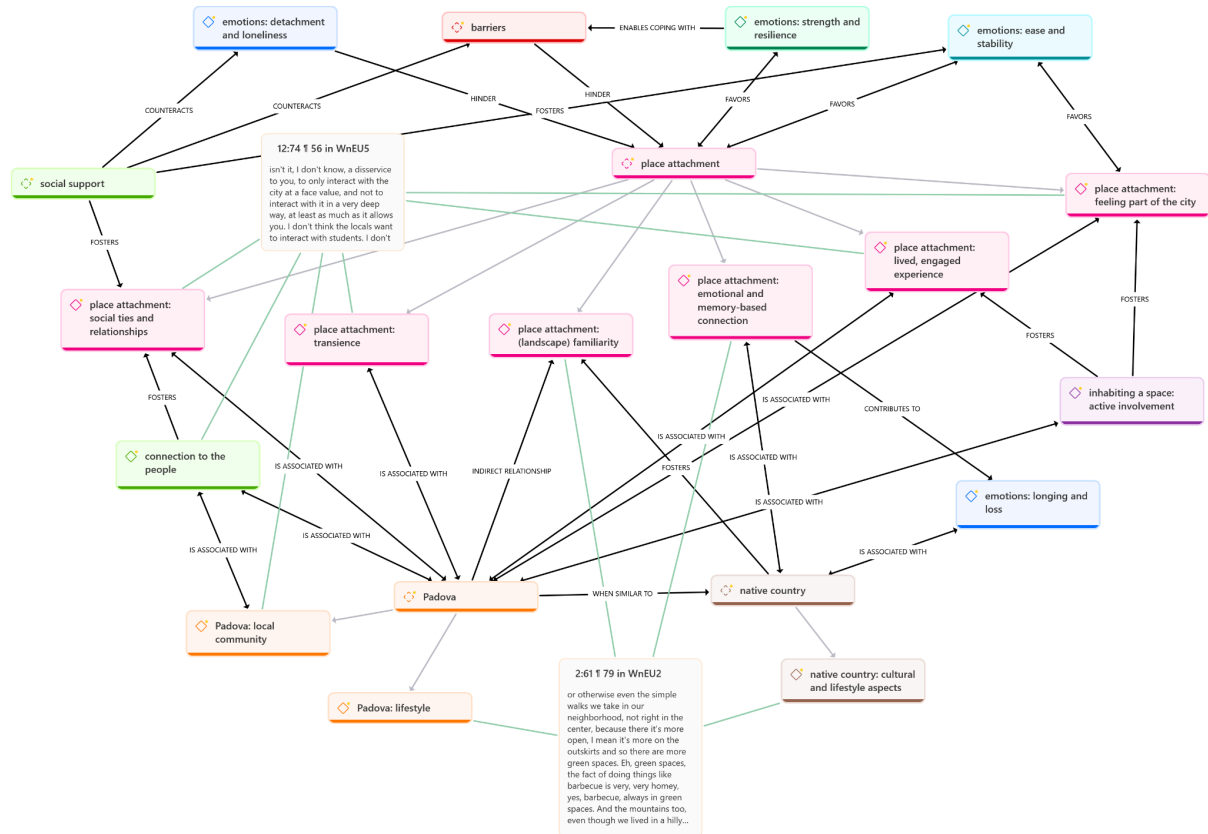


Figure 6 – *Network on place attachment*: the network shows different ways to develop place attachment and factors involved, in addition to how they relate to Padova and the native country in particular; contextualization within the framework introduced by the first network.

The upper section of the figure highlights the main nodes from the initial network, where the interconnectedness of social support, barriers, emotions, and place attachment is once again visible. Since the relationships between social support and barriers have already been covered, this section will focus on how these factors influence place attachment. We have already seen that barriers, particularly those related to language and social attitudes, can create a sense of isolation for migrants, which, in turn, hampers their ability to form meaningful attachments to their new environment. The feelings of detachment and loneliness that emerge from such isolation make it more difficult to develop a sense of belonging.

On the other hand, social support fosters positive emotions like ease and stability, which are crucial for building a sense of security in a new place. This emotional foundation helps foster place attachment, as individuals who feel more comfortable and supported in their surroundings are more likely to form positive connections with their environment. Importantly, this relationship is not one-directional – once an individual starts to feel attached to a place, they are also more likely to feel at ease within it. The results align with the role of place attachment in migrants' well-being, as discussed by Albers et al. (2021): according to the authors, emotional attachment to a place contributes to the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, improving self-esteem and providing a sense of belonging and meaning. This sense of well-being, in turn, promotes successful resettlement through emotional security and psychological integration. This cyclic relationship closely resembles the results of the present study.

Resilience, while often discussed alongside positive emotions, presents a more complex picture. Though it can help individuals cope with difficult circumstances, it also reflects the challenges migrants face, highlighting that resilience is often the result of a necessity. The role of resilience in place attachment is therefore nuanced, as it supports individuals in adapting to hardship, even if the need for resilience itself arises from unfavorable conditions.

After spending some time relocating in the previous framework, we can now move on to the protagonist of this framework and one of the main themes of the study: place attachment. The framework illustrates different "types" of place attachment, highlighting the factors associated with each. On the left, social support emerges as a key factor in fostering a *socially rooted* form of place attachment – the type formed through “social ties and relationships”. This attachment is not only reinforced by the presence of social networks but also by the quality of these relationships, with deep connections playing a pivotal role. The findings partially align with Toruńczyk-Ruiz & Brunarska's (2018) research on the relationship between place attachment and social integration. They argue that place attachment is an indicator of psychological integration and a mediator between ties with locals and settlement intentions, a connection which will be further explored in the next network. The authors also emphasize that the ability to feel at home in a place – a form of emotional bond – depends on the quality of social relationships formed in the host country, thus supporting the pivotal role of social connections highlighted in this study. Toruńczyk-Ruiz & Brunarska's (2018) research further confirms that social attitudes impact the development of

place attachment, noting that closed and prejudiced behavior from locals can prevent migrants from forming meaningful relationships with both the people and, consequently, the space.

This form of place attachment is tied to Padova in terms of migrants' ability to connect with the local community. In fact, while social ties are crucial, they may prove insufficient if limited to relationships with other migrants, particularly those planning to leave. The transient nature of such relationships can undermine a deeper attachment to the city itself, as experiences become framed as temporary. While transience emerged as a recurring sentiment in the interviews, it was discussed in relation to various places, not limited to Padova, confirming its broader relevance in discussions of place attachment.

On the right side of the network, two other pathways to place attachment are evident: "feeling part of the city" and "lived, engaged experience". Although closely related, these forms differ slightly. The first is about cultivating a sense of belonging within the city's community, while the second involves actively engaging with the physical space. Participants highlighted activism as a notable example of active engagement, strengthening their connection to the city. One participant, WEU1, offers a compelling reflection on how these two forms of attachment interact. Through her involvement in activist groups, she describes how engaging with the city on a deeper, more active level fosters both a sense of ownership and belonging:

"And having these places, knowing these people, [...] going through the streets of Padova, reclaiming those, like going to protest and like making it my place in a way, seeing that I'm part of a broader community, people that care. It's been very, very powerful for me and really makes, when I go through the streets, I walk through the streets with a certain confidence because I feel like I'm part of the city and part of the people that want to make this city, like, a better place for everyone." -WEU1

This quote illustrates how meaningful involvement can generate a strong emotional bond with the city, empowering the individual to feel integrated within both the physical and social fabric of their environment. In relation to these results, Zisakou et al. (2023) emphasize that place-making plays a key role in integration. Their research demonstrates that active engagement with and transformation of the surrounding environment can counter spatial segregation, exclusion, and isolation. Place-making, they argue, serves as a promoter of place attachment and identity redefinition, closely linked to feelings of belonging. As such, daily

interaction with the space contributes to place-making and eventually leads to the formation of place attachment.

The following quote from participant WnEU5, from Ethiopia, offers additional insights, as it captures the several facets of place attachment discussed – social ties, transience, belonging, and engaged experience. In the excerpt, she emphasizes the importance of interacting with the city on a deeper level, engaging with local people to truly connect with the environment:

“Isn't it, I don't know, a disservice to you, to only interact with the city at a face value, and not to interact with it in a very deep way, at least as much as it allows you. I don't think the locals want to interact with students. I don't know, but, don't you think it's really important for a person, for example, if you go to Ethiopia, if you only interact with Italians in the city, or a certain group, you can't see how Ethiopian people live. You need to have experience with the local vegetable seller. You need to ask them, how are you? How is your day? Did you have breakfast today? Did you like breakfast? How is the weather? Like, complain about the sun, complain about the rain, complain about anything or say, oh, how is your daughter? Like, have informal conversations, but sustain them.” -WnEU5

The participant touches on a significant barrier to deeper engagement: the city's receptiveness. While her example doesn't specifically refer to migrants, it highlights the challenges faced by students, who often struggle to establish meaningful connections with locals in Padova. Her description of superficial interaction with the city as a "disservice to you" suggests that building a deeper relationship with the city is integral to individual well-being. This relationship is represented in the network by the link between place attachment and positive emotions like ease and stability. This echoes Albers et al. (2021), who, as recently discussed, argue that place attachment contributes to a sense of belonging and emotional stability, both of which are essential for successful integration.

The last two forms of place attachment in the network are both linked to the native country. One form is based on emotions and memories, where strong emotional connections emerge around past places, especially the native country. These connections often evoke feelings of longing and loss, previously discussed as part of the emotional challenges of

migration. As noted in the analysis of word frequencies and co-occurrence tables, these codes often overlap with the theme of home.

The other form of place attachment is tied to the native country through familiarity, as the current place evokes aspects of past environments. Familiarity can manifest in various ways – e.g. through physical similarities in the environment, food, or lifestyle. For example, participant WnEU1, when talking about her feelings of alienation in Padova (previously discussed in the analysis of Table 4), revealed how the unfamiliarity of the people around her heightened her sense of disconnection from the city. Participants also frequently mentioned the significance of nature, with green spaces playing a crucial role in fostering a sense of home. For many, Padova's resemblance to their native environment – whether through its landscapes or social fabric – played a part in developing place attachment.

To better illustrate these two forms of attachment, consider the following extract from participant WnEU2. She describes how the green spaces in Padova remind her of her home village in Moldova. Simple activities like having a barbecue or walking in her neighborhood evoke memories from her past life, bridging her present with her previous home:

“Or otherwise even the simple walks we take in our neighborhood, not right in the center, because there it's more open, I mean it's more on the outskirts and so there are more green spaces. Eh, green spaces, the fact of doing things like barbecue is very, very homey, yes, barbecue, always in green spaces. And the mountains too, even though we lived in a hilly area, but still the mountains much more than the sea, because I never saw the sea until I got here. So yes, let's say nature.” -WnEU2

This participant's words highlight how everyday actions, like barbecues and walks, evoke memories and create a sense of home. The landscape, especially the green spaces, serves as a physical link between her current and past environments, reinforcing her emotional connection to Padova.

The results on place attachment to the native country contribute to a body of research that remains relatively scarce. As discussed in the first chapter, He et al. (2023) argue that research on place attachment and migration has primarily focused on the destination country, often overlooking the role of the bond with the native country. Their study found that attachment to the native place is often stronger than attachment to the destination place for both migrants and returnees, especially in terms of belongingness. This may be due to

experiences of discrimination and otherness in the receiving country. The present study raises interesting questions about whether a strong place attachment to the native country might limit the development of attachment to the new environment. However, both the results from He et al. (2023) and this study show the possibility of coexisting multiple place attachments to different locations. These attachments are not necessarily contradictory but rather cumulative, reinforcing the idea that individuals can develop emotional ties to both their native and destination countries.

In conclusion, this network elaborates on the interrelations between social support, barriers, and emotions, as established in the previous section. The analysis reveals that place attachment takes various forms, each reflecting different aspects of an individual's interaction with their surroundings. Some forms focus on present experiences – belonging, engagement, and social ties – while others link to the past, through emotions, memories, and familiarity. The emergence of transience in this context also highlights how future plans can shape, and at times limit, the development of attachment. This brings to light a controversial area of study: the impact of time on the development of emotional attachments. As previously discussed, some scholars, like Toruńczyk-Ruiz & Brunarska (2018), found that longer residence does not significantly promote stronger attachment, while others, such as Riethmuller et al. (2021), discovered that the length of time participants had lived in different locations influenced their feelings of attachment, suggesting that the longer they lived in one place, the more they identified it as home. This raises a valuable point for further research into how place attachment and a sense of home are distinct from one another, and how their individual impact differs on choices such as where to reside.

The next network will explore the decision-making process related to future residence, drawing hypotheses on the role of place attachment in the context.

### 4.3 Future Intentions

One of the main objectives of this research was to explore participants' intentions to stay in or leave Padova and the factors influencing their decision-making. The results emerging from the data are illustrated in Figure 7 – *Network on future intentions*.

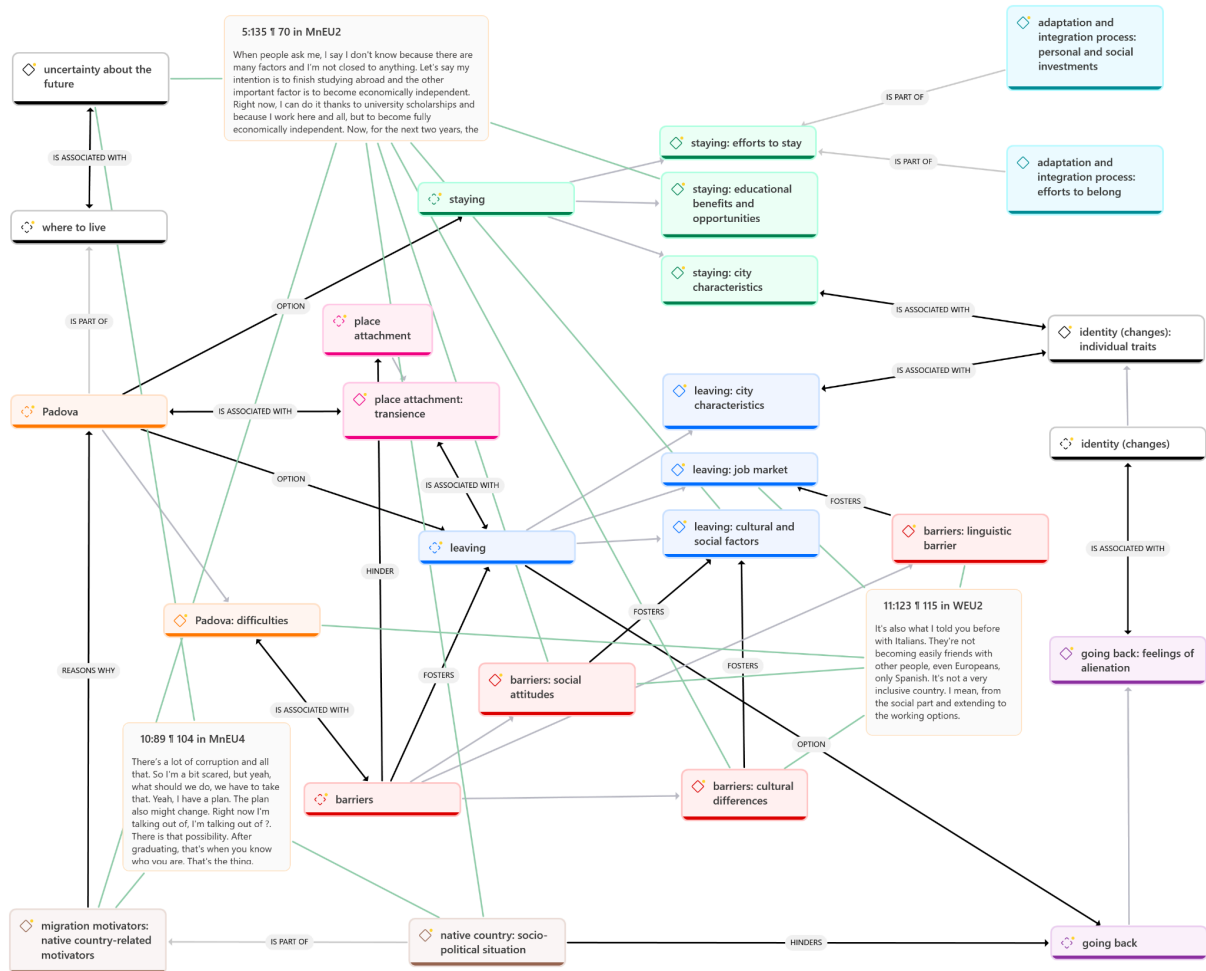


Figure 7 – *Network on future intentions*: the network illustrates the decision-making process and the relevant variables in the planning of the future. The two main alternatives, starting from Padova, are staying or leaving. Leaving, in turn, might lead to returning to the native country. The whole decision-making process is associated with uncertainty about the future.

“Padova” forms the central point of this analysis, as it constitutes the current place where participants find themselves. It is part of the broader category of “where to live”, encompassing the factors that participants would consider when deciding for their future. This decision is closely linked to a prevailing feeling of “uncertainty about the future”, which may stem from the life stage participants are passing through. As international students, the

question of what to do next arises naturally, especially as they approach the end of their Bachelor's or Master's studies. At that point, their options revolve around either staying or leaving the city or country. These feelings of uncertainty, together with the participants' age, are coherent with Arnett's life stage of emerging adulthood and its characteristics. Indeed, among the characteristics proposed by Arnett, *instability* resembles the results that emerged in the study. While young adults have more opportunities to explore their identities, desires, and goals, also through traveling, frequent changes in residence inevitably lead to instability and uncertainty about what to do next and where to live (Robinson, 2020).

Among the reasons participants mentioned for staying, two key motivators stand out: "educational benefits and opportunities" and "city characteristics". The code "staying: efforts to stay" refers instead to an intention, reflecting participants' desire to remain in the city and their active efforts toward integration. This is highlighted in the network's connection between staying and the "adaptation and integration process" code. The desire to stay can foster proactive efforts to adapt and integrate into the city, such as building social networks, engaging in the local culture, and cultivating a sense of belonging. These elements link back to various forms of place attachment, notably "social ties and relationships", "feeling part of the city" and "lived, engaged experience". In this context, the role of place-making helps explain the connection between active efforts to integrate and the development of a certain form of attachment (see Zisakou et al., 2023).

On the other hand, the decision to leave Padova stems from specific challenges, including perceptions of the city as a transitory space, particularly when unmet expectations come into play. While some participants came to Padova with a predefined timeline, others made the decision to leave after becoming more familiar with the city's environment. The focus on transience in the network is intentional, as the temporary nature of such a relationship with the place is most directly linked to the intention to leave Padova. While other pathways to place attachment are significant and addressed in the network analysis, they relate more closely to the native country or the ongoing efforts to integrate and are not visible in the network. This choice aims to simplify the network's complexity, allowing for a clearer examination of the motivations driving participants' decisions to leave. Three prominent factors emerged from participants' responses: "city characteristics", "job market", and "cultural and social factors".

The duality of “city characteristics” is notable, as it is a subcode of both “staying” and “leaving”. For example, while some participants praised aspects like the beauty of nature, others lamented the limited accessibility to green areas. This contrast reflects how “city characteristics” are closely tied to “identity traits” – what one person finds attractive about a city may not align with another’s needs. In these terms, the network emphasizes the individual nature of these decisions, which hinge on subjective experiences and personal goals.

Similarly, job market limitations also prompted decisions to leave, particularly due to the linguistic barrier. Several participants expressed frustration over the scarcity of opportunities for international students: the difficulty of securing a job without proficiency in Italian highlights a significant obstacle. For some, larger cities such as Milan seemed more appealing, offering better opportunities. This code is in contrast with the educational benefits and opportunities above mentioned. It is notable how the two codes correspond to different dimensions – work and study. The results suggest that while Padova provides opportunities for academic growth, particularly through its offer of courses in English, the job market for international students remains significantly less accessible, often leading participants to seek alternatives elsewhere.

“Cultural and social factors” also play a significant role in the decision to leave. Participants pointed to barriers such as “social attitudes” and “cultural differences”, which created challenges in feeling integrated into the local community. The “social attitudes” barrier has been thoroughly explored in previous chapters. Cultural differences, however, do not stem from attitudes or behaviors towards the other, but rather from characteristics inherent to the culture itself. The “cultural differences” code reflects the concept of “cultural distance”, namely the perceived dissimilarity between the heritage and the destination cultures (Ward and Kennedy, 1992, as cited in Berry, 1997; Ward and Searle, 1991, as cited in Berry, 1997). Berry (1997) suggests that greater cultural distance, combined with other stressors (i.e., barriers), can negatively impact the acculturation process and exacerbate acculturation stress. Without adequate social support or coping mechanisms, this stress can hinder migrants’ ability to integrate into the host country.

The following extract brings together several of the factors that were discussed contributing to the decision to leave. Participant WEU2 emphasizes how cultural differences and social attitudes – specifically, the way Italians interact – lead to feelings of social isolation, which plays a significant role in their decision to leave. The participant also

connects these social barriers to job opportunities, noting that a lack of inclusivity, particularly in terms of language, restricts access to employment.

“It's also what I told you before with Italians. They're not becoming easily friends with other people, even Europeans, only Spanish. It's not a very inclusive country. I mean, from the social part and extending to the working options.” -WEU2

Social attitudes, in this context, contribute to feelings of exclusion, while the language barrier further limits migrants' ability to engage with the environment and achieve economic independence, both of which shape participants' future decisions.

Overall, it is clear that the choice to leave goes often arm in arm with the barriers encountered in the process, especially if migrants don't have access to meaningful tools to overcome the challenges. Bureaucracy, language barriers, and negative attitudes are among the most significant challenges participants have faced in Padova. However, these are just a few of the many difficulties identified, including the housing crisis, a lack of institutional support, and the absence of spaces for meaningful encounters with others.

The theme of barriers has been ubiquitous throughout the results. Its impact spans different spheres, from integration to place attachment and psychological well-being. Barriers, particularly social exclusion and language difficulties, also prevent migrants from developing a feeling of psychological home. According to Cardinali et al. (2022), a sense of psychological home requires individuals to feel safe and secure in their environment, beyond its physical aspects. Feelings of loneliness, discrimination, and language difficulties all emerged in Cardinali et al.'s (2022) work as obstacles to developing a sense of psychological home, which, in turn, affects personal identity. As discussed in the literature review, the loss of a sense of home, often resulting from migration, profoundly impacts personal identity. Barriers that undermine this sense of safety and security hinder migrants' ability to redefine their identity and form emotional connections with their new environment.

When participants expressed their intention to leave, the option of returning to their native countries was the most frequently discussed. While many conveyed a strong place attachment rooted in memories and familiarity, they also identified significant obstacles. The network highlights two main challenges: the impact of identity changes following migration and the socio-political situation in their home countries.

Regarding identity changes, this section expands on the discussion in section 3.1.3, which explored how migration influences identity transformation. The new identity shaped by the migratory experience may not always be immediately recognized by those in the migrant's place of origin, especially after an extended period of absence. Upon returning, migrants may struggle to reconnect with their environment, as both they and the place have evolved over time.

Linking identity changes to the socio-political situation in their native countries, participant MnEU4 expresses concerns about returning to Uganda, particularly in relation to corruption and the uncertainty about the future:

“There’s a lot of corruption and all that. So I’m a bit scared, but yeah, what should we do, we have to take that. Yeah, I have a plan. The plan also might change. There is that possibility. After graduating, that’s when you know who you are. That’s the thing.”  
-MnEU4

This quote encapsulates the participant’s uncertainty and fear about returning, as well as the dynamic nature of his plans and identity. After spending an extended period abroad, participants may find that both their native country and their place within it have changed significantly.

Talking about the socio-political situation of the native country, we previously observed the relationships between “native country” and “going back: barriers” in section 3.2.4. Participant WnEU1, in particular, had expressed her frustration for being “forced to be out of (her) country”, due to the lack of safety and job opportunities. For many participants, the same factors – related to the native country – that motivated their migration continue to pose barriers to returning, further complicating their decisions about the future.

The results regarding the native country and the possibility to go back align with those of Riethmuller et al. (2021), who explored the impact of place attachment on migration decisions among university students. The researchers found a strong connection to participants’ hometowns, which were perceived as home and central to their sense of belonging. However, attachment to the hometown was not a sufficient motivator for them to return, as other factors, such as economic opportunities and new social ties, came into place. Over time, participants began to feel separated from their rural communities, sometimes experiencing feelings of separation or alienation, and beginning to feel like outsiders. The

results of Riethmuller et al.'s (2021) study support the findings of the present research, highlighting how a strong attachment to the native country can be overshadowed by practical needs and opportunities.

To conclude, participants' reflections on whether to stay in or leave Padova are deeply influenced by a combination of personal motivations, external barriers, and identity changes. As shown in the network, place attachment emerges as a dynamic process shaped by various factors, including educational opportunities, social integration, and the broader cultural and economic context. The decision-making process remains complex, with participants often feeling torn between their desire to remain and the barriers they encounter.

Participant MnEU2 reflections encapsulate the complexities of migration decisions, particularly regarding the future trajectory of international students. The following quote highlights the multifaceted nature of his intentions and the various factors at play:

“When people ask me, I say I don't know because there are many factors and I'm not closed to anything. Let's say my intention is to finish studying abroad and the other important factor is to become economically independent. Right now, I can do it thanks to university scholarships and because I work here and all, but to become fully economically independent. Now, for the next two years, the master's degree, I see myself here, because it's the only place outside of Venezuela where I can study independently, without financially depending on my parents. [...] I don't see myself going back to Venezuela to study because basically, well, I would have to study and work at the same time, it doesn't work like here, university costs much more, my parents can't afford it. If tomorrow I graduate and get a job I like and it pays well here, well, that's fine with me [...] but I say no because I'm increasingly rejecting Italian culture [...] and I see more and more things that I say, this is not what I want for my future, it's not the society or the country I like the most, and for that reason, I might go somewhere else.” -MnEU2

This quote underscores the theme of “uncertainty about the future”, reflecting the participant's ambivalence toward his plans. His intention to “finish studying abroad” emphasizes the significance of educational benefits and opportunities in the decision to stay in Padova. Conversely, the participant's growing dissatisfaction with “Italian culture” reveals the impact of cultural differences on his relationship with the space, aligning with the barriers identified

in the network. Moreover, his reluctance to return to Venezuela stems from the challenges of balancing work and study, highlighting the role of the native country's socio-political situation in the decision-making process regarding future intentions. This perspective illustrates the intricate dynamics of place attachment and the interconnectedness of influencing factors. While Padova offers educational advantages, it may not fully satisfy his personal and cultural needs. Conversely, while returning to Venezuela might address some of Padova's shortcomings, it lacks the opportunities necessary for independent study.

Overall, the network suggests that the various forms of place attachment, while fundamental, are insufficient to drive the decision to stay in one location. Instead, practical motivators related to quality of life and emotional experiences play a more decisive role in shaping future intentions. He et al. (2023) came to the same conclusion in their study, which showed how, while place attachment is important, some migrants choose to stay in locations where they did not develop strong attachments, suggesting that it is not the sole determinant in migration decisions.

As international students confront uncertainties about the future, they must reconcile their ambitions with the challenges posed by cultural differences and the socio-political landscape of both their destination and home countries.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to explore participants' relationships with space from various perspectives and examine how these relationships are influenced by migration. Specifically, the study focused on the development of place attachment, as well as the factors that influence it. Additionally, one goal was to investigate how international students decide whether to stay in or leave their current location of study, Padova. Using a qualitative, grounded theory approach, the research was exploratory in nature. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 international students currently enrolled at the University of Padova. After transcription, the data were coded and analyzed with the aid of the software ATLAS.ti, which produced three levels of analysis: word frequencies, co-occurrences, and networks.

### *Home and Identity*

Although home and identity were not explicitly the focal points in the network-based results, they were present throughout the research in a transversal way, forming a fundamental background to the data. Both concepts are widely examined in migration studies, and the questions asked to participants about these topics provided valuable insights into how migration shapes their experiences.

As Papadopoulos (2002, as cited in Casadei and Monti, 2022) argues, all migrants share a form of privation of home. However, the meaning of home varies significantly, given its multifaceted nature. Nevertheless, its pivotal role in psychological adaptation remains clear: feeling at home is fundamental for migrants' well-being (Cardinali et al., 2022). From the study's findings, home emerged as an emotionally charged concept, deeply tied to the migration experience. Participants associated home with positive emotions, such as safety and comfort, and described it as both a physical and a relational space. In this sense, home can exist both as a place and a relationship, including a connection to the self. Interestingly, for some participants, Padova has become a place where they can feel at home, despite its common transitory nature.

The research also highlights the dynamic process of identity transformation that individuals undergo when navigating the loss of home and reconstructing it in a new environment. The word frequencies revealed that migration significantly shaped participants' sense of identity, as they were forced to engage with labels such as "foreigner", "migrant", or

"different". Identity in this context was linked to both participants' cultural backgrounds and the social expectations in the destination country. By asking participants how migration impacted their sense of self, the study uncovered the fluid and dynamic nature of identity during the migratory process. In their quest to integrate, participants displayed resilience and adaptability, often through their response to barriers like language and social attitudes.

### ***Social support, barriers and emotions***

Social support, barriers and emotions emerged as crucial factors throughout the research, deeply influencing both place attachment and participants' intentions to stay or leave. The word cloud analysis confirmed the emotional nature of the migration experience, with the word "feel" appearing frequently – second only to "go". A first look was then confirmed by word clouds specific to home, identity, and place attachment, underscoring the emotional nature of migration, as argued by Boccagni and Baldassar (2015). The study identified a variety of emotions experienced during migration, explored in detail in section 3.2.1. These included feelings of detachment and loneliness, ease and stability, longing and loss, and the strength and resilience developed throughout the migration process.

The role of emotions is complex, intertwined with many other key concepts and codes. Emotions were most frequently connected to adaptation and integration, the overall migration experience, home, and identity – particularly in relation to what it means to be a migrant. They also intersected with physical locations, such as Padova and the native country, and with the concept of place attachment. These findings emphasize the importance of focusing on the emotional experiences of migrants to fully understand their stories, their struggles, and their well-being. As Boccagni and Baldassar (2015) argue, an emotional lens complements a more economic and practical dimension, resulting in a more holistic perspective. Additionally, emotions are critical for understanding the political narratives surrounding migration.

In the first network analyzed, emotions were most strongly related to barriers, social support, and identity in the context of migration. Barriers, particularly language and social attitudes, were closely linked to the emotional challenges of migration, such as feelings of detachment and loneliness. However, barriers also fostered positive emotions, such as strength and resilience, which participants developed in response to these challenges. The study identified a variety of barriers, with participants reporting difficulties related to bureaucratic hurdles, social attitudes, language, and cultural differences. Padova was frequently associated

with these barriers, particularly in relation to social attitudes. These findings align with the existing literature on migration, which shows how barriers can lead to isolation and heightened acculturation stress, especially when migrants lack adequate support systems (Berry, 1997). The link between barriers and emotions is therefore significant, as they heavily impact migrants' ability to adapt, integrate, and maintain mental health. For many migrants, the difficulties faced can become chronic, leading to long-term emotional struggles (Berry, 1997; Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015).

However, social support emerged as a buffer against these challenges. The study identified two primary sources of social support: the local community and communities with shared cultural or migratory backgrounds. Each of these served distinct purposes. Networking with the local community facilitated integration and fostered feelings of ease and stability, while forming or joining communities with a shared cultural background helped mitigate feelings of isolation by offering a space where participants could connect with others who shared similar experiences. These findings align with the literature, which emphasizes the importance of social support in helping migrants navigate the life transition of migration (Berry, 1997; Schlossberg, 1981, as cited in Robinson, 2020). Moreover, social integration has been identified as a key factor in developing a sense of home in the host country (Toruńczyk-Ruiz & Brunarska, 2018).

### ***Place attachment***

Place attachment emerged as a central theme throughout this study, even though none of the questions in the semi-structured interviews directly addressed it. This allowed the concept to surface organically from the data, providing a grounded understanding of how participants form attachments to places. From the word frequencies and co-occurrences analyses, place attachment was found to be intricately linked to several key themes, including migration, emotions, physical spaces, social relationships, and both the motivators and challenges associated with migration.

The different forms of place attachment that surfaced reflect these various themes. One prominent form is the emotional and memory-based connection, which participants expressed in relation to both their native countries and their experiences in Padova. For many, this type of attachment was shaped by memories of home, reflecting how familiarity with aspects of the environment can evoke a deep emotional response. As He et al. (2023)

observed, attachment to one's native place is often stronger than attachment to the destination country, particularly when linked to feelings of belonging and familiarity. Both the results from He et al. (2023) and this study show the possibility of coexisting multiple place attachments to different locations.

Another form of place attachment identified was the sense of "feeling part of the city", which refers to cultivating a sense of belonging within the community of Padova. Participants who engaged actively with the local community – whether through social or activist groups – described a growing connection to the city, rooted in social relationships. This echoes the role of social integration in fostering attachment, as described by Toruńczyk-Ruiz & Brunarska (2018). Similarly, the "lived, engaged experience" form of attachment involves active participation in the physical space itself, reinforcing the idea that place attachment can be built through interactions with both the people and the environment. This aligns with the findings of Zisakou et al. (2023), who emphasize the role of active engagement and place-making in fostering integration and developing an attachment to space.

At the same time, social ties and relationships proved pivotal in shaping participants' connection to Padova. These relationships provided social support, helping participants feel emotionally anchored in the city. As discussed earlier, developing social networks – whether through ties to the local community or shared cultural backgrounds – can mitigate feelings of isolation and foster a sense of belonging, as supported by Berry (1997) and Boccagni & Baldassar (2015). The strength and depth of these relationships often determined how much participants felt attached to Padova, linking social support to emotional stability and integration.

However, not all forms of attachment were positive. The theme of transience emerged strongly in relation to Padova, with many participants viewing the city as a temporary space. This perception undermined their ability to form deeper attachments, as many viewed Padova more as a temporary stopover than as a place to settle permanently. This finding mirrors broader migration literature, which emphasizes how temporary residency can prevent migrants from fully investing in their new environments. The presence of barriers, particularly related to social attitudes and language, further contributed to this sense of transience, hindering participants' capacity to develop a stronger connection to the city.

The co-occurrence analysis of place attachment, presented in table 6 – *Co-occurrences table on place attachment*, and the second network (figure 6 – *Network on place attachment*) both highlighted its strong relationship with key codes such as "barriers", "connection to the people", "home", "native country", and "Padova". These links underscore the multi-faceted nature of place attachment, which is shaped not only by emotional connection to a place but also by the social and practical challenges encountered by migrants.

### ***What makes people stay: participants' future intentions***

Regarding future intentions, the main finding of this research is that developing some form of place attachment to a city is not sufficient for people to choose to stay. Instead, practical motivators related to quality of life and emotional experiences play a more decisive role in shaping future intentions. This finding is consistent with a body of research focused on the factors influencing future intentions about where to reside, particularly the study by He et al. (2023). In the analysis of Table 7 – *Co-occurrences table on participants' future intentions*, the associations between "native country", "barriers to going back", "home", and "place attachment" suggest that participants have a strong attachment to their native countries, perceiving them as home. However, this attachment is strongly impacted by the barriers faced in returning.

When considering "Padova", it is noteworthy that while there is a strong co-occurrence with "place attachment", the co-occurrence with "home" is much weaker. This suggests that, while participants may feel attached to Padova, the attachment does not necessarily translate into a feeling of home. The data indicate that feeling at home requires a stronger emotional involvement and affection than place attachment alone can provide. While feeling at home in a space likely involves an attachment to that space, the reverse cannot always be said: place attachment does not necessarily make people feel at home. Feelings of ease, safety, and security are crucial elements of home, and might be missing in migrants' experiences. Along with social attitudes and other barriers, this lack of emotional comfort leads to greater stress and fosters intentions to leave. These results confirm Cardinali et al.'s (2022) perspective on psychological home, described as an ideal affective state which contributes to the well-being of migrants and their ability to adapt to a new culture.

Overall, the decision-making process regarding participants' future intentions is characterized by a sense of uncertainty, which likely stems from the life stage participants are

navigating. This uncertainty is coherent with Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood, characterized by feelings of instability (Robinson, 2020). The reasons to stay or leave are varied in nature, reflecting individual, social, and practical factors. Some are linked to personal preferences, such as city characteristics, while others refer to challenges resulting from social attitudes, language barriers, and job market opportunities. Participants' ability to overcome them is also shaped by their social support networks and individual coping strategies.

Finally, the option of returning to their home countries was frequently discussed, and the results highlight the role of the socio-political situation in shaping participants' decisions. Often, the same factors that motivated participants to migrate are the ones preventing them from returning. The findings of Riethmuller et al. (2021) support these results, highlighting how a strong attachment to the native country can be overshadowed by practical needs and opportunities. Overall, the decision-making process remains complex, with participants often feeling torn between their desire to remain and the barriers they encounter.

### ***Observations and proposals for intervention***

This study sheds light on the experiences of international students at the University of Padova, navigating their emotions, challenges, and the complexities of their relationships with their surroundings. Several points of intervention emerged both from the data and directly from the participants. As interviewees frequently expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of institutional support, all proposals for intervention call for the purposeful involvement of the University and other institutions.

A primary proposal, given the difficulties participants faced in forming connections with locals, is to organize events and create spaces where international students and Italians – both students and other community members – can actively and meaningfully engage with each other. Facilitating such interactions would be beneficial for both groups, helping to foster mutual understanding and integration.

Language barriers were another recurring theme, affecting not only participants' ability to integrate but also the job opportunities available to them. Offering more accessible Italian language courses could help address this issue. Providing a variety of resources and opportunities for language learning may enhance students' capacity to navigate both social and professional contexts without imposing undue stress.

Additionally, guidance with bureaucratic processes emerged as a significant need, as participants frequently encountered challenges related to visas, housing, healthcare, and other administrative requirements. Clearer guidance and support in navigating these bureaucratic hurdles could reduce stress and uncertainty, helping students feel more secure and supported in their host environment. Assistance with paperwork, multilingual resources, and access to advisors familiar with foreign student needs would further streamline these processes and facilitate smoother integration.

While future intentions depend on a multitude of factors, many of which are beyond the control of local institutions, targeted interventions can make a tangible difference. Institutional support, by fostering a sense of belonging, can be a key element in promoting psychological integration and creating a sense of home. Proposals like organizing social events, offering language courses, and providing assistance in overcoming bureaucratic barriers are essential to help students feel more grounded and connected.

These initiatives aim to mitigate isolation and cultivate positive emotions like ease and stability. As discussed, such emotions are crucial for migrants to develop place attachment, which may, in turn, influence their intentions to stay. While the perception of Padova as a transitory place is partly linked to students' life stages, these efforts could ease their integration into the local culture and society, enhancing their experience regardless of their ultimate decision to stay. Focusing on enhancing students' well-being during their stay, rather than on future decisions, is essential to improve their overall experience in the city.

### ***Questions and directions for future research***

In terms of future research, one key area worth exploring is the nuanced difference between home and place attachment, specifically exploring the emotional and psychological components required to develop each. This study suggests that these two concepts correspond to different levels of emotional involvement. While place attachment emerged as crucial, it appears insufficient by itself to influence decisions to stay. Investigating how individuals move from feeling place attachment to establishing a deeper sense of "home" would offer valuable insights, especially in terms of the conditions and social environments that foster each. Additionally, future studies could examine the role of time – how long it takes for someone to feel attached to a place or start to call it home, and whether these timelines differ for different populations.

Another potential avenue for research involves comparative studies between international students and students with refugee status, as their narratives and experiences with space and mobility are likely shaped by significantly different constraints. Refugees often have limited choices regarding residence and mobility, which could influence their attachment to their new environment, potentially leading to different emotional investments in place and home. Understanding these differences could provide a more comprehensive view of how migration status impacts spatial relationships, decision-making, and integration.

Moreover, expanding the scope to include Italian "off-site" students ("studenti fuori sede"), who leave their hometowns to study in cities like Padova, could offer new inputs. These students face similar transitions as international students but within the same country. Exploring how their attachment to Padova compares with that of international students might reveal useful contrasts, especially regarding the role of cultural familiarity, family proximity, and perceived permanence.

Transience, prominent in this study, also warrants further investigation. Erasmus students, both incoming and those returning home, could provide a specific population for examining the impact of transitory experiences on place attachment. How does knowing that one's stay is short-term impact the development of place attachment and the sense of belonging? What factors allow some students to develop stronger attachments despite the temporary nature of their residence? This research could also help guide university policies aimed at enhancing international students' integration, even in short-term academic programs.

Furthermore, the role of institutional support in facilitating or hindering place attachment and a sense of home deserves closer examination. As mentioned above, many participants in this study expressed concerns about a lack of institutional support, particularly regarding language barriers, social integration, and bureaucratic challenges. Future research could explore how targeted interventions – such as the ones proposed – impact students' emotional ties to their destination countries. Understanding the effectiveness of such measures could guide universities and policymakers in creating environments that not only support academic success but also foster lasting emotional connections to place.

Lastly, social attitudes were identified as a primary source of discomfort, complicating participants' efforts to integrate and adapt to their new environment, often resulting in feelings of loneliness and isolation. As Boccagni and Baldassar (2015) highlight, emotions play a crucial role in shaping immigration policies, which, in turn, influence everyday interactions between locals and migrants. While this study centers on the experiences and needs of students, broader research could investigate how institutional policies impact migrants' lives and interactions within the host society.

***Final comment: stories of a journey through space***

This research was born from daily conversations with my colleagues and other international students, sparking a deeper curiosity about their experiences as migrants. What emerged were life stories – rich with memories, hopes, and struggles, each participant given the space to voice their journey in their own way.

The results have shown that place attachment is a fluid concept, one that does not guarantee permanence but rather evolves with students' identities, future aspirations, and the cultural and social ties they nurture. As such, deciding whether to stay or leave is never purely a rational choice; it is laden with emotional complexity and shaped by a constantly evolving relationship with space, home, and identity.

In framing migration as a continuous journey, not just a moment in time, this research reinforces the importance of viewing the experiences of international students within a broader narrative. Their stories are ongoing, with each phase of their lives contributing to how they redefine home, reconfigure their identities, and negotiate their sense of belonging.

In the end, the questions of where we belong and what ties us to a place naturally emerge and shape the choices we make, migrants or not. This research, then, not only captures stories of migration but also reflects the broader journey of developing attachments to places – those we may eventually call home.

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