

**Coming Home During Coronavirus:
The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on
Ireland's returning young migrants.**

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DECLARATION

I declare that this Master Thesis entitled '*Coming Home During Coronavirus: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Ireland's returning young migrants*' is submitted to the Department of Development and Environmental Studies at the Faculty of Science, Palacký University Olomouc, under the supervision of Dr. Lucie Macková – in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree in International Development Studies (GLODEP). I declare that this thesis was composed by myself and that the work contained herein is my own, except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text. I confirm that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified above.



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Zásady pro vypracování

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected almost every aspect of our lives and represents a fundamental transformation in our experiences of international mobility. Throughout the pandemic, Ireland has seen a significant influx of return migrants from key emigration destinations such as the USA, Canada, Australia and the wider European mobility area. It is hypothesised that travel restrictions, economic uncertainties and the termination of employment associated with the pandemic have triggered the decision of these migrants to return, particularly amongst young high-skilled and student migrants. The central objective of this research is to better understand the return motivations involved in their individualised mobility decisions and the lived experiences of returning ‘home’ during a global pandemic. Based on semi-structured interviews of returnees, this research aims to identify patterns in the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ social and economic factors that have influenced the decision of these young people to return, and the potential effect this will have on their future mobility trajectories. Relevant to this discussion are the phenomena of transnationalism and counterurbanisation, both of which will have socio-economic impacts in the short-term and may have some enduring effects, potentially impacting Ireland’s long-term development.

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Abstract: The global outbreak of COVID-19 in 2019/2020 has undoubtedly influenced international migration trends of young people, and notably in Ireland there has been a significant influx of returning migrants from key emigration locations such as the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and other EU countries. As of April 2020, the highest number of returning Irish nationals since 2007 has already been recorded, with this trend being expected to continue into 2021 (CSO, 2020). While Ireland has a noteworthy history of mass emigration and well-documented periods of return, the recent experience of returning during the COVID-19 pandemic represents a novel phenomenon worthy of investigation. This thesis will examine the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on Ireland's returning migrants, to better understand the experiences, motivations and intentions related to their migration decisions. The research findings are drawn from semi-structured interviews, identifying factors that influenced the decision of these young people to return to Ireland. The central objective of this research was to better understand the lived experiences of returning 'home' during a global health crisis, and the potential effect this will have on their future livelihoods and reflexive mobility strategies. This research examines the unique set of circumstances and challenges facing this cohort of returning migrants and highlights the importance of further research on this subject.

Keywords: Transnationalism, return migration, high-skilled migration, new mobilities, COVID-19 pandemic

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1. Introduction

The global outbreak of the coronavirus disease, along with the extraordinary public health measures implemented to contain the spread of the virus, have led to profound changes in our daily lives. The societal and economic impacts of this pandemic cannot be understated: As of March 22nd, 2021, there have been 123.2 million cases of COVID-19 worldwide and some 2.7 million deaths (Roser et al., 2021). According to the International Labour Organization (2021) this period has been accompanied by 255 million full-time job losses, resulting in \$3.7 trillion in lost labour income. Emerging research in Ireland suggests that young people have been amongst the worst affected by the labour market impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (ERSI, 2021). This is partly because young people are overrepresented in the service industry or in the culture/arts, retail and hospitality sectors which have been worst affected by the public health measures associated with the COVID-19 outbreak (Byrne et al., 2020). These developments have significantly influenced migratory trends of young people, many of whom have returned to their communities and countries of origin as a result. The Central Statistics Office estimated that in 2020, Irish nationals accounted for 33.8% of the 85,400 immigrants coming into Ireland. This is the highest number of returning Irish nationals since 2007, with most of the impact of the pandemic on migration only expected to be seen in the 12 months following this reference period (CSO, 2020). While Ireland has a long history of mass emigration, the years following the collapse of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ economy in 2008 saw the reemergence of emigration as a central feature of post-recession Irish society and culture (Cawley and Galvin, 2016). This wave of emigration followed a period of unprecedented economic prosperity and upward class mobility, within a context of growing ease and affordability of air travel (Cawley and Galvin, 2016), as well as the advent of new media and digital technologies that have considerably altered transnational communication and social interactions which are known to facilitate return and repeat migration (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007; Brinkerhoff, 2009). Furthermore, the last several decades has seen an increase in youth mobility, a trend that has been evident across Europe as young people increasingly move for work, study and as a means of personal development (Krings et al, 2012).

The motivations for youth mobility are well conceptualised in the academic literature, however the recent experience of return during the COVID-19 pandemic represents a novel phenomenon worthy of investigation. This thesis will examine the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on Ireland’s returning migrants, to better understand the experiences, motivations and intentions of returning young people. In the first section a literature review will provide relevant foundational knowledge related to the subject, including an overview of recent research on the topic of return migration of young Irish graduates. The methodology section will attempt to outline the theoretical approach, limitations and research strategy

designed to capture the life-narratives of returning young people through qualitative interviews. The research findings aim to explore the experiences of Irish migration and return occurring within the unique set of circumstances presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, discussed with reference to existing literature on the subject. The final section will provide some context of the policy implications of this trend and some concluding remarks.

2. Literature Review

The following literature review aims to assess the existing theoretical knowledge in the field, including traditional theories of migration, globalisation and emerging mobility trends. To acquire further context-appropriate vocabulary, the socio-economic impacts of migration and the migratory networks/systems or ‘migration habitus’ of Ireland will also be discussed. It might first prove useful to clarify some terminology related to the research topic including Globalisation; Transnationalism; Immigration; Emigration; Short-term Migrants; High-skilled Migrants; Talent Flow; Return Migrant and Internal Migration. The definitions for these terms can be found in Table 1 of the appendices section.

2.1. Theorising Migration

A useful starting point for this inquiry is to review the main theories of migration studies, drawing from a useful typology provided by de Haas (2021), including theories related to the functionalist, historical-structuralist and symbolic-interactionist approaches. The core tenets of each perspective are outlined below.

2.1.1. Functionalism

The functionalist perspective is explicitly linked to theories on human capital, based on migrants seeking out the ‘best’ country (Borjas, 1989). Through this lens migration is conceptualised as a function of market forces (demand-pull and supply-push) and migration controls such as immigration policies which are considered distortions of the market (Sutcliffe, 2001). The dominant neoclassical framework for understanding migration gives rise to a well-known policy contradiction referred to in the literature as the “liberal paradox”, which describes the paradoxical situation of increasing demand for flexible labour and openness, against a growing political desire for tightly controlled borders (Wallace, 2001; Hollifield, 2004). Hunter (2011) suggests that the neoclassical approach is most relevant when considering incentives for migrating and/or returning. However, the limitations of neoclassical theory include that it is ahistorical and individualistic, relying on rational actor assumptions that migrants have the ability to make perfectly informed comparisons of the relative costs and benefits of migrating, to maximise their utility or

productivity on an individual level. Alternatively, the new economics of labour migration theory assesses migration in terms of households, asserting that families send individuals with the highest earning potential abroad, to spread income risks as a livelihood strategy (Stark 1991).

2.1.2. Historical-Structuralism

The historical-structural paradigm views migration as being shaped by structural inequalities and unequal power dynamics in the world economy, as well as reproducing and reinforcing them (de Haas, 2021). Popularised in the 1970s and 1980s, this approach views migration as a method of mobilising cheap labour on behalf of capital interests. Building on dependency theory (Frank, 1966) and ‘World Systems Theory’ (Wallerstein, 1974), this approach views migration as an increasing function of globalisation and the emergence of new forms of production in which capital and labour mobility are explicitly linked. For instance, the dual or segmented labour market approach views patterns of migration as being based on the structural demands for both high- and low-skilled workers (Piore, 1979). This approach focuses on institutional factors along with race and gender in constructing labour market segmentation. This perspective can be applied in the context of ‘global cities’, which are seen as experiencing increasing economic polarisation (Sassen, 2001). Following the historical-structural paradigm, structural changes in world markets and economic dualism are framed as the main determinants of migration. However, a central problem of this approach is that it excludes and even dismisses human agency within the migratory process (de Haas, 2021).

2.1.3. Symbolic-Interactionism

Migration networks theory identifies informal networks and social capital as the key facilitators of migration as people follow “beaten paths” or familiar migration routes (Stahl, 1993). Networks emerge through international labour flows which can become self-sustaining over time, even after the original economic motives have declined (Massey et al., 1998; Portes & DeWind, 2004). Migration systems theory suggests that migratory patterns arise in response to prior existence of links between sending and receiving states. These links can include colonialism, political influence, trade, investment or cultural ties grounded in historical or structural relationships between places (Castles et al., 2013). Additionally, transnationalism provides a theoretical framework which captures the connections between migrants’ host and origin countries, established through regular and persistent social contact across national borders (Portes, 1999). Theories related to transnationalism often emphasise human agency, cultural capital and individual lifestyle positions (Krings et al., 2012). They view globalisation as the main driving force behind new trends in migration and point towards the growing accessibility of migration through improvements in transport and

communication technologies (Castles, 2010). As migration is increasingly influenced by and through transnational ties, changing socio-cultural outlooks and technologies of transport, communication and social connectivity are seen as central to supporting transnational communities (Scott et al., 2015). Key factors which influence patterns of transnational migration are chain/network migration pathways, family and community strategies of migration, the growth of a migration industry, pro-migration policies (usually affecting middle-class, high-skilled migration), migrant agency and structural dependence (Castles et al., 2013). Through the symbolic interactionist perspective, the existence of a diaspora is a significant influence on migration decisions (Vertovec 2002). Transnationalist theories inform debates surrounding return migration, discussed in the following section.

2.1.4. Theorising Return Migration

The process of return migration is increasingly linked to globalisation, becoming a popular subject of study during the 1980s (Kubat, 1984), resulting in an extensive body of literature and producing a range of theoretical approaches to the phenomenon (Cassarino, 2004). An early typology put forward by Cerase (1974) categorises the four main types of return migrants, an overview of which can be found in Table 2 in the Appendices section. This typology highlights the diversity of return migration, both in terms of motivations, circumstances, preparedness (i.e., their willingness and readiness to return) and their potential capacity to contribute to development (Cassarino, 2004). More recently, authors such as Carling and Erdal (2014) highlight the interaction between transnationalism and return migration, post-return experiences, and future remigration trajectories. Research on return migration in the context of Ireland and Europe emphasises the motivations for returning (Corcoran, 2002; Jones, 2003), the adjustment process for returnees (O'Donnell, 2000; Ní Laoire, 2008; Ralph, 2009) including identity formation and counterurbanisation (Wilborg, 2004; Ní Laoire, 2007; Ralph, 2014) and the socio-economic impacts of return migration (Stockdale, 2006; Farrell et al., 2012). An overview of the findings from this research can be found in Table 3 in the Appendices section.

2.2. Globalisation and New Forms of Mobility

International migration is a central dynamic within globalisation, amplifying (inter)cultural capital and providing greater technical means for global interconnectedness. The globalisation of migration has led to more and more countries being affected by migration and increasing diversity among migrant populations (Castles et al., 2013). As a cultural process, globalisation is often linked to the rise of global products and the 'McDonaldization' of society (Ritzer, 1996), or to the 'planetization' of people's understanding (Vertovec, 1999). The processes of globalisation have given rise to several new forms of mobility, defined

by Sheller and Urry (2006) as the ‘Mobility Turn’. This new paradigm of migration emphasises self-actualisation, fluidity and post-modern living (Sheller and Urry, 2006) and is related to the emergence of the so-called ‘transnational capitalist class’ – a group of global elites who enjoys unprecedented mobility and cosmopolitan lifestyles (Sklair, 2001). Such theories are grounded in the logics of late modernity, seeking to describe lifestyle consumption practices which have increasingly become ‘decisions not only about how to act but who to be’ (Giddens 1991: 81). Several attempts have been made to conceptualise new patterns of globalised mobility, including but not limited to ‘lifestyle migration’, ‘residential tourism’, ‘Euro-commuters’, international student mobility and high-skilled migration.

2.2.1. ‘Lifestyle Migration’, ‘Residential Tourism’ and ‘Euro-commuters’

‘Lifestyle migration’ is associated with wider theories on tourism and counter-urbanisation (O’Reilly & Benson, 2009) and often pertains to relatively affluent actors whose migration is prompted by the pursuit of an individualised lifestyle (Skeggs, 2004). Here, there is a distinction between migration and mobility, with the latter perceived as being generally more fluid, ongoing and multi-transitional (Cohen et al., 2015) with specific identities associated with sustained mobility such as the so-called ‘creative class’ (Florida, 2007), ‘neo-nomads’ (D’Andrea, 2006) or ‘global nomads’ (Kannisto, 2016). Tourism is viewed as playing a central role in defining the search for spaces for lifestyle migration, emphasising the increasing fluidity between leisure travel and migration (Cohen et al., 2015). This is linked to the theory of ‘residential tourism’, which is characterised by short-term residence, second-home ownership, extended holidays, and often paves the way for ‘retirement migration’ (Williams et al., 2000). O’Reilly and Benson (2009) note an increasing number of working-age individuals engaging in residential tourism, similarly seeking new and more fulfilling ways of living. For example, the ‘Rural Idyllist’ who is searching for ‘the simple life’ in the countryside; the ‘bourgeois bohemian’ who seeks more alternative lifestyles that facilitate spiritual, artistic or creative aspirations; and ‘heliotropic’ migrant moving to better climates or pursuing the ‘Mediterranean lifestyle’. Furthermore, EU enlargement has created a new landscape for migration, leading to the emergence of ‘free movers’ – a new generation of Europeans who move for work and lifestyle, as well as for broader aspirations of self-development (Krings et al., 2012). The ‘marketisation of migration’ in Europe is linked to increasing international economic integration (Favell and Hansen, 2002), often conceptualised as ‘talent flow’ of economically valuable individuals who enact ‘global boundaryless careers’ (Carr et al., 2005). The increasing trend of intra-EU circulatory migration has given rise to a new distinct migrant group that Ralph (2015) refers to as ‘Euro-commuters’. In the Irish context, these cross-border commuters display shared characteristics in terms of socio-economic background, but often have distinct motivations ranging from ‘lifestyle migration’ to ‘livelihood strategies’ or a combination of the two (Ralph, 2015).

2.2.3. International Student Mobility and High-Skilled Migration

International students and young high-skilled graduates are easier to integrate and develop into the ‘wanted’ workforce of host societies, making them the potentially perfect elite migrants (Bilecen, 2016). This has resulted in what Florida (2007) refers to as the ‘new global competition for talent’, as student mobility is seen as an indicator of a nation’s ability to mobilise, attract, and retain human creative talent (Florida, 2007). Concerns over skills shortages and a mismatch in the skills portfolios of the domestic labour market has led to pro-migration policies aimed at attracting specific groups of immigrants (Mahroum, 2001; Menz, 2010). Incentives and special procedures for the high-skilled immigrants offered by some developed countries include preferential entry rules such as the ‘entrepreneur visa’ in the UK, the ‘scientist visa’ in France, and the ‘green card’ in Germany (Hollifield, 2004; Castles et al., 2013). Many states are willing, if not eager, to sponsor the importation of students and high-skilled individuals because there is likely to be less political resistance than towards other migrant groups (Hollifield, 2004).

Individuals in this category are often seeking to maximise return on their investment in education and training by moving in search of the highest paid and/or most rewarding employment (Iredale, 2001). Access to international education and high-skilled migration opportunities is linked to socio-economic background, with wealthier families predominating among those who circulate in a process of class reproduction that becomes evident through international mobility (Findlay et al., 2011; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). Notably in the Republic of Ireland, migration intentions are more prominent in middle class, urban populations (Cairns et al., 2012), whereas in the case of Northern Ireland, research has found that young people who remain tend to be overrepresented by lower class Catholic communities (Cairns, 2011). However, it has been highlighted by several authors that Irish graduates have amongst the lowest barriers globally to enact ‘global boundaryless careers’ (for example, Moriarty et al., 2015), having significant social networks generated through family histories and a prior culture of mobility, further facilitated through institutionally mediated movement (Moriarty et al., 2015). International student mobility programmes such as the European Commission’s Erasmus and J1 summer work and travel visa programmes facilitate mobility opportunities for those graduates not necessarily embedded in elite or high-income family backgrounds (Van Mol 2013; Moriarty et al., 2015).

2.3. Socio-economic Impacts of High-Skilled Migration

The 2000s saw the re-emergence of discourse surrounding brain drain/gain/circulation (Iredale, 2001) making it one of the most significant areas of research on skilled migrants (Favell et al., 2006). The departure of high-skilled professionals raises concerns about ‘brain drain’, but also generates hope that the human and economic capital migrants gain abroad can foster development in originating societies upon their return (Castles et al., 2013). The potential socio-economic impacts of this process are briefly described below.

2.3.1. Consequences for origin societies: ‘Brain Drain’ or ‘Talent Flow’

A key question for this area of research is whether migration encourages development of the countries of origin or hinders it. The response can be separated into two competing narratives: That of migration optimists and migration pessimists (de Haas, 2012). The former argue that migration brings growth and prosperity to origin countries through a process of ‘brain gain’ which encompasses gains made from human capital, modern ideas and entrepreneurial attitudes of returning migrants, facilitating economic take-off of origin countries. Migration pessimists, on the other hand, argue that migration undermines development through draining origin countries of their human and financial resources (Castles et al., 2013). Overall, a worldwide liberalisation of high-skilled migration benefits high-income countries and adversely affects developing countries (UNCTAD, 2007; Docquier and Machado, 2016). For example, ‘brain drain’ in the healthcare sector may be critical, as high-skilled health professionals are essential in achieving basic welfare objectives in developing countries (Skeldon, 2009). Discourse surrounding immigration policy in developed countries is increasingly taking on a dual approach of promoting skilled migration and limiting unskilled migration, rarely considering the impact that such policies might have on the sending countries. The policy responses to the ‘brain drain’ phenomenon are outlined by Skeldon (2009) and include the control of outflow of skilled workers, compensation, policies aimed at enhancing human capital in sending/receiving countries and establishing transnational communities through virtual networks (Carr et al., 2005). From a centre-periphery perspective, Ireland can be conceptualised as a small-scale, peripheral economy (Shuttleworth and King, 1995) which may be more severely affected by the consequences of brain drain compared with larger countries with more dynamic domestic economies. Arguably the result of a truncated labour market that does not provide sufficient employment opportunities for its graduate population, outward high-skilled migration and ‘brain drain’ habitualises the export of Ireland’s human capital to richer countries such as the UK and the USA (Shuttleworth and King, 1995).

2.3.2. Consequences for host societies: ‘Global Cities’ or ‘Brain Waste’

Findlay (1990) and Salt (1992) have linked the contemporary migration of high-skilled workers with the global expansion of world trade and the international expansion of transnational companies. Increasingly ‘global cities’ (Sassen, 1991) have become dual host sites for elite migrants and a migrant ‘underclass’, as migrant populations are becoming increasingly diverse (Scott, 2006). In the early 2000s, many European governments revised restrictive migration policies, apparently rediscovering the presumed benefits of migration for economic purposes, encouraging a global competition for skilled labour (Menz, 2015). The growing preference towards temporary, skilled migrants is based on the low cost of acquiring highly skilled workers and the ability to admit only persons who already have employment. In this way, migrant intakes can be managed to protect the jobs of domestic workers, avoiding the risk of migrants who have not found work becoming a perceived “drain” on the welfare budget (Iredale, 2001). Large influx of migrants often leads to ethnic minority formation and growing diversity in host countries, an issue that may become a highly politicised issue during times of economic or social crisis (Castles et al., 2013). ‘Brain waste’ is a term used to describe how the benefits of migration may be wasted due to local institutional factors such as cultural discrimination (Carr et al., 2005). Often migrants are unable to get their qualifications recognised or fail to find employment fitting their skill level (Castles et al., 2013). Skilled migrants may also face glass ceilings in their professional advancement because of their foreign status (Favell et al., 2006). In this way, the dichotomy of high-skilled versus unskilled migration glosses over and obscures the hard realities that many highly skilled educated migrants face (Favell et al., 2006).

2.4. The Migratory Process through ‘Boom’ and ‘Bust’ in Ireland

In an Irish context, youth migration must be situated within the historic narrative of mass emigration which has long been part of the Irish cultural experience (O’Leary and Negra, 2016). It was not until the early 1970s when net immigration was recorded for the first time in more than one hundred years (Kennedy, 1973; MacLaughlin, 1994). This was followed by the economic recession of the 1980s, renewing patterns of net out-migration to key destinations such as the UK, USA, Australia and Canada until the unprecedented economic growth of the 1990s ‘Celtic Tiger’ economy during which net immigration was once again recorded (Shuttleworth and King, 1995) as an economically viable Ireland promised employment in addition to community and kinship, providing incentives for Irish migrants to return (Farrell et al., 2012). Census data suggests that over 117,000 migrants returned in 1991-2000 and some 74,417 in the following five years, suggesting that return migration represents a significant trend prior to the current day (Cawley, and Galvin, 2016). Drawing on the symbolic-interactionist perspective, it is important to understand the historical systems and migration networks, as they continue to influence migratory trends to the present day. Strong ties with friends and family overseas contribute to continued migration to established locations, where Irish diaspora communities often provide a source of belonging and support for new arrivals (Cawley and Galvin, 2016).

The literature points to considerable continuity in the reasons cited for migration to and from Ireland, often linked to the state of the domestic economy in periods of economic ‘boom’ and ‘bust’, as well as the accessibility of employment and higher education opportunities overseas (Shuttleworth and King, 1995; Cawley and Galvin, 2016; Lulle et al. 2019). After the recession in 2008 a further large-scale outflow of migration took place. In 2009/10, 59% of Ireland’s students expressed intentions to leave (Cairns et al., 2012). In Northern Ireland, 55% indicated mobility intentions during the same graduating year (Cairns and Smyth, 2009). Irish graduates are arguably much more mobile than those in other European countries that were also badly affected by the 2008 recession such as Greece and Italy (Moriarty et al., 2015). This is due to their ability to successfully negotiate routes into global labour markets through favourable visa permissions, facilitated by the relatively straightforward recognition of their qualifications and their ability to speak English (Moriarty et al., 2015). The relative ease of Irish youth migration has provided an important ‘safety valve’, releasing pressure from the state welfare system during periods of high unemployment and shrinking domestic labour markets.

3. Methodology

This research draws on 20 semi-structured interviews of young people who initially emigrated from Ireland between the mid-2010s and early 2019, returning to Ireland during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic from the beginning of 2020 to 2021. Just under half of the respondents originated from one of the rural western counties in Ireland, Co. Mayo, which has historically seen high rates of emigration and return migration (Jones, 2003). The remaining participants were from rural and urban settings across the Republic of Ireland. The main objective of this research is to capture the migration experience of young people; thus, all participants were aged in their 20s at the time of the interviews (ranging from 23 to 29 years old). The respondents of this sample were all third-level graduates or migrants with high-skilled professional backgrounds including a broad spectrum of occupations. The periods of time they had spent abroad ranged from 6 months to three years, with the average being approximately 20 months. The majority of the respondents returned to the localities in which they had grown up, returning in most cases to their parent's home. A brief profile of the respondents can be found in Appendix B in the Appendices section. For this study, it was most appropriate to identify participants by selective or purposive sampling – involving a conscious selection of participants to include all relevant aspects in the sample (for example, achieving a relative gender balance, variation across age range and duration/location of stay abroad). The criteria used for selection of the sample can also be found in Appendix C. Theoretical sampling was carried out through a “snowball” process. To reduce bias in the sampling process beginning with personal acquaintances, several initial chains or key respondents were identified then those respondents helped to locate others through their own social networks (Warren, 2001). The following methodology section will briefly outline the theoretical approach and research design, including ethical considerations and research limitations.

3.1. Theoretical Approach and Research Design

In the literature reviewed, several methodologies were assessed in terms of their usefulness to the research subject at hand. Qualitative techniques stood out as particularly useful in understanding the individuals' perceptions and social reality of migration, and offer an “insider's” perspective (Deshpand 1983, p. 103). The interpretivism or phenomenological approach holds that “the important reality is what people perceive it to be” (Taylor and Bogdan 1998, p. 3), and is committed to understanding social phenomena from the actor's own perspective. In particular, the “life-narrative” approach employed by Ni Laoire (2007) is useful for the research of return migration. This approach references the idea that narratives

construct lives and identities actively through the act of ‘storying’ a set of experiences and events (Lentin, 2000; De Tona, 2004). The resulting narratives create coherence out of the fragmented nature of migrant and diasporic memories (De Tona, 2004). Based on this approach, the methodology chosen for data collection is predominantly inductive and discovery-oriented, using a semi-structured interview format to ascertain self-descriptions of the individuals’ migration trajectory. One of the key advantages of interviewing is the ability to make ‘cultural inferences’ and thick descriptions of a given social phenomenon which can be analysed for patterns and themes (Spradley, 1979). My own position as a return migrant of similar age is likely to have influenced the course of the research and may have influenced the ‘cultural inferences’ made during the interviewing process by sensitising me to particular issues and potentially desensitising me to others. However, to avoid the pitfall of over-identifying myself with the participants I generally did not mention my personal migration history and background, allowing a certain critical distance between the researcher and the respondent to maintain data integrity (Bowen, 2005). It is noted by Denzin and Lincoln (1994) that the interpretive paradigm frames qualitative research in terms of trustworthiness, as opposed to the conventional, positivistic criteria of validity, reliability, and objectivity. Trustworthiness in this case was established by prolonged engagement with the population of interest and triangulation using multiple data sources, thereby adding confidence as to the credibility of the research findings and conclusions. Following the “life-narrative” approach to interviews, the aim was to capture even the unacknowledged factors which may have influenced the migration experience or the decision to return during the pandemic.

Rubin and Rubin (1995: 145–46) note that the qualitative interview generally employs three lines of questioning: First, main questions that begin and guide the interview, secondly, probing questions that aim to clarify answers or request further examples, and finally, follow-up questions that pursue the implications of answers to the main interview questions. A sample of questions included can be found in appendix D. Main questions related to drivers for migration/return and the perceived positive and negative aspects of migration/return, identifying any professional development, skills or qualifications obtained whilst abroad. Further probing questions targeted employment status and educational attainment prior to migration and after return. Experiences of the Irish migration habitus and transnational practices were pursued as a secondary line of questioning, to assess the specific geography of migration, as well as intentions for future migration and onward destinations, if any. Despite the interviews being treated primarily as conversations, an interview guide was prepared in advance and used to provide a basic structure for the interviews, and to elicit detailed information and comments from the respondents. Using the interview guide also eased the task of organising and analysing the interview data (Bowen, 2005). The qualitative information obtained from the interviews was analysed to identify major themes and sub-themes

in the experiences of migration and return, both generally and with specific relation to the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic. Thematic analysis was used to generate a description of the trends and linkages discovered through the research, while content analysis was used to quantify the frequency of phenomena where appropriate. Analysis of interview transcripts was primarily based on an inductive approach, through identifying patterns in the data by means of thematic codes. Specifically, this entailed using qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti for assigning open codes or labels. This software was also useful in creating a network overview of the significant linkages or relationship between different thematic codes.

3.2. Research Limitations and Ethical Considerations

For the process of data collection, online video call interviewing was chosen as a practical method given the COVID-related public health measures that were in place for the duration of this research. This method had the advantage of allowing for more flexible interview appointments and was less time-consuming than carrying out face-to-face interviews at geographically dispersed locations. In choosing a method for data collection the characteristics of the target population (age, education profile, technological literacy) were also considered, leading to an expectation/assumption that online video calls were likely to be an appropriate method of communication. Some potential limitations of this method were that participants may have had less patience for online interviews. Furthermore, confidentiality may be compromised if another person can overhear the online call in a shared living environment, an issue which had to be appropriately addressed prior to the interviews. From an ethical standpoint, risks and concerns are greater in qualitative research than in quantitative research because of the considerable interpretive latitude and close involvement of the researcher (Bowen, 2005). Given the highly personal and sometimes sensitive subject matter of the interview questions, attention to ethical considerations was particularly important in this research. As a cornerstone of ethical practice, informed consent of participants was obtained by providing a description of the research and its procedures prior to interviewing participants. There was informed consent that participation was voluntary, and that the respondent had the right to withdraw at any time; an assurance of confidentiality and the necessary precautions taken to protect the subjects' identities and personal data. All the participants gave consent for audio recordings to be used for the purpose of transcription and analysis, later to be used for quotations and distinctive statements which may add to the quality of the research. All first names used in the subsequent discussion of findings are pseudonyms.

4. Research Findings and Discussion

This section will discuss the research findings, describing the migratory process referencing the individual's own perspective. The migratory process refers to the determinants, processes and patterns of population movement, encompassing “the complex sets of factors and interactions which lead to international migration and influence its course” (Castles et al., 2013: 21). The objective of the following analysis is to conceptualise this multifaceted process, including the driving forces behind migration, the transnational practices of Irish migrants abroad, and finally the impacts of the COVID pandemic on the migration experiences of the returning young people represented in this sample.

4.1. Reflexive Mobility Decisions and Migration Strategies

The experiences of first-generation migration and return are well documented, as are the personal capacities of migrants to adapt and make reflexive decisions about their migration strategies. Reflexive mobility refers to active decision-making in the migratory process, conceptualised as a deliberate strategy for high-skilled young people to meet their aspirations in life (Moriarty et al., 2015). Motivations for migration are increasingly being understood as individualised decisions based on personal and professional development, with a growing emphasis on life-course trajectories, and human agency within the migratory process. The returning migrants in this sample were asked to reflect on their initial motivations and the perceived benefits of migrating. The resulting themes and sub-themes that emerged are described below, with reference to relevant literature on the topic.

4.1.1. Livelihood Strategising

A defining characteristic of modern European life is the freedom to be mobile (Krings et al, 2013). For the youngest generations of EU citizens there is the additional imperative of using mobility as a resource, moving towards better educational and occupational outcomes, enhancing prospects for personal development (Krings et al, 2013). Livelihood migration, despite being traditionally associated with the movement of economically disadvantaged groups, is equally pertinent for affluent, skilled migrants migrating within and between high-income countries (Ralph, 2015). The mobility strategies of these migrants are similarly informed by opportunities for increased earnings and/or a contraction of earning potential in the origin country (Ralph, 2015). The two most important themes that emerged as negatively impacting livelihoods of young people in Ireland are the lack of employment opportunities and limited housing market, both of which were identified as major ‘push’ factors influencing the decision to migrate.

Availability of Employment Opportunities Abroad

From the traditional human capital perspective, it is argued that people choose to invest in migration as they would education or training and will migrate if the expected rate of return from higher wages in the destination country is greater than the costs incurred through migrating (Chiswick, 2000). Even for young people in relatively prosperous societies such as Ireland, a capacity to be transnationally mobile can be crucial in terms of maximising livelihoods. In this sample, several young graduates found opportunities abroad that might have been unattainable for them in Ireland, particularly in rural regions. James (27), a recent returnee from Germany, reflected on his decision to migrate in the absence of promising employment opportunities after graduating from university:

I knew that work opportunities are pretty limited in Dublin. And, yeah, I had [been] finished college [for] a year or so. I had applied to a couple of internships and didn't get any of them, then started working in the restaurant industry... I just don't feel like Ireland is really a place to be young. And just working day-to-day, unless you're in a strict career, I feel like it's very difficult to be in Ireland and feel like you're getting anywhere.

James highlights the main factors influencing his migration, to seek out better employment prospects as well as a more fulfilling social scene “to be young”. Similarly, Peadar (27), reflecting on his initial decision to migrate to Canada, states that he felt there were not suitable opportunities in his field and that Ireland didn't have “much to offer” him after graduation. The decision to migrate in both examples can be conceptualised as ‘livelihood strategising’, as both Peadar and James felt dissatisfied by the lack of opportunities available to them as graduates in Ireland and used migration as a strategy to improve their earnings and career potential. The lack of domestic employment opportunities, an enduring theme in migration literature, is evident in this sample with just under half of the respondents referring to the disappointing labour market as one of their main motivations for leaving Ireland. Highlighted in earlier research on Irish graduates, a 2013 survey found that ‘to improve my skills and opportunities’ and ‘a lack of suitable opportunities in Ireland’ were ranked as the two most important factors influencing the decision to move (Wickham et al. 2013; Moriarty et al. 2015). This demonstrates the continuing importance of employment and career motivations for Irish graduates to migrate.

Lack of Appropriate Housing

A recent analysis of the housing situation in Ireland refers to the concept of “Generation Rent”, whereby most young people in Ireland will likely never be able to afford to rent or buy their own home (Hearne, 2020). This generation of adult children are thus forced to live with parents and/or commuting

long distances, with many students and young professionals resorting to ‘couch surfing’ and sleeping in their cars (Hearne, 2020). In this sample one of the most salient issues “forcing” young migrants away from Ireland is the poor rental market, and the perceived housing shortage in Dublin in particular. Judy (26), a returnee from Australia, noted how this impacted the migration trajectory for her and her partner:

I think the renting situation in Dublin forced us to move to Australia sooner than we would have otherwise. I would probably have put it off for a few years and built my career because I was in a very good job in Dublin. I loved my job actually, I just hated living in that situation. Dublin is not a good renting city, prices are really high for quality of life and I pretty much could no longer stand that and wanted to move away from it. I think it was insecurity with a lot of laws regarding renting. The fear of moving to a different rental property to ensure that your landlord was going to follow the rules, not scam you over. And the price for quality was what I struggled with... In [my partner's] field, big tech industries, or well, like for him working with robotics, it's very Dublin-centric. I think a lot of the jobs in Ireland, the bigger jobs are in Dublin. But to live in Dublin you have to go back to that awful rental situation.

Judy refers to her insecurities and a perceived lack of protection for young people who are dependent on the rental housing market. In particular, she laments the poor quality of housing affordable to young professionals, comparing this to the more positive experience that she had renting and living in Sydney. The concentration of employment opportunities in specific industries and sectors is a sentiment that James (27) echoes, explaining that the opportunities in Dublin are “limited to a selective skill set” and certain industries such as finance and technology, with the living costs making it too prohibitive to live in Dublin for those with lower earning potential in other sectors. This intersection of challenges has contributed to many young people perceiving their livelihoods as “better off” in more affordable cities abroad.

4.1.2. Lifestyle Migration and Residential Tourism

Contemporary European migrants increasingly understand their mobility in terms of quality-of-life and notions of self-development (Moriarty et al., 2015). ‘Lifestyle migration’ is associated with wider theories on tourism and counter-urbanisation (O’Reilly & Benson, 2009) and often pertains to relatively affluent actors whose migration is prompted by the pursuit of an individualised lifestyle (Skeggs, 2004). Tourism facilitates this form of migration by constructing and marketing ideals, laying the perfect foundation for lifestyle migration (Williams et al., 2000). Tourism-informed mobility was evident in this sample, as young people moved in search of a better quality of life and oftentimes, simply seeking better

weather. Equally important to these young people are cultural values and notions of adventure, independence and personal growth offered by migration and international travel.

Experiencing New Lifestyles and Adventure

A sense of adventure and to experience more cultural variety is a significant motivating factor affecting the mobility decision of many young people (Kennedy, 2010). Many of the respondents in this sample expressed their decision to migrate in terms of seeking new experiences, choosing locations that better align with their individual interests and preferred lifestyles. For example, Joe (27) explains his decision to move to the UK with his partner, and how previous visits as a tourist informed his destination in Scotland. When choosing a city, he and his partner both identified Edinburgh as a location that matched with their values and interests as a couple. Likewise, Judy (26) explained her motivations and the specific lifestyle that Australia offered to her, including sunny weather, leisure activities and a sense of adventure:

I've just always loved traveling. And I know a lot of Irish people moved to Australia over the last 10 years, and I just heard a lot of stories [that] it was a fantastic country to live in. Better weather, better living conditions. And so yeah, that kind of motivated me... I spent most of my time every weekend cycling and exploring, which I absolutely loved, because I've never seen anything like the landscape in Australia. And there was always some new adventure.

In previous research, Irish graduates similarly emphasised the adventure seeking nature of their decision to move (Wickham et al. 2013). Several studies highlight working holiday visa schemes (e.g., the J1 visa for the USA and the 417 holiday visa for Australia) which are now routine elements of the third level experience for many students and graduates in Ireland (Moriarty et al. 2015). For many, this establishes movement as a normal part of career progression and often influences later decisions to migrate on a more long-term basis. Through this process, the ideals of leisure and tourism become feasible and attainable lifestyle choices.

Gaining Independence and Personal Growth through Migration

In examining the motivational factors for youth mobility, migrant narratives often emphasise individualised, self-realisation objectives for the decision to migrate. Judy (26) was one of the participants that highlighted this aspect of her experience, saying that she felt more 'grown up' and 'completely independent' living abroad. Similarly, James (27) felt that living abroad gave him more independence as it gave him the opportunity to move away from his family home for the first time. For many of the young people in this sample, the initial migration experience offered a sense of self-confidence and independence

that may have been lacking in their place of origin. Previous ethnographic research has revealed a narrative of escape permeating migrants' accounts of the decision to migrate, further emphasised by their negative presentations of life before migration (O'Reilly and Benson, 2009). Migration in these accounts is often described using language like 'making a fresh start', 'a new beginning'. Such narratives are also evident in this sample. For example, Fiona (29) explains the confidence she gained during her time abroad because she was no longer tied to "old narratives" about herself. The narrative of breaking free from old versions of oneself, and the sense of freedom and independence that migrating can offer was prominent in this sample, with several respondents identifying this as one of the main benefits of their time spent abroad.

Seeking a Better 'Quality of Life' Abroad

Other themes that emerged during the interview process included the negative perception of public services in Ireland. The experiences of a 'better quality of life' abroad highlighted a more engaging social scene and political landscape for young people. Roisin (29) reflected on her experience living in New Zealand stating:

They have so much public amenities over there. They've got parks everywhere with really good playgrounds. And they've got skate parks everywhere, they've great stuff for teenagers and kids to do outside and even parks have tennis courts that you can go to and they're all free. And there's public toilets everywhere. And they're all really clean. And there's always toilet paper. I don't know, I just feel like they're very respectful of their environments, you know, across all kinds of classes. Everyone seems to have a really nice standard of living over there. And it's beautiful.

Others similarly highlighted the quality of public amenities, infrastructure and services including healthcare. Public transportation networks and leisure facilities were highlighted as a significant advantage of living in cities abroad, particularly amongst the returnees from the UK and EU countries. Additional fundamental features of the different lifestyles sought abroad included the re-negotiation of the work/life balance and the quality of the physical environment including better weather conditions.

4.1.3. Benefits for Returning Migrants

In the context of the global market for talent, institutionally enabled mobility such as the Erasmus+ programme and post-study schemes to attract high-skilled migrants are deemed to promote cosmopolitan identities, foster strong European citizenship and increase competitiveness within knowledge economies (Favell, 2008; Moriarty et al., 2015). However, only a few of the respondents had experienced mediated or institutionally motivated mobility arranged by an employer or through a university, with most of these young people undertaking migration on an independent basis. Youth mobility is strategically encouraged to increase cultural capital (Van Mol 2013) as policymakers continue to emphasise the importance of ‘employability skills’ for graduates to be fully equipped in meeting the challenges of an increasingly flexible labour market (DIUS, 2008). The main advantages of migration in terms of skills, self-confidence and social capital are outlined below.

Building Employability Skills and Self-Confidence

With an increasing number of young, educated individuals migrating, often motivated by promoting their careers and increasing employability skills, there is a growing awareness amongst Irish graduates that credentialed qualifications are not wholly sufficient to secure employment (Moriarty et al., 2015). Employers in Ireland are also seeking certain competencies (attitude/personality/soft skills) that can facilitate knowledge-carrying (Moriarty et al., 2015). In this sample, the returning migrants articulated the perceived benefits of migration in terms of “professional growth” or gaining “soft skills” and improving their adaptability to the labour market. As one participant, Aisling (23) explained, the experience of migrating and working in the hospitality sector in London allowed her to improve her social and communication skills. This point was echoed by David (27) who experienced working in hospitality in Australia, describing how increased self-awareness and the interpersonal confidence that he developed as a migrant have been helpful in facilitating his return. Another respondent, Nuala (24), expressed the perceived advantage that the ‘soft skills’ she developed abroad has given her reintegration into the Irish labour market, describing it as an ‘edge’ she might have above young people who don’t have any working experience abroad. An earlier study by Lulle et al. (2019) demonstrated that Irish returnees tend to reference an increased confidence in their ability to succeed as well as the ability to operate in an unfamiliar environment, as the migratory processes is deemed to have equipped the migrant with a range of skills (both of a formal and informal nature) that help facilitate return to Ireland. This demonstrable reflexivity in evaluating both their current skills and the cultural capital accumulation through mobility experiences is salient and signifies the potential knowledge transfer as graduates move across both employers and borders (Carr et al. 2005). Despite most respondents reflecting on their professional development abroad as a positive experience,

there were several instances of skills and opportunities perceived as being “lost” as a result of the migratory process. Judy (26) articulates a perceived loss of local social capital as she lost the opportunity to build professional connections in Ireland prior to migration. However, it seems she understands this trade-off and the potential loss of social capital in Ireland as being “worth it” in order to make the move to Australia. The majority of respondents in the sample, despite potentially losing some opportunities for career advancement in Ireland, felt overwhelmingly positive towards the professional progression, training and education that they had pursued abroad.

Spatial Mobility as Social Mobility

Proponents of social-demand theory assert the growing strategic importance of social and cultural capital. Building foreign language capacity and cultural capital are also valued by young people themselves (Kennedy, 2010). The return migrants in this sample articulated improved intercultural competencies and social capital as an important benefit of their experience in foreign working environments. For example, Aisling (23) explained how her time working abroad improved her confidence and has given her ‘connections’ that might help her future careers. Fiona (29) from Dublin, articulated the benefits of developing her cultural understanding and self-perception having migrated to several different countries including Sri Lanka, New Zealand and Australia. Through prolonged mobility she was exposed to “a whole spectrum of different industries, and employment opportunities and skill sets” and views her resulting stock of cultural capital and diverse social networks as an asset. The perception that returning migrants have of ‘spatial-mobility-as-social-mobility’ is evident as they acknowledge the advantages of having improved social and cultural capital for future career networking. Thus, this research reveals the complex interweaving of economic and non-economic factors in returning migrants’ self-understanding of the motivational factors influencing their initial decision to move.

4.2. Transnational Practices of Migrants

It is important to locate trends in Irish migration within the wider historical context and well-established mobility habitus of Ireland. Authors such as Shuttleworth and King (1995) and O’Leary and Negra (2016) highlight modern experiences of net emigration of Irish university graduates, which reached unprecedented levels during the late 1980s, and once again after the collapse and aftershocks of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ economy in 2008. Despite this historical legacy of migration, the modern circumstances of transnational and diasporic practices are unique, particularly with regards to new media and digital technologies (O’Leary and Negra, 2016). Informed by migration networks and migrations systems theories, the following section aims to explore the transnational practices evident in this sample, and the impact of the Irish diaspora on the migratory experience.

4.2.1. The Impact of Ireland’s Migration Networks

It has been established through research that Irish graduates tend to engage in a lot of ‘to-and-fro movement’, indicating that they represent a highly mobile labour force that is responsive to opportunities both at home and abroad (Shuttleworth and King, 1995). For many of the interview participants, there seemed to be a normalisation of the migratory process and an acceptance of emigration as the commonly “done thing”. James (27) articulates the understanding of emigration as a natural “rite of passage” after graduating, highlighting that many of his friends left the country or intended to migrate, encouraging him to do the same. It was also evident that these young people had an awareness of the more well-established migration pathways to familiar destinations. The following paragraphs will explore the impact that prior connections to locations abroad have impacted the migratory process for these young people.

Kin Networks and the Irish Diaspora

Many of the respondents indicated a prior knowledge of their migration destinations or indicated the presence of friends or family in those locations influencing their decision to migrate. Judy (26), is one example, who mentioned how a prior awareness of Australia as a migration location influenced her own decision to move there:

Australia’s always been on the radar. I think historically, with Irish people moving over there, it’s kind of been known within Ireland to kind of make the move there. And I thought it was quite an exciting journey for myself, my partner to go over and experience it. And we always had friends

over there, which was a huge motivation to pick Sydney as the location we were moving to. Because we knew some people there it wasn't a scary move for us.

Judy highlights here the benefit of having established social networks abroad which helped to motivate and facilitate her migration. Aisling (23) had a similar experience, as she chose to move to London based on prior knowledge of the city from family connections and their experiences of living there:

So I have a couple, a couple of cousins to move out there, like in their mid-20s. And they've since come home. Well a few of my cousins are still over there... So I guess like being over to [visit] them, I knew their lifestyle and I knew I liked London, and kind of the pace of life and stuff. So yeah, they would have kind of influenced me... and it's still quite [an] Irish space as well. So it's not too scary, you know?

It is interesting that for both young women, the presence of friends, family or simply the prior knowledge of these locations as an Irish diaspora space, made these locations more desirable, diluting some of the fear that might otherwise be associated with moving to a city abroad.

Group Migration and 'Friendship Capital'

To circumnavigate feelings of fear and uncertainty throughout the migratory process, young Irish graduates are also engaging in group migration and choosing to cohabit together upon first arriving in their destinations abroad. This was particularly relevant for migrants establishing themselves in Australia and New Zealand but was also evident in migrant experiences within the EU. James (27) elaborates on his experience migrating as part of a larger friend group. He says:

I'd finished college. And my friends also just finished college. And I thought it's a good time to go, a good chance to experience the world. It would have been an influence, in the fact that I had friends moving there. We were happy to move over there together anyway. But I wasn't aware of how strong the Irish community in Berlin was. And so I can't say that I moved here because of that. But definitely in a more localised sense with my friends, choosing to go there. That's why I chose to go. I wasn't a particular fan of the city before I moved there. It was definitely because of my friends.

Several authors highlight the importance of 'bridging' social capital (Putnam, 2000) in influencing the mobility decision. Cairns et al. (2012) note that 'friendship capital' often decreases likelihood of migrating, as stronger peer relationships negate intentions to be geographically mobile. Along similar lines, a study of

student mobility in Northern Ireland highlights the influence of peers already overseas on mobility intentions (Cairns and Smyth, 2009) , while a 2010 study of Polish youth mobility examined the role different forms of social capital play in inducing or inhibiting a willingness to undertake transnational mobility (Growiec, 2010). It seems that in the case of young Irish migrants, friendship networks often serve to support and facilitate the migratory process.

4.2.2. ‘Home Away from Home’: The Irish Diaspora

An experience of connection with the Irish diaspora community abroad is something that almost all the young people in this sample referred to, a connection that took place either in person or online. The role of technological and cultural shifts linked to globalisation has increasingly allowed migrants to maintain close and durable links with their places of origin, and with each other. For example, Aisling (23) explains how social media played a role in connecting her with diaspora, using Facebook pages to communicate with other Irish women in London. Diaspora consciousness is often marked by dual or multiple identifications raising concepts of decentred attachments or ‘home away from home’. The most often cited difficulties and disadvantages associated with the migratory process for this sample included the presence of language and communication barriers, as well as cultural differences between Ireland and their locations abroad. This was particularly challenging for migrants outside of English-speaking countries or locations outside of the familiar Irish migration habitus. For example, Bob (23) who was carrying out an internship in South Africa before the COVID pandemic began refers to the idea of ‘culture shock’ and the difficulties he faced adapting to such an unfamiliar society. To circumnavigate these challenges, several of the respondents reported feeling a sense of comfort, understanding and familiarity in connecting with other Irish people abroad, while others pointed towards the important support network that their Irish friends provided them in times of crisis. For example, Peadar (27) highlighted the important role that the diaspora community played for him while living in Canada.

Our entire friend group was Irish over there. Which sounds a bit clichéd, I mean, going over you say to yourself we’re not going to become completely just Irish clichés, but once you’re there, suddenly, it’s everything, it’s for the sense of humor and identity. I suppose they’re kind of like family when you’re abroad, and they essentially kind of become your family. And, in many ways, if something happens, like if a friend gets ill in hospital, or, you know, if something bad happens, your family can’t help you in the ways they normally would so you’d be jumping in as a family member, basically, to help friends out and, and so we really heavily relied on the Irish diaspora over there.

For Peadar, and many others in this sample, the presence of non-kin diaspora networks were perceived as lowering the costs and risks and enhancing the returns on migration. The theme of diaspora support during times of crisis was particularly relevant for this sample, as many participants connected with diaspora communities online to find information and support during the coronavirus pandemic and to navigate the associated public health measures and travel disruptions.

Diaspora Stereotypes and Migrant Discrimination

Despite the benefits of connecting with the Irish diaspora abroad, there was also an expressed desire by many of the young people in this sample to avoid the perceived ‘cliché’ of migrating and relying on the Irish diaspora community. Some respondents expressed explicitly that they tried to avoid migrating to locations where Irish people were known to congregate, particularly in the English-speaking destinations such as Australia and New Zealand. Sarah (28) spoke specifically of working in the St Kilda suburb of Melbourne, which is a neighbourhood that is well known for attracting young backpackers and Irish migrants. She spoke of the sense of relief that the presence of Irish diaspora provided to her, but also of the desire to expand her friend group to encompass more ‘native’ people. Other migrants spoke of wanting to avoid the negative stereotypes associated with the Irish diaspora community. For example, Judy (26) felt it was important for her to distance herself from such harmful associations:

We actually went out of our way to avoid assimilating into the Irish community initially, because we wanted to, we wanted to live there long-term, therefore we wanted to build relationships that were more long-term. A lot of the Irish community stay on shorter visas... The Irish community in Australia has a notoriously terrible reputation with it, especially if you go to Bondi Beach. It's kind of considered, almost, trashy. And because I was going over there and wanted to build a career I very much didn't want to associate myself with that image. I wanted to go and be, like, above it. Be Irish, be proud of being Irish, but not be associated with this disgusting stereotype that I didn't want.

Judy, along with several others, expressed instances of discrimination including negative stereotypes associated with the Irish diaspora community. For Sarah (28) this discrimination manifested in a hesitancy on behalf of Australian employers to hire Irish people, particularly in the ‘fine dining’ area of the hospitality sector. She noted that for her this experience working in Melbourne was the first time she felt like an ‘outsider’ or had experienced prejudice or racism because of her nationality.

‘Brain Waste’ of High-Skilled Migrants

The racial stereotypes attached to migratory workers was not the only difficulty these young people faced in securing employment abroad. Opportunities and career prospects abroad are often curtailed by visa restrictions, particularly in relation to working holiday visa schemes in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and USA. Despite the perceived ease of securing such visas as an Irish graduate, many of the respondents felt discouraged by the type of employment and industries that these visas were designed to recruit for, such as the agricultural sector or service industry. For example, in Canada, Peadar (27) felt that his visa status left him vulnerable to seek out precarious and temporary employment, because of economic desperation but also because employers often gave preference to Canadian citizens, particularly in “white-collar” professions. Likewise in Australia, Judy (26) found securing long-term employment challenging, stating:

Mostly the government doesn't hire people on my [type of] visa because of the work restrictions that come with the visa. So the visa I was on meant that after six months I had to change my employment and [move] to a completely different job because that was just the way they set up the visa. So it encourages you to work within the service industry rather than try and build your career, unless you get sponsored. That kind of always hung over my head. And when I did, when I applied for loads of jobs, I was just getting rejected. Because of the areas I was applying for. It wasn't in the service industry, I was planning on building my career here. And I found that so difficult.

Thus, Irish graduates, despite being highly mobile within certain global labour markets (Canada, Australia, UK, New Zealand), due to the English language and qualification recognition, are also susceptible to impediments within these same labour markets, largely informed by visa status. This is an example of ‘brain waste’ of the potential of migrants to contribute to development (Carr et al., 2005). In this sample, the education and professional background of these migrants was often underutilised due to local institutional factors such as immigration restrictions and cultural discrimination.

Transnational Political Engagement

An additional characteristic of transnational migrants, according to Al-Ali and Koser (2002), is that they create and maintain economic, social and political networks that extend throughout numerous social orders. Accepted membership of these societies is often based on a common country of origin, common ethnicity and kinship linkages (diaspora). Notably some of the young people in this sample also referenced the diaspora community as an important site for engaging in political activities in their locations abroad.

James (27) found that he was able to stay connected with Irish political processes through the online diaspora network in Germany. He stated:

So there's a Facebook group of Irish in Berlin. That's pretty useful just for general queries and like, understanding differences and what to expect when you're there, for instance, German bureaucracy, or if you're trying to find home comforts. And additionally, I had contact with like a 'repeal the eighth' movement based in Berlin. And yeah, that was just more informative on political issues based in Ireland and not so not so much based about being abroad.

In this case, James is referring to a popular political movement 'repeal the eight' that was active during the Irish referendum to repeal the eight amendment of the constitution regarding abortion that took place in 2018. Several of the respondents engaged in political activities in their host countries, ranging from voting in local elections to protest movements for emancipatory and environmental causes.

4.2.3. The 'Cycle of Contact' and Connection with Home

Research in the area of transnational practices, such as Cassarino (2004), refers to a 'cycle of contact' when people migrate and when they return to their country of origin. This conceptual framework is based on two interrelated fields of investigation: transnational identities and transnational mobility. Transnational mobility is illustrated through the 'back and forth' movement initiated by migrants to maintain contact with family and friends in their country of origin. Transnational identities are a consequence of migrants retaining their original identity and at the same time adopting the identity of the host country. This ability, in addition to the 'cycle of contact', ensures that the returnees are arguably better prepared for their return and face fewer difficulties reintegrating in their home country (Farrell et al., 2012). In this sample, returning at least twice a year was common for the migrants in the UK and EU, while visits were less frequent for those in the US, Australia, Canada or elsewhere. The Christmas holiday period maintains particular significance for many Irish migrants and several of the respondents from this sample mentioned the hectic social engagements during holiday periods. Conversely, some of the most frequently mentioned negative aspects of the migratory process included feelings of homesickness or missing important milestones with family and friends including Christmas. The decision of returning migrants has been uniquely shaped by the uncertainty that the COVID-19 pandemic presented, mainly articulated in terms of their inability to easily and regularly return to Ireland for visiting. Many of the respondents highlight this as one of the central factors triggering the decision to return home.

Temporary Migration and ‘the myth of return’

Ní Laoire (2008) highlights how life events intersect with economic events, producing certain narratives of return and ultimately “settling down” in Ireland. This was evident in our sample as several of the returnees reportedly always viewed their migration as short-term or temporary, with emphasis on proximity to family being the long-term goal. For example, Mark (25), a returnee from France, always saw his move abroad as temporary, with the expectation that he would return to “settle down” in Ireland. Similarly, in an earlier study of Irish students, Cairns (2014: 246) found that most respondents intended to leave Ireland only for a short period, and mainly wanted to go to English-speaking countries. It is not unusual for migrants to state that they harbour a desire and capability to return. This is commonly articulated in migration studies as the ‘myth of return’ (Anwar, 1979), that is evident internationally in the imaginaries and narratives of migrants. This is especially present when a frequent ‘cycle of contact’ with family is maintained across international boundaries, which can be seen as enhancing the sense of attachment with “home” (Cawley and Galvin, 2016). This sense of anchoring to their communities of origin has been identified among Irish returnees from Britain (Ní Laoire, 2007, 2008a) and from the United States (Corcoran, 2002). A more recent study of returning migrants from Lulle et al. (2019) found that returnees emphasised both the temporary nature of migration and an anticipated eventual transition back to “family and home” in Ireland. As Joe (27) succinctly points out:

I think when you're abroad, especially if you're Irish and abroad, there's always a thing in the back of your mind that you will be moving home eventually.

Evidently, a strong and undiluted sense of Irish identity and Ireland as ‘home’ is voiced by many migrants abroad. Returning migrants, even those that return to live at some distance from their community of origin, still categorise their return to Ireland as a return ‘home’ (Lulle et al. 2019). Furthermore, migrants who state that they have been successful in their migration away from Ireland tend to cite the importance of family in their decision to return (Lulle et al. 2019). This tendency was observed in this sample as almost all the young people interviewed reference returning to Ireland as returning ‘home’ in an interchangeable manner, and many expressed the desire to pursue long-term career security, home ownership and parenthood in Ireland.

Returning to Family and Friends

Many of the returning migrants, whether returning to rural or urban areas, were explicit that one of their main reasons for returning was related to accessing family support or due to family reasons of one kind or another. This is not unusual among return migrants – other research carried out on the subject have

similarly found family ties to be the central influencing factor in decisions to return (Ní Laoire, 2007). It was observed in this sample that the positive aspects of returning to Ireland are often narrated in terms of proximity to friends and family, occasionally triggered by death or illness, and sometimes simply to be able to spend more time with friends and family. Several of the female participants in this research talked about the desire to support their ageing parents through this period of illness or stress, largely associated with uncertainties brought about by the pandemic. According to Gray (2003) and Ni Laoire (2007) this sense of obligation, as well as the complex system of responsibilities that bind migrants with their family members who remain, is a recurring theme amongst returning migrants, even if it is not always explicitly articulated as such. This reflects the strong emphasis on family and kinship in Irish society more generally but is also a common feature of international return migration (Ni Laoire, 2007). A household survey in County Mayo in 2002 revealed the predominance of family and quality of life reasons over economic reasons in the decision to return to Ireland (Jones, 2003).

4.3. The Coronavirus Pandemic and Returning ‘Home’

The economic impacts and financial hardships associated with the pandemic should not be understated. Principally, loss of employment is something that deeply affected the young people represented by this sample, with 18 out of the 20 respondents reporting job loss abroad related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Peadar (27) recalled his experience working in the tourism sector in Canada:

I was working in a ski resort in Canada and had to help with the shutdown of the ski resort because of COVID. I had to let 60 people know that they're out of a job. And then I was out of a job. I was the assistant manager in one of the departments. So the bearer of bad news, basically. And, and then I had to fly back. And, yeah. I haven't had a job since getting back... My girlfriend and I both lost jobs over there and then our living status was pretty precarious. We were living in the back of a car. So there was just so many uncertainties.

The majority of the sample experienced job loss and unemployment due to COVID-19 with several experiencing periods of homelessness abroad or perceived the threat of homelessness as a result of being unable to secure enough income to pay rent. The financial uncertainty and travel restrictions related to the pandemic were two of the most identified factors triggering the young people in this sample to decide to return to Ireland. Nuala (24) and her partner, who were both working as English teachers in France, explain the factors that influenced their decision to return as the pandemic worsened, and namely their loss of income and uncertainty about not being able to travel “home”. In many instances, restrictions on international travel and the increasing costs associated with returning home provided the motivations for the young people to decide to relocate to Ireland earlier than they had planned. Judy (26) explained the fear she might run out of money and then not be able to afford flights home, saying that it motivated her and her partner to return during the early stages of the pandemic.

Travel disruptions, the associated financial stress and mental strain of physically returning to Ireland during the pandemic was a common experience throughout this sample. Some of the respondents were also motivated by local COVID-19 ‘lockdown’ and social distancing policies, which they perceived as negatively affecting their lifestyle abroad. Joe (27) and his partner both felt that the measures implemented by the UK government to mitigate the spread and impact of the virus, also reduced the ‘pull’ factors they had previously associated with living in Edinburgh. He explains:

I think what triggered us to move home was due to coronavirus. All of these things that were keeping you in a place have just completely disappeared more or less overnight. Like, all these social structures and events, all these different things that were like reasons to stay had just kind of evaporated pretty quickly. So that was another kind of reason there wasn't as much keeping us in Scotland anymore and since I was kind of working from home all the time. I'm not able to see friends here or in Scotland which definitely made it that the pull factors to Edinburgh were not as strong as previous.

With the social and economic 'pull' factors that had originally attracted young migrants to these locations abroad diminishing due to COVID-19, most of the young people in this sample reflexively decided that the availability of support in Ireland, both through kin networks and state support, made returning to Ireland seem like the better option. Two-thirds of this sample specifically referenced the availability of financial support in Ireland as one of the main benefits of returning. Judy (26) describes the relief she and her partner felt in this regard upon returning to Ireland, knowing that she would no longer be under such financial duress or the threat of becoming homeless, "which happened to a lot of Irish people in Australia" according to her, due to a lack of support for foreign nationals during the pandemic. For others, the sense of financial relief from returning home was accompanied by relief from threats to their physical safety. Several of the respondents mentioned safety concerns abroad, including access to healthcare abroad as a migrant and lack of familial support in the event of sickness. Several of the respondents referred to having better access to healthcare in Ireland as one of the motivating factors to return. Some even felt fearful of the economic and political instability that might accompany the pandemic and specified that being at 'home' in a more familiar setting in Ireland would make them feel safer. It was clear from the interviews that the decision to return home during the pandemic was most often undertaken from a position of financial distress, economic uncertainty and fear. It is important to bear this context in mind in discussing the specific challenges facing this cohort of returning migrants.

4.3.1. The challenges of return migration during the pandemic period

As has been discussed in the preceding paragraphs, the decision to return home during the pandemic was most frequently associated with job loss and a period of significant stress for the returnees. Returning to an equally uncertain domestic economy has been particularly challenging, with the COVID-19 adjusted unemployment rate reaching 24.2% as of March 2021 (CSO, 2021). The following section will discuss the main challenges or negative aspects about having returned to Ireland in this context, including parental cohabiting, limited social networks and mental health difficulties.

‘Boomeranging’ and Parental Co-residence

One aspect that differentiates this period of return migration from earlier waves is the higher incidence of ‘boomeranging’, a phenomenon whereby adult children who have previously been living independently choose to return to live with their parents. The increasing trend in parental co-residence has been well-documented even before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, and is largely attributed to high housing costs, rising student debt and adverse labour market conditions for young people across many industrialised countries (Chan et al., 2021). In this sample it was observed that most of the returning young migrants have decided to live once again in their ‘family home’ or a parents’ house, with few finding the financial security to live independently. As has been previously discussed, the rental market and housing shortage for first-time buyers in Ireland represents a significant ‘push’ factor initially motivating these young people to migrate from Ireland, and many have found the domestic housing market to be equally challenging upon their return. Peadar (27) described his struggle to find appropriate housing and vocalised his frustration with the ongoing lack of housing support:

So I've moved house maybe 12 times since I got back. Maybe I can talk a bit about that. Because I think it was one thing for the government to call for everyone to repatriate, but there wasn't much of a follow-through or 'Okay, so now these people are back where are they actually going to live?'. It's kind of hard to move into anywhere at the moment. There is a lot of uncertainty. The whole rental situation in Ireland isn't great. I think it was just this call to get everyone back to their place of birth, without any foresight as to, okay, when these people get back, what are we actually going to do to make the move back, during already very difficult times, a little bit easier for them? And I don't think there was any support in place.

Compounding the trend of ‘boomeranging’ and difficulties finding housing, the persisting nature of the current situation of unemployment in Ireland is generating significant economic uncertainty for this cohort of returnees. Judy (26) describes how this uncertainty, both in terms of employment prospects and in the housing market, has been negatively affecting her and her partner as they meet the challenge of “having to start all over again” in Ireland. This issue represents a significant challenge for returning young people as they try to re-adapt to living at ‘home’.

Limited Social Networks

Condon’s (2005) research on return migration highlights the desire of returnees to access a ‘social field,’ or their local network of family, friends and community where they are ‘known’. This points to the importance of social capital that migrants expect to be able to draw upon, contributing to their return.

Several respondents expressed their frustration of not being able to access their expected or perceived social networks upon returning to Ireland due to social distancing measures and public health policies enacted during COVID-19 restrictions, limiting their resources for making a smooth transition or return to their 'home' communities. For returnees, the ability to network both in preparation for their return and once they returned is said to significantly contribute to the successful reintegration of migrants, particularly within a rural setting (Farrell et al., 2012). In this case, the negative impact of pandemic restrictions has aggravated the challenges these migrants face in returning as they more often lack access to their 'usual' social networks as a result of the pandemic.

Mental Health Difficulties

Following the global outbreak of COVID-19, numerous commentaries and public health officials have warned of dire mental health consequences due to the repercussions of the virus and the lockdown (Hyland et al., 2021). This was evident in this sample population as several of the respondents explicitly mentioned mental health challenges. Fiona (29) explains that mental health also played an important role in her decision to return to Ireland, saying:

I realised Australia wasn't going to financially support me. I wasn't established or set up there, I didn't have a job, I had two Irish friends that were my age, and I didn't feel like it would be appropriate to lean on them the amount that I would have had to lean on them. And again, it's just like everyone's juggling their own balls like and, and the stress was really high... So it became a matter of prioritising my immediate, like, basic level of security and safety, like I need somewhere to live and to eat. And for my sense of safety in terms of my mental health. Honestly, I think I needed to be brought home. I think and I think I needed support. And I think I was too afraid to admit that like that would be some kind of failure.

This final sentence is telling. Existing research on return migration in Europe (for example, Farrell et al. 2012) has discussed the potential for return migration to be interpreted as a failed attempt by the individual to improve his or her status. This has been somewhat prevalent in the results of this research, suggesting therefore that dominant discourses that equate return migration with 'failure', usually economic, may be particularly relevant to the circumstances and conditions of returning due to or during a global health crisis. Peadar (27) describes the challenges he faced returning to Ireland in the context of COVID-19 government-enforced 'lockdown':

Honestly. I was pretty depressed when I got back initially, like I found the first lockdown the hardest. And, and I'd say like, I didn't really have a very good handle on my drinking and stuff during the first lockdown. I think moving home, even in normal times, is already very difficult.

The sense of failure and other mental health challenges facing these returning migrants seems to be magnified by the high prevalence of unemployment, the increasing trend of 'boomeranging' or returning to live in the family home and compounded further by limited social fields and social distancing measures.

4.3.2. Looking towards the future and the post-COVID reality

The final section of this discussion focuses on the future as it is currently perceived by these returning young migrants. Several participants discussed the advent of remote working, the effect that this is having on their work-life balance and the potential for more flexible workplaces to allow for better opportunities in rural locations. Finally, the intentions and aspirations for future re-emigration were discussed as these young people reflexively assess their post-COVID landscape.

Remote Working and Counter-urbanisation

Several of the respondents had been pursuing higher education qualifications abroad, such as Alannah (23) and Eoghan (23), who had both been enrolled in postgraduate programmes at British universities during the pandemic. Of particular concern for these young professionals is the fear that many companies have delayed recruitment, and suspended graduate programs and internships. Overnight it seemed that higher education became digitised, and many workplaces were abandoned in an attempt to prevent further spread of the virus. However, the advent of widespread 'remote working' or working from home represents new opportunities for these returning migrants, particularly those who are returning to rural areas. Peadar (27) relates the opportunity that he perceives remote working to offer young people in rural areas, including the potential for counter-urbanisation:

Growing up in rural Ireland is a mixed blessing. You know, it's such a great place, but you kind of feel like you have to leave it to get on a career path and stuff. But I think, for me, this whole pandemic has given me a new appreciation for how brilliant the quality of life is in rural Ireland, there's much greater social capital and in rural Ireland than in, say, Dublin. And it's really awesome knowing everybody in the community. And you can live somewhere like rural Ireland and have a more alternative lifestyle and have a lot more freedom on how you want to live your life. Working remotely, it definitely opens up a lot of avenues... And so that's been a kind of positive

outcome of the pandemic and I think maybe, maybe it's triggering a bigger move towards decentralisation in Ireland, which I personally think would be the best thing ever for Ireland.

It was apparent from this research, supporting earlier research on return migration (for example, Farrell et al., 2012) that the lack of opportunities within rural areas was a determining factor in forcing the initial emigration. However, the perception of the rural environment as offering a better pace and quality of life is also evident, placing rural locations within an idealised narrative common amongst return migrants (Ni Laoire, 2008; Farrell et al., 2012). The unique circumstances of the pandemic and the rise of working from a distance, along with the wave of return of highly skilled young people, may present an opportunity for a 'brain gain' for peripheral regions. These migrants return to rural areas with a distinct advantage of mobility, social, cultural and human capital, making them more employable, entrepreneurial and innovative (Farrell et al., 2012). However, in light of the ongoing economic downturn associated with the pandemic, it is imperative that returnees are facilitated and guided as they return to the Irish labour market and the wider community.

Intentions for Onward Migration

Studies suggest that while Irish graduates demonstrate a strong orientation towards securing long-term employment, they also retained a deliberate uncertainty in relation to their plans (Wickham et al. 2013). For many young people in Ireland, mobility provides a mechanism for the reproduction of cultural and economic capital that somewhat insulates graduates from the dynamics of economic recession (Moriarty et al., 2015). The importance of reflexive mobility by Irish graduates with their opportunity structures, career aspirations and personal competences is demonstrated in their apparent capacity to reinvent themselves, adapt to labour market circumstances and display a clear openness to movement in their strategy (Moriarty et al., 2015). Peadar (27) is a perfect example of this reflexivity, as he expressed the capacity to engage in further onward migration in the face of economic uncertainties presented by the pandemic, without any explicit plans to do so at the time of being interviewed. Evidently, the narratives of these young Irish migrants acknowledge that in times of recession, their livelihood strategies will include mobility, making them adaptable and open to onward migration in a changing global labour market. In this sense, Irish graduates are comparatively advantaged in terms of an ability to negotiate the economic recession through mobility and in doing so accumulate enhanced skills and networks that will benefit them should they choose to return in the future (Moriarty et al. 2015). However, Lulle et al. (2019) findings on migration trajectories due to "crisis", shows that migration is often seen as a temporary solution for many Irish graduates, where return is but one of many solutions if economic opportunities are in place. Fiona (29) aptly describes several of the main economic challenges facing these returnees:

I think my entire generation is just kind of waiting. And that goes for people who are extremely well skilled and well educated. What are we waiting for, I have no idea but they're just kind of holding off their life to just wait until, you know, it's a more habitable environment, because it's just not at the moment for young professionals in Ireland.

It remains to be seen whether these returnees will successfully renegotiate their position in the domestic labour market, and in Irish society in a broader sense, or if they will be left “waiting” for the necessary support and structure to do so. Despite very few of the returnees in this sample population harbouring the explicit intention to migrate or spend extended periods abroad again in the future, it is not unreasonable to assume that many of these young people will potentially re-emigrate as part of their reflexive career strategies, seeking out more fulfilling employment opportunities and lifestyles overseas.

5. Conclusions

This study utilised qualitative interview techniques and in-depth investigation into a small and specific community is emphasised, with purposive sampling used to identify a sample of young migrants from across the Republic of Ireland who have returned during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the number of participants was decidedly small (20 respondents) as the emphasis was placed on the ‘thick’, descriptive quality of data, not statistical representativeness. One obvious limitation of this study was the restriction of participants to high-skilled professionals or students, thus further studies may be warranted to contextualise the migratory process among lower educated migrants during the pandemic and for other age groups. The interview transcripts were analysed using a constant comparative method whereby each line, sentence, and paragraph segments of the transcriptions were reviewed considering the ‘cultural inferences’ suggested by the data. Initially several overarching themes, subthemes and identifiable linkages emerged as a result of the combined learning based on the literature review, and through the process of coding the transcribed interview data. Migration has traditionally been explained in the context of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ social and economic factors, drawing on the individualistic rational actor approach, which is most relevant when considering particular incentives for migrating and/or returning (Hunter, 2011). In deciding whether migrating was a suitable option, the young people of the sample expressed a wide range of motives, from personal approaches to professional considerations. The most mentioned ‘pull’ factor for these young people to move abroad was undoubtedly the perception of better employment opportunities for graduates abroad. The poor quality of housing available to young professionals, particularly in Dublin, was highlighted as the main factor ‘forcing’ these young people to engage in migration as part of their livelihood

strategies. In this regard, livelihoods should not be seen solely in terms of earnings, but also as encompassing various societal norms and values (Ralph, 2015).

Many of the sampled respondents engaged in migration seeking different lifestyles and new experiences abroad, noting a sense of adventure and other quality-of-life factors as being significant motivating factors in their initial decision to migrate. The symbolic-interactionist approach is particularly useful in conceptualising Irish experiences of migration and return, as it allows the significance of migration networking, transnational practices and diaspora communities to be explored. Key factors that influenced patterns of transnational migration for these young people were prior knowledge of preexisting migration pathways, and prior connections with locations abroad through tourism or facilitated by family connections and ‘friendship capital’. In an era of globalised markets, labour mobility has been greatly enhanced, facilitating the establishment of transnational communities (Vertovec 2002; Castles et al, 2013). Through the symbolic interactionist perspective, the existence of a large diaspora and Ireland’s well-established mobility habitus continues to be a significant influence on migration decisions. The growth of a migration industry, internationalised higher education and pro-migration programmes such as the holiday-working visa schemes are also significant (Moriarty et al., 2015). Transnational theories are also useful in conceptualising return migration, as the ‘cycle of contact’ including frequent visits home and the so-called ‘myth of return’ are important factors facilitating return. Post-return transnationalism can also be important for livelihoods, as these young people draw from the professional experience, social networks, skills, self-confidence and cultural capital they developed through the migratory process. Through this lens migration is perceived as a pathway to success and a route out of disadvantage in peripheral societies.

The research findings presented herein report the experiences of Irish migration and return, occurring within the unique set of circumstances presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. The global outbreak of COVID-19 had an immediate, measurable impact on short-term migration trends in Ireland – with net inward migration or return of Irish nationals representing an increase of 2,600 in 2020 compared to the same period in 2019, and further estimated long-term effects reaching into 2021 yet to be seen (CSO, 2020). It emerged during the interview process that the decision to return home during the pandemic was often undertaken as a result of financial distress and job loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with many young people deciding to return ‘home’ to access financial and family support during this period of economic uncertainty. Many of these young people also indicated the desire to be close to friends and family, and for some the return to their communities of origin was always part of their long-term plans to ‘settle down’. Several respondents highlighted the potential of remote working to facilitate counter-urbanisation, potentially allowing young people to avail of more affordable living costs and a better quality

of life in rural areas. However, these young people face a unique set of challenges in returning during a public health crisis, including limited social fields, mental health challenges and a sharp rise in unemployment. Recent research from the ERSI (2021) highlights the disproportionate impact that the pandemic is having on young workers, with employment rates falling by almost 50% for the 20-24 age group in the second quarter of 2020 (ERSI, 2021). This context of high youth unemployment, declining rates of home ownership and rapidly rising prices in the private rental market (ERSI, 2020) has left many young people with little other options than to return to their parent's homes. The combined effect of these developments has raised concerns surrounding an increase in intergenerational inequality and should be of serious concern to policymakers. The relative ease of Irish graduate mobility to act as a 'safety valve' to alleviate domestic unemployment may also be called into doubt, as the risk associated with migration may be magnified during a global crisis which is affecting almost every country in the world and includes international travel restrictions. Despite displaying reflexive migration strategies to circumnavigate economic recession, Irish graduates may be limited in their future migration trajectories as a result of the pandemic – leaving a significant challenge for policymakers as to how best to reintegrate and support returning young people, as well as tackling the sharp increase in economic inactivity among this age group. To this end, more extensive investigation into this population is warranted, including a larger scale survey of returning migrants, for which this study will provide an important basis for future research.

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7. Appendices

APPENDIX A: TABLES

Table 1: Definitions

Key Concept	Definition
<i>Globalisation</i>	Intensified movement of goods, money, technology, information, people ideas and cultural practices across political and cultural boundaries (Holton, 2005).
<i>Transnationalism</i>	Multiple ties and interactions linking people and institutions across the borders of nation states". Transnationalism as a social morphology; a type of consciousness; a mode of cultural production; an avenue for capital; a site of political engagement; and as a reconstruction of 'place' (Vertovec, 2011).
<i>Immigrant</i>	A person who establishes his or her usual residence in the State for a period that is, or is expected to be, of at least 12 months, having previously been usually resident in another Member State or a third country (EU Immigration Portal, Source URL: https://ec.europa.eu/immigration/glossary_en).
<i>Emigrant</i>	A person, having previously been usually resident in the State, who ceases to have his or her usual residence in the State for a period that is, or is expected to be, of at least 12 months (EU Immigration Portal, Source URL: https://ec.europa.eu/immigration/glossary_en).
<i>Short-term Migrants</i>	Migrants are present and/or absent for more than 3 months but less than 12 months except in cases where the movement to that country is for purposes of recreation, holiday, visits to friends or relatives, business, medical treatment or religious pilgrimage. An example of a short-term migrant is a seasonal worker (United Nations, 1998).
<i>High-skilled migrants</i>	Migrants with a university degree or extensive experience in a given field with credentialed evidence of achievement (Iredale, 2001).
<i>Talent Flow</i>	The process whereby economically valuable individuals migrate between countries (Carr et al., 2005).
<i>Return migrant</i>	Person who has returned to his/her place of birth following a period of time in another country (Farrell et al. 2012).
<i>Internal migration</i>	A change of residence within national boundaries, such as between states, provinces, cities, or municipalities (Farrell et al. 2012).

Table 2: Cerase (1974) typology of return migrants.

Category	Description
The 'return of failure'	This category pertains to returnees who failed to integrate in the host country due to prejudices and stereotypes (Cassarino, 2004).
The 'return of conservation'	This category relates to migrants who have always intended to return and do so with enhanced socio-economic standing (Cerese, 1974: 254).
The 'return of retirement'	This refers to migrants who return to their home country to retire having amassed sufficient financial resources (Cassarino, 2004).
The 'return of innovation'	The final category put forward by Cerese (1974) refers to returnees wishing to utilise not only their financial resources but also their acquired skills upon returning to their home country.

Table 3: Overview of literature on return migration in Ireland.

Reference	Research Focus	Findings
<i>O'Donnell (2000)</i>	Return migration in a rural area in north Cork in Ireland.	Taking an experiential approach, this research highlights the problematic nature of the adjustment processes for the return migrant family.
<i>Corcoran (2002)</i>	Higher educated returnees from the United States.	Describes migrants' embeddedness in social and economic structures and their 'quest for anchorage' as a central motivating factor in their decision to return.
<i>Jones (2003)</i>	Return migration to County Mayo during the late 1990s.	Returnees prioritised family related motivations in their narratives, although the availability of employment clearly facilitated return.
<i>Wilborg (2004)</i>	Rural place identity in a context of increasing mobility.	Focusing specifically on the experiences of student migration, she traces a changing, more negotiated and reflexive form of relationship between people and place that challenges conventional understandings of place meaning and place attachment in the rural.
<i>Stockdale (2006)</i>	Economic impacts of return migration.	Examines the importance of return migration in terms of the successful economic development of rural areas, particularly in relation to the application of endogenous models of rural development.
<i>Ní Laoire (2007)</i>	Return migrants to rural areas since the mid-1990s.	Narratives of return often focus on renewing social ties with family and friends. Wanting to bring up their children in the countryside was a highly valued part of returning, related to discourses of rurality, notions of a rural idyll and 'insider-outsider' dualisms.
<i>Ní Laoire (2008)</i>	Experiences of reintegration of returning migrants.	Illustrates that re-adaptation and acceptance are often problematic and may stimulate repeat migration.
<i>Ralph (2009)</i>	Irish-born migrants returning from the United States.	Suggests that the concept of 'home for returning migrants is not simply a site of 'domestic bliss and security but can become a space of fear, insecurity and estrangement' (p. 195).
<i>Farrell et al. (2012)</i>	Return migration in rural Ireland.	Return migration facilitating 'brain gain'. Prevalence of the perception of the rural as 'safe', as 'close-knit' 'community', as 'a good place to raise a family' amongst returning migrants.
<i>Ralph (2014)</i>	Transnational identities among Irish return migrants from the USA between the years 1996 and 2006.	This analysis shows that return migrants maintain and establish transnational identities, particularly as a coping strategy responding to hostile societies.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW RESPONDENT PROFILES

- Tadhg, male, age 25, is a graduate of Arts and Communication Studies who moved to Greece for one year, returning to his rural family home in March 2020. His employment was remote and thus unaffected by his migration prior to and during the pandemic.
- Declan, male, age 29, is a healthcare professional who lived in the USA for two years prior to returning to his parent's home in a rural town in the West of Ireland in November 2020. After a brief period of unemployment upon returning, he has since found work locally in his field.
- Judy, female, age 26, and Kieran, male, age 27, are a couple who moved to Australia for 10 months, returning together to their family homes in rural areas in June 2020. Working respectively as Geospatial Analyst and Robotics Engineers respectively, they both remained unemployed at the time of being interviewed.
- James, male, age 26, is a graduate in economics from Dublin. He lived in various locations in the EU over the course of four years prior to returning to Ireland in November 2020. Having lost his employment as a chef in Berlin, he remains unemployed and living with his parents at the time of being interviewed.
- Alannah, female, age 23, is a graduate student from Dublin. She moved to the UK to pursue her Master diploma in social sciences for eight months, before returning to her family home in Dublin in March 2020. Her status as a student has been unaffected by the pandemic as her studies have been carried out remotely.
- Peadar, male, age 27, and his partner Eva, female, age 26, are returnees from Canada where they moved in January 2019. They returned to their families' homes in rural towns in the West of Ireland in March 2020 after becoming unemployed. They are both pursuing postgraduate education in Ireland at the time of being interviewed.
- Sarah, female, age 28 and her partner David, male, age 26, returned from Australia in September 2020, having been working there for almost two years. They are living independently and after experiencing a brief period of unemployment upon returning they have found work in the hospitality sector in Dublin.
- Joe, male, age 27, and Lisa, female, age 26, are a couple returning from the UK where they worked as a software developer and healthcare professional. Having lived in Scotland for three and a half years and two and a half years respectively, they returned together in December 2020 to live in Lisa's parents' home in a rural town in the Midlands region.
- Nuala, female, age 24, and her partner Mark, age 25, worked as English language teachers in France for just over a year, before returning to a rural region of Ireland in January 2021. They are qualified primary and secondary school teachers respectively, and they are both living with their parents and seeking employment at the time of being interviewed.
- Eoghan, male, age 23 is a graduate student who was carrying out an internship in South Africa mediated by his university. He returned to Ireland in April 2020 and was unable to complete his internship as a marine biologist as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. He returned to live with his parents in a rural town and is seeking employment.

- Fiona, female, age 29, traveled and worked throughout various locations in Australia and New Zealand for approximately two years before returning to Ireland in March 2020. She is living independently in Dublin and seeking employment.
- Oliver, male, age 25, is a geologist from the West of Ireland. He was carrying out a graduate qualification and research in the mining industry in the UK. He has since been continuing his research remotely and living independently in the East of Ireland since March 2020.
- Aisling, female, age 23, is a graduate returning from working in the hospitality sector in the UK. She was living in London for six months before returning to her parent's home in a rural part of Ireland in March 2020. She has since been unemployed and intends to re-emigrate to the UK as a result.
- Roisin, female, age 29, is a primary school teacher from Dublin, who along with her fiancée Brian, male, age 29, moved to New Zealand where they had worked for approximately two years. They returned together in December 2020 to live in their parent's houses and are both seeking employment and alternative housing.

All first names used are pseudonyms to protect the respondent's anonymity.

APPENDIX C: CRITERIA FOR SAMPLE SELECTION

The sample was selected with respect to the following predetermined criteria.

- Irish nationals with a professional background or third level education qualifications were selected.
- Near even selection of male and female respondents.
- Both individuals and couples were included.
- Respondents with length of their duration of stay abroad over a period of less than 6 months were excluded.
- Sample variation across age range 18 - 30 years old.

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW SAMPLE QUESTIONS

I. Demographic details:

- A. Age
- B. Gender
- C. Profession/Sector/Industry
- D. Previous location/s abroad
- E. Length of duration abroad
- F. Were there any immigration requirements (e.g., visa)?
- G. Date (month) of return
- H. Current (return) location (Specify Urban/Rural)
- I. Living independently or returning to the family home
- J. Employment status upon return

II. Question related to initial emigration (open questions)

- A. What were your motivations for initially moving abroad?
- B. Was this migration undertaken alone or with someone else?
- C. Was the migration institutionally driven (arranged for university studies or professional placement)?
- D. What was your education level or qualifications prior to moving abroad?
- E. Did you obtain any further education or qualifications whilst abroad?
- F. Can you explain any professional progression and experience/skills gained whilst abroad?
- G. Did you lose any skills or professional experiences by moving abroad?
- H. What do you perceive as the benefits/positives about your time spent abroad?
- I. What were the perceived challenges/negatives about your time spent abroad?
- J. Anything further you would like to add about the initial emigration experience?

III. Question related to transnational practices (closed/open questions)

- A. Did the presence of friends, family or contact with other Irish people affect your initial destination choice?
- B. Did you have any contact with people at home during your stay abroad? If so, what were the means of contact? Frequency?
- C. Did you visit home during the period abroad? If yes, how frequently?
- D. Were you aware of the 'home to vote' campaign?
- E. Did you return home to vote during the referendum or elections?
- F. Did you participate in any local political activities during your stay abroad?
- G. Did you have any contact with Irish diaspora community in the destination area(s)? If so, how did this affect your experience abroad?
- H. Are there any organisations that helped facilitate your migration abroad, or help you get established after you arrived?

IV. Motivations for return migrations (open questions)

- A. What were the reasons triggering your decision to return to Ireland?
- B. Was the return migration undertaken alone or with someone else?
- C. Did travel restrictions and/quarantine measures related to the coronavirus pandemic affect your return?
- D. What were the perceived benefits/positives about returning to Ireland?
- E. What were the perceived challenges/negatives about returning to Ireland?
- F. Are there any organisations that helped facilitate your return?
- G. What are your feelings towards current/future opportunities in Ireland?
- H. Do you have any intentions for future re-emigration (onwards destinations, specify rural/urban)?
- I. In what ways has the coronavirus pandemic affected your experience returning to Ireland?
- J. Anything further you would like to add?