

Accompaniment for integration: impact of a humanistic intervention for socially vulnerable migrant youth

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ABSTRACT

In Spain, there has been a profound transformation in patterns of migration over the past two decades, creating promising opportunities and significant challenges. One key challenge is the social inclusion of vulnerable migrant youth. This study examines the impact of a comprehensive intervention program aimed at furthering the social and employment inclusion of this population. This program was implemented by the Madrid City Council and carried out by the NGO CESAL. A longitudinal study was conducted with a sample of 102 at-risk individuals between 18 and 25 years of age ($M = 20.68$; $S.D. = 2.61$), who took part in the training program La Quinta Cocina.

After participating in the program, the young people showed a statistically significant increase in autonomy in the transition to adult life (ATVA), meaning in life, perceived social support, and self-concept. Those who initially presented lower levels of meaning in life also tended to obtain lower scores in perceived social support and self-concept. The combination of low scores in these three variables appears to be associated with a greater increase in ATVA following the intervention, suggesting that the program may be particularly beneficial for young people with greater deficits in personal and social resources.

In conclusion, the findings indicate that La Quinta Cocina represents a promising psychosocial intervention for at-risk migrant youth. Grounded in humanistic principles, the program goes beyond vocational training by strengthening meaning in life, enhancing self-concept, consolidating formal and informal support networks, and addressing diverse participant profiles.

1. Introduction

In Spain, social exclusion has a significant impact on a specific segment of the population, namely migrant youth (Fernández-Simo et al., 2022). Within this group, the individuals facing the highest levels of vulnerability are young people who have aged out of the child protection system (Quiroga Raimúndez et al., 2023). This population consists of young people who were under the guardianship of the different Autonomous Communities until 18 years of age and who are then required to transition to independence prematurely, without the resources needed to manage autonomous adult life (Santana Vega et al., 2018; Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018).

Due to growing migration into Spain, an increasing number of unaccompanied migrant minors (UMM) are under the tutelage of the child protection system (Observatorio Español del Racismo y la Xenofobia,

2024) with this population mainly concentrated in large cities such as Madrid and Barcelona (Observatorio de la Infancia, 2024). Spain has experienced a sustained increase in the number of unaccompanied migrant minors and young people aged between 16 and 23 who are no longer in care (i.e. care leavers), rising from just over 11,000 registered in 2021 to more than 15,000 in 2023. Most of these young people are of Moroccan origin (68%), followed by young people from Gambia (9%), Algeria (6%), and Senegal (4%) (Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración, 2024).

One of the principal difficulties faced by migrant youth, particularly for those who have aged out of the child protection system and UMM, is the poor expectation of social inclusion and the limited accessibility to basic resources such as housing and employment, severely increasing the risk of social exclusion (Alonso et al., 2017). This situation is compounded by a lack of preparation for independent living, particularly

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domestic skills, financial independence, and the creation of a social support network (Goig and Martínez, 2019). Numerous studies have found that the institutional environment of these young people does not provide adult role models or an effective social support network, generally limited to relationships formed with other young people in similar circumstances (Campos et al., 2020; Ball et al., 2021).

Although the Spanish protection system is very protective and offers UFM's socio-educational interventions that include coverage of basic needs, access to education and health, psychosocial support, training for autonomy and community integration, these measures do not always succeed in ensuring a smooth transition to independent living (Sevillano-Monje et al., 2023; Thompson et al., 2018). In many cases this is due to the lack of continued support and the absence of specific resources once they reach the age of majority (Artamonova et al., 2020; Driscoll, 2018). These circumstances become chronic difficulties for young people throughout their emancipation process.

The absence of adult support figures outside the institutional environment can further hinder the development of socio-affective relations, an essential skill for establishing healthy personal bonds in adulthood (De-Juanas et al., 2022). In addition, these young people often lack any formal education, thus making it more difficult to acquire the skills and competences necessary for economic independence and a future family life of their own (Artamonova et al., 2020; Martín et al., 2020). The lack of adequate education or training can also limit young people's ability to participate in inclusive social or leisure activities, and so exposing them to the additional dangers of high-risk behaviour (Díaz-Esterri et al., 2021).

A key milestone for the social inclusion of these young people is the strengthening of autonomy during the transition to adulthood, a particularly complex stage (Iglesias et al., 2023; Sánchez-Padilla et al., 2025; Melendro et al., 2020). From the perspective of self-determination theory, autonomy is understood as a dynamic process that is constantly being reshaped through social interactions and is closely linked to eudaimonic well-being (Ryff, 2019; Bernal Romero et al., 2020). Its development is influenced by various psychosocial factors, including perceived social support (García-Mendoza et al., 2020; Campos et al., 2020), sense of meaning in life (De-Juanas et al., 2020), and self-concept (Krabbenborg et al., 2016). These variables interact dynamically in the transition to adulthood. In particular, self-concept is a relevant predictor of a successful transition to adulthood and is influenced by the quality of social support, commitment to identity, and cultural factors (Kealy et al., 2022). In turn, perceived social support is positively associated with overall psychological well-being and acts as a protective factor against situations of vulnerability, promoting autonomy and the establishment of healthy relationships in young migrants (Melkman & Benbenishty, 2018; García-Alba et al., 2022).

Considering this reality, a number of studies have highlighted the effectiveness of support programs for young people who have aged out of the child protection system, emphasising the important role of educational tutors, mentors, and stable educational staff in residential care centres (Sulimani-Aidan, 2019; Martín et al., 2020). Within this context, social and occupational guidance programmes are a well-established tool for addressing the psychosocial risks of this population, providing young migrants who have aged out of care with the skills and competences necessary for inclusion in both the labour market and society. These socio-labour orientation programs offer structured and continuous accompaniment that helps boost self-concept, foster a sense of belonging, and brighten future prospects (Martín et al., 2020; Melendro et al., 2022).

One of the most important aims of these programs is to develop transversal competences, such as time management, conflict resolution and the ability to work in teams (Whelan et al., 2018). Several studies have highlighted that the lack of these competencies hinders access to secure and stable employment, leading to greater social and economic vulnerability (Comas-Forgas et al., 2018; García-Alba et al., 2022).

Another important aspect of socio-labour orientation programs is the

creation of professional support networks, creating links between these young people and mentors or reference figures within the labour market. These networks can offer positive role models, practical guidance in navigating the job market as well as opportunities to establish contacts which are often crucial for integration into the employment market (Rodríguez-Soler & Verd, 2023). With these networks contacts and the support of tutors or mentors, young people can gain employment-oriented learning experiences under controlled conditions, allowing them to build confidence in their abilities and gradually adapt to the demands of the job market (Sulimani-Aidan, 2019; Oterholm & Paulsen, 2018).

Specific training in technical and vocational skills is another crucial area within these programs, especially for those migrant young people without formal studies. Socio-labour guidance programs generally offer practical training, both regulated and non-regulated, in trades and technical skills oriented towards the demands of the local labour market, thus increasing employment opportunities. According to research by Artamonova et al. (2020), Kaasinen et al. (2022) and López González et al. (2025), technical training, when combined with the accompaniment of a tutor and access to an employment support network, can significantly reduce the likelihood that these young people will fall into social exclusion.

Finally, socio-labour guidance programs also have a positive impact on the emotional stability of migrant young people (Refaeli et al., 2019). By providing structure and purpose, these programs promote resilience and strengthen self-concept and self-esteem, essential for adaptation to an independent adult life. In this regard, these programs go beyond the development of work-related skills, but also foster personal growth which can help young people to face social and emotional challenges with greater stability and support (Melkman & Benbenishty, 2018).

Although many studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of socio-labour programs (Kaasinen et al., 2022; Melendro et al., 2022; Whelan et al., 2018), to date, no studies have been identified in the scientific literature into the interaction among the variables which determine the success of such programs and their influence on building autonomy during the transition to adult life.

In order to assess the impact of a comprehensive intervention model aimed at the social and labour inclusion of migrant young people at risk of social exclusion, promoted by the Madrid City Council and implemented by the NGO CESAL, the following specific objectives are proposed: 1. To identify the sociodemographic and psychosocial variables of the participating population; 2. To analyse the differences in the variables: meaning in life, social support, self-concept, and autonomy in the transition to adult life, before and after the intervention; 3. To examine whether there are differences in these variables between migrant young people who had been UMM and those who had not been under the guardianship of the Community of Madrid; and 4. to estimate the indirect effects of meaning in life, social support, and self-concept prior to the intervention.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 102 migrant young adults of both genders participated in the study, with a mean age of 20.68 years ($SD = 2.61$), all of whom were enrolled in the training program *La Quinta Cocina*, a project of the Madrid City Council managed by the NGO CESAL.

The inclusion criteria for participation were being enrolled in the *La Quinta Cocina* hospitality training course and being between 18 and 25 years of age.

The exclusion criteria were: not consenting to participate in the study or not having signed the informed consent form; presenting, at the time of assessment, any cognitive impairment that would prevent proper understanding of the questionnaires; being of Spanish origin and nationality; not having a sufficient competence in Spanish; and not having

completed the training program.

Fig. 1 illustrates the application process of the sample selection criteria.

2.2. Instruments

Sociodemographic questionnaire: This tool gather information on the variables of gender, age, nationality, education level and drug consumption.

Purpose in Life (PIL) (Crumbaugh and Maholick (1969)), Spanish version by Noblejas de la Flor (2000): This instrument evaluates meaning in life and existential frustration, consisting of 20 items on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 7. The test shows high reliability indices ($\alpha = 0.87$). In the present sample, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.84, indicating high reliability.

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) (Zimet et al., 1990). This scale consists of 12 items that measure perceived social support across three dimensions: family, friends, and significant others. Each item is scored on a 6-point Likert scale, where 1 represents "Strongly disagree" and 6 "Strongly agree." In the Spanish population, the scale has been shown to have high reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.85 to 0.94 across different samples. Its factorial structure has been confirmed in previous studies showing its validity in diverse populations (Landeta and Calvete, 2002). In the present sample, the Cronbach's alpha was 0.93, indicating a high level of reliability.

AF5: Self-Concept Form 5 (García & Musitu, 1999). The AF-5 is a psychometric tool designed to evaluate self-concept among adolescents and adults based on a multidimensional and hierarchical model. It consists of 30 items distributed into five self-concept dimensions: academic/work, social, emotional, family, and physical. Each item is scored using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." In its Spanish version, the AF-5 has shown good psychometric properties in terms of reliability and validity, with a

Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.71 (Esnaola et al., 2011). In the present sample the Cronbach's alpha was 0.89, indicating a high level of reliability.

Transition to Adulthood Autonomy Scale for Young People (Bernal Romero et al., 2020): This instrument is designed to assess the level of perceived autonomy in young people during their transition to adult life. Its aim is to measure skills and competences related to personal and social independence. The scale consists of 19 items that measure four key dimensions: autonomy in the household, economic autonomy, autonomy in social relationships, and autonomy in decision-making. It is aimed at young people between 16 and 25 years of age in the transition from adolescence to adulthood. It can be applied in both educational and clinical settings and is useful in psychological and sociological studies focusing on the development of youth autonomy. In this sample, Cronbach's alpha was 0.95, indicating a very high level of reliability.

2.3. Procedure

For years, the NGO CESAL has been conducting programs addressing the challenge of social exclusion and promoting the employment and community integration of vulnerable young people. These initiatives are based on humanistic principles and positive psychology, adopting an approach focussed on developing skills and capacities, resilience and personal growth.

According to Giussani (Tempesta, 2023), the design of socio-labour guidance programs for vulnerable migrant youth must go beyond the mere development of professional qualifications, incorporating comprehensive intervention strategies based on three essential dimensions:

1. The strengthening of meaning in life through vocational guidance and the development of meaningful personal projects.
2. The improvement of self-concept through training and empowerment that foster self-efficacy.

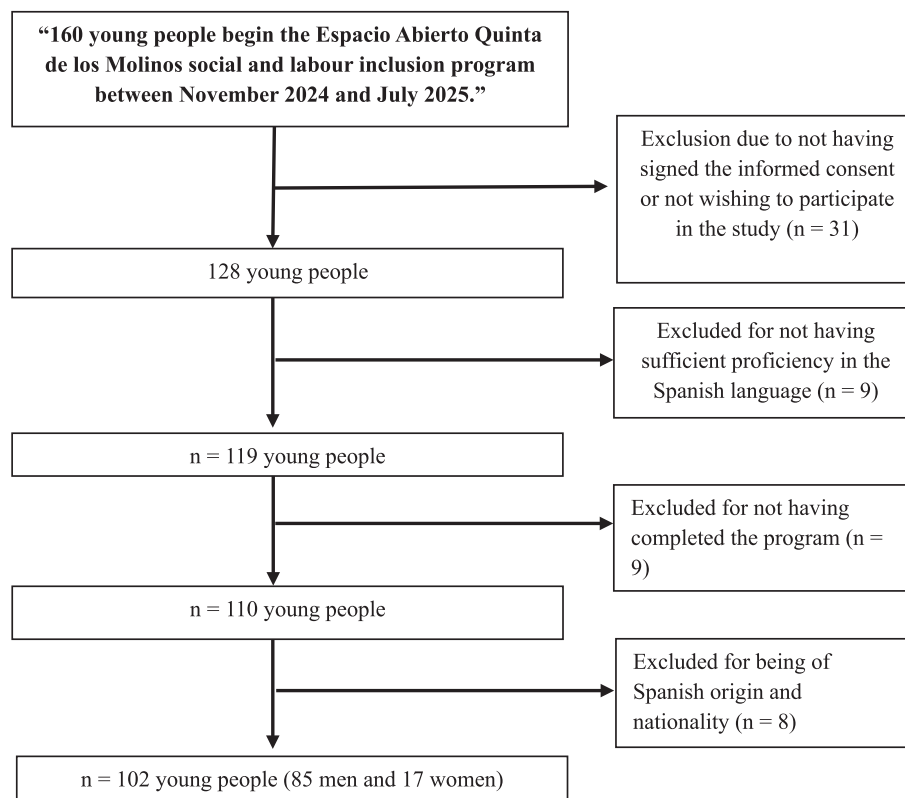


Fig. 1. Flow diagram of the sample selection process.

3. The consolidation of support networks, both formal and informal, for young people in their process of social and employment integration.

The *La Quinta Cocina* program operates within this framework, an initiative of the Madrid City Council managed by the NGO CESAL. It is a non-regulated training program that uses gastronomy as a pedagogical tool and a means of social transformation. Its methodology combines technical training in cooking with the development of personal and social competences, integrating both the professional and the human dimensions. The training has a duration of six months, consisting of three months of theoretical and practical training in hospitality and three months of professional internships in restaurants and companies in the sector.

CESAL's humanistic principles guide the intervention toward recognizing the dignity and potential of each participant, promoting a training model that simultaneously pursues employability and the construction of a sustainable life project through comprehensive accompaniment (López González et al., 2025). *La Quinta Cocina* structures its work around three complementary areas:

1. Technical training in cooking and table service: Participants receive theoretical and practical training in culinary techniques, food safety, nutrition and kitchen management, in an environment that replicates the real conditions of the hospitality sector. This experiential learning facilitates the acquisition of professional skills and positive work habits.
2. Development of transversal competences: The program promotes acquisition of essential skills such as communication, teamwork, responsibility, and emotional management. Through workshops and group activities, it fosters personal growth and the ability to adapt to diverse work contexts.
3. Comprehensive accompaniment: Each participant receives individual guidance that combines training tutorials with psychosocial accompaniment. This support helps overcome personal and contextual barriers and reinforces the continuity of the socio-labour integration process (López González et al., 2025).

The methodology of *La Quinta Cocina* is aimed at empowering young people as active agents of their own development, building self-esteem and autonomy while promoting social integration through interaction with the community. In this way, the program not only facilitates employment opportunities but also contributes to redefining narratives of exclusion, favouring a stable, sustainable and socially participatory life.

The present study used a non-probability convenience sampling method and a quantitative methodology with a longitudinal design. Participants were assessed at two time points: the first on the first day of enrolment in the *La Quinta Cocina* program, and the second at the conclusion of the training program. Assessments were conducted in groups and in person, using an online questionnaire that participants completed on their mobile phone.

The assessments were conducted by an experienced psychologist, a member of CESAL, who explained the objectives of the study and provided the informed consent forms to the young people who agreed to participate. The technical staff addressed any questions that arose during the completion of the questionnaires and offered support in understanding the items to participants with difficulty in the Spanish language.

2.4. Ethics

The present study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria (Reference Number 47_2024). Furthermore, the guidelines of the Ethical Principles of Psychologists by the American Psychological Association (APA) were respected throughout the research project.

2.5. Data analysis

The data were analysed using the SPSS 21.0 statistical software package. First, the sociodemographic and psychosocial variables of the population was identified using descriptive analyses of the information collected through the sociodemographic questionnaire.

To address the second and third objectives, changes in autonomy in the transition to adult life (ATVA), meaning in life, perceived social support, and self-concept were examined by comparing the scores obtained at the start and at the end of the intervention. A two-way ANOVA with repeated measures on one factor was conducted for each variable. The between-group factor corresponded to group membership (UMM vs. non-UMM), while the within-group factor corresponded to the evaluation time point (pre-intervention vs. post-intervention). Effect sizes (partial eta squared) of the differences observed within each group were also calculated. As there were statistically significant differences in age between the groups and a higher prevalence of females in the non-UMM group, a moderation analysis was conducted using PROCESS macro version 4.2 (Hayes, 2017) to assess the moderating role of these variables on the evolution of autonomy in the transition to adult life (EATVA). The EATVA variable was calculated as the difference between post-intervention and pre-intervention ATVA scores, in order to reflect the change experienced during the intervention.

Finally, to explore the underlying mechanisms in EATVA, a multiple mediation analysis was conducted, considering meaning in life, social support, and self-concept prior to the intervention as sequential mediating variables. This analysis was also carried out using PROCESS macro version 4.2 (Hayes, 2017), allowing for the estimation of the indirect effects of these variables on EATVA during the intervention.

3. Results

The study sample consisted of 102 young people, of whom 83.3% were men ($n = 85$) and 16.7% were women ($n = 17$). The mean age of participants was 20.68 years ($SD = 2.61$).

Regarding the origins of the participants, most were Maghrebi, with 53.5% ($n = 54$) being Moroccan nationals and 5.9% ($n = 6$) Algerian nationals. A total of 20.8% ($n = 22$) came from Sub-Saharan African countries (Senegal, Mali, Mauritania, and Angola), while 20.9% ($n = 21$) came from Latin American countries (Colombia, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Honduras, and Argentina). Finally, 1% ($n = 1$) came from South Asia (Bangladesh).

As for the legal status of participants, 1% ($n = 1$) held a permanent residence card, 40.2% ($n = 41$) had a temporary residence card, and 23.5% ($n = 24$) had an NIE. Some 35.3% ($n = 36$) had not yet regularised their status in Spain and were identified only by a passport or had no identification documents.

Regarding educational level, 2 individuals (2.0%) reported having no formal education or being unsure of their educational level; 7 (7.1%) reported incomplete primary education; 17 (17.2%) had completed primary studies or their equivalent; 19 (19.2%) had finished the first cycle of secondary education; 21 (21.2%) had completed the second cycle of secondary education; 8 (8.1%) had first-level vocational training (second cycle); 5 (5.1%) had higher-level vocational training; and 20 (20.2%) reported having foreign qualifications that had not been officially recognised.

Regarding the status of unaccompanied migrant minors (UMM), 47.1% of participants ($n = 48$) had been classified as UMM, while 52.9% ($n = 54$) had not. No statistically significant differences were found in the pre-intervention scores for ATVA, meaning in life, social support, or self-concept among young people who had been UMM and those who were not. However, statistically significant differences did appear in age ($F_{(1,100)} = 0.88$; $p < 0.001$) between participants who had been UMM ($M = 19.69$; $SD = 2.37$) and those who had not ($M = 21.57$; $SD = 2.51$). Similarly, there was a statistically significant association between gender and having been UMM ($\chi^2_{(1,102)} = 13.88$, $p < 0.001$), with 2.1%

women in the UMM group and 29.6% in the non-UMM group. To examine whether these two variables could significantly influence the impact of the program across the two groups, a moderation model was estimated to assess the effect of gender and age on the relationship between having been UMM and EATVA. The model results were not significant, indicating that none of these variables influenced improvement in EATVA (Fig. 2).

Regarding the second and third objectives, the results of the two-factor ANOVA with repeated measures on one factor indicate that the time factor was significant for the variables ATVA ($F_{(1,100)} = 97.55$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.49$), meaning in life ($F_{(1,100)} = 114.58$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.53$), social support ($F_{(1,90)} = 170.70$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.63$), and self-concept ($F_{(1,100)} = 55.19$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.36$), with participants showing increased competence in all these variables after the intervention. In contrast, the effect of the group factor and the interaction between time and group were not significant for any of the evaluated variables, indicating that both groups evolved in a similar way across all variables.

For the fourth objective, a multiple mediation analysis was conducted with three sequential mediators (meaning in life, perceived social support, and self-concept) all measured before the start of the intervention. This analysis aimed to evaluate the indirect effects on the EATVA variable. The mediation model was significant ($F_{(3,97)} = 20.24$; $p < 0.001$), with an R^2 value of 0.385, indicating that 38.5% of the change in EATVA can be explained by the mediation model (see Fig. 3).

The mediation model includes three pathways linking meaning in life to EATVA through the mediation of different variables. The first pathway that was significant involves meaning in life and perceived social support ($b = 0.17$; 95% CI $[-0.309, -0.065]$). The second significant pathway involves meaning in life and self-concept ($b = 0.105$; 95% CI $[-0.215, -0.028]$). The third significant pathway involves meaning in life, perceived social support, and self-concept ($b = 0.070$; 95% CI $[-0.137, -0.018]$). The direct effect of meaning in life on EATVA was not significant in this mediation model.

4. Discussion

Regarding the first objective, to characterise the sociodemographic and psychosocial variables of the population, the data show that nearly half of the participants (47.1%) began their immigration experience as minors, unaccompanied by their parents, and adopting an independent lifestyle from an early age. There is also an overrepresentation of males (83.3%), which aligns with previous studies on the migration flows of unaccompanied youth, particularly from the Maghreb, where males tend to migrate more frequently and at younger ages (Bravo & Santos-González, 2017).

As for the documentation status of the participants, 35.3% were in an

irregular situation, which limits their access to basic rights such as employment, housing, and education (Santana Vega et al., 2018). There is also a notable heterogeneity in terms of education, with 26.3% having not completed compulsory education and 20.2% holding foreign qualifications that are not officially recognised in Spain. This educational vulnerability restricts employment opportunities and further increases the risk of social exclusion.

Taken as a whole, these structural barriers, irregular documentation status, low educational level, and lack of support networks, are a direct threat to the socio-labour integration of migrant young people (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018).

Regarding the second objective, evaluating the impact of the *La Quinta Cocina* program, a statistically significant increase was observed in ATVA, meaning in life, social support, and self-concept, with large effect sizes across all variables. These results, in addition to the fact that 92.43% of participants who began the program completed it, suggest that *La Quinta Cocina* constitutes an effective and transformative training experience.

The importance of these results is further highlighted by the fact that increases in ATVA and self-concept are considered key factors for psychological development and a successful transition to adult life (Tajik-Parvinchi et al., 2024; Distefano et al., 2021). Previous research has emphasised that social support and ATVA promote self-efficacy, personal growth, and the consolidation of a prosocial identity (Tajik-Parvinchi et al., 2024; Faust & Kuperminc, 2020), suggesting that this program can serve as an effective tool to support the transition to adulthood of migrant young people who are socially vulnerable. Additionally, it has been shown that strengthening ATVA and self-concept provides young people with the personal resources and competences necessary to face the challenges of this life stage, which is particularly complex for this population (Sánchez-Padilla et al., 2025).

The improvements observed in ATVA and self-concept can facilitate access to educational and employment opportunities, promoting independence and economic stability (Ziaian et al., 2019). In parallel, improvements in social support and meaning in life can contribute to greater emotional and psychological well-being, strengthening the internal resources necessary to cope with the stresses inherent to the experience of immigration and the transition to adulthood, as noted by Hashemi et al. (2021) and Hidalgo et al. (2016). Similarly increased social support can act as a buffer against migratory stress and promote integration into new community environments (Maj et al., 2024; Hombrados-Mendieta et al., 2019), while greater feelings of meaning in life boost resilience and adaptability (Hashemi et al., 2021), two key variables which warrant further exploration in future research.

From a social perspective, these findings have significant value in terms of their insight into processes of inclusion and social cohesion. As noted by Bryant and Suleman (2025), strengthening social support and

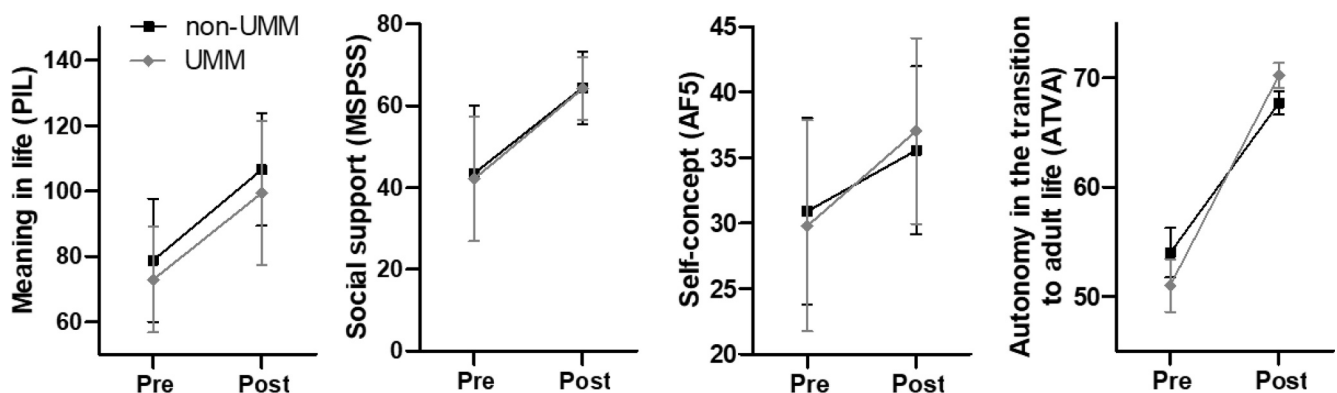
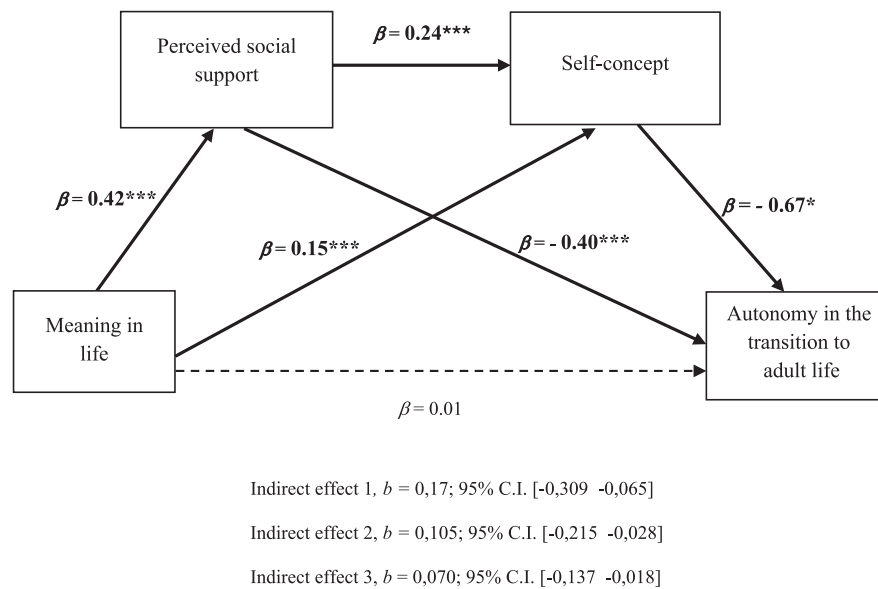


Fig. 2. Pre and post-intervention scores in the variables Meaning in life, social support, self-concept and autonomy in the transition to adult life. Note: Indirect effect 1: Meaning in life → Perceived social support → Autonomy. Indirect effect 2: Meaning in life → self-concept → Autonomy. Indirect effect 3: Meaning in life → Social support → Self-concept → Autonomy. * ($p < 0.05$); ** ($p < 0.01$); *** ($p < 0.001$).



Note: Indirect effect 1: Meaning in life → Perceived social support → Autonomy. Indirect effect 2: Meaning in life → self-concept → Autonomy. Indirect effect 3: Meaning in life → Social support → Self-concept → Autonomy.
 * ($p < .05$); ** ($p < .01$); *** ($p < .001$).

Fig. 3. Results of the mediation model with three mediators operating in series.

self-concept fosters a greater sense of belonging, mitigating the isolation frequently experienced by migrant youth. Furthermore, strong social networks and community ties constitute a fundamental pillar for integration and participation in the host society (Hombrados-Mendieta et al., 2019), reinforcing the notion that the program is effective in enhancing socialisation processes.

Regarding the third objective, the effect of the group factor, having been UMM or not, and the interaction between time and group were not statistically significant for ATVA, meaning in life, social support, and self-concept. This indicates that both groups evolved similarly across all analysed dimensions. These results were unexpected. Considering the numerous social, familial, and personal challenges faced by the UMM population (Alonso et al., 2017; Goig and Martínez, 2019), it had been hypothesised that they would exhibit lower levels of ATVA, social support, self-concept, and meaning in life compared to young people who had not been UMM prior to the intervention. However, this absence of differences may be explained by the characteristics of the sample, composed of at risk young people who, for the most part, were referred to the *La Quinta Cocina* program by Social Services. In this context, the variable “having been UMM” may not exert a differential influence as pronounced as in other populations with more stable life trajectories or lower levels of vulnerability.

It was also expected that in the post-intervention measurements, the non-UMM group would score higher on these variables, given that, generally having more consolidated support networks, they were presumed to benefit more from the intervention process. However, the results show that both the young people who were UMM and those who were not achieved comparable progress in ATVA, meaning in life, social support, and self-concept.

Regarding the fourth objective, analysing whether the relationship between meaning in life and autonomy in the transition to adult life (EATVA) is mediated by perceived social support and self-concept, the mediation analysis provided valuable insights into the interactions among these variables. Although the direct effect of meaning in life on EATVA was not statistically significant, the indirect pathways in which perceived social support and self-concept acted as mediating variables were significant.

The proposed model suggests that participants who, at the beginning of the program, had lower levels of meaning in life also tended to show

lower scores in perceived social support and self-concept. The combination of low scores in these three variables appears to be associated with an increase in EATVA, indicating that the program is particularly beneficial for those young people with greater deficits in personal and social resources.

These results highlight the interdependence between personal resources, such as meaning in life and self-concept, and social resources, such as perceived support, confirming the relevance of a comprehensive approach in interventions aimed at young people at risk. In line with positive development theories (Benson et al., 2006), the evidence reinforces the idea that simultaneous strengthening of internal and contextual factors constitutes an effective way to promote more autonomous, resilient life trajectories oriented toward personal growth.

The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of autonomy in young migrants leaving the protection system, showing that its development during the transition to adulthood does not depend solely on the acquisition of instrumental skills. On the contrary, this process seems to be mediated by the dynamic interaction between prior psychosocial resources such as meaning in life, perceived social support, and self-concept, in line with the studies by Bernal Romero et al. (2020) and García-Alba et al. (2022). In this sense, the mediation model suggests that meaning in life does not have a direct effect on the evolution of autonomy, but rather that its influence is channelled indirectly through the strengthening of social support and a more positive perception of one’s own abilities, pointing to a process of gradual psychosocial change in which motivational and identity factors favour the development of personal agency and autonomous decision-making, in line with the results of Melkman & Benbenishty (2018) and De-Juanas et al. (2022). Likewise, the fact that participants with lower initial levels in these variables showed greater increases in autonomy after the intervention suggests that the effects of the programme could be better explained by a compensatory model than by a resource accumulation model, insofar as the intervention appears to contribute to mitigating initial psychosocial disadvantages associated with trajectories of greater vulnerability during the emancipation process. However, given the absence of a control group, this interpretation should be considered preliminary and should be tested in future research using experimental or quasi-experimental designs.

The findings of this research should be interpreted taking into

account the limitations inherent in the study design. First, external validity could be compromised by the small sample size, the use of non-random convenience sampling, and the collection of data in a single centre, which limits the generalisation of the results to other contexts and settings. Furthermore, the overrepresentation of males (83.3%) restricts extrapolation to young female migrants, and the fact that participants were already linked to a support programme may introduce selection bias. On the other hand, the absence of a control group and the impossibility of longer-term follow-up reduce internal validity and condition causal interpretation, since the changes observed could also be explained by maturation processes, contextual influences, or regression to the mean.

In future research, it would be advisable to implement more robust methodological designs that strengthen the internal validity of the findings. In particular, the use of controlled or quasi-experimental designs would allow for a more accurate establishment of the relationship between participation in intervention programmes and the changes observed in psychosocial variables. Likewise, the incorporation of longitudinal evaluations would facilitate the analysis of the stability of the programme's effects in the medium and long term, while the inclusion of objective indicators of labour market integration would contribute to a more comprehensive evaluation of the impact of interventions in terms of socioeconomic inclusion.

These findings should be interpreted considering the inherent limitations of the study. First, external validity may be compromised due to the small sample size, the use of a non-randomised sampling method, and data collection at a single site. Furthermore, the overrepresentation of males limits the generalisability of the results to the female population. Another relevant limitation was the inability to include a longer follow-up period and a control group, which would have allowed for the application of a quasi-experimental methodology.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that the La Quinta Cocina program constitutes a promising psychosocial intervention tool for vulnerable migrant youth. Based on the principles proposed by Giussani (Tempesta, 2023), its approach goes beyond professional training by integrating strategies aimed at strengthening meaning in life, improving self-concept, and consolidating both formal and informal support networks. Thus, the program addresses the diversity of participant profiles and promotes equitable opportunities for personal development and social inclusion.

These results also show that socio-labour guidance programs such as *La Quinta Cocina* not only enhance personal and professional growth but also foster inclusion and prevent social exclusion. Taken together, these findings underscore the social relevance of such initiatives and reinforce the need to consolidate comprehensive interventions that promote more autonomous, resilient life trajectories oriented toward the well-being of vulnerable migrant youth.

Informed consent statement

Informed consent was obtained in writing from all participants enrolled in the CESAL vocational training program prior to their participation in the study between November 2024 and July 2025, through the signature of the document included as Annex II of the agreement signed between Universidad Francisco de Vitoria (UFV) and CESAL. The consent process was administered by CESAL staff, acting as the independent data controller, and signed directly by the participants.

The scope of consent covered: participation in the research questionnaires, the use of the data exclusively for scientific purposes in line with the study objectives, and the commitment to confidentiality in data handling.

All participants were fully informed that their anonymity was assured. CESAL was responsible for pseudonymizing the questionnaires, ensuring that UFV never had access to participants' identities. The collected data were coded and stored in separate encrypted files; the file linking participant identities to codes remained under the exclusive

custody of CESAL and was not shared with UFV. Once responses were coded, the physical questionnaires were destroyed.

Additionally, all personnel involved in the project, both from UFV and CESAL, signed a confidentiality agreement (Annex III of the UFV-CESAL agreement).

Ethical approval statement

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Universidad Francisco de Vitoria (reference number 47_2024). The approval covered the study protocol, participant recruitment, and informed consent procedures. Furthermore, all procedures were conducted in accordance with the Ethical Principles of Psychologists as described by the American Psychological Association (APA).

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

First author, A. F.-M.: Corresponding Author, Conceptualisation, Data Curation, Research, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft. **Second author, H.C.G.:** Supervision, Research, Conceptualisation. **Third author, R.D.M.-F.:** Formal Analysis, Methodology, Supervision. **Fourth author, D.R.:** Formal Analysis, Research, Methodology, Supervision, Conceptualisation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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