



## The Role of Heritage in Children's and Adolescents' Perceptions of Identity in the Catalan Pyrenees.

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### KEYWORDS

Identity  
Self-perception  
Narratives  
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### ABSTRACT

This article explores how children and adolescents in an area of the Catalan Pyrenees construct their personal and collective identities in relation to the cultural and natural heritage of their surroundings. Drawing on a constructivist approach and autobiographical narratives, it analyses the role of personal perceptions in shaping a sense of belonging and identity as a dynamic and context-dependent process. The research is based on a qualitative study involving 86 primary and secondary school students, who wrote autobiographies reflecting their perceptions of identity. Through thematic analysis, the most significant elements in their accounts were identified, including personal relationships, preferences, hobbies, everyday activities, and connections with the territory and its heritage. The findings suggest that local points of reference and popular celebrations predominate during childhood, whereas more complex reflections on personality, gender and mental health emerge during adolescence. With regard to heritage, natural heritage retains a certain presence at both stages, unlike historical or industrial heritage, which is scarcely mentioned. It is concluded that heritage acts as a symbolic generator of identity, although its influence appears to diminish with age. This disconnection, particularly in rural contexts, poses challenges for cultural transmission and attachment to place. The study highlights the need to strengthen heritage education as a key tool for fostering reflective and healthy identities, thereby enhancing social cohesion and well-being.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

Identidad  
Autopercepción  
Narrativas  
Patrimonio  
Educación  
Pirineos

### RESUMEN

Este artículo explora cómo niños y adolescentes de un territorio del Pirineo catalán construyen su identidad personal y colectiva en relación con el patrimonio cultural y natural de su entorno. Partiendo de un enfoque constructivista y a través de narrativas autobiográficas, se analiza el papel de las percepciones personales en la formación del sentido de pertenencia y la identidad como un proceso dinámico y contextual. La investigación se basa en un estudio cualitativo con 86 estudiantes de primaria y secundaria, quienes redactaron autobiografías en las que reflejan sus percepciones identitarias. A través de un análisis temático, se identificaron los elementos más significativos en sus discursos como relaciones personales, gustos, aficiones, actividades cotidianas, vínculos con el territorio y el patrimonio, entre otros. Los resultados sugieren que en la infancia prevalecen referentes locales y celebraciones populares, mientras que en la adolescencia emergen reflexiones más complejas sobre la personalidad, el género o la salud mental. En cuanto al patrimonio, el natural mantiene cierta presencia en ambas etapas, a diferencia del histórico o industrial, apenas mencionado. Se concluye que el patrimonio actúa como generador simbólico de identidad, aunque su impacto parece disminuir con la edad. Esta desconexión, especialmente en contextos rurales, plantea desafíos para la transmisión cultural y el arraigo territorial. El estudio subraya la necesidad de fortalecer la educación patrimonial como herramienta clave para fomentar identidades reflexivas y saludables, mejorando así la cohesión y el bienestar social.

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### 1. Introduction

The conceptualisation of the term "identity" has historically posed a major epistemological challenge for the different disciplines within the social sciences. The concept has been extensively

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addressed since antiquity by various schools of thought, evolving over time and adapting to modernity, yet without arriving at a single, conclusive definition (Smith, 2016; Ergün, 2020).

On some occasions, there is a preference to avoid the term "identity" and instead use concepts such as "identification", "self-perception", "ego" or even "personality", which are considered less problematic. However, these terms are not synonymous and, as Navarrete (2015) points out, acknowledging the epistemological insolubility of the concept of "identity" may invite us to accept its complexity and subjectivity as part of its intrinsic nature.

On this basis, this article approaches the concept of "identity" as an aporetic term, that is, a concept whose definitive definition remains unattainable because of its inherent complexity. Although it may not be possible to establish an exact and universal definition, its analysis remains essential for understanding the multiple dimensions involved in social research (Navarrete, 2015). Some approximation to the term is therefore fundamental to laying the foundations for a deeper analysis. Although there is no consensus regarding its definition, many theorists agree in explaining it as an intrinsic connection between history and the individual (Quiroga et al., 2021).

Tajfel and Turner (1979) synthesise this notion through Social Identity Theory, proposing that self-concept is based both on individual characteristics and on the context of social groups, thereby assigning value and meaning to collective belonging and situating social behaviour within a close relationship between the interpersonal and the intergroup. Identity construction is therefore a complex process located at the core of both the individual and their cultural context. At the same time, this entails a simultaneous exercise of sameness and otherness, a constant developmental process between differentiation and inclusion (Erikson, 1968; Smith, 2016; Ergün, 2022). Thus, the individual's continuous transformation throughout life forms part of the perspective of developmental constructivism and assigns particular importance to the construction of meaning between the individual and their sociocultural context, making it possible to recognise oneself as a unique being while also enabling interconnectedness with others (Sepulveda, 2020; Quiroga et al., 2021).

When addressing identity, particularly in the educational context, we must be aware that it is constructed dynamically and progressively, with different degrees of development that depend both on lived experience and on how it is perceived. Temporal dimensions mark different trajectories among individuals, since previous life experiences, present existential conditions and expectations regarding the future play a key role in understanding the transformations and changes that identity undergoes (Colás, 2007).

Expanding on Erikson's theory of the eight stages of psychosocial development, Marcia (1993) proposes a model that explores the process of identity formation in greater depth. In it, he identifies four statuses—diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium and achievement—which do not follow a strict chronological sequence, but instead represent different positions within the process of identity exploration and commitment. Taken together, they describe the transition from a poorly defined identity to a more consolidated one, a process that generally takes place particularly during adolescence and the early years of adulthood.

Identity not only influences how a person defines themselves. The characteristics of its construction process are fundamental to understanding individuals' psychosocial development. Moreover, identity plays a crucial role in different aspects of life, such as psychological well-being, self-esteem, behaviour, substance abuse, the onset of mental disorders and the capacity for social adaptation (Bishop et al., 2005; Luyckx et al., 2005; Schwartz et al., 2009, 2011<sup>a</sup>, 2012b). Understanding how identity functions and develops can therefore provide valuable tools for improving the population's quality of life.

Numerous factors can be identified as influencing identity formation to a greater or lesser extent during the different stages of an individual's development. Among them, heritage—understood holistically—stands out as one of the most relevant elements in this process, even before it is

recognised for its aesthetic or historical values (Le Goff, 1998; Kermani et al., 2016). Heritage acts both as a generator and as a symbol of place and community identity, fostering feelings of territorial belonging at different scales (local, national, etc.). This facilitates the construction of identity-based ties and networks that strengthen cohesion, stewardship, conservation and territorial management (Tornatore, 2020).

The value that a community assigns to its collective inheritance could serve as a measure of the degree of connection it has with its legacy and heritage. The symbolic capital attributed to a particular set of tangible or intangible heritage elements is closely related to the degree of identity awareness that a population group has regarding that set. In other words, the importance of heritage does not arise from an intrinsic and ineffable quality, but from the symbolic power that this inheritance exerts over the construction of an identity narrative that enables a community to understand itself as a cohesive and identifiable whole in relation to other groups (Domínguez and Cuenca, 2005).

Thus, the way in which heritage is addressed—the heritage conservation, preservation and dissemination strategies that are developed, and the heritage elements selected for emphasis over others—will directly influence the identity construction that society develops over time. In this context, heritage education emerges as a key pedagogical tool in assigning symbolic values to heritage elements, contributing to the formation of the collective imaginary that will ultimately shape the identity discourse of a community or society as a whole (Fontal, 2016).

In summary, identity is configured as a complex and multifaceted concept whose construction is intrinsically linked both to the individual and to their sociocultural context. Throughout life, this construction is influenced by multiple factors, such as personal experiences, interactions with the environment and collective representations, including cultural heritage. In this respect, far from being a static entity, heritage plays a crucial role in shaping identity by providing the symbolic elements that contribute to the formation of identity narratives.

The study is contextualised in the Catalan Pre-Pyrenees, specifically in two settlements within the same district, located in the heart of the Catalan Pre-Pyrenees in the province of Lleida and characterised by its remarkable geographical diversity and long history of human occupation. This has left a valuable cultural legacy, including examples of Romanesque architecture and living traditions such as the summer-solstice *falles*, among others. All of this makes the region an ideal setting for studying the relationship between human communities and their perception of the surrounding environment.

This article explores how children and young people from this area of the Pre-Pyrenees recognise and construct their identity, as well as how they establish a connection with the cultural and natural heritage around them. Through this analysis, it seeks to examine in greater depth how personal and collective histories intertwine, offering a unique perspective on identity processes in rural and mountainous contexts. Within this framework, the following research objectives are proposed:

The general objective is to explore the perceptions of children and adolescents from a region of the Catalan Pre-Pyrenees regarding their sociocultural identity, specifically analysing how elements of the surrounding heritage are integrated into their identity construction. Specific objectives:

- a. To explore the central elements shaping the identity perceptions of children and adolescents in the region concerned, based on their personal narratives.
- b. To examine the role of cultural and natural heritage in the development of participants' identity narratives.

## 2. Methodology

In light of the issues outlined in the theoretical framework, the study of sociocultural identity entails inherent complexities in its very formulation, particularly given the different disciplines that address the subject.

Given the considerable difficulty involved in defining the concept, the subjective component is of great value in achieving a broader understanding of the participants' identity status. Accordingly, this study adopted a qualitative approach and, more specifically, the technique of written autobiographical narrative, which prioritises the individual perception of personal identity over other aspects (Pujadas, 2000).

This approach not only enables the identification of characteristic and recurring elements within the narratives, but also allows individual and collective differences in identity construction to be explored. The analysis seeks to understand the students' self-image and how their experiences and contexts influence their perception of the self and the construction of meanings in life (Connelly and Clandinin, 1995).

Thus, when analysing a phenomenon as volatile and deeply intimate as identity construction, autobiographical narratives make it possible to reveal the different expressions of the interpersonal sphere, as well as the construction, through language, of meanings linked to the sociocultural context (Capella, 2013).

This methodological approach yields findings that not only characterise each individual's narrative identity, but also make it possible to categorise profiles, thereby providing an intermediate structure between the individual's subjective perception and the researchers' criteria. In each autobiographical narrative, the author, whether a child or young person, shares personal experiences that reveal the internalisation of values inherited from the social context in which they develop (Caro, 2013).

In other words, the aim is to analyse how participants perceive the world, the events occurring in their surroundings and the meaning they attribute to each of them. It is therefore essential to examine their personal experiences (Riley and Hawe, 2005). This methodology makes it possible to explore individuals' life experiences in depth within their social and personal contexts, while seeking to understand the processes of self-observation, self-reflection and self-discovery that occur during the creation of narrative discourse. This is particularly relevant in the educational sphere, as it may contribute to strengthening memory and fostering self-awareness (Zemelman, 2002; Delgado-García, 2019; Landín and Sánchez, 2019).

## 2.1 Participants:

The participants came from diverse backgrounds, as they belonged to a heterogeneous socioeconomic environment. This diversity is crucial for understanding the experiences recounted in their autobiographies, since identity is constructed and expressed differently depending on the social context. The aim was therefore to capture the voices of students who, despite their differences, shared an educational setting and common experiences that may contribute to an understanding of identity at these ages.

The study involved 86 students from two state schools in the district: 39 girls and 44 boys, together with three participants who preferred not to indicate their gender (45.3%, 51.1% and 3.5%, respectively). Of these, 24 were in the fifth year of primary education, aged between 10 and 11 (28%), and 62 were in the fourth year of compulsory secondary education, aged between 15 and 16 (72%). These year groups were selected because they are the final years of their respective stages of compulsory education, thereby facilitating comparison in terms of educational development.

To ensure anonymity, each participant was assigned an identification number according to the order in which the written texts were transcribed (ID + "Number").

## 2.2 Strategies and Instruments:

Participants were given a sheet of paper containing a prompt inviting them to write an autobiography in which they presented their view of themselves, highlighting the aspects they considered most relevant to their identity self-definition. The prompt asked students to imagine that they were writing a letter to an imaginary friend who lived on the other side of the world. The texts were subject to no restrictions regarding length or formal aspects, thereby allowing complete freedom of expression.

The prompt used was as follows:

*Write a story about yourself and your life. You may include explanations such as who you are, the things that make you who you are, the things or places in your surroundings that are important to you, and the things with which you identify most strongly (traditions, activities, interests, etc.), among others. (Think about everything you might explain to an imaginary friend who lives on the other side of the world):*

This prompt was designed on the basis of the studies conducted by Sepulveda (2007), Capella (2011) and Quiroga et al. (2021), which also served as inspiration for the methodology employed in this study.

## 2.3 Procedure:

Data collection took place during school hours and was divided into two separate sessions at each educational institution. Before the study began, consent was obtained from the participants' parents and legal guardians, and the research was conducted in collaboration with the schools' management and teaching staff. Participation was entirely voluntary, and it was guaranteed that there would be no repercussions for those who chose not to take part.

When the task was presented to the students, freedom of expression was emphasised, and they were assured that the written texts would not be formally assessed. Participants' anonymity was also guaranteed, thereby fostering an atmosphere of trust and openness. They were additionally given the option of omitting any information they did not feel comfortable providing.

Regarding the language used, participants were asked to write in Catalan, as this was the language of instruction at the educational institutions involved. However, they were also given the option of writing in Spanish or English, particularly in the case of immigrant or refugee students who had not yet acquired proficiency in Catalan.

## 2.4 Data Analysis:

The narratives were analysed exhaustively through a process of thematic coding using Atlas.ti. Recurring categories and elements were identified inductively in the written texts, with the aim of developing a categorisation within the domains previously established deductively (Table 1).

This process was conducted iteratively and triangulated by two researchers working independently in parallel, through the continuous reading of the texts and review of the emerging categories. The few discrepancies that arose were resolved through consultation with the rest of the research team.

In view of the aim of this study, particular attention was paid to references in the written texts that suggested a connection with heritage elements, both cultural and natural. Similarly, quotations of particular interest were selected which, owing to their illustrative value, were especially relevant to the analysis.

**Table 1.** List of dimensions and categories analysed and their description.

| Dimension                       | Category                  | Description (Reference to...)                                                   |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Personal characteristics</b> | Name                      | First name and/or surname                                                       |
|                                 | Age                       | Age or date of birth                                                            |
|                                 | Gender                    | Gender identity                                                                 |
|                                 | Personality               | Aspects of their personality or behaviour                                       |
|                                 | Year group                | School year                                                                     |
|                                 | Physical appearance       | Physical characteristics                                                        |
|                                 | Place of birth            | Place of birth or origin                                                        |
|                                 | Place of residence        | Current place of residence                                                      |
| <b>Community</b>                | Family                    | One or more family members or the concept of family                             |
|                                 | Friendship                | Friends or the concept of friendship                                            |
|                                 | Home                      | Usual place of residence or details thereof                                     |
|                                 | Locality                  | A specific locality, regardless of place of birth or residence                  |
|                                 | Educational community     | Educational setting (primary school, secondary school, etc.)                    |
| <b>Heritage</b>                 | Natural                   | Natural heritage (forests, mountains, etc.)                                     |
|                                 | Historical and artistic   | Historical and artistic heritage elements (churches, museums, sculptures, etc.) |
|                                 | Popular celebration       | Popular festivals or celebrations (intangible heritage)                         |
|                                 | Industrial                | Abandoned factories or mines, among other elements                              |
|                                 | Gastronomy                | Traditional dishes or drinks, etc.                                              |
|                                 | Language                  | Languages, whether spoken or not                                                |
|                                 | Other heritage            | Culture or traditions (in general terms)                                        |
| <b>Activities</b>               | Sport                     | Sport in general or a specific sporting activity                                |
|                                 | Partying                  | "Going out partying" (non-heritage related celebrations)                        |
|                                 | Academic and professional | Professional and academic situation or expectations                             |
|                                 | Music                     | Music, instruments, songs, etc.                                                 |
|                                 | Video games               | Video games, consoles, etc.                                                     |
|                                 | Audiovisual               | Television series, films, etc.                                                  |
|                                 | Reading                   | Reading activities, books, comics, etc.                                         |
|                                 | Leisure/play              | Other recreational activities or leisure activities in general                  |
|                                 | Dance                     | Dance in general or related activities                                          |

|              |                  |                                                                                  |
|--------------|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Other</b> | Visual arts      | Creative activities (painting, sculpture, among others)                          |
|              | Travel           | Tourism and visits to other regions for leisure purposes                         |
|              | Other activities | Other activities not specified in other categories                               |
|              | Motoring         | Vehicles, mechanics, amongst others.                                             |
|              | Food             | Diet and food (excluding traditional dishes included in the gastronomy category) |
|              | Consumption      | “Going shopping” and consumption-related activities                              |
|              | Health           | Physical or mental health status                                                 |
|              | Pets/animals     | Domestic or wild animals                                                         |
|              | Religion         | Religious activities, beliefs or orientation                                     |
|              |                  |                                                                                  |

Source: Authors' own elaboration, 2025.

Finally, the data obtained were organised in an Excel matrix by individual and topic, which facilitated the analysis of the results, as they could be examined in terms of frequencies or absolute numbers.

### 3. Results

The results obtained in this study make it possible to identify the main elements that participants considered most relevant in structuring their conception of identity. These are presented below (Table 2) according to age group and the different dimensions outlined above, together with examples of some of the most noteworthy quotations in each section.

**Table 2:** References to recurring elements in the written texts, by gender and educational level (n=86) (%).

|                           | % F   | % M   | % Primary Education | % Secondary Education | % T   |
|---------------------------|-------|-------|---------------------|-----------------------|-------|
| <b>Total</b>              | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0               | 100.0                 | 100.0 |
| <b>Name</b>               | 71.8  | 79.5  | 100.0               | 66.1                  | 75.6  |
| <b>Sport</b>              | 53.8  | 72.7  | 62.5                | 62.9                  | 64.0  |
| <b>Family</b>             | 66.7  | 54.5  | 70.8                | 58.1                  | 61.6  |
| <b>Friendship</b>         | 61.5  | 61.4  | 58.3                | 61.3                  | 60.5  |
| <b>Age</b>                | 51.3  | 52.3  | 62.5                | 46.8                  | 51.2  |
| <b>Personality</b>        | 64.1  | 34.1  | 8.3                 | 62.9                  | 47.7  |
| <b>Natural heritage</b>   | 41.0  | 45.5  | 58.3                | 38.7                  | 45.3  |
| <b>Place of residence</b> | 48.7  | 34.1  | 25.0                | 45.2                  | 40.7  |
| <b>Locality</b>           | 38.5  | 43.2  | 66.7                | 29.0                  | 40.7  |
| <b>Music</b>              | 51.3  | 20.5  | 12.5                | 41.9                  | 34.9  |
| <b>Place of birth</b>     | 43.6  | 25.0  | 25.0                | 37.1                  | 33.7  |

|                                         |      |      |      |      |      |
|-----------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| <b>Popular celebration</b>              | 28.2 | 38.6 | 75.0 | 16.1 | 32.6 |
| <b>Academic/professional</b>            | 43.6 | 18.2 | 12.5 | 37.1 | 30.2 |
| <b>Food</b>                             | 17.9 | 27.3 | 41.7 | 14.5 | 22.1 |
| <b>Other activities</b>                 | 20.5 | 20.5 | 25.0 | 19.4 | 22.1 |
| <b>Travel</b>                           | 25.6 | 18.2 | 29.2 | 17.7 | 20.9 |
| <b>Gender</b>                           | 19.7 | 18.1 | 4.1  | 25.8 | 19.7 |
| <b>Partying (non-heritage-related)</b>  | 17.9 | 15.9 | 25.0 | 12.9 | 17.4 |
| <b>Video games</b>                      | 5.1  | 27.3 | 29.2 | 12.9 | 17.4 |
| <b>Educational community</b>            | 10.3 | 18.2 | 33.3 | 6.5  | 14.0 |
| <b>Pets/Animals</b>                     | 17.9 | 6.8  | 12.5 | 12.9 | 12.8 |
| <b>Reading</b>                          | 20.5 | 2.3  | 8.3  | 12.9 | 11.6 |
| <b>Audiovisual</b>                      | 12.8 | 6.8  | 8.3  | 11.3 | 10.5 |
| <b>Dance</b>                            | 20.5 | 0.0  | 0.0  | 12.9 | 9.3  |
| <b>Language</b>                         | 12.8 | 4.5  | 4.2  | 9.7  | 7.0  |
| <b>Physical appearance</b>              | 10.3 | 2.3  | 4.2  | 8.1  | 7.0  |
| <b>Year group</b>                       | 7.7  | 4.5  | 4.2  | 6.5  | 5.8  |
| <b>Other heritage</b>                   | 7.7  | 4.5  | 0.0  | 8.1  | 5.8  |
| <b>Gastronomy</b>                       | 5.1  | 6.8  | 4.2  | 6.5  | 5.8  |
| <b>Visual arts</b>                      | 7.7  | 2.3  | 8.3  | 3.2  | 4.7  |
| <b>Motoring</b>                         | 0.0  | 9.1  | 0.0  | 6.5  | 4.7  |
| <b>Historical and artistic heritage</b> | 0.0  | 6.8  | 12.5 | 0.0  | 3.5  |
| <b>Leisure/play</b>                     | 0.0  | 6.8  | 12.5 | 0.0  | 3.5  |
| <b>Home</b>                             | 7.7  | 0.0  | 0.0  | 4.8  | 3.5  |
| <b>Health</b>                           | 2.6  | 4.5  | 0.0  | 4.8  | 3.5  |
| <b>Consumption</b>                      | 5.1  | 0.0  | 0.0  | 3.2  | 2.3  |
| <b>Industrial</b>                       | 0.0  | 2.3  | 0.0  | 1.6  | 1.2  |
| <b>Religion</b>                         | 0.0  | 2.3  | 0.0  | 1.6  | 1.2  |

Source: Authors' own elaboration, 2025.

### 3.1 Self-Perception in Primary Education (10–11 Years):

First, participants aged between 10 and 11 identify themselves through personal and sociodemographic aspects such as name (100%), age (62.5%), place of birth (25%) or place of residence (25%), while other aspects such as gender (4.1%), personality (8.3%) or physical appearance (4.2%) receive little attention.

However, physical appearance is acknowledged when it entails differentiation from their peers.

*I'm a dark-skinned girl and my hair is Afro type 4C, which is a type of hair.*

(ID15, 10-year-old girl)

The written texts reveal the considerable importance attached to the family environment (70.8%), followed by references to friends (58.3%) and expressions of attachment to a specific locality (66.7%), which in most cases coincides with their place of residence.

*Our village isn't very big, but I wouldn't want to live anywhere else*

(ID19, 11-year-old boy)

In addition, one third of all participants in this age group make positive references to the educational environment.

By far the most frequently mentioned heritage category is popular festivals and celebrations regarded as local and regional intangible heritage (75%), followed by natural heritage (58.3%).

*The tradition I like most in [my village] is the falles, and I have been celebrating them since I was very young. [Proceeds to explain this celebration at length]*

(ID16, 10-year-old girl)

*I like celebrating Carnival and the village festival. I like the activities we do at school and the Ramadan celebration with my family [...]. All these celebrations are very important to me and I think they are also important to others.*

(ID3, 11-year-old boy)

However, references to the remaining heritage categories are particularly scarce, and elements of local heritage are addressed only in isolated cases.

*[...] I like going to Barcelona because it's a big city and has lots of things we don't have [here]. What I like best is the Sagrada Família.*

(ID23, 11-year-old boy)

Within the domain of activities, references to sport are particularly prominent (62.5%), many of them specifically referring to football (46.8%).

*I really like playing football with my friends, [...] I feel free and confident.*

(ID7, 10-year-old boy)

The use of video games is also mentioned recurrently, although exclusively by male participants, as is an interest in travelling or an intention to travel.

*I love travelling; my dad travels a lot and we're always going to different places*

(ID22, 11-year-old boy)

Finally, it is worth noting the importance that many participants in this age group attach to their favourite food, although a traditional dish is mentioned in only one case, together with several references to favourite animals and pets.

### 3.2 Self-Perception in Compulsory Secondary Education (15–16 Years)

As in the previous age group, participants aged 15–16 also foreground personal and sociodemographic information, although name and age are represented somewhat less frequently. However, they assign greater importance to aspects of their personality (62.9%), in many cases providing details about their character.

*I love being different from everyone else and coming across as a bit odd; it makes me feel like I've got personality.* (ID55, 15-year-old girl)

Although not especially recurrent, references to physical appearance (8.1%) are relatively significant in their narratives. Likewise, adolescents make more references to the gender with which they identify (25.8%) than primary-school participants, while another group describe themselves as a "person" (19.3%), without mentioning any gender identification.

With regard to their social environment, there is a slight tendency for references to friendship (61.3%) to exceed those to family (58.1%), followed by references to the locality (29%). On many occasions, these references are made simultaneously or in general terms:

*One of the things that makes me who I am is being with the people I love and who I know love me.*

(ID83, 15-year-old girl)

Positive references to the educational community are scarce (6.5%). However, six negative references to the same category were also found (9.7%), referring either to the academic frustration they experience in general or to attending the educational institution.

*Since I repeated a year twice in a row, my life has got worse. Everyone says I am a [expletive], but they do not know what I am going through [...].*

(ID39, 18-year-old boy)

With regard to references to heritage elements, natural heritage tops the list, although it is less prevalent than in primary school (38.7%), followed by popular celebrations (16.1%).

*I am myself when I am in nature and there are no sounds except the animals and the wind.* (ID26, 15-year-old girl)

*I really identify [...] with the admiration we have for the mountains.*

(ID55, 15-year-old girl)

There are also occasional references to languages (9.7%) and gastronomy (6.5%), a single reference to industrial heritage, and none to historical and artistic heritage. In three cases involving

immigrant students, the narratives describe difficulties in adapting to the language and a desire not to lose their language of origin.

*I love sneaking into the abandoned factory and taking in the views.*

(ID38, 15-year-old boy)

Finally, there are also five general references to the importance of local culture or traditions.

*I follow the traditions of (district], but also those of Romania.*

(ID35, 16-year-old girl)

As regards references to activities, sport, mainly football, once again stands out considerably (62.9%), followed by music (41.9%) and academic and professional concerns (37.1%).

*One of the things I like most in life is playing sport because it helps me forget the problems I've had during the day.*

(ID77, 15-year-old girl)

One noteworthy finding is that all eight participants who mentioned reading (12.9%) and dancing (12.9%) were girls.

*One of the things that makes me who I am is dancing; for me, it's a way of expressing myself without a care in the world.*

(ID50, 15-year-old girl)

The remaining activities follow a heterogeneous pattern; many participants refer to activities that are unique within their group.

*My passion is hunting; I go hunting whenever I can. It's a passion I've had since I was little, when I used to go hunting with my grandfather.*

(ID28, 16-year-old boy)

References to the consumption of substances such as alcohol, cannabis or CBD (4.8%) should also be noted, as these are invariably linked to negative aspects of participants' lives.

With regard to the final domain, there are some references to food (14.5%), animals (12.9%), motoring (4.7%) and consumption (2.3%), as well as a single reference to religion (1.2%):

*I don't believe in God; in fact, I don't practise any religion.*

(ID76, 16-year-old boy)

Beyond the findings already mentioned, it is worth highlighting how many participants who have undergone a migration process, whether national or international, refer to this experience as a central element of their identity.

*[...] one day my mother decided to come and live in Spain to help my aunt with her work. We have been here for about a year and six months now. And we have adapted very well; we think the seasons are very beautiful because in [...] there are none.*

(ID46, 15-year-old boy)

*Since I arrived here, I have adapted very well, with my friends, the culture, the language and everything that comes with arriving in a new country that is very different from the one you were born in, but the truth is that I have had a very good time here.*

(ID27, 16-year-old girl)

Likewise, and with even greater intensity, participants who have had to flee their place of origin because of war or violence refer to this experience, providing details of what they have been through or drawing attention to what they perceive as a lack of awareness in the place where they now live.

*"Two years ago, war broke out in my country. I left so much behind there. But if you ask me what bothers me most, the answer is simple: why is so little said about this war?! So I'll say this: this is the only part of me that's public; there's no need to know anything else.*

(ID70, 15-year-old girl)

At the same time, some participants mention mental health problems they experience, providing details of the process they have been through or are still going through.

*[...] at secondary school I started being bullied, [...], this caused me many mental health problems that I am still suffering from and struggling with as I try to move forward. Now I am a different person, [...] I am once again the girl who laughed and had fun.*

(ID73, 16-year-old girl)

#### 4. Discussion

The results of this study offer a particular perspective on how children and adolescents in the district studied perceive their identity, integrating different elements of their everyday lives.

First, a predictable difference can be observed between the two age groups considered in terms of narrative complexity and the construction of an identity narrative.

Primary-school students perceive themselves through concrete and readily identifiable elements, such as basic personal information, their customs or their relationship with their community, refraining from developing more complex reflections. This discursive pattern can be explained by the fact that they are still at the earliest stages of identity development, basing their identity on recognisable pillars within their family and local environment, a crucial aspect of sociocultural development during childhood (Erikson, 1968; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Kroger, 2007). The emergence of references to physical appearance as a factor differentiating them from their peers suggests the early development of notions of otherness, which may indicate more complex identity formation and is linked to self-esteem (Harter, 2012).

Adolescents, by contrast, begin to display greater complexity in their self-definition, with references to categories such as personality and gender standing out, alongside in-depth reflections on their self-perception in relation to key aspects of their life experiences. This natural development during adolescence reflects the transition towards more advanced stages of identity development, with a shift towards more introspective and autonomous conceptions and future-oriented perspectives (Marcia, 1966; Kroger, 2007). More critical references to institutions or perceptions of injustice are also to be expected, in line with other studies highlighting adolescents'

dissatisfaction with authoritarian structures, related to their pursuit of autonomy and their need to question established norms (Steinberg, 2014; Wang et al., 2020).

Sport, and football in particular, stands out as one of the most prominent elements in the narratives of both age groups, underlining its importance as an activity for socialisation and personal development (Edison et al., 2021). While the presence of this sport among children is overwhelming, greater diversification towards other interests can be observed during adolescence. The heterogeneity of the activities practised by girls, not only in relation to sport, is particularly noteworthy, a difference that may reflect cultural and gender stereotypes that remain present in Western society (Fredricks and Eccles, 2004).

Just as an age-related difference can be observed in narrative complexity, as might be expected, a notable differentiation also emerges in references to heritage between children and adolescents.

First, the importance attributed to intangible cultural heritage during childhood, particularly local festivals and celebrations, is overwhelmingly greater than during adolescence. This reflects a sense of personal exaltation that could not otherwise be achieved, a collective identification generated by festive elements to which children attribute a certain moral authority (Requena, 2017). In other words, there appear to be indications of an apparent decline in awareness of ICH as a key identity element across the stages of development. This may indicate that, during adolescence, identity expands to incorporate other global or transnational elements, while local aspects become less prominent.

This effect is consistent with the provisions of the compulsory education curriculum in Catalonia set out in Decree 175/2022 of the Department of Education of the Government of Catalonia, in which heritage shifts from a greater focus on the immediate environment in primary education, reinforcing local and community identity, towards a more global, historical and critical perspective in secondary education, with the aim of strengthening intercultural openness in line with globalisation and an interconnected world (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2022).

Nevertheless, interpretations of this phenomenon are extremely complex and could range from an abandonment of roots in favour of identity aspects associated with an idealised view of society, to an association with a broader awareness of cultural diversity, or indeed an amalgamation of both (Phinney, 2003; Ward and Szabó, 2023).

As Arnett (2002) argues, the process of identity expansion is particularly relevant in an increasingly globalised world, in which young people are exposed to constant cultural influences—or interference. This gives rise to a process of acculturation that has been exacerbated by digital media and social networks, which are increasingly ubiquitous in everyone's lives but particularly influential among younger generations, and which have thus far been addressed by the official curriculum through policies on digital competences (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2022).

As regards natural heritage, it retains its relevance in both age groups, although with a certain decline at more mature stages of development. This may be linked to the recognition of this element as an integral aspect of their everyday surroundings, as well as to its continuity from primary to secondary education within the official compulsory education curriculum in Catalonia (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2022), reinforcing the idea that the physical environment plays a crucial role in developing a sense of belonging and connection to place (Pretty et al., 2003; Kudryavtsev et al., 2012).

Industrial and historical and artistic heritage were by far the least represented categories in the written texts of both age groups. This may be due to a weaker sense of belonging in relation to these physical elements, which are removed from sentimental or emotional involvement; in other

words, they are not elements integrated into people's everyday lives, but rather form part of an environment that is either ignored or overlooked, or that is less relevant during the individual process of identity development. However, as Chaos (2018) points out, we cannot disregard the ideological weight that a heritage element—an architectural one, for example—may carry in some cases, and it would therefore be inadvisable to draw premature conclusions in this regard.

Despite this, the apparent lack of integration of heritage during adolescence, in contrast to its notable presence during childhood, is concerning if we consider that this disconnection may limit individuals' ability to recognise and value their physical and social environment. This phenomenon may lead to a progressive detachment from—or even destruction of—the local or regional cultural particularities of younger generations in favour of a standardised and homogeneous model characteristic of neoliberal globalisation (Chaos, 2018).

Thus, this may translate into widespread detachment from the territory, a loss of sense of belonging and indifference towards cultural continuity. This is particularly alarming in rural and mountainous areas, as it could accelerate the current process of depopulation. Ultimately, these communities may not only see the preservation of ancestral knowledge and traditions—as well as other forms of heritage—placed at risk, but may also face marginalisation and institutional neglect as a result of dominant dynamics. These effects are particularly relevant in rural contexts, where widespread depopulation processes may contribute to socioeconomic decline (Castellano-Álvarez & Robina-Ramírez, 2024).

It is therefore essential to develop strategies that foster the construction and preservation of identity-based ties and networks which, in turn, strengthen community cohesion and the conservation, stewardship and management of the territory. Strategic approaches based on heritage education may prove decisive since, as Calaf et al. (2007) note, they enable the construction of heritage and the identities derived from it.

In this way, and as authors such as Tornatore (2020) and Levy and Marciela (2024) suggest, communities with strong sociocultural dynamics could be fostered, helping to retain a stable population in the medium and long term. This would provide significant relief from rural depopulation, one of the most pressing problems at present, particularly in Spain.

## 5. Conclusions

In summary, the research suggests that identity is perceived differently by children and adolescents, reflecting a progression towards greater narrative complexity as their cognitive and social development advances. During childhood, identity narratives tend to be constructed around more concrete and immediate elements—such as family or local customs—whereas during adolescence a more elaborate and complex perspective emerges, incorporating global aspects and deeper personal reflections.

However, adolescence is also characterised by a decline in the relationship with the immediate environment and a loss of interest in local heritage elements—particularly intangible cultural heritage—which could lead to progressive detachment and, ultimately, a loss of local identity. This phenomenon highlights the need to reconsider educational approaches to heritage and to foster a balanced sense of belonging that strengthens identity-based ties in order to promote social and cultural cohesion, particularly in rural settings (Fontal et al., 2020).

With regard to future research, it would be valuable to broaden the sample by including a more diverse population. At the same time, the role of new technologies and social media could be examined as key elements in identity construction processes and in their relationship with heritage, given their growing influence on contemporary sociocultural dynamics. Finally, it would be appropriate to extend the research by relating it to processes of cultural integration and

adaptation, since immigration has become a crucial factor in current community dynamics, particularly in rural areas, where the arrival of new groups can transform social and cultural structures.

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