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NEETs civic and political participation in outermost islands: The mediating roles of sense of community and agency

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Abstract

Our aim is to test the associations between collectivism, social support, sense of community, as well as agency with civic and political participation levels of NEETs living in The Azores, a group of islands forming a small and outermost archipelago. We surveyed 332 participants ($M = 26.78$; 69.30% women). We found that all factors, except for social support, were associated with higher participation levels among NEETs. We also found that stronger sense of community and agency mediated the connection between stronger collectivism and higher levels of participation. Therefore, we conclude that setting emotional bonds with the community and being involved in local traditions and causes are necessary conditions to translate dominant local values into NEETs civic and political participation in outermost islands. We further discuss how these results can be translated into more effective, person-centred policies to support NEETs inclusion.

KEYWORDS

Agency, collectivism, islands, NEETs, participation, sense of community

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Youth civic and political participation, from now on referred to as participation, corresponds to young people's engagement in an activity to achieve a collectively determined goal (Pozzi, Pistoni, & Alfieri, 2017; Wandersman & Florin, 2000). These are behavioural, enacted forms of participation which can include social action, volunteerism, collective action, voting, or protesting (Pozzi et al., 2017).

There has been an increasing interest in the topic of youth participation. Little is known, however, about the participation of young people who are Not in Employment, nor in Education or Training (NEET). NEETs are young people who have not been engaged in school or work activities for at least 4 weeks (Eurostat, 2020). The group includes those who have completed a cycle of studies, but have not managed to enter the labour market; dropped out of education without engaging in a new training or professional pathway; chosen not to engage in any activity or have been forced to leave education or employment for reasons such as caring for a family member (Alfieri, Rosina, Sironi, Marta, & Marzana, 2015). The disengagement from institutional participation, especially from school, is detrimental for vulnerable young people's civic and political engagement (Malafaia, Neves, & Menezes, 2021). While addressed by economic-led studies (e.g., Eurofund, 2012), NEETs' participation has been rather neglected by social and community psychology scholarship, as a bibliometric review has recently demonstrated (Simões, Erdogan, Muratovic, & Syk, 2022).

Even less is known about how NEETs in greatest disadvantage can find ways to participate in the resolution of collective affairs. Therefore, we focus on characterizing NEETs' participation living in an outermost European region. Outermost regions are small islands within the European Union, which are distant and isolated from the European continent and sometimes closer to non-European countries. Economically, these regions are excluded from significant international commercial flows, depending on limited local markets and relying on a small number of goods or the primary sector activities (e.g., agriculture). Moreover, these territories are challenged by demanding topographic conditions and recurrent extreme meteorological phenomena (European Parliament, 2015).

Our approach is novel in the literature for two reasons. Firstly, we seek to capture the participation conditions of NEETs in greatest disadvantage, with limited access to resources and opportunities. Second, we adopt a comprehensive approach, by testing a model that covers potentially relevant cultural, social, and individual factors that can be associated with these youths' participation. Specifically, we test the associations between collectivism, social support, sense of community and agency, as well as how these factors are linked to NEETs' participation levels, while controlling for relevant socio-demographics (e.g., gender).

More knowledge about NEETs' participation in outermost regions is required. At the individual level, NEETs in outermost regions are more exposed to social exclusion, lower qualifications and unemployment (Almeida & Simões, 2020), which limit their opportunities for institutionalized participation (Eurofund, 2012). Thus, uncovering the conditions associated with vulnerable youth participation in remote areas adds new layers of understanding to young people participation scholarship (Royle & Brinklow, 2018).

At the community level, outermost islands fit Bæck's (2016) definition of a shrinking region. Due to their remoteness, outermost islands struggle with a steep loss of population, especially among young generations (Simões et al., 2021), a narrower job market, often focusing on less rewarding activities and limited public services support, which usually do not match the needs of younger generations (Bæck, 2016). Thus, it is important to understand under which conditions young people can participate and positively affect local decisions. This is especially relevant among NEETs, as vulnerable young people tend to be the ones to stay on deprived areas such as outermost islands, due to the lack of resources to out-migrate (Farrugia, 2016). Moreover, this knowledge can also contribute to more informed and, hopefully, a more person-centred approach to public services deliverance.

1.1 | Complexities and benefits of youth participation

Young people are often accused of lacking knowledge and interest regarding social and political issues, due to the decline in their levels of participation in institutionalized settings (e.g., Curtice, 2005; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina,

Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). Such representations contrast with studies showing that young people are engaged in non-conventional and individualized forms of participation, including boycotts, protests, petitions and community-based action (e.g., Barrett & Zani, 2015). There is some evidence that even if young people are less likely than adults to become members of political and civic organizations, they tend to be more project-oriented, more likely to participate in horizontal networks, more often engage in individualized participation practices (Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014) and more willing to participate if a given issue concerns them directly (Youniss, Barber, & Billen, 2013). Furthermore, several studies have demonstrated that youth participation levels are partially explained by the feeling of marginalization from democratic practices and institutions (Harris, Wyn, & Younes, 2010).

Structural factors also affect young people's participation, including a lack of opportunities to discuss and engage with social/political issues (Fernandes-Jesus, Malafaia, Ribeiro, & Menezes, 2015; Ribeiro, Malafaia, Neves, Ferreira, & Menezes, 2015). Recent findings further demonstrate that school may be a highly significant and sometimes the only institutional leeway for creating conditions for political participation (Malafaia et al., 2021). Moreover, lower socio-economic resources, in terms of income, education, occupational status and cultural capital prevent young people's participation (Malafaia, Neves, & Menezes, 2017). The effect of cultural capital has been frequently measured via the number of books at home (Sieben & Lechner, 2019), with different studies indicating that this factor is highly associated with political knowledge and levels of civic and political participation among young people (e.g., Fernandes-Jesus et al., 2015; Malafaia et al., 2017). While there has been an increased recognition of the role of these dimensions in young people's participation, there is still a lack of research focusing on the specificities of NEETs' participation.

Youth participation impacts individual prospects. It promotes the upholding of prosocial norms and empowerment, protects against distress and deviance, and increases well-being, life satisfaction, citizenship, and sense of community (Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Caspo, & Sheblanova, 1998). Considering that NEETs participate less than non-NEETs (Eurofund, 2012) and that their trajectories tend to be worse by all standards (Almeida & Simões, 2020), it is crucial to uncover variables associated with their participation levels. This is especially relevant when structural conditions are demanding as is the case in outermost areas.

1.2 | NEETs on outermost islands: Conditions for participation

Livelihood on outermost islands is driven by feelings of pride about local culture, which is often understood by locals as a common heritage that needs to be perpetuated (Hay, 2006; Royle & Brinklow, 2018). Consequently, island societies tend to lean towards conservative values as opposed to more liberal views, which often leads to a dominant collectivism (Athanasou & Torrance, 2002; Royle & Brinklow, 2018). Collectivism refers to a preference for a society based on tight social bonds in which individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular ingroup to look after them in exchange for loyalty (Yoo, Donthu, & Lenartowicz, 2011). In this context, youth participation is ritualized as a mean to nurture social ties, new leadership socialization and local values' perpetuation (Athanasou & Torrance, 2002; Royle & Brinklow, 2018).

Collective-oriented island societies uphold a more hierarchical social organization, tightly knitted by ethnically homogeneous social networks (Athanasou & Torrance, 2002). Informal social support provided by family or friends to fulfil personal needs plays a pivotal role in developing the prospects of young islanders' personal development (Simões et al., 2021). Overall, social support is positively correlated with social-political attitudes among younger generations (Christens & Peterson, 2012). Moreover, young people's expectations of their role and the possibility of participation is moderated by their family and peer relationships (e.g., Muddiman, Taylor, Power, & Moles, 2019). The centrality of informal social support for younger islanders' participation, including NEETs, is driven both by collectivistic dominant views and by the need to compensate for the low quality of institutional support in outermost communities in the educational and employment fields (Simões, Meneses, Luís, & Drumonde, 2017).

Packed together, collectivism and informal social support may contribute to a stronger sense of community among young islanders, including NEETs. Sense of community involves four elements (McMillan & Chavis, 1986):

sense of belonging (i.e., feeling and experiencing being part of a community), influence (i.e., the influence of the community on its members and vice versa), integration and the satisfaction of needs (i.e., the certainty on the part of the members that their needs will be satisfied thanks to their membership of the group); and shared emotional connection (i.e., the presence of strong emotional ties between members).

Sense of community and participation are linked among young people (Evans, 2007; Marzana, Marta, & Pozzi, 2012), whether they belong to minorities or not (Albanesi, Mazzoni, & Zani, 2015). Furthermore, feelings of belongingness and identification with local communities tend to be stronger among those living in peripheral areas, namely on islands (Hernández, Carmen Hidalgo, Salazar-Laplace, & Hess, 2007). This trend is, however, inconsistent. Many young islanders acknowledge that close ties fill their needs and will remain available to address their requirements. Conversely, others would prefer to move out of the islands, but lack the resources to do it (Simões et al., 2021). For the latter, a sense of community and subsequent participation might only come through cognitive dissonance, often convincing themselves that their native area is better than others, thus deserving their contribution (Anton & Lawrence, 2014).

Altogether, the reported social conditions of outermost islands may facilitate agency and participation associations. Agency refers to a successful sense of goal-directed energy (Snyder, 2002). Usually, agency correlates with participation under dominant individualistic values (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019). Local traditions and family roles thwart the definition of personal goals, especially among women (Tuval-Mashiach et al., 2019). However, in small, peripheric islands, socialization processes emphasizing the importance of being active to perpetuate local values pair with high levels of place attachment (Hernández et al., 2007). Aside, institutional settings oriented by liberal views are considerably unsuccessful in meeting these vulnerable young people expectations (Eurofound, 2012). Consequently, islanders feel more energized to affect public matters with an immediate interest or impact on communities. This trend has been found overall for people living in deprived geographies including vulnerable young people who stay in these regions for economic reasons (Anton & Lawrence, 2014). Thus, islands' communities can offer valuable opportunities for NEETs' agency and subsequent participation which overlap with young people's preference for specific causes and non-conventional forms of participation (e.g., Youniss et al., 2013).

2 | CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Our aim is to explore the associations between collectivism, social support, sense of community and agency, as well as how these factors are linked to NEETs' participation levels on outermost islands. We addressed this goal accounting for relevant socio-demographics (e.g., gender) using a regression analysis approach with non-mediated and mediated effects, targeting participation.

Our study was conducted in an outermost Portuguese region, The Azores, an archipelago of nine islands in the Atlantic Ocean with a population of 236,657 inhabitants. Since the 19th century, and especially in the second half of the 20th century, the region has seen large out-migration fluxes from young people to the United States and Canada. For the past three decades, there has been a well-established young out-migration flow from the region to mainland Portugal, mostly constituted by those who want to obtain a tertiary education degree, although the region has its own local university. The Azores has had a regional government since 1976.

In 2020, 19.70% of young people aged 15–34 years old were NEET, well-above the national average (10.30%) (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2021). In 2020, The Azores also showed the highest rate of early school leaving by regions in Portugal (27.00%), again above the national rate (8.90%) (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2020a). In 2019, this region also had the highest regional rate of youth unemployment (23.50%) (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2020b). The tertiary sector covers 73.95% of the whole region's employment in the region, well-above both the primary (9.30%) and secondary sectors (16.75%) (Serviço Regional de Estatística, 2020).

We tested two hypotheses. First, we expected that social support and sense of community, as synthesizers of the perceptions about the quality of community ties, would mediate the connections between collectivism and participation. We anticipated this result considering the pivotal role of informal social support and community bonds on young people's social engagement in less affluent regions such as outermost regions. Second, we hypothesized that agency perceptions, as an individual and operative-oriented construct, would mediate the relationship between collectivism and participation. We tested this hypothesis considering that: (a) outermost regions can offer a singular context for NEETs self-directed goal investment being made in matters aligned with collective values (e.g., cultural heritage); and (b) that this can reflect overall young people preference for being energized by issues overlapping local needs.

To test our hypothesis we analysed a mediation model approach. We conducted post-hoc power analysis tests for each main effect using G*Power software (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) based on error probability ($\alpha = .05$), medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$) and sample size ($n = 332$). We also conducted power analysis for total and indirect effects using the Monte Carlo Power Analysis for Indirect Effects (Schoemann, Boulton, & Short, 2017). Our theoretical model is presented in Figure 1.

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Participants

A total of 941 NEETs complied with the study criteria. They were registered in local employment agencies under the Youth Guarantee framework, the EU initiative that targets NEETs across member states. From these, 332 participated. The participants were aged 19–34 years old ($M = 26.78$; $SD = 4.10$), 69.30% of them were women and the majority (98.90%) was native from the islands. Most of them had concluded basic (ninth grade) ($n = 137$; 41.30%) or secondary (12th grade) education ($n = 155$; 46.70%). Forty participants (12.00%) had concluded tertiary education. Often the participants' mothers ($n = 292$; 88.00%) had concluded basic education or less.

Moreover, 181 of the participants (54.50%) were inactive, meaning that they were not available or were not searching for work for different reasons (e.g., health conditions, family care duties). The remaining 151 (45.50%) were unemployed, meaning that they were actively searching for a job. Still, 67 (20.20%) had not made any contact with their employment agency in the 12 months prior to the study, while 128 (38.60%) had made that contact only once. During the same period, the remaining 137 participants (41.30%) had been in contact with their local employment agency twice or more. Moreover, 222 participants (66.90%) did not qualify for any unemployment subsidy.

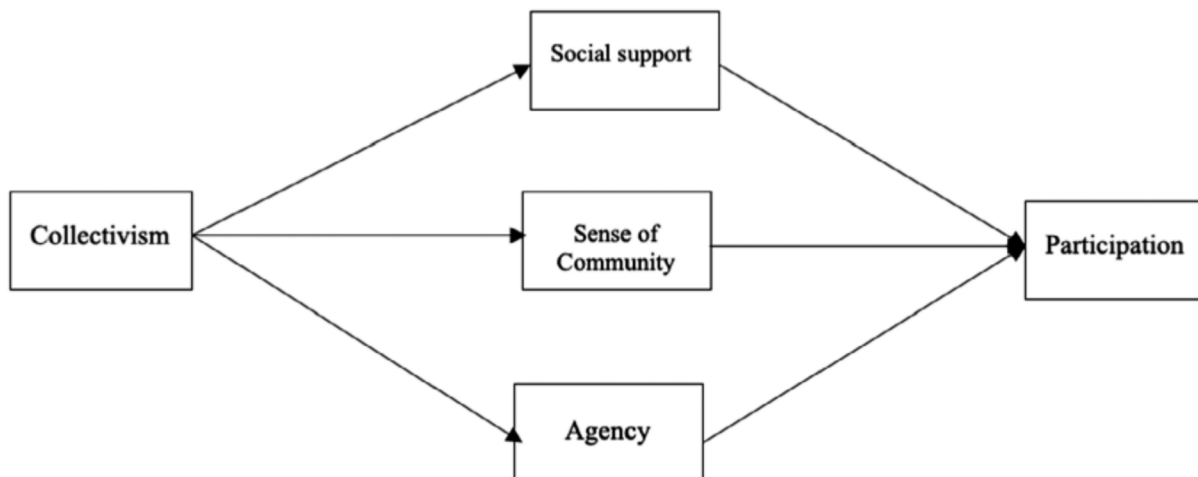


FIGURE 1 Tested model

4 | MEASURES

4.1 | Collectivism

We measured collectivism using the 6-item Portuguese version (Marques et al., 2014) of the collectivism subscale included in the Cultural Values Scale (CVSCALE) (Yoo et al., 2011). This subscale assesses personal attitudes in a *continuum* between individualism and collectivism (e.g., *Individuals must sacrifice their personal interests for the benefit of a group*).

4.2 | Social support

We measured social support using the 15-item Social Support Satisfaction Scale (Pais Ribeiro, 1999) that assess satisfaction with friends (e.g., *I am satisfied with the number of friends I have*); family (e.g., *I am satisfied with the amount of time I spend with my family*); intimate relationships (e.g., *Sometimes, I feel alone and without any support*) and social activities (e.g., *I miss social activities that satisfy me*).

4.3 | Sense of community

We assessed sense of community by using the 8-item Portuguese version (Marante, 2010) of the Brief Sense of Community Scale (BSCS) (Peterson, Speer, & Millan, 2007). This instrument measures emotional bonds to a given place in terms of belongingness, influence, needs and shared emotional bonds (e.g., *I feel connected to this community*). References to the community were replaced by the island of origin (e.g., *I feel I am a member of the community of my island*). This option was made considering that for islanders reasoning about social bonds overlaps the limited space they live in (Hernández et al., 2007).

4.4 | Agency

We measured agency using the 4-item Portuguese version (Marques, Lopez, Fontaine, Coimbra, & Mitchell, 2014) of the agency subscale included in the Adult Dispositional Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1991). This scale assesses personal perceptions about agentic behaviours (e.g., *I can think about many ways of achieving what is important to me*).

4.5 | Civic and political participation

We examined participation using the Portuguese Version (Menezes, Ribeiro, Fernandes-Jesus, Malafaia, & Ferreira, 2012) of the Civic and Political Participation scale. This 13-item scale covers different forms of participation (e.g., doing volunteer work) in the 12 months prior to the study.

4.6 | Covariates

We added gender (0 = male; 1 = female), age and NEET status (0 = unemployed; 1 = inactive) as covariates. We also added cultural capital. This variable was calculated as an index including the participants' educational level, their mother's educational level and the number of books at home. Educational level variables were ranked according to the Portuguese educational system (1 = basic education (ninth grade) or less; 2 = secondary education; 3 = tertiary education). The number of books at home was also ranked from 1 to 3 (1 ≤ 50 books; 2 = 51–200 books; 3 ≥ 200

books). The three variables were then combined in a composite measure ranging from 3 points (participants that had completed basic education or less, indicating that their mothers had also completed basic education or less and that had fewer than 50 books at home) to 9 (participants that had completed basic tertiary education, indicating that their mothers had also completed tertiary education, and that had more than 200 books at home). Intermediate values resulted from the multiple combination of these indicators.

5 | PROCEDURES

We developed a chatbot using the ManyChat app to survey NEETs. A chatbot is a program that imitates a human conversation on social media platforms, based on a previously created database. This database is organized as a flow to orientate interactions based on response patterns. The chatbot was delivered through Facebook Messenger for four reasons: (a) to use a digital platform to deliver the questionnaire, an approach that was adjusted to an archipelago of nine dispersed islands; (b) to undertake the study during the pandemic, when face-to-face meetings were not allowed; (c) to adjust to the NEETs' use of digital tools, as we were briefed by the regional employment services that young people did not use or check their email regularly; and (d) using an interactive way of delivering the questionnaire, adjusted to young people's characteristics and standard ways of communicating nowadays.

Data was collected in December 2020. The participation rate corresponded to 33.47%. Before receiving the link to the chatbot, participants received a text message from the employment services informing them about the study goals. When clicking on the link, all participants were reformed of the study aims and confidentiality terms and gave their consent to participate. They were also informed that they could stop the chatbot and reinitiate the survey at any time, within 72 h. During that period of time, three messages were sent to the participants to reengage them with the study, in case they had not completed the survey. Participants restarted where they had stopped without overwriting answers.

6 | DATA ANALYSIS

We checked for gender, age and school level differences between participants and non-participants. We also estimated skewness and kurtosis for the model variables. Values between ± 2 were considered as an indicator of normal distribution (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2014).

We regressed the outcome variable into each of the factors to test for linearity, outliers and multicollinearity. Linearity assumptions were plotted using P-P plots and scatterplots of the residuals. Outliers analysis was conducted using Cook's *D*, with *D* values below one indicating the absence of outliers. Multicollinearity was assessed using Variation Inflation Factors (VIF); values below four indicated non-overlap between factors (Argyrous, 2011). Afterwards, we examined bivariate correlations. All of these analyses were conducted using SPSS 25.0.

Finally, we investigated a mediation model (Model 4) using PROCESS macros 3.3 for SPSS. We included collectivism as a main factor, considering that this was a higher-order (cultural) factor. Social support, sense of community and agency were included as mediators. Gender, age, cultural capital and NEET status were included as covariates.

7 | RESULTS

7.1 | Preliminary analyses

Skewness estimates ranged between -0.90 and -0.24 and kurtosis estimates ranged from -0.63 to 0.58 , below the recommended cut-off point (Table 1). Both P-P plots and scatterplots graphically supported the assumption of a normal distribution of the outcome variable through each of the factors.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations ($n = 332$)

	M (SD)	Range	Alpha	Skewness	Kurtosis	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Gender	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Age	-	-	-	-	-	-.05	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3. Cultural capital	-	-	-	-	-	.10	.08	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
4. NEET status	-	-	-	-	-	-.01	.10	.08	-	-	-	-	-	-
5. Collectivism	20.69 (5.45)	1-5	.82	-.24	-.35	.12*	.03	.26**	-.07	-	-	-	-	-
6. Social support	54.11 (9.74)	1-5	.81	-.43	.09	-.10	-.02	-.06	-.04	.04	-	-	-	-
7. Sense of community	31.72 (5.93)	1-5	.84	-.58	-.63	-.05	.02	.01	.09	.13*	.23**	-	-	-
8. Agency	22.25 (5.23)	1-4	.78	-.43	.16	-.01	.12*	-.10	-.01	.29**	.22**	.30**	-	-
9. Participation	29.56 (12.00)	1-5	.82	-.90	.58	-.02	-.01	.08	-.04	.15**	-.02	.20**	.17**	-

TABLE 2 Regression analyses: unstandardized estimates, standard error, 95% confidence intervals (CI) and post hoc power analysis ($n = 332$)

	Social support			Sense of community			Agency			Participation		
	B	S.E.	95% CI	B	S.E.	95% CI	B	S.E.	95% CI	B	S.E.	95% CI
1. Gender	−1.93	1.18	[−4.24; .38]	−.52	.71	[−1.92; .88]	.40	.61	[−.79; 1.60]	−.74	1.37	[−3.43; 1.95]
2. Age	−.05	.13	[−.32; .21]	.01	.08	[−.16; .16]	.15*	.07	[.02; .29]	.23	.15	[−.54; .08]
3. Cultural capital	−.43	.49	[−1.40; .53]	.28	.30	[−.31; .86]	−.24	.25	[−.74; .26]	1.48**	.57	[.36; 2.51]
4. NEET status	−.12	1.17	[−2.42; 2.18]	.31	.71	[−1.09; 1.70]	−.26	.60	[−1.45; .93]	3.86**	1.35	[1.19; 6.52]
5. Collectivism	.02	.11	[−.18; .23]	.15*	.06	[.03; .28]	.24***	.06	[.13; .34]	.27*	.13	[.03; .51]
6. Social support				−	−	−	−	−	−	−.10	.06	[−.23; .03]
7. Sense of community	−	−	−	−	−	−	−	−	−	.30**	.11	[.08; .52]
8. Agency	−	−	−	−	−	−	−	−	−	.31*	.13	[.05; .57]
X^2	.01			.02			.09***			.11***		
Power ^a	.99			.99			.99			.99		

^aStatistical power tested using G*Power post hoc analysis: error probability ($\alpha = .05$); effect size ($f^2 = .15$); sample size ($n = 332$).

TABLE 3 Total and indirect effects: unstandardized estimates, standard error, 95% confidence intervals (CI) and power analysis ($n = 332$)

Models	B	S.E.	95% CI	Power
1.Total effects	0.11	0.05	[0.04; 0.22]	0.00
2. Collectivism – social support – participation	–0.01	0.01	[–0.30; 0.02]	0.00
3. Collectivism – sense of community – participation	0.05	0.03	[0.01; 0.10]	0.91
4. Collectivism – agency – participation	0.06	0.03	[0.01; 0.14]	0.72

Cook's D showed that the most extreme values reached 0.05, indicating the absence of outliers. The highest VIF value reached 1.188 for Agency.

We found that the participants had a higher chance of being women than men compared to non-participants, $\chi^2(2, 939) = 25.61, p < .001$.

Overall, covariates were not associated with each other or with collectivism, the mediators or the outcome variable. Exceptions to this pattern were that weaker collectivism rates were more common among men and among participants showing lower cultural capital. Higher agency perceptions presented a small association with age increase. Collectivism and mediators (social support and sense of community) presented small positive associations. Moreover, stronger collectivism perspectives among the participants were associated with stronger participation, although this connection was small. The same trend was found for sense of community and participation variables, as well as for agency and participation. Conversely, social support was not correlated with participation (Table 1).

7.2 | Regression analyses

According to our regression analyses, we found that collectivism was associated with sense of community $\beta = .15, p < .05, S.E. = 0.06, 95\% CI [0.03, 0.28]$. We also found that stronger collectivism perceptions were linked with stronger agency levels, $\beta = .24, p < .001, S.E. = 0.06, 95\% CI [0.13, 0.34]$.

When accounting for all covariates and factors we found that reporting higher cultural capital, $\beta = 1.48, p < .01, S.E. = 0.57, 95\% CI [0.36, 2.51]$, as well as inactive NEETs, compared with unemployed NEETs, $\beta = 3.86, p < .01, S.E. = 1.35, 95\% CI [1.19, 6.52]$ displayed higher participation rates. Seemingly, participants reporting stronger collectivistic perceptions, $\beta = .27, p < .05, S.E. = 0.13, 95\% CI [0.03, 0.51]$, a stronger sense of community $\beta = .30, p < .01, S.E. = 0.11, 95\% CI [0.08, 0.52]$, as well as higher agency estimates, $\beta = .31, p < .05, S.E. = 0.13, 95\% CI [0.05, 0.57]$ showed an increase of participation scores.

In addition, we found that sense of community mediated the association between collectivism and participation, indirect = 0.05, S.E. = 0.03; 95% CI [0.01, 0.10], Power = 0.91.

We also detected that agency mediated the association between collectivism and participation, indirect = 0.06, S.E. = 0.03; 95% CI [0.01, 0.14], Power = 0.72.

Tables 2 and 3 depict direct and indirect effect estimates.

8 | DISCUSSION

We reached three main findings. First, we found that stronger perceptions across all social determinants of participation were associated with higher NEET participation levels when all of these factors were taken together, except for social support. We consider that these results show the overall social conditions for NEETs' participation on outermost islands. The islands' remoteness is marked by a strong loyalty towards the local community identity and

priorities (Athanasou & Torrance, 2002; Royle & Brinklow, 2018). These social dispositions create the conditions for individuals, including the most vulnerable young people, to be agentic at a local level. Socialization, together with personal plans and efforts will, thus, be more easily translated into participation dedicated to strengthening social ties, perpetuating local values and enabling the emergence of new leaderships (Athanasou & Torrance, 2002; Royle & Brinklow, 2018). To some extent, our results confirm prior findings pinpointing the associations linking social and individual (agency) determinants to higher levels of vulnerable young people's participation. Outermost islands' stronger cultural and ethnic homogeneity may be providing an additional input to infuse vulnerable young people's participation (Loader et al., 2014). Remarkably, social support was irrelevant for NEETs' participation, whether alone or accounting for other social factors. Overall, social support provided by family and peers correlates with young people's social-political attitudes (Christens & Peterson, 2012) and moderates their access to participation opportunities (Muddiman et al., 2019). As other reports show, social support may be more important for other dimensions of these NEETs' personal development (e.g., self-efficacy) (Simões et al., 2017). Moreover, it is feasible that opportunities for these youths' participation are offered by informal ties within the community (e.g., neighbourhood, local clubs) (Ludden, 2011), which connects with the following finding.

Second, we established that sense of community significantly mediated the associations between collectivism and NEETs' participation. Overall, the participants voice that greater loyalty to a group is associated to greater levels of participation, as long as this is based on feeling attached to the community. Participation among these NEETs is, therefore, not only justified by cultural dispositions or pragmatic reasons associated with community perpetuation: setting emotional bonds with the community in terms of belongingness, mutual influence, or shared emotional connection is a key ingredient to bring these two factors together.

Two justifications can explain this central result of our research. Firstly, similarly to other outermost/remote territories that correspond to what Bæck (2016) has labelled as shrinking regions, The Azores' struggle with limited economic and employment opportunities. While such problems may create a sense of collective hopelessness; at times, locals may have some political or social instruments to fight back. In either case, these communities are often involved in solving very concrete needs unmet by institutions. Consequently, NEETs in these areas seem to be able to find opportunities to participate in the solution of tangible problems that affect the well-being or identity of the whole community. As others have demonstrated (e.g., Youniss et al., 2013), young generations are more willing to participate when anticipating that they can influence the outcomes of certain actions. Moreover, the lack of adequate on-the-ground educational resources, which are vital to support vulnerable youths' participation (Malafaia et al., 2021), may further reinforce the emotional attachment with the community in putting participation at the service of the locals.

Secondly, islanders feel more attached to local communities, because they nourish their origins in being unique. For them, the island often represents a distinctive place in terms of landscape and geographical situation (Hay, 2006), but also an unusual identity, based on singular forms of social and cultural organization (Hernández et al., 2007). This sense of uniqueness is even more dominant in the case of young islanders, coming from small and very isolated islands who often voice feelings of ownership and responsibility for the future of remote places (Simões et al., 2021). Subsequently, they feel more compelled to perpetuate local values and emotional bonds with their communities through their participation, almost as a form of resistance (Athanasou & Torrance, 2002; Royle & Brinklow, 2018).

Finally, we also found that agency mediated the connections between collectivism and participation. In islands, collectivism is based on socialization processes that focus on local worldviews and traditions (Royle & Brinklow, 2018) and a greater likelihood of young people being involved in horizontal networks (Simões et al., 2017). Overall, this leads to overlaps between communities' demands and locals' own self-directed goals, including among vulnerable young people, resulting in concrete forms of participation (Ludden, 2011). This is even truer in the case of NEETs, for whom experiences in institutional settings (e.g., school) that could socialize them in more individual-oriented values often lead to feelings of failure or unmet expectations (Eurofund, 2012). Therefore, while agency correlates with participation in more individualistic cultures (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019; Tuval-Mashiach et al., 2019) local expectations and needs in outermost regions seem a promising leeway for these young people to pursue their own goals.

Our findings have limitations. Mediation analysis using cross-sectional data prevents causal interpretation (e.g., Mitchell & Maxwell, 2013). However, recent efforts (e.g., Cain et al., 2018) have sustained that while cross-sectional models have an increased propensity of type I error compared to longitudinal models, these are only slight violations that happen at the most extreme level of between-person variance. They also demonstrate that cross-sectional models and sequence models were the most powerful among the one-level mediation models and seem to be unaffected by between-person variance (both in full and partial mediation conditions). We addressed the state of the art on this matter by keeping our goals and discussion within exploratory (non-causal) boundaries and by reporting on one-level (individuals) data.

We also used an innovative approach to survey the participants: a chatbot. Although this tool is seen as an alternative, friendly approach to surveying young people, it is still unclear how this approach affects response patterns.

While all participants were registered as NEETs, we cannot rule out that a fraction of them were involved in illegal types of work that occur in the region.

Finally, while our study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe this had a marginal impact on our results. Overall, youths may have become more reliant and more positive about their communities. However, lockdowns were shorter and much less severe on the islands, having no impact on formal or informal youth participation.

9 | IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Our results can inform programs to support NEETs' inclusion through participation in outermost regions if: (a) local matters aligned with collective action (e.g., cultural heritage perpetuation) and associated with attachment feelings to the community (e.g., natural resources protection), are intentionally placed as the main entrance for participation; (b) (in)formal community leaders allow youths to be agentic in the process; and (c) the process of participatory engagement progressively evolves to core political issues. A tool to promote such participation may be the participatory budget, which already exists in The Azores at the municipality and regional level, but does not purposively target youth participation.

The same approach may also inform public institutions to tailor public service deliverance. Prior research done in The Azores shows that young people are willing to contribute to the improvement of these services (Simões et al., 2021). However, on-the-ground services are centralized in major municipalities of the region and act in a very formal way. Thus, they are disconnected from informal leaderships and usually disregard communities' assets/needs for improving service deliverance. If these community resources are brought to the forefront on this point, we believe NEETs in The Azores can shape more efficient service deliverance in important areas for them, such as education and employment. The replication of our study can further inform in other shrinking regions across the continent and worldwide (e.g., rural areas or mountain areas).

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data is available on request to the corresponding author.

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