

# EMERGING ADULTHOOD 2.0

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Today we are going to talk about the new developmental phase of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, now in its second iteration.

## Disclosures:

In compliance with the ACCME Standards for Commercial Support of CME, the authors Dr. Pamela Meersand and Dr. Karen Gilmore do not have any relevant financial relationships to disclose in relation to this presentation.

Learning objectives: As a result of participating in this activity, you should be able:

- 1) to identify the five features of emerging adulthood as originally named by Arnett;
- 2) to explain the epidemiological shift and the cultural changes that set the stage for this new developmental phase;
- 3) to discuss the changing nature of identity development, the role of youth culture, and the new meanings of adulthood in contemporary society.

**“Standing too close to the great changes that have already taken place or are beginning to, and without a glimmering of the future that is being shaped, we ourselves are at a loss as to the significance of the impressions which press upon us and as to the value of the judgments which we form.”**

-- Sigmund Freud 1915: Thoughts for the times on war and death



# Emerging Adulthood: What is it?

- Emerging adulthood was originally identified by Jeffrey Arnett at the turn of the 21st century.
- While this term originally applied to millennials (those born between 1980-1984), Arnett's idea was that this was not simply a generational phenomenon, but marked a new developmental phase in the path to adulthood. He compared his discovery to that of adolescence which emerged a century earlier.
- The term has come to encompass the third decade of life.



*"When I was your age, I was an adult."*

# Emerging adulthood is distinguished by the following concerns:

- Identity (role) explorations
  - Instability
  - Self-focus
  - Feeling in-between
  - A widening of possibilities.
- Thus *role exploration* is “the heart of emerging adulthood” (Arnett 2000).



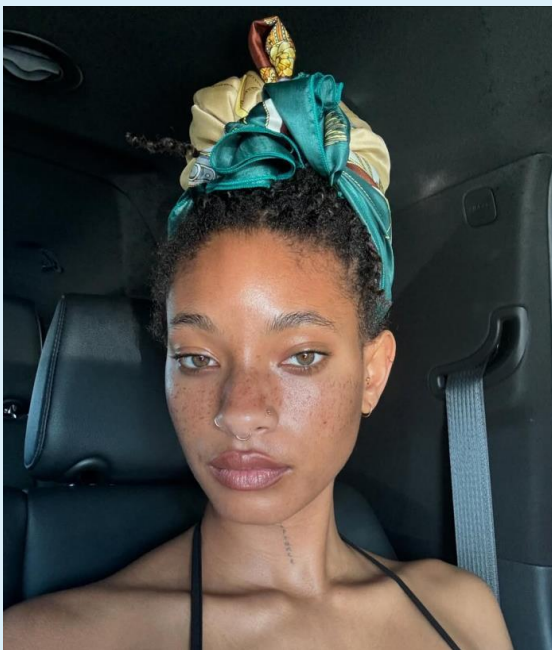












Gen Z stare

# Detractors (from Developmental Science)

- **Phases are an outmoded concept** that have no place in developmental thinking, especially in the context of radical transformations anticipated in the digital age
- From a systems point of view, what we are observing now are a series of transformations embedded in a complex environment. These self-organize into normative and nonnormative states depending on resources and are in rapid flux.
- Innumerable **social changes have allowed for the differences in pace and experience** of twenty-somethings; for example, more parents are providing room and board for their adult children than ever before. But will this repeat itself?







# Detractors (from Sociology)

- This is not a true developmental phase. It will not repeat itself: it is a transient phenomenon related to cultural change.
- Specifically, it is the result of radical shift in Western culture to an information-technology driven society.
- Traditional pathways to careers are no longer available.
- For the millennials, the parent generation was not able to guide today's young adults into full adulthood. But today, the children of gen Z are experiencing a fully mediated world.
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# Detractors from psychoanalysis

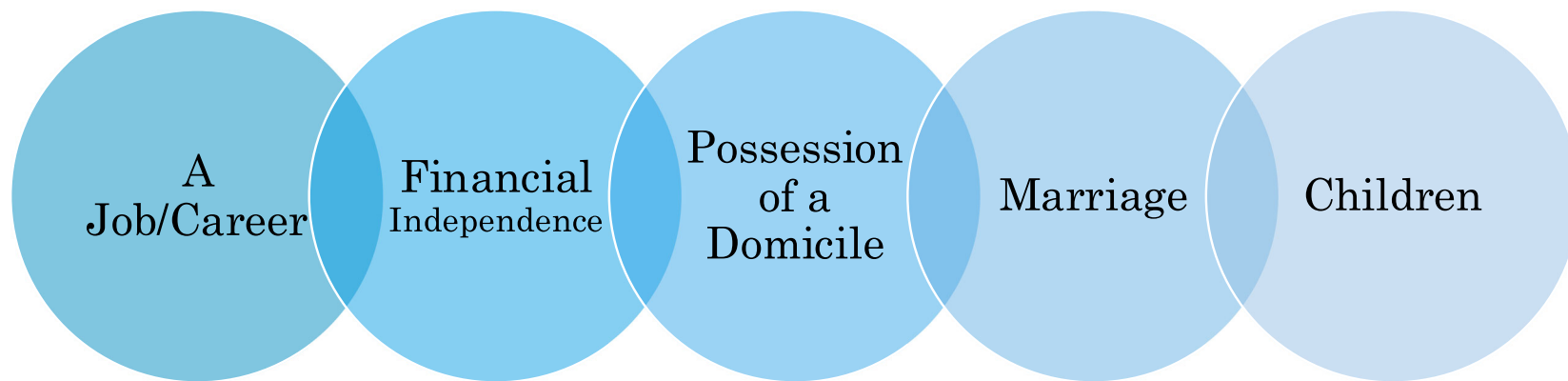
- The features of "feeling in between" reflects an immaturity and a failure to embrace adulthood.
- The features of "instability", "self-focus", and "role experimentation" reflect: identity diffusion, poor executive function and unreliable self-regulation, narcissistic preoccupations. These result in the superficial relationships found in borderlines.
- The upsurge in risk behaviors reflect impulsivity and recklessness.



- **Aspects of identity diffusion:**

- Feelings of incoherence and emptiness
- Difficulty with emotional self-regulation
- Distorted sense of self and others
- Use of action oriented outlets, risky behaviors and self-harm to manage strong feelings
- Disjointed personal narratives
- Relationships that tend to be unstable, unsatisfying, based on personal needs
- Difficulty committing to core set of roles, values, beliefs

# What is adulthood?



# A generational shift has pushed these markers deep into the twenties:

Achievement of all five markers  
by age 25:

In **1960**: 44% males  
68% females

In **2000**: 13% males  
25% females

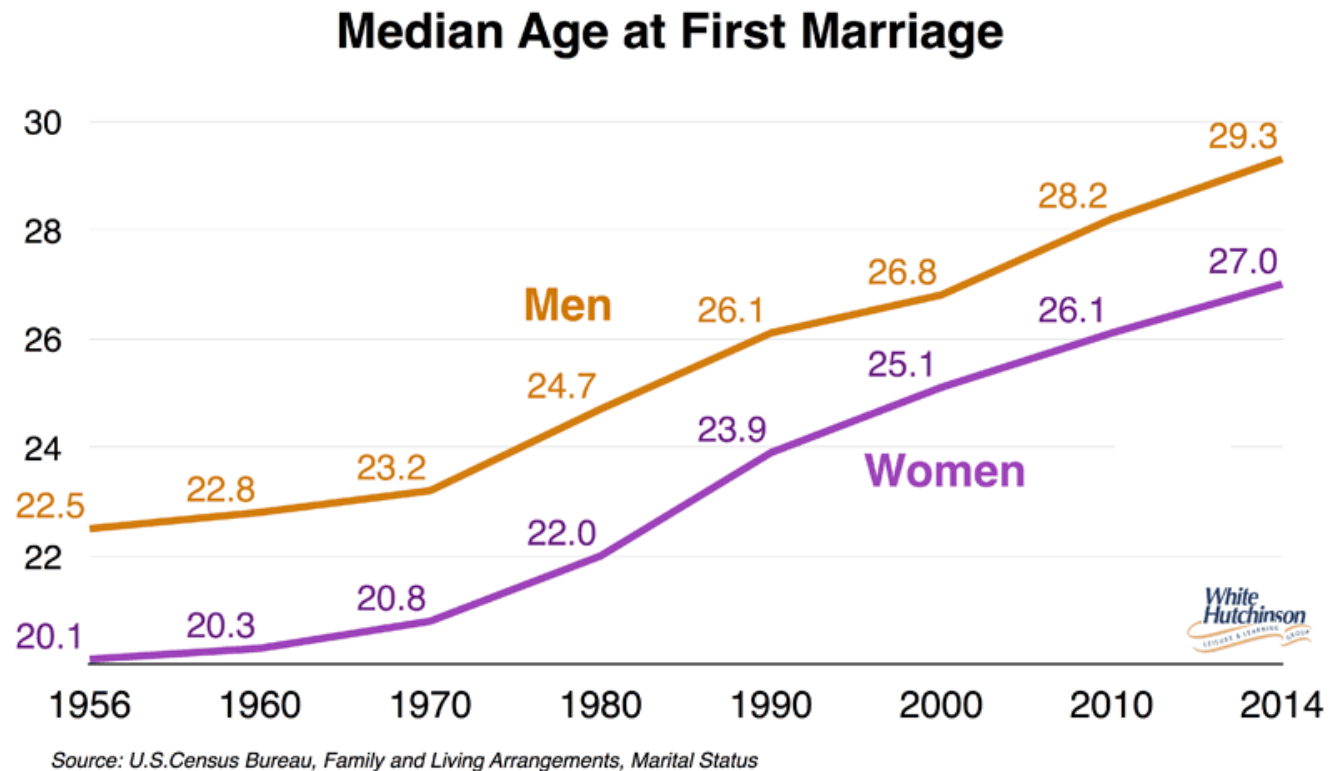
In **2024**: 17% males  
23% females

Median Age of Marriage

In **1950**:  
age 20 for women  
age 23 for men

In **2000**:  
age 25 for women  
age 27 for men

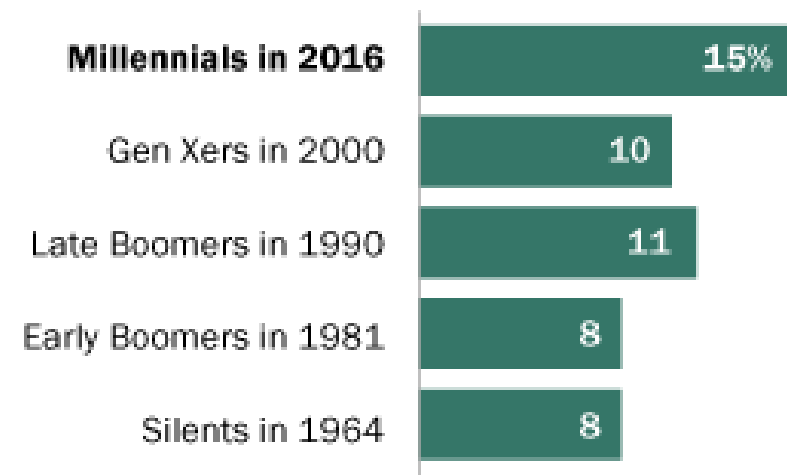
In **2024**:  
age 28 for women  
age 30 for men



# Millennials return home

## Millennials are the generation most likely to live at home

*% of 25- to 35-year-olds living in parent(s) home*



Note: "Living in parent(s)' home" means residing in a household headed by a parent.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 1964, 1981, 1990, 2000 and 2016 Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements.

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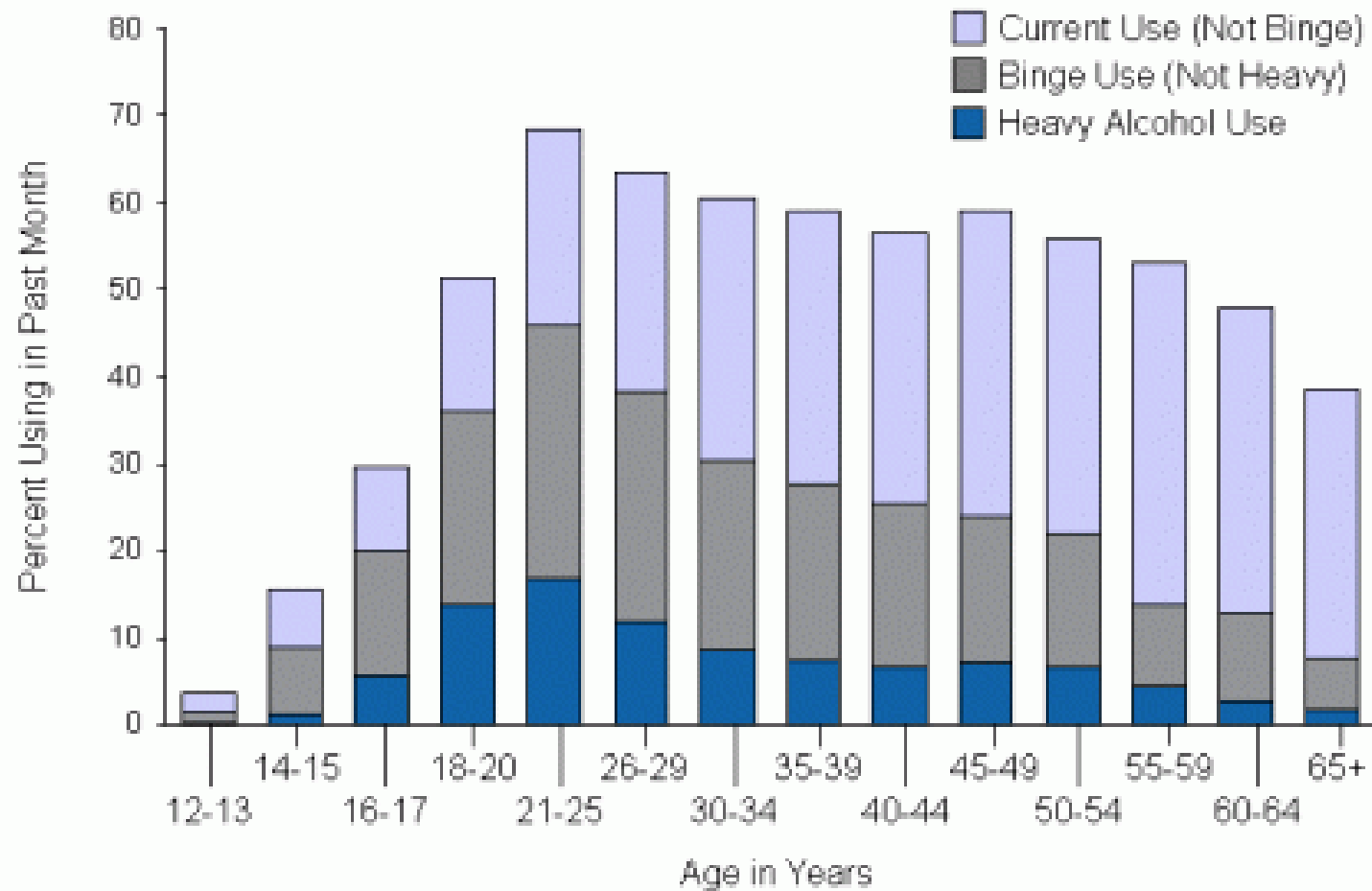
# Emerging adults (still) returning home

- Across the last 16 years over half of those in the late adolescent/ early emerging adult age group (18-24) lived with their parents and had the largest share living in a parent's home.
- The portion of 18-24 year olds living with parents peaked in 2020 at 59.2%. The share has slightly dropped and in 2023 the estimate ticked up slightly to 57.1%.
- In 2023, more than one in five (21.7%) young adults aged 25-29 were living in the parental home, up from 16.5% in 2007.



# Drinking by age:







from” 2010 National Survey on Drug Use and Health



# Risky Behavior of Gen Z







## Decline in Regular Drinking Among Younger Adults

Percentage who drank any kind of alcoholic beverage in the past seven days

	2001-2003	2011-2013	2021-2023	Trend	Change since 2001-2003
<b>Drinkers</b>					
18 to 34	67	64	61		-6
35 to 54	68	66	69		1
55 and older	63	67	69		6
<b>U.S. adults</b>					
18 to 34	49	41	38		-11
35 to 54	45	44	48		3
55 and older	31	38	40		9

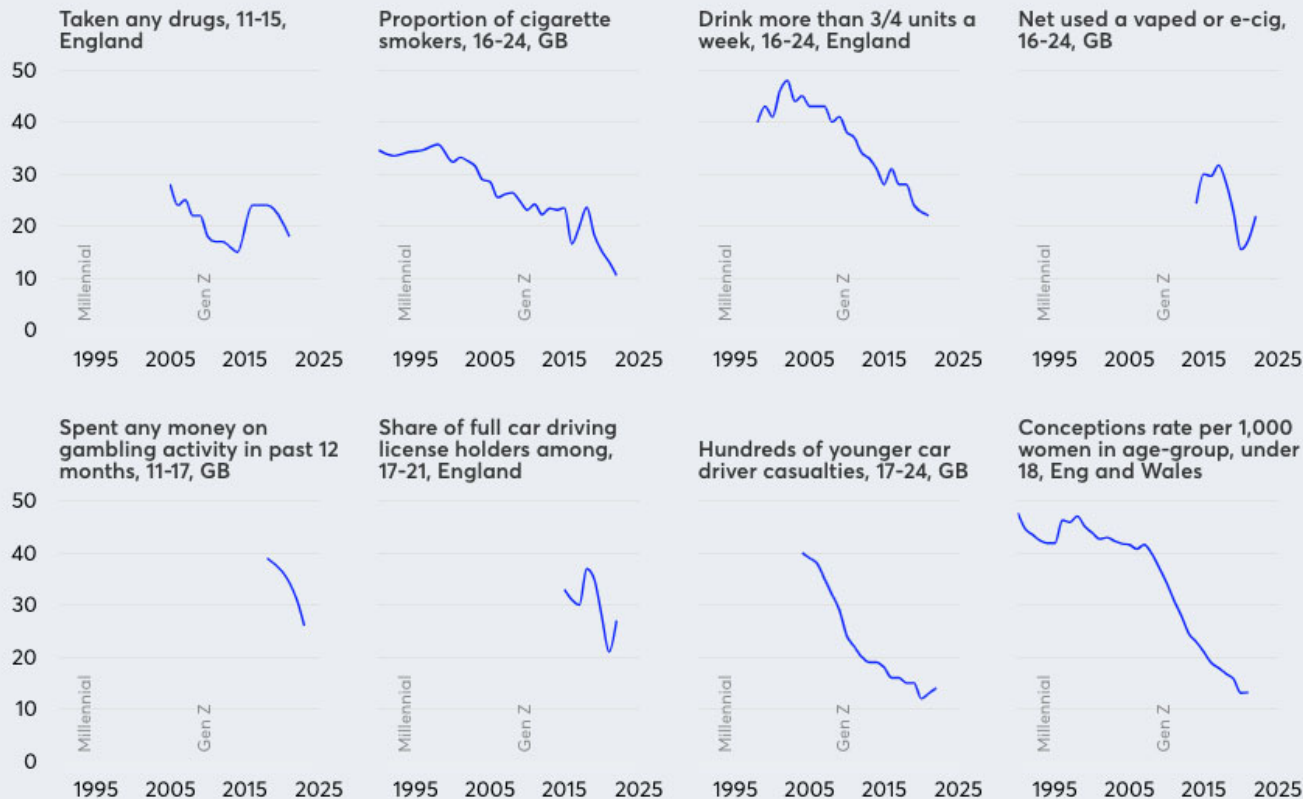
## Notable Decline in Young Adults' Excess Drinking

% Sometimes drink more alcoholic beverages than think you should

	2001-2003	2011-2013	2021-2023	Trend	Change since 2001-2003
<b>Drinkers</b>					
18 to 34	28	28	22		-6
35 to 54	22	22	20		-2
55 and older	10	12	14		4
<b>U.S. adults</b>					
18 to 34	21	18	13		-8
35 to 54	15	14	13		-2
55 and older	5	7	8		3

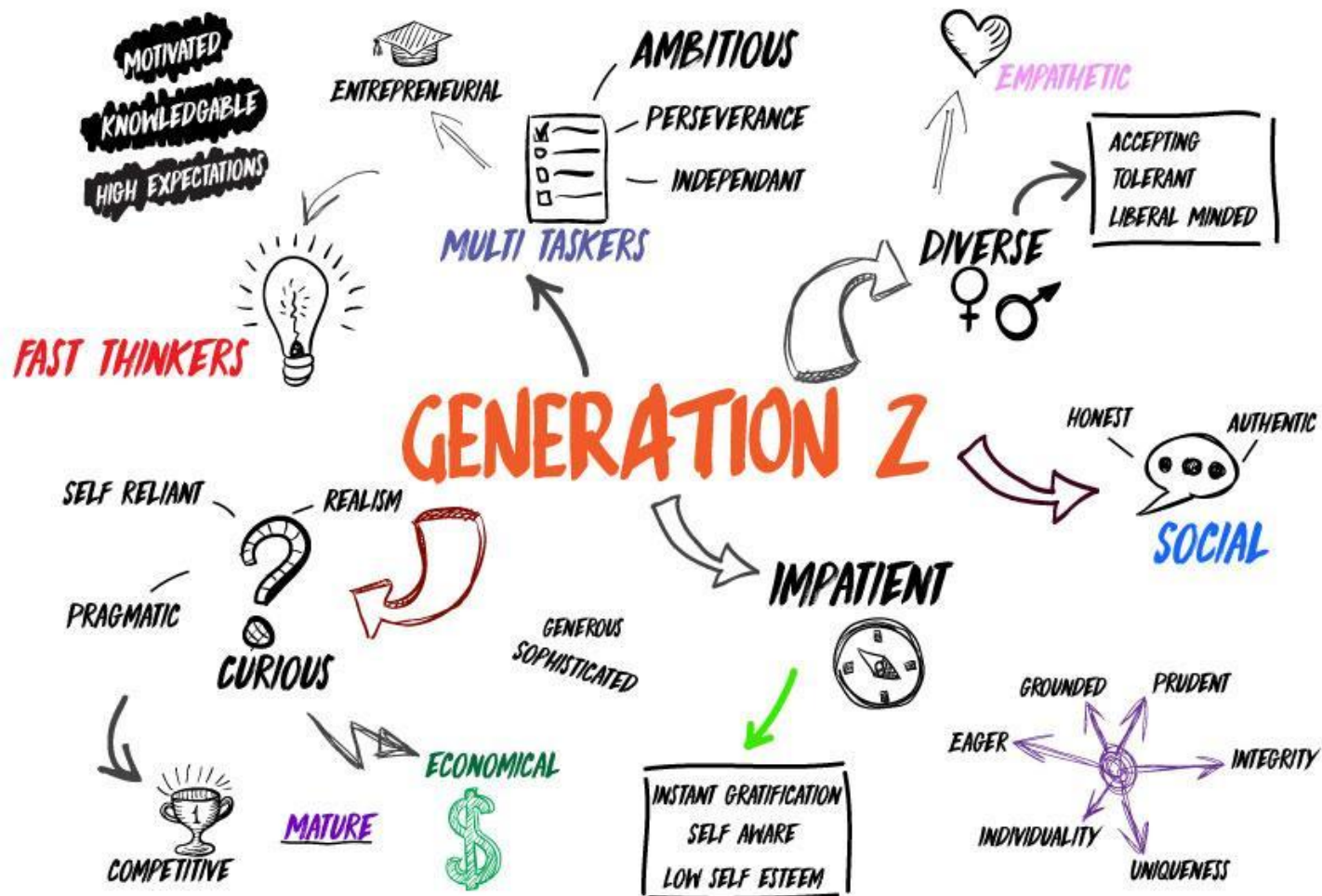
## Risky behaviour among younger people is on the decline

Selected 'risky' behaviour measures through time, various ages and geographies



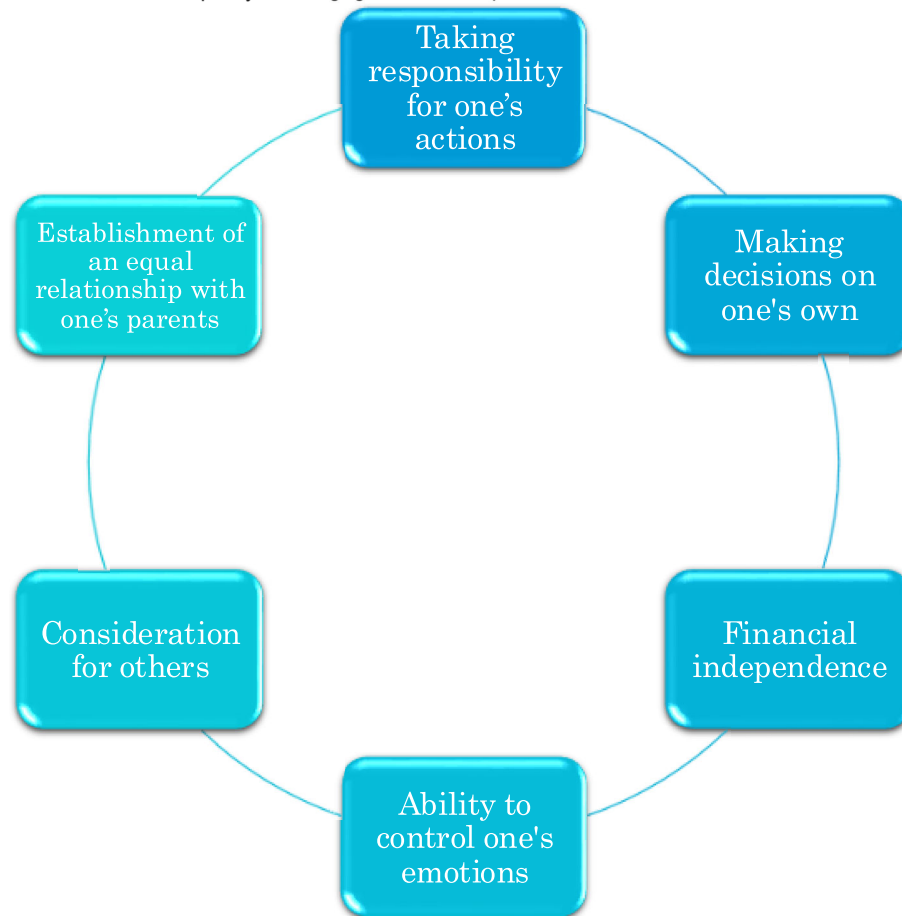
Source: [Taken any drugs, 11-15, England](#), [Cigarette smokers \(GB\)\(%\), 16 - 24, GB](#), [Drank more than 3/4 units last week, 16 - 24, England](#), [Net ever vaped, 16 - 24, GB](#), [Spent any money on gambling activity in past 12 months, 11-17, GB](#), [Driving license holders, 17-20, England](#), [Conceptions at ages under 18](#) [Conception rate per 1,000 women in age-group, Under 18, England and Wales](#), [GB Collisions involving one younger car driver, 17 - 24, GB](#)

Note: Younger car driver casualties are in hundreds and conceptions are per 1,000 women in age group, all other indicators are a share in this age range (%)



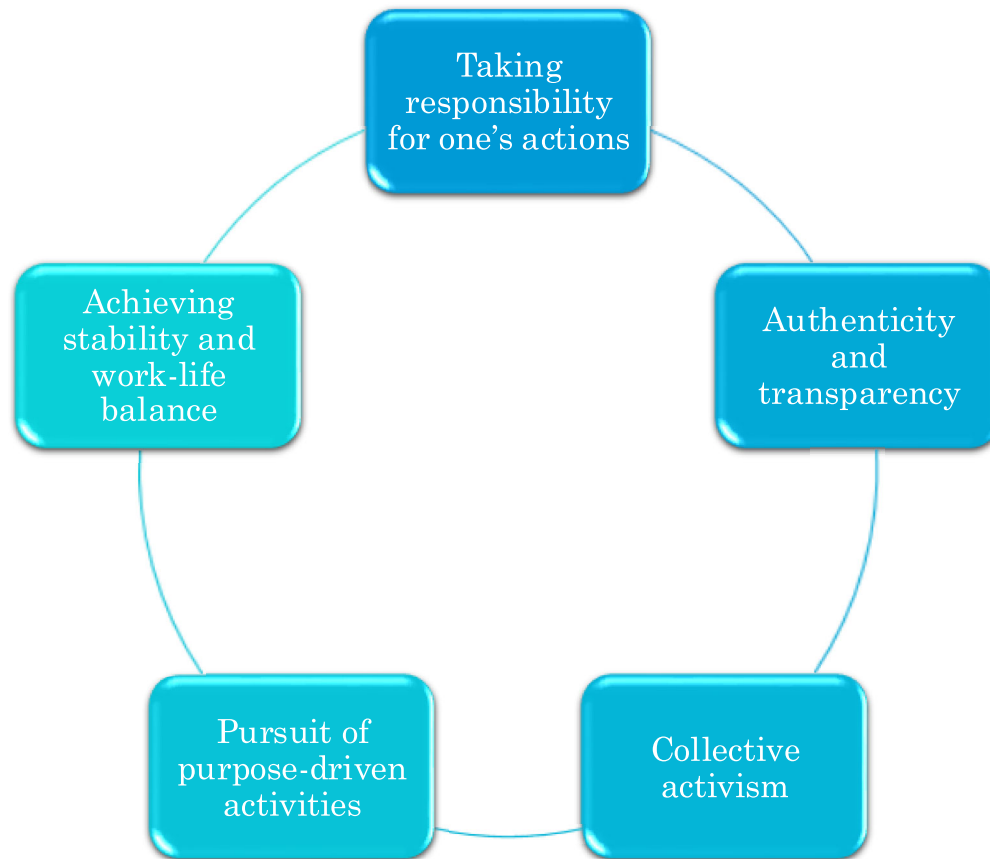
# The subjective experience of adulthood (millennial)

Nelson LJ, Luster SS. 26 "Adulthood" by Whose Definition?: The Complexity of Emerging Adults' Conceptions of Adulthood. The Oxford handbook of emerging adulthood. 2015 Sep 30:421-37





# The subjective experience of adulthood (Gen Z)



# “We must make sense of our own times” (V. Flanagan)

\*Flanagan V. Technology and identity in young adult fiction: The posthuman subject. Springer; 2014



# THE DIGITAL DIFFERENCE



- As reported by a 2025 Statista survey, **99%** of people between 18-29 use the **Internet**. All countries surveyed showed similar trends.
- Gen Zers use up to **3 social media platforms daily**
- Some **95%** of today's emerging adults rely on **smartphones**.
- Nearly all teens (**88%**) are **texters**.
- The same goes for multitasking: nearly 40% of 7th to 12th graders say that they **multitask** frequently, listening to music (43%), using the computer (40%), or watching television (39%). Some neuroscientists worry about how efficient multitasking really is and about its impact on the developing adolescent brain.



The virtual and real are continuous: “the virtually actual”.



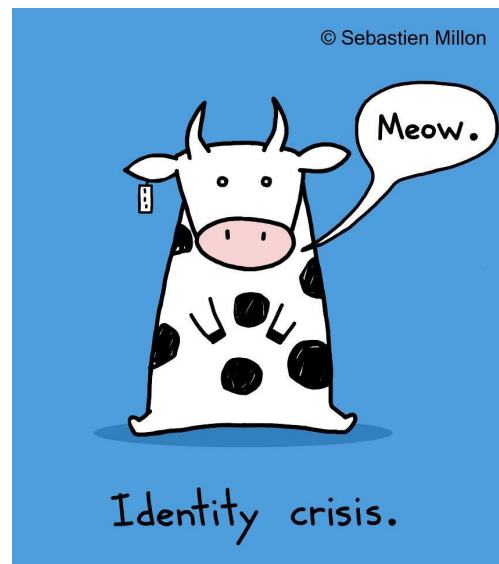
# Adult identity is no longer assumed to be unitary, binary or singular

- It is no longer presumed fixed by heredity, cultural stereotypes and environmental expectations: it has freed itself from the close connection to affirmation by a unified society that Erikson emphasized.
- Identity is a mosaic and the various elements find support in various communities. There is affirmation in a host of groups, online and off, that embrace new identity-complexity and fluidity.
- The research on the attainment of adulthood has been extended to many populations, but by maintaining heteronormative, 20th century adult benchmarks, it may be neglecting the impact of the rapid transformation of society.



# Identity Factors

- Identifications evolve throughout life
- Conscious components include:
  - Sexuality
  - Gender
  - Religion
  - Nationality
  - Belief systems
  - Dietary convictions
  - Political convictions
  - Avatars
  - Fandoms
  - Gamers groups
  - And so on



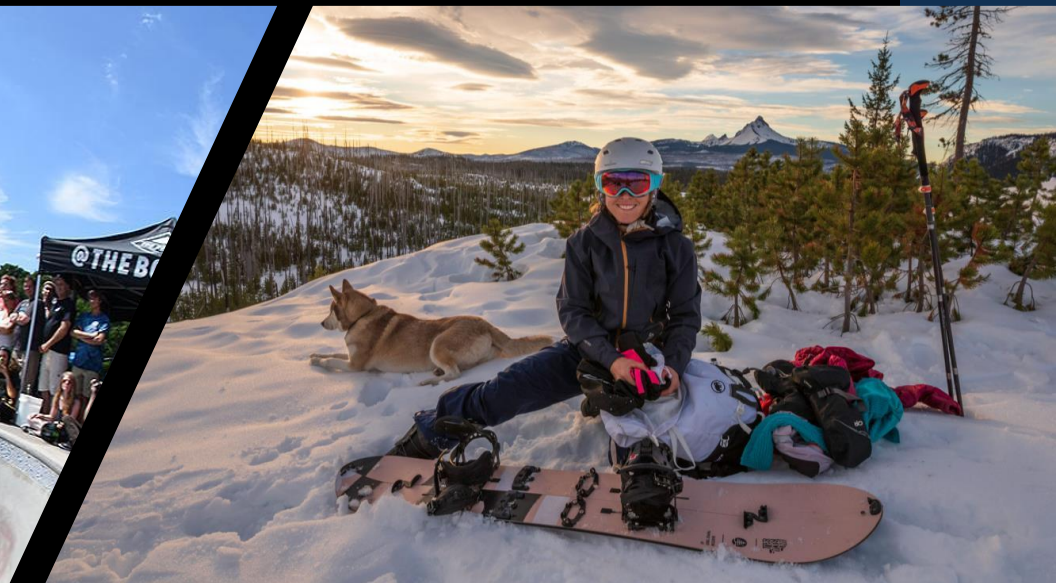
- **Unconscious aspects of identity:**
  - A sense of personal cohesion
  - Stability of self and other representations
  - Relational patterns
  - Habitual modes of managing affective arousal
  - Typical ways of managing anxiety and guilt
  - Self-fantasies and wishes that arise within close relationships
  - Emotional connection to a set of values, beliefs, roles

























**I don't know what I want to be!**

