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“Bearing the Heavy Weight”: The Challenging Experience of Becoming an Adult in Spain

Cecilia Serrano¹ · Eleanor Brown² · Sarah Carrica-Ochoa³ · Javier García-Manglano¹

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Abstract

This article examines how young people in Spain perceive and navigate the transition to adulthood, drawing on qualitative data from 30 in-depth interviews with individuals aged 18 to 32. The study uses a phenomenological approach to examine how Spanish youth define adulthood and identify role models, considering the interplay between individualization and individualism. Findings reveal that while some associate adulthood with opportunities, most emphasize its burdens—the demands, responsibilities, obligations, and the weight of decision-making. This “life is hard” narrative reflects a strong sense of uncertainty and pressure to construct an adult identity without clear societal benchmarks, illustrating the structural impact of individualization. While younger participants tended to associate adulthood with newfound freedoms, the oldest cohort highlighted solitude, acceptance, and the emotional weight of obligations. Gender differences also emerged: women were more likely to stress emotional regulation, care for others, and responsibility, while men more frequently emphasized bravery, risk-taking, and stepping outside one’s comfort zone. Despite individualistic discourse around self-sufficiency, participants often cited parents, particularly mothers, as role models of empathy and strength. By analyzing the overlapping yet distinct effects of structural individualization and cultural individualism, this study helps frame the tensions and difficulties experienced by young people in Spain. It challenges deficit-based narratives of youth “failing to grow up,” showing instead how young Spaniards actively negotiate adulthood and proposing a shift to a more relational perspective. This contributes to broader youth studies by illuminating how social and cultural context shape the experience of becoming an adult in late modern societies.

Keywords Adulthood · Individualization · Individualism · Qualitative · Role models

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

Introduction

In recent decades, the transition from adolescence to adulthood has been portrayed as increasingly prolonged and fragmented. Traditional milestones—such as completing education, securing stable employment, leaving the parental home, or starting a family—are questioned and redefined, weakening the cultural scripts that once structured the adult life course (Settersten et al. 2015; Blatterer 2007). At the same time, this “de-standardization of the life course” has been contrasted with empirical evidence and different theoretical approaches, presenting a more complex picture (Nico 2014). Scholars note that framing adulthood as a set of delayed milestones risks pathologizing youth by implying failure or inadequacy, while also obscuring the diversity of pathways shaped by class, gender, and cultural context (Furlong and Cartmel 2006; Woodman 2009). Others question the assumption of a linear or universal trajectory, pointing out that notions such as “emerging adulthood” (Arnett 2000) are heavily rooted in Western, middle-class experiences and may not capture alternative or relational ways of becoming adult (Côté 2018).

These critical perspectives highlight the need to examine not only traditional markers of adulthood or their structural barriers, such as job precarity and housing insecurity (Côté and Bynner 2008), but also the impact of the broader process of modernization. In late modern societies, young people are increasingly tasked with shaping their own biographies, rendering the life period between adolescence and adulthood flexible and uncertain (Caetano 2014). Consequently, defining adulthood becomes a deeply personal endeavor, often lacking clear reference points.

This process unfolds through two distinct but interrelated dynamics: individualization and individualism. Individualization describes a societal transformation where traditional norms and institutions lose their prescriptive power, requiring individuals to construct their own identities and life trajectories with blurrier or absent preset scripts. As Bauman (2001) puts it, “individualization consists in transforming human identity from a given into a task, and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences” (p. xv). On the other hand, even if becoming an adult implies the same processes and tasks as it did in the past, or in cultures with strong communal ties, the modern process of individualization adds additional burdens on the person by imposing new choices, options, and decisions – surrounded by uncertainty.

In contrast, individualism is a cultural orientation that prioritizes self-reliance and independence, often elevating personal goals above collective obligations (Colombo 2023). While individualization compels young people to navigate an open-ended transition to adulthood, individualism shapes their emphasis on self-sufficiency, sometimes straining social connections (Álvarez-Benavides and Turnbough 2024).

Understanding how youth define adulthood is not merely a theoretical exercise—it illuminates how they manage a changing landscape and balance personal aspirations with social expectations. This study explores how young people in Spain conceptualize adulthood, the attributes they associate with it, and the role models they admire. Since definitions of adulthood are tied to lived experiences (Côté 2000), this inquiry reveals how youth negotiate the overlapping yet distinct processes of individualization and individualism in their journey to adult life.

Defining Adulthood: Between Individualization and Individualism

The concept of individualization has been widely examined in sociological literature (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001; Bauman 2013; Genov 2018). It reflects a modernization process that erodes the traditional social and cultural frameworks that once guided individual lives. As Dawson (2012) notes, “individuals are left to create their own identity free from collective definitions while also experiencing increased individual responsibility” (p. 313). This shift is acutely felt in the transition to adulthood, where young people encounter “subjective discomfort and uncertainty” as they forge adult identities and coherent life narratives (Furlong and Cartmel 2006).

This de-standardization of the life course has fueled debates about the definition of adulthood, and has prompted extensive research on the different levels of meaning – such as intergenerational, normative, ideal, and descriptive (Pitti 2017). While subjective experiences of this transition have been emphasized (Andrew et al. 2006), some analyses overly focus on individualistic traits—such as autonomy or self-reliance—while neglecting the broader social and cultural contexts that shape these perceptions (Hartmann and Swartz 2006). Yet, adulthood is not solely a matter of personal perception; it also involves enacting social roles and meeting expectations tied to maturity (Côté 2000).

Under individualization, the responsibility of defining adulthood shifts to the individual, with traditional external markers becoming less authoritative. Giddens (1991) puts it, individuals “have no choice but to choose.” This is not banal with respect to the perceptions and experiences of young people. To the contrary, to the task of becoming a “socially recognized” adult (Blatterer 2007), a series of sub-tasks are appended: first, the definition of adulthood itself is now open-ended and problematized; second, the specific steps towards adulthood become optional, or a matter of choice; third, they are temporally disembedded. All this amounts to a heavy cognitive burden which demands higher reflexivity: life choices are perpetually questioned and reshaped (Caetano 2014), in what Archer (2012) calls “the reflexive imperative”. The heavy burden of becoming an adult does not end in an apparent (if not always *de facto*) multiplication of possibilities requiring reflexive decisions; rather, it reaches the consequences or outcomes of one’s choices. In late modernity, as social scripts are disregarded, “men and women have no one else to blame for their frustrations and troubles” (Bauman 2001).

To the heavier burden of defining and navigating one’s own path to adulthood in individualized ways, structural conditions contribute additional weight in two ways. First, by disconnecting one’s decisions from the outcome: for instance, even if one decides to invest in higher education, systemic conditions (such as an unexpected economic crisis) might result in a failure to find a stable or qualified job. Second, structural limitations might condition the process of constructing an adult identity: the characteristics of modern capitalism (flexibility, instability, the temporary nature of jobs) might shape the character development of individuals (Sennett 1998), making them less prone to making long-term, stable investments and commitments.

On the other hand, individualism, often reinforced by neoliberal ideology, champions self-making and independence as prerequisites for success. This cultural value can undermine social ties by prioritizing individual achievement over collective

well-being (Colombo 2023). However, individualization and individualism are not the same thing. Individualization is a structural condition that dismantles predefined paths, whereas individualism is an ideological stance that emphasizes self-sufficiency. For example, one might construct one's own biographical path to adulthood by reflexively deciding to strengthen community bonds, rather than relying exclusively on oneself; this would result in a non-individualistic lifestyle, despite operating fully within the process of individualization.

This distinction is critical when examining youth transitions. By analyzing how young people define adulthood in Spain, we disentangle the effects of individualization as they craft their biographies without fixed norms. By exploring their role models, meanwhile, we investigate the influence of individualism, revealing the premium placed on self-reliance.

Spanish Context

Spain offers a particular case for studying young people's experiences of individualization and individualism due to its distinct socio-economic and cultural context. Similar to other Southern European nations, Spain exhibits notable delays in traditional adulthood milestones: young people leave the parental home and have their first child later than most Europeans, and fertility rates rank among the lowest worldwide (Moreno Mínguez 2018; Llorente-Marrón et al. 2020). These trends are driven by structural precariousness, high youth unemployment, temporary contracts, low wages, and limited welfare support, which constrain autonomy and hinder the attainment of conventional adulthood markers (Politikon 2017). Walther (2006) describes this as a "sub-protective youth transition regime," where familial support compensates for institutional deficiencies.

In addition, Spain's late democratic transition in the 1970s and integration into the global economy in the 1980s accelerated a shift from a familistic society to one increasingly shaped by individualistic values. Nevertheless, the ideals of individual meritocracy and the "self-made man" coexist with a recognition of the dependency on a growing diversity of social support from family, friends, etc., making Spain a valuable context for studying how youth experience the path towards defining adulthood (Álvarez-Benavides and Turnbough 2024). It reveals the tensions between structural limitations and cultural ideals, and helps to explore how young people navigate the demands of constructing individual biographies while still embedded in relational, often family-based, networks.

Data and Methods

In this article, we present part of the results of a mixed-methods project exploring the challenges that today's youth face during their transition from adolescence to adulthood in Spain. The project's qualitative component adopted a phenomenological research design to investigate their perspectives and perceptions about adulthood. The phenomenological qualitative research approach is characterized by its focus on exploring and understanding individuals' lived experiences to uncover the essence of

a particular phenomenon. Rooted in the philosophy of phenomenology, this method aims to elucidate the meaning and significance individuals attribute to their experiences (Creswell 2012).

Participants

This research is part of a broader dataset investigating the transition to adulthood. Following the collection of a quantitative and representative sample comprising 1,200 Spanish emerging adults aged 18–32, we sought their willingness to participate in an online interview if subsequently selected. From those who agreed (53%), we categorized them into three age groups, each representing distinct phases in this life period: the transition to higher education or completion of studies (group 1: ages 18–20, $n=8$), the post-education period involving significant decision-making in relational and occupational aspects (group 2: ages 25–28, $n=14$), and the phase considered by many as the conclusion of this period (group 3: ages 30–32, $n=8$). Purposeful sampling was employed to ensure variation and richness of information across sex and age groups. Selection was based on sociodemographic diversity, and while interviewees were located in different parts of Spain, no systematic regional quotas were applied. The final sample comprises 14 Spanish women and 16 Spanish men, half of them living in cities of more than 100,000 inhabitants, with diverse sociodemographic backgrounds. Social class was self-reported by participants, following the same item used in the quantitative phase of the project. This variable, therefore, reflects perceived class position rather than objective socioeconomic indicators such as income or occupation, which is consistent with the phenomenological orientation of this study. Almost half of the participants identified as middle class ($n=14$), while the rest described themselves as upper-middle ($n=6$), upper ($n=1$), lower-middle ($n=3$), or lower class ($n=3$). This distribution suggests a relatively diverse—though not representative—range of perceived social positions within the sample. Most reported being in stable relationships (only 1 reported having children), and 21 participants were employed. For a detailed sociodemographic description of the sample, see Table 1.

Data Analysis

The research team devised semi-structured interviews, which were administered by an external team of professionals in July 2021 and audio recordings were obtained from 30 participants. Conducted in Spanish and online, these interviews had a duration of approximately 45–60 min, enabling the inclusion of participants from all over the country. The interviews were transcribed and reviewed for accuracy and completeness. The interviews explored topics such as adult identity, maturity, priorities, indecision, and relationships. Follow-up prompts were utilized to encourage respondents to elaborate on their responses, ensuring comprehensive coverage of all intended subjects. Before the interviews, informed consent and authorization for recording responses were obtained. The research was approved by the authors' University Ethics Board. All the data analysis was conducted in Spanish, the language of the interview data and the first language for all participants. Code names were trans-

Table 1 Main characteristics of the sample

	Characteristic		Sample's characterization	
Sociodemographic data (class, occupation, education, relational status, and habitat size) were unavailable for three participants. For these cases, only age and gender were collected during the interview stage	Age		The interviewees are aged between 18 and 32: 8 are aged 18–20, 14 are aged 25–28, 8 are aged 30–32.	
	Gender		The sample is composed of 14 females and 16 males.	
	Social class (self-reported)		14 participants identified as middle class, 6 as upper-middle, 1 as upper, 3 as lower-middle, 3 as lower.	
	Occupational status		21 interviewees are working (8 of those combining work and study), 4 are mainly studying, and 2 are looking for work.	
	Educational level		Most interviewees have completed at least high school (11). 7 hold a university degree, 7 have a master's or higher, and 2 have only secondary education.	
	Relational status		15 consider themselves in a stable relationship, 4 are single, 2 are married, 3 live with a partner, 2 are engaged, and 1 is casually dating.	
	Habitat size		14 participants lived in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants, 5 lived in towns between 20,000–100,000 inhabitants, and 8 lived in municipalities with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants.	

lated for the writing here, and all direct quotes were translated collaboratively by the researchers, who were three native Spanish speakers and a native English speaker, all of whom were fluent in both languages.

The analytic process was grounded in an interpretative, thematic approach. At the outset, the authors developed an initial framework to guide the reading of the data, focusing on whether participants referred to external, structural dimensions of adulthood or more internal, psychological aspects. Three of the authors independently coded each transcript, identifying how participants positioned themselves concerning these dimensions. Coding was supported by NVivo software, decisions were then compared, and any divergences were discussed with the fourth author until a shared interpretation was reached. This process was iterative and dialogical, allowing for continuous refinement of both the framework and the themes that began to emerge from the data. As analysis progressed, new themes surfaced that went beyond the original coding structure. It became evident that the external-internal binary was not always consistent with how participants themselves framed their experiences. For instance, references to the “challenges” of adulthood draw simultaneously on external pressures and subjective interpretations, making them difficult to classify strictly as external or internal. Rather than forcing participants’ accounts into this dichotomy, we refined our approach to emphasize three interrelated facets that emerged more clearly from the narratives: the opportunities associated with adulthood, the demands and responsibilities it entails, and the personal qualities required to navigate this life stage. This shift allowed us to capture the complexity of participants’ perspectives without reducing them to a rigid internal/external distinction. In a final stage of the analysis, the team considered whether any thematic patterns could be observed across

different age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, or between male and female participants. While such comparisons were not the primary aim, they provided an additional lens through which to consider how experiences and understandings of adulthood might vary within the broader sample.

We were interested in interpreting how young people make sense of their experiences of becoming adults. Our focus was on how young people see, understand and experience the transition to adulthood, both in terms of their perceptions of what it means to be an adult in principle, and how they are experiencing that transition personally. Firstly, we considered how they understood becoming an adult, focusing on questions in the interview data about what adulthood is, whether that is the same as maturity, and to what extent they consider themselves to be a mature adult. Secondly, we drew on the data about the role models of adulthood from questions about their own role models and what they perceive to be an ideal model of an adult. In the sections that follow, all direct quotes are referred to by the participant's sex and age.

What Does It Mean to Become an Adult?

Becoming an adult is widely understood as stepping into a phase of life marked by new and unavoidable challenges. Participants in the study did not seem to clearly distinguish adulthood from maturity. Both terms expressed a sense of resignation about the responsibilities that come with adult life, often depicting it as a harsh reality where “life is hard” and individuals must confront difficulties on their own, without the support they might have relied on during childhood or youth. Although some mentioned that one could be mature without being an adult by age, they also said that an adult who was not mature was not really an adult. These responses suggest that they think of adulthood in terms of an internal process—maturing—rather than in terms of social references. The overlap between the two terms may thus reflect the intertwining of structural and psychological dimensions of individualization, where external markers of adulthood are less available and young people increasingly define maturity through personal reflexivity and emotional regulation.

While a small group of participants highlighted the freedoms of adulthood, nearly all participants linked adulthood to the acquisition of new responsibilities, often expressed through narratives of obligations, worries, or problems. The subsections below explore these themes in terms of the opportunities, demands, and personal qualities associated with adulthood. In doing so, we illustrate the process of individualization (making decisions and lifting burdens without external guidelines) as well as the growing orientation towards individualism (being on one's own, facing responsibilities alone, without communal systems of support).

Adulthood as Opportunities

Amid the focus on challenges, one theme stood out as a positive contrast to youth: the acquisition of freedom and rights. These types of opportunities were mentioned by about a third of the participants. For some, adulthood brought stability and independence, which several participants translated into personal freedom. Far from being mundane, this freedom was something they learned to appreciate and enjoy through

maturity, which some saw as leading to happiness. As one participant put it, “It means more freedom when it comes to making important decisions” (Woman, 19). This view reflects a specifically individualized stance of adulthood: where in other contexts one would view it as a stage of higher commitment (to country, to family, to community), now it is largely viewed with no reference to external norms and dependencies.

Being an adult also brings with it more rights, new discoveries, and the ability to decide what you want to do and when, and to be “the owner of your life” (Man, 28). Within this, it was often implied that economic stability was what granted the independence and freedom that a mature adult is able to enjoy. They talked about the “rights to vote, have a car, have more freedom” (Man, 25), and about being able to “be yourself and do whatever you want” (Woman, 32). This perspective was more common among younger participants (groups 1 and 2) and was evenly split across genders.

The Demands of Adulthood

The majority of themes that emerged from the data underscored the demanding nature of adulthood, framing it as a period of significant challenges. Following our argument that individualization contributes to additional demands and decisions, we identify that extra load in five expressions which are arguably more acute in modern societies: you can’t just let yourself go anymore; there are many things you have to do; the heavy burden placed on your shoulders; you can’t mess up now; problems can make you mature more quickly.

Almost half the participants —slightly more men than women— referred to the idea that *you can’t just let yourself go anymore*. A frequent observation was the loss of youthful spontaneity. Participants noted that adulthood restricted activities like going out partying, playing games, having fun, or simply letting oneself go. Some felt they were not yet mature due to their “impulsive” or “spontaneous” tendencies, while others saw maturity in their ability to recognize that “this is not what is appropriate now” (Woman, 20). Maturity meant looking forward, thinking before acting, prioritizing the future over the moment, and avoiding “putting one’s personal pleasure first” (Man, 30), “living for the moment but evading responsibilities” (Man, 30), or “being led astray” (Woman, 19).

This shift was tied to increased constraints on one’s life, requiring individuals to “know your limits” (Woman, 20) and prioritize necessary tasks over desires. Some participants framed this sense of not being able to do whatever they wanted as becoming more realistic. Becoming an adult meant letting go of what you want to do and doing what you have to do. This heightened sense of limitation is fueled by the context of individualization, in which (ideal or potential) options are multiplied, with adulthood implying a greater sense of renunciation —by implying more alternatives to discard. Youth recognized the benefits of making decisions, but commented that “the path forward is no longer full of idealism, but realistic” (Man, 27). This theme resonated strongly with younger participants (group 1).

Over a third of the participants framed adulthood as a series of unavoidable obligations, expressed as things they *have to do* or feeling obliged to “take charge” (Woman, 19). Tasks like paying for things, having to work, maintaining a car, or managing

daily chores— “having to do the shopping, having to cook, having to make decisions...” (Man, 31)—were seen as burdensome yet essential. One participant summarized, “An adult has to take charge of all these things” (Woman, 30), even when unappealing (Woman, 28). This focus was slightly more prominent among women.

There was a feeling of having to “abide by rules, expectations, and laws” (Woman, 26). This is also related to feelings that becoming an adult means conforming to norms and expectations of society and thinking about “how people see you” (Man, 25). It was another level of acceptance of something unideal, but inevitable, about adulthood... “because I have adult responsibilities, now I occupy, how do you say it... a cog in the system” (Man, 26).

Closely tied to obligations, another theme was *the heavy burden* of decision-making and problem-solving in adulthood, which is characteristic of the reflexive imperative inherent to the individualization process. More than half the participants spoke of a “weight” (Woman, 19) or responsibility “on one’s shoulders” (Man, 19), requiring them to “take on” challenges (Woman, 26) and accept life’s difficulties. Adulthood meant “facing challenges” (Woman, 26), making “difficult decisions” (Man, 28), and resolving “problems” (Woman, 20). One noted, “There are situations where there will be setbacks and you will have to face up to them” (Man, 30).

Taking on an incredible amount of problems... everything seems lovely, but there comes a moment when you realize an enormous amount of responsibilities, of problems every day... You have to keep going... whether you are happy about it or not (Man, 28).

This weight for many participants was framed in terms of dealing with “worries” (Woman, 27) or having to suffer in adulthood, in a way that was not present in their youth. “You always have something in your head to do” (Woman, 31) and you just have to “keep chipping away to see what comes out” (Man, 26). This constant exercise of reflexive deliberation illustrates structural conditions where there may be “unexpected situations to face” (Woman, 26) and you may need to “struggle and fight” (Man, 28) to get what you need. There seemed to be a general feeling that the sheer “quantity of responsibilities” meant dealing with many “problems” (Man, 28) and that there are so many “things to worry about” (Woman, 28). Overall, there was a sense from the participants that being an adult meant having to “face life in a different way” (Woman, 28) and “sometimes sacrifice personal wellbeing” (Man, 30).

Mundane tasks like paying “bills and rent” (Man, 28) dominated these concerns, with one participant stressing the importance of planning and saving. This theme was more evident among older participants (group 3) and evenly distributed across genders and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The seriousness of adulthood was underscored by the weight of consequences. Almost a third of the participants highlighted having to face consequences and the need to “overcome errors” because decisions “weigh heavy” (Man, 27). Adulthood meant “*you can’t mess up now*” (Man, 25), as actions had far-reaching impacts: “In fact, everything you say and how you relate to others has consequences, not only for you, but also further afield” (Woman, 26). Personal accountability was key: “if you make a mistake, it has to be you who faces the consequences and it can’t be anyone

else, like your parents or tutors” (Woman, 27). This focus was stronger among group 2 and women. It is also a discourse that emerged slightly stronger from the low- and low-medium-class groups, and which resonates deeply with the individualization process, where the individual feels solely responsible for his or her decisions, mistakes, and successes.

Despite the difficulties, several participants saw a silver lining: adversity could hasten maturity, as *experiences can make you mature more quickly*. Some felt that personal problems and navigating life’s highs and lows fostered growth. Becoming a mature adult was tied to experience rather than age, with challenges shifting perspectives from egocentrism to a broader outlook. This theme was more common among women.

Personal Qualities Required to Face Adulthood

Beyond the opportunities and demands of adulthood, participants identified personal qualities essential for coping with the challenges of adulthood. In line with the logic of individualization (where structural or traditional milestones like employment, housing, or family formation no longer represent universal markers of adulthood), personal responsibility was universally cited as a defining trait, leading to a set of specific attributes that one needs to develop to become an adult.

First, *acceptance* of life’s harsh realities was vital: being an adult meant “being responsible” (Woman, 25), “accepting the way it is” (Man, 19), and being “capable of making decisions without only thinking of the most pleasurable outcome” (Man, 30). This realization, though sometimes painful, became easier over time (Man, 27). Second, *resilience* was crucial for “overcoming” difficulties (Woman, 20) and “managing” problems (Woman, 32), with participants admiring those who could “cope with situations” (Man, 25). *Bravery* was also valued, especially among men, who spoke of stepping outside their “comfort zone” (Man, 19) and facing “conflicts” (Man, 18) or “dangers” (Woman, 20). *Determination* and *decisiveness* were highlighted as well, with adults needing to be “decisive” (Woman, 32), “stand up to problems” (Woman, 25), and be “harder with things, stronger” (Woman, 25). Many participants, particularly the women, rejected impulsiveness, favoring *rationality* (Woman, 27) and a “cool head” (Woman, 20) over acting “on impulse” (Woman, 30). Finally, adulthood required the *ability* to achieve goals, make independent decisions, and enjoy life. One noted, “an immature person is not capable of... enjoying their work for example” (Woman, 30). Younger participants (group 1) emphasized bravery, while older groups focused on acceptance and resilience.

You’re on Your Own

A strong theme of individualism emerged, with participants stressing *self-sufficiency*. For almost all the participants, adulthood meant “resolving your own issues” (Woman, 30), “living for yourself” (Woman, 30), and being “self-sufficient” (Man, 30). It involved “taking control” (Woman, 26) and making “your own decisions” (Woman, 32), as one stated: “In whatever area, you are more alone.... You make the decisions, it all falls on you” (Man, 26). There was a feeling that you need to cope

with all the challenges alone, “without depending” on your parents or anyone else. Indeed, you need to “face up to things alone” and do it “without help” (Man, 19). They were clear that “it is you who has to worry about it” (Woman, 25).

This *sense of isolation* was more pronounced among older participants (groups 2 and 3) and noted by two-thirds of both men and women, though less so by group 1, possibly due to ongoing familial support.

What Does a Model Adult Look Like?

As participants discussed their adult role models, a diverse narrative emerged, with an emphasis on a culture of work and effort, intricately tied to the perceived challenging nature of adulthood—“life is hard”, and to the individualistic notion that success depends on the individual’s decisions and self-work.

More than half of the participants initially reported having “no concrete model” (Man, 26), reinforcing self-reliance. Some cited “negative role models” (Woman, 25) to avoid, while others admired traits across multiple individuals, creating a composite ideal. When asked to choose characteristics of a specific role model, most participants said they admired those people who they perceived as being able to deal with life’s challenges.

Parents as a Reference

When prompted to think of a specific role model in their lives, most mentioned one or both of their parents, with many mentioning both parents and a few mentioning either their father or their mother. These were evenly spread across the age groups, with slightly more men than women making these comments.

Parents were seen as role models, “simply because they are [their] parents” (Man, 28) and because they had “raised [them] to have certain values” (Man, 18), they had taught them, and for the ways they cared for them. They were obvious role models because “at the end of the day, they are adults, they are parents” (Woman, 30) and “everyone has their parents as a reference of adults” (Man, 28).

Another theme that emerged strongly from the analysis of the role models, was the value of being caring, kind and empathetic. One participant talked about the importance of only doing what you want in life as long as you do not have a negative impact on those around you, or you are trying to have a positive impact. They said: “All the people that I really admire and who have contributed something to me have that sense of always helping others. ... Empathy is difficult to find in a person that isn’t an adult, in the models I have” (Man, 28).

Interestingly, most of the participants, men and women equally, who talked about the importance of care and empathy in a role model, referred to their mothers. They talked about dedication to the family, knowing how to be in different situations and how to act with people in a good way, giving kindness, affection and love, and being emotionally responsible with the extended family. Mothers were also seen as a source of emotional “strength” and a symbol of being an adult. This was slightly less prominent in the older group.

Role Models Dealing with Life's Challenges

Most participants talked about the sorts of things they admired in other adults. Some of the themes that emerged were similar to the things they saw as key aspects of adulthood, relating mainly to the overarching narrative of “life’s hard”. They discussed admiring those who were able to overcome adversity and manage difficult things, or to be brave to face challenges. Almost half specifically focused on people who work hard and make an effort, and in some cases, noted that often they had to do this on their own –following the logic of individualism.

There were several themes in terms of aspects that were admired, which all tended towards the idea of succeeding at life despite its challenges. The first was that they admired people who seemed to manage to have a good balance in life and who had found stability in a range of areas. For instance, one person wanted to be like their older brother: “he is well informed. He works and socializes a lot, he is family-oriented and he has time to play sports. He’s organized and he gives a lot to life and so he’s getting to where he wants to be” (Woman, 20). The idea of having stability was key here: “family stability, economic stability, professional stability ... stability at home ... it implies having a stable life” (Man, 19).

Reflecting the internal characteristics associated with adulthood, resilience was also key as *overcoming and managing* were central. When discussing role models the language reflected the idea that life is difficult and a “good adult” has to overcome “whatever circumstances might happen” (Man, 20), so they admire those that “always manage to get through it” (Man, 20), “who never give up despite all the difficulties and problems... saying *I can do it*” (Woman, 18). The need to be *brave* in the face of life’s challenges was another dimension that was discussed. For example, facing precarity or complicated situations, you need to have the “bravery” ... to say “I’m going to take risks” (Man, 28). Or when an unexpected problem arises, being able to face it bravely (Woman, 26).

Perhaps the most admired quality in a role model was having a culture of *hard work* and making an effort. Most participants noted how they had observed their parents have to work hard to succeed. One mentioned how their mother had “worked hard since she was very young... never letting an opportunity be missed” (Woman, 30). This culture of hard work and effort was reflected in someone who “never renounced their responsibilities or obligations” (Man, 27), made a lot of effort, and worked in order to “have something in the future” (Man, 19). The key idea was that “nothing in life is given to you” (Woman, 19).

With all these challenges, participants also noted that those they most admired had done it all “on their own”. The characteristics of a role model also reflected the theme that came up in what an adult looks like or having to face the challenges of adulthood alone; the need to “not depend on anyone else and be independent” (Man, 20). It is admirable to be able to face life’s challenges alone:

Because she is someone who has faced many problems alone, without help from anyone, because she has basically been alone. She brought me up alone, ... and got on with everything alone. ... So, she is my role model. (Woman, 18)

Discussion

Our study explores how Spanish youth define, experience, and reference adulthood, drawing on interviews with 30 young adults aged 18 to 32. Set within a society shaped by enduring familistic traditions, emerging postmodern values, and the aftermath of recent economic crises, this research captures the complex realities of growing up in contemporary Spain. These rich findings resist simple summaries; we argue that these are best understood through the dual lenses of individualization and individualism—two interconnected yet distinct social processes. Individualization describes the modern necessity to carve out personal paths amid fading traditional guidelines, while individualism reflects a cultural valorization of self-reliance and autonomy.

Although some participants linked adulthood to newfound freedoms, most highlighted its inherent difficulties. This prevailing sense that adult life is “hard” resonates with the concept of individualization in two key ways. First, the absence of clear societal benchmarks leaves young people unassisted as they navigate uncertain terrain and they define their own trajectories: the burden feels heavier for them as they have to question themselves and their decisions constantly, without the “compass” of communal norms and traditions. Additionally, they shoulder full responsibility for their decisions and the outcomes that follow. This aligns with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (2001) view that individualization transforms life trajectories into “do-it-yourself biographies,” with Giddens’ (1991) idea of the constant negotiation of lifestyle choices among a diversity of options, or with Archer’s (2007) concept of the reflexive imperative—the obligation to practice reflexivity, to make sense of their own lives, plan their paths, and justify their choices. In sum, young people perceive a strong sense of ambivalence between their newfound sense of personal autonomy and the realization that success and failure rest solely on their shoulders.

Participants frequently emphasized the obligations, social expectations, and behavioral norms tied to adulthood, such as the pressure to maintain composure and meet responsibilities. This echoes Furlong and Cartmel’s (2006) insight that, although “the collective foundations of social life have become more obscure, they continue to provide powerful frameworks which constrain young people’s experiences and life chances” (p.138). Paradoxically, as Woodman (2009) suggests, the lack of normative structure, far from liberating, becomes a constraint, intensifying the psychological burdens of modernity. This is supported in our data, as we observed that participants speak about being an adult more in terms of personal and psychological characteristics, rather than just as a set of transitions and roles. This explains the proliferation of frameworks that emphasize the psychological—a sort of bottom-up approach. Our study does not negate the importance of the subjective, but highlights the structural underlying forces of individualization and individualism, balancing what at times has been an over-psychologizing view of this life stage.

The “weight” of responsibility described by participants further supports Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (2001) argument that individualization dissolves collective scripts and redefines identity as a self-directed endeavor. This burden manifests in the need to face the consequences of one’s actions, amplifying the tension between autonomy and accountability. The ways Spanish youth negotiate these tensions deserve further consideration.

Our findings also suggest that individualization may give rise to individualism, though not inevitably (Colombo 2023). Some participants defined adulthood as “being on your own” or “doing it all by yourself,” embracing a self-sufficient, “self-made” ideal that prioritizes independence over interdependence. This individualistic streak is evident in their admiration for role models who succeeded “despite all odds” through personal effort. Also, it is notable that there is a lack of references to parenthood in their views of adult life – nobody referenced children when defining adulthood. In the Spanish context of persistently low fertility rates, with only one participant in our sample being a parent and the national mean age at first childbirth among the highest in Europe, this disconnection between parenthood and the meaning of adulthood is not surprising. Parenthood today tends to be understood as a personal and delayed decision, one that takes place after the achievement of adulthood rather than as a constitutive marker of becoming an adult.

Yet, this narrative coexists with an appreciation for relational bonds, as some have suggested (Álvarez-Benavides and Turnbough 2024). Many highlighted as vital the empathy and care of their parents, especially mothers, and some aspired to emulate these qualities themselves. This tension reveals a disconnect: while their theoretical discourse leans individualistic, they do recognize the role of some key interpersonal relationships in their lives – family in general, but most frequently parents. This apparent contradiction points to the need for a more relational understanding of adulthood—one that unfolds within, and sometimes against, the pressures of an increasingly individualistic society. In this light, the self is not simply an autonomous project, but one shaped through networks of care, reciprocity, and responsibility (Donati and Archer 2015). For some, adulthood involves balancing the expectation of independence with the emotional and practical significance of relational ties. Resolving this conflict—crafting a relational adulthood in an individualistic society—emerges as a central challenge for today’s youth. This calls for a shift in perspective: from viewing adulthood as complete self-sufficiency to recognizing it as a condition deeply embedded in social bonds.

Finally, while our aim was not to produce a comparative analysis, some differences between groups emerged that are worth noting. The youngest participants (18–20) appeared slightly more optimistic in their view of adulthood, which they often associated with gaining rights and freedom. They were less likely to express a sense of being ‘on their own’ and instead described adulthood in terms of lost spontaneity and the need to ‘be brave’ in the face of new risks. In contrast, participants in the 25–28 age group were more attuned to the consequences of their decisions and the growing weight of responsibility, a theme that became even more pronounced among those aged 30–32, who expressed a stronger sense of solitude and the burden of obligations, albeit with a greater sense of calm and acceptance.

Both men and women referred to responsibility, effort and self-sufficiency as central to adulthood. While our study did not undertake a full gender analysis, some of their narratives reproduced gendered imaginaries of what an adult looks like. Male participants tended to emphasize bravery, risk-taking and standing up to challenges, echoing cultural ideals of active, self-reliant masculinity (e.g. hegemonic masculinity). Female participants more frequently invoked emotional regulation and the ability to “manage” or “hold everything together”, aligning with traditional models of

femininity, while also mentioning characteristics traditionally considered masculine, such as rationality (Connell 2005). Gendered expectations were especially visible in the role model section: mothers were admired almost unanimously for emotional strength, care and dedication to family networks, even among men.

Although our sample included participants from lower, middle, and upper socioeconomic backgrounds, we did not observe systematic differences in how young people from different class positions defined adulthood. However, socioeconomic background did mildly shape the intensity with which certain themes were experienced. For instance, the discourse of “you can’t mess up now” and the fear of consequences emerged more strongly among participants from lower- and lower-middle-class backgrounds, which suggests a heightened awareness that errors carry greater risk when fewer resources or safety nets are available (Furlong and Cartmel 2006). It is noteworthy that all participants from lower or lower-middle class backgrounds referred explicitly to financial concerns—such as paying bills, managing expenses, or achieving economic independence—when describing what it means to be an adult. These issues were also present among some (but not all) participants from other class positions, suggesting that material responsibility is a shared expectation, but more normalized by those at the bottom half of the (self-perceived) distribution of social class. Altogether, these differences reinforce the idea that young people’s responses to individualization are shaped not only by structural conditions but also by identity positions linked to age, gender, or class (Côté and Levine 2015).

Approximately half of our participants lived in large cities and the rest in smaller or rural localities, but our exploratory analysis did not reveal clear differences by habitat size. Still, given that processes of individualization may be experienced differently in rural and urban environments, this remains an important avenue for future research. It is also important to consider that the interviews were conducted in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, a period marked by uncertainty and social readjustment, which may have influenced participants’ reflections on responsibility, autonomy, and the fragility of adult life.

In conclusion, far from simply illustrating reluctance to grow up, our study reframes this discourse, revealing how Spanish youth grapple with the demands of individualization and with individualism’s push toward self-sufficiency. In Spain’s particular context, where economic precarity meets familistic roots, these dynamics underscore the challenges of balancing autonomy with connection. Future research could delve deeper into how individualization and individualism intersect, considering different circumstances and identities, and exploring the mediating role of family ties. By illuminating these tensions, our work enriches broader debates on youth, identity, and social change, offering insights that resonate beyond Spain to the study of adulthood’s evolving meaning.

Author contributions Cecilia Serrano and Javier García-Manglano designed the study and developed the interview protocol. They oversaw the data collection process, including the cleaning and transcription of the interviews. Cecilia Serrano defined the research questions and conducted the literature review, and developed the theoretical framework with Javier García-Manglano. Eleanor Brown, Sarah Carrica, and Cecilia Serrano carried out the qualitative analysis, with Sarah and Eleanor primarily responsible for drafting the methods and results sections. All four authors contributed to writing and revising the discussion section. The manuscript was written and reviewed collaboratively by all four authors.

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Data Availability The raw data contained in this manuscript is not openly available for download. The list of questions and the coding manuals are also not openly available, but may be obtained from the corresponding author if needed. All the materials used in the study are not openly available for download. This study did not include a pre-registration plan for data collection and/or analysis.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Navarra (2021.018 project) and was conducted in accordance with institutional guidelines and ethical standards for research involving human participants, aligned with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants were informed about the nature of the research and provided informed consent prior to participating in the research. The research was conducted according to the approved protocols.

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Authors and Affiliations

Cecilia Serrano¹  · **Eleanor Brown**²  · **Sarah Carrica-Ochoa**³  ·
Javier García-Manglano¹ 

✉ Cecilia Serrano
acserrano@unav.es

¹ Institute for Culture and Society, University of Navarra, Pamplona, Spain

² Department of Education, University of York, York, UK

³ Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Navarra, Pamplona, Spain