# "You Gotta Be Able to Pay Your Own Way": Canadian News Media Discourse and Young Adults' Subjectivities of Successful Adulting

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*Abstract*. Youth transitions to adulthood and traditional markers of adulthood are becoming more fluid, uncertain, and extended in contemporary societies. Despite these shifts, public discourses surrounding young adult transitional trajectories are dominantly informed by a linear benchmark perspective. This framework positions establishing financial autonomy with the goal of permanently leaving the parental home as central to successful adulthood. In this paper, we integrate textual news media and interview data to critically interrogate contemporary public discourses of adulting in tandem with Canadian young adults' subjective understandings of adulthood. We conduct Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) using two complementary data sources: (1) a selection of Canadian news media addressing youth transitions to adulthood ($n = 44$), and (2) interviews with Canadian young adults, assessing their perceptions and experiences of adulthood ($n = 20$). Our findings reveal that media and personalized constructions of successful adulthood are synonymous with financial independence and responsibility. These social norms reflect and shape young adults' subjective meanings of adulthood and inform the ways of being that young people imagine as ideal.

**Keywords:** youth transitions; adulting; discourse analyses; media representations; boomerang kids; subjectivities

*Résumé*. Les transitions des jeunes vers l'âge adulte et les marqueurs traditionnels de l'âge adulte deviennent plus fluides, incertains et étendus dans les sociétés contemporaines. Malgré ces changements, les discours publics sur les trajectoires de transition des jeunes adultes sont principalement éclairés par une perspective de référence linéaire. Ce cadre positionne l'établissement de l'autonomie financière dans le but de quitter définitivement le domicile parental comme un élément central de la réussite de l'âge adulte. Dans cet article, nous

intégrons des médias d'actualité textuels et des données d'entrevue pour interroger de manière critique les discours publics contemporains sur l'âge adulte en tandem avec la compréhension subjective qu'ont les jeunes adultes canadiens de l'âge adulte. Nous effectuons une analyse du discours foucaldienne (ADF) à l'aide de deux sources de données complémentaires : (1) une sélection de médias d'information canadiens traitant des transitions des jeunes vers l'âge adulte (n = 44), et (2) des entrevues avec de jeunes adultes canadiens, évaluant leurs perceptions et expériences de l'âge adulte (n = 20). Nos résultats révèlent que les médias et les constructions personnalisées d'une vie adulte réussie sont synonymes d'indépendance financière et de responsabilité. Ces normes sociales reflètent et façonnent la signification subjective qu'ont les jeunes adultes de l'âge adulte et informent les manières d'être que les jeunes imaginent comme idéales.

**Mots Clés:** transitions des jeunes; âge adulte; analyses de discours; représentations médiatiques; enfants boomerang; subjectivités

## Introduction and Context

"Adulthood" is a dynamic and elastic phase in the life course that varies socio-culturally, historically, and geographically. Public discourses—for example, popularized notions of adulthood propagated in print and online media—naturalize particular representations of adulthood at given moments in time. While such discourses are tentative and fluid, the norms they promote as ideal nonetheless impact how emerging and young adults understand themselves and act as adults within specific historical contexts. However, while adulthood is widely acknowledged as a social construct that is contingent on time and place (see, for example, Arnett 2015; Mary 2014, Mitchell 2007), there is a paucity of research critically examining how macro-level discourses of adulthood inform and reflect young peoples' subjective understandings of themselves as adults.

In this paper, we extend existing literature on youth transitions to adulthood by bridging two sociological dimensions that are generally considered separately in youth studies: the micro level of interactions, where subjective meanings of adulthood are lived, and the macro level of ideology, where dominant constructs of adulthood circulate. We employ Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (Parker 1992; Willig 2000, 2014, 2015) to illuminate the shaping influence of public discourses of adulting on young adults' subjective meanings of adulthood. Empirically, we bridge micro- and macro-level domains by integrating two complementary data sources: (1) Canadian news media articles addressing young adult life-

course transitions, and (2) semi-structured interviews with Canadian young adults assessing their understandings of adulthood. In considering public discourses and young adults' narratives simultaneously, we shed light on the discursive and ideological shaping of contemporary norms of adulthood, and we illuminate how young adults reflect social structures and make meaning of dominant constructs.

## Public Discourses of Successful Adulthood in Contemporary North American Culture

North American culture is characterized by strong expectations that children become independent, functioning, and contributing members of society. Indeed, popular understandings of adulthood have remained relatively consistent for decades, although crises and moral panics in relation to youth—albeit with shifting sets of concerns and issues—have long been a feature of public discussion, especially in sensationalist media accounts (see, for example, Mitchell 2007). In North America, adulthood remains broadly understood as a stable, irreversible stage in the life course characterized by the attainment of key time-graded benchmarks such as graduating from secondary school, gaining full-time employment, moving out of the home of origin, getting married or partnered, and building a family (Panagakis 2015; Settersten and Ray 2010; Waters 2011).

While popular understandings of adulthood have remained relatively consistent over time (see, for example, *New York Times* 2007 and *The Atlantic* 2016), academic literature documents that transitions to adulthood are becoming increasingly fluid, uncertain, and extended (Flynn 2020; Forrest and Yip 2012; Mazurik, Knudson, and Tanaka 2020; Mitchell, Wister, Li, and Wu 2020). This change in life-course patterns is attributed to a variety of causes impacting young adults' attainment of traditional benchmarks of adulthood. Such factors include precarious labour markets, unaffordable housing, rising student debt, changing social norms regarding family building and partnering, and an increasing diversity of cultural preferences regarding intergenerational living arrangements (Dettling and Hsu 2018; Jeong et al. 2014; Mitchell 2007; Mitchell, Wister and Gee 2004; Sirnivas 2019).

Notably, leaving the parental home—long considered a central marker of adulthood—is occurring at increasingly later ages, and pathways out of the home of origin are becoming more diversified (Kins et al. 2013; Settersten and Ray 2010). Leaving home is also not necessarily a permanent or linear life cycle stage, as rising numbers of young people return home to cohabit with their parents as "boomerang kids" (Mitch-

ell 1998, 2007; South and Lei 2015). These shifts in youth transitions invariably produce new meanings and subjectivities of what it means to become an adult and what makes for a successful transition to adulthood.

Despite changing conditions that limit young peoples' ability to attain time-graded benchmarks of adulthood, public discourses of "adulting" (a term popularized in recent popular culture) are dominantly informed by a linear benchmark perspective. This framework emphasizes the attainment of age-graded milestones as central to successful adulthood. For example, one prominent discourse figures millennials and "Gen Zers" sympathetically as unwilling victims of delayed adulthood due to obstacles inherent in trying to become independent. These obstacles are purported to range from having over-protective baby boomer "helicopter parents" who make it difficult for their children to grow up to larger socio-economic forces, such as the need for higher education, fewer career jobs, and high housing costs (*Bloomberg CityLab* 2018; *Globe and Mail* 2018).

This putatively sympathetic discourse is epitomized in self-help genre publications directed at aspiring adults and their "helicopter" parents; for example, Koslow's (2013) *Slouching Toward Adulthood: Observations from the Not-So-Empty Nest*, and Carrick's (2012) *How Not to Move Back in with Your Parents: The Young Person's Guide to Complete Financial Empowerment*. Overall, while this discourse takes a sympathetic tone, it nonetheless idealizes age-graded markers of adulthood by framing shifting economic and social conditions as a problem that young adults can and should work hard to overcome.

A second less prominent—though still influential—discursive strand seems to place young peoples' adulting problems squarely on their own shoulders. This discourse characterizes contemporary young people as a narcissistic "selfie generation" who are unwilling to grow up (see, for example, *ABC News* 2018, *The New Yorker* 2018, and *Time Magazine* 2013). Within this discourse stream, young adults are stereotyped as living at home in order to shirk the responsibilities of adulthood while enjoying a carefree—even hedonistic—lifestyle at the expense of their aging parents (see, for example, *Toronto Life* 2016). Broadly, this negative discourse masks structural barriers blocking young peoples' transitions to adulthood and portrays them as thoughtless, self-obsessed generations who lack the grit and drive to make it in the way previous generations did.

*Toronto Life* (2016) provides a particularly lurid example of this negative discourse in its profile of "Tony," a young man who reports that he lives with his aging parents in Toronto, earns $130,000 a year as a pharmacist, and could "buy a house tomorrow," but chooses instead to

drain his personal resources on "wild, rare, unforgettable experiences" as part of a living large ethos apparently symbolic of his generation (see also, for example, *CNBC* 2019). While this negative discourse chastises young adults instead of sympathizing with them, it—like the sympathetic discourse discussed previously—is informed by a linear perspective that figures attaining key benchmarks as central to successful adulthood.

As this brief overview of dominant depictions of adulthood reveals, young people navigate transitions to adulthood amidst changing social and economic realities. These conditions make traditional markers of adulthood increasingly difficult to attain, yet these very markers continue to be promoted as requisites for successful adulthood. As we discuss next, these social conditions have implications for social life and how contemporary young adults experience, understand, and embody adulthood.

*Research Rationale and Theoretical Framework*

Despite widespread acknowledgement that adulthood is a culturally contingent status (see, for example, Mary 2014), there is a paucity of research  explicitly examining how social constructs of adulthood reflect and impact young adults' subjective experiences of adulthood. Most research  that addresses transitions to adulthood is quantitative in orientation. This body of research is focused on illuminating socio-demographic and background predictors of time-related adulting benchmarks such as gender (Kleinpier and De Valk 2017), ethnicity (Ho and Park 2019; Mitchell, Wister, Li and Wu 2020) and quality of parent-child relationships (Akın et al. 2020); as well as on understanding terms of life course stage, duration, and the sequencing of events (Krahn et al. 2018).

While qualitative research exploring young people's understandings of adulthood exists (see, for example, Arnett 2015, Molgat 2007, and Panagakis 2015), this body of work is limited with respect to explicitly considering young adults' understandings as co-constructed artifacts of historical, social, and geographical contexts. While existing qualitative research sheds some light on, for example, how young adults prioritize individual qualities versus transition markers in their understandings of adulthood, researchers have had little to say about how these micro-level understandings are reciprocally linked and informed by macro-level public discourses.

This is a significant oversight, as scholars (see, for example, Fairclough 1995) have long noted that media representations help to construct social reality and shape individual lives. Rather than merely reflecting social reality, representation actively *constitutes* what is appre-

hended as reality at a given moment in time (Hajer 2006; Willig 2000). Discourses, or composed representations of reality through which individuals "imbue reality with meaning" (Ruiz 2009:2), designate what is normative and ideal at a given historical moment and create both ways of "*seeing* the world" and ways of "*being* in the world" (Willig 2015:172, our emphasis). These subjectivities, or composed ways of being, have implications for everyday experience. In other words, subjectivities "govern what it is possible to think…and influence…how individuals make sense of experience" (Singer and Hunter 1999:66).

*Theoretical Framework*

In this paper, we employ Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) to bridge two sociological dimensions that are generally treated separately: the micro level of interaction and subjectivity, and the macro level of discourse and ideology. Empirically, we bridge these dimensions by considering two data sources simultaneously: Canadian news articles addressing youth traditions to adulthood, and interviews with Canadian young adults assessing their perceptions of adulthood. Our dual-focus methodology allows us to demonstrate how representations of reality intertwine to shape—and in turn are shaped *by*—everyday experience at the micro level.

Discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary field of inquiry comprising diverse foci and methods. The approach we employ here—FDA—is distinct from other modes of discourse analysis commonly used in social science, such as critical discourse analysis and conversation analysis. While critical discourse analysis centralizes how discourses sustain unequal relations of domination (Fairclough 1995; van Dijk 1993), conversation methods examine the micro features of talk to make claims about everyday social interaction (see, for example, Schegloff 1968). In contrast, FDA focuses on the effects of cultural ideologies on social agents' capacities to think, speak, and act at a given moment in time (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine 2017; Parker 1992; Willig 2014, 2015). Like the broader field of discourse analysis, however, FDA is not a monolithic approach, and uses of the framework are interdisciplinary and methodologically diverse (see, for example, Zitz, Burns, and Tacconelli 2014 and Sutherland et al. 2016).

The style of FDA we employ is intellectually grounded in a social psychological tradition of discourse analysis that is concerned with distilling the representations of reality and subject positions available to social actors, and with understanding how these discursive resources shape participant talk (Parker 1992; Potter and Wetherell 1987). Unlike

interpretivist approaches that apprehend participant talk as a means of uncovering "'what really happened' or what an individual's attitude to X, Y or Z really is" (Bauer and Gaskell 2000:4), FDA recognizes participant accounts as fashioned from discursively dominant representations of social reality (Willig 2000, 2014).

## Methods

While detailed guides for applying FDA exist (see, for example, Colahan 2014, and Liao and Markula 2009), FDA is "not so much a recipe as a perspective from which to approach a text" (Willig 2014:343). We operationalized FDA by performing a discursive reading of our data corpus using guiding questions adapted from Willig (2014, 2015). These guiding questions included: What are the connections between public discourses of adulthood and *i*) young adults' ways of thinking and being, and *ii*) the identities that young adults imagine as possible and ideal? What *discursive resources* do participants draw on to make sense of their own experiences of adulthood? What subject positions do dominant discourses of young adulthood make available?

Our synthesis of Canadian news media and young adults' accounts presumes a phenomenological, rather than language-dominant, conceptualization of the relationship between discourse and social practice (Arribas-Allyon and Walkerdine 2017). While we do not presume that participant accounts are *determined* by discourse, we conceptualize young adults' narratives as constrained and enabled by culturally-dominant representations of adulthood, and thus as necessarily selective.

## Data Collection

### Textual Data

We used purposive sampling—specifically, a keyword delimited search within Canadian Newsstream—to identify relevant news articles. Given our interest in exploring how Canadian public discourse shapes young adults' subjective meanings and narratives of adulthood, we restricted our search to articles published between 2012 and 2017, the five years surrounding interview data collection. We selected the *Toronto Star*, the *Globe and Mail*, the *Vancouver Sun*, and the *National Post*, since these are among the most widely read and nationally circulated Canadian newspapers, representing a diversity of political orientations.

Although some scholars note that youth engagement with news media is increasingly selective (Clark and Marchi 2017), many young people continue to turn to legacy media for news information, especially in digital forms (Geers 2020). Young people are also socialized in an environment that directly and indirectly exposes them to mainstream discourses (for example, through their parents and other social actors). Thus, despite transformations in the consumption of news media by different age groups and the general public (and a growing apprehension towards "fake news"), legacy media texts remain crucial sites for the circulation and reproduction of ideas about adulthood in society.

As summarized in Table 1, our search keywords fell within three broad subject categories: "home-leaving/returning," "transitioning to adulthood," and "intergenerational transfers." Our search yielded 381 articles. After excluding duplicate articles and articles unrelated to young adult home-leaving transitions, 44 articles remained. As summarized in Table 2 (see below), the largest selection of articles retained for analysis were published in the *Globe and Mail* (*n* = 22), followed by the *National Post* (*n* = 9) and the *Toronto Star* (*n* = 9). The largest selection of articles appeared in the Business or Finance sections of newspapers (*n* = 25).

*Table 1*. Subject headings and keywords for news media data collection (*n* = 44).

| Subject Headings | Keywords |
|---|---|
| Home-leaving/returning | Young adults; millennials; home-returning; living at home; boomerang kids; returning to the nest; living with parents; delayed launch; failure to launch; home-leaving; leaving the nest; empty nest; boomerang; boomerang generation |
| Transitioning to, and markers of, adulthood | Adulting; adulthood; successful adulthood; becoming an adult; marrying; partnering; parental independence; having children |
| Intergenerational transfers | Parenting young adults; helping adult children; delayed empty nest; retirement and children; family transitions |

### Interview Data

Our interview data are drawn from a 4-year Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council funded mixed-methods study (2014-2018), which included a larger data set (*n* = 588) on family-related life course transitions (see Mitchell, Wister and Zdaniek 2019 for a full project description). Data utilized here are from one facet of the study: a follow-up convenience sample of 20 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Canadian young adults (ages 21-36) who resided in the Metro Vancouver area of British Columbia, Canada at the time of interviewing. These in-depth conversations assessed young adults' perspectives on adulthood and personal experiences in terms of home-leaving and home-returning.

For instance, young adults were asked what they identified as key markers of adulthood and whether they thought that home-leaving is a relatively easy transition for young people today. They were also asked about their own home-leaving/returning experiences (or expectations if they still lived at home), as well as the kinds of support that they gave and received from their parents. Interviews followed informed consent procedures and pseudonyms are used in lieu of names for all participants. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

*Table 2.* News media data sources ($n = 44$).

| Newspaper | Paper Section | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Business & Finance | Life & Arts | News | **Total** |
| Globe and Mail | 16 | 4 | 2 | 22 |
| National Post | 6 | 1 | 2 | 9 |
| Toronto Star | 2 | 2 | 5 | 9 |
| Vancouver Sun | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| **Total** | 25 | 9 | 10 | **44** |

As shown in Table 3 (see below), ages in the sample ranged from 21-36. Most interviewees were female ($n = 15$) and living independently (i.e., separate from their parent/s) at the time of interviewing. Approximately one-third of interviewees ($n = 6$) had returned home to live with their parents at least once when we interviewed them. Further sample details are presented in Table 3.

*Table 3.* Demographic and background information for interview participants (*n* = 20).

| Participant Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Cultural Background | No. of Times Returned Home | Living Arrangement at Time of Interview |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Carolyn | 36 | F | British | 2 | Independently[1] |
| Jade | 33 | F | British | 2 | Independently |
| Keith | 23 | M | British | 0 | Independently |
| Celeste | 28 | F | British | 1 | Independently |
| Natalie | 32 | F | British | 0 | Independently |
| Oscar | 21 | M | British | 0 | With Parent(s) |
| Arty | 32 | F | British | 0 | Independently |
| Cathy | 28 | F | British | 0 | Independently |
| Patrick | 31 | M | British | 2 | Independently |
| Karen | 26 | F | British | 0 | Independently |
| Finula | 22 | F | British | 0 | Independently |
| Melissa | 22 | F | Chinese | 0 | With Parent(s) |
| Nancy | 26 | F | Chinese | 1 | With Parent(s) |
| Kelly | 27 | F | Chinese | 0 | With Parent(s) |
| Diane | 27 | F | Chinese | 0 | Independently |
| Richard | 25 | M | Chinese | 0 | With Parent(s) |
| Jennifer | 29 | F | Chinese | 0 | Independently |
| Sapna | 29 | F | South Asian | 0 | Independently |
| Alborz | 34 | M | Iranian | 2 | Independently |
| Parvaneh | 24 | F | Iranian | 0 | Independently |

1. The living arrangements of participants not co-residing with their parents was quite varied (for example, alone, with a romantic partner, in an assisted living facility). In this table, we classify all participants not co-residing with parents as living independently.

## Phase 1: Descriptive Coding of Textual and Interview Data

We began our analysis by thoroughly reading all news articles (*n* = 44) and interview transcripts (*n* = 20). We then used descriptive and *In Vivo* codes (Saldana 2017) to summarize recurring themes, arguments, and emphases within and between news articles and interview transcripts. Textual data codes included, for example, "Economic Challenges," "Social Challenges," and "Don't Ever Give Up," while interview codes included, for example, "Be(com)ing an Adult," "Leaving Home," and "'There's Gotta Be a Reason [to Return Home]'". The goal of this initial phase was not to analyze, but rather to "squeeze an unwieldy body of discourse into manageable chunks" (Potter and Wetherell 1987:167) in preparation for our second, analytical phase.

## Phase 2: Discursive Analysis of Textual and Interview Data

After coding news textual and interview data, we analyzed the codes we generated in the initial phase together, as one data corpus. Using a constant comparative strategy (Glaser and Straus 1967), we created themes that merged codes generated in the initial phase. Informed by

FDA, second phase analysis centered on illuminating the relationship between young adults' narratives of adulthood and dominant portrayals of adulthood in contemporary Canadian media. Guided by the analytic questions outlined above (see page 219), we reduced Phase 1 codes into three central discursive strands and associated subject positions. As shown in Table 4 (see below), the discourses and subject positions we identified include: (1) Structural Change Discourse, epitomized in "The Adult" subject; (2) Neoliberal Ethos, epitomized in the "Aspiring Adult" subject; and (3) Failure Discourse, epitomized in "The Moocher" subject (see Table 4).

## Findings and Discussion

Leaving the parental home has long been considered a central marker of adulthood in North American culture (see, for example, Ho and Park 2019; Mitchell 2007). Thus, an unexpected finding of our research is that establishing residential independence from parents has taken on less significance as a marker of adulthood, both in the discourses of adulting present in the Canadian news sources we analyzed, and in the narratives of adulting presented by the young adults we interviewed. However, while contemporary discourses of adulting make space for definitions of adulthood that do not include living independently from parents, mature coresidence remains stigmatized. While living with parents is not universally stigmatized in Canadian news media, it is only represented as a legitimate living arrangement when it is short-term or temporary and ultimately geared toward enabling the young adult co-resident to establish residential independence from the parent. Our findings suggest that the stigma associated with mature coresidence—here defined as a living arrangement in which emerging adults cohabit with parents beyond ages deemed normative (for example, after age 25)—informs Canadian young adults' narratives of adulting.

In what follows, we present our findings (see Table 4 for an overview of discursive strands). First, we discuss a structural discourse that emphasizes young adults' difficulties in obtaining traditional benchmarks of adulthood as resulting from economic and social change. Second, we contextualize this dominant structural discourse by emphasizing its strong neoliberalist undercurrents, and we note the tendency of Canadian news media to frame structural challenges to achieving age-graded adulthood milestones as obstacles that can be overcome with hard work. This neoliberal ethos, we argue, is evident in our interviewees' accounts of their own life-course transitions. We show how young adults employ a

rhetoric of financial shrewdness to articulate themselves as "successful" adults. By strategically invoking the language of financial risk-aversion, young adults distance themselves from "The Moocher" subjectivity, even as they cohabit with parents and remain financially or emotionally dependent.

*Structural Change Discourse: "Young Adults Really Do Have It Tougher"*

The selection of news media we analyzed was overwhelmingly financial in focus (see Table 2). News articles presented debt and savings advice; information on managing student debt/loans; and expert perspectives (for example, academics, economists, and personal finance experts) on changes in Canada's most expensive housing markets. As shown in Table 4, while a minority of news articles invoked negative stereotypes of millennials and Gen Zers as "coddled," "lazy generation[s]" (*Toronto Star* 2016, 2017) who "spend hours per day texting" (*Globe & Mail* 2012) and live with their parents simply because they "feel as though they don't need to move on with their lives" (*Toronto Star* 2012), news media much more emphatically emphasized the structural constraints that make age-graded benchmarks difficult to attain. These structural constraints were purported to include difficulty gaining employment due to a paucity of paid, full-time positions; massive debt from, and diminishing returns on, post-secondary education; a generational income gap; and unaffordable housing. For example, in an article entitled "Securing Your Family's Future" (*National Post* 2015), the difficulty of establishing residential separation was attributed to the increasing unaffordability of housing:

> According to a January 2014 BMO Wealth Management Report, in 1997 a house cost five times your pre-tax income. Now it's nearly eight times pre-tax income, depending on where you live, which means they [millennials] will have to save longer.

An article in the *Globe & Mail* (2013) similarly established the legitimacy of young adults' struggles to obtain independent housing and full-time employment, by quoting a deputy chief economist on generational differences in purchasing power: "[i]n a way, it was easier for young people in the past than it is now. […] Basically, *you're running faster just to stay in the same place* today" (our emphasis).

In some cases, news media represented young adults' inability to obtain traditional adulthood benchmarks as a sensible, well-considered response to changing times. The *Vancouver Sun* (2012), for example, observed that "most young people aren't jumping into the marriage game," and quoted a family and life course expert who asked: "[a]re they [millennials] bucking the trend, or *just being sensible*?" (our emphasis). Stereotypes of millennial self-absorption and laziness were also criticized, and living with parents was represented as legitimate and even financially savvy:

> In many cases, young people are "smarter and thriftier" than their parents, opting to stay at home and save enough money to buy their own homes, rather than pouring their hard-earned cash into rents to pay for someone else's property (*Vancouver Sun* 2012).

The *National Post* (2012) similarly emphasized young adults' shrewdness by quoting a public policy expert:

> [Millennials are] a generation that is scared of commitment and [that] want…to be light on their feet. […] What once was seen as a solid investment, like a house or a car, is now seen as a ball and chain with a lot of risk to it.

As we discuss next, while this structural discourse undoubtedly de-stigmatizes mature coresidence by framing it as a risk-averse strategy to manage challenging economic times, this singular focus on the financial benefits associated with living with parents precluded a fundamental shift in how mature coresidence was narrated and understood by the young adults we interviewed. Our findings document young adults' embeddedness in a discursive economy wherein coresidence is acceptable *only* when other markers of putatively successful adulthood (for example, having a career job) are intact.

*Table 4.* Discursive strands and subject positions identified in Canadian news media (*N* = 44).

| Analytic Category | Sample Titles | Articles n (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **Structural Change Discourse** Articles in this category suggest that social and economic changes, such as growing labor market precarity, make traditional adult benchmarks increasingly difficult for emerging adults to obtain. | "Enough with the Millennial Bashing Already" (*Toronto Star* 2017) | 25 (57) |
| ***Subject of this discourse:* The Adult** A young person who lives independently from their parents and is financially and emotionally autonomous. | "Young Adults Have a Right to be Up in Arms" (*Globe & Mail* 2012) | |
| **Neoliberal Ethos** Articles in this category acknowledge that delayed adulthood is a result of social and economic change but insist that young adults' transitions to adulthood are within their own control: through hard work, young adults can achieve financial independence in the way previous generations did. | "A Financial Survival Guide for Young Adults" (*Globe & Mail* 2015) | 10 (23) |
| ***Subject of this discourse:* The Aspiring Adult** A person aged approximately 25-39 who lives with their parents and/or is emotionally or financially dependent on them. Other aspects of the aspiring adult's life reflect normative ideals of success (e.g., s/he has a career job or is saving money). | "Roadmap to Saving" (*National Post* 2013) | |
| **Failure Discourse** Articles in this category suggest that young adults are personally to blame for failing to achieve key benchmarks of adulthood. | "A Failure to Launch, or A Failure to Plan" (*Vancouver Sun* 2017) | 9 (20) |
| ***Subject of this discourse:* The Moocher** A young person who thoughtlessly drains the savings of his/her aging parents as a result of an inadequate work ethic and an absence of personal responsibility. The Moocher has failed to make it in the adult world. | "Adult Children Tapping their No. 1 Resource: Their Parents" (*National Post* 2012) | |
| **Total** | | 44 |

*Neoliberal Ethos: "We Can Still Make Our Dreams Come True…We'll Just Have to Work a Little Harder for It"*

By framing mature coresidence as acceptable only when used by young adults as a strategy for building personal savings, Canadian news media implicitly stigmatized other reasons for living with parents. An article in the *Toronto Star* (2017) exemplified the notion that mature coresidence is

a living arrangement with which young adults must grudgingly contend in order to eventually attain normative ideals of successful adulthood:

> Nobody…who lives with mom and dad is especially proud of this fact, but there's a shared understanding among a lot of millennial Torontonians that *desperate times call for desperate measures*. And choosing to live under your parents' roof well into your 20s is for many people their only shot at saving aggressively and one day owning a property of their own. In other words, *it's the least lazy, loser-ish thing a person can do* (our emphasis).

In framing mature coresidence implicitly as "loser-ish" (*Toronto Star* 2017), media reflect and reinforce a framework of adulthood that is confusing, contradictory, and even overtly judgmental. By encouraging young adults to strive for financial independence despite job instability and diminishing purchasing power, media suggest that independent residence and financial security are eminently possible as long as young adults "don't ever give up…[and] keep on trying" (*Globe & Mail* 2015).

As a columnist in the *Globe & Mail* (2015) advised:

> Lean on your parents, but don't bury them: Move back home if you can't afford to live on your own after graduation and repay any student debt, but don't be a parasite.

Other articles reinforced a meritocratic narrative by offering inspirational stories of overcoming the odds. One such article, "Adulting 101" (*National Post* 2016), discussed a workshop that offered young people advice on such basic tasks as choosing wines that fit within their budgets; staying within their credit limits; and buying fresh rather than take-out foods to increase their savings. The organizer of the workshop is quoted as optimistically stating:

> I wanted to become an advocate for financial literacy because of my own experience with credit card debt in my early 20s […]. I *pulled myself out* and wanted to help other young people experiencing the same thing (our emphasis).

In these two examples (*Globe & Mail* 2015; *National Post* 2016), structural forces impacting young adults' ability to achieve financial autonomy—such as the class privilege inherent in coresiding with parents while paying partial (or no) rent, or the racialized and gendered inequalities inherent in access to career jobs—are invisible, and financial autonomy is presented as something that can be achieved simply by curbing poor consumption habits.

This neoliberal ethos, here defined as the notion that structural inequities can be overcome by hard work, was internalized and reflected by millennials and Gen Zers. For example, a young adult quoted in the *Globe & Mail* (2012) stated:

> [On] behalf of my generation, we don't want your pity. Go ahead and call us "lazy and entitled": We're happy to prove you wrong. And we will remember the lessons learned so one day we can prepare our own children for a scary, unpredictable economy.  I'm confident we can still make our dreams come true – *we'll just have to work a little harder for it* (our emphasis).

The young adults we interviewed tended to narrate their adulthood trajectories as successful by presenting their financial shrewdness as a form of hard work that separated them from the pathologized "Moocher" identity. While participants' definitions of successful adulthood included both internal traits (for example, "responsibility") and external benchmarks (for example, "financial independence"), participants centralized age-graded milestones in their definitions of successful adulthood. With only three exceptions, all of the young adults we interviewed mentioned financial independence as a key marker of adulthood. Participants also emphasized "working" and "responsibility" above less tangible markers of adulthood, such as "confidence" and "direction."

Oscar, a 21-year old who lived with his mother and was in trade school with the goal of becoming a professional machinist, positioned himself firmly as an "Aspiring Adult" (see Table 4). Although he lived with his mother, Oscar made it clear that he was working at becoming a successful adult: leaving his mother's home was not something he was "rushing into," but rather was an event he was "working towards and preparing for." By narrating his choices through the lens of financial shrewdness, Oscar distanced himself from the moocher stereotype:

> [I'm waiting to] see how the housing market goes and stuff. Save up some money to make a down payment, basically, because I'd rather go off and buy a property right off the bat and get into the housing market, rather than rent an apartment and lose the money, right. At least if I'm paying a mortgage, that's in a way an investment, you get your money back at the end if you sell it.

Financial shrewdness ultimately enabled Oscar to see himself as successful: as he noted, "[being an adult means]…you're not just lounging around at home…*you gotta be able to pay your own way*" (our emphasis).

Jennifer (female, 29) similarly narrated herself as financially savvy to frame her own transition to adulthood positively, even though it did not cleanly map onto norms of successful adulting:

> I didn't leave until I got married and I thought that I was waiting a long time back then, but in hindsight, now that I think about it, *it was a smart thing to do* especially in the Vancouver market. It's fairly difficult to be able to stay but I think the longer you can stay with your parents *the more beneficial it is financially going forward* (our emphasis).

Other participants emphasized structural barriers to normalize—however narrowly—mature coresidence. As Kelly (female, 27) stated:

> I know someone who has a baby right now – she just had a baby. *She's thirty and she lives with her parents*. You kind of ask, "Why don't you have your own house?" Because obviously houses are expensive right now *so it's reasonable* (our emphasis).

Further reflecting public discourses that laud the "thriftiness" (*Vancouver Sun* 2012) of young adults that coreside with parents, some participants explicitly stated that mature coresidence is acceptable if it is geared toward financial independence:

> I would never judge somebody for moving back home. I think they are doing it because it's what is right for them. Frankly, there are a lot of people that are still renting a room when they are in their late thirties, living with their friends, paying rent. *And they should have moved back home so they can get their finances in order*. So, I don't see it as a weakness (Alborz; male, 34 [our emphasis]).

While Alborz allowed for the legitimacy of mature coresidence, he did so within the limited neoliberal frame of aspiring adulthood (see Table 4). Alborz' narration reflects a broader discursive economy in which mature coresidence cannot be articulated as a valid long-term living arrangement.

Echoing Alborz' sentiments, Parvaneh (female, 24) observed:

> [Being an adult] has more to do with age. I mean *it's smart and you save money if you are working and living at home*. You save so much money. I mean, I think if you are taking on some sort of responsibility you can call yourself an adult…But *I think if you quit your job and moved home and just stop looking for a job, then you are probably failing* (our emphasis).

By demonstrating their awareness of the narrow parameters within which the subjectivity of the "Aspiring Adult" can be realized even when key

markers of successful adulthood are absent, participants paradoxically reinforced the stigma associated with living with parents for non-financial reasons. Indeed, whether they cohabited with their parents or had returned home to live with their parents since initially moving out, many of the young adults we spoke to could only articulate home-returning as failure. Patrick, a 31-year old who lived on his own, but had returned to live with his parents twice at the time of being interviewed, stated:

> Lots of them [my friends] have [returned home], for sure. Not a ton of times. I don't think it's a sign of failure, but it's not typically…*it's not a proud moment for anyone* (our emphasis).

Carolyn, a 36-year old, seemed similarly unable to articulate her experience of returning home—which occurred after a divorce, at a time when she felt in need of emotional support—outside of the stigmatizing frame of failure:

> It was really difficult. I think I had just turned 30, and I was moving to my mom and dad's basement as a divorcee. . .[It felt] really crummy. Like, *really, really defeated, like definitely defeated* (our emphasis).

Voicing similar sentiments, Celeste (female, 29), observed:

> I would've been 21 when I moved back. Things had not panned out for me. I was very disappointed in myself. Oh man, why am I back here. I've done everything wrong. . . Like, you left home, you're gonna be an adult, and now you can't handle it and you have to go back to mom and dad. . . *it feels bad, it feels bad* (our emphasis).

Here, "being an adult" was narrated as irreconcilable with "going back to mom and dad," and the stigma of mature coresidence was reinforced.

Our analysis of Canadian news media and the narratives of young adults suggests that ideals of adulthood have not fundamentally shifted over the past several decades. Although the structural change discourse prominent in news media superficially provides a more expansive definition of adulthood, its de-stigmatization of living at home rests on a limited portrayal of mature coresidence. This discourse provides young adults with very limited linguistic resources to discuss mature coresidence. Indeed, young adults offer selective accounts of returning home that centralize feelings of failure and/or rely on ideals of financial shrewdness to achieve distance from the moocher stereotype. Cumulatively, participant accounts and news media represent living at home as an invalid long-term living arrangement, one that it is merely a grudg-

ing—if responsible—recognition of the gloomy reality that "desperate times call for desperate measures" (*Toronto Star* 2017).

## CONCLUSION

Our analysis suggests that despite public acknowledgment of the many macro-level shifts that have occurred in *how* and *when* young adults transition to adulthood, mainstream news content and young adults' narratives continue to rely on normative benchmarks of success. These markers of adulthood include the adoption of certain social roles/statuses and the completion of many conventional milestone events, such as (permanently) leaving the parental home and establishing financial autonomy/independence. Despite the emergence of a putatively sympathetic discourse in light of new social and economic realities, mature coresidence remains stigmatized.

While portrayals of young adults in contemporary news media acknowledge the many structural constraints that impede successful adulting, these media (especially right-leaning sources) are often laced with political victim-blaming rhetoric and/or are geared toward providing financial advice. The young adults we interviewed internalized these societal norms and changing social/economic realities, albeit with more ambivalent and nuanced appraisals (for example, by citing more exceptions to the rules). Overall, our findings demonstrate that young adults' narratives of adulting are firmly rooted in broader societal understandings, despite the competing ideological agendas, sensationalism, and overly-simplified portrayals of adulthood contained within such understandings.

An insight gleaned from our study is the observation that journalists routinely repeat ideological strands of crisis in the business and financial sections of newspapers. Carlson (2020) discusses how the repetitious use of particular stories is one way that journalists support and produce news as legitimate knowledge. This habituative journalistic practice has important implications when interpreting our results. Notably, journalists' discursive performance has relevance in terms of how moral panics become ritualized in public discourse and how meanings of successful adulthood are experienced in everyday life.

Our research is limited to coverage and analysis of mainstream Canadian news media and data gathered from a convenience sample of young adults living in Metro Vancouver.  Future studies need to incorporate a broader array of media sources, including more ethnically-diverse news sources and alternative social media consumption. In addition, our inter-

view data mainly rely on the perspectives of white women living in one major urban area with very high housing costs, although we do include perspectives from Chinese, Iranian, and South Asian young adults. More attention needs to be paid to uncovering intersections of ethnic/racialized social positions, gender/sexual orientation, and socio-economic status. Consideration of how politicized and ethno/euro-centric contexts generate language and social norms and work to reproduce power relations is also required. Racialized young men living at home, for instance, appear to be especially vulnerable to the most negative stereotyping relative to white men and women, and despite greater systemic or institutionalized obstacles.

Given that Canada is a culturally diverse society, it is important to consider the adulting discourses and social practices that exist within racialized/ethnic communities. In some ethnic groups, achievement of individual autonomy and perceptions of maturity may be less relevant and more highly contested. For example, in some families, multigenerational living may be more economically necessary and/or a long-standing, desirable cultural tradition (see, for example, Mitchell, Wister, Li and Wu 2020). Moreover, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly created a heightened need among young people to cohabit with their parents due to greater stress and uncertainty, financial struggle, and precarity in the labour market. In short, key markers of successful transitioning may become increasingly diverse and less applicable or realistic to achieve. These changing circumstances have potential to produce a host of social-psychological outcomes (for example, in terms of identity and self-esteem), in addition to exacerbating other gendered, class-based and racialized inequities.

In conclusion, while ample opportunities for continued work in this area emerge, our research provides a highly novel springboard for furthering understanding of youth transitions to adulthood. Our innovative methodological approach—synthesizing textual news media and interview data—combined with our FDA framework, enabled us to make sociological connections between pubic discourses, ideological structures, and personal subjectivities. We hope that our dual-focus methodology inspires further work illuminating the reciprocal shaping and influence of social discourse on young adults' understandings and embodiments of adulthood.

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