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To Be or Not to Be Generation?

The Generational Unity of Youth in Italy: An Analysis of Primary Data on the Conditions of Young People

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Abstract

Being part of a generation, perceiving it, and believing in the existence of generational units are conditions theoretically attributed to individuals. Despite the numerous theories addressing this topic over time, few have empirically investigated whether the concepts of ‘generational bond’, ‘generational units’, and ‘generational positioning’ are grounded in reality. This study reviews various strands of literature on youth and generations to explore the existence of these concepts. Confirming their existence would elevate Mannheim’s original theory to the status of a veritable social fact. The core hypothesis posits a weak relationship between these concepts and suggests that individuals perceive both the generational bond and the presence of generational units. To test this, a bottom-up approach will be employed. Using primary data collected from young Italians (aged 18–39) between February and June 2024 (N: 12,627), the study will conduct descriptive, typological, and configurational analyses, focusing on respondents’ perceptions of the key concepts from Mannheim’s classical theory of generations. The aim is to provide descriptive insights and assess whether Mannheim’s theory remains a relevant tool for sociological analysis today. This study represents a foundational step toward understanding how individuals can ‘become a generation’.

Key words: Generations; Mannheim; Primary data; Typology; Configurations;

1. The multiple meanings of generations

The concept of generation, while complex, is integral to the social sciences, emerging shortly after the discipline's inception as scholars investigated the transmission of symbols, meanings, and social change over time. It gained prominence in the 20th century, particularly until the 1970s, and saw a revival in the 1990s after a period of neglect (Pilcher, 1994). Despite confusion stemming from its varied interpretations, the concept endures due to its analytical potential (Kriegel & Hirsh, 1978).

Generation is not exclusive to sociology; its multiple meanings span disciplines, complicating its use. Early efforts to clarify the term include Troll (1970), who identified five definitions by

examining whether it referred to processes, structural elements, or other aspects, as well as its scale (micro or macro) and application. Kertzer (1983) built on Troll's work, categorizing four disciplinary uses: kinship in anthropology, cohorts in demography, life stages in sociology and social psychology, and historical periods in history. These interpretations often overlap, complicating their use. Subsequent studies, including Corsten (1999) and White (2013), expanded the typologies, highlighting additional ways to understand generations (Alwin & McCammon, 2007). Literature reviews play a crucial role in synthesizing these interpretations, identifying their strengths and weaknesses, and offering a foundation for future research (Popescu, 2019). This study builds on such efforts to refine the concept's analytical utility.

2. The various adjectives and the theoretic formulations

Another source of ambiguity surrounding the concept of generation lies in the variety of adjectives associated with it, which reflect different theoretical approaches. Arber and Attias-Donfut (2000) identify five primary descriptors: *demographic* (referring to cohorts), *genealogical* (focusing on familial relationships), *institutional* (linked to life stages defined by systems such as welfare policies), *sociological* (based on Mannheim's generational dynamics), and *historical* (emphasizing ties to specific periods or events; Spanò, 2018). Building on Mannheim's sociological definition, other adjectives like *global*, *political*, *strategic*, and *relational* have been introduced, further enriching the theoretical landscape. These labels often overlap but provide valuable insights into the evolving theoretical framework. While there are likely others, the ones mentioned here will serve as examples and should not be confused with labels attributed to generations in both scientific and popular discourse. It is crucial to distinguish between the commonly used categorizations for describing generations and those that emerge through a more in-depth analysis of social and cultural dynamics.

The concept of strategic generation (Edmunds & Turner, 2002a; 2002b) derives from Bourdieu's concept of habitus. This perspective on generations distorts the generational issue by considering the alternation between a passive generation (in Marxist terms, in-itself) and an active one (for-itself) in driving change, emphasizing the role of sudden shifts or traumatic historical events in the formation of generational consciousness. Despite its limitations, this interpretation of the concept has raised questions about intentionality and passivity in the interpretation of specific historical moments. The term 'historical generations' is used primarily in historical science (Kertzer, 1983) and sociology to label generations and study their characteristics, with an emphasis on their association with historical periods (Bristow, 2015).

The concept of political generation (Braungart, 2013) links the sociology of social and political movements with the succession of generations based on age, considering conflicts between different generations and political change. However, a significant issue with this conception remains unresolved: there is no clear variable for defining age groups, and a deep understanding of the cultural and historical context under analysis is essential. Despite this, the concept remains faithful to the formulations of classic theorists, particularly Mannheim and Ortega y Gasset, while providing interesting insights for both theoretical and empirical reflection (Bettin Lattes, 1999).

The global generation is arguably the most controversial concept in modern literature (Edmunds & Turner, 2005; Beck, 2008; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2009). This perspective stems from a critique of Mannheim, who argued that generations are nationally located—a stance for which he has been accused of methodological nationalism. According to proponents, this type of generation also results from the expansion of physical mobility, the growth of communication networks, and the international scope of traumatic events during the 2000s. However, as Beck (2008) acknowledges, there is no empirical evidence for the existence of a

global generation exhibiting the highlighted characteristics. Some authors suggest that it may be necessary to shift from this concept to a more specific social generation, which is often conflated with the sociological generation (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2014). This concept, therefore, adds to the existing confusion in the field without offering new insights, innovation, or even thought - provoking ideas. It merely follows the contemporary trend in sociological theory of expanding into macro topics without providing empirical proof (Bernardi, 2007). Moreover, the concept of global generations is fraught with misunderstandings and misinterpretations of Mannheim's original concept of generation. The only positive aspect may be that, in the future, the concept could be refined based on the mistakes of its proponents (Thorpe & Inglis, 2019). The global generation stands in opposition to the concept of relational generation, which focuses on the relationships between generations as a means of defining groups and justifying the genesis of new generations (Donati, 1995).

The final concept to be considered is the social generation (Wyn & Woodman, 2006), likely the most widely used today and the one around which the debate is most intense, with scholars both supporting and constructively opposing it (France & Roberts, 2015). This version of the concept of generation originates within youth studies and positions itself as an innovative tool for studying young people (Woodman, 2018; Bessant, Pickart, & Watts, 2019). Unlike previous versions, it sets a theoretical-methodological objective that goes beyond the traditional definition of generation. Proponents of the social generation place the concept within the fields of youth studies and social change, as an alternative to the notion of social transitions. Their aim is to highlight emerging new subjectivities in contemporary times and provide a more nuanced view of non-linear social phenomena compared to the past. This approach revisits Mannheim's original concept by emphasizing that generations are not merely collections of individuals, but social groups formed based on shared, sensitive experiences. Criticism of the social generation concept is as extensive as the support it receives. Some authors argue that elements within this new conception of generation are exaggerated to reject the transitions approach (Roberts, 2007). This critique is echoed by those who believe that insufficient emphasis is placed on the historical and social context in which individuals live. Critics contend that the concept of social generation is still too young and too confused to be truly useful, while the transitions approach has significantly improved and remains highly applicable in the field of youth sociology. Another significant criticism is the risk of overestimating the homogeneity of groups — particularly contested point. Critics argue that, in favoring generational analysis, this approach neglects the structural and non-structural diversity within human groups. In line with this, the most vehement critique claims that the concept appears to substitute class analysis in the study of social change, thereby overlooking, as previously mentioned, elements of difference, opposition, and conflict among groups, particularly in the study of inequalities (Roberts & France, 2021).

These are likely just some of the theoretical formulations of generation that exist. They differ from the previously discussed conceptions due to their distinct theoretical frameworks. However, it must be noted that the concept of generation is a product of knowledge that depends on the historical and social period in which it is formulated. Therefore, it assumes different meanings, like all knowledge, as it is subject to interpretation and the negotiation of meanings (Bristow, 2015). This applies both to generations as a concept and as a social fact.

3. The classical definitions of generation

The roots of modern and contemporary formulations of the concept of generation are, of course, found in the classics. Karl Mannheim (1952) is generally regarded as the focal point and the central figure around which formulations of what have been defined as sociological

generations revolve. To better understand the analyses that will be conducted later, and to equip us with a broader range of conceptual tools, it is essential to acknowledge that other classic scholars have also discussed generations. One such figure is the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset (1923). His studies, though like those of the Hungarian sociologist, focus on understanding the elements of radical historical change, almost imposing a biological rhythm on the turnover of generations. P. A. Sorokin (1947) can also be counted among these classic theorists, despite writing on the topic roughly twenty years later. His perspective is more focused on the conflict between generations and the relationship between them in relation to the same historical events, referring to them as age groups. One of the "forgotten by history" classics is Norbert Elias (2013; Connolly, 2019). His thinking is very similar to that of Mannheim. Elias also recognizes that a generation is not merely a group based on age; rather, it is characterized by individuals who share the same experiences and emotions, particularly in relation to the previous generation. Broadening the field of the classics, perhaps somewhat inappropriately, Spitzer (1973) also includes among them the structural-functionalist scholar S. Eisenstadt (1963), whose definition is based on the acquisition of societal roles in relation to age, in line with Parsonsian thought, as well as Ortega y Gasset's disciple, J. Marías (1967). Two final authors worth considering for the study of the concept of generation are Strauss and Howe (1991). These American authors focused particularly on the duration of generations (20-25 years) and the study of generational groups through archetypes. This theory has been partly opposed due to its empirically unprovable theses and the determinism underlying it.

Referring to all these classic theorists, to varying degrees, helps us understand, in the first instance, how extensive the debate surrounding the concept of generation is and how many definitions of it exist. While the definitions may be numerous, though certainly finite, the interpretations can be potentially infinite and of any kind. In this work, to avoid misunderstandings and problems of interpreting already interpreted definitions, we will adopt K. Mannheim's definition from his essay *Das Problem der Generationen* (1952 [1928]). For the analysis that follows, all the theoretical formulations discussed thus far will be considered, with the aim of providing an empirical criterion for identifying generations. This clarification is crucial because the concept of generation suffers from a much higher degree of arbitrariness compared to other sociological concepts (Pilcher, 1994).

4. Mannheim's heritage: location, bond and unities

The decision to use Mannheim's essay on generations is motivated by two factors: first, Mannheim was the first to systematically address the concept of generation, providing a comprehensive treatment of it (Pitti and Tuorto, 2021); second, the interpretative depth of his concept, despite numerous critiques over time. Mannheim was the first to integrate generations into a functional theory for social interpretation (Kriegel and Hirsh, 1978), laying the groundwork for many areas of sociology (Merico, 2014). As discussed earlier, his work remains a key reference in related fields.

Mannheim's essay on the problem of generations—central to his generational theory and a key part of the formulation of the sociology of knowledge—will not be examined in its entirety in this article. Only the concepts relevant to achieving the aims of this work will be considered, specifically those necessary for defining a generation in its complexity: the concepts of location, unity, and bond. It is the combination of these three elements that defines a generation. Thus, it is not merely age or membership in a group that constitutes belonging to a generation, but rather the bond and unity among its members. In other words, generational location is not just about belonging to a particular historical and cultural framework or being part of a collective that benefits—or does not benefit—from the opportunities this space offers

while experiencing the same events and shaping a similarly stratified consciousness. The Hungarian sociologist argues that understanding the biological rhythm of people and groups is insufficient; it is the socio-cultural elements of social reality that define generations. The generational bond—common belonging to a social time, shared experiences, and collective destiny—shapes generations. These elements emerge from cultural products such as values, language, and status symbols. Within this socio-cultural framework lies generational unity, representing the agency of individuals. Smaller groups within the same generation occupy the same space and time, perceiving the world through different lenses but sharing a common destiny and sometimes introducing new elements (Casavecchia, 2022).

For identifying empirical evidence of generations, the concepts of entelechy and social change are also important. However, it is not possible to explore the relationship between generations and the transmission of culture here. This generative factor of new generations, based on new values, accelerates with rapid change, making it harder to distinguish between closely timed generations. Therefore, developing analyses to define generations is increasingly useful (Chisholm, 2023). For the reasons presented so far, Mannheim's theory, along with the others discussed, in both their strengths and weaknesses, leads us to hypothesize that within contemporary complexity, there are criteria for defining a generation that may not be universally recognized. The underlying hypothesis is, therefore, that the concepts of generational link, generational units, and generational placement exist as social facts.

4.1 The problems of «the problem of generations»

Following revisions of the classical concept of generation, several issues arise concerning the problem of generations. While the theory's broad and highly theoretical nature may seem advantageous, it also constitutes a significant weakness due to its lack of empirical evidence.

One key issue is the misinterpretation of the concept in common usage, especially by civil society, media, and marketing. The media's application is particularly problematic, as it generates labels like "Baby Boomers", "Generation X", "Generation Y", and "Generation Z", leading to confusion even in scientific discourse (McCrindle, 2014). These generational labels are often associated with specific traits, but their boundaries are inconsistently defined, as Markert (2004) highlights. This inconsistency, combined with the challenges of operationalizing Mannheim's theory (Ryder, 1965), complicates its application. Qualitative research by Timonen and Conlon (2014) suggests individuals often use the concept of generation correctly, aligning with Mannheim's original insights. However, addressing its empirical challenges has primarily relied on quantitative research, particularly regarding generational boundaries. A central question, «How long is a generation?» (Berger, 1960), has persisted since the 1960s, alongside efforts to develop analytical tools. Ryder (1965) introduced the concept of 'cohort', defined as a group experiencing the same event within a specific time frame. This stripped Mannheim's definition of its focus on bonds and unity, emphasizing historical location instead. Cohorts have since become valuable for defining age groups and analyzing shared historical experiences (Rosow, 1978).

While some argue for replacing 'generation' with 'cohort' due to its empirical precision (Elder, Johnson & Crosnoe, 2002), these concepts are distinct, non-interchangeable, and have different societal effects. 'Generation' is often linked to qualitative studies and 'cohort' to quantitative ones (Nilsen, 2014). Another emerging approach involves studying generational identity, examining individuals' psychosocial belonging to groups, especially in marketing and business contexts (Urick, 2012; Lyons et al., 2019).

Amid the confusion and various definitions of generation and cohort, it's crucial to enhance definitional rigor. This can be achieved by recognizing generational differences without treating them as homogeneous age groups. A critical approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, is necessary for more comprehensive analyses. It's important not only to define generation *a priori* but also to avoid overly rigid definitions, acknowledging that generations and their definitions evolve over time and space. Enhancing the theoretical approach and fostering a more informed use of the concept can be highly beneficial (Scherger, 2012).

5. Methodology

Building on the theoretical framework outlined, this analysis aims to provide empirical evidence for the self-perceived existence of generations and generational units. The goal is not to explain the determinants of generational formation from a top-down perspective, but to examine whether individuals perceive these concepts, particularly those introduced by Karl Mannheim (1952). Primary data from the 'Survey on Youth Conditions in Italy', collected between February and June 2024, will be analyzed. The sample includes 12,627 Italian aged 18 to 39 (acknowledging that 39 may exceed conventional definitions of youth). Surveys are widely recognized as an effective tool for studying youth and generations (Spitzer, 1973). This questionnaire was designed in line with Mannheim's theory, which links youth to generational formation, though not necessarily within his identified age range. The study builds on Mannheim's idea that youth can be a driving force for social change, a notion also presents in contemporary theories (Polidori, 2023).

The analysis will not address respondents' self-perception as either young or adult. The focus is on generational belonging and unity, using the following questions: 'Do you think young people can be considered a single group?' ('No', 'Yes, but only partially', 'Yes, entirely') and 'To what extent do you identify with your generation?' (on a 5-point Likert scale). The responses will first be analyzed by demographic characteristics (gender and age), then by socio-demographic and status variables. Next, the responses will be categorized into a typology (Karlsson & Bergam, 2017), creating nine groups based on levels of generational identification and perceived unity. This typology will be further described using socio-demographic variables.

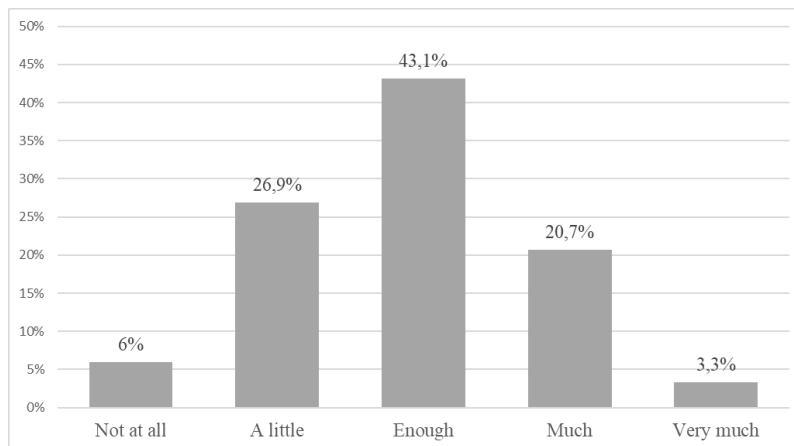
The final analysis will remain descriptive but adopt a configurational approach, mapping the ideal types onto a Cartesian space. The aim is to construct a coherent framework, consistent with the existing literature, highlighting self-perceptions of generational identification and the perceived existence of multiple generational units. This will test the hypothesis that, although weak, there is a link between Mannheim's categories, and that some individuals perceive it, making the tripartite division of generational bond, units, and placement a social fact rather than just a concept.

6. Identifying generation through data

I observe that Italian youth identify with a generation. Of the respondents, 6% do not identify with their generation at all, 26.9% identify only a little, 43.1% fall between those who feel little and a lot of belonging, 20.7% identify much, and 3.3% identify very much. This question

assumes the existence of a youth generation. A total of 67.1% of respondents feel they belong to a generation to some degree, from ‘quite a bit’ to ‘very much’ (see graph 1).

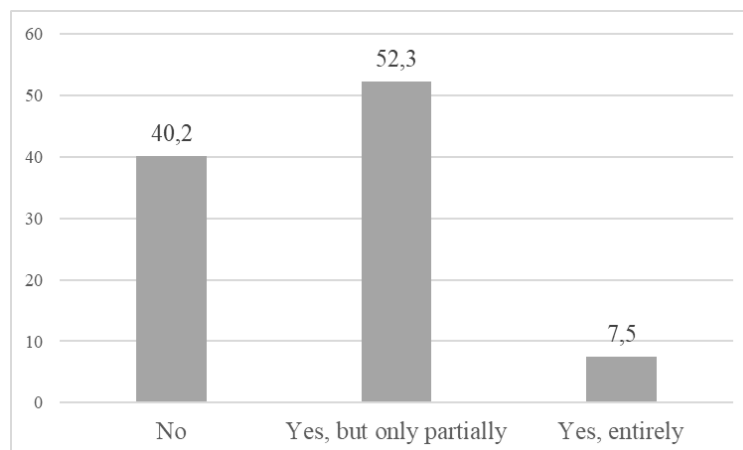
Graph 1 Bar chart of the question on identification with own generation



Source: Author elaboration

Additionally, it can be observed that 40.2% of young people believe the social category of youth cannot be considered a single group, 52.3% think it can, but only partially, and 7.5% agree that it can be considered a single group entirely (see graph 2).

Graph 2 Bar chart of the question on unity of youth



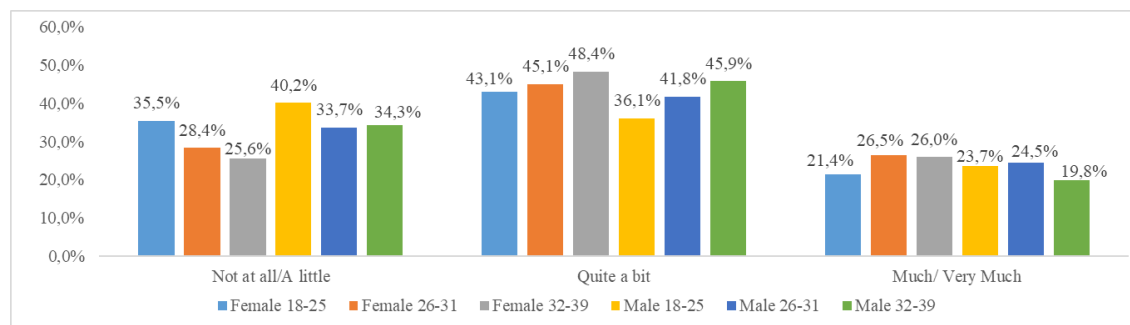
Source: Author elaboration

Analyzing these two variables independently reveals two key insights: first, young people predominantly identify with a generation; second, they recognize that youth cannot be seen as a homogeneous group. This suggests an awareness of what has been described as generational units in literature. The perception of generational bond and unity, even among those who view young people as only partially a singular group, offers valuable insights for further analysis, even if this bond is primarily self-perceived.

6.1 Characteristics of perceptions of belonging to a generation

Not all individuals perceive or identify themselves in the same way within a generation. To illustrate this, a series of bar charts, each divided by color to represent different categories, were used to track the column percentages. Those who do not identify with a generation tend to be younger males and females. Among those who feel they identify somewhat with their generation, older women and men are the most likely to consider themselves part of it. Women, in general, identify with this category more than men. Among those who much or very much identify with their generation, women aged 26 to 31 and 32 to 39 make up the majority. In comparison, men aged 18 to 25 and 32 to 39 follow these groups (see graph 3).

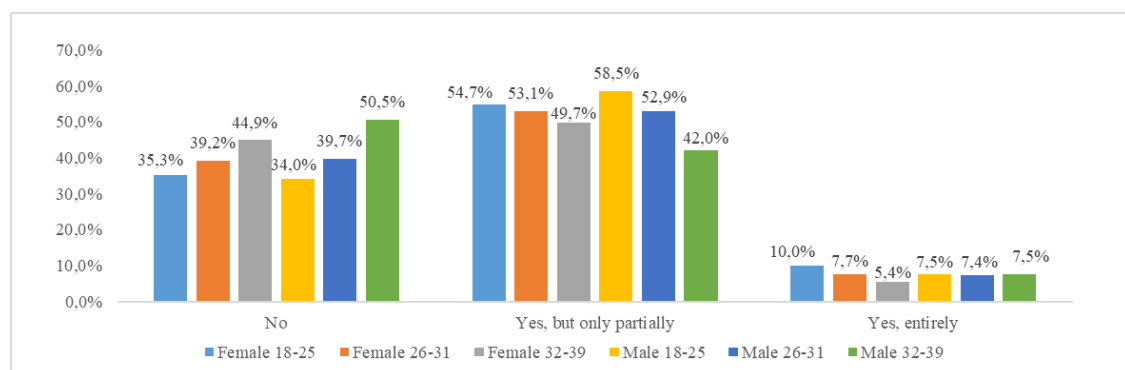
Graph 3 Bar chart of the question on identification with own generation by gender-age typology



Source: Author elaboration

Subtle differences can be observed in the distribution of responses to the question about the uniformity of the youth group. Among those who believe young people cannot form a single group, it is the older age categories (32-39) of both males and females who hold this view. Conversely, those who believe young people can only partially form a group tend to be from the younger age groups of both males and females. Among those who believe young people can entirely form a single group, there are no differences among males, but among females, younger individuals tend to perceive a greater uniformity (see graph 4).

Graph 4 Bar chart of the question on unity of youth by gender-age typology

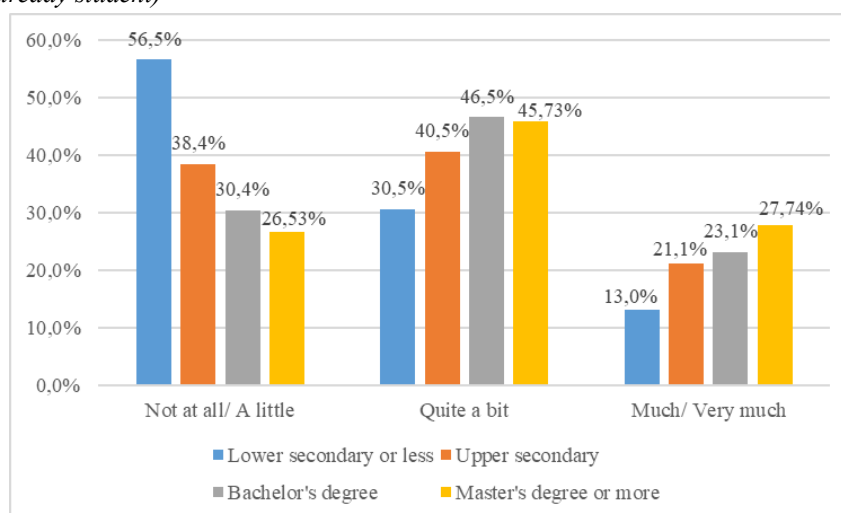


Source: Author elaboration

Moreover, self-perception of belonging to or identifying with one's own generation does not appear to be influenced by education, social position, or status, nor do opinions on whether young people can form a single group.

Family cultural capital does not appear to play a significant role in either descriptive or explanatory terms. However, individual education helps to explain both generational identification and the perception of unity or multiple identities. This analysis excludes individuals still in education (2,925 cases) to avoid potential distortions. The reduction in cases does not affect the column percentages, as the analysis uses percentages that account for the distribution of educational qualifications. Since the percentage figure is standardized, it remains comparable regardless of unit or sample size. Regarding identification, individuals with lower secondary education or less tend to either not identify or identify only slightly with their generation, while those with a bachelor's degree or higher are more likely to feel they belong strongly. Those with the highest educational qualifications are most likely to strongly or very strongly identify with their generation, as shown in the column percentage results (see graph 5).

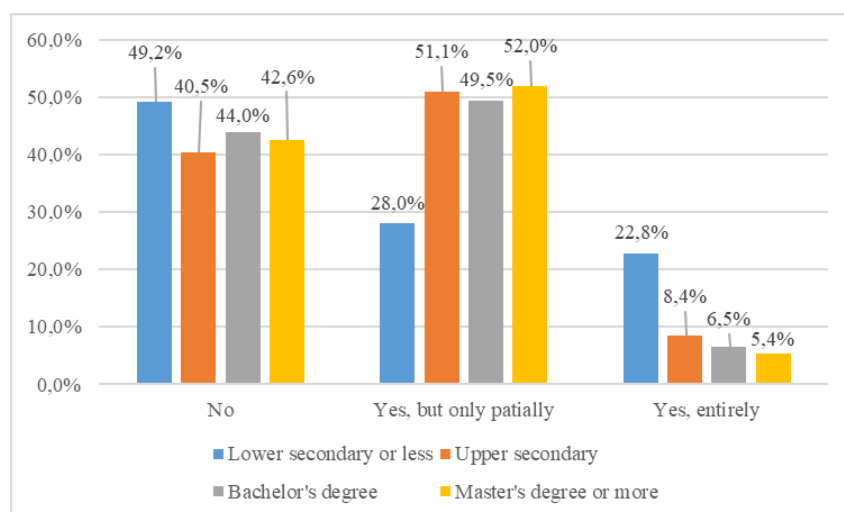
Graph 5 Bar chart of the question on identification with own generation by level of education (excluding who is already student)



Source: Author elaboration

The same cannot be said for the perception of the youth group. Those who do not believe that young people can form a single group are more likely to have lower educational qualifications, although the percentage differences between groups are not very pronounced. For those who believe young people can only partially be considered a single group, there are no significant differences by education level, except for those with lower secondary education or less, who are less likely to hold this view. However, in the final category, it is those with the lowest educational qualifications who are more likely to believe that young people can form a single group (see graph 6).

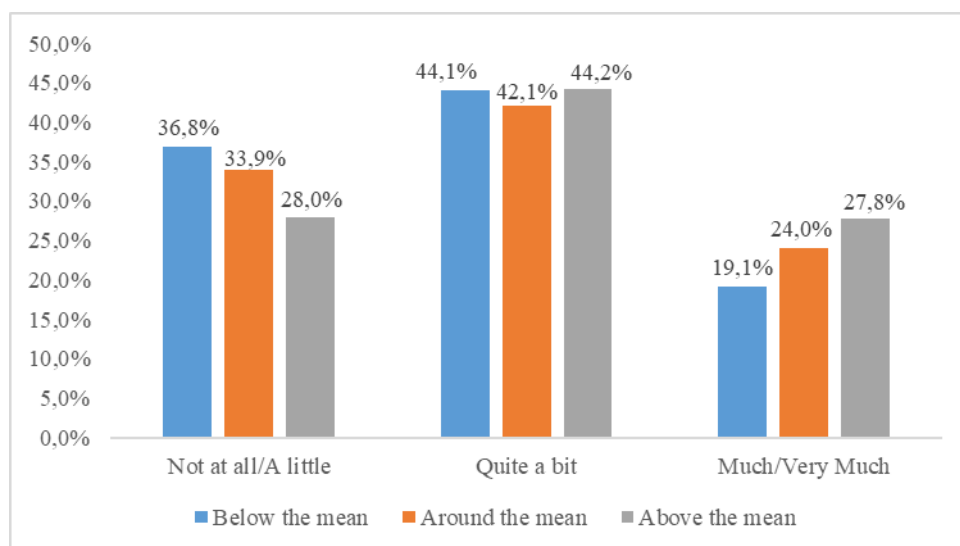
Graph 6 Bar chart of the question on unity of youth by level of education (excluding who is already student)



Source: Author elaboration

Another variable that seems to effectively describe generational identification is self-perceived social status (recoded into three categories based on the average positions¹). Respondents with a self-perceived status below average tend to identify less with their generation, often choosing the option of not identifying at all or only slightly. Among those who identify moderately, there are no significant differences. However, among those who identify very much, individuals with an above-average status make up a larger percentage (see graph 7).

Graph 7 Bar chart of the question on identification with own generation by social self-collocation

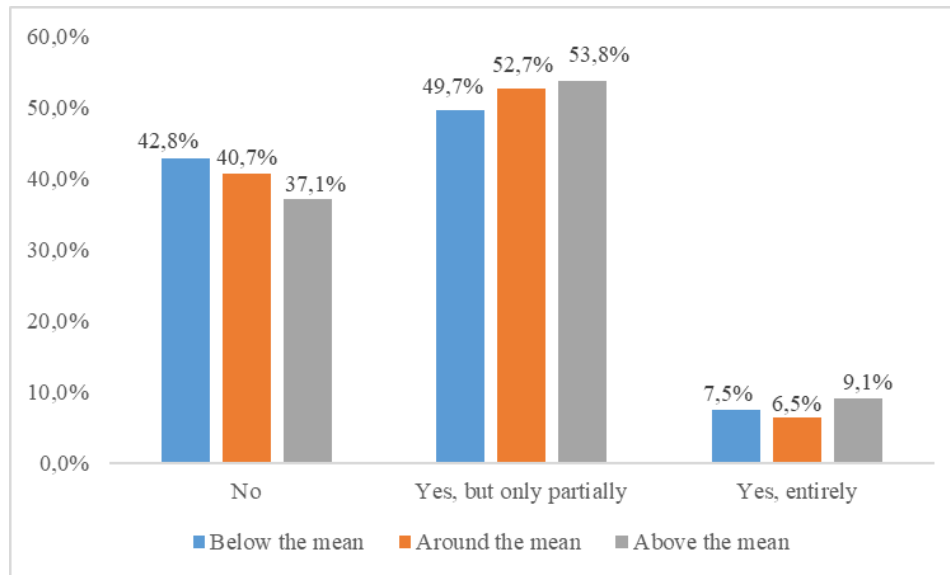


Source: Author elaboration

¹ below average from 1 to 5, around the average from 6 to 7, and above average from 8 to 10

Regarding the perception of youth group unity, those who do not believe that young people can represent a single group are more likely to have a below-average self-perceived social status. Among those who believe young people can only partially form a group, a slightly higher percentage have an above-average self-perceived social status compared to other categories. For those who think young people form a single group, there are no significant differences, though about 9% of respondents with an above-average status hold this view (see graph 8).

Graph 8 Bar chart of the question on unity of youth by social self-collocation



Source: Author elaboration

These subtle differences suggest that gender is not a key variable in distinguishing generational ties, unity, or the presence of generational groups. Age appears to be a more significant differentiator. Education level and self-perceived social status, while having a minimal impact, seem to play a role. Less educated individuals are more likely to believe that young people can form a single group, overlooking the possibility of multiple generational units, while the more educated tend to recognize greater differences. Similarly, those with below-average self-perceived social status show similar trends, although the effect is less pronounced.

Regarding generational identification, more educated individuals and those who perceive themselves as above average in social status tend to identify more strongly with their generation. Conversely, those with lower education levels and modest social status report feeling little or no sense of belonging, which may reflect a sense of exclusion and the perception of differentiated conditions within their generation.

6.3 A typology for analyzing generational identity and perceived belonging

Considering the previously observed variables, which serve as proxies for the perception of generational bonds and belonging, and the presence of multiple groups, the following will illustrate a type that encompasses both the perception of multiple groups among youth and the

identification/belonging with a generation. This provides a more nuanced view, offering an open analysis based on individual self-perceptions rather than rigid generational boundaries.

This type also reflects the contemporaneity of individuals within a generation, shaped by historical and social context. Thus, the sense of belonging to one's generation is primarily expressed through the group of young people.

From the typology nine ideal types of individuals emerge.

Table 1 Ideal types of groups that emerge from the combination of generational identification level and the perception of generational units.

		To what extent do you identify with your generation?		
		Not at all/ A little	Quite a bit	Much/Very much
Do you think young people can be considered a single group?	No	Monads/Hermits/Solitaries	Distant/Marginal	External
	Yes, but only partially	Disconnected/Independent	Moderates	Involved/Connected
	Yes, completely	Strangers/Alienated	Integrated/Aligned	Fused/Identified

Source: Author elaboration

Monads/Hermits/Solitaries (16.1%) believe that young people cannot be considered a single group and do not identify with their generation. *Disconnected/Independent* (15.2%) think young people can partially form a single group but do not feel a sense of belonging to their generation. *Strangers/Alienated* (1.7%) do not feel, or only slightly feel, a sense of belonging to their generation but believe young people constitute a single group. *Distant/Marginal* (17.2%) feel reasonably connected to their generation but think young people cannot be represented as single groups. *Moderates* (22.8%) feel fairly connected to their generation and think young people can partially represent a single group. *Integrated/Aligned* (3.1%) feel somewhat connected to their generation and believe young people represent a single group. *External* (6.9%) strongly identify with their generation but do not think young people can be a single group. *Involved/Connected* (14.3%) strongly identify with their generation but think young people represent a single group only to some extent. *Merged/Identified* (2.7%) feel a strong sense of belonging to their generation and think young people are a single group.

We must exercise caution when using these groups due to their small sizes, which could distort the analyses. It is important to recognize that these groups are part of an exploratory endeavor based on theoretical guidance, intended to be followed by more complex studies using the same data and conceptual framework. The distribution of cases within these groups is not optimal, with some groups being particularly small, complicating comparisons in the next analysis. These groups were created for theoretical reasons, grounded in the hypothesis of exploring generational bonds and perceived unity. This approach is aligned with the exploratory nature of the analysis, rather than being purely explanatory. In summary, the groups were constructed to test hypotheses and gain insights into their characteristics, which will enhance their explanatory and analytical power in future research.

6.4 The characteristics of the typology

The aim of this section, consistent with the existing literature, is to identify distinguishing elements that define key aspects of groups identified within classical generational theory, alongside traits linked to self-perception. Rather than adopting a top-down approach to externally define generations, this study investigates the existence of generations and the

perception of generational units by directly analyzing participants' responses, thereby capturing their synthesized lived experiences.

Before engaging in the core analysis, key characteristics of the groups were examined, focusing on age, gender, education level, and perceived social status.

The groups of strangers/alienated (average age: 27.0) and disconnected/independent (27.1) are the youngest. These are followed by the merged/identified (27.4) and involved/connected (27.8). Groups such as integrated/aligned (28), monads/hermits (28.2), and moderates (28.3)—characterized by a moderate generational sense—fall in the middle. The oldest groups, distant/marginal (29.7) and external (30.2), are more detached from notions of youth unity or generational identity. While no definitive conclusions emerge, younger groups tend to exhibit weaker generational identification but stronger perceptions of youth unity. Central groups with clearer generational belonging align with middle age ranges, while older groups show greater detachment.

Gender differences reveal three male-dominated groups: monads/hermits (55.3%), disconnected (55.7%), and strangers/alienated (54.7%). Female-dominated groups include distant/marginal (53.4%), moderates (52.8%), integrated/aligned (52.6%), and external (53.8%). Groups involved/connected and merged/identified show no significant gender disparities. Notably, women appear less likely to recognize themselves as part of a generational group, reflecting a weaker sense of generational identification.

Regarding self-perceived social positioning, most respondents identify as around the mean², but distinctions arise between those below or above it. Strangers/alienated (31.5%) and monads/hermits (26.3%) report a higher percentage of respondents below the mean. Groups above the mean include moderates (29.3%), integrated/aligned (32.8%), external (30.7%), involved/connected (30.1%), and merged/identified (40.3%). Distant/marginal and disconnected/independent show negligible differences.

Educational level distributions reveal certain patterns. Strangers/alienated (18.7%) and integrated/aligned (10.2%) have the highest proportion of respondents with lower secondary education or less. For strangers, upper secondary education accounts for 37.9%, while 32.2% hold bachelor's degrees. In other groups, higher education - upper secondary or master's degrees - is more prominent. Though not central to generational analysis, these trends reflect the broader phenomenon of educational expansion.

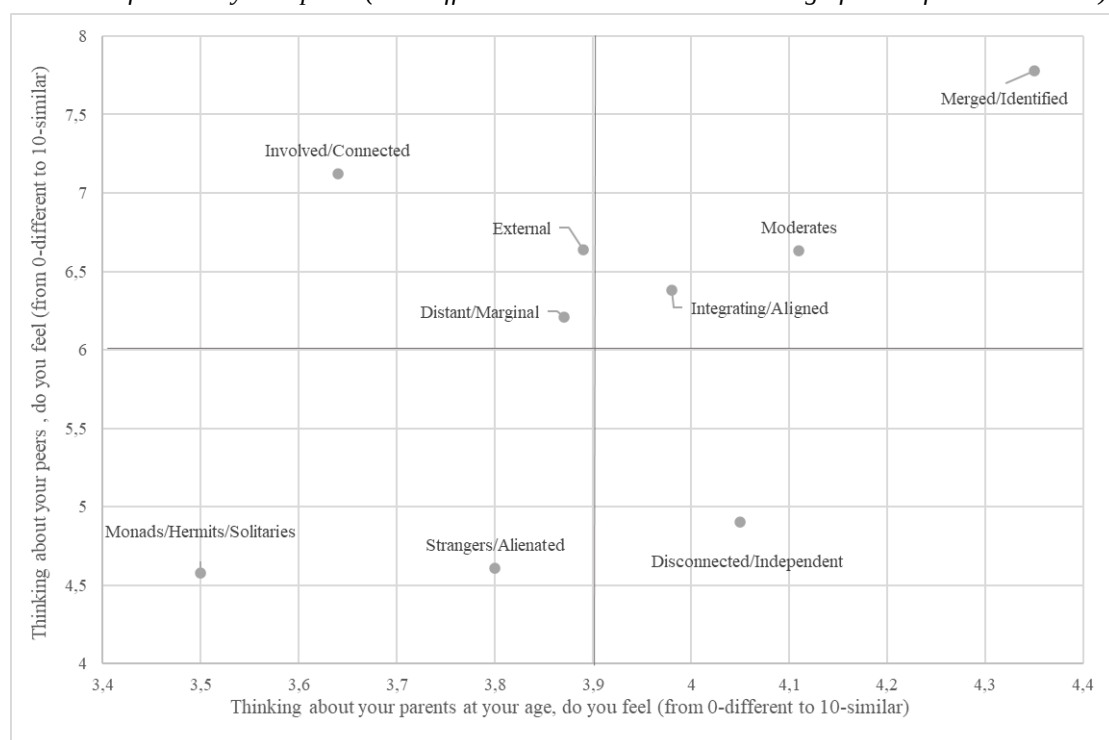
6.5 The typology between the axes

To describe in more detail the ideal types identified, they were plotted within Cartesian axes defined by different variables, allowing for the examination of their spatial configuration. For first, the groups are positioned in relation to the variable of self-perceived similarity/difference with parents and peers. In the second quadrant, individuals feel more like their peers than their parents. The 'involved/connected' group stands out most here, followed by the 'external' and 'distant/marginal', who are closer to the center. From a generational perspective, these individuals perceive a shift in their experiences, potentially belonging to a different generation than the previous one. Although these three ideal types don't share many similarities, the 'external' and 'distant/marginal' groups are closer to each other, as both do not believe young

² Monads/Hermits/Solitaires 50.8%, Disconnected/Independent 54.3%, Strangers/Alienated 46.5%, Distant/Marginal 51.5%, Moderates 49.3%, Integrating/Aligned 41.5%, External 52.5%, Involved/Connected 50.7%, Merged/Identified 46.9%.

people can be seen as a unified group but identify somewhat to very strongly with their own generation. The ‘involved/connected’ group, in contrast, believes young people can represent a unified group only partially but still feels a sense of belonging to their generation. While the differences between these ideal types are minimal, they suggest potential similarities and distinctions among groups even when defined by different characteristics. In the third and fourth quadrants, we find those who perceive themselves as more different and potentially excluded: the ‘monads/hermits/solitaries’ and the ‘strangers/alienated’, both of whom feel more different from both peers and parents. Lastly, the ‘disconnected/independent’ individuals occupy a position with moderate levels of similarity to their parents but low similarity to their peers (see graph 9).

Graph 9 Configuration of the ideal types between indicator of similarity with parents at same age and indicator of similarity with peers (all coefficients on both dimensions are significant for values <0.05)



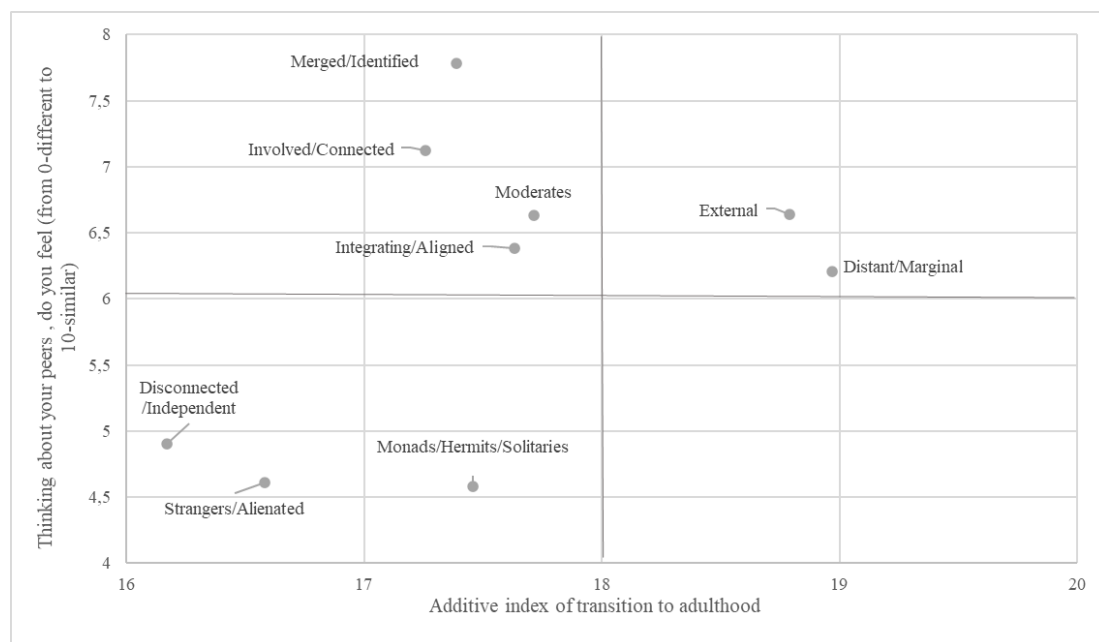
Source: Author elaboration

In this context, the spatial positioning of the ideal types was also examined in relation to the perception of similarity with peers and the additive index of adulthood³. Upon review, there are no groups in the fourth quadrant. In the third quadrant, we find those who identify little with their peers and cannot be defined as adults according to the stages of the transition to adulthood. These include the ‘monads/hermits/solitaries’, ‘disconnected/independent’, and ‘strangers/alienated’ groups. In the second quadrant, however, we find the ‘non-adults’ who do identify with their peers. The groups that feel most like their peers are the ‘merged/identified’, followed by the ‘involved/connected’, with the ‘moderates’ and ‘integrated/aligned’ positioned closer to the center. In the first quadrant, within the positive

³ based on five life events (completing education, securing stable employment, housing independence, cohabiting/marrying, parenthood), categorizes responses from "event fully excluded within three years" to "event already occurred." The index ranges from 5 (none of the events occurred) to 25 (all events occurred).

semi-axes of similarity and adulthood index, are the ‘external’ and ‘distant/marginal’ groups. This analysis highlights the analytical complexity surrounding youth and generational groups. It is not sufficient to simply observe these configurations; we must also follow the step-by-step process of constructing and describing the typology. This demonstrates how the perception of generational identification, combined with the perception of generational unity, corresponds to both individual and social characteristics. These factors must be considered not only to observe society and produce research but also to offer clear insights into who young people are, whether they can be considered a cohesive group, and whether interventions can be designed based on their differences to improve their conditions and promote positive changes in terms of social equity. Furthermore, the transition to adulthood index, in this configuration, offers a relatively clear picture of the characteristics of the groups. Observing the X-axis, we see that those who do not believe young people form a unified group are, in fact, the most ‘adult’, and are likely no longer young in the strict sense. On the other hand, those who are, by all measures, young according to the index are those who feel no sense of belonging to their own generation but believe that young people can form a unified group. By drawing an imaginary diagonal, there seems to be a continuity in generational belonging and perception, which, perhaps somewhat imprecisely, we can view as increasing over time. All other ideal types are young, and reference is made to the description of the quadrants, with the awareness that the process of becoming an adult brings significant changes. These changes warrant further exploration, especially considering the potential continuity in the descriptive power of the variables used (see graph 10).

Graph 10 Configuration of the ideal types between indicator of similarity with peers and additive index of adulthood (all coefficients on both dimensions are significant for values <0.05)

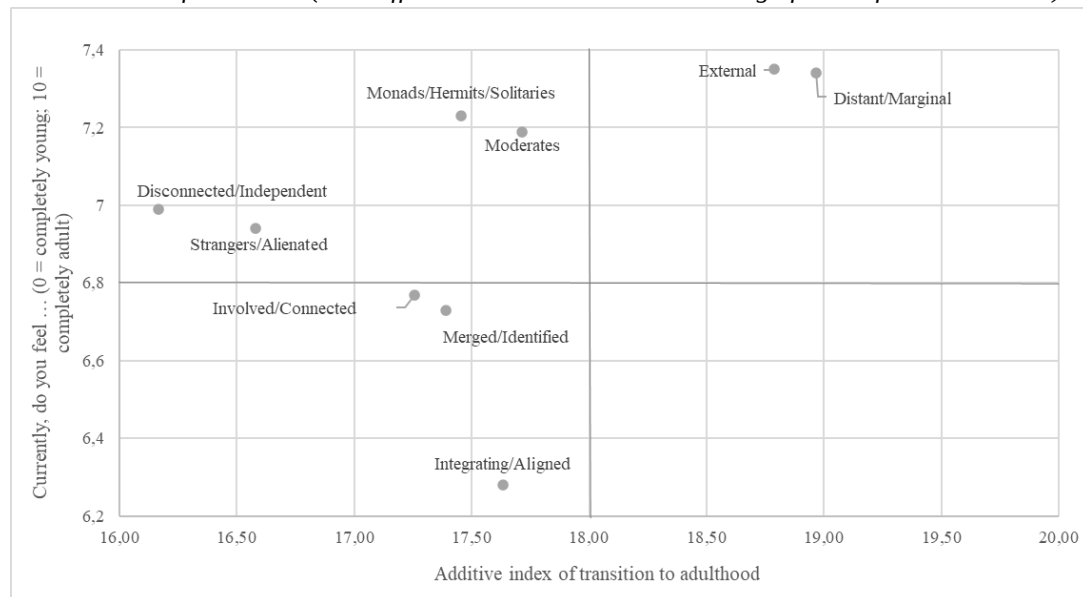


Source: Author elaboration

The final configuration observed, which can provide insight into the relationship between the concept of youth, generations, and, in this case, the transition to adulthood, involves the self-referential variable for studying self-perceived adulthood. This variable ranges from 0, representing ‘completely youthful’, to 10, representing ‘completely adult’. The fourth

quadrant remains empty, with the typologies identified in the first, second, and third quadrants. In the first quadrant, we find ideal types who perceive themselves as more adult and are indeed factually aligned with the adulthood index, partially overlapping with the previous configuration. The second quadrant shows a general overlap with the earlier configuration, except for the ‘strangers/alienated’ group. Despite feeling moderately adult, this group does not identify with their peers and has some of the lowest values on the additive adulthood index. This quadrant also includes the ‘disconnected/independent’, ‘monads/hermits/solitaries’, and ‘moderates’, positioned near the boundary with the first quadrant. Two sub-quadrants can be identified within this framework, although they are difficult to explain, as there is no underlying similarity between the pairs of ideal types that form them. However, what they indicate is that these groups perceive themselves differently on the scale of self-perceived adulthood/youth and the additive index. The ‘monads/hermits/solitaries’ and the ‘moderates’ perceive themselves as younger but are more adult, while the ‘strangers/alienated’ and the ‘disconnected/independent’ perceive themselves as older but are, in fact, younger. Naturally, beyond potential interpretative explanations, there are practical and statistical reasons that may account for these positions: given the small size of certain groups, it is possible that the centroids of each ideal type exhibit a high degree of internal variation, making their positions difficult to interpret due to a lack of statistical validity. In the third quadrant, we find those who perceive themselves as younger and are indeed younger according to the ‘stages’ of life. This includes the ‘involved/connected’, ‘merged/identified’ groups, who are at the boundary with the second quadrant, and the ‘integrated/aligned’ (see graph 11).

Graph 11 Configuration of the ideal types between indicator of self-perceived youngness/adulthood and additive index of adulthood (all coefficients on both dimensions are significant for values <0.05)



Source: Author elaboration

Considering the origin of the typologies, this combined information indicates that young people form a distinct group and identify with the generational group. They are also the ones who perceive themselves as younger in terms of life stages. This pattern is consistent across the other typologies, as they also identify more with their peers. This, together with other deducible insights from the combined configurations and descriptions, confirms the existence of a core group of individuals who feel young, perceive themselves as part of a generation, identify with their peers, and have not fully completed the transition to adulthood. This finding

contradicts both the pervasive individualism thesis and the absolutist views that negatively characterize youth as passive. The analysis also demonstrates that generalizations are not feasible.

7. Conclusions

To be or not to be? The answer, considering the outcomes of this work, may well be 'self-perception'. In the context of theoretical hyper-complexity, this study synthesizes various uses of the concept of 'generation'. For clarity and scientific rigor, Mannheim's original concept has been revisited alongside more contemporary approaches. Attention was given to the numerous, particularly operational, limitations inherent in Mannheim's theory. The aim, therefore, was to provide evidence for the existence of generations and generational units as Mannheim conceived them, not through a top-down approach, but based on the self-perceptions of respondents to the questionnaire. For this reason, a sensitive and descriptive methodology was chosen. The use of configurations proved essential in attempting to define, from the respondents' stated perspectives, the existence of generational units, a generation, or even a generational bond. From this approach, chosen for its empirical and interpretative flexibility, results emerge that, although still preliminary compared to the potential of the questionnaire, cannot be generalized. Not all respondents perceive the generation and units (see graph 1 and 2). For this reason, the use of typology was adopted (Table 1). It was further observed that typologies, and consequently the perception of generation, unity, and connection, vary by age. Groups that are less likely to believe in the unity of the youth group but identify with their own generation tend to be older, while younger respondents are those who completely identify with and believe that young people form a unified group. They also include those who feel excluded and do not identify with their own generation. Generally, these groups do not differ significantly by gender. However, males tend to identify less with their own generation compared to females, and vice versa, except for the extreme groups, who are more identified and perceive greater unity. Differences based on self-perceived social status and educational level are even smaller (see par 6.4). The typologies, the final tool used, provide more complex descriptive information. Within space, clusters of ideal types can be distinguished, reflecting differences in terms of dissimilarity/similarity with peers, adulthood, and similarity with one's own parents. In particular, the adulthood of the 'Distant/Marginal' and 'External' groups offers insights into the level of identification and the perception of unity among young people, suggesting that the sense of generational identity may begin to emerge with the early steps into adult life. Differences with respondents' parents' generation also highlight varying levels of perceived generational belonging. Among those with weaker identification, there is a greater sense of exclusion from shared generational dynamics, while those with stronger identification show slight continuity with their parents' generation, especially under conditions of social mobility. The typology, therefore, provides a synthetic overview of the peculiarities defining the groups, offering valuable insights into the complex interplay of similarity, difference, and perceived belonging within generational contexts (see par. 6.5).

In conclusion, although not highly generalizable, the concepts of generation and generational unity are present in the self-perceived imagination of Italian youth. The study has highlighted some differences among the sample, and, in line with the literature, we can affirm that the original concepts of Karl Mannheim, also validated for certain structural variables, continue to hold validity. This result, while confirming both the classical literature and our hypothesis, which is thereby strengthened, should be interpreted in its primordial form. It must be acknowledged that the findings are still empirically quite raw, and thus a more in-depth study will be required in the future, one that goes beyond mere description and employs multivariate analysis and control techniques. This will, of course, need to be preceded by a more accurate

generative synthesis of the groups under investigation, to better understand the concept of 'becoming a generation'.

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