

## **In Limbo: Liminality Narratives of Young Adults Returning to the Family Home**

*“It opened doors.” Mandy, 28*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Modern life trajectories (Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe 2003) are messy and non-linear (Shirani and Henwood 2011). Increasingly, fluid life courses include overlapping, intermingling transitions and even reversals (Shanahan 2003; Turner 1977). This is especially true of emerging adulthood (Arnett 2014), which has a “tremendous variation in timing of life course transitions” (Weinberger, Zavisca and Silva 2017: 334) and is characterized by instability and ambiguity (Harrington, Bielby and Bardo 2011). ‘Boomerang kids’—young adults returning to the parental home after a period of independence—are a rising global phenomenon, amplified by the recent pandemic (theguardian, 18th of October 2020). This reverse transition marks a regression of the normative progression to adulthood (Sassler, Ciambone and Benway 2008; Settersten 2003), accompanied by tensions between the established adult identities and the child-like state of living with parents, between autonomy and dependence (Lewis, West, Roberts and Noden 2016; Severson and Collins 2020).

Previous studies on young adults returning to the parental home have primarily focused on identifying the drivers that lead to their return (Billari and Liefbroer 2007; Holdsworth 2000; South and Lei 2015; Stone, Berrington and Falkingham 2014) and how they negotiate adulthood as a result of the move (Lewis et al. 2016; Sassler et al. 2008; Severson and Collins 2020). This study investigates ‘returning home’ pathways and the role of consumption in navigating the ambiguities that accompany the return to living with parents. Based on life-course and liminality literature and substantiated by in-depth interviews with young adults, this study presents three ‘returning home’ narratives and corresponding consumption transitions ‘in limbo’.

### **THEORY**

#### **Moving back home**

Individual life trajectories are varied and take unexpected paths. Young adults’ return to the family home often goes hand in hand with completing education, becoming unemployed or the dissolution of a partnership (Stone, Berrington and Falkingham 2014). In the UK, this trend has been made more prominent with the dramatic rise in housing costs and the recent SARS-CoV-2 pandemic (Bell, Codreanu and Machin 2020). Life-course literature recognizes these reversals of life transitions (McMillan and Eliason 2003; Shanahan 2003), potentially ending in a feeling of regression (Shirani and Henwood 2011).

Returning to the parental home has strong implications on young adults’ independence. Lewis et al. (2016) found that most returners struggled with a sharpened sense of dependence and being treated as a child by their parents when living together. A child-like self co-exists and competes with the adult self (Lewis et al. 2016; Sassler et al. 2008; Severson and Collins 2020), marking a dual state of self in transition. Further, Lewis et al. (2016) note that periods of co-residence are usually of uncertain duration, which renders the ‘betwixt and between’ state even more delicate. Yet, while young adults want to be treated as equals and aspire to recover their independence, Sassler et al. (2008) find that young adults also benefit from the domestic and economic support of their parents. Hence, transition reversals are experienced as highly ambiguous and liminal (Turner 1977; van Genneep 1960)—a transition-in-transition—waiting to be mastered and recovered.

## **Consumption in Transition**

Progression from childhood to adulthood marks a coming-of-age transition that is rooted in identity tensions between reliance and autonomy, chaos and organisation (Drenten 2013). Consumption plays a key role in helping young adults navigate and fulfil the desires latent between these tensions. Stability-seeking consumption (Noble & Walker 1997), self-gifting, compulsive consumption, indulgence and increased materialism (Rindfleisch, Burroughs and Denton 1997) constitute common coping strategies related to transition. Weinberger, Zavisca and Silva (2017), for example, found that the period after gaining residential independence is characterised by heavy investment in exploratory experience as a means to build cultural capital. In parting from the “old” self, the separation from possessions and consumption practices that represent the past can facilitate the transition (Martin Young 1991). In the transition to adulthood (Cody 2012; Hemetsberger, Bauer, von Wallpach and Broger 2013), consumption practices that represent the old selves are shed, while some childhood brands become therapeutic and alleviate the transition to a new role. However, consumption can also prolong or stall liminality (Darveau and Cheikh-Ammar 2021) when it hinders the self-development of a future self (see Yau and Christidi 2018). Appau et al.’s (2020) study of Pentecostal converts shows that individuals in transition can be even stuck in an ongoing cycle of incorporation and separation consumption practices when liminality turns permanent. Considering these different possible pathways, this study aims to understand the ambiguity inherent in re-transitions from independent life to home and uncover the role of consumption in alleviating or stalling young adults’ return to independence.

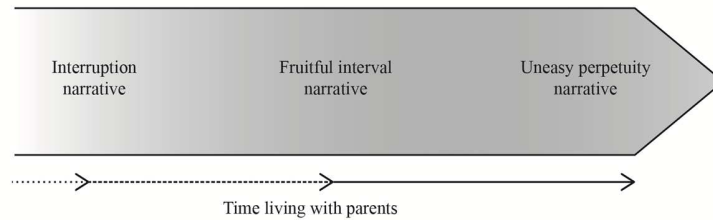
## **METHODOLOGY**

Our exploratory study includes 10 narrative interviews and collages to elicit individuals’ biographies and to gain a nuanced understanding of reverse transition narratives of young adults and related consumption patterns in regaining balance and independence (Flick 2018). The collages were used as autodiving technique helping participants to elicit rich life narratives and consumption patterns associated with their past, present and prospective future selves. The UK context was chosen to capture the rising trend of Generation Boomerang. Participants were recruited personally, via Gumtree and Reddit using maximum variation sampling (Patton 2014). Interviews were conducted in February and March 2020 online via video Zoom calls, lasting on average 75 minutes each. Following grounded theory, this study analyzed verbatim transcripts and developed narrative themes through an iterative process of categorization and abstraction (Charmaz 2006; Spiggle 1994).

## **FINDINGS**

Young adults’ transition to the parental home unfolded in the context of their broader past-present-future narratives that are deeply entangled with their former lives and current life contexts. We identified three key narratives and accompanying changes in consumption patterns: (1) *interruption* narrative, (2) *fruitful interval* narrative and (3) *uneasy perpetuity* narrative.

**Figure 1**  
*Narrative Distribution According to Time Living with Parents*



(1) The *interruption narrative* portrays young adults who experienced the return to the family home as an interruption to their otherwise ‘normative’ life trajectories (Settersten 2003). Prior to moving in, life was on a stable path, independence a matter of course. Moving back home is therefore a big adjustment and feels like going back in time – “I had that feeling of like, ‘oh, God living with my parents again’” (James, 32). Thus, staying with parents is characterized by strong tensions between the former independent self and the present child-like status. Yet, escaping the family home, similar to ‘disengagement’ coping strategies identified by Yau and Christidi (2018), offers temporary relief.

Still, moving back to the parental home and being cared for has its draws, as it has helped participants save a bit of money and they expect their future trajectories to progress as planned once they return to living independently. Despite the tensions and the strong intention to move out, there is an overall appreciation of the support offered and the convenience of living at the parental home. At times, this turns into an indulgence in their former selves, potentially stalling the transition (Darveau and Cheikh-Ammar, 2021). For Harriett (30), living with her mum is a time in which she can indulge by playing the role of a child (Martin Young, 1991) before she plunges back into adulthood.

The moving out date is in sight, thus rather than negotiating their place as adults in their family home, the young adults put their lives ‘on hold’, *suspend* self-oriented consumption and mostly adhere to parental consumption patterns and rituals. Some more active strategies of coping include *future-oriented* and *imagined* consumption. Maria, living out of boxes in her childhood room at the time of the interview, dreams of decorating her new home with pictures and plants, “It gives you a sense that the space is yours, and that you live there ... a stamp of your personality in your place” (Maria, 27). Harriet, about to move out, has been trying to spend as little as possible so she can save up for her new home. Accordingly, interruptors’ view of the future is optimistic and confident and their prospective consumption is detailed.

(2) Young adults in the *fruitful interval narrative* view the return to the parental home as a transformative and productive period in their lives, allowing them to build strength, take control and gather the necessary resources to achieve their future goals. For some it is a purposeful and significant turning point in their life trajectories: “I actually did make the decision to like – when I moved home to change my life around” (Mandy, 28). Often, young adults described their time living independently as liberating and tumultuous, characterised by abandoned consumption and loss of control. Adam describes the time before moving back to live with his parents as “living by like feeling, like doing whatever felt good. And then, just you know, paying the consequences for it afterwards.” (Adam, 33). Returning home is a consequent and constructive move, giving them the security and the freedom to pursue their careers and dreams. While the sense of freedom expressed by returners seems paradoxical and contradicts prior findings (Lewis et al. 2016;

Severson and Collins 2020), it marks a deliberate decision of the young adults to restructure their lives, as Mandy (28) expresses: "So, yeah, I just got a really strong support system. So, I think that's why I feel comfort, in a sense being home. Because I feel like I can take my time deciding what I'm going to do with my life, .....".

Their longer stay at the parental home gives them scope to negotiate their independence in the family home. *Reciprocity* as a coping strategy (Yau and Christidi 2018) is more prevalent and is keeping the parent-child relationship in balance. Mandy pays rent and Alia helps out extensively around the home. The young adults also express a strong sense of agency (Elder et al. 2003; Gecas 2003), viewing their parents as partners on a common mission.

Accordingly, consumption while living at home focuses on self-investment in the future and has therapeutic qualities in prospect of an independent life. Consumption strategies encompass *deconsumption* and *saving* behavior. Future orientation also emerges in other, less tangible areas, such as career-planning, living a healthier life, building up mental resilience or having the opportunity to learn from past mistakes – "So, when you've got your basic needs sorted, then you can go high-level thinking and reflecting and become more enlightened I suppose" (Adam, 33).

(3) *The uneasy perpetuity narrative* is the most challenging of the three. It applies to young adults who return to the parental home as a course of necessity and do not have the resources to progress to independent living, despite their desire to do so. Similar to lives preceding a fruitful interruption, time living independently was characterised by living in the moment, purposelessness and lack of control. Accordingly, consumption is indulgent, impulsive and oblivious. The underlying theme in their narratives is of loss of control and structure, which brings them back home. Lacking field-dependent capital (Appau et al. 2020; Üstüner and Holt 2007) to make the desired transition to independence leaves them in limbo. In uneasy perpetuity, the lack of financial resources but also less tangible means such as health, mental wellbeing and employability weigh heavy on them.

Participants have been living with their parents for an extended period (the longest stay in the sample is 11 years), with little hope of moving out in the future. This is problematic as they are stuck in an awkward limbo where they are neither at ease with their current state nor are they propelled to their desired state. Living in a state of permanent liminality (Appau et al. 2020; Szakolczai 2014; Thomassen 2009), participants feel immobilised, depressed and without enthusiasm for their futures. This shows up as stagnation and lack of structure while co-residing with parents. The lack of perceived self-efficacy and agency is palpable in their narratives: "and I think to myself, the future is going to happen whether I make it happen or whatever happens." (Wim, 35). Adam is plagued by uncertainty, which is reflected in the vagueness of his future outlook and narrative, "I don't know. I mean I just don't know what the future holds." (Adam, 32).

This state of paralysis is reflected in consumption habits as well. Rather than focusing on gaining independence, attention is centred around more achievable goals, self-improvement and focus on the here and now. Wim (38) likes to look for interesting, short-term work via Gumtree. Chance over choice (Drenten 2013) plays a big role in their future narratives. Wim (35) dreams of winning the lottery, while Roberto hopes his cryptocurrency investment will earn a substantial return and help him become more independent – "[that would] change my life" (Roberto, 28). Yet, daydreaming without agency leaves them in uneasy perpetuity of *investments in moments* of living and *risky investments* as coping strategies.

## DISCUSSION

Our study illuminates the role of consumption in transition, specifically reversals, and contributes to the literature on the life course trajectories of young adults. We identified three distinct narratives and related consumption patterns surrounding the return to the parental home. Sampling a broad variation in life trajectories, a striking divergence in the role of a reversal in an individual's life course is revealed: from being framed as a temporary reversal or a pause (*interruption*) to a crucial consolidating and productive stage in one's life course development (*fruitful interval*) to a seemingly permanent, pernicious reversal (*uneasy perpetuity*) (Appau et al. 2020; Szakolczai 2014). Thereby our study supports prior views of reverse transitions as being conceptually different from regular phases of liminality (Thomassen 2009; Turner 1977; van Genneep 1960).

Within the three narratives, distinctive consumption patterns unfolded. The *interruption* narrative exhibits *bridging* consumption patterns, suspending and reducing consumption related to independence and adapting to the demands of their new role. In the *fruitful interval* narrative, a shift from living in the moment to *future-oriented and imagined consumption* patterns characterizes a phase of productive consolidation and preparation for re-transitioning, akin to the 'turning point narrative' in first-time motherhood (Hemetsberger, von Wallpach and Bauer 2015). *Uneasy perpetuity* is framed by future uncertainty, thus consumption reflects *living in the moment* and coping with uncertain outcomes, as a result of a permanent, liminality-induced paralysis (Üstüner and Holt 2007; Shirani and Henwood 2011). *Deconsumption* emerged as a key consumption practice throughout the narratives—not as an ideological statement but rather as a pragmatic, potentially future-oriented strategy (Wilczak, 2018).

Our study also contributes to the broader literature on life transitions and liminality (van Genneep 1960; Elder et al., 2003) with three potential transitions in the context of broader past-present-future narratives. In reconciling independent selves, role-dependent tensions are either negotiated, compensated or result in paralysis and permanent liminality (Appau et al 2020). However, in contrast to the loss of control over oneself and one's environment (Drenten 2013) as dominant themes in the literature on reverse transitions (Lewis et al. 2016; Sassler et al. 2008; Severson and Collins 2020), we find that reverse transitions also exhibit a constructive and liberating character as reflected in the freedom rhetoric of the fruitful interval or, as our informant Mandy phrased it: "It opened doors".

**Table 1: Findings***Key Narratives of Young Adults Returning to Live With Their Parents*

Narrative	<i>Interruption</i>	<i>Fruitful Interval</i>	<i>Uneasy Perpetuity</i>
Duration	Short	Extended	Permanent
Description	A momentary interruption in / a reversal of their life trajectory.  "Yeah, I just come back, have a little sort of semi-holiday back in my home country for a few months, and then go back to China." (James, 32)	A period to recover, build strength and gather resources for the future.  "[I] actually did make the decision to like-- when I moved home to change my life around" (Mandy, 28)	A seemingly permanent state, marked by stagnation. Lacking the means to progress to independence.  "I'm staying with my parents, it's not too good, but I can't afford the rent. It's not too good to be staying with parents, I'm going to be 36 soon." (Wim, 35)
Consumption while living independently	Liberating, exploratory, relational consumption. Ascetic consumption framed by budgetary constraints. Investment in the future.	Indulgent, abandoned, exploratory, relational consumption. Ascetic consumption framed by budgetary constraints.	Indulgent, impulsive, relational, careless consumption. Ascetic consumption framed by budgetary constraints.
Consumption while living with parents	<b>Suppression</b> of individual consumption and <b>conforming</b> to family consumption habits. Indulgence in home comforts and family support. <b>Delayed</b> consumption.	<b>Self-investment. Future-orientated</b> saving and de-consumption. Strategic consumption of family support and reciprocation.	<b>Living and investing in the moment.</b> Self-improvement. Saving as a <b>coping</b> , precautionary strategy rather than an investment in the future.

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We hereby declare that (a) the presenting authors are not listed as presenters in more than two sessions in total, and (b) that the submission has not been submitted to multiple tracks, has not been previously presented at ACR, and has not been published or accepted for publication in any journal (including online publications and full-paper publications in conference proceedings).