Chapter 2
Young Adults as a Social Category: Findings from an International Study in Light of Developmental and Cohort Perspectives

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Abstract The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the basic characteristics of the university students who have participated in the Young Adults and Religion in a Global Perspective (YARG) project, as mirrored in the survey data, and to discuss the findings in light of theoretical assumptions about young adults. The chapter provides an introduction to two prevalent research perspectives on youth: a developmental perspective, and a cohort perspective. Background statistics as well as the main findings on religion are then discussed in light of these perspectives. The respondents' age, civil state and relational commitments are analyzed from a developmental perspective, which assumes similarity on behalf of young adults as a consequence of their age. Furthermore, findings on values and media use are presented in order to explore whether the survey data provides support for the participants forming a generation, the main tenet of a cohort perspective, in terms of sharing values and media habits. The concluding section discusses the extent to which higher education sets university students apart from the youth population in generally, as reflected in the YARG data. The chapter therefore provides a first glimpse into who the participants are, and what the categorization of them as young adults entails.

Keywords Young adults · Developmental perspective · Cohort perspective · Value change · Media use · Self-assessed religiosity · Religious practice

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2.1 Introduction

In studies of young people, researchers frequently refer to characteristics believed to be common for this age group or cohort. For example, in the work by Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (2004), young adults or emerging adults are depicted as finding themselves in an in-between stage and going through transitions. Jean M. Twenge (2014), in turn, depicts young people of today as "more confident, assertive, entitled – and more miserable" compared with previous generations.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the basic characteristics of the participants in the Young Adults and Religion in a Global Perspective (YARG) project as mirrored in the survey data, and to discuss the findings in light of theoretical assumptions about young adults. In YARG, a mixed-method approach including a survey, the Faith Q-Sort – a novel method used for the first time on a grand scale in the project – and semi-structured interviews was used to explore university students in thirteen different contexts (for more on the project see Chap. 1 in this volume). In any study relying on ideas about young adults, it is important to analyze the participants in relation to previous depictions of this social category. The transnational scope of YARG makes this particularly important, but the project also offers unique opportunities for this type of exploration. While it is true that the stages preceding adulthood entail increasing independence, contextual and cultural expectations influence at which age and how young people gain independence (Arnett & Galambos, 2003; Nelson et al., 2004). Furthermore, most of the labels that have been used to depict the contemporary cohort of young adults are based on studies in specific contexts. Are such labels equally valid for young adults in a transnational study?

This chapter begins with an overview of the main survey findings on religion (for more on the survey see Chap. 1 and Appendix 3). The findings and background data on the respondents are discussed in light of two prevalent research perspectives on youth. First, we provide an overview of emerging adulthood and the underlying developmental perspective. As this perspective assumes similarity on behalf of young adults as a consequence of their age, we explore how old the respondents are, their current civil state and relational commitments. Second, we present a cohort perspective on young adults, exploring the extent to which the survey data supports understanding our participants as a generation in terms of values and media use.

A critical question in relation to the YARG data is if it is valid to refer to the population studied as young adults, when the study is conducted in university contexts. The strategic selection of a certain segment of the youth population was a condition for the realization of the YARG study, but it also has implications for how the young people of the study should be understood in terms of privilege and class. In the concluding section, we explore the extent to which higher education sets university students apart from the youth population in general. In the conclusion, we draw together our findings regarding who our participants are, and what the categorization of them as young adults entails.

2.2 Indicators of Religion Amongst Young Adults: An Overview

In this section, we provide an introductory analysis of the survey findings on personal religiosity. Our first analysis concerns self-assessed religiosity, which was probed through the survey question: "*Regardless of whether you consider yourself as belonging or close to a particular religious group, community, or tradition, how religious would you say you are?*" The following question in the survey was: "*How religious would you say the family you grew up in was?*" On both questions, respondents were asked to do an estimation on a ten-degree scale, rated from "*Not at all religious*" (0) to "*Very religious*" (10). While we want to avoid an understanding of these findings as "static facts" regarding religious identities (cf. Day & Lee, 2014, p. 347), not least given the transnational scope of this survey, the findings nevertheless provide a first insight into the empirical data.

The mean of self-assessed religiosity across the entire sample (scale 0–10) is slightly below four (3.93), indicating a distanced degree of religiosity (Fig. 2.1). Six out of thirteen studied contexts or case studies are found within one scale step of the total mean, which indicates that the distanced relation to religion at a personal level holds true in many of the included contexts. However, the data also contains some exceptions. As indicated in Fig. 2.1, Sweden, Canada and Russia display means for self-assessed religiosity below three and are thereby characterized by high degrees

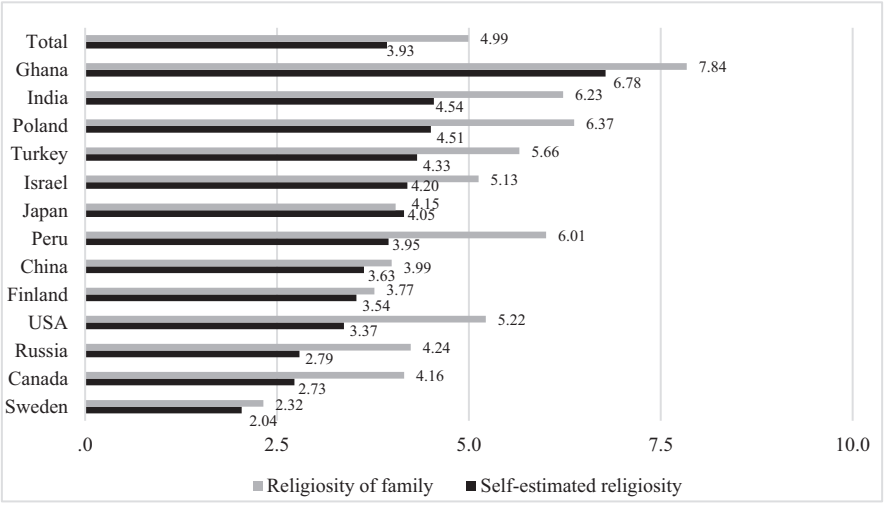

Fig. 2.1 Self-assessed religiosity vs. the family's religiosity per case study, reported as means. Sorted by degree of self-assessed religiosity (n = 4964)

of non-religiosity.[1] In contrast, Ghana is characterized by having the highest degree of self-assessed religiosity with a mean close to seven.[2] The general picture nevertheless indicates that the participants more often than not assess themselves on the side of the scale that indicates non-religion. However, the standard deviations of the case studies generally exceed 2.5, which points to internal variation within each case study.

The second central finding is that the respondents assess their own religiosity as being lower than the religiosity of their childhood homes (with one exception: Japan). For childhood homes, the total mean of 4.99 is placed in the middle of the ten-degree-scale: for seven contexts, the means indicate religiosity rather than non-religiosity as a description of one's childhood home. While the discrepancy between self-rated religiosity and one's childhood home is small in Finland, Sweden and China, eight contexts are characterized by self-assessed religiosity being more than one scale step lower than the assessment of one's childhood home. The highest discrepancies are found in India, United States, Poland and Peru.

As for public and private religious practice, the respondents were asked to rate how often they "take part in religious services or ceremonies" and "engage in private religious or spiritual practices such as worship, prayer, or meditation". After conflating the eight response alternatives into four categories ("weekly", "monthly", "from time to time" and "never"[3]), 60% of the respondents are found to fall into the same category for both questions, suggesting high inter-item consistency. Since private religious practice was reported as occurring somewhat more frequently, we limit the presentation to these findings. Previous research also suggests that patterns of private religious practice and personal beliefs remain somewhat more stable during young adulthood compared with public religious practice (Uecker et al., 2007; Koenig, 2015).

Table 2.1 demonstrates that just as for self-assessed religiosity, there is variation in private religious practice in the respective case studies.[4] While over half of the respondents from Ghana, Turkey and India report at least monthly practice – in Ghana, over half in fact report daily practice – over half of the participants in Sweden, Canada and Russia report never engaging in private religious practice.

The findings suggest a strong association between self-assessed religiosity and private religious practice. The mean for self-assessed religiosity on behalf of those

[1] Non-religiosity here should not be indicated as suggesting that those who have done this self-assessment cannot express an interest in some religious or spiritual issues. For more on the different views expressed by this group of young adults, see Chap. 6 in this volume.

[2] Differences in means of self-assessed religiosity between case studies were tested with ANOVA, $F(12, 4951) = 69.60$, $p < .001$. The Israeli data is reported at a national level, meaning that the data is presented as a total of the three Israeli case studies.

[3] The category "Weekly" include response alternatives "Every day"; "More than once a week" and "Once a week". The category "From time to time" includes alternatives "Only on special days and celebrations" and "Less often". Due to low frequencies of "I don't know" (1.5%), this category was excluded from the analysis.

[4] Differences in descriptions of private religious practice by case study were analyzed by Pearson chi-square, $\chi^2 (36) = 1186.46$, $p < .001$.

Table 2.1 Frequency of private religious practice, sorted by case study

Case study	*n*	Weekly	Monthly	From time to time	Never	Total
		%				
Ghana	416	83	4	12	1	100
Turkey	342	53	7	28	12	100
India	296	44	6	36	14	100
Israel	735	38	7	25	30	100
Poland	292	33	9	33	25	100
United States	293	32	11	22	35	100
Peru	316	30	6	35	29	100
Finland	478	29	9	21	41	100
Canada	406	21	8	18	53	100
Sweden	325	14	6	21	59	100
Russia	331	12	5	33	50	100
Japan	322	10	7	51	32	100
China	319	8	5	38	49	100
Total	4871	32	7	28	33	100

who report engagement in private religious practice at least weekly is 6.23, while less frequent private religious practice is related to lower means for self-assessed religiosity. The mean of self-assessed religiosity amongst those who have responded that they "never" engage in private religious practice is 1.58.[5]

These findings underline the need to pay attention to contextual differences, but also suggest that our participants generally identify as less religious than the family in which they grew up. Can such findings be attributed to the target group of this study being university students, and further reflect on the experiences of leading student life? Such reasoning resonates with a life-cycle perspective on young adults. We turn to this perspective next.

2.3 Young Adulthood as Part of the Life-Cycle: Age and Experience

The underlining argument for perspectives that understand youth as a particular phase of the life-cycle is that due to their age, young people share characteristics that set them apart from other age groups. Being children no more, youth is understood as characterized by a number of transitions leading towards adulthood. For a young person, these transitions are intertwined with reflections on identity and

[5] For monthly private religious practice, the mean for self-assessed religiosity was 4.76, and for those engaging in private religious practice from time to time, the mean was 3.81. Differences between means of self-assessed religiosity and private religious practices were tested with ANOVA: $F(3, 4867) = 1151.194$, $p < .001$.

values. Religion and spirituality also constitute issues that young people engage with (Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014). Drawing on perspectives from developmental psychology, the tasks and issues related to young adulthood make it essential to study young people in their own right.

However, critique has been voiced towards "youth" and "young people" as conceptual categories as they are seen as too vague considering the broad age span they refer to. Furthermore, "youth" is understood as being attached to ideas of childhood that are not equally applicable to all ages within this age group. One development in light of such critique is the concept of emerging adulthood, referring to a specific period of life separate from both adolescence and adulthood. Arnett (2000) suggests that due to demographic shifts in the form of prolonged education and postponed family formation, emerging adulthood is "characterized by change and exploration of possible life directions" (2000, p. 469). Due to these demographic shifts, the transition to adulthood is "more complex, disjointed and confusing than in past decades" (Smith & Snell, 2009, p. 6).

The concept of emerging adulthood has also been critiqued, as it is not seen as being applicable to all young people. Bynner (2005) argues that the perspective fails to acknowledge how structural factors shape identities. Based on British longitudinal data, he argues that stratification of young people leads to factors such as prolonged education and postponed family formation being more prevalent amongst more privileged segments (cf. Hendry & Kloep, 2010). The discussion of the concept has also concerned its applicability beyond the North-American context, and the individual-centered focus underlining emerging adulthood has been questioned (Nelson et al., 2004). Though criticized, emerging adulthood is becoming increasingly accepted as a perspective on young people.

Arnett (2004) suggests that the religious and spiritual developmental process that starts in adolescence becomes even more pronounced during emerging adulthood, due to the increased focus on identity issues. Studies on religious and spiritual development in emergent adulthood have also explored emerging adulthood as connected to physiological, cognitive, and emotional changes (Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014). According to Smith and Snell (2009, p. 280), "The emerging adult years often entail repeated life disruptions, transitions, and distractions – which poses challenges for sustaining religious commitments, investments, and practices." If we return to the findings reported in Table 2.1, the difference between self-rated religiosity and the religiosity of the family home could be understood as an indicator of a life phase marked by lack of stability.

In the YARG project the concept of emerging adults has not been used as a point of departure, but the developmental perspective can be applied to the young adults in our study. The participants could be described as being right in the midst of a unique life-cycle stage, characterized by occupation with identity issues. The focus on university students in the YARG study can be understood as further augmenting the prevalence of identity issues, due to the in-between character of student life. The transitional character of the life-cycle phase that our participants find themselves in could explain the differences we see between the level of self-identified religiosity and religiosity of the family home (Table 2.1): the poor fit between traditional

religious values and behaviors and student life would lead to a decline in religiosity. Previous research on religion and higher education has illustrated a decline in religious practice, but assumptions about higher education leading to decline in religious beliefs have been questioned (Mayrl & Ouer, 2009). Studies generally highlight a much weaker effect of higher education on religion than what has been previously theorized (Mayrl & Uecker, 2011; Hill, 2011). It has been suggested that the analysis of the influence of higher education on young people's beliefs, views and practices also need to consider factors such as the individual's religious affiliation, minority/majority status, ethnicity and pre-university experience (Bowman & Small, 2010; Hill, 2011; Park & Bowman, 2015). While the fact that the participants in YARG are all university students might explain some of the differences we see between the level of self-identified religiosity and religiosity of the family home, this factor certainly does not provide the whole answer.

Furthermore, research suggests that a developmental perspective cannot be applied to the category of young adults without hesitation. The transnational scope of the YARG project raises questions about the extent to which notions of emerging adults are culture-specific. While higher education can be understood as a moratorium, there may be contextual variation regarding, for example, the age and degree of independence amongst university students. We turn to our empirical data to explore these issues.

As age constitutes the focal point for the life-cycle perspective on young adults, the first analysis concerns the age of our participants. The age at which secondary education ends and enrollment into higher education begins varies depending on the national context. Furthermore, different systems of higher education allow for varying degrees of flexibility for students to shape the intensity and duration of their studies, which may also lead to age variations.

The students in the YARG study are primarily between 16 and 30 years old; respondents who reported being younger or older were omitted in this analysis. When this range is broken down into age brackets, it is clear that the majority of respondents (53%) are between 21 and 24 years old. This age bracket was therefore further divided into two categories. The age distribution according to case study (Table 2.2) illustrates that there is variation in homogeneity across the case studies, and that the greatest differences concern the extent to which university students belong to the youngest (16–20) and oldest (25–30) age brackets. While more than seven out of ten students in the Chinese case study belong to the youngest age groups, the same is true for less than one out of ten students in Ghana, India and Canada. Students above 25 are, in turn, uncommon in China, United States, Japan, Russia, Turkey and Poland, but make up more than one-fourth of the participants in Israel, Canada, Finland and Sweden. Some cases (Canada, Sweden, Finland and Israel) are characterized by a rather even distribution between the age brackets, while others are skewed towards the younger age groups. The mean age for the young adults in the YARG study is 22.

As the YARG study has been conducted through case studies, it is not self-evident that there is correspondence between the student population of a given country and the findings reported here. Nevertheless, Table 2.2 illustrates that

Table 2.2 Age distribution amongst respondents

Case study	*M*	*SD*	16–20	21–22	23–24	25–30	Total	*n*
			%					
China	20.0	1.43	72	23	3	2	100	317
United States	20.7	1.53	51	38	9	2	100	295
Japan	21.0	2.08	49	37	8	6	100	315
Peru	21.2	2.44	45	27	17	11	100	316
Russia	21.4	2.05	38	30	25	7	100	342
Poland	21.8	2.04	38	26	27	9	100	296
Turkey	21.8	2.04	35	26	30	8	100	341
Ghana	22.9	1.41	3	36	50	11	100	399
India	22.9	1.77	9	34	39	18	100	290
Israel	23.0	2.92	24	24	22	30	100	747
Canada	23.2	2.34	9	36	31	24	100	383
Finland	23.8	2.85	11	27	24	38	100	442
Sweden	24.0	2.89	12	22	27	39	100	302
Total	22.27	2.56	29	29	24	18	100	4785

The differences in means between case studies were tested through ANOVA, and differences between the distribution of age categories in each case study were tested through a chi-square test. Both tests were found to be statistically significant, ANOVA: $F(12, 4772) = 104.48$, $p < .001$; Chi-square: $\chi^2(36) = 1392.14$, $p < .001$

images of "the university student" varies depending on context. Moreover, when university students are selected as representatives for the category of "emerging adults", it is important to reflect on the correspondence between these categories. Since increased age is bound to result in accumulation of life experiences, differences between the experiences of young adulthood for a 20-year-old (mean age for China) and a 24-year-old (mean age for Sweden) can be expected.

Previous accounts of emerging adulthood point to transition being a main feature. Consequently, adulthood is characterized by an increasing degree of more permanent choices. The next analysis pinpoints the extent to which university students in our study have already made choices that signify relational commitment by exploring survey questions on civil state and caretaker responsibilities.

When our participants describe their civil state,[6] the majority of the respondents (86%) described themselves as being "single", 4% as "married" and 10% as "cohabitant or [in a] common-law marriage".[7] These findings demonstrate that most young adults have not (yet) formed binding commitments to a partner. We also explored the extent to which young people reported having children or responsibility for

[6] The question was worded "How would you describe your current civil state?".

[7] The response alternatives "widow/widower", "divorced" and "separated" were also included, but they were subsequently excluded in the analysis as each of these were selected by less than 20 respondents.

close relatives,[8] and the findings confirm that it is rare for university students to have such responsibilities: only 4% of the respondents report that this is the case.

When patterns of civil state are analyzed according to case study, the findings suggest that there are also cultural norms at play. The social acceptance regarding cohabitation in Sweden and Finland makes such living arrangements much more common. Furthermore, caretaker responsibilities are not evenly distributed between cases:[9] compared to how rare such experiences are in Russia, Turkey, United States and Japan (1–2%), experiences of carrying responsibilities for children is more common in Canada and India (9%, compared to the average of 4%).

Case study-specific factors influence to which extent respondents have experiences of long-term relational commitments. At the same time, it is likely that experiences of commitments are partly related to age, which suggests interplay between age, civil state and care-taking responsibilities. In order to analyze this interplay, respondents were divided into seven categories depending on age, whether they were married and/or had children or not, and whether they were in a civil partnership or not.[10] This categorization (Fig. 2.2) illustrates the heterogeneity of university students in terms of age and life experiences and in relation to case study. An illustrative example of this is that none of the case studies resembles the total distribution. However, the figures also illustrate that heterogeneity is not only found when case studies are compared, but is also a result of internal heterogeneity.

The analysis of subcategories amongst university students suggests interesting similarities and differences. First, in spite of the assumptions from a developmental perspective, age does not appear to be a weighing factor for the extent to which university students report long-term relational commitments. The average age amongst the students in the Canadian and Indian cases is similar, but while the Canadian case study is characterized by one of the highest rates of marriage and cohabitation (23%), the same is not true for the Indian case (5%). Second, this analysis establishes that experiences of cohabitation appear to be related to social factors rather than age, since the category of co-habitant 25–30-year olds does not correspond to the proportion of this age group in the case studies. Figures for respondents aged between 26 and 30 years exceeds 10% in Ghana, India and Peru (11%, 18% and 11% respectively), but the proportion of respondents who report that they are in a domestic partnership in these countries ranges between 0.3% and 1.2%.

The analysis thereby points to two ways in which the national origin of university students shape the category of university students, and consequently, who the young adults in YARG are. First, the national structures of higher education have

[8] The question was worded "Do you have children (either own or adopted) or close relatives you are responsible for?".

[9] Chi-square: $\chi^2(12) = 75.70$, $p < .001$.

[10] Some categories were omitted from this analysis due to the small number of respondents. The civil state categories "widow/widower"; "divorced and separated" and respondents aged 16–20 who were married/responsible for children ($n = 33$) or in a common-law marriage ($n = 30$) were omitted for this reason.

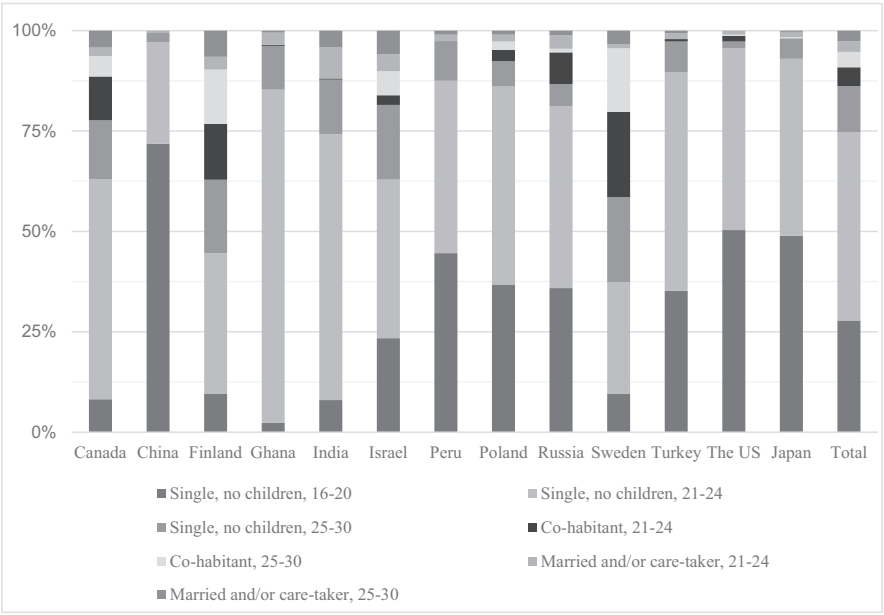

Fig. 2.2 University students in respective case studies, sorted into seven categories according to age, caretaker responsibilities, marriage and cohabitation per case study. (*Note.* Differences between case studies were tested through Pearson chi-square: $\chi^2(72) = 1886.40$, $p < .001$, ($n = 4698$))

important implications on how old university students are, resulting in an age span of 15 years between the youngest and oldest respondents in the YARG study. Second, the cultural expectations on young adults in a given context make it more or less likely for university students to have gained certain experiences. These findings illustrate that while the "typical" young adult in this study is between 21 and 24 years old and single (47%), the majority of respondents are either younger or older, and some of them are also characterized by having made relational commitments generally not associated with emerging adulthood.

Are there, then, associations between age and life experiences on the one hand, and ways of being religious on the other? As a final step in the analysis of young adults from a developmental perspective, the seven subcategories of university students presented in Fig. 2.2 were related to self-assessed religiosity. Figure 2.3 illustrates that there are notable differences in self-assessed religiosity between the subcategories.[11] The highest degrees of religiosity are found in the groups who are married or have caretaker responsibilities, regardless of age. Does this suggest that the transitional phase of young adulthood provides weak conditions for religious commitment, and that stable living conditions will result in higher commitment in

[11] Differences in means between categories were tested with ANOVA: $F(6, 4691) = 32.26$, $p < .001$.

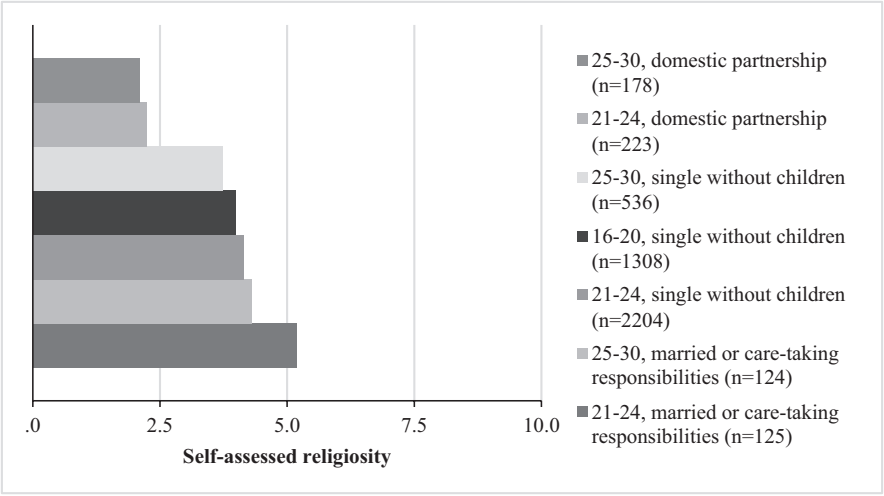

Fig. 2.3 Self-assessed religiosity per categories based on age, civil state and care-taker responsibilities, sorted from highest to lowest degree

other areas of life as well? The direction of influence is difficult to establish. The findings may point to the influence of religiosity on those lifestyle choices that make long-term relational commitments such as marriage a viable option. Support for such an interpretation is found in the association between co-habitation and lower degrees of religious self-identification. Furthermore, the previous analyses have also shown that case study influence may affect both relational commitment and self-assessed religiosity.

The analyses presented in this section provide valuable knowledge about the category of young adults in the YARG study. When the data is analyzed from a developmental perspective, the analysis has pointed to heterogeneity amongst the participants in terms of age. The variation, which can largely be attributed to the systems of higher education in the participating countries, calls for caution regarding how meaningful it is to apply contextual understandings to university students from another national context. Second, as there are strong relations between self-assessed religiosity and civil state and caretaker responsibilities, the analysis has pointed to context-dependent contingencies related to university students as a segment of the young adult category. The contextual variation regarding how old "university students" are and how they lead their lives thus suggest some caution regarding the application of a developmental perspective on this category.

2.4 Young Adults from a Cohort Perspective – Attitudes and Behaviors

An underlying idea in studies of change is that cohorts characterized by value change can be defined as generations. The study of generations has been particularly common in the North American context (Roof, 1999). In line with Karl Mannheim's (1952) reasoning, all cohorts do not form generations. A task for sociology thus becomes to explore whether the values of young cohorts indicate not only minor value change, but generational change.

When young adults are viewed from a cohort perspective, two main ideas are at play. First, young people's transition into independence and adulthood make them susceptible to cultural currents. Because of young peoples' adaptation to and incorporation of cultural and social developments, indications of value change will be most visible in the youth cohort (Collins-Mayo, 2010). Second, the values of young people are not temporary in character: the values that people adapt in their youth tend to settle into patterns brought into adulthood (Roof, 2011). This reasoning implies that value changes amongst youth are indicators of long-term societal change (Shildrick et al., 2009).

In contrast to a life-cycle perspective on youth, a cohort perspective thus considers how social, historical and cultural circumstances influence values, including religion and spirituality. Previous research has pointed to decline in religiosity between generations, but also, that the decline amongst contemporary youth is much steeper, suggesting generational change (Voas & Crockett, 2005; Crockett & Voas, 2006; Niemelä, 2015). If we return to Table 2.1 and self-assessed religiosity in relation to one's childhood home and interpret the findings from a cohort perspective, the findings would not only imply difference in religiosity between generations: they could also be understood as an indication of religious decline.

References to young people as forming distinct generations are frequent in contemporary studies on religion and youth. Following the idea of Generation X, the cohort born between the early 1960s and the early 1980s, the present generation of young adults has been called Generation Y. Broadly defined, Generation Y includes those born between 1981 and 1999. This generation has also been referred to as the Millennial Generation or Millennials (e.g. Brosdahl & Carpenter, 2011). Highlighting the centrality of media and technology to this generation, contemporary young adults have also been titled Digital Natives, the Media generation or the Net Generation (e.g. Persky, 2001; Margaryan et al., 2011). The younger participants in our study could also be argued to be a part of Generation Z, usually argued to be born between 1995 and 2010 (see for example Bencsik et al., 2016).

When the cohort idea is applied to the YARG study, it could be argued that youth culture has never been as globalized as it currently is. At the same time, such a conclusion calls for caution. When writing on age, generation, and cohort as shaping factors for the construction of religion and religious practice, Dillon confines her discussion to one context, due to religion being "heavily contextualized" (2007, p. 526). Furthermore, even within the same context, Roof contends that

"generational identities are contextually variable and ambivalent" (2011, p. 621), meaning that all members of the same generation are not equally influenced by historical events or social developments. It would thus be asking a lot to attempt to find indications of generational formation in a study of a transnational character. A more feasible solution is to explore some of the social and cultural indicators said to characterize contemporary youth. In this chapter, we approach the question of cohort change in two ways: through an analysis of attitudes and through an analysis of media use.

2.4.1 The Prevalence of Conservative-Liberal Values Amongst Young Adults

Before we present our data on values, we turn to data from the World Value Survey (WVS; Inglehart et al., 2014b). With the exception of Israel, all the contexts studied in YARG are part of one or both of the latest two waves of WVS (Wave 5, 2005–2008, and Wave 6, 2010–2014). WVS includes questions regarding views on how justifiable homosexuality and abortion is. The purpose of this analysis is not to compare the findings from WVS and YARG, as the survey questions are not worded in the same way. However, the findings from WVS indicate whether or not the attitudes towards homosexuality and abortion suggest cohort differences that could imply a more profound value change.

The findings from Wave 6 in WVS (Inglehart et al., 2014a) indicate that the national contexts studied in YARG are characterized by younger generations generally being more liberal. Regardless of case study, people under the age of 29 come across as more liberal in their attitudes towards homosexuality than those aged 50 and above. In many countries, the difference is larger than one step on a five degree scale. However, the most striking value differences in WVS do not lie in the differences between cohorts, but in the differences between countries studied in the YARG-project. The most conservative attitudes towards homosexuality in the age group 18–25 are found among the Ghanaians ($M = 1.39$), which can be compared to Sweden where attitudes are the most liberal ($M = 8.19$).[12] For abortion, the results are similar: abortion is seen as least justifiable in Ghana ($M = 1.66$), followed by India ($M = 1.86$) and Turkey ($M = 2.15$). The highest mean is again found in Sweden ($M = 7.68$), followed by Finland ($M = 6.01$). While it is true that the WVS data are characterized by cohort differences, such differences are rather modest compared to the differences between national contexts. We turn to the findings from the YARG

[12] Other countries with low approval of homosexuality include India ($M = 1.71$) and Turkey ($M = 1.8$). Countries with high approval include Japan ($M = 7.14$), Finland ($M = 6.77$).

survey to explore whether questions about attitudes towards homosexuality,[13] abortion[14] and euthanasia[15] reveal similar case study differences.

The analysis of attitudes amongst university students is based on seven survey questions worded as statements on a five-degree scale. As the statements expressed approval, attitudes were measured in terms of to what extent participants' views resonated with a liberal attitude towards homosexuality, abortion, and euthanasia. A reliability analysis indicated high inter-item correlation between the items measuring attitudes on each issue.[16] Sum variables for attitudes towards same-sex marriages, abortion and euthanasia respectively were therefore constructed in the form of means on a five-degree scale (disapproval-approval). When means were aggregated to case study level, the means of many case studies indicate strong opinions on the matters studied.[17] The five-degree scale was reduced to three categories: "disapproval", "neither disapproval nor approval" and "approval". Our presentation focuses on the extent to which university students expressed approval of the issues probed.

In total, 54% of the university students expressed approval of same-sex marriages, 77% expressed approval of abortion, and 41% expressed approval of euthanasia. However, Fig. 2.4 illustrates the variation across case studies. The case studies are particularly divided in their attitudes on same-sex marriages.[18] The strongest expressions of disapproval are found in Ghana (88%). For abortion, differences between countries are not as big. The attitudes towards euthanasia are characterized by the least extent of approval in the data.

The findings on how young adults approve of euthanasia, abortion and same-sex marriages suggest that young adults in this study are far from forming a generation in terms of attitudinal consensus. While survey data from WVS (Inglehart et al., 2014a, b) suggests slow value change in the form of values becoming increasingly liberal, both WVS and the YARG data demonstrate how the differences between case studies are far more striking when internal variation is analyzed. This analysis has therefore pointed to the importance of caution when applying a cohort perspective on transnational empirical data.

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[13] Statements included in the survey were "Same-sex marriage should be treated the same as marriage between a man and a woman" and "Same-sex couples should have the same rights for adoption as heterosexual couples."

[14] Statements included in the survey were "If a woman became pregnant as a result of rape she should be able to obtain a legal abortion"; "When a woman's own health is seriously endangered by a pregnancy she should be able to obtain a legal abortion" and "A pregnant woman should be able to obtain a legal abortion if the woman wants it for any reason."

[15] Statements included in the survey were "Doctors should be allowed to end the patient's life if the patient requests it" and "Doctors should be allowed to assist the patient to commit suicide if the patient requests it."

[16] For tests on inter-item reliability, Cronbach's alpha was used. Items on homosexuality: α=.92 Items on abortion: α=.76. Items on euthanasia: α=.79.

[17] Due to the skewed distributions of means, standard tests of differences between the distributions of means across case studies were not an option.

[18] Differences between case studies for the distribution over these three categories were tested with Pearson chi-square with the following results: Euthanasia: $\chi^2(24) = 920.21$, $p < .001$; Abortion: $\chi^2(24) = 929.72$, $p < .001$; Same-sex marriage: $\chi^2(24) = 1748.413$, $p < .001$.

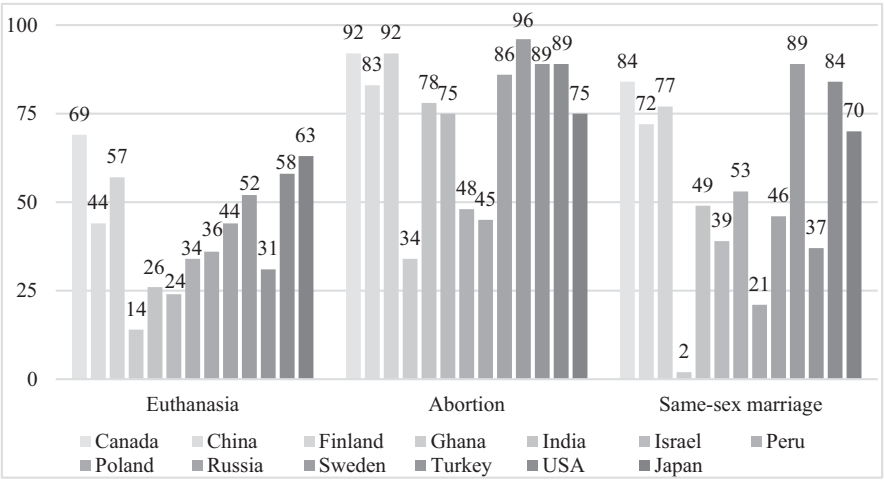

Fig. 2.4 Approval of euthanasia, abortion, same-sex marriage in case studies, reported in percent (n = 4336–4964)

2.4.2 Media use

Following developments in digital communication and increasing Internet accessibility, Internet use has grown exponentially on a global scale across all age groups (e.g. International Telecommunication Union, 2016; Statista, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2018). Notwithstanding the enduring presence of a "digital divide", the number of active Internet users worldwide as of July 2018 was estimated at around 4.1 billion (Statista, 2018). A Pew Research Center study from 2018 and recent Eurostat figures (Eurostat, 2017) reflect that, from an international perspective, young people (aged between 18 and 36 years) are more likely than older individuals to use the Internet. Internet use also correlates with education; highly educated adults are more likely to use the Internet (Pew Research Center, 2018). Recent international statistics thus support the view of young adults as frequent Internet users.

Table 2.3 confirms widespread Internet use among the YARG participants. Eighty-five percent report daily use of the Internet, and in nine out of thirteen case studies, the proportion of daily users exceeds 90 percent. When compared to daily use of television (21%), newspapers/magazines (13%), and radio (11%), the special status of the Internet is apparent. It is also worth noting that in the countries where Internet is used the least frequently, Internet is still widely used.

In order to further explore the function of media use amongst respondents, the survey included a question about purposes for Internet use.[19] Daily Internet use was most often reported for the purpose of "communication" (72%) and "finding

[19] The question was worded "If you ever use the Internet, for which of the following activities do you use it?". Responses were made on a five-point frequency scale, ranging from "every day" to "never".

Table 2.3 Internet usage according to case study

Case study	Occasionally/weekly	Almost every day	Every day	Total	n
	%				
Sweden	1	2	97	100	328
Finland	0	4	96	100	484
United States	3	3	94	100	304
Israel	2	5	93	100	761
Poland	1	7	92	100	299
Russia	1	6	92	100	343
Turkey	0	10	90	100	347
Canada	2	8	90	100	410
China	2	8	90	100	325
Ghana	9	22	69	100	420
Peru	5	22	73	100	321
Japan	11	29	60	100	323
India	24	20	57	101	288
Total	4	11	85	100	4953

Differences between case studies were tested through Pearson chi-square: $\chi^2(24) = 808.70$, $p < .001$

information" (63%). A little more than half the sample (53%) reported daily Internet use for the purpose of "entertainment". In contrast, using Internet daily for the purpose of "religious or spiritual services and issues" was only reported by 2% with 54% reporting never using Internet for this purpose. In comparison to the value patterns reported previously, which pointed to heterogeneity, the data on Internet use suggests many similarities. The findings indicate that for the university students in our study, Internet use is a natural part of everyday life. In this somewhat limited sense they can be viewed as "digital natives". However, our material does not allow us to explore this topic in more detail (for more on media use among the YARG participants see Moberg & Sjö, 2020).

It is not possible to make general claims about Internet use among young adults based on this data alone: due to their main occupation, university students are likely to be amongst the most frequent users in their age groups. Such reasoning leads to the final question in this chapter: how particular are the young adults in this sample?

2.5 The University Experience – Issues of Access and Privilege

In this section, we address how particular university students are in their national context. The extent to which young adults from different socioeconomic strata attend higher education depends on a range of factors, such as possible tuition fees and the national educational level. Consequently, figures on education must be selected and viewed with caution. Due to rapid structural changes in some societies, figures on educational attainment does not always provide a correct image.

Increasing numbers of governments have come to recognize the importance of higher education for social and economic development and for countering structural inequalities. China and India are examples of countries that have seen rapid changes in education systems (Wang, 2015, pp. 1–2; Tilak & Biswal, 2015, p. 47) and it is unlikely that data on educational attainment reflects recent transformations. A focus on the proportion of younger age cohorts who have a university degree is thus a more reliable option, but it carries its own challenges. As discussed, the admission ages across different national educational structures vary, as do the extent to which university studies are carried out according to set structures. Comparative figures on enrollment into or graduation from higher education amongst younger age cohorts will therefore not provide fully reliable figures of educational attainment.

Our first analysis targets two key figures that provide information on the national settings of YARG. Both indicators have been retrieved from databases that take contextual variations into account and thereby present comparable figures. The first key figure could be understood as a threshold indicator, namely, to which extent young people (aged 20–24) have completed secondary education. In many countries, completed secondary education is a requirement for higher education. The second key figure concerns the percentage of people aged 18–22 years who attend higher education. Such data provides a rough image of how common higher education is.

Table 2.4 demonstrates that the extent to which completed secondary schooling is common among young people varies greatly between the case studies in YARG. While the vast majority of young people in Israel, Finland, Poland and Sweden have completed secondary education, merely one-third of young people in China, Ghana and Russia fill the requirements. As expected, the numbers regarding enrollment into higher education are lower than the numbers on completed secondary education, and they further attest to contextual variation of educational level between the countries. Furthermore, these numbers illustrate that high numbers of completed secondary education do not correspond with high numbers of enrollment into higher education.

Taken together, both indicators confirm the notion that university students are far from representative of young adults. Furthermore, the varied proportions of completed secondary schooling could be understood as an indicator of the extent to which higher education should be understood as an indicator of privilege. In countries where secondary education is not a given, enrollment into higher education is to a higher extent a privilege of a chosen few.

To what extent do the indicators in Table 2.4 imply that university students constitute a privileged subgroup? We explore this issue further by turning to survey data that probes understandings of privilege in terms of the income level of one's family in relation to a perceived national average.[20] When we look at the total distribution,

[20] The question was worded: "In considering your family's monthly income relative to the average in your country, is it…" The response alternatives were "Much higher than the average", "Somewhat higher than the average", "About the average", "Somewhat lower than the average", "Much lower than the average", and "I don't know". Those who responded "I don't know" (6.9%) are not included in the presented analysis.

Table 2.4 Educational attainment in case study countries

Country	Completed secondary schooling, 20–24 (2010)[a]	Enrollment into higher education, 18–22[b]
	%	
Israel	80	N.A.
Finland	76	37
Poland	77	54
Sweden	73	57
Peru	65	29
Canada	48	N.A.
Turkey	48	17
Japan	47	N.A.
India	39	2
United States	38	N.A.
China	35	28
Ghana	34	4
Russia	25	N.A.

[a]The information is retrieved from Barro-Lee Educational Attainment Set (World Bank Group, 2018)

[b]The information is retrieved from World Inequality Database on Education (UNESCO, 2018), which combines the results of several large-scale international surveys

the largest category consists of those who have assessed their family's income level as being higher or much higher than the average in their country (38%). While such findings suggest that university students generally understand their background as more privileged than average, it is notable that the responses are quite evenly distributed between the response categories. Roughly one-third (34%) considers their family income to correspond to the national average, and 28% have assessed their family income as lower than the national average.

Is there a relation between how university students understand their family's financial status and the general income level of their country? In this analysis, we use the categories of national income levels used by the World Bank. When the study was conducted in 2016, the case study countries were placed in three different categories. Most case studies belonged to the high-income economies (Canada, Finland, Israel, Poland, Russia, Sweden, The United States, and Japan), three case studies were conducted in upper-middle-income economies (China, Peru and Turkey), and two case studies were conducted in lower-middle-income economies (Ghana and India).

The findings presented in Table 2.5 suggest that university students who live in upper-middle-income economies most often assessed their family income as higher than the national average. This was also the most common response for respondents in high-income economies. In other words, students in these economies who assess their income level as much or somewhat lower than average are more likely to stand out in relation to their student peers, since the majority is more privileged. However, in lower-middle-income economies, the opposite seems to be true. It is more common for university students to estimate their family income as lower than average,

Table 2.5 Assessed income level of one's family in comparison to average, percent

Family income	Much/somewhat lower	Average	Somewhat/much higher	Total	n
	%				
High-income economies	28	33	39	100	3100
Upper-middle-income economies	23	34	43	100	931
Lower-middle-income-economies	42	38	20	100	592
Total	28	34	38	100	4623

Differences between categories were tested through Pearson chi-square: $\chi^2(4) = 104.30$, $p < .001$

and eight students out of ten assess their family income to correspond to the national average or to be lower. In lower-middle-income economies, students who assess their family income to be much lower or somewhat lower than average are therefore likely to meet their peers in their university settings to a higher extent.

The analysis suggests that assumptions regarding university students as a privileged strata of young adults should not be made prematurely. On the one hand, the analysis has demonstrated that the proportion of young adults who meet the basic requirements for higher education vary. In countries with low proportions of completed secondary education, enrollment into higher education places a young adult in a special position. However, once enrolled in higher education, students from lower-middle-income economies are more likely to encounter students who do not describe their family backgrounds as privileged. In countries where higher education is more common, higher education comes across as an indicator of privilege at an individual level. The findings suggest that the differences regarding privilege are further accentuated at a personal level, as expressed by how the participating students assess the level of family income.

2.6 Conclusions

The beginning of this chapter provided a general presentation of religious identifications and practices reported in the YARG survey. The findings revealed that the majority of the young adults included in the study assess their personal religiosity on the lower end of the scale, and describe the religiosity of their families as being stronger than their own. Furthermore, while participants report similar frequencies of participation in public and private religious practice, private practice was reported as occurring more frequently. The heterogeneity in the data implies that the total distributions for self-assessed religiosity and religious practice reflect the situation in some national contexts better than others. Other contributions to this volume offer more detailed analyses of these findings (see for example Chap. 11 in this volume).

In this chapter, we have stated that the most common perspectives on young adults tend to understand this social category from either a developmental perspective or as a cohort. Both of these perspectives are based on certain assumptions

regarding shared characteristics of young adults as a category. These assumptions have important implications for the interpretation of research findings. The aim of this chapter has been to provide insights into who the young adults in our study are in terms of background characteristics, values, religious preferences, media use, and perceived social status/class. In this final section, we highlight our most significant findings and the conclusions they allow us to draw.

The participants in this study are not just any young adults, but university students. As our overview of the character of the higher educational fields of the included countries shows, in most cases, the people included in the YARG sample occupy a position not shared by the majority of their peers. However, this does not imply that our sample of university students view themselves as privileged. Assessments of family income compared to a perceived national average pointed to fluctuations depending on the general income level of the country studied. A first main point that emerges from the findings is therefore that while higher education often constitutes a threshold to professional career paths that are more likely to result in privileged societal positions, enrollment into higher education does not necessarily imply a privileged background for the YARG participants.

The internal heterogeneity found between our different case studies leads us to our second main point: the category of university students is context-dependent. The analysis of the age distribution in the sample as well as the participants' experiences of permanent life decisions point to some common themes in the data, such as the majority of the participants describing themselves as 21–24 years old as well as single. However, there were notable differences in the age distributions of the respective case studies. Furthermore, some case study contexts included notable proportions of young adults who were married, or reported having responsibility for children and/or close relatives. The analysis therefore suggests that in this study, university students not only come from different cultural contexts; they also make up a mixed crowd in terms of age and life experiences. While the developmental perspective, which points to age and life transitions as markers of emerging adulthood, resonates well with the findings from some case studies, it is not equally compatible with others. This finding highlights that transnational research on university students and young adults needs to be sensitive to the variations between young adults' life experiences and understandings of the young adult category across social and cultural contexts. Higher education may be characterized by increasing globalization and standardization (Maringe & Foskett, 2010), but the features of university students clearly vary between individuals and national contexts. This chapter therefore underlines the need to acknowledge the complexity evident in our material.

Furthermore, the findings illustrate the ways in which implicit assumptions of similarity may lead to overlooking important variations. A cohort perspective on youth explores whether certain features of a specific age cohort differ from other cohorts and suggests that such differences are attributable to broader processes of change. Here, we used cohort data from WVS on attitudes towards same-sex marriage and abortion to help us understand how the YARG data relates to the value orientations of other age cohorts. The YARG data revealed great differences between

attitudes towards euthanasia, same-sex marriage and abortion across the case studies. While longitudinal data from WVS suggest slow cohort change, such cohort change is not as conspicuous as the lack of attitudinal consensus amongst our participants. These findings point to heterogeneity rather than consensus as the most distinctive feature of the YARG data on values.

Overall, the findings reveal great variation across the case studies. While the focus on university students reduces the heterogeneity that any transnational study inevitably entails, this chapter has demonstrated that people who are enrolled in higher education in different social and cultural contexts still are far from similar in terms of age, life situation, social background, or attitudes. The transnational scope on university students also has implications for how the findings should be interpreted, as it points to the context-dependent nature of previous depictions of "university students" that do not hold for the YARG study as a whole. The study provides a valuable contribution to the study of religion and higher education, precisely because of its variable character.

Considering that the indicators that underpin cohort perspectives on youth have pointed to variation rather than homogeneity at a transnational level, one can question the usefulness of cohort perspectives on young adults. However, this is not the conclusion we wish to end with. It is true that our analysis points to the importance of testing underlying assumptions regarding the category of young adults against an empirical background. The poor fit between the age distribution in this sample and depictions of emerging adults in previous research is a good example of why. However, the mismatch between the total sample of university students included in this study and earlier depictions of emerging adults does not necessarily mean that the previous depictions are wrong. Previous depictions are likely to hold true for studies of limited contexts. Our exploration points to the need for future studies to be attentive to the context-dependent character of how the categories of "young people", "emerging adults" and "young adults" are described in order to avoid making premature assumptions about these social categories.

Furthermore, while cohort change does not seem to be the conspicuous feature of the attitudes of young adults studied here, it does not mean that cohort change is not worth studying. The identification of the main processes of social change and the forces driving them constitutes a central topic of inquiry in both the study of religion and the study of young adults. However, the analysis points to the dangers of studying young adults with a sole focus on their attitudes and values from a perspective of change. This overshadows the lived realities of young adults and the fascinating variations found within this group.

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