

UNBONDED

The Decline of Human Relationships?

Constanza Cilley

Voices!

Cornel Bursuc

Make Opinion



ACT I

The end of relational abundance



The Tipping Point

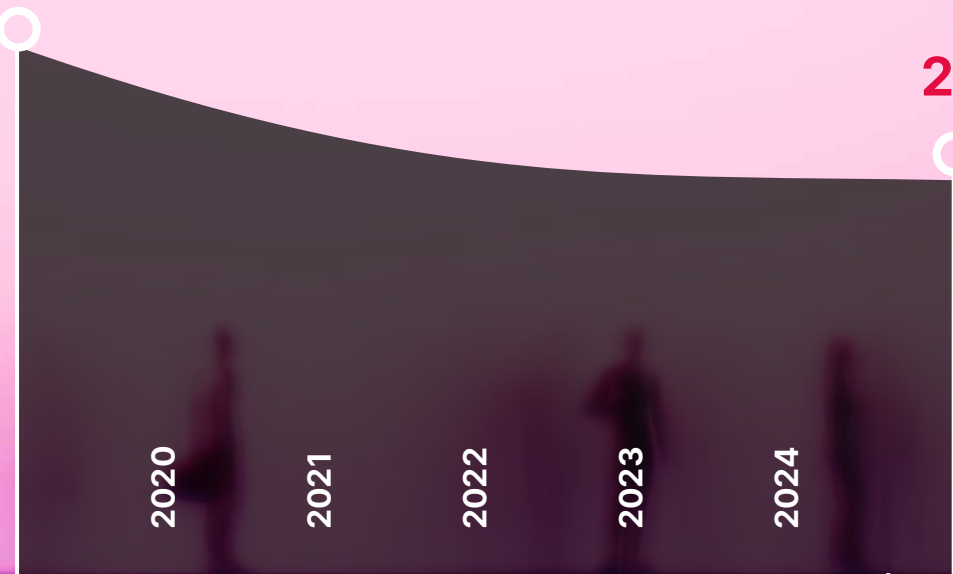
% that say their relationship with other people is very important

62%

2019

47%

2025



"This decline cuts across almost all segments. But it hits hardest among young adults (-18%) and lower education groups (-17%)."



The Symbolic Threshold

81%

Importance
of relationships
with people



78%

Importance
of relationships
with animals



69%

Importance of
relationships
with plants



1 in 4

Argentines value their
relationships with animals
and/ or plants more than with
other people.

**Among the young,
this reaches 31%.**

The Symbolic Threshold

The data drew two relational worlds

1

A human-centered universe —
now visibly eroding.

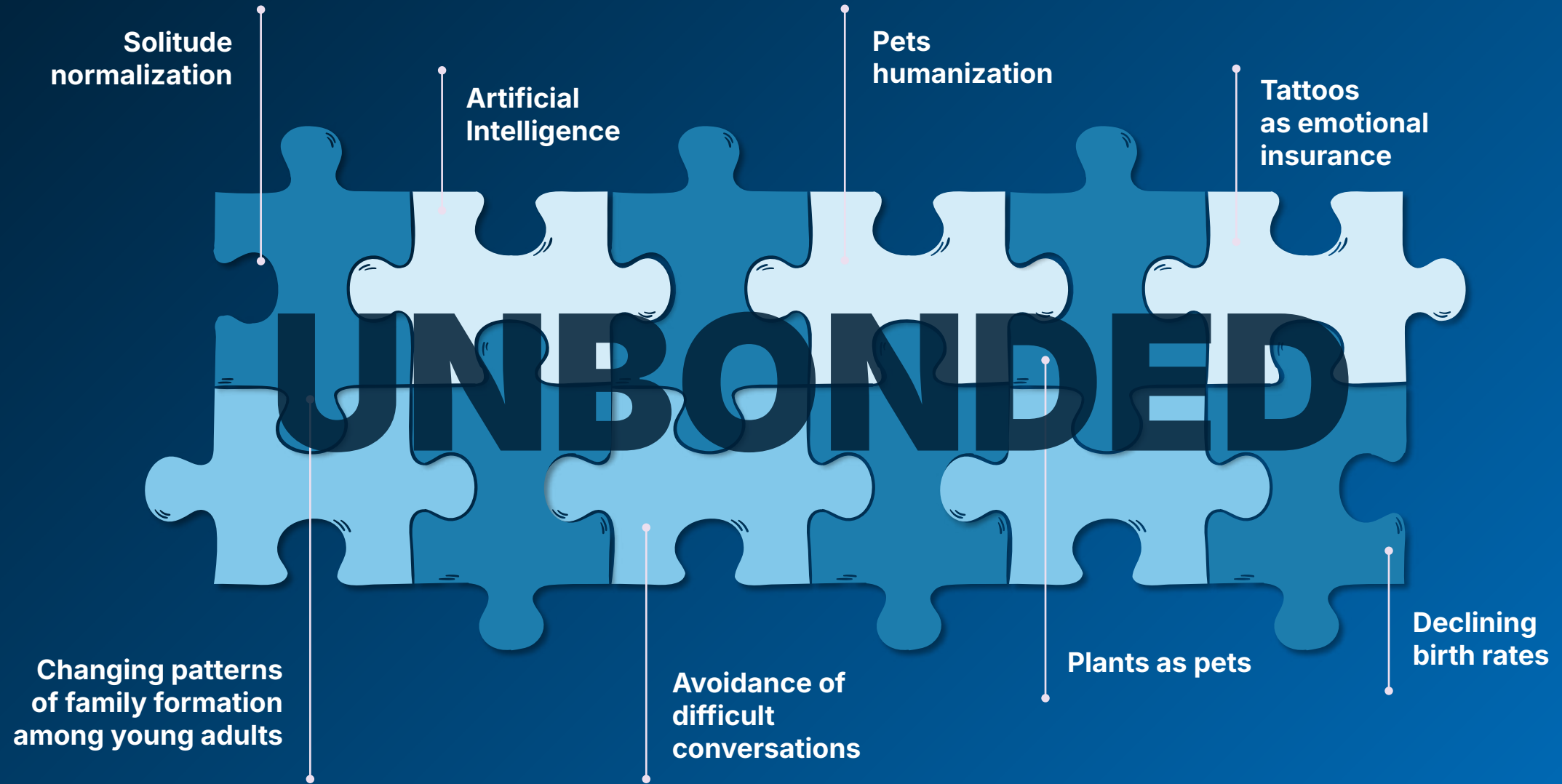


2

A biophilic universe — animals + plants — stable,
cohesive, emotionally anchored.



The Mosaic Moment



The Mosaic Moment

"What once
looked like isolated trends
suddenly aligned.

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was not one finding
it was a mosaic."

Why We Socialize Less

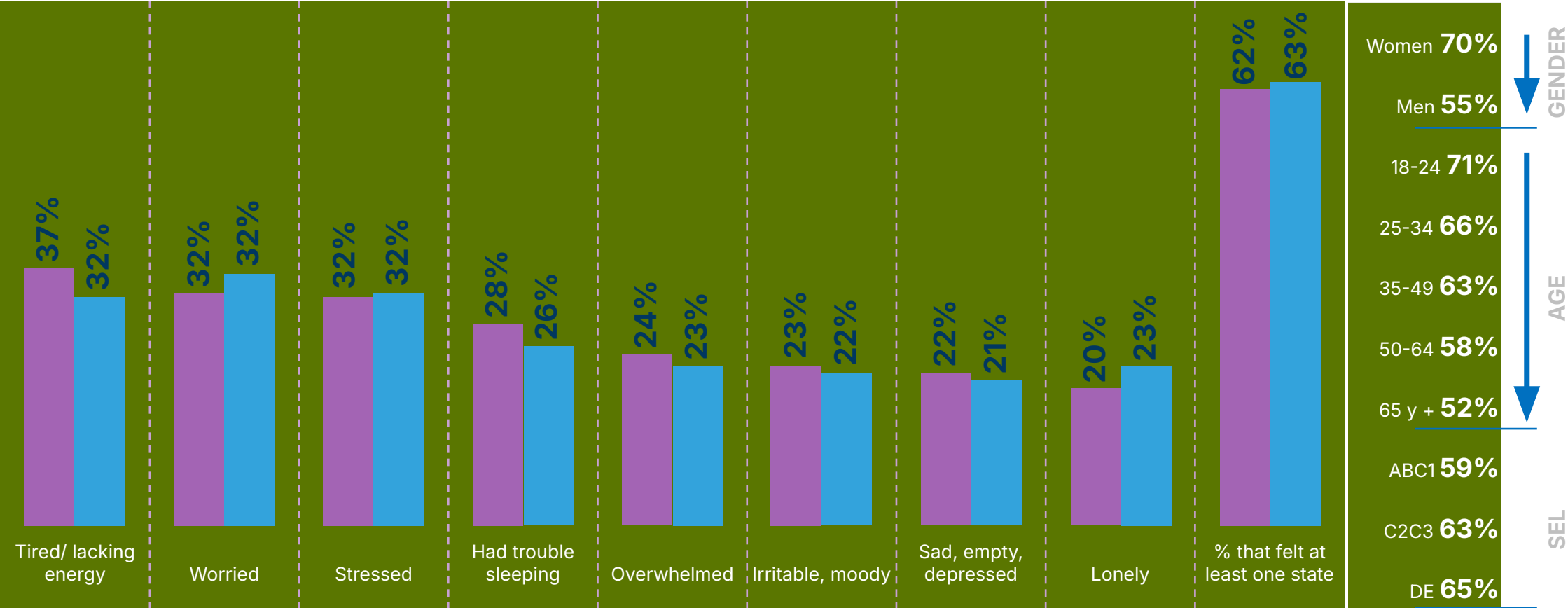
16-24 YEARS TOTAL



Emotional Landscape

“In the last 30 days, how often did you experience the following state?”

GLOABAL AVERAGE ARGENTINA



Source WIN Voices (40 countries) 2025

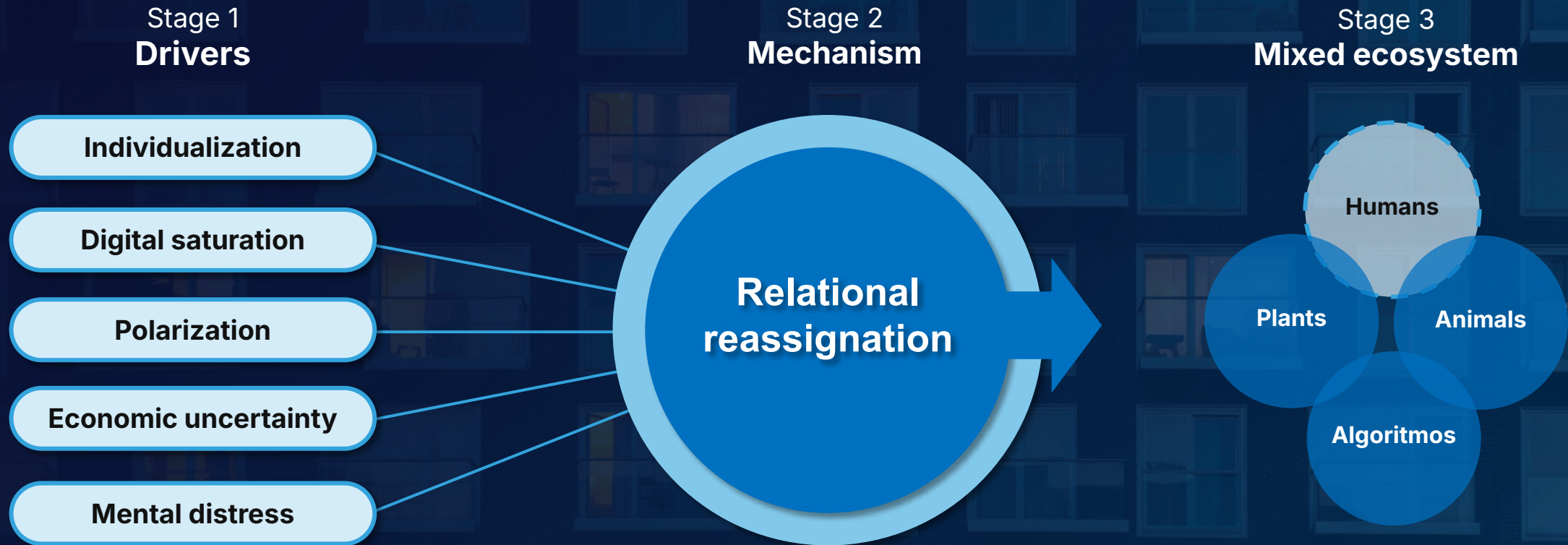
ACT II

The UNBONDED mechanism



The New Effective Ecosystem

The unbonded framework



Humans are no longer the unique center. We are moving from human high friction bonds to artificial or biological bonds of low friction



Old era

Relational abundance
(connect with everyone,
large nets)



New era

Relational sustainability
(delegate affection, keep
energy)

Methodological Approach for this Paper

A mixed-method design to capture relational change

3 Components

1

Longitudinal Data

Voices + WIN + WVS

2

2 New National Surveys

Argentina • $n > 1000$

3

Visual Qualitative Module

Photo diaries + coding

ACT III

The Redistribution of Emotional Energy



Pets & Plants as Biophilic Scaffolding

**Pets as the
new kids**



**Plants as the
new pets**

Pets

**I'M SORRY JACK,
THERE'S NOT ENOUGH ROOM**



Plants



84%

of Argentines live
with plants

80%

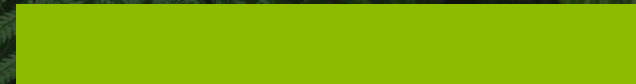
engage in plant care
activities

Connection to nature



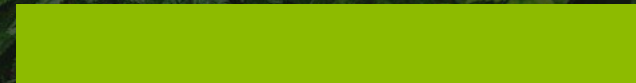
68%

Sense of emotional wellbeing



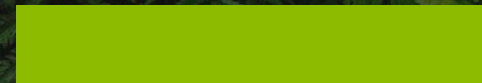
60%

Brings calm and relaxation



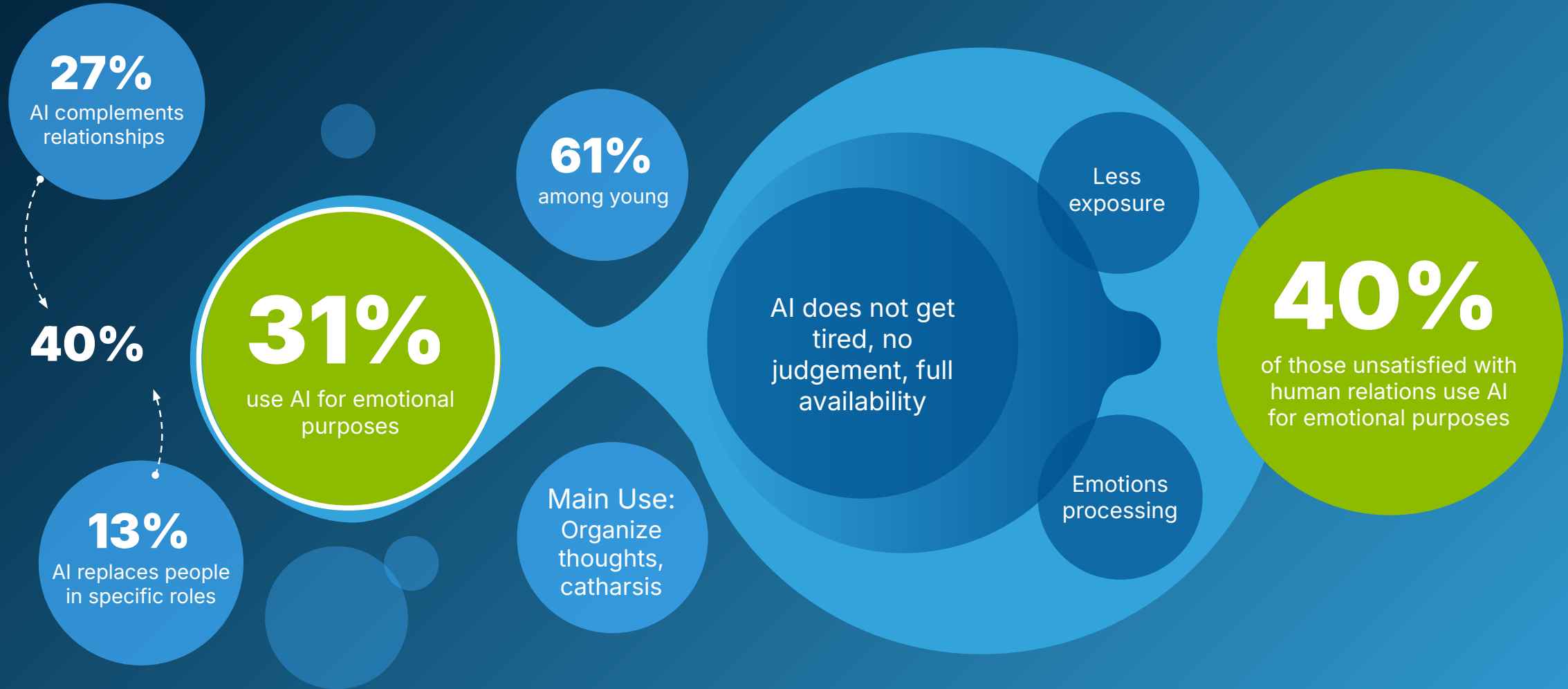
60%

Provides a sense of
companionship



46%

AI as Emotional Support

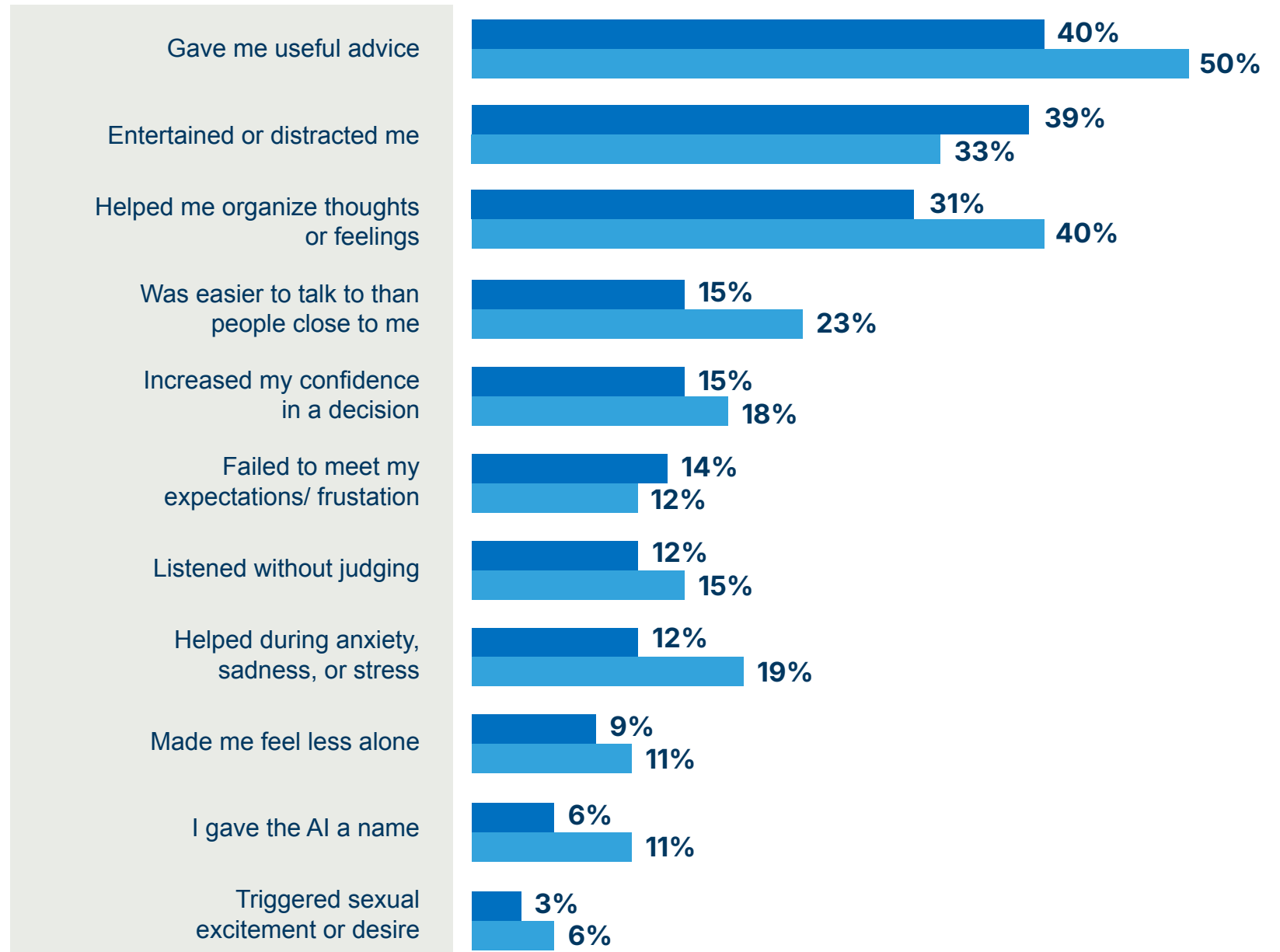


Emotional and Functional Experiences with AI

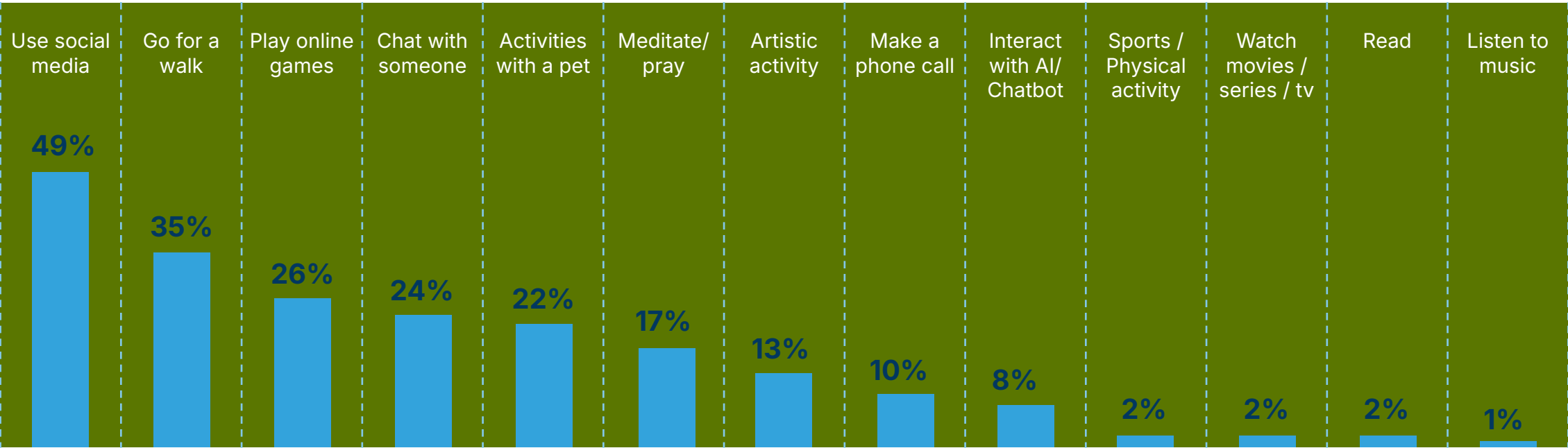
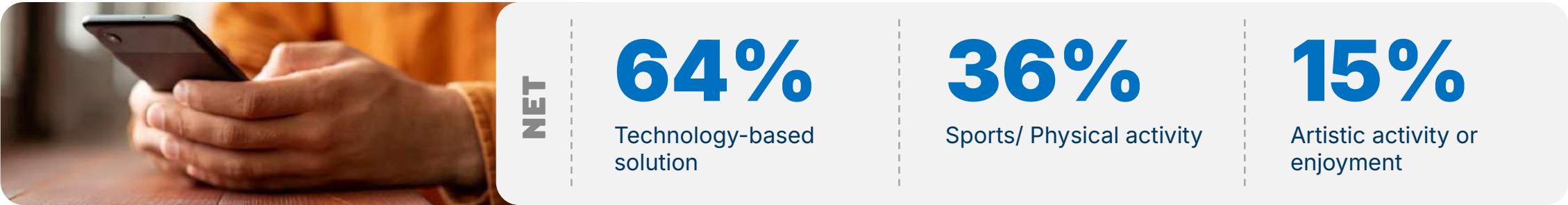
Total population
vs. youth (16–29)

- Total
- Youth 16-29

Source: Voices, Argentina, 2025



Reported Strategies for Coping with Feelings of Loneliness



Source Voices, Argentina, 2025

Reconfigure Human Bonds



**Marriage/
Total Commitment**

Essential for only

13%



Situationship

Intimacy without institutional, moral, or temporal anchors. Connection with an exit clause.



**Situationships /
"Just Talking"**

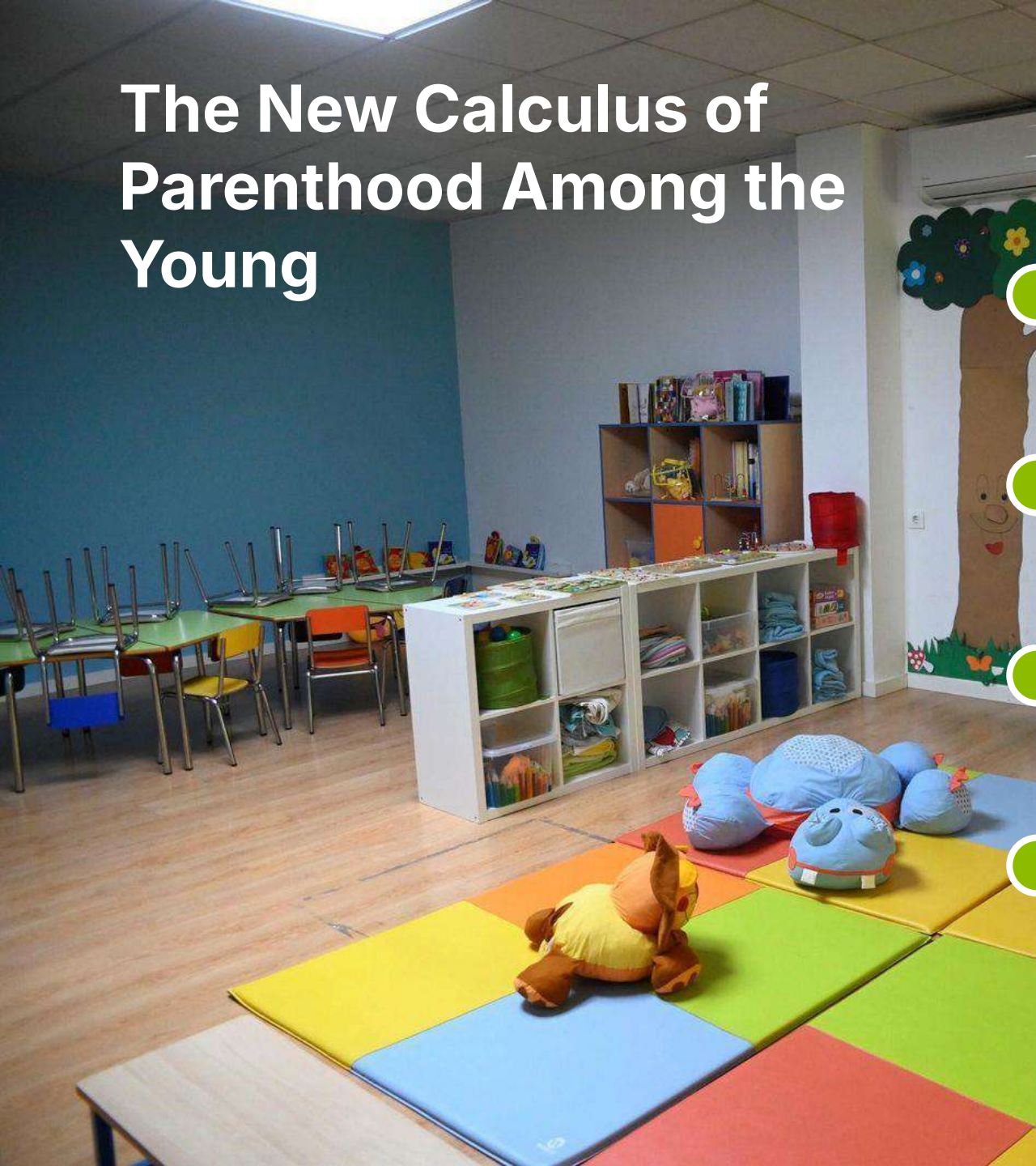
Growing prevalence



Even love adapts to the logic of sustainability.

We seek the warmth of companionship, but avoid the *weight* of future obligation.

The New Calculus of Parenthood Among the Young



The perceived loss of personal freedom

52%



lack of stability

30%



fear of responsibility

26%



and the absence of a stable partner

21%

alongside economic concerns.

What **CONNECTION** Looks Like Today

Connection

Regulated, episodic, and symbolically dense

Connection appears as:

- **Emotional regulation**, not intensity
- **Calm, grounding, relief, presence**
- **Contained moments**, often episodic
- **Low-demand relational settings**

Dominant contexts in the photos

- Nature and biophilic environments
- Pets and non-human companions
- Personal rituals (mate, music, silence)
- Family milestones and “safe” friendships
- Collective experiences without negotiation (concerts, sports)

Connection is not frequent — it is protected

It concentrates in moments and contexts that minimize exposure and emotional cost.

Regulated, episodic, and symbolically dense

DISCONNECTION in Everyday Life

Disconnection

Ordinary, immediate, and experientially dense

Disconnection is triggered by:

- Emotional overload and loss of agency
- Exposure without support
- Symbolic breakdown (things feel "fake", empty, meaningless)
- Institutional and work-related fragility

Dominant visual patterns

- Absence of others
- Semi-public or transitional spaces (transport, waiting, workplaces)
- Material disorder and malfunction
- Strong first-person perspective
- High presence of technology as withdrawal, not connection

Disconnection is not absence of emotion

It is emotion without containment.

Disconnection



Connection



ACT IV

Rebuilding Relational Capacity



Moral Activation Without Relational Capacity

Episodic Solidarity

There is an intention to help but the institutional scaffolding is weak.

Solidarity becomes episodic, fragmented — a “picking and choosing” of causes.

Conflict Without Buffers

Polarization intensifies because we lack the relational networks needed to absorb and process disagreement.

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produces a structurally fragile society: capable of rapid moral response, but vulnerable when it comes to sustaining social cohesion over time.

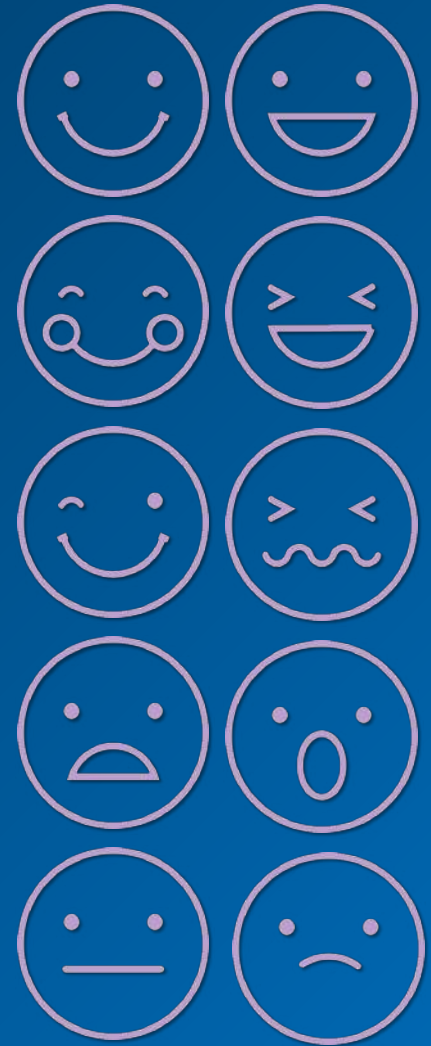
The Wellbeing Risk

Likely consequences

- Higher sensitivity to shocks
- Greater inequality in wellbeing
- Increased reliance on fragile supports

Key risk

Wellbeing becomes harder to sustain over time



The Mandate for Brands

Presence without pressure



Durability

Brand example: Patagonia
Permanence in a liquid world

patagonia[®]

Regulation

Brand example: Spotify
Mood-based playlists



Safe container

Brand example: Stanley
Products that accompany everyday life



The Mistake

Demanding constant energy.



The solution

Act as emotional scaffolding.

In an exhausted market, relevance is not about intensity, but about emotional utility.

Brands must offer stability and autonomy.

A New Research Paradigm

Redefining Demography and Connection



From...

Individual/Household-based models

- Fixed demographics
- Human-only relationships
- Declarative answers taken at face value



...To

Expanded Relational Ecosystems

- Affective trajectories over time
- Multispecies & algorithmic households
- Humans, pets, plants, and AI as relational agents

A New Research Paradigm

Redefining Demography and Connection

Three Research Imperatives

1.

Measure affective trajectories

Not just static demographics, but how emotional support is built, redistributed, and depleted over time.

2.

Include silent relational members

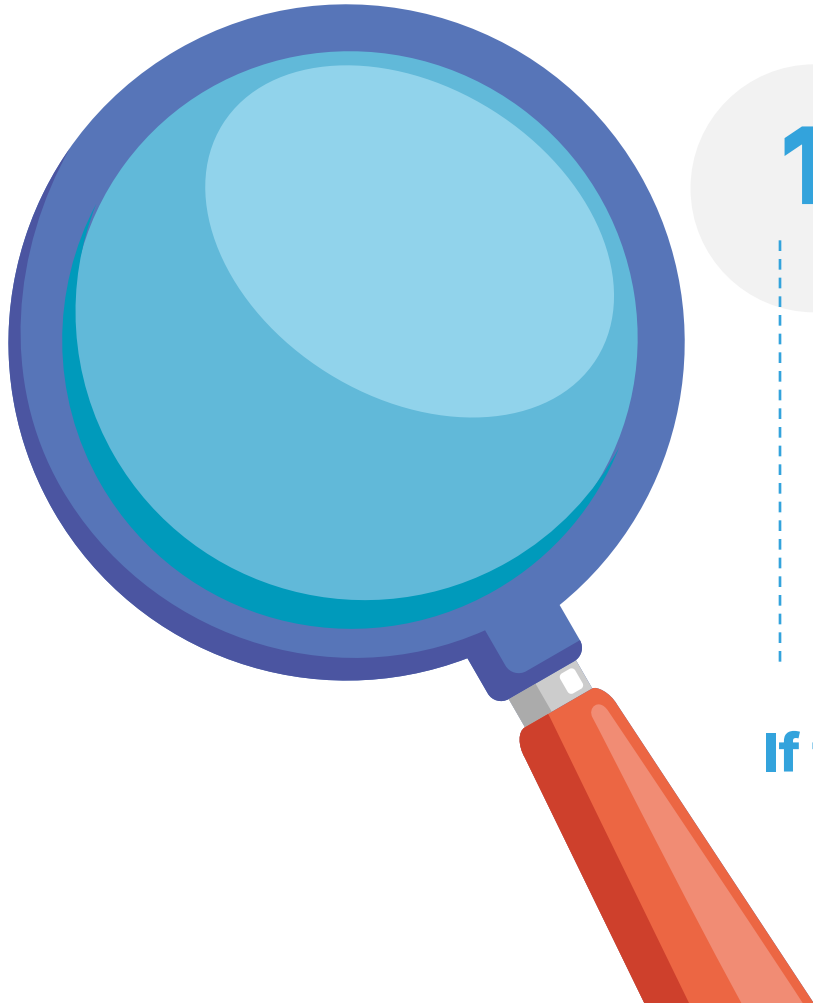
Pets, plants, and AI are no longer background variables — they actively structure emotional life.

3.

Read what is not said

Statements like “I don’t want children” or “I’m fine” may signal relational fragility, not preference.

If the household changes, the sample must change.





HOW ABOUT YOU?

A reflection on connection over time

Imagine you have 10 relational coins.
They represent emotional energy — not time, not money.

Relational Coins

A reflection on connection over time

Imagine you have 10 relational coins.
They represent emotional energy
— not time, not money.

 Family Friends Partner Kids	 Work
 Community	 Self
 AI/ Technology	 Pets
	 Plants



10 years ago

Where did most of your coins go?
(What felt natural, given, unquestioned?)



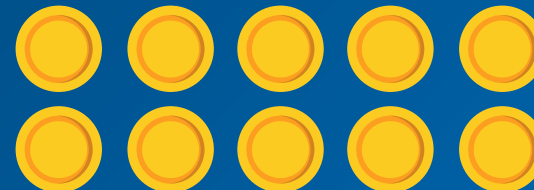
Today

Where do your coins go now?
(What requires more effort, protection, or regulation?)



10 years from now

Where would you like your coins to go?
(And what would need to change for that to be possible?)





**The future of connection depends on
how we rebuild relational capacity**