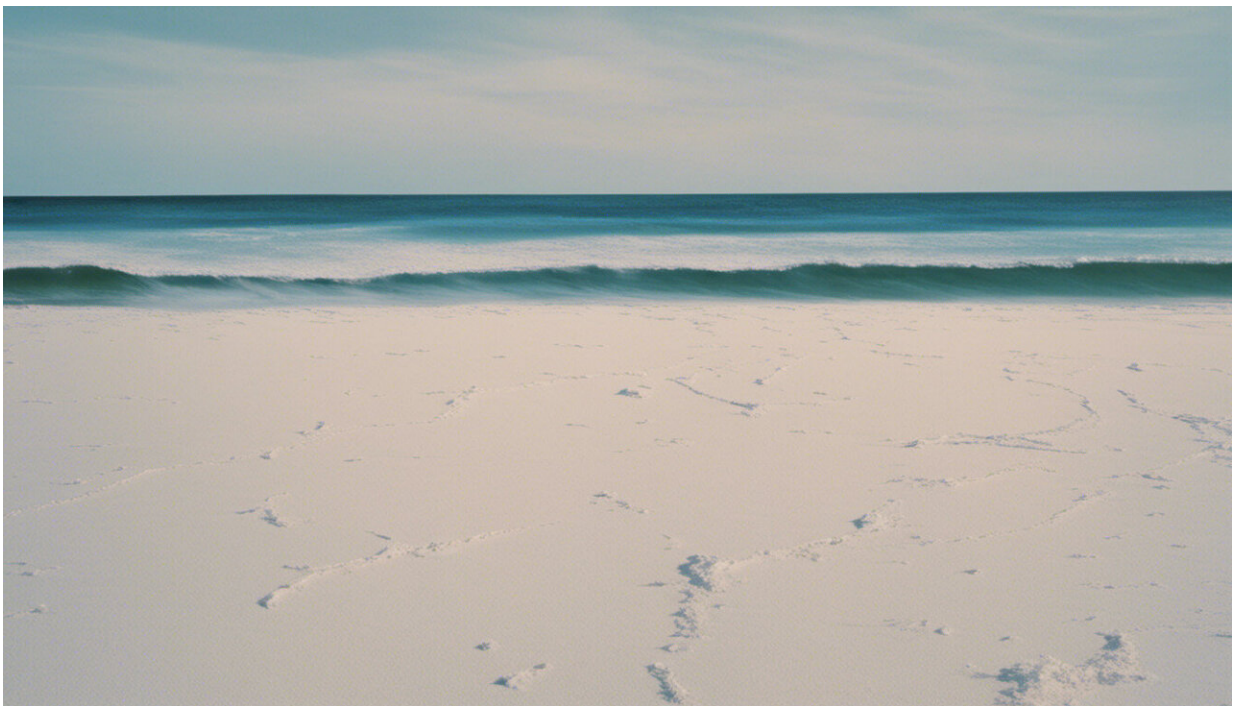


No festivals, no schoolies: Young people are missing out on vital rites of passage during COVID

September 7 2020, by Ben Green and Andy Bennett



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

As we approach the end of a uniquely challenging school year, the class of 2020 look set to miss out on many of the usual highlights of year 12.

Graduation [ceremonies](#), [formals](#), [schoolies week](#) and [summer music](#)

[festivals](#) have either been canceled or [restricted](#).

Meanwhile, those who may have been planning a gap year overseas are not able to leave the country.

So far, public discussion of these cancelations have understandably focused [on the risks](#) posed by COVID and the possible [mental health impacts](#) on young people.

But young people aren't just missing out on a chance to wear fancy clothes or party with their mates. Events like schoolies and formals also have a profound social purpose as rites of passage.

What are rites of passage?

Rites of passage are rituals that accompany changes in [social status](#) for individuals and groups. Their importance has been [recognized by social researchers](#) for more than a century.

In ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep's original 1909 work, which is still broadly accepted by researchers, rites of passage share three basic phases:

- a symbolic separation from normality, such as by travel or costumes
- an in-between stage, in which social norms and hierarchies are cast off and people embrace a community spirit
- a ceremonial confirmation of the new state of affairs, often with symbols like a ring or crown.

This creates a transformative experience for people. It marks a change as special, by stepping outside ordinary life.

The brief upturn in the social order also allows the community to strengthen its bonds and reaffirm its support for the broader, existing social system.

Traditional rites of passage are in decline

For young people today, ceremonies like school graduations or schoolies trips are even more important than for previous generations.

Declining rates of [religious affiliation](#) means religious coming-of-age has also declined in importance. Changing social norms also mean events like [debutante balls](#) and [weddings](#) are no longer common practice for teenagers and those in their early 20s.

Meanwhile, traditional economic markers of growing up—such as moving out of home, and starting full-time work—are also [proving more elusive](#) for young people, thanks to challenging job and housing markets.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Schoolies, gap years are even more important

This means other cultural traditions are a critical part of how young people transition to adulthood.

Often when we talk about ["muck up" days](#), schoolies and [gap years](#), debates focus (not always fairly) on the risks involved with young people who are celebrating and testing boundaries.

But research has shown how [schoolies](#) and [gap year travel](#) act as rituals to mark and manage the otherwise often unremarkable transition to adulthood.

These episodes provide a meaningful break with normal life and past identity. They see young people leave their comfort zone to experience a sense of community with their peers, before moving to the next stage of life.

Similarly, music festivals, while not one-off events, can also [provide these experiences](#). [Nightclubs](#) and parties—which have also been significantly curtailed during COVID—are also spaces to escape everyday rules and experience communal energy within the broader period of emerging adulthood.

Lasting impacts?

In addition to the impact on education—which has yet to be fully

understood—there are other ways in which the class of 2020 may be roundly disadvantaged.

COVID-19 has changed so many of the cultural experiences young people use to make their way into adulthood.

So what might be the lasting consequences for this year's school leavers?

Missing out on rites of passage like schoolies week and festivals could mar the transition into adult society in subtle but palpable ways.

Without such cultural experiences it is harder to know when this change has really happened, to respect its significance and feel a sense of belonging in one's new social role.

As per Van Gennep's work, this cohort of young people is also missing chances to bond as a community and to reaffirm their commitment to the social order by temporarily disrupting it.

This is why, in the absence of formal rites of passage, people develop their own replacements, for better or worse. Recent reports of an impromptu rave inside a kebab shop show that young people will [find other ways](#) of crossing boundaries together—testing both legal and [social norms](#).

On a more positive note, our [ongoing research](#) with young people about making music during COVID-19 is showing their resilience and creativity in balancing safety with social needs. [Online performances](#) are providing some missing ritual and social media also allows a level of community experience.

While we maintain our focus on community health and safety, we must recognize that what might look like frivolous or risky activities can have

huge significance for [young people](#) as they move into adulthood.

This means they also have huge significance for our society more broadly.

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