“BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY

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APPLIED COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY DOCTORAL SCHOOL

THE INTERPLAY OF MEANING IN LIFE, IDENTITY FORMATION, RELIGIOSITY, SPIRITUALITY, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING IN ROMANIAN EMERGING ADULTS

SUMMARY OF THE Ph.D. THESIS

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SUMMARY OF THE THESIS

Key words: *meaning in life, identity, religiosity, spirituality, wellbeing, emerging adulthood*

1. The summary of the main conclusions

This thesis includes four theoretical chapters and six studies that focus on capturing the relationship between religiosity, spirituality, identity, meaning in life, and psychological wellbeing during emerging adulthood in the Romanian socio-cultural context. These studies had the following aims:

i. we aimed to explore the particular nuances and personal understandings of Christian Romanian emerging adults when it came to religiosity/spirituality. This step was pivotal in our exploration of the research literature on these concepts, thus also leading us to select the instruments and theoretical conceptualizations used for the research;

ii. we aimed to explore the relationship between religiosity/spirituality and psychological wellbeing and various demographic variables (gender, parents' educational level, type of college) in a sample of Romanian emerging adults (EAs);

iii. we aimed to capture a snapshot of the identity and meaning in life statuses in relation to religiosity/spirituality and PWB of Christian and agnostic/atheistic EAs from the Romanian socio-cultural context;

iv. we aimed to better understand the relationship between identity, meaning in life, religiosity/spirituality, and PWB in the lives of Christian and agnostic/atheistic emerging adults from the Romanian socio-cultural context;

v. we aimed to take a closer look at the relationship between the presence of meaning in life, spirituality, and psychological wellbeing (PWB) in the lives of Christian and agnostic/atheistic EAs from the Romanian socio-cultural context.

vi. we aimed to establish a dialogue between psychology and theology in understanding and addressing the topics of identity, religiosity/spirituality, and meaning in life. aiming to bridge the gap between scientific and religious perspectives, foster mutual understanding, and

enhance the provision of culturally sensitive support for individuals with religious or spiritual beliefs, thereby promoting psychological wellbeing.

The first chapter was theoretical, and it explored the main characteristics of *emerging adulthood* (EA). This construct is relatively new, introduced by Arnett (2000). Following its introduction, it has been popularized and researched extensively. This chapter described this developmental period referencing the physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional development of EA. It also addressed the particularities of the significant relationships in the lives of emerging adults. This is the first chapter that sets the tone for the following constructs, which are presented in relationship to the characteristics of EA. In order to understand how identity, meaning in life, religiosity/spirituality, and wellbeing are to be studied and understood, a deep understanding of the developmental characteristics is needed.

The second chapter was the second theoretical section. This chapter aimed to summarize the main theoretical models of *identity* formation. It explored five main approaches to understanding and some even referring to the measurement of identity; these are:

a. *the psychosocial development theory* (Erikson, 1959, 1968);
b. *identity statuses theory* (Marcia, 1966, 1980, 1987);
c. *the three-dimensional Meeus-Crocetti model* (Crocetti et al., 2008; Meeus, 1996, 2011; Meeus et al., 1999);
d. *the process model of identity development* (Luyckx et al., 2006, 2008);
e. *the neo-eriksonian perspectives*: *identity style* (Berzonsky, 1989) and *narrative identity* (McAdams, 2011).

This chapter details the theoretical model of identity with its derived instrument for measurement used in the present thesis (i.e., the process model of identity development, Luyckx et al., 2006, 2008). Luyckx's model of identity formation consists of several phases. In the information-gathering phase, individuals collect information about themselves and the world while considering different identity options. The exploration phase involves actively exploring various identities, experimenting, reflecting, and seeking feedback. This phase is characterized by uncertainty and weighing the costs and benefits of different paths. The commitment phase is when individuals make a conscious decision to pursue a particular identity option and invest time, effort, and resources into it. This phase brings stability and direction as individuals have clear goals and values. Throughout the process of developing their identities, people could go

through phases of reflection. In this phase, earlier commitments are questioned and reexamined, new opportunities are investigated, and self-reflection is practiced (Luyckx et al., 2010). Reconsideration enables people to modify and change their identities in response to shifting circumstances, personal development, and shifting values. Individuals work to integrate and consolidate their convictions into a coherent and meaningful identity as they advance in their identity development. Achieving self-congruence and balance across several identity domains is a requirement for consolidation. It requires bringing several facets of one's identity into harmony and developing a strong sense of self.

The *formation of commitment* is influenced by *exploration in breadth*, which involves gathering information on various identity alternatives, and *commitment making*, which entails strong choices in different identity domains. *Commitment evaluation* involves *exploration in depth*, which includes introspection, information gathering, and evaluation of current commitments, as well as *identification with commitment*, which relates to the degree of security and certainty individuals feel about their existing commitments and their fit with personal standards and desires (Luyckx et al., 2006).

Additionally, the model includes *ruminative exploration*, which can occur at any stage of identity formation. Individuals high on this dimension struggle to settle on satisfying answers to identity questions, experiencing difficulty in making progress or feeling uncertain about certain aspects of their lives that they are questioning (Luyckx et al., 2008).

There are at least four identity styles that individuals may adopt during the exploration phase: moratorium, achievement, foreclosure, and diffusion. The *moratorium* status involves active exploration without commitment, while the *achieved* status encompasses both exploration and commitment. *Foreclosure* status is characterized by commitment without exploration, and *diffusion* status refers to neither exploration nor commitment (Schwartz et al., 2011).

However, the text notes that new identity statuses have emerged in different socio-cultural contexts. The inclusion of the ruminative exploration dimension has provided a nuanced understanding of the moratorium status, suggesting that individuals in this state may be at risk of remaining in it for an extended period. Additionally, the carefree diffusion and troubled diffusion statuses have been identified, with the difference lying in the seemingly untroubled approach toward identity (Luyckx et al., 2008; Schwartz et al., 2011).

The validity of Luyckx's identity model has been supported by research conducted across diverse cultural contexts and populations, including young adults from various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (Luyckx et al., 2011; Schwartz et al., 2013, 2013). The model has been used to examine the connections between identity formation and outcomes such as wellbeing, academic achievement, and career decision-making (e.g., (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2005; Berzonsky & Luyckx, 2008; Luyckx et al., 2015). In summary, Luyckx's model encompasses four identity styles during the exploration phase and has been found to hold validity across different cultural contexts. It has also been instrumental in studying the relationships between identity formation and various outcomes.

We continue with the theoretical background for the present thesis in the **third chapter**, which addresses the literature on meaning-making, distinguishing the concept of purpose in life as well. The following subheadings summarize the main theoretical models of understanding and measuring *meaning in life*. It explored two main approaches to understanding and measurement of meaning in life; these are:

a. *the narrative reconstruction model* (McAdams, 1993, 2001);
b. *the meaning-making model* (Steger et al., 2006, 2008).

This chapter presents the theoretical model for meaning-making with its derived instrument for measurement used in the present thesis. This theoretical model and its instrument capture both the search for meaning, as well as the presence of meaning in life (Steger et al., 2006, 2008). The concept of meaning in life has presented challenges in the literature, with different researchers offering various perspectives on its definition and measurement. In response to this lack of conceptual clarity, Steger and his colleagues proposed a model that distinguishes between two components of meaning: The presence of Meaning and the Search for Meaning.

Presence of Meaning, as defined by Steger et al. (2006), refers to individuals perceiving their lives as significant and purposeful. It involves understanding oneself and the world, including how one fits into the larger context. This dimension captures the subjective sense that one's life is meaningful and can be assessed using an instrument developed by the researchers.

On the other hand, the *Search for Meaning* focuses on the active and intense efforts individuals make to establish or enhance their understanding of the meaning and purpose of their lives. It measures the drive and orientation individuals have toward finding meaning in their

lives. This dimension highlights the process-oriented aspect of seeking meaning and can also be evaluated using the instrument developed by Steger and colleagues (2006; 2008b).

In summary, the Presence of Meaning dimension relates to the subjective perception of one's life as meaningful, while the Search for Meaning dimension emphasizes the active pursuit and exploration of meaning. These two components provide a comprehensive framework for understanding and assessing the multifaceted nature of meaning in life (Steger et al., 2006, 2008).

The fourth chapter is also a theoretical one, covering two distinct approaches to wellbeing: hedonic (Diener, 1984; Diener et al., 1999) and eudemonic (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 2008). We chose Ryff's approach to wellbeing, as well as the instrument elaborated in order to measure the concept. This model puts forth six aspects or factors that go into determining a person's total psychological wellbeing. For optimum wellbeing, these dimensions represent many facets of human functioning: (1) self-acceptance; (2) positive relations with others; (3) autonomy; (4) environmental mastery; (5) purpose in life, and (6) personal growth (Ryff, 1989).

Ryff's approach states that psychological wellbeing is a state of positive functioning across these six dimensions rather than only the absence of negative feelings. The model shows the multiple nature of psychological wellbeing and emphasizes the significance of these elements in enhancing total wellbeing. This model has been utilized by academics and professionals to evaluate and advance psychological wellbeing in a range of demographics, including clinical settings, scientific investigations, and programs meant to improve people's general wellbeing.

The final theoretical section is **the fifth chapter**, which addresses religiosity and spirituality during emerging adulthood. First, within the chapter, it is explored the many ways of defining these two concepts can be defined. We chose the conceptualization which differentiates between religiosity and spirituality (Hill et al., 2000). We are in line with the view that presents *religiosity* as a search for the sacred through the institution of the church (which does not exclude the promotion of spirituality within), while *spirituality* encompasses only the dimension of the search for the sacred (Mahoney & Shafranske, 2013).

The chapter presents the development of religiosity/spirituality in emerging adulthood, while also addressing models of religiosity/spirituality development during EA (i.e., models with and without stages). Also, the chapter addresses the characteristics of EA by connecting the

knowledge from the first chapter to religiosity/spirituality development. Finally, it presents religiosity by referring to the historical and current Romanian socio-cultural context.

As presented above, **the sixth chapter** presents the research within the thesis, the personal investigations. *The major objective of the thesis was to contribute to the advancement of knowledge scientific regarding identity and meaning in life in relation to religiosity/spirituality, as well as the implications for psychological and religious aid for emerging adults.*

Based on the major objective of the thesis, we have formulated the following additional main objectives, the first being covered by the above-presented chapters (i.e., to review the research literature that explores these concepts, exploring various theoretical conceptualizations as well as instruments that measure the concepts).

Study I and II. The first two studies were qualitative in nature, exploratory, and aimed at capturing the particular nuances of identity and meaning-making in the personal interpretation of a sample of religious Romanian emerging adults. Following the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) the themes that have emerged were addressed from the psychological and theological perspective. **The first study** (i.e., *Our God and the God of our parents: faith and identity*), explores the research question: *How do Romanian Orthodox Christian emerging adults define religiosity for themselves?* This brought to our attention the relevance of faith in the life of emerging adults (EAs) and the manners in which they learn their religious faith. Youth also used the word faith, without referring to religiosity and spirituality as much. Also, in an organic manner, the EA from the sample referred to aspects that fit the theory of identity formation.

The second study (i.e., *On faith and meaning-making: a psycho-theological perspective*) explores the research question: *Is there a connection between religiosity, spirituality, and meaning-making from the perspective of Romanian Orthodox Christian emerging adults?* The EA from the sample organically addressed in their answers aspects that relate to their religious meaning in life. They used the term “God’s will” for meaning in life and considered it either fully predetermined or partially predetermined. This study raised awareness of their wellbeing, due to their understanding of the divinity’s plan. All individuals referred to the idea that if they do good, they deserve good – while expressing distress at the thought of doing bad and deserving bad. Thus, naturally, we extracted part of the concepts that we have decided to further explore quantitatively.

The third study was conducted with the intention to take a closer look at the relationship between the presence of meaning in life, religiosity/spirituality, and psychological wellbeing (PWB) in the lives of emerging adults from an Eastern-European socio-cultural context. It aimed to explore the relationship between religiosity/spirituality, psychological wellbeing, and various demographic variables (i.e., gender, parents' educational level) in a sample of Romanian emerging adults (EAs). We opted for a more complex definition and operationalization of religiosity and spirituality. A large portion of the literature addresses these concepts either by using a single dimension or more dimensions in a unitary religiosity construct (for a review of the most popular approaches see Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Our approach involved addressing three dimensions of religiosity (i.e., cognitive, behavioural, and emotional), based on previous research conducted in a similar context, and also on a Romanian population (see Negru-Subtirica et al., 2017)). Further, we wanted to take a closer look at psychological wellbeing due to its protective role in sustaining long-term psychological and physical health among individuals (Chatterjee et al., 2021; Steptoe et al., 2015).

The results of the study show that there is a relationship between R/S and some dimensions of PWB, but not all. The correlations were moderate between cognitive religiosity with the dimensions: purpose in life, environmental mastery, respectively between behavioural religiosity and environmental mastery. These results are in line with the literature that has shown that religious participation is related to increased PWB, especially on the purpose in life dimension (Ryff, 2014). Considering the participants of this study, them being (57.9 %) theology students, this result can be better understood. Looking at these two PWB dimensions and their relationship with behavioural and cognitive religiosity, while also having in mind the percentage of students from theological faculties, we can anticipate a deeper intertwining that is worth exploring in the future. When looking at the comparisons within this sample, between non-theology and theology students, we notice a significantly increased cognitive and behavioural religiosity among the latter. As Negru-Subtirica and colleagues (p. 15, 2017) argued, "the cultural context influenced theological students' personal development in a pervasive manner, marking an unbearably light and perpetual presence in their everyday lives". This implies effects on their behaviour and cognition, by having the belief that one can manage their life and also act upon said belief. Religious faith can offer them parameters that guide and structure their lives. A potential explanation may lie in the religious individual's perception of internal control,

compared to the less or non-religious peer (Pargament, 1997). Finally, this being a correlational study, we can affirm only that these dimensions of PWB might increase, especially as behavioural and cognitive religiosity increase.

The other dimensions of PWB (i.e., autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, and positive relationships with others) had a small correlation with all three dimensions of R/S, except between behavioural religiosity and personal growth where there was none. Usually, emotional religiosity defined as spirituality is related to this facet beyond late adulthood (Frazier et al., 2005; Wink & Dillon, 2003)(Wink & Dillon, 2003; Frazier et al., 2005). Hence, it might not be apparent as much, yet.

Not having a strong relationship between PWB and R/S partially contradicts the existing literature, especially when thinking of the highly religious Romanian socio-cultural context. According to Arnett (2011) emerging adulthood, is associated with lower wellbeing, especially before the middle of it. Changes tend to appear later in life, towards the end of emerging adulthood and especially during late adulthood (Frazier et al., 2005; Hwang et al., 2022; Papadopoulos, 2020; Wink & Dillon, 2003). Considering M_{age}=24 of the participants in this research, they arguably fit in this description. Thus, a question arises whether R/S is a resource for PWB. In our study, we explored the relationship between religion/spirituality (R/S) and demographic variables, including gender and parental educational level. However, our hypothesis regarding R/S differences between males and females was not supported. We found that males showed a moderate increase in cognitive and emotional religiosity, as well as a significant increase in behavioral religiosity. These findings align with Mattis's (2014) argument that various factors, such as culture and specific contextual characteristics, contribute to observed differences.

To better interpret our results, it is important to consider the characteristics of our sample. In our study, 57.9% of the participants were students from different theological faculties, with a majority of them being male. Although the overall gender distribution in the sample was nearly equal (54.2% female), the presence of theology students, who have obligations to attend religious services, may help explain the higher level of behavioral religiosity observed. Additionally, this subgroup of emerging adults experiences religion both personally and professionally, which may contribute to increased cognitive and emotional religiosity. By comparing theology and non-theology students within our sample, we can gain further insight into these findings.

This within-subject comparison analysis highlights significant differences across all dimensions of R/S when comparing theology and non-theology students. Therefore, these comparisons provide a valuable framework for understanding the observed results within the context of emerging adults and their differing levels of involvement in theological studies.

Parents' educational level is related to increased R/S on all three dimensions. The lower the parental educational level, the higher the offspring's R/S is, on all three dimensions. This result is in line with the present literature when it comes to mothers (Benson et al., 1997; Desmond et al., 2010; Samani & Latifian, 2008). More so, we shed light on another important less studied aspect: the father's educational level and its relationship to R/S. This exploratory pursuit that we conducted added to the knowledge regarding the Romanian context, in which family is still "the most important aspect" (Negru et al., 2014, p.384) in adults' lives.

As far as emotional and behavioural religiosity/spirituality – theology students present higher scores. When looking at the cognitive dimension, non-theology students have a higher score. We argue that this might be due to the foreclosed religious context that these EAs live in (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2017). Indeed, they might not attend church or connect on a spiritual level (i.e., emotional religiosity) with the divine – but they might explore their family/cultural teachings.

Finally, we uncovered the presence of religiosity/spirituality among Romanian EAs, which we argued needs a deeper understanding. It appears that the religious socio-cultural context does play a part in the EA's lives, thus we set up to capture a snapshot in a religious frame of identity and meaning in life of Romanian emerging adults.

The fourth study was comprised of two parts which set out to capture the naturally occurring meaning in life (i.e., part 1) and identity (i.e., part 2) profiles. For both of them, we explored the profiles in relation to religiosity/spirituality and PWB of Christian and agnostic/atheistic emerging adults from an Eastern-European socio-cultural context, as well as presented various demographical data on the particular profiles that have emerged. We chose to focus only on the Christian denominations and the agnostic/atheistic participants from the larger sample; these being representative of the Romanian context presented in chapter five. We adopted a person-oriented approach, in order to identify naturally occurring patterns among variables (Bergman & Magnusson, 1997; Dezutter et al., 2014; Negru-Subtirica et al., 2017; Scholte et al., 2005). Thus, the present research aims to take a closer look at the relationship

between these concepts in the lives of emerging adults. Hence, even if in recent years EA has been more researched, not much attention has been given to the spiritual lives of EA, particularly from various denominations and an East-European socio-cultural context.

When addressing religiosity we include dimensions of spirituality (i.e., emotional religiosity), religious activity (i.e., behavioural religiosity), as well as cognitive constructions of religiosity (i.e., cognitive religiosity). We focused on college students (i.e., undergraduates and master's) because it is of high importance that psychological and pastoral aid (e.g., counselors, priests) within the college should integrate both perspectives. Religion can be an area where questioning, exploration, and preoccupation can arise during this period of instability (Johnson & Hayes, 2003; Steger et al., 2005).

On one hand, the results from the present study indicate that the more meaning in life one experiences, the greater the wellbeing and religiosity/spirituality. This is in line with other research on this topic (e.g., see Steger et al., 2009). On the other hand, when it comes to identity, the presence of the commitment dimensions, together with the absence of rumination in EA's lives indicates increased PWB and religiosity/spirituality.

Five meaning-in-life clusters emerged, and for each of them, the profile was presented and discussed in relation to the research literature. The clusters with the highest levels of PWB and religiosity/spirituality were, in this order: (1) *High Presence – High Search* and (2) *High Presence – Low Search*. These clusters registered the highest percentages of students from theology faculties (65-69 %), as expected. Given that religious dogma can guide one's meaning in life, both as a source for the presence of meaning as well as opportunities for a deeper understanding and enrichment of the sources of meaning (i.e., search for meaning in the presence of meaning, see Steger et al., 2008)) – these results are in line with the research literature.

This analysis shed light on the large numbers of EAs who have either (3) *Low Presence – High Search* or (4) *Low Presence – Low Search* (total of 178 students). The individuals in these clusters registered the lowest levels of PWB, as well as religiosity/spirituality, with the latter having the lowest of all. When looking at the percentages of the type of faculty and faith, these clusters have the least amount of theology students (23-24 %) and the highest (when compared to the other clusters) amount of atheist/agnostic individuals (21-24%; with the rest being Christian). This aspect raises awareness when it comes to the psychological aid that can be offered to these individuals.

Referring to the *Low Presence – High Search* cluster, These individuals already have renounced, or lack from the beginning, sources of meaning. They are on a continuous search for sources of meaning, without being able to adopt some. As expected, this cluster has the second to-lowest levels of psychological wellbeing. This applies to religiosity as well (i.e., emotional, cognitive, and behavioural). The PWB and religiosity on all dimensions differ significantly compared to all the other clusters, except for Low Presence – Low Search. This does not come as a surprise when considering that most of the individuals from this cluster are attending a non-theological college and experiencing it accordingly. EA is a period when individuals question their faith, thus, even though more than half of them identify as religious – we see that they do not derive meaning from their faith. The questioning, pursuit, search, and exploration which is a characteristic of EA can lead them to new sources of meaning, sources that fit them more than the previous ones (Arnett, 2014). We argue it might be possible that the search for meaning may represent a rejection of the values as well as existential beliefs associated with faith and religion held at that time (Steger et al., 2006). These EAs could identify as belonging to a Christian faith, but not find any source of meaning within it. This might be due to the fact that they live in a culture in which one is born into the faith and baptized at an early age (e.g., Orthodox Christian and Greek Catholic). According to Luyckx and colleagues (2011), this can be a result of negative long-term consequences of early developmental commitments, in a foreclosed social and ideological religious context, which can limit one's access to religion as a transcendent context (N. L. King, 2008; P. E. King, 2003). Finally, their meaning is absent, indeed – which means that life events that might challenge them can present a risk to mental health. But similar to the identity cluster of moratorium, this can be a transitional part of challenging the past and finding sources of meaning that suits them better.

We argue highest long-term risk is encountered among youth that fit in the *Low Presence – Low Search* cluster. Considering that EA is a period when individuals question their faith, we do expect individuals to renounce their initial beliefs or challenge them. A path that is not ideal is not being invested in self-exploration and understanding. Thus, even though more than half of them identify as religious – we see that they do not derive meaning from their faith, in fact, they lack meaning in general. Potentially, these individuals also lack deep religious beliefs beyond the assumed faith of the culture and family. They might identify as belonging to a faith, especially those who are born into it and baptized at an early age (e.g., Orthodox Christian and Greek

Catholic), but not find meaning within it. In a similar manner, the "search for meaning may represent an uncertainty that is less congruent with deeply held religious beliefs" (Martos et al., 2010, p. 864). The questioning, pursuit, search, and exploration which is a characteristic of EA could lead them to new sources of meaning, sources that fit them more than the previous ones (Arnett, 2014). Their meaning is absent, indeed – which means that life events that might challenge them can present a risk for mental health. In a similar manner as the identity cluster diffused, these EAs are at risk later in life. Lacking sources of meaning and not searching for them can make it difficult to find an identity, which can lead to a chain of negative effects on one's life as one age and enter adulthood (Arnett, 2000). As argued before, finding meaning and one's identity during emerging adulthood is decisive when it comes to wellbeing later in life considering that they usually make important life decisions after the age of 25 (e.g., marriage, forming a family, etc.; Arnett, 2014).

The fifth cluster, *Undifferentiated*, was comprised of a little over ¼ of the whole sample (n=205), with almost half of the EAs (49%) being from theology faculties, and 11% atheist/agnostic individuals (the rest being Christian). This signals an important potential risk when it comes to Romanian EAs. This cluster has an average level of psychological wellbeing. This applies to religiosity as well (i.e., emotional, cognitive, and behavioural).

During EA a path that is not ideal is not being invested in self-exploration and self-understanding. Thus, even though more than half of them identify as religious – we see that they do not derive meaning from their faith, in fact, they lack presence and search for meaning in general. It is possible that these individuals also lack deep religious beliefs beyond the assumed faith of the culture and family. They might identify as belonging to a faith, especially those who are born into it and baptized at an early age (e.g., Orthodox Christian and Greek Catholic), but do not find meaning within it. In a similar manner, the "search for meaning may represent an uncertainty that is less congruent with deeply held religious beliefs" (Martos et al., 2010, p. 864). The questioning, pursuit, search, and exploration which is a characteristic of EA could lead them to new sources of meaning, sources that fit them more than the previous ones (Arnett, 2014).

Even though at the time of the snapshot the PWB is not low, such a large percentage of EAs being in this cluster can pose an alarm signal. On one hand, one potential explanation can be the average age of the sample, most of them are undergraduates, under the age of 25, these results might be in line with emerging adulthood, this being a period of personal instability

(Arnett, 2007). Considering that this is just a snapshot, it might be that individuals did start to explore more after a period of time on their own. Still, on the other hand, religion still being present in their lives from an early age, living in a foreclosed cultural and religious context, there might be some negative outcomes related to early religious commitments. Such outcomes might "complement the detriments of high religiosity identified and analyzed on highly religious U.S. emerging adults (e.g., lower levels of safe sexual behaviours, increased prejudice towards outgroups" (Magyar-Russell et al., 2014, as cited by Negru-Subtirica et al., 2017, p. 17).

Their meaning is absent, indeed – which means that life events that might challenge them can present a risk for mental health. Lacking sources of meaning and not searching for them can make it difficult to find an identity, which can lead to a chain of negative effects on one's life as one age and enter adulthood (Arnett, 2000). As argued before, finding meaning and one's identity during emerging adulthood is decisive when it comes to wellbeing later in life considering that they usually make important life decisions after the age of 25 (e.g., marriage, forming a family, etc.; Arnett, 2014).

Six identity clusters emerged, and for each of them, the profile was presented and discussed in relation to the research literature. The clusters with the highest levels of PWB and religiosity/spirituality were, in this order: (1) *Internalized*, and (2) *Searching Moratorium (SM).* The first one had the highest percentage of theology students (61%) when compared to the other clusters; while *SM* had 56%. These clusters were almost identical when it came to the number and faculty of individuals within the cluster (n=88/89; 60-61% theology faculties). We argue that the difference between these two clusters consists in how they are explored.

First, *Internalized* cluster (n=85) is a cluster of emerging adults predominantly undergraduate, mostly female, religious with some type of Christian faith. These EAs registered a higher level on the commitment dimensions (i.e., commitment making, identification with commitment) and exploration in breadth. But similar to the *Foreclosed* cluster, they did not explore in depth or through rumination. We argue that it is possible that these individuals might have started from a set of commitments that they compared to others. As a result of the comparisons made, following their exploration, they returned to their initial beliefs but personalized them. We see that in the process of exploration, they might have touched on their spirituality (i.e., emotional religiosity), as well as reflected on their beliefs (i.e., cognitive religiosity), and practiced religious behaviours such as prayer (i.e., behavioural religiosity).

Given all of these positive religiosity aspects that the EAs engaged in, it does not come as a surprise that they register the highest level of MLQ-P as well as PWB. These results are in line and also add to the literature on the protective effects of religiosity against mental and physical health issues (i.e., anxiety, depression). Still, it is of relevance to point out that these youth might have presented resistance to change and exploration. Indeed, part of the healthy exploration involves an in-depth approach, which might at times raise the levels of rumination. Still, these individuals seem to fit in the socio-cultural context that they live in.

Second, the *Searching Moratorium* cluster is also the cluster with the least amount of individuals that identify as agnostic/atheist. Thus, we encounter a cluster of emerging adults predominantly undergraduate, almost equal in female and male distribution, religious with some type of Christian faith. These individuals score moderate to high in commitment dimensions (i.e., CM, IC), and exploration (i.e., EB, ED, RE) as expected. The profile of this cluster appears similar to Meeus and colleagues (Crocetti et al., 2008; Meeus, 2011) "reconsideration of commitment". This cluster is similar due to the individual's exploration in breadth while still maintaining a set of previously held commitments—although the individual is likely considering discarding these present commitments in favor of exploring new possibilities (Schwartz et al., 2011). Further, this cluster has the second highest level of psychological wellbeing (PWB). In part, this applies to religiosity as well (i.e., emotional, cognitive, and behavioural). Finally, individuals in this cluster appear to still maintain a high level of religiosity, considering that they do come from a highly religious socio-cultural context while continuing to explore and question, which fits the characteristics of emerging adulthood. This is in line with the literature (e.g., see Schwartz et al., 2013), indeed individuals in *SM* do seek to further question and explore aspects of their lives, while they maintain lower levels of previously held values, and beliefs. The fact that almost 50% of them are from theological studies might raise potential questions. Still, individuals in this cluster might be on their way toward the Achieved identity status. Once individuals start the questioning part, this does not necessarily involve changing previously held beliefs, but rather finding a deeper, more personalized understanding of them (Crocetti et al., 2008). Special attention should be paid to individuals in this cluster, due to the fact that at times, the transition towards Achievement is not as smooth, but rather difficult with many risks for physical and mental health (e.g., drug use, alcohol, anxiety, depression, see Kidwell et al., 1995; Schwartz, Zamboanga et al., 2009; Schwartz et al., 2011).

When it comes to the individuals belonging to the *Foreclosed* cluster, they unsurprisingly are the cluster with the second largest percentage of individuals from theology faculties. We obtained a cluster of emerging adults predominantly undergraduate, almost equal in female and male distribution, religious with some type of Christian faith. These youth did not explore in any way (i.e., in breadth, in-depth, through rumination). But rather adopted and maintained the commitments that were passed onto them from family and relevant individuals in their lives. As Negru-Subtirica and colleagues (2017, p. 17) argued: "many theology students seemed to have embraced their current life goals without further exploration, a choice that can be linked to the somewhat foreclosed cultural context". As argued in this thesis, the Eastern-European context is a highly religious context as of yet. In Romania, children are born in faith and for the dominant denomination (i.e., Orthodox Christian), they are baptized shortly after birth. It could be that the participants that fit in this cluster, being from both non-theological and theological faculties, might adopt their parent's faith more as well as their practices. According to LARICS Center for Sociological Research (ISPRI & CCSLARICS, 2022), regardless of religion, 90% of Romanians identify as religious, and believe in the existence of God, but only about 36% of them attend church regularly, 21.7% only occasionally (e.g., some holidays or family events), 18% only on big holidays (e.g., Christmas, Easter), and 17.2% about once a month. As far as prayer, about 68% pray daily or almost daily, without necessarily attending church.

Further, as expected, this cluster has relatively high levels of psychological wellbeing. This applies to religiosity/spirituality as well (i.e., emotional, cognitive, and behavioural). When looking at meaning in life, the results are also as expected, EAs in this cluster register the highest level or presence of meaning (i.e., MLQ-P) and lowest levels of search for meaning (i.e., MLQ-S). This is in line with the literature (e.g., see Schwartz et al., 2013), indeed individuals in Foreclosure do not seek to further question and explore aspects of their lives, while they maintain previous values and beliefs. Unlike previous research conducted only on EAs from theology, the participants in this research registered relatively equal levels of religiosity on all dimensions. Indeed, emotional religiosity (ER) is the highest, followed by behavioural religiosity (BR) and last, cognitive religiosity (CR). Finally, these results might indicate that EAs in this cluster do embrace the "perception of the transcendent (i.e., God, the divine) in daily life and the perception of interaction with, or involvement of, the transcendent in life" (Fetzer Institute and National Institute on Aging Working Group, 1999, p. 11). And to a somewhat lesser extent, they also

embrace the religious behaviors and teachings, thus still not excluding them. This approach appears to be in line with the Romanian socio-cultural context, which is a foreclosed religious context.

This cluster is in line with previous research; a Foreclosed profile had a positive, but also a negative dimension (e.g., Luyckx et al., 2009; Negru-Subtirica et al., 2017; Ortiz & Costigan, 2021). Taking into account that EA is a period when individuals question their faith, we do expect individuals to renounce their initial beliefs or challenge them. A path that is not ideal is not being invested in self-exploration and understanding. Potentially, these individuals also lack deep religious beliefs beyond the assumed faith of the culture and family. They might identify as belonging to a faith, especially those who are born into it and baptized at an early age (e.g., Orthodox Christian and Greek Catholic), but not find personalized meaning within it. The questioning, pursuit, search, and exploration which is a characteristic of EA could lead them to a better, personalized understanding of their meaning in life, beyond the meaning adopted from their parents or culture. These EAs are at risk later in life, if major changes that were not according to their expectations of the world occur. This is the double-edged nature of Foreclosure (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2017; Schwartz et al., 2013). Even from a theological point of view, not having an internalized faith can present various potential problems in the future (see study 6.1. Our God and the God of our parents: faith and identity).

The clusters *Diffused* (n=66) together with *Ruminative Moratorium* (n=109) had both the lowest percentage of theology students (28-39%), and the highest percentage of atheist/agnostic individuals (18-23%). The EAs belonging to the *Diffused* cluster are predominantly undergraduate, almost evenly split between male and female, and religious with some type of Christian faith. These individuals lack commitment, as well as adaptive forms of exploration, the lowest being exploration in depth. We notice an increase in ruminative exploration. This pattern differentiates this cluster from both Searching and Ruminative Moratorium. Individuals in this cluster manifest an indifference towards aspects that are characteristics of emerging adulthood. They lack exploration and self-exploration within their identity and meaning in life. Also, their levels of religiosity are the lowest, while still declaring (the majority of them) as belonging to a Christian faith. This might be due to the socio-cultural context described in this thesis. Individuals are born and raised within a highly religious culture, and still, a part of them do not commit to this identity and do not find meaning within it. It does appear to be almost 50-50 non-

theological and theological students, which raises different issues. Part of these individuals attend a theological college, most of them in order to become a member of the clergy. Considering that these EAs are in the half of the first part of emerging adulthood (i.e., Mage = 21), and also report the lowest PWB, they might benefit from guidance. Failing to find one's identity as well as sources of meaning in life by the end of emerging adulthood can have negative long-term consequences on one's mental and physical health (Arnett, 2014; Steger et al., 2009; Luyckx et al., 2008). Thus we argue that especially for such cases, an open dialogue between theology and psychology specialists is highly relevant.

While *Ruminative Moratorium* is formed of emerging adults predominantly undergraduate, mostly female, religious with some type of Christian faith. The PWB differs significantly compared to all the other clusters, having the second to lowest scores. This is in line with the literature. Indeed, individuals that score high on RE have a higher chance of struggling (Luyckx et al., 2008). The EAs in this cluster appear to renounce their religiosity while continuing to explore and question, which fits the characteristics of emerging adulthood, together with a background of instability. Still, considering that they do come from a highly religious socio-cultural context and that they declared themselves to be adept to their faith (only 18% reported atheist/agnostic) – this presents an interesting picture. Looking closer at their religiosity, we notice that ER and CR are higher than BR. We argue that these individuals struggle to find new meaning in life, and in their process of searching they explore a bit the teachings of their faith (i.e., cognitive religiosity), and the spirituality within their faith (i.e., emotional religiosity). In this process, they avoid any exploration through typical religious behaviours (i.e., behavioural religiosity). This is in line with the literature (e.g., see Luyckx et al., 2008), indeed individuals in RM do seek to further question and explore aspects of their lives, giving up on previously held ones, and all the while experiencing a lot of feelings of being overwhelmed (Schwartz, 2000, as cited in Luyckx et al., 2008), and lack of identity (Baumeister et al., 1985, as cited by Luyckx et al., 2008). As a result, these individuals are at a physical and mental health risk (Park et al., 2023), and they are the second largest cluster.

Finally, similarly to the meaning in life clusters, the *Undifferentiated* (n=149) one is the largest when it comes to identity clusters. This cluster has predominantly undergraduate individuals, religious with some type of Christian faith, out of which almost half 45% theology students, as far as gender, mostly female. We argue that these individuals are still deciding what

identity fits them, as well as which sources can bring them meaning in life – thus postponing and even avoiding making any commitments (Côtè & Schwartz, 2002). We can find the description for this cluster as appearing to resemble a "low profile Moratorium" (Luyckx et al., 2008, p. 78). All scores are intermediate, these individuals appear to be waiting for something to come along and see how they react, rather than engaging proactively with identity work (Luyckx et al., 2008).

Failing to find one's identity as well as sources of meaning in life by the end of emerging adulthood can have negative long-term consequences on one's mental and physical health (Arnett, 2014; Steger et al., 2009; Luyckx et al., 2008). Thus we argue that especially for such cases, an open dialogue between theology and psychology specialists is highly relevant. When analyzing their religiosity, we do see that they appear to engage to some extent in spiritual exploration (i.e., emotional religiosity), evaluating their religious faith (i.e., cognitive religiosity), and some religious behaviours (i.e., behavioural religiosity). This fits with the idea that they might be in a state of "wait and see" (Adams et al., 2006, p.89; Luyckx et al., 2008), and if in the meantime various life events, as well as identity crisis, invites religiosity in their lives, they do not dismiss it completely. Also, considering that they score relatively high on MLQ-S, they might be a bit more open to finding meaning, while lacking sources of meaning at the time of our snapshot.

We argue that youth in this cluster might present lower or higher religious identity in the future, but they might choose to stand on the sidelines for a while. Why might that be? When looking at the percentage of theology students, as well as the high percentage of individuals identifying with their faith (88%) – all of them being born and raised in this faith, this strategy of avoiding and postponing might have social benefits. By adopting this approach, on the one hand, they avoid conflict with their family members (see Mahoney, 2005; Ortiz & Costigan, 2022), and on the other hand, continue to socialize with their lifelong friends that grew up in a similar context (e.g., going to church together, Caneva, 2016; Ortiz & Costigan, 2022). The EAs in this cluster might have different views from their family and friends, maybe question their career choices (i.e., theology students), but avoid thinking about them because of the negative consequences that might result. If they remain stuck in this status, their mental health might be at risk (e.g., anxiety, depression, and stress, Ortiz and Costigan, 2022). Also, they might end up finding their own sources of meaning and resolving their identity crisis without moving too far

from their original faith – but avoiding exploration leaves them in this paralyzed state. We argue that individuals in this cluster also would benefit from the dialogue between psychological and theological specialists.

The fifth study was conducted with the goal of examining the relationship between identity, meaning in life, religiosity/spirituality, and psychological wellbeing. We set out to study the role of identity and meaning in life dimensions as well as religiosity/spirituality in predicting PWB among Christian and agnostic/atheistic EAs. We aimed to investigate if identity dimensions, meaning in life dimensions, and religiosity/spirituality have a significant impact on psychological wellbeing (PWB). The results of the research indicate that the more one identifies with his/her commitments and explores in depth, the more PWB he/she has. Once one has a deep understanding of their choices and identifies with them, they can start living accordingly. This phase is marked by a sense of stability and direction, as he/she has a clear sense of his/her goals and values. This in turn can lead one to feel accomplished, master of his/her life, and in line with Ryff's (1995) view of wellbeing, *in line with his/her potential.*

On the other hand, while exploration is indeed a characteristic of EA and has a beneficial component, there is a side to it that is less healthy and adaptive – ruminative exploration (Luyckx et al., 2008). Thus, the more one ruminates, the less PWB they have. This is the result of either their perception of not making progress toward their identity goals or from feeling uncertain regarding some aspects of their lives that they are questioning (Luyckx et al., 2008). Rumination and brooding share some cognitive mechanisms with worry, as Watkins and Moulds (2005)showed. Rumination and concern/worry, for example, both focus on personally significant issues, both are challenging to ignore, and both affect day-to-day functioning (Luyckx et al., 2008).

Further, the more presence of meaning (MLQ-P) one presents, the more PWB they have. Considering that Ryff (1995), and Ryff and Singer (1998), describe the state of wellbeing as the realization of one's true potential, we argue that this is in line with our results. Indeed, individuals who have meaning in life, have PWB. Also, as long as one has meaning in life, and continues to seek meaning, he/she can still have increased wellbeing (Cohen & Cairns, 2012; Steger et al., 2008). But the search for meaning alone does not play a significant role in shaping PWB in our sample. Still, the EAs with the highest levels of PWB are those who have the highest level of presence of meaning in life, and lowest levels of search for meaning.

When it comes to religiosity/spirituality, the results shed light on an interesting phenomenon in this sample. While it is true that, the more cognitive religiosity (CR) one presents, the more PWB they have, it is also true that as behavioural religiosity (BR) increases, PWB decreases. Emotional religiosity did not play a significant role in shaping PWB. First, when it comes to cognitive religiosity (CR), this dimension involves one thinking about his or her values and beliefs, approach to forgiveness as well as religious meaning. All of these concepts have been linked to increased wellbeing (e.g., for forgiveness see Fincham & May, 2022; Harmehak & Urvi, 2018; Karremans et al., 2003; Kim et al., 2022; Krause & Ellison, 2003; Wulandari & Megawati, 2020; for religious meaning see Krause, 2003; Krok, 2014; Park, 2013; Steger et al., 2008). Considering that religion serves as a mechanism for individuals to find purpose in their lives (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003), as it offers a significant advantage by providing a sense of meaning and a coherent understanding of ultimate truths (Exline & Rose, 2013), it is expected that this dimension to lead to increased PWB. As one has found purpose in his or her life, one can cultivate overarching long-term life aspirations that are in harmony with one's authentic self. By doing so, individuals can experience a sense of motivation that drives them towards engaging in activities that are relevant and meaningful to their aspirations (Steger, 2012). Thus, knowing that these EAs live in a "somewhat foreclosed cultural context" (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2017, p. 17), they might not attend church or connect on a spiritual level (i.e., emotional religiosity) with the divine – but they might live according to their family/cultural teachings. Such a set of knowledge about the world can aid in self, others as well as world understanding. Once one has this type of understanding, one can adapt to that world and feel a sense of control and mastery, as well as purpose – all of these increasing their PWB.

Considering that we conceptualized religiosity as being beneficial for wellbeing (e.g., for the benefits of prayer see Hood et al., 2003; for the benefits of religious services attendance see Chen et al., 2020; Dunbar, 2021; George et al., 2002; Petts, 2014; Powell et al., 2003), the results about emotional and behavioural religiosity are surprising. On one front, considering ER, this consists of the daily spiritual experiences that one has (Pargament et al., 2004, 2005), thus it is another dimension of the "inward experience of faith". The lack of effect on PWB might be due to the above-mentioned foreclosed cultural context within the individuals do not focus on their relationship with the divine, but rather on the faith-based teachings that guide their lives.

On the other front, our results indicate that as BR increases, PWB decreases. We argue that maybe for our sample of EAs that are in a phase of exploration and questioning, continuing these religious behaviours might not benefit them. Indeed, religious individuals tend to return to their religious behaviours later in life (Chen et al., 2020). But during this particular time in their lives, EAs might want to explore further from their foreclosed religious context, and when they do attend services they do out of stress and guilt – components which are incompatible with wellbeing (i.e, these might undermine one's sense of autonomy and control over their environment). As Ivtzan and colleagues (2013) discovered, religiosity (i.e., religious involvement/participation, when it is understood as the behavioural component) does not necessarily lead to increased PWB, while spirituality (when it is understood as the search for sacred), can lead to increased PWB without religious involvement or participation. Thus the lack of/decreased spirituality could explain the result. Another potential explanation might be that individuals practice these behaviours more when they are in distress, due to the uncertainty of this developmental period. While religious prayer can be beneficial (Hood et al., 2003), it can also involve negative religious coping – which does not lead to increased wellbeing, but quite the opposite (Pargament et al., 2004, 2005).

We believe that this research sheds light on a population that is less represented in the research literature: The eastern European socio-cultural context. It investigates variables that are known to be deeply embedded in one's culture (i.e., identity, meaning, and religiosity/spirituality). Even so, on a developmental period that still needs more representation in the research literature: emerging adulthood. On one hand, on the theoretical level, we have uncovered unexpected results when compared to the research literature, while still validating parts of it. We argue that this adds to the vast literature on religiosity and spirituality, with the particular elements of Eastern European culture and social context.

On the other hand, on a practical level, we wish to contribute to the raising of awareness for youth in general and Romanian youth in particular. When it comes to preparing emerging adults for adulthood, the university setting may be both beneficial and troublesome. In the university setting, they can encounter a high number of opportunities to explore and expand themselves. This can lead to either a deeper knowing and understanding of oneself, or to increased confusion regarding one's identity and meaning in life (Luyckx et al., 2008; Montgomery & Côtè, 2003). Those individuals that have the independence and initiative to

navigate an unstructured setting, such as a university, are more likely to succeed in it (Schwartz et al., 2005, 2011).

Finally, **the sixth study** builds on the previous one, aiming to take a closer look at the relationship between the presence of meaning in life, spirituality, and psychological wellbeing (PWB) in the lives of Christian and agnostic/atheistic emerging adults from an Eastern-European socio-cultural context. Considering that in the literature both religiosity and spirituality have been conceptualized as being beneficial for one's wellbeing, we aimed to understand how these relationships are in our sample, with their particularities. Even more so, bearing in mind that EA has been more research in recent years, still not much attention has been given to the spiritual lives of EA, particularly from various denominations and an East-European socio-cultural context. The results revealed that there is no significant direct effect of spirituality on PWB in this sample of emerging adults, as we have seen above. The individuals that report high spirituality, have an increased MLQ-P – a result that is in line with previous research (Cranney, 2013; Ivtzan et al., 2013). Spirituality creates a favorable space for the exploration of one's life meaning, the latter having a positive effect on PWB. When individuals' spirituality is not related to meaning in life, it decreases their PWB. Spirituality and MLQ-P are exerting opposite effects when they are separated, they cancel each other out. Thus, we argue that spirituality can affect one's PWB if it aids and cultivates one's meaning in life. This is in line with the Christian theological perspective which states that no matter one's age, it is through the pursuit of spiritual practices (i.e., prayer, fasting, participation in the sacraments, service to others, and reading as well as reflecting on spiritual writings) that one can begin to discern and fulfill their purpose. Through prayer and other spiritual practices, one can cultivate a deeper relationship with God and gain insight into the nature of the universe and one's place within it. This can help to provide a sense of direction and purpose, even if it is not yet fully realized or understood.

From a developmental point of view, reaching a point of doubt and exploration is a natural process (Erikson, 1963). More so, during this period individuals change their lives significantly (i.e., moving to a different city, going to college, increased responsibility and freedom), and as a consequence, they might doubt previously held beliefs, including their faith (Hall et al., 2016; Haney & Rollock, 2020; Liang & Ketcham, 2017; Upenieks, 2021). Thus, doubting one's faith can be a step toward becoming an adult. We notice this potential increase in the questioning of their originally held spirituality. As these EAs move toward the end of this developmental

period, the impact of spirituality on their psychological wellbeing in relation to the presence of meaning in life diminishes. Consequently, it appears that as they mature, spirituality loses its significance as a source of meaning in their lives. This might be a result of them literally moving away from environments that might have nurtured religious beliefs (e.g., family environment), to college. This transition usually involves moving away from home (Arnett, 2000), and a high percentage of the EAs in this sample (89%) live outside of their family home. Living in a different environment can support one's exploration of previously held beliefs, and as a consequence abandon some of them and replace them with others.

According to Haney and Rollock (2020), such exploration can lead to psychological vulnerability – which can have a negative impact on one's wellbeing. Hence, we argue that spirituality can represent a "double edge sword". On one hand, if it nurtures emerging adults' meaning in life, it can increase their wellbeing. On the other hand, if it stands on an "unsure terrain" of faith doubt, it can decrease their wellbeing. Future research should further explore the latter.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Contributions

The present doctoral thesis explores the psychological conceptualization of meaning in life, identity formation, religiosity, spirituality, and psychological well-being in emerging adults from Romania. It emphasizes the role of socio-cultural context and aims to contribute to a culturally nuanced understanding of these concepts. Thus, it sets a new standard of representativeness in Eastern Europe and investigates relevant psychological factors related to the search for meaning in life, personal identity, and religiosity/spirituality.

It also aims to contribute to informing specific techniques in psychological counseling, psychotherapy, and pastoral counseling to facilitate the exploration and construction of meanings and personal identities in relation to the religiosity and spirituality of young individuals. It contributes to understanding these concepts and their applications in counseling and psychotherapy practice, as well as in the theological and pastoral field.

By using both quantitative and qualitative research methods, the study provides a solid understanding of the investigated phenomena and their practical implications. It serves as a catalyst for further research in the fields of meaning in life, personal identity, and

religiosity/spirituality, combining psychological and theological perspectives. The thesis contributes theoretically by providing perspective on the interaction of variables among emerging young adults in Romania and by exploring the subtle aspects of religiosity/spirituality and the identity formation process. It also addresses the less studied concepts of agnosticism and atheism in the context of autonomous religious and belief definitions.

Regarding methodology, the thesis combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to capitalize on their respective strengths. The qualitative phase offers in-depth perspectives and generates hypotheses alongside future research questions, while the quantitative phase validates and generalizes the findings, contributing to evidence-based practices in psychology.

Overall, this research contributes to understanding psychological phenomena among emerging adults in Romania, stimulates interdisciplinary dialogue between psychology and theology, and contributes to evidence-based interventions and practices.

3. Recommendations and Practical Implications

The present thesis on identity, meaning in life, religiosity, spirituality, and psychological wellbeing of Romanian student emerging adults holds significant practical implications:

i. *Student Support Services:* The present findings can provide valuable insights for enhancing student support services in educational institutions (i.e., psychological and pastoral counseling, and psychotherapy). By understanding how these variables intersect, tailored programs and interventions can be developed to promote the holistic development and wellbeing of students during this transitional phase. The growing and promoted dialogue between the fields of psychology and theology can also be used to help this.

ii. *Counseling and Guidance*: The research outcomes can serve as a guide for psychological/pastoral counseling and guidance practices for student emerging adults. Professionals in counseling can utilize the findings to effectively address the unique challenges and needs related to identity formation, finding sources of meaning, religious or spiritual beliefs, and overall psychological wellbeing during college years.

iii. *Curriculum and Education*: The research can influence curriculum development and educational approaches. Integrating aspects of identity exploration, meaning-making,

religiosity, and spirituality within the educational framework can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of high-school students' wellbeing and foster their personal and academic growth. Namely, if students are used to this process and have been guided in the past, it could be an easier and smoother transition to college. Also, they might be more open to seeking pastoral or psychological aid.

iv. *Career Counseling*: The findings can contribute to career counseling services for student emerging adults. Understanding how identity, meaning in life, religiosity, and spirituality intersect with career choices and vocational aspirations can assist career counselors in helping students align their values, passions, and personal beliefs with their future career paths. This is true, especially for theology students, but non-theology students as well. If they are living in this culture with its previously presented characteristics – integrating these aspects in all areas of counseling can be beneficial.

v. *Campus Culture and Climate*: The research outcomes can inform the creation of a supportive and inclusive campus culture. By recognizing the identity and meaning in life statuses, and religious or spiritual orientations that students might have, institutions can foster an environment that encourages dialogue, respect, and acceptance, as well as opportunities that aid healthy exploration, thereby promoting the wellbeing of students emerging adults.

vi. *Mental Health Services*: The studies within this thesis can offer insights into the relationship between identity, meaning in life, religiosity, spirituality, and psychological wellbeing among Romanian student emerging adults. This knowledge can guide the development of targeted mental health services and interventions to address the specific needs and challenges faced by this population, in this particular socio-cultural context.

vii. *Policy and Advocacy*: The research can inform policy-making and advocacy efforts within the educational sector. By emphasizing the importance of supporting the identity exploration, meaning-making, religiosity, and spirituality of Romanian student emerging adults, policymakers can prioritize their wellbeing and holistic development in educational policies and initiatives.

Overall, the research on the identity, meaning in life, spirituality, and psychological wellbeing of student emerging adults has practical implications for developing student support services, counseling techniques, educational paradigms, campus culture, and mental health care.

Institutions can foster a setting that supports student emerging adults' personal development, wellbeing, and a smooth transition into adulthood by recognizing and catering to their specific requirements.

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