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**Ph.D. THESIS SUMMARY**

**THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN ROMANIA:  
A FOCUS ON SOCIETAL CRISES**

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## CHAPTER I. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1. Introduction and Research Problematic

In today's modern world, civic engagement can be linked with valuable benefits for both the individual and the wider society. However, there are diverse definitions of what constitutes civic engagement (e.g., Adler & Goggin, 2005; Zaff et al., 2011) and several domains research civic engagement using diverse methodologies and lacking integration (e.g., psychology, sociology, economics, political sciences). In their review of existing definitions, Adler and Goggin (2005) found that some authors use very broad definitions of civic engagement, whereas others use narrow, but possibly contradicting definitions. For example, some authors define civic engagement as community service, such as volunteering in one's local community, whereas others define it as political involvement, such as voting (Adler & Goggin, 2005). All these types of engagement are important and using a wide encompassing definition can build a more complex understanding of civic engagement. However, the diversity of definitions and the broad spectrum of civic actions contribute to the disparity of the field, making it hard to develop evidence-based interventions to increase it.

This challenge is only heightened by the scarce civic engagement research conducted outside Western countries (e.g., Zaff et al., 2011), with limited studies conducted in post-communist Eastern European countries. Regardless of how civic engagement is defined, research generally agrees that post-communist Eastern European countries display lower levels than other countries (e.g., Ekman, 2016; Kostelka, 2014). Romania is no exception, with low levels of engagement being observed for voting, volunteering, and different forms of protesting, such as signing petitions and attending peaceful demonstrations (Tufiş, 2014). Although the communist past can explain some of the low levels of engagement from the area (Voicu & Voicu, 2009),

post-communist countries also have specific particularities (e.g., socioeconomical contexts, national traditions, different rates of integration into international institutions) which might influence the effectiveness of interventions developed to increase civic engagement.

## **1.2. Relevance of the Research**

The value of civic engagement includes benefits on the individual level, but goes beyond it, reaching valuable implications on the wider social level as well. On an individual level, volunteering, which is conceptualized as a specific form of civic engagement in this thesis, has been linked to benefits in terms of personal (Mateiu-Vescan et al., 2021) and professional development (Marinica & Negru-Subtirica, 2020). On a social level, civic engagement is generally considered essential for the well-functioning of democratic societies (e.g., Checkoway & Aldana, 2013). Recent years have only highlighted the importance of increasing civic engagement, with societal crises making the cooperation of citizens necessary for better handling unexpected circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine (e.g., Ekzayez et al., 2020; Simsa et al., 2019).

In these unusual social circumstances civic engagement was not only preferable but could even be deemed essential for maintaining social balance. For instance, a UK-review suggests that, as the authorities were having a hard time adapting to the magnitude of the COVID-19 crisis, the help provided by regular citizens potentially had a life-saving role (Mao et al., 2021). Crisis engagement does, however, require adaption to the specificities of each crisis. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, civic engagement could have taken the form of vaccination and self-isolation for some people, as suggested by research showing that some Romanians decided to vaccinate due to civic duty and a desire to protect other people (Mărcău et al., 2022). Similarly, civic engagement by welcoming refugees at country borders or providing

accommodation are types of civic engagement which rapidly became important after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine (Carlsen et al., 2023; Tofan et al., 2024). Despite the undeniable influence of such particularities, crises can also create contexts in which engagement can be higher than in non-crisis times. This potentially higher civic engagement could attract people generally disengaged and, thus, possibly provide opportunities for better understanding Romanians' civic engagement.

Better understanding Romanians' civic engagement during crisis and non-crisis times can guide future interventions to enhance their engagement. However, the fragmented state of the civic engagement literature and the limited research conducted in Eastern Europe make the design of such interventions particularly challenging. In addition to this, despite sharing some similarities, post-communist Eastern European countries also have particularities which may lower the effectiveness of one-size-fits-all interventions, thus making it important to design culturally-adapted interventions. This thesis aims to put the building blocks for future culturally-adapted interventions by first providing an evidence-based understanding of civic engagement through the lens of psychology, an academic domain with extremely limited research on civic engagement in Romania (as detailed in the literature review further presented).

### **1.3. The Study of Civic Engagement in Romania: A Systemic Scoping Review**

This scoping review aims to provide an overview of the literature on civic engagement conducted in Romania by (1) identifying which academic domains research civic engagement, (2) categorizing the available studies based on the type of data used, (3) providing an overview of the studies conducted in psychology. In this regard, relevant studies published between 2013 and 2023 were identified through Scopus and Web of Science.

## **Methods**

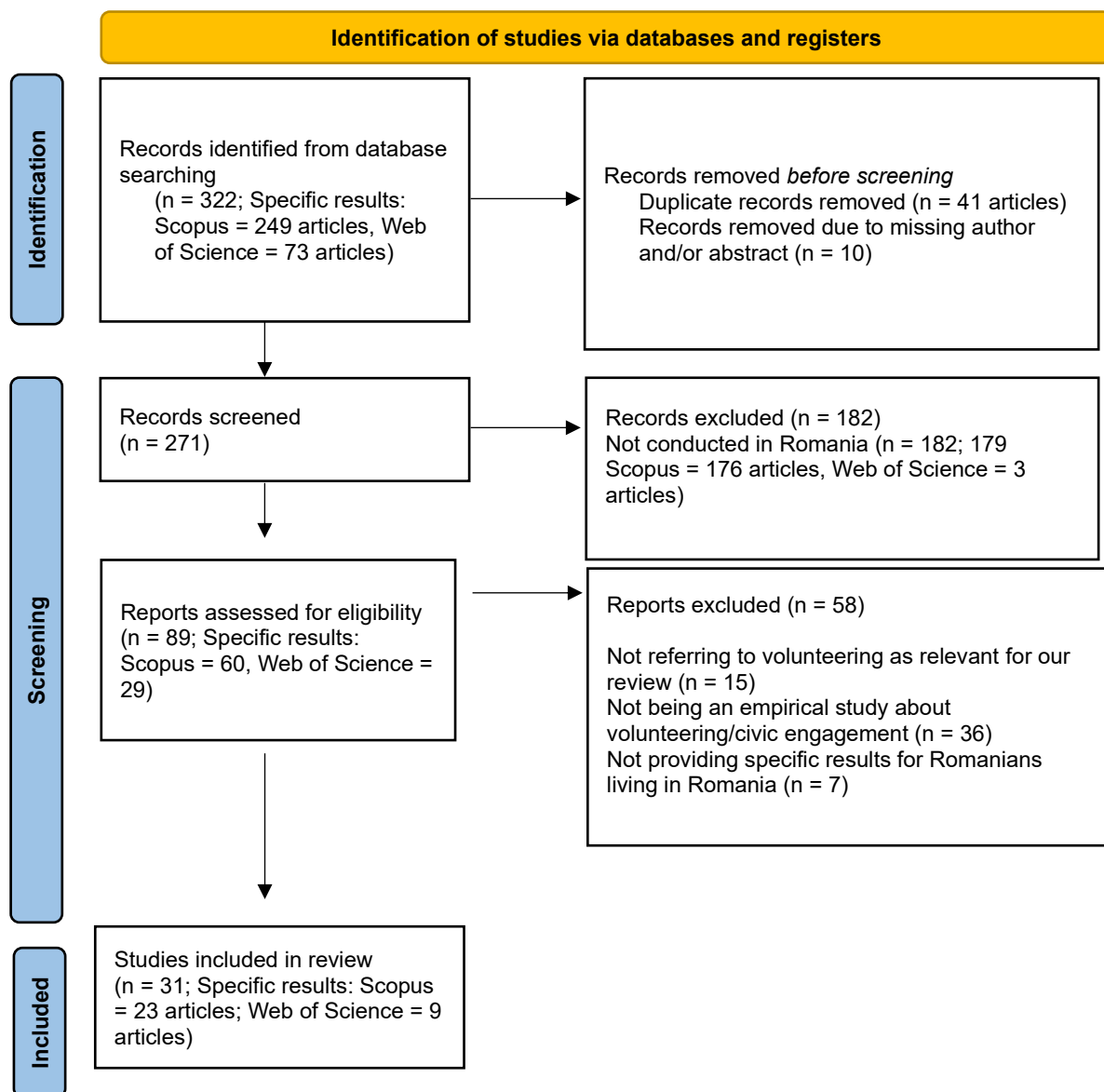


## Systemic Search and Screening

The following string was used to search for articles on Scopus and Web of Science in November 2023: "civic engagement" OR "civic involvement" OR "volunteering" OR "volunteerism" OR "voluntary involvement" OR "voluntary activities" OR "civic participation".

Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flow Diagram (Page et al., 2021).

**Figure 1**  
*Prisma Flow Diagram*



## Results

### Research Goal 1: Identifying the Academic Domains which Research Civic Engagement

Table 1 presents how many articles were assigned to each domain.

**Table 1**

*Overview of Research Prevalence by Academic Domain*

Academic domain	Number of articles	Percentage
Economics and business administration	8	25.80%
Sociology and social work	8	25.80%
Political, administrative and communication sciences	6	19.35%
Psychology and educational sciences	5	16.12%
Geography	3	9.67%
Silviculture	1	3.22%

### Research Goal 2: Categorizing the Existing Studies Based on the Type of Data Used

Table 2 summarizes the type of data used in the articles included in the review.

**Table 2**

*Prevalence of Research by Data Type*

Number of articles (%)		Number of articles (%)	
Primary data	16 (51.61%)	Participant-based	24 (77.41%)
Secondary data	11 (35.48%)	Media-based	4 (12.90%)
Primary & secondary data	4 (12.90%)	Participant & media-based	3 (9.67%)

### Research Goal 3: Providing an Overview of the Studies Conducted in Psychology

Only three studies (Maftei et al., 2022; Marinica & Negru-Subtirica, 2020; Marinica & Negru-Subtirica, 2023) were assigned to the domain of psychology, one of which does not particularly focus on civic engagement (Maftei et al., 2022), and another one is included in this thesis (Marinica & Negru-Subtirica, 2023). Therefore, the literature is too scarce to allow for

general conclusions regarding how civic engagement is researched in Romania in the field of psychology.

### **Discussions and Conclusions**

Results of our first research goal identified four academic domains responsible for most of the civic engagement research conducted in Romania: economics and business administration, sociology and social work, political, administrative and communication sciences, psychology and educational sciences. However, approximately half of the research has been conducted in two academic domains, namely economics and business administration, and sociology and social work. Results of the second research goal show a preference for the use of primary and participant-based data. However, these preferences seem to vary between domains. More specifically, the use of primary data was stronger in some academic domains (e.g., psychology and educational sciences), whereas research from political, administrative and communication sciences was characterized by a strong preference for secondary data. This could be an indicator of considerable differences in how civic engagement is researched in these fields, making a comprehensive overview of all of the available research challenging to integrate.

This challenge is only increased by the very narrow focus of some of the studies. First, some of the studies focused on specific regions or organizations. For instance, Nae et al. (2019) focused on housing activism initiatives in Bucharest, while Pacurar and Albu (2018) captured the high willingness of people from Brasov to volunteer to protect forests in the area. Second, some of the studies focused on diverse and specific forms of civic engagement, such as volunteer tourism (Manea et al., 2013), cross-border volunteering (Pantea, 2015), environmental volunteering (Puiu & Udriștioiu, 2023), service-learning (Ilić et al., 2021; Rusu, 2020), and protest participation (Burean & Badescu, 2014). Despite the narrow focus, these studies

contribute to research on civic engagement. For example, those with a regional focus can provide valuable implications for the local communities by emphasizing what types of civic engagement align with the needs of the community, whereas those focused on specific types of civic engagement can provide an in-depth understanding of the varied ways people could get engaged.

Despite the narrow focus of some studies and the diversity of the methodology employed, we noticed similarities regarding the topic of interest. Several studies from varied disciplines researched antecedents of volunteering, especially the motivations behind engagement or disengagement. Some studies from psychology researched why people got engaged to help Ukrainians (Marinica & Negru-Subtirica, 2023) or how volunteering motivations are related to vocational identity development (Marinica & Negru-Subtirica, 2020). Some studies from sociology and social work focused on what could make Romanians volunteer little in cross-border project (Pantea, 2015) and suggest that providing youth minimal civic education could increase their likelihood of civic engagement (Drăghici, 2017). Considering the overall limited literature on the topic, this interdisciplinary interest in why people volunteer is very important, as having a comprehensive answer to this question could be a very promising step towards future civic engagement interventions.

However, the situation of the literature is less promising when we take a closer look at studies from psychology. Not only are three studies too little for a comprehensive overview of the literature, but each of these studies focuses on a different domain. Whereas the study conducted by Maftai et al. (2022) focuses on mental health correlates of volunteering, the other two studies focus on professional development (Marinica & Negru-Subtirica, 2020) and personal motivations (Marinica & Negru-Subtirica, 2023). In addition to this, two of the studies focus on the same societal crisis (i.e., the war in Ukraine) and more research is needed to investigate

whether the results remain relevant in non-crisis times or during other crises. Therefore, we can conclude that the psychology research on civic engagement is very scarce and diverse.

Although our paper provides a valuable preliminary understanding of who researches civic engagement and the methodologies used in Romania, it does not provide a comprehensive integration of the existing literature. This would be done best by an interdisciplinary team which includes experts from each academic domain and an evaluation of the quality of the research. Future research should aim to bridge the gap between domains, leveraging the particularities of each domain to obtain an integrated and in-depth understanding of civic engagement in Romania. Without denying the value of research from each field, we urge for more research in psychology, as understanding the psychology of civic engagement can provide valuable implications for the development of future interventions. We hope that the results presented in the next sections of this thesis will pave the way for further understanding the psychology of civic engagement in Romania.

## CHAPTER II. THESIS OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The thesis includes four original studies conducted with the main goal of advancing the limited civic engagement research from Romania. Whereas the first study was conducted in non-crisis times and focuses on students' professional development through education-related volunteering, the other four studies aim to deepen the understanding of crisis civic engagement by focusing on two societal crises as they were unfolding: the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine. Taken together, these four studies sum up *the what, how, and whys of crisis civic engagement*: what it is (study 2a), how it's done (study 2b), why it's done (study 3), and why it matters (study 4). In this regard, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to obtain a

comprehensive image of civic engagement. An overview of the research questions of each study can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Overview of the Research Questions of Each Study from the Thesis*

Study	Research questions
<b>Study 1.</b> Marinica, B. V., & Negru-Subtirica, O. (2024). Approaching Graduation: Vocational Identity Profiles of Last-Year University Students and Their Links with Volunteering and Personal Values. <i>Identity</i> , 1-14.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which vocational identity profiles do university students belong to in their final semester before graduation?</li> <li>• How are these vocational identity profiles linked to education-related volunteering?</li> <li>• How are these vocational identity profiles linked to personal values?</li> <li>• How do Romanian emerging adults define community engagement?</li> </ul>
<b>Study 2a.</b> Marinica, B. V., & Negru-Subtirica, O. (2024). How do Romanian Emerging Adults Define Community Engagement?	
<b>Study 2b.</b> Marinica, B. V., & Negru-Subtirica, O. (2024). Community Engagement in Times of Crisis: How did Romanian Emerging Adults Engage? <i>Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai - Psychologia-Paedagogia</i> , 69(2), 25-48.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did Romanian emerging adults engage in their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic?</li> </ul>
<b>Study 3.</b> Marinica, B. V., & Negru-Subtirica, O. (2023). Civic engagement during times of crisis: Personal motivations of Romanian adults at the onset of the war in Ukraine. <i>Cognition, Brain, Behavior</i> , 27(2).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What motivated Romanians' civic engagement in the context of the war in Ukraine?</li> <li>• Are different personal motivations related to online civic engagement differences?</li> </ul>
<b>Study 4.</b> Marinica, B. V., & Negru-Subtirica, O. (in press). Online and Offline Civic Engagement Profiles: Relations with Co-Rumination about the War in Ukraine and Meaning in Life. <i>Psicologia Sociale: Social Psychology Theory &amp; Research</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which civic engagement profiles describe Romanians' online and offline engagement?</li> <li>• How are civic engagement profiles related to co-rumination about the war in Ukraine?</li> <li>• How are civic engagement profiles related to meaning in life profiles (i.e., based on presence and search of meaning)?</li> </ul>

## CHAPTER III. ORIGINAL STUDIES

### 1.1. Study 1. Approaching Graduation: Vocational Identity Profiles of Last-Year University Students and their Links with Volunteering and Personal Values<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

Last-year university students need to prepare for important career decisions, like choosing an occupational field for a first job or selecting the type of employment they are looking for (e.g., project-based, part-time). Preparation for such a career transition can influence students' career development in the long run (Sortheix et al., 2015), with vocational identity playing a central role in successful career transitions (Denault et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020) and also having valuable implications for facets of psychological adjustment, such as self-esteem and depression (Hirschi, 2012; Lannegrand-Willems et al., 2016). However, more research is needed to obtain a better understanding of last-year university students' vocational identity profiles right before graduation and of the varied factors which could contribute to their identity development.

#### Current Study

This study aimed to (1) identify vocational identity profiles in the last semester before university graduation, and (2) analyze the relations between profile belonging and volunteering and personal values.

#### Methods

##### Participants and Procedure

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<sup>1</sup> Study 1 was published as an original study:

**Marinica, B.V., & Negru-Subtirica, O. (2024).** Approaching Graduation: Vocational Identity Profiles of Last-Year University Students and Their Links with Volunteering and Personal Values. *Identity*, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2024.2318334>

The sample included 653 Caucasian students of Romanian ethnicity ( $M_{age} = 24.15$ ,  $SD_{age} = 4.97$ , 76.6% females) in their last semester of university studies at two large state universities in North-Western Romania. As much as 41.3% of students were engaged in volunteering.

## **Measures**

### ***Vocational Identity***

Vocational identity was measured using the Romanian version of the Vocational Identity Status Assessment (VISA; Negru-Subtirica et al., 2015; Porfeli et al., 2011). The instrument is divided into 6 subscales: commitment making (e.g., “No one will change my mind about the career I have chosen”), identification with commitment (e.g., “I chose a career that will allow me to remain true to my values”), in-breadth exploration (e.g., “I am learning about various jobs that I might like”), in-depth exploration (e.g., “I am learning what I can do to improve my chances of getting into my chose career”), self-doubt (e.g., “I may not be able to get the job I really want”), and flexibility (e.g., “My career choice might turn out to be different than I expect”). Participants rated how much the items applied to them using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”).

### ***Education-related Volunteering***

Volunteering was measured with the following question: “Are your volunteering activities related to your education?”, which had the following response options: “I don’t volunteer”, “No,”, “Some of them”, and “Yes”. Therefore, the extent to which students’ volunteering activities were related to their domain of education was measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (“no volunteering involvement”) to 4 (“involving exclusively in volunteering related to the domains of study”).

### ***Personal Values***



Values were measured using the Revised Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ-RR; Schwartz, 2017; Schwartz, Cieciuch et al., 2012). The instrument includes 57 items which ask participants to rate how much a described person resembles them, using a Likert scale from 1 (“not like me at all”) to 6 (“very much like me”). The two other-oriented values are self-transcendence (e.g., “She thinks it is important that every person in the world has equal opportunities in life”) and conservation (e.g., “It is important to her to maintain traditional values or beliefs”). The two self-oriented values are self-enhancement (e.g., “Being very successful is important to her”) and openness to change (e.g., “It is important to her to make her own decisions about her life”).

### **Analytic Plan**

To answer our research questions, we conducted Latent Profile Analysis (LPA) in Mplus 8.8. (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017), followed by the use of the automatic BCH method in Mplus (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014). Output files can be accessed on the Open Science Framework [https://osf.io/d8cmq/?view\\_only=7eaa9ebca77d4a37bfbdca4c88120da5](https://osf.io/d8cmq/?view_only=7eaa9ebca77d4a37bfbdca4c88120da5).

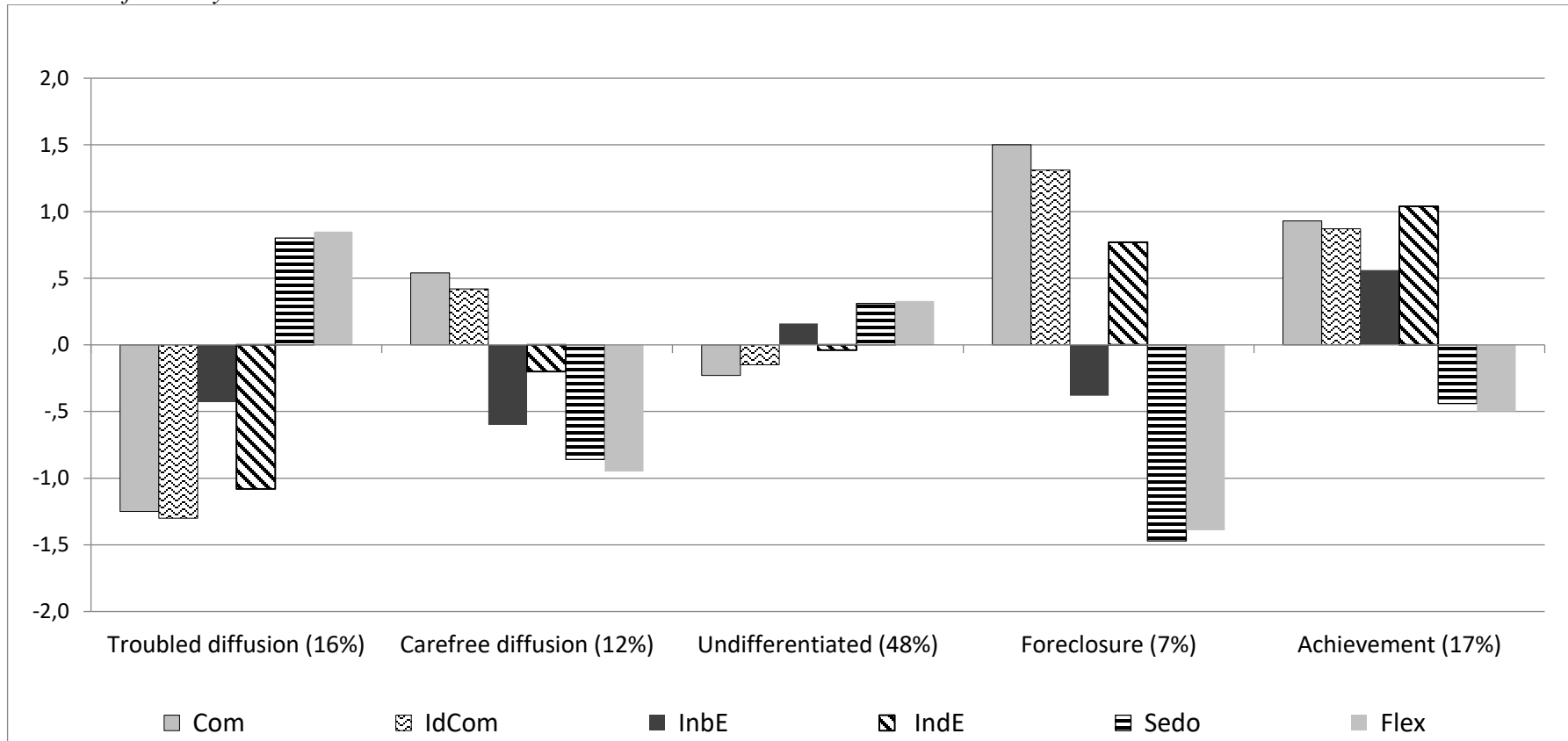
## **Results**

### **Step 1. Determining the Best Measurement Model**

The following profiles were identified (see Figure 1): troubled diffusion, carefree diffusion, undifferentiated, foreclosure, and achievement.

**Figure 1**

*Z-scores of Identity Processes*



*Note.* Com = Commitment Making; IdCom = Identification with commitment; InbE = In-breadth exploration; IndE = In-depth exploration; Sedo = Self-doubt; Flex = Flexibility.

## **Step 2. Education-related Volunteering and Personal Values Comparisons between Profiles**

Overall, education-related volunteering and self-transcendence were significantly higher in profiles marked by higher exploration and commitment, whereas self-enhancement was higher in the diffused profiles than in foreclosure and achievement (marginally significant).

## **Discussion**

### **Vocational Identity Status of Last-Year University Students**

We identified five vocational identity profiles: troubled diffusion, carefree diffusion, undifferentiated, foreclosure, and achievement. As expected, we found an overrepresentation of students in disengaged profiles, especially in the undifferentiated one (48% of the sample), but also in troubled diffusion (16%) and carefree diffusion (12%). Although expected, this result extends the literature on the relation between socio-cultural factors and identity development by capturing a particular socio-cultural context in which there is an overrepresentation of disengaged profiles similar to that from countries with limited job prospects (Sica et al., 2014), possibly due to youth perceiving unemployment as a more complex issue than statistics show (European Commission, 2020; Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2016) or due to issues with the quality of the opportunities available (e.g., mostly part-time or low-skilled jobs are available). Therefore, career interventions should also aim to guide students in proactively exploring employment opportunities and raise their awareness about barriers for university graduate employment in their countries.

### **Vocational Identity Profiles and Volunteering of Last-year University Students**

Our study extends the literature on student volunteering as it goes beyond acknowledging that career-related motivations are important (Chacón et al., 2017) and analyzes volunteering on a continuum of how closely related it is with students' educational path. Our results supported

the hypotheses that education-related volunteering is associated with more adaptative vocational identity profiles. More specifically, students engaged in education-related volunteering were more likely to be in the achievement profile, in comparison with troubled diffusion. This could be explained by the fact that volunteering is a context for vocational exploration which facilitates higher decidedness (Denault et al., 2019). Therefore, our results align with previous research on the contribution of volunteering to vocational identity formation (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011), bringing forward that volunteering plays a role in students' professional development especially when it is related to their educational path.

### **Vocational Identity Profiles and Personal Values of Last-year University Students**

As far as other-oriented values are concerned, as expected, students with high self-transcendence were more likely to belong to profiles marked by higher exploration and commitment. Interestingly, we did not observe the same relations between identity and conservation, with only one marginally significant result showing higher conservation scores in the undifferentiated profile, in comparison to troubled diffusion. A possible explanation is that conservation could make youth more likely to choose their career path in line with the social standards passed on by their close ones, without engaging in vocational identity development, as suggested by belonging to the undifferentiated profile.

As far as self-oriented values are concerned, diffusion profiles displayed higher self-enhancement scores, in comparison with foreclosure. Similar and marginally significant results were also obtained for the comparisons between achievement and the two diffusion profiles. This suggests that, as students focus on the pursuit of achievement and power characteristic of self-enhancement, they focus less on developing their identity through exploration and commitment processes. To our best knowledge, our study is the first one to analyze the relations between self-

oriented values and vocational identity, drawing attention to the potential drawbacks of following self-oriented values during a life stage linked with a higher probability of doing so. More specifically, self-oriented values can be particularly important for young adults as they perceive the need to prove themselves as they begin to build a career (Schwartz, 2005; Vecchione et al., 2016). One could argue that following one's interests in gaining success and power when entering a competitive workforce can set students on the right path towards professional development (e.g., by being highly motivated to prove themselves to potential employers and, thus, securing a job). However, our results show that self-enhancement values are higher in profiles marked by lower commitment and exploration, suggesting that the pursuit of one's personal agenda can potentially hinder one's vocational identity development. This could mean that, as students try to focus on proving themselves, they may end up following career paths they do not self-identify with, as suggested by the low levels of commitment processes.

### **Conclusions**

Our findings extend the literature by highlighting that many last-year university students belong to disengaged vocational identity profiles, which has important career counselling implications, as it highlights the need for career professionals to identify ways of better helping students as they prepare to leave the educational system. In addition to this, education-related volunteering and other-oriented values were linked to a higher probability of belonging to more adaptative profiles, marked by higher exploration and commitment, thus providing a better understanding of factors which might play a role in how well students approach career transitions. Overall, our results emphasize the importance of investigating factors that might influence students' vocational identity during transitional stages, as they could guide counselors in identifying students at risk of problematic transitions (e.g., students with self-oriented values)

and possible paths towards more adaptative vocational identity profiles (e.g., education-related volunteering).

## **1.2. Study 2. Community Engagement in Romania: How Do Emerging Adults Define It and How Did They Get Engaged during COVID-19?<sup>2</sup>**

### **Introduction**

Despite concerns about the declining rates of civic engagement (Ekman et al., 2016; Zaff et al., 2011), some research suggests these low levels could be a reflection of youth's preference for non-traditional forms of engagement, not a sign that they are totally uninterested in civic problems (e.g., Gaby, 2017). In addition to this, it is also possible that heavily relying on close-ended questionnaires does not always capture how youth get engaged (Zaff et al., 2011).

### **Current Study**

This paper took a qualitative approach in answering two research questions: (1) How do emerging adults define community engagement (Study 2a)? and (2) How did emerging adults engage in their communities during the pandemic (Study 2b)?

### **Methods**

#### **Participants and Procedure**

Our finale sample included 131 emerging adult respondents ( $M_{\text{age}} = 23.04$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.66$ ) aged between 18 and 29 years old. For each research question, we used a subsample of those who provided answers. More specifically, 116 responses ( $M_{\text{age}} = 22.96$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.69$ ) were

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<sup>2</sup> Study 2b was published as an original study.

**Marinica, B. V.**, Negru-Subtirica, O. Community Engagement in Times of Crisis: How did Romanian Emerging Adults Engage?. *Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai - Psychologia-Paedagogia*, 69(2), 25-48. Retrieved from <https://studiapsypaed.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2-2024-2.pdf>

analyzed for the first research question and 86 responses ( $M_{age} = 23.38$ ,  $SD_{age} = 2.71$ ) for the second one.

## **Measures**

### ***Community Engagement Definition***

Emerging adults' perception of community engagement was measured using the following prompt "For me, community engagement means...".

### ***Types of Community Engagement***

How emerging adults engaged in their communities was measured using the following prompt "Please take 5-7 minutes to write in as much detail as possible about an event which happened during the pandemic (taking place online or offline) where you felt that you were getting involved in the community or that you were contributing to a cause that was important to you. This event must be relevant to community involvement from your point of view, specifying: what exactly did you do in that activity, whether it took place online or offline."

## **Data Analysis**

Inductive (i.e., data driven) thematic analyses were conducted to answer both research questions, aligned with Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendations.

## **Results**

### **Research Question 1 (Study 2a). How do Emerging Adults Define Community Engagement?**

Many of the responses included examples of behaviors which emerging adults considered to be community engagement. Some of the answers were worded very generally, mostly highlighting the importance of active involvement, bringing your contribution and making a change: "*Being actively involved in the events happening in my community.*" (Respondent 246,

Female), “*A way to bring about a change at the micro level that can become macro, joy and satisfaction*” (Respondent 18, Female), “*to be the change I want*” (Respondent 223, Female).

However, many other responses included specific behaviors based on which we identified 3 main themes representing what Romanian emerging adults identify as community engagement:

1. Helping others by giving time, money, and skills (mentioned in 67.24% of the responses)
2. Staying informed and engaging in problem-solving (mentioned in 38.79% of the responses)
3. Making their voices heard through non-political and political channels (mentioned in 26.72% of the responses)

## **Research Question 2 (Study 2b). How did Emerging Adults Engage in their Communities during the Pandemic?**

Two main themes were identified: *General engagement* in the community and *Pandemic-related engagement* in the community. Titles and definitions for each subtheme can be found in Table 1.

### ***Theme 1. General Engagement***

This theme refers to community engagement which is not directly related to the pandemic, including 4 types of activities which could also be conducted in non-crisis times (e.g., workshops). However, despite not being as directly linked to the pandemic conditions as other possible activities (e.g., delivering groceries to the elderly who could not leave their house due to the higher risk associated with a possible COVID-19 infection), these activities could also be impacted by the wide-reaching effects of the pandemic. Notably, many of these activities could only be conducted online due to social distancing regulations and/or safety concerns. In other words, this theme includes activities which could be carried out in non-crisis times, but we must



acknowledge the possible differences regarding how exactly they were carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Table 1**

*Themes and Subthemes of how Emerging Adults Engaged in their Communities during the Pandemic*

	Title	Definition
General engagement (61.6%)	Passing on knowledge	This subtheme includes activities conducted with the aim of passing on knowledge on different topics (e.g., discrimination, mental health).
	Helping disadvantaged groups	This subtheme includes activities conducted with the aim of helping specific disadvantaged groups, such as people with mental and physical health problems.
	Organizing events	This subtheme includes varied tasks conducted with the final aim of organizing events other people can benefit from.
	Political engagement	This subtheme includes engagement in political activities, such as voting and protesting.
Pandemic-related engagement (38.4%)	Initiatives directly related to the COVID-19 virus	This subtheme includes activities conducted to mitigate the risks linked to the COVID-19 virus and the restrictions imposed to contain its spread, such as helping vulnerable categories self-isolate and adhering to the official recommendations.
	Initiatives related to the wider impact of the COVID-19 pandemic	This subtheme includes activities conducted to mitigate the wider impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and of the associated restrictions, such as loneliness and enhanced financial struggles.

## ***Theme 2. Pandemic-related Engagement in the Community***

This theme captures activities in which emerging adults engaged in order to help their communities through the difficult circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas the first subtheme (i.e., *Initiatives directly related to the COVID-19 virus*) focuses on activities related to the dangers of the virus, the second one (i.e., *Initiatives related to the wider impact of the COVID-19 pandemic*) includes activities related to the wider impact of the pandemic and of the restrictions on other life domains, such as mental health problems and financial struggles.

## Discussion and Conclusions

### How do Emerging Adults Define Community Engagement?

Over half of the respondents focused on *Helping others by giving their time, money and skills* (67.24%). Some of them explicitly mentioned volunteering, which often includes giving away your skills and time: “*For me, involvement in the community means taking part in volunteer activities through which I can help people who are in vulnerable situations and taking part in activities that involve both my development and that of other young people in order to be able to change certain things in the community.*” (Respondent 53, Female), whereas others generally referred to helping other people: “*helping others*” (Respondent 256, Female). The focus on engagement as doing voluntary service to help people from one’s community aligns with what Adler and Goggin (2005) defined as community service in their review of existing definitions of the literature. In addition to this, several respondents mentioned non-governmental organizations, suggesting the key role such organizations can have in supporting community engagement in the Romanian context. One possible explanation for their importance is that they often provide volunteering opportunities for youth. Therefore, interventions targeted at promoting community engagement among emerging adults should focus on providing engagement opportunities through the non-governmental organizations they already know and trust.

The second subtheme had a stronger focus on *Staying informed and engaging in problem-solving* (38.79%). Unlike the first subtheme, this one had a stronger emphasis on paying attention to what is going on in one’s community in order to gain useful knowledge for further action, which overlaps with Ekamn and Amnå’s (2012) typology. Interestingly, although Ekamn and Amnå (2012) emphasize the distinction between being interested in social and political

issues (i.e., social involvement in their typology) and actually taking action to address these issues (i.e., civic engagement in their typology), none of our respondents mentioned staying informed without also taking action. This could suggest that Romanian emerging adults who stay informed do so because they also believe in their power to act, whereas those less optimistic about their power to influence societal issues prefer not to stay informed.

The third subtheme focused on civic engagement with the aim of *Making their voices heard through political and non-political channels* (26.72%). Unlike the first two subthemes, this one had a stronger focus on active representation in the wider society. Although a few of the respondents provided specific examples of representation, most of the responses were worded very generally and focused on non-political channels. Notably, only 5 of the respondents mentioned voting as a form of community engagement, although data collection was conducted shortly after the Romanian Parliamentary Elections from December of 2020. This could suggest that youth do not perceive voting as an efficient way of community engagement.

### **Types of Civic Engagement: General Engagement**

Interestingly, the majority of respondents reported involving in activities not directly related to handling the COVID-19 pandemic, although they were detailing activities which took place during it and were sometimes influenced by the pandemic conditions (e.g., conducting a workshop online instead of offline due to safety concerns and/or regulations). This is particularly interesting because the previous literature on community engagement during the pandemic had a strong focus on actions directly linked with the pandemic or its broader consequences on important life domains (e.g., Mao et al., 2021). Therefore, our results shed light on the understudied forms of engagement conducted during the pandemic, without being directly linked to it, and possibly suggest ways of engagement emerging adults also prefer in non-crisis times. In

addition to this, similarly to the answers to the first research questions, there were limited mentions of political engagement in the answers to this research question as well. This is particularly worrying, as it could suggest a strong political apathy among Romanian emerging adults that might also be reflected in the results of future important elections.

### **Types of Civic Engagement: Pandemic-related Engagement**

In line with the previous literature on community engagement during the pandemic (e.g., Mao et al., 2021), several respondents (38.7%) got involved in activities related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thematic analysis revealed two subthemes: *Initiatives directly related to the COVID-19 virus*, and *Initiatives related to the wider impact of the COVID-19 pandemic*.

The first subtheme included activities which were aimed at mitigating the risks of the COVID-19 virus, such as delivering food and medicine to the elderly who needed to self-isolate: *“I help the elderly in the block (i.e., of flats) with the supply of essential products/medicines, basic food, paying the bills.”* (Respondent 16, Male). This aligns with the results of a rapid review about COVID-19 volunteering in the United Kingdom, which found that food shopping was one of the most common activities, especially during the first part of the pandemic (Mao et al., 2021), with people self-isolating and the elderly being perceived as the most vulnerable categories (Jones et al., 2020). Besides providing help to the most vulnerable categories, a few of the respondents also mentioned following the official recommendations as a way of contributing to their community by limiting the spread of the virus and protecting their loved ones, despite not perceiving themselves at risk: *“For me, the involvement in the community that had increased personal significance was represented by making the decision about vaccination against COVID. Although I was not afraid of this virus, I considered that by vaccinating, I can contribute to getting things back to 'normal' as much as possible, and as far as it is in my control. For me,*

*vaccination primarily denotes respect for other people and responsibility for the needs of those around me. I don't know if the fact that I live with my grandmother had some influence on this or not. I think it's possible because I considered her to be in the category of people who are vulnerable.*” (Respondent 245, Female, 23). This aligns with research showing that some Romanians’ decision to get vaccinated was not always driven by medical concerns, but sometimes by the desire to protect those around them and a perceived civic duty to do so (Mărcău et al., 2022).

The second subtheme was *Initiatives related to the wider impact of the COVID-19 pandemic*, which differentiates itself from the first subtheme because it can include activities which are not so specific to the challenges of the pandemic, but which address its wider impact on different life domains, such as feeling lonely or being sedentary as a result of quarantines. Respondents from this subtheme often emphasized how the wider impact of the pandemic motivated them to get engaged in these activities: *“I think that during the pandemic, relations cooled down, the number of interactions with colleagues and other people decreased, and in some cases a need for human contact and a feeling of loneliness began to develop. The events were aimed at creating bonds of friendship between people, reducing feelings of loneliness and increasing the quality of life during the Corona period, when social relations began to suffer.”* (Respondent 96, Male). This aligns with the results of the review about COVID-19 volunteering in the United Kingdom which found that, as the pandemic prolonged, more and more people got engaged in addressing the wider impact of the pandemic on other domains, such as employment and mental health (Mao et al., 2021). Choosing to engage in this way could also be related to the limited number of necessary volunteers for the activities directly related to the pandemic (e.g., Simsa et al., 2019). Therefore, it is possible that some emerging adults got engaged in ways less

directly related to the pandemic simply because these actions were more accessible to them. Considering the low level of engagement in Eastern Europe (Kostelka, 2014), the crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic could have been an opportunity to engage a population otherwise unengaged. In our sample, this seems to be the case for 17.4% of the respondents. Keeping these volunteers engaged in the long run could be an important first step towards slightly increasing civic engagement among emerging adults in Eastern Europe, in line with research suggesting that the majority of COVID-19 volunteers planned to continue volunteering (Gray et al., 2024). Therefore, non-governmental organizations and other institutions working with volunteers during crisis situations could focus on trying to maintain new volunteers engaged in the long run, possibly including them in new types of activities after the crisis is over.

### **3.3.Study 3. Civic Engagement during Times of Crisis: Personal Motivations of Romanian Adults at the Onset of the War in Ukraine<sup>3</sup>**

#### **Introduction**

Crisis situations, such as the still ongoing war in Ukraine, make civic engagement extremely important, especially in Eastern Europe. Eastern European countries not only have extensive borders with Ukraine, but also share a common history as members of the former communist bloc. This part of the world is characterized by low levels of civic engagement, though the proximity of war and the refugee crisis make humanitarian efforts imperative. Therefore, more research is needed to understand personal motivations for civic engagement in Eastern Europe.

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<sup>3</sup> Study 3 was published as an original study:

**Marinica, B. V., & Negru-Subtirica, O. (2023).** Civic engagement during times of crisis: Personal motivations of Romanian adults at the onset of the war in Ukraine. *Cognition, Brain, Behavior*, 27(2). <https://doi.org/10.24193/cbb.2023.27.10>

## **Current Study**

. The research questions addressed were: (1) What motivated civic engagement in the context of the war in Ukraine? and (2) Are different personal motivations related to differences in terms of online and offline civic engagement?

## **Methods**

### **Participants and Procedure**

Our sample consisted of 118 respondents ( $M_{age} = 27.93$ ,  $SD_{age} = 9.63$ ) who filled in an online questionnaire in March 2022 (i.e., approximately 3 weeks after the start of the war in Ukraine) as part of a larger project titled “With War on the Doorstep: Civic Engagement during the War in Ukraine”. The majority of them were females (87.3%) and university students (50.8% students, 40.7% both students and employees). Many of them had civic engagement experiences before the war in Ukraine (72%), but there were also some who reported having no previous experiences (28%).

### **Measures**

#### ***Ukraine-related Engagement Motivation***

Engagement motivations were collected using the following prompt: “If you are or have been involved in actions related to the war in Ukraine, please tell us in a few lines why you became involved.”

#### ***Civic Engagement***

We used the items from Jugert et al. (2013) to measure online and offline civic engagement. All items asked participants to rate how frequently they engaged in specific behaviors during the last 24 months, on a Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Online civic engagement was measured with five items (e.g., I have joined a Facebook group – or a similar

social media platform - related to a political or social cause.), while offline civic engagement was measured with seven items (e.g., I have attended fundraising concerts or events for a social or political cause.).

## Data Analysis

To answer our first research question, we conducted an inductive (i.e., data driven) thematic analysis of the answers, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines. For the second research question, we investigated whether the assumptions for conducting one-way ANOVAs were met. All of the assumptions were met for online civic engagement, but not for offline civic engagement. Therefore, a one-way ANOVA was conducted in SPSS 22 only for online civic engagement.

## Results

The themes and subthemes of the final thematic map can be found in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
*Themes and Subthemes of the Thematic Analysis*

	Theme 1. <i>Perceived similarity</i> (23.7%)	Theme 2. <i>General concern for people</i> (76.3%)
Subthemes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-group perception</li> <li>• Geographical proximity</li> <li>• Shared threat</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling the need to help</li> <li>• Having the possibility to help</li> </ul>

### Theme 1. Perceived Similarity

In line with previous research suggesting that higher perceived similarity facilitates empathy (e.g., Park & Schaller, 2005), some respondents justified their helping behavior mentioning perceived similarities with Ukrainians. Three main subthemes were identified: *In-group perception*, *Geographical proximity*, and *Shared threat*.



### **1.1. In-group Perception**

While some participants had general mentions of perceived similarity: *“because I identify with people from Ukraine”* (Respondent 48, Female), others focused on more specific similarities: *“it’s horrible what refugees so culturally similar to us are going through”* (Respondent 206, Female), including personal connections with them, such as having *“friends and family from Ukraine”* (Respondent 24, Female) or *“empathy for people I know personally and who are currently living in Ukraine”* (Respondent 54, Female). One example of in-group identification stood out, as it also referred to the struggles of “those who attack”: *“I’m the wife of an army officer and I understand both the issue of those being attacked, and those who attack following the order of a superior. There are psychological dramas on both sides. This is why stopping the war is essential!”* (Respondent 64, Female).

### **1.2. Geographical Proximity**

Some participants focused on the physical proximity of war: *“Because it’s very close to us and we can really help here”* (Respondent 8, Female) and on being geographical neighbors: *“They need the support of neighbor countries and communities in the current situation.”* (Respondent 252, Female). One very revealing example of how proximity led to increased awareness and empathy in the context of the Ukraine war is the following: *“I am originally from Sighetu Marmatiei, Maramures. This is one of the main reasons why I got involved, being right on the border with Ukraine, I felt a very strong empathy towards the refugees. Another reason for my involvement is a sort of awareness I had due to this proximity to us. There are wars everywhere, but until now I was maybe treating them with more indifference, not being so geographically involved, but now I understand people’s fear and despair.”* (Respondent 305, Female).

### **1.3. Shared Threat**

While some respondents focused on the need for international political protection: “*I think that without the EU (i.e., European Union) and NATO’s (i.e., the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) umbrella we could’ve very easily been in their situation*” (Respondent 48, Female), others considered their own country at risk of being attacked in the future: “*I know that any help would be welcome if I were in Ukrainians’ situation and we might be in a similar situation in the future*” (Respondent 105, Female). Some answers also included mentions of expecting reciprocity in a similar situation: “*I think that we, Romanians, could’ve been in their shoes. This is why I have decided to get involved, hoping that someday we might receive the same help.*” (Respondent 155, Female).

Some respondents captured all three subthemes: “*This war is so close to us. We can see videos with people in warzones, near communist blocks of flats which look just like ours. I watched a soldier’s vlog and I had to pause it because the street behind him looked so similar to the street my grandparents live on (in Romania) that my heart stopped for a second. It could be us. I wish other people would help me if I was in this situation.*” (Respondent 354, Female)

## **Theme 2. General Concern for People**

Most respondents justified their helping behavior by mentioning a *General concern for people*, without any mentions of perceived similarities. Two subthemes were identified: *Feeling the need to help* and *Having the possibility to help*.

### **2.1 Feeling the Need to Help**

Some respondents mentioned feeling the need to help others: “*I feel the need to help those who need help.*” (Respondent 154, Male), while others mentioned feeling the responsibility

to do so: *“I feel a moral duty towards the consequences of reprehensible actions on innocent people.”* (Respondent 114, Male). There were also mentions of how unfair the situation is: *“I try to do what I can so I don’t feel that I’m just watching an absurd show of injustice.”* (Respondent 150, Female) and getting involved as a way of coping with strong emotional reactions: *“I was very affected emotionally thinking about the drama these people are going through and any help I can provide makes me feel somehow useful and less guilty about the privileged position I am in by being here and not there.”* (Respondent 73, Female), *“I became so anxious when everything started that volunteering was most of all a way of coping with the constant agitation I was feeling. I wasn’t feeling good with myself knowing I am going on with my life like nothing is happening, when so many people are suffering and in need of help”.* (Respondent 360, Female).

## **2.2 Having the Possibility to Help**

Some respondents mentioned helping because they are in a position which allows them to: *“I felt I can do what other people would, but don’t have the opportunities that the environment in which I carry out my activity offers me.”* (Respondent 421, Female), with many highlighting the importance of small helping acts: *“Any small support given to the Ukrainians can help ease their pain.”* (Respondent 239, Female), *“I felt I want to do something, what I can, so that those affected don’t feel abandoned or hopeless. I think that small gestures together can make a difference in such a big drama”.* (Respondent 78, Female).

Many participants provided answers which include both subthemes: *“Because I wanted to help how I can. Looking at all the news coming from Ukraine, I felt that I had to do something to help, through the means I have at my disposal, the innocent people there who are suffering at this moment. I initially felt hopeless seeing the pain that people from Ukraine are going through, so*

*when I heard that there are centers where you can donate, even if maybe it wasn't a big help, I hope my gesture was useful to someone."* (Respondent 166, Female).

### **Comparisons between the main themes**

The two main themes identified (i.e., *Perceived similarity* and *General concern for People*) were used to group participants based on their motivation for involvement. A one-way ANOVA showed that those who justified their helping behavior by mentioning similarity scored significantly higher on online civic engagement, in comparison with those who mentioned *General concern for people*.

### **Discussions and Conclusions**

Inductive thematic analysis revealed two main motivations for engagement: *Perceived similarity* and *General concern for people*, which interestingly overlap with the two self-transcendence values (i.e., benevolence and universalism) from Schwartz's model of personal values (Sagiv et al., 2017), suggesting that highlighting the possibility of expressing one's own values may play an important role in encouraging civic engagement.

More specifically, the theme *Perceived similarity* resembles the benevolence value which has been linked with civic engagement behaviors, such as volunteering (Arieli et al., 2014) and financial donations for social causes (Verplanken & Holland, 2002). One possible mechanism which explains the higher likelihood of helping those from the in-group is the perceived similarity (e.g., Park & Schaller, 2005), which was also captured in the *In-group perception* subtheme (e.g., *"it's horrible what refugees so culturally similar to us are going through"*, Respondent 206, Female). However, the relation between perceived similarities and helping is more complex than simply being more willing to help those similar to you, with research also highlighting the role of sharing a common threat (Batson et al., 1979). In this regard, we

identified the *Shared threat* subtheme, which sometimes also included expecting reciprocity in a similar situation (“*I think that we, Romanians, could’ve been in their shoes. This is why I have decided to get involved, hoping that someday we might receive the same help.*”, Respondent 155, Female). Although we interpreted this shared threat as perceiving similarities with Ukrainians, as creating a more inclusive “us”, Batson et al. (1979) found that, in contexts of a present common threat, hoping for future reciprocity might facilitate helping even dissimilar people.

The theme *General concern for people* resembles the universalism value, which has been linked with tolerance of dissimilar people and positive attitudes towards immigration (Davidov et al., 2008). The subtheme *Feeling the need to help* captures civic engagement motivated by the desire to cope with negative emotions, such as anxiety, which aligns with the protective function of volunteering (Clary et al., 1998) and Terror Management Theory studies which showed that prosocial behaviors can be a coping strategy (e.g., Yum & Schenck-Hamlin, 2005). The subtheme *Having the possibility to help* captures civic engagement motivated by being in a position which allows one to help, which might be related to research linking community involvement with the belief in one’s control to influence sociopolitical aspects (e.g., Christens et al., 2011). In other words, some participants seem to be mostly motivated by confidence in the usefulness of their helping behaviors, explicitly mentioning the potential power of small acts (“*I think that small gestures together can make a difference in such a big drama*”, Respondent 78, Female).

The one-way ANOVA results revealed that respondents who justified their helping behavior by mentioning similarity scored significantly higher on online civic engagement, in comparison with those who mentioned *General concern for people*. One possible mechanism is that those who are more civically engaged online are also more exposed to online content which

highlights the similarities between them and Ukrainians, as also suggested by the following respondent: *“This war is so close to us. We can see videos with people in warzones, near communist blocks of flats which look just like ours. I watched a soldier’s vlog and I had to pause it because the street behind him looked so similar to the street my grandparents live on (in Romania) that my heart stopped for a second.”* (Respondent 354, Female).

The power of media in motivating action by showing the pain of those in need has also been captured by the following respondent: *“Because I wanted to help how I can. Looking at all the news coming from Ukraine, I felt that I had to do something to help, through the means I have at my disposal, the innocent people there who are suffering at this moment. I initially felt hopeless seeing the pain that people from Ukraine are going through, so when I heard that there are centers where you can donate, even if maybe it wasn’t a big help, I hope my gesture was useful to someone.”* (Respondent 166, Female). Therefore, social institutions and non-governmental organizations involved in crisis situations or providing help to disadvantaged groups could try to maximize their impact by creating online content which aims to enhance similarity awareness or use emotional cues to emphasize the suffering of those in need. Doing so could be especially important in crisis situations in which help needs to be provided outside one’s in-group, as is often the case in refugee crisis.

### **3.4. Study 4. Online and Offline Civic Engagement Profiles: Relations with Co-Rumination about the War in Ukraine and Meaning in Life<sup>4</sup>**

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<sup>4</sup> Study 4 has been accepted for publication as an original study:  
**Marinica, B. V., & Negru-Subtirica, O.** (in press). Online and Offline Civic Engagement Profiles: Relations with Co-Rumination about the War in Ukraine and Meaning in Life. *Psicologia Sociale: Social Psychology Theory & Research*

## **Introduction**

As COVID-19 restrictions were becoming less stringent and youth's mental health was improving (Henseke et al., 2022), another unexpected historical event affected the world: the war in Ukraine. This led to a huge humanitarian crisis and possibly the biggest refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War, one in which civic engagement needed to expand beyond one's local community, as was mostly the case during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, very little is known about civic engagement and coping in times of crisis, with the civic engagement literature focusing less on the increasingly popular forms of online engagement (Boulianne, 2020; Kwan, 2022; Jugert et al., 2013) and employing mostly variable-centered methods (e.g., Weerts et al., 2014).

## **Current Study**

Our main research goals were to (1) identify online and offline civic engagement profiles, (2) analyze the relations between civic engagement profiles and co-rumination about the war in Ukraine, and (3) analyze the relations between civic engagement profiles and meaning in life profiles.

## **Methods**

### **Participants and Procedure**

The sample consisted of 439 Caucasian Romanians ( $M_{age} = 26.17$ ,  $SD_{age} = 9.80$ ), mostly females (82%) and university students (58% students, 32% both students and employees). Half of them (50%) had previous experiences of civic engagement. Data collection was conducted as part of the project "With War on the Doorstep: Civic Engagement during the War in Ukraine" through an online questionnaire filled in online in March 2022.

### **Measures**

### ***Civic Engagement***

Online and offline civic engagement were measured using the items from Jugert et al. (2013). These items asked participants to evaluate the frequency of specific behaviors in the last 24 months, using a Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Examples of online behaviors include signing petitions and sharing social or political content, whereas offline behaviors include volunteering or wearing symbols in support of a social or political cause (i.e., bracelets, badges, t-shirts).

### ***Co-Rumination about the War in Ukraine***

Co-rumination was measured with the adapted Co-Rumination Short-Scale from Haggard et al. (2011). Participants were instructed to think about their discussions with close ones before rating how much 9 phrases such as “We talk about all the bad things which can happen because of the war in Ukraine” are relevant for them on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much).

### ***Meaning in Life***

The Romanian version of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016; Steger et al., 2006) was used to measure the two facets of meaning in life: presence of meaning (e.g., “My life has a clear purpose.”) and search for meaning (e.g., “I am always searching for something that makes my life feel significant.”). The items asked participants to rate how strongly they agree with specific phrases, using a Likert scale with values from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”).

### **Data Analysis**

To answer the first research question, Latent Profiles Analysis (LPA) was conducted in Mplus 8.8 (Muthén & Muthén 1998-2017) to identify civic engagement profiles. For the second research question, the LPA for civic engagement was followed by the BCH method in Mplus 8.8.



For the third research question, LPA was conducted in Mplus 8.8 to identify meaning in life profiles, profile membership for civic engagement and meaning in life profiles were extracted in SPSS 22, and then a  $X^2$  test was conducted to examine the relations between civic engagement and meaning in life profiles.

The data set, the study materials and the output files openly available on the Open Science Framework: [https://osf.io/w8zj3/?view\\_only=52f491a2e5534329bf9cab27ffa3a84](https://osf.io/w8zj3/?view_only=52f491a2e5534329bf9cab27ffa3a84).

## Results

### Research Goal 1. Identifying Civic Engagement Profiles

The following profiles were identified (see Figure 1): *Offline focused engagement*, *High online and offline engagement*, *Disengaged*, *Online focused engagement*, *Very high online and offline engagement*.

### Research Goal 2. Co-rumination about the War in Ukraine Comparisons

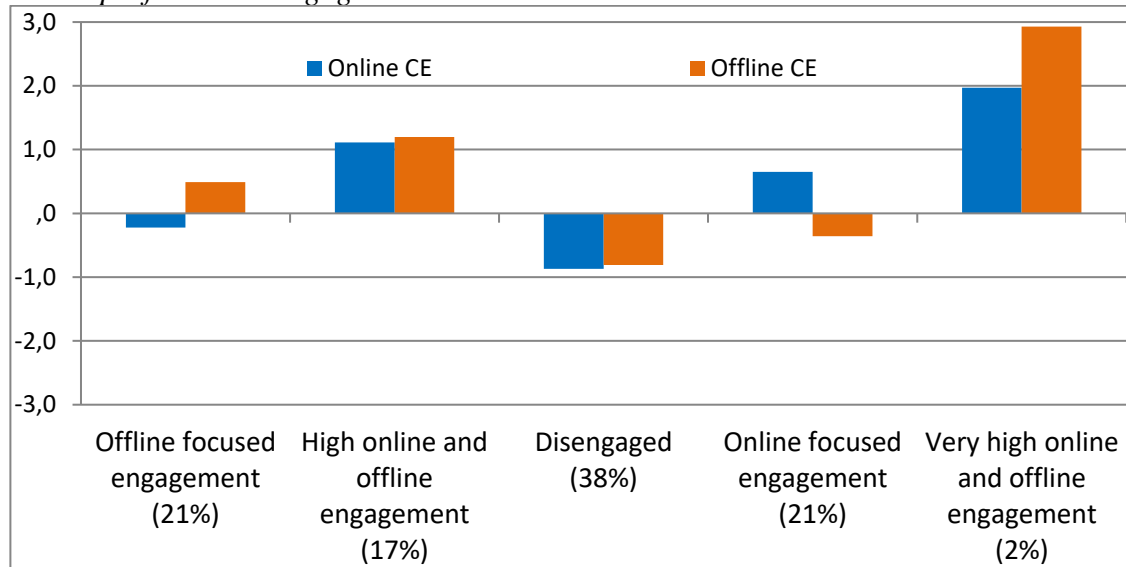
Participants belonging to the *Offline focused engagement* ( $M = 2.70$ ,  $SD = 0.10$ ) profile scored significantly lower on co-rumination about the war in Ukraine ( $p < .05$ ), in comparison with participants from the *High online and offline engagement* ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = 0.10$ ) and *Online focused engagement* ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 0.10$ ) profiles. Participants from the *Disengaged* ( $M = 2.52$ ,  $SD = 0.07$ ) profile also scored significantly lower on co-rumination about the war in Ukraine ( $p < .05$ ), in comparison with those from the *High online and offline engagement* ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = 0.10$ ), *Online focused engagement* ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 0.10$ ), and *Very high online and offline engagement* ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 0.34$ ) profiles.

### Research goal 3. Relationships between Civic Engagement and Meaning in Life Profiles

The following profiles were identified (see Figure 2): *Lack of meaning*, *Fulfilled*, *Light searchers*, *Undifferentiated*, *Fulfilled searchers*.

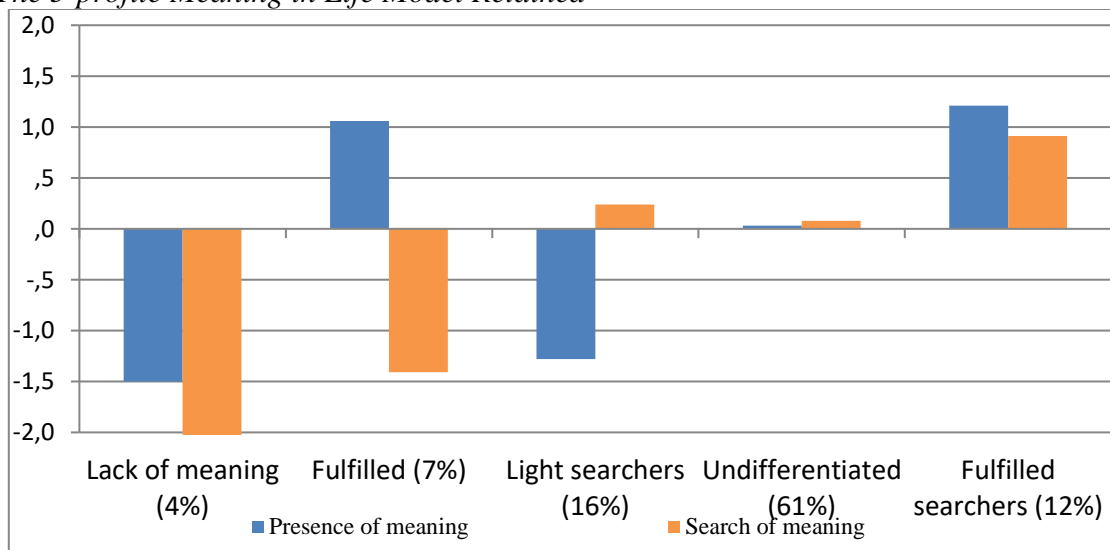
**Figure 1**

*The 5-profile Civic Engagement Model Retained*



**Figure 2**

*The 5-profile Meaning in Life Model Retained*



Results of the chi-square test showed that meaning in life profiles were significantly associated with civic engagement profiles ( $X^2 = 46.67$ ,  $df = 16$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Table 4 shows how the participants from each civic engagement profile are categorized into meaning in life profiles.

**Table 4**  
*Cross-tabulation of Civic Engagement and Meaning in Life Profiles*

Civic engagement profiles	Meaning in life profiles				
	Lack of meaning	Fulfilled	Light searchers	Undifferentiated	Fulfilled searchers
Offline focused engagement	3	12	4	62	19
High online and offline engagement	1	4	11	73	11
Disengaged	7	5	22	55	10
Online focused engagement	2	6	22	65	5
Very high online and offline engagement	0	22	0	44	33

*Note.* Data are expressed as rounded percentages.

## Discussion

Five civic engagement profiles were identified: *Offline focused engagement*, *High online and offline engagement*, *Disengaged*, *Online focused engagement*, *Very high online and offline engagement*. Interestingly, 38% of the respondents belonged to the *Disengaged* profile, displaying low levels of online and offline civic engagement. The high representation of this profile aligns with previous research which shows that Eastern European countries generally show low civic engagement (Kostelka, 2014), with Romania possibly standing out as a country with particularly low engagement (Nikolova et al., 2017).

In line with our expectations and previous research (e.g., Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020), three of the five profiles identified indicated similar online and offline civic engagement (e.g., respondents from the *High online and offline engagement* profile had similarly high online

and offline engagement, whereas those from *Disengaged* had similarly low online and offline engagement). However, there were also two profiles marked by a stronger preference for online (i.e., *Online focused engagement*), respectively offline civic engagement (i.e., *Offline focused engagement*), in line with the results obtained by Oser et al. (2013). Considering that the latter two profiles make up as much as 42% of our sample and may not have been identified using variable-centered methods, we second the encouragement of a wider use of person-centered methods (Weerts et al., 2014) with the aim of capturing a more comprehensive image of civic engagement.

Co-rumination comparisons confirmed our hypothesis, as the civically *Disengaged* profile had the lowest level of co-rumination, scoring significantly lower than participants from the *High online and offline engagement*, *Online focused engagement* and *Very high online and offline engagement* profiles. Interestingly, co-rumination was also significantly lower for the *Offline focused engagement*, in comparison with the *High online and offline engagement* and *Online focused engagement* profiles, both of which are marked by high online civic engagement. Therefore, our results confirm that higher civic engagement is linked with higher co-rumination, but also suggest that online engagement could be particularly relevant for the higher co-rumination of those most civically active. Our results align with research on crisis engagement (Maftei et al, 2022; Willems et al., 2020) and COVID-19 volunteering (Domaradzki, 2022), suggesting that, despite a big part of the research focusing on positive outcomes and emotions, those civically engaged might also experience negative outcomes and emotions.

In the case of the war in Ukraine, the higher co-rumination of those more engaged could be explained by an increased awareness of how overburdening and overwhelming wars are, in line with the previously identified relation between increased awareness and co-rumination (e.g.,

Smith and Rose, 2011). Besides the rather obvious scenarios of being aware of the tragedy of the situation by working directly with those affected by the war in Ukraine (e.g., volunteers welcoming refugees at the border), even rather indirect forms of engagement could facilitate an increased awareness. This could be especially relevant for online engagement, as suggested by the significant difference between the *Offline focused engagement* and *Online focused engagement* profiles. One possible explanation is that those engaged online are exposed to more photos and videos which emphasize the tragedy of the situation, in line with research linking higher social media use in the early stages of the war with higher anxiety (Maftai et al., 2022).

Although crisis situations are focused on helping those directly affected by the crisis (e.g., Ukrainian refugees), ignoring the helpers' wellbeing might limit their ability to remain engaged. Therefore, the potential wellbeing costs of co-rumination for those most engaged should also receive attention. In this regard, non-governmental organizations could prioritize providing psychological support to those involved in handling the crisis. However, as co-rumination has been previously linked with both positive and negative outcomes, further research is needed in order to understand whether higher co-rumination is indeed a “cost of caring” linked with wellbeing costs.

In line with our expectations, civic engagement seems to be linked with presence of meaning, as suggested by the fact that all respondents from the *Very high online and offline engagement* profile exclusively belong to meaning in life profiles marked by average or above the average presence of meaning. Although the cross-sectional nature of our data doesn't allow for causal inferences, in line with experimental data which links prosocial engagement with higher presence of meaning (e.g., Klein, 2017), it could be expected that higher civic engagement facilitates higher presence of meaning, thus making civic engagement a valuable

source of meaning, including in times of enhanced meaning-related concerns due to societal crisis (Yum & Schenck-Hamlin, 2005).

In the case of the war in Ukraine, this could mean that, as people are trying to cope with the situation in varied ways, those who cope by helping others or the community (i.e., through civic engagement) might experience a heightened presence of meaning in their lives. As shown by research on the COVID-19 pandemic (Schnell & Krampe, 2020; Zambelli et al., 2022), this increased perception of meaning could work as a buffer against the stressors of the crisis. In other words, coping by getting civically engaged could bring benefits not only on a social level, but also on a personal level (i.e., by working as a protective factor).

One rather unexpected result was that most participants from the *Disengaged* profile belonged to meaning profiles characterized by average or above average search for meaning, suggesting a relation between the lack of civic engagement and the search for meaning. This could mean that those who engage very little or not at all are seeking meaning in their lives, but not by getting civically engaged.

## **Conclusions**

Our findings extend the scarce literature on crisis civic engagement by identifying five civic engagement profiles distinguishable based on the type (i.e., online and offline) and intensity of involvement. In addition to this, our results suggest that civic engagement is linked with presence of meaning in life and co-rumination, thus capturing both a “bright side” and a potential “dark side” of engagement. More specifically, whereas presence of meaning could work as a buffer against the stressors of crisis situations (Schnell & Krampe, 2020), co-rumination could be a risk factor due to its link with internalizing problems (e.g., Rose, 2021).

## CHAPTER IV. GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

### **4.1. Summary of the Main Conclusions**

Table 1 includes a summary of the key results and conclusions for each study included in this thesis.

**Table 1***Main Results of the Thesis*

Study	Key results and conclusions <sup>a</sup>
<p><b>Study 1.</b> Marinica, B. V., &amp; Negru-Subtirica, O. (2024). Approaching Graduation: Vocational Identity Profiles of Last-Year University Students and Their Links with Volunteering and Personal Values. <i>Identity</i>, 1-14. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2024.2318334">https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2024.2318334</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The majority of last-year university students belonged to disengaged vocational identity profiles (76%), generally characterized by rather low vocational commitment. This could suggest that, despite being very close to graduation, many university students are not confident about their career path and do not integrate it into their identity. However, 24% of the students in the sample belonged to profiles with rather high vocational commitment.</li> <li>• Education-related volunteering was linked to belonging to more adaptative vocational identity profiles (i.e., characterized by high exploration and commitment), suggesting that engagement in volunteering activities related to one's academic domain can contribute to career development. This could be particularly important in contexts in which students have limited opportunities for career development through direct work experiences.</li> <li>• Other-oriented personal values were linked with belonging to more adaptative vocational identity profiles, whereas the self-oriented value of self-enhancement was linked with profiles marked by lower commitment and exploration. This suggests that self-oriented students may be at risk of problematic transitions to the work force as they may not identify with the chosen career path.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Study 2a.</b> Marinica, B. V., &amp; Negru-Subtirica, O. (2024). Community Engagement in Times of Crisis: How did Romanian Emerging Adults Define it?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When asked to define community engagement, Romanian emerging adults mentioned three core themes: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Helping others by giving time, money, and skills (mentioned in 67.24% of the responses)</li> <li>2. Staying informed and engaging in problem-solving (mentioned in 38.79% of the responses)</li> <li>3. Making their voices heard through non-political and political channels (mentioned in 26.72% of the responses)</li> </ol> </li> <li>• Most Romanian emerging adults focused on conducting activities which contribute to social positive change in specific communities, such as their city or university.</li> <li>• Only five out of 116 respondents mentioned voting in their definition of community engagement. This is worrying, considering that the data collection was done close to the Romanian Parliamentary Election from 2020.</li> </ul>



Study	Key results and conclusions <sup>a</sup>
<p><b>Study 2b.</b> Marinica, B. V., &amp; Negru-Subtirica, O. (2024). Community Engagement in Times of Crisis: How did Romanian Emerging Adults Engage? <i>Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai - Psychologia-Paedagogia</i>, 69(2), 25-48. Retrieved from <a href="https://studiapsypaed.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2-2024-2.pdf">https://studiapsypaed.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2-2024-2.pdf</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When asked to mention how they got engaged in their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, emerging adults mentioned two main categories of activities: <i>General engagement</i>, and <i>Pandemic-related engagement</i>.</li> <li>• The theme <i>General engagement</i> refers to activities which were not related to the COVID-19 pandemic, despite sometimes being impacted by the pandemic conditions (e.g., having to conduct workshops online instead of offline). It includes the following four subthemes: <i>Passing on knowledge</i>, <i>Helping disadvantaged groups</i>, <i>Organizing events</i>, and <i>Political engagement</i>.</li> <li>• The theme <i>Pandemic-related engagement</i> refers to activities strongly related to the COVID-19 pandemic. It includes the following two subthemes: <i>Initiatives directly related to the COVID-19 virus</i>, and <i>Initiatives related to the wider impact of the COVID-19 pandemic</i>.</li> <li>• Most Romanian emerging adults from our sample favored engagement in activities not specifically related to the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., 61.6% of the sample mentioned activities included in the <i>General engagement</i> theme). However, very few of them mentioned political forms of engagement, despite the data collection being conducted close to the Romanian Parliamentary Election from 2020. This only enhances the worrying conclusion of study 2a that many Romanian emerging adults may have strong political apathy, may not perceive political engagement as an efficient form of community engagement, or may be unaware of how to engage through political channels.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Study 3.</b> Marinica, B. V., &amp; Negru-Subtirica, O. (2023). Civic engagement during times of crisis: Personal motivations of Romanian adults at the onset of the war in Ukraine. <i>Cognition, Brain, Behavior</i>, 27(2). <a href="https://doi.org/10.24193/cbb.2023.27.10">https://doi.org/10.24193/cbb.2023.27.10</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When asked why they got engaged to help in the context of the war in Ukraine, Romanian adult respondents mentioned two main themes: <i>Perceived similarity</i> and <i>General concern for people</i>.</li> <li>• The theme <i>Perceived similarity</i> emphasizes that some Romanians got engaged due to perceiving similarities with Ukrainians affected by the war. It includes the following three subthemes: <i>In-group perception</i>, <i>Geographical proximity</i>, <i>Shared threat</i>.</li> <li>• The theme <i>General concern for people</i> emphasizes that most Romanians (i.e., 76.3% of the sample) got engaged due to a general concern for the wellbeing of other people, without mentions of perceived similarity. It includes the following subthemes: <i>Feeling the need to help</i>, <i>Having the possibility to help</i>.</li> <li>• Romanians motivated by <i>Perceived similarity</i> had significantly higher online civic engagement, in comparison with those motivated by a <i>General concern for people</i>. This</li> </ul>

Study	Key results and conclusions <sup>a</sup>
<p><b>Study 4.</b>  Marinica, B. V., &amp; Negru-Subtirica, O. (in press). Online and Offline Civic Engagement Profiles: Relations with Co-Rumination about the War in Ukraine and Meaning in Life. <i>Psicologia Sociale: Social Psychology Theory &amp; Research</i></p>	<p>could mean that those more engaged online are exposed to more content which emphasizes similarities with Ukrainians, suggesting that online content can play a very important role in motivating civic engagement in times of crisis. This could be particularly important in instances in which those in need of help are outside the helpers' in-group, as sometimes happens during refugee crises.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Five civic engagement profiles were identified in our sample of Romanian adults: Offline focused engagement, High online and offline engagement, Disengaged, Online focused engagement, Very high online and offline engagement.</li> <li>• Most of the respondents belonged to the Disengaged profile (38% of the sample), followed by Online focused engagement (21% of the sample) and Offline focused engagement (21% of the sample). The last two profiles would have probably not been identified using variable-centered methods, further emphasizing the need for more person-centered civic engagement research (e.g., Weerts et al., 2014).</li> <li>• Overall, higher civic engagement was linked with higher co-rumination about the war in Ukraine, capturing a potential “dark side” of civic engagement. This could be especially important in the case of online civic engagement, possibly due to a higher exposure to negative information.</li> <li>• Participants with a very high level of civic engagement also displayed at least average presence meaning of life, whereas many of the most disengaged ones displayed at least average search for meaning. This could mean that civic engagement is an important source of meaning for some Romanians, whereas those rather disengaged are searching for meaning, but not by getting civically engaged.</li> </ul>

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> The key results and conclusions column emphasizes some of the most important results from each study. Please refer to Chapter 3 for a more comprehensive presentation of each study.

## 4.2. Theoretical and Methodological Contributions

Considering the fragmented nature of the civic engagement literature, along with the scarce research from Eastern Europe and pinpointing the very few studies from psychology in Romania, this thesis had the overarching goal to provide the building blocks for understanding the psychology of civic engagement in Romania. The scoping review analyzed the peer-reviewed studies available on Scopus and Web of Science, confirming the fragmented nature of the civic engagement literature in Romania and the interdisciplinary interest in the topic, which emphasizes the need for more interdisciplinary research. In addition to this, we only identified three studies assigned to psychology, two of which were conducted by the Ph.D. candidate and the scientific advisor behind this thesis (one is included in this thesis: Study 3), further highlighting the need for more research about the psychology of civic engagement in Romania.

In this regard we have collected data in both non-crisis and crisis times (i.e., during two different societal crises), followed by the use of diverse methodologies (i.e., qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods) to build a comprehensive image of civic engagement, including person-centered methods. Such methods have the strength of providing a look at how different variables coexist *within* an individual, which is then used to find similar individuals (i.e., those with similar variable configurations) and differentiate them from those with different configurations.

Study 1 (i.e., *Approaching Graduation: Vocational Identity Profiles of Last-Year University Students and Their Links with Volunteering and Personal Values*) primarily focuses on vocational identity as a key element for professional development (e.g., Lee et al., 2020) and psychological wellbeing (e.g., Lannegrand-Willems et al., 2016). In this regard, it uses Latent Profile Analyses (LPA), an advanced statistical method which has been growing in popularity in

vocational research (Spurk et al., 2020) and shown to outperform cluster analysis, a method commonly used in identity research (Magidson & Vermunt, 2002; Negru-Subtirica & Klimstra, 2021). This study expands the vocational identity literature in several ways: (1) it focuses on the understudied developmental period of university graduation and confirms the existence of vocational identity profiles found in other countries, (2) it identifies that a worrying percentage of Romanian students belong to disengaged identity profiles in their last semester before graduation, generally characterized by low exploration and commitment to the chosen career path, (3) it is, to our best knowledge, the first study focused on the relation between vocational identity development and personal values, identifying that self-oriented values may inhibit vocational exploration and commitment processes, possibly being linked with the risk of following career paths one does not identify with.

In addition to this, Study 1 extends the literature on student volunteering, one of the most common forms of civic engagement among Romanian youth (Pantea, 2014) by emphasizing that education-related volunteering can provide an alternative path towards adaptive vocational identity development. Therefore, our results emphasize that some types of volunteering can be more valuable for students' professional development, which could potentially have societal implications as well. For example, volunteering activities related to their academic domains can aid students to increase their employability and become better future workers, thus becoming active members of the society through their professional roles as well.

Studies 2a and 2b (i.e., *Community Engagement in Romania: How Do Emerging Adults Define It and How Did They Get Engaged during COVID-19?*) provided an in-depth understanding of civic engagement during the COVID-19 crisis through a qualitative approach. Study 2a advanced civic engagement research by identifying three core elements of how

Romanian emerging adults define community engagement, proposing the following definition: *“bringing their own contribution towards positive change in the community by helping others (by giving their time, money, and skills, staying informed and engaging in problem-solving, and making their voices heard through political and non-political channels”*. It also identified that most respondents include helping others in their definition, with many explicitly mentioning volunteering and non-governmental organizations, but very few mentioning voting. In addition to this, although taking an interest in socio-political aspects and acting upon them can be considered different forms of engagement and exist independently (Ekman & Amnå, 2012), this was not the case in our sample. More specifically, all those who mentioned taking an interest in socio-political issues also mentioned taking action about them. From a theoretical perspective, this only enforces the need for developing civic engagement theories adapted to each particular socio-cultural context and further conducting relevant research in this regard.

Study 2b advanced crisis civic engagement research by identifying the ways in which Romanian emerging adults got engaged during the COVID-19 pandemic and that some of them reported no previous engagement (i.e., 17.4% of our sample), suggesting that the crisis may have prompted the engagement of those previously disengaged. Most of the research on engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic has focused on actions linked with the pandemic or its consequences (e.g., Mao et al., 2021). However, Study 2b highlighted that most Romanian emerging adults engaged in activities which were not specifically related to the crisis, and which could also be carried out in non-crisis times. In addition to this, Study 2b emphasized that not only do Romanian emerging adults not include political engagement in their definition of community engagement (Study 2a), but they also do not report engaging in political actions (e.g., voting), despite the data collection being conducted during an electoral year.

Studies 3 and 4 further advanced research on crisis civic engagement by focusing on another societal crisis: the war in Ukraine. Study 3 (i.e., *Civic Engagement during Times of Crisis: Personal Motivations of Romanian Adults at the Onset of the War in Ukraine*) used thematic analysis to identify Romanians' motivations for engagement. The findings indicate that some Romanians got involved because of perceived similarities with Ukrainians, but the majority of them were motivated by a general concern for the wellbeing of other people. Notably, these two themes overlap with the two self-transcendence values from Schwartz's model: benevolence and universalism (Sagiv et al., 2017), suggesting that engaging to express one's personal values could be a key motivation for Romanians. In addition to this, the subtheme *Feeling the need to help* emphasized that for some Romanians helping in the context of the war in Ukraine was a way of coping with their negative emotions, showing the power of crisis engagement of not only helping those directly affected by the crisis (e.g., Ukrainian refugees), but also those who face challenging emotions as a results of the crisis (e.g., Romanians who feel deeply saddened by the suffering of Ukrainians or who are anxious about having a war on their doorstep). Further one-way ANOVA comparisons found that Romanians motivated by *Perceived Similarity* reported higher levels of online civic engagement than those motivated by *General concern for people*. These results emphasize that: (1) engagement during the same societal crisis can be driven by different motivations, with personal values potentially playing an important role in motivating Romanians to engage, (2) different motivations can be linked with different types of engagement, and (3) online channels could play an important role in motivating civic engagement, at least for some people.

Study 4 (i.e., *Online and Offline Civic Engagement Profiles: Relations with Co-Rumination about the War in Ukraine and Meaning in Life*) builds upon civic engagement and

meaning in life studies which encourage the use of person-centered methods for obtaining a comprehensive image of both concepts (Dezutter et al., 2014; Weerts et al., 2014). Following Weerts et al.'s (2014) warning that variable-centered methods may facilitate inaccurate results, our study is one of the first to create civic engagement profiles based on the type (i.e., online and offline) and intensity of engagement. In doing so, it identified that some Romanians have similar levels of online and offline engagement, whereas others have a stronger preference for one type. The two profiles marked by a preference for online, respectively offline engagement, represent 42% of the sample and would probably not have been found using variable-centered methods, which reinforces the importance of using person-centered methods in the research of civic engagement. In addition to this, Study 4 brings additional empirical evidence for the relation between civic engagement and meaning in life, a relation expected based on common knowledge but backed up by limited empirical evidence so far (e.g., Klein, 2017). To our best knowledge, no previous study has employed person-centered methods to analyze these relations.

By looking at the relation between civic engagement and meaning in life profiles, Study 4 showed that those with the highest online and offline civic engagement also displayed at least average presence of meaning, whereas the majority of those least engaged online and offline had at least average search for meaning. Therefore, this study identifies the presence of meaning in life as a potential protective factor during societal crises, in line with past research about the COVID-19 pandemic (Schnell & Krampe, 2020). Despite the several benefits of civic engagement mentioned throughout the thesis, this study is unique in that it also shows a potential “dark side” of engagement in times of crisis: higher co-rumination about the war in Ukraine, which could be particularly important for online civic engagement. In other words, those more civically engaged were more likely to co-ruminate about the war in Ukraine, which may pose an

increased risk for their psychological wellbeing. The fact that the risk of co-rumination could be particularly relevant for those engaged online emphasizes the possibility that online civic engagement may have different correlates than offline civic engagement and, thus, should receive separate attention in the scientific literature. This aligns with the previously found relation between online civic engagement and the motivation to engage due to a perceived similarity with Ukrainians (Study 3).

#### **4.3. Recommendations and Practical Implications**

Overall, based on the results of Study 1 (*i.e., Approaching Graduation: Vocational Identity Profiles of Last-Year University Students and Their Links with Volunteering and Personal Values*), universities should acknowledge the value of career interventions in aiding their graduates transition to the workforce. In this regard, career interventions targeting Romanian university students should:

- help students get in touch with their work field, focusing on raising awareness about employment opportunities and barriers. This could be best done by building bridges between students and people working in their academic domains. Hopefully, doing so could contribute to lowering the percentage of last-year university students belonging to disengaged vocational identity profiles by providing additional exploration opportunities throughout their academic studies.
- encourage the use of education-related volunteering as an alternative path towards professional development, especially in work fields with limited opportunities for direct work experiences and challenging employment access. The value of education-related volunteering could also exist in the case of student-led non-governmental



organizations and have potential benefits for students' psychological wellbeing as well.

- consider the role of personal values in aiding (e.g., self-transcendence values) or hindering (e.g., self-oriented values) professional development, possibly putting students with self-oriented values at risk of challenging transitions to the workforce.

Based on the results of Study 2a (i.e., *Community Engagement in Romania: How Do Emerging Adults Define It?*), civic engagement projects and interventions should:

- acknowledge the key role of volunteering and non-governmental organizations in emerging adults' perception of community engagement.
- prioritize giving emerging adults engagement opportunities through familiar and trusted non-governmental organizations.
- try to promote engagement through political channels among those already involved in non-political actions. In this regard, the proposed definition can provide a valuable start in understanding what emerging adults expect from their engagement: making a positive change in their communities by helping other people, problem-solving societal issues, and making their voices heard. Emphasizing how these things could be done through political channels could play a role into making emerging adults perceive such involvement as more attractive. Keeping this definition in mind could also play a role in promoting other types of civic engagement among emerging adults.

Based on the results of Study 2b (i.e., *Community Engagement in Romania: How Did Romanian Emerging Adults Engage?*), the varied organizations and institutions working with volunteers during crises should:

- be open to welcoming some people with no previous civic engagement experience and try to keep them engaged in the long run. One possible way of attracting and maintaining them could be by providing engagement opportunities similar to those mostly reported in the *General engagement* theme: *Passing on knowledge*, *Helping disadvantaged groups*, and *Organizing events*. The non-crisis-specific nature of such activities could potentially help these volunteers remain engaged after the crisis is over because they would be already familiar with activities which could be conducted in non-crisis times.
- prioritize the transition to crisis contexts of those already engaged by providing them with the necessary support to adapt to the new circumstances, as their past experience could make their contributions particularly valuable and, otherwise, they could become difficult to re-engage after stopping their engagement (Gray et al., 2024).

Based on the results of Study 3 (i.e., *Civic Engagement during Times of Crisis: Personal Motivations of Romanian Adults at the Onset of the War in Ukraine*), the different institutions and organizations involved in crisis civic engagement should:

- provide engagement opportunities both offline and online, leveraging the strengths of each medium (offline/online) in line with the particularities of the crisis.
- try to attract and maintain the engagement of Romanian adults by emphasizing the opportunity to express their self-transcendence values (i.e., benevolence, universalism).
- acknowledge the potential contribution of online content in motivating the engagement of some people. This could be particularly important in crises during

which those in need of help are members of the out-group and online content could better emphasize their suffering and similarities with those able to help.

Based on the results of Study 4 (i.e., *Online and Offline Civic Engagement Profiles: Relations with Co-Rumination about the War in Ukraine and Meaning in Life*), the institutions and organizations involved in crisis civic engagement should:

- provide online and offline engagement opportunities, thus creating a context in which all those interested could get engaged, regardless of the medium (online/offline) they prefer.
- enhance the potential power of civic engagement to facilitate the presence of meaning in life by creating contexts in which those engaged can reflect on the meaningfulness of their work (e.g., having regular meetings in which they emphasize the positive impact of their work, ideally also including real testimonials from their beneficiaries).
- be aware of the potential “costs of caring” on the helpers’ wellbeing and provide psychological support to help those involved cope with the challenges of the crisis engagement in a healthy manner (e.g., workshops designed by psychologists who give them a chance to share their negative emotions, but also present healthy ways of coping with them, instead of co-ruminating).

Although many of the studies included in this thesis focused on two different societal crises, these recommendations and practical implications remain valuable for engagement in non-crisis times as well. For example, in study 2a we asked emerging adults to define community engagement, without prompting them to define it in times of crisis. Therefore, the resulting definition and the key role of volunteering and non-governmental organizations

likely remain relevant in non-crisis times as well. Even when asked to describe their engagement in times of crisis (i.e., during the COVID-19 pandemic), the majority of respondents mentioned activities which could also be conducted in non-crisis times (Study 2b).

In addition to this, the key role of personal values in motivating engagement during the war in Ukraine emphasized by Study 3 has also been found in non-crisis times. More specifically, expressing one's values was one of the volunteering motivations with the highest mean in a sample of Romanian emerging adults (e.g., Marinica & Negru-Subtirica, 2020). Similarly, enhancing the potential benefits and being aware of the possible costs of civic engagement (Study 4) remains important in non-crisis times as well. The link between meaning in life and volunteering has also been found in research conducted in non-crisis times (Klein, 2017), and experiencing emotional costs can also be expected in non-crisis times when volunteering in challenging contexts (e.g., having direct contact with people going through tough circumstances, such as abuse or illness, in your volunteering activity).

#### **4.4. Limitations and Future Research**

Although this thesis brings valuable advancements to understanding the psychology of civic engagement in Romania, some of its limitations should be acknowledged and used to guide further research.

One important limitation is that the studies are cross-sectional and, thus, do not allow for causal implications about the variables investigated. In some instances, an expected direction of the relation can be assumed based on theory and past research, but these hypotheses need to be further investigated through longitudinal designs. For example, in Study 4 it could be more likely for civic engagement to influence meaning in life, than the reverse direction, but longitudinal

research is necessary for better understanding this relation. Moreover, as there is limited research about some of the relations investigated (i.e., the relations between personal values and vocational identity in Study 1), more studies that replicate and deepen the understanding of these relations are necessary to build a high-quality evidence-based foundation for future research and interventions.

Despite our best efforts (e.g., in Study 1 we approached students studying varied domains, including some in which there are several male students; in Study 2 we partnered with Pro Vobis - The National Resource Centre for Volunteering for an online data collection in hopes of reaching a more diverse sample), the study samples are mostly made up of female university students, which affects the generalizability of these results to other groups of people (i.e., older adults, NEET emerging adults – not engaged in employment, education or training). Future research should investigate whether our results replicate on more diverse, nationally-representative samples. In addition to this, although the studies on crisis civic engagement provided a better understanding of Romanians' engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, it is possible that the particularities of each crisis influenced the results. Therefore, more research needs to be conducted to replicate these results in non-crisis times and during other crisis.

#### **4.5. Concluding Remarks**

This thesis provides a better understanding of the psychology of civic engagement in Romania, potentially laying the foundation for future culturally-adapted interventions. In this regard, we first conducted a literature review which showed the interdisciplinary interest in civic engagement, but also the scarcity of studies from psychology, followed by the development of four original studies. Through these four studies the thesis advances research on civic

engagement in crisis and non-crisis times, using diverse methodologies which allow for a more in-depth understanding of the psychology of those engaged.

Study 1 emphasized the potential value of education-related volunteering in helping Romanian graduates transition to the workforce in non-crisis times, also identifying that self-oriented personal values could represent a risk factor for a successful transition. The other studies focused on civic engagement during two important societal crises: the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine, with results providing an *overview of the what, how, and why of crisis civic engagement in Romania*. More specifically, Study 2 asked *what* Romanian emerging adults define as civic engagement (study 2a) and *how* they got engaged during the COVID-19 pandemic (2b), identifying specific activities which are not always related to the particularities of the crisis. Study 3 focused on *why* some Romanian adults engaged to help in the context of the war in Ukraine, finding that personal values could play a key role in motivating engagement. Last, Study 4 analyzed *why* understanding crisis civic engagement matters, finding that meaning in life can work as a protective factor in times of crisis, whereas co-rumination could potentially be a “dark side” of engagement.

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