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Quality of Life Among Medical Students: Rethinking the Evidence from a Sociological Perspective

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Abstract

Quality of life has become a central indicator of student well-being in medical education, reflecting the accumulated weight of academic demands, psychological strain, and social experience throughout professional training. Although the literature has expanded substantially over the past two decades, it remains fragmented across medicine, psychology, and education, and explicitly sociological analyses are still rare. This paper critically synthesizes the international and Romanian literature on quality of life among medical students, examining how the concept has been operationalized, which determinants dominate the field, and how far sociological perspectives have actually been integrated. We conducted an integrative literature review drawing on Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, CEEOL, and Romanian scientific sources. After applying predefined eligibility criteria and full-text screening, 37 studies formed the core review corpus subjected to thematic synthesis and conceptual coding. Cross-sectional designs dominate, the WHOQOL-BREF and SF-36 are by far the most frequently used instruments, and research centers overwhelmingly on psychological determinants such as stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression, while institutional culture, social capital, socioeconomic inequality, and professional socialization remain comparatively underexplored. The evidence explains how medical students experience reduced quality of life far more thoroughly than it explains why these experiences arise within specific educational environments. By reading the existing literature through a sociological lens, this review proposes a broader framework in which quality of life is understood as the product of continuous interaction between individual characteristics and institutional context, one capable of informing more comprehensive research designs and more responsive educational policy.

Keywords: *Quality of life; Medical students; Sociology of education; Integrative literature review; WHOQOL-BREF*

1. Introduction

1.1 Medical Education and the Growing Importance of Quality of Life Research

Medical education is widely regarded as one of the most demanding paths within higher education. Students absorb an enormous volume of scientific knowledge while taking on early clinical responsibilities, sitting through continuous assessment, and gradually building the professional identity, ethical judgment, and interpersonal skill that clinical work eventually requires.

Students adapt to competitive, hierarchical environments where institutional expectations and organizational culture shape daily experience just as much as the curriculum itself, and all of this feeds into their overall quality of life (Dyrbye, Thomas and Shanafelt, 2006; Chazan, Campos and Portugal, 2015; Solis and Lotufo-Neto, 2019; Taylor, Scott and Owen, 2022).

As awareness of these pressures has grown, so has research on medical students' quality of life. Reduced quality of life is consistently linked to stress, burnout, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, and heavy workload, while physical activity, supportive relationships, and a positive educational climate emerge as protective factors (Malibary et al., 2019; Miguel et al., 2021; Seo et al., 2023; Martins, Cruz and Dellalibera-Joviliano, 2024; Di Mario et al., 2024; Szemik, Gajda and Kowalska, 2024). Students' well-being does not emerge in isolation; it is shaped by the ongoing interaction between individual characteristics and the environments in which training actually takes place. Despite this growth, the literature remains conceptually narrow. Most studies approach quality of life from psychological or biomedical angles, relying on tools such as the WHOQOL-BREF and SF-36, and focusing heavily on burnout, stress, anxiety, depression, sleep, and coping (WHOQOL Group, 1995; Malibary et al., 2019; Seo et al., 2023; Martins, Cruz and Dellalibera-Joviliano, 2024). Institutional culture, organizational characteristics, socioeconomic inequality, professional socialization, and other structural conditions shaping students' everyday lives receive comparatively little attention (Di Mario et al., 2024; Martins, Cruz and Dellalibera-Joviliano, 2024).

From a sociological standpoint, this imbalance matters. Universities are social institutions that organize opportunities, regulate behavior, reproduce professional norms, and shape identity formation. Medical schools in particular combine demanding curricula with steep hierarchies and near-constant evaluation, producing institutional environments that influence well-being well beyond individual psychology.

Understanding quality of life properly requires moving past an exclusively individual lens toward a framework that also accounts for the relational and cultural contexts in which medical education unfolds.

This is the starting point for our argument: existing evidence offers a solid understanding of the psychological determinants of quality of life, but a much thinner account of its institutional and social roots.

Bringing sociological perspectives into the conversation could complement what is already known by explaining how organizational culture, educational governance, social relationships, socioeconomic conditions, and professional socialization shape students' experiences across medical training.

1.2 Current Evidence on Medical Students' Quality of Life

Research on medical students' quality of life has grown steadily over the past twenty years, spanning cross-sectional and longitudinal designs, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, validation studies, and integrative reviews across diverse settings. Despite this variety, findings converge on a fairly stable set of factors linked to student well-being (e.g., Henning et al., 2012; Latas et al., 2014; Kopylov and Popov, 2024; Terebessy et al., 2016; Swaminathan et al., 2016), complemented by a smaller number of qualitative studies exploring students' subjective experience of these pressures (Radcliffe and Lester, 2003).

Across the literature, quality of life is examined mainly through a psychological lens. Burnout, perceived stress, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, emotional exhaustion, and resilience are the determinants investigated most often, while the WHOQOL-BREF and SF-36 remain the principal instruments used to measure quality of life.

These are often paired with complementary scales, including the Maslach Burnout Inventory, the Perceived Stress Scale, the Beck Depression Inventory, the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales, the Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale, the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index, and the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, letting researchers probe several dimensions of psychological functioning at once (WHOQOL Group, 1995; Malibary et al., 2019; Solis and Lotufo-Neto, 2019; Seo et al., 2023; Taylor, Scott and Owen, 2022).

The reviewed evidence consistently shows that higher stress, anxiety, depression, burnout, and emotional exhaustion are associated with poorer quality of life across physical, psychological, social, and environmental domains (Dyrbye, Thomas and Shanafelt, 2006; Chazan, Campos and Portugal, 2015; Miguel et al., 2021; Martins, Cruz and Dellalibera-Joviliano, 2024; Dahlin, Joneborg and Runeson, 2005; Capdevila-Gaudens et al., 2021; Rosiek et al., 2016; Sender et al., 2004; Volpe et al., 2019; Bore, Kelly and Nair, 2016; Alkatheri et al., 2020).

Academic workload is another recurrent determinant: intensive curricula, frequent exams, long study hours, and competitive environments contribute to elevated distress.

Several studies suggest students' subjective perception of pressure can shape quality of life as strongly as objective workload itself, underscoring how much the educational environment matters beyond its formal demands (Malibary et al., 2019; Seo et al., 2023; Szemik, Gajda and Kowalska, 2024).

Lifestyle factors follow a similar pattern. Regular physical activity, healthy eating, adequate sleep, and good self-rated health support well-being, while poor sleep, sedentary behavior, and substance use work against it (Taylor, Scott and Owen, 2022; Szemik, Gajda and Kowalska, 2024).

Sleep quality stands out as one of the most consistent predictors of reduced quality of life, functioning as both symptom and cause of student well-being, while smoking and caffeine use as coping behaviors have also been documented (Šabić and Mujanović, 2020).

A smaller, growing body of research examines broader influences: educational climate, institutional support, peer relationships, mentoring, family support, socioeconomic status, and gender.

These variables, however, are usually folded into multivariate models as individual-level predictors rather than an organizational or sociological framework, leaving institutional culture, educational governance, social inequality, and professional socialization largely unanswered.

Part of this reflects disciplinary origin: most studies come from medicine, psychology, psychiatry, nursing, or public health, fields that frame quality of life as psychological or health-related well-being. These perspectives have meaningfully advanced understanding of student mental health and informed real interventions around stress reduction, but they were not designed to capture the institutional and structural conditions through which quality of life is actually produced.

Taken together, existing evidence gives a robust account of the psychological side of quality of life but a considerably thinner one of how institutional structures, organizational cultures, and broader social processes shape student well-being. This gap is the rationale for the present review, which reinterprets existing evidence through a sociological lens rather than replacing the already well-established psychological framework.

1.3 Aim of the Paper

This paper critically synthesizes international and Romanian research on medical students' quality of life through a sociological perspective, examining the dominant conceptual frameworks, methodological approaches, principal determinants, and underexplored dimensions that characterize current research. Particular attention is given to how far institutional, organizational, relational, and socioeconomic factors have been incorporated alongside the psychological and health-related variables that dominate the existing evidence.

By bringing together international and Romanian findings, the review argues for a broader conceptualization of quality of life as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the interaction between individual experience and institutional context, and it points toward directions for future sociological research in this field.

1.4 The Romanian Research Context

Compared with the fast-growing international literature, Romanian research on medical students' quality of life remains limited in both volume and conceptual diversity. Interest in student well-being has increased, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, but the available evidence consists mostly of cross-sectional quantitative studies conducted within individual medical universities.

Consistent with international trends, Romanian research focuses primarily on psychological well-being, burnout, perceived stress, anxiety, depression, resilience, sleep quality, and academic adaptation, generally assessed through the WHOQOL-BREF, SF-36, the Maslach Burnout Inventory, and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales. Collectively, these studies show that Romanian medical students face challenges comparable to those reported internationally, including high academic workload, emotional exhaustion, sleep disturbance, and elevated psychological distress (Silistraru et al., 2022; Mihăilescu et al., 2024; Lupu et al., 2014; Vlas, 2015; Sălcudean et al., 2023; Pleșea-Condratovici et al., 2025; Duica et al., 2025).

Even so, gaps remain. Most Romanian studies originate from medical or psychological disciplines, and explicitly sociological analyses are rare. Institutional culture, educational governance, socioeconomic inequality, social capital, peer networks, and professional socialization receive comparatively little attention, and longitudinal investigations are nearly nonexistent. Current evidence therefore offers limited insight into how students' quality of life develops throughout medical education or how institutional context shapes that trajectory.

This reflects a field still finding its footing; existing studies provide a solid empirical foundation for understanding psychological well-being, but they also point to the need for broader analytical frameworks integrating institutional and structural dimensions. Expanding Romanian research in this direction would strengthen understanding of medical students' well-being and the sociological contribution to this emerging field.

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Design

This study used an integrative literature review to critically examine quality-of-life research on medical students from a sociological perspective. Unlike systematic reviews and meta-analyses, which address narrowly defined questions through standardized procedures, integrative reviews synthesize evidence from diverse

methodological designs, enabling broader conceptual interpretation and theory development (Torraco, 2005; Whittemore and Knafl, 2005).

This approach was chosen because the objective was not to estimate pooled effect sizes but to understand how quality of life has been conceptualized, operationalized, and investigated across the international and Romanian literature, identifying dominant conceptual frameworks, methodological patterns, recurrent determinants, and underexplored dimensions. Beyond descriptive synthesis, the review incorporated thematic analysis to compare studies, identify conceptual convergences and divergences, and evaluate how far sociological perspectives have been integrated into quality-of-life research, providing a comprehensive overview of the field while pointing to directions for future sociological inquiry.

2.2 Literature Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted between February and June 2026 using international and national scientific databases. International publications were retrieved from Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and PubMed, while Romanian studies were identified through CEEOL, Google Scholar, institutional repositories, and Romanian scientific journals.

The search strategy combined terms related to quality of life, medical education, and the principal instruments and determinants examined in this field. Core search expressions included “quality of life” AND “medical students”, WHOQOL-BREF AND medical students, SF-36 AND medical students, well-being AND medical students, burnout AND quality of life AND medical students, stress AND medical students, and medical education AND quality of life. Equivalent Romanian terms were used to capture national literature, including *calitatea vieții studenților la medicină*, *calitatea vieții studenților mediciști*, WHOQOL-BREF studenți medicină, SF-36 studenți medicină, burnout studenți medicină, and stres studenți medicină. Reference lists of eligible publications were manually screened, surfacing additional studies not retrieved through database searches. Duplicate records were removed before full-text screening, after which potentially relevant publications were assessed against the eligibility criteria. The search was designed to identify empirical studies, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, validation studies, and other review articles examining quality of life or closely related constructs among undergraduate medical students.

2.3 Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility criteria were set before the analytical phase to ensure relevance and comparability. Studies qualified if they examined undergraduate medical students, or closely related populations, and addressed quality of life, health-related quality of life, well-being, or a related multidimensional construct. Eligible publications either used validated instruments such as the WHOQOL-BREF or SF-36, or investigated determinants consistently linked to quality of life, including burnout, stress, anxiety, depression, resilience, sleep quality, educational environment, and social support. Only peer-reviewed publications available in full text and published in English or Romanian were considered.

Given the integrative nature of the review, methodological diversity was deliberately retained, encompassing quantitative and qualitative studies, observational and longitudinal research, validation studies, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and integrative reviews, consistent with a methodology built for conceptual integration rather than statistical aggregation (Whittemore and Knafl, 2005; Torraco, 2005). Studies

were excluded when they focused exclusively on healthcare professionals or resident physicians without reporting findings separately for undergraduate students, or addressed educational outcomes unrelated to quality of life. Conference abstracts, editorials, letters, study protocols, duplicate publications, and reports lacking sufficient methodological detail were also excluded, as were publications without an available full-text version.

2.4 Study Selection and Screening Process

The initial search identified a broad body of potentially relevant publications through electronic database searches and manual screening of reference lists. After duplicate removal, titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, and potentially eligible studies underwent full-text assessment, checked against the predefined eligibility criteria with particular attention to whether quality of life was the primary outcome or a secondary construct.

The screening process identified 63 publications for full-text assessment (52 international and 11 Romanian). Following eligibility assessment, 54 were retained: 37 formed the core review corpus and 17 were included as supporting literature. Nine publications were excluded for not meeting the predefined methodological or conceptual criteria.

Consistent with the integrative review design, selection prioritized conceptual relevance over statistical homogeneity, enabling the inclusion of diverse methodological designs while maintaining a coherent framework for thematic synthesis.

2.5 Data Extraction

Relevant data were extracted using a structured analytical matrix developed for this review, providing a standardized framework for comparison while accommodating methodological diversity (Whittemore and Knafl, 2005).

For each eligible publication, extracted information included author and year, country or setting, study design, population and sample characteristics, quality-of-life instruments, complementary psychometric measures, principal determinants investigated, main findings, methodological limitations reported by the authors, and conceptual relevance from a sociological perspective.

The resulting database supported both descriptive and thematic synthesis and facilitated comparison across studies with different designs and analytical approaches. Sociological relevance was incorporated as an analytical dimension in its own right, allowing subsequent examination of how far institutional, relational, socioeconomic, and structural factors were represented in the existing evidence base.

2.6 Data Analysis and Thematic Synthesis

The extracted data were analyzed using thematic synthesis, well suited to integrative reviews because it allows evidence from heterogeneous designs to be interpreted within a common conceptual framework (Whittemore and Knafl, 2005; Torraco, 2005).

The process had two stages. First, studies were descriptively coded according to publication characteristics, geographical setting, methodological design, sample characteristics, quality-of-life instruments, and principal determinants, including stress, burnout, anxiety, depression, sleep quality, resilience, educational environment, physical activity, social support, socioeconomic status, and lifestyle behaviors.

In the second stage, a conceptual coding framework identified the dominant disciplinary perspectives represented across the literature. Psychological perspectives emphasized individual functioning and emotional well-being; biomedical perspectives focused on health outcomes and clinical or behavioral variables; educational perspectives covered curriculum, workload, and learning environment; sociological perspectives were identified through attention to institutional culture, organizational context, social relationships, socioeconomic inequality, professional socialization, and other structural determinants.

This conceptual coding framework is the analytical core of the review. Rather than limiting the analysis to a synthesis of previously reported findings, it enabled identification of broader disciplinary patterns and systematic assessment of how far sociological dimensions have been incorporated into research on medical students' quality of life, combining descriptive synthesis with critical interpretation of both the strengths of the existing evidence and the areas where institutional and structural explanations remain underdeveloped. Consistent with Whittemore and Knafl's (2005) integrative review methodology, no formal risk-of-bias or quality appraisal tool was applied, as the objective was conceptual synthesis rather than quality-weighted aggregation of effect sizes. Methodological limitations reported by primary authors were nonetheless extracted during data extraction (Section 2.5) and considered when interpreting the strength of the evidence.

3. Results

3.1 Composition of the Reviewed Literature

The database search and screening process identified 63 publications for full-text assessment, comprising 52 international and 11 Romanian sources. Of these, 54 were retained for analysis, including 37 core studies and 17 supporting publications, while nine were excluded. The 17 supporting studies were retained because they examined key determinants without treating quality of life as the primary outcome, whereas the nine excluded publications were methodological protocols, duplicate or insufficiently documented reports, or studies not meeting the conceptual inclusion criteria.

Table 1: Composition of the Literature Corpus after Full-Text Screening

Corpus category	International	Romanian	Total
Core review corpus	33	4	37
Contextual/supporting sources	12	5	17
Excluded / requiring verification	7	2	9
Full-text sources screened	52	11	63

Source: Author's analysis based on the reviewed literature

Distinguishing the core corpus from the supporting literature maintained methodological consistency: quantitative summaries and thematic synthesis are based exclusively on the core corpus, while supporting studies contextualize and sharpen interpretation of the findings.

The reviewed literature also reveals two broader characteristics of the evidence base. Research on medical students' quality of life remains dominated by international publications, with Romanian evidence comparatively limited, and the field is inherently multidisciplinary, with most studies originating from medicine, psychology, psychiatry, and public health rather than sociology, highlighting the comparatively limited contribution of sociological perspectives.

3.2 Methodological Characteristics of the Included Studies

The methodological profile of the 37 core-corpus studies shows a clear predominance of cross-sectional designs (Table 2). Observational studies conducted at a single point in time represent the principal approach, while longitudinal investigations, validation studies, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses are considerably less frequent.

Table 2: Study Designs in the Core Review Corpus

Study design	Number of studies	Percentage of core corpus
Cross-sectional study	15	40.5%
Observational/review study	8	21.6%
Validation study	3	8.1%
Systematic review	2	5.4%
Longitudinal/prospective study	2	5.4%
Systematic review and meta-analysis	2	5.4%
Overview of systematic reviews	1	2.7%
Integrative review	1	2.7%
Comparative study	1	2.7%
Randomized/intervention study	1	2.7%
Narrative review	1	2.7%

Source: Author's analysis based on the reviewed literature

This predominance reflects the largely descriptive character of current research, which has generated substantial evidence linking quality of life to burnout, stress, anxiety, depression, sleep, and educational environment, but which cannot establish causal relationships or capture change over time.

Longitudinal studies remain comparatively scarce despite their potential to track well-being across different stages of training (e.g., Guthrie et al., 1998; Rosal et al., 1997; Midtgaard et al., 2008; Brehm et al., 2016), while validation studies and systematic reviews or meta-analyses form a smaller but still meaningful part of the evidence base, contributing to cross-cultural instrument validation and synthesis (e.g., Ilić et al., 2019; Pacheco et al., 2017; Fernandes et al., 2023). The methodological heterogeneity observed across studies, in design, sampling, instruments, and analytical approach, strengthens the breadth of available evidence but limits direct comparability, an effect amplified by differences in educational systems and cultural settings.

Romanian research follows a similar pattern, relying predominantly on cross-sectional, questionnaire-based studies within individual universities, valuable but largely descriptive, offering limited scope for examining temporal change. Overall, the field would benefit from greater methodological diversification: longitudinal, multicenter, and mixed-methods studies could better capture how quality of life evolves throughout medical education and how institutional characteristics shape well-being over time.

3.3 Quality-of-Life Assessment Instruments Used Across the Literature

The core corpus shows considerable methodological consistency in how quality of life is assessed. Two instruments clearly dominate: the WHOQOL-BREF and the SF-36, together forming the principal methodological framework through which quality of life has been operationalized.

Table 3: Instruments Identified in the Core Review Corpus

Instrument	Number of studies	Percentage of core corpus
WHOQOL-BREF	19	51.4%
SF-36	11	29.7%
MBI	6	16.2%
PSS	4	10.8%
PSQI	4	10.8%
BDI	4	10.8%
SWLS	3	8.1%
WHOQOL-100	3	8.1%
DREEM	3	8.1%
WHO-5	2	5.4%
SF-12	1	2.7%
DASS	1	2.7%
CD-RISC	1	2.7%

Source: Author's analysis based on the reviewed literature

The WHOQOL-BREF's predominance, used in just over half the core corpus, reflects its international validation, cross-cultural applicability, and coverage of physical, psychological, social, and environmental domains, as illustrated by its consistent use across widely different settings, from South Korea and Jordan to Tunisia and China (Achangwa et al., 2022; Hamad, Smadi and Arabiat, 2025; Njah et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2012). The SF-36 is the second most common instrument, used mainly in studies adopting a health-related quality-of-life perspective centered on physical functioning, vitality, pain, and general health.

Complementary instruments appear consistently as well, including the Maslach Burnout Inventory, the Perceived Stress Scale, the Beck Depression Inventory, the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index, and the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, reflecting a dominant assumption that quality of life is closely tied to psychological functioning rather than being an isolated construct.

This methodological profile reveals a broader conceptual pattern: most complementary instruments assess individual characteristics such as stress, anxiety, depression, and coping, while comparatively few studies evaluate institutional climate, organizational culture, or other structural determinants. Even though the WHOQOL-BREF includes domains related to social relationships and environmental conditions, these are rarely examined through a sociological lens; social support and educational environment are generally treated as independent predictors rather than components of broader institutional processes. The literature therefore shows high methodological standardization but comparatively limited conceptual diversity, underscoring the need for frameworks capable of integrating individual, institutional, and social dimensions of well-being.

3.4 Dominant Themes and Determinants of Quality of Life

Across the 37 core-corpus studies, quality of life was explicitly operationalized as the primary outcome in 31 studies (83.8%), most often through the WHOQOL-BREF or SF-36 (see Table 3). The remaining thematic analysis (Table 4) focuses on determinants examined alongside this outcome.

Table 4: Determinants Associated with Quality of Life in the Core Review Corpus

Theme / determinant	Number of studies	Percentage of core corpus
Depression	31	83.8%
Anxiety	30	81.1%
Stress	29	78.4%
Burnout	24	64.9%
Educational environment/workload	22	59.5%
Gender	21	56.8%
Resilience/coping	16	43.2%
Academic performance	15	40.5%
Physical activity/fitness	13	35.1%
Sleep	12	32.4%
Social support/isolation	12	32.4%
Socioeconomic/financial	8	21.6%
COVID-19/online education	7	18.9%
Nutrition	6	16.2%
Personality	5	13.5%
Institutional services/facilities	2	5.4%
Professional socialization/career	1	2.7%

Source: Author's analysis based on the reviewed literature

Quality of life was the principal outcome in most reviewed studies but was rarely investigated as an independent construct, instead consistently analyzed alongside psychological, educational, behavioral, and health-related variables. Depression, anxiety, stress, and burnout emerge as the dominant themes, confirming that the literature conceptualizes quality of life primarily through psychological well-being.

Higher stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression were consistently associated with poorer quality of life across physical, psychological, and social domains. Academic workload, frequent exams, long study hours, and limited recovery time were recurrently identified as major contributors, and burnout, particularly emotional exhaustion, emerged as one of the strongest correlates of reduced well-being, suggesting quality of life is shaped not only by individual vulnerability but by prolonged exposure to demanding educational environments (e.g., Akiki et al., 2025; Farrell et al., 2019).

Protective factors identified include regular physical activity, adequate sleep, healthy lifestyle behaviors, and strong social support, all consistently linked to higher quality-of-life scores (e.g., McFadden et al., 2021; Walnik et al., 2022; Itagi et al., 2021). Educational characteristics such as curriculum intensity and institutional support were likewise frequently examined (e.g., Enns et al., 2016; Tempiski et al., 2015; Weurlander et al., 2018; Spina et al., 2023), though generally treated as contextual predictors rather than components of broader organizational systems. Other determinants investigated include academic performance (Gumbatova et al., 2022), personality traits (Maalouf, Hallit and Obeid, 2022), gender-related factors such as menstrual health (Maity et al., 2022) and gender differences in stress (Carpi et al., 2022), and the impact of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hatem et al., 2023). Socioeconomic conditions, institutional resources, and professional socialization were investigated considerably less, and when included were typically analyzed as individual-level predictors rather than within a broader sociological framework, an imbalance that

leaves the psychological correlates of quality of life well documented while its institutional and structural determinants remain comparatively unexplored.

3.5 Conceptual Perspectives of the Existing Literature

The final stage of the thematic synthesis examined the dominant conceptual perspectives through which quality of life has been investigated, focusing on the broader explanatory frameworks researchers adopted rather than only the determinants each study examined.

It is important to distinguish between a perspective's variables simply being present in a study and that perspective functioning as the study's primary explanatory framework. Table 5 reports the former, the proportion of studies incorporating relevant variables, not the latter; a study measuring social support as one predictor among several psychological variables, for instance, is counted under "sociological/contextual" even though its explanatory framework remains predominantly psychological.

Table 5: Analytical Perspectives Represented in the Core Review Corpus

Analytical perspective	Studies incorporating variables from this perspective (n)	Percentage of core corpus
Psychological	35	94.6%
Educational	29	78.4%
Biomedical/lifestyle	22	59.5%
Sociological/contextual	18	48.6%

Source: Author's analysis based on the reviewed literature

The analysis reveals a clear predominance of psychological approaches, present in 35 of 37 studies (94.6%), with variables such as stress, burnout, anxiety, depression, resilience, and coping forming the dominant explanatory framework and quality of life understood primarily as an individual outcome reflecting psychological adaptation to medical training. Educational perspectives were identified in 29 studies (78.4%), focusing on academic workload, curriculum, and learning environment, generally treated as contextual predictors rather than components of a larger institutional system. Biomedical and lifestyle perspectives appeared in 22 studies (59.5%), emphasizing physical health, sleep, nutrition, and fatigue, again interpreting quality of life mainly through individual characteristics.

Sociological or contextual dimensions were identified in 18 studies (48.6%), reflecting the incorporation of relevant variables, such as social support, socioeconomic circumstances, and institutional resources, rather than their adoption as the primary analytical lens. In most of these studies, such variables were operationalized as individual-level predictors rather than as indicators of institutional organization, social integration, or professional socialization (e.g., Jamali et al., 2013; Serinolli and Novaretti, 2017), leaving the literature with detailed evidence on the psychological correlates of quality of life but comparatively limited understanding of the institutional mechanisms through which medical education shapes students' experiences.

These findings do not diminish the importance of psychological or biomedical research; rather, they suggest that existing evidence would benefit from complementary sociological approaches capable of explaining why psychological outcomes emerge within particular educational environments and how institutional characteristics influence students' opportunities for well-being.

Future research should integrate psychological, educational, biomedical, and sociological perspectives to conceptualize quality of life as the multidimensional

phenomenon it is, produced through the interaction between individual experience and institutional context.

4. Discussion

4.1 Reconsidering Quality of Life Beyond Psychological Explanations

The present review shows that research on medical students' quality of life has expanded considerably over the past two decades. Across educational systems and cultural contexts, investigators have consistently identified psychological distress, burnout, anxiety, depression, workload, and sleep disturbance as principal determinants of diminished quality of life, substantially advancing understanding of students' individual experiences and the importance of promoting mental health throughout training.

At the same time, the dominant explanatory framework remains predominantly individualistic. Most reviewed studies conceptualize quality of life as an outcome determined by psychological functioning, coping capacity, or health-related behavior. These approaches have generated robust empirical evidence but direct analytical attention primarily toward the individual, with comparatively less emphasis on the institutional environments within which these experiences are produced.

This tendency is reflected in the methodological choices adopted across the literature as much as in the determinants investigated. Standardized instruments such as the WHOQOL-BREF, SF-36, MBI, PSS, BDI, and DASS predominantly measure perceptions and individual psychological functioning, while institutional culture, organizational structures, and social inequalities frequently appear as background variables rather than central explanatory concepts.

Quality of life is therefore often interpreted as a characteristic of students themselves rather than as the outcome of interaction between students and the educational systems they participate in.

From a sociological perspective, this is an important limitation. Medical schools are not simply places where knowledge is transmitted; they are complex social organizations with institutional hierarchies, formal and informal norms, professional expectations, and evaluation systems that shape students' everyday experience. Students' stress, burnout, and well-being emerge not only from individual psychological characteristics but also from the organizational environments in which medical education takes place.

These findings do not contradict existing psychological evidence but suggest that such explanations should be complemented by sociological perspectives capable of incorporating institutional and structural determinants, allowing researchers to move beyond describing psychological outcomes toward explaining how educational institutions help produce, reinforce, or reduce them.

4.2 Towards a Sociological Framework for Understanding Quality of Life

One of the principal findings of this review concerns the relative scarcity of explicitly sociological analyses of medical students' quality of life. Variables such as social support, socioeconomic status, and institutional resources occasionally appear in the reviewed studies but are rarely interpreted through established sociological theory, more often incorporated as independent variables within predominantly psychological explanatory models.

Future research could benefit from a broader conceptual framework integrating insights from the sociology of education, organizational sociology, and the sociology of health. Universities shape opportunities for social participation, access to resources, professional identity formation, and interpersonal relationships, and students' quality of life should accordingly be understood as the product of continuous interaction between individual characteristics and the organizational structures within which education occurs.

This perspective carries implications for educational policy. Interventions have traditionally focused on individual counseling, resilience training, and psychological support (e.g., Dunn, Iglewicz and Moutier, 2008; Slavin, Schindler and Chibnall, 2014; Bennett-Weston et al., 2024), and these remain essential, but institutional interventions may be equally important: curriculum organization, assessment strategies, mentoring systems, institutional communication, and equitable access to resources are all structural factors capable of shaping quality of life independently of individual psychological characteristics. Many such adjustments cost relatively little to implement and can reduce the burden currently placed on individual-level interventions alone. The sociological perspective proposed here therefore complements rather than replaces existing psychological approaches. Mental health interventions remain indispensable, but long-term improvements in quality of life are also likely to depend on educational environments that promote inclusion, organizational justice, and meaningful opportunities for professional and social development.

4.3 Strengths and Limitations of the Review

This review has several methodological strengths. It integrates evidence from both international and Romanian literature, offering a broader overview than studies restricted to a single geographical context.

The use of an explicit thematic coding framework enabled systematic comparison of methodological characteristics, instruments, determinants, and conceptual perspectives, while distinguishing the core corpus from contextual supporting literature increased analytical consistency by ensuring descriptive frequencies were calculated exclusively from studies directly addressing quality of life.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. The review relied on publications in English and Romanian and did not include other languages, and evidence from closely related health-profession students, such as dentistry (Sugiura, Shinada and Kawaguchi, 2005; Armencia et al., 2024), was noted only where directly relevant rather than systematically incorporated.

Because the objective was conceptual synthesis rather than statistical aggregation, no formal meta-analysis was performed, and classification of conceptual perspectives inevitably involved a degree of interpretive judgement, though the coding framework was applied consistently and documented explicitly to enhance transparency and reproducibility.

5. Conclusions

This integrative review critically synthesized the international and Romanian literature on quality of life among medical students while examining the conceptual frameworks through which this topic has been investigated.

Quality of life has become an increasingly important area of research in medical education, with stress, burnout, anxiety, depression, workload, and sleep quality

consistently emerging as principal determinants of student well-being, and the WHOQOL-BREF and SF-36 as the dominant assessment instruments.

The principal contribution of this review extends beyond summarizing existing evidence: by applying a systematic conceptual coding framework, it demonstrates that contemporary research is overwhelmingly dominated by psychological perspectives, while educational, biomedical, and particularly sociological approaches remain comparatively underrepresented. Importantly, the inclusion of variables such as social support or socioeconomic status should not automatically be read as evidence of a sociological perspective, since these factors are generally analyzed as individual-level predictors rather than manifestations of institutional or structural processes, a distinction that clarifies the current conceptual landscape and identifies an important gap in the literature.

Rather than questioning the importance of psychological research, this review argues for its conceptual expansion. Quality of life should be understood not only as an individual perception of well-being but as a multidimensional social phenomenon produced through continuous interaction between students and the institutional environments in which medical education takes place, environments whose cultures, governance structures, and professional norms shape opportunities for well-being, identity formation, and academic development. Future research priorities include greater methodological diversity, particularly longitudinal, multicenter, and mixed-methods studies, alongside the integration of sociological theory capable of explaining how institutional culture, organizational arrangements, educational inequality, and professional socialization influence students' experiences alongside established psychological determinants.

Ultimately, medical students' quality of life should be regarded not only as a public health or educational issue but also as a sociological one. Advancing research in this direction may contribute to more comprehensive explanatory models, evidence-informed educational policies, and institutional interventions that promote healthier and more equitable learning environments, positioning quality of life at the intersection of individual experience and institutional context.

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Sovereignism in Populist Digital Discourse: George Simion and Călin Georgescu in the 2024 Romanian Presidential Campaign

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Abstract

Sovereignism has emerged as a central concept in contemporary populist discourse, functioning both as a structuring element of political rhetoric and as a potential bridge between different populist movements. This article examines how sovereignism is articulated in the Romanian digital communication space during the 2024 presidential electoral campaign, focusing on two key political actors: George Simion and Călin Georgescu.

The study combines a qualitative analysis with a quantitative content analysis of Facebook posts published during the pre-campaign, campaign, and post-first-round period, up to the annulment of the second round of elections. The findings reveal that, although both candidates employ sovereignist and anti-system rhetoric, their discursive strategies differ significantly. While George Simion's communication is structured around antagonism and electoral mobilization, Călin Georgescu develops a more ideologically coherent and symbolically grounded form of discourse. These differences help explain variations in their capacity to mobilize the populist electorate.

The article argues that sovereignism should be conceptualized as a distinct discursive dimension, rather than a simple subset of populism.

Keywords: *Sovereignism; Populism; Social media; Political communication; Electoral campaign*

1. Introduction

In recent years, sovereignism has emerged as a central concept in contemporary political discourse, particularly within populist movements. While populism has been extensively studied as a thin-centered ideology structured around the opposition between “the people” and “the elites,” the role of sovereignism within this framework remains insufficiently theorized.

This article examines how sovereignism is articulated in the Romanian digital communication space during the 2024 presidential electoral campaign, focusing on two key political actors: George Simion and Călin Georgescu. Both candidates position themselves as anti-system actors and claim to represent the will of “the people,” yet their discursive strategies differ significantly.

The study combines a qualitative discourse analysis with a quantitative content analysis of Facebook posts published during the pre-campaign, campaign, and post-first-round period. The findings demonstrate that sovereignism cannot be reduced to a mere component of populism, but rather constitutes a distinct discursive dimension that shapes political communication in different ways.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Concepts as Social Reality and Frameworks of Action

This article analyzes how the concept of *sovereignism* is used in the Romanian political space in order to obtain legitimacy and gain electoral support. Concepts are not

simple words; they are essential for understanding reality, the past and the present, and they contribute to imagining the future.

Reality is socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1999: 28-62): individuals understand the objective world around them through subjective meanings. The symbolic representations that allow them to imagine society are constructed through language.

The theory of Michel Foucault concerning the relationship between concepts and political action is situated within a post-structuralist framework, according to which language and knowledge are not merely descriptive tools, but constitutive elements of social reality. For Foucault, concepts operate within discursive formations that delimit the field of possible thought and action.

Foucault argues that discourse consists of historically specific rules that govern the conditions of possibility for statements (Foucault, 1972: 31-56). Consequently, concepts do not passively reflect reality. Rather, they actively constitute it by defining what can be recognized as a legitimate object of knowledge. This implies that political action is always mediated by pre-existing conceptual structures that both constrain and enable social practices. Concepts are not neutral or purely cognitive entities, but fundamental components of power relations. They shape political action not only through external constraints, but also by configuring the very framework within which action becomes intelligible and possible.

The historian Reinhart Koselleck analyzed the role of concepts in historical research. He argues that facts and words condition each other, as there is a relationship of interdependence between concepts (as linguistic manifestations) and history (as extra-linguistic reality) (Koselleck, 2009: 43-54). In general, language evolves more slowly than sequences of events, but it underpins them and contributes to their emergence. In Koselleck's view, concepts are essential for social experience. Because language actively and creatively assimilates reality, everything that is experienced must be reduced to a concept.

Armin Heinen (2010: 36-38) advocates for conceptual history as an approach that captures social transformations, discontinuities in meaning, and the role of cultural structures and processes. In Romanian historiography, efforts to stimulate research based on conceptual history contribute to the demystification of the past (Neumann, 2010: 29). From this perspective, the work of historian Lucian Boia (2005) highlights the importance of analyzing the evolution of concepts in order to better understand historical narratives.

2.2 Populism: The Restoration of “True Democracy”

Recent decades have been marked by growing dissatisfaction with traditional politics and established party systems. The classical left-right divide has increasingly been reshaped by the rise of populism.

Populism is a highly diverse political phenomenon (Ballacci and Goodman, 2023), whose characteristics vary across national contexts. However, it consistently combines several core features: an anti-system orientation and the claim to exclusive representation of “the people,” structured through the opposition between “us” and “them” (Mudde, 2004).

The inherently antagonistic nature of populism requires the identification or construction of an enemy, often framed as an urgent threat that must be confronted (Müller, 2017). Political competition thus becomes a zero-sum game, in which opponents are delegitimized rather than engaged.

The strong appeal for political change is grounded in the promise to restore democracy to “the people,” who are portrayed as having been dispossessed of power by corrupt elites. This narrative is frequently accompanied by elements of nostalgia, protectionism, and a desire to return to a perceived moral order.

As Francis Fukuyama (2022) argues, contemporary politics is increasingly centered on identity. He introduces the concept of the “politics of resentment,” whereby political mobilization is driven by perceived violations of group dignity. Groups that feel humiliated or marginalized develop a stronger emotional response than those motivated solely by economic concerns.

The rise of populism can be linked to multiple factors, including the perceived negative effects of globalization (Rodrik, 2018), migration (Gherghina and Mișcoiu, 2025), threats to traditional identities (Brubaker, 2017), and economic insecurity (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2019). Additionally, transformations in communication technologies have facilitated polarization and provided new tools for political mobilization (Engesser et al., 2017).

Populist movements thrive in the digital communication environment, which allows direct interaction with audiences without the mediation of traditional media institutions. Social media platforms enable the construction of unfiltered narratives, reinforcing the populist claim of giving voice to “the people.” In Dîncu’s description of digital populism, populist leaders “no longer seek legitimacy through institutions, but through direct and immediate contact with the public, a contact mediated by social networks, where the personal narrative, the attack and the ‘authentic style’ create a magnetic presence” (Dîncu, 2026: 580).

Control over narrative is central to populist strategy. Populist actors not only challenge political institutions but also contest communication systems, accusing them of serving elite interests. They frequently claim to represent a “silent majority” (Müller, 2017) and extend their critique to journalists, academics, and non-governmental organizations.

This dynamic also explains the proliferation of conspiracy theories, which function as tools for undermining trust in democratic institutions. Despite ideological diversity, populist actors increasingly engage in forms of transnational cooperation. As Anne Applebaum (2025) suggests, an implicit “axis of autocrats” facilitates the circulation of narratives and mutual support among populist movements.

2.3 Globalization and Sovereignty

Globalization, understood as a process of planetary interconnection at an unprecedented scale and speed, produces major transformations that reshape both economy and society (Held et al., 1999: 483). An optimistic perspective has associated globalization with the global expansion of democracy, the extension of human rights, and the emergence of a system of governance guided by soft power, in which conflicts would become increasingly obsolete and unprofitable. At the same time, however, rapid transformations have generated imbalances and anxieties regarding the economic, cultural, and social effects of change, as well as perceived threats to communities, traditions, and identities (Rodrik, 2018).

John Breuilly (2019) explains modern sovereignty as the direct and centralized authority of the state over a clearly defined territory, evolving from monarchical rule to forms of popular sovereignty rooted in citizenship and democracy. He emphasizes that sovereignty is closely tied to territorial boundaries and national identity, even though its

practical exercise may differ from its formal recognition, particularly in weaker states. While globalization challenges the effective control of states, sovereignty remains resilient due to the strong identification of citizens with the nation-state.

Stephen Krasner (1999) argues in *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* that debates on sovereignty are often confused because the concept has been used in multiple and inconsistent ways. Some scholars argue that globalization erodes sovereignty, while others emphasize its persistence through international norms and mutual recognition. Krasner (1999: 9) distinguishes between four meanings of sovereignty: domestic sovereignty, referring to internal authority structures; interdependence sovereignty, referring to control over cross-border flows; international legal sovereignty, referring to mutual recognition between states; and Westphalian sovereignty, referring to the exclusion of external actors from domestic authority.

Anne Applebaum (2025: 98) also observes the strategic use of the concept of sovereignty, noting that it is frequently invoked by authoritarian regimes in response to external criticism of their policies.

The transformations generated by globalization have intensified debates regarding the sovereignty of nation-states. Held et al. (1999: 53-102) emphasize the need to distinguish between the claim to sovereignty, the legitimate right to rule, and state autonomy, understood as the effective capacity of states to pursue independent policies. In the context of global interdependence, political authority can no longer be confined exclusively to national governments, as states become embedded in complex networks of international relations.

Michael R. Lucas (1999) argues that sovereignty is being reshaped by supranational dynamics such as globalization, the rise of international governmental organizations (IGOs), and the growing influence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These developments blur the boundaries between domestic and international politics. While the nation-state remains a central actor, its traditional autonomy is transformed both “from above,” through supranational institutions, and “from below,” through transnational movements and civil society. This creates a paradox in which sovereignty is simultaneously constrained and reinforced, as states rely on international cooperation to pursue their objectives.

2.4 From Sovereignty to Sovereignism

Sovereignism can be understood as an umbrella concept that provides a unifying principle for populist movements. By invoking the idea of sovereignty, populist actors adopt a concept with strong normative legitimacy, allowing them to avoid labels such as “extremist.”

Sovereignist discourse promises a return to the foundational principle of political legitimacy: the people. It emphasizes national autonomy in relation to international actors and supranational institutions, as well as the protection of an “authentic” national identity perceived as threatened by elite-driven policies. These threats are often framed in terms of immigration in Western societies or economic dependency in Eastern Europe.

At the same time, sovereignism is oriented toward the reconstruction of internal democratic frameworks, by restoring voice and power to the people, conceptualized as a homogeneous entity. This entity is portrayed as being threatened by elites who are either complicit with external actors or incapable of defending national identity in the context of global transformations.

Basile and Mazzoleni (2022) argue that the transfer of power from nation-states to supranational institutions, such as the European Union, has generated insecurity and social dissatisfaction. This context has fostered sovereignist claims, often expressed through the idea of “taking back control,” referring to the restoration of political, economic, and territorial authority at the national level.

Within this framework, populism functions as a political logic that capitalizes on these grievances by reinforcing the opposition between “the people” and “the elites.” Sovereignism thus becomes a central axis of political competition and a key driver of populist mobilization. Sovereignism portrays the people as the legitimate holders of power, while accusing elites of betraying them and favoring external actors. Populist leaders present themselves as defenders of the people, aiming to restore sovereignty from elites back to the public.

2.5 Cultural and Historical Roots of Sovereignism in Romania

The concept of sovereignty provides an ideological platform for populist actors in Romania by drawing on long-standing cultural and historical narratives. Many of the ideas that underpin sovereignist discourse originate in the processes of nation-building and identity formation.

A strong connection between territory, language, rural life, and Orthodox Christianity has been central to the construction of Romanian national identity. The philosopher Lucian Blaga (1994: 90-91) argued that Orthodoxy functioned as a form of “Romanian law,” defining the nation through shared cultural and spiritual elements. In his influential work *Trilogia culturii* (The Trilogy of Culture), he conceptualized an organic link between land, language, customs, religion, and institutions. Victor Neumann (2005) also highlights the predominance of the idea that the Romanian nation is defined as ethnically Romanian, Christian, and Orthodox.

The opposition between an authentic national core and superficial foreign influences is clearly articulated in Titu Maiorescu’s (1868) famous critique of “forms without substance,” which contrasts the organic culture of the Romanian village with imported institutional models lacking a solid foundation.

Similarly, the poet Mihai Eminescu contributed to shaping the collective imagination by emphasizing the connection between land, language, and historical continuity, often in opposition to contemporary foreign influences. His journalistic writings promoted a form of rural nationalism and expressed strong criticism of external actors perceived as threatening national identity.

During the process of modernization, parts of Romanian cultural and political discourse remained skeptical of Western models, as reflected in the works of figures such as Nicolae Iorga and Constantin Rădulescu-Motru.

In the interwar period, intellectuals associated with the “Young Generation,” including Mircea Eliade and Emil Cioran (1990), criticized the perceived loss of authenticity and the distancing from the national core. Eliade’s article “Piloții orbi” [Blind pilots] (Eliade, 1937) reflects concerns about the inability of the state to protect national identity from external influences. These ideas continue to be reactivated in contemporary discourse, particularly in relation to perceived threats to cultural identity and economic sovereignty.

The communist regime established in 1947 introduced a radical ideological shift, imposing Marxism-Leninism as the dominant framework. However, after an initial phase of cultural Sovietization, the regime increasingly relied on nationalist themes to

legitimize itself. The doctrine of “protochronism” reactivated and exaggerated earlier nationalist ideas, promoting the uniqueness of the Romanian people and supporting the political direction of Nicolae Ceaușescu.

These narratives were disseminated for decades through education, literature, and media, contributing to the persistence of nationalist myths. Communist propaganda played a decisive role in this process: as Betea and Cioacă note, “in a communist regime propaganda is the only public form of communication” (Betea and Cioacă, 2022: 255), while “the re-signification of history and the falsification of the biography of the rulers” are “political manipulations widely used throughout human history” (Betea and Cioacă, 2022: 265). In the post-communist period, they have been reinterpreted and integrated into contemporary sovereignist discourse.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to analyze the relationship between sovereignism and populism in political communication.

The qualitative component focuses on the analysis of electoral programs, with particular attention to the conceptualization of sovereignty. The quantitative component examines social media discourse through a systematic content analysis.

The empirical analysis is based on a comparative case study of George Simion and Călin Georgescu, two political actors associated with populist and sovereignist rhetoric.

3.2 Data Collection

The dataset consists of 297 posts published on the official Facebook pages of the two candidates during the 2024 electoral campaign period, including pre-campaign, campaign, and the period between the first round of elections and the annulment of the second round (October 1, 2024 – December 7, 2024).

Facebook was selected as the sole platform of analysis in order to ensure consistency and comparability across cases, given the absence of a stable and complete dataset for TikTok, despite its relevance for campaign communication. The unit of analysis is the individual Facebook post. All posts published within the selected timeframe were included, resulting in a comprehensive corpus of campaign communication.

3.3 Coding Procedure

A manual content analysis was conducted in order to ensure conceptual accuracy and contextual sensitivity. Each post was coded using a structured codebook, with variables measured on a three-point ordinal scale:

- 0 = absent;
- 1 = present (implicit or secondary);
- 2 = dominant (explicit and central).

3.4 Operationalization of Variables

3.4.1 Sovereignism

Sovereignism is conceptualized as a discursive dimension referring to claims about national autonomy, independence, and resistance to external influence. It is operationalized through two variables:

- *Direct sovereignty*: explicit references to sovereignty, independence, or national control;
- *Indirect sovereignty*: implicit framing, including anti-EU rhetoric, anti-globalization discourse, and references to external influence.

3.4.2 Populism

Populism is operationalized as a multidimensional construct consisting of three components:

- *Anti-elitism*: criticism of political elites and institutions;
- *People-centrism*: construction of “the people” as a unified entity;
- *Exclusion*: construction of an out-group (“they”).

3.4.3 Political Strategy

Political strategy is focused on the attitude towards other competitors:

- *Attack*: direct criticism of opponents;
- *Mobilization*: calls to action.

3.4.4 Emotional Tone

Each post was coded as negative, neutral, or positive, capturing the affective dimension of political communication.

3.5 Data Analysis

All data were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

Two composite indices were constructed:

- Populism index = mean of anti-elitism, people-centrism, and exclusion;
- Sovereignism index = mean of direct and indirect sovereignty.

The analysis includes descriptive statistics and comparative analysis between the two cases.

4. Results

The analysis is based on a dataset of 297 Facebook posts published during the October–early December 2024 electoral period. The dataset is characterized by a high level of completeness, with less than 1% missing values, ensuring the robustness and reliability of the analysis.

To capture broader discursive patterns, two composite indices were constructed: a populism index (anti-elitism, people-centrism, exclusion) and a sovereignism index (direct and indirect sovereignty). Descriptive statistics for all variables are presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the variables

Variable	Simion Mean	Simion SD	Georgescu Mean	Georgescu SD	Total Mean	Total SD
Direct sovereignty	0.28	0.635	0.60	0.743	0.43	0.704
Indirect sovereignty	0.51	0.699	1.24	0.810	0.84	0.833
Anti-elitism	1.15	0.868	0.83	0.771	1.00	0.839
People-centrism	1.12	0.781	1.56	0.709	1.32	0.778
Attack	1.09	0.921	0.72	0.823	0.92	0.895
Mobilization	1.52	0.699	1.42	0.673	1.47	0.688
Emotional tone	0.20	0.956	0.46	0.868	0.32	0.924

Source: Author's calculations (IBM SPSS Statistics)

Table 2: Populism and sovereignism indices

Candidate	Statistic	Populism index	Sovereignism index
Simion	Mean	0.9358	0.3944
	Std. Deviation	0.49373	0.57121
Georgescu	Mean	0.8640	0.9191
	Std. Deviation	0.42899	0.66171
Total	Mean	0.9029	0.6347
	Std. Deviation	0.46582	0.66681

Source: Author's calculations (IBM SPSS Statistics)

4.1 Populism

The results indicate relatively similar levels of populist discourse across the two candidates. George Simion records a slightly higher mean score on the populism index ($M = 0.94$, $SD = 0.49$) compared to Călin Georgescu ($M = 0.86$, $SD = 0.43$). As we will see later, the difference between the two candidates is related to the way they approach the topic.

However, important differences emerge in the internal structure of populist communication. Simion places a stronger emphasis on anti-elitism ($M = 1.15$ vs. 0.83) and direct attacks ($M = 1.09$ vs. 0.72), indicating a more confrontational and conflict-driven style. His communication is also slightly more oriented toward mobilization ($M = 1.52$ vs. 1.42), reflecting a strategy focused on immediate political activation.

By contrast, Georgescu displays higher levels of people-centrist discourse ($M = 1.56$ vs. 1.12), suggesting a different construction of “the people,” less anchored in antagonistic framing and more oriented toward collective identity.

4.2 Sovereignism

Substantial differences emerge with regard to sovereignist discourse. Georgescu exhibits significantly higher levels of sovereignism ($M = 0.92$, $SD = 0.66$), whereas Simion's score remains considerably lower ($M = 0.39$, $SD = 0.57$).

This difference is particularly pronounced in indirect sovereignism, where Georgescu reaches a much higher mean ($M = 1.24$) compared to Simion ($M = 0.51$). Direct sovereignism also follows the same pattern ($M = 0.60$ vs. 0.28).

These findings indicate that sovereignism constitutes a central component of Georgescu's communication strategy, consistently emphasizing themes such as national autonomy, resistance to external influence, and sovereignty as a core political principle.

In contrast, sovereignist elements in Simion's discourse appear less systematically articulated and tend to function as a secondary framing device rather than a dominant theme.

4.3 Emotional Tone and Political Strategy

The emotional dimension further differentiates the two actors. Georgescu's communication displays a more positive or balanced emotional profile ($M = 0.46$), whereas Simion's discourse tends toward a more neutral-to-negative tone ($M = 0.20$).

In terms of political strategy, Simion relies more heavily on direct attacks and mobilization, reinforcing a style oriented toward confrontation and rapid audience activation. Georgescu, by contrast, adopts a less confrontational and more discursively structured approach, consistent with a more ideologically framed communication style.

4.4 Populism–Sovereignism Relationship

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that populism and sovereignism are not equivalent constructs, even though they may co-occur in political discourse (see Table 3).

Table 3: Comparative summary: Simion vs. Georgescu

Simion: high-intensity populism	Georgescu: ideologically structured form of sovereignism
strong anti-elitism	consistently high sovereignist framing
frequent use of direct attacks	lower levels of direct confrontation
higher levels of mobilization	a more balanced emotional tone

Source: Author's analysis

4.5 Summary of Findings

Overall, the results indicate that while both candidates incorporate elements of populist discourse, they differ fundamentally in their use of sovereignist framing. These findings support the argument that sovereignism should be conceptualized as a distinct discursive dimension, rather than as a simple subset of populism. The two constructs intersect but vary independently across political actors, producing different communicative configurations.

5. Comparative Discursive Patterns: Simion vs. Georgescu

The quantitative findings are further clarified through a comparative qualitative interpretation of the discursive patterns employed by George Simion and Călin Georgescu. The analysis reveals two distinct modes of political communication, which differ not only in intensity, but also in their underlying logic, temporal orientation, and sources of legitimacy.

Simion's discourse is primarily oriented toward political confrontation and electoral mobilization. His communication places strong emphasis on opponents and on the need to mobilize voters against the political elite. The discursive style is overtly polemical and conflict-driven, characterized by direct attacks, explicit references to adversaries, and a clear construction of political antagonism.

Within this framework, sovereignism appears as a secondary layer of discourse. While present, it functions mainly as a background narrative that legitimizes political struggle rather than as a central ideological axis. Simion can thus be portrayed as a campaign-oriented politician, whose primary objective is to generate support for immediate electoral change in favor of "the people." His discourse is anchored in the present political moment, emphasizing urgency, action, and short-term electoral outcomes.

In contrast, Georgescu's discourse follows a markedly different logic. His communication is structured around a deeply ideological and, at times, quasi-mystical tone. Rather than engaging directly in political confrontation, he invokes broader themes such as destiny, historical mission, and collective identity. References to a "calling" or to the act of "making history" position his discourse beyond the immediate context of electoral competition.

Georgescu's rhetoric is closely aligned with the cultural and historical narratives discussed earlier. His frequent references to Romanian land, Orthodoxy, and national character reflect a discursive strategy rooted in symbolic continuity rather than political conflict. The appeal to change is present, but it is not directed explicitly against political actors. Notably, his posts rarely mention the names of opponents or political parties.

From a temporal perspective, Georgescu's discourse operates within a long-term historical and symbolic horizon, situating political action within a broader narrative of national destiny. This contrasts sharply with Simion's focus on immediate political mobilization.

Anti-elitism, in Georgescu's case, is largely implicit rather than explicit. Instead of direct attacks, it is conveyed through narratives of national authenticity, moral renewal, and the need to restore a perceived natural order. This contributes to a communication style that is less confrontational but more ideologically cohesive.

The two discursive strategies also differ in terms of their target audience and mechanisms of legitimation. Simion addresses a mobilizable electorate, appealing to voters through urgency, conflict, and calls to action. His legitimacy is primarily electoral, grounded in the promise of immediate political change. Georgescu, by contrast, appears to address an identity-oriented audience, mobilizing symbolic resources and shared cultural references. His legitimacy is more symbolic and moral, rooted in claims of authenticity, historical continuity, and national mission (see Table 4).

Table 4: Qualitative analysis of the discursive approach: Georgescu vs. Simion

Dimension	Călin Georgescu	George Simion
Discursive style	Mystical-ideological	Pragmatic-polemical
Emotional tone	Predominantly positive, elevated	Predominantly negative, conflictual
Temporal orientation	Long-term, historical	Immediate, campaign-focused
Orientation	Symbolic, identity-based	Strategic, mobilization-oriented
Relation to conflict	Avoids direct confrontation	Emphasizes political conflict
Mobilization style	Calls for reflection, unity, and meaning	Calls for action and political struggle
Attitude toward elites	Implicit, indirect	Explicit, confrontational
Use of sovereignty	Central, ideologically embedded	Central, pragmatic
References to opponents	Absent or minimal	Frequent and explicit
Source of legitimacy	Symbolic / moral	Electoral / strategic
Overall tone	Serious, solemn	Energetic, polemical

Source: Author's analysis

Taken together, the comparison highlights a fundamental distinction between two types of political discourse: one centered on conflict, mobilization, and electoral competition, and the other on symbolic meaning, identity construction, and ideological coherence. While both incorporate elements of populism and sovereignty, they deploy them in structurally different ways.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to ongoing debates on the relationship between populism and sovereignty in contemporary political communication. While existing literature often treats sovereignty as a component of populist discourse (Basile and Mazzoleni, 2022), the empirical evidence presented here suggests a more complex relationship. The two cases analyzed demonstrate that populism and sovereignty can vary independently and may structure political communication in distinct ways.

George Simion exemplifies a form of high-intensity populism, characterized by strong anti-elitism, frequent use of direct attacks, and a mobilization-oriented

communication strategy. In this case, sovereignty plays a secondary role and is not consistently articulated as a central theme.

By contrast, Călin Georgescu illustrates a form of ideologically structured sovereignty, in which references to national autonomy and resistance to external influence are central and consistently integrated into the discourse. This form of communication is less confrontational but more conceptually coherent.

These differences suggest that sovereignty may function as an independent axis of political competition, rather than merely reinforcing populist narratives. In the Romanian context, this distinction is particularly relevant, as it helps explain variations in electoral mobilization and resonance.

More broadly, the findings highlight the importance of digital communication in shaping contemporary populist and sovereignist discourse. Social media platforms provide actors with the opportunity to construct and disseminate simplified yet powerful narratives that resonate with broader cultural and historical frameworks. In the Romanian case, Méndez de Valdivia observes that the 2024–2025 campaign was marked by a strong emotionalization, with dominant messages appealing to “fear (immigration, loss of sovereignty), indignation (corruption, national betrayal) and nostalgia (traditional values, ‘better times’)” (Méndez de Valdivia, 2026: 473).

7. Conclusions

This article has examined the role of sovereignty in the digital political communication of two Romanian candidates during the 2024 presidential electoral campaign. The findings show that, although both actors employ elements of populist discourse, they diverge significantly in the articulation and function of sovereignty. While George Simion’s communication is structured around antagonism and electoral mobilization, Călin Georgescu develops a more ideologically coherent and symbolically grounded form of discourse.

The comparative analysis further highlights two distinct modes of political legitimation. Simion relies on a pragmatic, conflict-driven strategy oriented toward immediate electoral outcomes, whereas Georgescu constructs a discourse rooted in historical narratives, identity, and symbolic continuity. These differences reflect not only divergent rhetorical styles, but also fundamentally different ways of structuring political meaning.

Taken together, these findings support the central argument of the article: sovereignty should be conceptualized as a distinct discursive dimension rather than a subset of populism. In this sense, sovereignty emerges not merely as a thematic component, but as a structuring logic of contemporary political communication.

This study is limited to a single platform and a specific electoral context, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research could extend the analysis to additional platforms and comparative cases in order to further explore the relationship between populism and sovereignty across different political and cultural settings.

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Perception of Pre-University Education Teachers on the Digitalization of Education: Opportunities, Challenges and Impact on Pedagogical Practice

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Abstract

The digitalization of education is a complex approach that involves not only the use of digital tools or the integration of new technologies in the educational process, but a new vision of learning, leading to the creation of contextual, current and school-oriented experiences. This involves a rethinking of the didactic approach in the classroom, new pedagogical practices, new strategies and a specialization of roles: the learner learns to become his own teacher. The development of the digital skills of teachers and, implicitly, of students becomes absolutely necessary in this process of personalizing learning and making it accessible with the help of technology. Starting from the research question “What is the perception of teachers in pre-university education on the digitalization of education?”, we formulated the following main objective: analyzing the perception of teachers on their own digital skills and on the use of technology in the teaching-learning-evaluation process. Thus, this study analyzes teachers’ perceptions of the integration of technology in education through a quantitative approach, using frequency analyses, Spearman correlations and independent samples t-tests on a sample of 250 teachers. The results highlight a predominantly favorable attitude towards the use of technology in education and a medium level of self-assessed digital skills. Perceived digital skills are positively correlated with the perceived benefits of technology and negatively correlated with the difficulties encountered in its use, while no significant differences were identified between urban and rural teachers in terms of digital skills, perceived benefits or difficulties. The study contributes to understanding how teachers perceive the processes of digitalization of education and highlights the importance of continuous professional development for strengthening digital skills and effectively integrating technology into pedagogical practice.

Keywords: *Digitalization of Education; Digital Skills; Digital Pedagogy; Teachers; Sociology of Education; Artificial Intelligence; Continuous Professional Development*

1. Introduction

The last decades have been marked by profound transformations generated by the development of information and communication technologies (ICT), which have significantly influenced all areas of social life, including education. The expansion of digital technologies has changed the way people communicate, work, access information and build knowledge, leading to the emergence of new requirements regarding the skills necessary for active participation in an increasingly digitalized society. In this context, educational systems are called upon to respond both to the needs of new generations of

students and to the requirements of a labor market characterized by continuous change and technological innovation (Selwyn, 2019).

However, the digitalization of education goes beyond the simple integration of digital tools in the teaching-learning-evaluation process. From a sociological perspective, it can be understood as a process of institutional transformation through which the school adapts its structures, practices and social relations to the requirements of the information society. Technology is not only a support for teaching activity, but also a factor that influences the distribution of educational opportunities, access to knowledge and the forms of participation of the actors involved in the educational process. In this context, the digital skills of teachers acquire strategic importance. They no longer represent just a dimension of continuous professional development, but a necessary condition for the provision of quality educational services and for achieving the goals of contemporary education, as provided by the Pre-university Education Law no. 198/2023 (Romania, 2023). The European Commission (2020) emphasizes that the effective use of digital technologies in education requires more than technical skills, and it is necessary to develop innovative pedagogical practices that harness the potential of technology in support of learning.

An important landmark in this field is the European framework for digital competences of educators - DigCompEdu (Redecker, 2017), which structures teachers' digital competence in six main areas: professional engagement, digital resources, teaching and learning, assessment, supporting the development of students' digital competences and facilitating their participation in the educational process. In this perspective, the teacher is no longer just a provider of information, but a facilitator of learning, a mediator of access to digital resources and a promoter of the critical and responsible use of technology.

The literature highlights that the development of digital competences is one of the essential conditions for active participation in social and professional life. Digital competence is included among the eight key competences for lifelong learning (European Parliament and Council, 2006) and is defined as a set of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that allow the critical, creative and responsible use of digital technologies (Ferrari, 2013). In the educational environment, these competences facilitate the design of relevant, personalized and adapted learning experiences to the needs of students. At the same time, recent research draws attention to the persistence of some forms of digital inequality. Van Dijk (2020) argues that effective participation in the digital society depends on the existence of a "digital capital", defined as the totality of resources, skills and opportunities that allow the efficient use of technology. From this perspective, differences in access to infrastructure, the level of digital skills and training opportunities can significantly influence the educational experiences of teachers and students.

In Romania, the process of digitalizing education experienced an unprecedented acceleration during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the transition to online and hybrid learning highlighted both the potential of digital technologies and the vulnerabilities of the education system in terms of infrastructure, access to resources and professional training of teachers. This experience brought to the forefront the need to strengthen digital skills and develop educational policies capable of supporting the digital transformation of schools.

Based on these considerations, the present study aims to analyze the perception of pre-university teachers on the digitalization of education, with a focus on digital skills,

opportunities and difficulties associated with the use of technology, as well as its impact on the teaching-learning-evaluation process. The research aims to contribute to the understanding of the factors that facilitate or limit the integration of digital technologies in teaching and to highlight the role of continuous professional development in strengthening teachers' digital skills.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Teachers' Digital Skills and the Factors That Influence Them

Teachers' digital skills are one of the most important predictors of technology integration in the educational process. Research in recent years has shown that the mere availability of technological infrastructure does not guarantee its effective use in teaching. The level of teachers' digital skills influences both the frequency of technology use and the complexity of pedagogical activities carried out with its help (Redecker, 2017; Voogt et al., 2015; OECD, 2023).

The literature highlights the existence of several factors that contribute to the development of digital skills. These include age, professional experience, access to technological resources, institutional support and participation in continuous training programs (Ferrari, 2013; Redecker, 2017; UNICEF, 2022). Although there is a perception that younger teachers use technology more frequently and demonstrate a higher level of digital skills due to earlier exposure to digital environments, the results of empirical research are inconclusive. Some studies have identified differences between generations in the use of certain digital tools and the level of confidence in using technology (Prensky, 2001), while other research has shown that professional experience, access to training opportunities and organizational context influence digital skills more strongly than chronological age (Bennett, Maton and Kervin, 2008; Selwyn, 2009; Redeş and Stan, 2022).

Another important factor is digital self-efficacy, defined as teachers' confidence in their ability to use technology to solve professional tasks and to manage digitally mediated learning situations. The concept derives from Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, according to which individuals' beliefs about their own capabilities influence behaviours, motivation and performance in different contexts of activity. Teachers who demonstrate a high level of digital self-efficacy are more willing to experiment with innovative teaching methods, use educational platforms and integrate emerging technologies into their teaching (European Training Foundation, 2024; UNICEF, 2022). In recent years, the literature has paid particular attention to the relationship between continuous professional development and teachers' digital competences. Participation in specialized training programs contributes to the development of technical and pedagogical skills necessary for the effective use of technology and favors the adoption of innovative educational practices (European Commission, 2020; Redecker, 2017). From this perspective, the development of digital skills can be interpreted as a continuous process of professional learning, influenced both by the individual characteristics of teachers and by the institutional context in which they carry out their work.

2.2 Opportunities for the Digitalization of Education

The specialized literature highlights that the digitalization of education can generate significant changes at the level of the teaching-learning-assessment process, offering opportunities for increasing the quality, accessibility and flexibility of the

educational act. International organizations and recent research emphasize that the positive impact of technology does not result from the simple presence of digital tools in school, but from the way in which they are integrated into pedagogical strategies and used to support learning (OECD, 2023; European Commission, 2020).

One of the most important opportunities offered by digitalization is the possibility of personalizing learning. Educational platforms and digital applications allow the adaptation of content, pace of work and teaching activities to the individual characteristics of students. In this way, technology can contribute to the development of more relevant and closer educational experiences to the needs of each student, favoring active engagement and individual progress (OECD, 2023).

Another important dimension is the expansion of access to information and educational resources. Digital environments offer teachers and students the opportunity to use a variety of multimedia resources, collaborative platforms and open educational materials, overcoming the spatial and temporal limits of traditional learning. In this context, students benefit from increased opportunities for exploration, documentation and autonomous learning, and teachers can diversify their teaching strategies and assessment methods (Fullan, 2012).

The digitalization of education can also contribute to the development of a more inclusive school. Digital tools and assistive technologies facilitate access to learning for students with special educational needs, offering the possibility of adapting educational content and activities according to their individual needs. Thus, technology can become an important tool for reducing certain educational barriers and increasing school participation (UNICEF, 2022).

At the same time, the use of technology facilitates the monitoring of school progress and the provision of rapid and personalized feedback. Educational platforms allow the collection and analysis of data on student activity, providing teachers with useful information for adapting pedagogical interventions and supporting the learning process. Specialized literature shows that the use of educational data can contribute to increasing the efficiency of the instructional-educational process and the development of evidence-based pedagogical practices (OECD, 2023).

Last but not least, the recent development of artificial intelligence opens up new perspectives for education. AI-based systems can support the personalization of learning, the generation of educational resources, the automation of certain administrative tasks and the provision of feedback tailored to the needs of students. However, the exploitation of these opportunities depends on the level of digital skills of teachers and their ability to use technology in a critical, responsible and pedagogically relevant way (European Commission, 2020).

Therefore, the literature highlights that the opportunities associated with the digitalization of education go beyond the technological dimension and aim to transform the way learning is organized and delivered. The potential benefits of technology are closely linked to the ability of educational actors to integrate digital resources into pedagogical practices that support participation, inclusion and the development of skills necessary for contemporary society.

2.3 Barriers and Inequalities in the Use of Technologies in Mainstream Schools

Although the literature highlights numerous benefits associated with the use of digital technologies in education, the digitalization process is accompanied by challenges

that may limit the realization of their potential. Recent research shows that the success of digital transformation does not depend exclusively on the existence of technological infrastructure, but on the interaction between material resources, institutional support and opportunities to use technology in relevant educational contexts (OECD, 2020; OECD, 2023).

One of the most frequently analyzed challenges is digital inequality. According to Van Dijk (2020), access to technology should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon, which includes not only the availability of devices and internet connection, but also the possibility of their effective use for educational purposes. From this perspective, the mere existence of digital infrastructure does not guarantee effective participation in technologically mediated learning processes nor the equal exploitation of the opportunities offered by digitalization.

In the educational environment, digital inequalities manifest themselves through differences in access to technological resources, the quality of school infrastructure and the availability of technical support necessary for the use of technology. These aspects have become particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the transition to online learning has highlighted the existence of vulnerabilities associated with access to technology and the capacity of educational institutions to support the instructional-educational process in the digital environment (OECD, 2020).

The literature also highlights the importance of the organizational context in the success of digitalization processes. The effective integration of technology is facilitated by the existence of adequate infrastructure, technical support services and clear institutional strategies regarding the use of digital resources. In their absence, the use of technology often remains dependent on individual initiatives and personal efforts of teachers (European Commission, 2020; OECD, 2023).

In addition to barriers associated with access and infrastructure, the literature also highlights a number of risks generated by excessive or uncritical use of technology. Kirschner and De Bruyckere (2017) show that the simultaneous use of multiple digital sources and tools can affect attention and cognitive performance, favoring phenomena such as information overload and diminished concentration capacity. At the same time, excessive dependence on technology can reduce opportunities for direct interaction and negatively influence certain dimensions of the educational process.

In recent years, the accelerated development of applications based on artificial intelligence has generated new challenges for educational systems. The use of these technologies raises issues related to the validity and accuracy of the information generated, the protection of personal data, the transparency of algorithms and the respect of ethical principles in education. For this reason, the European Commission (2020) highlights the need to develop frameworks for the responsible use of artificial intelligence and skills that allow for the critical evaluation of automatically generated content.

Therefore, the barriers to the digitalization of education are not exclusively technological in nature, but reflect the interaction between infrastructural, organizational and social factors. Understanding these challenges is essential for the development of educational policies capable of reducing digital inequalities and supporting the sustainable integration of technology into pedagogical practice.

2.4 The Impact of Digitalization on Pedagogical Practice

The impact of digitalization on pedagogical practice has been analyzed by numerous authors who highlight the potential of technology to transform teaching, learning and assessment processes. In the work *Stratosphere*, Fullan (2012) argues that technology can become a catalyst for educational change when it is coherently integrated into teaching activity and is supported by an organizational culture favorable to innovation. The author argues that the digital transformation of education does not depend exclusively on the availability of technological infrastructure, but on the ability of educational actors to capitalize on technology for pedagogical purposes.

According to Fullan (2012), the success of digitalization is based on several fundamental principles: developing engaging and relevant learning experiences for students, using accessible and intuitive technologies, consistently integrating digital tools into school activities, and promoting contextualized, experiential, and student-centered learning. In this perspective, technology is not an end in itself, but a means to create learning contexts that foster active participation, autonomy, and collaboration.

This perspective is also supported by the report *Shaping Digital Education* published by the OECD (2023), which highlights the role of digital education in increasing the quality, equity and efficiency of the educational process. The report emphasizes that the benefits of technology depend on the development of teachers' digital skills, the existence of coherent institutional strategies and the integration of digital technologies into relevant pedagogical practices. The OECD argues that investments in infrastructure must be complemented by measures aimed at the continuous professional development of teachers and at strengthening the capacity of schools to use technology to personalize learning, monitor school progress and increase student participation in the educational process.

3. Methodology

The present study aims to analyze, through a quantitative methodology, based on the sociological survey, using the questionnaire as an instrument (Chelcea, 2007), the perception of pre-university teachers on the digitalization process of education. The study focuses on the opportunities, challenges, impact and perceived barriers. The questionnaire included dichotomous questions and three Likert scales, with steps from 1 (To a very small extent) to 5 (To a very large extent). The first Likert scale evaluates the teachers' perception of the level of digital skills they possess. The second scale aims at the teachers' perception of the usefulness of technology in the educational process. The last scale takes into account the perception of the difficulties encountered in digital teaching.

Data collection was carried out between May and July 2025, obtaining 250 complete and valid responses from pre-university teachers teaching in 29 counties, both urban and rural, covering a large area of the country (Arad, Suceava, Iași, Vaslui, Bacău, Ilfov, Vrancea, Brașov, Cluj, Argeș, Olt, Dolj, Caraș-Severin, Timiș, Mehedinți, Gorj, Constanța, Brăila, Buzău, Sibiu, Maramureș, Galați, Prahova, Bihor, Satu Mare, Teleorman, Alba, Sălaj, Bucharest Municipality). An essential criterion for selecting respondents was that they had to have completed continuous professional development courses in the field of digital pedagogy.

The present research started from the following research question: "What is the perception of pre-university teachers on the digitalization of education?" Thus, the research objective is to analyze the perception of teachers on how the integration of

technology influences the quality of the educational process. From this objective, we formulated the specific objectives, along with the following hypotheses:

Objective 1: Identify the relationship between perceived digital skills and the benefits and challenges of using technology in a teaching context.

Hypothesis 1.1. There is a correlation between perceived digital skills and the benefits of using technology in a teaching context.

Hypothesis 1.2. There are differences between female and male teachers in terms of self-perception of digital skills, perceived benefits and challenges associated with the use of technology in a teaching context.

Objective 2: Analyze of the differences between teachers teaching in rural and urban areas in terms of perception of digital skills, benefits and challenges associated with the use of technology in the educational process.

Hypothesis 2.1. There are differences between teachers who teach in urban and rural areas in terms of self-perception of digital skills.

Hypothesis 2.2. There are differences between teachers who teach in urban and rural areas in terms of the benefits of using technology in a teaching context.

Hypothesis 2.3. There are differences between teachers who teach in urban and rural areas in terms of the challenges of using technology in a teaching context

The study has several limitations. First, the research was based exclusively on quantitative data obtained through the questionnaire, which limits the in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences and motivations regarding the use of technology in the educational process. Although statistical analysis allows the identification of general trends and relationships between variables, it does not provide detailed explanations of the context in which teachers use digital technologies or the factors that influence their adoption in pedagogical practice.

Second, the inclusion criterion in the study, namely the participation of teachers in training programs in the field of digital pedagogy, may lead to an overestimation of the level of digital skills and favorable attitudes towards the digitalization of education. Teachers who have already benefited from such programs are naturally more familiar with the use of technology and may demonstrate a higher degree of openness to innovation compared to teachers who have not had access to such training opportunities. Consequently, the results capture the perceptions of a category of teachers already involved in the process of developing digital skills and do not necessarily reflect the situation of the entire teaching staff.

Another limitation is that the study analyzes the perceptions of teachers without including the perspective of other actors involved in the educational process, such as students, parents or school principals. Integrating these perspectives would have allowed a more comprehensive assessment of the impact of digitalization on the teaching, learning and assessment process and would have facilitated the comparison of the perceptions of different categories of participants in the educational act.

However, the research provides a valuable contribution to the literature on the digitalization of education, as it highlights how teachers perceive the integration of technology in teaching and identifies factors associated with the development of digital skills. The geographical diversity of the respondents, the use of appropriate statistical tools and the analysis of several dimensions of digitalization allow for a consistent picture of the trends among teachers in pre-university education. The results obtained constitute a useful starting point for the development of future research, but also for the substantiation of professional training programs and educational policies oriented

towards the consolidation of digital skills and the efficient integration of technologies in pedagogical practice.

4. Results

The research sample consisted of 250 teachers from pre-university education. In terms of gender distribution, the majority of respondents were female (97.6%, $n = 244$), while men represented only 2.4% of the sample ($n = 6$). In terms of their background, the distribution of respondents was relatively balanced, with 52.4% coming from urban areas ($n = 131$) and 47.6% from rural areas ($n = 119$). Regarding the level of education in which they work, most participants teach in preschool education (44.0%, $n = 110$), followed by teachers from primary education (30.8%, $n = 77$), secondary education (19.6%, $n = 49$) and high school (5.6%, $n = 14$). The age of the respondents varied around a mean of 44.57 years ($SD = 9.73$), with a median of 45 years and a most common age of 42 years. The youngest respondent was 19 years old, while the most senior teacher was 65 years old. In terms of professional experience, the respondents had an average length of service in education of 20.60 years ($SD = 10.66$), with a median of 21 years and a modal value of 20 years. Taking into account the age of the respondents, as expected, there are respondents who do not have even one year of experience in the field. However, there are people with 45 years of experience as a teacher.

To test Hypothesis 1.1, a bivariate correlation was performed using the Spearman correlation coefficient (ρ), appropriate for ordinal variables and distributions that do not respect the assumption of normality. The results highlight the existence of a directly proportional, statistically significant, moderate-intensity correlation between perceived digital skills and the benefits of using technology in the educational process ($\rho = 0.430$, $p < 0.001$). This result indicates that teachers who evaluate their digital skills at a higher level tend to perceive the advantages of using technology in their teaching to a greater extent. At the same time, an inversely proportional, statistically significant, weak-to-moderate-intensity correlation was identified between perceived digital skills and the difficulties associated with using technology ($\rho = -0.331$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, as the level of perceived digital skills increases, the difficulties felt in using technology tend to decrease. The results also indicate a statistically significant, moderate-intensity inverse correlation between perceived benefits and difficulties in using technology ($\rho = -0.424$, $p < 0.001$). Teachers who identify more benefits of digitalization tend to report lower levels of difficulties in using technology in the teaching process.

Table 1: Spearman Correlations between Perceived Digital Skills, Benefits and Difficulties of Using Technology (N = 250)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Perceived digital skills	—		
2. Benefits of using technology	0.430***	—	
3. Difficulties in using technology	-0.331***	-0.424***	—

Note: Coefficients represent Spearman correlations (ρ). *** $p < 0.001$

Source: Authors' calculations

To test for differences between urban and rural teachers in terms of perceived digital skills, benefits of using technology and difficulties associated with its use, the independent samples t-test was used. In all cases, the Levene test indicated homogeneity of variances ($p > 0.05$), which is why the results corresponding to the "equal variances assumed" variant were interpreted.

Regarding perceived digital skills, no statistically significant differences were identified between urban teachers ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.84$) and rural teachers ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 0.79$), $t(248) = 0.761$, $p = 0.447$. Although urban teachers achieved a slightly higher average, the difference is small and not statistically significant.

Regarding the perceived benefits of using technology in the educational process, the results also indicate the absence of statistically significant differences between respondents from urban areas ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.66$) and those from rural areas ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.59$), $t(248) = -0.653$, $p = 0.514$. Thus, teachers from the two environments display similar perceptions of the advantages of using technology in teaching.

Regarding difficulties associated with the use of technology, teachers from rural areas reported a slightly higher level of difficulties ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 0.54$) compared to those from urban areas ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 0.56$). However, the difference is not statistically significant, $t(248) = -1.463$, $p = 0.145$.

Therefore, the results of the t-test indicate that the environment in which teachers work does not significantly influence the level of perceived digital skills, the perception of the benefits of using technology, or the difficulties encountered in integrating it into the educational process. Consequently, the hypotheses formulated regarding the existence of differences between urban and rural teachers are not supported by the empirical data.

Table 2: Differences between Urban and Rural Teachers Regarding Perceived Digital Skills, Benefits and Difficulties of Using Technology

Variable	Urban (n = 131) M (SD)	Rural (n = 119) M (SD)	t	df	p
Perceived digital skills	3.05 (0.84)	2.97 (0.79)	0.761	248	0.447
Benefits of using technology	3.72 (0.66)	3.78 (0.59)	-0.653	248	0.514
Difficulties in using technology	2.57 (0.56)	2.67 (0.54)	-1.463	248	0.145

Note: Independent samples t-test; equal variances assumed (Levene's test, $p > 0.05$)

Source: Authors' calculations

5. Conclusions

This research aimed to analyze the perception of pre-university teachers on the process of digitalization of education, with a focus on digital skills, benefits and difficulties associated with the use of technology in teaching. The results highlight that teachers demonstrate, overall, a favorable attitude towards the integration of technology in the teaching-learning-assessment process and self-assess their digital skills at a medium level.

Statistical analyses revealed a positive relationship between perceived digital competence and the benefits attributed to the use of technology in education, as well as a negative relationship between digital competence and the difficulties encountered in its use. Also, teachers who perceive more benefits of digitalization tend to report a lower level of difficulties associated with the use of digital tools. These results suggest that the development of digital competence contributes not only to a more efficient use of technology, but also to the consolidation of a favorable attitude towards the process of digital transformation of education.

An important result of the study is the absence of significant differences between urban and rural teachers in terms of perceived digital skills, benefits of using technology and difficulties associated with it. This finding indicates that the environment in which

teachers work is no longer a determining factor in the perception of digitalization, suggesting a reduction in the gaps traditionally associated with the two educational contexts. From a sociological perspective, this result may reflect the effects of investments made in digital infrastructure and professional training programs implemented in recent years, which have contributed to increasing access to resources and developing teachers' digital skills.

At the same time, the results confirm that the digitalization of education is a complex process, which goes beyond the simple use of technology and involves transformations in pedagogical practices, professional skills and organizational culture in schools. The level of digital skills seems to influence how teachers capitalize on the opportunities offered by technology and manage the challenges associated with its use, highlighting the importance of continuous professional development and institutional support in supporting the digital transformation process.

In conclusion, the research highlights that the success of the digitalization process of education depends to a greater extent on the development of digital skills and access to training opportunities than on contextual characteristics such as the environment of origin. The results can constitute a starting point for the development of educational policies and professional development programs aimed at strengthening the digital skills of teachers and the sustainable integration of digital technologies in pedagogical practice.

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Demographic Perspectives on Public Distrust in the Police Service

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Abstract

This study examines the demographic perspectives on public distrust of the police service in South Africa. The main objective is to understand the interaction between population demographics and distrust in the police service. The question of who is more likely to place greater distrust in the police service becomes an important question to interrogate and provide answers to. The study utilized a sample of 251 adult respondents, drawn from residents of OR Tambo district Municipality, South Africa. While data were collected through a structured survey instrument, regression was employed to analyse the data. The study found high level of distrust in the police among two-thirds of the respondents. Police not being straightforward, police not keeping important secrets of the informers and the doubt that the police are doing their work well, were found as important elements of distrust. Significant difference was found between rural and urban residents based on the level of police distrust ($p = 0.011$). The regression analysis also shows that a high level of distrust was significantly influenced by the following: longer years in the area of residence ($p = 0.003$), lower education ($p = 0.001$), and previously charged by the police ($p = 0.009$). Positive correlation was found between high level of distrust and being male, non-South African, previously reported case to the police, previously charged by police, being employed, lower education, rural, staying long in the area and being young. This study recommends the formulation of a gender-based policy to address the growing distrust and rebuild the eroded trust.

Keywords: Police; Trust; Distrust; Demographics; Confidence

1. Introduction

Trust is a very important element to be considered in all human relationships. It is beyond just having confidence but involves bonding and believing in the truth of an individual or an entity. Trustworthiness of an institution entails the importance and value people attach to the functions and operations of the institution, pertaining to its consistency and reliability (Tankebe, 2010). Public trust in the police service therefore translates to having confidence and believing in the actions of the police. It is defined by two things: namely the attitude the public have towards the police and the nature of relationship between them. Attitudes are behavioural tendencies that are inclined to instigate people to act in certain ways (Morris and Maisto, 2007). Negative or positive attitude towards the police may therefore translate to trust or lack of it in the organisation. For instance, studies have associated negative experience and attitude to the police with victims' lack of trust resulting to unwillingness to cooperate with the police in sharing information (Koster, Van der Leun and Kunst, 2020). Conversely, favourable perception about the police increases public trust in cooperating with them, including in crime reporting (Bolger, Lytle and Bolger, 2020). Invariably, when the citizens have favourable attitude and understanding of the police, they are more likely to cooperate with the organisation in actualising police functions in the communities. Positive attitude resulting from satisfaction also promote community support in addressing policing matters in the community (Merenda et al., 2020). Similarly, the nature of relationship between the public and the police has a strong bearing on the level

of trust in the organisation. Such that while poor relationship leads to distrust, a healthy and good one translates to increased trust and confidence. The assumption here is: while positive attitudes and relationship between the police and the public are associated with increased trust, the opposite is the case with negative attitudes and relationship, irrespective of the records of service.

Despite the reasonable success records of the Police Service in maintaining law and order in South Africa, the organisation is marred by series of controversies, especially regarding public confidence and trust. Available evidence from previous studies suggests a huge misunderstanding between the community and the police in many ways. Mabasa and Obioha (2020) detailed the difficulties the police face in working with the community and some anomalies arising from community participation in crime prevention in a South African cosmopolitan area. The study revealed a fundamental issue about distrust, bordering on the community members' reluctance to work with the police in identifying criminal elements amongst the community. This element of lack of trust also manifests in other services that need public cooperation, such as investigation and prosecutorial witnessing. Mutual suspicion has been found to exist between the community-based organisations and the police, which poses as an obstacle in the much-needed cooperation between the police and the community (Machethe and Obioha, 2018).

The observable police's misunderstanding with the community further leads to lack of trust by the community's utilisation of the services that the police render. The community lack confidence in the police services to the extent that the clientele is reluctant and unwilling to report crime to the police. On the other hand, the police equally hardly see the community members as trustworthy partners, as revealed in Mbewu, Obioha and Mugari (2021). Incidentally, some of the discouraging factors associated with no crime reporting are in themselves part of the police's internal contradiction and struggle over the years, which affects the overall police performance. Other important discouraging elements that lead to growing distrust include the public dissatisfaction with the police's handling of domestic violence complaints at station level (Dlepu and Obioha, 2020).

Previous studies have identified the security of lives and property, the extent to which the police are honest and the police service's capacity to execute their mandate within the prescripts of the law as the major determinants of public trust in the police (Tankebe, 2010; Boateng, 2012). The current public's lack of confidence and trust in the police and the police's not regarding the public as trustworthy partner in its social control mandate dates to a distant past and leaves more problem than anyone can envisage. Slingers and Obioha (2015) showed that the binary orientation of "policing for the people" and "policing of the people" were contradiction that faced the South African Police during the oppressive apartheid regime, which shaped "police culture" in the country. Unimaginably, some of these anti-democratic policing principles that created and deepened distrust spilled over into the current democratic dispensation in different ways, other than on white and black racial divide. While the lingering distrust in the police service by the community may be widespread, it may however be erroneous to generalise the situation in the entire community population. In this regard, there is a balance of probability that the public distrust in the services of the police may be a function of some variables, notably, the socio demographics. Elsewhere, from other jurisdictions, evidence abounds regarding the unpleasant public encounters with the police (Koster, Van der Leun and Kunst, 2020; Merenda et al., 2020; Abbas, Akram and

Saud, 2020), which affects the level of trust reposed on them. In South Africa, previous studies delved sufficiently into similar subject matter by establishing that there is suspicion (Machethe and Obioha, 2018), declining trust level in the police (Roberts and Gordon, 2022), misunderstanding (Mabasa and Obioha, 2020), lack of trust and confidence (Mbewu, Obioha and Mugari, 2021), and dissatisfaction with the police (Dlepu and Obioha, 2020), as they exist, but little evidence exists in literature regarding how the situation could be linked to the demographics of the people. Presently, there is no clear-cut indication regarding the social categories and demographics in the communities that may be more negatively affected by the police service's function, which may lead to distrust. This raises the question regarding what socio-demographic variables than the others are associated more with public distrust in the police service. Owing to the present gap in knowledge and literature, this present study is motivated to provide evidence-based information on how level of trust in the police is influenced by socio-demographics of the people. The study therefore aims to ascertain the level of public distrust in the police and the socio-demographic variables that influence or predict this disposition. The findings of this study will contribute towards demographic specific information that are relevant in understanding police -society relationship, but also on how to rebuild the public trust on the police amongst diverse social and demographic segments of the community.

2. Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to understand the interaction between population demographics and distrust in the police service. With the specific objectives being to, a) determine the main elements of public distrust in the police service, b) ascertain the level of police distrust, and c) determine the sociodemographic predictors of public distrust on the police service.

3. Theoretical Orientation

This study is foregrounded by the rational choice theory in explaining the course of people's disposition in trusting or distrusting the police service. Rational choice theory was promoted in the work of Friedman (1953), and later popularised by Becker (1976), who was one of the scientists to apply rational choice theory more widely. The theory also known as a choice or rational action theory was originally meant for understanding human behaviour in social sciences and economics. The theory explains and provides a theoretical understanding on why human beings behave the way they do, with its main thrust based on the notion that human actions are based on choice and freewill. When faced with several courses of action, people usually do what they believe is likely to have the best overall outcome. This means that individuals tend to act in ways that will benefit them, rather than being costly to them. For every action taken, there is cost benefit analysis, in which case on the balance of probability, an individual will take an action where the positive outcome outweighs the negative consequences. A related sociological tradition, social exchange theory, "explores reciprocity and benefit maximization", a logic that extends "beyond material exchanges to include symbolic relationships" (Cioacă, 2024: 496); from this perspective, the relationship between citizens and the police can also be read as an exchange whose symbolic returns, such as respect and fair treatment, weigh as much as its material ones.

Rational choice theory is predicated on the following assumptions: individualism, optimality, structures, self-regarding interest, and rationality. Firstly, on individualism, the theory holds that individuals are social actors in the society and everywhere, who act

and always behave as rational beings in self-calculating and self-maximising manner. Secondly, regarding optimality, individuals choose their course of action optimally, given their individual preferences, opportunities, and constraints that the individual face. In this case, the individual would have considered all other possible courses of action to follow. Thirdly, rational choice is also a function of structures, which entails that the norms and values, including expectations of the society influence and, in most part, dictate individual course of action and choices being made in prevailing circumstances. Fourthly, human actions, decisions and dispositions are self-regarding. This assumption presupposes that individual actions are concerned entirely with the individual's welfare. Fifthly and the most important is the rationality assumption. Based on this assumption, all individuals act in certain manner and ways that would benefit them more, in which case every individual will pursue an interest or action that he or she perceived as the best possible option to their advantage.

From its fundamental principles and assumptions, Rational Choice Theory is relevant and applicable in understanding individual and person's disposition to either trusting or distrusting the police service in South Africa. Peoples disposition to distrust the police for instance could be a function of the demographic attributes of individuals, which highlights the individuality of human action. As individuals have personal experiences, interactions and contact with the police service, their trust or distrust will ultimately be shaped by these circumstances. This implies that there would be no single or common disposition that can be generalised. Rather than generalising public distrust on the police service for instance, narrowing down to individual as the present research has spelt out will provide a nuanced understanding of the situation. However, as the social structure and norms influence individuals in the choice they make, the prevailing circumstances and known societal expectations on the police service to perform creditably in their mandate could also dictate and direct the individual member's trust or distrust in the police. This is given that the individual is most likely to react like other members of the society. Distrusting or trusting the police service in South Africa is entirely a self-regarding issue to individuals. Individuals who have had good experience in their interaction with the police service, in which the outcomes are positive and point towards their overall welfare would trust the police, more than those with negative experiences. Ultimately, trusting or not trusting the police is an outcome of rational calculation of costs and benefits. Members of the society and individuals engage on actions that are beneficial to them. Therefore, overtime, if trusting the police has brought no positive outcome and benefits to them, the trust will become unsustainable and wane away after some time or become distrusting, and vice versa.

4. Research Design and Methodology

The study was carried out in OR Tambo district Municipality, with a population of 1,501,702 people, according to 2022 Census, up from 1,364,943, recorded in 2011, being the fourth largest district in South Africa, in terms of population size (OR Tambo District Municipality, 2024). From this district Municipality, two local municipalities, namely King Sabata Dalindyebo (KSD) and Nyandeni were purposefully chosen due to the contrast in the urbanization structure and the contiguity. While KSD represents an urbanized municipality, mainly around Mthatha and its environs, Nyandeni is on the other hand a rural locality. In KSD, Mthatha, including its environs and Nqanduli were selected, while Libode and Nqeleni were selected from Nyandeni local municipality.

This study followed a cross-sectional causal comparative, ex post facto descriptive design. It involved a snapshot of selected segments across the population, where not all members of the public were used. Data were collected based on what currently existed within the period of this research and what has happened in terms of participants' experiences to understand the state of public's distrust in the police service. It adopted the quantitative approach where information and data collected were quantified, measured, and analysed.

The target population of this study consists of adult residents who have lived in the study area for a minimum of one year, from where a sample of 251 respondents were selected. The sampling procedure followed a combination of stratified technique in the first stage, where different locations were identified and selected from the urban and rural localities respectively. While Mthatha and Nqanduli were urban and rural locations chosen to represent KSD Municipality, Nqeleni and Libode were both rural areas identified from Nyandeni Municipality. In all selected localities, respondents were randomly drawn from different clustering and locations. In the sample distribution, out of the 251 respondents, 100 participants were selected from urban (Mthatha), while 151 participants were identified and reached from the rural locations (Nqanduli, 50, Nqeleni 51 and Libode, 50).

Relevant data were collected using structured survey instrument (questionnaire), which comprised of different sections, including SECTION A: demographic variables, Section B: Public Distrust Indicators: SECTION C: Drivers of Public Distrust in the Police. Besides the socio-demographic variables, the questionnaire was designed to elicit responses from participants using a variety of Likert scale modality. Given that the nature of data collected were quantitative in nature, relevant tools in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), were utilized in analyzing the data and generating results for this study.

5. Operationalisation of Research Variables

The essence of operationalization of the variables is to provide information regarding how various variables were measured and how they represent real life situation. The variables are broadly categorized as either dependent or independent variables. While the dependent variable is the variable that is being investigated, the independent variables are those that determine the change of behaviours or position of the dependent variable. As the dependent variable in this study, Public Distrust (level of distrust): is derived as a composite index from the aggregation of six indicators adapted from previous studies (Tankebe, 2010; Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Bello, 2021): How confident are you in what police do to stop crime? Would you depend on the police for your safety? Would you believe in what the police say? How sure are you that the police would do their job well? Would you say the police are straightforward? Do the police keep important secrets of the informers? based on a Likert Scale response (Always 1, Sometimes 2, Rarely 3, Not at all 4). Similarly, the independent variables were identified and measured. Age (measure as Youth, Old Adult, Advanced Adult, Senior Citizen); Years long in the area (measured as New 1, Relatively New 2, Long 3, Very Long 4); Place of Residence (measures as Rural 1, Urban 2); Highest Qualification (measured as None 1, Primary, 2, Secondary, 3 and Tertiary, 4); Marital Status (measured by Never Married 1, Married 2, Separated/Divorced 3, Widowed, 4); Employment Status (measured by schooling 1, unemployed 2, retired 3, Employed 4); Previously charged by police (measured by No 1, Yes 2); Previously reported case to police (measured by No 1, Yes 2);

Citizenship (Local SA 1, SADC 2, Other African Countries 3, Others 4); Gender (measured as Female 1, Male 2).

6. Ethical Considerations

This research followed and observed the required ethical considerations from the inception to the completion of the study. As part of a larger study, the researcher applied and secured an ethical clearance certificate (REC/04(XX)/2023) approved by the relevant structures and committees of Walter Sisulu University, South Africa. In this study, the respondent's informed consent was sought and secured. The researcher approached each respondent, explained what the research is about and the role that the respondent is required to play in the process. Besides, the respondents were given an opportunity to either agree or decline to be part of this research. Only participants, who agreed to be part of this study were included, while those that declined were excluded. This informed consent was very crucial as it allowed prospective participants a freedom of choice. Similarly, the researcher ensured the implementation of voluntary participation and withdrawal of respondents in the research. This followed a process whereby the participants were neither forced nor made to be part of the study compulsorily. As the participation was voluntary, there was no financial remuneration or compensation given to the participants, before or after the study. During this study, and at every stage, the participants could continue or discontinue without any repercussions. Confidentiality of every information provided by the participants was ensured. This amounts to protection and safeguarding personal information and details of the participants. To ensure that the participants are protected and their participation confidential, the survey instrument (questionnaire) was anonymized by excluding personal details, characteristics, or any individual person's identifiers. During and after the data analysis, no part of the information provided by the participants could be traceable them as individuals. As part of ensuring ethical research and integrity, due acknowledgements and references were made where necessary, when previous studies of other scholars and the researcher are used in this study.

7. Research Findings

7.1 Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents

The socio-demographic profile of the respondents is described in Table 1. In terms of location of residence, three-fifths (60.2%) of the respondents live in the rural areas of the district, while the others live in the urban areas. Nearly half (49%) of the respondents hold tertiary qualifications, followed by those with secondary education, while a few proportions (13.9%) completed primary education only. There are more respondents who are never married (47.4%) compared to those who are married (43.4%), and others who are separated/divorced, or widowed, which account for less than ten percent of the respondents.

A majority of the respondents are employed or own their own personal businesses (55.8%), while a smaller proportion are unemployed. Retirees and respondents who are currently in school, when combined, make up barely 20% of the respondents. About race, while a majority (87.6%) of the respondents are of African descent, all other races combined constitute the remaining percentage of the respondents. Regarding contact with the police, a majority of the respondents (92.8%) disclosed having not been previously charged by the Police. On a different note, over two-thirds of the respondents have not previously reported a case to the police. Slightly more

than half of the respondents reported that they rent their homes, while the others own their own homes. South African citizens constitute the majority (94.4%) of the respondents, while the rest claim to be from SADC countries. There are more females (52.6%) than males (47.4%) among the respondents. The Youth age category constitutes more than half (57.4%) of the respondents, followed by older (old) adults, advanced adults, and senior citizens, in that order. Respondents who are new and those who have been in the study area for a very long time constitute 31.9% and 31.1%, respectively, when compared to a smaller proportion who are either long or relatively new in the area.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 251)

Attribute	Category	Frequency	Valid percent
Location of residence	Rural	151	60.2
	Urban	100	39.8
Highest education	Primary	35	13.9
	Secondary	93	37.1
	Tertiary	123	49.0
Marital status	Never married	119	47.4
	Married	109	43.4
	Separated/Divorced	14	5.6
	Widowed	9	3.6
Employment status	Schooling	42	16.7
	Unemployed	53	21.1
	Retired	16	6.4
	Employed/Business	140	55.8
Previously charged	No	233	92.8
	Yes	18	7.2
Previously reported case to police	No	171	68.1
	Yes	80	31.9
Home ownership	Own	101	40.2
	Renting	150	59.8
Citizenship	Local	237	94.4
	SADC country	14	5.6
Gender	Female	132	52.6
	Male	119	47.4
Age category	Youth	144	57.4
	Old adult	78	31.1
	Advanced adult	20	8.0
	Senior citizen	9	3.6
Length of stay	New	80	31.9
	Relatively new	43	17.1
	Long	50	19.9
	Very long	78	31.1

Source: Author's compilation

7.2 Comparative Elements of Public Distrust in the Police Service

Distrust in the services of the police has become a concern in most countries all over the world. This phenomenon is characterized by several manifestations, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours among the public. Distrust encapsulates not being able to have confidence or confide in dealing with someone or an entity, in the case of the police service. They may be perceived mainly as the way the public react to the police services and functions in the society. The study investigated the relative importance of listed elements of public distrust in the police service. Generally, all the indicators performed above average in terms of response (Table 2), which shows that they are all issues of concern to the public. However, from the calculated response, Means ranging from “Always” to “Not at all”, the results reveal that public’s unsure about the straightforwardness of the South African Police service is the most important concern, among others. This is followed by problem of whether the police can keep important secrets from informants. The next is the uncertainty about the police officers doing their work well, while the least two concerns in the public distrust element are, believing in what the police say and being confident in what the police do to stop crime.

Table 2: Mean Values of the Elements of Public Distrust

Elements of distrust	Mean	Std. deviation
How confident are you in what police do to stop crime?	2.3665	0.88607
Would you depend on the police for your safety?	2.4143	0.98165
Would you believe in what the police say?	2.3147	0.89919
How sure are you that the police would do their job well?	2.4462	0.81492
Would you say the police are straightforward?	2.6853	0.84885
Do the police keep important secrets of the informers?	2.4542	0.95963

Source: Author's compilation

Further analysis was performed using the six indicators to derive level of Distrust as a composite index and its distribution. The categorical output (Table 3) revealed a significant difference in the sample, based on level of distrust, where 34.7% of the public has low distrust, while a majority (65.3%) have high level of distrust in the services of the South African Police. Comparatively, while the rural and urban population are not very different in terms of low level of distrust in the police service, there is a significant difference between the rural and urban population based on the high distrust level. In this case, a significant proportion of the rural population is inclined to high level of distrust in the police, when compared with their urban counterparts.

Table 3: Distribution of the Level of Distrust by Location (Urban or Rural)

Location	Level of distrust, n (%)		Total, n (%)
	Low distrust	High distrust	
Rural	43 (28.5)	108 (71.5)	151 (100)
Urban	44 (44.0)	56 (56.0)	100 (100)
Total	87 (34.7)	164 (65.3)	251 (100)

Pearson Chi-Square = 6.401, df = 1, p = 0.011

Source: Author's compilation

7.3 Socio-Demographic Predictors of Public Distrust

Even though there are many variables that could be linked to public distrust in the police, socio-demographic variables are also deemed important in gauging the public inclination in trusting or distrusting the police. Based on the composite (level of

Distrust), a regression analysis was performed to determine what socio-demographic variable could predict public distrust in the police service. Table 4 shows a regression output on how various selected variables affect level of distrust in the police service.

Table 4: Regression Results on Socio-Demographic Predictors of Public Distrust

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.	Correlations		
	B	Std. error	Beta			Zero-order	Partial	Part
(Constant)	2.378	0.398		5.974	0.000			
Age category	-0.061	0.066	-0.070	-0.925	0.356	-0.019	-0.060	-0.055
Years long in the area	0.117	0.039	0.208	2.994	0.003	0.229	0.190	0.177
Town	-0.022	0.085	-0.016	-0.258	0.797	-0.067	-0.017	-0.015
Highest education level	-0.214	0.062	-0.221	-3.482	0.001	-0.278	-0.219	-0.206
Marital status	-0.026	0.066	-0.028	-0.388	0.699	0.008	-0.025	-0.023
Employment status	0.035	0.036	0.061	0.981	0.327	0.017	0.063	0.058
Previously charged by police	0.434	0.165	0.162	2.631	0.009	0.237	0.167	0.156
Previously reported case to police	0.028	0.096	0.019	0.290	0.772	0.129	0.019	0.017
Citizenship	-0.037	0.182	-0.012	-0.203	0.839	-0.027	-0.013	-0.012
Gender	0.065	0.084	0.047	0.773	0.441	0.100	0.050	0.046

Dependent variable: distrust. $R = 0.398$, $R^2 = 0.158$, $F = 4.505$, $p < 0.001$

Source: Author's compilation

The study revealed educational level ($p = 0.001$), number of years lived in the area ($p = 0.003$) and being previously charged by the police ($p = 0.009$) as having significant effect on the distrust situation. In terms of educational level effect, distrust in the police is associated with lower educational qualification, depicting an inverse association between educational level and distrust. This implies that more education incrementally enhances the trust in the police and vice versa. This result resonates with the reality, in the sense that the more educated someone is, the more the person will understand the laws and by implication, the functions of the police services. Obviously, when this understanding is established, there would be respect for the law and its officers, resulting in trust and confidence creation.

Quite differently, number of years lived in the area within the OR Tambo is positively associated with public distrust in the police at a significant level. People who have lived long around the study area have shown to have distrust in the police service than other counterparts, who have lived for less number of years. This may stem from bad experiences and encounter people have had with the police services over many years, which new folks in the area might not have experienced. Being new in an area could sometimes bring new hopes, assurance, and confidence, especially if the present place of residence is comparatively more secured with less encounter with the police. This euphoria of high trust may linger for a while until a negative encounter with the police occurs, which will become a major turning point that will affect the trust threshold. However, the opposite is the case where new residents experience a high sense of insecurity and early unpleasant encounters with the police service.

Similarly, having been previously charged by the police is also positively associated with distrust in the police service at a significant level. Being charged by the police means that a person has had a very close encounter with the services of the police on a criminal allegation against the person. In this case, the treatment received by the fellow, while being charged determines hugely how the person will take the work of the

police. Unlike residents who have not gotten into close contact with the police through charges of criminal allegations, those who have been charged are exposed to situations that could be unpleasant to them, leading to distrust in the services of the police.

Besides the significant predictors of public distrust in the police services, the correlation result shows that respondent's being young of age, living in the rural location and of non – South African citizenship is associated with distrust. This means that younger people and those living in the rural areas of the study area have more distrust in the police service than their counterparts. Similarly, being separated or widowed, previously reported case to the police and being a male are more inclined to distrust the works and functions of the police, than their counterparts.

8. Discussion of Findings

This study sought to determine most important elements of public's distrust in the South African police service and the socio-demographic variables that drive this disposition. Even though all the elements of public's distrust tested in this study are important, public's being unsure about the straightforwardness of the South African Police service is the most important concern that account for distrust in the system. This finding resonates with the reality on ground regarding citizens' not depending on the police for their safety due to their disposition that the officers are not being straightforward about things. When an organisation is not straightforward, it means it cannot be depended upon, neither would it be a reliable partner in any case. Previous studies, for instance have shown some reasons why citizens are reluctant to report crime incident to the police, which relates to the fact that the police are not being straightforward. These include when they are not satisfied with the police service during encounters (Koster, Van der Leun and Kunst, 2020; Merenda et al., 2020). In South Africa, Mbewu, Obioha and Mugari (2021), revealed police absence of loyalty to citizens, lack of support for victims and lack of follow-up on reported cases as the major discouraging factors in crime reporting. The unreliability and lack of straightforwardness may account for the increasing rate at which the public seek alternative security in the private security companies and even community organised vigilantes. Evidence from previous study in Nigeria (Obioha, 2004), revealed that this situation therefore entails shifting allegiance, from state owned and organised policing agency that possesses the constitutional mandate to protect the citizenry, to private agencies subscribed by the citizens for certain contractual fees.

Also from this study, public's distrust is epitomised by the uncertainty about police keeping important secrets of the informers. As expected, the police have the responsibility to treat information from their informers and agents very secretly, but this study has shown that this ideal is far from reality, when the participants' responses are considered. Through space and time, the public hardly trust the police with secret information due to some reasons, which includes mutual suspicion that exists in the relationship between the police and the public, and the police internal deficiencies and lack of discipline. Another important element in the public distrust of the police is the uncertainty that the police officers are doing their work well. For the public to have trust in the police, they must be certainly assured that the officers in charge are discharging their duties well and in accordance with their constitutional mandate. Previous studies have identified lawfulness and procedural justice by the police (Koster, Van der Leun and Kunst, 2020), and how well the police perform their work to be instrumental in trusting to report crime to the police (Dlepu and Obioha, 2020; Weitzer and Tuch, 2005). In cases

where the police officers derail from this expectation, there would be resultant loss of trust.

From a further analysis conducted on the level of distrust, it revealed that a majority of the respondents has high level of distrust in the South African Police Service, when compared with those with low levels. This finding is consistent with what exists in the public domain and in some literature which have confirmed that public lack of trust and confidence in the police service is not new in South Africa. Roberts and Gordon (2022) interpreted the pattern of public confidence as studied by the Human Sciences Research Council for the period 1998 to 2021 and noted that the trust levels have remained relatively low over this period. Gleaning from HSRC data, they inferred that there was no year in the past 23 years when more than half of the adult public indicated they trusted the police. Comparable patterns have been documented in other post-authoritarian settings. For Romania, Dîncu describes an “endemic mistrust” in public institutions that “is both a legacy of the communist regime and a result of the post-communist transition”, with public opinion fragmented along urban/rural, generational and educational lines (Dîncu, 2026: 627).

Research focusing on the demographics of the population has been used in understanding the public's inclination towards the police function. They focused solely on the variation among citizens' demographics, such as race, age, sex, education and home ownership. The present study revealed that a high level of distrust in the police is significantly influenced and predicted by having lived longer years in the area, lower education, and previously charged by the police. The nexus between living longer in the area for about ten years and high level of distrust in the police can be understandable, given the accumulation of experiences and encounters, especially the negative ones. As trust is a state of being, which is reached after many years of encounter and interactions, it means that many years of the public's interaction and encounter with the police end up with distrust rather than trust and confidence building. Apparently, the situation may be different for someone who has lived in the area for a few years, and may not have many encounters, experience, and interaction with the police to reach any conclusion about trusting the police or not. The longer the exposure to negative experience, the more likely distrust sets in as trust wanes gradually or rapidly, depending on the peculiarity of individual encounter and situations.

Lower level of education was found to be a significant predictor that has influence on level of distrust in the police service. This implies that people with less education have more difficulty trusting the police and their services. This finding resonates with Frank et al. (1996) which revealed an association between low educational attainment and negative perception of the police. One wonders whether this could be because of the inability of people with lower education to understand the constitutional mandate, functions, and role of the police service. Undoubtedly, understanding the constitutional role and function of the police service may require a certain level of reading and understanding, which is absent in people with lower education. This relates to their inability and complications arising from the fact that they are most often unable to express themselves in official language of the service, which is English. From a different perspective, this disposition could be because of other things, such as inferiority complex developed over the years by people of such category, who may harbour a feeling that the Police officials look down on them because of their lower level of education.

Citizen's inclination and perception of the police, including trust in their services have been found to be influenced by the interactions that take place between the two, as

indicated by Wentz and Schlimgen (2012: 116). Previously charged by the police was revealed in the present study as a predictor and significant influencer of the high level of distrust in the police service. In similar context, previous studies (Reisig and Chandek, 2001) showed that involuntary contact with the police, whereby the contact is officer-initiated is associated with dissatisfaction, unlike the case of citizen-initiated contact. Similarly, a study by Bolger, Lytle and Bolger (2020) revealed that informal police contact may lead to more positive perception about the police, than being in formal contact, in which case being previously charged is involved. Apparently, being previously charged by the police for an offence, which is an officer-initiated contact, inferred from Reisig and Chandek (2001) could elicit negative feelings that ultimately led to trust breakdown. In the same vein, trust could have broken down because of unpleasant experiences during an individual's encounter with the police, emanating from the treatment received during the charge process. The interconnection between public's negative experience and reduced confidence in the police has been narrated by previous scholars (Reisig and Lloyd, 2009; Tyler, 2011). This finding substantiates the position that conflicting with the law could lead to distrust in the processes of the criminal justice system, especially the police service.

9. Conclusions

The police service in South Africa under the brand name, South African Police Service (SAPS), work towards fulfilling the constitutional mandate of providing protection and security services to the people. Literature had shown that the South African Police face institutional challenges, but more crucial are declining public trust, suspicion, misunderstanding, dissatisfaction, lack of trust and confidence by the public. While some variables and contexts may account for public distrust on the services of the police, how socio-demographic variables relate to this situation necessitated the present study. The study sought to establish levels of distrust, the main elements of public distrust, and the predictors of public distrust in the police service. By utilising different but suitable analytical tools, the study found a majority, two-thirds of the respondents having high level of distrust in the police, which is more prevalent in the rural areas than in the urban neighbourhoods. The non-straightforwardness of the members of the police service emerged as the most important identifiable element that represents public distrust in the police, followed by police not keeping important secrets and not doing their work well. These elements as revealed in the present study, which epitomise public distrust on the police service have in other jurisdictions led to the public shift of allegiance from the public police to the private policing agencies and increasing use of private police agencies services. High level of distrust was found to be significantly predicted by staying longer years (as measured) in the area, lower level of education, and being previously charged by the police. Furthermore, a positive correlation was found between high level of distrust on the police service and being male, non-South African, previously reported case to the police, previously charged by the police, being employed, lower education, rural, staying (living) long in the area and being young. Essentially, the individual's disposition to distrust or trust the police service as found in the present study could be explained by the principles of Rational Choice Theory. This theory assumed that individuals are free and have a choice to take any decision, given their circumstances and other exigencies.

10. Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study are derived from analysis of responses from a scientifically determined sample of the target population, which has implications for policing policy and practice in South Africa. However, while the findings are useful, they are fraught with some limitations since the data were collected from a cross section of the population. Besides, the sample size used for this study is not a true reflection of the diversity of the OR Tambo district. Therefore, it is difficult to draw causal conclusion that can be generalisable to the entire population of the district. Interpretation of the findings and the application thereof will be limited to the sample, although as a proxy to the target population of the district. Given this limitation, in future, a larger sample that will be more representative of the target population is required to make meaningful and acceptable generalisation. This will require not only increasing the number of participants but also making the sample derived from more diversity of the population.

11. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study and the conclusions drawn, there are recommendations that are amenable to the present situation, which would contribute towards enhancing trust and improving the relationship between the police service and the people.

Firstly, as the findings of this study revealed high level of distrust among majority of the study sample, it is therefore imperative that the police service tackle this situation through measures to return the people's confidence and trust, such as public education and enlightenment.

Secondly, the South African Police Service should embark on regeneration of the systems and structures of the service and reposition the organisation to be more reliable and straightforward, having respect for confidential matters and doing work more efficiently and thoroughly. This could be achieved through an orchestrated police members training that target the revamp of positive aspects of the police culture and behaviours.

Thirdly, this study also recommends interventions that will target specific socio-demographics associated with high levels of distrust on the police service, as revealed in the present study, which include people with lower education, who have stayed for a long time in the area and have been previously charged by the police for an offence. This approach differs from the standard interventional implementation that does not target any specific demographics or groups.

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Condemning Communism as an Act of Memory: Official Discourse, Everyday Remembering, and the Limits of the Tismăneanu Report

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Abstract

The 2006 Tismăneanu Report was expected to help Romania confront its communist past, yet its publication generated further controversy. This paper examines that tension through the sociology of memory. Drawing on discursive psychology and studies of public and everyday remembering, it asks how the Report establishes authority, represents victims, and relates to memories formed outside official debate.

The argument is that official condemnation is itself a practice of memory: it selects experiences, attributes responsibility, and promotes a particular account of the past. The Report invokes scientific expertise to support a judgment that preceded the inquiry. It presents communism as alien to the nation and speaks on behalf of victims without having collected their testimonies directly. Research on gendered repression, everyday remembering, and the communist mentalities studied by Lavinia Betea shows the limits of this account.

Studies of reception and public opinion indicate that condemnation did not produce the consensus anticipated by its supporters. They do not establish that the Report caused later attitudes toward communism. The paper argues for studying official accounts alongside testimonies and everyday practices, with attention to whose experiences each makes visible.

Keywords: Politics of memory; Tismăneanu Report; Discursive psychology; Everyday remembering; Post-communist Romania

1. Introduction

On December 18, 2006, two weeks before Romania joined the European Union, President Traian Băsescu addressed a joint session of Parliament and declared the communist regime “illegitimate and criminal” (Tismăneanu, 2008: 166). The verdict rested on a document of almost 700 pages, the Final Report of the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania (Comisia Prezidențială pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste din România, hereafter CPADCR), widely known as the Tismăneanu Report after the political scientist who chaired the commission. It was “the first clear and public condemnation of communism by a Romanian head of state” (King, 2007: 718).

Supporters expected the condemnation to acknowledge victims’ suffering and help reconcile society with its past. The chair of the commission described it as a “historical catharsis” (Tismăneanu, 2008: 167), and liberal newspapers saw in the Report a “redressive ritual that would bring closure to a traumatic past” (Hogea, 2010, apud Tileagă, 2012: 465). The continuing dispute suggests that these expectations were not generally fulfilled. Members of Parliament booed the President, and in the years after “the report and the President’s gesture of condemnation have stimulated further heated debates” (Paulesc, 2014: 12).

Three strands of scholarship examine different aspects of this episode. Studies of transitional justice examine the Report within the politics of de-communization, focusing on its implications for lustration, access to archives, and reparation (Stan, 2007; Tismăneanu, 2008). Discourse-oriented studies investigate the textual practices through which it constructs an authoritative representation of the past (Tileagă, 2012). Ethnographic and rhetorical studies examine remembering in museums, classrooms, and everyday settings (Haliliuc, 2013; Paulesc, 2014). Read together, they allow us to ask how a state-endorsed account acquires authority and whether people recognize their experiences within it.

We address three sociological questions: 1) how the Report's political mandate shapes its claims to historical knowledge; 2) how its separation of communism from the nation distributes blame and innocence; 3) how its account relates to the memories of people who lived under the regime or learned about it from others.

Our central argument is that *the official condemnation of communism is a selective and politically situated practice of memory. State endorsement gives an account public authority, but does not make it representative of the different ways people remember the regime.*

This argument does not dispute communist repression. It distinguishes the acknowledgment of crimes from the claim that an official judgment can settle how a society remembers its past.

We first explain how discursive psychology treats representation as social action. We then examine how the Report establishes authority and allocates responsibility. The following sections compare its account with research on victims' experiences, gendered repression, everyday remembering, and communist mentalities. Finally, we assess its reception and the limits of its claims to reconciliation. Quotations from Romanian sources are given in our translation.

2. Representation as Action: A Discursive Framework for the Memory of Communism

A cognitive approach asks what people believe about the past and how accurate those beliefs are. Discursive psychology asks how people construct accounts of the past and what they accomplish by using them. For Potter and Edwards, "representations are discursive objects which people construct in talk and texts" (Potter and Edwards, 1999: 448), and the analyst's interest lies less in their sense-making role than in "the way the representations are constructed as solid and factual, and on their use in, and orientation to, actions (assigning blame, eliciting invitations, etc.)" (Potter and Edwards, 1999: 448). Accounts of the past can therefore be studied as ways of establishing credibility, defining group identities, and attributing responsibility.

Three consequences follow for the study of memory. The first is that construction becomes observable. It "is done in talk and texts as specific versions of the world are developed and rhetorically undermined" (Potter and Edwards, 1999: 449), so that a report, a museum label, or a remark made in a queue can all be examined for the way they make a version of the past appear factual. The second concerns who can establish an account as knowledge, since "what counts as knowledge in different social and cultural settings is part of what is at stake in discourse practices" (Potter and Edwards, 1999: 450). The third is reflexive. Any study of representations has to face the question of "whose representations are privileged, the researchers' or the participants'?" (Potter and Edwards, 1999: 453).

Tileagă applies this perspective to the Romanian case. He proposes that representations of recent history be studied as “social accomplishments” (Tileagă, 2012: 464) and recalls that inquiry reports are “politically salient exercises in reality construction” (Green, 1983, apud Tileagă, 2012: 466). This approach does not require accepting or rejecting the Report as a whole. It asks how its authors select evidence, respond to competing interpretations, and claim to speak for the nation. Dîncu makes the general point in his account of the social construction of reality: language is “the main instrument through which social realities become objective and accepted as self-evident” (Dîncu, 2026: 610).

Memory studies likewise examine remembering as a practice. Paulesc recalls Olick’s formula that collective memory “is something – or rather many things – we do, not something we have” (Paulesc, 2014: 299). Haliliuc distinguishes personal memory, which is fluid and selective, from public memory, a mode of remembering that “aims at ‘fixing’ what people remember” (Haliliuc, 2013: 110). The tension she finds is “not between memory and forgetting, but between memory and representation” (Haliliuc, 2013: 110): experiences may be well known and still be denied a place in authoritative sites of memory. For such experiences she borrows the term “unmemorable” (Haliliuc, 2013: 110).

The concepts used to explain communism also have a history. Wydra shows that the symbolic structures of the communist century shaped the categories of its interpreters as well, and that Cold War explanation leaned on “the externalisation of ‘evil’ suggested by theories of totalitarianism” (Wydra, 2012: 64). He adds, following Lefort, that “we deceive ourselves if we assess the nature of communist power from the knowledge of its collapse and the certainties of the post-Cold War order” (Wydra, 2012: 66). This warning calls for scrutiny of how the Report uses totalitarianism to organize its account of the past.

From this framework we derive three questions, which organize the sections that follow. How does the Report establish its authority? Who interprets the past, and whose experiences are interpreted by others? How does this official account relate to remembering in everyday life, within what Paulesc calls “the field of connections, mutual influences, and collisions between individual and collective, private and public, official and non-official” (Paulesc, 2014: 19)?

3. The Report as a Text: The Construction of Official Memory

3.1 The Commission’s Mandate and Prior Judgment

The commission was created in April 2006 by the President, in response to an appeal from civil society, and it had until December to finish its work (Tismăneanu, 2008: 169-171). Responsibility for selecting its members was delegated to its chair. “President Băsescu entrusted me with selecting the members of the commission”, writes its chair (Tismăneanu, 2008: 169), who says he took into account “the scholarly competence and moral credibility” of those invited (Tismăneanu, 2008: 169). The body “lacked legislative backing and had minimum financial support, its members working mostly *pro bono*” (Tismăneanu, 2008: 171), and it had “no decision-making power and no subpoena prerogative” (Tismăneanu, 2008: 171).

The commission was asked both to document repression and to condemn it: “the work of the commission was meant to pass moral judgment on the defunct dictatorship” (Tismăneanu, 2008: 169). The chair acknowledges that “the PCACDR”, as he abbreviates the name of the commission, “was indeed a political project” (Tismăneanu, 2008: 177),

and a broadly favorable reviewer likewise observes that it “was not intended to produce an academic tome” but pursued “an avowedly political project” (King, 2007: 721).

The question is how a mandate to condemn affected the inquiry. Such a mandate does not invalidate the evidence collected, but the judgment it prescribes must be distinguished from the conclusions reached through research. Tileagă illustrates the distinction by quoting the chair: for him, “as historian and political scientist”, the verdict of such a commission “was not needed in order to argue that ‘communism has been an aberrant system, criminal, inhuman’” (Tismăneanu, 2007, apud Tileagă, 2012: 470). The professional categories, Tileagă comments, are “deployed to legitimate a social and moral judgment that is already firmly in place” (Tileagă, 2012: 470). The mandate and the chair’s stated position suggest that the commission was expected to document and give official standing to a judgment already held.

The selection of members also affected the Report’s credibility. Comparing the Romanian body with truth commissions elsewhere, Stan notes that it drew its members only from among the regime’s opponents and worked under a mandate of six months, much shorter than that of most comparable bodies (Stan, 2007). Paulesc connects the distrust of the Report to its authorship and sponsorship: “commissioned by the President, crafted by right-wing intellectuals”, the Report “was met with distrust in political circles, in the media, and also in academic/intellectual circles” (Paulesc, 2014: 108). The historian Dinu C. Giurescu, as Moghioroși reports, argued that the document had been written in order to condemn rather than to analyze (Moghioroși, 2014).

3.2 Scientific Authority and the Legitimation of Condemnation

The Report presents scientific expertise as grounds for accepting its judgment. Tileagă has traced how often the Report and the texts supporting it describe the undertaking as rigorous, scientific, synthetic, and coherent, and how these terms work together to establish a political judgment as grounded in scholarly method (Tileagă, 2012: 468-469). The aim, he writes, is “the creation of a particular ‘regime of knowledge’” (Tileagă, 2012: 469), and the hope is “that a scientific, carefully documented and sourced approach will trump other competing accounts, setting the record of communism straight” (Tileagă, 2012: 469).

The chair makes the claim explicit: the Report “settles the matter in an order of competence, truth and dignity” (Tismăneanu, 2007, apud Tileagă, 2012: 469). Here, expertise is invoked not simply to support a conclusion, but to settle disagreement. History in particular, as Teodorescu reminds us, is “a science compelled to revise, almost with every new generation, its concepts, methodologies, and working techniques” (Teodorescu, 2026: 517), and two historians may render the same epoch differently without their disagreement necessarily implying factual misrepresentation. The question is whether appeals to expertise leave room for disagreement over interpretation. In the terms of discursive psychology, the Report constructs its account “as solid and factual” (Potter and Edwards, 1999: 448) while assigning blame, which is one of the actions that such constructions typically serve.

The claim to certainty is also expressed through the Report’s language. The Report promises to bring together “all the incontestable facts” about the repressive nature of the regime (CPADCR, 2006, apud Tileagă, 2012: 467), and yet its central figure is an estimate that between 500,000 and 2,000,000 people were victimized by the state (King, 2007: 719), a range whose upper bound is four times the lower. The range

concerns the precision of the estimate, not the reality of repression. It nevertheless qualifies the promise of an entirely settled record.

The number of victims and the account of the opposition were disputed at once among historians, journalists, and public figures, and both the Romanian Academy and the Institute for the Investigation of the Crimes of Communism contested the scientific value of the document (Tileagă, 2012: 475). King, while acknowledging the Report's contribution, expects that historians "will occasionally cringe at the sweeping conclusions contained in the report, the unsubtle appropriation of patriotism, the unevenness in sophistication from chapter to chapter, and the sharp distinctions between villains and victims" (King, 2007: 721).

The scientific register also changes the status of disagreement. If the Report is equated with scientific knowledge, disagreement can be treated as denial rather than interpretation. In the texts that defend the Report, rival accounts are described as "revisionist" and "negationist" (Tileagă, 2012: 469).

In the chair's retrospective account, those who protested in Parliament "acted like hooligans" (Tismăneanu, 2008: 168); he reports with approval the President's view that "the hysteria of the crypto-communists and the nationalists" was no reason to desist and that their attitude was "a sign that the path chosen was the right one" (Tismăneanu, 2008: 168). Treating opposition as confirmation makes the argument harder to challenge on its merits. The objection that the Report exonerates political figures who were killed by the communists but were themselves no democrats is called "a false problem" (Tismăneanu, 2008: 172), and any attempt to find such a tendency in the document "a malevolent, biased statement more than a pointed academic argument" (Tismăneanu, 2008: 173).

Many of the attacks were indeed made in bad faith, and some were openly anti-Semitic (Tismăneanu, 2008: 169). These attacks must be distinguished from criticism of the Report's methods and interpretations. A division between those who accept the Report and those who deny repression excludes another position: accepting the evidence of crimes while questioning how the state selects and presents that evidence.

The recommendations also prescribe how the past should be commemorated. The Report asks for a monument to the victims in the capital, for lustration legislation, and for a ban on the public display of communist symbols, and it holds, in a passage quoted by its chair, that "no form of commemoration of communist leaders/representatives should be allowed" (Tismăneanu, 2008: 173). King wonders whether such measures "would encourage further debate about the past or simply replace a dark mythology with a rather more luminous one" (King, 2007: 721), and observes that they "seem at odds with the explicit call for greater openness and study of the communist past" made in the Report's introduction (King, 2007: 721).

Restrictions on commemoration do not necessarily prevent open historical inquiry. They do, however, require an explanation of where legitimate disagreement ends and prohibited commemoration begins. Teodorescu's account of totalitarian rule turns on the imposition, through physical and symbolic violence, of a "single truth" as an absolute principle of government (Teodorescu, 2026: 519). The Report employs no such coercion, so the two cases cannot be equated. The question here is narrower: can state endorsement make competing interpretations less acceptable in public debate?

3.3 Communism as “Other”: Symbolic Boundaries of National Identity

The Report also defines who belongs to the nation. Tileagă shows how its account presents communism as foreign in origin and opposed to national interests. The account “is not self-condemnatory or self-blaming” (Tileagă, 2012: 471); communism “is treated not as something of ‘our’ own making (reproduced and sustained by Romanians themselves), but rather as an emergence and outcome of other people’s desires and actions hostile to national values” (Tileagă, 2012: 472).

This boundary is expressed in categorical formulations. For four and a half decades, “the Romanian state was hijacked by a political group alien to the interests and aspirations of the Romanian people” (CPADCR, 2006: 17, apud King, 2007: 722). The People’s Republic was “neither a republic (in the authentic sense of this concept), nor ‘of the people,’ nor, certainly, Romanian” (CPADCR, 2006: 627, apud King, 2007: 722). The list of the regime’s crimes opens with the “abandonment of national interests through limitless servility” to the Soviet Union (CPADCR, 2006: 634, apud King, 2007: 721). The introduction attributes to the regime an anti-national character, in spite of its ceaseless professions of nationalist faith (CPADCR, 2006).

Patriotism also becomes a criterion for judging leaders and assessing the harm done to the population. “The truth is that neither Dej nor Ceausescu showed patriotic sentiments”, the Report holds (CPADCR, 2006, apud Tileagă, 2012: 473), and the autonomy of Romanian foreign policy after 1964 is denied any patriotic meaning. Among the harms of communism it counts “harmful consequences on the biological vitality of the nation” (CPADCR, 2006, apud Tileagă, 2012: 473).

This account raises two problems. First, as King observes, it understates the participation of Romanians in sustaining the regime. The republic may have been neither a republic nor the people’s, King writes, but Romanian it certainly was: “It was Romanians themselves who built the totalitarian machine that claimed other Romanians as victims, who learned to survive and even thrive within it, and who even now look back with some ambiguity on the legacies that the presidential commission’s report roundly denounces” (King, 2007: 722). Ceaușescu’s order was “a system built not just by a band of miscreants but by an entire country that spent the second half of the twentieth century at war with itself” (King, 2007: 723).

Research on legitimacy shows how the regime sought and sometimes obtained support within Romanian society. Ciobanu shows that the Romanian Communist Party, marginal before the war, searched energetically for national legitimacy after 1956 and for a time found it (Ciobanu, 2005: 97-98). Ceaușescu’s speech against the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 marked “the apex of expressed consent by the Romanian population (perhaps the only time when this consent was real and not fabricated)” (Ciobanu, 2005: 106), and it was in Romania that “nationalist pride provided legitimation for a communist leader” (Ciobanu, 2005: 107). The party that the Report describes as alien was, as Haliliuc recalls, “proportionally the biggest in the communist bloc” (Haliliuc, 2013: 110).

Nationalist appeals and mass party membership connected the regime to society. Membership does not in itself prove consent, but neither can it be explained by treating the party as wholly external to the population. Accommodation also mattered. In societies captive to totalitarian regimes, Teodorescu writes, lying works as “a generalized complicity between individual and State, in which hypocrisy is raised to the rank of a political system” (Teodorescu, 2026: 506-507). Such accommodation involved people in sustaining the regime, without making their power or responsibility equal.

Second, the Report criticizes the regime using some of the nationalist terms through which that regime justified itself. Its measure of the regime is patriotism, its first charge is servility to a foreign power, and its concern extends to the “biological vitality” of the nation. This is the vocabulary through which the regime justified itself from the mid-1960s on, when, as Ciobanu notes, “an enemy of Ceausescu was not only an enemy of the party-state but of Romania itself” (Ciobanu, 2005: 108). The Report reverses the judgment while retaining patriotism as a measure of political legitimacy. King characterizes this tendency as “the unsubtle appropriation of patriotism” (King, 2007: 721).

Attributing repression to outsiders can preserve an image of national innocence and obscure differences in participation within society. Teodorescu warns of the recurrent tendency to privilege heroic representations of history, at the risk of sliding into ethnocentrism, and notes that moments of social frustration predispose to it (Teodorescu, 2026: 518). Presenting the nation chiefly as a victim risks a similar selectivity.

Haliliuc, drawing on Bucur, explains why a memorial institution might privilege external responsibility. The focus on Soviet imposition and on the early years of terror answers to a “strong psychological motivation” (Haliliuc, 2013: 118): it compensates for mass party membership and for the scarcity of dissidents, and it allows a memorial institution to “demonize the communist regime as a foreign Soviet imposition, while still boasting resistance” (Haliliuc, 2013: 118). The Sighet Museum, she observes, “teaches its visitors to view the regime as a foreign invader” (Haliliuc, 2013: 126), and several authors of the Report take part in its symposia and summer schools (Haliliuc, 2013: 112).

With the presidential condemnation, this memory became “the official position of the Romanian state” (Haliliuc, 2013: 111). State endorsement gave this account greater authority without making it representative of all experiences. King identifies the limitation: “Viewing the past as the province of criminals is ultimately no more therapeutic than seeing it as the domain of Cominternists and foreigners” (King, 2007: 723).

4. The Limits of Official Representation

4.1 Expert Mediation and Victims’ Participation

The Report speaks in the name of victims and acknowledges what is lost when their suffering is reduced to numbers. Where victims could be counted they were counted, it says, and yet “we are responsible to every persecuted individual ... for having transformed it into a figure ... and figures are by definition cold and distant” (CPADCR, 2006, apud Tileagă, 2012: 470). Counting victims establishes the scale of repression, but cannot by itself convey their experiences.

The commission worked from archives, scholarship, and published memoirs. It “did not interview directly victims nor include testimonies of surviving victims” (Tileagă, 2012: 475). Stan, measuring it against the truth commissions of South Africa and Argentina, speaks of a “complete lack of testimonies gathered from victims” and notes that no public hearings were held (Stan, 2007). Published sources also required verification against the lives of those described. Stan and Moghioroși report that the document incorrectly declared dead the leader of the 1977 miners’ strike, Constantin Dobre, who was alive and announced that he would sue (Stan, 2007; Moghioroși, 2014).

Without hearings or interviews, victims had no direct opportunity to explain their experiences to the commission. Experts retained the authority to decide how those

experiences would be represented. Associations of former opponents complained that the variety of anti-communist movements had not been properly acknowledged (Tileagă, 2012: 475). As Ciobanu observes in a later study, the public reactions were struggles for representation within the new anti-communist narrative, over whose memory was being recovered and rewritten (Ciobanu, 2009, apud Tileagă, 2012: 475).

The question of “whose representations are privileged” (Potter and Edwards, 1999: 453) concerns who selected and interpreted the available sources. The commission worked with archives, scholarship, and published memoirs; it did not gather new testimony directly from victims. Its authors therefore determined how these sources would speak on victims’ behalf. By balancing statistics against compassion, Tileagă writes, the Report produces a robust official version and sets “limits on the kinds of stories that can be properly (in the sense of both veraciously and appropriately) told” about communism (White, 1992, apud Tileagă, 2012: 471).

4.2 The Gender of Victimhood

The Sighet Museum offers a related example of how public memory gives some experiences greater visibility than others. Haliliuc’s study of the Sighet Museum shows that its exhibits “reify resistance to and victimization by the communist regime as masculine” (Haliliuc, 2013: 108). Thirty-three of its forty-six rooms are devoted exclusively to the first decade of the regime (Haliliuc, 2013: 118). Women appear under the banner “Mothers, Wives, Sisters, Daughters”, and they “are recognized as political victims only by association” (Haliliuc, 2013: 120).

The emphasis on male political prisoners marginalizes women’s experience of reproductive coercion. Between 1966 and 1989 the ban on abortion cost the lives of about five hundred women each year (Haliliuc, 2013: 113), and, in Kligman’s words, “terror became embodied in the sexual lives of women” (Kligman, 1998, apud Haliliuc, 2013: 125). In the museum these experiences remain “unmemorable” (Haliliuc, 2013: 126), included within displays of everyday deprivation rather than treated as a distinct form of repression.

This finding cannot be transferred to the Report without qualification. Its introduction lists the forced pronatalist policy among the regime’s means of control (CPADCR, 2006), and the commission included a leading scholar of the subject, the anthropologist Gail Kligman (King, 2007: 718). Yet the account of a nation victimized by a foreign power leaves a difficulty unresolved. Under Decree 770, women faced imprisonment and death because the state claimed to defend the nation’s demographic future. Their experience exposes a conflict within the nation, between state demands and women’s control over their bodies. The category of the nation’s “biological vitality”, which appears in the Report, belongs to the same register as the demographic nationalism that produced Decree 770 (Haliliuc, 2013: 113).

Before the Report, Betea had examined the prohibition of abortion between 1966 and 1989 as “a fact of social memory” (Betea, 2004: 244). This directs inquiry toward how women experienced the policy and how those experiences were later recalled and passed on.

4.3 Everyday Remembering

Everyday memories of communism differ across people and settings, and often combine criticism with attachment. Paulesc, who followed it in Bucharest through conversations, objects, bars, performances, and foods, describes remembering as “a complex, meaningful, contingent, and rather cluttered process” (Paulesc, 2014: 297).

Live and mediated forms of memory coexist: “The communist past is not dead and its remembering is not entirely delegated to *lieux de memoire*” (Paulesc, 2014: 110).

Among Paulesc’s interlocutors, the Report offered little help in understanding the past. Two students interviewed by Paulesc complain of “a history that is hidden from us” (Paulesc, 2014: 107); one of them says that what he has are fragments of films and “fragments of what remains after one had visited a museum” (Paulesc, 2014: 109). Paulesc explains how distrust obstructed their use of official accounts: “it was quasi-impossible for my interlocutors to rely on the mediation of texts in their quest for knowledge about communism” (Paulesc, 2014: 108). The political quarrel over the condemnation says “a great deal about the largely dogmatic communist/anti-communist dichotomy”, she concludes, and very little about what Tileagă calls “the multiple realities, memories, and meanings attached to communism” (Paulesc, 2014: 13).

Tileagă identifies a related limitation through textual analysis. “For most Romanians communism was not just an external ideological order governing or influencing the behaviour of elites and population” (Tileagă, 2012: 473). Communism also shaped everyday social relations. A history centered on political leaders, in Bucur’s words, “provides very little insight into how people lived it” (Bucur, 2009, apud Tileagă, 2012: 473). The Report “falls victim to the temptation of treating the memory of communism as singular, mimetic, as somehow independent of social relations between people, as a tangible thing rather than a process” (Tileagă, 2012: 474), and its preferred version “reflects more the ideologies of elite interpreters than those of ordinary people” (Tileagă, 2012: 474).

Everyday memories are also selective and need to be examined critically. Remembering is shaped by the experience of the transition, which Andreescu describes as “a trauma of rapid and swift social dislocation from the order of the state to the order of the market” (Andreescu, 2014: 55), and by the public language available for discontent. Ost has shown that after 1989 the vocabulary of class was discredited by its association with the old regime, with the result that “‘nation’ had a free ride as the cry around which to galvanize critics” (Ost, 2015: 544).

Where present hardship is attributed exclusively to communist continuities, changes in the distribution of power and resources may receive insufficient attention. Film offers another way to examine these experiences. As King remarks, filmmakers have responded to the uncomfortable realities of the communist past “more eagerly than historians and political scientists” (King, 2007: 722), and the cinema of the transition has attracted scholarship concerned with experiences insufficiently represented in official discourse (Andreescu, 2014; Luca, 2014).

4.4 Mentalities, “Remanences”, and Oral Testimony

Lavinia Betea examines how ways of thinking learned under communism persist after the regime’s collapse. In *Mentalități și remanențe comuniste* (Betea, 2005) she treats post-communist collective mentalities as “remanences” of communist propaganda and of its effects (Betea, 2005: 30, apud Paulesc, 2014: 126). Paulesc takes up the idea when she traces the survival of the “wooden language” in present-day institutions and political speech (Paulesc, 2014: 163).

Such continuities cannot be explained by treating communism only as a foreign imposition. Whatever the regime’s origins, people learned ways of speaking, expectations of the state, and responses to authority that outlasted it. Comparative studies identify similar continuities. Schwartz and Bardi explain the value priorities of

East Europeans by adaptation to life under communist rule (Schwartz and Bardi, 1997). Alesina and Fuchs-Schündeln find, in the German case, that “the effects of Communism are significant and long-lasting” for people’s preferences regarding the role of the state (Alesina and Fuchs-Schündeln, 2007: 1507). Sandholtz and Taagepera argue that corrupt practices under communism were so widespread that they “became rooted in the culture in these societies” (Sandholtz and Taagepera, 2005: 109). Declaring a regime illegitimate does not by itself change the habits and expectations formed under it.

Betea also uses interviews to examine how former leaders account for their actions. Her book *Partea lor de adevăr* (“Their Part of the Truth”) gathers conversations, recorded between 1993 and 2001, with three former leaders of the regime: Ion Gheorghe Maurer, Alexandru Bârlădeanu, and Corneliu Mănescu (Betea, 2024). She treats them as interested witnesses whose recollections require critical comparison with memoirs, historiography, and archival files, yet she finds the conversations “at least as interesting as the documents” (Betea, 2024: 10). Former officials may provide knowledge unavailable elsewhere, but their accounts must be checked against other sources. Their involvement makes their testimony both valuable and interested.

In the preface to that book Betea also describes how the past was rewritten after 1989. In the 1990s, she writes, people who aimed at improving their social position displayed their anti-communism “belligerently and noisily” (Betea, 2024: 19). In her account, some historians continued to write toward a predetermined conclusion, keeping the old opposition between heroes and enemies but reversing the roles. “What had been white turned black, and the other way round”, she notes, and adds: “The Legionaries were exclusively anti-communist heroes, and the communists, Soviet stooges” (Betea, 2024: 20).

Betea is writing about the 1990s and does not mention the Report in these pages. We use her observation to compare two ways of writing history: the earlier account of a heroic party confronting external enemies and the Report’s account of an innocent nation confronting a party subordinated to Moscow. The comparison is ours, not Betea’s. The chair’s reply to those who objected to the treatment of non-democratic victims, namely that the commission identified victims “regardless of their political colors” (Tismăneanu, 2008: 173), leaves a separate question open: how to acknowledge persecution without endorsing the victim’s earlier political commitments. A substantial collection of critical readings of the Report appeared under a title referring to the “illusion” of anti-communism (Ernu et al., 2008).

5. Official Condemnation and Public Reception: Legitimacy and Social Effects

The Report was also intended to strengthen the legitimacy of the post-communist order. According to its chair, the President’s act opened the possibility of “laying the foundation of a ‘posttotalitarian legitimacy’” (Tismăneanu, 2008: 175). Ciobanu’s research, completed before the commission was established, shows why official condemnation alone might be insufficient.

Ciobanu distinguishes “legitimacy as claimed and legitimacy as accepted” (Ciobanu, 2005: 22) and finds that Romanian democracy rests on passive acceptance: citizens assent to the system out of the conviction that “a return to the previous communist regime is impossible and that there are no viable alternatives” (Ciobanu, 2005: 29). “This gap between the normative and the procedural aspects of legitimacy has tended to stall the process of democratization without necessarily threatening to

undermine it” (Ciobanu, 2005: 23). Her conclusion is that “the road from dictatorship to democracy can neither be reduced to a change in the political institutions nor based on mere rejection of the past regime” (Ciobanu, 2005: 226).

She also examines an earlier use of historical memory in political competition. In the 1990s the historical parties tried to challenge the heirs of the National Salvation Front by reviving the memory of the pre-war order: “The reinvention of a relatively remote historical past became their main weapon” (Ciobanu, 2005: 227). In her account, this strategy offered limited positive grounds for accepting the new regime and contributed to “an ideological bipolarity” between the two camps (Ciobanu, 2005: 227). The 2006 condemnation likewise used judgments about the past to support claims to legitimacy, this time with presidential authority. Ciobanu later described which groups gained and lost moral standing: the Report “deprived two groups (former communists and nationalists) of an honourable place in national history” and “endowed former dissidents and anti-communist opposition groups with a moral authority that conferred on them political legitimacy” (Ciobanu, 2009, apud Tileagă, 2012: 465).

Condemnation thus affected the standing of competing political groups. Tismăneanu addresses a related concern formulated by Adam Michnik, namely that the debate about communism “has thus become, through blackmail and discrimination against political enemies, a tool in the struggle for political power” (Michnik, 2002, apud Tismăneanu, 2008: 175). His response distinguishes the Romanian condemnation from this use of memory: in Romania the condemnation “did not serve either as a weapon of President Bănescu against his enemies” or as a means of rehabilitating pre-communist extremists (Tismăneanu, 2008: 175).

Yet the Report named living politicians, among them the honorary president of the largest party in Parliament (King, 2007: 720-721), and King holds that this willingness to list names lay, indirectly, behind Parliament’s attempt to unseat the President in the spring of 2007 (King, 2007: 718). Whatever the President intended, the Report became part of a struggle over political authority as well as historical interpretation.

Studies of reception show how these political disputes shaped public debate. Hogeia, who analyzed the political and media discourse, found it organized around “timing (the right moment has already passed), authority (only a non-communist can condemn communism), political capital (witch-hunting), and a new beginning (through the closure of a traumatic past)” (Hogeia, 2010, apud Tileagă, 2012: 465). Much of the debate therefore concerned who could condemn communism and whose interests condemnation served. The Orthodox Church, which since 1989 had “avoided any moral self-examination” regarding its collaboration with the regime (Stan and Turcescu, 2000: 1470), responded to the Report’s treatment of its hierarchy by commissioning its own investigation (Tileagă, 2012: 475; Moghioroși, 2014). The condemnation prompted another organization to defend its own account of the past.

Official endorsement did not ensure public acceptance. Tileagă judged that the Report’s influence was “limited at the general level of public opinion” and its function as a legal instrument “extremely limited” (Tileagă, 2012: 465). Surveys likewise record continuing ambivalence, although they do not directly measure the Report’s influence. In a poll conducted in 2010 by CSOP together with the state institute charged with investigating the crimes of communism, 61% of respondents considered communism a good idea, against 53% four years earlier, that is, in the year of the condemnation; 41%

agreed that the regime had been criminal and 42% that it had been illegitimate (Hotnews, 2010).

In the summer of 2025, a survey carried out by INSCOP for the same institute found that 55.8% thought the communist regime had been rather good for Romania, up from 45% in 2014, that 66.2% had a good opinion of Nicolae Ceaușescu, and that only 7% said they had learned about communism at school (Mihai, 2025). By December 2024 the Report itself could no longer be found on the websites of the Presidency, the Parliament, or the Government (Roman, 2024).

These figures require caution. Polls are not only methods of measurement but, as Dîncu argues, “devices for constructing public opinion” (Dîncu, 2026: 553). Answers may be “constructions of the moment, influenced by the wording of the questions, the social context, the status of the respondent, and the relationship with the interviewer” (Dîncu, 2026: 554). The commissioning body, here an institute investigating communist crimes, also helps determine which questions are asked. Differently worded items cannot be treated as a single measure.

The figures do not show that the Report caused nostalgia. Economic hardship and weak public institutions after 1989 also shaped evaluations of the past. The transition left, in Méndez de Valdivia’s words, “a legacy of distrust in public institutions” (Méndez de Valdivia, 2026: 474). In the 2024–2025 electoral campaigns, appeals to “better times” drew on these disappointments (Méndez de Valdivia, 2026: 473). Favorable memories of communism must therefore be examined alongside people’s experience of the order that replaced it.

The surveys nevertheless show a gap between the state’s judgment and public evaluations. This gap cautions against mistaking official agreement for social consensus. Dîncu associates such discrepancies in polarized settings with “false consensuses and ‘silent majorities’” (Dîncu, 2026: 549). Four years after condemnation, fewer than half of respondents endorsed its two central terms, illegitimate and criminal. Schools initially offered only limited support for teaching this history: the first textbook on communism was introduced in 2008 for an optional course (Paulesc, 2014: 108).

The chair of the commission acknowledged limitations in implementation when he wrote that the lack of resources and of consensus “prevented the Final Report and the PCACDR from having a structural impact” (Tismăneanu, 2008: 171) and that the commission and the President “could not impose reconciliation in the absence of repentance” (Tismăneanu, 2008: 178). This explanation stresses inadequate resources and the absence of repentance. We also ask whether speaking for society through a single authoritative account made it harder to address conflicting memories within it.

6. Discussion

The analysis supports four conclusions: 1) the Report uses scientific authority to support a judgment that preceded the inquiry; 2) its separation of communism from the nation understates Romanians’ participation in sustaining the regime; 3) its authors speak for victims without having collected their accounts directly, while research on women’s experiences and everyday life shows the limits of a unified national narrative; and 4) the available studies do not support the expectation that condemnation would produce a shared assessment of the past.

Condemnation participates in the production of memory. The Report selects evidence, organizes it into a narrative, and assigns responsibility with the authority of the state. Its appeal to science may make these choices less visible. Examining them does

not deny repression. It remains possible to acknowledge that hundreds of thousands of people were arrested, imprisoned, deported, or killed, and that a regime whose declared aim was to improve the quality of people's lives ended by "depriving the popular masses of the elementary goods of living" (Otovescu, 2026: 270). Acknowledging these crimes does not require accepting every interpretive choice through which the Report presents them.

This critique does not dismiss the Report's scholarly contribution. King calls it "the most serious, in-depth, and far-reaching attempt to understand Romania's communist experience ever produced" (King, 2007: 719), and its documentary contribution remains relevant. Nor does the critique side with those who attacked the commission in order to protect their own past; the chair identifies among its prominent opponents former officials and extreme nationalists (Tismăneanu, 2008: 167). Tileagă's caution also holds: "there is no point in starting from the assumption that elite texts, like the report, can be (or always are) instruments serving sectional and party politics" (Tileagă, 2012: 474). We therefore examine what the text does before attributing political motives to its authors.

A state need not wait for social consensus before acknowledging repression. Condemnation can therefore be justified without expecting everyone to remember the regime in the same way. Tismăneanu insists that the condemnation rested on "a civic-liberal ethos" and not on "a moral-absolutist discourse" (Tismăneanu, 2008: 174), and that the commission sought a synthesis between analytical distance and empathy with those who suffered (Tismăneanu, 2008: 172-173).

The difficulty lies in linking acknowledgment of harm to acceptance of a particular historical explanation. An apology by the state to those it harmed, which the President also offered (Tismăneanu, 2008: 174), can recognize documented harm without settling every question about the regime's place in Romanian history. Those questions remain open to research. Linking the apology to the claim that communism was alien to the nation made acceptance of one depend too closely on acceptance of the other.

The contribution to the sociology of memory is to show why official authority and social recognition must be studied separately. Paulescu's research demonstrates how much remembering takes place outside reports and museums. Official accounts and popular nostalgia both select from the past, but they differ in the evidence they use and the power they command. Neither should be treated as a transparent record of experience. The question is how each account is produced, whose experiences it includes, and how other people respond to it.

The study has three limits. It draws on published analyses and the Report's introduction, rather than a systematic reading of all chapters or original fieldwork. Its claims therefore concern the overarching account examined here, not every contribution to the Report. The survey figures come from press reports and cannot establish the effects of condemnation. Finally, English-language scholarship predominates in the corpus; Betea's work and recent Romanian sociology only partly redress that imbalance.

7. Conclusions

We have examined how the Tismăneanu Report sought to establish an authoritative memory of communism and why that authority did not settle public disagreement. Discursive psychology helps identify how the text claims expertise,

assigns responsibility, and speaks for others. Research on gendered, everyday, and oral memory shows what these choices leave insufficiently explained.

The Report's state endorsement distinguishes it from other accounts of the past, but does not remove its selectivity. The passages examined here support a prior judgment, draw a boundary between communism and the nation, and give experts the authority to represent victims. These are choices about how to remember, as well as claims about what happened.

Women's experiences of reproductive coercion, young people's fragmentary knowledge, former leaders' recollections, and favorable memories of everyday life call for different questions and sources. They cannot all be understood through the opposition between a criminal regime and an innocent nation. Betea's work adds a further problem: habits learned under communism may persist even among people who reject the regime.

Public evaluations remained divided after 2006. Favorable views of communism persisted, fewer than half of respondents in the cited 2010 poll endorsed the terms of condemnation, and the Report was later reported missing from official websites. These observations show the limits of expectations of closure. They do not demonstrate that the Report caused later attitudes or had no other effects.

Future research should examine how people use, contest, or ignore official accounts in their own remembering. A systematic reading of the Report's chapters could establish how widely the patterns discussed here recur. Comparison with other state apologies could clarify when acknowledgment of harm becomes tied to endorsement of a particular history. King ended his review by asking whether the Report would be used as "yet another opportunity to reject history or as a way of helping Romanians learn, at last, how to own it" (King, 2007: 723). The evidence considered here does not settle that question. It suggests, however, that presenting communism as foreign to the nation makes it harder to examine how Romanians participated in, endured, resisted, and later remembered it.

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Occupational Status and Health-Risk Behaviours: Smoking and Processed Food Consumption in an Urban Romanian Sample

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Abstract

Smoking and processed food consumption are among the behavioural risk factors associated with the development of cancer and cardiovascular diseases. In this study, we examine whether occupational status is associated with the likelihood of engaging in these two health-risk behaviours. We hypothesise that individuals who are currently working are more likely to report smoking and frequent processed food consumption. The study has two objectives: to examine the distribution of lifestyle-related variables, including smoking, processed food consumption, and dietary practices, and to identify the factors associated with smoking status and frequent processed food consumption. The study sample consisted of 61 participants who were living in Craiova, Dolj County, Romania, at the time of data collection. Participants were recruited using a link-tracing sampling procedure based on participant referrals. Data were collected using an egocentric network questionnaire. Specifically, we used a validated questionnaire developed within a Romanian living lab to investigate behavioural risk factors associated with the development of cancer. Most participants who were currently working reported frequent processed food consumption and did not engage in regular physical activity. Among these participants, 41% were current smokers. The likelihood of being a current smoker was higher among individuals who were currently working, were younger, and lived in lower-income households. The likelihood of frequent processed food consumption was also higher among younger participants and lower among those who had been diagnosed with cardiovascular disease. These findings suggest that occupational status and age are relevant correlates of health-risk behaviours in the study sample.

Keywords: Health-Risk Behaviours; Smoking; Processed Food Consumption; Occupational Status; Personal Networks

1. Introduction

At the EU level, cardiovascular diseases were the leading cause of death in 2021, accounting for 32% of all deaths, followed by cancer (22%) and COVID-19 (11%), according to a Eurostat report. Together, cardiovascular diseases and cancer accounted for 54% of all deaths in the EU (Eurostat, 2024). The prominence of COVID-19 within this mortality profile reflects the fact that the pandemic was still ongoing at that time. At the national level, cardiovascular diseases were the leading cause of mortality in Romania, accounting for 55% of all deaths. Cancer was the second leading cause, accounting for 17% of deaths. Among cancer-related deaths, lung cancer ranked first, followed by colorectal and breast cancer. Other diseases of the respiratory system, excluding cancer, also accounted for a further 11% of all deaths (National Institute of Public Health, n.d.).

According to OECD data, age-standardised mortality from preventable causes in Romania (358 per 100,000 inhabitants) is almost twice the EU average (180), while the gap in life expectancy between men and women has been associated with men's greater exposure to risk factors such as smoking and excessive alcohol consumption (Popa-Velea, 2026: 314-315). Lifestyle-related behaviours have a substantial impact on individuals' health. Smoking, high alcohol consumption, high body mass index (BMI), and low levels of physical activity contribute substantially to the global burden of disease, including disability and premature mortality (Gakidou et al., 2017). These findings draw attention to the long-term consequences of health-risk behaviours for morbidity, disability, and premature mortality. From a human resources perspective, premature morbidity may become a serious long-term concern. Individuals who are currently working may, in the future, be compelled to leave the labour market considerably earlier for health-related reasons, either through early retirement or as a result of more severe consequences, including death.

This study seeks to answer the following research question: Is there an association between occupational status and individuals' likelihood of engaging in specific health-risk behaviours, namely smoking and processed food consumption? Both behaviours have been shown to pose health risks and to contribute to the deterioration of individuals' health status. Their inclusion in the European Code Against Cancer further confirms their relevance as risk factors for individual health (International Agency for Research on Cancer, n.d.). An analysis of the factors associated with these two behaviours may contribute to a better understanding of the potential implications of these behaviours for individuals' work ability and continued participation in the labour market. More importantly, such an analysis may inform the development of measures aimed at reducing engagement in these two health-risk behaviours.

The relevance of examining smoking and processed food consumption lies in their widespread presence in everyday life and in their association with adverse long-term health outcomes. Both behaviours are recognised as modifiable risk factors within cancer prevention frameworks and may contribute to the development of chronic diseases. Their potential consequences extend beyond individual health, as deteriorating health may also affect work ability and continued participation in the labour market. Examining the social and occupational factors associated with these behaviours may therefore contribute to a better understanding of their distribution and may inform the development of targeted prevention measures.

The hypothesis tested in this study is that certain health-risk behaviours, such as smoking and processed food consumption, are more prevalent among individuals who are currently working. Although this hypothesis is supported by the existing literature, the present study aims to examine the extent to which the patterns observed in the study sample are consistent with previous findings, given that the studies identified in the literature were conducted in countries with substantially higher levels of socioeconomic development than Romania. To this end, we examine the distribution of health-risk factors both among study participants who were working at the time of data collection and among the alters named by each respondent. For this analysis, we use pooled data combining information on participants and their reported alters. In this study, health-related behaviours refer to the following variables: processed food consumption, smoking, dietary practices, and regular physical activity. We also identify the sociodemographic factors associated with smoking status and with frequent consumption of processed foods.

A further motivation for addressing this topic was the limited number of sociological studies examining these health-risk behaviours as potentially “contagious” practices shaped by social influence within an interconnected population. This dimension underlines the sociological relevance of the study. Moreover, the fact that the study population was drawn from an urban area in a country characterised by a comparatively lower level of socioeconomic development represents an additional element of novelty. For the present study, participants were recruited through a link-tracing procedure based on referrals through strong social ties. Just as information about the research was transmitted from one person to another, information disseminated through a potential public health campaign aimed at reducing individual health-risk behaviours could similarly diffuse through the social network. In other words, the respondent recruitment strategy could serve as a starting point for developing a network-based intervention aimed at reducing smoking and processed food consumption.

The data collection process began with the identification of five seeds with distinct sociodemographic characteristics. This strategy was intended to introduce sociodemographic variation at the beginning of the recruitment process, given that individuals tend to form social ties with others who are similar to themselves, a tendency known as homophily (Borgatti et al., 2024). The data were statistically analysed using RStudio.

2. Theoretical Framework

Europe accounts for only 10% of the world’s population; however, “approximately 25% of all cancer cases diagnosed annually occur in Europe” (European Commission, Joint Research Centre, 2022). In 2020, approximately four million people were diagnosed with cancer, while a further 1.9 million died from the disease. In order to reduce the number of cancer cases over time and prevent such a high incidence in the future, the European Commission developed the European Code Against Cancer (International Agency for Research on Cancer, n.d.). The Code includes recommendations concerning the avoidance of tobacco use (“Do not smoke. Do not use any form of tobacco”) and engaging in physical activity (“Be physically active in everyday life. Limit the time you spend sitting”). It also promotes a healthy diet by recommending the consumption of “plenty of whole grains, pulses, vegetables and fruit” and the avoidance of processed meat. Furthermore, the Code recommends limiting alcohol consumption, exposure to sunlight, and exposure to hazardous substances in the workplace. In addition, individuals are advised to participate in organised cancer screening programmes for colorectal, breast, and cervical cancer, in accordance with the relevant recommendations (International Agency for Research on Cancer, n.d.).

Tobacco use is addressed in the first recommendation of the European Code Against Cancer, indicating that it is among the principal risk factors contributing to the development of cancer. Smoking represents one of the most serious challenges faced by public health experts, who describe tobacco use as a global epidemic. Approximately eight million people worldwide die each year as a result of tobacco use. Of these deaths, more than seven million result from direct tobacco consumption, while slightly over one million are attributable to exposure to second-hand smoke (World Health Organization, 2023). In the context of the present study, the concept of an epidemic is also relevant to the social diffusion of smoking behaviour, rather than being understood exclusively in its medical or epidemiological sense. “High-income countries allocate between 6% and 15%

of their total healthcare expenditure to the treatment of smoking-related diseases” (World Bank, 1999).

From a sociological perspective, health-related behaviour is shaped by norms, values and social positions that can be learned and modified (Popa-Velea, 2026: 319). The existing literature supports the concept of social contagion in relation to tobacco use (Christakis and Fowler, 2013). When a member of the ego’s social network, such as a friend, smokes, the likelihood that the ego will also smoke may increase (Ennett et al., 2008). Another study suggests that smoking is a behaviour that may spread through an endogenous effect involving peer-to-peer influence. When an individual belongs to a group containing a large number of smokers, that individual is more likely to adopt the same behaviour. The desire to smoke may be reinforced by observing friends or colleagues smoking (Ali and Dwyer, 2009). An exogenous effect may also occur when behaviour responds to exogenous characteristics of the reference group, for example when smoking is widespread in their neighbourhood but not within their personal network (Ali and Dwyer, 2009). Personal network studies have shown that a 10% increase in the prevalence of smoking within an individual’s network is associated with a 5% increase in the probability that the ego will become a smoker (Ali and Dwyer, 2009). Moreover, the influence exerted by close friends during adolescence may persist into adulthood (Ali and Dwyer, 2009).

Lifestyle-related factors are associated with higher levels of workplace absenteeism (Virtanen et al., 2018). As one such factor, smoking is associated not only with adverse health outcomes but also with “significant impairments in work productivity” (Suwa et al., 2017). Tobacco use is therefore associated with costs at the societal level, in addition to those experienced by individuals, and is associated with lower workplace productivity (Sherman and Lynch, 2014). The same study found that smokers had lower compliance with recommended preventive care and lower medication adherence than non-smokers. Characteristics of the working environment may also influence smoking behaviour. In particular, work-related stress is associated with an increase in smoking intensity (Khorrami et al., 2021).

These factors contribute to increasing the costs ultimately borne by society. Such costs arise from illness and the potential premature exit of individuals from the workforce, in addition to the direct expenditure associated with medical care. “Compared with non-smokers, current smokers had a 33% increase in risk of absenteeism” (Weng, Ali and Leonardi-Bee, 2013). This increased absenteeism may reflect the greater burden of health problems experienced by smokers. Moreover, smokers may exhibit lower medication adherence than non-smokers (Sherman and Lynch, 2014).

According to the existing literature, smoking cessation produces benefits for both individuals and their employers. A study conducted in the United States found that reducing the prevalence of smoking within the workforce would substantially reduce the number of hospitalisations due to myocardial infarction and stroke (Beeler Asay et al., 2017). Such a reduction could also contribute to reducing the incidence of smoking-related diseases, including cancer and cardiovascular disease, two of the leading causes of mortality. However, smoking cessation may also involve group dynamics and the diffusion of behaviour from one person to another. Evidence suggests that smoking cessation may occur within socially connected groups, with changes in smoking behaviour among friends, spouses, and coworkers being associated with changes in individuals’ smoking behaviour (Christakis and Fowler, 2008). Thus, both the adoption of smoking and the decision to quit appear to be closely related to the behaviour of those

within an individual's social environment. Work colleagues may exert a substantial influence, particularly in small workplaces.

Unhealthy dietary practices also constitute an important health-risk factor. In recent decades, “global food systems have undergone substantial changes as a result of advances in food processing and technology, leading to the wider availability, affordability, and marketing of highly processed foods” (Swinburn et al., 2011). Although technological development is often regarded as beneficial and may create opportunities for large companies by enabling larger quantities of food to be produced in shorter periods of time, the resulting increase in the availability and consumption of highly processed foods may pose considerable long-term health risks to consumers. A study addressing this issue observed that “increasingly sophisticated processing methods have altered the structure, nutritional content, and taste of foods” (Poti, Braga and Qin, 2017). Consumers are therefore increasingly exposed to these new types of food products. This development has attracted the attention of researchers, who have found that processed meat and sugar-sweetened beverages are associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular disease (Micha et al., 2017).

These new types of food products may therefore adversely affect individuals' health, although they are widely consumed for a variety of reasons. One of the recommendations included in the European Code Against Cancer specifically addresses diet and nutrition. Since employed individuals spend a substantial proportion of their time at work, the workplace may contribute to shaping particular dietary patterns. The Code was developed during a period when average sales of ultra-processed products were increasing by approximately 1% per year in high-income countries and by up to 10% per year in middle-income countries (Monteiro et al., 2013).

Eating behaviour is an umbrella concept encompassing several types of decisions, including “what an individual chooses to eat, how much they eat, when they eat, and how they choose to eat, for example, alone or with others” (Emilien and Hollis, 2017). The proximity and availability of food options at work (Baskin et al., 2016), as well as the absence of facilities in which employees can prepare or reheat food, may contribute to unhealthy dietary practices (Clohessy, Walasek and Meyer, 2019). Co-workers may facilitate the adoption of healthier eating habits (Geaney et al., 2013). However, social relationships may also exert a negative influence on dietary behaviour (Wang, Pbert and Lemon, 2014).

The working environment may influence individuals' food choices. Convenience, workplace cultural norms, workload, and work-related stress may negatively affect employees' eating behaviour (Payne, Jones and Harris, 2013). Some employers provide employees with various snacks, partly to improve employee satisfaction. However, the proximity and accessibility of snacks in the workplace may increase their consumption (Baskin et al., 2016). A workplace intervention combining nutrition education and environmental dietary modification was associated with healthier dietary intake and weight loss (Geaney et al., 2016).

Physical inactivity and prolonged sedentary behaviour may both adversely affect individuals' health status. Prolonged sedentary behaviour has been associated with a range of adverse health outcomes (Chu et al., 2016). The inclusion of a specific recommendation concerning physical activity in the European Code Against Cancer highlights the importance of physical activity and of limiting sedentary time for maintaining good health and the potentially serious consequences of physical inactivity. Among desk-based employees, workplace sitting may account for a substantial

proportion of total daily sedentary behaviour (Chu et al., 2016). Office workstation characteristics may also be associated with differences in physical activity during working hours (Lindberg et al., 2018). The implications of occupational sedentary behaviour may extend beyond working hours and have substantial consequences for individuals' health, particularly because office-based employment requires workers to spend a large proportion of the working day performing sedentary tasks. Health-risk behaviours are therefore closely related to individuals' lifestyles, while their potential health consequences are considerable, given the substantial proportion of deaths attributable to cardiovascular diseases and cancer. In the Romanian sociological literature, the risk of illness is likewise regarded as avoidable through lifestyle change, which involves giving up cigarettes and fatty foods, avoiding excessive alcohol consumption and stressful situations, and choosing fresh fruit and vegetables and daily physical activity (Otovescu, 2026: 302). Taken together, the existing literature suggests that health-risk behaviours may be associated both with occupational contexts and with the social relationships in which individuals are embedded. From this perspective, smoking, dietary practices, and physical activity can be examined not only as individual behaviours but also as behaviours potentially shaped by workplace conditions and interpersonal influence.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews conducted in Craiova, Dolj County, Romania, between 10 and 18 April 2024. The study employed a cross-sectional design. Participants were required to be at least 18 years old and to be living in Craiova at the time of data collection. Official domicile in Craiova, as recorded on identity documents, was not required. For instance, university students were eligible if they spent most of their time in the city, even if their permanent legal residence was elsewhere. No other eligibility restrictions were imposed. A total of 61 respondents participated in the study. The research design was based on personal network analysis (McCarty, 2002). Participants were recruited using a link-tracing (chain-referral) sampling procedure. Respondents completed a face-to-face questionnaire that included a name generator for identifying social contacts, or alters, a name interpreter for collecting information about the nominated alters, and an alter–alter tie generator for identifying relationships among them. The research instrument was developed within the Romanian Living Lab of the 4P-CAN project, which examines behavioural risk factors associated with cancer among individuals living in a rural community in Romania (European Commission, n.d.).

The present study focuses on two health-risk behaviours associated with adverse health outcomes: smoking and processed food consumption. Craiova is the administrative seat of Dolj County and the largest city in the historical region of Oltenia. According to the 2021 Population and Housing Census, it had a population of 234,140 inhabitants, making it the seventh-largest city in Romania. The city covers an area of approximately 81 km² and is located in the Oltenia Plain, at an elevation ranging from 75 to 116 metres. From an administrative and functional perspective, Craiova serves as a regional centre for education, economic activity, and healthcare services (Craiova City Hall, n.d.).

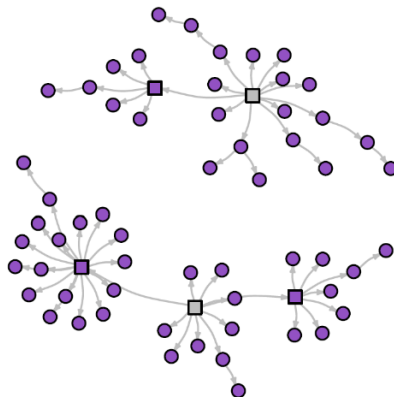
3.2 Procedure

Before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed about the objectives of the research. The ethical standards applicable to this type of study were observed and are described in greater detail below. In addition to receiving an oral explanation of the study objectives, participants were provided with an information sheet containing comprehensive details about the research and their rights as study participants. One such right was the possibility of withdrawing from the study at any time, including after completing the questionnaire and after the data collection process had ended. No risks associated with participation were identified. The information provided by participants was treated as confidential, and the data were anonymised. Participants signed both an informed consent form and a consent form regarding the processing of personal data. No financial or material incentives were offered for participation.

The interviews were conducted face to face. This mode of administration was selected to enhance data accuracy, given that respondents were required to remain attentive for a relatively long period of time. The questionnaire was administered using the Network Canvas software suite. The average interview duration was approximately 35 minutes. The software enabled the collection of both respondent-level data and personal network data, including information on network structure and alter attributes. Throughout the interview, participants were able to view all information entered into the computer. They were also able to return to previous questions and revise their answers where necessary.

The study employed a link-tracing sampling procedure, whereby individuals who had already participated were asked to refer additional potential participants. Respondents were invited to recommend individuals with whom they interacted frequently, representing strong social ties, and who lived in the municipality of Craiova. This recruitment strategy was intended to facilitate recruitment through existing social ties (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Network-Based Sampling through Social Ties (Link-Tracing)



Note: Square-shaped nodes represent the initial participants (seeds) from whom recruitment began and who referred additional respondents. The arrows extend from the person making the referral to the referred respondent, who is graphically represented by a circle. Grey indicates individuals who did not participate, whereas purple indicates those who participated.

Source: Authors' elaboration

Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of the process through which respondents were recruited. The study began with the recruitment of five individuals who were living in Craiova. All five provided referrals to other potential study participants. The initial participants were purposively selected to introduce variation in their sociodemographic characteristics. The group comprised three women and two men. Three had completed upper-secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education, while two had completed university-level education. In terms of age, two of the initial participants were under 30 years old, two were aged between 50 and 55, and one was over 65 years old.

The individuals who provided referrals during the initial stage of the study also differed in terms of occupational status. One was retired, two were employees, and two were self-employed business owners. Three reported incomes below the national average salary, while two reported incomes above this threshold. The inclusion of individuals with diverse characteristics at the initial stage of the study was intended to promote greater variation in the subsequent referral chains.

3.3 Data

The questionnaire began with the collection of sociodemographic data on the study participants. Age was determined on the basis of participants' dates of birth, as this approach allowed for greater accuracy than directly asking respondents to report their age. In some circumstances, respondents may report the age they are about to reach rather than their current age, owing to momentary confusion or other factors. Consequently, calculating age from the date of birth was considered important for improving the accuracy of the statistical models subsequently estimated. Data were also collected on the following sociodemographic variables: relationship status (single/in a relationship), educational attainment (up to eight years of schooling, between nine years of schooling and post-secondary non-tertiary education, and university education), sex (female/male), personal income, and household income.

Data on health-risk behaviours were collected both for respondents and for the alters with whom they interacted frequently. For smoking status, the response categories available for both respondents and alters were: current smoker, former smoker, occasional smoker, never smoker, and do not know/no response. Participation in sports at least once per week was measured using a binary response category (yes/no). Only activities involving a meaningful level of physical exertion were considered. Thus, a distinction was made between activities such as fishing and physically demanding sports such as football, swimming, or running. With regard to the variable measuring whether individuals followed a specific diet, the response categories allowed participants to indicate whether they were following a diet based on medical advice, following a diet as a result of a personal decision, or not following a diet. Processed food consumption was considered a health-risk behaviour and was therefore measured and subsequently included in the analysis. To minimise potential measurement error arising from respondents' differing interpretations of the concept of "processed foods," several specific examples were provided: salami, ham, luncheon meat, sausages, frankfurters, pâté, pizza, popcorn, crisps, commercially canned foods, burgers, and shawarma. This variable was measured using a binary response format (yes/no), and data were collected for both egos and alters. The presence of cardiovascular disease was assessed through an open-ended question that allowed respondents to report any type of cardiovascular

condition. Based on these responses, a separate variable indicating self-reported cardiovascular disease was subsequently constructed.

3.4 Statistical Analysis

We used pooled data comprising information on both respondents and their nominated alters in order to obtain a broader perspective on the distribution of health-risk behaviours among individuals who were currently working. This descriptive analysis informed the subsequent development of the statistical models used to test the study hypothesis and address the research objectives. The mean age in the pooled dataset was 40.5 years, with a standard deviation of 12.8 years. The health-related behaviours included in the analysis were smoking, participation in sport, following a diet, and processed food consumption. The results are reported as both percentages and absolute frequencies.

Two regression models were estimated. The first model examined the factors associated with smoking status among respondents, while the second examined the factors associated with processed food consumption. The models were used to assess the empirical support for the study hypothesis, according to which health-risk behaviours such as smoking and processed food consumption are more prevalent among individuals who are currently working.

In Model 1, smoking status was specified as the dependent variable. Sociodemographic characteristics were included as predictors. Occupational status was the principal independent variable of interest, while sex, age, and household income were included as control variables. The variables were coded as follows: sex was coded 0 for men and 1 for women; age was included as a continuous variable; occupational status was coded 0 for individuals who were not currently working and 1 for those who were currently working; and household income was included as an ordinal variable comprising the ten ordered categories used in the questionnaire.

In Model 2, processed food consumption was specified as the dependent variable. Self-reported cardiovascular disease diagnosis and body mass index were included as predictors, while sex and age were included as control variables. Processed food consumption was entered into the model as a binary variable, coded 0 for individuals who did not report consuming at least one of the listed processed foods at least once per week and 1 for those who did. Sex was coded 0 for men and 1 for women. Cardiovascular disease diagnosis was also included as a binary variable, coded 0 for individuals who had not been diagnosed with cardiovascular disease and 1 for those who reported such a diagnosis. Age and body mass index were included as continuous variables. Body mass index was calculated by dividing each participant's weight in kilograms by the square of their height in metres. The resulting value represented the body mass index of each individual. In this model, sex and age were treated as control variables.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics for the Variables Analysed

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the study participants according to the variables of interest. In terms of sex, approximately 43% of the participants were men, while women constituted the majority of the sample, accounting for approximately 57%. In absolute terms, the study sample comprised 26 men and 35 women. The distribution according to the highest level of education completed was as follows: five respondents had completed up to eight years of schooling, representing approximately 8% of the

sample; 35 had completed from nine years of schooling up to post-secondary non-tertiary education, representing approximately 57%; and 21 had completed university-level education, representing approximately 34%. Most respondents were in a relationship (75%; $n = 46$), while approximately 25% ($n = 15$) were single.

With regard to occupational status, approximately 70% of respondents were currently working, while the remaining 30% were not currently working. In absolute terms, 43 respondents were currently working and 18 were not currently working. Among respondents who reported household income ($n = 50$), the percentage distribution was as follows: 26% of respondents reported a monthly household income of between RON 500 and RON 5,000, 36% reported an income of between RON 5,001 and RON 10,000, and 38% reported an income exceeding RON 10,000. In absolute terms, 13 respondents were in the first category, 18 in the second category, and 19 in the third.

Three-quarters of the participants reported that they had not been diagnosed with cardiovascular disease ($n = 46$). Only 15 respondents, representing approximately one-quarter of the sample, reported having been diagnosed with such a condition. Most participants were not current smokers (approximately 60%; $n = 37$), while almost 40% were current smokers. Approximately 79% of respondents did not engage in regular physical activity, defined as participation in physical activity at least once per week, whereas 21% reported engaging in regular physical activity. In absolute terms, these categories comprised 48 and 13 individuals, respectively. Nearly 79% of the sample ($n = 48$) reported consuming at least one item from the list of processed foods at least once per week. The examples provided included salami, ham, luncheon meat, sausages, frankfurters, pâté, pizza, popcorn, crisps, commercially canned foods, burgers, and shawarma. Thirteen respondents did not report consuming any of these processed foods at least once per week. Only approximately 12% of respondents reported following a diet. Although the questionnaire distinguished between medically prescribed diets and diets adopted following a personal decision, these two categories were combined in the present analysis. In absolute terms, seven respondents were following a diet. Consequently, approximately 88% of participants were not following a diet ($n = 54$).

As shown in Table 2, the mean age of the respondents was 44 years, with a standard deviation of 18.4 years (median = 41). The youngest respondent was 18 years old, while the oldest was 81 years old. There were no missing data for this variable. The mean body mass index was 26.4, with a standard deviation of 4.3. According to the classification thresholds proposed by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (n.d.), a BMI value of 26.4 falls within the overweight range. The minimum recorded BMI was 19, which falls within the normal-weight range. The maximum BMI was 38, which falls within the obesity range.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the Study Sample (N = 61)

Variable	Category	n (valid %)	Missing
Sex	Men	26 (42.6%)	0 (0.0%)
	Women	35 (57.4%)	
Education	At most eight years of schooling	5 (8.2%)	0 (0.0%)
	Nine years of schooling to post-secondary education	35 (57.4%)	
	University education	21 (34.4%)	
Relationship status	In a relationship	46 (75.4%)	0 (0.0%)
	Single	15 (24.6%)	

Variable	Category	n (valid %)	Missing
Occupational status	Not currently working	18 (29.5%)	0 (0.0%)
	Currently working	43 (70.5%)	
Household income	RON 500-5,000	13 (26.0%)	11 (18.0%)
	RON 5,001-10,000	18 (36.0%)	
	Over RON 10,000	19 (38.0%)	
Cardiovascular disease	No	46 (75.4%)	0 (0.0%)
	Yes	15 (24.6%)	
Smoking status	Non-smoker	37 (60.7%)	0 (0.0%)
	Smoker	24 (39.3%)	
Sport	Does not engage in sport	48 (78.7%)	0 (0.0%)
	Engages in sport	13 (21.3%)	
Diet	Does not follow a diet	54 (88.5%)	0 (0.0%)
	Follows a diet	7 (11.5%)	
Processed food consumption	Does not consume	13 (21.3%)	0 (0.0%)
	Consumes	48 (78.7%)	

Source: Authors' calculations

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for the Numerical Variables

Indicator	N	Mean	Median	Std. deviation	Min	Max
Age	61	44.03	41	18.44	18	81
BMI	61	26.41	26	4.38	19	38

Source: Authors' calculations

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics for the alters nominated by the respondents. These alters represent members of each respondent's personal network with whom they have strong ties. In the present study, strong ties were operationalised as relationships with alters whom the ego met at least once per week. The mean age of the alters was 46.2 years, with a standard deviation of 16.9 years. The youngest alter nominated by the respondents was 18 years old, while the oldest was 90 years old. Only alters aged 18 years or older were included in this analysis. According to the data, approximately 43% of the alters were men and 57% were women. In absolute frequencies, there were 329 men and 431 women. Among the alters, 74% (n = 562) were currently working, while approximately one-quarter (26%; n = 198) were not currently working. Nearly 89% of the alters did not engage in regular physical activity involving physical exertion. Only approximately 11% (n = 83) engaged in regular physical activity. Approximately 34% of the alters were current smokers, while 66% were non-smokers, corresponding to 260 smokers and 500 non-smokers, respectively. Respondents reported that approximately 86% of their alters frequently consumed processed foods, while approximately 14% did not frequently consume such products. Among alters with available data, approximately 11% were following a diet, while around 89% were not doing so at the time of data collection. Missing values were recorded for the variables measuring diet and processed food consumption. The largest proportion of missing data was observed for processed food consumption (2.4%; n = 18), followed by the diet variable, for which data were missing for 11 alters.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for the Analysed Sample of Alters (N = 760)

Variable	Category	n (valid %)	Missing
Sex	Men	329 (43.3%)	0 (0.0%)
	Women	431 (56.7%)	
Occupational status	Not currently working	198 (26.1%)	0 (0.0%)
	Currently working	562 (73.9%)	
Sport	Does not engage in sport	677 (89.1%)	0 (0.0%)
	Engages in sport	83 (10.9%)	
Smoking status	Non-smoker	500 (65.8%)	0 (0.0%)
	Smoker	260 (34.2%)	
Diet	Does not follow a diet	665 (88.8%)	11 (1.4%)
	Follows a diet	84 (11.2%)	
Processed food consumption	Does not consume	105 (14.2%)	18 (2.4%)
	Consumes	637 (85.8%)	

Source: Authors' calculations

4.2 Distribution of Health-Risk Behaviours among Currently Working Respondents and Alters

Table 4 is based on pooled data comprising information on both respondents and the alters with whom they had strong ties, defined as individuals with whom they had contact at least once per week. For egos, the variables included in the table were measured on the basis of self-reported information, whereas information on alters was provided by the respective egos, based on their knowledge of the alters' behaviours. Given the focus on strong ties, the existing literature suggests that egos are likely to be familiar with these aspects of their alters' lifestyles. The variables included in the analysis were smoking status, regular physical activity undertaken at least once per week, following a diet, and processed food consumption.

The total number of individuals analysed in Table 4 was 598. This table includes both respondents and alters, but only those who were currently working at the time of the study. Of these individuals, 41% were current smokers, corresponding to 243 individuals. Only 14% regularly engaged in physical activity, representing 86 individuals. Approximately 10% were following a diet. Processed food consumption was highly prevalent, with 87% of the individuals analysed (n = 523) reporting consumption of such products. These findings refer to an analysed group with a mean age of 40.5 years and a standard deviation of 12.8 years. The youngest individual was 18 years old, while the oldest was 75 years old. All individuals who were reported to have a job were classified as currently working, irrespective of the statutory retirement-age thresholds. This decision was based on the assumption that employment may shape individuals' lifestyles regardless of their age.

Table 4: Lifestyle Behaviours among Currently Working Respondents and Alters

Health-related behaviour	n	%
Current smokers	243	41
Regular physical activity (sport)	86	14
Following a diet	60	10
Processed food consumption	523	87
Total individuals analysed	598	100

Source: Authors' calculations

4.3 Analysis of Factors Associated with Smoking

Table 5 presents Model 1, estimated using multiple logistic regression. Respondents' smoking status was specified as the dependent variable, while sex, occupational status, age, and household income were included as predictors. Smoking status was entered into the model as a binary variable, coded 0 for non-smokers and former smokers and 1 for current smokers. Occupational status was positively and statistically significantly associated with smoking status at the 1% significance level. Household income was negatively and statistically significantly associated with smoking status at the 5% significance level. Age was also negatively associated with smoking status and was statistically significant at the 10% level. No statistically significant association was observed between sex and smoking status in this model. Household income data were missing for 11 respondents; consequently, the model included 50 cases rather than the full sample of 61 respondents. The likelihood of being a current smoker was higher among individuals who were currently working, were younger, and lived in households with comparatively lower incomes. The model yielded a McFadden pseudo- R^2 of 0.291 and a Nagelkerke R^2 of 0.436.

Table 5: Model 1: Sociodemographic Variables Associated with Smoking Status

Predictor	Coefficient (standard error)
Sex	-1.033 (0.763)
Occupational status	3.889*** (1.462)
Age	-0.048* (0.029)
Household income	-0.378** (0.169)
Constant	3.529 (2.633)
McFadden R^2	0.291
Nagelkerke R^2	0.436
Observations	50
Log likelihood	-23.534
Akaike information criterion	57.069

Note: Dependent variable: current smoker. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Source: Authors' calculations

4.4 Analysis of Factors Associated with Frequent Processed Food Consumption

Table 6 presents the model examining frequent processed food consumption, with sex, cardiovascular disease diagnosis, age, and body mass index included as predictors. Neither sex nor body mass index was significantly associated with frequent processed food consumption. A negative and statistically significant association was observed between cardiovascular disease diagnosis and the dependent variable at the

10% significance level. Age was also negatively and statistically significantly associated with frequent processed food consumption at the 5% level. These findings indicate that frequent processed food consumption was more likely among younger individuals and less likely among those who had been diagnosed with cardiovascular disease.

The model yielded a McFadden pseudo- R^2 of 0.297 and a Nagelkerke R^2 of 0.411.

Table 6: Model 2: Factors Associated with Frequent Processed Food Consumption

Predictor	Coefficient (standard error)
Sex	0.371 (0.803)
Cardiovascular disease	-1.534* (0.894)
Age	-0.060** (0.025)
Body mass index	0.116 (0.108)
Constant	1.547 (3.084)
McFadden R^2	0.297
Nagelkerke R^2	0.411
Observations	61
Log likelihood	-22.204
Akaike information criterion	54.409

Note: Dependent variable: frequent processed food consumption. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Source: Authors' calculations

5. Discussion

The gap identified in the existing literature concerns the limited number of studies examining workforce health within an interconnected population. The focus is not solely on individuals' current health status, but also on how their health may evolve over the coming years. Such developments may be better understood by analysing the health-risk behaviours of individuals who are currently working. The selection of smoking and processed food consumption was not incidental. Both behaviours are relevant to cancer prevention, as reflected in the European Code Against Cancer, while cancer represents the second leading cause of death in both the EU and Romania. These behaviours are also associated with cardiovascular diseases, which account for an even greater proportion of deaths. The analysis of a relatively small, interconnected sample can provide an initial perspective on these patterns and may subsequently be examined in larger samples. Moreover, existing social ties may provide potential pathways through which information could diffuse, which may be relevant to the design of network-based interventions.

The distribution of health-risk behaviours in the pooled dataset suggests a concerning pattern, both for the individuals themselves and for organisations that rely on a healthy workforce in the future. For two of the three health-risk behaviours analysed, the majority of individuals were in the less favourable category, while smoking was also highly prevalent. Only 14% of the individuals included in the analysis engaged in physical activity involving meaningful physical exertion at least once per week, whereas the remaining 86% did not. Furthermore, 87% consumed at least one of the listed processed foods at least once per week. With regard to smoking, 41% of the individuals included in the analysis were current smokers, representing a notably high prevalence. Given the health risks associated with these behaviours and the fact that the individuals included in this analysis were currently working at the time of the study, these findings raise concerns regarding workforce health. The existing literature associates

physical inactivity, smoking, and certain unhealthy dietary practices with adverse long-term health outcomes. The high prevalence of several of these behaviours in the analysed group therefore indicates an unfavourable health-risk profile. The health-risk profile observed among the currently working individuals included in the study may have important implications for their long-term health. The lifestyle-related variables examined indicate substantial exposure to health-risk behaviours, with high prevalence observed for several of the behaviours analysed.

In the first multiple logistic regression model, smoking status was specified as the dependent variable, while sex, age, occupational status, and household income were included as sociodemographic predictors. The results indicated that the likelihood of being a current smoker was higher among individuals who were currently working. This finding may be considered in light of previous research showing that workplace-related factors, including occupational stress and social dynamics, may be associated with smoking behaviour. The analysis also showed that younger individuals were more likely to be current smokers. Household income was negatively associated with smoking status, indicating that individuals from lower-income households had a higher likelihood of being current smokers. Overall, the likelihood of being a current smoker was higher among individuals who were currently working, were younger, and lived in households with comparatively lower incomes.

From the perspective of workforce health, this finding points to potential consequences that may become apparent in the future. Based on medical research examining the effects of smoking, tobacco use among younger individuals may increase the long-term risk of developing cardiovascular disease or cancer. These effects may not necessarily be evident at present; however, continued smoking over time may increase the risk of chronic health conditions, with potential implications for future workforce health.

In Model 2, frequent processed food consumption was specified as the dependent variable. Individuals were classified as frequent consumers if they reported eating at least one item from the predefined list of processed foods at least once per week. The list comprised salami, ham, luncheon meat, sausages, frankfurters, pâté, pizza, popcorn, crisps, commercially canned foods, burgers, and shawarma. Sex, age, self-reported cardiovascular disease diagnosis, and body mass index were included as predictors. Frequent processed food consumption was more likely among individuals who had not been diagnosed with cardiovascular disease and among younger individuals. Both age and cardiovascular disease diagnosis were negatively associated with the dependent variable.

As in the case of smoking, processed food consumption was more likely among younger individuals. The finding that individuals without cardiovascular disease were more likely to consume such products may suggest that dietary behaviour changes following diagnosis, possibly as a result of greater awareness of the health effects of diet. However, the cross-sectional design of the study does not allow the temporal direction of this association to be established. This result also points to a potential direction for future research, namely a more detailed examination of how a major health event, such as being diagnosed with a disease, may influence both an individual's behaviour and the behaviours of those within their social environment. Overall, the present findings indicate that increasing age and a diagnosis of cardiovascular disease are associated with a lower likelihood of frequent processed food consumption.

6. Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that most members of the study sample displayed an unfavourable health-risk profile with regard to the variables analysed, namely smoking, regular physical activity, and processed food consumption. The likelihood of both smoking and frequent processed food consumption was higher among younger individuals. These findings raise important concerns, even though the study was conducted on a non-representative sample. The health profile observed among currently working individuals may have implications for the future health of the workforce. Occupational status was positively associated with smoking, suggesting that individuals who currently constitute the workforce may face increased health risks in the future in the absence of effective preventive measures. The analysis also showed that a diagnosis of cardiovascular disease was associated with a lower likelihood of frequent processed food consumption. A lower likelihood of frequent processed food consumption was also associated with increasing age.

The findings provide an indication of how future health-promotion interventions targeting members of the workforce could be developed. Since both smoking and processed food consumption were more prevalent among younger individuals, this group could constitute one of the potential targets of such an intervention. Another direction could focus specifically on smoking as a behaviour that was particularly prevalent among individuals who were currently working. The recruitment method used in the study may also be relevant to the potential implementation of such a campaign, as the referral chains may help identify possible pathways through which information could diffuse through strong social ties.

Future research could extend the analysis to a larger study sample. Moreover, examining individuals' personal networks in relation to the health-risk behaviours identified in the European Code Against Cancer could provide valuable evidence for understanding how such behaviours may diffuse through social relationships. Such an analysis could also determine whether individuals with similar characteristics tend to cluster within personal networks.

This study used a non-probability sample recruited through participant referrals using a link-tracing procedure. Although this recruitment strategy may be relevant for the development of potential network-based interventions, the findings cannot be generalised to the population of Craiova as a whole or to broader populations. The limited generalisability of the results therefore represents an important limitation of the study.

7. Bibliography

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The Circulation of Organizational Models in the Social Economy: An Analysis Based on the Case Study of the OilRight Social Enterprise

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Abstract

This article seeks to explain how organizational models circulate within the social economy by examining the case of the OilRight social enterprise in Romania. Drawing on the literature on mimetic isomorphism, organizational translation, and knowledge brokers, the study explores how an organizational model developed in a different institutional context is identified, transferred, and reinterpreted during the establishment of a new social enterprise. The research adopts a case study design based on a semi-structured interview conducted with the organization's founder, complemented by an analysis of publicly available information. The findings show that, in the case examined, the circulation of the organizational model unfolded through three successive stages: identifying the model within a transnational professional network, transferring it through access to organizational resources and collaborative relationships, and reinterpreting it in response to the characteristics of the local context. The study contributes to the literature on mimetic isomorphism and organizational translation by providing an analytical reconstruction of the process through which organizational models circulate and by highlighting the role of knowledge brokers and the local actor in facilitating this process. The findings further suggest that, in the case of OilRight, the circulation of the organizational model did not involve the complete transfer of the reference model but rather its reinterpretation and reconfiguration in relation to the institutional context in which the new organization was established.

Keywords: Social Economy; Circulation of Organizational Models; Mimetic Isomorphism; Organizational Translation; Knowledge Brokers; Case Study

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, the development of the social economy in Central and Eastern Europe has been shaped by increasingly intensive relationships among organizations, networks, and actors involved in the development of the sector. These dynamics have fostered the circulation of organizational models both within and across national organizational fields, facilitating the exchange of practices, knowledge, and organizational forms across different institutional contexts. Beyond the resources mobilized through public policies and funding programmes, the development of the social economy has also been supported by processes of learning, collaboration, and knowledge exchange taking place within transnational professional and organizational networks.

Neo-institutional theory provides a robust framework for understanding organizations' tendency to adopt similar models in response to institutional pressures and the pursuit of legitimacy (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 2014). However, it offers a more limited explanation of the mechanisms through which organizational models

circulate across different institutional contexts and are identified, transferred, and reinterpreted during the development of new organizations. This gap is particularly evident in the Romanian social economy sector, where the circulation and adaptation of organizational models have received limited attention from a neo-institutional perspective. More broadly, the social economy in Romania remains “little known in public opinion and academic debates” (Cioacă, 2020: 363).

Against this background, the article addresses the following research question: *How do organizational models circulate within the social economy, and what role do transnational networks and relational capital play in this process?*

To answer this question, the study examines the case of the OilRight social enterprise in Romania, drawing on a semi-structured interview conducted with the organization's founder and complemented by an analysis of publicly available information.

The article aims to contribute to a better understanding of the processes through which organizational models circulate within the social economy and, consequently, to refine existing explanations of mimetic isomorphism by analytically reconstructing the process through which an organizational model is identified, transferred, and reinterpreted.

2. Theoretical Perspectives on the Circulation of Organizational Models

Explaining the circulation of organizational models within the social economy requires the articulation of several complementary theoretical perspectives. Although neo-institutional theory provides a robust framework for understanding organizations' tendency to adopt models perceived as legitimate, it offers a more limited explanation of the mechanisms through which these models circulate across different institutional contexts and are reinterpreted during the development of new organizations. To address this limitation, the present article adopts an extended neo-institutional perspective that brings together institutional isomorphism theory, the organizational translation perspective, and the literature on knowledge brokers.

Taken together, these perspectives explain the main dimensions of the process examined in this study. Institutional isomorphism theory explains why organizations seek models regarded as legitimate; the organizational translation perspective explains how these models are reinterpreted as they circulate across different institutional contexts; while the literature on knowledge brokers highlights the relational mechanisms through which this circulation becomes possible.

In this article, the circulation of organizational models is understood as the process through which an organizational model is identified, transferred, and reinterpreted across different institutional contexts. This conceptualization provides the theoretical foundation for the analysis of the OilRight case study presented in the following sections.

2.1 Institutional Isomorphism: Why Organizations Seek Legitimate Models

According to the neo-institutional perspective, organizations pursue not only economic efficiency but also legitimacy within the organizational field in which they operate (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). DiMaggio and Powell distinguish three principal mechanisms through which organizations tend to become similar: coercive isomorphism, driven by institutional constraints and regulations; normative isomorphism, resulting from professionalization and shared standards; and mimetic

isomorphism, which emerges under conditions of uncertainty and involves the adoption of models perceived as legitimate or successful.

Mimetic isomorphism is particularly relevant for understanding the development of the social economy, which is often characterized by multiple objectives, ambiguous performance criteria, and relatively low levels of institutionalization within the organizational field (Nicholls, 2010). Under such conditions, organizations tend to seek external reference points and adopt models that have already been validated in other contexts. From this perspective, mimetic isomorphism explains why organizations search for organizational models regarded as legitimate, without, however, explaining how these models actually circulate across different institutional contexts.

2.2 The Circulation of Organizational Models: Beyond Imitation

The literature on the circulation and transfer of organizational models has challenged the interpretation of mimetic isomorphism as a simple process of copying existing models. Czarniawska and Sevón (1996) argue that organizational ideas and models do not circulate in their original form; rather, they are translated as they move across different institutional contexts.

The concept of organizational translation suggests that local actors select, modify, and combine elements of the original model in order to respond to the constraints and opportunities of the context in which they operate. From this perspective, the circulation of organizational models is not a linear process of diffusion but rather one of continuous reinterpretation, in which models are transformed as they become embedded in new institutional contexts.

This perspective complements institutional isomorphism theory by explaining how organizational models move across organizational fields and acquire forms that are adapted to local contexts.

2.3 Institutional Actors and Knowledge Brokers: How the Circulation of Organizational Models Becomes Possible

While institutional isomorphism explains why organizations seek legitimate models and the organizational translation perspective explains how these models are reinterpreted, the literature on institutional actors and knowledge brokers contributes to understanding the mechanisms through which the circulation of organizational models becomes possible.

Beckert (1999) and Battilana (2006) argue that certain individuals occupy privileged positions within networks and may act as institutional entrepreneurs, facilitating the introduction and legitimization of new organizational practices and models. These actors are not merely intermediaries in the transfer of information; rather, they actively contribute to the selection, interpretation, and adaptation of the models they promote.

This perspective is complemented by the literature on knowledge brokers. Meyer (2010) defines knowledge brokers as actors who connect knowledge producers and knowledge users, facilitate the circulation of ideas across different organizational communities, and support their adaptation to local contexts. From this perspective, the circulation of organizational models involves not only the transfer of practices and knowledge but also the mobilization of relationships and trust required for their adoption and adaptation.

The capacity of these actors to facilitate the circulation of organizational models is closely related to their position within networks and to the cognitive, relational, and

symbolic capital they are able to mobilize (Bourdieu, 1986). In the Romanian sociological literature, social capital is likewise defined as the present or future resources available within a social network that strengthen it by facilitating the actions of its members; it may take a “bonding” form, built within a group on earned trust, or a “bridging” form, established between different social groups on the basis of attributed trust (Popa-Velea, 2026: 332-333). Consequently, the circulation of organizational models can be understood as a relational process in which actors embedded in professional and transnational networks mediate the identification, transfer, and reinterpretation of organizational models across different institutional contexts.

Taken together, these perspectives constitute the theoretical framework used to analyse the OilRight case study. They make it possible to interpret mimetic isomorphism not as a simple process of organizational imitation but as a process of organizational model circulation, in which the identification of legitimate models, their circulation through actors embedded in professional networks, and their reinterpretation within the local context represent successive stages of the same process. As the empirical analysis will demonstrate, in the case of OilRight this process involves not only the transfer of organizational knowledge and practices but also the construction and mobilization of legitimacy through relationships developed within transnational networks.

3. Methodology

This study employs the case study method, which is particularly suited to investigating complex organizational processes within their real-life context and to addressing “how” and “why” research questions (Yin, 2018). This research design is appropriate to the objective of the study, namely to reconstruct the process through which organizational models circulate across different institutional contexts and are reinterpreted within the social economy.

The OilRight social enterprise was selected as the case study because it allows the observation and reconstruction of the entire process through which an organizational model circulates, from the identification of a model regarded as legitimate, through its transfer via professional relationships and networks, to its reinterpretation within the local context. At the same time, the case provides an opportunity to analyse the role of actors and transnational relationships in the development of a social enterprise within a context characterized by a still relatively low level of institutionalization of the organizational field.

The empirical data are based on a 60-minute semi-structured online interview conducted in November 2024 with Roxana Damaschin, founder and manager of the OilRight social enterprise. The interview sought to reconstruct the organization’s development process, focusing on the identification of the organizational model, the mechanisms through which it circulated across institutional contexts, its reinterpretation and adaptation, as well as the role of professional relationships and transnational collaborations in this process. The interview was audio-recorded, transcribed, and subsequently analysed.

The interview data were complemented by an analysis of publicly available information from the websites of OilRight Romania and its partner organization in Slovenia (OilRight Romania, n.d.; OilRight Slovenia, n.d.). These sources were used to corroborate and contextualize information regarding the organization’s history, mission, activities, and national and international collaborations.

The data were analysed through deductive thematic coding, based on the conceptual framework developed in the theoretical section. The analytical dimensions included:

- the identification of organizational models regarded as legitimate;
- the mechanisms underlying the circulation and transfer of the organizational model;
- the reinterpretation and adaptation of the model to the local context;
- the role of actors and knowledge brokers;
- the role of professional and transnational relationships and networks;
- the mobilization of trust-based relationships and relational resources.

Consistent with the logic of case study research, the aim of this study is not to achieve statistical generalization but to develop an analytical explanation of the mechanisms through which organizational models circulate within a particular institutional context (Yin, 2018).

4. Reconstructing the Process of Organizational Model Circulation

4.1 Case Study Context: The OilRight Social Enterprise

The OilRight social enterprise was established in Timișoara at the end of 2020 with the support of European funding dedicated to the development of social enterprises and in partnership with OilRight Slovenia and Oil2Wax Portugal. According to the organization's official presentation, its mission is to transform an insufficiently addressed environmental problem—the management of used cooking oil—into an opportunity for sustainable development and social inclusion. This pattern is common in the Romanian social economy, where most social enterprises have relied on external financing at their founding, while the lack of adequate funding opportunities has been identified as “the main reason behind the cessation of the activity” (Cioacă, 2020: 368-370).

OilRight operates as a work integration social enterprise (WISE), building its activities around a dual mission that combines environmental protection with the labour market inclusion of people with disabilities. The environmental issue addressed concerns the low rate of household used cooking oil collection, while the social dimension focuses on creating employment opportunities and supporting the labour market integration of people with disabilities. In the Romanian literature, this work integration function is regarded as one of the defining purposes of the social economy, which is expected to contribute to “increasing the employment rate of people belonging to vulnerable groups” (Otovescu, Calotă and Cioacă, 2019: 30).

The organization's economic model is based on collecting used cooking oil and creating value by transforming part of it into candles while selling the remaining quantity for biodiesel production. This business model supports both the organization's commercial activities and the fulfilment of its social and environmental mission.

The relevance of the OilRight case for the present study lies in the fact that the organization did not emerge as an independently developed initiative but rather as the result of adapting a pre-existing organizational model that had been identified through a European professional network and subsequently reinterpreted in response to the specific characteristics of the Romanian context. This feature makes it possible to reconstruct the stages through which an organizational model circulates across different institutional contexts and is adapted at the local level.

4.2 Identifying the Organizational Model

The reconstruction of OilRight's development process shows that the identification of the organizational model was not the result of a deliberate search for good practices but rather emerged from the founder's participation in European professional networks dedicated to the social economy. The organizational model developed by OilRight Slovenia became known to Roxana Damaschin while she was active within the international NESsT network, one of the organizations that has played an important role in the development of the social economy in Central and Eastern Europe. This finding suggests that access to relevant organizational models is influenced by actors' positions within professional networks and by the opportunities for interaction that these networks create, rather than exclusively by the existence of formal mechanisms for disseminating good practices.

As Roxana Damaschin explains:

"My background at the European level really helped—it made all the difference. Otherwise, I would never have had the chance to know about them because they weren't promoting themselves or doing anything specifically for the Romanian market."

At the same time, the OilRight Slovenia initiative had already gained recognition at the European level, having been presented by the European Commission in 2017 as an example of good practice in the field of the circular economy (European Commission, 2017). Nevertheless, the interview indicates that this institutional recognition was not the main mechanism through which the model became known in Romania. Rather, its identification was made possible through relationships developed within transnational professional networks, which facilitated direct contact with the organization and access to its experience.

The findings further indicate that the selection of the organizational model was not based solely on its economic viability. The interview suggests that the selection process was also influenced by the compatibility between the characteristics of the model and the founder's own vision of the social economy. The relevance of the model was associated with its ability to coherently integrate environmental protection, social inclusion, and community engagement, as well as with its potential to be reinterpreted in other institutional contexts.

As Roxana Damaschin states:

"Of all the business models I came across, this was the one that stayed with me because it made so much sense—from creating jobs for vulnerable people, to protecting the environment, activating the local community, and ultimately its potential for replication (...). Three years after I first heard about it... it was the very first thing that came to mind when I thought, 'If we were to do something, this would be it.'"

This excerpt highlights that, among the many organizational models to which the founder of OilRight had been exposed through European networks, the model developed by OilRight Slovenia was perceived as the one most closely aligned with her own vision of the social economy. The findings therefore suggest that the identification of an organizational model depends not only on its legitimacy or success but also on the degree of alignment between the values embodied by the model and those of the actors who evaluate it.

Overall, the analysis shows that participation in transnational professional networks not only facilitated access to information about the existence of an organizational model but also enabled its recognition as a relevant alternative for developing a social enterprise in Romania. In this sense, identifying the organizational model represents the first stage in the process of organizational model circulation reconstructed in this study and creates the conditions for the transfer analysed in the following section.

4.3 Transferring the Organizational Model through Knowledge Brokers

Identifying the organizational model represented only the first stage in its circulation. Transforming the model into a concrete organizational initiative required access to practical knowledge, organizational experience, and collaborative relationships that made it possible to transfer the model across different institutional contexts.

The findings indicate that this transfer did not occur through formal dissemination mechanisms, such as replication manuals or social franchising systems, but through relationships developed within a transnational professional network. At this stage, NESsT acted as a knowledge broker by facilitating connections between Roxana Damaschin and the organizations that had previously developed the model in Slovenia. Her previous involvement in the network enabled both the initiation of collaboration and access to the experience accumulated by the partner organizations.

The subsequent collaboration with OilRight Slovenia and Oil2Wax Portugal enabled the transfer of organizational resources that proved essential for the development of the new social enterprise. These resources included technical know-how, working methodologies, operational documents, contractual templates, elements of visual identity, and practical experience accumulated through implementing the model.

As Roxana Damaschin describes:

“There was no financial transaction at all. Everything they gave us was provided free of charge. Nothing. It was such an incredible act of trust—they shared recipes, contract templates, working methodologies, the brand, the whole design process behind it. It was all extremely collaborative and entirely driven by impact.”

The findings suggest that the transfer of the organizational model was supported by relationships based on collaboration and mutual trust. Although the COVID-19 pandemic prevented the study visits originally planned, knowledge exchange continued through online meetings and ongoing communication between the organizations. Consequently, the transfer of the model did not consist of adopting a standardized set of procedures but rather of a continuous process of learning and exchange among the actors involved.

Building on the organizational knowledge and resources accessed through these transnational collaborations, Roxana Damaschin mediated the transfer of the organizational model between the two institutional contexts. Her role consisted of selecting those elements considered relevant for developing a social enterprise in Romania and preparing their transfer to the new organizational context. At this stage, the organizational model had not yet been reinterpreted; rather, the conditions necessary for its subsequent adaptation to the characteristics of the Romanian context were established.

Overall, the findings indicate that knowledge brokers do not transfer organizational models that are ready for implementation. Instead, their role is to facilitate access to knowledge, experience, and collaborative relationships that reduce

the uncertainty associated with developing new initiatives. At the same time, the case study shows that the transfer of the organizational model is mediated by the local actor, who selects and mobilizes the organizational resources acquired through previous collaborations, thereby preparing their subsequent reinterpretation in accordance with the characteristics of the new institutional context.

4.4 Reinterpreting the Organizational Model in the Local Context

The case study analysis demonstrates that the transfer of the organizational model did not involve the wholesale adoption of its operational components but rather their reinterpretation in accordance with the institutional and organizational characteristics of the Romanian context. While the previous stages made it possible to identify the model and gain access to the knowledge required for its implementation, the development of OilRight ultimately depended on the founding team's capacity to reconfigure the model in response to local realities.

The findings indicate that what was successfully transferred was, above all, the underlying logic of the intervention. The organizational model developed in Slovenia demonstrated that an insufficiently addressed environmental problem could provide the basis for an economic activity with social impact. At the same time, the economic mechanism based on the valorization of used cooking oil and the integration of environmental protection and social inclusion objectives were retained as defining features of the original model.

The analysis further suggests that the reinterpretation did not affect all components of the organizational model equally. While the intervention logic, the economic mechanism, and the articulation between environmental and social objectives were largely preserved, the collection infrastructure, the configuration of the social mission, and the role of educational activities were reconfigured to respond to the characteristics of the Romanian context. Consequently, the reinterpretation of the model took place along three main dimensions: the development of an independent collection infrastructure, the strengthening of the social mission through the expansion of the work integration component, and the transformation of community education into a structural component of the organizational model.

The first dimension of reinterpretation concerned the infrastructure for collecting used cooking oil. In Slovenia, the organization benefited from the existence of a well-functioning collection system and collaboration with specialized waste management operators. In Romania, by contrast, the household collection of used cooking oil was almost non-existent, while public awareness of the environmental impact of this type of waste remained very limited. Under these circumstances, the model could not be transferred in its original form.

As Roxana Damaschin explains:

"We focused much more on communicating with households and individual citizens. (...) They worked with something similar to RETIM, which was already quite active in collecting household cooking oil. (...) We didn't have anything like that, and used cooking oil was almost completely neglected at the household level. So we invested heavily in outreach—radio campaigns, leaflets, posters, community events, festivals, and educational workshops."

The second dimension of reinterpretation involved redefining the relationship between the organization and the local community. In the Romanian context, OilRight had to do more than simply organize the collection of used cooking oil; it also had to

create the social conditions necessary for the collection system to function. Information campaigns, educational activities, and participation in community events became structural components of both the organizational model and the economic activity itself, contributing to the development of the behaviours required for the collection system to operate. In this way, community education was not a complementary activity but an essential condition for the viability of the organizational model.

The third dimension of reinterpretation concerned the organization's social mission. While the Slovenian organization initially worked with people experiencing mental health problems and, over time, the work integration component became secondary to the economic activity, OilRight Romania strengthened this dimension from the very outset of the organization's design. The Romanian model sought to integrate work integration as a central component of its economic activity by creating employment opportunities for people with disabilities and aligning this mission with its environmental objectives.

The findings suggest that the reinterpretation of the organizational model drew upon two complementary sources of knowledge. The first consisted of the organizational resources, practical experience, and working tools accessed through collaboration with partners in Slovenia and Portugal. The second derived from a systematic analysis of the Romanian context conducted prior to the establishment of the organization, as well as from collaboration with local initiatives already engaged in promoting the collection of used cooking oil.

Before launching the social enterprise, the OilRight team conducted a market analysis and examined existing collection practices, identifying the differences between the two contexts and establishing partnerships with local initiatives already involved in raising public awareness about used cooking oil collection. As Roxana Damaschin recalls:

"We spent an entire summer working on the business plan and the market analysis (...) and it also helped enormously that, from day one, we partnered with Borcanul cu Ulei (...). So we weren't starting completely from scratch here either."

Overall, the analysis suggests that the reinterpretation of the organizational model did not consist merely of adapting existing procedures but rather of reconfiguring the original model by combining organizational resources acquired through previous collaborations with an analysis of the Romanian context and the incorporation of knowledge developed locally. The resulting organizational model preserves the fundamental logic of the initiative developed in Slovenia while integrating context-specific solutions regarding the collection infrastructure, community education, and the strengthening of the work integration dimension.

The process of reinterpretation therefore highlights the active nature of organizational model circulation, in which transfer is accompanied by the transformation and reconfiguration of the original model. In this sense, the transfer of an organizational model should be understood as a relational process involving the circulation and recombination of organizational resources rather than as the unilateral transmission of a model from a source organization to a recipient organization.

5. Discussion and Theoretical Implications

The findings of the case study allow for a discussion of several theoretical implications regarding the circulation of organizational models within the social economy. In what follows, the results are interpreted in relation to neo-institutional theory and the organizational translation perspective, with particular attention to how

the OilRight case contributes to refining our understanding of the mechanisms through which organizational models are identified, transferred, and reinterpreted.

5.1 Mimetic Isomorphism as a Process of Organizational Model Circulation

Neo-institutional theory explains mimetic isomorphism as organizations' response to uncertainty and their need to achieve legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). From this perspective, organizations tend to adopt models perceived as legitimate or successful within their organizational field. Although this explanation captures the motivation behind organizations' orientation towards existing models, it provides only limited insight into the mechanisms through which these models circulate across different institutional contexts.

The OilRight case study confirms the general logic of mimetic isomorphism, insofar as the organization's development was guided by a model perceived as legitimate and relevant to the social economy. At the same time, the analysis demonstrates that this process cannot be reduced to the simple replication of an existing organization. The model identified in Slovenia was reinterpreted as it circulated into the Romanian context, being transformed in response to the characteristics of the institutional and organizational environment in which it was to be implemented.

This observation is consistent with the organizational translation perspective proposed by Czarniawska and Sevón (1996), according to which organizational models do not circulate in their original form but are transformed as they move across different institutional contexts. In the present case, the mimetic process involved not only the identification of a legitimate model but also access to organizational resources, the selection of those elements considered relevant, and their reinterpretation in accordance with local conditions.

From this perspective, the case study suggests that, in the case of OilRight, mimetic isomorphism took the form of a process of organizational model circulation in which continuity and transformation coexisted. The identified model served as the starting point for the organization's development, but it was not adopted in its entirety; rather, it was reinterpreted and reconfigured in accordance with the characteristics of the local context. Given that the analysis is based on a single case study, the findings do not support conclusions about all processes of organizational model circulation. Instead, they suggest that reinterpretation represents one possible way in which organizational models may circulate across different institutional contexts.

5.2 Mediating the Circulation of Organizational Models

The literature on knowledge brokers highlights the role of actors who facilitate the circulation of knowledge across organizations and professional communities (Meyer, 2010). Complementing this perspective, Beckert (1999) and Battilana (2006) argue that actors occupying privileged positions within networks can facilitate the introduction and legitimization of new organizational models. However, the literature pays comparatively less attention to the ways in which these forms of mediation interact within the concrete processes through which organizational models circulate.

The case study makes it possible to distinguish two successive mechanisms of mediation. The first consists of knowledge brokering performed by support organizations and professional networks, which facilitate access to organizational models, experience, and resources developed in other institutional contexts. In the case analysed, this role was fulfilled by NESsT, which created the learning and collaborative opportunities that enabled the identification of the organizational model.

The second form of mediation operates at the level of the local actor who initiates the development of the new organization. In the case of OilRight, Roxana Damaschin mediated the transfer of the organizational model by selecting and mobilizing those elements considered relevant to the Romanian context. Rather than involving the direct adoption of the original model, the transfer consisted of creating the conditions necessary for its subsequent reinterpretation in light of local resources, constraints, and opportunities.

The findings therefore suggest that knowledge brokering and mediation performed by the local actor fulfil complementary functions in the circulation of organizational models. While the former facilitates access to organizational models and resources, the latter enables their transfer and reinterpretation in accordance with the characteristics of the local institutional context.

5.3 Reinterpreting the Organizational Model as a Process of Reconfiguration

The organizational translation perspective argues that organizational models are reinterpreted as they circulate across different institutional contexts (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996). The OilRight case study supports this perspective by showing that, in the case examined, reinterpretation involved more than merely adapting existing practices; it entailed reconfiguring the functions that particular components perform within the organizational model.

The analysis demonstrates that reinterpretation was not uniform across all components of the model. The underlying intervention logic, the economic mechanism, and the articulation between environmental and social objectives were preserved, ensuring continuity of the organizational model. By contrast, the collection infrastructure, the configuration of the social mission, and the role of educational activities were reconfigured in response to the characteristics of the Romanian context.

In particular, the case highlights a transformation in the function of educational activities. Whereas in the original model these activities primarily supported the organization's operations, in OilRight Romania they became a structural component of the organizational model. Information campaigns, educational workshops, and community-based activities do not merely aim to raise awareness; they also contribute to creating the conditions required for the economic mechanism to function by fostering the behaviours and social relationships that sustain the collection of used cooking oil.

The findings further suggest that this reinterpretation did not derive exclusively from the experience accumulated through international collaborations. Rather, it emerged from combining the organizational resources and experience accessed through partnerships with organizations in Slovenia and Portugal with a systematic analysis of the Romanian context and the incorporation of knowledge developed by local initiatives. In this sense, reinterpretation appears as an active process of selecting, recombining, and reconfiguring the components of the organizational model through which local actors construct an organizational configuration adapted to their own institutional context.

From this perspective, the case study suggests that reinterpretation constitutes the mechanism through which continuity and change coexist in the circulation of organizational models. In the case of OilRight, the original model was preserved at the level of its underlying intervention logic, while the development of an independent collection infrastructure, the strengthening of the work integration mission, and the

incorporation of community education as a constitutive component of the organizational model resulted in the emergence of a distinct organizational configuration.

5.4 The Role of Support Organizations in the Circulation of Organizational Models

The literature on knowledge brokers highlights the role of actors who facilitate the circulation of knowledge across organizations and institutional contexts (Meyer, 2010). Complementing this perspective, neo-institutional theory emphasizes the importance of actors and networks in processes of institutional change (Beckert, 1999; Battilana, 2006). Building on these perspectives, the OilRight case study illustrates how a support organization may perform the role of a knowledge broker by facilitating access to organizational models, relationships, and resources developed in other institutional contexts.

In the case analysed, the support organization neither promoted a standardized model nor coordinated its transfer. Rather, its contribution consisted of facilitating access to organizations, experience, and organizational resources developed in other institutional contexts, while creating opportunities for collaboration among the actors involved. From this perspective, support organizations may function as knowledge brokers by reducing barriers to information and facilitating connections between actors operating in different institutional contexts.

The findings nevertheless indicate that access to organizational models and resources alone is not sufficient for the development of a new initiative. Support organizations create the conditions necessary for the circulation of organizational models, whereas their transfer and reinterpretation ultimately depend on the capacity of local actors to mobilize the resources and relationships accessed through these networks. This is consistent with the recommendation that Romania should “create and develop a collaborative inter- and intraregional social economy network” in a sector that is still represented by “disparate, uncorrelated initiatives with a minor community impact” (Cioacă, 2020: 375).

From this perspective, the case study suggests that the role of support organizations should be understood not in terms of their capacity to transfer organizational models but rather in terms of their ability to facilitate access to knowledge, relationships, and organizational resources that enable local actors to develop their own responses to the challenges encountered in different institutional contexts.

6. Conclusions

This article set out to explain how organizational models circulate within the social economy and to examine the role of transnational networks and relational capital in this process. Drawing on the case study of the OilRight social enterprise, the research analysed the mechanisms through which an organizational model developed in a different institutional context was identified, transferred, and reinterpreted in Romania.

The findings show that, in the case examined, the circulation of the organizational model unfolded through three successive stages: the identification of a model perceived as legitimate within a transnational professional network, its transfer through access to organizational resources and collaborative relationships, and its reinterpretation in accordance with the characteristics of the Romanian context. The analysis demonstrates that this process did not involve the wholesale adoption of the original organizational

model but rather its reconfiguration in relation to local resources, constraints, and opportunities.

The study contributes to the literature on mimetic isomorphism and organizational translation by analytically reconstructing, through the OilRight case study, the process through which organizational models circulate and by highlighting the mechanisms that made this process possible. In the case examined, knowledge brokers facilitated access to organizational models, relationships, and resources developed in other institutional contexts, while the local actor played a crucial role in selecting, mobilizing, and reinterpreting these resources in accordance with the context in which the new organization was established. The findings therefore suggest that institutional isomorphism theory and the organizational translation perspective should be viewed as complementary approaches to explaining the circulation of organizational models.

While institutional isomorphism explains why organizations seek models perceived as legitimate, the organizational translation perspective contributes to understanding how these models are reinterpreted and reconfigured as they circulate across different institutional contexts.

At the same time, the study demonstrates that the reinterpretation of the organizational model extended beyond operational adjustments and involved the reconfiguration of its structural components. In the case of OilRight, the expansion of the social mission, the development of an independent collection infrastructure, and the integration of community education as a constitutive component of the organizational model illustrate how adaptation to the local context may lead to the emergence of a distinct organizational configuration while preserving the underlying logic of the original model.

The findings should be interpreted in light of the study's limitations. The analysis is based on a single case study and does not seek to produce generalizable conclusions regarding the circulation of organizational models within the social economy. Rather, the conclusions reflect the way in which this process unfolded in the case of OilRight and suggest one possible interpretation of the mechanisms involved in the circulation of an organizational model across different institutional contexts.

Building on these limitations, future research could comparatively examine multiple processes of organizational model circulation within the social economy in order to explore the extent to which they involve reinterpretation of the original model or, alternatively, the transfer of models that maintain a higher degree of fidelity to the reference organization. Such research could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the diversity of mechanisms through which organizational models circulate across institutional contexts and to further refining explanations of mimetic isomorphism within the social economy.

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Sexual Violence in Nouakchott: Sociological Insights from Interviews with Survivors in a Women's Shelter

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Abstract

This study examines the experiences and perceptions of survivors of sexual violence who received support at a women's shelter in Nouakchott, Mauritania. Sexual violence constitutes a serious violation of human rights and remains a highly sensitive and under-researched issue in Mauritanian society due to the strong social stigma and cultural taboos surrounding the topic. The research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach based on structured interviews conducted with 32 survivors who accessed services at the Shelter for Women Victims of Violence between May and September 2024. The study explores the social characteristics of survivors, the contexts in which assaults occurred, and the perceived social factors contributing to sexual violence. The findings suggest that vulnerability to sexual violence may be shaped by a combination of structural and contextual factors, including social stigma, limited reporting mechanisms, economic vulnerability, and weaknesses in legal protection frameworks. In many cases, perpetrators were known to the victims, highlighting the role of trust and social proximity in the dynamics of sexual violence. While the study does not aim to generalize its findings to Mauritanian society as a whole, it provides exploratory sociological insights based on survivors' experiences within a specific institutional setting. The study concludes by recommending improvements in legal protection, reporting procedures, and psychosocial support mechanisms for survivors.

Keywords: Sexual violence; Rape; Survivors; Mauritania; Sociology of crime

1. Introduction

Mauritanian society, like many contemporary societies, has experienced significant social transformations in recent decades. These transformations are closely linked to broader processes of globalization, urbanization, and changes in social structures. Such developments have affected various aspects of social life, including family organization, social relations, and value systems.

While these transformations have created opportunities for greater social openness, they have also contributed to the increased visibility of several social problems, including sexual violence. Rape, in particular, constitutes one of the most serious forms of violence against women and carries profound psychological, social, and legal consequences.

Despite the seriousness of the issue, research on sexual violence in Mauritania remains limited. One of the main reasons for this gap is the strong social stigma surrounding rape, which often discourages survivors and their families from reporting incidents or participating in research. Cultural norms associated with honor and shame further contribute to the social invisibility of the phenomenon.

In this context, studying sexual violence presents significant methodological and ethical challenges. Nevertheless, understanding the social factors associated with rape is

essential for developing effective prevention strategies and improving support mechanisms for survivors.

This study therefore seeks to explore the sociological dimensions of sexual violence in Mauritania through a qualitative investigation conducted in Nouakchott, the country's largest urban center. By focusing on the lived experiences of survivors residing in a women's shelter, the research aims to shed light on the social characteristics of survivors, the contexts in which assaults occur, and the broader social factors that may contribute to the persistence of this phenomenon.

2. Significance and Objectives of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to provide a sociological understanding of sexual violence in the Mauritanian context, particularly in the city of Nouakchott. Given the limited number of empirical studies addressing this issue in Mauritania, this research contributes to filling an important gap in the existing literature.

From a social perspective, the study seeks to raise awareness about the dynamics and contexts in which sexual violence occurs, with the aim of encouraging the development of more effective mechanisms for protecting survivors and supporting their recovery.

From an academic perspective, the study contributes to the development of local sociological research on gender-based violence and opens the way for future studies that may explore related issues using broader samples and different methodological approaches.

The objectives of this study can be summarized as follows:

- To identify the social characteristics of women who have experienced sexual violence in the context of Nouakchott;
- To explore the social, cultural, and economic factors that survivors perceive as contributing to the occurrence of sexual violence;
- To examine the contexts and circumstances in which sexual assaults occur;
- To highlight potential gaps in legal and institutional protection mechanisms that may affect the reporting and handling of sexual violence cases.

3. Problem Statement

In recent years, Mauritania has witnessed an increasing visibility of reported cases of sexual violence, particularly rape. Although the actual prevalence of the phenomenon remains difficult to measure due to underreporting, available evidence suggests that sexual violence constitutes a significant social and legal challenge.

The issue is particularly complex in Mauritania, where cultural norms related to honor and family reputation strongly influence how cases of sexual violence are perceived and addressed. In many situations, families may prefer to conceal such incidents in order to avoid social stigma, which can limit survivors' access to justice and support services.

In addition, legal ambiguities, procedural barriers, and limited institutional support mechanisms may discourage survivors from pursuing legal action. These factors contribute to a broader social context in which sexual violence remains insufficiently documented and inadequately addressed.

Given these challenges, it becomes important to investigate the phenomenon from a sociological perspective that considers both the lived experiences of survivors and the social contexts in which sexual violence occurs.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to address the following research question:

What are the sociological dimensions of sexual violence in the context of Nouakchott, Mauritania?

From this central question, several sub-questions emerge:

- What are the social characteristics of women who have experienced rape?
- In what social contexts and circumstances do sexual assaults occur?
- What factors do survivors perceive as contributing to sexual violence?
- What preventive and support mechanisms can be developed to address this issue?

4. Previous Studies

Reviewing previous studies represents an essential step in scientific research, as it helps clarify the theoretical background of the topic and identify existing research gaps. It also allows researchers to situate their work within the broader academic context and highlight the contribution of their study. In this regard, the present research refers to previous literature that has addressed the issue of rape and sexual violence in Mauritania.

One of the most relevant studies in the Mauritanian context is that of Lehbib (2021), entitled “Rape in Mauritania: Between the Power of Social Factors and Legal Leniency,” published in the *Journal of Law and International Business*. The study aimed to examine the extent to which social factors and weaknesses in the legal system contribute to the prevalence of rape in Mauritanian society.

The research relied on a descriptive analytical approach, primarily based on the analysis of legal texts related to sexual violence, reports from human rights organizations, media coverage, and the existing literature on the subject.

The study reached several important conclusions. It showed that social and cultural factors—particularly social stigma and the tendency of families to conceal rape cases in order to protect family honor—play a significant role in limiting the reporting of such crimes. The research also highlighted several legal shortcomings, including the absence of clear and strict legislation, complex procedures for proving rape, and lengthy judicial processes, which may contribute to the impunity of perpetrators. In addition, the study pointed to the limited availability of psychosocial support services for survivors, which exacerbates the social and psychological consequences of sexual violence.

While Lehbib’s study focused primarily on the legal and structural dimensions of rape in Mauritania, the present research differs in its empirical orientation. Unlike the previous study, which relied mainly on legal texts and documentary sources, this research is based on field interviews conducted with survivors residing in a women’s shelter in Nouakchott. Through this methodological approach, the current study aims to provide a sociological perspective grounded in survivors’ lived experiences, thereby complementing existing research on the subject.

Despite the importance of the issue, empirical sociological research on sexual violence in Mauritania remains extremely limited. Most available works focus primarily on legal analysis, human rights reports, or media coverage rather than field-based sociological investigations. This scarcity of empirical studies partly reflects the strong social stigma surrounding sexual violence, which often limits access to participants and discourages systematic academic research on the topic. Consequently, the present study seeks to contribute exploratory sociological insights based on primary field data collected in Nouakchott.

5. A Conceptual Approach to the Subject of the Study

Defining key concepts is an essential step in scientific research, particularly in sociology, where concepts often carry multiple meanings depending on the theoretical perspective adopted. Clarifying the main concepts used in the study helps ensure analytical precision and avoids ambiguity in interpreting the research findings. As noted by Kass (2022), the definition of concepts may vary according to the disciplinary perspective and the intellectual framework within which they are used.

Since this research focuses on the social factors associated with the phenomenon of rape in Mauritania, the following concepts are briefly defined:

5.1 Factors

The concept of factors refers to a set of variables that influence a particular situation or phenomenon and contribute to shaping individual behaviors and social attitudes. These factors may include both visible and latent influences that interact to shape social practices and individual responses within a given social context (Al-Sanad, 2018).

5.2 Social Factors

The term social factors refers to the environmental and social conditions that influence the behavior and well-being of individuals and groups within society. These conditions may include economic status, educational level, cultural norms, social roles, and broader institutional structures. According to the American Psychological Association (2025), social factors refer to conditions that influence human behavior, including economic circumstances, educational opportunities, environmental contexts, and the social norms of the groups to which individuals belong.

For the purposes of this study, social factors are defined operationally as the social conditions that may influence an individual's vulnerability to sexual violence and contribute, directly or indirectly, to the persistence of this phenomenon within Mauritanian society.

5.3 Rape

Definitions of rape vary across disciplines due to the different perspectives adopted in legal, sociological, and psychological research. However, most definitions agree that rape involves a sexual act imposed on another person without their consent.

From a legal perspective, rape was defined in 1980 as “any act of sexual penetration of whatever nature committed against another person through violence, coercion, or surprise” (Tazdaït, 2018).

This definition emphasizes that rape involves sexual penetration, which distinguishes it from other forms of sexual assault such as harassment or non-penetrative sexual violence, although these acts may also have severe consequences for victims. Penetration may occur through the penis or through other objects used to impose sexual penetration without consent (Easteal, 2011).

The absence of consent is therefore the central element in defining rape, whether coercion occurs through physical violence, threats, intimidation, or other forms of control over the victim.

5.4 Mauritanian Society

Mauritanian society is characterized by ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, including Arabic-speaking populations as well as several African linguistic communities such as Wolof, Pulaar, and Soninke. Differences observed in reporting patterns in this

study may reflect variations in access to support institutions, levels of trust in public institutions, or awareness of available services rather than differences in the actual prevalence of sexual violence (Messoud and Benguegua, 2025).

6. Theoretical Framework

Understanding sexual violence requires a theoretical perspective capable of explaining the social, cultural, and structural conditions that enable such acts to occur. In this study, two complementary sociological approaches are used to interpret the phenomenon of rape in Mauritanian society: Feminist Theory and Social Control Theory. These perspectives help explain both the gendered nature of sexual violence and the role of social institutions in regulating behavior.

6.1 Feminist Theory

Feminist theory provides one of the most influential frameworks for analyzing violence against women. According to this perspective, sexual violence is not merely an individual deviant act but is closely related to broader structures of gender inequality and power relations between men and women within society (Dobash and Dobash, 1979).

Feminist scholars argue that patriarchal social systems often produce norms and power structures that privilege male authority and subordinate women, which can create environments where violence against women is tolerated or insufficiently challenged (Walby, 1990). In this context, rape is interpreted as a manifestation of power and control, rather than simply a sexual act.

Brownmiller (1975) argued that rape functions as a mechanism through which male dominance is maintained in society, reinforcing women's social vulnerability and limiting their autonomy. From this perspective, sexual violence is embedded in social institutions, cultural beliefs, and gender norms that may normalize or minimize violence against women.

Within the Mauritanian context, feminist theory helps explain how social stigma, cultural expectations regarding honor, and unequal gender relations may shape the experiences of survivors and influence reporting patterns. The fear of social blame or reputational damage may discourage victims from reporting sexual violence, thereby contributing to the persistence and invisibility of the phenomenon.

6.2 Social Control Theory

Social Control Theory provides another important framework for understanding deviant behavior, including sexual violence. The theory suggests that individuals "are less likely to engage in deviant behavior when they are strongly connected to social institutions such as family, school, and community" (Hirschi, 1969).

According to Hirschi, social conformity is maintained through four main elements: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. When these social bonds are weakened, individuals may become more likely to engage in behaviors that violate social norms and legal rules.

From this perspective, sexual violence can be partially understood in relation to weakened mechanisms of social control that regulate individual behavior. Factors such as family disintegration, weak parental supervision, economic hardship, and social marginalization may reduce the effectiveness of informal social control and create conditions in which deviant acts become more likely.

In urban contexts undergoing rapid social change, traditional mechanisms of social regulation may become less effective, while modern institutional controls remain limited. In Mauritania, structural factors such as poverty, limited access to education, and weak institutional protection may reduce both informal and formal social control, thereby increasing the vulnerability of certain groups, particularly young women. Analysing contemporary transformations of the family, Voinea and Apostu observe a similar process: growing social openness and new benchmarks of freedom “have gradually caused the social control to decrease, the relations between generations to change, the cultural influences taken over through the socialization process to diminish” (Voinea and Apostu, 2026: 142).

By combining Feminist Theory and Social Control Theory, this study provides a broader sociological interpretation of sexual violence. While feminist theory emphasizes the role of gender inequality and patriarchal power structures, social control theory highlights how weakened social regulation and institutional gaps may create opportunities for such crimes to occur.

Together, these perspectives allow for a more comprehensive understanding of sexual violence as a phenomenon shaped by both structural gender relations and the effectiveness of social and institutional control mechanisms.

7. Methodological Foundations of the Field Study

This section presents the methodological foundations of the field study, including the study population, research approach, data collection tools, ethical considerations, and data analysis procedures.

7.1 Population and Sample

The study population consisted of survivors of rape who received support at the Shelter for Women Victims of Violence in Nouakchott during the period of fieldwork, which took place between May and September 2024.

Due to the limited number of survivors who accessed the center during this period, the research adopted a comprehensive sampling approach (total enumeration). All available cases during the fieldwork period were included in the study. The final sample consisted of 32 survivors who were receiving services at the shelter at the time of data collection.

This sampling strategy allowed the researcher to obtain a broader understanding of the experiences of survivors within this specific institutional context.

In addition to the interviews conducted with survivors, informal discussions were also held with staff members at the shelter, including social workers and legal specialists. These actors are closely involved in supporting survivors and provided additional insights that helped contextualize the phenomenon under study.

7.2 Research Approach

This study follows a descriptive analytical approach, which aims to understand the phenomenon under investigation and identify relationships between its main variables. The descriptive approach is widely used in social sciences to provide an accurate description of social phenomena through the collection, classification, and interpretation of empirical data (Abidat, Abu Nassar and Mubaideen, 1999).

By adopting this approach, the study seeks to analyze both theoretical and field data in order to produce sociological insights that may contribute to a better

understanding of sexual violence and inform potential social and institutional responses to the phenomenon (Zerouati, 2007).

7.3 Data Collection Tools

The selection of research tools was determined by the nature of the phenomenon under study. Given the sensitivity of the topic and the relatively low educational levels of many participants, the interview method was considered the most appropriate data collection tool.

The interview can be defined as a guided conversation conducted between a researcher and participants with the aim of obtaining specific information relevant to the research objectives (Hallas, 2006).

This study employed structured interviews, in which questions were prepared in advance and asked in the same order to all participants. This approach ensured consistency across interviews and facilitated the comparison of responses.

An interview guide composed of 23 questions was developed and divided into two main sections:

- The first section focused on the social characteristics of the participants, including age, housing conditions, educational level, marital status, economic situation, and family structure;
- The second section included 16 questions combining open-ended and closed-ended formats. Open-ended questions allowed participants to describe their experiences and perspectives freely, while closed questions helped organize and compare certain aspects of the responses.

The interviews addressed three main themes:

- the social characteristics of survivors;
- the circumstances in which sexual violence occurred;
- survivors' perspectives on the causes of the phenomenon and possible preventive measures.

Due to the linguistic diversity of the participants, interviews were conducted in Arabic or French, depending on the language with which each participant felt most comfortable. This approach facilitated communication and helped ensure that participants were able to express their experiences clearly and accurately.

7.4 Research Ethics

Ethical considerations were central to the design and implementation of this study due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the vulnerability of the participants.

Prior to conducting the research, authorization was obtained from the management of the Shelter for Women Victims of Violence in Nouakchott. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all adult participants.

For participants who were minors, interviews were conducted only with the presence and approval of the shelter's social workers responsible for their care.

All interviews were conducted in a confidential environment to ensure participants' safety and emotional comfort. Personal identifiers were not recorded, and all data were anonymized during the analysis process.

Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the interview at any time without any consequences for the services they received from the shelter.

Given the psychological sensitivity associated with discussing experiences of sexual violence, interviews were conducted with the support of social workers from the shelter, who were available to provide emotional assistance if necessary.

7.5 Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted in three main stages, following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006):

First, the interview transcripts were carefully reviewed several times in order to identify meaningful segments related to the research questions. These segments were then coded through an open coding process.

Second, the generated codes were examined and grouped into broader thematic categories representing recurring patterns in participants' responses. These themes captured the main sociological dimensions of the phenomenon, including the social characteristics of survivors, the contexts of sexual assault, and the perceived causes of sexual violence.

Finally, the identified themes were interpreted in light of the study's sociological framework in order to explore the relationships between social factors and the occurrence of sexual violence in the Mauritanian context.

8. The Phenomenon of Rape from a Legal Perspective

Legally speaking, Mauritania is not new to participating in meetings and ratifying international conventions aimed at protecting women. For example, it participated in the 1993 United Nations meeting aimed at eliminating violence against women and the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing. It also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) submitted by the United Nations Committee in 2001, with a reservation that there is no conflict between its articles (13 and 16) and the provisions of the Islamic Sharia. In 2003, "Mauritania approved the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, known as the Maputo Protocol" (Evrard and Pettigrew, 2019).

Despite all these agreements and laws, these legal measures have not fully addressed the persistence of sexual violence, particularly rape. This prompted the associations active in the field of protecting rape victims (Association of Women Heading Households, Mother and Child Health Association) to call for the adoption of the "Law 2020" aimed at preventing violence against women and girls. However, this law has sparked a wide debate in cultural circles and jurists who considered it contrary to the texts of religion; therefore, the proposed law became the subject of intense public debate in media and political circles, particularly between conservative and reform-oriented actors.

According to legal expert El Eid Mohameden Mbarek, (personal communication, April 8, 2025) laws against sexual assault in general and rape in particular are described as weak despite the fact that they stem from the texts of Islamic law, as it is difficult to separate cases of rape from adultery. Hence, the right of the victim of rape may be lost, in light of administrative and financial corruption. As a result, cases of sexual assault are often interpreted as adultery.

9. Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study are based on the thematic analysis of interviews conducted with survivors of rape who received support at the Shelter for Women Victims of Violence in Nouakchott. The analysis revealed several recurring themes that reflect

the social characteristics of survivors, the contexts in which sexual violence occurred, and the broader social and institutional factors shaping the phenomenon.

Rather than presenting the results through statistical measurements, the following section highlights the main patterns emerging from survivors' narratives. These findings are interpreted in light of the theoretical framework of the study—particularly Feminist Theory and Social Control Theory—and are also compared with previous research conducted in Mauritania.

Before presenting and analyzing the study findings, it is important to outline the socio-demographic characteristics of the study sample. This provides a general overview of the participants' social background and helps contextualize the circumstances in which the incidents of sexual violence occurred.

Table 1 presents the main socio-demographic characteristics of the participants, including their educational level, economic situation, age, marital status, and family structure.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants (N = 32)

Educational level	Economic situation			Age		Marital status			Family structure	
	Poor	Middle	Rich	Under 18	18 and over	Single	Married	Divorced	Nuclear	Extended
Not enrolled	10	1	0	11	1	13	0	0	3	8
Primary	8	5	0	12	1	12	0	0	7	8
Middle school	3	4	0	6	0	6	0	0	1	4
Secondary	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0
Total	21	11	0	30	2	32	0	0	12	20

Source: Compiled by the researchers from field data

The table shows that most participants come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, with 21 out of 32 describing their economic situation as poor. The majority of survivors were also under the age of 18 (30 cases), highlighting the particular vulnerability of adolescent girls to sexual violence. In addition, most participants were unmarried and lived in extended family households, reflecting common family arrangements in Mauritanian society.

9.1 Social Characteristics of Survivors

The interviews suggest that many survivors experienced sexual violence during adolescence. Participants frequently described themselves as being very young at the time of the assault, often before reaching adulthood. Their young age appeared to shape their vulnerability in several ways, including limited social power, lack of experience, and dependence on family members.

This finding is consistent with global research on gender-based violence. According to the World Health Organization, adolescent girls and young women are among the most vulnerable groups to sexual violence due to age-related power imbalances, limited autonomy, and social dependence on family structures (World Health Organization, 2013). Studies conducted by UN Women similarly emphasize that young and economically marginalized women face higher risks of sexual violence because structural inequalities restrict their access to protection mechanisms and social resources (UN Women, 2020).

From the perspective of Feminist Theory, this finding reflects broader gendered power relations within society. Feminist scholars argue that young women and girls often occupy socially vulnerable positions within patriarchal systems where gender inequalities limit their ability to resist or report violence (Walby, 1990). In such contexts,

sexual violence may be used as a mechanism of domination and control over women (Brownmiller, 1975).

Most survivors also reported being unmarried at the time of the incident. In Mauritanian society, unmarried girls often face heightened social vulnerability due to the cultural importance attached to honor and reputation. This finding is consistent with the observations of Lehbib (2021), who noted that social norms surrounding honor and family reputation often shape how sexual violence is perceived and addressed within Mauritanian communities.

The narratives further revealed that many survivors came from economically marginalized backgrounds and had limited access to education. Rather than indicating that low educational attainment directly causes sexual violence, this finding reflects broader structural inequalities that may restrict access to information, protection, and institutional support.

This observation can also be interpreted through Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969), which suggests that weak social bonds and limited integration into social institutions such as schools may increase vulnerability to deviant behavior. In contexts where educational opportunities are limited and social supervision is weakened, protective social structures may become less effective.

Economic vulnerability also emerged as a recurring theme. Many participants described families in which parents were required to work long hours outside the home, resulting in reduced parental supervision. According to Social Control Theory, weakened attachment and supervision within family structures may reduce informal social control and increase exposure to risk.

Family structure also appeared to play an important role. Many survivors reported living in extended family households. While extended families are a common social arrangement in Mauritania, the presence of many individuals within the same domestic space may complicate supervision and blur social boundaries between family members and acquaintances.

Despite these vulnerabilities, several participants emphasized that they continued their education or social activities after the incident, often with the support of family members or the shelter. These accounts highlight the role of social support systems in facilitating recovery and resilience among survivors.

9.2 Contexts and Circumstances of Sexual Assault

The interviews revealed that sexual violence occurred under a variety of circumstances. Survivors described strategies used by perpetrators such as intimidation, coercion, deception, and manipulation.

Some participants explained that the perpetrator used direct threats to force submission, while others described situations in which they were lured to isolated locations under the pretext of assistance or friendship. In several cases, survivors reported being forcibly transported to another location before the assault occurred.

An important finding is that many assaults occurred during daytime hours. Participants explained that perpetrators often took advantage of moments when parents or guardians were absent from the home due to work obligations. This finding supports the assumptions of Social Control Theory, which emphasizes that deviant behavior becomes more likely when informal supervision and social regulation are weakened (Hirschi, 1969).

These results also correspond with previous research in Mauritania. Lehib (2021) similarly observed that social and structural factors—such as economic pressures on families and limited supervision—may indirectly create conditions that facilitate sexual violence.

These patterns are also reflected in international research on sexual violence. According to UNODC, many sexual assaults occur in situations where perpetrators take advantage of temporary opportunities, such as the absence of guardians or weak supervision in private environments (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019). Such conditions create what criminologists describe as “opportunity structures” that facilitate deviant behavior when social control mechanisms are weakened.

9.3 Places Where Sexual Violence Occurred

Survivors described a variety of locations where assaults took place. In many cases, incidents occurred within private residential spaces such as houses or apartments. Perpetrators often exploited their familiarity with the household environment to gain access when parents or guardians were absent.

Other cases occurred in public spaces such as streets or vehicles, indicating that sexual violence can also occur in environments where security and surveillance are limited.

A smaller number of incidents occurred in educational settings, where the aggressor was often a classmate who used trust and familiarity to isolate the victim.

These findings suggest that sexual violence in Nouakchott occurs across both private and public environments. From a sociological perspective, this reflects the interaction between individual opportunity structures and weak social control mechanisms, as suggested by Social Control Theory.

Global studies on sexual violence indicate that assaults frequently occur in environments familiar to the victim, including homes, schools, and community spaces. The World Health Organization reports that sexual violence often takes place in private settings where perpetrators can act with reduced risk of detection (World Health Organization, 2013). This observation supports the findings of the present study, where many incidents occurred within residential spaces.

9.4 Relationship Between Victim and Perpetrator

One of the most significant findings of this study is that perpetrators were often known to the victims, a pattern widely documented in international research on sexual violence.

From the perspective of Feminist Theory, this pattern reflects the role of gendered power relations within everyday social interactions. Feminist scholars argue that sexual violence frequently occurs within familiar social environments where power imbalances and trust relationships can be exploited (Dobash and Dobash, 1979).

This finding also aligns with Lehib’s study, which highlighted that many cases of rape in Mauritania occur within close social networks and may remain hidden due to family pressure and social stigma.

Participants frequently described a strong sense of betrayal when the aggressor was someone they trusted. This emotional dimension highlights the psychological consequences of sexual violence when it occurs within familiar social relationships.

This finding corresponds with global statistics on sexual violence. According to the World Health Organization, a significant proportion of sexual violence cases “are committed by individuals known to the victim, including acquaintances, relatives, or

intimate partners” (World Health Organization, 2013). Similar conclusions are reported in international studies conducted by UN Women, which indicate that sexual violence frequently occurs within existing social relationships rather than through attacks by strangers (UN Women, 2020).

9.5 Harassment and Warning Signs Prior to the Assault

Some survivors reported experiencing verbal harassment or inappropriate behavior from the aggressor prior to the assault. These behaviors included sexual comments, gestures, or attempts at unwanted physical contact.

This pattern suggests that sexual violence may sometimes develop through a process of escalating harassment. Feminist scholars have often emphasized that sexual harassment and sexual violence exist along a continuum of gender-based violence.

However, several participants indicated that no clear warning signs were present before the assault. In these cases, perpetrators appeared to conceal their intentions in order to maintain the victim’s trust. This observation illustrates the complexity of predicting or preventing sexual violence in everyday social interactions.

This observation reflects what global gender-violence research describes as the continuum of sexual violence, where harassment, coercion, and intimidation may precede more severe forms of sexual assault. International studies emphasize that sexual harassment and assault are interconnected forms of gender-based violence that often occur within the same social environments (UN Women, 2020).

9.6 Social and Cultural Factors Contributing to the Phenomenon

Participants frequently referred to broader social and cultural factors influencing sexual violence in Mauritania. Social stigma emerged as a key barrier to reporting sexual violence. In sociological terms, social stigmatisation is “a process in which certain individuals are placed in a socially inferior position through the attribution of discreditable characteristics and properties, or through the discrediting of their existing characteristics” (Popa-Velea, 2026: 333).

When asked about the perceived reasons behind the assault, survivors provided different interpretations. Some attributed the incident to individual factors such as psychological problems or uncontrolled sexual desire. Several participants expressed this perception in simple terms:

Case 1: “Mental illness and ignorance.”

Case 2: “Sexual desire.”

Case 3: “Mental and physical weakness.”

Case 4: “Psychological disorders.”

Case 5: “There was a romantic relationship before the incident.”

Case 6: “I don’t know.”

Survivors explained that families often conceal incidents of sexual violence in order to protect family honor and avoid social shame. This finding strongly corresponds with Lehbib’s research, which highlighted the role of honor-based cultural norms in limiting the reporting of rape cases in Mauritania.

From a Feminist Theory perspective, such cultural norms may reinforce gender inequalities and silence victims by placing greater emphasis on family reputation than on justice for survivors.

Economic vulnerability was also mentioned as a contributing factor. Poverty, unemployment, and limited access to education may expose young girls to unsafe

environments or dependent relationships. These structural conditions reflect broader social inequalities that shape vulnerability to violence.

Participants also mentioned the spread of drugs and psychotropic substances among some young people as a potential factor contributing to violent behavior.

The role of social stigma identified in this study is also widely documented in international research. According to UN Women, fear of social stigma, victim blaming, and damage to family reputation are among the main factors that discourage survivors from reporting sexual violence in many societies (UN Women, 2020).

Some survivors also emphasized institutional weaknesses that they believed contributed to the occurrence of sexual violence. According to statements recorded during legal proceedings, participants pointed to issues such as weak law enforcement and limited security presence. Their statements included:

Case 1: "The absence of security."

Case 2: "Lack of law enforcement."

Case 3: "The rape happened because of the lack of security and the failure to enforce the law."

Case 5: "Exploitation of her mental and economic vulnerability."

Case 6: "Nothing was recorded."

9.7 Survivors' Perspectives on Prevention and Support

When asked about possible solutions, survivors proposed several measures aimed at preventing sexual violence and supporting victims.

Many participants emphasized the importance of raising awareness among girls regarding personal safety and the need for caution in social relationships. They also highlighted the role of family supervision and communication between parents and children.

These recommendations reflect the importance of strengthening informal social control mechanisms within families and communities, which is consistent with the principles of Social Control Theory.

Participants also stressed the need for emotional and social support for survivors. They emphasized that victims should receive compassion and assistance rather than blame or stigmatization.

At the institutional level, survivors called for clearer legal protections against sexual violence and stronger enforcement of laws. These demands reflect the importance of formal institutional control in addressing sexual violence and ensuring accountability for perpetrators.

When asked what advice they would give to other survivors and their families, participants emphasized the importance of justice, emotional support, and rejecting victim blaming. Some of their messages included:

Case 1: "Follow the case to obtain justice."

Case 2: "Seek both medical and legal support."

Case 3: "Do not blame your daughter; she is not at fault."

Case 4: "Do not stay silent about rape."

Case 5: "Support the survivor emotionally so she can overcome the trauma."

10. Discussion of the Findings

The findings of this study should be interpreted in relation to the specific institutional context in which the research was conducted. The participants interviewed were survivors who had accessed services at a single women's shelter in Nouakchott

operated by a civil society organization providing support for victims of sexual violence. Although the shelter receives survivors from diverse social and geographic backgrounds, the sample remains institutionally bounded and therefore cannot be considered representative of all survivors of sexual violence in Mauritania. The results should therefore be understood as exploratory sociological insights derived from a specific support setting.

The narratives of the participants highlight the important role of social stigma in shaping the experiences of survivors. Many interviewees described the strong pressure placed on families to protect family honor and reputation, which can sometimes discourage the public disclosure of sexual violence. In such contexts, survivors may experience fear of social judgment. These findings are consistent with previous research conducted in Mauritania (Lehbib, 2021), which similarly identified honor-based cultural norms as an important factor influencing the visibility of sexual violence.

From a sociological perspective, these dynamics can be interpreted through the lens of Feminist Theory, which emphasizes how gendered social norms and power relations may shape both the occurrence of violence and the social responses to it. In societies where reputation and social honor are strongly connected to female sexuality, survivors of sexual violence may encounter forms of social stigma that shift attention away from the responsibility of perpetrators and toward concerns about family reputation.

The findings also suggest that structural and situational factors may influence the contexts in which sexual violence occurs. Several participants described assaults taking place during periods when parents or guardians were absent from the home due to work obligations. In rapidly urbanizing environments where economic pressures require extended working hours, traditional forms of informal social supervision may become less consistent. From the perspective of Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969), such situations may create temporary opportunities for deviant behavior when social monitoring is reduced.

Economic vulnerability also appeared in several narratives as a broader contextual condition shaping exposure to risk. Poverty, limited access to education, and social marginalization may restrict the availability of protective resources and institutional support mechanisms. These structural inequalities do not cause sexual violence directly, but they may influence the environments in which individuals interact and the capacity of communities to prevent or respond to such acts.

Another important pattern emerging from the interviews concerns the familiarity between victims and perpetrators. Many participants indicated that the aggressor was someone they already knew, such as an acquaintance, neighbor, or member of the broader social network. This finding is widely documented in international research on sexual violence, which shows that assaults frequently occur within existing social relationships rather than through attacks by strangers (World Health Organization, 2013; UN Women, 2020). Such dynamics highlight the complex nature of trust and proximity within everyday social environments.

The study also points to the importance of institutional responses in addressing sexual violence. Survivors emphasized the need for stronger legal protections, clearer reporting mechanisms, and expanded psychosocial support services. These perspectives reflect the role of both formal institutions and community support systems in preventing violence and assisting survivors in their recovery.

Overall, the findings suggest that sexual violence should be understood as the result of a complex interaction of social, economic, cultural, and institutional factors rather than as the consequence of individual behavior alone. Addressing this phenomenon therefore requires multidimensional responses that combine legal reform, social awareness, institutional protection mechanisms, and support services for survivors.

11. Conclusions

The findings suggest that sexual violence in the studied context is shaped by the interaction of social stigma, economic vulnerability, gender inequality, and institutional limitations. The study highlights the role of gender inequality, economic vulnerability, and limited awareness of women's rights in shaping environments where sexual violence may occur.

The results also emphasize the influence of social stigma, which often leads families to conceal incidents of rape in order to protect family honor. This dynamic can contribute to the underreporting of cases and may allow perpetrators to avoid accountability.

Addressing sexual violence in Mauritania therefore requires coordinated efforts at multiple levels. These efforts should include strengthening legal protections for survivors, improving reporting mechanisms, raising community awareness about the nature of sexual violence, and expanding psychosocial and institutional support services for victims.

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Social Responsibility Initiatives of Economic Organizations in the Western Region of Romania

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Abstract

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become an important component of organizational strategy, reflecting the growing expectation that economic organizations should combine financial performance with social and environmental responsibility. This study explores the CSR initiatives implemented by economic organizations in Western Romania, with particular attention to their contribution to organizational performance and community well-being. It also examines the alignment of CSR activities with organizational values and strategic objectives, the motivations underlying organizational involvement, the participation of stakeholders, and the long-term sustainability of these initiatives. A qualitative research design was employed, based on semi-structured interviews with ten representatives of economic organizations operating mainly in Timișoara and the Western Region of Romania. The participants occupied different organizational positions and represented multinational companies, retail organizations, non-governmental organizations, social enterprises, and manufacturing companies. The data were examined through thematic analysis with the support of NVivo. The results indicate that organizations implement a diverse range of CSR activities, particularly in the fields of environmental sustainability, education, community development, social inclusion, employee engagement, and support for vulnerable groups. CSR was generally perceived as being integrated into organizational strategy and associated with values such as responsibility, transparency, sustainability, innovation, and community involvement. The main motivations included ethical responsibility, the intention to address social and environmental problems, and strategic benefits such as improved reputation, customer trust, and employee commitment. Stakeholder involvement through consultations, partnerships, volunteering, and feedback mechanisms was considered essential to the effectiveness and sustainability of CSR initiatives. Overall, the findings suggest that CSR in Western Romania is increasingly evolving from isolated philanthropic action toward a strategic, collaborative, and sustainable organizational practice capable of generating economic, social, and environmental value.

Keywords: *Corporate Social Responsibility; Economic Organizations; Stakeholder Engagement; Community Development; Sustainability; Western Romania*

1. Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has gained increasing importance in both academic research and organizational practice, becoming a central element of ethical business conduct and sustainable development. Contemporary organizations are no longer evaluated exclusively through their financial results, but also through the social and environmental consequences of their activities. Therefore, businesses are increasingly expected to balance profitability with environmental protection,

responsible governance, stakeholder interests, and contributions to community well-being (Luetkenhorst, 2004; Dartey-Baah and Amponsah-Tawiah, 2011).

The development of CSR reflects a broader transformation in the understanding of the role of economic organizations in society. Initially associated mainly with philanthropy and charitable actions, CSR has gradually developed into a strategic approach that can influence organizational decision-making, employee relations, corporate reputation, customer loyalty, and long-term competitiveness. From this perspective, socially responsible initiatives are not external to business activities, but can be incorporated into organizational values, operational processes, and strategic objectives.

CSR may include a wide range of activities, such as environmental protection, responsible resource management, educational support, community investment, employee volunteering, social inclusion, and assistance for vulnerable groups. These initiatives can generate benefits for communities by improving access to education, employment, social services, and environmental resources. At the organizational level, they may contribute to a stronger public image, increased stakeholder trust, employee motivation, and more sustainable relationships with local communities.

In Romania, CSR practices have developed alongside economic globalization, European integration, the expansion of multinational companies, and growing public expectations regarding responsible organizational conduct (European Commission, 2011). The Western Region provides a particularly relevant setting for examining these developments because of its diversified economy, international business presence, educational institutions, civil society organizations, and emerging social enterprises. Timișoara, as one of the region's main economic and social centers, brings together organizations from sectors such as telecommunications, retail, automotive manufacturing, services, social entrepreneurship, and the non-governmental field.

Although CSR has received considerable international attention, fewer studies have examined how economic organizations in Western Romania understand and implement social responsibility initiatives. More specifically, limited attention has been given to the ways in which these initiatives are connected to organizational strategy, the motivations that determine organizational engagement, the role of stakeholders in their development, and their perceived effects on organizational performance and community well-being.

The present study addresses this gap by analyzing CSR initiatives undertaken by economic organizations operating in Western Romania, with particular attention to Timișoara. The research investigates the main types of initiatives implemented, their alignment with organizational values and strategic goals, the motivations supporting CSR engagement, stakeholder participation, and the long-term strategies developed to maintain and expand these activities.

The study is based on a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews with ten representatives of different economic and social organizations. The participants occupied positions such as CSR coordinator, communication specialist, manager, department head, senior management representative, and employee. The data were analyzed thematically in order to identify common patterns, distinctive practices, and relevant differences between the organizations included in the research.

The relevance of the study lies in its contribution to understanding how CSR operates within a regional and transitional economic context. By examining the experiences of organizations from different sectors, the research provides empirical

insights into the practical integration of social responsibility into organizational activities. It also highlights the importance of stakeholder collaboration, strategic planning, innovation, and long-term commitment for developing CSR initiatives that generate benefits for both organizations and local communities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

In academic circles, the definition of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) remains a subject of ongoing debate, with no universally accepted interpretation (Chen et al., 2019). Broadly, CSR encompasses initiatives that extend beyond mere legal compliance to benefit society and the environment (Yousefian et al., 2023). Some scholars define CSR as the allocation of organizational resources toward promoting social well-being and strengthening relationships with stakeholders (Chen et al., 2019). According to the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), CSR refers to “an organization’s responsibility for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment through transparent and ethical behavior that contributes to sustainable development, health, and the welfare of society, takes into account the expectations of stakeholders, complies with applicable laws, is consistent with international norms of behavior, and is integrated throughout the organization and practiced in its relationships” (Bhaye, 2009: 2). Similarly, Davis (2005 apud Stanislavská et al., 2010) argues that CSR extends beyond legal obligations to encompass voluntary actions by corporations aimed at generating positive social outcomes.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) offers a range of strategic and ethical benefits for organizations, contributing to stronger stakeholder relationships, improved internal culture, and enhanced brand reputation. The following dimensions illustrate its broader significance:

- i. **CSR and Customer Relationships:** One of CSR’s central tenets is its ability to foster deeper engagement between companies and their communities (Lord and Beeston, 2019). Through active involvement in local initiatives, businesses can strengthen connections with customers and employees, cultivating trust and loyalty within the markets they serve. Such engagement often leads to increased brand affinity and long-term competitive advantage.
- ii. **Employee Motivation and Retention:** Employees are among the most critical stakeholders in CSR implementation. A company’s workforce plays a central role in operational success, and CSR practices that align with employee values can significantly boost morale and productivity (Lord and Beeston, 2019). Organizations that prioritize employee well-being and social impact are more likely to retain top talent and foster a committed, purpose-driven workplace.
- iii. **Demonstrating Genuine Commitment:** Effective CSR initiatives go beyond symbolic gestures by integrating sustainability and social responsibility into core business practices. Examples include using environmentally friendly materials, supporting charitable causes, and encouraging employee volunteerism (Lord and Beeston, 2019). When combined, these efforts reflect an authentic commitment to societal well-being and environmental stewardship, amplifying their collective impact.
- iv. **Social Media Visibility:** In the digital era, publicizing CSR activities on social media platforms is essential for maintaining a positive brand image. Highlighting socially responsible actions through digital channels allows companies to engage

with audiences on a deeper level, beyond traditional marketing (Lord and Beeston, 2019). This approach not only strengthens brand identity but also encourages customer loyalty and positive word-of-mouth promotion.

v. Government and Public Relations: Companies that actively pursue CSR are often viewed more favorably by governmental and regulatory bodies. In contrast, those neglecting CSR may be subject to greater scrutiny or public criticism (Lord and Beeston, 2019). A strong CSR profile can act as a buffer against activist pressure and regulatory intervention, while also enhancing a company's legitimacy in the eyes of policymakers.

vi. Positive Workplace Culture: A culture of social responsibility contributes to a positive and inclusive work environment. When employees believe their organization is making a meaningful social or environmental impact, they are more likely to experience job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Lord and Beeston, 2019).

2.2 Principles of Corporate Social Responsibility

Defining Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and delineating its activities remains challenging due to the conceptual ambiguity surrounding what qualifies as responsible corporate conduct. To address this complexity, scholars often rely on three foundational principles that underpin all CSR initiatives: sustainability, accountability, and transparency:

2.2.1 Sustainability

Sustainability refers to the long-term impact of present-day decisions on future generations. It emphasizes the responsible use of resources to ensure that today's consumption does not compromise the ability of future stakeholders to meet their needs (Crowther and Aras, 2008). The principle is particularly critical when dealing with finite or scarce resources, highlighting the need for organizations to adopt practices that balance economic growth with environmental stewardship.

2.2.2 Accountability

Accountability involves an organization's recognition of its impact on both internal and external environments, and its obligation to take responsibility for those effects. This principle requires companies to assess the social, environmental, and economic consequences of their actions and to communicate these outcomes transparently to affected stakeholders (Crowther and Aras, 2008). It also reinforces the need for ethical governance, where organizations are answerable not only to shareholders but also to a broader group of stakeholders.

2.2.3 Transparency

Transparency entails the open and honest disclosure of information related to corporate operations and their societal impacts. It ensures that stakeholders, especially external parties without access to internal decision-making processes, can understand the implications of a company's actions (Crowther and Aras, 2008). Transparency reflects a commitment to ethical conduct, fosters stakeholder trust, and supports informed public discourse.

2.3 Social Initiatives

Social initiatives represent a vital aspect of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), encompassing actions aimed at addressing societal challenges through both

philanthropic and strategic efforts (Yousefian et al., 2023). Scholars such as Porter and Kramer (2011) emphasize the importance of aligning social initiatives with business strategies to create “shared value”, where corporate success and social progress are mutually reinforcing. In this view, CSR initiatives are not peripheral but embedded in sustainable business models that enhance long-term stakeholder relationships and competitiveness (Brønn and Vidaver-Cohen, 2009). Effective social initiatives also require a shift from symbolic actions to systemic change, particularly in supporting marginalized groups (Shekhar, 2018). This commitment to social equity enhances corporate legitimacy and relevance. In transitional economies such as Romania, CSR initiatives are especially significant, as they help bridge gaps in public infrastructure and government services. In such contexts, CSR functions as a complementary force, amplifying social impact and contributing to localized sustainable development.

2.4 Economic Organizations in the Context of CSR

Economic organizations are entities engaged in the production, distribution, and exchange of goods and services with the objective of creating economic value while responding to the needs of various stakeholders (Gibbons and Roberts, 2015). In contemporary business environments, organizations are increasingly expected to balance economic objectives with social and environmental responsibilities. As a result, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become an important component of organizational strategy and decision-making (Luetkenhorst, 2004).

The role of economic organizations extends beyond profit generation to include contributions to sustainable development, community well-being, environmental protection, and ethical business conduct. Through CSR initiatives, organizations seek to address stakeholder expectations while enhancing organizational reputation, competitiveness, and long-term sustainability (Brønn and Vidaver-Cohen, 2009). This shift reflects a broader understanding of business responsibility, whereby organizations are viewed not only as economic actors but also as contributors to social and environmental progress.

In the Western Region of Romania, economic organizations play an important role in promoting CSR through initiatives in environmental sustainability, community engagement, education, and social inclusion. Their involvement in such activities demonstrates the growing integration of CSR principles into organizational practices and strategic objectives, contributing to both organizational performance and regional development (Yousefian et al., 2023).

2.5 The Western Region of Romania

The Western Region of Romania is one of the country’s eight development regions and comprises the counties of Arad, Timiș, Caraș-Severin, and Hunedoara. Due to its strategic location at the border with Hungary and Serbia, the region serves as an important gateway between Romania and Central Western Europe. The region benefits from well-developed transportation networks, strong cross-border connections, and access to European markets, which contribute significantly to its economic competitiveness (West Regional Development Agency, n.d.).

Among the region’s major urban centers, Timișoara plays a particularly important economic role. As the capital of Timiș County and one of Romania’s leading business hubs, the city has attracted substantial domestic and foreign investment, particularly in the automotive, manufacturing, information technology, telecommunications, and service sectors (National Institute of Statistics, n.d.; Timișoara

City Hall, n.d.). The presence of multinational corporations, a highly skilled workforce, and several higher education institutions has further strengthened the region's economic development and innovation capacity.

The Western Region is characterized by a diversified economic structure, relatively high levels of foreign direct investment, and strong integration into European economic networks. These characteristics create favorable conditions for the development and implementation of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives. As organizations increasingly respond to environmental, social, and governance expectations, the region provides an appropriate context for examining how CSR practices contribute to organizational performance, stakeholder engagement, and sustainable regional development (West Regional Development Agency, n.d.).

2.6 Theoretical Foundations and Models

2.6.1 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory was formally developed by Freeman (1984) as a managerial framework that emphasizes the importance of addressing the interests and expectations of all stakeholders who can affect or are affected by an organization's activities (Freeman, 1984). It supports the idea that companies should pursue not only core business objectives but also voluntarily embrace broader social and environmental responsibilities (Mahmud et al., 2021). The theory gained traction during the post-Great Depression era, when scholars and practitioners began advocating for corporate accountability to a wider range of stakeholders, including employees, customers, communities, and the environment (Yousefian et al., 2023). Neglecting these groups in favor of shareholder primacy has been shown to result in long-term strategic and reputational risks.

In the context of economic organizations in Romania's Western region, stakeholder theory offers a valuable lens for analyzing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices. These organizations are increasingly expected to address societal needs and environmental concerns, especially in areas where industrial activities may disrupt local communities or ecosystems, often referred to as "silent stakeholders". Social responsibility initiatives, guided by stakeholder theory, aim to balance corporate interests with broader ethical obligations. Fassin (2009) expands the stakeholder framework by identifying three categories: real stakeholders, who are directly affected by or influence the company; stake watchers, who serve as intermediaries safeguarding stakeholder interests; and stakekeepers, such as regulatory agencies, who exert control through governance mechanisms (Alkalah, 2016). This categorization supports a more nuanced understanding of how CSR initiatives can be tailored to meet the expectations of diverse stakeholder groups.

2.6.2 The Triple Bottom Line Theory

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) theory, introduced by Elkington (1997), proposes that organizational success should be evaluated not only in terms of economic performance but also through its social and environmental impacts (Elkington, 1997; Dartey-Baah and Amponsah-Tawiah, 2011). This approach shifts the corporate focus from a profit-centric model to a more holistic view of success, emphasizing the interdependence of people, planet, and profit (Crowther and Aras, 2008). TBL is often viewed as essential for achieving long-term sustainability and guiding sustainable development strategies within organizations (Dartey-Baah and Amponsah-Tawiah, 2011).

The TBL framework is structured around three core dimensions of sustainability. The environmental component emphasizes responsible resource management to ensure environmental preservation for future generations (Dartey-Baah and Amponsah-Tawiah, 2011). Economic sustainability, meanwhile, extends beyond financial performance to consider a company's broader impact on the local and global economic systems in which it operates. The social dimension, often the least developed of the three, centers on principles of social justice, focusing on the fair distribution of resources, opportunities, and societal benefits (Dartey-Baah and Amponsah-Tawiah, 2011).

By integrating these dimensions, the Triple Bottom Line theory provides a comprehensive framework for evaluating the full impact of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. This model is particularly relevant in the context of the Western region of Romania, where economic organizations are increasingly expected to address not only profit objectives but also environmental preservation and community development. As such, TBL serves as a valuable tool for analyzing how CSR practices affect corporations, local communities, and the environment in a balanced and sustainable manner.

2.6.3 Carroll's CSR Pyramid Model

Carroll's CSR Pyramid is one of the most influential frameworks for understanding corporate social responsibility (CSR). Developed by Carroll (1991), the model conceptualizes CSR as a hierarchy of four interrelated responsibilities that organizations must fulfill: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities. According to the model, businesses are expected to be profitable while simultaneously complying with legal requirements, acting ethically, and contributing voluntarily to the well-being of society (Carroll, 1991).

The foundation of the pyramid is economic responsibility (Ararat, 2005), which reflects the organization's obligation to generate profits, create value for shareholders, and ensure long-term business sustainability. Legal responsibility forms the second level and requires organizations to operate within the laws and regulations established by society (Chen et al., 2019). Ethical responsibility extends beyond legal compliance and refers to behaviors, standards, and practices that are expected by stakeholders even when they are not codified in law. At the highest level of the pyramid is philanthropic responsibility (Ararat, 2005), which involves voluntary activities aimed at improving community well-being through charitable donations, community projects, educational programs, and other social initiatives (Carroll, 1991).

Carroll's CSR Pyramid provides a useful framework for understanding how economic organizations balance economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities. In the context of Romania's Western Region, the model highlights how CSR contributes to organizational performance while creating social and environmental value for stakeholders (Carroll, 1991).

2.7 Previous Studies

Previous research has demonstrated that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become an increasingly important aspect of organizational strategy, contributing to both business performance and sustainable development. Studies have shown that organizations implementing CSR initiatives often experience improved stakeholder relationships, enhanced corporate reputation, increased customer loyalty, and stronger organizational performance (Jackson and Apostolakou, 2010; Kumari et al., 2021). In Europe, institutional environments have been found to influence the adoption and

effectiveness of CSR practices, with organizations operating in liberal market economies generally demonstrating higher levels of CSR engagement (Jackson and Apostolakou, 2010). Similarly, Kadłubek (2015) reported that CSR initiatives can generate competitive advantages by increasing customer engagement and organizational performance, while González-Rodríguez et al. (2019) found that organizational culture plays a significant role in the successful implementation of CSR, particularly through employee involvement and customer satisfaction.

Research has also highlighted that CSR practices vary according to cultural, social, and economic contexts. Chen et al. (2019) found that Muslim consumers in Pakistan and Sudan held particularly positive perceptions of CSR, emphasizing the influence of cultural values on stakeholder expectations. Likewise, Mahmud et al. (2021) demonstrated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations adapted their CSR strategies by prioritizing employee welfare, community support, and public health initiatives. These studies illustrate the flexibility of CSR and its capacity to respond to changing societal needs and external challenges.

Studies conducted in emerging and developing economies provide additional insights into the opportunities and challenges associated with CSR implementation. Abdelsamad (2023) identified inconsistencies in CSR practices among oil companies in Sudan and emphasized the need for stronger regulatory frameworks and closer collaboration with local communities. In contrast, Yousefian et al. (2023) reported that CSR initiatives within the European mining industry positively influenced financial performance, profitability, and firm value. Together, these findings suggest that while CSR generates significant organizational and societal benefits, its effectiveness is influenced by institutional conditions, governance structures, and stakeholder engagement.

Overall, previous studies indicate that CSR has evolved beyond philanthropic activities to become an integral component of organizational strategy. The literature consistently demonstrates that successful CSR implementation depends on balancing economic, social, and environmental objectives while responding to stakeholder expectations. However, despite the growing body of international research, limited attention has been given to CSR practices within economic organizations operating in the Western Region of Romania. In particular, few studies have explored how CSR initiatives align with organizational values and strategic objectives, how stakeholders participate in their implementation, and how these initiatives contribute to both organizational performance and community well-being. This study addresses this gap by providing qualitative evidence from organizations operating in a transitional regional economy, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of CSR implementation within the Romanian context.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore CSR initiatives undertaken by economic organizations in the Western Region of Romania, particularly in Timișoara. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the research sought to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of CSR practices rather than measure them quantitatively.

For this research, the following objectives were formulated:

- i. To explore the corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives undertaken by economic organizations in the Western region of Romania and assess their impact on both business performance and societal well-being.

- ii. To examine the extent to which CSR activities align with the strategic goals and core values of economic organizations in the region.
- iii. To investigate the underlying motivations driving economic organizations to engage in CSR initiatives.
- iv. To analyze how stakeholders are involved in the planning and implementation of CSR initiatives.
- v. To provide practical insights and recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of CSR efforts in the Western region.

Besides the previous objectives, the following research questions were formulated:

- i. What types of social responsibility initiatives are implemented by economic organizations in the Western region, and how do these initiatives affect organizational performance and community well-being?
- ii. In what ways do CSR initiatives align with the strategic goals and core values of economic organizations in the Western region?
- iii. What are the primary motivations driving economic organizations in the region to engage in CSR activities?
- iv. How are stakeholders involved in the planning, execution, and evaluation of CSR initiatives by economic organizations in the Western region?
- v. What long-term strategies are being developed by organizations in the Western region to strengthen and sustain their CSR initiatives?

Regarding the implementation of the research, Timișoara was selected as the focal point of this study due to its economic significance and diverse organizational landscape. As one of Romania's leading economic centers, the city hosts numerous national and multinational organizations operating across sectors such as telecommunications, manufacturing, retail, technology, and services.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that respondents possessed relevant knowledge and experience regarding CSR initiatives. The sample consisted of ten participants representing multinational corporations, retail organizations, social enterprises, and manufacturing companies. Participants occupied various organizational roles, including senior management representatives, CSR coordinators, communication specialists, department heads, managers, and employees.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was developed based on the research objectives and questions. Interviews explored CSR initiatives, motivations, alignment with organizational values, stakeholder involvement, impact measurement, challenges, and long-term strategies.

The interviews lasted approximately 15-20 minutes and were conducted with participants who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study.

The interview data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. The process involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, grouping of related codes into categories, and the development of broader themes. Examples of codes included "Environmental Conservation Programs," "Stakeholder Feedback Collection," "Ethical Responsibility Motivation," and "Strategic CSR Integration."

Related codes were subsequently organized into themes such as "Environmental Sustainability Initiatives," "Participatory Stakeholder Engagement," and "Strategic CSR Integration." NVivo software was used to facilitate coding, data organization, and retrieval throughout the analytical process.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained before data collection.

To ensure confidentiality, participants were anonymized using identifiers such as P1 (F), P2 (F), and P3 (M). All data were treated confidentially and used exclusively for academic purposes.

To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, the researcher followed a systematic and transparent analytical process. Interview transcripts were reviewed multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data, and coding decisions were documented consistently throughout the analysis. The use of NVivo software facilitated the organization and retrieval of data, while the continuous comparison of codes and themes across participants helped ensure the consistency and coherence of the findings. These procedures contributed to the reliability and credibility of the study.

4. Findings by Research Question

4.1 Research Question 1

What types of social responsibility initiatives are implemented by economic organizations in the Western Region, and how do these initiatives affect organizational performance and community well-being?

The findings indicate that economic organizations in the Western Region of Romania implement a broad range of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives that primarily focus on environmental sustainability, education, social inclusion, community development, employee well-being, and support for vulnerable groups. Although the specific activities varied across organizations, participants consistently emphasized that CSR has evolved from isolated philanthropic actions into strategically planned programs integrated within organizational objectives.

Environmental initiatives represented one of the most frequently mentioned categories. Several participants described projects aimed at reducing waste, promoting recycling, planting trees, minimizing carbon emissions, and encouraging responsible consumption of resources. Organizations also invested in sustainable technologies and promoted environmentally responsible practices among employees and local communities.

Education emerged as another major area of CSR involvement. Participants reported supporting schools, universities, vocational education, scholarship programs, internships, mentoring activities, and educational campaigns designed to increase knowledge and develop practical skills among young people. These initiatives were frequently implemented through partnerships with educational institutions and non-governmental organizations.

Many organizations also focused on social inclusion and community support. Their initiatives targeted vulnerable populations, including children, elderly individuals, disadvantaged families, and people with disabilities. Examples included financial donations, volunteering activities, fundraising campaigns, provision of essential goods, and collaboration with local NGOs to address community needs.

Employee-oriented CSR initiatives also played an important role. Organizations promoted employee volunteering, health and well-being programs, diversity and inclusion policies, professional development opportunities, and activities designed to strengthen organizational culture. Participants noted that employee engagement not

only generated social value but also increased motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment.

Beyond their direct social impact, CSR initiatives were perceived as producing significant organizational benefits. Participants consistently reported improvements in corporate reputation, stakeholder trust, customer loyalty, employee engagement, and organizational image. Several interviewees highlighted that socially responsible behavior strengthened relationships with local communities and enhanced public confidence in the organization.

Community benefits were also widely acknowledged. According to participants, CSR initiatives contributed to improving educational opportunities, environmental quality, social cohesion, access to resources, and overall community development. Rather than addressing only immediate social needs, many organizations emphasized creating sustainable long-term impacts through continuous partnerships and strategic planning.

Overall, the findings suggest that CSR initiatives implemented by economic organizations in the Western Region extend well beyond charitable donations. Instead, they constitute comprehensive organizational strategies that generate mutual benefits for both businesses and society by simultaneously improving organizational performance and contributing to sustainable community development.

4.2 Research Question 2

In what ways do CSR initiatives align with the strategic goals and core values of economic organizations in the Western Region?

The interviews revealed that Corporate Social Responsibility is increasingly perceived as an integral component of organizational strategy rather than a separate or occasional activity. Most participants emphasized that CSR initiatives are closely connected to their organizations' missions, visions, and long-term objectives. Rather than being implemented solely for reputational purposes, CSR activities are designed to reinforce organizational values while creating positive outcomes for both the organization and society.

One of the most frequently identified themes was the alignment between CSR and organizational values such as responsibility, integrity, sustainability, transparency, innovation, and respect for people. Participants explained that these values guide decision-making processes and influence the selection of social initiatives undertaken by their organizations. Consequently, CSR activities are viewed as natural extensions of the organizational culture rather than external obligations.

Several respondents highlighted that CSR contributes directly to achieving strategic organizational objectives. These include strengthening corporate reputation, increasing stakeholder trust, improving employee engagement, attracting and retaining talent, enhancing customer loyalty, and supporting long-term organizational sustainability. Participants indicated that organizations increasingly recognize that social responsibility and business performance are complementary rather than conflicting objectives.

Environmental sustainability was identified as one of the strategic priorities integrated into organizational planning. Interviewees described initiatives focused on reducing environmental impact, promoting responsible resource management, and implementing sustainable operational practices. These actions were considered consistent with both organizational values and broader sustainability strategies adopted at corporate level.

Another recurring theme concerned the importance of employee engagement in supporting strategic CSR objectives. Many organizations encourage employees to participate in volunteering activities, community projects, and environmental campaigns, considering employee involvement an essential mechanism for strengthening organizational culture and translating corporate values into everyday practice.

Participants also emphasized the strategic importance of partnerships with educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, public authorities, and local communities. Such collaborations enable organizations to maximize the impact of CSR initiatives while ensuring that projects address genuine community needs and remain aligned with organizational priorities.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that CSR is no longer perceived as a peripheral function but as an integrated strategic approach embedded within organizational values, decision-making processes, and long-term development plans. Organizations increasingly view responsible business practices as contributing simultaneously to competitive advantage, stakeholder satisfaction, and sustainable social development.

4.3 Research Question 3

What are the primary motivations driving economic organizations in the region to engage in CSR activities?

The interviews indicate that organizations are motivated to engage in Corporate Social Responsibility by a combination of ethical, social, strategic, and organizational considerations. Although participants acknowledged that CSR may generate reputational and competitive benefits, most emphasized that their organizations perceive social responsibility primarily as an obligation to contribute positively to society and to address the needs of local communities.

A dominant motivation identified throughout the interviews was the desire to create a positive social impact. Participants described CSR as an opportunity to improve people's quality of life, support vulnerable groups, promote education, protect the environment, and contribute to the sustainable development of local communities. Several respondents stressed that organizations have responsibilities that extend beyond economic performance and should actively participate in solving social and environmental challenges.

Ethical responsibility also emerged as a central motivational factor. Interviewees frequently referred to organizational values such as responsibility, integrity, solidarity, respect, and sustainability as principles that naturally encourage CSR involvement. According to participants, socially responsible initiatives represent an expression of the organization's identity and ethical culture rather than simply a business strategy.

Participants also identified several strategic motivations associated with CSR implementation. Many organizations acknowledged that responsible business practices improve corporate reputation, strengthen public trust, increase customer loyalty, and enhance relationships with key stakeholders. In addition, respondents noted that CSR contributes to employer branding by making organizations more attractive to current and prospective employees, particularly among younger generations who increasingly value social and environmental responsibility.

Employee engagement was another important motivating factor. Several participants explained that CSR initiatives provide opportunities for employees to become actively involved in volunteering, fundraising campaigns, environmental

projects, and community development activities. Such initiatives contribute to higher levels of employee motivation, organizational commitment, teamwork, and job satisfaction while reinforcing organizational culture.

Another recurring motivation concerned the development of long-term partnerships with community organizations, educational institutions, and non-governmental organizations. Participants explained that these collaborations allow organizations to respond more effectively to local needs while increasing the sustainability and overall impact of CSR initiatives.

Although business benefits such as improved competitiveness and organizational visibility were acknowledged, respondents consistently emphasized that these outcomes were viewed as complementary rather than primary objectives. CSR was generally perceived as a long-term investment capable of generating value simultaneously for organizations, stakeholders, and society.

Overall, the findings suggest that CSR engagement is driven by a balanced combination of ethical commitment, community responsibility, stakeholder expectations, employee involvement, and strategic organizational objectives. Rather than pursuing short-term promotional advantages, participating organizations increasingly understand CSR as a fundamental component of sustainable organizational development and responsible corporate citizenship.

4.4 Research Question 4

How are stakeholders involved in the planning, execution, and evaluation of CSR initiatives by economic organizations in the Western Region?

The findings indicate that stakeholder engagement represents one of the fundamental components of successful Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives. Participants consistently emphasized that CSR activities achieve greater effectiveness and sustainability when developed collaboratively with both internal and external stakeholders. Rather than implementing projects independently, organizations increasingly adopt participatory approaches that encourage dialogue, cooperation, and long-term partnerships.

Employees were identified as one of the most actively involved stakeholder groups. Several respondents explained that employees participate directly in volunteering activities, fundraising campaigns, environmental projects, educational initiatives, and community events. Beyond participating in implementation, employees are also encouraged to propose ideas for new CSR initiatives and provide feedback regarding existing programs. This participatory approach strengthens organizational culture while increasing employees' sense of ownership and commitment toward socially responsible activities.

Local communities also play an important role throughout the planning process. Participants reported that organizations seek to identify genuine community needs before launching CSR initiatives through consultations, meetings with community representatives, collaboration with local institutions, and continuous communication with beneficiaries. This approach allows organizations to design projects that respond more effectively to local priorities rather than relying solely on internal organizational assumptions.

Partnerships with non-governmental organizations emerged as another recurring theme. Interviewees described NGOs as strategic partners that contribute expertise, knowledge of vulnerable populations, and practical experience in

implementing social projects. Through these collaborations, organizations are able to increase both the efficiency and the long-term impact of CSR initiatives while ensuring that available resources are used effectively.

Educational institutions were likewise identified as important stakeholders, particularly in projects related to education, professional development, internships, mentoring, and youth engagement. Participants explained that cooperation with schools and universities facilitates knowledge transfer while helping prepare future generations for both professional careers and civic participation.

Several organizations also emphasized collaboration with public institutions and local authorities. These partnerships facilitate the implementation of community projects, improve coordination among stakeholders, and support broader local development objectives. Respondents considered cooperation with public authorities particularly valuable when addressing complex social or environmental challenges requiring coordinated action.

An important aspect highlighted throughout the interviews was the use of feedback mechanisms. Organizations regularly collect feedback from employees, beneficiaries, community members, and partner organizations to evaluate the effectiveness of CSR initiatives and identify opportunities for improvement. Participants noted that continuous evaluation allows organizations to adapt their programs, respond to changing community needs, and strengthen the sustainability of future initiatives.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that stakeholder involvement extends throughout the entire CSR process, from identifying community needs and planning interventions to project implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Organizations perceive stakeholder participation not only as a means of improving project outcomes but also as an essential mechanism for building trust, strengthening partnerships, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives.

4.5 Research Question 5

What long-term strategies are being developed by organizations in the Western Region to strengthen and sustain their CSR initiatives?

The findings indicate that organizations increasingly approach Corporate Social Responsibility from a long-term strategic perspective rather than as a series of isolated or short-term projects. Participants consistently emphasized that the sustainability of CSR initiatives depends on their integration into organizational strategy, continuous stakeholder engagement, and the establishment of long-lasting partnerships capable of generating enduring social impact.

One of the most frequently mentioned long-term strategies involves embedding CSR into the overall organizational vision and strategic planning process. Rather than treating CSR as a separate department or occasional activity, respondents explained that social responsibility has become integrated into organizational decision-making, operational processes, and corporate culture. This strategic integration ensures continuity regardless of changes in management or individual projects.

Another recurring strategy concerns the development of sustainable partnerships. Participants highlighted the importance of maintaining long-term collaborations with non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, public authorities, and local communities. Such partnerships enable organizations to identify emerging community needs, share expertise and resources, and implement initiatives

with greater efficiency and broader social impact. Respondents considered collaborative networks essential for ensuring the continuity and scalability of CSR programs.

Organizations also emphasized continuous employee engagement as a key element of long-term CSR sustainability. Interviewees explained that encouraging employees to participate regularly in volunteering activities, environmental campaigns, fundraising events, and community projects helps institutionalize social responsibility within the organizational culture. Several participants noted that employees increasingly perceive CSR as part of their professional identity rather than as an additional organizational activity.

Continuous evaluation and improvement also emerged as an important strategic direction. Participants reported that organizations regularly monitor the effectiveness of CSR initiatives through stakeholder feedback, internal evaluations, beneficiary assessments, and impact measurement. These evaluation processes allow organizations to identify successful practices, improve existing programs, and adapt future initiatives to changing social and environmental needs.

Environmental sustainability represents another major long-term priority. Several respondents described ongoing investments in environmentally responsible technologies, resource efficiency, waste reduction, circular economy practices, and climate-related initiatives. These actions are viewed as essential for ensuring both organizational sustainability and long-term environmental protection.

Participants also stressed the importance of investing in education and community development as sustainable forms of social responsibility. Instead of focusing exclusively on short-term financial donations, many organizations prioritize educational partnerships, mentoring programs, internships, scholarships, and capacity-building initiatives that create lasting benefits for individuals and communities. Such investments are perceived as generating long-term social value while simultaneously contributing to future workforce development.

Overall, the findings suggest that organizations operating in the Western Region increasingly understand CSR as a continuous organizational commitment rather than a collection of isolated philanthropic activities. Long-term sustainability is achieved through strategic integration, stakeholder collaboration, employee participation, continuous evaluation, and ongoing investment in environmental protection and community development. These strategies enable organizations to create lasting value for both society and the business itself while reinforcing their role as responsible corporate citizens.

5. Conclusions

This study explored the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives implemented by economic organizations operating in the Western Region of Romania, with particular attention to their strategic integration, organizational motivations, stakeholder involvement, and perceived impact on both organizational performance and community well-being. The findings demonstrate that CSR has evolved beyond traditional philanthropic activities and has become an integral component of organizational strategy, reflecting the growing recognition that economic success and social responsibility are mutually reinforcing objectives.

A first important conclusion is that organizations implement a diverse portfolio of CSR initiatives addressing environmental sustainability, education, community development, employee well-being, and support for vulnerable groups. Rather than

focusing exclusively on charitable donations, organizations increasingly develop comprehensive programs designed to generate long-term social value while simultaneously strengthening organizational performance and stakeholder relationships.

The research also highlights that CSR initiatives are closely aligned with organizational values and strategic objectives. Participants consistently described CSR as being embedded within corporate missions, organizational cultures, and long-term development strategies. Values such as responsibility, integrity, sustainability, transparency, innovation, and respect for people guide both the selection and implementation of CSR activities. Consequently, social responsibility is perceived not as an external obligation but as an essential component of responsible organizational management.

Another significant finding concerns the motivations underlying CSR engagement. Although participants acknowledged the reputational and competitive advantages associated with socially responsible behavior, ethical responsibility and the desire to generate positive social impact emerged as the dominant drivers. Organizations increasingly recognize their responsibility to contribute to solving social and environmental challenges while simultaneously strengthening employee engagement, customer trust, and stakeholder confidence.

The study further demonstrates that stakeholder participation represents a fundamental condition for effective CSR implementation. Employees, local communities, non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, and public authorities are actively involved throughout the planning, implementation, and evaluation of CSR initiatives. Such collaborative approaches enable organizations to better understand community needs, improve project effectiveness, and establish long-term partnerships that increase the sustainability of social interventions.

Another important conclusion concerns the long-term orientation of CSR strategies. Rather than implementing isolated activities, organizations increasingly integrate CSR into strategic planning, organizational culture, and everyday decision-making processes. Continuous evaluation, employee participation, stakeholder dialogue, environmental sustainability, and investments in education and community development are perceived as essential mechanisms for ensuring the continuity and long-term effectiveness of CSR initiatives.

Overall, the findings suggest that Corporate Social Responsibility has become an important strategic resource for economic organizations operating in the Western Region of Romania. CSR contributes not only to improving corporate reputation, stakeholder trust, employee commitment, and organizational sustainability but also to strengthening local communities through environmental protection, educational opportunities, and social inclusion initiatives. The study therefore supports the growing body of literature that views CSR as a multidimensional approach capable of simultaneously generating economic, social, and environmental value.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the research is based on a relatively small qualitative sample consisting of ten participants representing organizations operating primarily in the Western Region of Romania. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to all economic organizations. Second, the study reflects participants' perceptions and experiences, which may be influenced by organizational perspectives and the possibility of social desirability in responses. Finally, because the research focused exclusively on qualitative interviews, future studies could

combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to obtain a broader understanding of CSR implementation and its organizational outcomes.

Future research may expand the geographical scope of investigation, compare CSR practices across different Romanian regions or economic sectors, and examine the perspectives of additional stakeholder groups, including beneficiaries, customers, employees, and community members. Longitudinal studies could also provide valuable insights into the long-term impact of CSR initiatives on organizational performance, stakeholder relationships, and sustainable regional development. Overall, the findings contribute to a better understanding of how Corporate Social Responsibility is implemented within economic organizations in Romania and highlight its growing importance as a strategic instrument for creating sustainable value for organizations, stakeholders, and society.

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The Role of School-Family Partnership as a Decisive Factor in Education

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Abstract

The paper addresses the partnership between school and family as a direct decision-maker in the educational process. The aim of the research is to identify parental perceptions related to school-family collaboration, as well as strategies to prevent and combat school dropout and educational risks. The qualitative method was used, and the research sample involved twenty parents from Lugoj, interviewed on the basis of a structured interview guide. The conclusions of the research indicate the importance of parental involvement both in the educational sphere and in the relationship with the educational institution. Also, the perceptions of the parents involved in the research are diverse, there are on the one hand good parts in the collaboration with the teachers, as well as involvement and vocation, but also unfavorable parts as social inequalities. In terms of educational risk prevention strategies, it involves good collaboration through constant communication between parents, students and educational institution, as well as the importance of involving social workers, educational counsellors and psychologists in the relationship between family, student and school.

Keywords: Education; Family; School-Family Partnership; Social Worker; Vulnerability

1. Introduction

The article “The role of school-family partnership as a decisive factor in education” addresses how important field practice is in the social care system, with a focus on practice in the educational environment and how the social worker becomes a mediator between family, child and school. Eaton (2026) specifies that direct experiences with the entire system contributing to long-term education is perceived as a defining pedagogy of the social work system.

In the contemporary period, where problems are rapidly changing and multiplying, the training of social workers is impetuously necessary to meet socio-economic and environmental challenges. Payne and Askeland (2016) conducted multiple research to understand how the globalization process has accelerated the change and modernization of social work education.

Soliman and Koran (2025) believe that the reform of the curriculum in the field of social work is based on many guidelines, since social workers have several roles, both in the area of evaluation, eligibility check and social benefit, knowledge of legislation and

social services provision, as well as counseling and therapeutic intervention. Depending on the field of activity, in addition to these, mediation and maintaining a positive relationship between the community and institutions are added.

Significant changes in society have also brought about changes in the personal sphere. In general, new generations are more tempted to prioritize technology compared to education, and the role of the family is very important, both in the formation of the personality of the student and in the influence they have on activities in everyday life.

Roostin (2018) and Utomo and Alawiyah (2022) state that the family is the main source of moral values. However, families in contemporary society are in a dynamic process to continuously adapt to the changes that are occurring. This adaptive dynamic is observed both on the area of functions, configurations, family structures, but also on parental models.

Vertel et al. (2024) believe that the role of a specialist who understands human thinking and emotions is necessary in a society where parents spend less and less time with their own children, this area being in a continuous decline. As an institution, children generally spend more time with educators and teachers in formal educational institutions, and the status of the family remains that of fundamental unity in their growth and education, but it loses time.

Caspe and Hernandez (2024) believe that all teachers in the education system must receive training to be able to communicate effectively with families and diverse communities from which students come. This ability is perceived as one of the most promising, which has the role of improving the learning process of students and building more equitable classes.

International literature has developed and published studies in the field of collaboration between teachers, students, family and community, and Boonk et al. (2018) state that with the involvement of the family and the community, the educational system is transformed into an ecosystem, and the main benefits arise, as follows: students perform in the learning process, manage to integrate socially and academically much faster; teachers say they feel an increased level of job satisfaction, while the family and the community specify a better state of well-being, feeling as a respected partner in the educational process, and all this is reflected in educational institutions that become more equitable (Mapp et al., 2022).

Learning Heroes and TNTP (2023) state that with the Covid-19 pandemic, the system created by the family, community and educational institution has grown because all actors have functioned as protective factors to prevent school dropout and reduce the risk of regression in the learning process. Geller and Perry (2023) and Ishimaru (2019) state that this system becomes effective only if there is respect, communication, reciprocity, and decisions are made jointly. Caspe et al. (2022) state that in the American tradition, this collaboration between the three actors, family, school and community, was an important principle in the XIX-XX centuries.

Pineau et al. (2018) state that this tradition has diminished with the passage of time, still finding problems identical to those of past centuries. At the same time, specialized training aimed at teachers and specialists who collaborate with the community, are not so well perceived, because there is a mentality that these skills can develop naturally. Kelley (2020) and Mancenido and Pello (2020) said the family and the community must engage authentically and consistently to develop new skills. When there is this involvement, teachers are more willing to change different techniques and

approaches because they base their change on family resources, known experiences, assumed and the real commitment of parents to their own children.

Walker (2022) specifies that the main problems in the education system that bring barriers and multiply educational barriers, are, overcrowded classes, loaded curriculum, the low number of teachers, the low training of teachers, the busy jobs of parents, but also the lack of specialists from the community level. All of this merges with low resources. A problem that arises in contemporary times is the tendency to divide groups of parents, creating discrepancies between family, school and community. Thus, the relations between the three actors can become tense, starting from polarizing speeches.

In international literature, this partnership is much more present. As proof of the importance of the partnership, it is the National Association for Family, School and Community Engagement that launched in 2022 the Educator Preparation Framework for Family and Community Partnerships (National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement, 2022). This partnership has proposed new ideas for the training of teachers in order to assimilate knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary for the interaction with families and communities.

Gibbs et al. (2021) state that worldwide, overall, the partnership between the education system and the family is perceived as very important, correlated with academic performance. At the same time, in the case of students coming from disadvantaged families or vulnerable groups, academic performance may be related to the general status of the family (Pribesh et al., 2020).

The educational system and the community can be positive factors in cases where the school performance of the students cannot be supported by the parents. In addition, the partnership between school and family is essential in cases where there are emotional problems, in the sphere of parental involvement. This constant collaboration aims to reduce inequalities and form a social network that improves school performance in general, as well as children from families with low social and economic status, or who have problems in the area of emotional neglect, school failure, family abandonment and other difficulties (Pusztai et al., 2025).

Brown and Makridis (2024) stated that many educational institutions fail to capitalize on the true potential of collaboration with parents, because there are still prejudices about the social status of each person. The lack of trust and respect, as well as the equitable treatment of each individual, gradually leads to the implementation of social policies that promote the family-school-community partnership.

Research in this field exists, if we refer to the parents' activity in the educational institution, Morrison (1978) presented this fact, then Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) emphasized the role of this collaboration in terms of parental resources that parents can bring in the educational system. Further, LaRocque et al. (2011) researched the role of parents in child education, and Hill and Taylor (2004) said that parenting activities in educational institutions help students achieve more prominent academic success.

Jeynes (2024) specifies that parental involvement in the educational process is different, both in the gender of the student, at the educational level, but also at his age. Thomas et al. (2019) specify that in adolescence, the involvement of parents in the educational process no longer contributes to academic performance, but, has direct implications on the emotional and development of intrinsic motivation, self-regulation strategies, self-efficacy, but directly and indirectly supports the school course.

The management of the educational institution, the attitude of the teachers towards the parents, the communication and the relationship of trust established, the culture and resources of the school, have a significant impact on the level of family involvement. The holistic school approach, in terms of direct collaboration with family members in the educational process of the child, is based on the following types of involvement: parental education, volunteering, home learning, decision making, collaboration with the community and communication. These types of involvement are decisive in building a school-family partnership. In the same sense, the welcoming environment of the educational institution supports the development of culture of partnerships between school and family.

Hornby (2011) claims that parents are more involved when schools are more open to feedback and communication. The support of the trust relationship can be developed through counseling of parents by teachers, through physical and telephone communication, through informative reports. Ivan and Cristei (2011) conducted a study that also included Romania, and the main results show that parents' expectations towards educational process contribute to the school performance of students. There are also differences between the gender of the parents, and Romanian mothers are more often found in the sample of parents involved in the education of children.

Markovich Morris and Cheng (2025) stated that globally, the partnership between school, family and community is lacking. After the Covid-19 pandemic, it was highlighted that families, teachers, school leaders presented different perspectives towards the educational process. The research states that it takes time for families to understand the values they manifest as a guide to school beliefs, then to better understand social, cultural and shared points in education.

The harmonious development of the student is based on several factors, and the partnership between school, family and community, according to the studies, contributes to educational success. Important in the current study is to understand the perspective of families towards this collaboration and to explore strategies that can create an acceptable framework that can overcome the challenges felt by the student.

2. Methodology

The purpose of the research is to explore parents' perception of the role of school-family partnership in preventing and combating educational risks.

2.1 Objectives

O1: Identifying the parents' perception towards the role of the partnership between school-family, as well as the importance of the social network in the education process.

O2: Exploring strategies to prevent educational risks through school-family partnerships.

2.2 Research Questions

Q1: What are the perceptions of parents about the role of partnership between school, family, as well as the importance of social networking in the educational process?

Q2: What are the strategies for preventing educational risks through the partnership between school and family?

2.3 Sample and Instrument

A fourteen-question interview guide was used, which deepened parents' perception of their role in education, as well as the partnership between the family school and the community. Also, the social network was another topic debated. In addition, the interview guide brought clear strategies on the prevention of educational risks with the help of the school and family partnership. The qualitative method was used, and Ratner (2002) stated that this method directly brings the subjectivity of the researcher in scientific research, because it encourages reflection on the values and objectives of the research. At the same time, this method brings details that the quantitative method cannot interpret in terms of closed responses.

2.4 Data Collection and Processing

Twenty individual interviews were collected with women, mothers with children who are pupils in an educational cycle, in Lugoj municipality. The interviews were held face to face, being collected in February 2026. The research participants were informed about the purpose and objective of the research and participated voluntarily. The interviews were transcribed exactly as they were transmitted for more effective coherence and more objective research.

3. Results and Discussion

Paccaud et al. (2021) specify that the partnership between school and family is a two-way collaboration, with the main purpose of supporting academic performance, but also the integrated development of children through shared responsibility. Arar and Karadas (2026) believe that collaboration between the educational institution, parents and students is beneficial, and its great potential, but, it encounters structural and attitudinal barriers, such as insufficient initial training of teachers in relation to systematic methods of family partnership, social, economic and communicational imbalances, with communication problems and fast and often unrealistic expectations between school and family.

The topics addressed are focused on parental perceptions on the role of partnership between school, family and partnerships and the importance of social networks in the educational process, as well as strategies to prevent educational risks through school-family partnership.

From the point of view of the partnership between school, family and community, school dropout prevention must be treated as a topic of national interest, a major problem, increasingly present in the Romanian education system. Respondents state that the lack of financial resources is directly correlated with school dropout, and the implications of the educational institution are absolutely necessary. Basically, access to education is directly influenced by the social and economic conditions of the family.

"It should be a close communication, because both the parent and the teacher or the teacher and the educator have an important role in the education of the child, and then there must be a very close collaboration between the parent and the school." (R1)

A circle is clearly observed, which brings to the fore school dropout as a failure of all the actors involved, only not exclusively of the school. Joint responsibility in supporting school participation and early identification of risk factors are positive strategies through which the educational system together with the family focuses directly on the real needs of students. In the same framework, the involvement of

specialists, such as: teachers, psychologists, school counsellors and social workers, is a direct support, but the respondents state that in reality the staff is insufficient or non-existent due to limitations related to human resources, payroll and time resource issues.

“Firstly, to have empathic and sociable teachers and to support the needs of children, but to be a very good collaboration between teachers and parents. I think that’s the key to success.” (R2)

Respondents’ responses highlight the confusion regarding the differences between school counselor, social worker and psychologist, in practice, generating unrealistic expectations from the specialists involved. Also, the interviewed parents specify that in addition to material deprivation, their own children need emotional involvement, time spent with children when they choose to work on homework, but also constant affection. This deficit is highlighted in the educational outcomes of children, with respondents recognizing that when they choose to be directly present in the educational life, children are more attentive during school hours, and no longer tend to overuse technology. From a sociological perspective, this emotional deficit can be related to loneliness, which contemporary theories approach both as an objective, structural condition produced by weakened social ties and as a subjectively lived experience (Cioacă, 2025).

“Children need confidence, career guidance and emotional support. The school offers them a lot, but it is important to continue to motivate them at home.” (R8)

As regards the partnership between school and family, the interviewed parents consider that equal opportunities and lack of discrimination are important aspects, because the educational system in Romania is free and equal conditions are offered to all students, but the reality brings to the attention of the public subtle or significant differences of treatment. Respondents say that children from favourable socio-economic backgrounds are better treated compared to children with needs. Thus, there are differences in treatment, the attention of the teacher being manifested more towards children who come from environments proper to harmonious development.

“There must be a family-friendly school and it should be open to dialogue and put the student in the plan.” (R3)

At the same time, another aspect highlighted by respondents is related to personality types, because introverts are more shy, withdrawn, and if this cumulates with the vulnerable environment from which they come, there may be a risk of marginalization. Thus, at the institutional level, there are relational inequalities, consciously or unconsciously practiced by the people involved.

“They are marginalized children, do not have clothes and other things, there are comparisons between them and others.” (R10)

Marginalization of children is a reality recognized by most participants, being associated mainly with economic status, family environment and school performance. The effects of marginalization are described as profound and lasting, including low self-esteem, social isolation, and in some cases, early school leaving. Responsibility for preventing marginalization is attributed to both the family and the school.

Parents are considered the main trainers of values, while teachers have the role of creating an educational environment based on respect and empathy. Practically, the opinions of the participants are anchored on the one hand in a positive way, concluding that the relationship with the educational institution is functional, but on the other hand there are negative aspects, such as inequality and low quality of the educational system.

“There are no social workers in my children’s school, I think he’s a psychologist.” (R2)

As for the development of a cohesive space between parents and school, there are difficulties, because there is unequal participation from parents. The number of parents attending constant meetings with the teacher and engaging in school activities is low, and the causes are diverse: full-time work, lack of interest in educational aspects, low educational level of parents, social and economic difficulties, shame, stigmatization. Similar patterns have been documented in a Romanian survey of eighth-grade pupils from the South-West Oltenia region: 68% of urban pupils, compared with only 31% of rural pupils, reported receiving regular help from their parents, a gap associated with parents’ low level of education, their work schedules and limited resources, while 80% of urban schools, but only 20% of rural ones, had a school library and an educational counsellor (Motoi, 2026: 372).

The following topic addresses educational risk prevention strategies through school-family partnership. Respondents consider that the main strategy that brings visible effects is related to material and economic support. The parents consider that the lack of financial resources is a major risk factor and propose measures such as: increased number of students receiving social scholarships, free after-school programs, hot meals, free school supplies, free meditations in case of learning difficulties. These interventions are perceived as essential to keeping children in the education system and reducing inequalities.

“School management is not involved in solving real problems, and the teacher is not so much involved.” (R5)

Another strategy is related to the implications of the emotional and psychological component and the role that the teacher and specialists inside the educational institution can have in increasing students’ self-esteem and increasing school motivation. Parents underline the need for counselling, both of students and parents. This component belongs, according to the respondents, to school counsellors employed in the educational institution, the General Directorate of Social Work and Child Protection, but also to psychologists. Counselling is perceived as a preventive tool, able to identify and manage problems before they become critical.

“An example is a collaboration between the school counselor and the parents of a school student. The parents followed the advice of the school counselor and there were positive changes.” (R13)

The interviewed parents believe that the phenomenon of school dropout may decrease if there is communication between parents and teachers, but also if there is an attachment relationship between the child and the parents. The active involvement of parents in the educational process requires monitoring of school attendance, constant support in the learning process, but also the presence at school meetings, which also involves the presence of specialists, such as social workers, school counsellors and psychologists. Parents propose the development of attractive activities for children, which increase school motivation, such as: educational games, recreational activities, counseling sessions, school competitions. These activities are perceived as effective means of preventing abandonment and social integration, which can also increase the level of parental involvement in collaboration with the educational institution.

“I think the important steps are mentoring programs, regular discussions with the psychologist, attractive extracurricular activities and parental involvement both at home and in the relationship with the school.” (R4)

Parental speeches reflect a pragmatic orientation, focused on concrete solutions. Unlike other themes, intervention proposals predominate here, which indicates a high level of awareness of the problems and the need for action. The proposed strategies are diverse, but they converge towards the idea of collaboration and integrated support.

4. Conclusions

The research objectives have been fulfilled and the research results are similar to those found in the literature. Curşeu et al. (2025) examine the triad of teachers, family and students, being an interdependent system necessary for educational performance and well-being. Bătrănu-Pinţea and Coman (2023) refer to the family as the direct social environment that influences the child. Thus, if the family is directly related to the school, it is not just a simple socialization environment, but a direct factor that can change the educational path. Goian (2020) believes that school, family and society have an important role in the development of children, and the problems that arise inside the school can be combated by frequent involvement of parents in the educational process.

The conclusions of the research focus on the two topics approached, on the one hand the perception of parents towards the need to be involved in the educational process of their own children, and on the other hand, the strategies they propose for preventing educational risks.

The results of the research highlight that educational issues cannot be separated from the social and emotional context of children. Identified vulnerabilities are the result of the interaction between individual, family, and institutional factors. Basically, in addition to the involvement of parents, the role of social worker in educational institutions and collaboration with specialists such as: educational advisors and psychologists is impetuously necessary. Education is founded as a complex, child-centered process in which success depends not only on academic performance, but also on emotional and social well-being. The ideal school model described by respondents is open, empathetic and child-centered, where communication, support and collaboration are essential elements. The strategies identified highlight the importance of school-family partnership in preventing educational risks. Effective interventions are those that combine material support, counseling, parental involvement and institutional collaboration. The practical implications of the paper point to the increase in the number of positions designed to engage in the educational system of psychologists, social workers, school counsellors in order to succeed in creating solid relationships and to combine the needs of students, teachers and parents to form a framework in which each party involved in the process is satisfied with the result.

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The Impact of Local Public Administration on the Development of the Social Economy and the Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups within Local Action Groups

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Abstract

Local public administration plays an important role in promoting territorial development through partnerships established within Local Action Groups (LAGs), contributing to local economic development, social economy, and the social inclusion of vulnerable groups. This study aims to explore how local public authorities perceive their contribution to these processes and the main challenges encountered in implementing local development strategies. A qualitative research design was employed, based on semi-structured interviews conducted with ten representatives of local public administration (eight mayors, one deputy mayor, and one public administrator). Data were analyzed using thematic and interpretative analysis. The findings indicate that local administrations are perceived as strategic coordinators, facilitating partnerships, attracting external funding, and supporting community development initiatives. Agriculture remains the predominant economic sector, while tourism, entrepreneurship, and social economy are increasingly recognized as opportunities for local development. Respondents also identified bureaucracy, limited administrative capacity, and shortages of specialized personnel as the main barriers to sustainable development. Overall, the results highlight that effective collaboration between local authorities, Local Action Groups, civil society organizations, and local communities represents a key factor in achieving sustainable local development and strengthening social inclusion.

Keywords: Local Public Administration; Local Action Groups (LAGs); Social Economy; Social Inclusion

1. Introduction

The sustainable development of rural communities and areas affected by industrial restructuring is a central objective of current public policies. In this context, Local Action Groups (LAGs) function as public-private cooperation structures, aiming to ensure the implementation of development strategies based on the specific needs of the territory (Albu and Chițu, 2019; Pîrvu et al., 2025).

This paper analyzes the impact that local public administration has on the functioning of the social economy and on the stimulation of economic initiatives within these partnerships. In a context marked by demographic changes and socio-economic inequalities, it is necessary to evaluate how local authorities go beyond their purely legal and administrative attributions, becoming strategic coordination factors and facilitators of social inclusion (Fina, 2021). The relevance of the study starts from the need to investigate, through sociological and administrative methods, the capacity of LEADER-

type structures to generate cohesion and support economic activities based on solidarity and the valorization of local resources (Florescu, 2021).

2. The Conceptual Approach to the Social Economy and Its Historical Evolution

The social economy is a model of organizing economic activity based on the priority of social objectives instead of maximizing financial profit. Defined in the specialized literature as a sector located between the public and the private capitalist sectors, the social economy encompasses a variety of entities, such as cooperatives, mutual societies, associations, foundations and social enterprises (Albu and Chițu, 2019). The Romanian legal framework provides a rigorous delimitation through Law no. 219/2015 on the social economy (Romanian Parliament, 2015), establishing that this set of activities is organized independently of the public sector, with the aim of serving the general interest or the interests of a community by increasing the employment rate of people belonging to vulnerable groups.

The historical evolution of the concept highlights a transition from traditional forms of assistance and philanthropy in the 19th century, generated in reaction to the effects of massive industrialization, to modern models of integrated social entrepreneurship (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010). While classical approaches associated this field exclusively with the management of marginalization, recent research demonstrates the transformation of the social economy into a component capable of generating sustainable jobs and valorizing local resources (Amin, 2009). From a sociological perspective, this evolution marks the transition from mechanical solidarity, based on specific support actions, to an organic solidarity based on self-sustaining economic structures, in which inclusion is achieved through active participation in the labor market.

However, the conceptual delimitation of the social economy faces difficulties in local administrative practice. Empirical studies indicate that, at the level of small communities, the concept is frequently confused with social assistance or passive forms of public assistance (Institute of Social Economy, 2016). This confusion affects the capacity of territorial actors to implement integrated measures, reducing social enterprises to the role of recipients of subsidies, instead of recognizing their potential as viable economic agents.

3. Local Action Groups (LAGs) as Territorial Governance Instruments

Local Action Groups are territorial public-private partnerships, established with the aim of developing and implementing Local Development Strategies (LDS) through the LEADER community approach (Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale) (Kah et al., 2023). Introduced by the European Commission as a rural policy instrument, LAGs bring together representatives of local public institutions, the business sector and civil society, ensuring a decision-making balance in which private partners and minority associations hold the majority of votes.

The theoretical foundation of the functioning of LAGs is found in multilevel governance models and in the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) approach (Kah et al., 2023). Unlike centralized, “top-down” public policies, which apply uniform measures without taking into account regional specificities, the LEADER approach imposes the “bottom-up” principle, according to which decisions on funding priorities are taken directly by the actors in the territory (Copus and Dax, 2015; Jankovic, 2012). This mechanism allows for increased flexibility in the allocation of funds, supporting

initiatives that combine the modernization of agricultural holdings with non-agricultural diversification, such as agritourism and the preservation of traditional crafts (Gavrilă-Paven et al., 2015).

In Romania, the implementation of this model has highlighted major advantages in stimulating social capital but has also generated significant structural limitations. The lack of diversification of funding sources and the almost exclusive dependence on the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) restrict the capacity of LAGs to intervene effectively in the area of complex social services, forcing them to prioritize infrastructure investments or primary agricultural production to the detriment of social innovation (Grebeldinger and Sendroni, 2024).

4. The Role of Local Public Administration in Rural Economic and Social Development

The role of local public administration in territorial development processes has been redefined in the context of modern theories of public management. Historically, local public authorities have been guided by the classical Weberian bureaucratic model, characterized by centralization, strict adherence to legal procedures and a passive role in the economy. Later, the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm introduced economic efficiency, results orientation and outsourcing of services (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011).

In the specific context of rural governance and LAG partnerships, both models have proven insufficient, being gradually replaced by the New Public Governance paradigm, which emphasizes networks of collaboration, co-production and inter-institutional partnership (Osborne, 2010). Thus, local public administration goes beyond its traditional administrative function and becomes a facilitator of territorial dialogue and a strategic coordinator of resources. Local authorities have in-depth knowledge of social problems in the territory and represent a factor of long-term institutional stability, providing continuity to community projects beyond the limited life cycles of external funding programs.

However, the exercise of this role is hampered by the presence of severe institutional barriers. Excessive bureaucracy, complex procedures for obtaining approvals and rigidity of national regulations slow down the pace of implementation of local development projects (Vincze, 2019). Also, the shortage of qualified human resources within rural municipalities and financial limitations reduce the administrative capacity to manage complex financing, often leading to an approach focused on procedural compliance to the detriment of socio-economic performance (Junjan, 2010).

5. The Relationship between Administration, LAG and Social Economy in the Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups

The social inclusion of vulnerable groups — defined in the rural context by categories such as elderly people affected by demographic isolation, single-parent or low-income families, young people outside the employment system (NEETs), and marginalized ethnic communities — requires an integrated approach, achieved through collaboration between public and associative structures (Grebeldinger and Sendroni, 2024). In this community ecosystem, the social economy acts as a bridge between the financial resources distributed through the LAG and the logistical expertise of the city halls.

The theory of social capital, developed by authors such as Robert Putnam and Mark Granovetter, provides an essential explanatory framework for understanding this interaction. Collaborative networks based on mutual trust and norms of reciprocity (bonding social capital) and connections established between different institutions (bridging social capital) are fundamental for the functioning of local partnerships (Putnam, 2000). When the local public administration actively collaborates with non-governmental organizations, educational institutions and religious structures within the LAG, the efficiency of identifying vulnerable groups increases through the complementary use of official tools (such as social surveys carried out by specialized departments) and direct monitoring based on community proximity.

The major limitation identified in the literature on this relationship is the risk of institutional capture phenomena or the manifestation of social desirability among decision-makers. Due to power and resource asymmetries, large municipalities can exercise a disproportionate influence on the prioritization of LAG strategies, directing resources towards classical public infrastructure and neglecting social economy projects or services aimed at the direct inclusion of marginalized minorities (Buda and Pop, 2024).

6. Research Methodology

The research uses a qualitative methodological design, aiming to explore the perceptions, experiences and practices of local actors, especially members of public administration, involved in economic development processes, including to gain a deeper understanding of how these actors perceive the role of local public administration on the development and functioning of LAGs.

The research method was a semi-structured interview, conducted based on an interview guide developed in relation to the research questions. The use of a semi-structured interview allowed both the comparability of responses between participants, by addressing the same themes, and the flexibility necessary to delve into specific aspects of each community.

The interview guide was structured around several themes: the role of local administration within the LAG, the processes of establishing development priorities, collaboration between local actors, local economic development, social economy, social inclusion, identification and support for vulnerable groups, as well as assessing the impact of local interventions on community development.

The data were examined through thematic and interpretative (hermeneutic) analysis, tracking the meanings attributed by participants to the investigated phenomena. At the same time, comparative analysis was used, which allowed highlighting convergences and differences between the perspectives expressed by different categories of respondents.

To ensure confidentiality, all data have been anonymized. In the analysis and presentation of the results, respondents are identified exclusively by their initials and the position held at the time of the interview, without mentioning their locality or other information that could lead to their identification.

The general objective of the research is to analyze how local public administration and partnerships developed within Local Action Groups (LAGs) contribute to stimulating local economic development, promoting the social economy and the inclusion of vulnerable groups, by exploring the perspectives of local actors involved in territorial development processes. Also, the general question that guided the

research was: How do local administration and partnerships developed within LAGs contribute to stimulating local economic development, promoting the social economy and the inclusion of vulnerable groups in the territory?

Starting from the main general objective and the general research question, we formulated the following specific objectives:

- Analyzing the role of local public administration within the LAG and in the economic and social development processes carried out at the local level.
- Identifying ways in which local administration, LAG, non-governmental organizations and other local actors collaborate to plan and implement economic development and social inclusion interventions.

The selected respondents were members of the public administration, with eight mayors, one deputy mayor and one public administrator being interviewed. They were selected because they have relevant information and direct experience regarding local development processes and the functioning of the LAG partnership.

The interviews took place between March and May 2026. The snowball method was used to identify respondents, with the interviewed people helping to identify other suitable people to interview.

The research also has several limitations.

First, the research reflects the perspectives of a limited number of institutional actors, most of whom come from local public administration. Therefore, the results mainly capture the perceptions and experiences of local decision-makers and less the perspective of direct beneficiaries of interventions or other categories of community actors.

Second, there is the possibility of some forms of social desirability in responses. Given the positions held by the participants, some responses may reflect a tendency to highlight the positive aspects of the activity of the institutions they represent and to minimize certain existing difficulties or limitations.

During the data collection and analysis process, difficulties were also encountered related to the availability of respondents, with the busy schedules of the interviewees sometimes making it difficult to participate in the interview.

However, the results are sufficiently detailed and relevant to highlight the respondents' perception of the topic studied.

7. Research Results

7.1 The Role of Local Administration within the LAG

The participants' responses paint a clear picture of local government as a central actor in territorial development, whose role goes beyond administrative management and extends to the coordination, facilitation and strategic orientation of development processes. A more frequently mentioned aspect is that the government is perceived as an intermediary between community needs and funding opportunities, by promoting available calls, identifying potential beneficiaries and providing support in accessing funds. In this regard, one respondent highlights that the government has the role of "promoting funding opportunities" and providing "advice and guidance for choosing activities with real chances of success" (Mayor NR).

Also, several participants describe the local administration as a factor of stability and continuity in a context characterized by projects and programs with limited duration: "The LAG has a life cycle (...), but the city hall remains", which gives the administration the responsibility to integrate projects into a coherent vision of

development and to avoid interventions without real impact on the community (Mayor FB).

The administration is also perceived as an actor that capitalizes on local resources and potential to generate development. This aspect is evident both in the case of localities undergoing economic transformation, where the administration aims to “transform industrial heritage into a resource for development” (Mayor RG), and in communities that rely on tourism, heritage or cultural resources as factors of economic growth (Mayor PI).

At the same time, the participants highlight the participatory and collaborative nature of local development. The development of LAG strategies is described as a process based on community consultation and cooperation between the administration, the private sector and civil society. Thus, the local administration appears not only as a public authority, but also as a facilitator of dialogue and territorial partnerships, contributing to the identification and implementation of solutions adapted to local needs.

7.2 The Influence of Local Administration on Setting Development Priorities at Local/LAG Level

The results indicate that local government is generally perceived as an actor with a significant influence on the establishment of development priorities, an influence that comes from the ability to identify local needs. Several respondents emphasize that the government contributes to defining priorities because it has direct knowledge of existing problems and resources. In this regard, one respondent states that the government has “an important influence in setting priorities because it has direct information on the needs of the community” (Administrator LL), while another considers that the influence is “determinative, because in-depth knowledge of the local specifics allows targeting priorities to the areas with the greatest impact” (Mayor ML). A similar perspective is expressed by Mayor GI, who states that the government “defines the development agenda based on the real needs identified”.

A second recurring theme concerns the role of the administration in the strategic orientation of investments and available resources. For some respondents, the influence of the administration is manifested in the ability to prioritize certain areas considered important for the development of the community. Thus, Mayor RG states that the administration directs resources towards “urban and social regeneration projects, vital for a city that has gone through a severe mining restructuring process”, and priorities are set to “support disadvantaged communities and revitalize local infrastructure”. Similarly, the mayor of PI considers that the administration directs priorities towards “tourism infrastructure and support for small producers”, ensuring that projects “value natural landscapes and the diversity of local gastronomy”. In another area, priorities are associated with “urban regeneration, social inclusion, green economy, education and digitalization”, areas that aim to “increase the quality of life” (Deputy Mayor MC).

However, the interviewees mention that the influence of the administration is closely linked to the existence of a strategic vision and correct planning. One respondent emphasizes that “the influence of the local administration depends very much on how well it is prepared and how clear the direction it proposes is”, adding that “if you come up with a clear strategy, with objectives, priorities and solid arguments, things change” (Mayor FB). The same respondent highlights the fact that not all the needs of the community can be covered by the LAG and that they must be “integrated into a larger plan”, which suggests a strategic approach in which individual projects are subsumed

under a long-term development vision. A similar perspective also appears in the case of Mayor NR, who mentions the existence of a “Local Development Strategy approved by the Local Council”, which includes areas such as cultural, institutional, industrial and socio-economic development.

At the same time, the responses show that setting priorities is perceived as a participatory process, involving other community actors. The mayor from SA states that “public meetings were organized in which people expressed their needs and desires regarding the areas in which they want to be financed”, and another respondent believes that priorities must be set through “constant dialogue with local actors: NGOs, educational institutions, the economic environment and representatives of vulnerable communities” (Deputy Mayor MC). In the same vein, the mayor from BC specifies that the administration’s proposals result from “consultation of citizens and analysis of community needs”, and the administrator from LL emphasizes that priorities must be set “through consultation and partnership between the public sector and other actors involved”.

7.3 The Relationship and Collaboration between the Local Administration and the Other Actors in the LAG

The participants’ responses paint a predominantly positive picture of the relationship between the local administration and the other actors involved in the LAG, which is mainly described by concepts such as partnership, collaboration, dialogue and common objectives. Several respondents characterize the relationship as one of “open partnership, based on common objectives of modernizing the rural environment” (Mayor GI), respectively a “solid collaborative partnership” in which constant communication with local actors contributes to achieving development objectives (Mayor LM). Similarly, Administrator LL states that the relationship can be characterized by “collaboration and partnership”, and someone else appreciated the communication as open, marked by “support, promptness and professionalism” (Mayor BC).

A central element of collaboration is communication and the ability of actors to identify common solutions to community problems. A relevant example is provided by Mayor SA, who describes how the LAG representatives “analyzed the situation, understood the problem and together sought new solutions” when a previously made investment no longer met local needs. He concludes that the relationship was “a productive one”, and the projects were adapted to the needs of the community. Mayor NR also highlights the concrete collaboration between the administration and the LAG in organizing local events, mentioning that through the LAG, invitations are sent to local producers and cultural and community promotion activities are supported.

Participants also highlight the importance of collaborating with a diversity of local actors. One respondent believes that the problems of vulnerable communities “cannot be addressed by the administration alone”, requiring collaboration with “NGOs, schools and social service providers” (Deputy Mayor MC). Similarly, another interviewee describes close collaboration with “cultural associations of the Czech, Serbian and German communities”, to ensure “fair representation and a unitary development project” (Mayor RG). These responses suggest that local development is perceived as a collective process, requiring the involvement of several categories of actors.

However, collaboration is not presented as being without challenges. Some respondents mention the existence of differences in approach between the administration and the other partners, as one participant observed that the

administration is “more oriented towards implementation and compliance with procedures”, while other actors may have “a more flexible and conceptual approach” (Mayor FB). Another respondent also mentions difficulties generated by “different work rhythms, bureaucracy, limited resources or different administrative capacity between partners” (Deputy Mayor MC). However, these aspects are perceived as manageable challenges rather than major obstacles, with respondents appreciating that permanent dialogue and coordination contribute to maintaining functional relationships.

Thus, it can be observed that the relationship between the local administration and the other LAG actors is perceived as collaborative and oriented towards achieving common objectives. Constant communication, mutual trust and the ability to adapt interventions to the needs of the community appear as the main elements that support the efficient functioning of this partnership.

7.4 Types of Economic Initiatives Supported at the Territorial Level

The participants’ responses indicate that the economic initiatives supported at the territorial level are strongly influenced by the local specificities and the available resources, but agriculture remains the predominant field in most communities. One of the respondents emphasizes that “the most important economic activities in our commune are agricultural”, mentioning the existence of small farms, cereal growers and field crops (Mayor NR), while another respondent states that “agriculture remains an important pillar”, even if a trend of economic diversification is observed (Mayor FB). Other participants mention supporting the “modernization of agricultural holdings”, local producers and traditional product processing activities (Administrator LL; Mayor LM).

In addition to agriculture, respondents highlight a growing interest in developing tourism and valorizing local heritage. One respondent mentions that initiatives that promote “agritourism and local gastronomic points” are supported, as well as projects that develop leisure infrastructure (Mayor PI). Another participant states that the administration encourages “small businesses in industrial and cultural tourism” and activities that promote “traditional crafts of local ethnic groups” (Mayor RG). Also, one respondent highlights the potential of the community’s cultural and historical heritage, mentioning the intention to promote the area through “cultural events, shows and historical reenactments” (Mayor NR).

Another direction identified in the respondents’ discourses is the diversification of the local economy through the development of services and entrepreneurship. One participant notes the emergence of “small processing units, local services and related activities”, considered important because they “change the direction of development” (Mayor FB). In the urban environment, the emphasis is placed on initiatives that contribute to “diversification of the local economy and job creation”, with areas such as “green economy, energy efficiency, tourism, digital skills, local services, creative industries and educational and vocational training projects” being mentioned (Deputy Mayor MC).

At the same time, the importance of public investments and infrastructure as support for economic development is specified. One participant believes that “investments in infrastructure and public services are mainly supported, because they create the necessary conditions for economic development” (Mayor BC), while another mentions investments in equipment and technological modernization to support local development activities (Mayor GI).

7.5 The Contribution of Local Administration to Stimulating Local Economic Development

The local administration contributes to economic development mainly by creating the necessary conditions for attracting investments and supporting entrepreneurial initiatives. One of the respondents states that economic development depends primarily on infrastructure, emphasizing that “without roads, utilities and access we cannot talk about economic development” (Mayor FB), while another participant mentions investments in industrial areas that will be “divided and equipped with complete utilities: water, sewage and electricity” to be made available to investors (Mayor NR). In the same vein, a respondent believes that the administration must create “a favorable climate for small investors” and support the diversification of the local economy (Mayor RG).

Several participants highlight the role of the administration in facilitating access to funds and supporting local projects that generate jobs. One respondent states that the administration contributes by “supporting projects that can generate jobs, investments and diversification of economic activities” (Administrator LL), while another highlights the importance of partnerships that “facilitate local actors’ access to various sources of financing and development programs” (Mayor LM). Also, one participant mentions providing “administrative support so that small entrepreneurs (...) can access financing more easily” (Mayor BC).

Participants also highlight the role of the administration in capitalizing on local resources and stimulating entrepreneurial initiative. One respondent describes the steps taken to identify unused land and the intention to encourage citizens to develop “small businesses using this land” (Mayor SA), while others emphasize investments in tourism, promoting gastronomic points and developing tourist routes as ways to stimulate the local economy (Mayor PI; Mayor BC). In the urban environment, economic development is associated with investments in urban regeneration, mobility, education and energy efficiency, considered interventions that “increase the attractiveness of the city, improve the quality of life and support the development of human capital” (Deputy Mayor MC).

Other respondents emphasize the importance of a predictable institutional climate and an accessible administration. One participant states that the administration must “simplify the relationship with the city hall, provide clear information and openness”, but also transmit “a signal of stability and trust”, since investments occur more easily in an environment perceived as predictable and safe (Mayor FB).

7.6 The Main Administrative and Institutional Obstacles to Local Economic Development

The main barriers affecting local economic development are related to bureaucracy, limited human resources and the complexity of the legislative framework. Several respondents describe the existence of “complex administrative procedures”, “excessive bureaucracy” and regulations that hinder both the implementation of projects and the development of private initiatives (Mayor SA; Mayor GI; Administrator LL; Deputy Mayor MC; Mayor LM). One participant explicitly states that “bureaucracy is a major obstacle to economic development”, being associated with difficulties in obtaining permits, approvals and meeting administrative deadlines (Mayor SA). Similarly, other respondents mention that complex procedures slow down the implementation of projects and access to financing, especially in the case of investments financed from external funds (Mayor GI; Administrator LL).

A second recurring problem is the shortage of human resources and the lack of specialized personnel. Several participants report the existence of “limited human resources in the city hall” and “limited capacity of specialized personnel in the management of non-reimbursable funds” (Mayor RG; Mayor GI; Mayor LM). One respondent considers that “the lack of qualified personnel is a frequently encountered problem” (Administrator LL), and another identifies this situation as one of the main obstacles for both the local administration and the implementation of development projects (Mayor FB).

Participants also highlight the difficulties generated by the legislative and institutional framework. One respondent considers the legislative framework to be very complex, which makes it difficult for inexperienced people to develop a business (Mayor NR), while another draws attention to the “rigidity of some national regulations” that limit the adaptation of solutions to the specific needs of local communities (Mayor LM). In the same vein, a participant mentions that certain regulations can limit the development of local economic initiatives, especially in the field of gastronomy and tourism (Mayor PI).

In addition to administrative obstacles, some respondents bring up structural problems that affect economic development. These include degraded infrastructure, the “high degree of wear and tear of the legacy infrastructure” from the past (Mayor RG), limited financial resources (Administrator LL), but also the migration of young workers. One respondent highlights the existence of a mismatch between the demands of the labor market and the educational system, stating that “the labor market demands one thing, and the educational system offers another”, which creates difficulties in ensuring the human resources necessary for economic development (Deputy Mayor MC).

7.7 Understanding the Social Economy at the Level of Local Actors in the Territory

The social economy is understood mainly through its social and community role, being associated with the integration of vulnerable people, creating opportunities and strengthening social cohesion. One participant describes it as “an indispensable tool for survival and integration”, which offers income alternatives for people affected by economic changes and for vulnerable groups (Mayor RG), while another respondent considers it “a sustainable strategy for combating unemployment and integrating disadvantaged people into the labour market” (Mayor LM).

The association of the social economy with the provision of services and interventions for people in vulnerable situations was noted, with a project being mentioned that will develop social services for vulnerable families, the elderly and children at risk of school dropout, underlining the need to “intervene in vulnerable families” and create community support mechanisms (Mayor SA). Similarly, another participant highlights the role of partnerships with non-governmental organizations and the development of “integrated social services” adapted to the needs of the community (Deputy Mayor MC).

However, the notion of social economy is not always clearly defined at the local level. One respondent states that the social economy is “beginning to be understood, but is not yet fully integrated in practice”, stating that many people confuse it with “social assistance”, although this essentially involves “integration and the creation of opportunities” (Mayor FB). The same idea is supported by another participant, who mentions that the concept “is not always theoretically known by citizens”, even if its

principles are applied in practice through activities that generate benefits for the community (Mayor BC).

Some respondents extend the understanding of the social economy beyond the dimension of social inclusion and associate it with the valorization of local resources and identity. One participant considers it to be “a form of preserving culinary and cultural traditions by involving the community in income-generating economic activities” (Mayor PI), while another describes it as “a model of resilience” that complements economic investments and contributes to the integration of the local workforce in activities that benefit the community (Mayor GI).

7.8 The Role of Local Administration in Supporting Social Economy Initiatives

The local administration is mainly seen as a facilitator of social economy initiatives, with the role of identifying community needs, supporting vulnerable groups and creating partnerships that allow the implementation of projects with social impact. Several respondents emphasize the importance of identifying groups in situations of vulnerability and developing interventions adapted to their needs. One participant states that the administration must identify “vulnerable groups in the community and provide the necessary logistical framework for the development of social enterprises” (Mayor LM), while another considers that the role of the administration is to “identify target groups, create partnerships and support the implementation of projects” (Mayor FB).

The development of social services and measures aimed at social inclusion are other important aspects. One respondent mentions the promotion of initiatives addressed to vulnerable groups, such as “social services, sheltered workshops or professional integration projects” (Administrator LL). Similarly, another participant describes the existence of services dedicated to the elderly and people in difficulty, highlighting the involvement of the social worker and the community health worker in identifying problems and finding appropriate solutions for each case (Mayor SA).

Participants also highlight the role of the administration in facilitating access to funding and developing integrated interventions. One respondent states that the administration is a “partner for social economy initiatives”, with concrete support including “partnerships with NGOs, facilitating access to available funding and developing integrated social services” (Deputy Mayor MC). The same participant emphasizes that the experience of projects implemented in vulnerable communities has demonstrated the importance of interventions that combine infrastructure investments with educational, social and community activities (Deputy Mayor MC).

One participant believes that the administration should promote local gastronomic points and facilitate collaboration between small producers, as these activities contribute to both economic development and social inclusion of the community (Mayor PI). Similarly, another respondent describes the administration as an actor that creates links between “social needs and opportunities for sustainable development” (Mayor GI).

7.9 Examples of Relevant Social Economy Initiatives and Ways to Support Them

The participants’ responses highlight a variety of initiatives with social and community impact, supported by collaboration between local administration, LAGs and other local actors. Examples include projects focused on social inclusion, community services, promoting cultural heritage and supporting local producers.

Several respondents provide examples of initiatives dedicated to vulnerable groups. One participant mentions the existence of associations that manage “day centers for the elderly” and local cooperatives, supported by access to public spaces and co-financing from the local administration (Mayor LM). Another respondent highlights projects aimed at “professional integration of vulnerable people” and the development of useful services for the community (Administrator LL). The implementation of social housing projects, educational activities and after-school programs for children from vulnerable backgrounds is also mentioned (Deputy Mayor MC).

Participants emphasize that support for these initiatives is achieved through funding, partnerships and logistical support. One respondent indicates that social projects have been developed through “European funding, partnerships between the administration and civil society and the involvement of local actors in identifying needs and solutions” (Deputy Mayor MC). He emphasizes that their goal is not only to solve specific problems, but also to build “sustainable mechanisms of community inclusion and participation” (Deputy Mayor MC).

Another category of initiatives is represented by those that capitalize on cultural identity and local resources. One participant mentions the existence of cultural associations that promote local traditions and that benefit from support through the provision of event spaces and access to grants (Mayor RG). In the same vein, another respondent describes the network of local gastronomic points, supported by promotion and their inclusion in materials and events aimed at tourists (Mayor PI).

Some participants also provide examples of community initiatives based on volunteering and civic involvement. They mention greening activities, maintenance of green spaces, tree planting and recreational events organized with the support of young people and volunteers from the community (Mayor NR). Although these activities do not represent classic forms of social economy, they reflect the concern of local actors for the development of social capital and the involvement of citizens in community life.

7.10 Main Vulnerable Groups and Ways of Identification

The results obtained highlight the existence of relatively similar categories of vulnerable groups in the analyzed communities, the most frequently mentioned being the elderly, people with disabilities, low-income families, children at risk and people affected by social exclusion.

The elderly are the most frequently mentioned vulnerable category by respondents. One participant states that the main vulnerable group in the community is the elderly, explaining this by the aging population and the migration of young people to urban centers or abroad (Mayor SA). Similarly, other respondents include the elderly among the main vulnerable categories identified at the local level (Mayor NR; Mayor GI; Administrator LL; Mayor LM; Deputy Mayor MC; Mayor BC).

Another frequently specified category is represented by people in economic difficulty and low-income families. Participants refer to people at risk of poverty, families affected by economic precariousness and people without employment opportunities (Administrator LL; Deputy Mayor MC; Mayor LM). One respondent also mentions the existence of vulnerable categories specific to the local context, such as former miners affected by economic restructuring and members of ethnic communities in situations of social risk (Mayor RG).

Children and young people in vulnerable situations are also mentioned. Participants refer to children from disadvantaged families, children at social risk, young

people with limited access to education and people with a low level of qualification (Administrator LL; Mayor LM; Deputy Mayor MC). One respondent also draws attention to children whose parents work abroad, considered a vulnerable category that requires additional support (Mayor BC).

Regarding the identification of vulnerable groups, the responses indicate the use of complementary institutional and community mechanisms. Most respondents mention the activity of social assistance departments and the conduct of social surveys as the main tools for identifying community needs (Mayor RG; Administrator LL; Mayor LM). In addition, collaboration with other institutions and the exchange of information with schools, social assistance departments, NGOs and other local structures are highlighted (Mayor NR; Mayor LM; Deputy Mayor MC).

Some participants also emphasize the importance of direct knowledge of the community. One respondent states that, in a small community, the administration knows the situation of citizens very well and can quickly identify people who need support (Mayor SA). Similarly, another participant mentions direct monitoring and permanent collaboration with social workers to identify people in vulnerable situations (Mayor PI).

7.11 Types of Measures and Interventions Implemented for the Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups

Interviewees highlight that social inclusion measures implemented at local level aim to both meet the immediate needs of vulnerable groups and create opportunities for long-term integration. The interventions described cover areas such as social assistance, education, health, employment, culture and community development.

The implementation of social and support services dedicated to people in difficulty was described as an important aspect; one respondent identified the aim of “increasing the degree of social inclusion and improving the quality of life of vulnerable people” through social services, monitoring, counseling and support provided to people in difficulty (Mayor SA). Similarly, other respondents highlight the existence of social assistance programs and medical and social services at home intended especially for the elderly and vulnerable families (Mayor LM; Deputy Mayor MC).

Educational and skills development measures are also important. One respondent highlights the importance of educational and after-school programs, training activities and support for access to the labor market (Deputy Mayor MC). At the same time, projects aimed at reducing school dropout and supporting children from vulnerable backgrounds through monitoring and counseling activities are mentioned (Mayor SA).

Participants also emphasize the importance of approaches oriented towards integration and active participation. One respondent states that “it is not enough to provide help”, but it is necessary to “create opportunities for these people and for these vulnerable categories”, even if this process requires time and resources (Mayor FB). This perspective reflects an approach that goes beyond the logic of traditional social assistance and aims to develop autonomy and social participation.

Several respondents describe measures aimed at cultural inclusion and strengthening community relations. One participant mentions the involvement of Roma children in folk dance ensembles and the promotion of the culture of different ethnicities at local events (Mayor NR). Similarly, another respondent highlights the organization of cultural activities dedicated to various ethnic groups, such as Roma Day, performances, traditional dances and culinary competitions (Administrator LL).

In some communities, inclusion is also associated with the integration of vulnerable people into local economic activities. One respondent mentions the organization of training courses for hospitality activities and the integration of beneficiaries into the local tourism value chain (Mayor PI). Another participant refers to professional retraining programs for people affected by local economic transformations (Mayor RG).

7.12 Collaboration of Local Actors to Support Social Inclusion

Most respondents believe that social interventions are more effective when they are carried out through partnerships and by mobilizing the resources available at the local level. They describe the existence of collaborative networks in which each actor contributes with specific resources and skills. One respondent states that the administration coordinates the available resources, while community organizations and other local structures contribute with expertise and support for the implementation of inclusion projects (Mayor RG). Similarly, another participant describes an “integrated network” in which the administration provides the logistical base, non-governmental organizations contribute with expertise, and the LAG provides the financial framework necessary for the implementation of social interventions (Mayor LM).

Direct communication with the community appears as an essential element of collaboration. One respondent emphasizes the importance of permanent contact with vulnerable people and field trips to identify problems and intervene quickly in difficult situations (Mayor SA). Another participant also highlights the constant collaboration between the administration, schools, churches and other local institutions to identify community needs and develop appropriate responses (Mayor NR).

The involvement of non-governmental organizations and other institutional partners is also very important. As one respondent specified, “you cannot work alone”, and collaboration with organizations, educational institutions and partners from other sectors is necessary to develop effective interventions (Deputy Mayor MC). The same participant describes the involvement of a large number of organizations and institutions in social inclusion projects developed at the local level, highlighting the benefits of a partnership-based approach (Deputy Mayor MC).

Others mention the existence of partnerships between the administration, cultural institutions, community organizations and representatives of different local groups to organize joint activities and promote social inclusion (Administrator LL). In some cases, the collaboration is also oriented towards the integration of vulnerable people in economic and tourist activities, by facilitating dialogue between local actors and identifying available sources of funding (Mayor PI).

7.13 How Decisions on Economic and Social Priorities Are Made

The establishment of economic and social priorities is based, in most cases, on consultative processes and on the analysis of community needs. Participants describe mechanisms that combine strategic planning, public consultation and the involvement of different categories of actors in the decision-making process. For example, one of the participants states that decisions are the result of a “consultative process” involving community representatives and various local social actors (Mayor RG), while another respondent states that priorities are established following public meetings, consultations and direct discussions with citizens (Administrator LL). Similarly, another participant mentions the organization of consultations in all localities belonging to the community, to identify needs and plan investments (Mayor NR).

The analysis of the real needs of the community is presented as a central criterion of the decision-making process. One respondent believes that the role of the administration is to “analyze the real needs of citizens and set priorities based on them” (Mayor SA), while another states that decisions must reflect the “future interests of the residents” and contribute to the modernization of the community (Mayor GI).

Participants also highlight the importance of having a clear strategic direction. One respondent states that decisions are made “based on a clear strategic direction”, avoiding short-term measures and pursuing medium and long-term objectives (Mayor FB). Similarly, other respondents refer to local development strategies as tools that guide the process of prioritizing investments and projects (Mayor LM; Mayor BC). Others draw attention to the influence of the broader institutional framework. One respondent notes that some of the development priorities are influenced by objectives and conditionalities established at national and European level, which may limit full adaptation to the specifics of each community (Mayor NR). At the same time, another participant believes that a functional LAG must ensure balanced representation of the administration, the private sector and civil society in the decision-making process (Deputy Mayor MC).

7.14 Main Difficulties in Collaboration between Local Administration and Other Actors

The results suggest that the main difficulties in collaboration between local government and other actors are related to coordination, differences in work pace and administrative constraints. Several respondents point out that the institutions involved have different priorities and ways of functioning, which can make cooperation difficult. One participant states that “each actor has its own priorities and its own work pace”, and managing these differences is one of the major challenges of collaboration (Mayor FB). Similarly, another respondent considers that difficulties arise from “differences in work pace between public institutions and private entities or NGOs” and the need to synchronize activities and available resources (Mayor LM).

Another aspect mentioned in this question, but also in previous discussion topics, is bureaucracy and the complexity of administrative procedures. One respondent believes that local development would be accelerated by “simplifying administrative procedures and reducing bureaucracy” (Mayor NR), while another mentions the existence of a large number of “permissions, authorizations, certificates and approvals” that make it difficult to implement projects (Administrator LL). Also, one participant notes that harmonizing the fast pace of the private environment with “the rigor of administrative procedures imposed by attracting European funds” is a constant challenge (Mayor PI).

Participants also highlight the issue of limited resources, especially human resources. Several respondents refer to the “lack of staff” and the difficulty of identifying qualified human resources, especially in smaller or isolated communities (Administrator LL; Deputy Mayor MC). One participant emphasizes that administrative staff are often involved in numerous projects simultaneously, which leads to overload and different implementation rhythms between partners (Deputy Mayor MC).

Communication and building trusting relationships also appear as essential elements of collaboration. One respondent mentions that maintaining trust between the actors involved requires “increased attention” to communication (Mayor RG), and another states that difficulties can be reduced through “constant communication and collaboration” (Mayor FB). At the same time, one participant draws attention to the fact

that sometimes there is “a lack of a culture of real partnerships”, in the sense that certain collaborations exist formally, but do not function effectively in practice (Deputy Mayor MC).

However, not all experiences reported are marked by difficulties. One respondent states that he did not encounter “significant difficulties in collaborating with partners involved in local development”, appreciating that dialogue and cooperation were effective during the implementation of projects (Mayor BC).

7.15 Assessment of the Impact of Local Government on Economic Development and Social Inclusion and Directions for Improvement

Participants predominantly positively assess the impact of local administration on economic development and social inclusion, highlighting its contribution to the modernization of infrastructure, attracting funding and developing services for the community. Several respondents consider that the effects of interventions are visible in the “increase in the quality of life”, “modernization of infrastructure” and strengthening social cohesion (Mayor BC; Mayor LM). One participant emphasizes that the impact of the administration is reflected in the “implementation of local projects, attracting funds and supporting collaboration between community actors” (Administrator LL), and another considers that the projects developed have contributed to “urban regeneration, improving infrastructure and developing social services” (Deputy Mayor MC).

An important theme is the long-term perspective on development. One respondent points out that the impact of the administration cannot be assessed exclusively through immediate results, because “development does not come from a single project, but from a series of correct and correlated steps” (Mayor FB). He notes that, over time, “the infrastructure has improved”, and in communities one can notice a greater involvement of citizens and an intensification of economic activity in the areas where investments have been made (Mayor FB).

At the same time, one of the participants brings up the importance of human involvement and available resources, stating that “without involvement nothing happens, you need people and money to make things work” (Mayor SA). He believes that access to information, availability of funding and community participation are essential conditions for local development.

Regarding the areas that need improvement, respondents frequently mention reducing bureaucracy and strengthening administrative capacity. One participant considers that “less bureaucracy and more flexibility at local level” is necessary (Mayor FB), while another emphasizes the importance of “strengthening administrative capacity” and investing in staff, skills and organization (Administrator LL). Several respondents also highlight the need for specialized staff and resources to enable efficient project implementation (Deputy Mayor MC; Administrator LL).

Participants also emphasize the importance of more active community involvement and the development of partnerships. One respondent believes that it is necessary to “increase community participation in the decision-making process” (Administrator LL), and another states that sustainable development cannot exist “without social cohesion and without community participation in decision-making” (Deputy Mayor MC). In the same logic, the need for “more effective partnerships with NGOs and the private sector” and the importance of developing integrated projects, in which local actors collaborate around common objectives, are highlighted (Administrator LL; Deputy Mayor MC).

Some respondents also bring up the need to better capitalize on local potential. Opportunities such as attracting foreign investment and capitalizing on cultural diversity for tourism development (Mayor RG), developing tourism promotion and diversifying local services (Mayor PI), as well as supporting associative forms and facilitating access to information and financing (Mayor NR) are mentioned.

8. Conclusions

The research aimed to analyze the role of local public administration and the partnerships developed within the Local Action Group (LAG) in stimulating local economic development, promoting the social economy and supporting the social inclusion of vulnerable groups. The results obtained highlight the fact that local administration is perceived by respondents as one of the main actors of territorial development, having a role that goes beyond classic administrative attributions and extends to the coordination, facilitation and strategic orientation of local development processes.

A first important conclusion is that the local administration occupies a central position within the LAG, being responsible for both identifying community needs and promoting funding opportunities and supporting the implementation of local projects. Respondents appreciate that the administration has the best knowledge of the problems and resources existing at the local level, which gives it a significant influence on setting economic and social development priorities.

The results also highlight the fact that local development is perceived as a collaborative process, based on partnerships between the administration, LAG, non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, religious denominations and other community actors. Collaboration is predominantly characterized by dialogue, cooperation and common objectives, and the LAG is seen as a mechanism that facilitates the coordination of resources and the implementation of interventions at the territorial level. At the same time, respondents report the existence of difficulties generated by differences in work pace, bureaucracy and the limited administrative capacity of some institutions, aspects that can affect the efficiency of collaboration.

In terms of economic development, the research highlights that agriculture continues to represent the main economic sector supported by most of the communities analyzed. However, the results indicate the existence of economic diversification trends through the development of tourism, the valorization of cultural and natural heritage, the promotion of local products, the support of services and the encouragement of entrepreneurship. Local administration contributes to these processes by investing in infrastructure, facilitating access to financing, administrative support and the development of a favorable investment climate.

Another relevant conclusion is related to the existence of administrative and institutional obstacles that limit local economic development. Excessive bureaucracy, complex administrative procedures, lack of qualified personnel, insufficient financial resources and the rigidity of certain regulations are identified as the main barriers faced by both local administrations and economic and social actors in the territory.

Regarding the social economy, the results show that it is understood mainly through its role of social integration and support for vulnerable groups. Although the concept is not always known at a theoretical level, the principles of the social economy are present in numerous local initiatives aimed at inclusion, community development and the creation of opportunities for people in difficulty. The social economy is associated

both with the development of social services and professional integration, and with the valorization of local traditions, cultural heritage and community resources.

Regarding social inclusion, the research highlights the existence of vulnerable categories common to most of the communities analyzed: elderly people, people with disabilities, low-income families, children and young people at risk, Roma people and people affected by social exclusion. Their identification is carried out through social surveys, collaboration with specialized institutions and through direct knowledge of the community by the local administration. The interventions implemented include social services, educational programs, cultural activities, medical services, professional integration projects and community support measures.

The results suggest that the impact of local government on economic development and social inclusion is perceived predominantly positively. Respondents appreciate the contribution of the administration to the modernization of infrastructure, attracting external funds, developing public services and strengthening social cohesion. However, areas for improvement are also identified, such as reducing bureaucracy, strengthening administrative capacity, increasing community participation in the decision-making process, developing partnerships and increasing the level of professionalization of staff involved in project management.

Thus, the research confirms that local government and the partnerships developed within the LAG are essential factors for territorial development. The efficiency of these processes, however, depends on the capacity of local actors to collaborate, to mobilize resources and to build integrated interventions that simultaneously respond to the objectives of economic development and social inclusion. The results obtained support the importance of participatory approaches and inter-institutional cooperation as fundamental elements for the sustainable development of local communities.

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Reconstructing the Wellbeing Concept Through an Integrative Approach

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Abstract

Wellbeing is perceived differently by research fields and its definitions and conceptualizations vary across domains that even common-sense understandings raise questions and create confusion.

The present study addresses a research gap between existing conceptualizations of wellbeing and the complexity with which wellbeing is experienced in the real-life.

It starts with a critical analysis of existing definitions of wellbeing, clarifies the conceptual differences between wellbeing and welfare, and underlines the fragmented nature and limited capacity of existing approaches and conceptualisations to explain wellbeing across different contexts and states.

Starting from natural human behaviour and needs, the study proposes an integrative theoretical framework, and reconstructs the wellbeing concept by conceptualising it as a way of thinking, a lifestyle, a continuous process, and an end in itself. Instead of interpreting these wellbeing dimensions as competing or separate, the study shows that they are interconnected, each naturally building on the previous one.

Keywords: *Wellbeing; Welfare; Lifestyle; Life satisfaction; Human flourishing*

1. The Challenge of Defining Wellbeing: Research Context and Gap

The Cambridge Dictionary (2023a) defines wellbeing as “the state of feeling healthy and happy” and highlights welfare as a synonym. But welfare is described as “help given, especially by the state or an organization, to people who need it, because they don’t have enough money” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023b). This definition raises questions regarding the dependency of wellbeing on financial resources alone, how much money is enough for wellbeing, how should we approach the wellbeing of those who are not in need of financial help, etc.

Similarly, the Merriam Webster Dictionary (2023a) defines wellbeing as “the state of being happy, healthy, or prosperous”, and suggests welfare as a synonym, which is defined as “the state of doing well especially in respect to good fortune, happiness, well-being, or prosperity, and aid in the form of money or necessities for those in need” (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2023b).

In wide terms, both sources explain wellbeing, but they contradict when proposing welfare as a synonym. Because if welfare involves help for those in need, then the necessity of this help highlights these people’s struggle and difficulty in matter of independence and self-sufficiency. Thus, questioning their capacity to manage their own lives, and revealing new needs and vulnerabilities.

Consequently, we argue that the meaning of wellbeing should not be treated as universal and static, but rather as a dynamic construct that evolves in response to contexts, personal needs, social needs, political systems, organizational structures, and cultural contexts.

Meanwhile, the governments adopted the wellbeing concept to measure social contentment, and “commonly identified it as a goal of public policy” (Fisher, 2019). The definitions applied to it during measurement changed from economic approaches focused solely on gross domestic product (GDP) as a proof of national development and happiness (Nordhaus and Tobin, 1973) to social indicators theories concentrated on building a timely list of social indicators of wellbeing like, “life satisfaction, availability of social support, percentage of population with improved sanitation facilities, GINI coefficient (income distribution), unemployment rate, proportion of children of official primary school age not enrolled” (Hagtvædt Vik and Carlquist, 2018: 283).

Although these definitions may represent the overall level of social progress, they are limited in illustrating the wellbeing levels since its indicators may vary across individuals’ personality and emotional reactivity, cultural, ethnic and religious groups, age and gender differences, etc. (Diener, Oishi and Lucas, 2003).

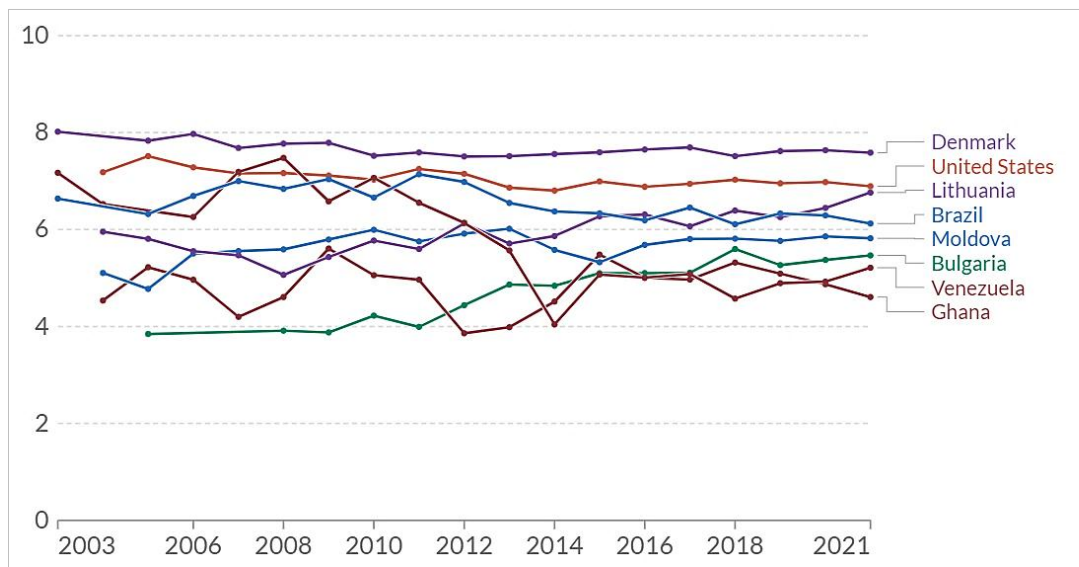
The psychological works of Taylor (2011) and Sfeatcu et al. (2014) attach the meaning of wellbeing to mental health. The economic perspective of Greve (2008) defines it in financial terms. The mixed and social studies argue that wellbeing is influenced and described by both, psychological and financial factors (Dwyer et al., 2020; Adler and Seligman, 2016). But what if wellbeing has a dynamic nature, and its meaning is meant to change?

In 2020 Gallup World Poll focused on filling up research gaps in the wellbeing field and employed large sample sizes, representing more than 95% of the world’s population on any given year. It looked at wellbeing in terms of “measures of law and order, food and shelter, work quality, health, standard of living, citizen engagement, migration intentions, views of governance, and demographic variables” (Lambert et al., 2020: 3).

“[The broad coverage of this study helped understanding better the relationships between different variables of the wellbeing]” (Deaton, 2008, apud Lambert et al., 2020: 4), but because it did not consider the cultural and geographical influences on the people’s perception of wellbeing, nor the emotional or the cognitive needs, its contribution to understanding and defining wellbeing remains limited.

In 2008 Deaton drew a parallel between countries’ income, health satisfaction, and wellbeing and showed that countries like Ghana, Denmark, Venezuela, Brazil and USA register a high level of life satisfaction, while countries like Bulgaria, Moldova, and Lithuania register low levels. But GDP covers more aspects than people’s income, like investments, “[which do not always and immediately lead to higher welfare]” (Dynan and Sheiner, 2018: 43) and an improved standard of living (Arezki and van der Ploeg, 2007).

GDP is a macro aspect that can help measuring social wellbeing, but it must be combined with micro aspects, such as the subjective feeling of happiness (Greve, 2008). Consequently, if we measure life satisfaction by the Cantril Ladder metrics, the life satisfaction ranking of the countries from Deaton’s study changes (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Countries life satisfaction by Cantril Ladder metrics

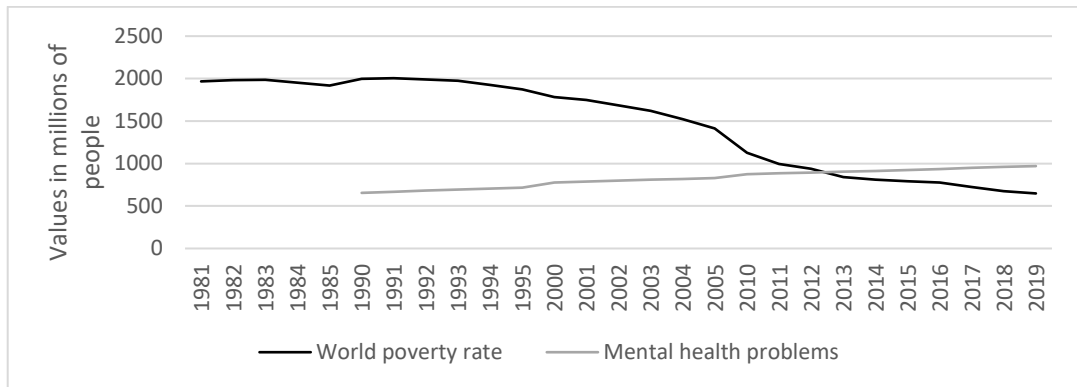
Source: Author's figure after Ortiz-Ospina, Acisu and Roser (2023)

GDP and economic growth do not guarantee increased happiness. Although on short term increased income can create a positive relationship between subjective wellbeing and GDP, on long-term increases in social income do not guarantee and maintain social happiness (Easterlin, 2013a, 2013b). Even more, in the case of nations reaching a certain level of economic development, the non-monetary aspects become more important than the monetary ones (Greve, 2008).

Individual happiness is shaped by current aspirations, past aspirations, and social comparison (Easterlin, 2001; Clark, Frijters and Shields, 2007), but also by mental health, independence, social health, the living environment, the quality of the physical environment, and the quality of the spiritual life (Sfeatcu et al., 2014). Consequently, subjective approaches define wellbeing as a subjective experience, “[influenced by people’s individual characteristics and the characteristics of the places where they live]” (Luhmann, Murdoch and Hawkey, 2014: 1).

Thus, wellbeing is shaped by external circumstances like the environment, events and situations, and internal circumstances like emotional states and personal characteristics (Diener et al., 1999), together with other influential factors like social trends, lifestyles, physical health, previous life experiences, and the perceived distance between personal desires and ideals and actual living conditions (Veenhoven, 1991). But even so, our evaluations of wellbeing depend on how we define a good standard of living, a better life, our lifestyle, and what is advertised to us on daily basis.

So, interested in understanding wellbeing through monetary and non-monetary aspects, we focus on observing the global evolution of income and mental health across time. Because, if income alone would be capable of generating wellbeing, then we should observe similar evolution graphs when following the simultaneous evolution around the world in the dynamics of poverty level and the trajectory of mental health problems (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: World poverty and mental health rates between 1981 and 2019

Source: Author's figure after World Bank (2023) and Our World in Data (2023)

The results indicate a global decline in poverty levels, alongside a steady increase in mental illnesses since 1990. This observation aligns with Greve's (2008) findings, and shows that wellbeing is both, a sum of objective circumstances and a subjective interpretation by the people who lived them (Gough and McGregor, 2007).

In addition to income, subjective interpretation, mental health, and emotional states, wellbeing is also shaped by the individual capacity to positively interpret life events (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2000) and by social constructs such as culture (Schimmack et al., 2002).

For example, the people from Sama-Bajau archipelagic Southeast Asia consider a larger set of values and principles "embedded in their connection to the maritime environment and in their interactions with one another and other groups" when evaluating wellbeing (Majors, 2008, apud Stacey et al., 2018: 100). Consequently, for them wellbeing is about "spatial mobility, resource use, identity and kinship" (Stacey et al., 2018: 100).

Denmark, Slovakia, Russia, and Portugal, register different flourishing rates and cultural differences too, when evaluating wellbeing (Huppert and So, 2013). Consequently, comparing and assessing life satisfaction across countries would cause a loss of valuable information, including the way modernity impacted the nations lifestyle and their view of wellbeing (Veenhoven, 2008, apud La Placa, McNaught and Knight, 2013).

But these findings and the current conceptualizations explain only parts of the wellbeing nature while the relationships between its characteristics and how wellbeing is experienced in daily life remain unexplored. To address this research gap, we focus on the following research objectives:

1. Clarifying the conceptual ambiguity between wellbeing and welfare;
2. Analysing existing definitions of wellbeing and identifying their underlying assumptions and limitations;
3. Presenting and critically evaluating existing theoretical approaches to wellbeing;
4. Reconstructing the wellbeing concept through an integrative theoretical approach based on the comparative and critical analysis of existing perspectives.

2. Research Methodology

The study starts with a literature review to reveal the theoretical limitations and inconsistencies of existing wellbeing definitions. Then, by using the Our World in Data tools we separate large data figures illustrating countries life satisfaction to figures incorporating only the countries relevant to our study. Through comparative analysis of these figures and the findings of existing studies we examine if the theoretical limitations are reflected in real-life wellbeing patterns.

We apply conceptual analysis on the wellbeing literature and critical analysis of the wellbeing definitions to underline their strengths and limitations, and analyse their potential contribution to a better understanding of wellbeing. Along with this, we use the *a contrario* method to highlight characteristics and conditions that should not be considered necessary features of wellbeing.

We use critical and comparative analysis of existing theoretical approaches to identify the source of the most common challenges in the wellbeing research, and to highlight the necessity for an integrative approach to the topic for a better understanding of how wellbeing is defined, understood and experienced by individuals, society, and both external and participant observers. We employ positive and negative analysis, and *a contrario* reasoning on these findings to clarify the essential characteristics of wellbeing crucial in a broader conceptualization.

By adopting an integrative theoretical synthesis, we examine existing conceptualizations of wellbeing and identify how they complete each other. Through this framework, conceptual reconstruction, and abductive reasoning, we redefine wellbeing.

Throughout the paper we use normative philosophy. By finding the limits of existing theories and the unexplained aspects of wellbeing we move away from the question of “how was wellbeing defined” and we ask ourselves “what wellbeing should be”.

3. Welfare and Wellbeing: Clarifying the Conceptual Ambiguity

The Cambridge Dictionary (2023a) and the Merriam Webster Dictionary (2023a) use the welfare concept interchangeably with wellbeing. Campbell et al. (2016) noticed this tendency in research and in common understanding, and highlighted that wellbeing “is often discussed under the heading self-interest, one’s interest, one’s advantage, one’s good, prudential value, quality of life, flourishing, the good life and welfare” (Campbell et al., 2016: 2).

Trying to make a difference between wellbeing and welfare Jordan (2008) argued that wellbeing must be seen in terms of social value, while welfare in terms of economic perspective of utility (Jordan, 2008, apud Taylor, 2011). But, because wellbeing is to be achieved when a set of resources are available, the nowadays society and part of the research environment tend to speak of wellbeing in terms of welfare.

The association between welfare and wellbeing was strengthened with the link between a higher income and a higher wellbeing. In this context, aspects such as “food, shelter, clothing and health care” (Fischer, 2009: 3) were considered main indicators of subjective wellbeing while being directly associated with welfare, and welfare policies.

In response to the common association between wellbeing and resources, Easterlin (1974) sustained that GDP must not be considered a general and unique indicator of happiness. He showed that in spite of a fast-raising GDP, the American society registered increasing values of unhappiness and mental instability. Thus, a

raising income does not necessarily imply an increasing level of happiness (Layard, 2005, apud Greve, 2008).

Yet welfare is further linked to income, maintenance and services (Handel, 2009). This view, brings welfare closer to help and state policies, but highlights the problem of further associating welfare with wellbeing. This association creates confusion regarding the meanings of wellbeing deriving from human support policies, and raises questions about the wellbeing of self-sustaining individuals, the role of self-managing personal domains of life, and whether wellbeing would be possible without support policies.

The necessity to clearly separate welfare from wellbeing comes also from the fact that financial resources alone are not enough to reduce poverty, to improve health, and create a good family (Campbell et al., 2016). For wellbeing, people need to balance all domains of life, especially between work and family (Campbell Clark, 2000), and ensure “[a good mental health (the capacity to experience life, understand wellbeing personally, make plans, and enjoy the present), independence (as mobility, control, the ability to exist outside a specific system), social activity (the capacity to experience interaction, responsibility, and reciprocity), a great living environment (with access to resources, great mobility opportunities, freedom), and life quality (a qualitative physical environment and that of the spiritual experience)]” (Sfeatcu et al., 2014: 127).

Because welfare is often referring to help given to those in need, and relying on resources for giving this help, we see welfare as a concept oriented on public policies reflecting social prosperity, access to resources, and development. In contrast, wellbeing is a wider concept involving individual fulfilment across various domains of life and the subjective experience of life.

Greve (2008) defined welfare as “[the highest possible access to economic resources, a high level of well-being, including happiness of the citizens, a guaranteed minimum income to avoid living in poverty, and having the capability to ensure the individual a good life]” (Greve, 2008: 58). But by associating welfare with access to resources, he limited the meaning of wellbeing only to a state of happiness reached through access to these resources.

In this context, we acknowledge that wellbeing is an end in itself experienced as happiness, that can be reached through access to resources, but we argue that resources alone are not enough because wellbeing is subjective and depends on individual interests at specific moments, and happiness itself requires “positive emotion, engagement, and meaning” (Seligman, 2011). Even more, there are needs that go beyond policies and financial support, like finding a life partner, raising a child as a single parent, (Campbell et al., 2016), increasing self-esteem, belonging, and personal growth. Consequently, if welfare is defined as access to resources, including resources provided through state policies, then it should be understood as a component of wellbeing rather than as an equivalent or competing concept.

4. Wellbeing: The State of the Art

Wellbeing is an under conceptualized term (Drulhe, 1997; Fleuret and Atkinson, 2007). One of the reasons for this is that most of existing definitions revolve around data and lack theoretical explanations (Ryff, 1989, apud Taris and Schaufeli, 2014). For example, in the late 90’s wellbeing was mostly defined and measured in degrees of human self-acceptance, the number of positive relationships, having autonomy, disposing of good environmental conditions, having a purpose in life, and the ability to grow (Ryff, 1995, apud Adler and Seligman, 2016). Only later it was explained through

the lenses of human capacity to have positive emotions, being able to engage and perform an activity, and the capacity to have and recognize personal achievement (Seligman, 2011, apud Adler and Seligman, 2016).

To explain wellbeing researches often report to the quality of life (Lehnert, Sudeck and Conzelmann, 2012). But the quality of life itself cannot only be measured in data without involving a subjective evaluation of the individuals that are being assessed (Costanza et al., 2006). And even more, the “[quality of life itself comprises objective and subjective assessments across seven domains: material well-being, health, productivity, intimacy, safety, community, and emotional well-being]” (Cummins, 1997: 7).

Nowadays, our lifestyle is shaped by continuous change that generates social challenges and fluctuating resources, that impact our states and interpretations of the wellbeing. Thus, when analysing and measuring wellbeing, we must consider “subjective well-being measures as measures of fluctuating states rather than stable traits” (Headey and Wearing, 1991: 57).

Ideally, “[stable wellbeing is possible when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet various challenges]” (Dodge et al., 2012: 230). Yet practically, wellbeing involves continuous work and adaptation to new challenges and the functionality of this effort to fulfil personal needs while keeping a balance between available resources and current challenges (Day, 1986).

If we look at wellbeing in terms of positive mental health, and combined elements of feeling and functioning, it becomes a synonym to flourishing, described as “a combination between feeling good and functioning effectively” (Huppert and So, 2013: 838). This approach brings wellbeing closer to mental health and subjective experience, but distances it from individual progress across other life domains and from the evaluative process that makes these states possible.

Focused on a more inclusive approach Fisher (2019) defined wellbeing as the capacity to exercise a set of actions including: responding appropriately to social challenges, engaging in activities that involve self-control and creativity, enjoying activities, being able to project and perceive reciprocity in social relationships, initiating “present-focused activities”, creating an activity balance between socially created and the goal-focused ones, and understanding the nature of wellbeing. These actions shape our understanding of wellbeing, and help us build a personal approach to it and a definition of that fits our personal needs.

In Aristotle’s writings, wellbeing is found under the term *Eudaimonia*, translated as “human flourishing”. Aristotle’s *Eudaimonia* started from the idea that people are “autonomous and capable of choosing their actions, shaping their own ethical characters, lives and personal identities” (Bynum, 2006: 160). But, to be able to grow and reach flourishing, special conditions are needed, like being part of a society. Aristotle considered that people have a social nature; thus, flourishing was about the human capacity to totally master individual life and actions while being part of a society (Bynum, 2006). But this was possible only when three types of resources were available “external goods, goods of the body, and goods of the soul” (Aristotle, EN 1098b13-15, apud Ransome, 2010: 45).

In terms of individual autonomy and freedom, people were seen as seekers of wellbeing, but also as individuals pursuing personal goals, ideas, and commitments, which may not necessarily involve or lead to wellbeing (Sen, 1985, apud Ransome, 2010: 203-204). In this light, wellbeing is about accomplishment, comparison, and social influences.

In terms of external goods, the goods of the body, and those of the soul, wellbeing is about balance and the human capacity to “thrive across multiple domains of life” (Diener, Scollon and Lucas, 2003). This capacity has a cognitive, affective, and material nature, which describes the subjective filters through which we experience life.

Nowadays, a resource-centred definition of wellbeing is fostered by governments interested in “ensuring economic security, growth and the material prosperity of the population” (Atkinson, 2013: 137). While earlier perspectives saw resources as means to achieve individual flourishing and happiness, the contemporary ones, place material resources at the core of human satisfaction and happiness, transforming them into the very purpose of human life. The first view emphasized the human capacity to grow and achieve fulfilment through the process itself, while the later discredits the impact of the process on the subjective experience of life.

Psychological approaches see wellbeing as an end in itself, a synonym for happiness, and as an outcome of human action. They focus on the human capacity to analyse, evaluate and understand “individual experiences, social circumstances, and subjective feelings often in comparison with those of others”, and describe wellbeing as a product of “social conditions which enable a positive experience of self” (Taylor, 2011: 780).

The resources centred and the individualist approaches create a separation between objective and subjective views. The first ones often illustrate a macro perspective, defining wellbeing through the prism of “industrialization, individualization, state organization and welfare state regimes” (Veenhoven, 2008), while the second adopt a micro view, focused on the individual perception of life and its quality, personal experiences, and preferences (Adler and Seligman, 2016).

A view that integrates both perspectives, describes wellbeing as “self-efficacy”, referring to the capacity to function well, meaning having a good mental condition and physical health, and a social environment offering the right opportunities and support for achieving goals (Ryan and Sapp, 2007, apud Taylor, 2011).

Still, wellbeing is often studied through the hedonic approaches, focused on resources and the individual subjective experience of life through the lenses of “what I have”, or the eudaemonic approaches, that see wellbeing as a process in itself, involving decisions and actions oriented towards achieving a desired life. The later concentrates on “what I do” because life, is not lived and measured only in the moments of achievement, but continuously through assessments of progress and the joy of doing something.

Different from this, the utilitarian view describes wellbeing as something that really matters (Campbell, 2016), and places it above everything else, subordinating other aspects of life to this single purpose. Thus, transforming wellbeing into the main goal of life.

Social constructionism discusses wellbeing in terms of “a way of living” (Fisher, 2019: 7) and argues about the vitality of the sociocultural environment for the individual wellbeing. This milieu is a place to negotiate meanings, formulate a general idea of wellbeing, and share and find the most effective methods to comply to this way of living.

Through these lenses Ereaut and Whiting (2008) define wellbeing as a social construct where society is the environment and the actor that shapes meanings, purposes, and limitations that define a good life - a definition that is constantly debated, discussed, and agreed upon by the people that are part of that society.

To integrate the idea of socially constructed meanings and things, and human subjectivity the constructivist paradigm emerged. It recognizes the importance of society but only as an external factor that stimulates change at the individual level, and focuses on the way these changes are experienced and internalized by the individual. But since individual experiences are unique, the constructivists argue that the definition of wellbeing depends on the individual, which is permanently reevaluating his wellness in presence of great factors like modernity (Veenhoven, 2008).

Meanwhile the Self Determination Theory (SDT) looks at wellbeing in terms of good states of the mind and body, and focuses on the basic conditions and the impact of daily activity on the individual.

But if we look at wellbeing in the light of inherited human needs like, relatedness (the capacity to initiate, maintain and enjoy relationships); competence (the capacity to understand, engage and accomplish certain challenges); and autonomy (the human experience of freedom of thought, choice, behaviour and speech) (Ryff, 1989, apud Taris and Schaufeli, 2014), then, wellbeing is about developing individual capabilities and access to resources to fulfil personal needs.

From the presented approaches, we observe that wellbeing is understood as a human need constantly pursued in life, dependent on a large variety of factors. It is not something guaranteed, or exact, and cannot be touched, and seen. It depends on material and physical needs, but also on individual psychological and cognitive states and capabilities. It is a social construct meant to shape and explain social behaviour and states of mind, but also an individual construct defined and internalized through personal filters, experiences, desires, and needs.

These findings explain wellbeing, but also raise new questions about how we should approach and use this concept in daily life across cultures, emotional states, and time (Diener et al., 1999).

To answer this challenge, we start from the idea that wellbeing depends on aspects such as the joy of living and the ability to live in the present and to enjoy it (Taylor, 2011; Adler and Seligman, 2016; Veenhoven, 2008).

The joy of living is a state of mind and spirit, acquired through actions, attitudes, and the narratives individuals construct in daily life (Waters and Fivush, 2015; McAdams and McLean, 2013). Consequently, it can be seen as an indicator of wellbeing. By consciously evaluating the personal level of happiness in daily life, individuals can master their own lives by managing, planning, and changing their actions and ideas. In this sense, we can see wellbeing as a continuous process of human adaptation to specific situations, contexts, and thoughts, guided by happiness and directed towards personal interests.

This rational choice approach explains individual behaviour partially, highlighting what changes, but not why some changes are happening (Scott, 2000), especially in the case of actions that bring no benefits or pleasure to the individual.

All perspectives presented above explain characteristics of wellbeing, but we lack integrated approaches that connect all its meanings to illustrate the wellbeing complexity we experience in daily life. Consequently, we focus further on proposing an integrated approach to wellbeing.

5. An Integrative Approach to Wellbeing

If we define wellbeing as “a state of happiness and contentment, with low levels of distress, overall good physical and mental health and outlook, or good quality of life” (American Psychological Association, 2018), then we lack the component that makes it a process, namely, the cognitive evaluation of our physical and psychological needs and expectations, which provides a result that is the direct impulse for a psychological and emotional state that we measure. This state allows us to assess the level of fulfilment and happiness at three distinct moments: when we identify a specific set of needs, during the process of pursuing them, and when we fulfil these needs. It is this evaluation process that gives meaning to our state of happiness, by shaping how we understand our fulfilment across various fields of life and the joy we feel while pursuing specific needs.

Without comparison, wellbeing would be just a state of mind and spirit with no specific levels. But we speak about low and high levels of wellbeing and about various measurement systems of wellbeing (Diener, 2009; Diener et al., 2010; Seligman, 2011, apud Hone et al., 2014). Thus, it is not a one-level state, and involves comparison and expectations. In this sense, wellbeing is a state but also a process of evaluation of needs, their fulfilment, the level of happiness acquired after this evaluation, and the comparison of this level of fulfilment and happiness with previous expectations and experiences.

In this context, we may look at wellbeing as to an exclusively individual experience, but since life in total solitude and without external sources of information (technology and social contact) is almost impossible, we must consider the impact of society, culture, age, and how daily life is structured, on the subjective satisfaction across life fields (Diener, 1984). This context highlights the dual nature of wellbeing: communication, as a social component, makes it a social construct (Fisher, 2019), and individual experiences, emotional and cognitive processes make it an individually shaped one (Diener, 1984).

The individual and the social dimensions of wellbeing meet in daily life and in the governance process. They are necessary to shape the society and its purpose by considering individual and social needs and desires (Rose, 1999). It all starts with individual needs, taken together with emotional and psychological outputs, and physical and material things that people can see, touch and use to fulfil their needs. Together, these things contribute to building a personal definition of wellbeing that is later projected into society to shape a broader social concept. Then, through communication and negotiation of meanings, society and its institutions shape a wellbeing concept that includes rules of behaviour, policies, and national strategies, which is projected back onto individuals to be internalized and integrated into their individual definitions of wellbeing for new behavioural adjustments.

This process of redefining wellbeing, following the subjective individual experience of life and the constantly developing and changing society, is continuous. The only constant aspects that describe wellbeing are related to basic human needs derived from human nature (Max-Neef, 2010). In this light, we can define wellbeing as a human heritage based on a stable natural and biological set of needs, and on an evaluative mindset developed from the survival instinct, which follows a continuous state of fulfilment and peace.

Focused on evolutionary psychology and neuroscience, Rusk (2022) showed that wellbeing “arises directly from a system for adaptive motivation”, which makes it “a

consequence of motivational processes” (Rusk, 2022: 17). But this approach is limited in explaining the social influences in shaping individual definitions of wellbeing.

Trying to integrate individual and the population-based views, Fisher (2019) defined wellbeing as “a way of living, that is always realized or not, through processes of interaction between the individual and his or her sociocultural milieu” (Fisher, 2019: 7). But the attention given to underline the “transactional nature of wellbeing, and the permeability of the individual to its environment” (Fisher, 2019: 7) distanced this approach from the individual processes, risking to transform wellbeing into merely a result of socialization.

Fisher (2019) mentioned that “wellbeing consists in seven basic abilities, which are always developed and exercised (or not) through constant processes of interaction between the individual and his environment” (Fisher, 2019: 1). He describes these abilities through a series of activities, but does not fully explain the social and individual internal mechanisms and processes that shape these activities. So, we focus on these processes and their contribution to wellbeing starting with what exactly makes something a way of life.

In 1992, Adler thought that to define lifestyle one must look at individual behavioural patterns, which represent his way of expression. In this sense, lifestyle, found as “the style of life”, was defined as individual’s “[method of approaching his personal goal of superiority]” (Adler, 2013: XII). In this light, for something to be a lifestyle, it must involve “[activities and adjusted behaviour, values and attitudes, social interaction, coherence, recognizability, and choice]” (Veal, 1993: 233).

Thus, for wellbeing to be a way of life, it should encompass activities and perceptions, but also values, attitudes, choices, and other underlying conditions.

In matter of activities and behaviour, wellbeing involves actions oriented at providing a good state of mind and spirit. As we find in Fisher’s (2019) work, these activities can involve individual isolated actions to experience life, or socially-oriented actions that contribute to individual wellbeing through participation, belonging, and the joy of helping others.

But to adjust behaviour, plan and engage in activities, the individual must identify a set of personal values that he reports to. These sets “were formed in childhood in a local context, and are challenged by the global world” (Sagy, Erikson and Braun-Lewensohn, 2015: 74). Yet, “[freedom and human dignity always remain core human values]” (Robbins, 2015: 36).

Similar to activities, we differentiate between personal and socially constructed values (Joseph, 2015: 3). The individual constantly tests both sets of values to understand which ones contribute more to fulfilling personal needs (Kasser, 2015: 84), and which ones require adjustment.

The next component of a lifestyle is social interaction (Veal, 1993). But we sustain that socialization is not a necessary condition for the existence of a lifestyle. A way of life can be perceived as a set of values, attitudes, choices and behaviours the individual follows and applies to satisfy a set of needs. Thus, the individual can develop a lifestyle in hypothetically socially sterile conditions, pursuing a positive emotional state associated with fulfilled needs within the limits of available resources.

In this context, a lifestyle is built through the continuous interaction between the individual’s emotional, cognitive, and physical needs, the actions he takes to fulfil them, the evaluation of outcomes, and the reformulation of needs. This process occurs through the individual interaction with the environment, whether it is socially sterile or not.

Consequently, for wellbeing to be a lifestyle, a social component is not necessary, but since a socially sterile environment is almost impossible, we recognize the impact of social interaction on individual perspectives on wellbeing, and the content and expression of lifestyles.

Another component of a lifestyle is coherence, that Adler (1992) identified as a principle of individual actions beyond surface, helping to identify the unity of personality and its expressions. If we define coherence as “the situation when the parts of something fit together in a natural or reasonable way” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2026), then as a lifestyle wellbeing would require a logical connection between needs, actions, perceived states of good and personal values.

Recognizability is another a possible feature of a lifestyle (Veal, 1993), and refers to a specific set of actions that describe a behaviour pattern whose logic is easy to follow and makes it easy to distinguish a person or a groups’ behaviour from another. Yet, because individual experience is limited, and the interpretation of other lifestyles is subjective, “[partial, superficial and often inaccurate, recognizability may be a feature of some lifestyles, but it is not a necessary part of the definition of lifestyle]” (Veal, 1993: 245). This illustrates an ordinary observer perspective.

However, if we look through participant lenses, recognizability can be seen as a feature of a lifestyle identified in the individual’s alignment of actions with a relatively stable set of values and needs.

In this sense, as a feature of wellbeing, recognizability can be observed in the continuous process of identifying needs, fulfilling them, comparing the fulfilment with personal expectations, having a specific emotional state, comparing this state and its emotional intensity with previous ones, and, based on this, evaluating the state of good, reformulating needs, projecting new actions, and redefining the personal definition of wellbeing according to new conditions and circumstances.

The last but most important feature of a lifestyle is choice. Veal (1993) and Oishi (2000) argued that choice is easy to observe in western societies where the degree of freedom of choice is more significant than in other societies. But contrary to this, Chirkov et al (2003) argued that “[autonomy is a basic concern for all humanity, and only the study of internalization and relative autonomy within varied cultures may tell us more about what types of practices are most assimilable and conducive to wellbeing]” (Chirkov et al., 2003: 108).

By performing such a study on 4 cultures, outside western societies, the authors showed that individuals are free to choose how to organize life within their personal space, according to individual needs, a personal vision of a good life, and the experience of what brings individual wellbeing (Chirkov et al., 2003).

From here we argue that autonomy and choice are necessary conditions for shaping a definition of wellbeing and for registering different levels of wellbeing. Individuals need choice in order to follow a specific type of action or to select a specific resource that fits better to personal needs and their fulfilment. Without choice, the concept of wellbeing would be static and would imply a stable state. Thus, choice is a necessary feature of wellbeing, lying at the basis of this continuous process of redefining needs, choosing which ones are more important in specific circumstances, choosing a set of actions to fulfil these needs, and adopting a narrative that further shapes the lenses through which we experience life (Bauer, McAdams and Pals, 2008; Lind et al., 2024).

Choice, together with other defining features of a lifestyle, helps us explain specific characteristics of wellbeing. However, before understanding wellbeing as a lifestyle, at first, we must understand it as a way of thinking, given that a lifestyle is expressed through a coherent pattern of repeated choices and actions.

In this paper through *a way of thinking* we refer to a relatively stable framework encompassing cognitive structures, beliefs, ideas, and culturally acquired assumptions through which individuals perceive reality, interpret experiences, evaluate situations, and guide choices and actions.

As a way of thinking, wellbeing is based on a set of beliefs and values, acquired in childhood and continuously adjusted through life (Sagy, Erikson and Braun-Lewensohn, 2015). This way of thinking is shaped through interaction with the environment (Clark, 2013) and refined through a trial-and-error system (Campbell, 1960). It is not limited to particular contexts or moments of decision-making, includes a worldview “that provides the epistemic and ontological foundations for other beliefs” (Koltko-Rivera, 2004), and represents a relatively stable framework that shapes individuals’ perception of reality, their personality, identity, preferences, and actions.

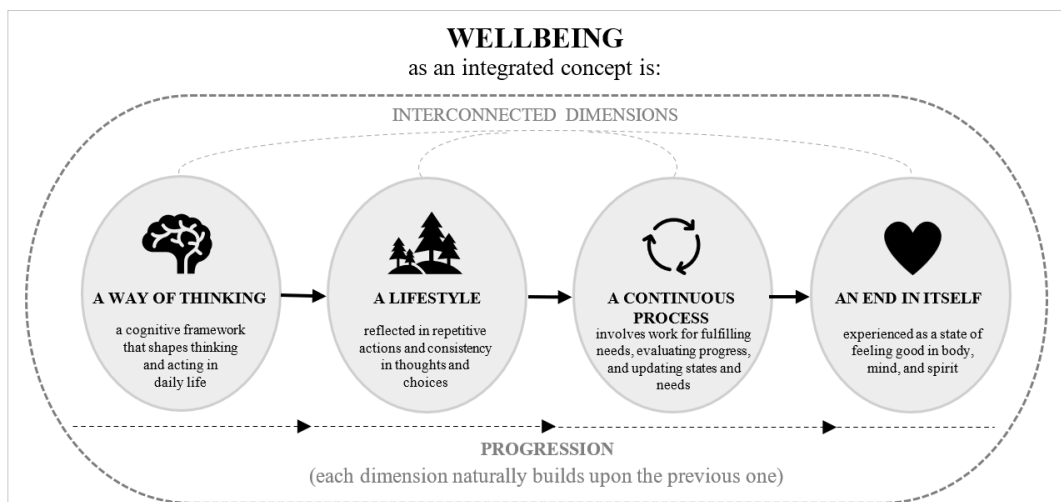
Thus, as a way of thinking, wellbeing is a relatively stable cognitive framework, encompassing a worldview, beliefs, and values that shape individual thinking and behaviour across different contexts, which guides individuals in pursuing a good state of body, mind, and spirit.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Studying existing approaches and conceptualizations to wellbeing, we find that existing perspectives and definitions are complementary rather than mutually exclusive, and altogether reflect the complexity of wellbeing.

These findings help us define wellbeing in a way that describes the natural progression through which it is experienced and expressed: from a way of thinking, to a lifestyle, to a continuous process, and to an end in itself. Wellbeing exists simultaneously at all four interconnected levels, with each level naturally emerging from the previous one (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: An integrative conceptualization of wellbeing



Source: Author's figure

As a way of thinking, wellbeing can be understood as a cognitive framework that shapes individual thoughts and actions in daily life, which naturally develops into a lifestyle. As a lifestyle, wellbeing is reflected in repetitive actions and consistency in thoughts and choices in daily life. These repetitive actions and choices reveal wellbeing as a continuous process which involves physical, cognitive, and emotional work of fulfilling needs, evaluating progress, and continuously updating emotional states and needs. But because this process springs from natural needs and follows their fulfilment across various fields of life, it constitutes the purpose of life. In this sense, as a process, wellbeing functions as a guarantor of happiness. And finally, wellbeing is also an end in itself, experienced as a state of feeling good in body, mind, and spirit.

7. Data Availability Statement

The data used for this study is available at this link: doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.33084674

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Contemporary Fatherhood: Implications for Social Work Practice and Research

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Abstract

Fatherhood is an emerging area of interest in child development and family support policy research, but fathers' experiences remain underexplored compared to mothers'. This article provides an integrative analysis of the literature on factors influencing father involvement, the social, economic and psychosocial challenges associated with the transition to fatherhood, and the extent to which social services and professional interventions in Romania meet the needs of fathers. The literature indicates that family support, the quality of the couple's relationship and access to support services facilitate fathers' involvement, while economic precariousness, low education, exclusion from services and the persistence of traditional gender norms can limit the exercise of the parental role. At the same time, the results highlight that the active involvement of fathers has beneficial effects on child development and family functioning, and interventions focused on fathers' inclusion contribute to strengthening parental skills and reducing vulnerabilities associated with fatherhood. The article emphasizes the need to develop public policies and social assistance services sensitive to the specific needs of fathers, oriented towards promoting co-parenting, parental involvement and child and family well-being.

Keywords: Paternity; Barriers; Facilitating factors; Family well-being; Social assistance intervention

1. Introduction

Social and cultural transformations in recent decades have significantly changed the way parental roles are understood and exercised, favoring a redefinition of maternal and paternal responsibilities. In this context, parenthood is no longer viewed exclusively through the lens of traditional gender norms, but as a process of co-parenting in which both parents participate in the care, education and development of the child. However, the specialized literature shows that parenthood continues to be influenced by gender differences, and caregiving responsibilities fall, to a large extent, on mothers (Dermott, 2008). Although social changes have created the premises for the affirmation of alternative models of fatherhood, the transition from the father-provider model to that of the involved father remains an unequal process and dependent on the social and institutional context.

Furthermore, Dermott (2008) highlights that social changes mainly influence representations and expectations regarding the role of the father, without always causing corresponding changes in the distribution of parental responsibilities. Thus, the image of the active and involved father is increasingly present in public discourse and in family policies, but the effective participation of fathers in childcare continues to be conditioned by cultural norms, institutional practices and structural inequalities.

These contradictions are also reflected in the field of social services. Although research demonstrates that the active involvement of fathers is associated with favorable outcomes for child development and family functioning, fathers continue to be

insufficiently included in social assessment and intervention. Scourfield (2003) shows that they are often marginalized in the assessment, planning and provision of services, regardless of whether they represent an important resource for the child or a potential risk factor. Consequently, interventions aimed exclusively at mothers limit the valorization of the contribution that fathers can make in promoting the well-being of the child and the family.

The systematic review by Khraisha et al. (2024) shows that paternal involvement is influenced by both individual characteristics of fathers and organizational and institutional factors, such as the culture of services, the skills of professionals, and the existence of policies explicitly oriented towards the inclusion of fathers. Similarly, the systematic review by Jeong et al. (2023) highlights that interventions that actively involve fathers contribute to the development of parenting skills, the strengthening of the father-child relationship, and the improvement of child development.

However, although the international literature on paternal involvement has developed considerably in recent years, research dedicated to fatherhood remains relatively limited, and in Romania the subject is insufficiently explored both from the perspective of fathers' experiences and the way in which social policies and services respond to their needs. Integrated analyses that simultaneously examine the facilitators and barriers to paternal involvement, the challenges associated with the transition to fatherhood, and the response of the social service system are lacking.

Starting from this gap, this article carries out an integrative analysis of the specialized literature on fatherhood, with the objectives of identifying the factors that influence fathers' involvement, analyzing the social, economic and psychosocial challenges associated with exercising the parental role, and assessing the extent to which social services and professional interventions, with a focus on the Romanian context, respond to the needs of this category of parents. By critically integrating the existing evidence, the article contributes to strengthening the knowledge base on fatherhood and formulates relevant directions for the development of family policies and social assistance practice oriented towards the inclusion of fathers and the promotion of co-parenting.

2. Literature Review

In recent decades, the role of the father in the family has undergone significant transformations, driven by social, economic and cultural changes that have redefined gender relations and parental responsibilities. While in the traditional model the father was predominantly associated with the function of provider of material resources and with family authority, contemporary research highlights an expansion of his role towards direct involvement in the care, education and support of the child's emotional development. In the Romanian sociological literature, Voinea and Apostu note that "in the traditional family, the man held absolute power", while social changes have diminished his absolute authoritarian role, "prefiguring for developed societies the egalitarian type of authority" (Voinea and Apostu, 2026: 128). Therefore, fatherhood is conceptualized as a complex process, which involves not only the physical presence of the father, but also active participation in care activities, emotional availability, parental responsibility and the building of a secure attachment relationship with the child (Diniz et al., 2021). Fatherhood is thus a key resource for family well-being, having a positive impact on the cognitive, religious, moral and socio-emotional development of children,

as well as on the development of parental skills and the reduction of risk factors for their upbringing (Cabrera, Volling and Barr, 2018; WHO, 2007).

Positive father-child relationships, characterized by sensitive interactions, play, learning, and exploration, stimulate the development of language, executive functions, and cognitive skills. Also, parenting styles characterized by responsiveness, emotional warmth, and stimulation appropriate to the child's developmental level favor the acquisition of cognitive skills and socio-emotional adaptation (Sarkadi et al., 2008; Lamb, 2010; Cabrera, Volling and Barr, 2018; Diniz et al., 2021). According to Patterson (1986), inadequate parenting practices, characterized by inconsistent discipline, insufficient supervision, hostility, and coercive interactions, can negatively affect the child's socio-emotional development. These experiences are associated with the emergence of low self-esteem, feelings of rejection, anger, depressive symptoms, and difficulties in social adaptation, while increasing the risk of developing problematic behaviors during childhood and adolescence (Patterson, 1986). Also, high levels of coercion and aggression displayed by parents may contribute to increased emotional and behavioral problems in children (Conger et al., 1994). In addition, aggressive behaviors in children may provoke negative reactions from parents, leading to a power struggle between parents and children through the use of aversive interaction techniques (Conger et al., 1994; Patterson, 1982, 1986).

The literature highlights that the parent-child relationship is a dynamic process, in which parental behavior and child characteristics influence each other. In this perspective, not only do parents contribute to shaping children's behavior and development, but children's characteristics and behaviors can also influence parental responses, attitudes, and practices (Bell, 1968; Deater-Deckard and Petrill, 2004). Parent-child mutuality, expressed through emotional reciprocity, co-responsiveness, and cooperation, thus constitutes an important component of the processes of co-regulation of behavior and emotions (Deater-Deckard and Petrill, 2004). At the same time, parenting practices must be understood in relation to child characteristics, the parent's psychological resources, and the contextual conditions in which family life takes place (Belsky, 1984). Therefore, the way in which parents exercise their parental role and construct their care and education practices cannot be explained exclusively by their individual characteristics, but must be analyzed within the framework of the mutual parent-child relationship and the broader family and social context.

3. Methodology

This article is based on an integrative review of the specialized literature on fatherhood and father involvement, aiming to critically synthesize the results of relevant research and identify the main directions of analysis regarding the factors that influence the exercise of the parental role, the challenges associated with the transition to fatherhood and the response of social services to the needs of this category of parents.

The documentation was carried out by consulting the scientific literature published in international databases (Web of Science, Scopus, PubMed, PsycINFO and Google Scholar), as well as reports and documents developed by international organizations and relevant institutions in the field of child protection and family policies. Studies published in the last twenty years were analyzed with priority, including reference works considered fundamental for the development of the theoretical framework.

The literature selection followed the relevance of the studies for the objectives of the article, including research on fatherhood, father involvement, co-parenting, barriers and facilitators of father involvement, as well as interventions and services for fathers. The analysis of the information was carried out through thematic synthesis, with the results organized according to the main dimensions identified in the literature: father characteristics, factors influencing father involvement, social and economic challenges, support services, and implications for social work practice and public policy development.

4. Results

The literature review was structured on several levels – individual, family, socioeconomic and community/institutional – to capture both the factors that facilitate and support fathers' involvement, as well as the barriers and constraints that may limit their participation in the care and education of their children. Such an approach allows us to overcome a perspective focused exclusively on the father's alleged "deficits" or his lack of involvement and orients the analysis towards the relationship between individual resources and capacities, on the one hand, and the opportunities, support and constraints existing in the family and social environment, on the other.

Therefore, examining the challenges associated with fatherhood requires an integrated analysis of the resources, opportunities and conditions that facilitate involvement, as well as the constraints, difficulties and barriers that limit it. Such an approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of fathers' experiences and provides a relevant framework for identifying directions of intervention in social assistance, by orienting services not only towards reducing barriers, but also towards strengthening factors that can support and amplify paternal involvement.

4.1 Individual Influences

Individual influences are the starting point of paternal involvement, as they shape a man's willingness and motivation to assume the parental role. In Parke's (1996, apud Bamishigbin, Dunkel Schetter and Stanton, 2019) perspective, cognitive representations of the father's role influence parental behaviors from the prenatal period. Fathers who value emotional closeness, communication, and active participation in their child's life develop closer relationships with their child and are more involved in daily care and education activities. In support of this perspective, Lamb (2010) emphasizes that paternal involvement should not be assessed exclusively by the time spent with the child, but also by emotional accessibility and the responsibility assumed for the child's well-being.

Another important individual factor is the moment when a man becomes a father. The transition to fatherhood represents a major developmental stage, which involves the reorganization of personal and family identity (Cowan and Cowan, 2000). Parke (1996) highlights that father involvement begins before the birth of the child, through participation in pregnancy monitoring, preparation for birth and the development of prenatal attachment. This early involvement facilitates subsequent adaptation to the parental role and favors the establishment of a close relationship with the child.

The age at which a man becomes a father can also influence the quality of his involvement. Fathers who become parents at a more mature age generally benefit from greater economic and emotional stability, which facilitates the assumption of parental responsibilities (Cabrera, Volling and Barr, 2018). In contrast, fatherhood at very young ages can be associated with financial difficulties, lower educational level and limited

psychological resources, factors that can diminish involvement. Low parental self-efficacy, i.e. the father's belief that he does not have the necessary skills to care for and educate the child (Bandura, 1997), and low confidence in his own abilities tend to participate less in parenting activities. Psychological stress, paternal depression, and anxiety associated with the transition to parenthood reduce emotional availability and time dedicated to the child (Cabrera, Volling and Barr, 2018; Paulson and Bazemore, 2010).

Personal experiences in the family of origin also influence the way a man constructs his own parental role. According to Parke (1996), parental models internalized in childhood contribute to the development of representations about fatherhood and can be reproduced or, on the contrary, modified depending on adult experiences and the current family context.

4.2 Relational Factors

In the systemic model of paternal involvement, Ross D. Parke (1996, 2002) considers that father involvement is the result of the interaction between family relationships and the social context. Relationships between family members are interdependent, such that father-child and mother-child relationships mutually influence the father's availability and opportunities to actively participate in the child's upbringing and education.

The father-child relationship represents a fundamental dimension of paternal involvement, which goes beyond material responsibilities and includes the development of an affective bond based on sensitivity, availability and quality interactions (Parke, 1996). Paternal involvement can be divided into three essential components: direct interaction with the child, accessibility and assumption of parental responsibility (Lamb, 1986; Pleck, 2012) but is also measured by caregiving activities and shared responsibilities (Pilkauskas and Schneider, 2020).

Studies show that fathers' participation in daily activities, such as playing, caring, reading, or supporting children in school activities, contributes to the development of social skills, emotional self-regulation, academic performance, and self-esteem (Cabrera, Volling and Barr, 2018; Sarkadi et al., 2008). At the same time, the relationship is bidirectional, with child characteristics influencing the level and manner of father involvement, and early involvement favors the development of a secure attachment and the maintenance of high involvement throughout childhood and adolescence (Parke, 1996; Lamb, 2010).

In the systemic perspective, the *mother-child relationship* indirectly influences paternal involvement through the way the mother facilitates or restricts the father's access to the child. The concept of maternal gatekeeping describes the behaviors through which the mother can encourage or limit the father's participation in parenting activities (Allen and Hawkins, 1999). Confidence in the father's competence and parental cooperation favor a higher level of paternal involvement, while frequent criticism and excessive control can diminish his initiative and confidence in his own parenting abilities (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). Also, a secure attachment between mother and child facilitates the development of a close relationship between the child and the father (Belsky, 1984). Therefore, the quality of the couple's relationship directly influences paternal involvement. Marital conflicts, reduced marital satisfaction and lack of parental cooperation are associated with decreased paternal participation (Belsky, 1984).

In addition to family influences, Parke (1996, 2002) emphasizes the importance of *extrafamilial relationships* in shaping paternal involvement. The extended family provides practical, emotional, and informational support, contributing to reducing parental stress and strengthening the father's role (Cochran and Niego, 2002). At the same time, experiences in the family of origin influence representations of fatherhood and subsequent parenting behaviors (Parke, 1996). However, traditional norms promoted by the family may limit fathers' involvement in child care.

Relationships with friends and neighbors facilitate the exchange of experiences, the development of paternal identity, and the reduction of feelings of parental isolation. Fathers who benefit from extended social networks show lower levels of stress and more active involvement in the lives of their children (Cochran and Niego, 2002).

Also, communities characterized by social cohesion and mutual support create favorable conditions for fathers' participation in children's recreational and educational activities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

4.3 The Professional Environment

The literature highlights that organizations that support work-life balance, through flexible schedules and policies favorable to paternal leave, facilitate the active participation of fathers in the lives of their children (Cabrera, Volling and Barr, 2018). Conversely, organizational cultures that promote traditional gender role stereotypes or require constant availability for work can reduce the time and energy dedicated to family (Pleck, 2010).

One of the most important enabling factors is the existence of family-friendly organizational policies and access to paternity or parental leave. Research shows that the availability of these measures can increase fathers' participation in childcare, but their effective use depends on the characteristics of the workplace and organizational culture. Whitehouse, Diamond and Baird (2007) highlighted that fathers in stable positions and with favorable working conditions are more likely to use parental leave, while employees in precarious employment situations face greater difficulties in accessing this right. Similarly, Escot, Fernández-Cornejo and Poza (2014) showed that fathers employed in the public sector use paternity leave more frequently than those in the private sector, suggesting that occupational stability and institutional support facilitate paternal involvement.

Work flexibility is an important factor in facilitating paternal involvement, as the possibility of adapting work to family responsibilities can expand fathers' opportunities to participate in childcare. A systematic review of the literature on fatherhood and flexible work arrangements highlights that flexibility can facilitate fathers' involvement, although its effects are influenced by gender norms, organizational culture and expectations of professional availability (Ewald, Gilbert and Huppertz, 2020). Similarly, Roeters et al. (2012) highlighted an association between work characteristics and the time parents spend with children, highlighting the importance of autonomy and work time organization. Recent research confirms the relevance of work flexibility for paternal involvement, showing that fathers' access to flexible work arrangements can influence the distribution of childcare responsibilities (Brega, Yerkes and Grau-Grau, 2026). Therefore, paternal involvement must be analyzed not only through the lens of individual motivation, but also in relation to the opportunities and constraints created by the occupational and organizational environment.

Another important barrier is the *fear of negative career consequences*. Petts, Mize and Kaufman (2022) highlighted that the use of parental leave may be associated with lower perceptions of employee professional commitment, especially in organizations that do not actively promote family-friendly policies. In these contexts, fathers may avoid taking leave or reduce the time dedicated to family responsibilities for fear of affecting professional evaluations, promotion opportunities, or relationships with superiors.

Traditional gender norms are also a significant source of constraints. Gheyoh-ndzi and Holmes (2023) have shown that cultural representations that associate masculinity with the role of the family's primary economic provider continue to influence fathers' behaviors and decisions. Even in situations where parental rights are available, cultural and organizational pressures may convey the message that childcare is primarily the responsibility of mothers. As a result, some fathers may perceive intense involvement in their children's lives as incompatible with professional and social expectations associated with the male role.

Therefore, the literature suggests that fathers' involvement is influenced by the interaction between organizational policies, work flexibility, professional culture and social norms regarding gender roles. Promoting paternal involvement requires not only the existence of parental rights, but also the development of organizational environments that normalize fathers' participation in childcare, reduce the stigma of using parental leave and facilitate the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities.

4.4 Cultural Factors

In the systemic model of paternal involvement, Ross D. Parke (1996, 2002) argues that father involvement is influenced by the cultural context, which shapes norms regarding parental roles, family relationships, and the responsibilities assumed by parents. Thus, fatherhood must be understood in relation to the values, beliefs, and cultural practices of the community to which the family belongs.

The differential socialization of boys and girls is one of the main factors influencing the development of parental identity. According to Parke (1996), childhood experiences contribute to the formation of representations about family roles and parental responsibilities. In many cultures, boys are encouraged to develop independence and autonomy, while girls are oriented towards caring behaviors and emotional expressiveness (Leaper, 2015). These socialization models subsequently influence men's willingness to participate in the care and upbringing of children. At the same time, men who have benefited from involved father models and an equitable distribution of family responsibilities tend to show, in turn, higher paternal involvement (Parke, 1996). Conversely, rigid socialization in the spirit of traditional roles may limit the development of caregiving skills and may lead to the perception of fatherhood predominantly as a role of financial support (Parke, 1996).

In contrast, cultures that promote gender equality and supportive family policies support the active participation of both parents, which is associated with higher levels of paternal involvement and closer emotional relationships between fathers and children (Cabrera, Volling and Barr, 2018). Parke (2002) emphasizes that these attitudes are transmitted and reinforced through the family, school, community and media, and recent social transformations have favored the shift towards a model of fatherhood characterized by shared responsibility and emotional closeness (Lamb, 2010).

Family values and beliefs associated with ethnicity also influence how the father's role is defined and exercised. Norms regarding parental authority, the

distribution of responsibilities, and intergenerational relationships differ across cultural groups, and paternal involvement must be analyzed in light of these cultural particularities (Parke, 1996; Cabrera, Volling and Barr, 2018). In collectivist cultures, responsibility for raising children is shared by the extended family, while religious traditions and cultural values may emphasize either authority and discipline or emotional closeness and cooperation between parents and children (Bornstein, 2012).

4.5 Institutional Factors

The specialized literature highlights that institutional factors significantly influence the involvement of fathers in the life of the child, with health, education and social assistance services having an essential role in facilitating or limiting paternal participation (Cabrera, Volling and Barr, 2018).

In this regard, it has been highlighted that *educational services* represent an essential context for strengthening paternal involvement, as they facilitate collaboration between the family and the institutions responsible for child development. The participation of fathers in the activities carried out in nurseries, kindergartens and schools contributes to the development of positive parent-child relationships, to the increase in school performance and socio-emotional skills of children, as well as to the strengthening of the sense of parental responsibility (Cabrera, Volling and Barr, 2018; Goodall and Montgomery, 2014).

However, research shows that educational institutions continue to develop the relationship with the family through the mother, who is implicitly considered the main interlocutor in communication with teaching staff. This institutional practice leads to reduced participation of fathers in meetings with educators and teachers, in school activities and in decision-making processes regarding the child's education (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). Similarly, Cabrera, Volling and Barr (2018) emphasize that traditional representations of parental roles influence institutional practices, contributing to the maintenance of a mother-centered perspective and limiting opportunities for active involvement of fathers.

In the case of young fathers, participation in educational services and activities may be limited by the accumulation of socioeconomic and occupational vulnerabilities. Low levels of education, job insecurity, limited financial resources, and difficulties in reconciling work schedules with family responsibilities can reduce opportunities to participate in educational institutions. In this context, barriers do not necessarily reflect a low level of parental interest, but may be associated with resources and contextual constraints that limit the possibility of parents to get involved (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014; Ewald, Gilbert and Huppatz, 2020). At the same time, the lack of parental experience and a sense of insecurity about their own skills lead some young fathers to avoid contact with educational staff, especially when they perceive that the institution does not consider them equal partners in the educational process (Cabrera, Volling and Barr, 2018).

The literature also highlights the existence of institutional barriers. Communication between educational institutions and families is often addressed exclusively to mothers, information materials are developed from a predominantly maternal perspective, and activities for parents are organized at times that are difficult to accommodate with fathers' professional schedules (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). In addition, teachers rarely receive training on developing inclusive educational practices for fathers, which can lead to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and a

decrease in paternal participation (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021).

At the same time, studies show that educational services can become an important facilitator of paternal involvement when they promote a family-centered approach. Direct communication with both parents, explicit invitation of fathers to educational activities, organization of flexible programs and development of teaching staff skills in collaboration with fathers contribute to increasing their participation and strengthening the partnership between the family and the educational institution (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014; Cabrera, Volling and Barr, 2018; UNESCO, 2021). These interventions are particularly relevant in the case of young fathers, for whom educational services can represent not only a space for the child, but also a supportive framework for the development of parental skills and social integration.

In *the health services field*, the literature highlights that fathers can experience marginalization and exclusion from perinatal and pediatric services, especially when these are predominantly organized around the mother as the primary recipient of care. In such contexts, fathers may be perceived as companions to the mother rather than active partners in child care, which limits their opportunities to participate in information, decision-making, and support for child health (Forbes et al., 2023; Wynter et al., 2024).

This situation is facilitated by the persistence of traditional models of care, and in this regard, a recent synthesis of empirical evidence by Wynter et al. (2024) identifies as the main institutional barriers the orientation of services towards the mother, the implicit exclusion of young fathers from interaction with professionals, the lack of information materials dedicated to them and the insufficient training of medical staff for collaboration with young fathers. These practices contribute to the emergence of a feeling of marginalization and the diminution of paternal involvement in child care (Wells, 2016; Wynter et al., 2024).

In addition, organizational barriers, such as scheduling consultations during working hours, reduced accessibility of services, infrastructure insufficiently adapted to the presence of fathers, and lack of flexibility in service delivery modalities limit their participation, especially in the case of young fathers, who often face economic and professional vulnerabilities (Wynter et al., 2024).

In contrast, the literature shows that adopting a family-centered approach and developing inclusive services for fathers favors increased paternal involvement. Training professionals in “father-inclusive” practice, using language and communication that explicitly acknowledges the role of the father, actively inviting him to consultations and parenting programs, and developing flexible and accessible services are interventions with demonstrated effectiveness (Persson, 2012; Wells, 2016; Wynter et al., 2024). At the same time, the use of digital technologies, including online platforms, mobile applications and SMS messages, facilitates fathers’ access to information and services, contributing to increasing their participation in the perinatal and postnatal period.

5. Implications for Social Work Practice – Services and Interventions for Fathers in the Current Context

In Romania, services for fathers need to be analyzed in the broader context of the child protection system, social services for families and parenting support policies. Currently, there is no distinct and systematic network of specialized social services exclusively addressed to fathers at the national level. Rather, their needs can be

addressed within the framework of general services for children, parents and families, such as day care centers, counseling and support centers for parents, public social assistance services and specialized services provided through the General Directorates of Social Assistance and Child Protection (Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity [MMSS], 2026).

This institutional organization reflects the general orientation of the Romanian system towards preventing the separation of the child from the family and strengthening the family's capacity to respond to the child's needs, rather than developing differentiated services according to the specific role and needs of each parent.

Within the social services system, parent counseling and support centers are one of the relevant forms of intervention for fathers. These services aim to support parents in developing and strengthening their parental capacities, offering counseling, information and parenting opportunities. The Romanian regulatory framework allows for the organization, within the framework of day social services for children and families, of parenting education programs, including forms of "school for parents", adapted to the needs identified at the community level (Ministry of Labor and Social Justice [MMJS], 2019).

From this perspective, fathers can be formally included in the category of beneficiaries of these services, but this possibility does not automatically equate to the existence of interventions designed and implemented specifically for their needs.

This distinction is important because the existence of services intended generically for "fathers" does not in itself guarantee the effective and equitable participation of fathers. A truly inclusive approach involves the active identification of both parents, their direct contact and involvement in the intervention process, and the adaptation of the modalities of service provision to their particularities and availability. In the case of young fathers, this need is all the more relevant as the transition to fatherhood can occur simultaneously with the completion of studies, integration into the labor market, the acquisition of economic independence and the assumption of new family responsibilities. Therefore, services intended for this category should go beyond the approach limited to the development of parental skills and include integrated interventions, which simultaneously respond to the social, economic, educational and family dimensions of the young father's situation.

Another relevant framework for supporting fathers is integrated community services, which facilitate the identification of vulnerable individuals and families and their orientation to social, medical and educational services. The integrated approach is particularly relevant for fathers who face poverty, unemployment, school dropout, housing instability or reduced access to services, as these vulnerabilities are interdependent and require coordinated interventions in several areas. In Romania, integrated community services are designed precisely to correlate interventions in the areas of social assistance, health, education, employment and housing, in order to prevent social exclusion and reduce poverty (MMSS, et al., 2024; Ministry of Health, 2025).

Integrated community services can be a relevant mechanism for identifying and supporting young parents in vulnerable situations. The integration of social, medical and educational interventions allows for a multidimensional assessment of the family's needs and facilitates its access to locally available resources, thus contributing to a coordinated approach to factors that may limit paternal involvement (MMSS et al., 2024; Ministry of Health, 2025).

However, it is important to emphasize that these services are not specifically designed for them, but are generally aimed at vulnerable individuals and families. Consequently, their effectiveness in supporting fathers depends largely on the ability of professionals to identify the father as an individual beneficiary and to integrate his needs into the assessment and intervention process.

Another relevant form of support is represented by parenting education programs and digital resources for parents. In Romania, UNICEF has developed and promoted parenting support tools, including the *Bebbo* app, which provides information and recommendations on child health, development and care and is a relevant example of the differentiated participation of mothers and fathers in digital parenting services. In September 2023, of the more than 21,700 users of the app in Romania, 79% were mothers and only 15% were fathers, with the remainder being other caregivers or service providers. This distribution suggests a significantly lower participation of fathers in the use of this parenting support tool and may indicate the need for additional strategies to promote and adapt digital services to encourage paternal participation (UNICEF Romania, 2023). These data do not allow generalizations regarding the general level of paternal involvement in Romania, but they may constitute a relevant indicator of the need to develop communication and recruitment strategies that facilitate fathers' access to parenting resources.

In the case of young fathers, parenting education programs can have a preventive and skills-building function, contributing to strengthening confidence in one's own parental abilities and developing a positive relationship with the child. In this regard, "parent school" programs, provided within the framework of social services for children and families, could be adapted to address specific themes of the early transition to fatherhood, such as assuming the role of father, developing the father-child relationship, parental communication and cooperation, managing family conflicts, balancing professional and family responsibilities, emotional health and access to social resources (MMSS, 2019).

At the same time, effective intervention for young fathers in vulnerable situations requires an approach that goes beyond the exclusively parental paradigm. A young father may simultaneously have needs related to employment, further education, housing, mental health, relationship and development of parenting skills. For this reason, services for this category should be accessible, coordinated and intersectoral, so that the intervention can address the factors that influence both the father's well-being and his ability to be involved in the child's life.

The literature highlights the existence of examples of good practice in supporting and involving young fathers, especially at the level of local authorities that have developed interventions adapted to the particularities of this category of beneficiaries. A relevant example is provided by Davies and Neale (2015), who analyze the experience of a local authority in the north of England that developed a specialized mentoring service for teenage fathers, later integrated into a broader approach, oriented towards "father-friendly" services. The analyzed experience highlights the importance of the existence of dedicated professionals, of trusting relationships with fathers and of institutional practices that identify and actively include them in services aimed at families. The authors also emphasize the value of combining specialized support with the integration of fatherhood issues into mainstream services, thus avoiding both the isolation of interventions aimed at fathers and their exclusion from general services (Davies and Neale, 2015).

In the same vein, Cundy (2012) highlights the need for an integrated approach, in which health and maternity services, children's centres, educational institutions, housing and social protection services collaborate to respond to the complex needs of young fathers. Recommended practices include actively identifying and contacting fathers, including them in the assessment of family needs, offering opportunities for intervention at key moments of the transition to fatherhood and coordinating services through a reference professional. Such an approach allows overcoming the fragmentation of services and facilitates young fathers' access to the support they need, including in areas such as education, employment, housing and the development of parenting skills (Cundy, 2012).

A central tenet of these good practices is the shift from a predominantly mother- and child-centred approach to one that recognises the father as a beneficiary and partner in the child's care and development. In this regard, services are encouraged not to wait for fathers to request support, but to identify them and actively invite them to participate in the intervention. At the same time, professional attitudes towards young fathers need to change, so that they are not automatically considered "hard to reach", uninterested or vulnerable, but rather people who can demonstrate availability and capacity for involvement when given appropriate opportunities and forms of support (Neale and Davies, 2015). Consequently, accessible, coordinated, flexible and sensitive services to the particularities of young fathers can be an important factor in strengthening their well-being and supporting their active involvement in the lives of their children.

Therefore, in the Romanian context, the main problem does not seem to be the total absence of services that can be accessed by fathers, but the lack of a systematic and explicitly oriented approach towards this category of beneficiaries. Fathers can benefit from general services intended for children and families, but there is no evidence, at national level, of a consolidated network of specialized services that explicitly respond to the particularities of the early transition to fatherhood. In this sense, the development of truly inclusive services for fathers would require not only guaranteeing their formal access to existing services, but also introducing active mechanisms for identification and involvement, training professionals in the perspective of paternal inclusion, developing parental education programs adapted to fathers and strengthening cooperation between social, medical, educational and employment services (Johnson and Briggs, 2021).

Therefore, the development of interventions dedicated or adapted to fathers represents an important direction for the consolidation of family policies and services in Romania. Such an orientation would allow the transition from a predominantly child- and mother-centered approach to one that recognizes the father as a direct beneficiary and active partner of social intervention. In the case of young fathers, this paradigm shift is particularly important, because early support for the transition to fatherhood can contribute to the development of parental skills, the strengthening of the father-child relationship and the reduction of social and economic factors that may limit paternal involvement.

Providing appropriate and timely formal support can contribute to improving outcomes for young parents and their children, including psychological, emotional and economic well-being, the quality of parenting practices and the prevention of situations that may require the intervention of child protective services (Hadley, 2014; Lau Clayton, 2016).

6. Conclusions

An important conclusion of the analysis is that facilitators and barriers should not be understood as strictly opposite dimensions, but as dynamic elements, whose effects are conditioned by the resources and context in which the paternal role is exercised. Thus, the same characteristic can constitute a resource or, on the contrary, a vulnerability factor, depending on the available family and social support and the opportunities offered by the community and institutions. This finding supports the relevance of ecological and systemic models for the analysis of paternal involvement, as they allow for understanding how the individual characteristics of the father interact with family relationships, the community environment and social and institutional structures (Parke, 1996; Cabrera, Volling and Barr, 2018).

In the Romanian context, the institutional framework provides mechanisms through which fathers can benefit from services intended for children and families, especially through general social services, community services and parenting education programs. However, the formal existence of services accessible to both parents does not automatically guarantee the effective participation of fathers. For services to become truly inclusive, fathers must be identified, contacted and actively involved in the assessment, intervention planning and support process.

In Romania, the development of integrated community services can constitute a favorable framework for such an approach, by facilitating collaboration between social, medical and educational services and by allowing for the identification and coordinated approach of situations of vulnerability that may affect paternal involvement (Ministry of Health, 2025).

Therefore, promoting a father-inclusive practical perspective in social services is a relevant direction for the development of interventions that are more sensitive to the diversity of parental experiences. This involves recognizing young fathers as direct beneficiaries of services, with their own needs, resources and responsibilities, as well as their early involvement in the assessment and intervention processes. The development of adapted parenting education programs, strengthening mechanisms for identifying and involving fathers and intersectoral cooperation can contribute to increasing parental skills and supporting positive father-child relationships (Johnson and Briggs, 2021). From this perspective, the inclusion of fathers is not only a way to improve the support provided to them, but is a component of a preventive, integrated and family-centered approach, with the potential to support child well-being and family functioning.

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The Minimum Inclusion Income in Romania: From Policy Intentions to Implementation Realities

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Abstract

This article examines the implementation of the Minimum Inclusion Income (Venitul Minim de Incluziune – VMI) in Romania, a major reform replacing previous social welfare mechanisms, namely the Guaranteed Minimum Income and the Family Support Allowance. The primary objective of this research is to evaluate the efficacy of this instrument in mitigating poverty and social exclusion through an integrated approach. The methodology employs a documentary and comparative analysis of the legislative framework (Law 196/2016) and administrative data to identify discrepancies between policy objectives and the realities of local implementation. The findings reveal that, although the VMI introduces an advanced concept of “beneficiary activation” by linking monetary transfers to access to healthcare, education, and employment services, its success is hindered by significant institutional challenges. These include the limited capacity of local social services, the bureaucratic complexity of the selection process, and the risk of real-value erosion of the benefits within an inflationary context. This study argues that the VMI represents a necessary paradigm shift, yet one that remains insufficient for eradicating extreme poverty in the absence of robust complementary policies focused on rural development and education. In conclusion, this paper emphasizes the need for rigorous monitoring and the increased flexibility of administrative mechanisms to ensure the sustainability of the inclusion package, while providing recommendations for optimizing inter-institutional coordination.

Keywords: Minimum Inclusion Income (VMI); Social Welfare; Public Policy; Active Inclusion; Romania

1. Introduction

Social protection serves as a foundational pillar of the European social model. Within the European Union, social protection systems are highly developed and designed to safeguard the population against various risks, including unemployment, parental responsibilities, healthcare needs, disability, the loss of a spouse or parent, old age, housing instability, and social exclusion (National Institute of Statistics, 2022). In light of the multidimensional nature of contemporary economic, demographic, and technological pressures, social policy frameworks necessitate a strategic realignment. The funding of European Social Policy (ESP) is operationalized via the European Social Fund, which centers on two foundational pillars: fostering social investment and strengthening social protection mechanisms (Antoхи et al., 2023). The Council Recommendation of 30 January 2023 on adequate minimum income ensuring active inclusion (CELEX: 32023H0203(01)) aims to mitigate poverty and social exclusion across EU Member States by integrating income support with labor market activation and access to essential services. It advises member states to benchmark minimum income thresholds against national indicators—such as the at-risk-of-poverty rate or real-price reference budgets—to guarantee a dignified standard of living from the age of eligibility until retirement. Furthermore, the framework emphasizes customized support

mechanisms, streamlined and transparent bureaucratic procedures, individualized assessments, and unhindered access to high-quality essential services, including healthcare, education, social care, affordable housing, and energy provisions (Council of the European Union, 2023).

The initial forms of modern minimum income schemes (commonly designated in the specialized literature as MIS) trace their institutional origins to the post-war period and evolved through successive reforms across Western European states (Natili, 2020). The United Kingdom pioneered European Safety Nets in 1948 by establishing the first national income support scheme for vulnerable populations, heavily influenced by the Beveridge Report (Natili, 2020; Nelson, 2008). France introduced the *Revenu Minimum d'Insertion* (RMI) in 1988 (Natili, 2020; Bernhofer et al., 2024), pioneering the link between financial aid and state-backed labor market integration, which became a blueprint for modern European safety nets.

The Minimum Inclusion Income (Venitul Minim de Incluziune - VMI) is Romania's primary social assistance program. Regulated for the first time by Law No. 196/2016 (Romanian Parliament, 2016) and implemented in its current form on January 1, 2024, it consolidated and replaced the former guaranteed minimum income and family support allowance. Prior to the implementation of the Minimum Inclusion Income, Romania's social safety net for vulnerable populations was split into two distinct programs governed by legacy legislation: the Guaranteed Minimum Income (Law No. 416/2001; Romanian Parliament, 2001), which provided basic financial support for indigent individuals and families, and the Family Support Allowance (Law No. 277/2010; Romanian Parliament, 2010), which specifically targeted low-income households with children to encourage school attendance.

Integrated into Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) to unlock European funds, the Minimum Inclusion Income underwent successive legislative amendments—such as Emergency Ordinance No. 114/2022 (Government of Romania, 2022a)—to adjust income thresholds and benefit amounts for inflation. More than seven years after its initial adoption, the scheme became effective nationwide on January 1, 2024, permanently replacing the former guaranteed minimum income and family support allowance.

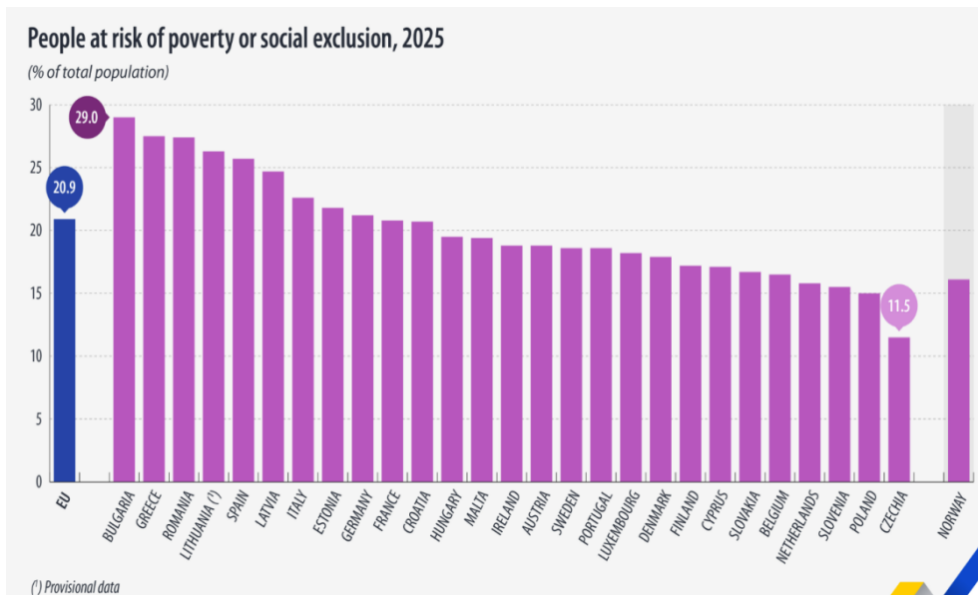
2. Methodology

The research employs a robust methodological design that integrates a detailed scrutiny of the legislative framework—specifically Law 196/2016—with an evidence-based assessment of administrative implementation data. By juxtaposing statutory goals with empirical implementation outcomes, this study highlights the critical friction points that emerge when translating national social policy into grassroots administrative practice.

3. The Risk of Social Exclusion in Europe and Romania

At the European Union level, approximately 92.7 million individuals—representing roughly 20.9% of the population—are classified as being at risk of poverty or social exclusion, according to Eurostat data. This demographic constitutes the primary target population for such social safety nets.

Figure 1: Population at Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion in the EU Member States, 2025



Source: Eurostat (2026)

The chart delineates the cross-national distribution of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion across European Union member states for the year 2025, revealing a regional average of 20.9% while underscoring substantial structural disparities, with peak vulnerabilities observed in Bulgaria (29.0%), Greece, and Romania, contrasted with the lowest incidence recorded in Czechia at 11.5%. In order to mitigate the risk of poverty or social exclusion (the AROPE indicator) and align with the European 2030 targets (the Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights), European Union member states adopt strategies and policy packages tailored to their respective economic and structural realities (Eurostat, 2025). In high-vulnerability countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece—where poverty risks are driven by regional inequalities, low work intensity, and educational deficits—governments mitigate these challenges through periodic minimum wage and pension increases, targeted state aid like food and energy vouchers, school dropout prevention programs, and the expansion of integrated community social services in rural and disadvantaged regions (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2026).

Poverty drives the reproduction of social inequalities primarily through educational deficits—manifested as academic failure and high dropout rates—which subsequently restrict occupational qualifications and hinder labor market integration. Structural vulnerability to exclusion is disproportionately concentrated among specific social categories, including children, youth, single-parent households, unsupported elderly populations, households with dependent members, migrants, persons with disabilities, and marginalized ethnic minorities (e.g., the Roma). Mitigating these cumulative disadvantages requires a multidimensional policy framework that combines innovative social protection measures with targeted interventions in education, housing, healthcare, family-work reconciliation, and systemic family support. Aligned with the National Strategy for Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction (2022–2027) and legislative reforms enacted between 2022 and 2025, social support measures for vulnerable populations aim to guarantee a minimal standard of living—consistent with

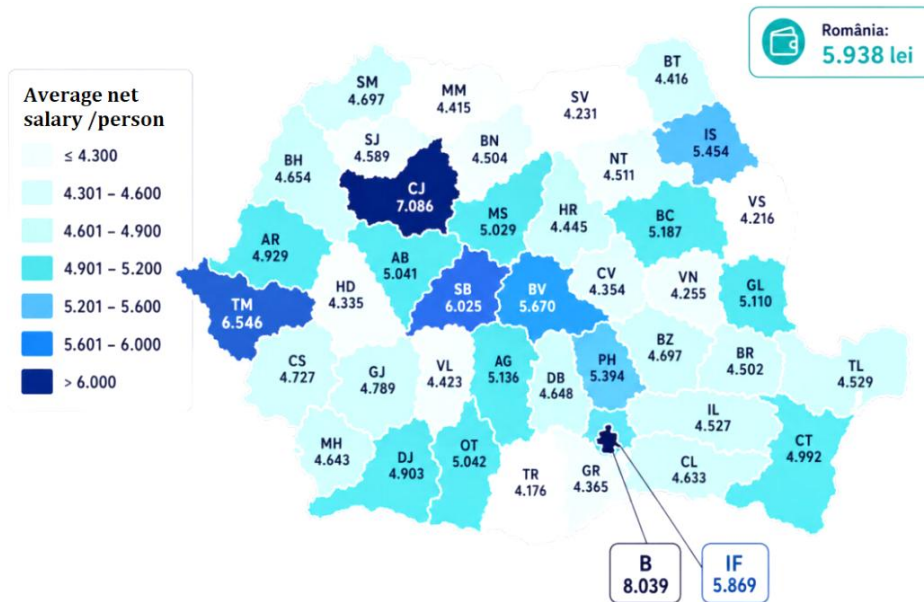
European Union benchmarks—defined by the fulfillment of fundamental individual needs, including nutrition, clothing, personal hygiene, and housing maintenance (Government of Romania, 2022b).

The Minimum Inclusion Income (VMI) serves as the primary state financial instrument designed to guarantee a minimal standard of living, prevent social exclusion, and stimulate school participation. Structured through inclusion support, child-rearing family support, and complementary measures, the system is supplemented by emergency aid and individualized interventions financed through national or external funds, aimed at facilitating access to the labor market, healthcare, education, social services, and housing. Poverty in Romania presents a dual challenge: “mass poverty,” where a vast majority of the population cannot meet accepted basic standards, and extreme poverty, representing an even more severe level of deprivation that constitutes the society’s most vulnerable core (Molnar, 2013). Continuous studies and World Bank reports on poverty in Romania highlight the ongoing need to improve social assistance targeting, expand safety nets like the guaranteed minimum income, and better support vulnerable populations in transitioning to employment (Stroe, 2022: 3-4). The Romanian National Strategy for Sustainable Development 2030 aims to mitigate social polarization by raising low incomes, boosting rural economies, and enforcing social inclusion legislation, while leveraging labor market, social protection, and fiscal adjustments to foster equity and align national indicators with EU benchmarks (Militaru et al., 2019).

The highest vulnerability to poverty and its extreme manifestations characterizes households with multiple dependents, those combining children with inactive or unemployed members, low-wage workers, and single-parent families. Contributing to the academic literature on poverty and social policy, this study dynamically evaluates the impact of the guaranteed minimum income on relative poverty—defined as 60% of median income per equivalent adult—specifically focusing on large households.

In September 2025, the empirically derived minimum consumption basket requisite for a decent standard of living within a standard nuclear household—delineated as two adults and two dependents—was quantified at 11,370 RON monthly. Concomitantly, this vital threshold registered an 8.8% year-on-year upward adjustment from the 2024 baseline of 10,450 RON per month, reflecting compounding economic pressures on household reproduction costs (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Romania Office, 2025). Data from the National Institute of Statistics (INS) for April 2026 indicate an average net monthly earnings of RON 5,843 (RON 9,740 gross). However, the more representative indicator for socio-economic reality is the median net salary—prudently estimated between RON 4,000 and RON 4,300—which divides the employed population into two equal halves. The discrepancy of over RON 1,500 between the statistical average and the median value (relative to a net minimum wage of approximately RON 2,700) accounts for the divergence between official macroeconomic indicators and the purchasing power actually experienced by the population (Undelucram, 2026).

According to the Hunedoara Territorial Labour Inspectorate, in the economic context of 2026, the increase in the gross minimum wage to RON 4,325 (a 6.79% rise via Government Decision no. 146 of March 12, 2026; Government of Romania, 2026) fell below the inflation rate of 10.40%, generating a contraction in real purchasing power and deepening the vulnerability of lower-income wage structures amidst macroeconomic pressures (Hunedoara Territorial Labour Inspectorate, n.d.).

Figure 2: Average Net Salary by County, March 2026

Source: Undelucram (2026)

Within the landscape of contemporary social stratification in Romania, the chronic disproportion between macroeconomic indicators—such as median or average income—and the level of institutionalized social assistance reveals a profound fault line in the architecture of the welfare state. In this context, the Minimum Inclusion Income (VMI), theoretically conceived as an instrument for social cohesion and recovery, functions more as a mechanism for the reproduction of absolute poverty rather than an effective lever for social mobility or genuine inclusion. According to data provided by the National Agency for Payments and Social Inspection (ANPIS), the amount of the inclusion allowance is regulated through rigid thresholds: 393 lei/month per family member, and 572 lei/month for single persons aged 65 and over, respectively (National Agency for Payments and Social Inspection, n.d.). This value represents the difference between the aforementioned statutory ceilings and the household's net income. For beneficiaries entirely lacking alternative sources of income, these amounts serve as absolute ceilings of state support.

4. Current Context and the Evolution of the Minimum Inclusion Income (VMI) in Romania

Academic critique and civil society advocacy consistently underscore a profound structural disconnect: the statutory eligibility thresholds and financial disbursements of the Minimum Inclusion Income (VMI) remain severely misaligned with cumulative inflationary shocks and the escalating costs of basic necessities. Allocations hovering below 400 lei per household member are structurally inadequate to absorb the market pressures of escalating utility tariffs, pharmaceutical costs, and staple foodstuffs. Concurrently, the operational logic governing the inclusion component for able-bodied recipients relies on rigid conditionality—mandating monthly public interest labor and formal registration with public employment services (AJOFM). From a sociological standpoint, these heavily bureaucratic and quasi-punitive compliance mechanisms fail to stimulate genuine labor market integration. Instead, they function as regulatory

deterrents, obstructed by structural deficits such as absent local support infrastructure in peripheral rural communities and systemic gaps in vocational capitalization. Consequently, while aggregate macroeconomic metrics—including national average wages and GDP per capita—depict an overarching narrative of continuous economic expansion, VMI recipients remain structurally sequestered in chronic socio-economic deprivation. The contemporary architecture of social protection thus operates less as an engine of social mobility and more as a superficial palliative, incapable of bridging the widening chasm between marginalized populations and normative standards of a dignified livelihood. The challenges associated with the social assistance of Minimum Inclusion Income (VMI) beneficiaries are intricately linked to regional development disparities, the concentration of welfare recipients, and the distinct budgetary and administrative resources available across individual counties.

An examination of the territorial distribution of Minimum Inclusion Income (VMI) beneficiaries—disaggregated at both the regional and county levels—serves as a vital empirical framework for mapping structural vulnerabilities, calibrating targeted welfare interventions, and comprehending the multidimensional architecture of social exclusion nationwide (see Table 1 and Figure 3).

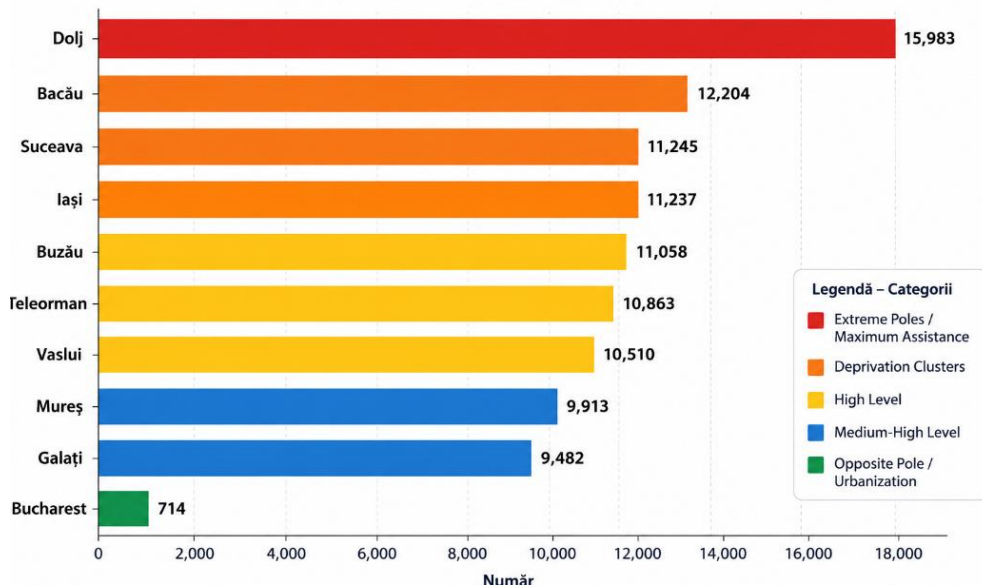
Table 1: Report on the Minimum Inclusion Income (VMI), May 2026

County	Paid beneficiaries	Amount paid (RON)
Alba	4,732	3,479,483
Arad	3,104	2,368,257
Argeş	7,529	5,491,716
Bacău	12,204	8,211,446
Bihor	5,959	4,790,135
Bistriţa-Năsăud	3,911	2,779,900
Botoşani	7,317	5,098,645
Brăila	5,201	3,536,508
Braşov	6,158	5,918,521
Bucharest	714	412,077
Buzău	11,058	7,419,989
Călăraşi	5,264	4,052,087
Caraş-Severin	3,260	2,357,834
Cluj	3,820	3,157,414
Constanţa	5,059	3,887,216
Covasna	3,036	2,775,088
Dâmboviţa	6,761	5,114,363
Dolj	15,983	11,488,473
Galaţi	9,482	6,401,358
Giurgiu	4,672	3,600,595
Gorj	3,563	2,266,729
Harghita	3,815	3,250,941
Hunedoara	2,858	2,053,548
Ialomiţa	4,141	2,986,821
Iaşi	11,237	8,205,876
Ilfov	1,025	753,451
Maramureş	6,049	4,624,713
Mehedinţi	6,328	4,164,709
Mureş	9,913	9,052,096

County	Paid beneficiaries	Amount paid (RON)
Neamț	8,108	5,963,232
Olt	7,108	4,496,350
Prahova	4,850	3,279,093
Sălaj	4,091	3,853,212
Satu Mare	5,338	4,589,909
Sibiu	5,477	4,568,919
Suceava	11,245	9,009,746
Teleorman	10,863	7,307,214
Timiș	2,463	1,957,304
Tulcea	2,507	1,631,755
Vâlcea	4,257	2,755,801
Vaslui	10,510	7,175,638
Vrancea	7,902	5,811,030
Total	258,872	192,099,192

Source: National Agency for Payments and Social Inspection (2026)

Figure 3: County-Level Distribution of VMI Beneficiaries, May 2026



Source: Author's elaboration based on National Agency for Payments and Social Inspection (2026)

The data delineates extreme poles of institutional dependency. Dolj County emerges as the highest recipient cluster, registering 15,983 paid beneficiaries and an allocated financial volume of 11,488,473 RON (National Agency for Payments and Social Inspection, 2026). Conversely, Bucharest records the lowest figures in the dataset, with a mere 714 beneficiaries and a financial allocation of 412,077 RON. This stark contrast highlights the urban-rural and core-periphery divides, where metropolitan centers with diversified labor markets experience minimal reliance on state subsistence, whereas peripheral zones exhibit deep structural vulnerabilities. High-density poverty areas, exemplified by counties such as Bacău (12,204 beneficiaries), Iași (11,237 beneficiaries), and Suceava (11,245 beneficiaries)—consistently absorb monthly public expenditures exceeding 8 to 9 million lei. Sociologically, these high-volume disbursements reflect generational cycles of deprivation and localized economic stagnation that routine social transfers fail to structurally disrupt. The heavy concentration of maximum welfare

outlays within the historical regions of Moldova, Oltenia, and the broader Northeast macro-region underscores deep-seated regional disparities. The chronic absence of dynamic labor market opportunities, coupled with deficient infrastructure, anchors these populations in a permanent state of dependency on minimalist state redistribution, transforming social assistance from a springboard for mobility into an institutionalized buffer against absolute destitution.

Table 2: Registered Unemployed and Unemployment Rate at National and County Level, 31 May 2026

County	Total unemployed	Women	Compensated	Non-compensated	Rate (%)	Female rate (%)	Male rate (%)
Alba	5,922	3,009	1,756	4,166	3.89	4.48	3.43
Arad	4,427	2,203	2,228	2,199	2.32	2.60	2.09
Argeş	9,984	5,029	3,034	6,950	4.36	4.78	4.00
Bacău	3,062	1,527	1,473	1,589	1.62	1.91	1.40
Bihor	5,050	2,663	1,995	3,055	2.13	2.52	1.81
Bistriţa-Năsăud	3,690	1,724	1,527	2,163	3.31	3.61	3.09
Botoşani	3,798	1,616	605	3,193	3.46	3.26	3.61
Brăila	5,822	2,591	788	5,034	5.48	5.31	5.62
Braşov	7,261	3,491	1,137	6,124	2.82	3.19	2.55
Buzău	5,313	2,458	1,227	4,086	3.78	3.93	3.66
Călăraşi	4,665	2,409	596	4,069	5.99	6.79	5.32
Caraş-Severin	3,287	1,555	1,205	2,082	3.57	4.03	3.24
Cluj	5,352	2,789	1,541	3,811	1.50	1.75	1.30
Constanţa	5,265	2,936	1,623	3,642	1.92	2.57	1.46
Covasna	4,779	2,297	693	4,086	6.11	6.68	5.67
Dâmboviţa	6,026	3,096	1,240	4,786	3.83	4.67	3.22
Dolj	19,598	9,014	1,655	17,943	8.43	8.53	8.35
Galaţi	10,121	4,402	1,228	8,893	6.11	5.92	6.26
Giurgiu	2,225	1,251	381	1,844	3.25	4.13	2.56
Gorj	5,289	2,765	2,183	3,106	4.35	4.92	3.86
Harghita	5,848	2,915	1,473	4,375	4.85	5.80	4.17
Hunedoara	7,762	4,358	2,313	5,449	5.12	6.29	4.14
Ialomiţa	4,395	2,114	691	3,704	5.61	5.97	5.30
Iaşi	9,556	4,421	1,327	8,229	3.42	3.46	3.38
Ilfov	1,109	706	498	611	0.51	0.79	0.31
Maramureş	5,061	2,626	1,375	3,686	2.90	3.37	2.52
Mehedinţi	7,246	3,185	1,091	6,155	8.54	8.77	8.37
Bucharest Municipality	5,653	3,483	1,881	3,772	0.43	0.52	0.34
Mureş	5,832	2,750	1,099	4,733	2.81	2.98	2.68
Neamţ	8,687	3,845	1,254	7,433	5.67	5.64	5.70
Olt	7,652	3,439	982	6,670	5.92	6.05	5.82
Prahova	5,879	3,167	2,414	3,465	2.22	2.83	1.77
Sălaj	5,688	2,544	887	4,801	6.37	6.42	6.33
Satu Mare	5,844	2,882	852	4,992	4.55	4.79	4.34
Sibiu	5,832	2,744	998	4,834	3.05	3.25	2.89
Suceava	12,402	5,487	2,599	9,803	6.30	6.19	6.38
Teleorman	9,434	3,942	1,035	8,399	8.72	7.84	9.49
Timiş	3,323	1,783	1,846	1,477	0.99	1.21	0.82
Tulcea	2,895	1,503	592	2,303	3.93	4.68	3.35
Vâlcea	4,104	2,116	1,666	2,438	2.95	3.32	2.65
Vaslui	9,643	4,248	967	8,676	8.87	7.96	9.76

County	Total unemployed	Women	Compensated	Non-compensated	Rate (%)	Female rate (%)	Male rate (%)
Vrancea	2,013	1,033	673	1,340	1.84	2.07	1.65
Total	256,794	124,116	56,628	200,166	3.21	3.41	3.04

Source: National Agency for Employment (2026)

From a structural sociological perspective, the data in Table 2 (National Agency for Employment, 2026) highlight a profound territorial polarization between economic convergence poles (such as Bucharest-Ilfov or Timiș) and the peripheral or semi-peripheral regions in the south and east of the country (Vaslui, Teleorman, Mehedinți, and Dolj), where the deficit of major investments and the lack of economic diversification sustain high rates of structural unemployment, social exclusion, and community marginalization. The overwhelming share of non-compensated unemployment nationwide (almost 78%, namely 200,166 persons out of a total of 256,794) reveals a chronic phenomenon of discouragement and disconnection from the formal labor market, wherein individuals lose their entitlement to contribution-based protection and become dependent on passive social assistance policies. In terms of gender inequalities, the slightly higher rates of female unemployment (3.41%) compared to male unemployment (3.04%) reflect additional structural barriers to women's professional integration, driven by family constraints, reduced access to support infrastructure in certain rural areas, or their underrepresentation in dynamic sectors of activity. The Minimum Inclusion Income (VMI) mechanism functions as an institutional safety net of last resort for mitigating extreme poverty, with the high volume of beneficiaries being directly proportional to areas characterized by massive long-term unemployment, demonstrating that social assistance absorbs the pressure generated by the mismatch of the local labor market.

From an economic and institutional perspective, the data indicate a clear convergence between areas with chronic labor market deficits and those concentrating massive volumes of Minimum Inclusion Income (VMI) beneficiaries, with counties such as Dolj, Bacău, Suceava, or Iași highlighting structural economic vulnerability. This dynamic outlines a sharp territorial cleavage: while poles of urban agglomeration and economic convergence (Bucharest-Ilfov, Timiș) maintain unemployment rates below the 1% threshold and a minimal volume of social assistance, peripheral regions simultaneously bear a formal employment deficit and acute budgetary pressure for subsistence. At the same time, the numerical decoupling between the mass of registered unemployment and the cohorts of VMI beneficiaries demonstrates the residual and selective nature of the institutional safety net, as the latter is not an automatic extension of unemployment, but rather an instrument strictly conditioned by the patrimonial criteria of the extreme poverty threshold, highlighting the imperative for active integration policies tailored to local realities.

Despite the meager amounts that fail to cover a family's basic needs, Minimum Inclusion Income (VMI) beneficiaries receive, in addition to the single monthly financial support payment, health insurance, housing and energy support as vulnerable consumers, access to social services tailored to their needs, incentives and active labor market measures, as well as facilities that encourage children's participation in education (Ministry of Labour, Family, Youth and Social Solidarity, 2025). Law no. 141 of July 25, 2025 was adopted in Romania through the government's assumption of political responsibility, with the primary objective of implementing a comprehensive package of emergency fiscal-budgetary measures designed to foster the recovery of the Romanian

economy (Romanian Parliament, 2025). The normative act instituted strict control over operational budgetary expenditures. Major restrictions were imposed by freezing vacant positions in public administration and capping personnel expenses, suspending or capping certain categories of bonuses, incentives, or additional salary rights, with the exception of critical public order and national security sectors. The law introduced extensive fiscal amendments to broaden the collection base and increase budgetary revenues. Among the most visible measures were adjustments to tax rates and the revision of special tax regimes, such as raising the tax on dividends or increasing VAT and excise duty rates, directly aiming to bring the public deficit within the limits assumed before the European Commission. In the Romanian sociological literature, the austerity package announced in July 2025 (non-indexation of incomes to inflation, the liberalisation of energy prices, and higher VAT, excise duties and taxes) has been described as a decision unfavourable to the quality of life, in which low incomes were the most exposed; according to a CURS survey conducted in July 2025, 78% of citizens expected its impact on their living standards to be “large” or “very large” (Otovescu, 2026: 305-306). Through related fiscal measures (such as the introduction of certain contributions or the restriction of tax exemptions in specific fields), the law generated an economic shockwave felt throughout society. Within such a landscape of budgetary restraint, social safety nets—such as assistance mechanisms for disadvantaged groups or the Minimum Inclusion Income (VMI)—fell under dual pressure: on the one hand, an acute need from the vulnerable population facing rising prices, and on the other hand, strict budgetary constraints imposed on the state in scaling its social expenditures. Although Law no. 141/2025 did not directly or specifically alter the nominal amount of the Minimum Inclusion Income (VMI), it profoundly affected the beneficiaries’ purchasing power and the stability of social protection measures through the macroeconomic and fiscal effects it generated. Although VMI beneficiaries hold the status of vulnerable consumers and receive heating allowances, the generalized increase in energy, gas, and fuel tariffs has exacerbated housing vulnerability, with actual costs far exceeding the state-subsidized threshold. Because certain related social assistance measures, emergency aid, and local facilities depend on municipal budgets, the austerity and expenditure-restricting policies imposed on public administrations by Law no. 141/2025 have diminished local authorities’ capacity to provide additional or complementary support to VMI beneficiaries. Furthermore, the fiscal package curtailed a series of exemptions and modified the contribution regime (including aspects related to health insurance contributions—CASS—for certain categories or related income), thereby increasing the overall financial pressure on households living on the verge of extreme poverty.

5. Current Challenges and Directions of Action

The implementation of the Minimum Inclusion Income (VMI) in Romania represents not only a milestone undertaken through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), but also a direct response to the strategic directions established at the European Union level in the field of social rights and poverty alleviation. Public Social Assistance Services (PSAS) in rural areas and disadvantaged communities face a chronic shortage of qualified personnel (social workers, mediators) and a bureaucratic overload generated by the complexity of the new income and asset assessments (World Bank, 2023: 43-45). One of the current challenges entails the real-time interconnection of databases managed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity, the National Agency

for Fiscal Administration (ANAF), local tax and revenue directorates, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Technical malfunctions or the absence of high-performance digital infrastructure in certain Administrative-Territorial Units (ATUs) generate the risk of major payment delays or allocation errors (Ministry of Labour, Family, Youth and Social Solidarity, 2023: 69-71). Accelerating the implementation of the measures outlined in the NRRP and the ESF+ is imperative for improving socio-economic conditions and contributing to the achievement of the 2030 target aimed at lifting 2.5 million individuals out of the risk of poverty or social exclusion. Within the framework of the NRRP, Romania is reforming the Minimum Inclusion Income (VMI) to enhance social assistance effectiveness, mitigate poverty, and simultaneously alleviate administrative burdens (European Commission, 2024: 72-73). While EU employment guidelines mandate that member states avoid poverty and passive welfare traps by transforming social benefits into a stepping stone toward the labor market, the Minimum Inclusion Income (VMI) framework in Romania maintains mandatory community service and employment agency registration for able-bodied recipients, although the overall efficacy of these activation measures remains heavily conditioned by structural fund-backed active labor market policies and programs 2021-2027 (Ministry of Investments and European Projects, n.d.). A large portion of social benefit recipients (especially minimum inclusion income or long-term unemployment benefits) come from disadvantaged backgrounds, having a low level of education and being unprepared for the current demands of a digitized, service- and technology-oriented labor market (Ionescu, 2015: 352-354 apud Zamfir, Stănescu and Arpinte, 2015). The lack of employment opportunities in isolated or rural areas renders the mere imposition of employment conditions for receiving social assistance ineffective, as there is no genuine labor supply in the vicinity (Mișca and Neamțu, 2016). In this context, the social economy has been proposed as “a viable alternative for the beneficiaries of minimum guaranteed income”, capable of “increasing the employment rate of people belonging to vulnerable groups” and of limiting the risk of “developing dependency relationships through the guaranteed minimum income” (Otovescu, Calotă and Cioacă, 2019: 30-33). A sudden cut or excessive tightening of eligibility criteria, without active integration measures, does not eradicate poverty, but rather deepens it. This can lead to the severe marginalization of families with children, directly impairing their access to education and healthcare.

Although in the short term reducing the number of beneficiaries may yield savings for the state budget, in the medium and long term, uncontrolled social costs—such as crime, high public healthcare expenditures generated by untreated conditions, and child protection expenses in cases of abandonment—can far outweigh the funds saved by cutting off social assistance.

6. Conclusions and Discussion

The implementation of the Minimum Inclusion Income (VMI) in Romania represents a major legislative and institutional step, undertaken both through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) and in alignment with European Union recommendations concerning active inclusion and poverty reduction. However, the analysis of empirical data and the implementation framework reveals a series of profound discrepancies between the macro-level intentions of the reform and on-the-ground socio-economic realities. First, research highlights a structural dysfunctionality between the amount of benefits and the real cost of living. Eligibility thresholds and granted amounts (situated below 400 lei per family member) are manifestly insufficient

to counteract inflationary shocks and the rising prices of utilities, food, and medical services. In the absence of flexible indexing mechanisms linked to the real cost of a decent consumption basket, the VMI risks functioning rather as an instrument for the perpetuation of absolute poverty than as an effective lever for social mobility. Secondly, territorial polarization represents a major vulnerability of the system. The massive concentration of beneficiaries in disadvantaged historical regions (such as Moldova, Oltenia, and the north-eastern macro-region, with poles such as Dolj, Bacău, or Suceava) demonstrates that social assistance absorbs the pressure generated by the chronic lack of economic investments and the deficit of local labor supply. In isolated or rural areas, the lack of economic infrastructure and supporting social services renders measures conditioning aid through community work or registration with the County Employment Agency (AJOFM) inefficient. Furthermore, the vulnerable profile of the beneficiaries—often individuals with a low level of education, unprepared for the demands of a highly digitalized and technology-oriented labor market—demands a radical rethinking of activation policies. Rigid and quasi-punitive bureaucratic measures do not substitute for the lack of integrated vocational training and personalized counseling programs.

From a fiscal-budgetary perspective, although austerity measures and public expenditure limits (such as those introduced by Law no. 141/2025) may generate short-term savings for the state budget, in the medium and long term, the collateral social costs—the amplification of the marginalization of families with children, school dropouts, the deterioration of health status due to deficient access to medical services, and the increase in crime rates—risk considerably exceeding the funds saved.

In conclusion, the VMI is an indispensable instrument for Romania's social safety net; however, its efficacy depends directly on overcoming institutional and administrative bottlenecks (the limited capacity of local public services, poor database interoperability). Optimizing this mechanism requires a close correlation between fiscal reforms, European funds (ESF+, NRRP), and robust complementary policies in rural development, education, and human capital investment. Only through a multidimensional and flexible approach can social assistance evolve from a mere survival palliative into a genuine vector of inclusion and social cohesion.

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The Impact of Trending Hashtags on Media Agenda-Setting: A Case Study of Algerian Journalists in Jijel Province

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the impact of trending hashtags on the journalistic agenda and media choices regarding significant topics and issues in news coverage. This is examined in light of the growing prominence of trending hashtags in the current digital age. To achieve this objective, a case study methodology was adopted, utilizing a questionnaire as the data primary collection tool. The questionnaire was distributed to a sample of journalists affiliated with print and audiovisual media in Jijel Province. The findings revealed no strong correlation between hashtags and the media agenda among the surveyed journalists. The majority of journalists approach hashtag content with caution and reservation. This is reflected in their limited use of hashtags on one hand, and their reluctance to provide media coverage for these topics or prioritize them within their news output on the other. Conversely, the journalistic agenda remains predominantly driven by internal editorial policy and public interest.

Keywords: Hashtag; Agenda; Media institution; Journalist; Editorial policy

1. Introduction

The hashtag has emerged as a recent phenomenon deeply intertwined with social media platforms, garnering significant user engagement for expressing ideas, voicing opinions, and advocating for various causes and movements. Consequently, hashtags encapsulate a multitude of concepts and narratives that serve as vital journalistic sources. Indeed, according to a study by the Reuters Institute at the University of Oxford, 55 % of journalists worldwide alter their coverage priorities based on trending topics (2025, محمود). This is particularly evident today as journalists increasingly utilize social media platforms for both personal and professional purposes, transforming the virtual space into a fertile ground from which they extract news and diverse topics for their journalistic coverage.

Traditionally, mass media institutions acted as primary gatekeepers, determining what the public should care about and, consequently, shaping public priorities. However, in light of the rise of active citizen users on these platforms, this dynamic may invert; media outlets themselves risk becoming subservient to audience priorities. This shift is accelerated by the phenomenon of the “Trend,” which guarantees the virality of specific content. As a result, audience interests may dictate media agendas. Today, the audience constitutes a formidable collective force capable of steering the broader public opinion agenda. This phenomenon is corroborated by Zhang and Ng (2023), whose study demonstrated that trending content on Twitter (now X) significantly influences how participants perceive the social agenda.

Accordingly, media organizations may resort to aligning their coverage with hashtags and trends to secure the desired reach, often at the expense of other substantive content. For instance, even established outlets like The New York Times have been shown to respond to congressional posts on Twitter (Gilardi et al., 2022). Furthermore, journalists might adopt these hashtags without rigorously verifying their credibility or

accuracy, thereby potentially compromising the media institution's professional integrity and ethical responsibility.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the reality of this phenomenon among journalists in the Wilaya of Jijel. It seeks to investigate the extent to which their editorial choices are influenced by hashtags, and how they integrate them into content production and news gathering processes to the point of modifying editorial decisions. To address this, the study poses the following central question:

RQ: How do hashtags influence the media agenda of journalists in Jijel province?

This study is situated within the framework of understanding the ongoing paradigm shift in agenda-setting within the digital age, specifically examining objective and editorial choices in the presence of social media platforms as formidable competitors. Thus, analyzing the hashtag phenomenon is essential, as it provides a profound understanding of how social platforms influence media institutions.

Furthermore, this research contributes to understanding who determines news priorities in the digital era. It uncovers the audience's role in setting the media agenda, influencing events, and shaping public opinion trends. It also evaluates whether the audience influences the editorial decisions of media organizations within the emerging landscape of participatory media. Ultimately, the study serves as an attempt to leverage hashtags, particularly trending ones, within the framework of utilizing social media services productively.

2. Literature Review

First Study: Intermedia agenda setting between Social Media and Legacy News in Kenya: An Analysis of the Relationship Between Twitter Hashtag “#LIPAKAMATENDER” and “Citizen TV News” by Kiambo (2018), this study explored the agenda-setting dynamics of the Kenyan public between social media and traditional media (television) by examining the Twitter hashtag #LIPAKAMATENDER, which was related to the doctors' strike in Kenya, and comparing it with the television coverage on Citizen TV. The researcher applied a simple random sampling technique to a corpus of 800 tweets featuring the hashtag, comparing it against a simple sample of 36 news broadcast video clips covering the strike. The study yielded the following findings: a strong correlation exists between the hashtag agenda and the television channel's agenda. The media agenda gradually evolves to mirror the structure of the social media agenda; social media platform trends significantly influence the trends of television news.

Second Study: Factors Influencing Columnists' Selection and Processing of Trending Content in Egyptian Electronic Newspapers: A Field Study by (2023, البحراوي), this study aimed to uncover the primary factors influencing the selection of trending topics by columnists in Egyptian electronic newspapers. To achieve this, a field survey was conducted via a questionnaire administered to 104 columnists across three digital news portals (Ahram Gate, Youm7, and Al-Wafd Gate). The study demonstrated the following: (44.3%) of columnists actively and consistently monitor trending topics. Personal factors ranked as the primary reasons for interest in trends, most notably the trend's alignment with the journalist's personal stance and cultural background, followed by internal institutional factors, trending topics incentivize journalists to write about them because they serve as a tool for identifying current public affairs.

Third Study: Trending Now: How Twitter Trends Influence Social and Personal Agendas by Zhang and Ng (2023), this study investigated the extent to which Twitter trends influence individuals' social and personal agendas within the framework of their

perceptions of social reality. Adopting an experimental approach, the researchers conducted an experiment on 331 undergraduate students in the United States, divided into control and treatment groups. The study concluded that: twitter trends significantly impact students' social agendas. Public issues were prioritized in terms of importance according to their ranking within Twitter trends. The study sample treated the reality constructed by Twitter trends as an absolute fact, and consequently shaped their personal agendas accordingly.

Fourth Study: Communication Through Hashtags in Social Movements: A Systematic Literature Review by Agustya, Natalia and Irwansyah (2023), this study aimed to investigate the evolution of hashtag-based communication within social movements through a systematic literature review. Employing a meta-analysis technique, the authors analyzed 60 peer-reviewed scientific journals. The study revealed the following: hashtags have become an indispensable communication tool across various social movements. Hashtags function to mobilize support for protests and catalyze debates surrounding diverse social issues. Numerous marginalized causes and movements successfully find their voice through targeted hashtag utilization.

Fifth Study: The Agenda Setting of Instagram: A Case Study of Raphaël Glucksmann's Online Campaign to Promote the Uyghur Cause by Charat (2021), this study addressed the structural shifts that Instagram introduced to McCombs and Shaw's (1972) traditional agenda-setting theory. It examined the online campaign against the oppression of the Uyghur people in China, executed on Instagram by Member of the European Parliament Raphaël Glucksmann via the hashtag “#FreeUyghur”. Employing a case study method, the researcher utilized PhanomBuster software alongside Imagesorter and PicArrange to perform visual data processing of the extracted content. Among the results achieved were: there is a bidirectional relationship of mutual influence, wherein the social media agenda actively drives and reshapes the traditional media agenda. The parliamentary campaign successfully pushed the Uyghur cause further into mainstream mass media, stimulating extensive coverage. The campaign effectively escalated the issue onto the floor of the European Parliament.

Sixth Study: Advocating for Change: The Strategic Use of Hashtags in Social Media Advocacy by Saxton et al. (2015), this study examined the strategic deployment of hashtags to advocate for public causes and individuals. Data was harvested from the official accounts of 105 organizations within the National Health Council (a US-based national alliance advocating for patients with chronic diseases and disabilities). A series of quantitative content analyses were conducted to identify the most prevalent hashtag strategies. The study concluded that: all hashtag optimization strategies contribute directly to increasing public engagement metrics. The sampled organizations strategically utilize hashtags to mobilize the public for collective action. Hashtags that embed hyperlinks and video URLs exhibit a significant positive correlation with user retweeting behavior.

A critical review of the aforementioned literature reveals that the vast majority of prior studies have primarily centered on the hashtag in relation to the public agenda, social movements, and cause advocacy, rather than its direct role in institutional media agenda-setting. The notable exception is Carolyn Kiambo's study, which explicitly examined agenda-setting dynamics between social media and traditional media (television). In contrast, the current study directly measures the relationship of the hashtag to media agenda-setting by focusing on practicing, on-the-ground journalists

who are fundamentally responsible for selecting news stories and determining priority issues.

Methodologically, previous research has alternated between quantitative and qualitative frameworks. For instance, Kiambo (2018) and Charat (2021) analyzed digital media content (Twitter and Instagram datasets), whereas Zhang and Ng (2023) focused empirically on user audiences. Another segment of the literature approached hashtags and the social agenda through descriptive systematic reviews.

Crucially, however, the existing literature has largely neglected the phenomenon from the perspective of the journalist as the primary gatekeeper, with the exception of (2023, البحراوي) study. Yet, even El-Bahrawi limited his scope to identifying the factors that motivate columnists to track and write about a trend, rather than investigating the trend as a structural catalyst that actively alters a journalist's broader agenda of issues. This precise research gap is what the current study seeks to address.

Ultimately, these prior studies have been highly beneficial in conceptualizing the topic as a multifaceted phenomenon. Their empirical findings serve as a robust foundational launchpad for our research, and they will concurrently serve to validate, enrich, and cross-reference our forthcoming results within the framework of the academic discussion.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Definition of Hashtag

A hashtag is a conceptual phrase prefixed with the “#” symbol, utilized across social media platforms to establish a shared context for specific events or topics alongside public or user-generated content. It functions primarily in two ways: first, as a mechanism for content categorization, and second, as a tool for fostering virtual communities bound by shared interests. Furthermore, hashtags are frequently intertwined with highly controversial debates (Lin, Lee and Choe, 2024).

Concurrently, the hashtag is a method for tagging keywords, topics, or trends within a social network. Hashtags possess the unique capacity to sort and aggregate web resources, thereby enabling users to effortlessly locate messages with specific content. Consequently, they serve as digital rallying points for the latest breaking news, trends, and protests (Kiambo, 2018).

3.2 Significance of the Hashtag

The strategic deployment of hashtags facilitates the dissemination of relevant topical content and significantly expands a message's reach by encouraging the public to voice their opinions on issues of public concern; this, in turn, catalyzes social media movements. Moreover, it creates a structured administrative platform for investigating specific issues and acquiring deeper information, with trending hashtags yielding the most substantial impact (Viswam and Graciyal, 2018).

Additionally, the hashtag yields the following advantages:

- Enhancing the virality and reach of digital content;
- Mobilizing individuals around social movements (issue-specific hashtags);
- Fostering global consciousness and understanding of international issues;
- Generating massive user engagement surrounding specific causes that previously lacked visibility within traditional public spheres (2022, جيوشي).

Furthermore, according to a study by Laucuka (2018), hashtags serve several core functions, including: defining the core theme of a post (e.g., #Elections), aggregating

information surrounding a particular topic, facilitating social networking and the sharing of lived experiences and expressing ideological stances and public opinions.

3.3 Hashtags and Journalistic Information Sources

Modern journalists rely on a diverse array of electronic sources, ranging from digital interviews and visual storytelling to public opinion polls conducted via chat rooms and forums. In this context, the platform X (formerly Twitter) stands as the preferred outlet for journalists due to its deep association with political elites and intellectuals, alongside its structural focus on information and debate. Concurrently, over the past two years, Instagram has experienced an exponential rise, largely driven by its highly engaged youth demographic (Torres, 2024).

According to a prominent American study, journalists actively utilize social media platforms to scout for new news stories and feature ideas. Consequently, journalists themselves have become subservient to trending topics, employing the “Trend” during the preliminary stages of content creation. Therefore, the trend directly interferes with the most critical phase of journalism, issue definition, which constitutes an integral component of the agenda-setting process.

Structurally, a hashtag emerges when an event generates prolonged public engagement, whether positive or negative. It typically surfaces due to two main catalysts: first, an instantaneous, real-time event documented simultaneously by a vast number of users; second, artificial algorithmic manipulation through networks of bots or fake accounts posting synchronously to forcefully push a specific issue into the trending charts. Similar mechanisms were documented in the 2024–2025 Romanian elections, where political marketing companies promised “increased digital visibility through artificial amplification techniques, astroturfing, and the creation of fake accounts”, while “the logic of digital platforms prioritizes content that generates the greatest interaction, regardless of its veracity” (Méndez de Valdivia, 2026: 479).

Ultimately, hashtags influence the field of journalism in the following ways: topic selection, media organizations are often compelled to cover specific topics to secure the desired digital reach. This aligns with (2023, البحراوي) findings, which indicate that audience interest and engagement act as primary incentives for journalistic writing. Populist Dissemination, engaging in digital campaigns that lack relevance to the public interest and instead drown in populism. Marginalization of Objectivity, restricting the dissemination of objective, substantive issues due to the trivial or sensationalist nature of trending content dictated by these platforms. Validation Seeking, gaining a sense of public validation and recognition by prioritizing what the audience deems important (2023, شنينو). Unverified Adoption, utilizing hashtags without rigorous verification, which directly exposes the media institution to spreading rumors or fake news. Editorial Modification, permitting structural alterations in the media institution’s editorial policy to keep pace with trending events.

3.4 Hashtag and the Public Agenda

Hashtags effectively function as cognitive filters that shape people’s perceptions of social reality. This mechanism rests on a broader sociolinguistic premise, namely “that the vocabulary we use influences our perception of reality” (Cioacă, 2018: 91): language “allows the transition from concept to category and thereby structuring social reality” (Cioacă, 2018: 92), and a hashtag condenses precisely such a category into a single, searchable label. This occurs because social media platforms have empowered audiences

to become the “new agenda-setters”, transforming social media trends into a vital source of social order. Recognizing this shift, platforms like Facebook and Twitter historically institutionalized this dynamic by aggregating the most frequently used terms into curated trending lists.

By organizing conversations around topics of public interest, the hashtag exerts immense structural pressure on contemporary newsrooms to broadcast content that directly aligns with follower preferences. In their work entitled “A Framework for Social Semantic Journalism,” researchers Harvey and McGinnis demonstrate that journalists actively monitor social platforms for breaking news and granular details. This is corroborated by a global survey across 15 countries, which revealed that half of the participating journalists utilized hashtags on Twitter to discover unique news story angles (Kiambo, 2018).

Consequently, when a hashtag transitions into a trending topic, its visibility translates into immediate newsworthiness, allowing it to easily permeate mainstream mass media outlets outside the digital platforms. Trending topics not only capture broader public attention but also actively set public agendas by unifying collective focus. Ultimately, they act as centralized information hubs through which users perceive social reality, a constructed reality that the public occasionally treats as absolute fact (Zhang and Ng, 2023).

4. Methods

To address the research problem, this study adopts the case study method, which is a well-established approach in media and communication impact studies when empirical experimentation is unfeasible. This method allows for the measurement of a set of impact indicators through a questionnaire, which is considered one of the primary tools in descriptive research.

In addition to one interview with the editor-in-chief of Algerian Radio from Jijel, the questionnaire consisted of 14 closed questions distributed across 3 axes: (1) The impact of trending hashtags on determining media issues (5 questions), (2) The impact of trending hashtags on prioritizing media issues (4 questions), (3) The impact of trending hashtags on framing media issues (5 questions).

The questionnaire was reviewed by two reviewers: the first: a professor at the National High School of Journalism and Information Sciences, the second: a journalist at Jijel Radio, and it was prepared in its final version after the required amendments.

The questionnaire was administered to a sample of journalists in Jijel province working across various media outlets (print media and audiovisual sectors) that represent legacy (traditional) media. A convenience sampling (accidental sampling) technique was utilized to reach the maximum possible number of journalists, given the lack of a definitive sampling frame. The final sample size comprised 34 journalists.

Table 1: Demographic profiles and characteristics of the sample (N = 34)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	23	68 %
	Female	11	32 %
Age	Under 30 years	5	15 %
	30 – 40 years	10	29 %
	40 years and above	19	56 %
Professional experience	Less than 5 years	6	17 %
	5 – 10 years	4	12 %
	10 – 15 years	5	15 %
	More than 20 years	19	56 %

Source: Data collected by the author through the field study

As delineated in Table 1, the vast majority of the study sample is male, accounting for (68 %), whereas females represent (32 %). This disparity is deeply intertwined with the grueling nature of the journalistic profession, often dubbed the “profession of hardships”, which demands frequent and rigorous field mobility across challenging geographical terrains. Such demanding field conditions for news gathering and interviewing often pose greater logistical and physical constraints for female practitioners, particularly when operating in remote or isolated regions.

Regarding the focal point of this study, namely, trending hashtags, the male majority within the sample suggests a higher baseline inclination toward proactive information monitoring. In terms of media consumption patterns, males generally exhibit a pronounced adherence to tracking breaking public affairs and current events, a trait that is further amplified by their professional identities as practicing journalists.

In terms of age distribution, more than half of the respondents (56 %) fall within the “40 years and above” cohort, signifying a highly seasoned sample. Crucially, this perfectly mirrors the professional experience metrics, where (56 %) of the sample possesses more than (20) years of active tenure. This structural seniority indicates an entrenched level of professional wisdom and caution when navigating news sources, particularly emerging digital spaces like trending social media hashtags. Consequently, any engagement with these digital platforms by the surveyed journalists is driven by extensive professional maturity and informed digital literacy rather than arbitrary adoption.

5. Results

The results showed that there is no strong correlation between hashtags and the media agenda among the journalists studied, across the three research areas: the impact of trending hashtags on determining media issues, the impact of trending hashtags on prioritizing media issues, and the impact of trending hashtags on framing media issues.

Table 2: The impact of trending hashtags on defining media issues (N = 34)

Indicator / Item	Often		Sometimes		Rarely		Never		Total
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	
Utilizing trending hashtags to identify the most critical public issues	10	29 %	17	50 %	4	12 %	3	9 %	34
Covering and structurally processing trending hashtag issues	9	26 %	14	41 %	7	21 %	4	12 %	34
Covering trending issues even if they diverge from the editorial policy	1	3 %	14	41 %	8	24 %	11	32 %	34
Processing trending issues even if they lack public interest value	1	3 %	6	18 %	9	26 %	18	53 %	34
Incorporating information embedded within trending hashtags into media coverage	6	18 %	15	44 %	5	15 %	8	23 %	34

Source: Data collected by the author through the field study

The empirical data in Table 2 clearly demonstrates that trending hashtags exert a restricted influence on the architectural setting of media agendas. Although hashtags construct a collaborative virtual environment for public deliberation regarding trending current events (2021, رقاڤ), they do not constitute a primary or institutionalized source for issue selection among the sampled practitioners. This resistance to digital agenda adoption is statistically confirmed by the heavily skewed distribution toward the negative spectrum of responses (“Sometimes,” “Rarely,” and “Never”).

Specifically, regarding the first indicator, “Utilizing trending hashtags to identify the most critical public issues,” exactly half of the sample (50 %) opted for “Sometimes,” while only (29 %) indicated “Often.” Similarly, a mere (26 %) “Often” provide media coverage for trending issues. These figures suggest that local journalists maintain a cautious professional distance from digital trends compared to the general public, indicating an underlying professional skepticism or systemic hesitation toward hashtag-driven narratives.

Consequently, these findings diverge significantly from the study conducted by (2023, البجراوي), which concluded that (44.3 %) of columnists actively monitor trends as an indispensable tool for identifying current public affairs.

This divergence can be explained by the rigid structural role of institutional editorial policy, which rigorously dictates the selection, framing, and dissemination of news stories. Within this ecosystem, individual journalists possess limited autonomous flexibility. This institutional constraint is highly justified given that trending hashtags are frequently localized, trivial, or completely detached from the authentic public interest, primarily because they are generated by a decentralized audience.

Thus, these results reinforce the professional commitment of local journalists to serious, high-priority public affairs that directly affect the Jijel community, demonstrating a rejection of sensationalist, crowd-pleasing topics. This ethical anchoring is structurally supported by the sample’s demographics, given that (56%) are senior veterans over the age of 40 with more than two decades of field experience.

Furthermore, this cautious approach reflects a profound lack of trust in digital trends due to their susceptibility to systemic manipulation. As empirically demonstrated by (2021, رقاڤ) in his study on how hashtags construct public opinion, digital trends can deeply deceive audiences and manufacture a false consensus through coordinated bot networks and fake profiles—a phenomenon known as digital disinformation.

This professional resistance is further confirmed by indicators 3 and 4, which isolate the influence of editorial policy and public interest. For indicator 3, the highest

concentrations accumulated under “Sometimes” (41 %) and “Never” (32 %). For indicator 4, a staggering (53 %) answered “Never,” and (26 %) answered “Rarely.” Statistically, this proves that public interest remains a foundational pillar for agenda-setting among these practitioners. They actively ignore digital traction metrics if a hashtag lacks public utility. This underscores a collective commitment to social responsibility and public service journalism, contrasting sharply with contemporary digital spaces that pursue “Clickbait” or “Buzz” for commercial reach.

Similarly, institutional editorial policies operate as a legal and administrative firewall, particularly within public sector media, preventing trending hashtags from becoming recognized agenda sources. This caution is also evident in how information extracted from hashtags is utilized (indicator 5), where a clear pattern of restraint emerges. Because hashtag content is often unverified, ethically unanchored, and generated by ordinary citizens, treating it as an authoritative source exposes journalists to factual errors, libel, and legal liability.

In conclusion, the impact of trending hashtags on local journalistic agenda-setting ranges from limited to weak, whether in terms of issue selection, information sourcing, or editorial framing. This finding directly contradicts the empirical conclusions of Kiambo (2018), who discovered a powerful correlation between the hashtag agenda and television news agendas in Kenya. This contrast highlights that the integration between digital platforms and legacy mass media is significantly more advanced in Kiambo’s geographical scope than in the localized context of the current study.

Nevertheless, practitioners should strategically leverage the structural advantages of hashtags as information gathering tools. As (2025, مصطفى) emphasizes, the digital user has become a critical actor in restructuring public priorities, and algorithmic architectures now assist media houses in transforming hashtag narratives into media agendas. As a result, the boundary between the public agenda and the media agenda is becoming increasingly blurred.

Table 3: The impact of trending hashtags on the prioritization of media issues (N = 34)

Indicator / Item	Often		Sometimes		Rarely		Never		Total
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	
Altering the priority / order of media issues based on trending hashtags during coverage	7	21 %	11	32 %	7	21 %	9	26 %	34
Placing trending hashtag issues at the forefront of media coverage priorities	5	14 %	15	44 %	7	20 %	7	20 %	34
Frequently reiterating the trending hashtag issue to enhance its perceived salience	6	17 %	10	29 %	9	27 %	9	27 %	34
Subjecting trending hashtag issues to extensive analysis and discussion	10	30 %	12	35 %	9	26 %	3	8 %	34

Source: Data collected by the author through the field study

The issue hierarchy constitutes a pivotal variable in the media agenda-setting process, commonly referred to as the “prioritization matrix.” Regarding the structural alignment of media issues and the extent of trending hashtags’ influence on them, the empirical data in Table 3 closely correlates with the patterns observed in Table 2. The distribution heavily leans toward the mid-to-lower spectrum of agreement (“Sometimes,” “Rarely,” and “Never”). Specifically, (32 %) of the surveyed journalists alter their issue priorities “Sometimes,” while (26 %) “Never” do, and (21 %) do so “Rarely,” a

percentage equal to those who answered “Often” (21 %). This low “Often” metric statistically verifies that only a critical minority of journalists are willing to restructure their pre-established agendas in favor of a digital trend. This rigidity is directly attributed to their strict compliance with the institutional frameworks dictated by the editorial board.

Consequently, these findings contrast sharply with the study of Kiambo (2018), which demonstrated that the media agenda progressively adapts to replicate social media agendas. In the local ecosystem under study, successful trending hashtags are predominantly restricted to development-oriented, awareness-raising, or social advocacy campaigns. This alignment corresponds with the empirical conclusions of Saxton et al. (2015) regarding hashtag activism, which established that hashtags primarily serve to mobilize public crowds for social action and maximize civic engagement, rather than structurally rewriting professional journalism agendas.

As further evidence of this restricted influence, the indicator measuring the “frequent reiteration of trending hashtag issues to enhance their perceived salience” reveals a scattered and weak distribution: “Sometimes” (29 %), “Rarely” (27 %), and “Never” (27 %). This uniformity confirms that trending hashtags do not constitute a strategic priority for local journalists in the Jijel province. Despite the profound digital pressure exerted by social networks as primary news environments, the relationship between the traditional journalist and digital platforms remains characterized by a degree of professional insularity rather than systemic integration.

This stands in direct opposition to the findings of Charat (2021) on Instagram agenda-setting, which proved that the social media agenda successfully forced corporate mass media to cover and illuminate the Uyghur crisis. This divergence is explained by institutional orientation; agendas are organically embedded within the structural philosophy of the media house, whether driven by public service mandates or commercial profit. Within this study’s sample, the overwhelming majority of journalists operate within public sector institutions where the public service model strictly regulates the gatekeeping process.

Interestingly, the indicator regarding “subjecting trending hashtag issues to extensive analysis and discussion” yielded the highest positive metrics, with (30 %) answering “Often” and (35 %) “Sometimes,” compared to a minimal (8 %) for “Never.” Since deep analysis and discussion are the ultimate indicators of an issue’s high status within an institution, these metrics might superficially suggest high adoption. However, when synthesized with the previous variables, it implies that while journalists rarely adopt a hashtag as an original primary agenda item, once a digital issue forces its way into the public sphere due to its severity, it is scrutinized analytically rather than accepted at face value.

In stark contrast, the lay audience exhibits absolute vulnerability to these trends. As demonstrated by Zhang and Ng (2023), the student demographic prioritizes public issues entirely based on Twitter (X) trend rankings, evaluating simulated digital realities as objective facts and constructing their personal agendas accordingly. This divergence emphasizes that media institutions must strategically capitalize on digital hashtag agendas. Through algorithmic mechanisms, contemporary platforms deliver media content accessorially to users, meaning the traditional concept of public opinion, anchored in a monolithic majority consensus within legacy media, has effectively ceased to exist (2020, السيد). Dîncu reaches a similar conclusion: in the digital era, public opinion “is no longer seen as a unitary block, but as a multitude of fragmented digital publics, rapidly

mobilized through social platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, or TikTok” (Dîncu, 2026: 535).

Table 4: The impact of trending hashtags on the media framing of issues (N = 34)

Indicator / Item	Often		Sometimes		Rarely		Never		Total
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	
Altering media framing / angles of an issue to align with the dominant angles of the trending hashtag	2	6 %	18	52 %	6	17 %	8	23 %	34
Integrating ideas embedded within the trending hashtag during media processing	7	20 %	18	52 %	4	11 %	5	15 %	34
Utilizing the specific terminology embedded within the trending hashtag during media processing	10	29 %	14	41 %	5	14 %	5	14 %	34
Re-purposing user-generated imagery / visuals embedded within the trending hashtag	9	26 %	10	29 %	8	24 %	7	21 %	34
Utilizing active characters / influencers embedded within the trending hashtag during coverage	11	32 %	14	41 %	4	12 %	5	14 %	34

Source: Data collected by the author through the field study

Given that issue framing represents the second level of agenda-setting, delineating the specific cognitive and evaluative mechanisms used to process media content, the empirical findings in table 4 reveal a highly targeted and calculated digital influence. The primary vector of interaction is predominantly formal and visual, represented by the re-purposing of user-generated imagery and visuals (26 % “Often” and 29 % “Sometimes”), whereas substantive cognitive frames remain heavily resistant to digital trends.

For the variable “altering media framing/angles of an issue to align with the dominant angles of the trending hashtag,” a substantial majority of (52 %) answered “Sometimes,” while (23 %) “Never” alter their analytical angles, preferring to preserve the original institutional frame of the story. Only a marginal (6 %) “Often” alter their treatment angles based on digital trends. Parallel trends emerge regarding the adoption of raw ideas, terminology, and active characters. These components constitute the cognitive core of media discourse, heavily influencing public perception, value systems, and collective beliefs.

Consequently, these thematic components are strictly guarded by institutional editorial policies, which dictate the specific ideological and analytical parameters of coverage to serve corporate or state objectives.

Furthermore, the “ideas” circulating within trending hashtags are organically generated by ordinary digital users, content creators, or digital influencers who generally lack professional journalistic training and comprehensive background knowledge of complex public policy issues. Unbound by professional codes of ethics, user-generated content is frequently characterized by structural randomness, subjectivity, confirmation bias, and emotional polarization, rendering it highly problematic for standard journalistic cross-verification.

This dilemma is further amplified by the total absence of legal accountability for digital citizens, whereas professional journalists operate within a rigid architecture of press laws and strict professional liability. Thus, adopting substantive digital frames is highly sensitive and tightly regulated.

These metrics confirm that trending hashtags exert a highly restricted influence on issue framing and substantive content within local media, directly contradicting

Kiambo (2018), who observed a profound digital distortion of television news directions. The data reinforces the systemic hesitation among journalists in the Jijel province to utilize digital trends as authoritative content repositories or framing templates.

While trending hashtags possess the structural capacity to frame issues by imposing a specific context, which could theoretically assist media houses in maximizing digital engagement journalists consciously resist this alignment to preserve institutional objectivity and professional autonomy.

6. Conclusions

Based on the empirical data collected in this study, there is no strong relationship between the hashtag agenda on social media and the agenda of institutional media among local journalists. Trending hashtags are not considered an institutional source for selecting issues or determining topics, except in isolated and intermittent cases. Media practitioners prioritize institutional editorial policies and objective assessment of public interest as primary criteria for agenda-setting, thus surpassing digital metrics and popularity algorithms. Local journalists resist restructuring their pre-determined agendas to fit digital trends and maintain traditional hierarchies in terms of order, repetition, and analytical discussion. The influence of trending hashtags on issue formulation remains weak and superficial, as practitioners adhere strongly to institutional angles, conceptual ideas, and professional terminology, rejecting the self-framing of citizen-generated trends, while sometimes using external visual assets or identifying prominent digital actors.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the structural relationship between local journalists and trending hashtags remains limited, cautious, and highly restricted. It has not yet achieved the systemic integration or structural convergence frequently documented in contemporary Western and regional media literature. Instead, the relationship is defined by professional skepticism and institutional insulation, manifesting as a clear divergence between the hashtag agenda and the editorial agenda of media establishments, both in terms of issue prioritization and analytical framing.

This insularity necessitates a calculated opening from media practitioners toward digital phenomena. Trending hashtags and algorithmic architectures have become highly potent mechanisms in engineering public opinion and steering collective attention. Media institutions cannot remain structurally isolated from these decentralized communicative environments if they intend to preserve their traditional social roles as primary guides of public orientation.

To maintain relevance and effectively shape the public agenda, legacy media houses must proactively integrate digital trend analytics within their professional workflows. They must transform these raw digital inputs through rigorous investigative verification and professional framing, rather than retreating into absolute closure. Ultimately, this dynamic remains an open and evolving field of inquiry, requiring continuous empirical investigation to track the shifting boundaries between institutional media agendas, digital algorithms, and public perception.

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Book Review: *Sociolog în România. In Honorem Dumitru Otovescu. 50 de ani în amfiteatrele vieții universitare (1973–2023)*

Maria Pescaru (Ed.), Beladi Publishing House, Craiova, 2024

Cristina-Maria PESCARU

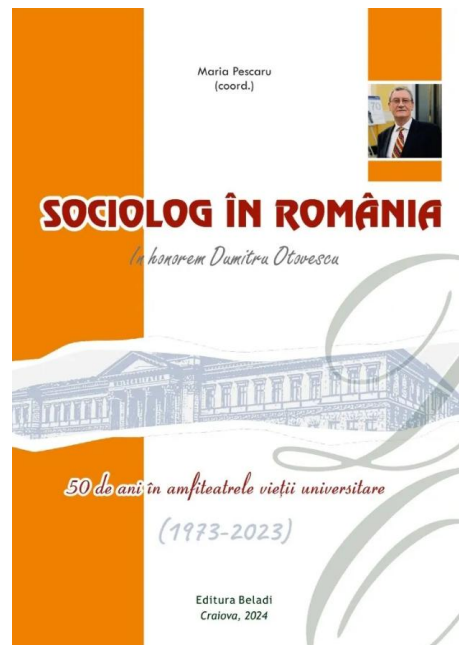
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The publication of the commemorative volume *Sociologist in Romania. In honorem Dumitru Otovescu. Fifty years in the lecture halls of university life (1973–2023)* (Pescaru, 2024), published by Beladi Publishing House in Craiova in 2024 and edited by Associate Professor Maria Pescaru, is an editorial and academic event of undeniable relevance to postwar and contemporary Romanian sociology. Beyond its anniversary significance, the volume is an extensive undertaking to recover, preserve, and bring academic memory to light. It allows readers to reconstruct the intellectual, pedagogical, institutional, and personal trajectory of Professor Dumitru Otovescu, from a complex and multifaceted perspective.

In its structure and documentary scope, the book goes beyond the bounds of a conventional tribute volume. It can be read at once as a biographical record, a collection of personal recollections, a source for the history of Romanian sociology, an account of the formation of a regional sociological school, and a document tracing the development of university-level sociology in Romania. In this respect, it has considerable historiographical value: it follows both the career of an academic figure and the changes Romanian sociology has undergone over more than five decades of university teaching.

The choice of the title *Sociologist in Romania* is itself significant. Rather than confining its subject to a single institution or university centre, it suggests Professor Dumitru Otovescu's place within a wider scholarly community and within the history of a discipline that has been rebuilt, consolidated, and established in contemporary Romania. The subtitle, *In honorem Dumitru Otovescu. Fifty years in the lecture halls of university life (1973–2023)*, defines the project's chronological scope and underscores the continuity of an academic vocation.

As the volume's editor, Associate Professor Maria Pescaru, notes, Professor Dumitru Otovescu belongs to the first generation of graduates after 1970, when sociology teaching in Romania was re-established following the suppression and marginalisation of the discipline during the early communist period. His decision to pursue sociology in 1969 and his graduation from the University of Bucharest in 1973 marked the beginning of an intellectual and professional career spanning more than five



decades, characterised by scholarly rigour, commitment to teaching, and sustained involvement in the institutional development of sociology.

Professor Otovescu's career brings together field research, cultural theory, prolific authorship, university teaching, mentorship of successive generations of students and researchers, and institution building. At a time when Romanian sociology was rebuilding its conceptual and methodological foundations and seeking new institutional forms, he helped mobilise academic energies and contributed to the University of Craiova's development into an important centre for the social sciences at both national and regional levels.

One of the volume's principal strengths is its ability to convey this range of roles. Professor Otovescu is portrayed neither solely through his bibliography nor exclusively through the academic offices he has held. Instead, his profile emerges from the perspectives of colleagues, professors, students and doctoral candidates, collaborators, researchers at other universities, international partners, cultural figures, and journalists.

The volume brings together accounts by 62 figures from academic and public life, giving it considerable breadth. Contributors include members of the Romanian Academy, professors from major university centres across the country—Bucharest, Iași, Timișoara, Oradea, Cluj-Napoca, Brașov, Sibiu, Alba Iulia, Pitești, and Reșița—as well as former students, doctoral researchers, and international collaborators. Taken together, their contributions reveal the professional and academic network Professor Otovescu has built over time.

The participation of contributors from different university settings gives the book a strong national dimension. Contributions from Bulgaria, Algeria, and Cameroon also show that Professor Otovescu's work extended beyond the institutional setting of the University of Craiova and formed part of a wider network of academic collaboration.

The volume follows methodological and editorial principles that give it coherence and unity. Biographical and bibliographical documentation alternates with analytical recollection, personal testimony, academic reflection, and visual records. Its seven chapters offer a chronological reconstruction of Professor Otovescu's intellectual and professional life, beginning with his background and early education and proceeding through his academic and institutional work, international activity, and public reception.

Chapter I, "Biographical background and professional milestones" (Pescaru, 2024: 22-72), provides the book's scholarly and documentary foundation. It presents detailed biographical information, key stages in his education and career, and a comprehensive list of the more than 48 books and treatises he has published.

Among Professor Dumitru Otovescu's notable works and contributions are the *Treatise on General Sociology* (2010), which he edited and co-authored with 39 contributors from 14 universities and which has served as a foundational textbook in Romanian higher education; monographs on communities, institutions, and notable figures in Oltenia (Dolj, Gorj, Mehedinți, Olt, and Vâlcea), which have revitalised the Gustian monographic method in the region; studies of changing cultural values, the sociology of religion, and the philosophy of Romanian culture; research on the Romanian diaspora in Europe and the Americas and on social and professional integration, contributing to international research projects and public policy reports; and translations and editions of foundational works by major European and international sociologists, which have made primary sources more accessible to students.

Particular attention is given to the recognition and presentation of the research directions of the Craiova Sociological School, encompassing general sociology, the history of sociology, the sociology of culture, monographic research, the sociology of migration, and the translation and renewed study of classic works. This section thus offers readers more than information about an individual: it provides a framework for understanding the development of an academic institution and school of thought.

Chapters II and III cover his secondary-school and university education between 1965 and 1973. They bring together recollections by classmates from the school in Melinești, Elena Cuza High School in Craiova, and the Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology in Bucharest. Contributions by Viorica Dumitrașcu, Paul Demetrian, Mihai Milca, and Vasile Ancuța help reconstruct the intellectual profile of the young Dumitru Otovescu, marked by a passion for learning, an exceptional memory, an interest in ideas, and remarkable oratorical ability. These chapters are valuable because they add a biographical and personal dimension, showing how his academic vocation gradually took shape.

Chapter IV, devoted to his professional path from 1973 to 2023, is the book's most substantial section (Pescaru, 2024: 99-226). It brings together contributions by leading figures in Romanian sociology. Academician Cătălin Zamfir describes him as a "prominent figure in sociology," while Professor Ilie Bădescu, a corresponding member of the Romanian Academy, memorably calls him the "Sociologist of the five Oltenias". Professor Septimiu Chelcea, in turn, emphasises the "demiurgic" character of his work (Pescaru, 2024). With contributions from Iași, Timișoara, Oradea, Brașov, Sibiu, Alba Iulia, Pitești, Reșița, and other university centres, the chapter demonstrates the breadth of Professor Otovescu's academic relationships and his recognition within the national sociological community.

Chapter V, "The voices of his disciples: views of former students and doctoral candidates," has particular emotional resonance. The accounts of former students and doctoral candidates highlight Professor Otovescu's generosity as a teacher, methodological rigour, and enduring willingness to support young researchers in their first scholarly endeavours. These testimonies bring out what might be called the mentor's Socratic approach: his ability to encourage questioning, dialogue, reflection, and intellectual independence. This dimension is essential to understanding an academic school, which is sustained through the people it trains and the transmission of an intellectual tradition from one generation to the next, as well as through publications and institutions.

Chapters VI and VII, devoted to international connections and media coverage, broaden the perspective on Professor Otovescu's work. Contributions by professors Vihren Bouzov (Bulgaria), Soufyane Badraoui (Algeria), and Willy Konefon (Cameroon) illustrate the international reach of his collaborations. Reflections by journalists and cultural figures, including Tudor Nedelcea and Vasile Gogonea, also underscore the public and cultural impact of his work. The academic portrait is thus complemented by its international and public dimensions, presenting Professor Otovescu as a figure whose work has resonated beyond the university.

One of the book's most significant themes is Professor Dumitru Otovescu's contribution to founding the sociological school at the University of Craiova and establishing its scholarly standing. Professor Ilie Bădescu, a corresponding member of the Romanian Academy, expresses this point as follows: "Dumitru Otovescu is not merely an accomplished researcher of social phenomena, but a true founder of a sociological

school, a man of concrete achievements who has left behind institutions, libraries, and generations of specialists” (Bădescu apud Pescaru, 2024). This statement captures a central idea of the volume: an academic career cannot be assessed solely by the number of publications it produces, but also by its capacity to establish institutions, educate generations of specialists, and build a lasting academic infrastructure.

In a university environment traditionally dominated by philology, history, and the exact sciences, Professor Otovescu helped establish sociology as a discipline in its own right. This process culminated in the establishment of the Faculty of Social Sciences and the Doctoral School of Sociology, an achievement of clear institutional and historical importance for Romanian sociology.

In the spirit of the Gustian tradition of sociological monographs, Professor Dumitru Otovescu redirected research attention towards the communities of the Oltenia region. The project devoted to the five counties of Oltenia—Dolj, Gorj, Mehedinți, Olt, and Vâlcea—is an extensive sociological investigation combining empirical research with theoretical analysis. In this approach, the monographic tradition is more than an object of historical recovery: it becomes a means of understanding contemporary communities and social processes.

Professor Dumitru Otovescu’s body of work is distinguished by its thematic diversity and continuity. In general sociology, a key publication is the *Treatise on General Sociology* (2010), which he edited and produced with 39 contributors from 14 universities. The work has an important educational role and can be regarded as a significant editorial contribution to university-level sociology teaching in Romania.

In monographic research, the studies of communities, institutions, and notable figures in Oltenia—Dolj, Gorj, Mehedinți, Olt, and Vâlcea—are particularly important. They have helped revitalise the Gustian monographic method at regional level and have had substantial institutional impact.

In the sociology of culture, Professor Otovescu’s research has addressed the dynamics of cultural values, the sociology of religion, and the philosophy of Romanian culture. In migration and diaspora studies, he has researched Romanian communities in Europe and the Americas and the challenges of social and professional integration. These interests have also informed international research projects and reports relevant to public policy.

Another important contribution consists of translating and editing foundational works by classical European and international sociologists, giving Romanian students and researchers access to primary sources essential to their theoretical education in sociology.

Professor Dumitru Otovescu’s career also combines scholarly work with institutional leadership and editorial activity. As a dean and founder of academic journals, he has helped build a lasting institutional infrastructure. His work on evaluation committees for the Ministry of Education and ARACIS has contributed to assessment and quality assurance in higher education in sociology and social work.

His editorial projects are also notable, including series published by established houses such as Beladi Publishing House and Scrisul Românesc Publishing House. This editorial activity has had an important educational dimension, offering many young researchers an opportunity to publish their findings. Professor Otovescu has thus been both a demanding critic and a source of support for the professional development of new generations.

An assessment of the volume must give particular attention to the contribution of its editor, Associate Professor Maria Pescaru. Editing a book of this scope entails substantial work in conception, research, selection, organisation, and integration. The result shows the editor's ability to shape numerous individual testimonies into a unified, coherent work relevant to the history of Romanian sociology.

Her first achievement lies in the book's overall structure. The seven chapters follow a progressive sequence: biographical and professional background, education, career, relationships with students and younger scholars, international connections, and public reception. This arrangement enables readers to follow the development of the subject over time and to understand the relationship between individual biography and institutional context.

A second achievement is the book's range of perspectives. The editor has brought together figures from different university centres and professional settings while maintaining its thematic coherence. A third is its documentary scope. The volume extends beyond reminiscences to include biographical and bibliographical information, evidence of the reception of his work, and extensive photographic documentation.

The editor has also maintained a balance between the book's tribute to its subject and the demands of academic scholarship. That distinction matters because an *in honorem* volume can sometimes be confined to commemoration. Here, the documentary structure and diversity of contributions give the work value beyond its commemorative purpose.

Through this work, Associate Professor Maria Pescaru also contributes to the preservation of academic memory within an institutional record. She does more than document a career: she creates a resource for future researchers interested in the history of sociology, the Romanian university system, and the development of higher education institutions.

By designing and structuring the volume, gathering representative voices from the academic community, organising the material into a coherent whole, and including substantial documentary appendices, the editor has turned a commemorative project into a work of clear biographical, documentary, and historiographical value.

A further strength is the documentary rigour of the appendices, which makes the book a useful resource for historians of Romanian sociology rather than simply a commemorative collection. Appendix I (Pescaru, 2024: 338-346) provides both a quantitative and a qualitative picture of how Professor Dumitru Otovescu's scholarly work was received in its time. It brings together citations, reviews, and references in specialist literature for 1991–2013 and 2014–2022, as well as data on downloads of his works from the Virtual Library of Sociology.

The appendix documents the circulation and reception of his ideas, enabling an assessment that goes beyond subjective impressions and providing reference points for future research into the impact of his work.

Appendix II (Pescaru, 2024: 347-383) forms a photographic microarchive of key stages in the professor's life: childhood and adolescence, student years in Bucharest, moments from his personal life, and, above all, episodes from his teaching, leadership, and public activity. The visual archive complements the written record and helps reconstruct both a professional profile and a personal and institutional memory.

From a historiographical perspective, the volume can be read as a sociological panorama of how a university discipline was built and consolidated in a regional Romanian centre. Its significance therefore extends beyond Professor Dumitru

Otovescu's biography. Through his story, the volume captures wider processes: the re-establishment of sociology after 1970, the development of regional university centres, the emergence of sociological schools, the training of generations of specialists, the growth of monographic research, the internationalisation of academic work, and changes in the editorial and institutional infrastructure of the social sciences. In this sense, the book offers a perspective on the relationship between individual lives and institution building, and between intellectual vocation and academic responsibility.

The editorial quality of this Beladi Publishing House volume adds to its overall value. The breadth and variety of testimonies make it an intellectual undertaking that goes beyond the format of a conventional anniversary book. The work will appeal to sociologists, cultural historians, researchers in education and the social sciences, university teachers, doctoral candidates and students, and anyone interested in the development of academic elites and university institutions in postwar and contemporary Romania.

Through the wealth of its testimonies, the rigour of its organisation, the richness of its documentary material, and the quality of its editorial construction, *Sociologist in Romania* offers an enduring account of a life devoted to sociology, university education, and the training of generations of specialists.

The idea that a life devoted to sociology is a life devoted to understanding people and communities captures the spirit of the book. It restores to the academic community the image of a professor and researcher whose contributions are found not only in books and articles, but also in institutions, schools of thought, libraries, research projects, and generations of specialists.

In this respect, *Sociologist in Romania. In honorem Dumitru Otovescu. Fifty years in the lecture halls of university life (1973–2023)* stands both as a tribute to an academic figure and as a record of Romanian sociology's collective memory and a point of reference for future generations of researchers.

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Book Review: Contemporary Sociology. Fields of Study and Representative Concepts

Dumitru Otovescu and Cristina Otovescu (Eds.), Vols. I-II, 2nd edition, revised and expanded, Beladi Publishing House, Craiova, June 2026

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The publication of a large-scale work entitled *Contemporary Sociology* (Otovescu and Otovescu, 2026), in two volumes and in a bilingual Romanian-English version (the English text being translated from the second Romanian edition), prepared by an international team of authors and distributed free of charge through ResearchGate and the Virtual Library of Sociology (Biblioteca Virtuală de Sociologie), is an event of real significance for the academic community and for the general public.

A work of this scope, which demanded considerable effort from its two coordinators, Professors Dumitru and Cristina Otovescu, and which comprises 28 chapters written by 27 specialists from Romania, Spain and Algeria, resonates on several levels.

1. Democratizing Access to Education and Scientific Culture

The free distribution, through the Virtual Library of Sociology, of a work of this size, roughly 1,200 pages, is probably the decision with the greatest immediate social impact. Academic inequalities are reproduced to a large extent through unequal access to specialized literature, and free access acts precisely on this mechanism, in two ways:

- *Removing financial barriers:* undergraduate, master's and doctoral students and early-career researchers (not only in Romania, but in other parts of the world as well) gain immediate access to a first-rate academic resource which, in the usual publishing circuit, would have been costly.

CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGY

Fields of Study and
Representative Concepts

VOL. I



Editors:
Dumitru Otovescu
Cristina Otovescu



CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGY

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VOL. II



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Cristina Otovescu



- *Countering academic inequalities:* smaller universities and researchers from disadvantaged regions (including developing countries) can use an up-to-date work, written to international standards, without budget constraints.

2. Internationalization and Romanian Academic Diplomacy

By bringing together university teachers from Romania, Spain and Algeria, the work demonstrates a strong capacity for transcontinental coordination and for building academic networks.

- *Cultural and scientific bridges:* the inclusion of Algeria and Spain opens a dialogue, both intercultural and interdisciplinary, between Eastern European, Western European (Mediterranean) and North African sociology. At the same time, readers can become acquainted with the sociological contributions of representative authors from Europe, North America, Chinese culture and Arab culture. This meeting of traditions offers perspectives on globalization, migration, social transformation and public policy that would be difficult to obtain from a single vantage point, precisely because they come from regions with very different dynamics.
- *Global visibility through the bilingual edition:* publishing the text in English as well means that the work of Romanian researchers and of their colleagues from Spain and Algeria can be cited, reviewed and integrated into the global flow of scholarship, beyond national borders.

3. Methodological Impact and Thematic Relevance

Published recently, in June 2026, the book is led by current social realities to address the pressing issues of the present. Its authors were able to analyze very recent phenomena: the impact of artificial intelligence on the labor market and on human interaction, new geopolitical shifts, climate crises and the post-pandemic transformations of society. For the specialized literature, the two volumes therefore become, from the moment of their publication, a *barometer of the current state of the discipline*, showing where sociology stands in the middle of this decade.

4. Strengthening the Standing of the Coordinators and of the Social Sciences at the University of Craiova

The coordination of the book by Professor Dumitru Otovescu, PhD (an established figure in sociological research), and Professor Cristina Otovescu, PhD habil. (known for the results of her interdisciplinary legal and sociological research, particularly in the field of human rights), required laborious communication with the 27 authors and amounts to a genuine editorial *tour de force*. At a time when research sometimes tends towards hyper-specialization and fragmentation, the ability to coordinate a two-volume treatise of synthesis reflects a macroscopic vision of sociology.

Building on earlier experience – the publication, in 2010, of the *Tratat de sociologie generală* [Treatise of General Sociology], with the participation of 39 authors and co-authors from Romania, France, Canada and the USA – the present work reconfirms the university center of Craiova and its associated platforms as sources of scientific influence at the international level.

Its size of approximately 1,200 pages, covering 28 representative fields and concepts of contemporary sociological thought, turns this work from a relatively conventional format into a genuine editorial monument and a work of encyclopedic

scope. This massive and comprehensive structure adds several important nuances regarding the book's impact and significance.

5. A Comprehensive Map of Contemporary Sociology

The coverage of 28 distinct fields means that *Contemporary Sociology. Fields of Study and Representative Concepts* is not confined to the traditional branches (such as the sociology of the family, rural sociology or political sociology). Such breadth makes room for subdisciplines of critical relevance to the twenty-first century, such as:

- *digital sociology and the sociology of artificial intelligence* (the impact of technology on social ties);
- *the sociology of globalization and transnational migration* (essential for the Romania–Spain–Algeria axis);
- *the sociology of health and of the environment*, fields that are redefining current public policies.

6. Value as a Reference Work (a “Handbook”)

At 1,200 pages, the work becomes what the English-speaking world calls a *handbook*, a standard reference work. Each of the 28 chapters can serve as a self-contained guide for researchers: a student or professor who needs a quick, well-documented methodological and theoretical synthesis on a particular topic will find it already structured in the two volumes.

7. Standardizing International Sociological Language

The fact that this massive conceptual architecture (28 fields) is presented in bilingual form helps to unify sociological terminology. The precise translation of complex sociological concepts from Romanian into English (and vice versa), applied to such a large body of text, provides the Romanian scientific community with a valuable instrument for standardizing specialized academic language.

That such a large team managed to condense 28 facets of society into a unified whole of 1,200 pages – and to make it immediately available, free of charge, to the whole world through ResearchGate and the Virtual Library of Sociology – sets a new standard of academic excellence and generosity in today's scholarly landscape.

This book is an indispensable source of information and knowledge in contemporary sociological thought for undergraduate, master's and doctoral students and researchers, as well as for other specialists interested in deciphering and explaining the phenomena that shape human society today.

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