Civic Engagement in Times of Crisis: How did Romanian Emerging Adults Engage?

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ABSTRACT. The COVID-19 pandemic created a unique context in which community engagement was necessary for handling the crisis and emerging adults had a reduced risk in the face of the virus. Therefore, this paper aimed to take an in-depth look at the ways in which emerging adults engaged in their communities. Inductive thematic analyses conducted on a sample of 86 Romanian emerging adults (M_{age}= 23.38, SD_{age}= 2.71) revealed two main themes: *General engagement* (subthemes *Passing on knowledge*, *Helping disadvantaged groups*, *Organizing events*, and *Political engagement*), and *Pandemic-related engagement* (subthemes *Initiatives directly related to the COVID-19 virus*, and *Initiatives related to the wider impact of the COVID-19 pandemic*). Results show that most Romanian emerging adults engaged in activities not directly related to handling the crisis and identify one worryingly unpopular form of engagement: political engagement.

Keywords: community engagement, civic engagement, Eastern Europe, emerging adulthood, COVID-19

Despite a lack of consensus regarding the definition of civic engagement, Eastern European countries consistently show lower engagement than Western countries (Ekman et al., 2016; Kostelka, 2014). However, social crises can make people more willing to help others (e.g., Yum & Schenck-Hamlin, 2005), with

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the number of willing volunteers sometimes higher than the actual need for them (e.g., Simsa et al., 2019). Past research highlights the valuable role of the civil society in handling crises during which authorities are overwhelmed (e.g., Simsa et al., 2019) or dependent on the compliancy of the public for reducing disease contamination (Ekzayez et al., 2020; Laverack & Manoncourt, 2016). This likely occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic as well, with people engaging in different civic behaviors as they felt an increased need to help handle the pandemic (Mao et al., 2021).

In their review of volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United Kingdom, Mao et al. (2021) go as far as suggesting that the civic engagement of regular citizens had a life-saving role while public services were having issues responding to the pandemic. Such valuable types of engagement included the delivery of food and medication to vulnerable categories in the beginning of the pandemic. As the pandemic prolonged, other types of activities became increasingly popular, such as those geared towards reducing social isolation (e.g., providing emotional support thorough phone calls) and handling the broader consequences of the pandemic on important life domains, such as employment and mental health.

Similar to non-crisis times, Eastern Europeans' civic engagement in times of crises is understudied. However, research has shown an increase in solidarity (Voicu et al., 2021) and Eastern Europeans' motivation to get engaged during social crises has been observed during the more recent societal crisis generated by the war in Ukraine (Marinica & Negru-Subtirica, 2023). When faced with war on their doorstep, Romanians expressed several motivations for helping their neighbors, mostly related to the need to express their personal values. Considering that people generally have a higher propensity to help in-group members (Levine et al., 2005), we could expect even higher civic engagement among Romanians in the context of COVID-19, a societal crisis directly affecting those close to them and with whom they share even more similarities than with their neighbors from Ukraine.

Educated young people could be the group most likely to engage in non-crisis times in Romania (e.g., Dragan & Popa, 2017), especially after they reach the voting age of 18, which expands their range of possible civic engagement activities. This age overlaps with the beginning of emerging adulthood, a period lasting from 18 to 29 years old (Arnett, 2011) during which youth ponder their role in society (Lannegrand-Willems et al., 2018) and civic engagement is generally increasing (Wray-Lake et al., 2020). As youth were least likely to be seriously harmed by the COVID-19 virus, their engagement may have been particularly important during this crisis, potentially providing unique insight into emerging adults' engagement and capturing implications for the social well-being and stability of the already weakened Eastern European democracy (Koc-Michalska et al., 2024).

To our best knowledge, only one previous study researched how emerging adults engaged during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting their preference for getting engaged online through distributing information about COVID-19 on their social media platforms or by volunteering remotely to help those affected by the pandemic (Yazdani et al., 2022). However, like most studies on the topic, this study focused on a Western sample and gave respondents a predetermined list of civic behaviors to choose from, potentially missing types of engagement not already included in the questionnaire. Therefore, more research is required to understand how emerging adults engaged in times of COVID-19, especially those from Eastern European contexts, who might display higher engagement than in non-crisis times and have a crucial role in the future of democracy in this part of the world.

CURRENT STUDY

Despite concerns about the low levels of civic engagement from Eastern Europe (Kostelka, 2014), research on the topic is scarce (Zaff et al., 2011), especially in times of crisis during which it can be particularly important and youth are at low risk. Therefore, this paper aimed to investigate the ways in which emerging adults engaged in their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, using thematic analysis as recommended by Braun and Clarke's (2006) paper. As several of the ways in which people engaged during the COVID-19 pandemic were adapted to the universal particularities of the crisis (e.g., delivering essentials to those forced to stay inside due to the virus), we expect Romanians' civic engagement to be similar to that from other countries (Mao et al., 2021). However, as most of the previous research has been conducted on Western cultures using self-reported questionnaires (e.g., Zaff et al., 2011), answers to our open-ended question could reveal other specific ways in which Romanian emerging adults engage in their communities, possibly capturing important cultural differences.

METHODS

Participants and Procedure

Our sample included 86 Caucasian Romanians aged between 18 and 29 years old (M_{age}= 23.38, SD_{age}= 2.71). The majority of them were females (74.4%) and had community engagement experiences before the COVID-19 pandemic

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(82.6%). Data collection was conducted as part of the larger project titled "Offline and online civic engagement during emerging adulthood" after the research ethics approval number 1664/19.02.2021 was granted to the first author by the Scientific Council of the Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca. Respondents filled in a questionnaire who was distributed online as part of a partnership with ProVobis - The National Centre for Volunteering Resources from Romania. A study description and a link to the questionnaire were posted on their website. The link was also shared on different Facebook pages and groups, in addition to being directly shared with ProVobis' network of partner organizations. Respondents were rewarded with participation to a free webinar delivered by the first author and had the chance to win one of the three raffle prizes.

MEASURES

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

DATA ANALYSIS

Inductive (i.e., data driven) thematic analysis was conducted in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendations for conducting this analysis in psychology: (a) initial patterns were identified after the entire data set was read many times by each author, (b) the initial patterns identified were used to propose initial codes, (c) each author independently matched the initial codes with respondents' responses using both excel documents and printouts, (d) matching disagreements were solved through discussion, (e) broader themes were created by organizing the codes from the previous steps, (f) a thematic map including codes and themes was generated and reviewed by both authors (Figure 1).
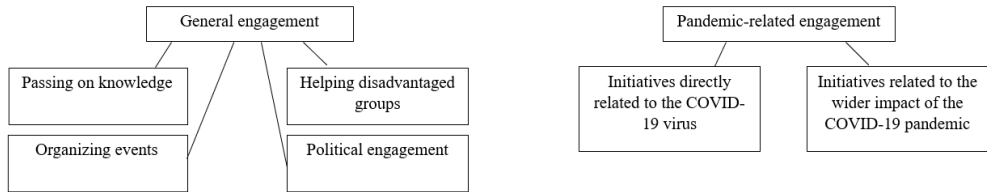
Figure 1. Final thematic map showing the two main themes and their subthemes

RESULTS

Two main themes were identified: *General engagement in the community* and *Pandemic-related engagement in the community.* In other words, whereas some participants engaged in activities which could also be carried out in non-crisis times, possibly with the need for adaption to the pandemic context, others chose to engage in activities which were specific to handling the unique crisis created by the pandemic. Titles, definitions, and sample items for each subtheme can be found in Table 1.

Theme 1. General engagement

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

Table 1. *Themes and Subthemes of how Emerging Adults Engaged in their Communities during The Pandemic*

	Title	Definition	Sample Item
General engagement (61.6%)	Passing on knowledge	This subtheme includes activities conducted with the aim of passing on knowledge on different topics (e.g., discrimination, mental health).	*"I contributed to creating and delivering online sessions within a mental health campaign from XXX. I felt that I was sharing relevant and useful information for students regarding mental health."* (Respondent 248, Female, 23 years old)
	Helping disadvantaged groups	This subtheme includes activities conducted with the aim of helping specific disadvantaged groups, such a people with mental and physical health problems.	*"I organized volunteer campaigns, together with my colleagues, to help different social categories, especially children with health problems. We have created campaigns, sales exhibitions, fundraising activities. We donated toys and various other products to families with many children."* (Respondent 60, Female, 28 years old)
	Organizing events	This subtheme includes varied tasks conducted with the final aim of organizing events other people can benefit from.	*"An event from the pandemic period, in which I was deeply involved, was the project XXX. I took care of organizing the courses, sending emails to the participants, organizing the XXX (i.e., specific activity) facilitating some activities during XXX (i.e., specific activity) and communicating with the teachers"* (Respondent 35, Female, 20 years old).
	Political engagement	This subtheme includes engagement in political activities, such as voting and protesting.	*"I voted. I wasn't home, I was in a different country. It was hard and inconvenient for me to do this, but I believe it is my duty to thick this off (i.e., do it)."* (Respondent 168, Male, 27 years old)

Pandemic-related engagement (38.4%)	Initiatives directly related to the COVID-19 virus	This subtheme includes activities conducted to mitigate the risks linked to the COVID-19 virus and the restrictions imposed to contain its spread, such as helping vulnerable categories self-isolate and adhering to the official recommendations.	"*During the pandemic, I signed up as a volunteer to do shopping for the elderly who stay at home. I would talk to them on the phone, take the shopping list and leave their bags in front of the house.*" (Respondent 73, Female, 26 years old)
	Initiatives related to the wider impact of the COVID-19 pandemic	This subtheme includes activities conducted to mitigate the wider impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and of the associated restrictions, such as loneliness and enhanced financial struggles.	"*As we all know, this pandemic led to the beginning of an economic crisis whose presence will be felt even after the pandemic. Each person had to organize himself from an economic point of view; but those who had this problem before the pandemic felt the presence of this problem much more. In the association I belong to, we know that those who have had a hard time will have it even more during the pandemic. That's why we decided to act before Christmas, offering different clothes, food, toys and personal hygiene products. The activity took place offline, going to the homes of needy people in the commune (i.e., rural area) with bags full of the previously mentioned objects; with the aim of helping and offering a smile to people before the holidays. I did nothing but help to distribute the bags; but I consider that even so it was a brave involvement, with a positive impact on my conscience and the whole community.*" (Respondent 79, Male, 19 years old).

Passing on knowledge

This subtheme showed up in almost half of the responses from this theme (47.16%) and it includes varied activities through which emerging adults wanted to share their knowledge about specific topics. Whereas in some instances these topics were specifically related to sharing their experiences with other members of student organizations: *"During the pandemic, I took part and still take part in the meetings of the volunteer association on behalf of the university to develop and improve projects that will be carried out in the online environment. In this activity, I came up with ideas and arguments and took on various tasks to help the process.* "(Respondent 8, Female, 20 years old), *"Well, first of all, the activity in which I was involved consisted in establishing a working strategy of a student organization for the current academic year. My role in this activity was to guide the new people who will deal with the implementation of this strategy and to give them advice."* (Respondent 153, Male, 26 years old), many responses also included a focus on raising awareness about specific topics, such as discrimination, bullying and mental health. Raising awareness was often done in the formal setting provided by non-governmental organizations: *"I contributed to creating and delivering online sessions within a mental health campaign from XXX. I felt that I was sharing relevant and useful information for students regarding mental health."* (Respondent 248, Female, 23 years old)", *"I started volunteering for XXX, and during the pandemic I went through a series of modules through which I gained more knowledge about drugs, addictions and how to convey this information to teenagers. I was actively involved in the meetings, which took place exclusively online. It is important for me because this field attracts me, I would like to do addiction counseling someday. Also, many teenagers are at risk of consuming drugs, so I would like to be able to make a positive contribution when I get involved in prevention campaigns."* (Respondent 210, Female, 22 years old), "*I was involved in an anti-bullying campaign that I coordinated and still coordinate. This aims to bring together specialists related to the decrease of bullying in schools, in order to provide them with information, but more than that, to help them create relationships at national level and collaborate on effective projects*" (Respondent 156, Female, 24 years old), *"With the end of the summer and the processing (to a certain extent) of the events that took place worldwide, I felt (more than before) the need for active involvement. Thus, I resumed my online volunteer activity that I had abandoned because it seemed too demanding and chaotic. I started to be active again within the association I belong to and had the initiative to coordinate an event for the first time. The latter (i.e., the event) consists in organizing and delivering workshops on discrimination (racial, gender, bullying, religious, etc.) to some high school students. The campaign was initiated by XXX. This is still ongoing*

as we wait for the right moment to hold the workshops in a physical format without exposing participants and facilitators to high risk. However, in addition to this activity, together with the team we are looking for alternative ways to promote inclusiveness and acceptance." (Respondent 19, Female, 20 years old).

Some answers focused on narrow topics that did not repeat much, but the desire of passing on knowledge remained. For example, participants mentioned initiatives related to pollution: "*During the pandemic, I participated in an action in which I presented some of the aspects of pollution to secondary school students and asked them what they thought would be useful to do from that moment on to contribute to reducing pollution. The meeting took place online, the students were very interested, and their ideas were very good. Each of them made a promise at the end of the meeting. Some of them promised not to throw waste on the ground, for example. I think this is an important step, the awareness of bad habits. Their enthusiasm inspired me and I still believe that young people can change society. If for those past middle age change comes more difficult, young people can be shaped much more easily.*" (Respondent 240, Female, 26 years old) and traffic education: *"I was and still am a trainer/facilitator for traffic education classes dedicated to children between the ages of 9-12, the modules being delivered both online and in the physical environment. One of the moments when I realize that my activities really have an impact is when I see the children get involved and not only put into practice the information received, but also pass it on to their parents or friends"* (Respondent 165, Female, 22 years old), sometimes also highlighting their hope that the knowledge they shared will have a long-term impact (e.g., by "shaping" a generation more concerned about pollution in the first example or by knowing that participants sometimes share their learning with others in the second example). Similarly, other participants gave specific and sometimes very detailed examples of knowledge they passed on to others, such as information about the experience of being a medical student: *"During the pandemic, I had the opportunity to participate in 3 online projects to inform future medical students. 1 event was on a platform with former fellow volunteers from XXX. I talked to them for about 2 hours about the advantages and disadvantages of XXX (i.e., specific medical school in Romania). (....) and 1 is a video (...) in which, together with 2 other older colleagues from XXX (i.e., specific medical school in Romania), we respond to a set of approx. 50 questions about medicine"* (Respondent 184, Female, 19 years old) or teaching French: *"Starting from September last year and until February this year, as part of my XXX volunteer internship, I was a French teacher for an emigrant community in the north of France and through weekly French language classes, I helped a group of seven young women to integrate into the local community. The courses were held on site and as a result, the students declared that they have a*

more autonomous life, more self-confidence and increased chances of employment as well as improved interpersonal relationships. Specifically, thanks to the skills developed during the courses, they were able to go shopping, help children with their homework and complete administrative procedures." (Respondent 76, Female, 27 years old).

Summing up, despite the wide range of topics approached, this subtheme captured emerging adults' engagement in activities which allowed them to pass on their knowledge to other people, often motivated by the desire to raise awareness about social issues, such as discrimination and mental health.

Helping disadvantaged groups

Responses from this subtheme included activities aimed at helping people from disadvantaged groups: *"I participated in volunteering activities within school activities, within the institution where I carry out my activity. I organized volunteer campaigns, together with my colleagues, to help different social categories, especially children with health problems. We have created campaigns, sales exhibitions, fundraising activities. We donated toys and various other products to families with many children."* (Respondent 60, Female, 28 years old), *"I help people with disabilities (autism, down syndrome, epilepsy, etc...) to live a better life. This is my job and I believe that by helping these people I am helping the community. By doing this, it shows me that I care about the people in the community I live with.* (Respondent 201, Male, 26 years old), *"I answered calls as part of a volunteering program that focuses on people at risk of suicide. It took place online/by phone. It is significant because I was able to help actively psychologically guide the distressed caller."* (Respondent 160, female, 25 years old). Some of the answers from this theme also referred to providing financial help: *"I donated around 300 lei (i.e., Romanian currency) for planting trees, building hospitals, feeding children and adults in the Middle East, especially for those who are at war. I donated to support websites that offer free books and materials for knowledge and evolution of the IT field."* (Respondent 20, Female, 22 years old), *"The only real support that I can say that I brought to the community was the money donations (via bank transfer) made to associations/foundations that helped people (especially children) with more serious health problems."* (Respondent 164, Female, 27 years old).

Many of the responses from this subtheme also include mentions of other subthemes, such as *Passing on knowledge*: *"I have been a volunteer at XXX for 2 years and since the pandemic, I have been doing online activities with children from placement centers (i.e., places which provide housing and other social services to children separated from their parents). Even if it is online, I feel*

that I help the children a lot through the activities I do (online safety or math)" (Respondent 83, Female, 20 years old), "*Starting from September last year and until February this year, as part of my XXX volunteer internship, I was a French teacher for an emigrant community in the north of France and through weekly French language classes, I helped a group of seven young women to integrate into the local community. The courses were held on site and as a result, the students declared that they have a more autonomous life, more self-confidence and increased chances of employment as well as improved interpersonal relationships. Specifically, thanks to the skills developed during the courses, they were able to go shopping, help children with their homework and complete administrative procedures."* (Respondent 76, Female, 27 years old).

Summing up, responses from this subtheme highlighted that some emerging adults engaged in activities which allowed them to use their resources and skills to help disadvantaged groups, such as people with health problems and children from poor backgrounds.

Organizing events

Reponses from this subtheme were centered around organizing events for other people: *"I organized the first online public event of the organization. I was involved in its coordinating and promotion. We started by actively collaborating with the team and setting a strategy, then we started to implement the strategy and develop the event."* (Respondent 15, Male, 21 years old), *"An event from the pandemic period, in which I was deeply involved, was the project XXX. I took care of organizing the courses, sending emails to the participants, organizing the XXX (i.e., specific activity) facilitating some activities during XXX (i.e., specific activity) and communicating with the teachers"* (Respondent 35, Female, 20 years old).

Some of the respondents from this subtheme overlapped with the subtheme *Passing on knowledge*: *"I am involved in a community where I carry out activities together with other people which involve different ways of expression through art, where I coordinated, participated, helped support this place and continue to do so, with the vision of creating something special in our city in terms of cultural life.*

These cultural events (local festivals, fairs, outdoor film screenings, organizing events with live music) help me to feel that I belong to a group of people, with whom I do these things, in whom I trust more and more and I continue to invest time and energy with a common goal that we have together, namely the creation of a playground for young adults who want to deepen their creative and artistic side through music, dance, painting, culinary arts, didactic arts and many others." (Respondent 113, Male, 26 years old), *"I was involved in an anti-bullying*

campaign that I coordinated and still coordinate. This aims to bring together specialists related to the reduction of bullying in schools, in order to provide them with information, but more than that, to help them create relationships at the national level and collaborate on effective projects." (Respondent 156, Female, 24 years old).

Summing up, this subtheme highlighted that some emerging adults got engaged in their communities by organizing events which could help other people. Besides conducting administrative tasks (e.g., sending emails), several of these emerging adults also facilitated specific activities with the goal of passing on knowledge.

Political engagement

Very few respondents mentioned getting involved through political channels, such as voting and protesting: *"I voted. I wasn't home, I was in a different country. It was hard and inconvenient for me to do this, but I believe it is my duty to thick this off (i.e., do it)."* (Respondent 168, Male, 27 years old), *"I believe that such an incident would be the participation in the protests held by XXX regarding the cutting of free railway transportation for students. My involvement consisted in participating in various meetings in the online environment, about how to organize it, what steps to take, what slogans to have, how to respect the protection rules (i.e., related to COVID-19) and so on. It ended with the physical participation in the respective protest, in XXX. But until the protest, I also had discussions with my colleagues from XXX, and then I tried to convey the importance of involvement in this effort to the volunteers as well. At the same time, I shared the XXX posts on personal accounts, so that the message reaches as many people as possible, who feel like getting involved in their turn. I got involved in the protest by conveying, at the end, my point of view and the reasons why we as students deserve to fight for this right."* (Respondent 180, Female, 22 years old). Few of the respondents also mentioned singing petitions supporting different causes: *"I signed petitions for Greenpeace for the various events that they voice. It was the online signature for forests/animals on the brink of extinction, etc., it depends on the context and topic. I have always been for the natural environment and the importance of nature in a human context."* (Respondent 179, Female, 26 years old), "*I filled out the petitions from XXX, I contributed to research by filling in questionnaires - I think that every person who does this helps to make a big change, so every vote given and every completed questionnaire helps someone - both took place online."* (Respondent 236, Female, 23 years old)

Summing up, this subtheme captured that some emerging adults engaged in activities which aimed to influence political decision-making, such as protesting and voting. However, their number is very low.

Theme 2. Pandemic-related engagement in the community

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

Subtheme 1. Initiatives directly related to the COVID-19 virus

This subtheme focuses on the activities conducted in order to help mitigate the unique risks associated with the COVID-19 virus and the measures imposed to handle it. Many of the activities from this subtheme aimed to provide help to the categories most vulnerable in the face of the virus: *"It was about helping the most vulnerable people and with an increased risk of having serious consequences after being infected with sars-cov2 by doing their shopping or providing them with the necessary things without having to leave the house."* (Respondent 189, Female, 25 years old). As the elderly were one of the most vulnerable categories in the face of the virus, they were often mentioned in this subtheme: "*I helped the elderly in the block (i.e., of flats) with the supply of essential products/medicines, basic foods, paying the bills." (Respondent 16, Male,28* years old*), "During the pandemic, I signed up as a volunteer to do shopping for the elderly who stay at home. I would talk to them on the phone, take the shopping list and leave their bags in front of the house."* (Respondent 73, Female, 26 years old), *"I contributed to very important causes to save lives. Even if sometimes the cases we go to with the ambulance are not necessarily medical emergencies, a kind word and a handshake can do more than anything. In addition to the actual shifts on the SMURD (i.e., Romanian Mobile Emergency, Resuscitation and Discharge Service) special vehicle, during the state of alert I was also a volunteer at the DSP (i.e., Directorate of Public Health) where I helped enter data into the computer.*

One of the incidents in which I felt a special contribution, was when I went to see a very nice grandmother, who had an altered general condition and had many health problems. She appreciated every single word and thanked me countless times for every intervention. She told me that I have a very light hand for a nurse and wished me all the best in the world and to succeed in life, learn and be a good person with patients. These words make you understand that what you do is very important for the community, and people in suffering need helpers with a good heart, who will understand their suffering and then solve their problems." (Respondent 119, Female, 21 years old).

Getting engaged in order to help vulnerable categories protect their health was also mentioned by a respondent who volunteered in an oncology hospital: *"At the beginning of the pandemic, I was a volunteer at an oncology clinic in XXX County, where young volunteers without comorbidities were needed to help triage patients. I went every day from morning to evening and filled in the triage sheets of the patients, dressed them appropriately with disposable materials (because many of the patients were unable to dress themselves due to oncological problems) and directed them to the office/salon where they were expected. I really liked this type of volunteering because I felt that those people needed me and I was there to help them. I felt appreciated by both the patients and the doctors in that clinic for the courage I have. At the beginning of the pandemic, the world was much more scared than it is now, and I think that few people would have done what I did."* (Respondent 274, Female, 25 years old).

A few of the respondents mentioned helping to mitigate the dangers of the virus by getting vaccinated and following the official recommendations of the national authorities: *"Honestly, all I can say I did was follow the social distancing rules etc. It seems to me that I helped stop the spread of COVID-19 and the moment I got infected, I locked myself in the house:)). And now I can say that I am trying to help by getting vaccinated and supporting it, promoting it among the people around me and not only."* (Respondent 235, Female, 21 years old), *"For me, the involvement in the community that had increased personal significance was represented by making the decision about vaccination against COVID. Although I was not afraid of this virus, I considered that by vaccinating, I can contribute to getting things back to 'normal' as much as possible, and as far as it is in my control. For me, vaccination primarily denotes respect for other people and responsibility for the needs of those around me. I don't know if the fact that I live with my grandmother had some influence on this or not. I think it's possible because I considered her to be in the category of people who are vulnerable."* (Respondent 245, Female, 23 years old).

Summing up, this subtheme captured the varied ways in which emerging adults got engaged to help mitigate the unique risks of the COVID-19 virus. While some of them took a more general approach by getting vaccinated and respecting the official recommendations, others engaged to specifically help the categories most vulnerable to the virus, especially the elderly.

Subtheme 2. Initiatives related to the wider impact of the pandemic and the restrictions

This subtheme included activities aimed at addressing the wider impact of the pandemic and of the restrictions imposed to stop its spread, especially self-isolation. For instance, some respondents got engaged in activities aimed at helping people handle the consequences of self-isolation, such as the lack of physical exercise and loneliness: *"together with the XXX association, we organized an online training in which we brought a speaker from XXX (i.e., foreign country), who is a fitness trainer, and we held an event about how to do sports safely at home, what movements and exercises to do, and it was significant because, especially during the pandemic, many people remained sedentary and I think this event helped them"* (Respondent 9, Female, 19 years old), "*In the faculty, I participated in several online social activities (game night, movie evenings, socializing evenings). I tried to gather more people together (in some cases I also organized the events) to have fun together, to get to know each other better, to create a better atmosphere related to online activities (not just the stress of projects). I think that during the pandemic, relations cooled down, the number of interactions with colleagues and other people decreased, and in some cases a need for human contact and a feeling of loneliness began to develop. The events were aimed at creating bonds of friendship between people, reducing feelings of loneliness and increasing the quality of life during the Corona period, when social relations began to suffer.*" (Respondent 96, Male, 26 years old). Loneliness was also mentioned by other respondents, some of which also referred to the need to address mental health problems: "*I volunteered in 2 support telephone lines for people who feel lonely and a telephone line for anxiety and depression. At the beginning of the pandemic, all the activity of these lines moved online, so I was able to become a volunteer.*" (Respondent 243, Female, 22 years old), *"Together with my colleagues, I created a free psychological support page for all interested people. Being at the beginning of the pandemic, things were uncertain, panic set in and people became very anxious. I also created a platform where I wrote articles in a non-academic language, an Instagram page where I post things, precisely to have access to as many age groups as possible."* (Respondent 192, Female, 28 years old)

Some of the respondents mentioned getting engaged to help tackle the impact of the pandemic on those struggling financially and the deepening of already existing social inequalities: *"As we all know, this pandemic led to the beginning of an economic crisis whose presence will be felt even after the pandemic. Each person had to organize himself from an economic point of view; but those who had this problem before the pandemic felt the presence of this problem much more. In the association I belong to, we know that those who have had a hard time will have it even more during the pandemic. That's why we decided to act before Christmas, offering different clothes, food, toys and personal hygiene products. The activity took place offline, going to the homes of needy people in the commune (i.e., rural area) with bags full of the previously mentioned objects; with the aim of helping and offering a smile to people before the holidays. I did nothing but help to distribute the bags; but I consider that even so it was a brave involvement, with a positive impact on my conscience and the whole community."* (Respondent 79, Male, 19 years old).

Several respondents mentioned getting engaged to address the impact of the pandemic on education: *"At the moment I am part of the XXX team, as a mentor. My activity involves a weekly meeting with a group of first-year freshmen from the Faculty of XXX. In these meetings, I, as a mentor, have the duty to be a support for freshmen in any difficulty/question/situation they have. In the 2 meetings I've had so far, I've answered students' questions about note-taking, how to study effectively, classes, teachers, organizational aspects, and I've held get-to-know-you activities with freshmen. Meetings take place online. These meetings are valuable to me because I want to help those with less experience during this difficult time, especially since college is online. (...) I think my involvement in this activity is of great benefit to freshmen, as I hope to contribute to the prevention of college dropout and to be able to be a support for those who are starting this new stage in their lives."* (Respondent 1, Female, 22 years old*), "An event from the pandemic period is related to the moment when we resumed doing activities with children from families that do not have a favorable situation. After a period when they were locked up and had no one to guide them, we were able to get involved in their education. For me it was meaningful because I was able to help develop a child in terms of education. My responsibilities were to help them solve their homework, do recreational activities and prepare with them in the subjects they were not able to cope with."* (Respondent 53, Female, 22 years old).

Summing up, this subtheme captures that some emerging adults got engaged in tackling the wider impact of the pandemic on varied domains, such as mental and physical health, education and financial struggles.

DISCUSSION

There have been growing concerns about the declining rates of civic engagement, especially in the understudied region of Eastern Europe (Ekman et al., 2016; Zaff et al., 2011). However, the COVID-19 pandemic created a societal crisis during which community engagement may have been unusually high, especially among emerging adults. Therefore, our study aimed to take an in-depth look at how Eastern European emerging adults engaged during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Types of civic engagement: General engagement

Two broad categories of community engagement were identified: *General engagement* (61.6%), and *Pandemic-related engagement* (38.4%). Interestingly, the majority of respondents reported involving in activities not directly related to handling the COVID-19 pandemic, although they were detailing activities which took place during it and were sometimes influenced by the pandemic conditions (e.g., conducting a workshop online instead of offline due to safety concerns and/or regulations). This is particularly interesting because the previous literature on community engagement during the pandemic had a strong focus on actions directly linked with the pandemic or its broader consequences on important life domains (e.g., Mao et al., 2021). Therefore, our results shed light on the understudied forms of engagement conducted during the pandemic, without being directly linked to it, and possibly suggest ways of engagement emerging adults also prefer in non-crisis times. Interestingly, several of these subthemes could be related to generativity, a concept broadly defined as *"the human experience of contributing to and promoting lives of others and oneself."* (Kim et al, 2017, p.7).

The most popular subtheme was *Passing on Knowledge* (47.16% from the responses from this theme), which was often linked to emerging adults' desire to raise awareness about social issues: "*I contributed to creating and delivering online sessions within a mental health campaign from XXX. I felt that I was sharing relevant and useful information for students regarding mental health."* (Respondent 248, Female, 23 years old)". This subtheme resembles one of the facets of generativity included in the Loyola Generativity Scale (McAdams & St. Aubin, 1992), namely passing on knowledge, skills, and so on, to others, especially those from future generations. Our responses do not necessarily suggest a focus on the next generations, which aligns with the more recent perspective that generativity is not only relevant for older adults and limited to concern for future generations (e.g., Kim et al., 2017).

The subtheme *Helping disadvantaged groups* referred to activities conducted mainly to help specific disadvantaged categories, such as children with health problems: *"I participated in volunteering activities within school activities, within the institution where I carry out my activity. I organized volunteer campaigns, together with my colleagues, to help different social categories, especially children with health problems. We have created campaigns, sales exhibitions, fundraising activities. We donated toys and various other products to families with many children."* (Respondent 60, Female, 28 years old). This subtheme also resembles a facet of generativity from the Loyola Generativity Scale (McAdams & St. Aubin, 1992), namely caring for and taking responsibility for other people.

The subtheme *Organizing events* centered around playing a role in the organization of events for other people, sometimes overlapping with the respondents' desire to pass on their knowledge: *"I was involved in an anti-bullying campaign that I coordinated and still coordinate. This aims to bring together specialists related to the reduction of bullying in schools, in order to provide them with information, but more than that, to help them create relationships at the national level and collaborate on effective projects."* (Respondent 156, Female, 24 years old). This subtheme could also be related to facets of generativity, such as making valuable contributions to the betterment of one's community (if respondents are organizing these events in hopes of improving their community) or caring for and taking responsibility for other persons, as other people will be benefiting from them (McAdams & St. Aubin, 1992). However, the similarity is less clear than in the case of the previously mentioned subthemes.

The last subtheme refers to *Political engagement*, with very few respondents mentioning political forms of engagement, such as voting: *"I voted. I wasn't home, I was in a different country. It was hard and inconvenient for me to do this, but I believe it is my duty to thick this off (i.e., do it)."* (Respondent 168, Male, 27 years old) and signing petitions which could potentially influence decision-making: *"I signed petitions for Greenpeace for the various events that they voice. It was the online signature for forests/animals on the brink of extinction, etc., it depends on the context and topic. I have always been for the natural environment and the importance of nature in a human context."* (Respondent 179, Female, 26 years old). What makes these results particularly worrying is that data collection was conducted shortly after the Romanian Parliamentary Elections from December of 2020. According to the official statistics released by the Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority (2020) only 31.84% of the eligible population voted in these elections. Taking a closer look at youth, The Romanian National Youth Council (2020) points out that, despite an increase from the attendance rate from the last parliamentary elections, as

much as 74.61% of the Romanians aged between 18 and 24 years old did not attend the elections. This percentage could be partially explained by the fact that the pandemic context prevented some youth from voting. However, the low prevalence of political engagement is worrying, as it could suggest a strong political apathy among Romanian emerging adults that might also be reflected in the results of the several important elections from 2024.

Although the types of engagement from this theme are not directly related to handling the pandemic, these emerging adults may have been motivated to get engaged by the uncertainty and challenges of the pandemic. Previous research suggests that, when faced with the crisis generated by the war in Ukraine, Romanians' motivations for engagement were related to the desire to express their personal values (Marinica & Negru-Subtirica, 2023). However, this study did not assess whether respondents also got engaged in activities not directly related to the war in Ukraine. Therefore, it is possible that crisis situations, like the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic, could make emerging adults more willing to engage civically in diverse activities which allow them to act upon their values, not just in activities directly related to the crisis that enhances their motivation. However, for some respondents, engagement unrelated to the crisis could simply be a continuation of their previous activities, as is the case for the volunteers who decided to pass their knowledge to the younger generation from their student organization: *"Well, first of all, the activity in which I was involved consisted in establishing a working strategy of a student organization for the current academic year. My role in this activity was to guide the new people who will deal with the implementation of this strategy and to give them advice."* (Respondent 153, Male, 26 years old).

While it is possible that these students would have carried out these activities in non-crisis times as well, without the pandemic playing a crucial role in their decision to remain engaged, it is notable they did not stop their engagement during the pandemic. In line with research suggesting that those who stopped their engagement during the pandemic might be particularly hard to re-engage (Gray et al., 2024), organizations and institutions working with volunteers should prioritize helping their volunteers to remain engaged during crises. Although the help of new volunteers can be crucial in times of crisis, those with more experience could have an easier time adapting to the challenges, as they are already familiar with the procedures and tasks from the organization. Therefore, organizations should ideally welcome new volunteers, while also helping the old ones adapt to the new circumstances. In line with the activities identified in this theme, it is possible that one way to attract Eastern European emerging adult volunteers is by creating opportunities which allow them to pass on their knowledge, help disadvantaged groups, and organize events.

Types of civic engagement: Pandemic-related engagement

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

The first subtheme included activities which were aimed at mitigating the risks of the COVID-19 virus, such as delivering food and medicine to the elderly who needed to self-isolate: *"I help the elderly in the block (i.e., of flats) with the supply of essential products/medicines, basic food, paying the bills."* (Respondent 16, Male, 28 years old). This aligns with the results of a rapid review about COVID-19 volunteering in the United Kingdom, which found that food shopping was one of the most prevalent activities, especially at the beginning of the pandemic (Mao et al., 2021), with people self-isolating and the elderly being perceived as the most vulnerable categories (Jones et al., 2020). Besides providing help to the most vulnerable categories, a few of the respondents also mentioned following the official recommendations as a way of contributing to their community by limiting the spread of the virus and protecting their loved ones, despite not perceiving themselves at risk: *"For me, the involvement in the community that had increased personal significance was represented by making the decision about vaccination against COVID. Although I was not afraid of this virus, I considered that by vaccinating, I can contribute to getting things back to 'normal' as much as possible, and as far as it is in my control. For me, vaccination primarily denotes respect for other people and responsibility for the needs of those around me. I don't know if the fact that I live with my grandmother had some influence on this or not. I think it's possible because I considered her to be in the category of people who are vulnerable."* (Respondent 245, Female, 23 years old). This aligns with research showing that some Romanians' decision to get vaccinated was not always driven by medical concerns, but sometimes by the desire to protect those around them and a perceived civic duty to do so (Mărcău et al., 2022).

The second subtheme was *Initiatives related to the wider impact of the COVID-19 pandemic*, which differentiates itself from the first subtheme because it can include activities which are not so specific to the challenges of the pandemic, but which address its wider impact on different life domains, such as feeling lonely or being sedentary as a result of quarantines. Respondents from this subtheme often emphasized how the wider impact of the pandemic motivated them to get engaged in these activities: "*we held an event about how to do sports safely at home, what movements and exercises to do, and it was significant because,*

especially during the pandemic, many people remained sedentary and I think this event helped them" (Respondent 9, Female, 19 years old), "*I think that during the pandemic, relations cooled down, the number of interactions with colleagues and other people decreased, and in some cases a need for human contact and a feeling of loneliness began to develop. The events were aimed at creating bonds of friendship between people, reducing feelings of loneliness and increasing the quality of life during the Corona period, when social relations began to suffer.*" (Respondent 96, Male, 26 years old). This aligns with the results of the review about COVID-19 volunteering in the United Kingdom which found that, as the pandemic prolonged, more and more people got engaged in addressing the wider influence of the pandemic on other domains, such as employment and mental health (Mao et al., 2021). Choosing to engage in this way could also be related to the limited number of necessary volunteers for the activities directly related to the pandemic (e.g., Simsa et al., 2019). Therefore, it is possible that some emerging adults got engaged in ways less directly related to the pandemic simply because these actions were more accessible to them. Considering the low level of engagement in Eastern Europe (Kostelka, 2014), the crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic could have been an opportunity to engage a population otherwise unengaged. In our sample, this seems to be the case for 17.4% of the respondents. Keeping these volunteers engaged in the long run could be an important first step towards slightly increasing civic engagement among emerging adults in Eastern Europe, in line with research suggesting that the majority of COVID-19 volunteers planned to continue volunteering (Gray et al., 2024). Therefore, non-governmental organizations and other institutions working with volunteers during crisis situations could focus on trying to maintain new volunteers engaged in the long run, possibly including them in new types of activities after the crisis is over. Keeping these new volunteers engaged could enhance the benefits of volunteering not only on the individual level (e.g., by providing emerging adults with additional opportunities), but also on the social level by addressing community's problems and supporting democracy in Eastern Europe by increasing community engagement (Koc-Michalska et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

Our paper contributes to the scarce literature on community engagement among Eastern European youth by researching how Romanian emerging adults get engaged in times of crisis. Two main themes were identified regarding their community engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic: *General engagement* (subthemes *Passing on knowledge*, *Helping disadvantaged groups*, *Organizing*

events, and *Political engagement*), and *Pandemic-related engagement* (subthemes *Initiatives directly related to the COVID-19 virus*, and *Initiatives related to the wider impact of the COVID-19 pandemic*), suggesting that many emerging adults got engaged in activities which were not directly related to the pandemic and very few got engaged through political channels. Future research should focus on taking a comprehensive approach of community engagement, while investigating ways to engage youth in diverse activities, including those related to political channels.

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