

SPIRITUALITY AND QUALITY OF LIFE: THE ROLE OF NEW AGE MOVEMENTS IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA

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SUMMARY

This paper investigates the intersection of spirituality and quality of life in post-communist Romania, emphasizing the rise of New Age movements such as yoga, Reiki, astrology, and energy healing. Drawing on existing academic literature, historical accounts, and sociological theory - complemented by an original quantitative survey conducted in June 2025 - the research explores the socio-cultural implications of these spiritual practices. Romania's spiritual evolution is examined across three historical phases: the interwar period marked by Orthodox dominance and esoteric experimentation, the communist era characterized by religious repression, and the post-1989 era defined by spiritual liberalization and global wellness culture. The article is grounded in multiple theoretical frameworks: Secularization Theory, Subjective Well-Being Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Postmodern Consumer Culture Theory. These models contextualize the emergence of spirituality as a tool for psychological resilience and social affiliation amid institutional erosion and neoliberal transitions. Data from a June 2025 online survey on a sample of 102 respondents engaged in spiritual practices, including yoga, meditation, and energy healing, reveal high levels of participation among women with higher education from urban area, with notable associations between spiritual engagement, perceived emotional resilience, and overall life satisfaction. This interdisciplinary, mixed-methods analysis contributes to understanding how post-communist societies negotiate well-being, belonging, and personal meaning in an era shaped by rapid cultural and economic transformations.

Keywords: *New Age movement, quality of life, social identity, spirituality, well-being*

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of Romania's social and spiritual landscape following the fall of communism has given rise to new avenues for self-exploration and well-being. Among these, New Age spiritual movements have emerged as prominent alternatives to both traditional religion and secularism, offering individuals pathways to meaning, self-development, and social belonging. The present article aims to examine how such movements contribute to quality of life of the participants in Romania, addressing both their psychological and sociological implications. The decision to focus on this subject, stems from the growing popularity of New

Age practices in Romanian cities, alongside a broader global trend in wellness culture. Existing literature on post-communist transitions, secularization, and alternative spirituality highlights the impact of such movements on identity construction and well-being. However, little research has specifically examined their role in Romania within the broader historical context of religious suppression, neoliberal expansion, and cultural transformation. The analysis seeks to fill this gap by providing an interdisciplinary analysis that connects historical shifts, social identity, and quality of life.

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The inquiry was conducted using a secondary research methodology, incorporating historical analysis, sociological theories, and discourse analysis of media representations of New Age spirituality in Romania. The study reviewed academic sources, historical records, and qualitative research findings to assess how New Age movements shape perceptions of quality of life in post-communist urban settings. The paper begins by exploring the historical and sociological evolution of spirituality in Romania, tracing its transformation across different periods and cultural shifts. It then delves into the research approach, highlighting the theoretical perspectives and methodologies that shape the analysis. The discussion that follows examines the intricate relationship between spirituality, well-being, and identity, revealing how New Age movements have influenced personal fulfillment and social belonging. In the final section, the paper reflects on the broader impact of these spiritual practices on quality of life and considers potential directions for future research in this evolving field. Complementing the theoretical exploration, a quantitative survey was conducted in

June 2025 on a sample of 102 participants engaged in New Age spiritual practices in Romania.

A mixed-methods design is employed, combining a literature-based qualitative analysis with original quantitative data to examine the role of New Age spirituality in shaping quality of life in post-communist Romania. The qualitative dimension draws on an extensive interdisciplinary literature review, incorporating historical, sociological, and cultural perspectives to trace the evolution of Romanian spirituality across three key periods: the interwar era, shaped by Orthodox hegemony and emerging esoteric thought; the communist period, marked by state-imposed atheism and suppression of religious expression; and the post-1989 phase, characterized by spiritual liberalization, global wellness culture, and the increasing visibility of alternative spiritual movements.

This conceptual foundation is informed by several theoretical frameworks. Secularization Theory provides a lens to understand how modernity and political transition have reshaped spiritual expression in

Romania. Following the fall of communism, the spiritual landscape did not revert solely to Orthodox religiosity but diversified to include personalized, non-institutional forms of spirituality. As argued by Dungaciu (2004), the Romanian case reflects broader Eastern European trends where the weakening of institutional religion has created space for pluralistic and experience-based spiritual engagements. The rise of practices such as yoga, Reiki, astrology, and neopaganism signals a shift from doctrinal adherence to individualized belief systems embedded in global cultural flows.

Complementing this, Subjective Well-Being Theory (Diener, 1984) frames spirituality as a potential contributor to life satisfaction, emotional stability, and psychological health. Particularly in post-communist societies where socio-economic upheavals have disrupted traditional identity structures, individuals may turn to spiritual practices as tools for self-regulation, meaning-making, and stress management. These practices align with the theory's emphasis on internal perceptions of well-being over material or structural conditions, offering pathways to resilience and personal fulfillment.

In addition, Social Identity Theory (Hogg, 2016) offers insights into how participation in spiritual groups, whether online or in-person, shapes individual and collective identities. New Age communities often emphasize belonging, shared values, and personal growth, providing psychological and social benefits comparable to those of traditional religious institutions. Meanwhile, Postmodern Consumer Culture Theory helps illuminate the commodification of spirituality within Romania's neoliberal context, where wellness and self-care are increasingly marketed as consumable experiences. Practices once rooted in mysticism or healing are now packaged in coaching sessions, mindfulness apps, and spiritual retreats, reflecting the broader cultural logic of individual optimization and lifestyle branding.

To reinforce the theoretical exploration with empirical evidence, a structured online survey was conducted between 18–25 June 2025 on a sample of 102 respondents from Romania who engage in New Age spiritual practices, including meditation, yoga, Reiki, and astrology. While not statistically generalizable, the survey aimed to explore patterns of spiritual engagement, perceived emotional and psychological benefits, and institutional trust, offering empirical support to the broader conceptual analysis and adding measurable insights into the subjective dimensions of well-being. The questionnaire, disseminated via social media platforms, wellness blogs, and Facebook groups, gathered information on demographics (age, gender, education, residence), the type and frequency of spiritual practices, perceived benefits such as life satisfaction and emotional resilience, and levels of trust in both institutional religion and alternative spiritual communities.

The respondents were predominantly urban (92%), female (91%), and highly educated, with 80% holding university or postgraduate degrees. Most participants practiced spirituality weekly or more often, and more than half had been involved for over three years. Survey data revealed significant associations between frequent spiritual practice and enhanced subjective well-being, including reduced stress and greater emotional balance. These empirical insights enrich the theoretical discussion by illustrating how contemporary spiritual practices operate not only as personal coping mechanisms but also as culturally embedded responses to post-communist transformation and existential uncertainty.

The research is exploratory in nature, aiming to investigate underexamined aspects of spiritual engagement and its perceived impact on well-being in contemporary Romanian society. The goal is not to produce generalizable results, but to map tendencies and raise questions for future empirical testing.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF SPIRITUALITY IN ROMANIA

The Interwar Era (1918–1947): Orthodox Dominance and Esoteric Influences

The interwar period in Romania was marked by a strong national identity intertwined with Orthodox Christianity, which played a central role in shaping both societal values and state ideology. Following the unification of Greater Romania in 1918, religion became a key pillar in reinforcing a sense of national unity and cultural continuity. The Romanian Orthodox Church held considerable influence over education, politics, and public morality, maintaining a close relationship with the state. In rural communities, which made up the majority of the population, religious rituals and church attendance remained fundamental aspects of daily life. Spirituality was deeply embedded in folklore, traditional beliefs, and local customs, blending Orthodox teachings with older, pre-Christian superstitions. However, despite this dominance, the interwar period also

witnessed the rise of esoteric and mystical movements, particularly among Romania's intellectual and artistic circles. Inspired by global trends in theosophy, Eastern philosophies, and Western esotericism, these movements introduced alternative perspectives on spirituality that contrasted with institutionalized religion. One of the most notable figures of this era was Mircea Eliade, who explored the study of mysticism, yoga, and comparative spirituality (David, 2012). Eliade's works, influenced by his personal experiences in India, helped introduce Eastern spiritual practices such as meditation and asceticism to a Romanian audience. Similarly, other scholars and writers, particularly those involved in avant-garde cultural movements, began integrating esoteric and occult elements into their philosophical and literary explorations.

A pivotal figure in this esoteric landscape was Marcel Avramescu. In 1934, he founded *Memra*, the only Romanian esoteric periodical of the time (Buleu, 2012), which served as a platform for discussions on mysticism, Kabbalah, and other esoteric subjects. Beyond his editorial work, Avramescu was an avant-garde poet and writer, publishing articles under pseudonyms like Jonathan X., Uranus and Mark Abrams. His writings, featured in Tudor Arghezi's magazine *Bilete de Papagal*, showcased his engagement with contemporary artistic movements and his exploration of esoteric themes. Later in life, Avramescu experienced a spiritual transformation, converting to Orthodox Christianity. He graduated from the Theology College in 1948 with a thesis on the New Testament and Kabbalah, reflecting his continued interest in mystical traditions. Subsequently, he became an Orthodox priest, serving in various locations including Bucharest, Tulcea, Văliug, and Jimbolia. Avramescu's multifaceted contributions, ranging from his editorial endeavors and literary works to his spiritual journey, underscore his significant role in shaping Romania's esoteric and religious landscape during a period of cultural transformation.

Concurrently, the Symbolist movement in Romania, active since the late 19th century, continued to influence the cultural milieu during the interwar years. This movement, characterized by its cosmopolitanism and endorsement of Westernization, promoted a distinctly urban culture that often incorporated esoteric themes. Romanian Symbolists assimilated elements of France's Symbolism, Decadence, and Parnassianism, contributing to a rich tapestry of literature and visual arts that subtly challenged traditional religious narratives. These developments indicate that, despite the overarching influence of Orthodox Christianity, there was a vibrant undercurrent of esoteric exploration in Romania's interwar period. Intellectuals and artists sought alternative spiritual expressions, contributing to a diverse and dynamic spiritual landscape. For a more comprehensive understanding of this period, the article "Esotericism in Romanian Religious History" (Băncilă, 2023) provides an in-depth analysis of the indigenization of various esoteric currents in Romania.

These esoteric currents, while not mainstream, played a crucial role in diversifying the spiritual and cultural expressions of interwar Romania, leaving a lasting impact on its religious and intellectual history. While Orthodox Christianity dominated public life, emerging esoteric movements among elites created a parallel spiritual discourse that warrants further comparative analysis with Western European trends. Despite these intellectual developments, mainstream Romanian society remained deeply rooted in Orthodox traditions, and alternative spiritual movements never gained mass appeal during this period. However, they laid the groundwork for later developments in Romanian spirituality, particularly in the post-communist era, when New Age movements and Eastern philosophies resurfaced as tools for self-discovery and well-being. The interwar period thus represents a complex

intersection of religious conservatism and intellectual experimentation, where Orthodox Christianity maintained its grip on the general population while esoteric ideas quietly influenced a subset of Romania's cultural elite.

The Communist Era (1947–1989): Suppression and Underground Spirituality

During the Communist era in Romania (1947–1989), the state pursued an aggressive anti-religious campaign aimed at eradicating religious faith and practice from society. Under the doctrine of Marxist–Leninist atheism, religion was viewed as an ideology of the bourgeoisie, incompatible with the principles of socialism. Consequently, the regime sought to suppress religious institutions and promote atheism as the state ideology (Pascan, 2023).

The Romanian Orthodox Church, as the predominant religious institution, faced significant challenges during this period. While the church was not officially abolished, it was subjected to strict state control and surveillance. Clergy members were often coerced into collaboration with the regime, and those who resisted faced persecution. The state's interference extended to the appointment of church leaders, censorship of religious publications, and restrictions on religious education. This produced a dual response from within the Church: while some leaders passively adapted to state directives in order to preserve institutional continuity, others engaged in subtle or overt forms of resistance, attempting to safeguard spiritual integrity and autonomy. Despite these pressures, the church endeavored to maintain its religious practices and community services, navigating a complex relationship with the communist authorities (Turcescu & Stan, 2015). In response to the suppression of official religious institutions, underground spiritual movements emerged as alternative avenues for religious expression. These clandestine groups often operated in secret, conducting religious services, study groups, and other spiritual activities away from the prying eyes of the state. The state's secret police, actively sought to infiltrate and dismantle these underground networks, viewing them as subversive elements that threatened the socialist order. Despite the risks, these underground movements provided a sense of community and spiritual solace for many individuals during this oppressive period (Kapaló & Povedák, 2022). The state's anti-religious campaign was not limited to the Orthodox Church but extended to other religious groups as well. For instance, Jehovah's Witnesses faced severe persecution due to their refusal to comply with state mandates, such as compulsory military service, and their international connections, which aroused suspicion during the Cold War era. Many members were arrested, and their activities were driven underground. These forms of resistance, both institutional and grassroots, illustrate the spectrum of opposition that religious communities mounted against the state's secularizing pressures. It wasn't until after the fall of communism in 1989 that Jehovah's Witnesses

and other suppressed religious groups were able to practice their faith openly and legally.

Throughout the communist period, the Romanian state's efforts to suppress religious expression were met with both compliance and resistance. While some religious institutions and individuals acquiesced to state demands, others sought covert means to preserve their spiritual practices. This era left a complex legacy on Romania's religious landscape, influencing the nature of religious practice and belief in the post-communist period.

The Post-1989 Era: Spiritual Liberalization and the Rise of New Age Movements

Following the 1989 revolution, Romania experienced a significant transformation in its religious and spiritual landscape. The fall of the communist regime led to the lifting of restrictions on religious practices, resulting in a resurgence of interest in both traditional religions and alternative spiritual movements. This period of spiritual liberalization saw the Romanian Orthodox Church regain prominence, while simultaneously, New Age movements and other forms of spirituality began to flourish.

The newfound religious freedom allowed for the establishment and growth of various spiritual organizations. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness, commonly known as the Hare Krishna movement, established communities in cities like Bucharest and Timișoara, organizing cultural festivals and programs such as the annual Rath Yatra, which attracted thousands of participants (Bordaș, 2020).

Transcendental Meditation, which had been prohibited during the communist era, also experienced a revival, particularly among intellectuals in urban centers like Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca. Additionally, the Sahaja Yoga movement, led by Sri Mataji Nirmala Devi, gained a substantial following in Romania, with thousands of practitioners across multiple cities. The movement's focus on self-realization and spiritual awakening appealed to those exploring new forms of spirituality beyond traditional religious frameworks. This era also witnessed the emergence of neopagan movements, such as Zalmoxianism, which sought to reconstruct ancient Dacian and Thracian spiritual practices (Palaga, 2022). Organizations like the Gebeleizis Society aimed to reconnect Romanians with their pre-Christian roots, reflecting a broader interest in indigenous spirituality and cultural identity.

The proliferation of these New Age and alternative spiritual movements in post-1989 Romania can be attributed to several factors. The collapse of the communist regime left a spiritual vacuum, as the enforced atheism of the previous decades had eroded traditional religious structures. In this context, many individuals sought new forms of spiritual expression to fill the void. The global spread of New Age philosophies and the increased accessibility of information through media and travel also facilitated the introduction and adoption of diverse spiritual practices. This period saw an explosion of spiritual experimentation, yet the regulatory and institutional responses to these movements remain underexplored.

THE INTERSECTION OF SPIRITUALITY, WELL-BEING, AND IDENTITY

One of the central findings of the June 2025 survey is that New Age spirituality functions as a coping mechanism for individuals navigating the socio-economic and psychological transitions of post-1989 Romania. The uncertainty associated with the shift from communism to capitalism, compounded by globalization and increasing individual pressures, has fostered a collective desire for emotional regulation, inner peace, and existential clarity. Practices such as yoga, meditation, Reiki, and astrology, reported by the majority of participants, are widely adopted as tools for mental well-being, self-healing, and empowerment.

From the perspective of Subjective Well-Being Theory, these spiritual practices support personal happiness and life satisfaction by enhancing self-awareness, mindfulness, and emotional balance, rather than depending on material or external conditions (Gupta, et.al., 2016). A large majority of respondents in the present study reported that engaging in spiritual practices contributed to reduced stress levels and enhanced emotional resilience, aligning with existing research on the psychological benefits of contemplative and holistic approaches. Additionally, participants

expressed high levels of life satisfaction, suggesting that spirituality functions as an important mechanism for fostering subjective well-being by promoting inner balance and a sense of purpose (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009).

Beyond personal well-being, the data also illustrate the role of spirituality in identity construction. New Age movements provide a fluid and self-directed framework for identity development, contrasting with the rigidity of institutional religious affiliation. This dynamic is particularly evident among the study's predominantly educated female participants, many of whom engage in spiritual practices not as fixed belief systems, but as evolving pathways of self-discovery and expression. According to Social Identity Theory, spiritual participation contributes to a sense of group belonging and shared values. In this context, 72% of respondents reported participating in spiritual communities, both online and in-person, suggesting that these movements fulfill the collective identity function traditionally associated with organized religion (Chin, 2006).

The survey also revealed a distinct trust shift: while only 6% of participants expressed high trust in the Orthodox Church, 75% reported moderate to high trust

in New Age communities. This finding aligns with Secularization Theory, which posits that institutional religion declines as societies modernize, giving way to individualized and pluralistic spiritualities. However, in the Romanian context, this shift does not indicate a full rejection of traditional religion but rather a transformation. Many respondents combine Orthodox rituals with alternative practices like astrology or Reiki, creating hybrid spiritual systems, a phenomenon consistent with the concept of religious bricolage (Heelas, 2006). A noteworthy shift was observed in religious self-identification. Participants practicing for one to three years were more likely to maintain a traditional religious identity, with 35.5% identifying as “religious.” In contrast, those with longer involvement - four to six years or more than seven years - tended to adopt more individualized or hybrid spiritual identities, often identifying as “somewhat religious” or distancing themselves from institutional religion altogether. This shift may reflect a process of spiritual individuation that occurs as practitioners integrate alternative practices more deeply into their lives.

Another major pattern concerns the commodification of spirituality, which reflects broader dynamics described in Postmodern Consumer Culture Theory. The increasing availability of spiritual services, such as yoga retreats, mindfulness coaching, and energy healing, points to a marketplace where spiritual fulfillment is packaged and sold as part of a wellness lifestyle (York, 2001). Romanian media representations and online platforms often frame spirituality in terms of productivity, personal success, and optimization (Hodge & Turner, 2024), indicating how spiritual engagement intersects with neoliberal values.

Finally, spirituality appears to offer a form of healing from both historical trauma and ideological disillusionment. The repression of religion during communism, followed by the destabilization caused by abrupt democratization and neoliberal expansion, left many individuals with a spiritual void and weakened collective identities. In line with recent research on identity and belief reconstruction (Mavor, Ysseldyk, 2020), spirituality in contemporary Romania provides a mechanism for regaining existential orientation, rebuilding personal agency, and forming new communal bonds.

Spirituality as a Pillar of Quality of Life

Quality of life encompasses both objective factors (such as economic stability, healthcare, and education) and subjective experiences (such as life satisfaction, emotional fulfillment, and a sense of meaning). Over the past decade, Romania has experienced notable improvements in its quality of life according to official statistics. According to data from the National Institute of Statistics (INS), Romania's Human Development Index increased from 0.74 in 2012 to 0.85 in 2024, reflecting gains in health, education, and income dimensions (UNDP, 2023; CountryEconomy, 2024). In 2024, average life expectancy at birth reached 76.6 years, comprising 72.9 years for men and 80.5 years

for women (Eurostat, 2024). Meanwhile, subjective life satisfaction - assessed on a 0–10 scale - also trended upward. In 2012, individuals with tertiary education in Romania reported an average satisfaction of approximately 7.3, compared to around 6.9 among those with only secondary education. By 2023, these averages had risen to 8.4 and 7.8, respectively (Eurostat, 2024). This consistent gap highlights both a general increase in well-being across educational levels and the persistent advantage held by higher-educated groups. Together with improvements in health and socio-economic indicators from 2012 to 2024, these findings suggest a broad-based, multidimensional enhancement of Romania's socio-economic landscape.

Despite improvements in several quality-of-life indicators since 2012, Romania continues to face demographic challenges. That year, the country recorded a birth rate of 9.2 per 1,000 population and a death rate of 12.4 per 1,000, with a total fertility rate of approximately 1.59 children per woman, according to data from the INS and Eurostat. By 2018, the birth rate had dropped to 8.7, while the death rate remained high at 12 per 1,000, and the fertility rate slightly increased to 1.71. Most recently, 2023–2024 figures indicate a birth rate of 9.3, a death rate of 13.4, and a fertility decline to 1.65 children per woman (INS, Eurostat, 2024).

These trends highlight Romania's ongoing natural population decline and sustained fertility rates below the replacement level. These statistics illustrate Romania's ongoing journey toward enhancing the quality of life for its citizens, highlighting both progress made and areas requiring continued attention. While these statistical indicators provide an essential framework for understanding the material and structural aspects of quality of life in Romania, such as economic stability, life expectancy, and education levels, they do not fully capture the subjective and existential dimensions that contribute to overall well-being. Beyond financial security, healthcare access, and demographic shifts, individual perceptions of happiness, life satisfaction, and personal fulfillment play a crucial role in shaping the lived experience of quality of life.

In this context, spirituality emerges as a parallel and complementary factor influencing how individuals define and pursue well-being. As Romania has transitioned through decades of political upheaval, economic restructuring, and globalization, the search for meaning, emotional stability, and identity has intensified. While objective improvements in quality of life are measurable, the inner experience of well-being, rooted in personal beliefs, social connections, and a sense of purpose, remains deeply subjective.

New Age spirituality, with its emphasis on self-discovery, emotional healing, and holistic well-being, provides an alternative lens through which many individuals navigate these complexities. Whether through meditation, energy healing, or personal growth practices, spirituality offers a means of interpreting personal struggles, coping with uncertainty, and

fostering a deeper connection to oneself and the world.

Spiritual engagement has evolved beyond the boundaries of traditional religious institutions, emerging as a comprehensive approach to personal development, emotional resilience, and social connection. Unlike the structured doctrines of institutional religion, modern spirituality, particularly within the New Age movement, emphasizes individual experience, personal transformation, and emotional well-being. In post-1989 Romania, these alternative spiritual practices have become fundamental pillars in shaping individuals' perceptions of quality of life, responding to deep-seated psychological, existential, and social needs that traditional institutions may no longer fully address. The intersection of spirituality, well-being, and identity in Romania reflects a profound transformation in belief systems and self-perception. New Age movements are more than just lifestyle trends, they represent a deeper societal shift toward self-directed spirituality, psychological well-being, and fluid identity formation. While institutional religion remains a cultural pillar, its monopoly on spiritual meaning has weakened, giving rise to diverse, personalized approaches to existential fulfillment. The findings of this study suggest that, in the post-1989 era, spiritual pluralism has become a defining characteristic of Romania's evolving socio-religious landscape, shaping the way individuals seek happiness, connection, and purpose in an increasingly complex world.

Spirituality, particularly in the context of New Age movements, enhances subjective well-being and contributes to individuals' overall life satisfaction in several important ways. First, spirituality acts as a psychological coping mechanism, helping individuals manage stress, anxiety, and uncertainty in the post-communist era. Practices like yoga, meditation, Reiki, and mindfulness are associated with reduced stress levels, improved mental clarity (Channawar, 2023), and greater emotional balance, aligning with Subjective Well-Being Theory, which emphasizes that happiness is influenced by internal perceptions and emotional resilience rather than solely by external conditions. Second, spirituality plays a crucial role in identity formation and social belonging, as Social Identity Theory suggests that a sense of community is essential for well-being (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). New Age movements provide alternative social spaces where individuals can engage in self-directed spiritual growth and foster a sense of belonging, particularly for those disillusioned with institutionalized religion. Third, spirituality serves as a source of meaning and purpose, offering alternative existential frameworks that help individuals navigate personal struggles and find greater life satisfaction. Additionally, spirituality has emerged as a tool for emotional healing, particularly in Romania's post-communist landscape, where individuals continue to process economic instability, social fragmentation, and historical trauma. Many find that spiritual engagement allows them to regain a sense

of control, process past hardships, and build emotional resilience. Lastly, the commodification of spirituality has transformed well-being into a marketable product, making self-improvement tools such as wellness retreats, coaching programs, and online spiritual communities widely accessible. While some critique this trend as inauthentic, it reflects a modern, individualized approach to happiness, where people actively curate their own spiritual journeys as a means of enhancing personal growth and life satisfaction. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that New Age spirituality in Romania is not merely a trend but a multifaceted force that enhances well-being, shapes identity, and redefines quality of life in an evolving socio-cultural landscape.

One of the most significant aspects of spirituality's impact on quality of life is its role in enhancing emotional and cognitive resilience. Spiritual practices such as meditation, energy healing, and yoga cultivate mindfulness, self-awareness, and a greater sense of control over one's thoughts and emotions. Unlike rigid dogmatic frameworks, these practices allow for a dynamic and evolving approach to personal development, fostering adaptability in the face of social uncertainty, economic struggles, and existential anxiety. The rise of self-help literature, spiritual coaching, and wellness retreats in Romania further reinforces the idea that spirituality is no longer solely about metaphysical beliefs - it is actively sought out as a practical tool for psychological well-being. Additionally, spiritual engagement plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of purpose and existential fulfillment. Traditional religious institutions once provided overarching narratives of meaning, offering individuals a sense of belonging within a structured cosmic order. However, with the decline of institutionalized religion, many Romanians, particularly younger generations, have turned toward New Age philosophies and self-discovery frameworks to construct their own meaning-making systems. Concepts such as energy alignment, karma, and universal consciousness offer alternative ways of understanding life's challenges, allowing individuals to perceive personal struggles as part of a larger transformative journey rather than as isolated setbacks.

From a sociological perspective, spirituality also reinforces social cohesion and communal identity in an era where traditional collective structures have weakened. Many New Age movements function as modern spiritual communities, providing spaces for individuals to interact, share experiences, and build relationships based on shared values and practices. Whether through local meditation groups, online spiritual forums, or holistic healing workshops, these communities serve as vital sources of emotional support, encouragement, and social belonging. In post-communist Romania, where historical shifts have fragmented collective identity, such spaces play an essential role in rebuilding interpersonal trust and fostering a sense of connection beyond institutional frameworks.

To better understand how spirituality contributes to subjective well-being in post-communist Romania, survey results were analyzed in relation to broader quality-of-life indicators. Respondents widely reported that spiritual practices, such as meditation, yoga, Reiki, and astrology, played a meaningful role in managing stress, enhancing emotional resilience, and increasing life satisfaction. These subjective outcomes, as reflected in the empirical data, complement objective indicators like educational attainment and life expectancy. The findings suggest that for many Romanians, particularly women from urban environments with higher education, spirituality has become a personalized strategy for navigating the psychological demands of modern life, echoing key insights from subjective well-being theory and contemporary identity frameworks. The majority of respondents were female (91%). The distribution of education levels among respondents confirms a strong academic profile: 51% had completed university studies, and an additional 29% held postgraduate degrees, indicating a strong presence of highly educated individuals increasingly drawn to non-traditional spiritual frameworks. In contrast, only a minority reported completing only high school (11%) or post-secondary non-university education (9%). This educational landscape likely shapes how participants approach spirituality, favoring individualized, reflective, and eclectic practices over inherited religious dogma.

This demographic pattern can be interpreted through postmodern consumer culture theory, which emphasizes the appeal of individualized, experiential approaches to meaning-making among populations with higher educational attainment. Participants reported frequent spiritual engagement: 80% practiced at least once per week, and more than half had maintained their practices for over three years. These consistent patterns of involvement suggest that spiritual practice serves not merely as a passing trend, but as a long-term strategy for managing psychological and existential challenges.

The respondent profile mirrors global patterns in contemporary spirituality, where educated women are among the most actively engaged in wellness-oriented practices. Theories such as Postmaterialist Value Shift (Inglehart, 2018) suggest that individuals whose basic material needs are met tend to seek fulfillment through self-actualization and personal development. In this context, spiritual practices like meditation, yoga, or Reiki are not merely symbolic but function as tools for emotional regulation, identity construction, and existential meaning-making. Subjective Well-Being Theory also supports this trend, emphasizing that psychological well-being is enhanced by perceived agency and intentional emotional self-care, attributes closely tied to mindfulness-based and embodied spiritual practices. In the Romanian post-communist context, these patterns further reflect how historical disillusionment with institutional ideologies has fueled the search for alternative, individualized systems of meaning and healing. This pattern reflects a broader

post-secular cultural shift, where rational-scientific worldviews coexist with renewed spiritual exploration. Education plays a central role in this shift, not by suppressing spirituality, but by enabling individuals to deconstruct religious dogma and reconstruct meaning through eclectic, self-directed spiritual engagements. In this sense, education acts as a catalyst for reflexivity, encouraging critical evaluation of inherited beliefs and fostering openness to alternative spiritual paradigms.

Educational attainment also correlates with specific spiritual choices. Respondents with university or postgraduate degrees report the highest levels of engagement in yoga and meditation, each surpassing 35%. This supports the notion that such practices appeal to those with access to wellness culture and resources associated with self-development. Conversely, energy healing appears more frequently among individuals with secondary education, pointing to a broader, more diverse appeal of certain New Age modalities across educational backgrounds.

Popular activities included yoga (38%), meditation (33%), and energy healing (13%), often practiced in combination, highlighting the eclectic and personalized nature of spiritual engagement. An expanded analysis of practice combinations reveals that a significant portion of respondents engage in multiple spiritual activities simultaneously, indicating a holistic and integrative approach to New Age spirituality. For example, 23.5% of participants reported practicing both yoga and meditation, forming the most frequent pairing. Additionally, 17.6% practice a triad of yoga, meditation, and astrology, while 9.8% combine yoga and astrology. These figures suggest that New Age spirituality is not practiced in isolation but rather as a composite system, where different modalities are selected to serve diverse personal needs - ranging from physical wellness (yoga) to emotional balance (meditation) and metaphysical guidance (astrology). A detailed analysis of the distribution of spiritual practices reveals clear patterns linked to age, education level, and gender. Among younger participants (under 45), meditation emerges as the most frequently practiced method, with approximately 41% engaging in it regularly. This cohort also shows strong interest in yoga (40%), indicating a preference for practices associated with mindfulness, stress reduction, and physical wellness. In contrast, older participants (over 45) report lower levels of engagement in meditation (22%), while showing a higher tendency toward crystal therapy (28%), suggesting an orientation toward symbolic or metaphysical approaches to healing. The empirical data offer a descriptive overview of participants' engagement with spiritual practices and their perceived psychosocial benefits. When situated within a broader analytical framework, these responses suggest that spirituality operates not merely as a system of belief, but as an embodied mechanism for emotional regulation, identity formation, and social affiliation. Such interpretative findings correspond with established theoretical models concerning subjective well-being,

community dynamics, and the commodification of spiritual experience in contemporary Romanian society. The original survey data offer a nuanced view of how New Age spiritual practices are integrated into daily life and perceived to impact well-being among urban Romanians. Several clear patterns emerge.

From the perspective of Subjective Well-Being Theory, these practices function as mechanisms for enhancing emotional regulation and life satisfaction. When asked to rate overall life satisfaction on a 5-point scale - where 1 represents very low satisfaction and 5 very high - 82% selected scores of 4 or 5. Similarly, 89% reported that their spiritual practices helped reduce stress and anxiety, and 92% stated that they enhanced emotional resilience. These findings illustrate how spirituality contributes to subjective well-being, particularly among individuals navigating the complexities of post-communist societal transformation.

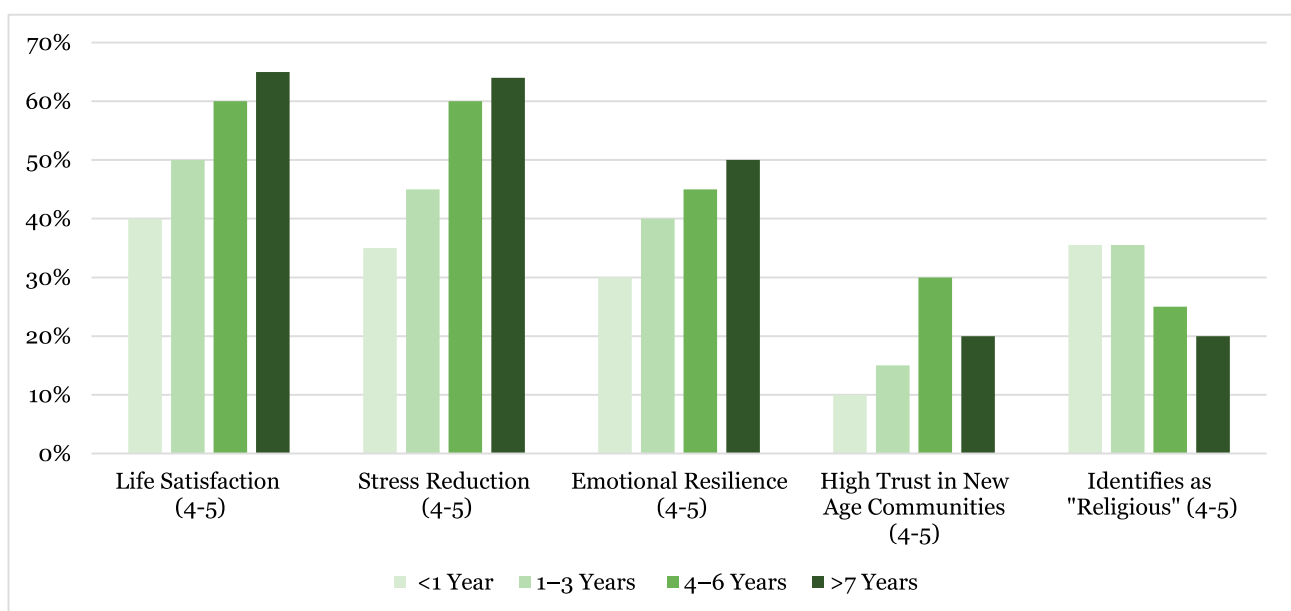
An analysis of the duration of spiritual engagement reveals important correlations between the length of practice and various aspects of subjective well-being. Participants who have been involved in spiritual practices for longer periods, especially those practising for four to six years or more than seven years, report

the highest levels of life satisfaction. Over 60% of respondents in these groups selected scores of 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale, indicating a strong perceived impact on their overall quality of life. Conversely, individuals who have been practising for less than one year are more likely to report moderate satisfaction levels, suggesting that the transformative effects of spirituality may develop gradually over time (Figure 1).

Similar trends emerged in responses related to stress and anxiety reduction. The most consistent and positive outcomes were reported by participants practicing spirituality for four to six years (60%) and those with more than seven years of experience (64%), both of whom rated stress reduction at the highest level. Conversely, those newer to spiritual practices showed greater variability in their responses and were less likely to select the maximum score. This pattern was mirrored in responses about emotional resilience. Nearly half of those practicing for more than seven years rated their emotional resilience as significantly improved (score of 5), while those with one to three years of experience also reported strong benefits. Newer practitioners, however, expressed lower confidence in these benefits.

Figure 1.

Perceived Benefits of Spiritual Practices and Trust in New Age Communities by Duration of Practice



Source: own survey 2025

Respondents with over seven years of experience expressed considerably more trust in New Age communities, with 20% reporting very high trust and nearly half reporting moderate trust. In contrast, those newer to spiritual practices (less than one year) demonstrated greater skepticism, with many indicating little or no trust. This suggests that trust in alternative spiritual communities may deepen with continued engagement and exposure. Together, these patterns

suggest that prolonged engagement in spiritual practices is not only associated with enhanced well-being but also plays a role in reshaping trust, identity, and communal affiliation.

Open-ended responses within the survey indicated that many participants view spirituality as a strategy for personal transformation and emotional healing. Several participants described using meditation, yoga, or energy healing to navigate emotional challenges, establish inner

balance, or regain a sense of control over their lives. In this context, spirituality acts as both a coping mechanism and a framework for identity construction, particularly relevant in post-communist Romania's landscape of ideological rupture and institutional distrust.

From a sociological perspective, these findings resonate with theories of late modern individualization (Giddens, Beck), where identity is no longer inherited but constructed. The educated urban Romanian is no longer bound to tradition or institution, but free to assemble a "spiritual toolkit" that aligns with personal values, psychological needs, and lifestyle preferences. This aligns with Postmodern Consumer Culture Theory, where individuals behave as spiritual consumers, navigating between global practices and local cultural norms.

The expanding role of spirituality in enhancing quality of life is not without its tensions. As spiritual practices become increasingly accessible, they are also being absorbed into a market logic that commodifies personal transformation. Meditation apps, coaching programs, and lifestyle retreats now circulate as consumer

products, often promoted through wellness influencers and monetized platforms. While this democratization broadens participation, it raises concerns about superficial engagement, the erosion of spiritual depth, and the exploitation of vulnerable seekers under the guise of self-improvement.

In post-1989 Romania, spirituality has clearly moved beyond its institutional religious framework to become a dynamic resource for emotional resilience, self-actualization, and social connection. For many, it offers a path toward healing in the aftermath of collective trauma, economic instability, and dislocation from traditional values. However, the rise of New Age movements also introduces ethical and psychological challenges, particularly as practices are reframed through the lens of capitalist ideals of optimization and success. Moving forward, deeper inquiry is needed to understand how these evolving spiritual forms will influence Romania's cultural identity, mental health landscape, and the collective pursuit of meaning in an increasingly individualized and commercialized society.

DISCUSSIONS

The present findings align with a growing body of international research that views spirituality as a significant factor in subjective well-being, especially in transitional or destabilised societies. For example, a study conducted in the Netherlands and Belgium demonstrated that baseline levels of spirituality, particularly those related to meaning-making and existential coherence, predicted improved emotional well-being and reduced distress after four weeks (Huijs et al., 2024). This aligns with the Romanian context, where participants engaged in New Age practices and reported enhanced emotional resilience and life satisfaction, especially after sustained engagement. The research also highlighted a distinction between spirituality rooted in trust and connectedness, which produced positive outcomes, versus transcendental or mystical experiences, which in some cases were linked to increased psychological distress. This bifurcation offers a useful perspective to interpret a tension also evident in the Romanian data: while spirituality facilitates emotional self-regulation and subjective well-being, it can also introduce ontological instability for individuals navigating competing belief systems and hybrid identities.

A complementary perspective arises from qualitative studies on spirituality within immigrant populations, highlighting the adaptive and identity-shaping roles of religious and spiritual practices in transitional settings. A 2022 study examining Sri Lankan immigrants in Italy found that engagement with religious rituals and meditative practices acted as psychosocial anchors, helping to reduce the disorientation caused by cultural displacement (Jayawardana & Esposito, 2022). Participants frequently reported using New Age practices

not only for emotional regulation but also as tools to reclaim agency and coherence amid socio-economic changes. This aligns with broader patterns seen in the literature, where spirituality supports existential resilience through meaning-making, ritual organisation, and community connection.

Further support for the connection between spirituality and well-being comes from research on adolescent populations in religious societies. Gavaruzzi et al. (2022) examined Italian adolescents and discovered a strong positive link between religious importance, emotional well-being, and life satisfaction, especially when religious commitment was internalised as a personal value rather than imposed from outside. This finding is reflected in the current Romanian sample, where participants reported higher life satisfaction through voluntary and self-directed spiritual practices. Notably, although institutional religion was less prominent among Romanian respondents—particularly women with higher education—the pursuit of existential coherence and moral orientation remained central. These patterns suggest that the psychosocial benefits of spirituality do not rely solely on formal religious affiliation but can also arise through personalised and eclectic spiritual pathways, especially when such practices offer emotional grounding and affirmation of values (Gavaruzzi et al., 2022).

Furthermore, recent meta-analytic research in environmental psychology has highlighted the mental health benefits of nature-based spirituality and mindfulness. Ivtzan and Papantoniou (2023) report that individuals engaging in nature-connected spiritual practices experience increased vitality, autonomy, and positive affect, which are closely linked to subjective

well-being. Participants in the current study frequently referenced outdoor meditation, energy healing with natural elements, or symbolic reconnection with nature as part of their spiritual practices, reinforcing this broader association. Additionally, the role of spirituality as a coping resource during adversity is well established in the psychology of religion literature. Pargament et al. (2021) demonstrate that spiritual coping, especially practices rooted in acceptance, meaning-making, and transcendence, can significantly buffer the impacts of trauma and existential anxiety. These findings further support the Romanian data, where spiritual engagement often functioned as a personalised strategy for managing stress and disillusionment, particularly among those with sustained spiritual involvement (Ivtzan & Papantoniou, 2023; Pargament et al., 2021).

The patterns of the widespread shift towards

individualised spiritual practices, the decline in trust in institutional religion, and the pursuit of existential clarity, as identified in this study, closely mirror the dynamics described by Curşeu and Ilies (2022). In their cross-cultural analysis of post-communist societies, the authors contend that the ideological collapse of communism in Eastern Europe created a long-lasting identity vacuum characterised by weakened collective narratives and diminished institutional authority. Within this vacuum, spirituality appears as an adaptive framework for meaning reconstruction, personal agency, and psychosocial continuity. The Romanian data presented here supports this regional perspective: participants increasingly turn to New Age practices as tools for managing uncertainty, expressing personal growth, and fostering emotional resilience in a fragmented social environment.

CONCLUSIONS

New Age spiritual practices have become a key part of Romania's changing psychological and cultural scene, offering adaptable ways to manage emotions, find existential meaning, and build social connections in the post-communist era. This study shows that practices such as yoga, Reiki, astrology, and energy healing are not just fleeting trends but are deeply rooted responses to the weakening of institutions, ideological shifts, and the psychosocial challenges brought by rapid modernisation.

Rather than replacing traditional religious affiliations entirely, contemporary spirituality in Romania often acts as a complementary or hybrid system. Many participants maintain symbolic ties to Orthodox Christianity while engaging in personalised rituals and beliefs that mirror global spiritual influences. This blending of institutional and non-institutional elements exemplifies a broader trend of spiritual bricolage, supporting theoretical models of religious pluralism in late modernity.

The findings also highlight a gendered and educational pattern of spiritual engagement, with urban, highly

educated women exhibiting the highest levels of involvement and perceived benefits. These patterns imply that New Age spirituality functions not only as a coping mechanism but also as a means for identity formation and self-actualisation, particularly in contexts where institutional trust is low and individual agency is emphasised. The commodification of spiritual services, while increasing accessibility, raises important concerns about authenticity, spiritual depth, and socioeconomic inequality in the pursuit of well-being.

Future research should investigate how spiritual engagement develops across various Romanian regions and age groups, how online spiritual communities influence meaning-making, and whether sustained participation in such practices is linked to measurable psychological health outcomes. A cross-cultural comparison could also reveal whether the Romanian pattern is unique or part of a broader reconfiguration of spirituality in Eastern Europe. In an era increasingly characterised by uncertainty, individualisation, and digital mediation, understanding the socio-psychological effects of spiritual pluralism will continue to be a crucial interdisciplinary task.

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