

**PEDAGOGICAL STATE UNIVERSITY „ION CREANGĂ” IN CHIȘINĂU
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY**

With manuscript title
C.Z.U: 159.922.8(043.2)=111

LUNGU VIOLETA

**OPTIMIZING BEHAVIOUR BY AMELIORATING
DYSFUNCTIONAL MENTAL SCHEMAS IN EMERGING ADULthood**

Specialisation: 511.02 Developmental Psychology and Educational Psychology

Summary of the doctoral thesis in psychology

CHIȘINĂU, 2024

The thesis was developed within the Doctoral School of Psychology at the „Ion Creangă” State Pedagogical University in Chişinău.

Composition of the Committee for public presentation of the doctoral thesis:

Chairman:

LOSÎI Elena, associate professor, PhD in psychology, Department of Psychology, „Ion Creangă” State Pedagogical University in Chişinău.

Ph.D. supervisor:

RACU Igor, university professor, habilitated doctor in Psychology, Department of Psychology, „Ion Creangă” State Pedagogical University in Chişinău.

Official reviewers:

PLEŞCA Maria, associate professor, PhD in psychology, Department of Psychology, „Ion Creangă” State Pedagogical University in Chişinău.

CERLAT Raisa, associate professor, PhD in psychology, Head of the Department of Psychology, State University of Moldova.

COVACI Mihai, associate professor, PhD in psychology, Dean, Hyperion University, Bucharest, Romania

The presentation will take place on, 2024, at 11:00 am, during the meeting of the Doctoral Committee of the Doctoral School of Psychology of „Ion Creangă” State Pedagogical University in Chişinău, Str. I. Creangă, 1, MD-2069, bl.2, Senate Hall.

The doctoral thesis in psychology and the summary can be consulted at the Scientific Library of „Ion Creangă” State Pedagogical University in Chişinău and on the website of ANACEC (www.anacec.md, www.cnaa.md).

The abstract was sent on 2024.

Chairman of the Committee for public presentation:

LOSÎI Elena, associate professor, PhD in psychology

Ph.D. supervisor:

RACU Igor, university professor, habilitated doctor in Psychology

Author:

LUNGU Violeta

CONTENTS

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF RESEARCH	2
THESIS CONTENT	8
BIBLIOGRAPHY	29
LIST OF AUTHOR'S PUBLICATIONS	31
ANNOTATION	33

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF RESEARCH

Relevance and importance of the theme. The research on emerging adults is highly relevant and important today. This group of young individuals faces specific challenges during this stage of life, as well as the complexities of the society they live in. Their prolonged transition into adulthood has a significant psychosocial and economic impact. The development of their identity and personality, as well as the socio-cultural changes generated by this demographic group, highlight the necessity of research in this field. Emerging adults represent a valuable resource for society, with a considerable impact on the labour market and social dynamics. It is essential to provide them with support and resources to harness their potential and contribute to the development of society. Special attention should be given to the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth, who constitute a distinct sub-category and require appropriate interventions to overcome their difficulties and integrate into society. Through research and understanding of the specific processes of this stage of life, we can develop policies and interventions that support the development and success of emerging adults in contemporary society.

Description of the research field and identification of the research problem. The field of emerging adulthood presents research problems and gaps, inherent to its relative novelty, driven by social, economic, and cultural dynamics. Classical fundamental works by authors such as L.S. Vygotsky [40], E. Erikson [14], U. Bronfenbrenner [6], and J. Marcia [26] require updating and integration with new knowledge from evolutionary psychology and neuroscience, as presented in the works of M. Del Giudice [12], A.J. Figueredo [16], Z. Hochberg, and M. Konner [20].

Among the research conducted in Romania and Moldova, aligned with J. Arnett's [3] conceptualization of emerging adulthood, notable works include those by L. Raiu [33], A. Curaj [11], O. Negru [27], I. Racu [32, 25], E. Losii [22], Yu. Racu [31], and V. Lungu [23, 24]. However, there are authors who challenge the distinct nature of this developmental category, such as J.E. Côté [10] and L.J. Nelson [28].

A critical aspect is the need for preventive interventions and behavioral optimization for emerging adults. Existing research, such as the works of K. Sheldon [37] and C. Wrzus [41], has highlighted concerns regarding the adaptation of existing psychological interventions to better meet the needs of emerging adults. We align ourselves with the opinions that support specific interventions for this age category.

I have identified significant gaps in the specialized literature and existing research regarding the adaptation of psychological interventions to the specific needs of emerging adults, particularly those in the NEET category, a growing group that affects approximately one in four young people in Romania and Moldova. These individuals are not engaged in education and/or

employment, which can lead to difficulties in their transition to independent and fulfilling adult life. Based on the analysis of the specialized literature and considering current practices in the field of emerging adulthood psychology, I have formulated the following research question: How can we optimize behavior in emerging adulthood to prevent the NEET condition?

To address this research problem, we can identify several possible directions by answering a series of derived questions: 1. What are the dimensions and indicators of development in emerging adulthood that are involved in optimal behavior? 2. What is the level of manifestation of cognitive and emotional schemas that allows us to evaluate their dysfunctional nature? 3. What is the level of development of facilitating factors for optimal behavior, such as personality traits, resilience, psychological flexibility, postformal thinking autonomy, and psychological well-being, which are involved in preventing the NEET condition? 4. What psychometric tools can be applied to assess these dimensions and factors? 5. How can we contribute to the development of these facilitating factors? 6. What are the effective methods and techniques for improving dysfunctional mental schemas? 7. What are the efficient strategies to ensure that the intervention will achieve the proposed goal of preventing the NEET condition by promoting optimal and functional behavior?

The purpose of the research is to investigate and understand the optimal development of emerging adults and to develop a holistic psychological intervention program to improve the facilitative dimensions and indicators of maturity, reduce the manifestation of maladaptive cognitive and emotional schemas, and optimize behaviour specific to this stage of development.

The established **objectives** for achieving this purpose:

- Analysing and integrating theoretical models of emerging adulthood development and identifying gaps or unexplored aspects in previous research.
- Developing a methodology for creating a comprehensive and measurable profile of emerging adults.
- Conducting a comparative study of active and NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth, examining the presumed psychological characteristics involved in the difficulties of transitioning from adolescence to adulthood.
- Evaluating the level of development in the emerging adult stage, the levels of manifestation of maladaptive cognitive and emotional schemas, and the levels of facilitative factors for optimal behaviour.
- Identifying the relationships between the dimensions and indicators of emerging adulthood maturity, maladaptive cognitive and emotional schemas, and facilitative factors for optimal behaviour in the emerging adult age, specifically in an active socio-educational status.

- Developing and implementing a holistic psychological intervention program with the objective of improving the NEET status.

- Formulating practical psychological recommendations for the prevention and improvement of the NEET status in emerging adulthood.

The experimental research was conducted in two stages:

The observational stage aimed to evaluate and compare the development of active and NEET youth, investigate the relationships between the dimensions and indicators of emerging adulthood, maladaptive schemas, and facilitative factors for optimal behaviour, and develop a methodology for creating a psychological profile of active/NEET emerging adults.

The formative stage aimed to develop, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of a holistic psychological intervention program for emerging adults in the NEET category, to improve their status and provide necessary support in their development. The operational objectives included increasing the dimensions and indicators of emerging adulthood maturity, improving maladaptive cognitive and emotional schemas, increasing facilitative factors for behavioural optimization, and improving the NEET condition.

The general hypothesis of the study assumed the existence of differences between active and NEET youth in terms of development in the emerging adulthood stage, the manifestation of maladaptive mental schemas, and the facilitative factors for optimal behaviour, aspects that can be developed through a holistic intervention.

The theoretical framework of this research included the following:

1. Explanatory theories and conceptual delimitations regarding the psychology of youth development, as presented in the works of L.S. Vygotsky [40], E. Erikson [14], U. Bronfenbrenner and G.W. Evans [7], I. Racu [32], E. Verza [39], E. Losîi [22], F. Golu [18], and D. Papalia [30].

2. Theorizations and research on the specificities of development in emerging adulthood, based on the concepts of J. Arnett [3], research from Romania by L. Raiu [33], A. Curaj [11], and O. Negru [27], as well as critical works by J.E. Côté [10] and L.J. Nelson [28].

3. Evolutionary concepts of emerging adulthood, such as those proposed by M. Del Giudice and colleagues [12], A.J. Figueredo and colleagues [16], Z. Hochberg and M. Konner [20], as well as meta-analyses conducted by J.R. Schwab and M. Syed [36] and E. Charnov [8].

4. Theories and applications regarding maladaptive mental schemas, focusing on the cognitive-behavioral approaches of J. Young [42] and R.L. Leahy [21].

5. Concepts related to behavioral optimization, such as those presented by K. Sheldon [37], in a constantly changing world.

Psychological intervention has focused on individual and group cognitive-behavioral methods and techniques, guided by the works of A.T. Beck and colleagues [5], the rational-

emotive behavioral therapy (REBT) developed by Albert Ellis [13], schema therapies proposed by J. Young [42] and R. Leahy [21], solution-focused therapeutic approaches, the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) model developed by S. Hayes [19], dialectical behavioral interventions developed by A.L. Chapman [7], as well as approaches inspired and guided by philosophical counseling, logotherapy, principles of positive psychology, and recommendations from the works of R. Baumeister and colleagues [4], holistic counseling, and somewhat limited interventions that specifically focus on emerging adults [41].

Research data on emerging adults and the NEET category were analyzed in the context of data provided by organizations in the European Union [15], Romania [46], Republic of Moldova [2; 44], and other international institutions [29]. This correlation allowed for the identification and deeper understanding of the phenomenon, providing a broad perspective on the situation and trends in different regions and socio-economic contexts. By examining data from these sources, the research was able to contribute to identifying the specific problems and needs of emerging adults and the NEET category, as well as formulating appropriate recommendations and interventions to support and facilitate their integration into society and the labor market.

The methodology of scientific research is the result of the research purpose, objectives, and hypotheses, and involves a combination of theoretical, empirical, and statistical methods.

Theoretical models - the study, analysis, and synthesis of specialized literature, as well as the hypothetico-deductive method to interpret and explain the research findings.

Empirical methods - various questionnaires were used to measure different dimensions and variables relevant to the research: the Inventory of Emerging Adulthood Dimensions [34], the Arizona Life History Battery K-42 [16], Young's Cognitive Schema Questionnaire (YSQ-S3) [42], Leahy's Emotional Schema Questionnaire [21], Goldberg's Big Five Personality Inventory IPIP [17], Personal Autonomy Evaluation Questionnaire [1], Acceptance and Commitment Questionnaire - AAQ-II [19], Postformal Thinking Questionnaire - PTQ [38], Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale - CD-RISC [9], and Psychological Well-being Scale - PWS [35]. A self-designed questionnaire, the NEET Status Identification Questionnaire, was developed to identify the status of emerging adults (Active or NEET).

Descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used to analyze and interpret the data: calculation of measures of central tendency and data distribution, tests of significance of mean/rank differences, effect size, correlation tests, and regression analyses.

Experiments - exploratory and control experiments were conducted to investigate the dimensions and indicators of emerging adulthood, cognitive-emotional scales, and behavioral optimization factors.

Psychological interventions - tailored psychological interventions were designed, developed, and implemented to support the development and behavioral optimization of emerging adults.

The scientific novelty and originality of the research findings. This study stands out for its scientific novelty and originality, as it is among the few studies worldwide and the first at the national level to comparatively examine active emerging adults and NEET emerging adults. Furthermore, specific interventions tailored to this developmental category are also very limited.

The scientific novelty and originality of the results are highlighted through 1. The innovative approach to active and NEET youth, focusing on analyzing and comparing these groups to provide a deeper understanding of their differences, similarities, and the factors that influence their specific status and needs.

The integration of contextual perspective and the constructivist-developmental model, facilitating the understanding of the complexity of emerging adult development and the interaction between individual and contextual factors in determining NEET behavior and status, considering theoretical and explanatory approaches that challenge it.

The development of a profile of NEET youth, proposing the creation of a psychological profile model based on the assessment of the level of emerging development, the manifestation of maladaptive mental schemas, and the factors that can facilitate behavioural optimization.

The implementation of a holistic psychological intervention program, remarkable for its integrated approach to cognitive-behavioural methods and techniques, positive psychology, and philosophical counselling, with the potential to bring significant changes to the lives and future perspectives of young people.

The obtained results that contribute to addressing the important scientific problem:

1. The development of a profile model for active or NEET emerging youth, providing a clearer understanding of the level of development in dimensions of emerging adulthood, cognitive indicators of life strategy, manifestation of maladaptive cognitive and emotional schemas, as well as the level of development of factors that facilitate optimal behaviour. This information has helped to better understand the needs and characteristics of emerging adults and to develop appropriate holistic interventions to improve their behaviour.

2. The design, development, implementation, and validation of a holistic psychological intervention program aimed at behavioural optimization in emerging adults. The program provided concrete tools and strategies for emerging adults to enhance their level of development in terms of emerging maturity and optimize their behaviour in various areas of their lives, with the goal of improving and preventing future NEET conditions.

The theoretical significance of this work resides in the following aspects:

1. Through the review of existing literature and the synthesis of previous research, this work brings to the forefront current and comprehensive knowledge about emerging adulthood in an innovative manner.

2. The research findings complement and enrich the fields of developmental psychology and educational psychology, adding new knowledge and understanding about the development and behavioural optimization of emerging adults.

3. By identifying and examining mental schemas and psychological correlates that facilitate behavioural optimization, this work makes a significant contribution to understanding the factors that influence development in this crucial stage of life.

4. The results, explanations, and conclusions formulated in this work are essential for the conceptualization and advancement of the field dedicated to emerging adults in disciplines such as developmental psychology, age psychology, educational psychology, sociology, anthropology, human resource management, and psychological/vocational counselling.

Applicative value of the thesis lies in developing a profile model for NEET youth and an intervention program for behavioural optimization. These can be utilized to assess and support emerging adults in various organizational contexts, considering the specificities of young people in Romania. This contributes to developing and implementing effective and personalized interventions in addressing the NEET issue.

Main scientific results submitted for presentation:

- The development and fulfilment challenges of the emerging age stage represent an important field that impacts both the individual and society.

- The difficulties of the emerging stage are particularly pronounced in young people with NEET status.

- There are significant differences between Active and NEET youth in terms of their level of development in the emerging stage, the manifestation of maladaptive cognitive and emotional schemas, as well as the manifestation of facilitating factors for behavioural optimization.

- Identifying the relationships between the psychological dimensions that differentiate Active youth from NEET youth can lead to the design, development, and implementation of psychological intervention programs aimed at preventing/improving the NEET condition.

- Psychological intervention represents a holistic approach, based on cognitive-behavioural principles, rational-emotive techniques, positive psychology, and philosophical counselling.

Implementation of scientific results. The obtained results are used in the process of profiling young individuals in development, carried out in psychological/vocational/career counselling and psychotherapy. The methods and techniques are useful for clinical psychologists,

vocational and career counsellors, educators, and trainers, as well as human resource professionals working with emerging adults. The theoretical and practical aspects of the work are part of the Developmental Psychology course at Hyperion University Faculty of Psychology in Bucharest, the Teacher Training Department at Valahia University in Târgoviște, the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest, as well as the Faculty of Psychology at "Ion Creangă" University in Chisinau. The intervention program is implemented in private companies and consulting associations for training and professional reorientation. Additionally, the program is included in the portfolio of the Association for Psychology in Education, Development, and Continuous Training.

Approval of research results. The results of the theoretical-experimental research have been discussed and approved during the meetings of the Psychology Doctoral School, at the Department of Psychology of the "Ion Creangă" State Pedagogical University in Chișinău. They have also been presented at scientific conferences and published in national and international scientific journals between 2017 and 2020. In addition to my doctoral work, I have participated in national and international conferences (in Bucharest, Bălți, Cahul, Chișinău, Prague), published articles in specialized journals, and organized workshops and presentations.

Publications on the thesis topic. The fundamental ideas and content of the thesis have been reflected in 21 scientific papers. I have published 7 articles in national and international scientific journals and have contributed to 14 articles in conference proceedings and other scientific events.

Volume and structure of the thesis. The thesis includes abstracts (in Romanian and English), a list of abbreviations, introduction, three chapters, general conclusions and recommendations, a bibliography consisting of 299 titles, 5 annexes, and has been completed in 158 pages, including 44 figures and 37 tables.

Keywords: *emerging adult, youth in development, cognitive schemas, emotional schemas, personality, resilience, postformal thinking, flexibility, autonomy, psychological well-being.*

THESIS CONTENT

In the **Introduction**, the relevance and contextual significance of the topic are argued. The current state of research, the purpose, derived objectives, and hypotheses are presented, highlighting the novelty of the obtained results and the applied value of the research, along with the exposition of implementation methods for a significant impact on the formation and development process of emerging adults in general and NEET individuals in particular.

Chapter 1, titled *The Dynamics of Development in the Emerging Adult Stage*, provides a review of the existing literature regarding emerging adults, the developmental tasks during emerging adulthood, and the unique condition of NEET youth. The concepts of optimal development and behavioural optimization in relation to emerging adulthood are conceptualized

and analysed. This literature review provides a solid foundation for a contextual understanding of the relevant factors in the research.

Chapter 2, titled *Experimental Research on Optimal Development in Emerging Adults*, presents the research methodology and the findings of the experimental study conducted with the participation of 236 young individuals aged between 21 and 29 years ($M=24.8\pm 2.09$ years). The participants were divided into two groups: 116 active young individuals engaged in education/training/work and 110 NEET young individuals (not employed in gainful activities or engaged in education/training).

The purpose of the exploratory research is to conduct experimental studies on optimal development in emerging adults.

The specific objectives of the exploratory research are as follows:

O1. Comparative evaluation of the development of active youth and NEET individuals (emerging cognitive dimensions and indicators, dysfunctional schemas, and facilitating factors). This comparative evaluation can provide a clearer perspective on the relationship between the NEET condition and the level of emerging development.

O2. Investigation of the relationships between the dimensions and indicators of emerging adulthood, dysfunctional cognitive and emotional schemas, and the facilitating factors of optimal behaviour.

O3. Development of a methodology for creating a psychological profile of active/NEET emerging adults.

The general hypothesis of the exploratory experiment suggests that the developmental profile of active emerging adults differs from that of NEET youth. The differences manifest in the following ways: 1. Active emerging adults exhibit higher levels of emerging dimensions and indicators compared to NEET youth; 2. Active emerging adults have higher levels of facilitating factors for optimal behaviour necessary for fulfilling developmental tasks compared to NEET youth; 3. Active emerging adults display lower levels of maladaptive cognitive-emotional schemas compared to NEET youth. Therefore, the hypothesis suggests that active emerging adults have a more favourable developmental profile characterized by more developed emerging maturity, higher facilitating factors for optimal behaviour, and less pronounced maladaptive cognitive-emotional schemas.

These differences can be explained by the fact that active emerging adults are engaged in educational, professional, or training activities, which can facilitate personal development, acquisition of skills and abilities, and provide a structured framework and growth opportunities. On the other hand, NEET youth may lack these favourable developmental contexts, which can affect their trajectory of maturation and make them more vulnerable to the manifestation of

maladaptive schemas. Validating this hypothesis could provide valuable insights into understanding the specific needs of these two groups and developing targeted interventions to support the optimization of development during the emerging adult period, especially for NEET youth.

The general hypothesis allowed for the advancement of the following operational hypotheses:

H1. We assume the existence of significant differences between Active and NEET youth in terms of dimensions and indicators of emerging maturity, the manifestation of maladaptive cognitive schemas, and the levels of facilitating factors for behavioural optimization.

H2. We presume the existence of significant correlational relationships between dimensions and indicators of emerging maturity, the manifestation of maladaptive cognitive schemas, and the levels of facilitating factors for behavioural optimization in emerging adults.

The variables of the exploratory experiment are:

Independent variable: Socio-professional status (active or NEET)

Dependent variables: 1. Level of emerging development, 2. Maladaptive cognitive and emotional schemas, 3. Facilitating factors for optimal behaviour (Personality, Resilience, Postformal Thinking, Flexibility, Autonomy, Psychological well-being).

Instruments used: Socio-demographic and NEET identification questionnaire, Inventory of dimensions of emerging maturity-IDEA, Arizona Life History Battery K-42, Young Schema Questionnaire, YSQ-S3, Leahy Emotional Schema Scale - LESS, IPIP - International Personality Item Pool, Personal Autonomy Assessment Questionnaire (CAP), Acceptance and Commitment Questionnaire (AAQ-II), Postformal Thinking Questionnaire (PTQ), Resilience Scale - CD-RISC, Psychological Well-being Scale - PWS.

The results of the experimental research on some particularities of emerging development

Hypothesis 1 presumed significant differences between Active and NEET youth in terms of dimensions and indicators of emerging maturity, with Active youth exhibiting higher levels in some of these dimensions and indicators.

Dimensions and indicators of emerging maturity (IDEA and BIVA-k). Active emerging adults have significantly higher scores than NEET youth in the following dimensions: Identity exploration ($U = 3600.5$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.483$), Possibility exploration ($U = 1888$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.729$), Other-centeredness ($U = 3122$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.548$), Self-centeredness ($U = 5769.5$, $p = 0.021$, $r = 0.171$), Transitional feelings ($U = 4106$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.41$), IDEA Total ($U = 2609.5$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.625$). NEET youth have significantly higher scores than active emerging adults in the

dimension: Negativity/Instability ($U = 2950.5$, $p = 0.007$, $r = -0.203$). The effect size (r) ranges from 0.171 to 0.729, indicating effects ranging from small to large (fig. 1).

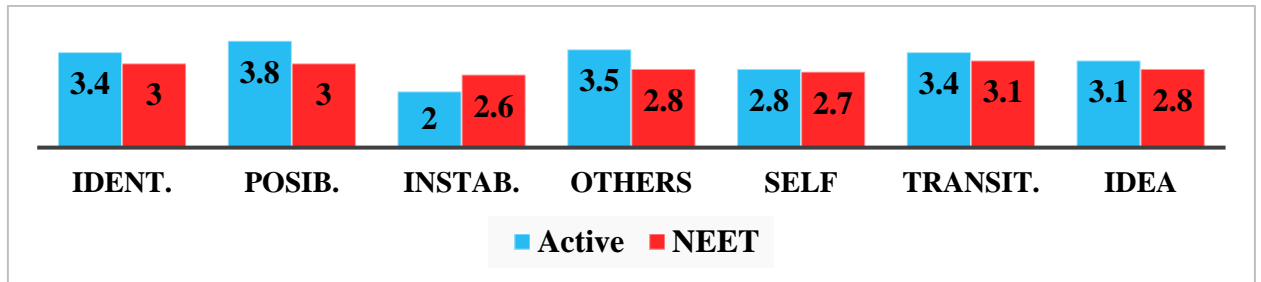


Figure 1. Means for IDME, Active Youth and NEETs

Active emerging adults have significantly higher scores than NEET youth in the following indicators: Perspective, planning, and control ($U = 4878.5$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.844$), Family contact and support ($U = 5911.5$, $p = 0.045$, $r = 0.133$), General altruism ($U = 5688$, $p = 0.015$, $r = 0.183$), K factor ($U = 4935.5$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.291$). There are no significant differences between the two groups for the indicators: Parental relationship ($U = 5997.5$, $p = 0.066$, $r = 0.138$), Friend contact and support ($U = 6364.5$, $p = 0.254$, $r = 0.086$), Romantic attachment ($U = 6058.5$, $p = 0.084$, $r = 0.130$), Morality ($U = 6498$, $p = 0.378$, $r = 0.066$). The effect size (r) ranges from 0.066 to 0.844, indicating effects ranging from negligible to large (fig. 2).

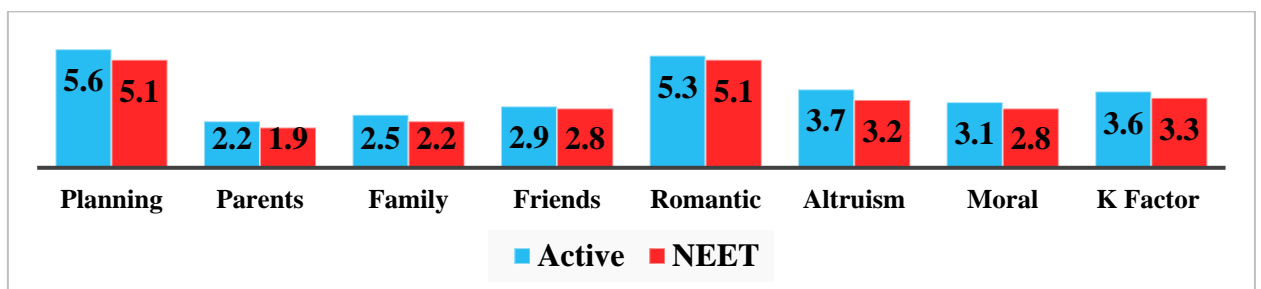


Figure 1. Means for BIVA, Active Youth and NEETs

Active emerging adults exhibit a significantly different developmental profile compared to NEET youth, both in terms of dimensions of emerging maturity and certain cognitive indicators. On one hand, active emerging adults demonstrate significantly higher levels in most of the IDEA dimensions, such as Identity exploration, Possibility exploration, Other-centeredness, Self-centeredness, and Transitional feelings. The only exception is the dimension of Negativity/Instability, where NEET youth have higher scores. On the other hand, in terms of cognitive indicators, active emerging adults have significantly higher scores in half of them, particularly in Perspective, planning, and control, Family contact and support, General altruism, and the K factor. These findings partially support the general hypothesis of the study, which suggests that the developmental profile of active emerging adults differs from that of NEET youth, with the former exhibiting higher levels of dimensions of emerging maturity and cognitive factors

that facilitate optimal behaviour. The presence of dimensions and indicators where differences are not significant also suggests some similarities between the two groups.

Hypothesis 2 assumed significant differences between Active and NEET youth in terms of cognitive-emotional schemas.

Young's Cognitive Schemas (YSQ). The results indicate that NEET youth have significantly higher scores than active emerging adults in all five domains (fig. 3): I. Separation-Abandonment ($U = 4955$, $p < .001$, $r = -0.34$), II. Autonomy and Performance ($U = 5544.5$, $p = 0.007$, $r = -0.27$), III. Defectiveness/Shame ($U = 5231$, $p < .001$, $r = -0.39$), IV. Dependence ($U = 5409.5$, $p = 0.003$, $r = -0.32$), V. Hypervigilance and Inhibition ($U = 5232.5$, $p < .001$, $r = -0.42$). The effect size (r) ranges from -0.27 to -0.42 , indicating moderate to large effects.

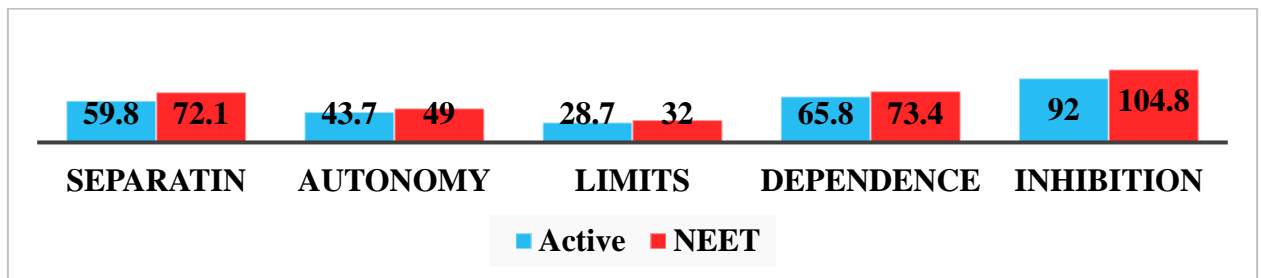


Figure 2. Means for YSQ, Active Youth and NEETs

Emotional Schemas Leahy (LESS). The results show that NEET youth have significantly higher scores than active emerging adults in 12 out of the 14 LESS scales and in the total score: Invalidation ($U = 4022$, $p < 0.001$, $r = 0.271$), Guilt ($U = 5246$, $p = 0.011$, $r = 0.196$), Perception ($U = 4439$, $p = 0.007$, $r = 0.205$), Devaluation ($U = 4389$, $p < 0.001$, $r = 0.255$), Emotional Numbing ($U = 4467.5$, $p = 0.013$, $r = 0.191$), Over-rationalization ($U = 4215$, $p = 0.002$, $r = 0.236$), Duration ($U = 3877$, $p < 0.001$, $r = 0.298$), Low Consensus ($U = 4085.5$, $p < 0.001$, $r = 0.260$), Non-acceptance ($U = 4177$, $p = 0.002$, $r = 0.243$), Rumination ($U = 4194$, $p = 0.002$, $r = 0.24$), Poor Expressiveness ($U = 4474$, $p = 0.013$, $r = 0.189$), Blaming Others ($U = 4486$, $p = 0.014$, $r = 0.187$), LESS Total ($U = 3068$, $p < 0.001$, $r = 0.444$). There are no significant differences between the two groups for the scales: Misunderstanding ($U = 5004$, $p = 0.222$, $r = 0.093$), Loss of Control ($U = 4754$, $p = 0.070$, $r = 0.139$). The effect size (r) ranges from 0.187 to 0.444 , indicating small to moderate effects (Fig. 4).

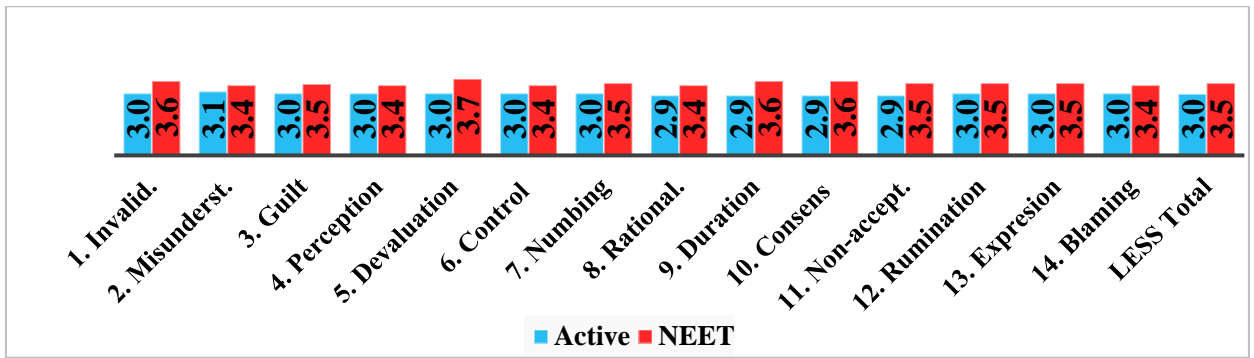


Figure 3. Means for Leahy Emotional Schemas (LESS)

NEET youth exhibit a significantly different cognitive-emotional profile compared to active individuals, displaying higher levels of maladaptive schemas and deficits in emotional awareness and expression. The results support the hypothesis that the developmental profile of active emerging adults differs from that of NEET youth. The presence of maladaptive cognitive-emotional schemas and more pronounced emotional difficulties in NEET youth may indicate an increased vulnerability to psychological and social adaptation problems during this critical transition period towards adulthood.

Hypothesis 3 presumed significant differences between NEET youth and active individuals in terms of dimensions that facilitate behavioral optimization (Personal Autonomy, Personality Factors, Resilience, Critical Thinking, Cognitive and Experiential Flexibility, Psychological Well-being).

Personal Autonomy. Active individuals have significantly higher scores than NEET youth in the following dimensions of autonomy: A. behavioral ($U = 5684.5$, $p = 0.015$, $r = 0.183$), A. cognitive ($U = 5427.5$, $p = 0.003$, $r = 0.22$), A. emotional ($U = 6057.5$, $p = 0.045$, $r = 0.13$), A. personal (total score) ($U = 5453.5$, $p = 0.004$, $r = 0.216$). There are no significant differences between the two groups for A. values ($U = 5960.5$, $p = 0.056$, $r = 0.144$). The effect size ranges from 0.13 to 0.22, indicating small to moderate effects.

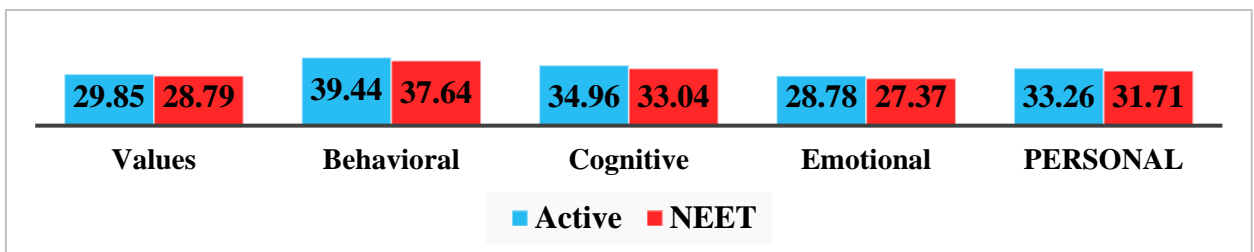


Figure 4. Means for Personal Autonomy and Dimensions (CAP)

Personality. The results from the IPIP assessment of personality traits according to the Big Five model are presented in Figure 6. Active individuals have significantly higher scores than NEET youth in all five dimensions of personality: Extraversion ($U = 4888.5$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.298$), Emotional Stability ($U = 4881.5$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.299$), Agreeableness ($U = 5699$, $p = 0.016$, $r =$

0.181), Conscientiousness ($U = 4677.5, p < .001, r = 0.328$), Openness ($U = 5637.5, p = 0.012, r = 0.19$). The effect size (r) ranges from 0.181 to 0.328, indicating small to moderate effects.

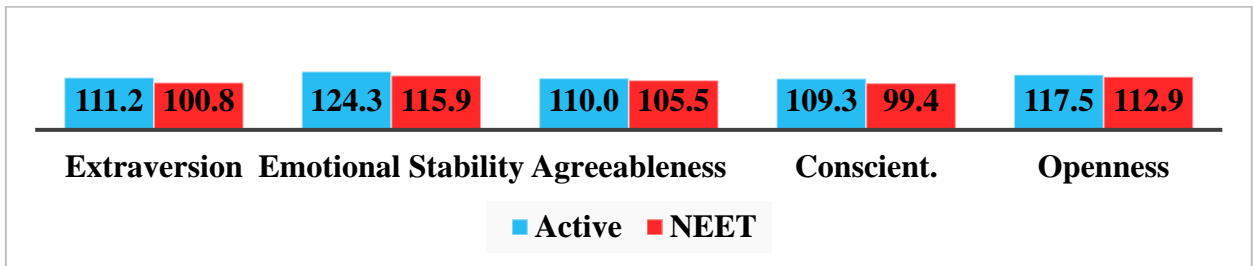


Figure 5. Means for Personality (IPIP)

The results support the hypothesis that active emerging adults have a more adapted and functional personality profile compared to NEET youth. Higher scores on the Big Five dimensions suggest that active individuals are more sociable, emotionally balanced, cooperative, responsible, and open to new experiences. These traits can facilitate a smoother transition into adulthood. The lower scores of NEET youth on these dimensions indicate increased vulnerability and difficulties in psychosocial adaptation, sometimes even mental health issues.

Postformal Thinking and *Psychological Flexibility* were assessed using the PTQ and AAQ II. Active emerging adults have significantly higher scores than NEET youth in the following dimensions of postformal thinking: General Factor ($U = 5250, p = 0.001, r = 0.246$), Multiple Elements ($U = 5871.5, p = 0.036, r = 0.156$), Subjective Choices ($U = 5639.5, p = 0.011, r = 0.19$), and Basic Complexities ($U = 5236, p = 0.001, r = 0.248$). NEET youth have significantly higher scores than active emerging adults in Inflexibility ($U = 5476.5, p = 0.005, r = -0.213$). The effect size (r) ranges from 0.156 to 0.248 for postformal thinking dimensions, indicating small to moderate effects. For Inflexibility, the effect size is -0.213, indicating a small to moderate effect.

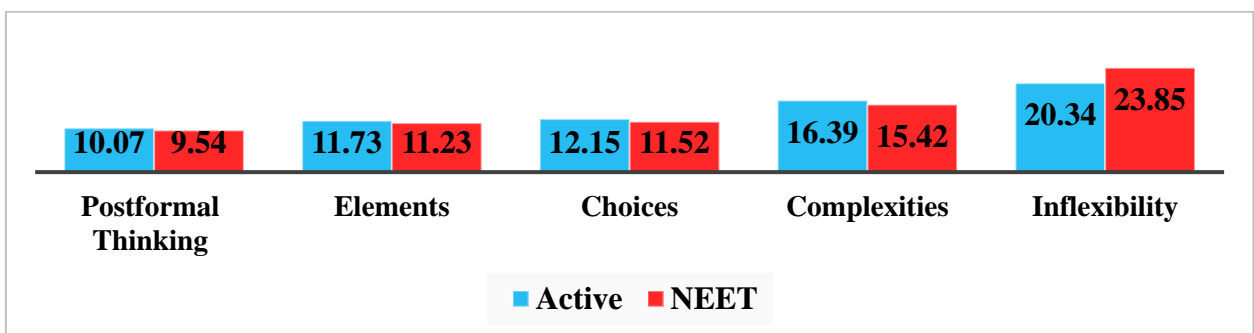


Figure 6. Means for la Postformal Thinking (PTQ) and Inflexibility (AAQ-II)

These results support the hypothesis that active emerging adults have a more developed and adapted postformal thinking style compared to NEET youth, which can facilitate better adaptation and functioning during this transitional period into adulthood. Postformal thinking, characterized by flexibility, considering multiple perspectives, and tolerance for ambiguity, is an important acquisition in the cognitive development of emerging adults. The lower scores of NEET

youth on most dimensions of postformal thinking and their higher level of inflexibility may indicate difficulties in adapting to complex cognitive demands and ambiguous or uncertain situations, which are specific to this stage of development.

Resilience was assessed using the Resilience Scale - CD-RISC. Active youth reported significantly lower scores for overall resilience and its factors: Adaptation ($U = 2980, p < .001, r = 0.574$), Commitment ($U = 2958.5, p < .001, r = 0.572$), Control ($U = 3027, p < .001, r = 0.575$), Relationships ($U = 3131.5, p < .001, r = 0.565$), Optimism ($U = 3151.5, p < .001, r = 0.55$), Resilience (total score) ($U = 2964, p < .001, r = 0.547$). The effect size (r) ranges from 0.547 to 0.575, indicating large effects.

The results support the hypothesis that active youth have a greater capacity to cope with adversity and adapt positively to changes and challenges compared to NEET youth. The higher levels of resilience among active emerging adults can be an important protective factor during this transition period into adulthood, facilitating better psychosocial adaptation and functioning. On the other hand, the lower scores of NEET youth on resilience dimensions and total score suggest increased vulnerability to difficulties in adaptation and mental health problems in the face of stress and adversity.

Psychological well-being was measured using the PWS. Active emerging adults have significantly higher scores than NEET youth on all dimensions of psychological well-being and the total factor: Positive Environment ($U = 4839, p < 0.001, r = 0.305$), Positive Relationships ($U = 5436.5, p = 0.003, r = 0.219$), Personal Growth ($U = 4716.5, p < 0.001, r = 0.322$), Self-Acceptance ($U = 5050, p < 0.001, r = 0.274$), Purpose in Life ($U = 4849.5, p < 0.001, r = 0.303$), and Overall Well-being (total score) ($U = 4200, p < 0.001, r = 0.397$). The effect size (r) ranges from 0.219 to 0.397, indicating small to medium effects for specific dimensions and a medium to large effect for the total score (Fig. 8).

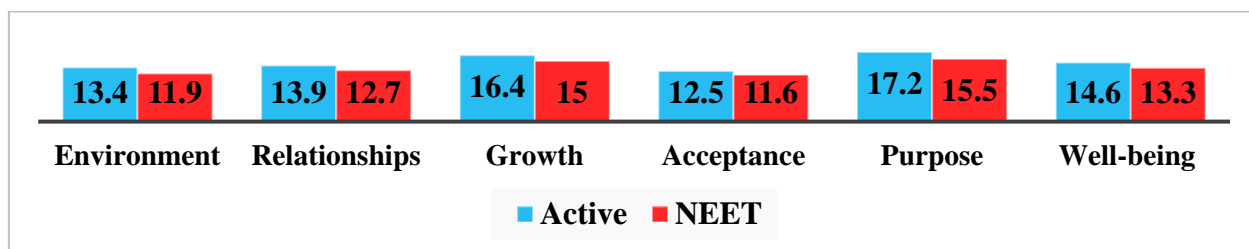


Figure 7. Means for Well-being (PWS)

The results support the hypothesis that active emerging adults have better psychological well-being compared to NEET youth. The higher levels of well-being among active emerging adults can be an indicator of positive psychological adaptation and optimal functioning during this transition period into adulthood. The lower scores of NEET youth suggest increased vulnerability to mental health issues and difficulties in adaptation during this stage of development.

Hypothesis 4 assumed associations between cognitive-emotional schemas and dimensions of emerging maturity. Correlations were analysed between the cognitive schemas of Young, the emotional schemas of Leahy, indicators of emerging maturity (IDME), and indicators of life strategy (BIVA-k). The results showed the following: 1. Significant positive correlations between the cognitive schemas of Young and emotional schemas (LESS) ($\rho = -0.303... -0.538$, $p < 0.01$); 2. Significant negative correlations between the cognitive schemas of Young and indicators of emerging maturity (IDME) ($\rho = -0.456... -0.532$, $p < 0.01$); A significant negative correlation between fast-slow life strategy indicators and emotional schemas (LESS) ($\rho = -0.323$, $p < 0.01$); 3. A significant positive correlation between fast-slow life strategy indicators and indicators of emerging maturity (IDME) ($\rho = 0.696$, $p < 0.01$). Linear regression analysis indicated that maladaptive cognitive and emotional schemas explained 45% of the variance in IDME and 40%.

Table 1. Correlations between Young Schemas, LESS Schemas, IDME, and BIVA

	II	III	IV	V	LESS	IDME	BIVA
I. SEPARATION	.641	.667	.790	.665	.538	-.435	-.482
II. AUTONOMY _	-	.617	.756	.610	.444	-.499	-.578
III. LIMITs		-	.701	.683	.303	-.356	-.413
IV. DEPENDENCE			-	.629	.342	-.532	-.329
V. INHIBITION				-	.432	-.467	-.455
LESS					-	-.488	-.323
IDME						-	.696

Significant links have been found between cognitive-emotional schemas and dimensions of emerging maturity. Maladaptive cognitive and emotional schemas have a negative impact on the development of emerging maturity and adaptive behavior, explaining a significant proportion of their variance. The presence of maladaptive emotional schemas can negatively influence psychological functioning by distorting information processing, impairing emotional regulation, disrupting interpersonal relationships, promoting ineffective coping strategies, undermining self-esteem, and fostering cognitive and behavioral rigidity.

Hypothesis 5 assumed the existence of correlational links between levels of cognitive-emotional schemas and facilitative dimensions of behavioral optimization in emerging adults. The obtained results indicate the following:

Significant negative associations between the Conscientiousness ($\rho = -0.271$ to -0.266 , $p < 0.01$), Extraversion ($\rho = -0.218$, $p < 0.01$), and Openness ($\rho = -0.238$ to -0.150 , $p < 0.01$ or $p < 0.05$) traits and various domains of cognitive-emotional schemas. These traits can act as protective factors against the development and maintenance of maladaptive schemas.

Significant associations between the Young schemas, Leahy schemas, and facilitative dimensions of behavioural optimization, such as Resilience ($\rho = -0.419$ to -0.483 , $p < 0.01$), Inflexibility ($\rho = 0.436$ to 0.581 , $p < 0.01$), Postformal Thinking ($\rho = -0.223$ to -0.320 , $p < 0.01$),

Autonomy ($\rho = -0.304$ to -0.652 , $p < 0.01$), and Psychological Well-being ($\rho = -0.334$ to -0.552 , $p < 0.01$). Thus, higher levels of maladaptive schemas are associated with less optimal psychological and behavioural functioning.

The Autonomy and Performance domain has the strongest negative correlations with autonomy ($\rho = -0.652$, $p < 0.01$) and well-being ($\rho = -0.485$, $p < 0.01$), while the Deficiency Limits domain has the strongest positive correlation with Inflexibility ($\rho = 0.581$, $p < 0.01$).

Emotional schemas (LESS) have significant correlations with all facilitative dimensions, indicating the broad impact of maladaptive emotional processing on psychological and behavioural functioning ($\rho = -0.340$ to -0.512 , $p < 0.01$).

Table 2. Correlations Between Cognitive-Emotional Schemas and Personality Traits

	I. SEP.	II. AUT.	III. LIM.	IV. DEP.	V. INH.	LESS
Resilience	-.445	-.483	-.419	-.435	-.448	-.459
Inflexibility	.511	.516	.581	.43	.489	.512
PFT	-.251	-.223	-.284	-.269	-.320	-.340
Autonomy	-.363	-.652	-.304	-.555	-.443	-.441
WB	-.552	-.485	-.334	-.367	-.415	-.435
Extraversion	-.218	-.094	-.078	-.059	-.121	-.361
Em. Stability	-.086	-.068	-.127	-.099	-.097	-.368
Agreeability	-.082	.021	-.013	-.034	-.027	-.036
Conscient.	-.271	-.239	-.228	-.237	-.266	-.311
Openness	-.238	-0.11	-.130	-.166	-.150	-.188

In conclusion, the results support the hypothesis of correlational links between cognitive-emotional schemas and facilitative dimensions of behavioural optimization. Lower levels of maladaptive schemas appear to facilitate resilience, flexibility, autonomy, and well-being. These findings can be useful in developing therapeutic strategies to reduce the manifestation of maladaptive schemas and promote behavioural optimization and personal development in emerging adults (Table 2).

Hypothesis 6 assumes correlational links between dimensions of emerging maturity and facilitative dimensions of behavioral optimization. The results from Table 3 support the hypothesis, indicating a significant interconnection between the variables.

Significant positive correlations between Emerging Maturity and Resilience ($\rho = 0.664$), Postformal Thinking ($\rho = 0.516$), Autonomy ($\rho = 0.687$), and Psychological Well-being ($\rho = 0.519$), as well as the negative correlation with Inflexibility ($\rho = -0.415$), suggest that the development of emerging maturity is closely linked to factors that promote optimal behaviour.

The analysis of life history strategy indicators (BIVA) highlights the importance of childhood and adolescence experiences in psychological and behavioural development. Recognizing the early origins of most mental, emotional, and behavioural problems emphasizes the need for early intervention and protective factors.

Multiple regression analyses show that Personal Autonomy ($\beta=0.327$), Resilience ($\beta=0.286$), Postformal Thinking ($\beta=0.158$), and Psychological Well-being ($\beta=0.173$) are positive predictors of Emerging Maturity (IDME), while Inflexibility ($\beta=-0.132$) has a negative impact. For BIVA, Psychological Well-being ($\beta=0.341$), Personal Autonomy ($\beta=0.226$), Postformal Thinking ($\beta=0.211$), and Resilience ($\beta=0.164$) are positive predictors, while Inflexibility ($\beta=-0.235$) has a negative impact.

Table 3. Correlations Between Indicators of Emerging Maturity and Facilitators of Optimal Behavioral Outcomes

Facilitators Factors	IDEA	BIVA
Resilience	.664	.476
Inflexibility	-.415	-.539
Postformal Thinking	.516	.524
Personal Autonomy	.687	.582
Psychological Well-being	.519	.654

The results support the idea that dimensions of emerging maturity and facilitative factors of behavioral optimization are interconnected and mutually influential. The development of emerging maturity is associated with increased resilience, flexibility in thinking and behavior, cognitive development, autonomy, and overall well-being.

Childhood and adolescence experiences, such as the family environment and peer influences, have a long-lasting impact on psychological and behavioral development. Identifying and cultivating protective factors, including those associated with emerging maturity, are essential for preventing issues and promoting optimal behavior.

The development of personal autonomy, resilience, postformal thinking, and psychological well-being can contribute to higher levels of emerging maturity and associated behavioral indicators. On the other hand, inflexibility appears to have a negative impact on these constructs.

Understanding these relationships can inform the development of interventions and strategies aimed at promoting emerging maturity and cultivating factors that contribute to optimal behavior among emerging adults. Cultivating these variables is important to promote maturity development and adaptive behaviors.

Chapter 3, titled *Behavioral Optimization in Emerging Adulthood*, presents principles, strategies, and techniques for avoiding/alleviating the NEET condition. The goal of the formative experiment was to develop dimensions of emerging maturity, improve dysfunctional mental schemas, and increase factors that facilitate behavioral optimization, resulting in overcoming the NEET condition. The general objectives were: 1. Development and implementation of a holistic psychological intervention program for emerging adults with NEET status, 2. Evaluation of the

effectiveness of the intervention program among the participating NEET individuals, 3. Drawing conclusions and providing recommendations to specialists who can implement this program.

The specific objectives of the formative research aimed to: increase the level of development in emerging adulthood, improve maladaptive cognitive and emotional schemas, increase facilitative factors of optimal behavior such as personality traits, resilience, postformal thinking, flexibility, autonomy, and well-being, and improve the NEET condition.

The independent variable is the holistic intervention program in which the young individuals participated. We assumed that the intervention program could modify certain factors involved in achieving concrete behavioral optimization, resulting in overcoming the NEET condition. The dependent variables were dimensions and indicators of emerging maturity, dysfunctional cognitive-emotional schemas, and facilitative factors of optimal behavior (personality traits, resilience, postformal thinking, flexibility, autonomy, and well-being).

The hypothesis of the formative experiment is the assumption that through specially organized psychological interventions, it is possible to optimize the behavior of NEET individuals by integrating them into productive and/or educational activities.

The formative research was conducted with the participation of 24 young individuals (12 females and 12 males) divided into two homogeneous groups, the Experimental Group (EG) and the Control Group (CG). The EG participated in the psychological intervention program, which lasted for 13 months. The criteria for participation in the intervention group were age between 23 and 26, without occupation for at least 12 months, living with parents (or others) and being financially supported by them without having responsibilities, unmarried or in a consensual relationship, without children, former students who dropped out or extended their studies for more than two years without justification, not coming from dysfunctional families or disadvantaged backgrounds. We established these criteria to control for socio-economic influencing factors.

The intervention program was based on cognitive-behavioural approaches, which have a solid foundation of efficacy demonstrated through scientific research. Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) focuses on the influence of individual thoughts, beliefs, and interpretations on one's state and behaviour. The aim of these therapies is to identify and improve dysfunctional thoughts, cognitive schemas, and behaviours. The models and approaches used in the intervention program were: 1. The cognitive-behavioural model; 2. The rational-emotive and behavioural model (REBT); 3. The early maladaptive schema model; 4. The emotional schema model; 5. The Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) model; 6. The Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) model of psychological flexibility; 7. Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT); 8. Philosophical counselling in 5 steps (PEACE).

The intervention program was designed in 12 modules, with the aim of comprehensively addressing aspects related to behavioural optimization and overcoming the NEET condition. The duration of the program was 13 months, starting in September 2018 and ending in September 2019, with a planned break in July 2019. The goal of our program was to support participants in overcoming the NEET condition and help them optimize their behaviour and skills needed to find employment or pursue education or vocational training.

The dimensions of IDEA. There is a significant increase in scores for all variables at the retest compared to the initial test. The largest difference is observed for the "Self-Centeredness" variable (from 7.9 to 13.92), followed by "Instability/Negativity" (from 15.72 to 21.92) and "Identity Exploration" (from 21.83 to 24.88). The total score of the Inventory of Emerging Maturity Dimensions (EMDM) also increased significantly from 13.6 to 17.6. All differences are statistically significant, with p-values smaller than 0.05 (the significance threshold), as shown in Fig. 9.

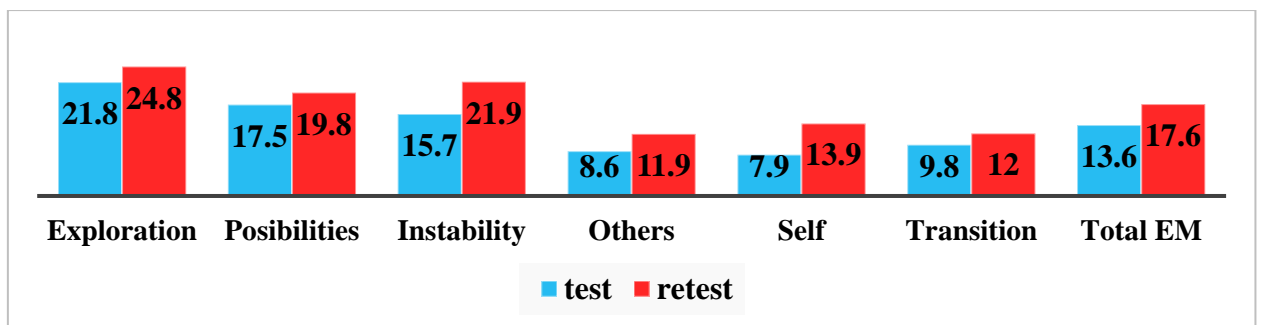


Figure 8. Means for IDEA Dimensions, GE (test-retest)

We obtained a significant increase in scores for all indicators at the retest compared to the initial test (Fig. 10). The largest differences are observed for the indicators of "Perspective, Planning, and Control" (from 21.83 to 30.75), "General Altruism" (from 20 to 28), and "Morality" (from 16.5 to 25.5). The overall K score, which reflects the general orientation of the life history strategy, also increased significantly from 20.7 to 27.5. All differences are statistically significant ($p < 0,05$).

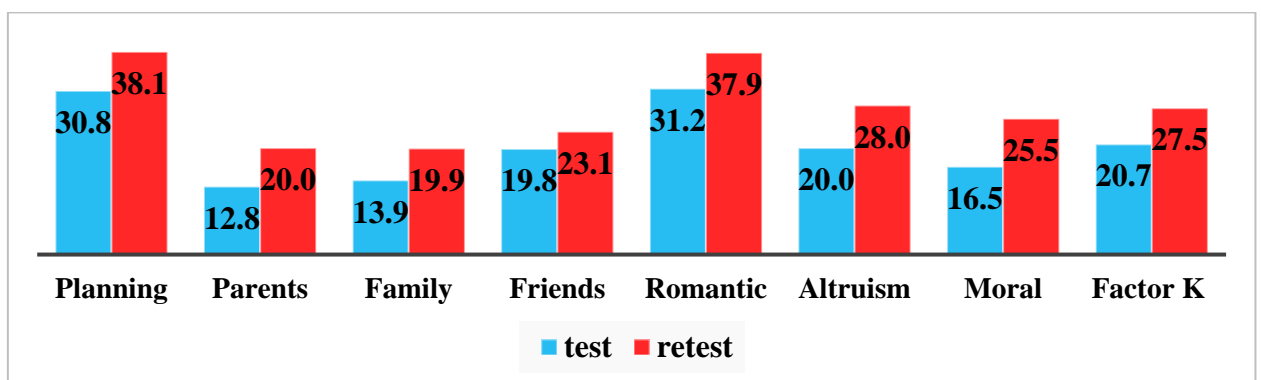


Figure 9. Means for BIVA-k, GE (test-retest)

The Young's Schema Domains. There is a significant decrease in scores for all domains at the retest compared to the initial test (Fig. 11). The largest differences are observed for the domain of "V. Hypervigilance and Inhibition" (from 90.67 to 56.42), followed by "IV. Dependence on Others" (from 68 to 43.75) and "I. Separation and Rejection" (from 56.33 to 38.92). All differences are statistically significant ($p < 0,05$).

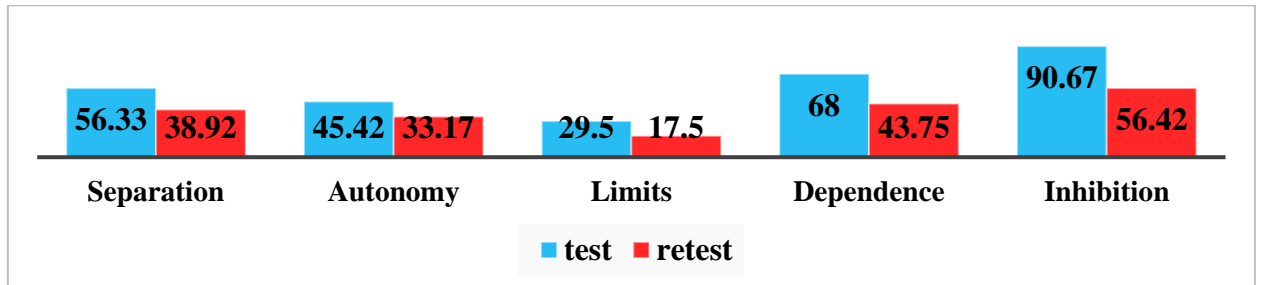


Figure 10. Means for Young's Schema Domains (YSQ), GE (test-retest)

The significant decrease in scores at the retest suggests a reduction over time in the intensity of maladaptive cognitive schemas in the study participants. The substantial decrease in scores in the domain of "V. Hypervigilance and Inhibition" indicates that participants have developed better emotional regulation abilities, reduced excessive vigilance, and increased openness in expressing emotions and needs. The significant decrease in scores in the domain of "IV. Dependence on Others" suggests the development of autonomy and the ability to function independently, without relying excessively on validation and support from others. The decrease in scores in the domain of "I. Separation and Rejection" may indicate an improvement in the ability to form and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships, as well as a reduction in sensitivity to rejection and abandonment. The significant decreases in the domains of "II. Autonomy and Performance" and "III. Deficiency of Limits" also suggest the development of a sense of personal competence, the ability to set and achieve realistic goals, and the ability to manage impulses and behaviors. Overall, these results support the idea that maladaptive cognitive schemas are dynamic structures that can be modified and improved over time through psychological interventions and corrective experiences.

Emotional Schemas Leahy (LESS). We observe a significant decrease in scores for all variables at the retest compared to the initial test (Fig. 12). The largest differences are observed for the variables of "Acceptance" (from 31.67 to 25.67), "Rumination" (from 20.50 to 14.92), and "Understanding" (from 19.33 to 15.67).

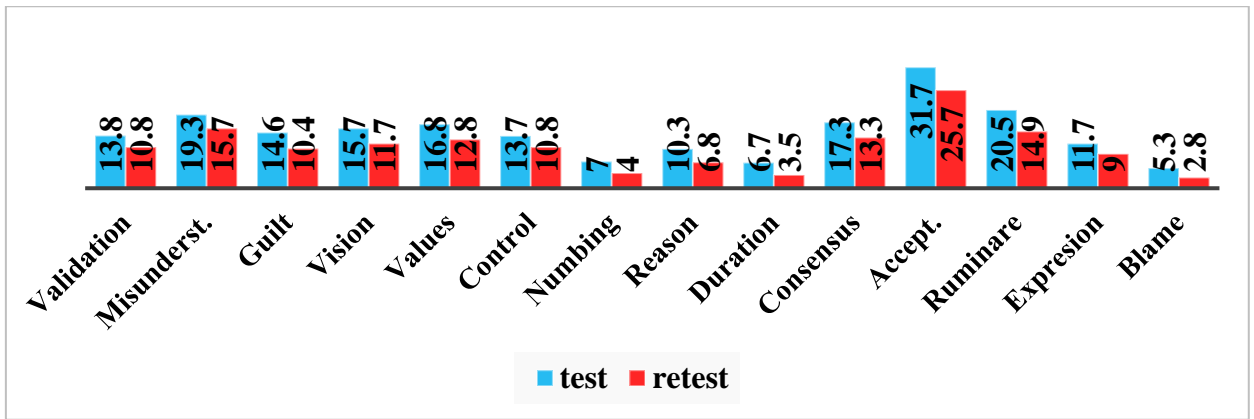


Figure 11. Means for Emotional Schemas Leahy (LESS), GE (test-retest)

The significant decrease in scores at the retest suggests a positive change over time in the evaluated psychological processes. The substantial reduction in scores for the variable "Acceptance" may indicate an increase in participants' ability to accept and tolerate negative experiences and emotions without trying to excessively control or avoid them. The significant decrease in scores for the variable "Rumination" suggests a reduction in the tendency to excessively dwell on negative thoughts and emotions, which can contribute to better mental health and improved psychological functioning. The decrease in scores for the variable "Understanding" may indicate a decrease in participants' need to constantly seek explanations and meaning for their experiences, reflecting greater acceptance and tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty. The significant decreases in other variables such as "Validation," "Guilt," "Simplistic Vision," "Values," "Control," "Numbing," "Reason," "Duration," "Consensus," "Emotional Expression," and "Blame" also suggest positive changes in the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes associated with these variables.

Personality. There is a significant increase in scores for all factors (Fig. 13). The largest difference is observed for the factor of "Openness" (from 112.67 to 132.50), followed by "Conscientiousness" (from 88.92 to 113.67) and "Extraversion" (from 103.5 to 124.08). All differences are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

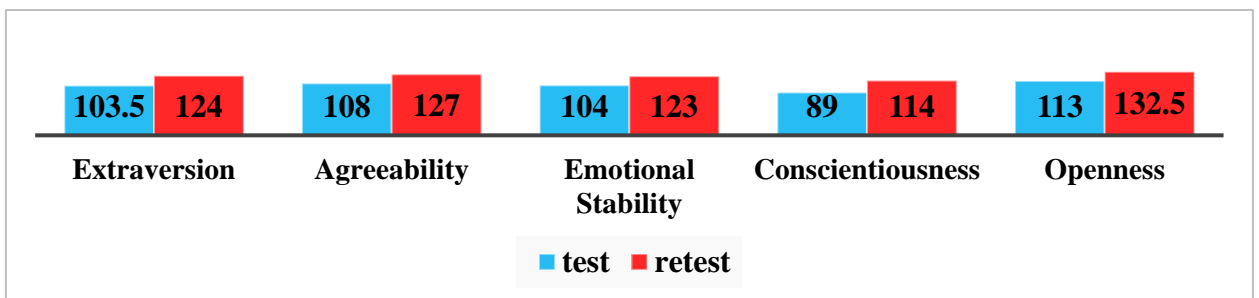


Figure 12. Means for Personality (IPIP), GE (test-retest)

Resilience. We observed a significant increase in scores for all resilience components and the overall score at retesting (Fig. 14). The largest differences ($p < 0.05$) were found for the

"Adaptation" component (from 20.7 to 25.7), "Commitment" (from 18 to 24), and "Control" (from 13 to 17).

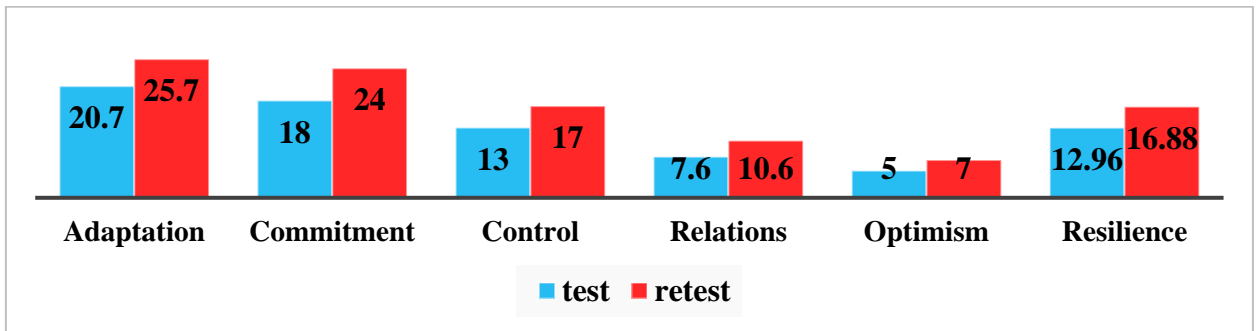


Figure 13. Means Resilience (CD-RISC), GE (test-retest)

Postformal Thinking and Cognitive Inflexibility. There is a significant increase in scores for postformal thinking and all its components at the retest compared to the initial test (Fig. 15). The largest difference is observed in the total score of postformal thinking (from 39.33 to 53.83), followed by the component of "Subjective Choices" (from 11.92 to 17.58) and "Multiple Elements" (from 11.17 to 16). Conversely, there is a significant decrease in the score for inflexibility (from 24.75 to 16.58).

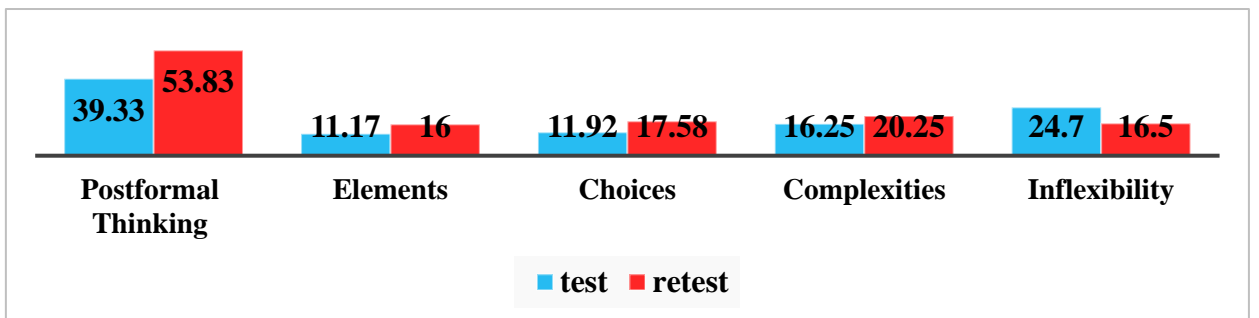


Figure 14. Means for Postformal Thinking (PTQ) and Inflexibility (AAQ-II)

Personal Autonomy. There is a significant increase in scores for all dimensions of personal autonomy and the total score of personal autonomy at the retest compared to the initial test ($p < 0.05$). The largest difference is observed in the dimension of "Behavioral Autonomy" (from 38.33 to 48.33), followed by "Cognitive Autonomy" (from 32.83 to 42.83) and "Value Autonomy" (from 29.25 to 38.92), as shown in Fig. 16.

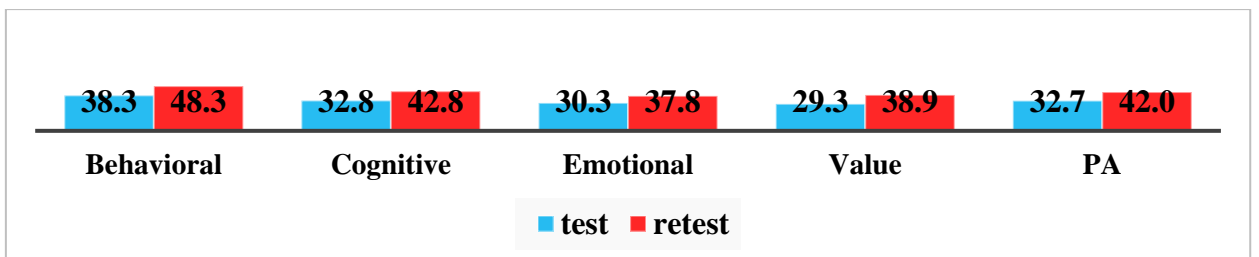


Figure 15. Means for Personal Autonomy (CAP), GE (test-retest)

Psychological Well-being. There is a significant increase in scores for all dimensions of psychological well-being and the total score ($p < 0.05$). The largest differences are observed in the dimensions of "Self-acceptance" (from 10.7 to 17.7), "Personal Growth" (from 11.58 to 17.33), and "Positive Environment" (from 12 to 17).

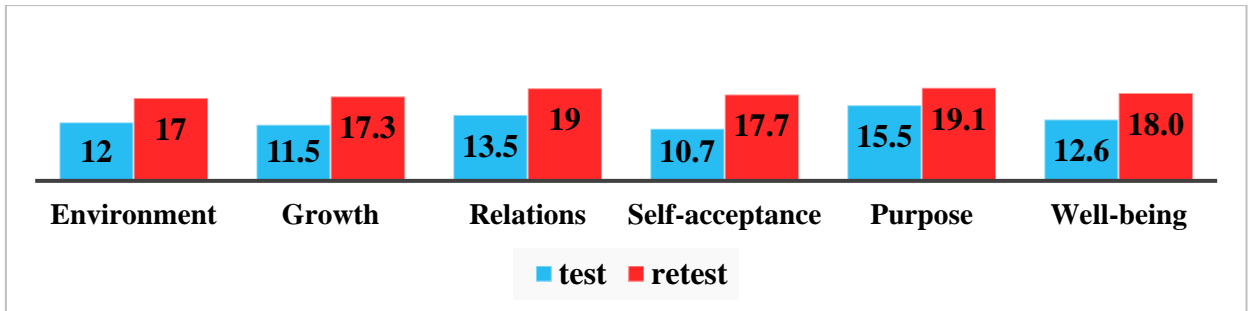


Figure 16. Means for Psychological Well-being (PWS), GE (test-retest)

Following the psychological intervention, as observed from the data presented in Figure 17, there have been increases in the dimensions and indicators of emerging maturity, facilitating factors for optimal behavior, and improvements in most early maladaptive cognitive and emotional schemas. Additionally, by the end of the intervention, all 12 participants have overcome the NEET condition by resuming/continuing their studies, enrolling in internships or employment, or engaging in mixed activities involving both studies and work.

In conclusion, following the psychological intervention, we observe a positive and significant evolution in several psychological characteristics and dimensions of individual functioning. Participants in the psychological intervention have demonstrated substantial improvements in resilience, postformal thinking, personal autonomy, and well-being, suggesting a process of personal development and maturity.

The significant increase in scores for resilience components (adaptation, commitment, control, relationships and social support, optimism) indicates that participants have become more capable of coping with adversity, adapting to change, maintaining commitment and purpose in life, managing stressful situations, building supportive relationships, and maintaining an optimistic perspective.

The development of postformal thinking, reflected in the increase in scores for its dimensions (multiple elements, subjective choices, complexities) and the decrease in cognitive inflexibility, suggests that participants have acquired an increased capacity to think in a complex, nuanced, and flexible manner, surpassing the limitations of rigid and dogmatic thinking.

The increase in personal autonomy, both overall and across its dimensions (behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and value autonomy), indicates that participants have become more independent, more confident in their own thoughts and values, and more capable of managing their emotions and taking responsibility for their decisions and actions.

Finally, the improvement in well-being, reflected in the increase in scores for its dimensions (positive environment, personal growth, positive relationships, self-acceptance, life purpose), suggests that participants have developed a more positive and fulfilling psychological functioning, characterized by better self-acceptance, satisfactory relationships, a sense of growth and continuous development, and a clear life purpose.

The study results demonstrate the high effectiveness of the Phoenix Program in addressing the issue of NEET youth. The fact that all 12 participants managed to overcome the NEET status by the end of the intervention, either through resuming/continuing their studies or finding employment, indicates a significant positive impact of the program.

Furthermore, the three-year follow-up conducted in 2023 confirms the sustainability of the achieved results, with all participants being active and engaged in educational, training, or employment activities. This aspect highlights the long-term effects of the Phoenix Program and its ability to produce lasting changes in the lives of NEET youth.

Although the sample of 12 participants is relatively small, the 100% success in overcoming the NEET status and maintaining these results over a three-year period suggest that the Phoenix Program is a promising and effective intervention. It would be beneficial to replicate the study on a larger sample to confirm these results and assess the potential of the program to be implemented on a larger scale in addressing the issue of NEET youth.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Emerging adults have a significant impact in various domains of society, such as the labor market, economy, culture, policies, governance, technology, and innovation. Recognizing and valuing their contributions can create an environment conducive to their development and active engagement in shaping the future. However, the complexity of society makes them vulnerable and prolongs the duration of the transition to adulthood, which is why specific support and assistance are necessary.

For a more comprehensive understanding, it is important to integrate theories and research from various fields of developmental psychology and utilize data from national and international sources to provide appropriate recommendations for supporting and integrating emerging adults into society and the labor market. The analysis of theoretical and experimental results has led us to draw the following conclusions:

1. Emerging adulthood is a current and urgent issue in our society. An increasing number of young people face difficulties in education and career, and the situation of NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth is alarming (one in four young people). This situation has profound and multiple consequences both for the individual and for society.

2. There is an interdependence between the level of development of emerging adulthood/life strategy adopted and the socio-professional status of young people.

3. Maladaptive cognitive schemas play a significant role in the transition to adulthood. They are the result of a combination of factors, stemming from early childhood but also from adolescence and the emerging period.

4. Identifying and intervening on maladaptive schemas, as well as developing facilitating factors, are essential for supporting young adults.

5. It is evident that emerging adults exhibit specific psychological vulnerability, which requires holistic and personalized interventions.

6. Specific interventions for emerging adults should focus on developing stress management skills, building psychological resilience, increasing psychological flexibility, and fostering critical thinking.

7. It is essential to provide support in identifying and exploring career and educational pathways, as well as developing decision-making skills and future planning.

Research directions for emerging adulthood

Regarding research on emerging adulthood, there are several research directions that can provide a better understanding of supportive factors and interventions that can influence the developmental trajectory of emerging adults.

At the societal level, it is important to examine the impact of government policies and programs on the development of emerging adults. This involves examining education and vocational training programs, mental health services, and social protection measures to understand how they support the development and success of emerging adults. Additionally, social and cultural changes can play a significant role in the developmental trajectory of emerging adults. It is crucial to analyze evolving social values and norms and how they influence the decisions and choices emerging adults make in their lives.

Research questions can explore possible patterns of early interventions to optimize emerging adulthood, the impact of delays in relational or vocational commitment on the trajectory of adult life, racial/ethnic differences, and how the evolving society, information economy, and increased educational demands influence the choices of young people. By addressing these questions and understanding the impact of policies, programs, and social changes on the development of emerging adults, we can create more effective policies and interventions that support young people in their development and maximize their potential.

At the community level, social and community institutions can play a significant role in supporting the development of emerging adults. Therefore, research can explore the role that schools, non-profit organizations, and religious groups play in providing support and resources for emerging adults. Additionally, interpersonal relationships such as mentoring relationships and familial and peer support can have a significant impact on the developmental trajectory of emerging adults. Therefore, research can examine the influence these relationships have on the development and success of emerging adults. Research questions can explore family predictability factors, resilient change patterns, and the role that extended families and peer group selection can play in this development.

By addressing these research questions, we can gain a deeper understanding of how social and community institutions, as well as interpersonal relationships, can influence the development and success of emerging adults.

At the individual level, traits such as personality, skills, and values can affect the developmental trajectory of emerging adults. Research can explore how these individual characteristics shape the choices and decisions that emerging adults make in their lives. Relevant questions for the applied understanding of emerging adulthood could be related to the factors that influence cognitive, social, physical, moral, and spiritual development during this stage. Additionally, it is important to examine whether exploration, which is a normative aspect, should be encouraged or discouraged and how we can quantify the impact of brain development on factors that influence the developmental trajectory during emerging adulthood, such as executive control (planning, future orientation), motivation, self-efficacy, and hope/optimism.

Continuing research can make significant contributions to the development of social policies and appropriate interventions to promote healthy development and support emerging adults. By gaining a deeper understanding of the influences and factors that shape the development of emerging adults, we can identify their needs and challenges and develop effective policies and interventions to support them. By adopting research-based and evidence-based approaches in policy development and interventions, we can ensure that emerging adults receive the necessary support to reach their full potential and actively contribute to the communities and society they are a part of. The research findings at these levels can have a significant positive impact on the lives of emerging adults and contribute to building a more prosperous and equitable future for all.

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ANNOTATION

Violeta Lungu. Optimizing behaviour by ameliorating dysfunctional mental schemas in emerging adulthood.

Doctoral thesis in Psychology. Chisinau, 2024.

The structure of the thesis consists of the following: annotations in three languages (Romanian, English and Russian), a list of abbreviations, a list of tables, a list of figures, an introduction, three chapters, general conclusions and recommendations, a bibliography of 299 titles, 5 appendices, 158 pages of main text, 44 figures, and 37 tables. The research results have been published in 21 scientific papers.

Keywords: emerging adult, NEET youth, emerging maturity, maladaptive mental schemas, optimal development, and behavioural optimization.

Field of study: the psychology of the emerging adult.

The research aimed to investigate and understand the optimal development of the emerging adult and to develop a holistic psychological intervention program that improves the level of dimensions and facilitators of maturity and reduces the manifestation of maladaptive cognitive and emotional schemas, to optimize behaviour in fulfilling the specific tasks of this developmental stage and overcoming the NEET condition.

The research objectives consisted of 1) analysing, studying, and explaining theoretical models of emerging adult development; 2) a comparative study of active emerging youth and NEET youth; 3) the development of a methodology for creating a psychological profile of active/NEET emerging adults; 4) estimation of the level of development of cognitive dimensions and indicators of emerging maturity; 5) identification of the level of manifestation of maladaptive cognitive and emotional schemas; 6) evaluation of facilitators for optimal behaviour; 7) design, development, and implementation of a holistic psychological intervention program aimed at behavioural optimization; 8) formulation of practical psychological recommendations for behavioural optimization and overcoming the NEET condition.

The results obtained in the research contribute to solving an important scientific problem by developing a profile model of the emerging adult, which serves to design and develop behavioural optimization interventions to overcome the NEET condition.

The scientific novelty and originality of this research bring significant contributions through an innovative approach to active and NEET youth from a developmental perspective, integrating contextual perspective and constructivist-developmental model, developing a profile of NEET youth, and implementing a holistic psychological intervention program for optimizing the behaviour of emerging adults with NEET status.

The theoretical significance lies in the analysis and integration of research in emerging maturity with evolutionary psychology, bringing new perspectives and understanding to this field.

The practical value of the work lies in developing a validated experimental model of the NEET youth profile and an intervention program for behavioural optimization. These can be used in the evaluation and support of emerging adults in various organizational contexts and tailored to the specificities of youth in Romania.

The implementation of the scientific results. The use of materials resulting from the continuous and complementary training process of counsellors within the Association for Psychology in Education, Development, and Continuous Training. Additionally, these materials are used for training students and master's students at Hyperion University of Bucharest, Valahia University of Târgoviște, and the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. The intervention program developed in the research is applied by counsellors, psychologists, and trainers in evaluation centres and therapy offices, aiming at the personal development of emerging youth.

LUNGU VIOLETA

**OPTIMIZING BEHAVIOUR BY AMELIORATING
DYSFUNCTIONAL MENTAL SCHEMAS IN EMERGING ADULTHOOD**

Summary of the doctoral thesis in psychology

Specialisation: 511.02 Developmental psychology and educational psychology

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Offset paper. Offset printing.	Circulation 5 ex.
Printing papers: 1.5	Order no.

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