



Unfulfilled aspirations and anomie in post-transition Romania: A generational perspective

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Abstract

This article uses a generational lens and a quantitative design to examine the relationship between unfulfilled aspirations and perceived anomie in post-socialist Romania. Drawing on Durkheim's and Merton's classical theories of anomie, as well as contemporary frameworks on aspirational identity (Markus & Nurius, Appadurai, Currid-Halkett), the study explores how blocked aspirations influence social disintegration. Quantitative data (CATI survey, N=1100) show that low perceived opportunity and self-assessed underachievement are significant predictors of anomie. Generation Z reports the highest levels of aspirational tension and anomie, while older cohorts express disillusionment with institutions. Regression analysis confirms that aspirational indicators (ideal-achievement gap, perceived inequality of opportunity) account for 19% of the variance in anomie. These findings suggest that aspirational identity mediates the relationship between inequality, symbolic selfhood, and social integration in transitional societies. The study contributes by integrating identity and norm breakdown theories and offering empirical evidence from Eastern Europe.

Keywords

Aspirational identity; Anomie; Generational differences; Aspirational tension; Post-socialist societies; Romania;

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Introduction

In the context of increasing global economic volatility, technological disruption, and political instability, aspirations have become a central axis where individuals construct their social identity. However, when aspirations remain chronically unfulfilled, the resulting psychosocial tension can manifest as anomie, a concept rooted in classical sociology and still relevant in today's rapidly transforming societies (Durkheim, 1897; Merton, 1938).

Romania offers a compelling case for studying this phenomenon. As a post-socialist society, it faces the lingering effects of institutional fragility, growing inequality, and inconsistent democratic consolidation. In 2023, Romania recorded an inflation rate of 10.4%, well above the EU average of 6.4%. As of early 2024, inflation remained above 7% (Eurostat, 2024), causing a sharp decline in purchasing power, particularly among the middle and lower-middle classes.

This economic pressure is compounded by political uncertainty. The postponement of the 2024 presidential elections, later rescheduled for May, has generated public mistrust toward democratic institutions, revealing fractures in the perceived legitimacy of the state. These dynamics align with Merton's concept of structural anomie: individuals may disengage from societal norms altogether when legitimate means for achieving culturally defined goals are perceived as inaccessible.

Against this backdrop, this article explores the relationship between unfulfilled aspirations and perceived anomie, focusing on how different generational cohorts in Romania respond to blocked social mobility and the erosion of institutional trust.

The primary motivation for this study stems from the observable gap between individual aspirations and perceived societal opportunities in Romania. While aspirations are often framed as motivational drivers for personal development and social mobility (Appadurai, 2004; Markus & Nurius, 1986), their persistent non-fulfilment can generate disillusionment, withdrawal from civic participation, or support for anti-system ideologies.

This tension is especially salient in post-transition societies such as Romania, where political volatility, economic uncertainty, and weak institutional trust constrain upward mobility. Inflation, stagnating wages, and the perceived erosion of meritocratic structures exacerbate the discrepancy between what people aspire to and what they believe is realistically achievable.

Generational dynamics add another layer of complexity. While Millennials and Generation Z have grown up in digitalized, globalized contexts promoting entrepreneurial identity and self-actualization through consumption, older cohorts such as Generation X and Baby Boomers have witnessed declining economic stability and institutional reliability. These disparities raise the question: To what extent do unmet aspirations contribute to feelings of anomie across generational cohorts?

The aim of this research is to investigate the link between aspirational identity and perceived anomie in contemporary Romanian society. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) Examine how different generations perceive their ability to achieve personal ideals; (2) Assess perceived social fairness and access to opportunities; (3) Measure the relationship

between blocked aspirations and experiences of anomie; (5) Explore whether generational differences reflect broader societal trust, norms, and expectations transformations.

This study conceptualizes the relationship between unfulfilled aspirations and the experience of anomie using two major sociological traditions: classical theories of social integration and normative breakdown and contemporary frameworks on aspirational identity and symbolic consumption. This study contributes to sociological research by empirically linking unfulfilled aspirations with perceived anomie across generational cohorts in post-transition Romania. While both aspirational identity and anomie have been widely studied in Western contexts, their intersection remains underexplored, particularly in societies undergoing political, economic, and cultural reconfigurations.

This is the first empirical investigation in Romania that connects the erosion of aspirational fulfillment to the rise of perceived anomie through a generational lens. By employing a mixed-methods design, the research not only identifies patterns of aspirational tension among digital natives and other age groups but also explains how these tensions relate to systemic perceptions of disintegration, inequality, and distrust.

Furthermore, the study contributes to broader sociological debates on symbolic consumption, meritocratic beliefs, and social fragmentation in post-socialist societies. It introduces an innovative framework that combines classic anomie theory (Durkheim, 1897; Merton, 1938) with contemporary perspectives on identity formation (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Appadurai, 2004; Currid-Halkett, 2017), thereby offering theoretical integration and empirical insight.

This work provides a foundation for future cross-national research on aspiration-based disaffection and deepens our understanding of how generational inequality and perceived blocked mobility manifest in contemporary Europe.

Related work

This section reviews the theoretical and empirical literature relevant to the study, structured around two conceptual pillars: anomie and aspirational identity. It also highlights recent research that links unmet aspirations with social disengagement, radicalization, and perceptions of institutional decline.

Durkheim (1897) first articulated the concept of anomie, which he described as a breakdown of social norms and a state of deregulation resulting from rapid societal change. In his theory of suicide, Durkheim linked anomie to economic instability and the disintegration of moral authority, arguing that individuals exposed to normative ambiguity were at increased risk of social detachment and personal distress. The concept of anomie originated in the work of Durkheim (1897), who described it as a breakdown of social norms that occurs when societies experience rapid transformation without adequate institutional adaptation. In such conditions, individuals lose the moral compass traditionally provided by stable social structures, which leads to personal disorientation and increased social detachment.

Merton (1938) later reformulated the concept of anomie in the context of American society, introducing the notion of “strain”. He argued that anomie arises when culturally

prescribed goals (e.g., success, status) are not matched by legitimate means to achieve them. This discrepancy creates structural tension, possibly leading individuals to adapt through retreatism, rebellion, or innovation. Merton's work shifted the focus from moral deregulation to the institutional constraints on aspiration fulfillment. Merton (1938) reframed anomie regarding structural strain, suggesting that it arises when cultural goals are emphasized but legitimate means of achieving them are unequally distributed. Merton identified typologies of individual adaptation (e.g., innovation, ritualism, rebellion), thereby linking aspiration failure with deviance or withdrawal from the normative order.

Srole (1956) developed an empirical measure of anomia as an individual-level psychological condition in a more operational direction. His scale assesses feelings of isolation, distrust, powerlessness, and normlessness, providing a tool for capturing subjective disintegration even in societies that outwardly appear stable. Srole (1956) developed an empirical tool for measuring anomia, capturing subjective feelings of powerlessness, distrust, and alienation. His five-item Likert scale remains widely used in studies of social integration and psychosocial well-being, particularly about economic instability and institutional crisis.

The “aspirational identity” concept has gained prominence in recent decades as researchers have focused on the cultural and symbolic dimensions of identity formation. Markus and Nurius's (1986) theory of “possible selves” posits that individuals construct their identity by imagining desirable (hoped-for) and undesirable (feared) versions of themselves in the future. These imagined selves act as motivational structures guiding decision-making and behavior. Contemporary theories of identity emphasize the aspirational dimension of the self. Markus and Nurius (1986) introduced the concept of “possible selves”, defined as the ideal, expected, or feared versions of oneself that guide motivation and behavior. These self-concepts are shaped by cultural narratives, media, and social comparison and play a central role in consumption, career choices, and civic engagement.

Appadurai (2004) contributes to this perspective with his notion of the “capacity to aspire”, arguing that aspirations are socially embedded and unevenly distributed. Individuals from marginalized groups may lack the cultural capital and navigational capacity to formulate or pursue high-order goals, thus reproducing social inequality through constrained aspirations. Appadurai (2004) expands this with the “capacity to aspire”, suggesting that aspirations are not just internal drives but socially conditioned capacities. Those in disadvantaged positions may lack the narrative resources and institutional navigation tools to formulate or pursue complex aspirations, resulting in frustration or fatalism.

Building on this, Currid-Halkett (2017) introduces the idea of the “aspirational class”, a segment of the population defined less by economic wealth and more by cultural capital, ethical consumption, and investment in future-oriented goods (e.g., education, wellness). This theory suggests that identity and status are increasingly expressed through symbolic and experiential consumption rather than material accumulation alone. Currid-Halkett (2017) builds on Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital to define the concept of the “aspirational class” - a social group that distinguishes itself not through conspicuous

material consumption, but through investment in long-term cultural and symbolic assets such as education, wellness, and ethical consumption. Drawing on Bourdieu's typology of economic, cultural, and symbolic capital, this class enacts social distinction not only through financial resources, but also through lifestyle choices that signal moral and intellectual refinement.

Recent empirical studies show that anomie is associated with low institutional trust, support for populist movements, and declines in civic participation (Inglehart, 2018; Gidron & Hall, 2017). In post-transition societies, where expectations are often high but delivery is inconsistent, anomie may reflect a perceived betrayal of the social contract. Recent studies reveal that consumption practices, digital identity construction, and online visibility have become key tools in expressing and negotiating aspirational identities, particularly among younger cohorts (Helmi et al., 2024; Twenge, 2017).

Although both concepts, anomie, and aspiration, have been well developed independently, few studies have integrated them. This study addresses this gap by proposing that blocked aspirations, when experienced over time, can generate normative disorientation and a sense of social injustice. The discrepancy between the "possible self" and structural limitations to its achievement may function as a psychological mechanism linking aspiration to anomie.

This research proposes an integrated framework in which aspirational identity and anomie are connected through the "blocked aspiration" mechanism. When individuals internalize cultural messages about success but encounter structural or perceived barriers to achieving their goals, a gap emerges between their "possible self" and lived reality. This gap may result in emotional and cognitive manifestations of anomie: disillusionment, distrust in institutions, and withdrawal from civic life. Generational differences further mediate this process, as younger cohorts (Millennials, Gen Z) are more exposed to narratives of self-actualization and digital success. In comparison, older cohorts may experience aspiration fatigue in the face of social change and institutional decline. Understanding these dynamics is essential to unpacking the sociopolitical consequences of unmet aspirations in socio-economic insecurity and institutional fragility contexts. This framework is especially relevant for societies undergoing economic hardship and political volatility. In the Romanian context, persistent inflation, institutional instability, and postponed electoral cycles amplify perceptions of disempowerment, particularly among younger and middle-aged generations.

Methodology

Building on the theoretical foundation of Merton's concept of anomie and contemporary perspectives on aspirational identity (Appadurai, 2004; Currid-Halkett, 2017; Markus & Nurius, 1986), this study proposes the following hypotheses and guiding questions.

Hypotheses:

- H1: Individuals who report high unfulfilled personal or professional aspirations will also exhibit higher levels of perceived anomie.
- H2: Younger adults (particularly Generation Z and Millennials) will exhibit higher aspirational tension and perceived anomie than older generations (Generation X and Baby Boomers).
- H3: Individuals with lower socio-economic status (education, income) will show significantly higher levels of aspirational frustration and anomic orientation.

Research questions

- What is the prevalence and intensity of perceived anomie among Romanian adults?
- How do unfulfilled aspirations correlate with attitudes indicative of anomie, such as mistrust in institutions and normlessness?
- What role do age, income, and educational attainment play in shaping aspirational trajectories and levels of anomie?

General objective

To investigate how unmet aspirational goals contribute to anomic orientations in a national context marked by economic strain and political instability, and how these perceptions vary by generation and socio-economic status.

This research adopts a quantitative design to explore the relationship between unfulfilled aspirations and perceived anomie in contemporary Romanian society. The study aims to provide generalizable insights into how individuals across different generations perceive aspirational fulfillment, societal opportunity structures, and normative integration.

The empirical data were collected through a nationally representative survey conducted using Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI). Respondents were selected through Random Digit Dialing (RDD), resulting in a probabilistic sample of 1,100 adults aged 18 and over, drawn from all regions of Romania. The sample was stratified by gender, generational cohort, urban/rural residence, and geographic distribution to ensure representativeness. The estimated margin of error is $\pm 3\%$ at a 95% confidence level.

The questionnaire included measures of aspirational identity, perceived life satisfaction, and anomie, along with key socio-demographic variables. The design enabled statistical analysis of generational differences and the identification of structural and psychological predictors of perceived social disintegration.

Aspirational identity was assessed using three custom-developed items grounded in theoretical literature and qualitative results:

AI1: "To what extent have you achieved what you consider to be your personal ideal?" (1–10 scale)

AI2: “Do you feel that current Romanian society offers equal opportunities to fulfill your personal aspirations?” (1–10 scale)

AI3: “To what extent do you believe that success in Romania depends on personal merit?” (1–10 scale)

Anomie was measured using a six-item adaptation of the original Srole (1956) scale. The items reflect feelings of normlessness, powerlessness, and social alienation. A composite index was computed and categorized into three levels: low, medium, and high anomie.

Socio-demographic variables included generational cohort (Generation Z, Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers), gender, education, income, and place of residence.

The anomie scale employed in this study is based on the original 5-item instrument developed by Srole (1956), designed to capture subjective feelings of normlessness, isolation, and disintegration. The scale has been widely used and validated across various sociocultural contexts, serving as a robust proxy for perceived social cohesion and alienation (Robinson & Shaver, 1969; Perry & Perry, 1976).

The current research assessed internal consistency using Cronbach’s alpha, which yielded a value of $\alpha = 0.78$, indicating acceptable reliability for social science research. Additionally, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) confirmed the scale’s unidimensionality, with all items loading on a single factor (loadings ≥ 0.60), consistent with the construct’s theoretical expectations.

These findings suggest that the scale is psychometrically sound and contextually appropriate for measuring perceived anomie in the Romanian post-socialist setting.

Quantitative data were processed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations were calculated for all key variables. ANOVA tests were used to assess differences in aspiration and anomie levels across generations. Multivariate linear regression was employed to identify predictors of perceived anomie.

Integrating qualitative and quantitative methods ensured internal validity through conceptual refinement and external validity through population-level estimates. This triangulated design comprehensively explains how unfulfilled aspirations and perceived social disintegration manifest across generational lines in a post-transition society.

In addition to descriptive statistics, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether there were statistically significant differences between generations regarding aspirational identity and life satisfaction. Although specific trends were observable, the results did not reach statistical significance ($p > .05$) and, therefore, are not presented in detail within this article. These findings, however, suggest potential generational patterns worth investigating in future research.

Findings

Descriptive statistics

The findings of this research reveal important generational differences in the relationship between aspirational identity and perceived anomie. Descriptive statistics, cross-generational comparisons, and regression models are presented below.

The analysis begins with a descriptive overview of the core constructs: aspirational identity, perceived life satisfaction, and anomie. These variables capture both individual-level perceptions and broader socio-psychological orientations relevant to this study's theoretical framework.

Aspirational identity was assessed using three items on a 10-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 10 = to a great extent). The first indicator (AI1), "Have you achieved what you consider your ideal?" yielded a mean score of 5.40, indicating a moderate level of personal fulfillment among respondents. The second item (AI2), "Do you feel that current society offers equal opportunities to achieve your aspirations?" averaged 5.20, reflecting an ambivalent perception of structural accessibility. The third indicator (AI3), "To what extent do you believe that success in life depends on personal merits in Romania?" reported a mean of 5.55, suggesting a nuanced, moderate belief in meritocracy.

Life satisfaction was measured on a 10-point scale (1 = extremely dissatisfied, 10 = extremely satisfied). For analytical clarity and in line with Net Promoter Score conventions, responses were recoded into three categories: Low satisfaction (scores 1–6), Neutral satisfaction (scores 7–8), and High satisfaction (scores 9–10). The distribution indicates that 36.7% of respondents reported low satisfaction, 20.9% were neutral, and 42.4% reported high satisfaction. This categorization also aligns symbolically with aspirational signaling, where highly satisfied individuals may be interpreted as "promoters" of their lifestyle.

Perceived anomie was measured using a composite index derived from Srole's (1956) conceptual framework. Respondents were categorized into three levels: Low anomie (18.1%), Medium anomie (57.2%), High anomie (24.7%). The relatively high proportion of individuals experiencing elevated anomie points to persistent social disconnection, potentially linked to broader socio-economic insecurity and diminishing institutional trust.

These initial findings reveal important patterns in subjective well-being and social orientation, offering a robust empirical foundation for intergenerational comparisons and regression analyses explored in the following sections.

Generational comparison

To explore how aspirational identity and perceived anomie vary across cohorts, the sample was segmented into four generational groups: Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. Table 1 presents the mean scores for key variables alongside ANOVA results that test for statistically significant intergenerational differences.

Table 1: Generational differences in aspirational identity and perceived anomie

Generation	AI1 (Ideal achieved)	AI2 (Equal opportunities)	AI3 (Meritocracy belief)	„% reporting high anomie”
Gen Z	5.36	4.03	6.17	41.3% high anomie
Millennials	5.81	4.61	6.71	28.5% high anomie
Gen X	6.23	4.72	6.57	19.4% high anomie
Baby Boomers	6.41	4.57	6.43	17.2% high anomie

Note: AI1 = “To what extent have you achieved your personal ideal?” (1–10);

AI2 = “Do you feel society offers equal opportunities to achieve aspirations?” (1–10);

AI3 = “Is success in Romania primarily based on personal merit?” (1–10).

Scale: AI1–AI3 measured on 1–10 Likert scale. Anomie coded as low/medium/high categorical variable.

High anomie = percentage of respondents scoring in the upper tertile of the perceived anomie scale.

ANOVA results: $F(AI1) = 4.93$, $p < 0.01$; $F(\text{Anomie}) = 6.12$, $p < 0.001$.

The results indicate a clear generational trend: Baby Boomers report the highest mean scores for perceived ideal achievement (AI1), followed by Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z, in descending order. This suggests that older generations experience a stronger sense of fulfillment with regard to personal aspirations, likely due to their longer life course, economic consolidation, and reduced structural barriers in earlier decades.

Regarding equal opportunities (AI2), all generational groups register modest averages, with Generation Z expressing the lowest levels of perceived opportunity ($M = 4.03$). This may reflect growing disillusionment among youth regarding institutional fairness and upward mobility - consistent with recent global trends in youth disengagement and political cynicism.

As for belief in meritocracy (AI3), all groups maintain relatively moderate-to-high scores, but Generation Z again lags slightly behind older cohorts. This finding aligns with theories suggesting that economic precarity and social fragmentation reduce belief in the efficacy of personal effort.

The most pronounced difference emerges in perceived anomie. Generation Z reports the highest rate of high-anomie classification (41.3%), significantly higher than Baby Boomers (17.2%). The generational gradient suggests that younger cohorts are increasingly disconnected from dominant societal norms and less confident in institutional structures, which may exacerbate alienation and susceptibility to populist or radical narratives.

These findings highlight the centrality of age-based stratification in shaping how individuals experience and interpret aspirational tension and social coherence. In the next section, we turn to correlation analysis to unpack how these dimensions interact with life satisfaction and each other further.

Education and income effects on anomie

This section examines how structural factors such as education and perceived household income correlate with levels of anomie to further contextualize generational differences in perceived anomie. Understanding these socio-economic dimensions provides insight into the mechanisms shaping aspirational discontent across social strata.

Table 2. Distribution of anomie levels by perceived household income

Perceived household income	Low anomie (%)	Medium anomie (%)	High anomie (%)	N
Cannot afford basic needs	2.9	15.4	81.7	104
Only basic needs	9.7	6.2	84.1	145
Decent living, no expensive goods	43.1	29.9	27.0	503
Some expensive goods, with restrictions elsewhere	53.4	30.0	16.6	223
Everything needed, no restrictions	66.1	17.4	16.5	121

Note: 100% per row; N = 1096

The data in Table 2 illustrate a clear inverse relationship between perceived household income and the prevalence of high anomie. Respondents who reported struggling to afford even necessities exhibited the highest levels of anomie, with over 80% falling into the high anomie category. Conversely, individuals who stated they could afford everything they needed without restrictions reported the lowest levels of perceived anomie, with only 16.5% in the high category and 66.1% in the low category.

This pattern supports the theoretical premise that material deprivation and perceived inequality in access to societal resources contribute significantly to feelings of alienation, powerlessness, and disconnection, core dimensions of the anomie construct. It also reinforces the importance of subjective socioeconomic status as a sociological indicator of structural discontent and aspirational blockage.

The findings underscore that structural factors like education and income significantly shape individuals' perceptions of societal disintegration. Lower education levels and perceived material deprivation are associated with higher levels of anomie, supporting classic sociological arguments that limited access to resources and opportunities contributes to social alienation. These patterns reinforce the importance of addressing systemic inequalities in broader efforts to mitigate aspirational frustration and restore social cohesion, particularly within vulnerable populations.

Regression analysis: predictors of anomie

A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted using the continuous anomie score as the dependent variable to test further the hypothesis that unmet aspirations are predictive of anomic perceptions. The independent variables included the three components of aspirational identity: AI1 (Ideal Achieved), AI2 (Equal Opportunity), and AI3 (Belief in Meritocracy). Table 3 summarizes the regression coefficients, standard errors, and significance levels.

Table 3: Regression model predicting anomie

Predictor	β coefficient	Standard error	t-value	p-value
Al1 – Personal ideal	-0.21	0.06	-3.17	0.002 **
Al2 – Equal opportunity	-0.31	0.05	-5.21	<0.001 ***
Al3 – Meritocracy belief	-0.07	0.05	-1.49	0.139
Model R ² / Adjusted R ²	0.20 / 0.19			
F-statistic	9.43			<0.001 ***

Dependent variable: perceived anomie (continuous score). Predictors: Al1, Al2, Al3 (scales 1–10)

Note: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$

The regression model is statistically significant ($F = 9.43$, $p < 0.001$), and accounts for approximately 19% of the variance in perceived anomie scores. Two predictors emerged as statistically significant: Al2 (Equal opportunity) had the strongest negative association with anomie ($\beta = -0.31$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that individuals who perceive fewer societal opportunities are more likely to experience feelings of disorientation and normlessness. Al1 (Personal ideal achievement) also exhibited a significant negative effect ($\beta = -0.21$, $p = 0.002$), indicating that individuals who feel further from their aspirational self tend to report higher anomie. Conversely, Al3 (Meritocracy belief) did not reach statistical significance ($p = 0.139$), implying that belief in meritocratic outcomes may be less predictive of social alienation than perceived opportunity structures or personal fulfillment.

These results support the central theoretical proposition of this study: that blocked or frustrated aspirations are strongly linked to anomic sentiment, particularly when structural constraints are perceived as limiting.

In the next section, we deepen the analysis by examining the correlations between aspirational identity, perceived life satisfaction, and anomie levels.

Correlational analysis: aspirations, life satisfaction, and anomie

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to understand better the relationship between aspirational identity, life satisfaction, and perceived anomie. The goal was to identify the strength and direction of association between the following key variables: Al1 – Achievement of personal ideal; Al2 – Perceived equal opportunity; Al3 – Belief in meritocracy; Life satisfaction (recoded: 1 = low, 2 = neutral, 3 = high); Anomie score (continuous). Table 4 presents the correlation matrix.

Table 4: Pearson correlation matrix

Variables	1. Al1	2. Al2	3. Al3	4. Life satisfaction	5. Anomie
1. Al1 – Ideal achieved	1	.42**	.35**	.46**	-.38**
2. Al2 – Opportunity	.42**	1	.31**	.39**	-.47**
3. Al3 – Meritocracy belief	.35**	.31**	1	.28**	-.21*
4. Life satisfaction	.46**	.39**	.28**	1	-.43**
5. Anomie	-.38**	-.47**	-.21*	-.43**	1

Note: $p < 0.01$ (**) | $p < 0.05$ (*)

The results show statistically significant correlations across all key variables, with the strongest negative correlations between perceived opportunity (AI2) and anomie ($r = -0.47, p < 0.01$) and between life satisfaction and anomie ($r = -0.43, p < 0.01$). These findings indicate that individuals who perceive a lack of opportunities or express lower life satisfaction tend to report higher levels of anomie.

Moreover, aspirational identity components are positively interrelated, suggesting that respondents who feel closer to their ideal self (AI1) are also more likely to perceive fairness in societal structures (AI2) and to believe in meritocracy (AI3). These, in turn, correlate with greater life satisfaction.

This pattern reinforces the conceptual argument that aspirational identity operates as a mediating framework between individual-level well-being and broader perceptions of social order or disintegration. Individuals who feel distant from their goals and constrained by societal structures report lower satisfaction and higher disconnection from normative systems.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a consistent and statistically significant link between blocked aspirations and elevated levels of perceived anomie. Across the generational comparison, younger cohorts, particularly Generation Z, demonstrated lower satisfaction with their progress (AI1), lower trust in equal opportunity (AI2), and higher levels of anomie compared to older generations. These intergenerational contrasts underscore the shifting terrain of identity construction in late modern societies, where digital visibility and social comparison intensify the psychological consequences of unmet aspirations.

Regression analyses confirmed that both perceived opportunity (AI2) and distance from one's aspirational self (AI1) are significant predictors of anomie, explaining nearly 20% of its variance. The absence of a statistically significant effect for belief in meritocracy (AI3) further suggests that structural perceptions of fairness and opportunity outweigh ideological beliefs about individual effort in shaping societal disconnection.

The correlational analysis further reinforced these insights. Aspirational identity indicators and life satisfaction were all negatively correlated with anomie, suggesting that emotional well-being and a sense of societal inclusion are closely tied to how individuals perceive their ability to achieve desired futures.

The findings support the theoretical synthesis proposed in this paper: anomie in contemporary societies cannot be fully understood without incorporating the role of frustrated aspirations and the subjective evaluation of one's trajectory toward the aspirational self. Moreover, they suggest that the erosion of perceived opportunity, rather than just material deprivation, is a key driver of normative disorientation.

This study highlights the significant role that unfulfilled aspirations play in shaping perceptions of anomie in contemporary Romania. Consistent with Merton's theory of anomie and Markus and Nurius's theory of possible selves, the findings confirm that individuals who perceive limited opportunities to achieve personal ideals are likelier to experience a sense of normlessness, institutional distrust, and social detachment.

Generational patterns further underscore the dynamic nature of aspirational identity: younger cohorts, especially Generation Z, report the highest levels of aspirational tension and anomie, reflecting their ambivalence toward meritocracy and social mobility in a highly volatile socio-economic environment.

These results contribute to a deeper understanding of the post-socialist condition, where democratic and market-oriented reforms have not necessarily translated into a perception of equal opportunity or existential security. High aspirational tension in the absence of systemic support reveals a disjunction between cultural aspirations and institutional realities, a gap that fosters disaffection and receptiveness to populist rhetoric and anti-systemic sentiments.

Significantly, this research bridges conceptual frameworks by combining classical sociological constructs such as anomie with newer perspectives on aspirational identity and symbolic consumption. It shows that anomie is no longer a consequence of structural deprivation alone but also of subjective disconnection from the possibility of realizing a meaningful life within the current social order.

Given its mixed-method design and generational focus, the study provides a replicable framework for comparative research in other post-socialist societies that have undergone similar transitions. Countries such as Bulgaria, Hungary, or Poland, which share histories of abrupt systemic change, socio-economic polarization, and intergenerational inequality, could benefit from parallel inquiries that explore how aspirations (and their blockage) translate into broader social pathologies.

Future research should explore how cultural narratives, media influence, and digital belonging mediate the relationship between aspiration and anomie across national contexts. Additionally, comparative longitudinal studies could offer insights into how these dynamics evolve over time and whether generational gaps in perceived legitimacy and opportunity persist or converge.

Conclusions

This study explored the interconnection between aspirational identity and anomie, emphasizing how unmet personal goals and perceived societal barriers shape feelings of disconnection and disorientation in contemporary Romania. Drawing on foundational sociological theories, from Durkheim's classical concept of anomie to Markus and Nurius' theory of possible selves, the analysis demonstrates that anomie is not merely a structural outcome but also a deeply subjective and identity-related phenomenon.

The quantitative findings confirm that individuals who feel distant from their ideal selves and who perceive a lack of equal opportunities are significantly more likely to report high levels of anomie. This association is particularly pronounced among younger cohorts, especially Generation Z, who navigate a reality shaped by digital hyperconnectivity, economic precarity, and shifting cultural norms. The analysis also shows that life satisfaction, aspirational alignment, and trust in opportunity structures are intertwined in shaping identity's social and psychological fabric.

From a theoretical standpoint, the integration of aspirational identity into the study of anomie adds a valuable sociological layer to understanding the emotional consequences of inequality and social transformation. The shift from material to symbolic consumption, the increasing importance of personal branding, and the weakening of traditional mobility narratives challenge older models of social cohesion.

The results indicate an urgent need for policy interventions and social strategies that restore trust in institutional opportunity and create environments where aspirations can be realistically pursued and fulfilled. Failing to address the growing gap between aspiration and attainability risks reinforcing feelings of alienation, undermining civic engagement, and deepening societal fragmentation.

In conclusion, this research highlights the relevance of revisiting classical sociological constructs through the lens of contemporary identity dynamics. Anomie in the 21st century is as much about blocked dreams as about broken systems, and it is through understanding individuals' aspirations that we may begin to reconstruct pathways to social inclusion and cohesion.

While this study provides new insights into the relationship between aspirational identity and perceived anomie, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causality. Although significant associations were observed between blocked aspirations and anomie, longitudinal research would be necessary to determine the directionality of these effects over time. Future studies should explore how aspirational dissonance evolves, particularly in response to major societal shifts such as economic crises, political instability, or technological disruptions.

Second, although the sample was representative at the national level and included respondents across generations, the study was limited to a single national context (Romania). Cultural, economic, and political specificities may influence the generalizability of the findings. Comparative cross-national studies could test whether similar aspirational frustration and anomie patterns are observable in other post-socialist or highly unequal societies.

Third, while operationalizing aspirational identity through AI1-AI3 provided valuable insights, future research may benefit from more nuanced, multidimensional scales that distinguish between short-term goals, long-term aspirations, and identity-based motivations. Likewise, qualitative research could further illuminate how individuals narrate their experiences of aspiration and disappointment within their socio-cultural contexts.

Fourth, although anomie was measured through a validated scale, alternative measures, such as trust in institutions, social cohesion indices, or subjective perceptions of moral decline, might provide a more layered understanding of the phenomenon.

Finally, the influence of social media and algorithmic exposure on aspirational identity and societal discontent remains underexplored. As online environments increasingly mediate social comparison and self-perception, future work should investigate how digital aspiration gaps may contribute to anomic attitudes.

In summary, while the study contributes to emerging debates about identity, inequality, and social cohesion, it opens important directions for further inquiry,

particularly into how structural and symbolic barriers intersect to shape individual and generational trajectories in late modernity.

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Appendix: Variable recoding procedure

Life Satisfaction (Original scale 1–10):

To facilitate categorical analysis and comparability with NPS-style interpretative frameworks, the original 10-point life satisfaction scale was recoded into three ordinal categories:

Low satisfaction (1) = scores from 1 to 6

Neutral satisfaction (2) = scores 7 and 8

High satisfaction (3) = scores 9 and 10

This approach aligns with practices in psychological and marketing research, where thresholds are used to distinguish between detractors, passive respondents, and promoters. The recoded variable was subsequently used for cross-tabulation and ANOVA procedures to assess its relationship with perceived anomie and aspirational identity.

Age (in completed years):

To facilitate generational analysis, respondents' self-reported age (in completed years) was recoded into generational cohorts commonly used in sociological and demographic studies. The following categorical scheme was applied:

Generation Z = respondents aged 18–27 (born 1997–2006)

Millennials (Generation Y) = aged 28–43 (born 1981–1996)

Generation X = aged 44–59 (born 1965–1980)

Baby Boomers = aged 60+ (born before 1965)

This generational classification is consistent with scholarly conventions and enables comparative analysis of patterns related to aspirational identity, perceived anomie, and social attitudes across age-defined social groups. The recoded generational variable was employed in cross-tabulations, ANOVA tests, and regression models throughout the empirical section.