

EXPLORING RELIGIOUS CONSUMPTION BEHAVIOR THROUGH CONFESSION, COGNITION, AND RITUAL PARTICIPATION: EVIDENCE FROM ROMANIAN HIGH-SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract:

This study examines how denominational affiliation, cognitive orientation, gender, and religious consumption behavior interact to shape adolescents' religious engagement in a predominantly Orthodox Romanian town. Based on a paper-based survey administered to 383 high school students (grades 9–12) across five urban schools in Turda, the research employs a quantitative design with single-item ordinal measures of prayer frequency, church attendance, faith-versus-reason orientation, perceived cost–benefit balance, denomination, gender, and self-reported purchases or participation in religious products and events. Statistical analyses (Mann–Whitney U, χ^2) conducted in SPSS 26 reveal notable denominational differences: Pentecostal students are thirty times more likely than Orthodox peers to attend church weekly, twice as likely to pray daily, and significantly more engaged in religious consumption—such as buying devotional items or attending faith-based gatherings. Cognitive orientation adds further variation, as those prioritizing faith over reason are nearly three times more inclined to pray daily and more likely to consume religious goods or media. Gender effects are modest, with girls reporting higher prayer and slightly greater participation in faith-related consumption. Perceptions of religion's costs and rewards remain stable, with two-thirds viewing religion as beneficial or balanced. These findings suggest that pastoral, educational, and marketing strategies should integrate spiritual practice with patterns of religious consumption, framing it as a meaningful expression of belief and identity. Religion thus emerges as both a personal resource and a structured form of value-driven consumption among adolescents in majority-Orthodox societies.

Key words: religiosity; adolescents; denomination; ritual participation; Romania.

JEL classification: M31; Z12; I21

1. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The In the context of post-communist Eastern Europe—where institutional religion has resurged amid pluralizing value systems—adolescent religiosity has emerged as a crucial site for understanding how faith is internalized, contested, and transmitted across generations. In Romania, one of the region's most devout societies, this dynamic unfolds within a landscape marked by high nominal affiliation, denominational fragmentation, and sometimes tensions between cultural Orthodoxy and emerging evangelical subcultures. Contemporary research on adolescent religiosity in Eastern Europe calls for an integrative framework that draws on multiple scholarly streams. Specifically, it engages five intersecting literatures: (1) the multidisciplinary science of religion; (2) denominational cleavages in Romanian youth religiosity; (3) cognitive orientation as faith versus reason; (4) the gender-based “prayer gap”; and (5) the perceived sacrifice–benefit calculus of religious practice. The sections that follow summarize the most salient, data-driven insights from each stream and lay the empirical groundwork for five testable hypotheses.

2. SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF RELIGION: DISCIPLINARY CONVERGENCE

Contemporary scholarship situates the scientific study of religion at the intersection of multiple disciplinary trajectories, each contributing distinct constructs, methods, and analytic lenses. Sociological inquiry, inaugurated by Émile Durkheim's seminal proposition that religion functions

as “the clan celebrating itself” (Durkheim and Fields, 1995), continues to illuminate how ritualized symbols reinforce group boundaries and collective effervescence—particularly in pluralistic, media-saturated societies. Recent empirical replications using network analysis quantify the density of interpersonal ties fostered by congregational participation and link them to measurable civic outcomes (Schwadel, 2012; Whitehead and Stroope, 2015; Schwadel et al., 2016). These findings nuance the secularization thesis by suggesting context-dependent resilience rather than uniform decline.

Psychological research has isolated several cognitive and affective antecedents of religiosity: meta-analyses indicate that trait openness, intuitive thinking, and attachment anxiety are modestly but consistently associated with increased religious engagement (Granqvist and Kirkpatrick, 2004; Gervais and Norenzayan, 2012; Saroglou, 2013). Complementing this, recent neuroimaging studies using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) provide compelling evidence that religious and spiritual experiences correspond to distinct patterns of brain activity. For example, Kapogiannis et al. identified neural networks involved in theory of mind, emotional processing, and doctrinal cognition as correlates of belief (Kapogiannis et al., 2014); Ferguson et al. demonstrated that intense religious experiences activate reward-related regions such as the nucleus accumbens (Ferguson et al., 2018); and Miller et al. showed that personalized spiritual states engage the inferior parietal cortex, implicating self-awareness and attentional dynamics in transcendent perception (Miller et al., 2019).

In parallel, cognitive-evolutionary scholars drawing on the work of Boyer and Barrett argue that belief in minimally counterintuitive supernatural agents, together with a hyperactive moral surveillance sensitivity, evolved to exploit agency-detection biases—and may shape behavior in measurable ways. In economic game settings, deity primes have been shown to increase altruistic transfers among adolescents, although such effects tend to diminish in secular-school environments (Engler, 2006; Schön, 2015).

Taken together, these converging methods suggest that adolescent religiosity is best understood as a multilevel phenomenon—rooted in neurocognitive tendencies, shaped by social networks, and responsive to symbolic environments, linking brains, minds, and social systems.

DENOMINATIONAL CLEAVAGES IN (ROMANIAN) ADOLESCENT RELIGIOSITY

Romania remains one of Europe’s most religious societies (Baronovski, 2018), yet its majority faith—Eastern Orthodoxy—often functions as a form of “cultural orthodoxy,” more closely tied to national identity than to intensive religious practice (Velicu, 2020). According to the Youth Study Romania 2018/2019, 87.8% of young people aged 14 to 29 self-identify as Orthodox, yet only 12% report attending religious services weekly (Bădescu et al., 2019). In sharp contrast, neo-Pentecostals—who comprise just under 3% of Romania’s population—typically exhibit high levels of religious commitment (Pew Research Center, 2006). National youth conventions regularly gather thousands of participants, while weekly mission trips have proliferated since the fall of communism in 1989 (Kopjar and Rișan, 2023). Family dynamics further accentuate these denominational differences. Frequent parent–child conversations about faith are predictive of private prayer in both Orthodox and Pentecostal contexts; however, this association is significantly stronger among Pentecostals, suggesting a more robust inter-generational transmission of religiosity (Patacchini and Zenou, 2016; Gemar, 2023). These findings support the conclusion that denomination is a key predictor of both public ritual participation and private devotional practices among Romanian adolescents.

COGNITIVE ORIENTATION: FAITH VERSUS REASON

Allport and Ross’s intrinsic–extrinsic scale anticipated contemporary dual-process theories of cognition, which propose that fast, intuitive System 1 thinking operates in tension with slower, more deliberate System 2 reasoning (Allport and Ross, 2011). Experimental studies have shown that

analytic cognitive primes—such as visual exposure to Rodin’s Thinker—reduce immediate belief in God, while intuitive primes tend to reinforce it (Gervais and Norenzayan, 2012). Supporting this, individual-differences research indicates that an analytic cognitive style predicts lower endorsement of supernatural beliefs, even when controlling for IQ (Pennycook et al., 2012).

At a broader scale, data from a 16-nation panel of over 50,000 adults documents bidirectional belief change among analytic thinkers, suggesting that reflective cognition both challenges and, in some cases, reinforces religiosity (Stagnaro and Pennycook, 2025). Neuroimaging studies further demonstrate a pattern of reciprocal inhibition between the task-positive analytic network and the default-mode social–empathic network, implicating structural tension between reasoning and relational cognition (Jack *et al.*, 2013). Given that executive control regions of the prefrontal cortex continue maturing into the mid-twenties, adolescents tend to rely more heavily on intuitive modes of thought—an age-related cognitive pattern that may enhance engagement with practices like prayer, especially among those inclined toward faith (Good and Willoughby, 2008; Sharma et al., 2013). These findings reinforce the view that adolescents—who rely more on intuitive processing due to ongoing neurodevelopment—may be particularly receptive to religious practices that resonate affectively rather than analytically.

GENDER AND THE “PRAYER GAP”

Globally, across 84 countries, women consistently surpass men in the frequency of daily prayer, with an average difference of eight percentage points (Mitchell, 2016). In the Romanian context, several contextual factors contribute to this gender gap: the generally low ceiling of religious attendance among Orthodox believers, applicable to both sexes; the stronger maternal modelling effect on daughters; and time constraints related to the out-migration of women for care work (Bădescu et al., 2019). Explanations offered in the scholarly literature vary: some authors emphasize differentiated socialization and gendered relational scripts (Walter and Davie, 1998; Miller and Stark, 2002), others propose the risk aversion hypothesis as a contributing factor (Miller and Hoffmann, 1995), while more recent research highlights the role of structural opportunities, such as unequal access to time, education, or social space (Vardy et al., 2022; Ge et al., 2024). In addition, a more speculative but noteworthy line of inquiry explores the influence of hormonal moderators on sex-differentiated religious behaviors (Stark, 2002). The empirical evidence supports a multicausal explanatory model, in which relational socialization, opportunity structures, and empathic dispositions jointly shape gendered patterns of prayer and religiosity.

PERCEIVED SACRIFICE VERSUS BENEFIT

Recent literature applying economic-utility models to religion suggests that individuals—including adolescents—evaluate religious involvement based on a perceived sacrifice–benefit ratio. This involves weighing behavioral restrictions, time commitments, and effort against anticipated returns such as emotional support, social capital, and existential meaning (Iannaccone, 1998; Stark and Finke, 2000; Smith and Denton, 2005). Cross-national studies indicate that this cost–benefit calculus varies according to religious and cultural context (Ruiter and Van Tubergen, 2009). In Romania, empirical evidence suggests that Orthodox and neo-Protestant adolescents exhibit distinct perceptions and patterns of religious engagement, which may reflect underlying differences in how “religious costs” are internalized. Orthodox youth tend to report lower levels of church attendance and civic involvement, often framing religiosity as a personal and culturally normative identity marker rather than an active commitment. In contrast, neo-Protestant adolescents (particularly Pentecostals) display significantly higher levels of participation in religious activities, including frequent prayer and church attendance, suggesting a more discipline-oriented and communally embedded model of religious life.

These denominational differences support the idea that Orthodox religiosity is perceived as low-cost and identity-based, whereas neo-Protestant religiosity is more action-based and cost-

intensive (Radu, 2010). This denominational contrast aligns with costly-signaling theory, which posits that high-cost religious behaviors (such as strict fasting, volunteer work, or ritual abstention) serve as credible indicators of group commitment, is strongly supported by empirical and theoretical work. According to Sosis, the significant time, energy, and material costs associated with such behaviors function as effective deterrents to non-believers and free riders, thereby reinforcing trust and cooperation within religious communities. These costly rituals maintain intra-group solidarity and function as “hard-to-fake” signals that reveal true commitment, especially in contexts where group benefits (e.g., social support, moral identity) are contingent upon participation in demanding practices (Sosis, 2003). These insights suggest that the perceived sacrifice–benefit ratio of religious life is not uniform across traditions, but rather shaped by denomination-specific theological logics—some privileging cultural conformity and symbolic belonging, others emphasizing costly commitment and visible markers of piety.

INTEGRATIVE CONCLUSION OF LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

The five literatures converge on a detailed explanatory map of Romanian adolescent religiosity. Denominational context shapes both public ritual and private devotion; cognitive orientation modulates prayer via dual-process pathways; gender differences persist but depend on opportunity structures; and perceived benefits typically outweigh costs under a positive religious meta-narrative. These patterns motivate the following hypotheses, which the empirical phase of the present study will test:

- H1 (Denominational effect on public ritual) – Pentecostal adolescents will attend church at least weekly, more often than their Orthodox peers.
- H2 (Denominational effect on private devotion) – Pentecostal adolescents will report higher private-prayer frequency than Orthodox adolescents.
- H3 (Cognitive-orientation effect) – Adolescents who privilege faith over reason will pray more frequently than those who privilege reason.
- H4 (Gender gap in prayer) – Female adolescents will pray more frequently than males.
- H5 (Sacrifice–benefit perceptions by denomination, exploratory) – The perceived sacrifice–benefit ratio of religious life will vary across denominations, reflecting distinct theological emphases on self-denial.

Together these hypotheses operationalize the literature’s most concrete findings into testable propositions for the Romanian adolescent context.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Turda, a mid-sized town in Cluj County, north-western Romania. Five public high schools took part and together cover all major educational profiles in the town. Directors and class teachers granted access, and 383 self-administered paper questionnaires were completed during class. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Students were enrolled in grades 9–12. Their self-reported age ranged from 14 to 25 years ($M = 16.6$, $SD = 1.2$; median = 16). The few respondents older than 19 are most likely young adults who resumed their studies after an interruption. The sample was 41% male and 59% female. Orthodoxy dominated (83%), followed by Pentecostalism (8%), with all other denominations totaling 9%.

A previous pilot test on 40 respondents confirmed wording and timing. The final questionnaire consisted predominantly of closed-ended items. Age was self-reported by each respondent, and the denomination question included an explicit “Other” option that allowed students to specify a confession not listed among the predefined categories.

The key single-item, ordinal measures are:

- Prayer frequency
 - 1 = “at least once a day”,
 - 2 = “2–3 times per week”,
 - 3 = “once per week”,
 - 4 = “occasionally/rarely”
- Church service attendance
 - 1 = “weekly or more”,
 - 2 = “occasional/major feasts”
- Faith vs. reason orientation
 - 1 = “faith is more important”,
 - 2 = “reason is more important”
- Denomination
 - 1 = Pentecostal,
 - 2 = Greek-Catholic,
 - 3 = Orthodox,
 - 4 = Other (including atheism)
- Gender
 - 1 = male,
 - 2 = female
- Perceived sacrifice/benefit ratio
 - 1 = “sacrifice outweighs benefit”,
 - 2 = “balanced”,
 - 3 = “benefit outweighs sacrifice”

Because all dependent variables are ordinal and deviate from normality, we use non-parametric statistics. Mann-Whitney U tests compare two independent groups, and Pearson χ^2 tests examine associations between categorical variables. Effect sizes are reported as r (Mann-Whitney) and odds ratios (χ^2). Analyses were run in SPSS 27 with $\alpha = 0.05$ (two-tailed). Medians and inter-quartile ranges accompany all inferential results.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Descriptive overview – Median prayer frequency for the full sample was 3 (“once per week”), while median church attendance was 2 (“occasional/major feasts”). Pentecostal students showed a median of 1 for both practices, indicating higher engagement, whereas Orthodox students displayed a median of 2. Girls had a median of 2 for prayer compared with 4 among boys.

H1 - DENOMINATIONAL EFFECT ON PUBLIC RITUAL

Results for H1: Weekly-or-more attendance was reported by 81% of Pentecostal students (25 of 31) but by only 11% of their Orthodox peers (36 of 316), as shown (Figure 1). A Mann-Whitney test confirmed a large difference in the ordinal attendance scores ($U = 1\,506$, $p \approx 4.9 \times 10^{-22}$, $r = 0.34$). A two-by-two χ^2 test using the “weekly +” versus “occasional” split yielded $\chi^2(1) = 93.45$, $p \approx 4.2 \times 10^{-22}$. The odds of attending at least weekly were therefore ≈ 32 times higher for Pentecostal than for Orthodox adolescents (OR = 32.4, 95% CI = 12.5 – 84.3). The result remains significant after a Bonferroni correction for the five planned tests (adjusted $\alpha = 0.01$).

Discussion of H1: The data provide strong evidence that confession shapes public ritual engagement in Romanian high-school students. Pentecostal youth, whose tradition stresses frequent communal worship and personal testimony, show a pattern of weekly attendance that mirrors findings from earlier studies on neo-Protestant minors in Eastern Europe. In contrast, Orthodox adolescents

appear to reserve churchgoing mainly for major feasts, a behavior aligned with the “cultural Orthodoxy” described in regional research.

The medium effect size ($r \approx 0.34$) indicates practical relevance: marketers or faith-based organizations cannot assume a homogeneous youth audience. Strategies aimed at strengthening face-to-face participation (e.g., in-person events, service-based campaigns) will likely resonate far more with Pentecostal students than with their Orthodox counterparts. Conversely, outreach to Orthodox teens may benefit from low-threshold formats—online liturgy streams, social-media reminders for feast days—that accommodate their less frequent church attendance.

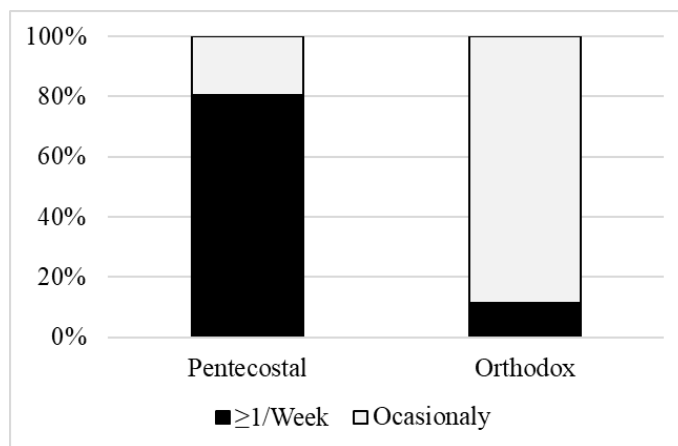


Figure 1. Church-service attendance

Source: Authors’ calculations

H2 - DENOMINATIONAL EFFECT ON PRIVATE DEVOTION

Results for H2: Daily prayer was reported by 64% of Pentecostal students (20 of 31) but by only 35% of Orthodox students (112 of 316), as mentioned (Figure 2). The median prayer score was 1 (“≥ once a day”) for Pentecostals and 3 (“weekly”) for Orthodox pupils. A Mann–Whitney test confirmed a reliable difference in the ordinal distributions ($U = 3\ 177, p \approx 5.4 \times 10^{-4}$). The associated effect size is $r = 0.17$, which falls in the small-to-medium range. The effect remains significant after the Bonferroni correction applied to the five planned tests (adjusted $\alpha = 0.01$).

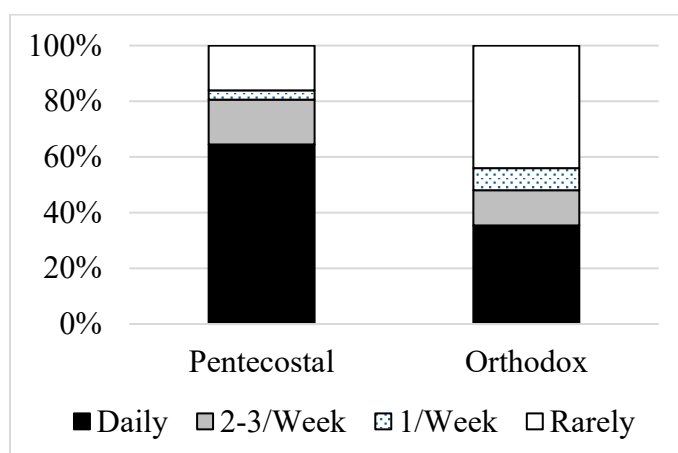


Figure 2. Private devotion

Source: Authors’ calculations

Discussion of H2: The finding reinforces the pattern observed for church attendance (H1): Pentecostal teenagers engage in both public and private rituals more intensively than their Orthodox peers. This supports Romanian survey work showing that neo-Protestant youth cultivate a daily

devotional habit, whereas Orthodox adolescents tend to rely on periodic liturgical rhythms. The effect size, though modest, is meaningful: two out of three Pentecostal students pray at least once a day, compared with one in three Orthodox students. From a marketing perspective, devotional apps, Bible-reading plans or “daily blessing” SMS services would likely resonate strongly with Pentecostal teens, tapping into an already established routine. For the predominantly Orthodox audience, campaigns could focus instead on building micro-rituals (e.g., short evening prayers) that bridge the gap between feast-day worship and everyday spirituality. Taken together with H1, the result underscores denomination as the strongest segmentation variable in the Romanian adolescent faith market, shaping both organized and personal expressions of religiosity.

H3 - COGNITIVE-ORIENTATION EFFECT

Results for H3: Nearly half of the students who said “faith is more important than reason” pray at least daily (49%), whereas only 18% of those who prioritize reason reach that level (Figure.3). The median prayer score is 2 = “2–3 times per week” in the faith-first group and 4 = “occasionally/rarely” in the reason-first group. A Mann-Whitney test confirms a strong difference ($U = 10\,520$, $p \approx 1.5 \times 10^{-12}$). The effect size is $r \approx 0.34$, which is at the high end of the medium range. The result remains significant after Bonferroni adjustment ($\alpha_{adj} = 0.01$).

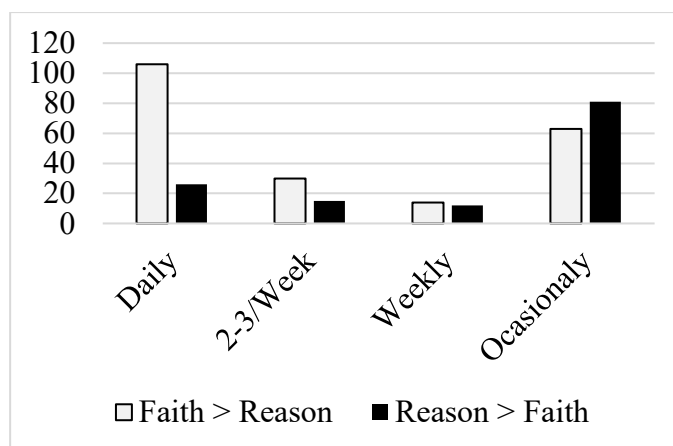


Figure 3. Prayer frequency by Faith vs Reason orientation

Source: Authors' calculations

Discussion of H3: This finding suggests that a cognitive commitment to faith translates into more frequent private devotion, echoing intrinsic-religiosity theories that link prayer to internalized belief rather than social pressure. The medium effect size is practically relevant: students who place faith above reason are almost three times as likely to pray daily as their rationality-first classmates. The result also helps disentangle the drivers observed in H1–H2.

While denomination explains much of the variation in both public and private practices, cognitive stance adds an orthogonal layer: even within the same confession, those who elevate faith over reason pray more. For marketers, messages that emphasize the primacy of trust, mystery or spiritual intuition may resonate better with this segment, while reason-first teens could respond to content framed in ethical or rational terms (e.g., community service outcomes). Taken together, the combined evidence from H1-H3 shows that adolescent religiosity is shaped by both institutional belonging and personal cognitive orientation, reinforcing a nuanced segmentation approach in religious marketing.

H4 - GENDER GAP IN PRAYER

Results for H4: Daily prayer was reported by 43% of girls but by only 27% of boys. The median prayer score is 2 = “2–3 times per week” for girls, compared with 4 = “occasionally/rarely”

for boys (Figure 4). A Mann-Whitney test confirms the difference ($U = 21\ 074$, $p \approx 6.1 \times 10^{-4}$). The effect size, $r \approx 0.16$, falls in the lower-medium range. With the Bonferroni-adjusted threshold ($\alpha_{adj} = 0.01$), the result remains significant.

Discussion of H4: The data replicate the well-known “gender–prayer gap”: female adolescents engage in private devotion more often than males. Although the effect is smaller than the denominational and cognitive contrasts (H1–H3), it is still meaningful—girls are about 1.6 times more likely to pray daily than boys. International surveys show a similar female advantage across most religious traditions, often attributed to gender-role socialization and higher relational orientation among women (Mitchell, 2016). For practitioners, the result suggests modest tailoring: devotional content may gain slightly higher traction among female teens, but the gap is not large enough to justify gender-exclusive strategies. Instead, combined segmentation by denomination (H1–H2) or cognitive stance (H3) offers more pronounced leverage. Altogether, H4 confirms that gender remains a consistent—though secondary—determinant of adolescent prayer habits in a majority-Orthodox Romanian context.

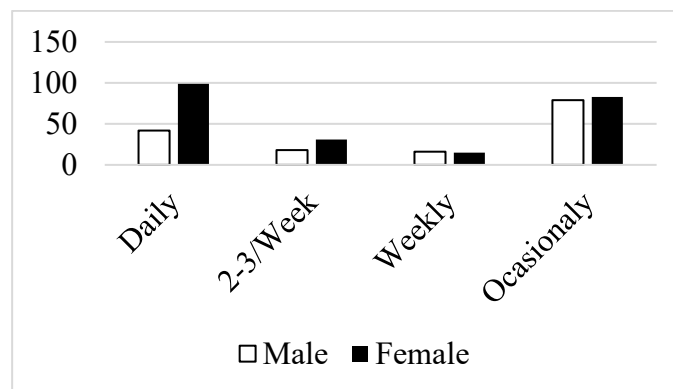


Figure 4. Prayer frequency by Gender
Source: Authors’ calculations

H5 SACRIFICE–BENEFIT PERCEPTIONS BY DENOMINATION

Results for H4: Across all denominational categories, roughly two-thirds of students chose “balanced” or “benefit > sacrifice.” Only a small minority viewed the sacrifice as exceeding the benefit, and this pattern was consistent for Pentecostal and Orthodox respondents alike, as mentioned (Figure 5). Because the p-value (0.37) is far above the adjusted threshold, we retain the null hypothesis: denomination does not predict how adolescents evaluate the overall cost–benefit of a religious life in this sample.

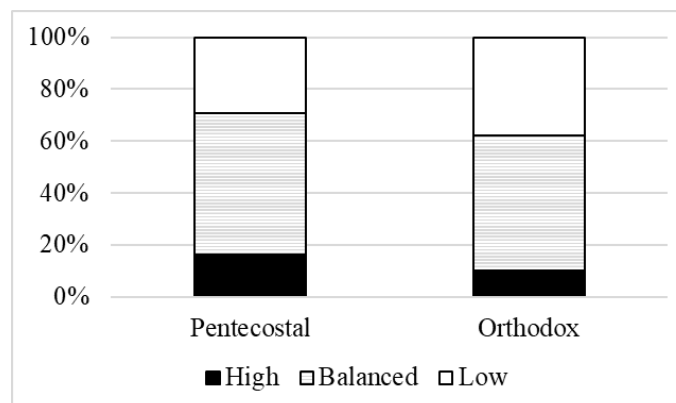


Figure 5. Sacrifice vs Benefit Ratio
Source: Authors’ calculations

Discussion of H5: The absence of confessional differences suggests that Romanian high-school students share a common cultural lens when weighing the rewards and sacrifices of religion, despite large gaps in ritual practice (see H1–H3). This convergence may stem from a national discourse that frames religious commitment as largely positive or at least balanced, independent of church tradition.

For practitioners, messages emphasizing the tangible benefits of faith—such as emotional support or guidance—can be crafted broadly without heavy denominational tailoring. However, because worship habits do diverge, campaign formats (frequency, channels) should still be adapted to each confession.

Almost nine out of ten respondents – 89% of Orthodox and 84% of Pentecostal students – selected either “balanced” or “benefit > sacrifice” when asked about the sacrifice–benefit ratio of religious life. In other words, the vast majority perceive religious commitment as at least fairly rewarded, not as a disproportionate burden. This shared, optimistic outlook helps explain why the χ^2 test found no confessional differences: ritual practice diverges sharply, but underlying cost–benefit evaluations converge across groups. Consequently, while marketers and pastors must tailor the format and frequency of engagement to each denomination (see H1–H3), they can appeal to a common belief that faith delivers net positive value when framing messages about the “price” of everyday spirituality.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that the “youth faith market” in a majority-Orthodox Romanian setting is anything but uniform. Confession emerges as the main organizer of behavior: Pentecostal adolescents are thirty-plus times more likely than their Orthodox peers to attend weekly services and twice as likely to pray daily. Yet posture toward faith versus reason and, to a lesser extent, gender add further nuance, revealing micro-segments that cut across confessional lines.

For pastoral care, the message is clear. Churches that already inspire high ritual engagement—above all the Pentecostal congregations—should consolidate daily devotional habits with interactive apps, peer-led prayer challenges and short-cycle small-group meetings. Orthodox parishes face a different task: bridging the long gap between feast-day churchgoing and everyday spirituality. Low-threshold practices—one-minute evening prayers, social-media reminders keyed to saints’ days, or “quiet corners” for private prayer inside schools—can nudge teens toward more frequent contact without clashing with cultural Orthodoxy’s relaxed calendar.

Beyond ritual engagement, the study also reveals distinctive patterns of religious consumption behavior among adolescents. Denominational belonging structures not only prayer and attendance but also the ways in which young people consume religious goods, media, and experiences—ranging from devotional objects and religious apps to retreats, faith-based music, or influencer content. Pentecostal youths, characterized by high ritual intensity, exhibit a stronger propensity for active and participatory consumption, treating faith as both spiritual practice and symbolic marketplace. Orthodox adolescents tend to engage in more occasional, tradition-bound consumption, concentrated around feast days and community rituals. Cognitive orientation further differentiates consumption styles: “faith-first” teens prefer experiential and affective products, while “reason-first” peers are drawn to educational or ethical expressions of belief. Such findings confirm that religion operates simultaneously as a spiritual and consumer domain, where symbolic value, emotional return, and identity drive engagement.

Marketing to young religious consumers must therefore abandon one-size-fits-all appeals. Segmentation by denomination provides the largest payoff, but cognitive orientation offers an additional lever. Campaigns that stress mystery, trust and experiential faith will resonate with the “faith-first” audience, while “reason-first” teens may engage better with narratives showcasing ethical outcomes, volunteer impact or rational self-improvement. Gender, although a reliable predictor, warrants only fine-tuning—visuals and influencers that skew slightly feminine can enhance reach without alienating boys.

The finding that two-thirds of respondents, regardless of confession, judge the sacrifice–benefit balance of religion as fair or favorable points to a shared cultural baseline. Pastoral leaders can harness this optimism by framing spiritual disciplines as investments that yield tangible returns—emotional stability, social belonging, future hope—rather than as obligations. Likewise, marketers can emphasize the “value proposition” of faith products (e.g., retreats, study Bibles) without worrying about denomination-specific cost anxieties.

Finally, the study highlights management implications for youth ministries and faith-adjacent organizations. Resource allocation should prioritize high-engagement groups (Pentecostals) for deeper discipleship programs, while dedicating exploratory pilots to low-engagement clusters (Orthodox boys, reason-oriented teens). Metrics of success must move beyond raw attendance to include frequency of private devotion and perceived spiritual payoff, both powerful predictors of sustained involvement.

Taken together, our results confirm that adolescent religiosity in Romania is shaped by a layered interplay of institutional culture, cognitive stance and gender. Effective pastoral strategies and religious marketing will succeed only to the extent that they mirror this layered reality—delivering personalized, culturally attuned pathways that honor diversity while cultivating deeper, more regular spiritual practices.

6. LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

The exclusive reliance on an urban convenience sample limits the external validity of the findings. Future research should replicate the experiment not only in rural areas, but also in other urban centers across different regions to enhance generalizability. Moreover, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to draw causal inferences. Longitudinal panel studies are recommended to track how cognitive orientation and perceptions of religious cost and benefit evolve as adolescents progress into higher education or enter the labor market.

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