Locus of Control and Value Orientations in Preadolescents: Psycho-Pedagogical Implications and Methodological Guidelines in the Digital Age

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Abstract: The continuous expansion of the virtual environment generates major transformations in the psycho-social and cognitive development of preadolescents, directly affecting the mechanisms of psychological self-regulation. The present study analyzes the complex structural relationship between the locus of control and value orientations at this stage of development. It also highlights how dependence on specialized media platforms modifies the individual structure of preadolescents. Based on a theoretical-analytical framework and a conceptual synthesis of standardized psychological variables, the paper examines how the externalization of causal attribution interferes with the hierarchical stability of terminal and instrumental values. The synthesized data reveal a close correlation between prolonged screen time and a significant shift toward an external locus of control. This evolution is directly associated with the prioritization of immediate gratification and social validation to the detriment of academic achievement and autonomous moral judgment. Consequently, a pronounced axiological dissonance is recorded between declared ideals and practical behavior. Towards the end, the study substantiates essential psycho-pedagogical guidelines and structured instructional strategies aimed at reconstructing the internal locus of control and consolidating a sustainable ethical compass in the modern school environment.

Keywords: self-regulation; screen time; axiological dissonance; social validation; dependence

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1. Introduction

The study of personality and value dynamics during preadolescence has acquired unprecedented complexity in the context of acceleration of globalization and digitalization (Zuboff, 2019). Preadolescence represents a critical transition stage, characterized by profound restructuring at cognitive, emotional, and social levels, in which identity construction becomes extremely vulnerable to external environmental influences (Erikson, 1968).

In contemporary society, this process no longer takes place exclusively in traditional spaces of socialization - such as the family, school, or physical peer groups - but is deeply mediated by digital platforms, social networks, and hyper-connected virtual worlds.

The contemporary sociocultural context is defined by pronounced fluidity, a dense information network, and a complex coexistence of diverse value paradigms. These are fueled by the correlated processes of globalization and digitalization. These structural transformations generate an existential framework marked by ambiguity, with a particularly profound impact on the age segment transitioning from childhood to puberty. This ontogenetic stage represents a major window of vulnerability, characterized by accelerated identity reconfigurations and re-evaluations of one's own moral references. In this screen-mediated landscape, decoding how preadolescents establish their existential priorities and ground their meaning of life constitutes a priority research direction for modern developmental psychology.

Another central construct directly influencing individual motivation and actions is the Locus of Control. It defines the extent to which a person perceives events as being the result of their own actions (internal LOC) or external forces (external LOC). Although both concepts are well studied separately, their relationship of interdependence at preadolescence is insufficiently explored. Current research requires an analysis of how the perception of control (internal vs. external) shapes the value hierarchy. This determines preadolescents to prioritize either values of self-determination and achievement (expected in internals) or security and conformity (expected in externals).

In this sense, the core of the epistemic interrogation of the present study aims to identify those structural and content differences in the system of value orientations (terminal and instrumental values) of preadolescents with a predominantly internal locus of control, compared to preadolescents who manifest a predominantly external

locus of control. Starting from this problem, the research theoretically and analytically substantiates two guiding hypotheses:

• There are significant differences in the structure of value orientations of preadolescents with an internal locus of control compared to those with an external locus of control. Preadolescents with an internal locus of control will attach greater importance to values of self-determination and achievement, while those with an external locus of control will prefer security and conformity values.

• There are differences in the manifestation of the locus of control depending on spiritual values. Preadolescents with an internal locus of control will manifest a higher level of awareness of spiritual values (related to the meaning of life, the purpose of existence, internal morality) and will position them higher in the value hierarchy (terminal values) than preadolescents with an external locus of control. Meanwhile, preadolescents with an external locus of control will manifest greater inconsistency between declared spiritual values (ideals) and adopted instrumental values (means of achieving goals), indicating a lower integration of spiritual ethics into practical behavior.

2. Theoretical Grounding and Critical Review of the Literature

The conceptual framework dedicated to the locus of control finds its origins in social learning theories (Rotter, 1966), which demonstrated that expectations regarding the control of reinforcements shape personality. Those who develop an internal locus of control demonstrate pronounced individual autonomy and fully assume the consequences of their own decisions. In contrast, individuals with an external orientation become vulnerable to resignation, a behavior that derives directly from learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975).

During preadolescence, this construct undergoes a critical stage of crystallization as the individual extends interactions beyond the family nucleus (Eisenberg, Fabes & Spinrad, 2006). Self-knowledge becomes a mandatory condition for structuring the ego (Pavelcu, 1982), providing stability in moments of axiological crisis in the contemporary digital environment.

In the axiological field, the universal model of human values (Schwartz, 1992) provides a rigorous structure for describing human orientations through ten motivational types ordered on bipolar axes. Empirical research highlights that these orientations are not purely theoretical constructs but exert a direct influence on the

selection of life goals and prosocial acts (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003). The integration of these values ensures the psychosocial adaptation of preadolescents (Paladi, 2022). The value system acts as a critical filter in processing macromedium messages.

The emergence of the virtual environment on a global scale has visibly altered classical trajectories of psychological development. Recent analyses indicate the appearance of a generation deeply dependent on screens, whose self-image is closely linked to interactions in virtual networks (Twenge, 2017). The architecture of digital platforms, governed by intermittent reward systems similar to those described in behavioral psychology (Skinner, 1953), favors a massive shift of the locus of control towards the outside. The identity validation of preadolescents no longer derives from tangible achievements in the real world but is mediated by external quantifiable indicators, such as reactions, likes, or views obtained in online communities (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). This network of virtual rewards induces a subtle state of psychological dependence.

This culture of immediate gratification destabilizes traditional value hierarchies. Instead of consolidating orientations toward autonomy or moral responsibility, preadolescents with prolonged exposure to virtual environments tend to internalize values related to artificial social status, idealized image, and easy popularity (Uhls & Greenfield, 2012). Thus, a clear conflict appears between values promoted by the digital environment and those cultivated in the school space, the latter being oriented toward sustained effort, critical analysis, and internal discipline (Greenfield, 2009). Models proposed in the sociology of values (Voicu, 2008) draw attention to the risk of devaluing work in communities excessively exposed to the culture of online entertainment.

3. Methodology and Research Course

The present study adopts a theoretical-analytical and advanced conceptual synthesis research design, based on the convergence of internationally recognized psychometric models and synthesis data on preadolescents' internet behavior in recent years (DataReportal, 2021). The course of the research involved the correlational analysis of synthesis data regarding the correlation between Rotter's Locus of Control Scales, Schwartz's Portrait Value Questionnaire (PVQ), and indicators of screen exposure.

The procedure aimed at the theoretical mapping of relationships between the construct of causal attribution and the two large categories of values: terminal

(fundamental goals of existence, including the spiritual dimension) and instrumental (means and behaviors used to achieve goals), as delimited in the literature (Paladi, 2022; Iluț, 2004). Through this method, the aim was to logically and empirically verify the two formulated hypotheses, analyzing how the intensive use of screens and the loss of direct interpersonal skills (Chapman & Pellicane, 2018) modify the weight of these variables in the structure of the preadolescent's personality.

4. Results and Discussions

The synthesis of theoretical data and the analysis of standardized psychological variables highlight a clear differentiation of the axiological profile depending on the orientation of the subjects' locus of control in the digital context. Preadolescents who spend significant time on social networks develop an acute dependence on external validation, which weakens their self-esteem and shifts their pole of psychic stability.

Table 1. Configuration of value orientations depending on the type of locus of control

Value Dimension (Schwartz Model)	Profile with Internal Locus	Profile with External Locus
Self-Determination and Autonomy	High priority	Low priority
Academic Achievement and Success	Orientation towards performance	Orientation towards avoidance
Hedonism and Stimulation	Moderate importance	Maximum priority
Conformity and Security	Subordinated to autonomy	Active search for validation

The data systematized in Table 1 confirm the first hypothesis of the study. It is observed that individuals characterized by an internal locus of control manage to maintain their focus on autonomy and real academic performance, considering that success depends on their own involvement (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003). In contrast, preadolescents with an external locus of control place long-term personal achievement in the background, migrating towards values of stimulation and digital hedonism, where the reward is instantaneous and does not require complex cognitive effort (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014).

Regarding the second hypothesis, the investigation of the relationship between the locus of control and the spiritual dimension revealed particularly important aspects related to the ethical consistency of behavior. When control is externalized, the capacity for self-regulation decreases, increasing the risk of manifesting impulsive or disruptive behaviors (Vîrlan & Baciu, 2016).

Table 2. Consistency between terminal spiritual values and instrumental values

Type of Locus of Control	Awareness of Spiritual Values (Terminal)	Integration into Practical Behavior (Instrumental)	Level of Axiological Dissonance
Internal Locus of Control	High (Meaning of life, morality)	Coherent (Responsibility, effort)	Low
External Locus of Control	Declarative (Borrowed from environment)	Inconsistent (Avoidance of effort)	High

The analysis reflected in Table 2 shows that preadolescents with an internal locus of control not only position spiritual values related to morality and the meaning of existence higher in their hierarchy but also manifest high coherence with instrumental values, such as hard work or responsibility (Antoci, 2019). In counterpoint, subjects with an external locus of control present a significant rupture between discourse and action. Although they may declare attachment to high moral values, in daily practice the digital environment determines them to adopt instrumental behaviors guided by utilitarianism or group conformity, registering a pronounced axiological dissonance (Uhls & Greenfield, 2012). They perceive personal effort as being ineffective against external pressure, abandoning values that require perseverance (Iluț, 2004).

5. Psycho-Pedagogical Implications and Methodological Guidelines

The results of this theoretical analysis demand a profound restructuring of educational methodologies used in the school environment, with the aim of supporting preadolescents in effectively managing challenges specific to the digital age. Contemporary psycho-pedagogical interventions must act simultaneously on two essential coordinates: the development of individual autonomy and the consolidation of a stable system of value orientations. In this sense, the implementation of the digital school concept in Romania (Iovan, 2015) must not be reduced exclusively to the technologization of hardware and software infrastructure. On the contrary, such a reformative approach must primarily target the protection of humanism and the development of students' critical thinking, avoiding the traps of raw technological conformity.

The articulation of active pedagogical intervention pillars within contemporary school culture becomes an imperative necessity, derived directly from the fragmentary dynamics of the current virtual ecosystem. In this fluid digital space,

traditional axiological guidelines are often dissolved in unmonitored data streams, generating complex phenomena of moral dissonance. Therefore, the formal educational environment must assume the role of a regulatory instance, providing structured methodological frameworks capable of re-anchoring the preadolescent in real and stable networks of meaning.

From this perspective, the corrective actions established at the classroom level target two major methodological directions, developed complementarily.

5.1. Strategies for Stimulating the Internal Locus of Control

To counteract the tendency to externalize control fueled by continuous interaction with digital devices, the school environment must implement specific techniques based on process feedback (Graber, 2020). Didactic evaluation needs to emphasize the invested effort, the chosen cognitive strategies, and persistence in tasks displayed by preadolescents, eliminating rigid labels related to native intelligence.

An effective practical method resides in the application of the pedagogy of controlled choices. Offering structured options in conducting school projects or homework restores preadolescents' sense of active control over their own learning. Also, systematic monitoring of evolution through personal progress journals supports the awareness of the direct causal link between the allocated volume of work and the school performance obtained in reality.

5.2. Strategies for Remodeling and Stabilizing Value Orientations

Diminishing the impact of materialist-hedonistic values promoted online can be achieved by introducing pragmatic and systematic media education activities during school counseling and guidance hours. Critical analysis of social media content, discussing how influence campaigns are constructed, and demystifying ideal images displayed on virtual platforms help reduce social anxiety and re-evaluate one's own axiological priorities in accordance with historically validated ethical references (Twenge, 2017).

Also, organizing structured debates based on real moral dilemmas (such as the ethics of using artificial intelligence in homework or the limits of the right to privacy online) stimulates the transition from passive conformity to autonomous moral reasoning (Antoci, 2018). These methods provide a secure framework in which

spiritual and ethical values can be transposed from the sphere of abstract ideals into concrete behavioral decisions, considerably reducing the axiological dissonance identified in subjects with an external locus and stabilizing the mature personality structure.

6. Conclusions

The present study highlights that contemporary preadolescence undergoes a stage of profound axiological and cognitive restructuring, marked by the pressure of the digital ecosystem. The analyzed data show that abusive use of screens acts as a vector for externalizing the locus of control, which entails a depreciation of autonomy and the appearance of ruptures between ideal moral values and daily instrumental actions. This reality requires the urgent adoption of active methodological guidelines in the school environment, meant to restore preadolescents' sense of their own value and cultivate a stable critical spirit in relation to virtual stimuli (Graber, 2020).

As lines of further development, the necessity of conducting longitudinal studies emerges to track whether these axiological mutations from preadolescence become chronic in the form of rigid personality traits in adulthood. Another necessary line of investigation targets the analysis of the impact that new immersive technologies, such as virtual reality and advanced generative artificial intelligence systems, exert on the capacity for emotional self-regulation and on the formation of the ethical compass of new generations of students in the Romanian educational space.

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