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Early maladaptive schemas and value-goals. Analysis in a group of young adults representing Generation Z[1]

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Abstract: *Introduction:* The aim of the study was to identify the relationships between early maladaptive schemas and preferred life values in a group of young adults from Generation Z. It was hypothesized that schemas, which according to theory are shaped in early childhood, may significantly relate to the value system of young individuals. ***Method:*** The study involved 191 individuals aged 18–35 years (M = 22.9; SD = 3.62). *The Young Schema Questionnaire (YSQ–S3)* and *the Schwartz Value Survey (PVQ-21)* were used. The correlational analysis was exploratory in nature and aimed to identify relationships between types of schemas and values. ***Results:*** Moderate relationships were found between schemas and values. Self-enhancement was associated with dominance, severity, and the need for acceptance. Conservation correlated with emotional inhibition and seeking approval. Openness to change was positively related to dominance and negatively to feelings of defectiveness. Self-transcendence was linked to self-sacrifice and the need for acceptance. ***Conclusions:*** The obtained results suggest that the value system may be partially rooted in unconscious emotional schemas. This opens new perspectives for the integration of clinical and motivational psychology and practical applications in psychotherapy and education.

Keywords: Generation Z, Young's schemas, Schwartz's values-goals

Introduction

Contemporary research points to growing mental health problems among young people, who are increasingly experiencing symptoms of anxiety, depression, chronic stress, and feelings of social isolation (Borg, Heffer, & Willoughby, 2025; Cheng et al., 2024). At the same time, psychological literature draws attention to the increasing difficulties in shaping identity, building a coherent value system, and formulating long-term life goals, which are essential components of personal and social development (Luyckx et al., 2023; Yanitskiy, Seryy, & Braun, 2020). These phenomena point to the need for an in-depth analysis of the psychological mechanisms underlying these problems, including, in particular, persistent patterns of cognitive-emotional functioning and axiological preferences, which significantly determine the way we perceive ourselves, other people, and the surrounding reality.

In clinical psychology, one of the models describing permanent patterns of mental functioning is Young's schema theory (2010). It assumes that as a result of unfavorable environmental conditions in childhood, in particular the failure to satisfy basic emotional needs, the individual internalizes permanent and dysfunctional beliefs about themselves and the world. These beliefs, referred to as early maladaptive schemas, become dominant cognitive-emotional

1 Article in Polish language: https://stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/64P_grab.pdf

patterns that persist into adulthood and influence interpersonal functioning, self-esteem, and decision-making (Roediger, Stevens, & Brockman, 2018).

Young, with collaborators Klosko and Weishaar (2003) identified 18 schemas, which were grouped into five overarching domains: (1) Disconnection and rejection, (2) Impaired autonomy and performance, (3) Impaired limits, (4) Other-directedness, and (5) Over-vigilance and inhibition. These schemas function as internal motives, determining how reality is interpreted and patterns of behavior. The areas and their corresponding schemas are presented in Table 1.

Concurrently, Concurrently, in social and motivational psychology, a prominent position is held by Schwartz's Theory of Values (2017). In his conceptualization, values are a cognitive representation of motivational, desirable goals that are trans-situational, meaning they are applicable across multiple life contexts. Schwartz emphasizes that values comprise both a cognitive component (they are consciously recognized and verbally articulated) and a motivational component (they reflect the individual's needs and aspirations). The structure of values is universal and takes the form of a circular continuum, in which adjacent values are motivationally congruent, while values situated in opposition are antagonistic. The classic model delineates 10 basic values, which are clustered into 4 higher-order categories (Bilsky, Janik & Schwartz, 2010):

1. Self-Transcendence: Universalism, Benevolence,
2. Openness to Change: Self-Direction, Stimulation (and partially Hedonism),
3. Self-Enhancement: Achievement, Power (and partially Hedonism),
4. Conservation: Security, Conformity, Tradition.

These values set the directions for action and are tightly linked to the individual's goals. Goals – conceptualized as intentions, aspirations, and strivings – constitute the motivational mechanism that gives direction to behavior. Schwartz emphasizes that values and goals remain in a close relationship – values indicate which goals are preferred, while the realization of goals serves the actualization of values (Sagiv & Roccas, 2021).

Although both Young's schemas (2010) and Schwartz's values (2017) relate to stable aspects of personality, empirical research analyzing the direct dependencies between these constructs is lacking. It is not known to what extent specific early schemas

Table 1. Model of early maladaptive schemas in the concept of Young et al. (2003)

Schema area	Schemas
I. Disconnection and rejection	1. Abandonment – Sooner or later I will be left alone again. 2. Mistrust – Getting too close is dangerous, I need to keep my distance. 3. Emotional deprivation – I am not getting support, love and understanding. 4. Defectiveness/Shame – I am worthless, therefore unworthy of love. 5. Social isolation – I am different from everyone around me.
II. Impaired autonomy and performance	6. Dependence/Incompetence – I cannot survive without the help of others. 7. Vulnerability to Harm or Illness – I'm so weak, I have to be on my guard. 8. Enmeshment/Undeveloped Self – I can't live without my parent/partner and they without *me.* 9. Failure – I am *a loser, others are better than me.*
III. Impaired limits	10. Entitlement/Grandiosity – I am allowed more than others. 11. Insufficient Self-Control/Self-Discipline – I can't stand it, it should be done by someone else.
IV. Other-directedness	12. Subjugation – My opinion means nothing, let others decide. 13. Self-Sacrifice – I have to forget about myself, I have to help others. 14. Approval-Seeking – I am valuable as long as others accept me.
V. Over-vigilance and inhibition	15. Pessimism – I feel some kind of misfortune approaching. 16. Emotional Inhibition – I can't show my feelings because I will be ridiculous. 17. Unrelenting Standards – I am only worthy when I achieve high results. 18. Punitiveness – Whoever makes a mistake must be punished.

Annotation: Translation of names describing schemas according to: Oettingen, Chodkiewicz, Mącik & Gruszczyńska, 2018. Definitions of schemas based on: Young et al. (2003).

can predict particular value patterns or, conversely, in what way the value system can modulate the activation or content of schemas.

It can be hypothesized, however, that schemas – e.g., those related to abandonment, mistrust/abuse, dependence, or uncompromising standards – shape the way values are selected and realized (Vreeswijk, Broersen, & Nadort, 2015). A young person may prefer certain values not as a result of mature and autonomous choices, but rather as a response to anxiety, shame, or feelings of insecurity – which are secondary motivations rooted in schemas. For example, the mistrust schema may favor the preference for values such as security or conformity, as a defense mechanism against a real or imagined threat. (Cieciuch & Schwartz, 2018).

The integration of schema theory and value theory may provide a more coherent framework for understanding identity formation and motivational processes in the younger generation. Within the context of schema therapy, examining a patient's self-reported values may facilitate the identification of those that arise from maladaptive patterns rather than from authentic needs or aspirations. In this way, interventions aimed at modifying maladaptive schemas can be further supported by fostering values that promote psychological well-being and overall individual functioning (Arntz & van Genderen, 2020).

In the area of education and psychological support for young people, understanding the relationship between schemas and values may contribute to more effective design of psychoeducational programs, developing mental resilience, self-awareness, and the ability to make mature life choices. For Generation Z – operating in a world of information overload and instability – the ability to organize their value system and understand the mechanisms of their own functioning can be an important element of mental health prevention (Jia & Li, 2024).

In light of the foregoing considerations, it is appropriate to formulate the following research question: *Which of Young's schemas are associated with specific Schwartz values among young adults belonging to Generation Z?*

To address this research question, an empirical study was designed and conducted with the aim of identifying the relationships between entrenched cognitive–emotional patterns and the value systems of young adults.

1. Method

1.1. Participants and Procedure

The study was targeted at representatives of Generation Z and was conducted online using standardized questionnaire instruments. Prior to participation, participants were informed about the voluntary nature, purpose, and procedure of the study, and were assured of complete anonymity and the use of the collected data solely for scientific purposes. The snowball sampling method was applied for the recruitment of respondents. Participating individuals received a link to the form with a request to further disseminate it among persons meeting the age criterion, which enabled the researchers to reach a wider audience.

Based on the empirical material collected, the study group comprised 191 young adults aged 18 to 35 years (M = 22,9; SD = 3,62). T he majority of participants were students, of whom 62.3% were women and 36.1% were men. Regarding place of residence, individuals living in large cities dominated (47.6% came from agglomerations with over 500,000 inhabitants), while 28.8% of respondents lived in rural areas. The remaining participants originated from small and medium-sized towns. The vast majority of participants had no children (96.3%). Over half of the respondents were in romantic relationships, including 27.7% in cohabiting relationships and 18.3% in relationships without cohabitation. The most frequently declared level of education was general secondary or technical education (56.5% combined). Approximately 32% of respondents already held a higher education degree (bachelor's or master's) at the time of the study. Participants also differed in terms of declared parental plans – over 60% expressed a strong desire to have children in the future. In terms of economic situation assessment,

the majority of participants deemed it moderately stable. Over half (56.5%) declared that they were partially self-supporting, with financial assistance from their family, while 31.4% fully relied on the help of close relatives.

1.2. Research tools

1.2.1. Young Schema Questionnaire (YSQ–S3)

In the present study, the Young Schema Questionnaire (YSQ–S3) was employed, which is used to measure the severity of eighteen Early Maladaptive Schemas according to the concept by Younga et al. (2003). The Polish adaptation of the instrument was developed by Oettingen, Chodkiewicz, Mącik and Gruszczyńska (2018), based on the original version by Young (2005). The questionnaire contains 90 statements referring to beliefs and emotional attitudes concerning the self, the world, and interpersonal relationships. The respondent assesses the degree of agreement with each statement on a six-point scale, where 1 means "completely untrue" and 6 means "perfectly describes me". The theoretical range of scores for each schema is between 5 and 30 points – the higher the score, the greater the severity of the schema and its cognitive rigidity. In the presented study, Cronbach's α reliability coefficients for the majority of the scales ranged from 0.81 to 0.92, which indicates high internal consistency. An exception was the *Entitlement/Grandiosity* (ET) scale, for which a value of $\alpha = 0.69$ was obtained. In the context of exploratory research, this result should be considered acceptable, especially given the preserved theoretical consistency and the equal number of items in each scale.

1.2.2. Portrait Value Questionnaire (PVQ-21)

The PVQ-21 is an abbreviated version of the questionnaire used to measure the ten types of values according to the classic Schwartz model (1992). The questionnaire contains 21 items – two for each value, with the exception of Universalism, which is measured by three items. Newer analyses have demonstrated that this instrument can measure the four main value groups (Davidov, Schmidt, & Schwartz, 2008) or be used to analyze single values (Zercher, Schmidt, & Cieciuch, 2015). Cronbach's α reliability coefficients for the individual scales ranged from 0.69 to 0.85.

2. Results

The analyses conducted in this study were exploratory in nature and aimed to identify relationships and patterns emerging between early maladaptive cognitive-emotional schemas and the value preferences endorsed by Generation Z respondents.
This section of the article presents descriptive statistics (Table 2) and the results of the most statistically significant relationships and detailed correlations (Table 3).

In the initial stage of the analysis, the distributions of the examined variables were assessed, which enabled the selection of appropriate statistical procedures. Depending on the characteristics of the data, the nonparametric *Spearman's rho* correlation test was applied, while parametric tests were used for the remaining scales included in the analysis.

As a result of the conducted analyses, several statistically significant correlations of moderate or weak magnitude were identified. To ensure clarity in the presentation of the findings, the results were organized according to the relationships between early maladaptive cognitive-emotional schemas and values as well as meta-values, with the latter encompassing both the higher-order value dimensions and their more specific subordinate categories. These results are presented in Table 3.

The analysis of the associations between the higher-order value dimensions (PVQ) and early maladaptive schemas (YSQ) revealed marked heterogeneity in the observed correlation patterns. *Self-Enhancement* showed the broadest and relatively strongest positive associations ($r \approx 0{,}14–0{,}45$). he highest coefficients appeared for *Entitlement/Grandiosity* ($r = 0{,}45$) and *Approval-Seeking* ($r = 0{,}44$), with substantial correlations also identified for *Unrelenting Standards* ($r = 0{,}38$). *Conservation* demonstrated weaker positive associations ($r \approx 0{,}15–0{,}22$), primarily with

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics (N = 191)

		M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
PVQ	Self-Transcendence	4.43	1.08	-0.60	0.01
	Openness to Change	3.72	1.16	0.04	-0.69
	Self-Enhancement	3.39	1.20	0.37	-0.44
	Conservation	3.72	1.12	-0.06	-0.67
	Universalism	4.25	1.30	-0.50	-0.31
	Benevolence	4.62	1.12	-0.71	0.01
	Self-Direction	4.12	1.30	-0.27	-0.76
	Stimulation	3.66	1.40	0.07	-0.82
	Hedonism	3.37	1.39	0.21	-0.80
	Power	2.81	1.36	0.73	-0.20
	Achievement	3.97	1.34	-0.15	-0.89
	Tradition	3.52	1.56	-0.01	-1.19
	Conformity	3.96	1.33	-0.43	-0.57
	Security	3.69	1.22	0.08	-0.51
YSQ	Emotional deprivation (ED)	2.38	1.34	0.97	0.15
	Abandonment (AB)	3.13	1.34	0.35	-0.75
	Mistrust (MA)	2.79	1.33	0.57	-0.65
	Social isolation (SI)	2.94	1.37	0.47	-0.77
	Defectiveness/ Shame (DS)	2.29	1.33	1.05	0.37
	Failure (FA)	2.80	1.39	0.70	-0.32
	Dependence/ Incompetence (DI)	2.47	1.16	0.80	0.13
	Vulnerability to Harm or Illness (VU/ VH)	2.64	1.27	0.89	0.11
	Enmeshment/ Undeveloped Self (EM/EU)	2.22	1.11	1.17	1.18
	Subjugation (SB)	2.59	1.21	0.89	0.20
	Self-Sacrifice (SS)	3.12	1.17	0.34	-0.27
	Emotional Inhibition (EI)	2.79	1.24	0.50	-0.42
	Unrelenting Standards (US)	3.37	1.22	0.14	-0.65
	Entitlement/ Grandiosity (ET)	2.78	1.00	0.77	0.98
	Insufficient Self-Control/Self-Discipline (IS)	3.20	1.26	0.30	-0.50
	Approval-Seeking (AS)	3.41	1.23	0.09	-0.64
	Pessimism (NP)	3.10	1.38	0.43	-0.66
	Punitiveness (PU)	2.71	1.23	0.75	-0.05

Unrelenting Standards, *Emotional Inhibition* and *Approval-Seeking*. For *Openness to Change*, only one significant positive correlation was observed with *Entitlement/Grandiosity* (r = 0,30) – and two low negative correlations with *Emotional Inhibition* and *Defectiveness/Shame*. *Self-Transcendence* was positively associated mainly with *Self-Sacrifice* and *Unrelenting Standards* (r ≈ 0,25), and to a lesser extent with *Approval-Seeking*, whereas weak negative correlations emerged with *Defectiveness/Shame*.

Regarding the basic value dimensions, the relationships were more differentiated yet internally consistent. *Universalism* showed weak but significant positive associations with *Self-Sacrifice* and *Unrelenting Standards* (r ≈ 0,17–0,20). *Benevolence* correlated moderately with *Self-Sacrifice* (r ≈ 0,28) and more weakly with *Unrelenting Standards* and *Approval-Seeking* (r ≈ 0,19–0,24). *Self-Direction* revealed a significant positive correlation only with *Entitlement/Grandiosity*, while negative correlations were noted with *Defectiveness/Shame* and *Dependence/Incompetence*. *Stimulation* and *Hedonism* were primarily associated with *Entitlement/Grandiosity (Stimulation:* r = 0,30; *Hedonism* – the only significant association was with *Entitlement/Grandiosity*). *Power* exhibited positive correlations with strengths ranging from r ≈ 0,17–0,38, most strongly with *Entitlement/Grandiosity* (r = 0,38) and *Approval Seeking* (r = 0,30). *Achievement* was characterized by the broadest spectrum of positive correlations (r ≈ 0,16–0,48), with particularly strong associations with *Unrelenting Standards*, *Entitlement/Grandiosity*, and *Approval Seeking* (r ≈ 0,42–0,48). *Tradition*, however, showed a significant negative relationship *with Vulnerability to Harm or Illness* (r = -0,23), and the remaining negative correlations were weak in strength (r ≈ -0,15 do -0,17). *Conformity* presented weak to moderate correlations (r ≈ 0,15–0,26) with *Enmeshment/Undeveloped Self*, *Unrelenting Standards*, and *Approval Seeking*, whereas *Security* correlated positively in the range of r ≈ 0,16–0,29, primarily with *Unrelenting Standards*, *Emotional Inhibition*, and *Entitlement/Grandiosity*.

In summary, the significant correlations suggest that Early Maladaptive Cognitive-Emotional Schemas may be associated with lower importance attributed

Table 3. Relationships between Early Maladaptive Cognitive-Emotional Schemas and Goals-Values (N = 191)

		PVQ													
		Self-Transcendence	Openness to Change	Self-Enhancement	Conservation	Universalism	Benevolence	Self-direction	Stimulation	Hedonism	Power	Achievement	Tradition	Conformity	Security
YSQ	Emotional deprivation (ED)	-0.114	-0.071	0.203**	-0.011	-0.092	-0.113	-0.139	-0.018	-0.031	0.200**	0.161*	*-0.093*	0.017	0.065
	Abandonment (AB)	0.139	-0.085	0.165*	0.010	0.127	0.122	-0.085	-0.082	-0.052	0.033	0.262**	*-0.129*	0.137	0.050
	Mistrust (MA)	0.052	-0.038	0.238**	0.011	-0.001	0.103	-0.031	-0.034	-0.032	0.169*	0.254**	*-0.119*	0.037	0.133
	Social isolation (SI)	0.005	-0.055	0.049	-0.037	-0.012	0.025	0.018	-0.040	-0.113	0.026	0.062	*-0.098*	-0.001	0.031
	Defectiveness/Shame (DS)	*-0.174**	*-0.151**	*0.027*	*-0.132*	*-0.151**	*-0.131*	*-0.207***	*-0.098*	*-0.080*	*-0.019*	*0.050*	*-0.138*	*-0.053*	*-0.085*
	Failure (FA)	0.030	-0.115	-0.076	-0.113	-0.007	0.066	-0.132	-0.106	-0.058	-0.104	-0.030	*-0.131*	-0.063	-0.071
	Dependence/Incompetence (DI)	0.054	-0.108	-0.014	-0.072	0.070	0.022	-0.145*	-0.126	-0.010	-0.053	0.028	*-0.138*	-0.009	-0.049
	Vulnerability to Harm or Illness (VU/VH)	0.091	-0.071	0.144*	-0.053	0.069	0.096	-0.082	-0.074	-0.028	0.083	0.174*	*-0.235***	0.043	0.066
	Enmeshment/Undeveloped Self (EM/EU)	*0.006*	*-0.014*	*0.065*	*0.061*	*0.024*	*-0.012*	*-0.074*	*-0.072*	*0.094*	*0.037*	*0.075*	*0.021*	*0.146**	*0.011*
	Subjugation (SB)	0.042	-0.069	0.085	-0.036	0.033	0.043	-0.133	-0.059	0.011	0.044	0.107	*-0.157**	0.066	0.005
	Self-Sacrifice (SS)	0.251**	0.044	0.238**	0.134	0.177*	0.280**	0.020	0.075	0.016	0.128	0.295**	*0.000*	0.179*	0.157*
	Emotional Inhibition (EI)	-0.035	-0.165*	0.121	0.212**	-0.013	-0.051	-0.127	-0.134	-0.161*	0.050	0.165*	*0.091*	0.213**	0.212**
	Unrelenting Standards (US)	0.244**	0.024	0.378**	0.224**	0.201**	0.238**	0.091	0.009	-0.033	0.196**	0.476**	*0.025*	0.262**	0.290**
	Entitlement/Grandiosity (ET)	0.096	0.305**	0.453**	0.066	0.116	0.049	0.168*	0.304**	0.302**	0.381**	0.423**	*-0.145**	0.084	0.219**
	Insufficient Self-Control/Self-Discipline (IS)	0.139	0.091	0.131	-0.042	0.119	0.130	0.049	0.073	0.109	0.093	0.139	*-0.141*	0.062	-0.005
	Approval-Seeking (AS)	0.159*	0.071	0.440**	0.150*	0.098	0.193**	0.071	0.061	0.050	0.297**	0.485**	*-0.032*	0.262**	0.171*
	Pessimism (NP)	0.117	-0.075	0.191**	-0.018	0.100	0.110	-0.035	-0.072	-0.082	0.083	0.256**	*-0.174**	0.095	0.049
	Punitiveness (PU)	0.075	-0.052	0.147*	0.140	0.053	0.083	-0.041	-0.040	-0.052	0.082	0.179*	*0.085*	0.162*	0.100

Annotation: **Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed), * Correlation significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed). Values in italics indicate Spearman's rho correlation coefficients.

to values related to *Self-Transcendence*, *Openness to Change*, *Universalism*, *Self-Direction*, *Tradition*, and *Security*. The interpretation of these dependencies enables a better understanding of the mechanisms through which early emotional experiences co-determine the hierarchy of values and the life goals of the individual.

3. Discussion

In light of the presented theoretical assumptions and the results of the conducted study, it becomes possible to gain a deeper insight into the relationships between enduring cognitive-emotional schemas and the value system among young adults belonging to Generation Z. The analysis of the obtained empirical data represents a significant step towards integrating Young's (2010) and Schwartz's (2017), theories in the context of identity and motivation development.

According to schema theory, maladaptive patterns formed in early childhood play a significant role in adulthood, serving as a motive for decision-making and overall psychosocial functioning. In this context, it is pertinent to ask to what extent the value system declared by young people reflects autonomous and conscious choices, and to what extent it remains connected to unconscious, entrenched cognitive-emotional structures that regulate emotional experiences, the way relationships are formed, and the direction of life goals (Baxendell et al., 2025; Selph, 2016).

The aim of this research was to explore this area and identify potential connections between schemas and preferred life values. The study sought to determine whether there are relationships, and if so, what kind, between cognitive-emotional schemas and declared values among young adults from Generation Z.

Higher-order values showed moderate relationships with selected cognitive-emotional schemas. For better readability, they are presented below, grouped according to Schwartz's (2017) four meta-values, with the most significant correlations highlighted:

I. *Self-enhancement (achievement, power)*
Characterized by the pursuit of control, success, and recognition. Positively correlated with:
- *entitlement/grandiosity,*
- *approval-seeking,*
- *unrelenting standards.*

II. *Conservation (security, conformity, tradition)*
Related to the need for order, stability, and predictability. Positively correlated with:
- *unrelenting standards,*
- *emotional inhibition,*
- *approval-seeking.*

III. *Openness to change (self-direction, stimulation, hedonism)*
Reflects the need for autonomy, variety, and pleasure. Showed:
- *positive correlation with entitlement/grandiosity,*
- *negative correlations with defectiveness/shame and emotional inhibition.*

IV. *Self-transcendence (universalism, benevolence)*
Associated with concern for others, acceptance of diversity, and cooperation. Positively correlated with:
- *self-sacrifice,*
- *unrelenting standards,*
- *approval-seeking.*

The analysis of the obtained results allows us to formulate the hypothesis that individual meta-values may be associated with a specific set of early childhood cognitive-emotional schemas. For example, the meta-value of Self-Transcendence seems to constitute a constellation of schemas such as Self-Sacrifice, Unrelenting Standards, and Approval-Seeking. This may suggest that specific configurations of childhood experiences – shaping schemas belonging to different domains – create psychological structures conducive to internalizing certain values as life goals (cf. Loose, Graaf, & Zarbock, 2023).

Schemas – according to Young's (2010) theory – include both emotional and cognitive components, whereas values fulfil cognitive-motivational functions, reflecting one's needs, aspirations, and personal strivings (Karaosmanoğlu et al., 2024). t is therefore

plausible that schematic structures emerging from early childhood experiences constitute a psychological foundation for the cognitive representations of life goals. Within this framework, values are not solely outcomes of autonomous developmental choices; they may also reflect compensatory or adaptive mechanisms rooted in earlier emotional schemas (Jia & Li, 2024; Selph, 2016).

In the context of young adulthood – a pivotal stage in identity formation – the observed associations make it possible to capture the moment in which specific values, regarded by participants as especially significant, co-occur with defined sets of maladaptive schemas. This may serve as a starting point for further analyses of how internalized schemas shape the development of individuals' axiological systems (Luyckx et al., 2023).

The results indicate that the higher-order value of *Self-Enhancement* and the basic value of *Achievement* are positively associated with the schemas of *Entitlement/Grandiosity* and *Unrelenting Standards*. Such a configuration may suggest that an orientation toward success and power is linked to an internalized belief that one's worth is contingent upon continuous high performance. In this context, a focus on self-enhancement may correspond with the activation of schemas belonging to the *Impaired Limits domain* (e.g., *Entitlement/Grandiosity*) and the *Overvigilance* and *Inhibition domain* (e.g., *Unrelenting Standards*), both of which reflect tendencies toward control, perfectionism, and dominance (Cieciuch & Schwartz, 2018; Young, 2010).

mportantly, both the need for *Achievement* and values related to *Self-Enhancement* were also positively correlated with the *Approval-Seeking* schema, which belongs to the *Other-Directed* domain. This may indicate a latent emotional dimension underlying these strivings: from the perspective of Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT), primary emotions – such as a deep need for acceptance – may underlie tendencies toward dominance and perfectionism. These primary emotions are often masked by secondary, learned response patterns, such as self-criticism or competitiveness (Elliott & Greenberg, 2025). Although secondary emotions may have been adaptive in the context of early experiences, they can paradoxically hinder the fulfillment of authentic emotional needs in adulthood.

A similar mechanism may be observed for values within the *Conservation* group (*Security*, *Conformity*, *Tradition*). Their positive correlations with the schemas of *Unrelenting Standards*, *Emotional Inhibition*, and *Approval-Seeking* suggest that, for some individuals, a focus on *Conservation* may not stem solely from a mature reflection on the importance of stability. Rather, it may also serve as a form of emotional regulation, providing predictability and social acceptance in the face of internal tension (Mącik, 2021).

From a life-span development perspective, early adulthood represents a critical stage for the formation of relatively stable values, life goals, and personal identity. The moderate correlations observed between schemas and higher-order values suggest that these two structures – although functionally distinct – may share common origins in early childhood experiences. Within this framework, both early maladaptive schemas and value preferences can be understood as forming a psychological "scaffold" for the developing personality of the adult individual (Baxendell et al., 2025; Luyckx et al., 2023).

It is important to emphasize that personality development is a complex and multifactorial process. Cognitive-emotional schemas and values are only part of a larger whole, and their interactions can be modulated by environmental, relational, and cultural factors (Yanitskiy et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the observed relationships indicate the need for further research exploring the pathways through which early emotional experiences translate into the motivational structures of adult functioning.

These findings gain additional significance in the context of the increasing prevalence of anxiety disorders, depression, and identity-related difficulties among young adults (Borg et al., 2025). Research suggests that emotional schemas formed during childhood may play a substantial role in the development of mental health disorders (Thimm & Chang, 2022). However, there is still a lack of in-depth analyses capturing not only the relationships between sche-

mas and clinical symptoms but also the processes through which these schemas may contribute to an individual's value system.

If – as the results suggest – early schemas influence the formation of values as life goals, it is possible that one of the key pathways of human motivational development has been identified. This would imply that adult motivations may have their roots in cognitive-emotional structures shaped by deficits, injuries, or unmet needs during childhood. Understanding these relationships may carry important theoretical and practical implications, not only for psychotherapy but also for preventive and educational interventions aimed at supporting young adults in the development of a mature, integrated sense of identity.

Conclusions

The results of the conducted analyses confirm the existence of significant, albeit moderate, relationships between cognitive-emotional schemas and preferred values among young adults from Generation Z. The obtained correlations suggest that certain meta-values – such as *Self-Enhancement*, *Conservation*, or *Self-Transcendence* – may be associated with specific configurations of schemas formed in early childhood. This may indicate that an individual's value system, although perceived as autonomous, partly grows out of deep cognitive-emotional structures rooted in early relational experiences. The empirical data obtained in the study represent an important step towards integrating two significant psychological approaches – schema theory and values theory – opening new possibilities for understanding the mechanisms underlying the development of identity, motivation, and psychosocial functioning of young adults. These results can be applied both in clinical practice (e.g., in recognizing patients' unconscious motivations) and in educational and preventive activities supporting youth in building a mature value system and mental resilience.

It is also important to emphasize that the formation of personality and value systems is a complex and multifactorial process. The obtained results indicate a significant, but not exclusive, role of schemas in this process, making further research in this area both justified and promising. It is worth noting that existing studies on the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and value systems are few, and in the European context – virtually absent. The lack of previous comparative studies thus constitutes a significant interpretative limitation but also highlights the innovative nature of this project.

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