SCIENTIFIC ANNALS OF „ALEXANDRU IOAN CUZA" UNIVERSITY OF IAȘI
VOLUME XIX/1, SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK, 2026

DOI: 10.47743/asas-2026-1-874

LIGHTS, SHADOWS AND SCREENS CHILDREN'S VULNERABILITIES AND RISKS IN THE AGE OF AI

Cristina GAVRILUȚĂ[1], **Carmen PALAGHIA**[2]

Abstract: This article proposes a socio-anthropological interpretation of new forms of delinquency among children and adolescents, a phenomenon that has developed thanks to new technologies. Starting from the identification of the vulnerabilities and risks that children present in the digital environment, we seek to explain the mechanisms that generate addiction and behavioral perversion in children, transforming them into petty aggressors, murderers, or criminals. In this regard, we have borrowed from the psychoanalytic literature the concept of shadow, considered as an expression of an invisible evil or as a social archetype, and we have tried to identify how the shadow takes different forms and affects children who frequent certain spaces of the digital world.

Keywords*:* vulnerabilities, new risks, technologies, shadow (C. G. Jung)

Résumé : Cet article propose une interprétation socio-anthropologique des nouvelles formes de délinquance chez les enfants et les adolescents, un phénomène qui s'est développé grâce aux nouvelles technologies. Partant de l'identification des vulnérabilités et des risques que les enfants présentent face à l'environnement numérique, nous cherchons à expliquer les mécanismes qui engendrent l'addiction et la perversion comportementale chez les enfants, les transformant en petits agresseurs, meurtriers ou criminels. À cet égard, nous avons emprunté à la littérature psychanalytique le concept d'ombre, envisagé comme expression d'un mal invisible ou comme archétype social, et nous avons tenté d'identifier comment l'ombre prend différentes formes et affecte les enfants qui fréquentent certains espaces du monde numérique.

Mots-clés *:* vulnérabilités, nouveaux risques, technologies, ombre (C. G. Jung)

Rezumat: Articolul își propune să ofere o interpretare socio-antropologică a noilor forme de criminalitate în rândul copiilor și adolescenților, fenomen ce a prins contur grație noilor tehnologii. Plecând de la identificarea unor vulnerabilități și riscuri pe care le prezintă copiii față de mediul digital, ne propunem să oferim o seamă de explicații cu privire la mecanismele care produc dependență și pervertirea comportamentelor la copii, transformându-i pe aceștia în mici agresori, asasini sau infractori. În acest sens, am preluat din literatura psihanalitică conceptul de umbră ca expresie a răului invizibil sau ca arhetip

[1] Professor, PhD, Department of Sociology, Social Work and Human Resources, „Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iaşi, Romania; email: cristina_gavriluta@yahoo.fr

[2] Senior Lecturer, PhD, Department of Sociology, Social Work and Human Resources, „Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iaşi, Romania; email: carmenpalaghia@yahoo.com

social şi am încercat să identificăm felul în care umbra ia diferite chipuri şi afectează copiii care frecventează anumite zone din lumea digitală.

Cuvinte-cheie: vulnerabilităţi, riscuri noi, tehnologii, umbra (C. G. Jung)

1. Vulnerabilities and risks in the world of new technologies

We live in a time when the presence and development of new technologies in everyday life are changing the way we think, act, feel and perceive reality. The online environment comes with an offer that opens up to a series of freedoms that become „dizzying, sensational and exciting for millions of people" (Aiken, 2019, p. 16). In fact, what virtual space offers us is an illusory freedom. *The digital fortress* lures us with amazing promises and captures us in a fictional, algorithmic universe in which the individual disperses and loses his own identity, being overwhelmed by the worlds that are constantly opening up to him. It is a captivity in a space of illusory freedom with visible effects on the social, but also on the individual.

Some studies (Desmurget, 2021; Haidt, 2024; Nadin, 2016) indicate a decrease in the intellectual capacities of children and young people, *a decrease in school performance* in the short, medium, and long term, the emergence of functional illiteracy, and the increase of aggression and radicalization phenomena (Gavriluță et al., 2016). To these are added *the decrease in cognitive functions, the ability to reflect, concentrate and know.* Dependence on technology leads to the fragmentation and destructuring of thought, changes in the structure and functioning of the brain and an impoverishment of the spiritual life, promoting superficiality, indifference to culture, resignation and boredom (Larchet, 2018). In harsher terms, authors such as Manfred Spitzer (2020) identify *the phenomenon of digital dementia* with exact reference to the effects that addiction to the digital environment can have.

New technologies also stand out for the fact that they demand to the maximum only one of the senses, that of sight, while they demand, in a negligible quantity, the functions of thought and intellectual activity. They would also be the ones that would lead to the alteration of the aesthetic sense and behavior. Moreover, some images and messages „enhance the senses, the primary, biological data of the human species. It cultivates bad taste and even vulgarity" (Gavriluţă, 2003, p. 157).

Other explanations capture precisely *the effect of online anonymity* on behavior. John Suler (2004) proposes the *theory of online disinhibition*, according to which people who frequent and communicate in cyberspace can show a *„benign disinhibition"* that turns out to be aggressive, malevolent, and toxic. From this perspective, there are six explanatory factors of uninhibited behavior:

1. *Dissociative anonymity* – the idea that others „don't know me directly" can make internet users feel unaccountable for their behaviors. This dissociative anonymity leads to a loss of responsibility that can have a toxic disinhibition effect.

2. *Invisibility* – the idea that „they can't see me" can lead to the omission of nonverbal expression (people no longer paying attention to their physical appearance and nonverbal expressions, which amplifies the effect of disinhibition).
3. *Asynchrony in communication* – the statement „see you later" characterizes an absence of immediate feedback, which favors disinhibiting behavior.
4. *Solipsistic introspection* – the idea that „everything is in my mind" determines the person to build a certain mental representation of the interlocutor, to whom he attributes qualities such as voice, personality, and visual representation, which coincide with his expectations. In fact, we only see the other in certain poses, and we know him too little. Most often we imagine it, which is why the interaction with it becomes uninhibited.
5. *Dissociative imagination* – the idea that everything „is nothing but a game", indicates a placement from the beginning in a playful space. The virtual being associated with the unreal, the playful, there is an imaginative dissociation between the real and the virtual world. Therefore, it is two spaces with different rules, which allows us to behave differently.
6. *Minimizing authority* – in the virtual space we feel that we are all „equal". The virtual cancels hierarchies, competences, power relations, status, or other asymmetrical situations. The figure of authority disappears and equal relations are established (Suler, 2004), which allows uninhibited behaviors.

Like the crowd that uniformizes and in which the individual is lost under the mask of invisibility (Le Bon, 2022; Y Gasset, 2007), the virtual universe confers the perfect illusion of anonymity and a certain technology-mediated protection that stands between me and the Other. Unlike the real crowd, in which the self dissolves into a new, collective being that accumulates energy and power, in the digital crowd he feels that he is accumulating superpowers and the courage to say and present anything, anyhow, anytime. Legions of anonymous heroes make up a digital world in which they express themselves without inhibitions, personal experiences, value judgments, recipes for life, success and happiness, miraculous solutions and unheard of subtleties. *The invisibility of the superhero*'s power makes its presence felt in an equally invisible, immaterial world. This disinhibition in the online environment shows that „our instincts that have been perfected for the real world, fail in cyberspace" (Aiken, 2019, p. 18).

In the digital world, our identity is digitized, metamorphoses, unveiled in the most unusual ways. „Digital identity, beyond the management of personal data, tries to extend to the symbolic, social and subtle mechanisms of production of our identities" (Gavriluță, 2021, p. 49). However, this unveiling is not only a disenchantment of identity, in the sense given by Max Weber (1963) and later M. Mafesolli (2008), but also a vulnerability of the individual through unlimited exposure.

Regardless of the explanations we can identify regarding the negative effects of using new technologies, the fact is that, in their presence, man reveals a whole series of vulnerabilities. Hidden desires, frustrations, unspoken dreams,

fears and aspirations, hatred and pleasure, envy, *pathology, deviance*, all are exposed democratically, without (self-)censorship.

In the face of the unlimited offers and promises of exploration and affirmation offered by new technologies, *the most vulnerable are children*, since their ability to discern between good and evil, truth and falsehood, normal and pathological, reality and fiction is limited by the specifics of age and real-life experiences. *The digital universe* manages to cancel these dichotomies and value contrasts through overexposure and multiplication. Here, good and evil are reconstructed, and the truth multiplies, so that everything becomes uniform; it turns into a *space for the manifestation of weak thinking* (Vattimo, 1995). All this enhances children's vulnerabilities in an environment where fictions become reality, and reality becomes fictional (Gavriluță, 2017).

Thus, vulnerabilities related to age-related *immaturity* are compounded by a series of *vulnerabilities that come from exposure and overexposure* in the digital environment. Other vulnerabilities announce real problems faced by the child or adolescent and come from the psychosomatic or medical spectrum.

Desensitization, *radicalization*, *feelings of hyperdemand*, *hyperactivity*, *hyperfatigue*, *burnout*, and *depression* are just some expressions of the vulnerability of children, but also of ours, in contact with new technologies.

Some phenomena, such as cyberbullying, have gained momentum on social networks and indicate that adolescents or children are capable of developing unprecedented *symbolic violence* in the online environment (Palaghia, 2019). The tools they access become real weapons of revenge, blackmail, social denigration of the other, and image attack. Exposing and defaming the other, through *faked or unfaked images*, through spectacular revelations, through insults or *defamatory statements*, harsh ironies or other forms of image attack, are just as many *infamous strategies*, easily used by children and young people, with devastating effects for the victims.

What remains remarkable here is the way in which Filipp Budeikin, a 21-year-old young man, has created online a real network of „curators" whom he has trained to identify, recruit, manipulate and systematically harass children in the virtual environment. They have led hundreds of curious or vulnerable teenagers, due to personal problems, *to torture themselves for 50 days, after which they end their own lives* (Palaghia 2018, 2024).

Accessing online games such as *Blue Whale, Momo, and Russian Currency* has demonstrated how vulnerable children and adolescents are to challenges of this kind. Likewise, accessing social networks and responding to malicious challenges launched from a series of platforms showed not only their power of manipulation, but also the inability of children to distinguish between reality and fiction, to respond to blackmail, or to deal with *subtle means of manipulation.*

There are gradual and controlled commands, such as:

- "Draw *a whale* on a sheet of paper";
- "You will have to overcome a fear";
- "Carve a whale in your hand with your blade";

- "Listen to the music that the administrator sends you";
- "Watch psychedelic clips all day";
- "Don't talk to anyone";
- "Get on a crane";
- "Walk on the roof";
- to *„Commit suicide!".*

They show that it is not a simple game, but a subtle mechanism of domination and manipulation, in which the administrator plays with the mind of the one who comes into contact with him. It is a form of *annulment of discernment* and transformation into a *perfect slave*, without any instinct of preservation. The well-known challenges launched on social media platforms work on the same principle. The result is dramatic: *sick minds, mentally damaged children, suffering and self-mutilation, suicide and destroyed families.*

In 2021, in January, the case of a ten-year-old girl who wanted to play „*Truth and Dare*" on TikTok appeared in the media (Urra, 2022). She died of suffocation by self-asphyxiation, while practicing a challenge on the social network called *the blackout challenge*, which consisted of trying to resist without oxygen for as long as possible (Karri, 2022).

An equally terrible reality is the fact that *thousands of children are being recruited and used in armed conflicts around the world.* Between 2005 and 2022, more than 120,000 children were confirmed to be recruited and used by parties involved in the conflicts, although the actual figure is considered to be much higher (Pruteanu, 2023).

UNICEF (*United Nations Children's Fund*) reveals that sometimes the warring parties use children not only as *fighters*, but also as *messengers, scouts, guards, cooks, porters*, and in other roles, and that many of them, especially girls, are bullied. Thousands of boys and girls are used as soldiers, cooks, spies, and more in armed conflicts around the world (English, 2022). Some of them are recruited online. The same happens with human and child trafficking, the recruitment activity being adapted to new technological developments.

Cyber aggressors reveal harmful behaviors that outline *the dark tetrad of personality*, as psychologists Delroy L. Paulhus and Kevin M. Williams (2002) show. Its characteristics are:

1. *Machiavellianism* – characterized by cynicism, cunning, deception, manipulation, the absence of principles;
2. *Subclinical narcissism* – specific to people with feelings of grandeur, immeasurable superiority, need for admiration and self-importance, pride, lack of empathy, low self-control, selfishness, impulsivity and unstable self-esteem;
3. *Subclinical psychopathy* – which characterizes irresponsible people, with impersonal coldness, remorseless, reckless, with a complete lack of empathy; low impulse control, exacerbated self-esteem, and violation of social norms are present;

4. *Sadism* is characterized by intimidation, physical and psychological domination and control, humiliation, low levels of empathy and moral inhibition, as well as the joy of perceiving the suffering of another.

The above traits have been shown to explain behaviors such as network trolling (Robaina, 2022).

The fact that the entire scenario is packaged in a playful register, capable of taking man out of real space and time and introducing him to a new universe, with other rules, shows that it is abundantly predestined for children and adolescents, that is, those for whom the playful way of discovering the world and interacting with reality is valid. *Homo ludens* (Huizinga, 2023) becomes *homo vulnerabilis* and then a *homo violentus* or *homo aggresivus* (Furtună, 2017). This time, the logic of the game develops on the dark ground of human drives and imagination.

2. Control of shadows and screens

Lately, there has been more and more talk about the seduction that screens exert on us and especially on children. It is an unusual attraction to a limitless universe which, paradoxically, becomes a *digital fortress* that easily controls those who cross its threshold. They are addictive; they produce psycho-mental and behavioral disasters. The fact is most visible among children. Extremely suggestive is the image below, taken with the help of AI. Although it seems metaphorical, this formulation *„controlled by shadows and screens"* expresses a rather cruel reality.



Figure 1: The sketch made with ChatGPT and entitled:
„Controlled by shadows and screens".

Therefore, we are warned in various ways, including by artificial intelligence creations, that the dangers in the online environment have become

much more serious than we imagine. Children and adolescents are recruited for all kinds of aggression and to commit crimes on demand.

In November 2025, Catherine De Bolle, executive director of Europol, reported that there are criminal networks that „use children as weapons, to commit acts of torture and murder" (Ross, Dinger, Pfahler, and Woldin, 2025). These networks recruit children through multiplayer video games and smartphones, and parents, most often, don't know anything. This is also true for the European territory. It is not about small deviations, but about serious crimes. An extremely serious case is that of a boy who was ordered to kill his younger sister, De Bolle said. She also warned that, currently, the biggest threat facing the European Union from organized crime comes from groups that have industrialized the recruitment of children online (DIGI 24, 2025).

How can we explain this formidable power of technology? What are the springs that contribute to altering our thinking and behaviors in a world that wants to be civilized, tolerant, full of compassion and understanding? What are these screens in front of which we spend a large part of our time, and why do they have so much power over children and adults? Here are some questions that can be answered differently.

The explanations that we want to outline here mainly concern the symbolic dimension of the phenomenon and a series of socio-anthropological data. We start from the premise that the game is about new expressions of evil, this time mediated by technologies. In itself, technology is neither good nor bad. However, the way in which it is instrumentalized, the social representations it enjoys, and the symbolic investments we make in these instruments can all function as true generative metaphors (Frye, 1981).

Taking into account the emergence of deviant phenomena and crime among children and adolescents in the company of new technologies, we could say that they can be considered as *New expressions of evil*. The data show that technological means potentiate this evil and that they have an unusual power to contaminate. It is quite difficult to understand how it is possible for very young people, innocent children, to develop so much aggression, cruelty, and behaviors that nullify any moral benchmarks. In this case, perhaps the most appropriate association of evil is that with the *Shadow image*, with direct reference to Jung's approaches. However, in our case, the shadow can receive several meanings, and through them, the phenomenon can receive different explanations. Thus, we identify several meanings of shadow:

2.1. The shadow as a hypostasis of the evil within us

Coming from the field of analytical psychology, the concept of shadow marks the unseen side of the individual and collective unconscious, a world of collective archetypes (Jung, 1994, 2003), difficult to access, hidden, opaque and devoid of light, which lies in the dark corners of our individual and social being. This is a first sense of shadow. It is well camouflaged under the daily masks given by education, rules, values, principles, fashions and models. It also hides under the

seductive image of civilized, sophisticated, hyper-technologized, educated and regulated societies. In fact, „our crust of civilization hides a kind of brute with a prehistoric appearance (....)", said C. G. Jung. The civilized man (child, young or adult), carries his own shadows, consciously or not, and sometimes discovers, surprisingly, that anger, aggression, fear, sexual instincts, hostility, curiosity, cruelty and many others are not alien to him. Dreams, extreme situations, crises, rituals, games, the world of screens and new technologies are just vehicles that bring our shadows to light. This shows us that the game, for example, also involves a serious, sometimes terrifying component that *gives shape to our shadows*. The child and adolescent who has always been taught the bright lesson of honesty, of positive values and principles, of a childhood with limitations and taboos, suddenly discovers another world, in which he can deny reality, test his limits, where he can show that he is completely different. Taboos are crumbling in the virtual world of new technologies, and self-censorship and social control mechanisms no longer work. Shadows make their presence known by sometimes taking control (Hall, 2013).

This can explain why new technologies facilitate and develop phenomena such as *child pornography*, the recruitment of children and adolescents into different *substance consumption networks*, and the like. It is worth mentioning that shadows manifest themselves both individually and collectively. „The contents of the personal unconscious are mainly the so-called affective complexes, which constitute the personal intimacy of the psychic life, while the contents of the collective unconscious are the so-called archetypes" (Jung, 1994, p. 58). The manipulation of these archetypal structures present at the collective level thanks to new technologies can generate phenomena of contagion, collective psychosis, collective whims or madness, riots or mass suicides, etc. (Ficeac, 2010).

This is how crowd behaviors can be explained in the real or virtual world. *Blue Whale* and *Truth or Dare* are just two examples of manipulating children through play.

2.2. Shadow as a negative entity

Most often, the shadow is associated with the devil as the perfect embodiment of evil. He is the one who separates or divides people and the world. *Divide et impera* is a Latin proverb that surprises the fact that, in the end, the goal is to dominate, control, and dominate. Most often, the devil is the perfect embodiment of shadow and evil. He is the anti-model par excellence, and his essence is precisely disguise, shamelessly or subtly forcing of shades and usurpation of appearances. He masterfully masters *the art of making shapes lie* (De Rougemont, 2006). A master of dissimulation and deception, he always hides behind the best intentions and in the most attractive promises. It can hide under pleasant, sometimes innocent, charismatic faces, in animated characters, avatars, or Artificial Intelligence (AI) creations that give you attention, satisfaction, and that allow you access to knowledge, unusual experiences, and access to taboo areas of reality. In virtual reality, everything becomes accessible, and everything

becomes possible. Hidden, unknown areas of human nature can come to life. For children, the fact is often interpreted in a playful register. However, there is a danger that everything will turn into a dangerous adventure if evil intentions are hidden behind the game and the characters. In this understanding, the shadow as a negative entity can take any form, proving *a spectacular power of camouflage*, so that, at the limit, we doubt its very existence. In fact, Baudelaire's formulation that *„the devil's greatest trick is to convince you that he does not exist*"[3] has remained famous. For this reason, not a few have questioned the existence of shadow and evil as an entity; it is often associated with fallen human nature and vice, and it is more a personification of evil.

In this sense, authors such as Gérard Messadié show that in none of the horrors of history has the physical presence of the devil been signaled as a distinct and repulsive entity. In fact, it is an expression of human passions and hatred, a hatred that does not characterize the animal but only man (Messadié, 2008).

However, seen as personification or as a negative entity, evil has an external placement, foreign to human nature. Its stake is to seduce, pervert, and prove our virtues. In this case, the shadow turns out to be a good manipulator who chooses his victims carefully. In the case of those who do not yet have emotional and social maturity or who have psycho-emotional deficiencies, this is as easy as possible. Being at the age of discovery, *children and adolescents are the easiest prey to the means of seduction developed by existing technologies*. The entire scaffolding built through education in the family, school and society is shaking in the face of subtle means of manipulation exercised in the virtual environment. Thus, persistent contact with a number of virtual constructions (games, networks, websites), which have behind them characters with dubious interests, without empathy and without scruples or morals, can shape and pervert an entire inner universe. *Cyber predators* function as real shadows that develop highly effective manipulation strategies.

Catherine De Bolle, Executive Director of Europol, presented the modus operandi of these cyber predators, which allowed us *to identify a gradual strategy* such as:

- *Lure* – The most common methods of recruitment are on multiplayer video games, which give the player the opportunity to feel good, offer the satisfaction of winning, affirmation, and the feeling that he is part of a group or community that appreciates him and shares his passions. In other situations, it may be *seemingly harmless* groups that develop interactive communication, which fully stimulates *the sense of belonging*.
- *Gaining trust* – The chat function that games have and interactivity allow you to address *seemingly harmless* topics, such as pets, family life, hobbies, and the like, which *creates a kind of openness and familiarity.*

[3] The original wording (French): „La plus belle des ruses du diable est de vous persuader qu'il n'existe pas!" Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867).

- *Exploiting vulnerabilities* – At this stage, they move on to a *closed chat*, where they discuss more sinister topics and convince the child to reveal personal details, such as address, personal and family data, and other aspects related to their personal life. Every piece of information they have facilitated access to becomes a vulnerability that is extremely well exploited by *cybercriminals*.
- *Target* identification – Specific to this stage is the speculation of individual characteristics of the child who becomes the perfect target for criminals. It is the stage in which a series of individual particularities are sought among vulnerable children, such as: the desire to be appreciated, to have money, to travel, conflicts with parents, pro or antisocial behaviors, lack of a group of friends in the real world, aspects related to the child's perception of learning. The networks are mainly aimed at *children who are vulnerable* due to psychological problems or those who are victims of (cyber)bullying (Ross et al., 2025).
- *Indoctrination* – The indoctrination stage is not necessarily mandatory; it takes place according to *the stakes of the recruiter*. However, in some cases, strategies are used to shape the perception of good and evil, just - unjust, fair - unfair, truth - lie, possible - impossible, moral - immoral, justice - injustice.
- *Orders* – They appear imperatively, as solutions to solve problems or simply as *express wishes on the part of criminals*, without any justification. They can range from simple harmless tasks to destruction of property, self-mutilation, murder or suicide.

Europol acknowledged in 2025 the existence of 105 cases in which minors have been involved in violent crimes committed as a service, including 10 murders on demand, as well as many failed murder attempts because the children are inexperienced (Ross et al., 2025).

- *Blackmail and bribery* – If there is a refusal to respond to orders, then bribery and blackmail are used.

Depending on the game, the stages can be compressed and adapted. For example, in the case of the Blue Whale game, four stages can be identified:

1. Identification with the target group;
2. The rule: there is no way back;
3. The message of imposition: You will die!
4. Threats, coercion, emotional blackmail: „If you don't do what is asked of you, then we will help you. We know your name. We know where you're staying. We have all the data about you", „They will come after you!" (Palaghia, 2023).

In the situations reported in 2025, criminals offer children money to commit a crime, and the amounts offered reach up to $20,000, without always being paid (Ross et al., 2025). It is also revealed that in some cases the pets of children who did not want to carry out the order were killed, or they went further, with

threats such as: „We know where you live, we know who you are, you will listen, and if you don't, we will go even further and kill your mother or father" (Ross at al., 2025).

This *externalization of evil,* like a faceless shadow behind the screens, but without a certain location, becomes the main culprit of the horrors produced by children. Some authors consider that things are more complicated, and the feats of the shadows in the virtual environment are only the opportunity to demonstrate how weak human nature is and how fragile or lacunar our existing values, relationships, and educational strategies are.

2.3. Shadow as projection of screens

The myth of Plato's cave, in an updated version, brings up the same subject of the distinction between reality and the perception of its shadows. The place of fire in the famous allegory is currently taken by technology. In the blue-violet light of screens, reality is filtered by algorithms, sophisticated networks, and data streams. Man becomes a user and manipulator of this data. In fact, what we discover is that *technology has always been interposed between man and reality, that the truths and knowledge with which we operate bear the imprint of the technologies used.* The way we built this world, the way we think and act, is also due to the technology that mediated our access to reality. The world of children raised in front of screens is different from the world of children raised in nature. Their realities are different: one experiential and the other mediated, digitally constructed. However, unlike the fire in the Platonic cave, current screens and technologies allow *for a double projection*: one that goes from us to the virtual environment and another that comes from that environment to us. If the Platonic shadows did not speak, but only reflected a presence towards which the viewers behaved as real, the shadows of new technologies are much more sophisticated: sometimes they take shape (AI constructions, avatar, hologram, familiar images or not) and other times omniscient shadows remain mysterious, always available and very curious about human nature, such as Chat GPT, Claude, Perplexity and others of the same kind: they intercede, give advice, become indispensable and create addictions. This is a sophisticated context that allows a two-way circulation of fantasies and information. So, shadows are projections of our fantasies on the screens of devices but also the responses of the virtual world to our own projections. Our pleasures and fears, our ambitions and weaknesses, our hidden perceptions and desires, are all projected on screens, through words, gestures, images, through interactions or through the traces we leave in the virtual universe.

In turn, technology comes to us with an offer that is hard to refuse and perfectly suited to the profile we have revealed by accessing technology. Our passions, curiosities and concerns will be met by alluring solutions. The whole world that opens up to us is a perfect feedback at our own screenings. Movies, games, music, information, groups and social networks are equally shadows and responses of our screenings. They all open up a universe with an unusual capacity

for seduction, which finally makes you feel like yourself, but on which you become addicted.

In fact, *this game of fantasies artificializes existence, drains man of the inner dimension*, of authentic experiential data, but also of the capacity for knowledge and representation. The main danger of AI comes from the fact that it not only projects realities but also creates them based on existing data. Undoubtedly, in this *game of fantasies,* the most vulnerable are children.

Specialists point out that artificial *intelligence is currently fueling an explosion of deviant acts*, referring not only to online frauds that have grown in recent years. On April 11, 2025, Adam Raine, a 16-year-old boy from California, committed suicide, guided by ChatGPT, which gave him a complete guide to end his life in 5-10 minutes (Buhiyan, 2025).

In October 2025, Megan Garcia, the mother of a 14-year-old child who committed suicide, sued Character AI, claiming that her son committed suicide after falling in love with the „*Game of Thrones*" chatbot, which encouraged him when the boy shared his suicidal thoughts with her (Montgomery, 2025, 23 Oct.).

Camouflaged as a friend, technology becomes a real enemy. Basically, the technology is at a level where it is not only instrumentalized to manipulate victims by cybercriminals but *becomes a manipulator itself*. The cases presented above illustrate the unusual generative force of a computer system that can cause dramas and disasters.

Perhaps this is the perfect image of a shadow that we perceive as a reality. By developing technology, we have been able to transfer an entire world, including its areas of delinquency and crime, into an artificial environment. The problem becomes a real one when behind information, decisions, or formulas of interaction in the virtual world there is no longer any human entity, but only an algorithm that develops diabolical strategies and solutions.

In the face of these challenges coming from the virtual universe with seductive but terrifying shadows and lights, it is quite difficult to find solutions for children, that is, for those who consider the virtual as a panacea. Their vulnerability lies precisely in the fact that they are digital natives, that for many the virtual world operates as a reality and AI as a provider and holder of truths and solutions.

We find that, this time, new technologies, as holders of a large volume of information, of our data, of fantasies and of an entire human ballast, manage to process them algorithmically and provide savory solutions to existential dilemmas. Some turn out to be dramatic with direct effects on physical, mental, and social health.

*

The emergence and development of new technologies, despite the countless benefits, shows us how vulnerable our children and we are to our own creations. At the limit, they prove their ability to autonomize based on operating algorithms. The fact that we are importing artificial intelligence into all our

activities, digitizing school, health, transport, and other sectors of life, means that we are validating it and investing in it strongly.

Or, in such a scenario in which life takes place in close connection with the virtual environment, addiction is established, but also the inability to detach ourselves or to distinguish truth from lies, reality from fiction, good from evil.

Digitally native children cannot imagine life outside of technology. It becomes a resource for knowledge, socialization, leisure, escape, and creativity. More specifically, for them, artificial intelligence often manages to replace reality itself.

In this context, the solutions that come from the area of regulation and control are not enough on their own, as the virtual space is easily accessible to anyone and has countless resources to camouflage potential dangers. For this reason, we believe that a series of measures such as controlling the virtual environment, games and sites that develop addictions and aggressive behaviors, controlling children's access to various unsafe sites, and a reconsideration of parental and school education that recognizes the child in nature, in real life could produce some positive results, provided that the temptations generated by actions and games that generate new activities. attractive, useful, and educational in the real world.

The school should offer alternatives for education, knowledge, and expression of the personality and creativity of each child. It can become a space of direct, authentic manifestation, an experiential and knowledge resource, which confers a certain autonomy in relation to technology. Here children could also be helped to understand the algorithms of the virtual universe, the advantages, but also the dangers it hides. We do not know if the forced digitization of education is the solution that makes us less vulnerable in the digital world and if it helps us to adopt a critical attitude in contact with new technologies. The solutions to abandon different forms of digitization of education in schools, in the Nordic countries, raise serious questions about the effectiveness of new technologies in training and educating children. Awareness of the risks can be a first step in protecting children.

Parental control can be a solution if parents are familiar with the mechanisms of operation of new technologies so that they manage to provide a convincing education and do not fall into the trap of addiction to this tool themselves. Moreover, the new contexts require greater responsibility from parents, in the sense that they should change their educational strategies, allocating much more time to interactions with their own children. It is a known fact that technology is often a form of replacement for the absence or lack of attention from parents, friends, or a pleasant environment for children.

Undoubtedly, the biggest challenges for the future come from the area of artificial intelligence and new technologies, whose speed of development we can hardly anticipate, but which bring with them, every time, extremely attractive promises, but also risks matching. The examples in this article provide enough cause for concern about children's vulnerabilities and the need for sustainable and effective solutions.

References

1. Aiken, M. (2019). *The cyber effect. Psihologia comportamentului uman în mediul online, Niculescu*
2. Buhiyan, J. (2025, August 29) „ChatGPT encouraged Adam Raine's suicidal thoughts. His family's lawyer says OpenAI knew it was broken", *The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/aug/29/chatgpt-suicide-openai-sam-altman-adam-raine
3. De Rougemont, D. (2006). *Partea Diavolului*, București: Humanitas.
4. Desmurget, M. (2021). *Fabrica de dependenți digitali. Pericolele ecranelor pentru copiii noștri*, București: For You.
5. DIGI 24 (2025, novembre 21). Avertismentul Europol: copiii sunt manipulați să comită crime prin intermediul jocurilor video. Care e cel mai grav caz, Digi24" https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/ue/avertismentul-europol-copiii-sunt-manipulati-sa-comita-crime-prin-intermediul-jocurilor-video-care-e-cel-mai-grav-caz-3512863
6. English, J. (2022, December 10). „Children recruited by armed forces or armed groups. Thousands of boys and girls are used as soldiers, cooks, spies and more in armed conflicts around the world.", UNICEF https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/save-children-unicef-and-france-launch-new-handbook-strengthen-bid-end-recruitment
7. Europol (2025). *European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment. The Changing DNA of Serious and Organised Crime*, https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/EU-SOCTA-2025.pdf
8. Ficeac, B. (2010). *De ce se ucid oamenii*. București: RAO.
9. Frye, N. (1981). *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, Toronto: Academic Press.
10. Furtună, D. (2017). *Aggressive man. Hommo aggressivus. De ce nu se opresc războaiele și violența*,, ON Publishing House.
11. Gavriluță, N. (2003). *Fractalii și timpul social*, Cluj-Napoca: Dacia .
12. Gavriluță, N., Dima, N., & Mihalache, S. (2016). *Religie și violență în Europa seculară*, Bucureşti: Editura Trinitas a Patriarhiei Române, Editura Universității "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" din Iași
13. Gavriluță, C., (2017). „Ficțiuni și realități", în volumul Emanuela Ilie și Claudia Tărnăuceanu, *Educația valorilor din Antichitate până în prezent*, Iași: Editura Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza".
14. Gavriluță, C. (2021). „Digital Identity". *Scientific Annals of Sociology and Social Work of the „Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași*, 14(2), 45-54
15. Haidt, J. (2024). *O generație în pericol. Cum afectează telefonul sănătatea mintală a copiilor noștri și cum îi putem proteja*, Bucureşti: Bookzone.
16. Hall, J.A. (2013). *Interpretarea jungiană a viselor*, Bucureşti: Herald.
17. Huizinga, J. (2023). *Homo ludens. Incercare de determinare a elementului ludic al culturii,* București: Humanitas.
18. Jung, C.G. (1994). Jung, C.G. (1994), *În lumea arhetipurilor*, București: Jurnalul Literar..
19. Jung, C.G. (2003). *Arhetipurile şi inconştientul colectiv*, București: Editura Trei.
20. Kari, P. (2022, July 6), „Families sue TikTok after girls died while trying 'blackout challenge'", The Guardian, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/jul/05/tiktok-girls-dead-blackout-challenge
21. Larchet, J. C. (2018). *Captivi în internet*, București: Sofia.
22. Le Bon, G. (2022). *Psihologia mulțimilor*, București: Rolcris.

23. Mafesolli, M. (2008). *Revrăjirea lumii: o etică pentru timpurile noastre*, Iași: Institutul European.
24. Messadié, G. (2008). *Istoria generală a diavolului*, București: Editura Humanitas.
25. Montgomery, B. (2024, October 23) „Mother says AI chatbot led her son to kill himself in lawsuit against its maker", *The Guardian*, https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/e2e8fc50-a9ac-05ec-edd7-277cb0afcdf2/2025-09-16%20PM%20-%20Testimony%20-%20Garcia.pdf.
26. Nadin, M. (2016). *Civilizația Analfabetismului*, București: Spandugino.
27. Palaghia, C. (2018). The „death games", between suicide and cyberbullying. An analysis of the risks to which children are exposed in the virtual environment. *Revista de Asistență Socială*, *17*(2), 1-11.
28. Palaghia, C. (2019). The dynamic of the aggressor-victim relationship specific to the school bullying and cyberbullying phenomenon. *Social Research Reports 11*(2), 37- 48.
29. Palaghia, C. (2023). The risks to which children are exposed in the virtual environment, *Revista Universitară de Sociologie*, Issue 3, Craiova: Beladi.
30. Palaghia, C. (2024). *Asistența socială școlară bazată pe evidențe.. Evidence-Based School Social Work*. Bilingual edition. București: Pro Universitaria.
31. Paulhus, D. L., & Williams, K. M. (2002). The Dark Triad of personality: Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. *Journal of Research in Personality, 36*(6), 556–563. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0092-6566(02)00505-6
32. Platon, *Republica*, București: Humanitas.
33. Pruteanu, C. (2023, June 6). „More than 300,000 grave violations against children in conflict verified worldwide in past 18 years – UNICEF", *UNICEF România,* https://www.unicef.org/romania/press-releases/more-300000-grave-violations-against-children-conflict-verified-worldwide-past-18
34. Robaina N.F. (2022). *Cyberpsihologia. Cum gândim, simțim și acționăm în era digitală,,* București: Litera.
35. Ross et al. (2025, novembre 21). „Children groomed for murder through video games, Europol warns", *Politico*, https://www.politico.eu/article/children-groomed-for-murder-through-video-games-europol-warns/
36. Spitzer, M. (2020). *Demența digitală: cum ne tulbură mintea noile tehnologii*, București: Humanitas.
37. Suler, J. (2004). The Online Disinhibition Effect. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, *7*(3), 321–326. https://doi.org/10.1089/1094931041291295.
38. Urra, J. (2022). *Adolescența, vârsta marilor schimbări*, București: Litera.
39. Vattimo, G. (1995). Societatea transparentă, București: Pontica.
40. Weber, M. (1963). *The Sociology of Religion*, Boston: Beacon Press.
41. Y Gasset, J.O. (2007). *Revolta maselor*, București: Humanitas.
42. Zimbardo, P. (2011). *The Lucifer effect: Understanding How good people turn evil*, New York: Random House.