



## VALUE-SEMANTIC ATTITUDES IN HISTORICAL EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF ST. PETERSBURG SCHOOLCHILDREN

### ACTITUDES SEMÁNTICAS DE VALOR EN LA EDUCACIÓN HISTÓRICA: UN ESTUDIO DE CASO DE ESCOLARES DE SAN PETERSBURGO

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#### ABSTRACT

The article aims to identify the interpretive patterns used by high school students when interacting with historical content. The primary research method was a focus group comprising eight 10th-grade students specializing in a journalism-oriented track, aged 16–17. These participants were selected based on their skills in analyzing historical events, critical thinking, and ability to comprehend complex historical content. To clarify interpretive patterns, the respondents attended a multimedia exhibition titled “Leningrad during the Great Patriotic War,” after which they answered questions divided into thematic blocks and participated in in-depth discussions using the laddering method. The study identified key values shaping the interpretive processes of schoolchildren in the context of historical memory: “life,” “humanity,” “memory,” “fact,” and “emotion.” These values define four interpretive patterns: integrative (based on collectivism), individualistic (emphasizing the uniqueness of personal stories), factual (focused on unemotional perception of facts), and emotive (linking historical memory to emotional reactions and empathy). The findings suggest that adolescents’ historical memory is shaped not only by digital and educational media but also by emotional resonance and personal relevance. Understanding these interpretive patterns can help educators design more effective history education strategies that align with students’ value systems and cognitive development.

#### Keywords:

Historical memory, education, adolescents, emotional response, collective memory.

#### RESUMEN

El artículo busca identificar los patrones interpretativos utilizados por estudiantes de secundaria al interactuar con contenido histórico. El método principal de investigación fue un grupo focal compuesto por ocho estudiantes de 10.º grado de periodismo, de entre 16 y 17 años. Estos participantes fueron seleccionados por sus habilidades para analizar eventos históricos, su pensamiento crítico y su capacidad para comprender contenido histórico complejo. Para aclarar los patrones interpretativos, los participantes asistieron a una exposición multimedia titulada «Leningrado durante la Gran Guerra Patria», tras lo cual respondieron preguntas divididas en bloques temáticos y participaron en debates a fondo utilizando el método de escalera. El estudio identificó valores clave que configuran los procesos interpretativos de los escolares en el contexto de la memoria histórica: «vida», «humanidad», «memoria», «hecho» y «emoción». Estos valores definen cuatro patrones interpretativos: integrador (basado en el colectivismo), individualista (que enfatiza la singularidad de las historias personales), factual (centrado en la percepción no emocional de los hechos) y emotivo (que vincula la memoria histórica con las reacciones emocionales y la empatía). Los hallazgos sugieren que la memoria histórica de los adolescentes se ve moldeada no solo por los medios digitales y educativos, sino también por la resonancia emocional y la relevancia personal. Comprender estos patrones interpretativos puede ayudar a los educadores a diseñar estrategias de educación histórica más eficaces, alineadas con los sistemas de valores y el desarrollo cognitivo de los estudiantes.



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**Palabras clave:**

Memoria histórica, educación, adolescentes, respuesta emocional, memoria colectiva.

**INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, the focus of researchers studying media-tized practices of constructing and developing historical memory has understandably shifted toward digitalization (Kassenova et al., 2020). This “digital turn” in memory studies appears both natural and somewhat overdue, given that the spread of new technologies significantly outpaces the speed at which researchers comprehend the impact of these digital tools on collective historical memory within online communities and other non-classical groups formed on the internet (Kenzhin et al., 2021; Malika et al., 2022; Ybyraimzhanov et al., 2022). This impact remains substantial: according to the annual Digital report, in 2023, the average Russian aged 16 to 64 spent 2 hours and 21 minutes daily on social media, 55 minutes on media (including online media), and 8 hours and 21 minutes online overall (Datareportal, 2024). These significant figures underscore the high penetration of network technologies in Russia.

However, it would be a mistake to reduce all research questions related to historical memory exclusively to digital technologies. While the spread of information on the internet today undeniably influences the patterns of forming and solidifying the value base in individuals’ consciousness — on which their interpretation of past events is built, these interpretive patterns are not shaped solely by “digital means.” Digital technologies are tools that coexist with others, such as upbringing, socialization, and analog media. The issue lies not in the continuity of memory intermediaries based on homogeneous and static needs of network actors, but in the combined influence of various types of intermediaries on the formation of historical memory within the individual, against the backdrop of a dynamically evolving media context.

That said, it is equally unacceptable to ignore the digital turn in memory studies or overestimate its role. First, the features of information dissemination via the Internet and the mediatization of historical memory (e.g., through the construction of historical or pseudo-historical narratives in computer games) do influence the interpretation of historical events (Pavlovsky, 2023). Second, the digital turn has introduced an intergenerational gap based on different generations’ relationships with technologies: today’s adolescents belong to the “screenagers” generation—individuals who spend their free time from an early age in front of computer or smartphone screens.

Adolescents, therefore, represent one of the most intriguing audience categories for studying the formation and

development of historical memory. On the one hand, they are influenced by various intermediaries shaping historical memory during socialization. These intermediaries primarily include three types: family, friends, and school. Family and friends are strong-tie social connections (Granovetter, 1973), while schools have a clearly defined educational function. On the other hand, modern adolescents largely belong to the “screenagers” cohort, spending considerable time consuming media content on screens.

Thus, the main problem of our study is to identify and examine the interpretive patterns formed in adolescents when interacting with historical contexts. Investigating such patterns will enable us to determine the value bases underpinning adolescents’ consciousness in constructing historical memory. It is essential to understand that adolescents’ value bases likely represent a fluid construct as they are still in the process of formation. In the long term, it will be necessary to compare these identified interpretive patterns with those of other generations to assess the validity of the hypothesis stated above.

Research on historical memory is a dynamically developing field characterized by the heterogeneity of its subject area. This heterogeneity largely stems from the complexity of the concept of “historical memory”: On one hand, it can be studied as the testimonial memory of individuals who experienced certain events, such as Holocaust survivors. On the other hand, the term is used to study representations of the past and its construction through memory media—books, films, monuments, ceremonies, etc. (Safronova, 2018).

In the context of our study, particular interest lies in questions related to the mediatization of historical memory. Here, two main research directions can be identified:

The first direction focuses on studies that *“examine <...> memory intermediaries from the perspective of media”* (Pavlovsky, 2023, 23). This includes dominant research on social networks, “mobile memory,” digital archives, YouTube, and Wikipedia. However, entire types of media—such as VR/AR, video games, and neural networks—have received insufficient attention from researchers (Pavlovsky, 2023). This direction also encompasses studies on specific types of historical content online (e.g., historical memes (Khlevniuk & Noordenbos, 2024) or particular topics, often associated with historical traumas.

In English-language academic discourse, unlike in Russian, the topic of World War II receives relatively little attention. In Russia, however, one of the main metanarratives reflected in online communities is: *“Russia has a rich history that must be remembered. Above all, the memory of the Great Patriotic War must be preserved”*. (Dunas et al., 2023, 2291)

This direction also includes research analyzing the degree of influence exerted by various social institutions on the formation of historical memory. Pronina (2021), for instance, concludes in her study: *“The primary sources of knowledge about the Great Patriotic War <...> are the primary agents of socialization—family and school”* (p. 138). Meanwhile, in English-language academia, significant attention is given to research on decolonization and the colonial period as traumatic for various ethnic groups (Graefenstein & Kennedy, 2024; McGregor & Dragojlovic, 2024).

The second direction focuses on studies where the audience of media and other types of intermediaries becomes the object of research. These studies often use survey methodologies, including various types of interviews. For example, Zernov & Igaeva (2021), conducted a survey among students of historical and non-historical majors, concluding that “youth historical memory is becoming increasingly mediatized and less critical, aimed at reproduction rather than interpretation of data”. (p. 306)

If this thesis is confirmed in our study, the mediatization of historical memory among school students will result in blurred interpretive patterns for analyzing historical content, with respondents unable to identify key points in their responses. Using focus group methods, Sidorov (2022), found that students expressed a demand for a unifying ideology in modern Russian society, which could simplify the formation of interpretive patterns concerning historical content. For journalism students, ideology appears as “a cultural asset of society, an integral part of public consciousness, and a matter of state interest”. (p. 178)

In our study, we decided to combine these two approaches. The immediate object of study is a group of senior high school girls—the audience for historical content. At the same time, we shifted the focus of their perception to specific historical content related to the Siege of Leningrad during the Great Patriotic War. This allowed us to trace the formation of interpretive patterns from a specific topic to the value bases of the focus group participants.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The main research method was a focus group involving eight 10th-grade students from a specialized journalism class, aged 16–17. The selection of respondents was based on several factors. First, the students had initial training in journalism, possessed skills in analyzing historical events, and demonstrated critical thinking abilities, which enhanced their ability to comprehend historical content. Second, selecting 11th-grade students might have introduced cognitive biases related to their preparation for final school exams, as the focus group was conducted on May 30, shortly before the Unified State Exam. There was a

concern that their attention might have been divided due to the upcoming exams. Finally, students aged 16–17 are still in the process of forming their value base, which shapes their perception of historical content, yet they already have some experience engaging with such material. Their intellectual and psycho-emotional development allows for discussions that require significant cognitive effort, which is crucial for aligning research programs with both student and teacher respondents (a study with teacher respondents is planned for late August 2024).

Before the focus group, on the same day, the respondents visited the exhibition “Leningrad during the Great Patriotic War” at the State Museum of the History of St. Petersburg (State Museum of the History of St. Petersburg, 2025). The exhibition, opened in 1964 on the eve of the 20th anniversary of the complete defeat of fascist troops near Leningrad, is organized thematically and chronologically, presenting key events related to the heroic defense and life of the city during 1941–1945. It spans 12 halls and includes over 2,000 exhibits. The exhibition was chosen for its multimedia nature, combining “analog,” physical artifacts with multimedia elements and various types of media, such as video clips and sound effects. It was deemed important not to focus on a specific type of media but to create a multimedia environment for respondents to perceive historical content.

The questions posed to respondents were divided into two groups. The first set focused on their impressions of the exhibition: “What did you dislike about the exhibition?” “What would you change?” “What did you like?” “Could the aspects you liked be improved?”

The second set of questions was divided into three blocks, considering the specifics of online communication. The first block addressed attitudes toward internet communities, using this term instead of “network communities” to avoid potential misinterpretation by respondents even with prior clarification from the facilitator. Questions included: “How do you behave on social networks or in messengers?” “Are you part of any internet communities?” The second block explored respondents’ attitudes toward social media content, particularly historical content: “Do you encounter historical content at all?” “What should a post look like to grab your attention?” “What kind of content would prompt you to leave a comment?” The third block focused on historical memory and respondents’ understanding of it: “What comes to mind when I say ‘historical memory’?” “Why do you remember certain facts from historical excursions but not others?”

The laddering method was also used during the focus group. When respondents answered a question, the

facilitator continued asking clarifying questions (“Why?” “How does this happen?”) until students reached a value-based level of interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of respondents’ answers was conducted in two directions: quantitative and qualitative. Initially, the frequency of word usage in the respondents’ answers was calculated, and the most frequently used lexemes were co-related with the values they represented. The values were determined through qualitative text analysis, based on the context of the responses. Functional parts of speech were excluded from the count. The analysis utilized Porter’s stemming algorithm, which removes endings and suffixes from words to group similar lexemes into one category. In the table below, endings and suffixes have been re-added for readability, and similar lexemes have been consolidated into single categories. The moderator’s questions were not included in the count (Table 1).

Table 1. Word frequency in respondents’ answers.

Lexeme	Number of Mentions in Responses	Values Corresponding to the Lexeme
People / person	37	Humanity / Life
History / historical	35	Memory
Emotions / emotional	28	Emotion
Community	17	Collectivism
Interesting / interest	13	Emotion / Identity
War / Great Patriotic War	12	Memory / Life / Emotion
Knowledge / know	11	Fact / Cognition
Remember / memory	11	Memory
Fact	9	Fact
New	8	Fact / Cognition
Think	8	Fact / Cognition
School	5	Collectivism / Identity

Source: Prepared by authors

The most frequently used lexemes were “person” and “people” in various forms. The tour guide’s narratives strongly emphasized themes of death and suffering experienced by Leningrad residents during the Siege, which highlighted the value of life for respondents. The frequent reference to memory as a distinct value in respondents’ answers can be explained by the nature of the questions posed. However, a clear interpretive pattern emerged among focus group participants: history is memory. The exhibition’s themes and the narratives of both the guide and the displays underscored the collective struggle of Leningrad’s residents, which emphasized the value of collectivism.

At the same time, another interpretive pattern was evident in the respondents’ answers: historical memory is not only collective memory but also a tool for shaping identity.

The respondents’ answers to the question “What is the first thing that comes to your mind when I say ‘historical memory’?” are particularly telling. Four out of eight participants answered “Great Patriotic War” or simply “war,” implicitly referring to World War II. One respondent mentioned “the Siege,” while other answers included “personalities,” “Alexander Nevsky,” and “stories about my grandfather.” This indicates that the Great Patriotic War and related events, such as the Siege of Leningrad, are closely associated with the concept of “historical memory.” In other words, in the interpretation of schoolchildren, the Great Patriotic War emerges as a key concept in Russia’s collective historical memory.

Respondent Margarita particularly emphasized the unifying nature of the Great Patriotic War in the collective historical memory of Russians: “I recall a conversation with my history teacher, who said that because Russia is a multinational country, one of the last things that unites us all is the memory of the Great Patriotic War. It’s practically the only thing that unites us today.”

Thus, the interpretive pattern used by schoolchildren to analyze the concept of “historical memory” can be identified as an integrative pattern. Historical memory is perceived by respondents as collective memory, with a distinct emphasis





on its integrative nature: it is the memory of key events in Russian history, particularly the Great Patriotic War, and this memory unites Russians.

However, another pattern emerges in the respondents' interpretations of "historical memory," which can be termed the individualistic pattern. Unlike the integrative pattern, which is rooted in collectivist values and highlights the unifying nature of historical memory, the individualistic pattern is used by respondents who interpret historical memory through individuals rather than events. These can include specific historical figures, such as Alexander Nevsky or a family member like a grandfather, or abstract "personalities."

Even those respondents who employed the integrative pattern when interpreting "historical memory" showed an interest in individuals and personal stories. For instance, respondent Ekaterina noted how she consumes historical content on social media: "Whatever pops up on VK, we read it. Famous people can be interesting."

The individualistic pattern is also evident in responses related to the exhibition. Participants mentioned familiarity with many facts about the Siege and the Great Patriotic War, which heightened their need for individual stories filled with emotional details. Respondent Maria's answer is illustrative: "I've been on many excursions, and my family and I have traveled on trips about the Great Patriotic War. On every excursion, what I remember most are images from those times. Perhaps the most vivid image is people throwing their hats into the air in celebration of Victory. Even today, they showed a short film at the end with footage from both our time and that era. I always remember these moments because I pay attention to people. Unfortunately, on the excursion, they didn't tell us much about people we don't know. We know about Tanya Savicheva, but unfortunately, we know nothing about other people. Maybe it's because my grandfather was a child during the war—he's 91 now—and I always imagine how he lived then, making glue soup. He used to tell us all these stories, and perhaps such personal stories are very emotional."

The distinction between fact and emotion is central to the respondents' answers. Consequently, two additional interpretive patterns emerge: the factual and the emotive patterns.

The factual pattern is activated when students encounter historical content rich in facts, such as troop movements, dates, and unemotional narratives. The emotive pattern, on the other hand, is activated when students encounter historical content filled with emotions, such as personal stories or audio-visual media. For example, the daily bread ration of 125 grams given to residents of blockaded Leningrad can activate either the factual or emotive pattern, depending on how the information is presented. A

textual reference to the 125-gram ration represents a factual delivery, while an installation featuring a visual representation of a bread piece vividly demonstrates the small size of the ration, thereby activating the emotive pattern.

It is important to note that even content rich in facts can evoke emotions, depending on an individual's worldview, value base, socialization, and other factors.

In this group of respondents, the factual interpretive pattern ranks lower in the value hierarchy compared to the emotive pattern. This positioning is largely due to the lack of novelty, as noted by respondent Margarita: "Most of us study in a history-focused class, and since we covered the Great Patriotic War about three months ago, practically none of us learned anything new. We reviewed the material and saw it all with a multimedia component, but there was virtually no new knowledge." However, one respondent noted that facts are just as important as emotions, while another emphasized the importance of emotional components in museum exhibitions: "In school, we sit and study facts, but on an excursion—especially for people who know history well—emotions are probably more important. School is about facts, but excursions are about emotions."

Overall, respondents highlighted that the most memorable exhibits were those that activated the emotive interpretive pattern. Six out of eight respondents found audio exhibits, such as the sounds of air-raid sirens and the metronome signaling safety, to be the most emotional. At the same time, one respondent emphasized the importance of the factual interpretive pattern: "I really liked the exhibit on the Road of Life. I preferred the moments related to historical facts rather than the room with the siren and alarms. For some reason, that didn't resonate with me emotionally."

Interestingly, respondents did not overestimate the significance of multimedia installations. For the focus group participants, authentic artifacts from the Great Patriotic War were more valuable than the interactive elements of the exhibition, which may seem surprising given their age. In some responses, a connection between the emotive and factual interpretive patterns emerged:

"We all visited the Road of Life museum together, during the dates marking the lifting of the Siege of Leningrad. Authentic artifacts were very moving—like the torn and crumpled flags from the ships, hanging all over the ceiling. That really stayed with me. I also remember the story about the first female diver. Later, I even prepared a report on her for history class because I remembered how heavy her diving suit was and imagined how she worked at the bottom of the lake. Another memorable artifact was an iron boot. When the Germans tried to replicate something like our felt boots, they ended up with an uncomfortable, large iron boot" (Sofia).

“For me, authentic artifacts and precise facts evoke more emotions than multimedia content. For example, in this museum, the shells left the strongest impression. I imagined how they were manufactured in Germany and then fell on the city. Authentic artifacts like these evoke emotions for me. By contrast, the Museum of Political History didn’t appeal to me at all because it had no genuine artifacts—everything relied on sensations and multimedia. You pull out a stand from the wall with something written on it. It felt like it was designed for people with a short attention span who need to touch and see everything” (Margarita).

“As Rita mentioned, there are people with a short attention span. I consider myself one of them because I need to touch, see, and listen to everything. I want all my senses activated: touch, smell, hearing, sight—everything. I’d add more large installations like in one of the smaller halls, where it felt immersive. I’d like more of that to overwhelm me and others” (Margarita 2).

The emotive and factual interpretive patterns do not exclude one another. Based on the respondents’ answers, it can be assumed that both patterns can be simultaneously activated in an individual’s consciousness when interacting with historical content.

These patterns include the integrative, individualistic, factual, and emotive patterns. A detailed description of each pattern is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Interpretive patterns used by schoolchildren in consuming historical content.

Pattern	Description
Integrative	This pattern is based on the value of collectivism. Historical memory and related content are perceived as unifying people into a community, collective, or nation. Consuming historical content allows individuals to feel part of a larger group of like-minded people who «remember» the same things.
Individualistic	This pattern emphasizes values associated with individual identity. It is less important to remember what everyone else does. What matters more is remembering something unique, tied to specific individuals and their smaller, personal stories rather than global events.
Factual	This pattern is activated when historical content is rich in facts. It encourages an unemotional perception of historical content, making it difficult to «feel» the historical event.
Emotive	This pattern is triggered by content rich in emotions, such as personal stories. Historical memory, when this pattern is activated, appears as an emotionally charged space that allows one to «feel» historical events and fosters empathy.

Source: Prepared by authors

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CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to the growing body of research on historical memory by offering a nuanced view of how adolescents interpret and emotionally engage with historical content in educational settings. It highlights the interplay between personal experience, educational exposure, and media environments in shaping students’ historical consciousness. The findings underscore the importance of understanding students’ value-semantic frameworks in order to develop more effective history education strategies.

The most significant values accompanying interpretive processes in the context of historical memory for schoolchildren are “life,” “humanity,” “memory,” “fact,” and “emotion.” These values were reflected in respondents’ answers regarding their consumption of historical content. They also define the interpretive patterns activated

in students’ consciousness when engaging with historical material.

The article undeniably has certain limitations. Conducting focus groups with different respondent groups, such as history teachers, students who do not study history as a specialized subject, and others, seems advisable. This would allow for comparisons of interpretive patterns across various social groups and the identification of their similarities and differences. However, even considering these limitations, the patterns identified in the respondents’ answers were distinctly evident, allowing us to confidently describe them as phenomena accompanying schoolchildren’s consumption of historical content.

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