The Contributing Factors of Gen Z Prevalent Addictions

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the complex phenomenon of addiction among Generation Z (Gen Z), a cohort shaped by rapid technological evolution, cultural pluralism, and socio-emotional fragility. Defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, Gen Z navigates life in a hybrid reality—both physical and digital—where identity, values, and behaviors are increasingly shaped by online engagement. The paper offers a multidisciplinary analysis of addiction, integrating psychological, social, spiritual, and physiological perspectives. It examines contributing factors such as family dysfunction, loneliness, peer pressure, digital overstimulation, postmodern value relativism, and biological predispositions. Special attention is given to behavioral addictions—such as compulsive pornography use, social media dependency, and online gambling—as well as substance-related dependencies. Key generational traits including digital fluency, emotional sensitivity, and a longing for authenticity make Gen Z both highly capable and highly vulnerable. The study concludes by proposing a holistic framework for prevention and intervention that emphasizes relational authenticity, character-centered education, and transcendent meaning-making. Addressing the addictions affecting Gen Z requires an integrative response that engages theological, psychological, and cultural resources to promote personal integrity, communal belonging, and spiritual resilience.

KEYWORDS: Gen Z, identity, addiction, social behavior, loneliness, peer-pressure, school dropout

1. Preliminaries

The past three decades have been marked by rapid and far-reaching transformations across social, economic, technological, and ideological domains—transformations that have reshaped human experience at an unprecedented pace. Central to this shift is the digital revolution, which, alongside the globalization of values and the weakening of traditional community structures, has profoundly altered how individuals think, relate, and behave. Among the most affected is Generation Z—typically defined as those born between 1997 and 2012—a

cohort uniquely formed within an environment of uninterrupted digital connectivity and continuous stimulation.

From early childhood, Gen Z has had access to the internet, smartphones, and social media platforms, rendering digital technology not an enhancement of life but a framework in which life unfolds. This constant connectivity has facilitated creativity, learning, and global interaction. However, it has also contributed to increased exposure to addictive stimuli, elevating their susceptibility to both behavioral and chemical forms of addiction (Twenge, 2017, pp. 28-30). As Jean Twenge observes, Gen Z youth are not simply using digital tools; they are shaped by them in ways that influence brain development, attention patterns, and relational dynamics (Twenge, 2017, pp. 28-30).

Understanding addiction within this generational context requires more than psychological or sociological explanation. The phenomenon must be approached holistically, incorporating theological and spiritual dimensions. The pressures confronting Gen Z—intellectual overload, emotional instability, relational breakdown, and spiritual alienation—create conditions ripe for compulsive behaviors. These behaviors often emerge not merely as unhealthy habits but as maladaptive strategies to manage internal fragmentation and loss of meaning. While technology itself is neutral, its uncritical absorption into a culture that prioritizes autonomy, moral relativism, and expressive individualism often results in the normalization of destructive paradigms, weakening the individual's capacity for discernment and self-regulation (Treuman, 2020, ch.1).

This study proposes a multidisciplinary investigation into the contributing factors of addiction among Gen Z, seeking to identify not only what addictions are most prevalent, but also why they have taken such deep root within this demographic. The inquiry begins by clarifying the concept of addiction itself—distinguishing between behavioral dependencies (e.g., gaming, social media, pornography) and chemical dependencies (e.g., alcohol, cannabis, prescription drugs). It will also explore how the diagnostic understanding of addiction has evolved, particularly considering Gen Z's unique technological and cultural formation.

Following this conceptual groundwork, the study examines four intersecting domains that contribute to the rise of addiction in Gen Z:

1. Psychological factors, including emotional dysregulation, unresolved trauma, identity confusion, and low distress tolerance. Gen Z's emotional fragility—intensified by curated social comparisons and performance anxiety—renders them especially vulnerable to addiction as a coping mechanism.

2. Social factors, such as peer pressure, family breakdown, and the influence of digital media. In a world where validation is often obtained through online engagement, social reinforcement frequently incentivizes addictive behavior, particularly in digital spaces.

3. Spiritual factors, including the loss of transcendent reference points, detachment from religious tradition, and existential disconnection. The weakening of spiritual anchors contributes to a void that young people often attempt to fill through compulsive activity or substance use.

4. Biological factors, such as neurochemical imbalances and genetic predispositions. Advances in neuroscience have revealed how certain patterns of behavior or substance use can hijack the brain's reward circuitry, particularly during the neuroplastic years of adolescence and early adulthood.

The paper then proceeds to analyze the generational profile of Gen Z. This includes traits such as high digital literacy, openness to diversity, sensitivity to injustice, and a strong desire for authenticity. However, it also highlights weaknesses—emotional volatility, fear of failure, and reduced resilience—that intersect with cultural and technological forces to exacerbate the risk of addiction. The impact of hyperconnectivity is examined as a double-edged sword: offering unprecedented access to knowledge and community, while simultaneously undermining attention span, sleep cycles, and relational depth.

With this context in place, the study turns to the most prevalent addictions among Gen Z, divided into two main categories:

- Digital addictions, including pornography, social media, video games, and online gambling. These forms are notable for their accessibility, social acceptability, and algorithmic reinforcement—often leading to compulsive behavior, psychological dependency, and in some cases, significant relational and spiritual damage.

- Substance-based addictions, involving alcohol, marijuana, vaping, and the misuse of prescription drugs. Though often overshadowed by digital addictions in public discourse, these remain critical issues with severe physical, cognitive, and emotional consequences.

Each type of addiction will be assessed for its prevalence, impact on development, and spiritual significance, using current data and interpretive frameworks from psychology, sociology, theology, and neurobiology. Importantly, the goal of this research is not solely diagnostic. The study aims to offer a constructive and integrative framework for responding to addiction among Gen Z. This involves identifying preventive strategies and intervention models that are not only clinically sound but also theologically rooted. Approaches must account for Gen Z's longing for relational authenticity, purpose, and moral coherence. This includes restoring community, fostering spiritual resilience, and reframing suffering and longing in light of a transcendent vision of human flourishing.

In sum, the rising tide of addiction among Generation Z reflects a broader cultural disorientation that demands multidisciplinary insight and holistic engagement. Addressing it will require coordinated efforts across educational, pastoral, familial, and therapeutic contexts. Only through such an integrated

response can we hope to empower this generation not merely to resist addictive patterns, but to cultivate a life marked by wholeness, freedom, and enduring meaning.

2. The Characteristics of Gen Z

The concept of a "generation" holds a central place in sociological and anthropological discourse, serving as a framework for understanding the formation of collective identity across cohorts of individuals born within a relatively narrow temporal window—typically spanning 15 to 20 years. Generational theory posits that members of the same generation are shaped by shared formative experiences, including major historical events, technological innovations, social transformations, and cultural shifts. These common influences contribute to the development of distinct patterns of thought, values, and behavior that differentiate one generation from another and inform their approach to life, relationships, and institutional structures.

A foundational contribution to this field comes from the sociologist Karl Mannheim, who emphasized that generations are not merely chronological groupings, but rather sociological constructs marked by a form of "generational consciousness." According to Mannheim, individuals who come of age during the same historical period tend to internalize a similar worldview, creating a "generational location" that gives rise to a shared cultural and intellectual outlook (Mannheim, 1952, pp. 276-320). This shared consciousness forms the basis for a generation's distinctive identity, exerting a profound influence on its members' attitudes, aspirations, and responses to the challenges of their time.

Generation Z—commonly defined as those born between 1997 and 2012— exemplifies this generational framework in a particularly vivid way. As the first generation to grow up entirely within a digitally networked society, Gen Z has been profoundly shaped by rapid technological advancements, social media proliferation, and a cultural climate characterized by constant connectivity, instant access to information, and exposure to a globalized marketplace of ideas. These conditions have influenced not only the way Gen Z communicates and learns, but also how it forms identity, engages with authority, and perceives truth and morality.

In contrast to previous generations, Gen Z tends to value authenticity, diversity, and social engagement, while simultaneously displaying higher levels of anxiety, emotional fragility, and uncertainty regarding long-term life commitments. They often exhibit strong digital literacy but face challenges in interpersonal communication and sustained attention. Moreover, their psychological and spiritual landscapes are shaped by a postmodern context that prizes individual autonomy and self-expression, often at the expense of transcendent or community-oriented frameworks.

Thus, understanding the characteristics of Gen Z is essential for analyzing their susceptibility to various forms of addiction. Their unique generational profile—formed by digital immersion, social fragmentation, and cultural relativism—creates both opportunities for innovation and risks for maladaptive coping mechanisms. Any meaningful inquiry into addiction among Gen Z must begin with a thorough exploration of these generational traits.

2.1. Gen Z: Identity and Values

Generation Z, frequently labeled as "digital natives", encompasses individuals born roughly between 1995 and 2012 (Seemiller, 2016, p. 9). This generational cohort has been profoundly shaped by an environment defined by ubiquitous technology, globalization, and the erosion or reconfiguration of traditional cultural, moral, and institutional frameworks. From early childhood, Gen Z has inhabited a world in which internet connectivity, social media, and mobile devices are not innovations but givens—integrated seamlessly into everyday life. Consequently, their identity formation, worldview, and relational dynamics have been fundamentally mediated through digital interfaces, with deep implications for their psychological, social, and spiritual development.

The formative landscape of Gen Z has been marked by both the opportunities and the challenges of the digital age. Their cultural horizon includes early exposure to global diversity, ethical pluralism, and rapid social change, contributing to heightened awareness of contemporary issues such as climate change, gender equality, mental health, and social justice. At the same time, their early and continuous engagement with smart technology, artificial intelligence, and immersive media environments (e.g., virtual and augmented reality) has altered the very processes by which they acquire knowledge, build relationships, and construct meaning (Seemiller, pp. 14-16).

A large-scale quantitative study involving over 150,000 Gen Z participants highlights several core character traits consistently identified by this cohort: honesty, kindness, humor, fairness, and—most notably—authenticity (Twenge, 2017, pp. 43-45). The emphasis on authenticity reflects both their internal need for self-expression and their external expectations in relational and institutional contexts. For Gen Z, authenticity entails a high degree of congruence between inner beliefs and outward behavior. In an age dominated by curated online personas and performative identity, this generation demonstrates a strong desire for transparency and integrity, particularly in leaders and influencers.

The technological environment in which Gen Z was formed is not simply a tool but a constitutive element of their identity. As the first generation never to have known a world without internet access or smartphones, Gen Z has developed an advanced level of digital fluency. Their communication styles, cognitive processing, and learning preferences have been shaped by a visual, interactive, and

highly customizable information ecosystem. Social media platforms not only serve as means of interaction but also as spaces for identity construction, political expression, and community formation. However, this immersive digital environment also creates a heightened risk for emotional dysregulation, reduced attention span, and social comparison, all of which contribute to mental health vulnerabilities (Barna Group, p. 42).

In terms of values, Gen Z tends to prioritize personal well-being, authentic interpersonal relationships, financial security, and a sustainable work-life balance. These preferences are not formed in a vacuum but emerge in response to broader social phenomena, including economic instability, a perceived failure of institutional leadership, and existential threats such as climate degradation. The generation's formative years, overlapping with the global financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and intensifying sociopolitical polarization, have generated both resilience and caution, pushing many toward pragmatic, purpose-driven life orientations.

A key motivational characteristic of Gen Z is its goal-directedness and performance orientation. Often described as a "purpose-driven generation," many Gen Z individuals seek not only material success but also meaning and impact in their educational and vocational pursuits (Seemiller, p. 83). This orientation is partly influenced by their interaction with gamified environments—particularly video games and apps that reward users with instant feedback, incremental progress, and personalized challenges. These interactive systems have contributed to the formation of a mindset that values short-term objectives, quick validation, and quantifiable achievement.

However, this proclivity for immediate gratification carries potential psychological and behavioral risks. The frequent reliance on fast digital feedback can lead to low frustration tolerance and a diminished capacity for delayed reward. In such a climate, when emotional needs are not quickly met or validation is absent, the individual may turn to maladaptive coping mechanisms. Recent studies indicate a correlation between excessive digital engagement and increased susceptibility to behavioral addictions, including compulsive social media use, impulsive consumption patterns, and even substance abuse. The convergence of high emotional sensitivity, constant digital stimulation, and weakened formative structures leaves many in this generation particularly vulnerable to escapist behaviors and identity confusion.

In conclusion, Generation Z embodies a complex and ambivalent identity. On one hand, it demonstrates remarkable assets: digital competence, social awareness, adaptability, and a commitment to authenticity. On the other, it faces profound vulnerabilities rooted in hyperconnectivity, performance pressure, and the lack of stable moral and existential reference points. Addressing these challenges requires more than technical solutions; it demands a robust educational, ecclesial, and formative response. Any strategy aimed at Gen Z must

prioritize relational authenticity, promote character-centered leadership models, and offer transcendent frameworks for meaning, capable of guiding young people toward integrated personal development and resilience in the face of cultural fragmentation.

3. Factors Leading to Addictions

The complexity of the addiction phenomenon requires a multidimensional approach, since no individual enters a state of dependence without deep structural, psychological, and contextual causes. Addiction is not merely the result of an individual choice but the product of an accumulation of factors that increase vulnerability and diminish one's ability to manage internal and external tensions. Thus, it is essential to understand those predisposing factors that drive an individual—particularly from Gen Z—to seek refuge in addictive behaviors.

3.1. Socio-Psychological Factors

3.1.1. Family Dysfunction

One of the most influential causes of addiction is the dysfunctional family environment. The family, as the primary nucleus of socialization, exerts an overwhelming influence on the development of values, resilience, and emotional self-regulation in children. Studies indicate that young people who grow up in families where one or both parents consume alcohol or drugs have a significantly higher risk of replicating such behavior in adulthood. Statistically, between 40% and 60% of children with addicted parents also become addicted, sometimes with escalated levels of consumption (Fagan, p. 2004).

Parental neglect is another major factor. During adolescence, when moral and emotional discernment is still being shaped, lack of parental involvement can have devastating consequences. Jean Richardson (Richardson, p. 1999) highlights that adolescents who consistently return home to an empty house are significantly more likely to engage in substance use than those who benefit from parental supervision. Paradoxically, not only the absence of boundaries but also the imposition of excessive, authoritarian rules can have adverse effects. Parents who adopt a punitive educational style and severely restrict their children's freedom risk provoking a strong desire for autonomy that may manifest through deviant behaviors.

Single-parent families are another favorable context for addiction. Youth raised in the aftermath of divorce, abandonment, or the death of a parent face heightened psycho-emotional risks. They may develop feelings of insecurity, abandonment, and social stigmatization, often living with the perception that the family breakdown is a result of their own insufficiency. Such emotional baggage predisposes adolescents to depression, anxiety, and implicitly, the pursuit of solace in addictive behaviors.

The impact of divorce on self-identity is often underestimated. In the absence of healthy self-esteem, the adolescent will seek social validation—often in virtual environments such as social media—thus developing a dependency on technology. Similarly, the absence of emotional and spiritual support from parents is associated with a heightened predisposition to disordered sexual behaviors or promiscuity. Studies show that youth from broken families are more susceptible to sexual addiction compared to those raised in stable family environments.

Another controversial yet present issue in the literature concerns the influence of atypical family structures on gender identity development and sexual behavior. Sociologist Judith Stacey argues that boys raised by lesbian mothers tend to display more feminine behaviors, while girls raised in the same context exhibit masculinized traits (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Although these claims remain debated in academic circles and require rigorous critical evaluation, they reflect scholarly concern with the socializing impact of the family on sexual orientation and identity formation.

In conclusion, family dysfunction—whether in the form of neglect, authoritarianism, lack of emotional support, family disintegration, or deviant parental models—contributes significantly to the emergence of addictive behaviors among youth. These conditions foster a precarious emotional climate in which the child or adolescent seeks validation, security, or comfort from harmful external sources that can easily become addictions.

3.1.2. Loneliness

Another essential factor that fosters the development of addictions among Gen Z is loneliness. This constitutes a deeply subjective and emotional experience, characterized by feelings of isolation and the absence of authentic and meaningful interpersonal relationships. Loneliness can be temporary or persistent, manifesting in both occasional episodes and long-term conditions that affect an individual's psycho-emotional development. It involves an acute awareness of the lack of significant contact with others, generating a sense of inner emptiness often accompanied by sadness, discouragement, restlessness, anxiety, and a strong desire to be accepted and valued by others.

Those who experience loneliness often feel excluded, rejected, or unaccepted—even when physically present among others. Alleviating this form of loneliness requires the development of profound relational bonds. Secondly, social loneliness reflects a lack of integration into community life, felt through a sense of marginalization and direction lessness. In such cases, individuals need a group of accepting friends and well-developed social skills.

In a similar analysis, Gary R. Collins argues that individuals overwhelmed by loneliness may turn to addictive behaviors to cope with psychological pain. These behaviors include substance or alcohol abuse, as well as retreat into pornography as a substitute for genuine intimacy (Collins, 2007, pp. 417-428). Henri Nouwen

(Nouwen, 1992, pp. 44-47) underscores the illusory and destructive nature of pornography, stating that it "commercializes intimacy" and offers only a superficial replacement for authentic human connections. Thus, Gen Z youth, in search of emotional connection and acceptance, often find refuge in artificial forms of fulfilling their need for belonging and meaning, ultimately developing compulsive and addictive behaviors.

These observations are especially relevant because Gen Z has been described by specialists as "the loneliest generation in history". According to a study cited by Ryan Jenkins, 73% of this generation reported experiencing loneliness in some form—either temporarily or as a persistent state of deep emotional isolation (Jenkins, 2025). The implications of this phenomenon are alarming, as chronic loneliness is associated with increased risks of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, low academic performance, and antisocial behavior.

It is essential that both the church community (Rotaru, 2012, p. 5) and educational (Rotaru, 2021, pp. 190-196) and family (Rotaru, 2011, p.5.) institutions recognize the gravity of this phenomenon and respond by cultivating healthy relational contexts grounded in love, acceptance, and belonging. Addressing loneliness cannot be reduced to mere technical solutions but requires the development of authentic and profound relationships in which young people are heard, valued, and integrated into communities that promote cohesion, responsibility, and spirituality.

3.1.3. Peer Pressure and Manipulation: The Impact on Gen Z

Young people from Gen Z face a variety of social pressures stemming from multiple spheres of influence: school, family, peer groups, as well as traditional and digital media. This intensified exposure to external behavioral norms is closely associated with one of the five fundamental human needs identified in Abraham Maslow's hierarchy—the need for social belonging. According to this theory, human beings aspire to be part of a group or community, to form meaningful relationships, and to experience acceptance and social integration (Maslow, 1987, pp. 43-54). This need becomes particularly acute during adolescence, a stage marked by the search for personal identity and the definition of social relationships. In the absence of adult-specific responsibilities such as marriage or parenthood, adolescents define themselves primarily through relationships and activities within contexts such as school or peer groups. Thus, the desire to be accepted by relevant age groups can significantly influence their decisions and behaviors, sometimes to the detriment of personal values. For many young people in Gen Z, peer pressure constitutes a determining force in the process of social conformity. This pressure often entails a compromise: the acceptance of group norms as the price of inclusion. If the group promotes moral values and healthy behaviors, the influence can be beneficial, contributing to the adolescent's personal development. However, in cases where the group encourages deviant attitudes, the

exerted pressure may have destructive effects. Adolescents may thus be persuaded to engage in risky behaviors, such as using illicit substances, in order not to be excluded from or stigmatized by the group.

A relevant example is the pressure exerted on some youth to use drugs or other addictive substances, despite their initial opposition to such practices. The desire to be accepted and to demonstrate loyalty to the group becomes stronger than previously held moral principles. Another frequent case is participation in risky sexual behaviors, including group or promiscuous sexual activities, driven by the desire to conform to gender stereotypes or meet group expectations. In this sense, peer pressure can become an instrument of subtle manipulation, a form of moral blackmail based on the group's power to accept or reject the individual. The psychological strength of this dynamic is also supported by Maslow's fourth need—the need for esteem. This includes the desire to be respected by others and to have confidence in oneself (Maslow, 1987, pp. 20-21). For many adolescents, social recognition and appreciation constitute essential goals, and achieving them may justify behaviors that contradict personal or moral values.

In the context of Gen Z, this phenomenon is amplified by the influence of social networks, which act as virtual spaces for validation and exposure to public judgment. Visible appreciation (likes, comments, shares) becomes a substitute for authentic esteem, and youth are tempted to adopt behaviors aligned with trends and norms promoted by these platforms—even if they are harmful to personal or spiritual development.

Furthermore, contemporary popular culture often validates individualism, rebellion against authority, and uninhibited sexual expression, which further weakens youths' resistance to group pressure. In the absence of strong reference points provided by family, church, or school, adolescents become vulnerable to external influences that emphasize superficial aspects of their identity—physical appearance, social status, online popularity—at the expense of deeper values such as honesty, responsibility, and self-control.

3.1.4. The Pressure of the Virtual Environment on Gen Z: Between Social Influence and Addiction Risk

In recent decades, social media platforms have radically redefined the way individuals communicate, interact, and relate to themselves and others. One of the most prominent manifestations of this new environment is the emergence of so-called "influencers"—individuals with a significant digital audience who shape the behaviors, values, and choices of young people, particularly those in Gen Z. This demographic, generally composed of individuals born after 1995, is deeply immersed in the digital realm, where influencers symbolically become their "virtual entourage."

The influence exerted by these figures is explained by their ability to create appealing, personalized content on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok,

YouTube, or Twitter, covering domains from fashion and beauty to technology and lifestyle. Studies show that youth perceive authenticity as an essential value when evaluating influencers, which amplifies the psychological impact of the messages these figures convey (Abidin, 2018, pp. 17-20). From this perspective, influencers become carriers of social norms and vectors of desirable behaviors—including, unfortunately, destructive ones.

The normalization of certain behaviors, including addictive ones, in the virtual environment—through their presentation as part of a "cool" or "free" lifestyle—contributes to lowering the moral barrier for young people to adopt them. Examples include celebrities such as Justin Bieber, Cardi B, or Drake, who frequently post content involving alcohol or drug use, serving as negative role models. According to a study by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, youth who spend significant time on social media are five times more likely to purchase cigarettes, three times more likely to consume alcohol, and twice as likely to use marijuana compared to those who spend less time online (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, 2011). Moreover, influencers often promote a luxurious lifestyle inaccessible to most young people. According to Bareth's research, this constant promotion creates psychological pressure on adolescents and young adults who, unable to reach such standards, develop feelings of inadequacy and frustration (Bareth, 2021, p. 280). Gen Z, already facing economic instability and a constantly shifting job market, is thus exposed to the risk of developing fragile self-esteem tied to the inability to access conspicuously promoted consumption.

Beyond material aspects, a critical dimension involves the promotion of unrealistic beauty standards. Edited, filtered, and carefully selected images create the illusion of nearly unattainable bodily perfection. This phenomenon contributes to the rise of a dysfunctional culture of comparison, generating eating disorders, social anxiety, and depression. Young people compare themselves to aesthetic ideals that do not correspond to biological or social reality, creating an identity dissonance with harmful effects on mental and behavioral health.

Virtual pressure is further amplified by trends in traditional mass media, which, to capture public attention, often employ tactics based on emotional shock, emphasizing themes such as violence, social instability, natural disasters, and global conflict. These constant exposures to anxiety-inducing content generate chronic stress reactions, with adverse effects on young people's psycho-emotional development. In the absence of healthy coping mechanisms, many adolescents and young adults seek refuge in addictive behaviors, including substance use, gambling, pornography, or compulsive engagement with digital platforms (Twenge, 2017, pp. 202-205).

A study conducted by UNICEF during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals that approximately 20% of youth aged 15–24 report frequent depressive states associated with social pressure and isolation (UNICEF, 2021). In the absence of

clear reference points, many turn to the virtual environment as a coping strategy, replacing authentic relationships with superficial interactions and digital self-validation.

3.1.5. The Contemporary Social Model: Postmodernism and Its Impact on Gen Z

Postmodernism constitutes one of the most influential philosophical and cultural paradigms of recent decades, profoundly impacting how Gen Z youth perceive the world, values, and social behaviors. Although postmodernism does not present itself as a unified doctrine, but rather as a constellation of ideas and attitudes critical of modernity, it has contributed to redefining the relationship between the individual and truth, authority, and morality. In addition, the contemporary ethical model, proposed by postmodernist morality, is based, as Ioan Brie aptly captures, on the human right to autonomy, self-determination, and privacy. (Brie, 2022). This cultural model can be identified as an indirect factor in encouraging deviant and addictive behaviors among young people, through the relativization of values and the promotion of subjectivism.

For Gen Z, who are exposed to a plurality of voices, ideas, and lifestyles via social networks and online media, this lack of clear reference points can generate identity confusion and moral disorientation (Twenge, 2017, pp. 28-30). In the absence of a stable ethical framework, young people may seek validation and meaning in fleeting experiences or risky behaviors, including substance use or addictive practices, perceived as forms of personal exploration or liberation from imposed constraints.

Second, postmodern culture favors the aesthetics of experience and sensation over rationality and critical reflection. In a cultural climate dominated by spectacle and instant gratification, the fundamental question is no longer "Is it true?" but "How does it make me feel?". This shift in focus, supported by consumerism and visual culture, generates an inclination toward impulsivity and superficiality in decision-making. Personal happiness, understood as immediate and intense pleasure, becomes the supreme value in the postmodern axiological system. This mentality directly affects Gen Z youth, who are often encouraged to live in the present, follow their instincts, and reject any form of self-control or discipline. The absence of a transcendent moral horizon leads to the trivialization of sin and the disregard of long-term consequences. Modern addictions—whether to substances, technology, or behaviors—thus become symptoms of a society centered on the consumption of sensations and the avoidance of discomfort. The lack of a pedagogy of patience, limits, and sustained effort creates the premises for a culture of emotional vulnerability and behavioral instability.

Third, one of the central themes of postmodernism is the deconstruction of authority. In this ideological framework, authority—whether religious, familial, or institutional—is perceived as a social construct intended to perpetuate domination and exclusion. Therefore, authority must be challenged, demystified, and

ultimately dismantled. This perspective, in which rules are seen as oppressive and conformity as a lack of authenticity, fosters behaviors that reject established order and embrace subversive conduct.

Young people from Gen Z, raised in a climate of contestation and encouraged to follow their own "inner voice," may exhibit a refractory attitude toward community norms or the authority of parents, teachers, and spiritual leaders. In the absence of a coherent model of authority based on love and responsibility, these youths may seek belonging in groups that promote antisocial, illegal, or self-destructive behaviors. In this context, the need for a solid spiritual and moral formation becomes evident—not as authoritarian imposition but as a relational and transformative exercise.

3.1.6. School Dropout

School dropout represents an alarming phenomenon with significant impact on the psychosocial development of Gen Z youth, constituting a major risk factor regarding their predisposition to addictive behaviors. Essentially, school dropout involves the premature interruption of the educational pathway and implies the loss of fundamental opportunities for intellectual formation, socialization, and professional orientation.

School dropout can produce a series of psychosocial consequences, amplifying the vulnerability of youth to harmful temptations, including addictions. First, premature disengagement from formal education is often associated with a decrease in self-esteem and confidence in one's abilities, generating feelings of uselessness and disorientation. In the absence of a clear sense of existential purpose and a predictable developmental framework, many young people resort to destructive compensatory behaviors such as alcohol, drug use, or other forms of addiction.

Second, school dropout contributes to increased risk of social isolation. School is not only a learning space but also an important relational context for developing social skills. Without this structured environment, young people may be exposed to negatively influential groups where behavioral norms promote deviance and toxic substance use.Moreover, the lack of adequate education directly affects the ability of young people to make responsible decisions and manage daily difficulties. Cognitive skills and problem-solving abilities are gradually formed in the educational context. Without these formative benchmarks, youth are more inclined to seek immediate and compensatory solutions to existential challenges, often choosing the path of addiction as a means of escape.

A notable study conducted by Jeffrey Fagan and Edward Pabon highlighted a strong correlation between school dropout and drug use. The research shows that both boys and girls who dropped out of school exhibited higher rates of substance involvement compared to those who continued their education. In particular, the number of boys who dropped out was three times higher than that

of those who remained in the education system (Fagan & Pabon, 1990, pp. 306-307). These data underscore the fundamental importance of education as a protective factor against psychological and social vulnerabilities. From this perspective, school dropout should not be analyzed in isolation, but in relation to the entire developmental ecosystem of the adolescent. The lack of a formal educational framework essentially means the absence of a support network, the loss of identity-forming opportunities, and the disintegration of institutionalized socialization processes.

Therefore, preventing school dropout must become a strategic priority for public policies and for churches, NGOs, or educational institutions that seek to counteract the long-term effects of addictions and social dysfunctions. This involves not only punitive or administrative measures but especially the development of alternative educational programs, mentoring, psychological counseling, moral formation, and relational rehabilitation.

3.2. Physiological Factors in Youth Predisposition to Addictive Behaviors

The specialized literature highlights a series of physiological factors contributing to the vulnerability of young people in developing addictive behaviors. A central element is neurochemical imbalance, particularly at the level of neurotransmitters such as dopamine, serotonin, and endorphins, which play a crucial role in the brain's reward and motivation mechanisms. These substances are involved in regulating mood, motivation, and pleasure perception, and dysfunctions in this system can lead to increased susceptibility to behaviors or substances that induce intense pleasure or temporary euphoria.

According to Gábor Maté, addicted individuals exhibit a reduced level of D2 dopamine receptors, making them more sensitive to the effects of substances that stimulate the dopaminergic system. This heightened sensitivity leads to a compulsive search for external stimuli that can artificially increase dopamine levels in the brain to compensate for internal neurochemical deficits (Maté, 2010, pp. 145–147). Research indicates that these chemical imbalances may result from the interaction between genetic predispositions and environmental factors. Specifically, heredity plays a significant role in developing vulnerability to addiction. A large-scale study conducted on a sample of over 4,000 individuals addicted to alcohol found that 52% of participants had a parent who suffered from alcoholism (Sher et al., 2001, pp. 545–552). This correlation suggests an intergenerational transmission of susceptibility, most likely through a combination of genetic mechanisms and behavioral modeling within the family.

Moreover, medical interventions and pharmacological treatments can directly influence normal brain functioning. For example, prolonged use of certain categories of psychotropic medications—such as antidepressants or anxiolytics—can disrupt neurotransmitter balance, negatively affecting the brain's reward

circuit. These changes may lead to increased tolerance and, consequently, to dependence on the substances used, especially when administered without proper monitoring.

Specifically, the mesolimbic circuit, also known as the "reward system," is involved in reinforcing addictive behaviors. Repeated stimulation of this circuit through addictive substances or behaviors induces neurobiological adaptations that can result in long-term restructuring of brain mechanisms involved in impulse control and decision-making. This maladaptive brain plasticity facilitates the transition from occasional use to dependence (Nestler, 2008, pp. 3245–3255).

Therefore, understanding the physiological dimension of addiction is essential for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies, especially for youth whose neuropsychological development is still ongoing. Adolescence is marked by intense activity in the dopaminergic system and an incomplete maturation of the prefrontal cortex—the brain region responsible for reasoning, self-control, and anticipating consequences. This biological discrepancy explains, at least in part, young people's tendency toward risk-taking and their heightened vulnerability to addictive stimulus.

4. Conclusion

The study of Generation Z—a cohort situated at the intersection of technological acceleration and socio-cultural upheaval—reveals a generation defined by a complex interplay between potential and fragility. Gen Z embodies digital fluency, social awareness, and a quest for authenticity, yet these strengths coexist with deep psychological, emotional, and spiritual susceptibilities. These are not signs of mere personal weakness but reflect broader structural transformations in how identity is formed, relationships are experienced, and meaning is constructed in today's hyperconnected world.

A defining insight of this research is that Gen Z is the first generation to fully inhabit a hybridized reality, where digital and physical realms are equally integral to self-perception and interpersonal experience. Whereas past generations developed identity through direct relationships and tangible social roles, Gen Z does so through fragmented online ecosystems, shaped by algorithmic feedback and public performance. The result is a heightened risk of identity dissonance—a widening gap between curated digital personas and the vulnerable, offline self. This dissonance weakens emotional coherence and contributes to rising levels of anxiety, depression, and social detachment.

Gen Z's emotional economy is further destabilized by the dynamics of digital validation. Platforms reward visibility, immediacy, and aesthetic coherence, conditioning users to equate self-worth with metrics—likes, comments, and shares. This externalization of self-esteem fosters chronic feelings of inadequacy and social comparison. When digital approval falters, many young people seek

comfort in avoidant behaviors: compulsive scrolling, escapism, withdrawal from real-life engagement, and in some cases, substance use.

Despite these challenges, this generation's vulnerabilities may also indicate a deeper sensitivity—a longing for rootedness, coherence, and purpose in a culture that often overwhelms rather than orients. Their anxieties and existential concerns suggest a profound openness to meaning, offering a unique opportunity for thoughtful and transformative responses.

To address Gen Z's needs meaningfully, three guiding principles emerge:

Relational Authenticity.

Gen Z's skepticism toward institutions is not mere rebellion but a cry for integrity. They seek consistency between proclaimed values and lived behavior, particularly in authority figures. Educational and pastoral responses must therefore be grounded in empathy, transparency, and ethical coherence. Leaders who embody what they teach become credible mentors in a world marked by digital duplicity and image management.

Character-Centered Formation.

In contrast to a culture obsessed with quantifiable success, Gen Z needs formation that prioritizes interior development—resilience, humility, discernment, and integrity. Performance-based systems must be replaced with educational and mentoring models that cultivate virtue and moral imagination. Helping Gen Z name not only what they want to do, but who they want to become, is essential for their long-term growth.

Transcendent Meaning-Making

Secular culture increasingly reduces belief to personal preference and fragments meaning into consumable parts. Gen Z, however, asks deeply human questions: *Who am I? What is my place? What story do I inhabit?* These questions demand answers not merely from therapy or technology but from communities that embody transcendence and purpose. Social institutions, churches, schools, and families must recover their identity as communities of meaning, where truth is lived, not just taught. Institutions serving Gen Z must also rethink educational and relational models. One-way, content-heavy approaches are insufficient. Gen Z thrives in interactive, collaborative, and experiential environments. Integrated models—blending truth with creativity, structure with flexibility—are necessary to educate the whole person. Practices such as storytelling, mentoring, and service-learning can provide spaces where intellect, emotion, and spirit are formed together.

Alongside formation, Gen Z must be equipped with tools of discernment to navigate the digital world critically. Digital literacy should go beyond technical skills to include ethical and emotional awareness. Questions such as *What does this*

platform do to my desires? How does it shape my identity? must be part of education. In cultivating this reflective posture, we empower Gen Z to become not passive consumers but intentional participants in shaping the digital culture.

Finally, this study underscores the importance of intergenerational relationships. Amid the noise of media and ideological division, one of the most healing gifts for Gen Z is the presence and mentorship of older generations. When younger and older cohorts engage in mutual dialogue—marked by humility, listening, and shared purpose—formation becomes anchored in embodied wisdom rather than outsourced to algorithms. In such relationships, identity is not performed but rooted in shared story and spiritual depth.

In conclusion, Generation Z stands at a threshold that is both perilous and promising. Formed amid seismic cultural shifts and digital saturation, they carry within themselves the potential for both disintegration and renewal. Their vulnerabilities are not liabilities to be fixed, but invitations to reimagine formation, leadership, and belonging in a way that responds to the full complexity of the human person in a technological age. If this generation is to flourish, they must be met with an equally holistic response—one that integrates psychological support, spiritual anchoring, moral vision, and relational trust. This is the task before educators, mentors, pastors, parents, and cultural leaders: to walk with Gen Z not simply as instructors, but as co-travelers, guiding them toward a life of integrity, purpose, and love in a fractured world. Only then can Generation Z move from survival to flourishing, and from fragmentation to a renewed sense of calling in the world they are poised to shape.

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