

How Current Technologies and Parenting Trends Have Shaped Generation Z

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Abstract

Generation Z, the largest cohort of today, is the first generation to have its members develop themselves psychosocially within a truly digitized society, resulting in traits and trends that have not yet been adequately understood by society nor described by academia. The study at hand examines the effects of growing up in an ever-connected reality without adequate mediation and presents data suggesting that several of Generation Z's idiosyncrasies derive primarily from the factors here discussed: the negative consequences of the excessive use of digital devices since a very early age, the constant presence in a computerized reality that blurs the line between the real and virtual worlds, and contemporary parents' excessive influence in their children's lives.

Keywords

Generation Z — Generational traits — Theory of generations — Sociology of generations

INTRODUCTION

The concept of “generations” as a sociological phenomenon has its origins in Karl Mannheim’s 1923 essay *The Problem of Generations* (Pilcher 1994). It refers to a group of individuals who, born within a specific time period and

influenced by the same sociohistorical events, especially during youth, acquire traits that distinguish them from other cohorts, born within diverse time periods (Pilcher 1994; Mannheim 1952).

According to the most accepted classification in the West, the generations of the twentieth century can be described

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in the following manner: the Lost Generation, spanning from 1883 to 1900; the Greatest Generation, from 1901 to 1927; the Silent Generation, from 1928 to 1945; the Baby Boomers, from 1946 to 1964; the Generation X, from 1965 to 1980; the Millennials, or Generation Y, from 1981 to 1996; the Generation Z, from 1997 to 2012; and the Generation Alpha, from 2013 onward.

The study at hand focuses on Generation Z (Gen Z), projected to account for about one-third of the global population by the year 2019 (Miller and Wei 2018). Born and raised in the midst of the digital revolution of the last decades and citizens of an interconnected world, Generation Z members display a variety of idiosyncrasies that, despite cultural and regional differences, can be observed in individuals across the globe. However, a substantial number of papers and articles have taken a somewhat overly optimistic approach to the topic of Generation Z characteristics and trends, often underestimating or overlooking the significant effects that the cohorts' unique sociohistorical reality has had on their biopsychosocial development, which the present work seeks to address.

The first chapter will discuss the excessive use of digital devices, particularly smartphones, during

childhood and adolescence, which is suggested by available data to have significant negative impacts on human biopsychosocial development. The second chapter will examine inter-generational dynamics related to Generation Z, contextualizing the cohort's socio-emotional profile through a brief comparison with trends existing among previous generations. The third chapter will discuss the contemporary parenting trends that encourage parents to constantly monitor their children and artificially shield them from the real world—often violating their privacy in the process—as well as the notable influence the parents of Generation Z members have exerted upon their children. The conclusion will summarize the outcomes of the interplay of the sociohistorical factors outlined in this work in the emergence of several of Generation Z's biopsychosocial traits.

REPERCUSSIONS OF THE EXCESSIVE USAGE OF DIGITAL DEVICES ON BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Human society worldwide experienced significant technological advances during Generation Z's formative years, of which the following can be cited as among the

most important ones: the popularization of the World Wide Web, which went from being a privilege of the few to an integral part of 21st century society; the proliferation of smartphones, which evolved from gadgets designed exclusively for making and receiving phone calls to smart devices capable of performing a myriad of functions, thus becoming the primary source of recreation for many; the advent and fast spread of social media, which drastically changed the way that individuals interact socially; and the advent of Web 2.0, which emphasizes user-generated content, forever changing how people use the Internet and allowing for the rise of important websites of today, such as Wikipedia, YouTube, and numerous social networking websites.

In this emerging, digitally-oriented society, Gen Z members have had nearly unrestrained access to digital devices, particularly smartphones, from a very early age, which has led to children and adolescents spending a significant amount of time in front of screens.

According to The Council on Communications and Media (2013) from *Pediatrics*, the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, the daily exposure time of children and teenagers to the so-called “new media” (e.g., mobile phones, tablets, social

media) should not exceed 2 hours, as evidence shows that media “can and do contribute substantially to many different risks and health problems.” Nevertheless, the current exposure time of children and adolescents to screens averages almost 3 hours a day for two-year-olds, about 5 hours a day for eight-year-olds, and over 7 hours a day for teenagers, meaning that, before reaching eighteen years of age, they will have spent the equivalent of 30 school years in front of screens (Desmurget 2020).

Recent studies have correlated the excessive use of digital devices with impaired early cerebral development, delayed development, sleep deprivation, attention deficit, and mental illnesses such as anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, and psychosis (Rowan 2014), with available data suggesting that teenagers who use electronic devices for 3 hours or longer a day are 35% more likely to develop a suicide risk factor (Twenge 2017a). Available data also indicate that time spent in front of recreational screens delays anatomical and functional maturation of the brain in several cognitive networks related to language and attention, and that the earlier children are exposed to screens, the more severe the effects on their brains are (Desmurget 2020).

Available data further suggests that the excessive usage of digital devices since infancy may have had a negative impact on the intelligence quotient (IQ) of Generation Z individuals, since in several countries where sociocultural factors have been stable for decades, such as Denmark, Norway, Finland, and the Netherlands, the measured IQ of today's children and adolescents is lower than that of their parents, indicating an unprecedented reversion to the *Flynn Effect*—a term that refers to the increase in IQ observed from generation to generation (Desmurget 2020).

It is important to mention that despite the popular belief that the intensive use of digital devices from a very young age has made present-day children and adolescents highly skilled in technology-related topics, studies indicate that they do not exhibit great performance with computers nor efficiency in processing and understanding the vast amount of information available on the Internet; in fact, according to a report from the European Union, the low digital competency of present-day children and adolescents obstructs the implementation of educational technologies in schools (Desmurget, 2020).

These are among the reasons why experts often assert that children under a

certain age should ideally not make use of screens or handheld devices at all (Desmurget 2020; Rowan 2014), opinion that starkly contrasts with the digitized, always connected lifestyle that Gen Z has predominantly been raised in.

There is evidence that the continuous and unrestrained access to new media since infancy has profoundly shaped the way the cohort perceives and interacts with the world, resulting in a huge group of individuals who live in a digitized reality where the real world is merely an extension of the virtual one. As a matter of fact, the very idea of establishing a clear division between the real and virtual may seem odd to a Gen Z individual, for the lines between their online and offline lives are nearly indistinguishable to them (IBM Institute for Business Value 2017).

In this new reality where the virtual and real worlds are irreversibly intertwined, interpersonal interactions are often superficial and fluid, taking place primarily through smartphone screens. As a consequence, the acquisition of efficient, fruitful social skills and the interaction with people in real life seem far less appealing to Generation Z individuals.

The present work posits that such behavior is, at its essence, both an

extension and a replication of the behavior they engaged in during childhood, when they were conditioned, mostly by their parents, to make excessive use of smartphones as a means of engaging in a presumed safe distraction rather than being encouraged to play and interact with actual people, which is the verified way that children develop important competencies such as memory, decision-making, mental-processing speed, self-control, and socialization skills, as well as learn to cope with difficulties (Marano 2014; Bettelheim 1987).

The effects of having grown up in such a digitized reality have been apparent for at least a decade. By the year 2011, the suicide rate among teenagers was higher than the homicide rate for the first time in 24 years, and between the years 2012 and 2015, symptoms of depression increased by 21% among boys and 50% among girls, with studies correlating excessive time spent on screen-related activities with unhappiness (Twenge 2017a). Furthermore, available data indicate that violence among students has increased significantly over the last decade, and mass shootings have reached unprecedented levels (Cox et al. 2023; St. George 2022; Densley, Riedman, and Peterson 2022). In fact, the number of

individuals killed in mass shootings in American schools between the years 2018 and 2022 exceeded the total number of victims of the preceding 18 years (Densley, Riedman, and Peterson 2022).

The study at hand argues that the existing evidence is solid regarding the negative effects of the excessive use of digital devices during childhood and adolescence on individuals' biopsychosocial development. Surely, this work does not intend to suggest that every single member of said cohort has been affected in the same way or with the same intensity; still, available data does seem to indicate that a significant number of individuals from Generation Z around the world—although it appears to be more prevalent in the West—exhibit some degree of intellectual or biopsychosocial impairment that can be correlated with the excessive use of digital devices.

Desmurget (2020) identifies the following factors as contributing to the impaired cerebral and intellectual development of today's young: a decrease in the quality and quantity of intrafamilial interactions, which are essential for emotional development; a decrease in time dedicated to intellectually enriching activities such as music, art, and reading, which leads to a

lack of intellectual stimulation and impedes the brain from developing to its full potential; low-quality and decreased sleep time; overstimulation of attention, which leads to concentration and learning disorders; and a sedentary lifestyle, which compromises cerebral maturation.

It must be highlighted that the new technologies can be powerful tools for children and adolescents to acquire knowledge and a vast array of competencies, as long as their utilization is adequately mediated by capable adults and within the daily limits recommended by experts. However, when a child or teenager is left by themselves with a screen, they most often use it to engage in intellectually impoverishing recreational activities (Desmurget 2020), a behavior pattern that the present work considers to be correlated with the emergence of several biopsychosocial and emotional traits observable in Generation Z individuals.

ABRUPT SHIFTS AND REVERSAL OF TRENDS: NOTABLE GEN Z IDIOSYNCRASIES

While the characteristics that end up defining a generation used to emerge gradually as a consequence of continuous

rises in previously existing tendencies, adolescent behavior changed abruptly in the last decade, causing the characteristics of the cohort immediately preceding Generation Z to start disappearing at an unprecedentedly fast rate (Twenge 2017a), resulting in a generation that diverges from the immediately preceding one far more than what was seen with other cohorts.

For instance, research shows that, unlike Millennials, who exhibited generational traits such as individualism (Twenge 2017a), optimism (Murphy 2018), and idealism (Moore 2012), Generation Z individuals seem to be more socio-emotionally reliant on their parents (Duffy et al. 2018, 30; Marano 2014), have far less interest in socializing (Twenge 2017a; 2017b), consider depression and anxiety as major issues among themselves (The Economist 2019), and demonstrate a sense of humor marked by dark tones, nihilism, absurdism, and pessimism (Narvasa 2019; Mercado 2019).

Although both Millennials and Generation Z hold a close relationship with the Internet and smart devices, research indicates that the latter has become much more dependent on the digital world. Illustrating, a 2017 study learned that 74% of Generation Z

individuals in general preferred to spend their leisure time online (IBM Institute for Business Value 2017); on the other hand, a 2013 study discovered that male Millennials preferred watching TV, listening to and playing music and playing computer games, while female Millennials favored spending time with family, watching TV, and reading (Lachman and Brett 2013). Moreover, 41% of male and 43% of female Millennials affirmed they used to spend time with their friends in real life, and only 28% of males and 33% of females reported spending time on online social networks (Lachman and Brett 2013).

Such differences in behavior probably stem from the fact that Millennials did not grow up in a world where the Internet was continually available and as easily accessible as it is today (Twenge 2017a). In addition, Millennials typically accessed the Internet via personal computers that had to be kept in a fixed location in the house, meaning that said cohort's members often had to choose between socializing and accessing the World Wide Web, the latter being often perceived among both their peers and their seniors as a solitary and socially impoverishing activity.

One could argue that Millennials already had laptops, which allowed for a

form of computer usage that did not imply the need to stay at home. It is important to note, however, that the utilization of portable computers by Millennials during their childhood and adolescence was substantially different from how people use smartphones today.

This is primarily due to the technological limitations of the 1990s, 2000s, and early 2010s, when wireless networks were slower and significantly less widespread and laptops were bulkier, carried batteries with shorter lives, and generally had weaker hardware when compared to desktop computers. The consequence was that, albeit an efficient tool for people who needed to work en route, particularly those whose jobs involved tasks that benefited from having a physical keyboard (e.g., typing documents, answering e-mails), laptops were impractical for constant, intensive, and predominantly recreational mobile use similar to that allowed by the smartphones of today.

A noteworthy aspect of Generation Z's psychosocial profile is the reversal of previously observed generational trends. For instance, a survey learned that by 2014, only 42% of the students polled disagreed that a male breadwinner and a female homemaker family was the best household agreement, marking a

significant decrease from 1994, when 58% of the students disagreed with the statement, which in turn represented a substantial rise from the fewer than 30% of disagreeing students in 1976 (Pepin and Cotter 2017).

Furthermore, the same survey revealed that when presented with the affirmation that the husband should make every important decision in the family, approximately 59% of high school seniors in 1976 disagreed; that number rose to 71% by 1994 but receded to 63% by 2014, indicating students' perspectives on the husband's authority and divisions of labor at home to have become considerably more traditional after decades of a trend towards egalitarianism (Pepin and Cotter 2017). Discussing the collected data, the researchers were unable to explain the decline in egalitarian opinions even when accounting for contextual variables such as race, region, religion, or family configuration (Pepin and Cotter 2017).

It is worth noting that although available research indicates a decrease in crime, drinking, smoking, and unsafe sexual behavior among Gen Z, this does not appear to be attributable to the young becoming mindful of the negative consequences of such behaviors—in reality, Gen Z members seem less

concerned about risks than Millennials were (Duffy et al. 2018, 41-42).

When Millennials in 2004 were asked about the risks of substance consumption, 90% of them classified using cocaine as “very risky,” with 76% of them thinking the same about smoking cigarettes and 76% about sniffing solvents or glue; however, when asked the same in 2018, Generation Z members classification of “very risky” was about 85% for using cocaine, 70% for smoking cigarettes, and 64% for sniffing solvents or glue (Duffy et al. 2018, 42).

Moreover, 67% of Millennials in 2004 classified walking alone at night in a strange area as “very risky,” whereas only 57% of Generation Z members did the same in 2018; and while 63% of Millennials in 2004 regarded unprotected sexual activities as “very risky,” only 57% of Generation Z members did so in 2018 (Duffy et al. 2018, 42).

Remarkably, 15% of Generation Z members in 2018 classified engaging in protected sexual activities as “very risky,” whereas only 5% of Millennials did the same in 2004 (Duffy et al. 2018, 42), suggesting that Generation Z may be less knowledgeable than the previous cohort on topics of sexual education.

The disinterest in real-life socializing among today's children and teenagers has

also been sufficiently documented. For instance, the number of adolescents who used to meet up with their peers nearly every day decreased by more than 40% between 2000 and 2015, which means that as of 2015, 12th-graders were going out less than 8th-graders did back in 2009 (Twenge 2017a).

Additionally, while around 85% of Baby Boomers and Generation X members went out on dates when they were high school seniors, only about 56% of Generation Z individuals of equal age presented the same behavior as of 2015 (Twenge 2017a), reflecting both the cohort's lower interest in dating and their propensity to stay at home with their significant other instead of going out, traits that depart from those observed in previous generations.

The deep, intricate relationship Generation Z has with the smartphones they have known since the earliest stages of life also sets them apart from other cohorts. In a survey, subjects were asked if—and for how long—they would be willing to refrain from sexual relations instead of refraining from using their smartphones; and while 53% of overall subjects said they would rather forgo their phones for a month than abstain from sexual activity for the same period, 56% of Generation Z respondents stated

that they would rather refrain from having sexual intercourse for a month than be separated from their phones (Tocci 2020).

It is important to note that due to the globalized nature of the digitized reality that Generation Z predominantly lives in, many of the mentioned traits and standpoints—or some form of them—can be found in Gen Z individuals from across the world regardless of cultural, historical, and social regional backgrounds, although this does seem to occur predominantly in the West.

REPERCUSSIONS OF INTENSIVE PARENTING ON GENERATION Z'S BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

This section presents the hypothesis that Generation Z individuals have been considerably more influenced by their parents—predominantly members of Generation X (Eldridge 2023)—than previous generations' individuals were by their own parents, and that such influence has had a significant and observable impact on Generation Z individuals' biopsychosocial and emotional development.

It has recently become noticeable to the general public that the decade of the

1980s, a time when smartphones and other technologies that permeate contemporary society either did not exist or were in their early stages, is seen as deeply fascinating by a substantial number of Generation Z individuals (Reese 2022). While it is understandable that the imagery of a world permeated by analog devices may sound idyllic to people who have never experienced a life where the digital and the real are dissociated and clearly distinguished, it must be noted that Generation Z individuals do not typically demonstrate a comparable infatuation for other decades that were equally, or even more, reliant on analog technologies. This suggests that merely the absence of a society's dependence on the Internet and digital devices is not a decisive factor for Gen Z members to feel fascinated by the era during which said society has thrived.

The study at hand argues that Generation Z's choice of the 1980s as a time to be nostalgic for is predominantly correlated with the fact that said decade was precisely the time when the majority of Generation X individuals were either teenagers or young adults, indicating that Generation Z members tend to hold the sociohistorical reality of their own parents' youth in a higher regard than previous generations did. Millennials, for

example, not only do not appear to have, or have had, a similar infatuation for the sociohistorical reality of their own parents' youth; on the contrary, they would often regard the trends and vogue of said sociohistorical period as outdated and distasteful.

The tendency to cherish the sociohistorical reality of their parents' youth can be correlated with the type of parenting Generation Z individuals have predominantly experienced, which has deeply molded their traits and worldviews: *Intensive Parenting*.

The term refers to a parenting style that involves constant monitoring and stimulation of dependency, with one of its defining characteristics being the belief that children and adolescents, regardless of age, are invariably, inherently, and deeply vulnerable, which leads parents to overestimate risks and overprotect their children, shielding them from the outside world (Bernstein and Triger 2010). Available data indicate that this parenting style is detrimental to children's psychological well-being, leading to issues such as higher rates of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (Bernstein and Triger 2010).

In addition to the abovementioned, research also suggests that the current Intensive Parenting trends result in

children who exhibit lower levels of creativity, spontaneity, attention, and proactivity, are less caring about others' feelings, and are more likely to suffer from low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and stress (Bernstein and Triger 2010). Moreover, children become excessively self-conscious when constantly scrutinized, consequently becoming less communicative and less inclined to be experimental and playful (Marano 2014).

Because today's children and adolescents are regarded as constantly at risk from a wide range of online and offline dangers, parents are encouraged to maintain constant surveillance over them, an attitude that marks a departure from the traditional understanding that good parents should trust their children (Shmueli and Blecher-Prigat 2011).

Parents today are also significantly more involved in their children's lives than parents of previous generations, as they are encouraged by current parenting trends to take an interventionist approach and to become involved in activities and decisions that were once left to teachers' and educators' discretion (Shmueli and Blecher-Prigat 2011).

It must be stressed that although it is unquestionably reasonable for parents to be concerned about their children's security, not all scenarios of excessive

parental surveillance are related to safety or risk prevention; oftentimes, it is simply a matter of the parents wanting to know meticulously what is happening in their children's lives (Shmueli and Blecher-Prigat 2011). Moreover, even when their children's security is their absolutely sincere concern, available data suggests that parents may be overestimating the hazards to which their children might be exposed (Shmueli and Blecher-Prigat 2011).

Additionally, the study at hand considers the lack of appreciation for independence observed in numerous Generation Z individuals as one of the possible consequences of being raised under Intensive Parenting practices. Available data have revealed that Generation Z teenagers are significantly more willing to go out either chaperoned by or accompanying their parents, indicating that "the allure of independence, so powerful to previous generations, holds less sway over today's teens" (Twenge 2017a). This behavior is remarkably distinct from that of prior cohorts, who usually saw independence as one of the most important competencies to be acquired during youth in order for individuals to become able to overcome life's challenges without the tutelage of their parents.

The present study also refers to data indicating that the onset of adolescence is being delayed and that childhood-related behaviors are persisting well into high school (Twenge 2017a) as documenting plausible outcomes of Intensive Parenting practices. This is in consonance with studies indicating that children who were subjected to Intensive Parenting practices frequently feel that adulthood starts only at the age of thirty (Bernstein and Triger 2010).

CONCLUSION

The present work sought to examine how aspects of contemporary society have affected the shaping of Generation Z's biopsychosocial profile.

Due to growing up in the present-day digitized and ever-connected society, Generation Z has internalized its emerging values and worldviews better than any other cohort, thus acquiring traits that radically set them apart from other generations, prompting abrupt shifts in teenager behavior and a reversal in trends that had been in place since at least the 1970s.

Generation Z has also experienced a number of issues brought about by the intensive, non-mediated use of new media

since infancy, as studies show a significant rise in several psychological and emotional issues, as well as suicidal tendencies, among today's youth. School violence has reached unparalleled levels, with episodes of extreme violence becoming considerably more frequent.

Generation Z has also been subjected more than any other cohort to Intensive Parenting practices, which seems to be producing anxious, depressed, and dependent individuals who often persist in childhood-related behaviors well after the onset of adolescence, or sometimes even after adulthood.

Given that in life "early impressions tend to coalesce in a natural view of the world" from which all later experiences will draw meaning (Mannheim 1952, 298) and that certain people's aspirations may be permanently deadened or diminished as a consequence of experiencing life at a very low level (Maslow 1943, 386), the current study hypothesizes that Generation Z individuals have grown deeply accustomed to living a life with a scantiness of socially healthy, real-life human interactions due to experiencing such scantiness on a daily basis since a very early age.

Therefore, the work at hand postulates that the available data is substantial with regard to the molding of Generation

Z's biopsychosocial profile being correlated with the factors thus identified:

- 1 · The excessive use of digital devices, especially smartphones, since infancy, which, as documented by a solid number of studies, may lead to a variety of issues such as anxiety, depression, problematic behavior, and impaired intellectual and cerebral development;
- 2 · The constant presence on the Internet from an early age, which leads to a digitized life that blurs the boundaries between the virtual and real worlds, contributes to increasing social isolation and worsens already existing or yet developing biopsychosocial issues, ultimately leading to a socio-emotional detachment from empirical reality and a severe loss of interest in healthy interactions with real human beings;
- 3 · The excessive parental influence, constant monitoring, and marked interventionism brought about by the current trends of Intensive Parenting, which encourage a practical and emotional dependency that leads to infantilized and immature individuals who struggle to face the natural challenges of life.

This work additionally argues that an important number of studies and reports have misinterpreted several of Generation Z's traits and trends. Therefore, it suggests a reexamination of the available data regarding the cohort's behavior, which is to be guided by insights from the fields of neuroscience and psychology, as well as from research regarding the characteristics of Generation X and the trends of their youth's sociohistorical reality, as this is key to better understanding the origin and motivations of the parenting style Generation Z members were largely subjected to.

The present work also highlights the need for more research on the intricacies of the intergenerational dynamics between Generation X and Generation Z, which, despite having the potential to further clarify the psychosocial significance of several of Generation Z's trends, traits, and standpoints, have received little academic attention until the present date.

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