Prevalent Addictions in Gen Z

Ioan SZASZ

Lecturer, PhD, Pentecostal Theological Institute in Bucharest, Romania
iancsz@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper offers a comprehensive interdisciplinary analysis of the addiction crisis among Generation Z, the first generation raised in an entirely digital environment. Characterized by unprecedented exposure to smartphones, social media, and online platforms, Gen Z faces heightened vulnerability to both behavioral and chemical addictions. Drawing on psychological, sociological, biological, and theological perspectives, the study explores the multifaceted causes and consequences of addictions, including pornography, social media dependence, gaming, gambling, and substance use. These behaviors are often expressions of deeper crises in identity, emotional regulation, and spiritual orientation, shaped by hyperconnectivity, social fragmentation, and cultural relativism. The research reveals how digital environments restructure reward mechanisms and promote compulsive behaviors, while also contributing to emotional isolation and diminished resilience. Through critical engagement with empirical data and theological reflection, the study argues that addiction in Gen Z must be viewed as a symptom of existential dislocation and the erosion of relational and moral frameworks.

Keywords: Digital Culture, Addiction, Gen Z, Pornography, Social Media, FOMO, Gambling

Preliminaries

In the unfolding panorama of the 21st century, the convergence of rapid technological innovation, cultural flux, and socio-political uncertainty has reshaped the fabric of global life. Emerging during a time marked by ubiquitous connectivity, Gen Z navigates life in an ecosystem saturated with digital devices, algorithm-driven content, and instantaneous access to both information and gratification. Their developmental trajectory has coincided with the ascension of social media, the proliferation of mobile technology, and the decline of traditional community anchors such as religious institutions, neighborhood life, and intergenerational households (Twenge, 2017, pp.71-74).

This digitally mediated environment offers unique advantages—enabling self-expression, expanding educational access, and facilitating global interaction. Yet it also cultivates a vulnerability to new psychological and behavioral risks. Among the most pressing of these is addiction, particularly in forms closely intertwined with the digital milieu. These include compulsive behaviors such as online pornography consumption, excessive gaming, social media dependency, and substance experimentation reinforced by internet subcultures. The neurological plasticity of the adolescent brain, especially susceptible to dopamine-driven feedback loops, intensifies this vulnerability, contributing to what some scholars have described as a "crisis of attention, identity, and purpose" among Gen Z youth.

Understanding the nature and scope of addiction in this generation requires a comprehensive, integrative framework that transcends disciplinary boundaries. While psychology and neuroscience offer critical insights into cognitive and emotional pathways to dependency, any holistic account must also engage sociocultural, moral, and theological dimensions. In a secularizing age, where moral relativism and performative individualism often dominate youth culture, the loss of transcendent anchors further compounds the search for meaning—a quest that frequently manifests in addictive patterns of escape and self-soothing.

Moreover, addiction within Generation Z reflects more than personal pathology; it reveals a generational condition shaped by global precarity, social comparison, disrupted relational structures, and existential anxiety. Whether through binge-watching, substance misuse, or immersive online gaming, these behaviors often function as mechanisms for coping with emotional disconnection, chronic stress, and spiritual dislocation. They signal a broader malaise: the erosion of internal resilience and external structures that traditionally fostered human flourishing.

In addition to etiological factors, the study scrutinizes both strengths and limitations intrinsic to Gen Z's psychological and cultural profile. Traits such as technological adaptability, social advocacy, and global awareness coexist with increased sensitivity to stress, fragmented identity construction, and a dependency on curated virtual personas. These dynamics create a paradoxical mix of empowerment and fragility—amplifying exposure to dependency-forming stimuli while diminishing resilience to resist them.

The research proceeds to categorize and assess the dominant types of addiction within this age cohort. Behavioral addictions—particularly those mediated by technology—include social media dependency, pornography, compulsive gaming, and online gambling. Chemical addictions encompass the misuse of alcohol, marijuana, vaping devices, and prescription stimulants. Each of these will be explored in terms of prevalence, psychological impact, theological significance, and their resonance within broader cultural narratives.

Ultimately, this inquiry aims not only to describe the landscape of addiction in Generation Z but to contribute a constructive paradigm for healing and intervention. Effective strategies must integrate empirical evidence and spiritual formation, recognizing the multi-dimensionality of human experience. A robust response to this addiction crisis must prioritize not only prevention and recovery but the cultivation of identity, resilience, and purpose rooted in moral integrity. Such a vision—grounded in grace and truth—can offer Gen Z a path not merely out of bondage, but into lasting transformation.

1. The History of Modern Generations

For an adequate understanding of Gen Z's profile, a brief overview of the genealogy of modern generations, starting with the 20th century, is necessary. The first relevant generation in this regard is the "G.I. Generation" or "The Generation of the Great Depression and World War" (1901–1924). This generation is defined by the traumatizing experiences of World War I, the Great Economic Depression of the 1930s, and, most notably, World War II. Sacrifice, duty to the nation, and a strong work ethic are defining values for this generation.

The second is the "Silent Generation" (1925–1945), formed in the postwar period, during which social stability and conformity were strongly encouraged. The term "silent generation" reflects both the public silence in the face of authority and the marginalization of civic participation. The expression "children should be seen and not heard" is emblematic of the educational and familial climate of the era. The "Baby Boomers" (1943–1960), the following generation, is marked by a significant demographic boom in the

postwar period. Economic prosperity, the development of the suburbs, and a general sense of optimism fostered confidence in the future and institutional stability. This generation was deeply involved in the social movements of the 1960s–1970s, such as the civil rights movement, the women's rights movement, and the protests the Vietnam War (Twenge, 2006, p. 46).

"Generation X" (1965–1980) is often described as the "lost generation" or the "transitional generation." It grew up in a context of economic uncertainty, increasing divorce rates, and a growing emphasis on individualism. At the same time, it witnessed the early stages of the digital revolution—the emergence of personal computers and the first forms of publicly accessible information technology (Taylor, 2014, p.33).

Following is "Generation Y" or the "Millennials" (1981–1996), raised in the era of globalization and the internet. Characterized by cultural openness, digital connectivity, and a preference for flexibility in work and life, this generation revolutionized communication, information consumption, and attitudes toward authority.

2. The Vulnerabilities of Gen Z

Despite its remarkable strengths, Gen Z is marked by a series of significant vulnerabilities, the most evident being identity crises, anxiety, chronic stress, depression, and difficulties in emotional adaptation. The process of forming personal identity unfolds within a socio-digital framework that differs profoundly from that of previous generations. Whereas in the past, identity was primarily shaped through direct interactions, social roles, and physical experiences, Gen Z lives in a dual space—both physical and virtual—where self-construction and expression are profoundly influenced by multiple and often contradictory environments.

This "dual reality" facilitates the development of multiple identities, particularly in the online environment, where users can shape their self-image in a controlled and idealized manner. Virtual identity often becomes a selectively constructed entity, in which personal aspects are presented strategically, and real traits are either amplified or obscured. The use of pseudonyms, selective content sharing, and the creation of stylized versions of the self-emphasize the gap between the "online self" and the "authentic self". This identity dissonance inevitably contributes to confusion and insecurity in the personal development process, directly affecting self-esteem and the ability to form authentic relationships.

Recent studies emphasize that a good part of Gen Z youth maintain multiple online identities, which encourages the emergence of identity crises and predisposes them to various forms of digital addiction and compensatory behaviors. Additionally, the specialized literature indicates a direct correlation between the construction of multiple digital identities and the emergence of adjustment disorders and anxiety (Freitas, 2017, p. 72).

Against this complex backdrop, it is not surprising that Gen Z has been labeled in both public and academic discourse as the "anxious generation." According to research conducted by Corey Seemiller and Meghan Grace, an alarming percentage of students belonging to Gen Z—report high levels of anxiety related to multiple aspects of daily life (Seemiller & Grace, 2016, p.80). Among the main sources of anxiety are fear of failure, fear of rejection and isolation, concerns regarding personal and professional failure, financial stress, and unease about the current state and future of society.

These persistent states of worry can be understood as the result of a combination of psychosocial factors, in which technology plays an ambivalent role. On one hand, permanent connectivity offers instant access to information; on the other hand, it induces a state of continuous alertness and emotional overload. The strong preference for digital communication can lead to the erosion of deep interpersonal relational skills, generating

chronic feelings of loneliness and alienation. Moreover, constant exposure to unrealistic standards of success, beauty, and performance promoted through social media exerts significant psychological pressure on young people. Ongoing comparison with others, the effect of "passive scrolling," and the pursuit of external validation through likes and comments can lead to a climate of personal dissatisfaction, cognitive distortion, and a sense of anticipated failure (Freitas, 2017, pp. 39-42). In this context, it is not surprising that some young people choose to escape from a reality perceived as oppressive through maladaptive avoidance behaviors, including substance use, social isolation, or withdrawal from educational and social responsibilities.

The vulnerabilities of Gen Z must be understood not merely as individual challenges but as symptoms of a deeply transformed cultural and technological context. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of identity, social pressures, and the impact of digitalization on emotional balance becomes essential for any educational (Rotaru, 2021, pp. 87-92), pastoral (Rotaru, 2017, pp.57-76), or psychological initiative aimed at supporting young people in a holistic and sustainable way.

3. The Most Common Forms of Addiction Among Gen Z

Gen Z, composed of individuals born between 1997 and 2012, faces a range of addictions characteristic of the digital age. These forms of addiction include, but are not limited to, pornography consumption, excessive use of social media, video game and gambling addiction, as well as the use of harmful substances. Among these, pornography addiction stands out due to its magnitude, accessibility, and profound impact on the psycho-emotional and spiritual development of young people.

3.1. Pornography: Industry, Consumption, and Impact

In a hyper-sexualized society, where digital and real-world environments converge into a culture that normalizes erotic stimulation, pornography has become ubiquitous and highly accessible. Etymologically, the term "pornography" derives from the Greek words πορνεία (*porneía* –fornication) and γραφία (*graphía* –writing), referring to visual or textual representations of sexual acts designed to generate arousal and often consumed for recreational purposes.

The expansion of this industry has been catalyzed by the development of the internet and digital technology. Prior to the digital era, access to pornographic materials was restricted by cultural, economic, and legal factors. The emergence of smartphones, the anonymous availability of the internet, and the absence of effective regulations have turned pornography consumption into a frequent practice, especially among youth. According to recent data, approximately 12% of all websites on the internet contain pornographic content, with around 4.2 million active websites in this domain and over 420 million web pages dedicated to this industry. It is estimated that about 350 new pornographic websites are created daily, and a quarter of all internet searches are related to such content.

A telling example is the platform "Pornhub," which records over 42 billion visits annually, amounting to more than 115 million daily visits (Fernandez, 2021, p.1). Each year, approximately 6 million videos are uploaded to the site, which would require over 169 years to watch in their entirety. The pornography industry generates estimated annual revenues of $57 billion, surpassing the combined profits of the professional football, baseball, and basketball leagues in the United States (Romney, 2020, p. 50).

Pornography consumption is a disturbing reality for Gen Z. Studies show that approximately 70% of young people aged 18 to 34 regularly access pornographic material (Barna Group, 2016, p. 33). Even more alarming is that 90% of adolescents aged 8 to 16 have been exposed at least once to such content (Covenant Eyes, 2022). Additionally, 70%

of children between the ages of 8 and 18 accidentally access pornographic sites while searching for educational information online. In many cases, this involuntary exposure represents the gateway to long-term addiction.

Beyond the impact on psychological and relational development, pornography also manifests in new digitalized forms, among which "sexting" is perhaps the most widespread. The term, derived from "sex" and "texting," refers to the sending of sexually explicit messages, images, or videos through mobile devices or digital platforms. This practice is prevalent among teenagers, regardless of the existence of a romantic relationship. A recent study shows that 39% of Gen Z adolescents have engaged in sexting, and 51% of girls report having done so under pressure.

All these data reveal an alarming picture: pornography is no longer a marginal phenomenon but an industry that shapes mentalities, distorts perceptions of sexuality, and profoundly affects the identity and relational health of young people. In the absence of healthy sex education aligned with Christian values, adolescents turn to harmful sources that compromise their integrity and perception of self and others. As William Struthers uphold, viewing pornography physically alters the structure and function of the brain, impairing the capacity for authentic relationships and generating a deeply dysfunctional attachment to the object of sexual desire (Struthers, 2009, pp. 59-60).

3.1.1. Psychological Effects of Pornography Consumption

Although the pornography industry presents its products under the guise of entertainment, numerous studies and expert analyses reveal that pornography has a profoundly disruptive potential on the mental health of its consumers. Its psychological impact is complex, affecting self-regulation capacity, decision-making mechanisms, and emotional balance. Pornography consumption can produce intense pleasure, associated with a euphoric state comparable to that induced by psychoactive substances such as cocaine or heroin—and may even exceed these effects due to its engagement of fundamental psychosocial needs like affection and sexual intimacy (Carnes, 2001, p. 30).

From a neuropsychological perspective, pornography acts on the central nervous system through the excessive activation of the reward circuitry, especially by triggering dopamine release—the neurotransmitter associated with pleasure, learning, and reinforcement behaviors. The euphoria induced by repeated consumption leads to the formation of an addictive pattern like that observed in chemical dependencies.

By comparison, cocaine is known for its stimulant effect on the central nervous system, causing a massive release of dopamine, while heroin has sedative properties and induces a state of deep relaxation through the activation of opioid receptors. Pornography, however, appears to combine the effects of both: it initially triggers a state of arousal and intense pleasure and subsequently provides a post-orgasmic relaxation like that induced by opiates. This "double effect" contributes to an increased addictive capacity and a regression in cognitive control over behavior.

Statistical data highlight the magnitude of the phenomenon. In the United States, it is estimated that there are approximately 40 million active online pornography users—a significantly higher number compared to cocaine users (1.9 million) or heroin users (2 million). These figures indicate not only broad accessibility but also increased vulnerability to addiction effects, especially among adolescents and young adults.

Beyond addiction formation, frequent pornography use has direct implications for individuals' cognitive and affective structures. Repeated exposure to explicit sexual content leads to a process of desensitization, whereby materials initially perceived as shocking become banal, and the consumer seeks increasingly aggressive, deviant, and sometimes illegal stimuli to achieve the same level of arousal. This progression resembles the tolerance

seen in substance addictions, requiring increasingly higher doses to obtain the same neurochemical response.

The psychological consequences also extend to the consumer's perceived reality. One develops a distorted image of sexuality, human relationships, and the self, replacing real interaction with a fictional world fueled by fantasy (Struthers, 2009, p.44). In advanced stages, "soft" (nonviolent) pornography may become a gateway to "hardcore" content, and imitative behaviors may range from voyeurism, sadomasochism, and sexual harassment to criminal acts. The link between aggressive pornography consumption and criminal behavior has been confirmed by sociological studies and federal agency investigations. An FBI report highlighted that 29 out of 36 analyzed serial killers had a documented history of addiction to aggressive pornography (U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2012). Moreover, a concerning increase in rates of rape and sexual crime has been observed in correlation with the availability and consumption of pornography.

The effects are not limited to behavioral dimensions but extend to emotional states. Regular consumption is associated with the onset of anxiety symptoms, irritability, and depression. First, consumers develop a negative self-image, struggle with profound guilt, and lose control over their lives. Second, fear of being discovered fuels social anxiety and isolates the individual. Third, the lack of emotional satisfaction derives from the deeply impersonal and mechanical nature of pornography, which contradicts the purpose of sexual relationship.

This dissonance between fantasy and reality produces a psychological and emotional rupture, wherein the individual feels disconnected from both self and others. Instead of interpersonal communion, the consumer experiences solitude and disappointment, exacerbating depressive states and functional decline (Zimbardo & Coulombe, 2015, p. 104).

3.1.2. Social Repercussions of Pornography Consumption

One of the most common misperceptions among pornography consumers is the belief that this behavior has purely personal effects, without producing consequences on the immediate social environment. Pornography consumption exerts significant influence on an individual's family, professional, and friendship relationships, thus impacting the social structure.

Within family relationships, the psychological and emotional effects of pornography consumption are comparable to those of infidelity. Neuroscience studies indicate that repeated viewing of pornographic material triggers brain responses like those associated with erotic attachment behaviors toward real individuals. This leads to a distorted perception of the life partner and to the objectification of that person as a mere instrument for satisfying personal sexual fantasies. As a result, the marital relationship becomes increasingly devoid of affection, empathy, and authentic connection.

Consequently, both men and women often interpret pornography consumption as a form of emotional infidelity. This generates feelings of betrayal, anger, mistrust, and rejection, which can gradually lead to emotional estrangement and marital breakdown. Multiple empirical studies support the conclusion that the risk of infidelity in a relationship increases by over 300% when one of the partners is constantly exposed to pornographic content (Fagan, 2009, p. 8). A quantitative analysis conducted by Samuel Perry and his colleagues shows that the likelihood of divorce increases significant among those who regularly consume pornography (Perry, 2017, p. 3).

In the realm of non-romantic interpersonal relationships, pornography users face clear difficulties in developing stable and authentic friendships. Deep friendships require transparency, vulnerability, and mutual trust—affective dimensions that are difficult to access for someone living with the constant feeling of shame and the risk of being judged for their hidden behavior (Carnes, 2001, pp. 95–97). Additionally, pornography addiction

often involves a significant investment of time, leading to withdrawal from social contexts and a lifestyle marked by isolation and avoidance of real relationships.

Concretely, sexually addicted individuals tend to invest predominantly in solitary online activities, which diminishes both their availability and their capacity to engage in meaningful relationships based on reciprocity and emotional involvement. This leads to a vicious cycle of isolation and disconnection from community, with negative effects not only on the individual but also on social cohesion in general.

In conclusion, the impact of pornography consumption extends beyond the individual sphere, manifesting destructively in both marital and social relationships. These effects justify the need for integrated pastoral, educational, and therapeutic responses that support the restoration of relational health and the development of life models based on responsibility, honesty, and authentic relationships.

3.2. FOMO and Digital Addiction

In recent decades, a new and alarming form of digital addiction has emerged, particularly associated with young people from Gen Z: addiction to social media. This generation lives in a state of profound hyperconnectivity, marked by a constant attachment to technology, especially smartphones, which are kept in proximity almost continuously—even during the night. Phones are compulsively checked during any brief pause, indicating a relationship with technology that transcends utility and becomes almost an extension of the self.

In this context, the concept of "FOMO" (Fear of Missing Out) has been introduced—a notion describing a psychological state of restlessness and anxiety generated by the idea that one might miss a significant event or important social interaction while being offline. Studies show that this phenomenon affects over 56% of social media users, with a higher incidence among those aged 23 to 38 (69%) and 15 to 18 (55%) (Taheer, 2023).

Social networks offer users a platform for building self-esteem, which depends on two central factors: the sense of control and social recognition. Through functionalities such as the "like" button, comment sharing, or the number of followers, users receive immediate feedback, generating emotional satisfaction through instant gratification. This rapid reward becomes a refuge from more pressing existential realities, contributing to a distorted perception of the self and personal worth.

This practice is correlated with a shift in the criteria by which individual value is assessed. Instead of academic or professional achievements, young people evaluate their personal status based on digital metrics: the number of likes, comments, and followers on social platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, or TikTok (Freitas, 2017, pp. 89–91). In this sense, online notoriety becomes a social capital, and virtual recognition substitutes for authentic validation, with profound consequences for the identity and emotional balance of young people.

FOMO is not merely a fear of missing out on events; it reflects a deeper fear—the fear of being invisible, of not mattering, of not being acknowledged. Thus, social media becomes a modern form of idolatry in which image and popularity are adored, and the person risks losing themselves in the artificial stream of digital validation.

3.3. Video Games

In the context of the increasing integration of virtual reality into daily life, a notable and increasingly widespread phenomenon among Gen Z is that of video games. Initially considered an innocent form of entertainment, video games have, in recent decades, evolved into a powerful industry and, simultaneously, a catalyst for modern forms of addiction. The phenomenon began in 1962, when the first computer game prototypes were developed in the laboratories of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, marking the beginning of a new

digital era in interactive entertainment. Subsequent technological developments led to the emergence of gaming consoles such as Nintendo, PlayStation, and Xbox, which made video games accessible in the home environment, replacing public arcades. Today, video games are no longer confined to consoles or computers; they are available on a wide range of devices, from smartphones to tablets, becoming omnipresent in daily life. Advances in graphic design have blurred the boundaries between reality and virtuality, significantly contributing to capturing users' attention and emotional involvement—especially among young people.

The motivations behind the intense involvement in the world of video games are manifold. According to researchers Valkenburg and Piotrowski, there are four major factors that explain their popularity and addictive potential (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017, pp. 72). The first factor is the competitive dimension. Video games offer users the opportunity to engage in direct confrontations with other players or with the game's intelligent system, creating an ideal setting for demonstrating personal performance and obtaining validation. The second factor refers to the illusion of control. Most games allow users to influence the narrative flow, game settings, and avatar characteristics, contributing to an increased sense of autonomy and mastery.

The third identified motivation is the social component. Modern video games function as genuine social networks, facilitating real-time communication and cooperation among players, even developing a specific vocabulary within virtual communities. Finally, a fourth attractive element is the desire for self-improvement, cultivated by progressive difficulty levels. The subjectively experienced reward following the overcoming of challenges activates the brain's pleasure centers, reinforcing compulsive gaming behavior (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017, p. 273).

Deliberately, game developers integrate behavioral mechanisms that increase the risk of addiction. These include the random distribution of rare rewards; penalties for prolonged absence from the game; slow progress systems requiring substantial time commitments; and the complexity of virtual worlds, which may take months to explore fully. Games such as *Minecraft*, *Fortnite*, *League of Legends*, or *Call of Duty* are relevant examples that exhibit these features and have attracted millions of players globally.

The impact of video games on the health of young people cannot be ignored. Excessive use is associated with a range of negative effects, including sleep disorders, sedentary behavior, anxiety, social isolation, and diminished cognitive performance. According to the World Health Organization, over 3 billion people worldwide engage in video gaming activities, and approximately 3% of them exhibit clinical symptoms of addiction (World Health Organization, 2018). A report by Deloitte Insights found that 87% of Gen Z youth reported engaging weekly in video game-related activities using various digital platforms (Deloitte Insights, 2021).

Against the backdrop of these statistics, it becomes evident that the video game industry, although offering opportunities for entertainment, social engagement, and the development of certain cognitive skills, also poses a real risk to the psychological and physical balance of young people. Economic projections confirm the increasing impact of this industry: in 1999, the video game market generated approximately $7.4 billion in revenue, while in 2021 it reached $178 billion, with estimates of over $268 billion by 2025 (Statista Research Department, 2022).

In conclusion, video game addiction represents a major challenge to the health of Gen Z youth, as well as to the educational and pastoral strategies of those involved in their formation. A multidisciplinary and collaborative approach among parents, educators, spiritual leaders, and mental health professionals is essential for preventing and treating the harmful effects of excessive digital gaming consumption.

3.4. Gambling Addiction

One of the acute issues within the context of Gen Z is the phenomenon of gambling addiction. This practice is generally defined as the act of wagering money or items of value on random events with the intent of gaining a reward, but which—due to the frequency and intensity of involvement—produces destructive effects on the individual and their relational network, particularly on financial, emotional, and social levels.

Gambling can be accessed both in physical formats—such as casinos, gaming halls, and betting agencies—and in virtual environments, such as online platforms, which have recorded significant growth in the last decade. These include a variety of formats: casino games, lotteries, sports betting, electronic gaming machines (slot machines), and card games, all of which share the common mechanism of random reward that stimulates the brain's dopaminergic cortex.

3.4.1. The Stages of Addiction Development

Gambling addiction evolves progressively and is recognized in the specialized literature as occurring in four distinct stages.

1. *The Winning Phase*: This stage is characterized by positive experiences in gambling, often marked by initial winnings, which give the individual an illusory perception of control and future success. At this stage, unrealistic expectations are formed, and some researchers argue that gamblers are more attracted to the thrill of risk than to the actual monetary gain (Schüll, 2012, p. 173). Others contend that players exhibit an irrational belief in their ability to beat the system, disregarding the fundamentally random nature of the game.
2. *The Losing Phase*: As losses accumulate, the individual compulsively attempts to recover lost funds—a phenomenon known as "chasing losses". At this point, the gambler intensifies their engagement with gambling, often resorting to lying to family and friends, taking on debt, or selling personal belongings to finance the addictive behavior (Lesieur & Rosenthal, 1994, pp.168-169).
3. *The Desperation Phase*: In this phase, the individual confronts a profound crisis: significant financial losses, deterioration of interpersonal relationships, and internal moral conflict. Deviant behaviors escalate, sometimes extending to criminal acts such as theft or fraud to sustain the addiction cycle (Lesieur & Rosenthal, 1994, p. 174).
4. *The Emotional Collapse Phase*: This stage is marked by feelings of shame, guilt, and severe depression. Hopelessness may lead to acute psychological crises, including suicidal ideation. Recent studies have highlighted a significant correlation between pathological gambling and suicide risk among young people.

3.4.2. Connections with Alcohol and Drugs

Addictive behavior related to gambling is often interconnected with other forms of addiction, particularly the consumption of alcohol and psychoactive substances. Alcohol, known for its disinhibiting effects, is frequently used in gaming venues to stimulate risk-taking. Research has shown that the presence of alcohol in gambling contexts can reduce decision-making capacity and increase impulsivity. As a result, many gambling operators offer free drinks to extend the time spent at gaming machines or tables (Lesieur & Rosenthal, 1994, p.168). Similarly, drug use can become an emotional avoidance strategy employed by gamblers to cope with financial pressure and repeated failures. Thus, a vicious cycle is created between material losses, substance abuse, and the deterioration of mental health. Gambling addiction among Gen Z represents a multidimensional challenge that requires integrated interventions—at educational, psychological, and spiritual levels. Preventing this phenomenon involves critical education regarding the risks of gambling, the development of

mentoring and support programs within churches and families, as well as the regulation of gambling access for vulnerable age groups.

3.5. Substance and Alcohol Use

After analyzing four forms of behavioral addiction characteristic of Gen Z, it is necessary to address the phenomenon of compulsive substance use, a major public health issue among contemporary youth. In the first chapter of this study, the main categories of addictive substances were introduced, divided into four major classes: sedatives, opioids, hallucinogens, and stimulants. These substances affect the functioning of the central nervous system, inducing significant changes in human perception, mood, and behavior.

Recent studies suggest that members of Gen Z are at a higher risk of developing substance addictions compared to previous generations. This risk is fueled by a series of correlated factors, including deteriorating mental health, increased exposure to social media, and easy access to information about drugs—sometimes presented in a glamorized manner. Thus, substance use becomes, for some youth, a dysfunctional mechanism for emotional regulation and a maladaptive response to the pressures of daily life.

According to data provided by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (2015), approximately 23.6% of American 12th-grade students reported using illegal drugs. Regarding marijuana use, about 40% of adolescents have tried this substance at least once, while 22% use it regularly (Volkow et al., 2015). Data on cocaine use indicate that approximately 9% of teenagers have experimented with the substance, and 4% are regular users (Schulenberg et al., 2002).

Alcohol continues to represent one of the most widespread substances used recreationally by young people. Approximately 75% of high school students reported occasional alcohol consumption, and 28% acknowledged participating in episodes of excessive drinking (binge drinking) (Posavec, et al., 2022). Tobacco smoking also remains a relevant concern, despite anti-smoking campaigns and stricter regulations. It is estimated that 10% of adolescents smoke up to 15 cigarettes per day for approximately 20 days each month (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014).

The data presented reveal an alarming reality: Gen Z is not only exposed to but actively engaged in diverse forms of substance use, with increased risks of addiction, cognitive impairment, and social marginalization. Furthermore, the use of these substances affects not only the physical and mental health of young people but also their ability to integrate and grow within church, educational, and social communities.

4. Conclusion

The phenomenon of addiction among Generation Z represents one of the most pressing and multidimensional challenges of our time. As this research has demonstrated, Gen Z youth are uniquely positioned within a rapidly evolving cultural and technological landscape—one that offers both remarkable opportunities and unprecedented vulnerabilities. From early childhood, they have been immersed in digital environments that shape identity, reconfigure relationships, and influence emotional development. Within this context, the rise of addiction—be it to pornography, social media, gaming, gambling, or substances—is not a surprising anomaly but a predictable symptom of deeper systemic and existential crises.

What emerges clearly from this study is the need to move beyond reductionist views of addiction as merely a behavioral disorder or a series of poor choices. Rather, addiction in Gen Z must be understood as an expression of unmet psychological, social, and spiritual needs—needs that are intensified by hyperconnectivity, fragmented identity development, and cultural narratives that promote autonomy without accountability, pleasure without purpose, and expression without integration. The compulsive behaviors discussed

throughout this paper reflect a generation that is often overwhelmed by stimulus yet undernourished in meaningful human connection and transcendent vision.

The analysis of the most common forms of addiction reveals a complex interplay between accessibility, normalization, and neurological susceptibility. Pornography, for instance, is not simply a private indulgence but a global industry that shapes relational expectations, brain chemistry, and the theological understanding of human intimacy. Likewise, social media is not just a tool for connection but a psychological arena where performance often substitutes for authenticity, and where "likes" become proxies for worth. Video games and online gambling offer not only entertainment but entire alternate realities where success is immediate, and identity is constructed through customizable avatars. Meanwhile, substance use continues to be a method of emotional self-medication—a way to dull the pain of disconnection, failure, or existential anxiety.

Underlying these patterns are four interrelated dimensions that must be addressed:
1. Psychological fragility, particularly in the areas of identity formation, emotional regulation, and trauma recovery.
2. Social fragmentation, seen in the breakdown of family structures, peer influence shaped by algorithms rather than empathy, and the absence of trustworthy mentors.
3. Biological predispositions, including neurochemical imbalances and genetic vulnerabilities that affect impulse control and susceptibility to dependence.
4. Spiritual disorientation, where the loss of transcendent anchors leaves young people adrift in a sea of relativism and consumerism.

Considering these findings, several conclusions and recommendations emerge. First, any effective strategy for addressing addiction in Gen Z must begin with relational restoration. Relations—rooted in trust, vulnerability, and mutual accountability—are the antidote to both emotional isolation and identity confusion. These relationships must be cultivated intentionally in homes, schools, churches, and mentoring communities. Programs that pair digital natives with spiritually and emotionally mature mentors can bridge generational divides and reintroduce models of integrity and resilience.

Second, there is a critical need for education. Gen Z does not merely need information or even inspiration—they need formation. Moral imagination, emotional resilience, delayed gratification, and a sense of communal responsibility must be integrated into educational curricula and church discipleship models. Theological frameworks must reassert a compelling vision of the human person—one that upholds dignity, purpose, and the sacredness of embodiment in contrast to the objectification, commodification, and digitization promoted by modern culture.

Third, interventions must include discernment-based digital literacy. This means teaching young people not only how to use technology, but how to critically reflect on its influence on their desires, attention, and worldview. Discernment becomes a discipline, one that is essential for sustaining a life of freedom in a tech-saturated age.

Fourth, responses must be multidisciplinary. Theology alone cannot mend trauma; biology alone cannot resolve relational brokenness. It is only through the convergence of clinical support, spiritual direction, and community involvement that holistic healing can occur.

Gen Z stands at a cultural crossroads. The addictions they face are not merely private vices but social and spiritual signals—indicators of a generation caught between digital immediacy and existential longing. Our response must be equally complex and compassionate. We are called to stand not above them in critique, but beside them in solidarity; to offer not judgment but hope; not shallow solutions, but pathways toward transformation.

References

Barna Group. (2016). *The porn phenomenon: The impact of pornography in the digitalage*. Barna Group.

Carnes, P. (2001). *Out of the shadows: Understanding sexual addiction* (3rd ed.). Hazelden Publishing.

Covenant Eyes. (2022). *Pornography statistics 2022*. https://www.covenanteyes.com

Deloitte Insights. (2021). *Digital media trends, 15th edition*. https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/insights/articles/7157_Digital-media-trends-15-ed/DI_Digital_media-trends-15ed.pdf

Dines, G. (2010). *Pornland: How porn has hijacked our sexuality*. Beacon Press.

Fagan, F. P. (2009). The Effects of Pornography on Individuals, Marriage, Family and Community. *Studies in Catholic Higher Education*, December 2009.

Fernandez, P. D. (2021). The Pornography "Rebooting" Experience: A Qualitative Analysis of Abstinence Journals on an Online Pornography Abstinence Forum. *National Library of Medicine, 5*(2), 711-722.

Freitas, D. (2017). *The happiness effect: How social media is driving a generation to appear perfect at any cost*. Oxford University Press.

Lesieur, H., & Rosenthal, R. (1994). Pathological gambling: A review of the literature. *Journal of Gambling Studies, 10*(2), 139–149. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02104903

National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse. (2011). *National Survey of American Attitudes on Substance Abuse XVI: Teens and Parents*. Columbia University.

Perry, S. L. (2017). Does viewing pornography reduce marital quality over time? Evidence from longitudinal data. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 46*(2), 549–559. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-016-0770-y

Peter, J., Valkenburg, P. M., & Piotrowski, J. T. (2017). *Plugged in: How media attract and affect youth*. Yale University Press.

Posavec, J. & Danica Rorat Pavlic. (2022). Prevalence of alcohol consumption among high school students: A cross-sectional study. *National Library of Medicine*, Nov 30, 10(4).

Romney, B. (2020). Screens, teens, and porn scenes: legislative approaches to protecting youth from ecposure to pornograpgy, *Vermont Law Review,* Vol. 45:043.

Rotaru, I-Gh. (2021). Current Values of Education and Culture. In *Proceedings of the 23rd International RAIS Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities,* edited by N. E. Heghes, 87-92. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5507021.

Rotaru, I-Gh. (2017). Misiunea Bisericii în societate. *Timotheus – Incursiuni Teologice Tematice 4* (2), 57-76.

Schulenberg, J., Maggs, J. L., & Hurrelmann, K. (2002). Substance use during adolescence: A review of ecological and developmental processes affecting risk and protection. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *31*(6), 252–260.

Schüll, N. D. (2012). *Addiction by design: Machine gambling in Las Vegas*. Princeton University Press.

Seemiller, C., & Grace, M. (2016). *Gen. Z goes to college*. Jossey-Bass.

Statista Research Department. (2022, October). *Video game industry - Statistics & facts*. https://www.statista.com/topics/868/video-games/

Struthers, W. M. (2009). *Wired for intimacy: How pornography hijacks the male brain.* InterVarsity Press.

Taheer, F. (2023). 21 FOMO Statistics: Understanding the Fear of Missing Out. *Trustpulse*. https://trustpulse.com/2023/04/14/fomo-statistics/

Taylor, P. (2014). *The next America: Boomers, millennials, and the looming generational showdown*. Pew Research Center.

Twenge, J. M. (2006). *Generation Me.* Atria Books.

Twenge, J. M. (2017). *iGen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy—and completely unprepared for adulthood*. Atria Books.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2014). *The health consequences of smoking—50 years of progress: A report of the Surgeon General.* Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2012). *Behavioral analysis of serial criminals.*

Volkow, N. D., Baler, R. D., Compton, W. M., & Weiss, S. R. B. (2015). Trends in marijuana use among adolescents. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 169(6), 580–586.

World Health Organization. (2018). *International classification of diseases (ICD-11)*. https://www.who.int

Zimbardo, P., & Coulombe, N. (2015). *Man (dis)connected: How technology has sabotaged what it means to be male.* Rider.