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Gen-Z Challenges and Problems: A Research Review Study

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Abstract

Generation Z (born ≈1997–2012) faces a complex set of interrelated challenges as they transition into adulthood, shaped by digital hyperconnectivity, economic uncertainty, and global environmental threats. This review synthesizes contemporary empirical and review literature (2019–2025) on major problems confronting Gen-Z, focusing on mental health and emotional wellbeing, digital life and smartphone/social media impacts, educational transitions, employment insecurity including automation risks, and climate related anxiety and civic engagement. Evidence indicates elevated self-reported rates of psychological distress among Gen-Z compared with prior cohorts, with social media use and information overload functioning both as stressors and as routes for help-seeking (McKinsey, 2023). Climate anxiety is prevalent and linked to perceptions of inadequate institutional responses (Hickman et al., 2021). Digital addiction and excessive smartphone use are associated with poorer sleep, attention, and emotional regulation in youth samples (Mason, 2022; Shiferaw et al., 2025). The review highlights methodological heterogeneity, gaps in longitudinal data, and the need for culturally diverse samples. Recommendations include targeted mental health interventions that integrate digital literacy, curricular redesign responsive to Gen-Z learning preferences, and policy measures addressing economic precarity and climate mitigation.

Keywords: Generation Z, digital addiction, mental health, climate anxiety, social media, education

Introduction

Generation Z -loosely identified as individuals born roughly between 1997 and 2012 — is entering adulthood during a period of rapid technological change, shifting labor markets, and intensifying global environmental crises. Early demographic and attitudinal profiles show that Gen-Z is the most racially and ethnically diverse cohort in many countries and is markedly digital-native: persistent internet and smartphone access are normative and shape how this generation learns, socializes, and engages civically (Pew Research Center, 2020). While these features offer opportunities (e.g., rapid information access, novel forms of activism), they also expose Gen-Z to distinctive stressors — from continuous social comparison on social media to a heightened sense of economic and ecological uncertainty.

A mounting body of empirical research points to elevated prevalence of mental health concerns among Gen-Z compared with older cohorts. Large surveys and syntheses indicate that many Gen-Z individuals report symptoms of anxiety and depression and that these problems have been increasing since the late 2010s (McKinsey, 2023). The relationship between digital engagement and psychological wellbeing is complex: social platforms can provide social support and access to mental health resources, but they can also amplify information overload, social comparison, and fear of missing out (FOMO), contributing to anxiety and sleep disruption (Sharma, 2023; Mason, 2022). Recent systematic reviews of youth digital

addiction highlight associations between excessive digital use and a range of adverse outcomes including poorer sleep, attention difficulties, and emotional dysregulation — factors particularly relevant to Gen-Z's developmental stage (Shiferaw et al., 2025). Another emergent stressor is climate anxiety. Large-scale international work has documented significant worry about climate change among young people, and higher levels of worry are linked to perceptions that governments are failing to act adequately — a perception that intensifies distress and fuels activist responses (Hickman et al., 2021). For many Gen-Zers, climate anxiety is not an isolated phenomenon but intersects with broader feelings of future uncertainty and concerns about economic stability. Education and employment represent further domains of challenge and transition. Gen-Z students have different learning preferences — often favoring multimedia and interactive content — and educators face pressure to adapt pedagogy and assessment for media-rich, online learning contexts (Fandrejewska, 2025). Simultaneously, the labor market presents real concerns: automation, AI deployment, and an uncertain economy have created anxiety about entry-level opportunities, with surveys suggesting many young people fear an erosion of traditional job pathways (Guardian News, 2025). These economic pressures may interact with mental health and education outcomes for a generation whose early adult milestones (stable employment, home ownership) appear less certain than for prior cohorts.

Method

This paper adopts a narrative research review approach, synthesizing findings from peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, and meta-analyses published between **2019 and 2025**. Databases such as PsycINFO, Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar were searched using key terms like Generation Z, mental health, social media use, digital addiction, climate anxiety, education, and employment challenges. Studies were included if they examined Gen-Z populations (aged 11–28 years) and addressed psychological, social, educational, or economic outcomes.

The review prioritized empirical and systematic reviews with clear methodologies, representative samples, and relevance to Gen-Z's lived experiences. Publications focusing solely on older or mixed-age populations without disaggregated Gen-Z data were excluded. Data were analyzed thematically under five domains:

1. Psychological and emotional health
2. Digital life and technology use
3. Education and learning patterns
4. Economic and employment challenges
5. Environmental and social responsibility

This approach allows for a broad, integrated understanding of Gen-Z's unique circumstances while identifying knowledge gaps and methodological trends in current research.

1. Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being

Research since 2019 consistently reports that Gen-Z experiences higher rates of anxiety, depression, and emotional distress than previous generations (Twenge et al., 2021; McKinsey, 2023). The World Health Organization (2022) highlighted that youth aged 15–24 represent one of the fastest-growing groups reporting depressive symptoms globally. Several factors contribute to this trend: social media exposure, climate-related fears, economic insecurity, and academic pressure.Twenge et al. (2021) noted that Gen-Z's constant connectivity leads to overstimulation, poor sleep, and social comparison cycles, intensifying

depressive affect. Yet, paradoxically, digital environments also provide new avenues for mental health awareness and peer support (Sharma, 2023). Gen-Z shows higher openness to discussing psychological issues and utilizing tele-mental-health services, suggesting both risk and resilience within the same context.

2. Digital Life, Social Media, and Technology Dependency

Gen-Z is the first cohort to grow up fully immersed in digital culture. Smartphone access, online learning, and virtual friendships define their daily experiences (Pew Research Center, 2020). Studies identify dual outcomes: while digital fluency enhances creativity and access to knowledge, excessive exposure contributes to digital fatigue, cyberbullying, FOMO, and information overload (Mason, 2022).Shiferaw et al. (2025) demonstrated that daily smartphone use exceeding six hours correlates with attention deficits and mood instability in youth. Additionally, "doomscrolling" — habitual exposure to distressing online content — has been linked to increased anxiety and hopelessness (Nesi, 2023). Conversely, digital activism and online learning platforms have empowered Gen-Z to express social identity and participate in civic causes (Anderson, 2024). The literature underscores the need for digital literacy programs that emphasize self-regulation, media discernment, and balance.

3. Educational Transition and Learning Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed educational delivery, thrusting Gen-Z into remote and hybrid learning environments. While digital natives adapted relatively quickly, studies reveal substantial variation in engagement and performance (Fandrejewska, 2025). Many Gen-Z students prefer experiential and visually rich learning, yet sustained concentration online remains a challenge.Further, global educational inequality widened during pandemic years, particularly affecting students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who lacked stable connectivity (UNESCO, 2022). Asynchronous learning also intensified feelings of social isolation and reduced peer interaction — factors negatively associated with motivation and persistence (Keller, 2023). Educators are now urged to employ blended approaches that integrate technology meaningfully while re-emphasizing in-person collaboration. Curricular reforms should embed critical thinking, emotional resilience, and sustainability education to meet Gen-Z's expectations and prepare them for uncertain futures.

4. Employment and Economic Insecurity

The early career experiences of Gen-Z are marked by unprecedented economic volatility. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023) reported that global youth unemployment rates remain significantly higher than for adults, with automation and AI reshaping entry-level opportunities. Gen-Z workers express strong preferences for job flexibility, purpose-driven organizations, and mental-health-friendly work cultures (Deloitte, 2024).

However, research also indicates pervasive underemployment and rising financial anxiety (Guardian News, 2025). Many young adults delay milestones such as marriage or home ownership due to cost-of-living pressures. Hybrid work models, while increasing autonomy, can also blur boundaries between work and personal life, intensifying stress (McKinsey, 2023).

Policies promoting skill development in emerging sectors, paid internships, and equitable wages are central to addressing Gen-Z's employment concerns. Economic precarity, if unaddressed, risks deepening generational inequity and psychological distress.

5. Environmental Consciousness and Climate Anxiety

Gen-Z demonstrates heightened ecological concern compared to earlier generations. In a 2021 global study across 10 countries, over 59% of respondents aged 16–25 reported being "very" or "extremely"

worried about climate change (Hickman et al., 2021). Many experience **climate anxiety**, described as persistent fear or grief about environmental degradation and future security.

While this emotional engagement drives sustainability activism — such as school strikes and digital campaigns — it also correlates with helplessness and anger when policy responses appear inadequate (Clayton, 2022). Scholars suggest that integrating environmental education and community-based resilience projects can transform anxiety into agency (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2023). Gen-Z's climate consciousness is thus both a source of stress and a motivator for systemic change.

Discussion

Synthesizing the above themes reveals a generation negotiating profound social transformation. Gen-Z's experiences are characterized by hyperconnectivity, economic volatility, and existential concern over planetary futures. The coexistence of digital empowerment and digital exhaustion encapsulates the paradox of this cohort's environment.

The literature points toward interconnected vulnerabilities: digital addiction exacerbates sleep and emotional problems, which in turn hinder academic and occupational functioning. Simultaneously, uncertainty about economic prospects and environmental crises amplifies psychological strain. Yet, Gen-Z also displays adaptive strengths — digital competence, inclusivity, and social activism — which can be leveraged through evidence-based interventions.

Cross-cultural differences remain underexplored. Most studies are Western-centric, with limited focus on youth from low- and middle-income nations where infrastructural and cultural factors differ (WHO, 2022). Moreover, methodological inconsistencies — self-report measures, cross-sectional designs, and convenience samples — limit causal inference. Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies are needed to track trajectories of resilience and risk across cultural contexts.

Conclusion

Generation Z embodies the intersection of technology, identity, and uncertainty. The reviewed literature underscores both heightened vulnerability and remarkable adaptability. Mental health struggles, digital dependency, educational disruption, economic precarity, and environmental distress converge to define the Gen-Z experience. Addressing these requires coordinated efforts across psychology, education, policy, and community engagement.

Future research must prioritize inclusive, longitudinal, and cross-disciplinary perspectives to move beyond stereotypes and document Gen-Z's evolving wellbeing in a rapidly changing world. Only by understanding their lived realities can institutions craft responsive systems that support their potential and resilience.

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