

## **GENERATION Z: TEENAGERS IN THE VORTEX OF FLUIDITY. CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY IN LATE MODERNITY**

**George Kounnousii\***

Generation Z has been born and raised entirely in the 21st century,<sup>1</sup> that is, in the modern society of late modernity.<sup>2</sup> This generation has experienced economic and health crises, political instability and the breakdown of peace all over the world. Generation Z has therefore felt insecurity and fear throughout their life. At the same time, they have been brought up, in the context of globalization, with all the means of digital technology and it seems unimaginable for this generation to live without a smartphone or internet connection!<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is the official name of the generation of those who will be between twelve and twenty-four years old in 2024. The next one is called generation A, while the previous one is the generation of Millennials. Despoina Dimas, "Η μάχη τών γενεών: Από την 'χαμένη γενιά' στην 'γενιά Άλφα'," Τό βήμα, January 13, 2024, <https://www.ot.gr/2024/01/13/plus/executive/i-maxi-ton-geneon-apo-tin-xameni-genia-stin-genia-alfa>.

<sup>2</sup> The term belongs to A. Giddens. Z. Bauman has introduced the term liquid modernity, U. Beck the term second modernity, N. Mouzelis the term globalized modernity and recently Th. Tassis the term figurative modernity. All terms in modern social theory have a common content, since modernity is seen as a continuous evolving process of the modern. Christos Tsironis, *Θρησκεία και Κοινωνία στη δεύτερη νεωτερικότητα. Λόγοι, διάλογοι & αντίλογοι στο έργο του U. Beck* (Thessaloniki: Barbounaki, 2018), 40-1; Nicos Mouzelis, *Νεωτερικότητα και Θρησκευτικότητα. Έκκοσμίκευση – Φονταμενταλισμός – Ήθική*, ed. V. Liotzis, greek trans. T. Plyta (Athens: Polis, 2014), 77; Theophany Tassi, *Πολιτικές του βίου II: Η έπιμέλεια έαυτού στην εικονιστική κοινωνία* (Athens: Armos, 2017), 45-6.

<sup>3</sup> "They 'breathe' from their mobile phones, 'juggle' payment applications and consider unnecessary terms, e.g. the 'online shopping'... After all, Generation Z has practically been raised with a smartphone in hand and in ... eyes." Chryso Antoniadou, "Οι Millennials αλλάζουν το τραπεζικό 'παιγνίδι'," Brief, November 25, 2023, <https://www.brief.com.cy/oikonomia/kypros/oi-millennials-allazoyn-trapeziko-paignidi>

All these living conditions, which share lack of socialization, have been a subversive process in the life of today's teenagers. In contrast to traditional society, where man and especially young individuals were supported by a safe social environment to build their identity through codes and values determined by community culture and social structure, in modern society young people are left alone to make their choices freely.<sup>4</sup> However, when there is no stable framework and security in everyday life, people are trapped in the vortex of fluidity with negative consequences, both for themselves and for their society.<sup>5</sup> Everything is connected with the rest of the problems the youth are deeply affected by (drugs, addiction to the internet and electronic games, smoking, alcohol, etc.), acknowledging the long absence of generation Z, due to the global health crisis, composed by society and schools<sup>6</sup> alike.

Furthermore, the possibility of multiple lifestyle choices contributes to the formation of the identity of young people the modern society, that is, the participation without terms and conditions in the consumer culture. In this way, material goods disorient young people from the special nature of values and responsibility for fellow human beings, since everything is considered expendable. Thus, people's sociability is shuttered and social cohesion is negatively affected along with the simultaneous increase of individualism.<sup>7</sup> Job

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<sup>4</sup> For more details see Anthony Giddens, *Οι συνέπειες της νεωτερικότητας*, greek transl. G. Mertika – ed. G. Lykiardopoulos (Athens: Kritiki, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Zygmunt Bauman and Thomas Leoncini, *Born liquid, transformations of the third millennium*, greek transl. S. Triantafillou (Athens: Pataki, 2019), 24-5.

<sup>6</sup> Alexandra Skaraki, "Η γενιά Z ξεπέρασε τους γονείς της σε προκαταλήψεις," *Καθημερινή*, November 29, 2023, <https://www.kathimerini.gr/visual/infographics/562755535/i-genia-z-xeperase-toys-goneis-tis-se-prokatalipseis/>; Dina Karatzidou, "Παραβατικότητα ανηλίκων: Όμη βία, έτσι για τη φάση," *Lifo*, December 17, 2023, <https://www.lifo.gr/stiles/optiki-gonia/parabatikotita-anilikon-omi-bia-etsi-gia-ti-fasi>.

<sup>7</sup> Christos Tsironis, "Η αντίνομία της οικειότητας: Έπικοινωνία και άποξένωση στο διαδίκτυο," in *Άνθρωπος και Κοινωνία. Συμβολή στο διάλογο Θεολογίας και Κοινωνικής Θεωρίας*, ed. Christos Tsironis (Thessaloniki: Vaniias, 2013), 266.

uncertainty, the cost of living and rising inflation are now among the main concerns of Generation Z, as most young people are unable to plan their future.<sup>8</sup> As early as adolescence, many are forced to work part-time jobs –even full-time jobs during summer holidays– to contribute to family income or to fulfill their personal desires. Their failure to integrate into the consumer culture either leads them to a second job on the internet, such as selling products and/or services,<sup>9</sup> or to become influencers on social media, otherwise there is a risk of feeling unhappy.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, the wide individualization and the possibility of choice that the modern man now has to define his personal life, had as a consequence the rupture of relations with his fellow human beings and with religion.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, individualism in the modern world has been enhanced through self-projection, mainly by social media, of a false or distorted image of an idealized self.<sup>12</sup> Let's not neglect the fact that today's young people belong to a generation that is on the internet on a daily basis. They don't just use it, but live in it, like being in a parallel universe, a fact that needs to be taken into serious consideration nowadays.<sup>13</sup> Specifically many online platforms are used by young people to do deeds which they may not realize the

<sup>8</sup> Bauman speaks of a permanent and unbroken regime of uncertainty under which modern man experiences the perspective of the future. Zygmunt Bauman, 'Η μετανεωτερικότητα και τὰ δεινά της, greek trans. G.-I. Babasakis – ed. Ger. Lykiardopoulos (Athens: Psychogios, 2002), 52. Elsewhere he refers to the feeling of constant and fearful uncertainty in a Liquid Modernity. By the same, Πευστός φόβος, greek transl. G. Karabelas (Athens: Polytropon, 2007), 173-213.

<sup>9</sup> Roula Salourou, "Τί ζητούν ἡ γενιά Z καὶ οἱ millennials ἀπὸ τὴν ἐργασία τους," Καθημερινή, May 19, 2023, <https://www.kathimerini.gr/economy/562428028/ti-zitoun-i-genia-z-kai-oi-millennials-apo-tin-ergasia-toys/>

<sup>10</sup> George Kounnousii, "Απὸ τὸ μπορῶ στὸ θέλω. Σκιαγραφώντας τὴ σύγχρονη κυπριακὴ κοινωνία," Ἑνατενίσσεις 22 (January-June 2014), 61-7.

<sup>12</sup> Mouzelis, Νεωτερικότητα καὶ Ὁρσκειυτικότητα, 64.

<sup>12</sup> Tassi, Πολιτικὲς τοῦ βίου II: Ἡ ἐπιμέλεια ἑαυτοῦ στὴν εἰκονιστικὴ κοινωνία, 306-310.

<sup>13</sup> Bauman and Leoncini, Born liquid, transformations of the third millennium, 86-90.

extent of their severity, such as to harm themselves or their fellow human beings.<sup>14</sup>

Today's teenagers cannot find balance nor moderation because they are immature. They do not acquire this possibility, because they do not hold the key that will unlock the problem.<sup>15</sup> They fail because they lack essential safety nets –necessary skills, principles and values – to distinguish right from wrong.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, according to the research findings of the National Center for Social Research of Greece in the years 2022 and 2023, the young individuals of generation Z, are considered “a healthy generation with reasonable concerns and anxiety, without anger or a tendency to resign. They are seeking for changes in the institutional framework and vital space-time, so that they can take a breath”.<sup>17</sup> The multiple choices and various occupations took away valuable free time to utilize their talents and deprived them of a good quality of life. They therefore need moments of pause from the intense and frenetic rhythms of everyday life. They are all running around but getting nowhere.<sup>18</sup> For this reason they look for vents: they

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<sup>14</sup> “The 14-year-olds are the ones who are brainwashed by the trap. They thrive on illegality and the big money that comes from robberies and drugs. They are totally affected by it. Their whole life is TikTok. They upload videos of knives and money, they do what trappers do. We have 13-year-old girls who now behave like 25-year-olds: they are already sexually active, taking drugs, walking around with knives.” Dina Karatziou, “Παραβατικότητα ανηλίκων: Όμη βία, έτσι για τη φάση.”; John Pantazopoulou, “Τὰ μηνύματα μίσους στο TikTok και ή βία ως μέσο έκφρασης,” Lifo, September 10, 2023, <https://www.lifo.gr/stiles/optiki-gonia/taminymata-misoys-sto-tiktok-kai-i-bia-os-meso-ekfrasis>.

<sup>15</sup> “Η αντίνομία της οικειότητας: Έπικοινωνία και αποξένωση στο διαδίκτυο,” 262-270.

<sup>16</sup> Theophany Tassi, Ψηφιακός ανθρωπισμός. Εικονιστικό υπόκειμενο και τεχνητή νοημοσύνη (Athens: Armos, 2019), 32-9.

<sup>17</sup> Johanna Fotiadis, “„Διαβάζοντας„ τὸ μυαλὸ τῆς γενιᾶς Z: Οἱ μαθητὲς προτιμοῦν τὴ συζήτηση, ὅχι τὴν κατάληψη,” Καθημερινή, December 1, 2023, <https://www.kathimerini.gr/society/562758556/diavazontas-to-myalo-tis-genias-z-oi-mathites-protimoy-n-ti-syztisi-ochi-tin-katalipsi/>

<sup>18</sup> Characteristic of this way of life in modern society is the song by the band Loco-

choose the appropriate direction based on upbringing, opportunities, circumstances and values acquired from childhood. It is for these reasons that human institutions, such as society, school and the Church, must, more than ever before, stand by young people and their parents, to help and support them. When institutions cooperate, a “total social phenomenon” as defined by the science of Sociology, is accomplished and contributes to the progress and well-being of human society.<sup>19</sup>

It is, therefore, particularly difficult for a generation Z teenager to build his identity today within the complex landscape of late modernity. In the modern world, there is a strong absence of a stable framework, i.e. a place – a community – where the young person will feel safe to grow up psycho-emotionally and build their identity. This environment will help to strengthen the character of the modern teenager, it will lead him to maturity and to achieve balance in his daily life.<sup>20</sup> The values of their life will be acquired with effort and sacrifice, in contrast to the consumer culture that advocates the ease of acquiring, consuming and discarding the material lifestyle with the ultimate goal of entrenching resignation and disappointment.<sup>21</sup>

A stable social environment and the involvement of young people as free and rational individuals, contributes to the creation of healthy

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mondo, “Δέν προλαβαίνω,” in Schoolwave (2014), lyrics-music: Markos Koumaris: “Δέν προλαβαίνω ποτέ δέν προλαβαίνω / Ὁ χρόνος τρέχει καὶ ἐγὼ ξωπίσω μένω / Δέν προλαβαίνω ποτέ δέν προλαβαίνω / Πές μου τὸν λόγο ποὺ ἐδῶ ἀκόμα μένω”.

<sup>19</sup> The term belongs to the French sociologist Marcel Mauss, see Niki Papageorgiou, *Μεταμορφώσεις τοῦ ἱεροῦ. Κοινωνιολογία καὶ Θρησκεία στὸ ἔργο τοῦ Marcel Mauss* (Thessaloniki: Pournara, 2005), 72-84.

<sup>20</sup> Anthony Giddens, “Living in a Post-Traditional Society,” in *Reflexive modernization: Politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order*, ed. U. Beck, A. Giddens, S. Lash (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 57-109.

<sup>21</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Παράπλευρες ἀπώλειες. Κοινωνικὲς ἀνισότητες στὴν ἐποχὴ τῆς παγκοσμιοποίησης*, greek trans. E. Paradellis – scientific editor Th. Paradellis (Athens: Publications of the twenty-first, 2012), 123-124; Christos Tsironis, *Ὁ καταναλωτισμὸς στὴ σύγχρονη κοινωνικὴ θεωρία. Τομὲς στὸ ἔργο τοῦ Z. Bauman* (Thessaloniki: Barbounaki, 2013), 180-1.

interpersonal relationships. The definition of personal life and identity helps to highlight their specific traits and at the same time to separate them within the diversity of the local community. On the one hand, the feeling of belonging and, of uniqueness on the other, provides the adolescent with stability, security and the context of the development of their principles and values based on specific codes of behavior that have been tested and agreed upon in the particular local community.<sup>22</sup>

According to orthodox theology, the place where generation Z will be able to build its identity is the place of the church parish.<sup>23</sup> There, young people will experience the three elements of identity: self-awareness, belonging and adopting principles and values.<sup>24</sup> The proposal of orthodox theology for the modern world is once again associated with the findings of the science of Sociology of Religion. The integration of the young people of late modernity into an active church parish, where they will have a say and acquire the role of an active subject<sup>25</sup> for example, a fully participatory personal presence – in contrast to the passive object of previous eras<sup>26</sup>– will give them a healthy sociability, a balanced identity and a gifted ontological state.

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<sup>22</sup> Ioannis Petrou, Χριστιανισμός και κοινωνία. Κοινωνιολογική ανάλυση των σχέσεων του Χριστιανισμού με την κοινωνία και τον πολιτισμό (Thessaloniki: Vannias, 2004), 241-58.

<sup>23</sup> Stavros S. Fotiou, Ζωντανή ζωή (Athens: Armos, 2013), 49-63.

<sup>24</sup> George Kounnousii, "Σχέσεις και σχάσεις στη σύγχρονη νεωτερική κοινωνία," in Χαράγματα για τον σύγχρονο κόσμο, ed. Stavros S. Fotiou [series: Θεολογικά Δοκίμια 10], (Nicosia: Kykkou Monastery Studies Center, 2020), 42-54.

<sup>25</sup> Tsironis, Θρησκεία και Κοινωνία στη δεύτερη νεωτερικότητα, 119-121.

<sup>26</sup> Ioannis Petrou, Θρησκεία και Κοινωνία. Κοινωνιολογική ανάλυση των σχέσεων θρησκείας και κοινωνίας στη σύγχρονη πραγματικότητα (Thessaloniki: Barbounaki, 2012), 365-387.

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**George Kounnousii\***

### **Abstract**

Generation Z has been born and raised entirely in the 21st century. It has experienced the economic and health crisis, political instability and the breakdown of peace throughout the world. It has therefore felt insecurity and fear throughout its life. At the same time, “zoomers” have been brought up with the means of digital technology and it seems unimaginable for them to live without a smartphone and internet connection!

All these living conditions which share lack of socialization, have been a subversive process in the life of today’s teenagers. When there is no stable framework and security in everyday life, people are trapped in the vortex of fluidity with negative consequences, both for themselves and for their society.

Furthermore, the possibility of multiple lifestyle choices, i.e. the unconditional participation in the consumer culture, contributes to the formation of the identity of young people in modern society. In this way, material goods disorient young people from the special nature of values and responsibility for fellow human beings, since everything is perceived as expendable. Thus, human sociability is dissolved and social cohesion is affected with the simultaneous increase of individualism.

It is, therefore, particularly nowadays difficult for a generation Z teenager to build his identity in the complex landscape of late mo-

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dernity. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the problem of identity creation, as well as to highlight the institutional frameworks that can support adolescents in their endeavor, such as family, school and religion.

*Keywords: Generation Z, fluidity, identity, late modernity, individualism.*