


# Chapter 15


## Digital Distraction in Gen Z: Strategies for Focused and Engaging Online Learning Environments

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### ABSTRACT

*The increasing shift toward online learning has fundamentally transformed educational environments, requiring teachers to develop new skills that combine content expertise with effective digital pedagogy. As technology continues to shape learning experiences, understanding how to engage students in online spaces while mitigating the challenges of digital distractions becomes crucial. Drawing from educational frameworks, this chapter examines how these models collectively inform the development of more effective online learning strategies. By emphasizing the importance of fostering social connections, collaboration, and self-regulation, these models offer valuable insights into how educators can create supportive learning environments that minimize distractions and enhance student focus and engagement. Through this lens, the chapter explores how educators can better navigate the complexities of online education, providing both theoretical and practical perspectives on how to support Gen Z learners in maintaining focus and maximizing their potential in digital classrooms.*

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-6013-3.ch015

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly evolving digital landscape, the learning environment is transforming significantly, especially for Generation Z (Gen Z), those born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s. Representing over a third of the global population, Gen Z has now surpassed Millennials in size (Miller & Wei, 2018). Often described as "native speakers of the digital language", this generation has grown up immersed in a hyper-connected world where smartphones, tablets, and social media are daily staples (Ismail, 2017; Pantano et al., 2022). Accustomed to multitasking across devices and consuming information rapidly, Gen Z engages with content in dynamic, often fragmented ways (Choudhary & Pandita, 2024). However, this comfort with digital environments has sparked debate regarding their actual technological proficiency and their ability to multitask effectively (Kirschner & van Merriënboer, 2013).

A recent survey found that 95% of Gen Z individuals aged 13 to 22 own a smartphone, with 61% using them for five or more hours daily and 26% exceeding ten hours. Notably, 65% use their devices after midnight multiple times a week, compared to 39% of Millennials (State of Gen Z, 2018). Similarly, Pew Research (2018) reported that 45% of teens are online "almost constantly". While Facebook remains relevant for 77% of Gen Z monthly, YouTube dominates, with 90% accessing it regularly (Global Web Index, 2019). This trend reflects the generation's preference for video content, gamification, and on-demand entertainment, often making them more fluent in navigating online platforms than in engaging with traditional learning spaces.

Yet this digital fluency is a double-edged sword. While technology offers opportunities to enhance learning, it also introduces persistent distractions that can undermine academic focus and engagement (Aldahdouh et al., 2020; Talwar et al., 2019). Studies show many students struggle to stay attentive during lessons due to frequent non-academic device use (Ellis & Bliuc, 2019; Morgan-Thomas & Dudau, 2019). Despite engagement being a known predictor of academic success (Huzooree & Doargajudhur, 2023), Gen Z learners often face a cycle of disengagement and distraction. Ryan and Deci (2020) describe this state as "amotivation", a lack of interest or value placed on academic tasks, which correlates with reduced performance and higher dropout risks.

McCoy (2020) reveals that students spend roughly 19% of class time on non-academic digital activities. Alarming, 87% struggle to focus during lessons, and 80% report missing important instruction due to distraction. Adding to this concern, 90% of students admit to feeling bored in school (Furlong et al., 2021), and boredom is a key predictor of disengagement. Students who report chronic boredom are less likely to exert effort and more likely to succumb to digital distractions.

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