

Generation Alpha in the Digital Age. Anthropological Shifts and a Contextual Pastoral Response

Pokolenie Alfa w epoce cyfrowej. Przemiany antropologiczne
i kontekstualna odpowiedź duszpasterska

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Abstract: The article offers a theological interpretation of the anthropological and spiritual challenges associated with Generation Alpha, a cohort formed in a fully digitised, technologically saturated environment. It argues that the digital transformation of cognitive and relational patterns is not merely a sociocultural phenomenon but also a theological matter, insofar as it shapes the conditions under which truth, authority, and communion are received and embodied. The analysis critically engages with posthumanist and transhumanist proposals, identifying their normative limitations from the perspective of a Christian anthropology grounded in the human person's orientation toward truth and relationality. Selected phenomena associated with contemporary digital culture – such as nomophobia, cyberbullying, digital narcissism, the Lake Wobegon effect, cyberautomatism, and the incel subculture – are interpreted here as symptoms of existential fragility rather than as indicators of anthropological advancement. In response, the article outlines context-sensitive forms of pastoral practice, including small formation groups, religious tourism, individual spiritual accompaniment, and international retreat centres. These practices are presented not as innovations detached from tradition, but as renewed actualisations of ecclesial care under transformed epistemic conditions. The study contributes to practical theology by clarifying the anthropological and ecclesial implications of digital culture for youth ministry.

Keywords: Generation Alpha; Theological Anthropology; Digital Culture; Practical Theology; Pastoral Formation; Spiritual Accompaniment; Authority and Truth.

Streszczenie: Artykuł proponuje teologiczną interpretację antropologicznych i duchowych wyzwań związanych z pokoleniem Alfa — kohortą ukształtowaną w środowisku w pełni scyfryzo-

wanym i nasyconym technologią. Stawia tezę, że cyfrowa transformacja wzorców poznawczych i relacyjnych nie jest jedynie zjawiskiem społeczno-kulturowym, lecz także kwestią teologiczną, w tej mierze, w jakiej kształtuje warunki, w których prawda, autorytet i komunია są przyjmowane i urzeczywistniane. Analiza krytycznie odnosi się do propozycji posthumanistycznych i transhumanistycznych, wskazując ich ograniczenia normatywne z perspektywy antropologii chrześcijańskiej, ugruntowanej w ukierunkowaniu osoby ludzkiej na prawdę i relacyjność. Wybrane zjawiska związane ze współczesną kulturą cyfrową – takie jak nomofobia, cyberprzemoc, cyfrowy narcyzm, efekt jeziora Wobegon, cyberautomatyzm oraz subkultura incel – zostają tu zinterpretowane jako symptomy egzystencjalnej kruchości, a nie jako oznaki antropologicznego postępu. W odpowiedzi artykuł zarysowuje wrażliwe na kontekst formy praktyki duszpasterskiej, w tym małe grupy formacyjne, turystykę religijną, indywidualne towarzyszenie duchowe oraz międzynarodowe domy rekolekcyjne. Praktyki te przedstawione są nie jako innowacje odezwane od tradycji, lecz jako odnowione aktualizacje troski eklezjalnej w przekształconych warunkach epistemicznych. Studium wnosi wkład do teologii praktycznej, klarując antropologiczne i eklezjalne implikacje kultury cyfrowej dla duszpasterstwa młodzieży.

Słowa kluczowe: pokolenie Alfa; antropologia teologiczna; kultura cyfrowa; teologia praktyczna; formacja duszpasterska; towarzyszenie duchowe; autorytet i prawda.

Introduction

The emergence of Generation Alpha – children born after 2010 – marks a new stage in the formation of identity, socialization patterns, and spirituality in the digital age. This is because, unlike prior generations, Generation Alpha lives in a world in which digital media mediates nearly every facet of communication, learning, and self-expression. This means that this generation is immersed in an environment saturated with digital technologies, algorithmic personalization, constant connectivity, and the increasing prevalence of artificial intelligence.

Much has been written about the impact of digitalization on concentration, social interactions, and mental health (Firth et al., 2019, pp. 119–129; Keles et al., 2020, pp. 79–93). Nevertheless, inquiries concerning how immersion in the digital realm alters the self and the experience of transcendence still necessitate theological insight. This article contributes to this reflection by posing an indirect critical question: Is integral personal and spiritual development possible in a world dominated by digital media? Moreover, if so, how can Christian theology and pastoral practice respond constructively to this new challenge? The article proposes a view that draws on Christian anthropology and interdisciplinary insights from philosophy, pedagogy, neuroscience, and practical theology to address these issues. These findings do not, in themselves, determine a theological conclusion, but they do indicate that the digital environment is not a neutral backdrop for faith formation. Rather, it shapes the cognitive and relational conditions under which faith may be received, interpreted, and practiced.

The problem addressed in this article is therefore not technology as such, but the transformation of the cognitive, relational, and epistemic conditions under which faith, authority, and communal belonging are received and interpreted. If practical theology presupposes that faith is transmitted within historically and culturally conditioned forms

of cognition and sociality, then a transformation of these conditions necessarily becomes a theological problem, not merely a sociological or psychological one. This article argues that the emergence of Generation Alpha reveals such a transformation and that the challenges associated with digital culture must therefore be interpreted within a theological-anthropological framework, which in turn requires a reconsideration of certain forms of pastoral practice.

The central claim of this article is that the Christian community can respond proactively to the new and complex spiritual challenges associated with Generation Alpha, including digital narcissism, cyberautomatism, and forms of disembodied identity (Parker et al., 2010, pp. 827–856). Drawing on recent research and selected pastoral examples, the article explains why practices such as small formation groups, religious tourism, individual spiritual accompaniment, and international centres for spiritual renewal may offer adequate responses to these existential challenges. The argument is strengthened by analyzing selected digitalization-related challenges in the context of intergenerational change and examining normative anthropological theories, whose pluralism proves limited not only *a priori*, but even more so when confronted with empirical data.

Methodologically, this article distinguishes between empirically observable phenomena and interpretive projections concerning the future development of Generation Alpha. It adopts an interdisciplinary approach in which selected empirical findings from psychology and media studies are interpreted within a framework of philosophical anthropology and pastoral theology. The empirical research cited in the article does not serve as an independent object of analysis but rather as a descriptive and interpretive point of departure for anthropological and theological reflection, whose ultimate aim is to formulate an adequate pastoral response to the emerging cultural situation. In this sense, the article follows the methodological logic of practical theology, moving from description and interpretation to normative reflection and pastoral practice (Osmer, 2008).

The structure of the article reflects this approach and corresponds to the logic of the argument developed here. The argument is developed in three steps: first, by situating Generation Alpha within a broader anthropological and intergenerational framework; second, by analysing selected existential risks associated with digital culture as symptoms of deeper anthropological transformation; and third, by proposing pastoral responses that correspond to these transformed conditions of subjectivity, relationality, and transcendence. In this way, the article moves from description and interpretation to normative and practical theological reflection.

1. Understanding Generation Alpha: A Contextual Analysis of History, Technology, and Anthropology

Generation Alpha can be adequately understood only when situated against the background of earlier generations, especially in relation to technological change, cultural expectations, and modes of socialization. This intergenerational perspective is not adopted here for

purely descriptive purposes, but as a methodological point of departure. By examining the changing environments in which successive generations have grown up, we can better understand how technological mediation gradually reshapes the conditions under which human identity, relationships, and the experience of reality are formed. For this reason, the analysis proceeds from a historical and intergenerational perspective to a philosophical-anthropological one, asking not only how the environment of human development has changed, but also what these changes mean for our understanding of the human person.

1.1 Generation Alpha in the Context of Previous Generations

Among the generations still active in public life, the baby boom generation occupies a senior position, even though some representatives of the pre-war Silent Generation are still living. In technological terms, the baby boom generation experienced the spread of radio, the consolidation of television, and, later, the emergence of the computer. Music was associated with gramophone records, and large music festivals became important cultural events. Although the invention of the computer marked a major technological turning point during this period, it did not yet become a widely used everyday tool for most members of this generation (Twenge, 2023, pp. 33–40). In moral and social terms, the early phase of this generation was shaped in part by the cultural liberalization associated with the sexual revolution of 1968 and the spread of birth control. Later decades, however, witnessed a movement toward more conservative positions in many contexts. In this sense, the generation may be described as having undergone a significant internal shift in social and moral outlook, although the scope and form of that shift varied across national and political contexts (Twenge, 2023, pp. 72–80).

Generation X developed under different historical and social conditions. It is often described as a generation socialized into independence and self-reliance. In technological terms, it grew up during the expansion of television, cassette culture, and portable music devices such as the Walkman, while personal computers had not yet become fully integrated into everyday life for most households. This generation also witnessed the political transformations of 1989 in Europe and, in many contexts, participated consciously in the social changes associated with that period (Twenge, 2023, pp. 149–160). It is frequently characterized as strongly oriented toward education, professional achievement, and international mobility. The growing significance of English as a language of global communication also became an important feature of its cultural horizon. Compared with earlier generations, Generation X can thus be seen as a cohort that combined relatively traditional forms of socialization with the first stages of late-modern globalization (Twenge, 2023, pp. 170–227).

The millennial generation was the first to grow up with computers as increasingly commonplace tools for work, study, and entertainment. Although this technological transition was gradual, digital tools became central to everyday functioning more quickly than in previous generations. Millennials also came of age in the era of mobile phones, though still before the full dominance of smartphones. Their cultural environment was shaped by CDs, portable

music players, MP3 files, and the expansion of early online communication. They grew up in a period that, in many regions, initially appeared economically promising, contributing to a higher standard of living than earlier generations. At the same time, their passage into adulthood was marked by growing insecurity, including labour-market instability and the broader social consequences of terrorist attacks and geopolitical unrest in the early twenty-first century. Social media, which emerged during their adolescence and early adulthood, was often perceived as a new means of sustaining friendship and a sense of belonging amid changing conditions of work and mobility (Twenge, 2023, pp. 231–240, 300–320).

The generation immediately preceding Generation Alpha is Generation Z, usually defined as those born after 1995 and now entering adult social and professional life. This generation was shaped by a more intensive phase of digital expansion. Among the symbolic milestones of this period are the launch of YouTube in 2005, the introduction of the first iPhone in 2007, the appearance of the Facebook “Like” button in 2009, and the arrival of front-facing smartphone cameras, which contributed to the rise of selfie culture (Twenge, 2023, pp. 345–350). For Generation Z, the internet became an almost ubiquitous environment for communication, entertainment, learning, and identity performance. Social media and online gaming increasingly structure peer interactions (Twenge, 2023, pp. 400–410). This generation is often described as more globally oriented, linguistically flexible, and culturally open than many of its predecessors. At the same time, researchers and commentators have also pointed to the risks associated with life in environments shaped by rapid digital stimulation, including more fragmented attention, intensified social comparison, and greater susceptibility to media influence. These tendencies should not be treated as exhaustive characteristics of the generation as a whole, but they do help illuminate the broader cultural setting out of which Generation Alpha emerges.

Against this background, Generation Alpha may be provisionally described as the first generation to grow up from early childhood within an environment deeply shaped not only by digital media, but increasingly by artificial intelligence. Multimedia devices are not simply tools occasionally added to everyday life; rather, they form part of the ordinary developmental environment from the earliest years. According to widely cited observations, first contact with smartphones often occurs at a very early age, which means that movement between offline and online reality becomes normalized during childhood itself (Twenge, 2017, pp. 49–59). It is therefore plausible to assume that, in education, communication, and creative practices, this generation will interact with algorithmically mediated systems to a much greater extent than previous generations. If these tendencies continue, Generation Alpha may become the first cohort for whom the distinction between human and digital mediation is experienced less as an opposition than as an ordinary condition of daily life. In this sense, it resembles Generation Z, but it also goes beyond it, because artificial intelligence and advanced personalization technologies may shape its experience of reality at a qualitatively different level. Since this process is still unfolding, any description of Generation Alpha must remain partly provisional and open to revision in light of future empirical research.

The intergenerational differences outlined above should not be interpreted merely as differences in lifestyle or cultural preferences. They point to a deeper transformation in the conditions under which human subjectivity, relationships, and the experience of reality are formed. If technological mediation increasingly shapes perception, communication, and self-understanding from early childhood, then the question arises whether we are dealing only with cultural change or with a more profound anthropological shift. From the perspective of practical theology, this question is decisive because faith is always received, interpreted, and lived within historically conditioned forms of cognition, communication, and community. For this reason, the analysis must now move from a descriptive intergenerational perspective to a philosophical-anthropological one.

1.2 Are We Still Human? Technological Mediation and Human Identity

The profound intergenerational changes brought about by technology raise significant anthropological and theological questions: can we discern a unifying essence of humanity amidst these changes, or is it imperative to adopt new paradigms such as transhumanism or posthumanism? Should we continue to use the designation “human” as a universal and coherent concept that encompasses all generations, or are we witnessing a redefinition of humanity in response to technological advancements?

From the perspective of classical humanism, humanity is characterized by the ability to transcend our given conditions through moral, spiritual, and intellectual development (Rüsen, 2013, 162-184, pp. 12–30). Humanistic thought assumes the existence of a kind of human nature, in either an essentialist or a constructivist sense, that is capable of transcending environmental influences. However, among the youngest generation (Generation Alpha), it can be argued that advanced information technologies increasingly mediate human subjectivity. Children and young people are increasingly supported or replaced by “ready-made” digital frameworks, such as apps, algorithms, and curated media, which potentially shorten or shape their identity and worldview development (Ziatdinov & Cilliers, 2021, pp. 783–789). There is concern that technology may entangle people in a web of constant immediacy and stimulation, thereby hindering reflection and self-transcendence, as valued in humanism. This may undermine the humanistic idea of an autonomous Self that exists independently of the world and can maintain a critical and free relationship with it (Striet, 2018, pp. 75–84). This situation is so complex that it raises the question of the transcendence of the human spirit in a new context: whether it has been fragmented or fundamentally limited by the conditions of contemporary digitalization.

Conversely, a historical perspective may mitigate these apprehensions. We can identify similarities that confirm the continuity of humanism by examining the adaptations of earlier generations. Take, for example, the baby boom generation: in their youth, they embraced radical liberalism, which, according to some critics at the time, undermined moral and spiritual foundations; however, many members of this generation later returned to more traditional values. Regardless of the precise reasons underlying the conservative response of the baby boom generation, this trajectory can be perceived as evidence of hu-

manity's enduring ability for self-correction and the transcendence of social limitations. Similarly, although Generation Alpha is deeply influenced by technology, it is conceivable that they will also discover innovative ways to affirm fundamental human qualities, such as creativity, empathy, and moral choice, in response to their technological environment, rather than succumbing to its determinism. In other words, Generation Alpha may see a unique affirmation of human transcendence, just as previous generations found ways to affirm their humanity in the face of the forces that shaped them. We should not overlook this potential for positive development, even if its manifestations differ from those of the past.

At the same time, we should consider the rise of alternative concepts such as transhumanism, which directly address the fusion of humans and technology. Transhumanism sees technologies (artificial intelligence, bioengineering) as tools for enhancing human capabilities, perhaps even to fundamentally transform the species (Tirosh-Samuelson, 2012, pp. 710–734). In the transhumanist vision, Generation Alpha may ultimately witness an “augmented humanity” in which cognitive or physical abilities are extensively enhanced by technology. Proponents of this theory, such as Max More, argue that overcoming biological limitations through technology is the next step in human evolution (More, 2013, pp. 3–17). Critics, however, point to the conceptual ambiguities of transhumanism: what does “enhancement of humanity” really mean, and do enhanced capabilities truly represent a flourishing of humanity? This question is aptly summarised by Martin Heidegger's classical statement on technology, which can reduce distances without bringing people closer together (Wendland et al., 2019, pp. 13, 61, 205–206). This suggests that while technology may enhance our power or reach, it may not develop the qualities of human relationships and spontaneity (e.g., the *homo ludens* aspect of being human) that give life meaning. Note that in defining what may be lost when humans connect with machines (loss of empathy, authenticity, etc.), we implicitly rely on humanistic values, which makes this paradox seem irreparable. It can therefore be argued that transhumanism presupposes humanism, even if it claims to replace it. Thus, a purely transhumanist approach is insufficient for understanding the future of Generation Alpha, as it risks overlooking the immutables associated with bonds, love, and the meaning of life, which technology alone cannot satisfy.

Another perspective is posthumanism, which questions and blurs the distinction between humans and machines, rather than simply extending human capabilities. Posthumanist thinkers envision humans in symbiosis with technology, fully integrating technology into the fabric of life and even their own identity. Donna Haraway's famous cyborg metaphor exemplifies the posthumanist perspective – the view of humans as hybrids of biological and technological elements, challenging rigid dichotomies such as human/machine or natural/artificial (Haraway, 1991, pp. 149–181; Rae, 2014, pp. 505–528). Posthumanism, especially in its more critical forms (influenced by new materialism and anti-oppressive thought), emphasizes the relationality and decentration of humans, calling for ethical coexistence with non-human entities (animals, ecosystems, artificial intelligence) and an awareness of how information systems shape society (Coole & Frost, 2010, pp. 7–10).

For Generations Z and Alpha, immersed in virtual and interactive digital environ-

ments, the fluid language of posthuman identity may feel familiar. A teenager who creates multiple online avatars or forms relationships with AI “friends” may intuitively accept a less clear boundary between themselves and technology. Posthumanism offers a perspective for critically evaluating this situation, potentially empowering young individuals to resist being treated as mere instruments within digital systems by developing an understanding of and reconfiguring their relationship with technology. Nevertheless, in the absence of a common moral or ontological foundation, the guidance provided by posthumanism may be fragmentary. It is a descriptive ethos rather than a unified system of values, which makes it challenging to determine its practical political and ethical implications. Thus, although posthumanism addresses some realities of Generation Alpha, it can offer only a partial perspective if it overlooks aspects of humanity that remain constant.

The comprehensive anthropological position adopted in this study assumes that the transformations of the digital age creatively challenge the concept of humanity, but do not eliminate it. Humanism and its alternatives (transhumanism, posthumanism) can be understood not as mutually exclusive but as complementary frameworks for explaining the complex relationships between humans and technology. A balanced perspective can recognize new forms of identity and relationships supported by technology (as posthumanism does), while protecting the core of human dignity and the capacity for transcendence (as humanism does). In practical theology, this requires a dialogical, critical theological anthropology that engages with insights from secular visions of humanity’s future while measuring them against theological convictions about persons created in the image of God, with inherent value and a calling to transcendence.

One strategy for highlighting the rationale for a critical theological anthropology of this kind may be to limit the pluralism of normative options by focusing on empirical reality and moderating radical philosophies with insights from research, including research on the situation of young people. For instance, French philosopher Catherine Malabou argues that the brain’s neuroplasticity creates a new continuity between humans and machines, thereby reinforcing the posthumanist idea of fluid identity (Malabou, 2009, pp. 36–38, 78–79).¹ However, when one examines the empirical evidence on the well-being of Generation Alpha, a more sobering picture emerges: rather than enjoying liberation through fluid digital identity, today’s youth often exhibit distress (e.g., anxiety, loneliness) associated with intensive use of digital devices. In other words, the promised posthuman “enrichment” of identity is not supported by current data; rather, we have reasons for concern that necessitate a response. For this reason, our analysis now shifts to an empirical, descriptive mode, identifying specific areas of existential risk for Generation Alpha, consistent with recent research. This will form the basis for further theological and practical discussions about the challenges young people face.

1 See Malabou (2009, pp. 36–38, 78–79) for an elaboration of the thesis and Williams (2013, pp. 6–25) for a discussion of her position.

2. Areas of Existential Risk for Generation Alpha

Identifying all existential challenges facing any generation is likely impossible, but we can examine the most salient ones. Six categories of existential challenges for Generation Alpha are: Nomophobia, the “Cocktail Party” Effect, Cyberbullying, Digital Narcissism (including the Lake Wobegon Effect), Cyber-automatism, and the Incel Subculture. In the following passages, the practical effects of these phenomena on Alpha youth are examined.

However, the phenomena discussed below require an important clarification. First, the phenomena mentioned are not analysed here as isolated social problems but as symptoms of a deeper transformation of subjectivity, relationality, and the experience of reality under conditions of digital mediation. Second, some of them are already described in empirical studies concerning children and adolescents, for example, problematic smartphone use or cyberbullying, whereas others are more interpretive or prognostic in character. They will be discussed together here, but with explicit awareness of this distinction. For the sake of analytical clarity, it should also be noted that some terms used in this article, such as nomophobia or cyberautomatism, do not always have a single, stable equivalent in the international literature and therefore require operational clarification in the context of the present study.

2.1 Nomophobia: Fear of Being Disconnected from the World of Technology

Young people fear losing access to mobile phones and other electronic devices. This is described as ‘no mobile phone phobia’ – a condition known as nomophobia. Growing up in the age of the Internet and its constant availability, thanks to the widespread use of smartphones, can lead to anxiety or even fear when a person loses access to this medium, even for a moment. Access to a cell phone has become both a status symbol and an essential means of communication. This fosters a strong emotional attachment to the device. The problem that emerges here is the increasingly frequent transfer of essential interpersonal communication to social media, which leads to superficial relationships (Rodríguez-García et al., 2020, p. 580). Nomophobia may, in some cases, be associated with problematic forms of internet and smartphone dependence, discussed in the literature under such concepts as Internet Addiction Disorder (Young, 1998, pp. 237–244).

Nomophobia reflects a deeper problem of difficulty in forming authentic interpersonal relationships in the offline world. As a result, young people may feel that their lives are meaningless when they lack a constant connection to the virtual world. This phenomenon is associated with a recurring paradox of technology. On the one hand, young people are firmly connected; on the other, they are increasingly isolated and exposed to a growing sense of meaninglessness.

2.2 Cocktail Party: Lost in the Media Crowd

The term “Cocktail Party” was introduced to describe the specific situation in which young people of Generation Alpha currently find themselves. The term is used here as an

interpretive category rather than as a strict technical term from auditory psychology, where it originally described the ability to focus on a single voice in a noisy environment. It refers to functioning on the border between two worlds: the analog and the virtual, where the excess of stimuli and information reaching young people from these worlds prevents them from forming authentic and deep relationships with others and from fully engaging in everyday life (Cherry, 1953, pp. 975–979).

A cocktail party is associated with emotional inconsistency, in which internal emotions do not align with the external conditions and social expectations of the person's group. For example, someone who feels sadness and frustration internally must present themselves as confident and courageous. Such emotional incongruence may contribute to inner tension, instability of self-presentation, and a weakened sense of personal coherence. In more serious cases, and in interaction with other social and psychological factors, these tensions may be associated with depressive states or broader identity-related difficulties (Cherry, 1953, p. 979).

2.3 Cyberbullying: The Face of Digital Violence

There is another serious problem in today's society, described under the notion of cyberbullying. It is a very insidious phenomenon because, unlike classic forms of violence, it is difficult to detect, and a large number of perpetrators can attack their victim at the same time. Cyberbullying often follows a recognizable pattern. It begins with the uncontrolled dissemination of misinformation about a person, followed by manipulation to influence the audience's emotions, so that they involuntarily join in this nefarious precedent. In the background, there is constant information chaos and numerous pseudo-arguments, which are difficult for the victim to address (Patchin & Hinduja, 2012, pp. 61–75).

Cyberbullying causes severe emotional damage to the victim, translating into a feeling of powerlessness in the face of constant harassment. Information disseminated in the virtual sphere influences external references, not only in the peer environment, but also in a much broader context. The victim may feel discredited and have no concrete means of escaping the situation, which intensifies their sense of meaninglessness (Patchin & Hinduja, 2012, p. 70).

2.4 Digital Narcissism and the Lake Wobegon Effect: A Virtual Love Affair With Oneself

Constant interaction on social media and a focus on presenting interesting aspects of one's friends' lives can trigger a desire to shine in front of others and to present oneself in unusual circumstances that attract the attention of a large audience, as evidenced by likes. This triggers an excessive focus on oneself and a belief in one's uniqueness (Szpunar, 2016, pp. 15–16).

Narcissistic self-presentation is measured by the number of likes, followers, and the quality of comments posted under a post. Digital narcissism leads to superficial relationships with others, driven by the desire to use them to enhance one's image, without ge-

nuine interest in their personal affairs. This, in turn, impoverishes social intelligence, i.e., an individual's ability to empathize with and understand another person in their life situation. Insufficient relationships with others can lead individuals to retreat into a world of their own perceptions and imagination, contributing to a sense of unreality and, consequently, a feeling that life lacks meaning (Szpunar, 2016, pp. 16–30).

Closely related to digital narcissism is a phenomenon known as the Lake Wobegon effect. In the present article, this concept is used as an interpretive analogy for digitally intensified self-comparison and self-idealization rather than as a direct empirical category specific to Generation Alpha. The name originates from Garrison Keillor's novel "Lake Wobegon Days," which was written as a protest against negative social trends in the United States in the 1980s. The novel describes the lives of the inhabitants of an idyllic village in Minnesota, where all the women are strong, the men are handsome, and the children are brilliant. Of course, Lake Wobegon is a fictional place that cannot be found on a map of the United States. The novel is strictly psychological and responds to readers' growing desire to be above average (Plous, 1993, pp. 132–134). However, this superiority is only an illusion of the villagers. In reality, they are very ordinary people with no distinguishing features. This fits perfectly with digital narcissism. Social media intensely arouses the desire to be above average, a desire that can be achieved through well-organized posts and photos. Meanwhile, a person's life is often weaker than that of their peers (Plous, 1993, pp. 132–134).

2.5 Cyberautomatism: A Modern Form of Unreflexivity

Cyberautomatism can be briefly described as a state in which a person browses through thousands of pieces of information that appear daily on social media without fully engaging with the content presented. The term "cyberautomatism" is used here as an analytical concept describing habitual, automatic, and largely unreflective patterns of digital media use, rather than as an established clinical or psychological term. This leads to a superficial understanding of phenomena and processes, a misunderstanding of the world, and susceptibility to media manipulation. This tendency can be observed, for example, in political communication on social media, where complex issues are often reduced to simplified and emotionally charged messages (Kubera, 2024).

Being satisfied with reading article headlines on the Internet or with shocking titles also weakens critical thinking. It creates a need to obtain information quickly without considering its credibility and reliability. This, in turn, leads to serious problems in education. Individuals accustomed to such forms of information consumption may find it more difficult to engage with longer, more complex arguments, expecting information to be delivered in a condensed, immediately accessible form. As a result, their knowledge of the world is fragmented, and they cannot navigate its complexity and phenomena (Kubera, 2024).

The phenomenon described here as cyberautomatism finds partial support in research on the attention economy and information overload, which describes the situation in which the amount of incoming information exceeds the individual's capacity to process it effectively (Davenport & Beck, 2001; Eppler & Mengis, 2004). Studies on media multi-

tasking and attentional control suggest that intensive digital media use may be associated with diminished capacity for sustained concentration and greater susceptibility to distraction (Ophir, Nass, & Wagner, 2009; Uncapher & Wagner, 2018). Research also indicates that the mere presence of a smartphone and frequent notifications may negatively affect cognitive capacity and attention (Stothart, Mitchum, & Yehnert, 2015; Ward et al., 2017). At the same time, caution is warranted when drawing overly general conclusions, since the relationship between digital media use and well-being remains complex and methodologically debated (Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Ra et al., 2018). In this sense, “cyberautomatism” functions as a synthetic interpretive category that brings together phenomena discussed in contemporary research under headings such as information overload, fragmented attention, media multitasking, and weakened cognitive control.

2.6 Incel: Involuntary Digital Celibacy

Incel is short for “involuntary celibate.” It refers to online communities composed mainly of men who perceive themselves as unable to form intimate relationships, even though they desire to do so. Thanks to social media, they have easily found each other and formed a specific community based on their shared experience (Sugiura, 2021, pp. 45–72).

Incels often use specific jargon and ideology that blame women, whom they perceive as too demanding or superficial, as well as modern society, which they believe promotes “unfair” standards of attractiveness. Some members of these communities express deep hatred towards women and think that they deserve intimate relationships because of their “male privilege” (Sugiura, 2021, pp. 52–60).

A characteristic of this community is its relative susceptibility to radicalization, which in extreme cases results in increased aggression. As a result, incels are criticized for promoting aggression, hatred, and vulgar language, especially towards women. This phenomenon highlights yet another issue: the inability to manage one’s emotions (Sugiura, 2021, pp. 70–72).

3. Pastoral Strategies for Addressing the Crisis of Meaning in the Alpha Generation

The proposed pastoral responses also require clarification regarding the relationship between pastoral support and psychological assistance. Spiritual accompaniment should be understood as a practice rooted in the tradition and life of the Church, directed toward the development of one’s relationship with God and the integration of spiritual life. Psychology, by contrast, plays a complementary role by offering diagnostic tools and support for emotional and social functioning. These two orders are not identical, although they may fruitfully complement one another.

To strengthen the argument’s coherence, the pastoral proposals presented below are explicitly related to the anthropological categories discussed earlier in the article, particularly subjectivity, relationality, and transcendence. They are intended to function not only

illustratively, but also argumentatively, as concrete responses to the forms of fragmentation diagnosed in the analytical part of the article.

Given the phenomena associated with Generation Alpha's digital attachment, the question arises: which specific pastoral practices should be adopted to enable them to use the digital world responsibly, on the one hand, and to protect this generation from the harmful effects of disorder in virtual reality, on the other?

First, it must be clearly stated that digital reality cannot be eliminated from modern life. Any attempts to discredit this reality are counterproductive. Therefore, when assessing pastoral proactivity in response to phenomena spreading among Generation Alpha, it is necessary to consider measures that harness digital reality for specific pastoral activities to help young people escape the realm of digital meaninglessness. This task is highly demanding and must be grounded primarily in the group's specific dynamics. Nevertheless, the following section presents some general suggestions that may serve as inspiration for finding one's own solutions. These include small formation groups, religious tourism, individual spiritual direction, and spiritual renewal centres.

The development of digital communication has also contributed to the emergence of new forms of religious practice and community, often described in the literature as "digital religion," in which religious life is partially mediated through online communication and digital platforms (Campbell, 2013). This does not replace the embodied and sacramental life of the Church, but it does indicate that pastoral theology must take the digital environment seriously as a space of socialization, communication, and religious formation.

3.1 Small Formation Groups

Small formation groups can proactively support pastoral care in response to phenomena such as Incel, Cocktail Party, nomophobia, and cyberautomatism. An example of such groups is the concept of new pastoral groups and small home groups, initiated by the rector of the Polish Catholic Mission in France, Bogusław Brzyś (NewPastoral.net, 2025). Small home groups are gatherings of people who know one another well and regularly meet at home to prepare for formation meetings. The same group of people participates in each meeting. Meeting materials are available through a special app. It features testimonials from notable individuals and engaging videos that spark discussion based on the provided outline. Small home groups not only help build a real community once a month, but also allow participants to maintain constant contact. Additionally, the app provides continuous access to religious content, enabling each group member to share their posts or recordings inspired by the home meeting.

These must relate to current issues that young people hear about in the media. Leaders play a crucial role in these meetings, as they can empathize with participants and select the most appropriate language. It is also possible that such meetings will initially take place exclusively online. Such groups may initially function online, but over time, they can foster an embodied community in which participants can appear in a more au-

thentic, less performative way. In this sense, such a group will become a counterweight to phenomena such as Cocktail Party and Incel.

Small formation groups may therefore be interpreted as a practical realization of the effort to rebuild relationality and subjectivity under the conditions of digital culture, which corresponds to the humanistic vision of the person developed in the analytical part of the article.

3.2 Religious Tourism

Generation Alpha is growing up in a world that is, first and foremost, open and, secondly, very mobile. The world of Generation Alpha has no boundaries, not only in terms of territory, but also in terms of mentality and language. Overcoming the fear of the world, which, for their grandparents' generation, stemmed from factors such as the political situation, limited foreign-language skills, and economic instability, is no longer a concern for Generation Alpha. In addition, their approach to life as entertainment makes their professional life very fluid and free from emotional attachments. This encourages religious tourism by combining entertainment, new experiences, mobility, and openness to the world, thereby fostering profound spiritual experiences. According to one of the pioneers of religious tourism in Poland, Maciej Ostrowski, religious tourism is a journey during which, in addition to typical tourist elements such as physical activity, relaxation, and a desire to explore, religious aspects also appear, such as visiting places of worship or monuments and participating in religious ceremonies of different faiths to learn about them (Ostrowski, 2002, pp. 41–51; Ostrowski, 2005, pp. 41–44).

For young people of Generation Alpha, religious tourism can be an unforgettable adventure, a confrontation with a world known from films, such as medieval monasteries, a glimpse into the life of monks, e.g., in contemplative orders, or the subterranean spaces of old churches. Through such trips, a genuine community is created, built on authentic experiences in response to, for example, cocktail parties (Blittersdorf, 2014, pp. 24–41).

As such, religious tourism may be understood not merely as an attractive pastoral activity but as a concrete response to digitally mediated disembodiment, weakened communal experience, and the loss of contact with spatially and symbolically dense environments.

3.3 Individual Spiritual Accompaniment

Individual spiritual accompaniment helps people find their place and follow their path. Above all, it helps discover one's spiritual source and draw from it. Spiritual accompaniment helps individuals recognize the obstacles they encounter on their life path and suggests specific spiritual exercises through which they can discover the depth of spiritual life and draw strength from it for everyday tasks. Its main goal is to support an ever-increasing openness to the experience of God.

Given Generation Alpha's tendency toward idealized and digitally curated self-presentation, individual spiritual accompaniment may become one of the few spaces in which a person can confront the real self outside the logic of performative visibility. It may provi-

de a context of acceptance, discernment, and interior integration that resists the pressures of comparison, exhibition, and fragmentation characteristic of digital culture. This must be a space to which young people have constant access when life in digital falsehood exhausts them, and they experience various frustrations against this backdrop. It must be a space in which they can confront their authentic personality rather than an idealised image. Moreover, they must feel accepted and welcome in this space and draw support from it when they are hurt or need practical help. In this sense, individual spiritual accompaniment may constitute an adequate pastoral response to digital narcissism and cyberbullying, while psychological support may remain a distinct but complementary form of help where emotional or mental-health difficulties require it.

Individual spiritual accompaniment thus appears as a particular form of work on subjectivity, enabling the integration of inner experience with the narrative unity of one's life. In this respect, it stands in direct opposition to the fragmentation of identity characteristic of the digital environment.

3.4 Spiritual Renewal Centres

Young people of Generation Alpha are growing up in a specific social context. They increasingly spend their childhood and youth in patchwork families, broken families where, although they lack nothing in material terms, they face serious emotional challenges related to the atmosphere of family life (Pasteels & Bastaits, 2020, pp. 213–231). The family alienation that can occur in this context, combined with the experience of cocktail parties, intensifies the feeling of alienation and loneliness. The Church should therefore adequately anticipate this social situation. This is already happening, but on a small scale. An example of this is the pastoral work of the Holy Spirit Association, which was reactivated in Poland after a hundred years. Its primary goal is to establish Holy Spirit houses along tourist routes, serving as shelters for tourists and places of spiritual rest.

Revived after a hundred years, the association already has four such houses worldwide, located in Poland, Germany, France, and Ukraine. Many young people from all over the world take advantage of what is offered.² Young people come here to experience the warmth, cordiality, and love of others and find motivation for their future lives. In the houses operated by the Association, emphasis is placed on collaboration, prayer, and an engaging educational and pastoral program. The location of these homes, close to nature, is also important. It allows for spiritual rest and restores physical strength for further activity. The friendly atmosphere is conducive to building relationships and fostering a sense of home.

From anthropological and pastoral perspectives, such centres address a cluster of problems identified earlier in the article: loneliness, weakened relational bonds, instability of belonging, and a lack of environments conducive to interiority. They are therefore not

2 The example of these centers is accessible under: Haus Concordia – A Place of Encounter in Germany, accessed February 14, 2026. <https://www.haus-concordia.com/web/de/home-2>.

merely organizational initiatives, but spaces in which a more integral form of embodied, communal, and spiritually meaningful life may become possible.

Conclusion

The argument developed in this article can be summarised as a theological claim concerning the conditions of faith transmission in digitally mediated contexts. The emergence of Generation Alpha should be understood not merely as the appearance of a new sociological cohort, but as a sign of a deeper transformation of the cognitive and relational conditions under which faith, authority, and community are received and interpreted. This article has argued that digital mediation does not remain external to human agency; rather, it shapes attention, memory, authority structures, and modes of presence. If practical theology presupposes that faith is received, interpreted, and enacted within historically situated forms of cognition and sociality, then a transformation of these forms necessarily becomes a theological concern.

The decisive issue is therefore anthropological. Christian theology affirms that the human person is ordered toward truth and communion. When the structures through which truth is encountered and relationships are sustained are modified, theology must ask whether these new structures facilitate or inhibit a person's orientation toward truth. The problem is not technology as such, but the normative patterns of cognition and interaction that it stabilises. A digitally saturated environment may expand access to information while simultaneously fragmenting attention; it may intensify connectivity while weakening embodied communion. Theological reflection must therefore distinguish between mediation as such and mediation that redefines the grammar of authority and presence.

The pastoral proposals discussed in this article – such as small formation groups, religious tourism, individual spiritual accompaniment, and spiritual renewal centres – should therefore be understood not as optional pastoral initiatives or merely pragmatic solutions, but as responses to transformed conditions of subjectivity, relationality, and the experience of reality. In this sense, pastoral practice appears not as a secondary application of theological reflection, but as a privileged locus in which the Church responds to historically changing conditions of human experience and communication.

In this context, the metaphor proposed by Otto Neurath offers an apt description of the Church's situation: "We are like sailors who have to rebuild their ship on the open sea, never able to dismantle it in dry-dock and to reconstruct it there out of the best materials" (Neurath, 1973, p. 199). The Church cannot suspend its historical embeddedness in order to redesign pastoral structures from an external vantage point. Reconstruction takes place within the very conditions that require it. This entails a disciplined, piecemeal reconfiguration rather than programmatic rupture.

Such reconfiguration is best understood not as innovation in the sense of novelty production, but as semantic and practical reactivation. Reflections on metaphor by Friedrich Nietzsche and Donald Davidson – interpreted through discussions in Ortony (1993,

pp. 114–118) and Rorty (2012, pp. 162–172) – highlight that new insight often arises through the creative redeployment of inherited language. Transposed into pastoral theology, this suggests that the Church's task is not to replace its practices with technologically fashionable substitutes, but to reinterpret and re-enact established practices under altered conditions of reception. The criterion is not originality, but fidelity capable of renewed intelligibility.

The reconstruction demanded by the emergence of Generation Alpha is thus neither a strategic adjustment nor a cultural concession. It concerns the intelligibility of faith under transformed epistemic conditions. Further theological work should therefore clarify the relation between digitally shaped cognition and classical anthropological claims concerning freedom, truth, and relationality. Empirical research into the reception of authority, community, and religious language among digitally formed generations would refine this analysis. Finally, a systematic evaluation of pastoral initiatives that integrate embodied community with digital mediation is required in order to avoid both nostalgic defensiveness and uncritical technological accommodation.

The present article has been theoretical and interpretive in character and has not presented original empirical research; rather, it has proposed a theological-anthropological framework intended to guide further empirical and pastoral investigation. Practical theology, if it is to remain coherent with its own presuppositions, must address the transformation brought about by digital culture not only at the level of methods and strategies, but at the level of the anthropological and epistemic conditions under which faith can remain intelligible, credible, and livable in contemporary digitally mediated forms of life.

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