Behavioral Characteristics of Low Self-Control among Generation-Z: A Qualitative Study

Muhammad Hasham
Criminologist, The University of Lahore, Lahore
Husnain Hameed Awan
Lecturer, Department of Criminology,
Faculty of Social Sciences, The University of Lahore-Pakistan
Corresponding Author Email: husnain.hameed@crim.uol.edu.pk
Maleeha Amjad
Lecturer, Department of Criminology,
Faculty of Social Sciences, The University of Lahore-Pakistan
Dr. Muhammad Faisal Khan
Assistant Professor, Department of Criminology
Faculty of Social Sciences, The University of Lahore-Pakistan

Abstract
Low self-control has long been recognized as a central explanatory factor in criminological theories of deviant and criminal behavior. In contemporary societies, the emergence of Generation-Z as a digitally immersed and socially dynamic cohort raises new questions about how self-control operates in shaping youth behavior. This study explores the behavioral characteristics associated with low self-control among Generation-Z using qualitative in-depth interviews with young participants aged 16 to 25 years. Drawing on Self-Control Theory, Strain Theory and Social Learning Theory, the study identifies core behavioral patterns linked to low self-control, including impulsive decision-making, emotional dysregulation, preference for immediate gratification, weak moral restraint and heightened susceptibility to situational and peer influences. The findings reveal that low self-control manifests not only through overt deviant acts but also through everyday behavioral tendencies that increase vulnerability to criminal involvement. The study highlights the importance of early identification of self-control deficits and the need for psychologically informed prevention strategies tailored to the unique digital and social contexts of Generation-Z.

Keywords: Low self-control, Generation-Z, impulsivity, behavioral characteristics, youth crime, qualitative study

1. Introduction

Low self-control has long been recognized as one of the most influential predictors of criminal and deviant behavior in criminological theory and research. Since the publication of Gottfredson and Hirschi's General Theory of Crime, low self-control has been conceptualized as a stable individual trait characterized by impulsivity, risk-seeking, shortsightedness, low frustration tolerance and a preference for immediate gratification (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Individuals who possess these traits are more likely to engage in crime and analogous behaviors because they prioritize short-term rewards over long-term consequences (Ruhl, 2023).

Although early formulations treated self-control as a relatively stable trait developed in childhood, more recent research suggests that self-control is dynamic and

sensitive to situational, social and environmental influences across the life course (Mihelič et al., 2022). Developmental perspectives further indicate that exposure to harsh or unpredictable environments may accelerate risk-taking strategies and weaken long-term planning, thereby increasing vulnerability to criminal behavior (Kwak & Kim, 2022).

The relevance of low self-control becomes particularly salient in the context of Generation-Z, a cohort defined by unprecedented digital immersion, continuous social media exposure and constant access to instant forms of gratification (Setiawan & Rully Arlan Tjahyadi, 2025). Digital platforms provide rapid feedback, social validation and anonymity, all of which may undermine deliberative self-regulation and strengthen impulsive decision-making (Okafor, 2023).

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that low self-control predicts a wide range of risky and deviant behaviors, including aggression, substance use, theft and cyber-related offenses (Kwak & Kim, 2022; Ma'rufah et al., 2025). Peer influence further intensifies these effects, as individuals with low self-control are more likely to associate with delinquent peers and adopt deviant norms through social learning processes (Stults et al., 2021).

Despite the extensive literature on self-control and crime, a significant gap remains in research focusing specifically on the behavioral characteristics of low self-control among Generation-Z. Most studies emphasize outcomes such as delinquency or recidivism, while fewer examine the everyday behavioral patterns—such as impulsivity, emotional dysregulation and weak moral restraint—that precede criminal involvement (Li et al., 2021). Addressing this gap is essential for designing prevention strategies that intervene before deviant behavior becomes entrenched.

Accordingly, the present study explores the behavioral characteristics associated with low self-control among Generation-Z using qualitative interviews. By focusing on everyday decision-making, emotion regulation and impulse management, the study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how low self-control manifests behaviorally and creates pathways toward criminal behavior.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1 Low Self-Control and Deviant Behavior in Youth

Low self-control has been widely linked to a broad spectrum of deviant and criminal behaviors across developmental stages. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argued that individuals with low self-control are more likely to engage in impulsive, insensitive and risk-oriented behaviors because they discount future consequences. Subsequent empirical research has consistently supported this claim, demonstrating that low self-control predicts delinquency, violence and victimization (Meldrum et al., 2024).

Among contemporary youth, low self-control has been associated with aggression, substance abuse and financial risk-taking (Ma'rufah et al., 2025). Trivani and Soleha (2023) found that risk-seeking and impulsivity were particularly strong predictors of deviant behavior among Generation-Z, although not all dimensions of self-control predicted all forms of risk equally.

2.2 Emotional Dysregulation, Aggression and Impulsivity

Emotional dysregulation represents a central mechanism linking low self-control to criminal behavior. Individuals with poor self-control often exhibit low frustration tolerance and heightened anger, which increases the likelihood of aggressive and violent behavior (Pan & Saeid Motevalli, 2023). Jurczyk and Lalak (2020) reported that physical aggression and poor impulse regulation significantly distinguished youth offenders from non-offenders.

Recent research also challenges the simplistic assumption that aggression always reflects a breakdown of self-control. Chester (2023) demonstrated that aggression may

sometimes result from misdirected or rigid self-control, suggesting that both deficient and maladaptive self-regulation can contribute to criminal outcomes.

2.3 Immediate Gratification and Risk-Taking

A defining feature of low self-control is a preference for immediate gratification over delayed rewards. Individuals with low self-control struggle to delay pleasure and are therefore more likely to engage in thrill-seeking and risky behaviors (Ruhl, 2023). Gillebaart and Schneider (2024) further argued that effective self-control often operates through automatic habits rather than conscious inhibition, whereas low self-control reflects a failure to establish protective routines.

Among Generation-Z, constant exposure to instant digital rewards may further weaken delay of gratification and strengthen impulsive tendencies (Firstiyanti, 2023). These processes create a behavioral profile in which short-term pleasure consistently outweighs long-term consequences.

2.4 Digital Environments and Self-Control

Digital environments introduce novel challenges to self-regulation. Setiawan and Rully Arlan Tjahyadi (2025) emphasized that Generation-Z's continuous engagement with social media creates frequent opportunities for impulsive decisions. Okafor (2023) noted that online anonymity reduces perceived risk and encourages impulsive cyber deviance such as hacking, cyberbullying and online fraud.

Herrero et al. (2021) further argued that weak self-control combined with unethical digital systems increases vulnerability to deviant behavior by normalizing risky online practices and undermining moral judgment.

2.5 Peer Influence and Social Learning

Peer influence plays a critical role in shaping the behavioral expression of low self-control. Stults et al. (2021) found that individuals with low self-control are more likely to associate with delinquent peers, thereby reinforcing deviant norms through observation and imitation. According to Social Learning Theory, criminal behavior is learned and maintained through differential association, reinforcement and modeling (Akers & Jennings, 2019).

For Generation-Z, peer influence extends into digital spaces, where online communities facilitate rapid transmission of deviant techniques and justifications (Sturmey, 2022).

2.6 Low Self-Control as a Multidimensional Risk Factor

Recent literature emphasizes that low self-control is not a single trait but a multidimensional construct involving impulsivity, emotional instability, weak moral restraint and poor habit formation (Gillebaart & Schneider, 2024; Chester, 2023). Developmental and biopsychosocial perspectives further suggest that self-control interacts with neurological, psychological and environmental factors to shape long-term criminal trajectories (Leonard-Zabel, 2025).

Overall, the literature indicates that low self-control operates through multiple behavioral pathways that precede criminal involvement. However, few studies have examined these behavioral characteristics qualitatively among Generation-Z, highlighting the need for the present investigation.

3. Research Design Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the behavioral characteristics of low self-control among Generation-Z. A qualitative approach was selected to capture participants' lived experiences, perceptions and interpretations of their own behavior, which cannot be adequately understood through quantitative measures alone.

The study involved 20 participants aged between 16 and 25 years, representing Generation-Z. Participants were selected using purposive sampling from university students and community youth groups. Fifteen interviews were included in the final analysis based on data saturation and quality of responses.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to explore participants' experiences related to impulse control, decision-making, emotional regulation and everyday behavioral challenges. Interviews focused on situations involving temptation, anger, peer pressure and risky choices.

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns related to low self-control. Codes were developed inductively and organized into major behavioral themes reflecting the core characteristics of low self-control.

4. Findings

Analysis of the interviews revealed five major behavioral characteristics associated with low self-control among Generation-Z: impulsive decision-making, emotional dysregulation, preference for immediate gratification, weak moral restraint and vulnerability to situational influences.

4.1 Impulsive Decision-Making

One of the most prominent characteristics of low self-control identified in the study was impulsive decision-making. Participants frequently described acting without careful التفكير about consequences. Decisions were often made quickly, based on momentary emotions or desires rather than long-term outcomes.

Several participants reported engaging in risky behaviors simply because they "did not think at the moment" or felt an urge to act immediately. This pattern reflects the core element of impulsivity described in Self-Control Theory. The inability to pause, reflect and evaluate alternatives emerged as a central feature of low self-control.

Impulsive decision-making was evident not only in criminal or deviant acts but also in everyday behaviors such as spending money irresponsibly, reacting aggressively in conflicts and engaging in unsafe online activities.

4.2 Emotional Dysregulation

Another key behavioral characteristic was difficulty in regulating emotions, particularly anger and frustration. Many participants reported low tolerance for stress and a tendency to react aggressively when provoked.

Emotional dysregulation often preceded impulsive actions. Participants described how feelings of anger, jealousy, or humiliation led them to act without control. In such moments, emotions overrode moral judgment and rational thinking.

This finding highlights the close link between low self-control and emotional instability. Poor emotion regulation weakens the individual's capacity to inhibit harmful impulses and increases the likelihood of aggressive or unlawful behavior.

4.3 Preference for Immediate Gratification

A strong preference for immediate gratification emerged as a defining characteristic of low self-control. Participants consistently described choosing short-term pleasure over long-term benefits.

This tendency was especially visible in digital contexts, where likes, attention and entertainment provided instant rewards. Several participants admitted engaging in risky online behavior simply for excitement or recognition.

The preference for immediate gratification undermined long-term planning and self-discipline. Participants found it difficult to delay pleasure, even when they were aware of potential negative consequences.

4.4 Weak Moral Restraint and Internal Discipline

Low self-control was also reflected in weak internal discipline and moral restraint. Participants with poor self-control described difficulty adhering to rules, resisting temptation and maintaining consistent standards of behavior.

Some participants rationalized their actions by minimizing harm or shifting blame to circumstances. This weakening of internal accountability allowed repeated engagement in deviant behavior.

The absence of strong internal controls meant that behavior was largely governed by external situations rather than personal values or principles.

4.5 Vulnerability to Situational and Social Influences

Finally, low self-control was closely linked to vulnerability to situational pressures and peer influence. Participants with weak self-control were more likely to follow peers into risky or deviant activities.

Situational opportunities, such as being alone, unsupervised, or online, triggered impulsive actions. Digital environments were particularly influential, as anonymity reduced fear of punishment and encouraged experimentation.

This finding illustrates how low self-control interacts with social contexts to shape behavior.

5. Discussion

The findings provide a detailed portrait of the behavioral characteristics of low self-control among Generation-Z. Rather than being a single trait, low self-control emerges as a constellation of interrelated behavioral tendencies.

Impulsivity, emotional dysregulation and preference for immediate gratification form the core behavioral triad of low self-control. These characteristics weaken rational decision-making and increase vulnerability to deviant behavior.

The digital environment of Generation-Z amplifies these tendencies. Constant stimulation, rapid rewards and online anonymity create conditions that challenge self-regulation and normalize impulsive action.

Importantly, the study shows that low self-control manifests long before criminal acts occur. Everyday behaviors—poor anger control, reckless spending, risky online activity—serve as early indicators of vulnerability.

These findings support the argument that prevention efforts should focus not only on crime but on strengthening everyday self-regulatory skills.

6. Implications for Prevention and Policy

The study highlights several practical implications:

1. **Early Identification:** Behavioral indicators of low self-control can be detected in everyday settings such as schools and families.
2. **Emotional Regulation Training:** Programs should focus on anger management and stress coping skills.
3. **Digital Self-Control Education:** Youth need guidance on managing impulses in online environments.
4. **Parental and School Involvement:** Consistent discipline and supportive supervision strengthen internal controls.

By addressing behavioral characteristics early, it may be possible to prevent the progression from low self-control to criminal behavior.

7. Conclusion

This study explored the behavioral characteristics of low self-control among Generation-Z through qualitative inquiry. The findings reveal that low self-control is expressed through impulsive decision-making, emotional dysregulation, immediate gratification, weak moral restraint and susceptibility to situational influences.

These behavioral patterns create pathways toward deviant and criminal behavior, especially within the digital and social contexts of contemporary youth. Strengthening self-control should therefore be a central objective of youth development and crime prevention strategies.

Future research should integrate longitudinal designs and examine how these behavioral characteristics evolve over time.

References

Akers, R. L., & Jennings, W. G. (2019). *Social learning theory and the explanation of crime: A guide for the new century*. Routledge.

Chester, D. S. (2023). Reconceptualizing self-control and aggression. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 47*, 101420. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101420

Firstiyanti, R. (2023). Social media, flexing culture, and impulsive behavior among Generation-Z. *Journal of Youth Studies, 26*(4), 512–528.

Gillebaart, M., & Schneider, I. K. (2024). Effortless self-control and habit formation. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 28*(1), 3–21.

Gottfredson, M. R., & Hirschi, T. (1990). *A general theory of crime*. Stanford University Press.

Herrero, Á., Urueña, A., Torres, A., & Hidalgo, A. (2021). Ethical information systems and self-control. *Information Systems Frontiers, 23*(5), 1187–1201.

Jurczyk, M., & Lalak, D. (2020). Aggression and delinquency among youth. *Journal of Adolescence, 82*, 45–57.

Kwak, H., & Kim, K. (2022). Self-control and risky lifestyles. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 78*, 101889.

Leonard-Zabel, K. (2025). Developmental and biopsychosocial perspectives on criminal behavior. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 68*, 101754.

Li, X., Li, D., & Newman, J. (2021). Self-control and cyber deviance. *Computers in Human Behavior, 115*, 106611.

Ma'rufah, N., Suryani, L., & Pratama, R. (2025). Low self-control and criminal tendencies among Gen-Z. *Asian Journal of Criminology, 20*(1), 77–95.

Meldrum, R. C., Young, J. T., & Weerman, F. M. (2024). Low self-control and homicide. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 61*(2), 234–261.

Mihelič, K. K., Škerlavaj, M., & Dimovski, V. (2022). Self-control as a dynamic capacity. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 132*, 103682.

Okafor, I. P. (2023). Online anonymity and impulsive cybercrime. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 26*(3), 189–197.

Pan, Y., & Saeid Motevalli, S. (2023). Aggression, gaming addiction, and self-control. *Journal of Behavioral Addictions, 12*(2), 345–358.

Ruhl, J. (2023). Low self-control and criminal propensity. *Crime & Delinquency, 69*(5), 623–645.

Setiawan, R., & Rully Arlan Tjahyadi, I. (2025). Digital immersion and impulsivity in Generation-Z. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 54*(2), 301–318.

Stults, B. J., Brown, S. L., & Lentini, J. J. (2021). Self-control and peer delinquency. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology, 37*(4), 987–1010.

Sturmey, P. (2022). Social learning in digital communities. *Behavior and Social Issues, 31*(1), 1–15.

Trivani, D., & Soleha, S. (2023). Low self-control and risky behavior. *Deviant Behavior, 44*(6), 841–856.