

Fragmented Ethics of Gen Z in the Age of Digital Disruption

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ABSTRACT

Digital disruption has fundamentally transformed how Generation Z communicates, yet little scholarly attention has been paid to how this generation constructs and negotiates ethical boundaries within everyday online interactions. Grounded in Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory and Social Identity Theory, this study examines the reconfiguration of ethical values in Gen Z's digital communication practices across TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter/X. Employing a qualitative netnographic approach combined with summative content analysis, data were gathered from February to June 2025 through digital ethnography of selected accounts demonstrating key phenomena of alter account use, generational slang, and platform-specific ethical norms. The analysis reveals that Gen Z exhibits a highly contextual and performative mode of ethical reasoning, wherein alter accounts reflect Goffman's front stage and back stage dynamics and the adoption of exclusive slang signals in-group solidarity consistent with Social Identity Theory. Rather than adhering to fixed normative codes, Gen Z constructs ethics through community consensus, algorithmic visibility, and affective engagement. These findings suggest that digital disruption does not merely alter media channels but actively reshapes generational ethics into dynamic, situational, and socially negotiated constructs — with practical implications for digital literacy education, content regulation, and intergenerational communication strategy.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Submitted: 7 August 2025

Revised: 10 December 2025

Accepted: 31 January 2026

KEYWORDS

algorithmic influence, digital identity, participatory ethics, platform-based expression, youth online behaviour

INTRODUCTION

The era of digital disruption has fundamentally reconfigured how Generation Z perceives information and forms attitudes, with social networks exerting greater influence than digital media alone (Chang & Chang, 2023). For Generation Z—often described as digital natives—social interaction is increasingly mediated through online platforms, frequently taking precedence over traditional face-to-face encounters. This generation was born and raised in a

world saturated with connectivity, where digital interaction is not an alternative but the default mode of engagement. This reality is particularly pronounced in Indonesia, where Gen Z's media consumption patterns are shaped significantly by platform-specific affordances and peer-driven content cultures (APJII, 2024, 2025; Evita et al., 2023). According to the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII), internet penetration in Indonesia reached 80.66 percent in 2025, with Generation Z recording a penetration rate of 87.80 percent—one of the highest among all generational cohorts. In 2024, Gen Z (born 1997–2012) contributed the largest share of internet users nationally at 34.40 percent, underscoring the extent to which this generation drives the country's digital landscape. As communication migrates to digital spaces, new patterns of behavior, linguistic expression, and ethical considerations continue to emerge.

Digital communication no longer simply transmits information; it functions as a performative act that constructs reality, reinforces collective identities, and generates normative expectations. The ubiquity and immersive nature of exposure to online content fosters a communication ecosystem that is decentralized, largely unregulated, and increasingly shaped by platform logic rather than formal institutions (Farrahsasti et al., 2024; Simeone & Russo, 2017). This shift has prompted scholars to reconsider how ethics and values are produced and enacted in virtual environments, especially among younger generations.

Generational identity is socially constructed, historically situated, and discursively reproduced. Numerous studies have mapped generational differences across various domains, such as emoji usage (Prada et al., 2018), workplace attitudes (Weeks & Schaffert, 2019), environmental concerns (Jordan, 2021; Tyson et al., 2021), and marketing segmentation (Munsch, 2021). These studies offer critical insight into the differentiated values, behaviors, and preferences across generational cohorts. However, they often overlook how moments of technological rupture—such as digital disruption—destabilize the coherence of generational categories themselves. In contexts where communication tools, social platforms, and content formats change rapidly, generational labels risk becoming overly rigid, obscuring the complexity of how individuals actually perform their identities and navigate social norms. As Bennett and Maton argue, the use of fixed generational distinctions may conceal more than they reveal, particularly in fluid digital contexts where cultural capital and technological literacy are unequally distributed even within a single cohort (Bennett & Maton, 2010). This study therefore questions the analytical usefulness of generational labels in understanding communication ethics, and instead foregrounds how values are emergent, performative, and contingent upon media environments.

Within the architecture of social media platforms, Gen Z demonstrates distinct communication styles marked by creativity, irony, and emotional transparency, differing substantially from the communication preferences of preceding generational cohorts (Leaver et al., 2020; Raslie & Ting, 2021). One illustrative practice is the use of "alter" or secondary Instagram accounts, which allow users to disclose personal narratives, share emotionally charged content, and cultivate more intimate social relationships. These accounts are typically private, curated for a limited audience, and often contrast with the polished, public-facing

persona maintained on primary accounts (Huang & Vitak, 2022; Watuseke et al., 2023). This dual-account strategy reflects Gen Z's negotiation between visibility and vulnerability, a pattern that has been documented among Indonesian university students as a deliberate form of online identity construction. Through this practice, identity is not merely expressed but continuously recalibrated through the interface, audience feedback, and perceived norms within peer communities — a process in which platform choice itself becomes an ethical act. Generation Z's value systems are consequently deeply entangled with their media choices and platform preferences, oscillating between visibility and authenticity (Hällgren & Björk, 2023; Tirocchi, 2023), a tension that manifests with particular intensity in the Indonesian digital context.

Another key phenomenon is the normalization of previously taboo or vulgar slang expressions such as "anjir," "bjirr," and "anjay" in everyday digital discourse. These terms, though initially considered offensive, have undergone semantic shifts and are now frequently used to convey amusement, shock, or social bonding. Their adoption indicates a broader transformation in youth language practices, where verbal aggression is reframed as humor, solidarity, or emotional sincerity (Putri et al., 2021; Viklous, 2022). Similar trends have been observed in international contexts, where Gen Z employs irony, sarcasm, and "off-limits" humor as a means of resisting normative expectations and asserting generational identity (Leaver et al., 2020). Rather than functioning as moral violations, these linguistic practices become tools for community building and expressive freedom. Such developments reflect how digital ethics are increasingly context-sensitive and negotiated through affective peer interactions, rather than imposed by universal standards.

Two theoretical frameworks are particularly productive for analyzing these phenomena. First, Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory (1959) provides a conceptual lens through which the alter account phenomenon can be understood as a form of strategic self-presentation. Goffman argues that social life resembles theatrical performance, wherein individuals manage impressions across "front stage" and "back stage" regions. Applied to the digital context, social media blurs the traditional boundary between these regions, enabling users to manage distinct performances across different audience settings (Wang, 2022). A Gen Z user's primary account thus functions as the front stage—a carefully curated, public-facing performance designed for broad audiences—while the alter account operates as the back stage, a space of relative freedom where authentic, unfiltered self-expression occurs away from institutional scrutiny and social judgment (Goffman, 1959). This dramaturgical reading explains not merely the structural separation of accounts, but the ethical logic underpinning it: different moral standards govern each stage of performance depending on the perceived audience and level of intimacy.

Second, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) offers a framework for examining how the exclusive use of Gen Z slang functions as a mechanism of in-group boundary construction. According to this theory, individuals derive a significant part of their self-concept from membership in social groups, and they actively differentiate their in-group from out-groups in order to maintain positive social identity. In digital environments, coded language such as "anjir," "gaskeun," and "bngst" serves not merely as communication but as a symbolic

marker of generational belonging—signaling membership, reinforcing solidarity, and creating deliberate barriers of intelligibility for those outside the peer community (Putri et al., 2021; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Together, these frameworks illuminate how ethics and identity in Gen Z's digital practices are not arbitrary but are systematically organized through performance and group differentiation.

The implications of these processes extend beyond interpersonal communication, influencing how values are transmitted, contested, and reshaped in the public sphere. Algorithmic curation privileges certain types of content—often those that are emotionally charged, humorous, or controversial—thereby reinforcing communicative behaviors that align with platform logics (Gerbaudo, 2024). TikTok in particular has restructured social publics from network-based interactions toward interest-cluster dynamics (Gerbaudo, 2024; Hadinata et al., 2026; Wulandari et al., 2025), with significant implications for how users perceive their own identities and values (Ionescu & Licu, 2023; Oden & Porter, 2023; Turvy, 2025). This phenomenon raises critical questions about whether Gen Z's ethical frameworks are being cultivated through deliberative engagement or shaped reactively in response to digital stimuli and peer feedback. While previous research has examined the effects of social media on youth identity, mental health, and political engagement, relatively few studies have interrogated the formation of digital ethics as a distinct area of inquiry. Addressing this gap requires situating ethical practices within the socio-technical systems that enable and constrain them, acknowledging both the agency of users and the structuring influence of technological affordances (Paasonen, 2021).

Despite the significance of these behavioral and linguistic transformations, there remains a scarcity of research that systematically investigates how ethical frameworks are constructed, negotiated, and enacted by Gen Z in response to digital disruption. Most existing literature tends to focus on either psychological well-being or digital literacy (Al Ketbi et al., 2025; Avci et al., 2025; Valkenburg, 2022), leaving a theoretical gap in understanding the ethical dimensions of digital youth culture. This study seeks to fill that gap by analyzing how Gen Z in Indonesia interprets and performs ethical behavior within the everyday practices of digital communication. Specifically, the research aims to (1) investigate how ethical values are manifested in Gen Z's linguistic choices and platform-specific practices, (2) analyze how in-group and out-group dynamics within peer communities produce and sustain those ethical expressions, and (3) examine the role of digital disruption in transforming conventional ethical standards.

The novelty of this study lies in its conceptualization of digital ethics not as a fixed moral code, but as an emergent, performative, and participatory construct shaped by the interplay of dramaturgical performance, social identity negotiation, algorithmic design, and the affective economies of digital communities. By foregrounding the contextual and collective dimensions of ethical behavior in virtual spaces, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how youth negotiate values in a hyperconnected, structurally disrupted media landscape.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative netnographic design to investigate the shifting patterns of communication and ethical reasoning among Generation Z in the context of digital disruption. Netnography—a method rooted in the tradition of online ethnography—is particularly suited for analyzing community practices, linguistic choices, and value systems embedded within user-generated content in virtual spaces (Kozinets, 2020). As digital natives who simultaneously inhabit multiple social media platforms, Gen Z constitutes a compelling subject for this form of inquiry, given the centrality of platform-mediated interaction in shaping their social identities and ethical orientations.

Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) were selected as the primary data sources for three interrelated reasons: their documented dominance in the Indonesian Gen Z digital landscape, their distinct affordances for identity performance and community discourse, and their structural capacity to host the phenomena under investigation—namely, alter account practices and the circulation of coded generational slang. Rather than treating these platforms merely as conduits for communication, they were approached as cultural fields in which identity, ethics, and social norms are actively negotiated and reproduced. Consistent with Kendall and Wickham's (1999) genealogical approach to discourse analysis, the totality of platform content—texts, images, hashtags, memes, videos, and interactional threads—was treated as a corpus of statements reflecting broader cultural formations and normative expectations (Kendall & Wickham, 1999).

Data collection was conducted between February and June 2025 through systematic digital participant observation. The researcher engaged in sustained immersion within Gen Z-dominated online communities, employing a multi-modal sampling strategy that included keyword-based search queries, hashtag tracing, account mapping, tagging analysis, and observation of user interactions across reply threads and video response chains. Particular analytical attention was directed toward content featuring spontaneous vernacular expression, informal language use, and explicit or implicit ethical stances articulated in posts, captions, and comment sections.

Account selection followed a purposive sampling strategy guided by four inclusion criteria: (1) accounts demonstrably operated by Gen Z users, identified through self-disclosed age, biographical information, or content characteristics consistent with the 1997–2012 birth cohort; (2) accounts exhibiting high engagement rates, as evidenced by active interactions through comments, shares, duets, or reply threads, indicating genuine community participation rather than passive content broadcasting; (3) accounts consistently demonstrating at least one of the key phenomena under investigation—alter or secondary account practices reflecting front stage and back stage identity dynamics, habitual employment of Gen Z-specific coded language, or the articulation of ethical stances within digital content; and (4) accounts that were publicly accessible at the time of observation, in accordance with established netnographic standards for the ethical observation of publicly available digital behavior. This iterative selection process yielded a final corpus of more than 20 accounts across the three platforms, including accounts on TikTok (e.g.,

@brandnewmonster, @dinsha, @silamki), Instagram (e.g., @fradelsaa paired with @wufflemonade, and @nailakh._ alongside @naichiato), and X (e.g., @fuckingdustbag, @hybeeland), collectively representing diverse expressions of Gen Z digital communication culture within the Indonesian context.

Given that all data were drawn exclusively from publicly accessible accounts, no informed consent procedures were required under the prevailing netnographic research ethics framework (Kozinets, 2020). To further protect user privacy, the analysis prioritizes the interpretation of communicative patterns and linguistic trends rather than the identification or profiling of individual users.

To complement and systematize the netnographic observations, a summative content analysis was conducted to quantify and contextualize the frequency and pragmatic functions of specific linguistic patterns (Krippendorff, 2022). This mixed-methods integration enabled the study to account for both quantitative indicators—such as the relative frequency of slang expressions across platforms and content genres—and qualitative dimensions, including the moral logic and affective registers embedded in user narratives. Linguistic items were coded according to three dimensions: (a) emotional tone (e.g., humorous, aggressive, affective); (b) rhetorical function (e.g., critique, solidarity-building, identity signaling); and (c) social implication (e.g., norm reinforcement, in-group boundary construction). Terms that had previously carried vulgar or taboo connotations were subjected to particular scrutiny, with attention paid to their semantic shifts and pragmatic normalization within peer discourse.

The analytical process proceeded in three sequential stages. In the first stage, the researcher engaged in extended immersion within content streams and community threads to develop contextual sensitivity and identify recurring patterns of communication. In the second stage, linguistic and behavioral patterns were systematically coded across posts, comment sections, and interaction sequences, guided explicitly by the two theoretical frameworks: Goffman's (1959) Dramaturgical Theory, applied to analyze front stage and back stage identity performances across primary and alter accounts, and Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory, applied to interpret in-group boundary construction through coded generational slang and community-specific norms. In the third stage, emergent themes were interpreted in relation to the research objectives, with particular focus on how ethical reasoning is constructed, negotiated, and enacted within platform-specific communicative contexts. Triangulation of netnographic observation and summative content analysis ensured both interpretive depth and analytical rigor, enabling a contextually grounded understanding of how digital disruption reconfigures the ethical frameworks of Generation Z in Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigates how digital disruption reconfigures the communication patterns and ethical values of Generation Z through their everyday social media practices. Data gathered through netnography across Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X are analyzed through the dual theoretical lenses of Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory (1959) and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Rather than treating these frameworks as post-hoc labels, the

analysis foregrounds their explanatory mechanisms—impression management, front and back stage dynamics, social categorization, and intergroup differentiation—to account for why Gen Z's digital ethics take the specific forms they do. The findings converge around three interconnected phenomena: the normalization of coded slang as a boundary-marking mechanism, the use of layered account strategies as a morally structured form of identity segmentation, and the role of algorithmic logic and intergenerational conflict in reshaping the very foundations of ethical conduct in digital environments.

Observations across TikTok accounts such as @dinsha, @brandnewmonster, @silamki, and @zaviersyari, as well as Twitter/X accounts including @hybeeland, @casytaleo, and @yapperdolls, reveal that Generation Z employs a highly distinctive vernacular characterized by modified profanities and hybrid expressions, including 'anjir,' 'jir,' 'bjirr,' 'santuy,' 'gaje,' and 'cringe,' as well as hybrid phrases such as 'awkward vibes.' As summarized in Table 1, a summative content analysis of observed content confirms that 'anjir' and its variants appeared in more than thirteen instances across the observed accounts, deployed across a range of emotional registers—surprise, amusement, admiration, and annoyance.

Table 1 The Result of A Summative Content Analysis of Gen Z's Distinctive Language

Word / Phrase	Frequency of Occurrence	Usage Context	Social and Ethical Function
<i>anjir / anjirrr</i>	13+	Expression of surprise, amazement, annoyance	Enhances emotional expression; signifies informal closeness
<i>bjirr / jir / jirrr</i>	6+	Variant of <i>anjir</i> , more expressive	Emotional slang variation; intensifies reaction
<i>gila</i>	4+	Sarcasm, internal humor	Functions as satire; strengthens interpersonal bonding through humor
<i>bangsat / bngst</i>	3+	Expressing shock or empathetic teasing	Critique framed as familiar expression; builds group solidarity

To understand this pattern as more than a linguistic curiosity, it is necessary to engage the full explanatory apparatus of Social Identity Theory. Tajfel and Turner (1979) argue that group membership is not merely a social fact but a cognitive and motivational process through which individuals derive self-esteem from belonging to positively valued in-groups. This process operates through three psychological mechanisms: social categorization, the classification of self and others into groups; social identification, the internalization of group membership as part of the self-concept; and social comparison, the evaluation of one's group relative to out-groups in order to achieve positive distinctiveness. Within Gen Z's digital discourse, coded slang functions as an operationalization of all three mechanisms

simultaneously. The deployment of 'anjir' in contextually appropriate emotional registers performs social categorization in real time: it marks the speaker as a legitimate in-group member and implicitly positions those who interpret the same expression as offensive—typically older-generation users—as out-group members. Social identification is reinforced through the repeated use of these codes as a form of linguistic ritual, embedding group belonging into everyday communicative practice. Social comparison operates through the implicit contrast between Gen Z's anti-formal, affectively honest communication style and the perceived rigidity of preceding generational norms.



Source: TikTok, 2022

Figure 1 TikTok Account @brandnewmonster

This dynamic carries direct ethical implications. Within the logic of Social Identity Theory, in-group linguistic competency becomes a form of moral capital: the ability to deploy 'anjir' correctly is not merely a communicative skill but an index of authenticity, intimacy, and ethical membership in the peer community (see Figure 1). Conversely, those who fail to deploy or interpret the code correctly are not merely communicatively incompetent but are implicitly positioned as ethically exterior to the community's normative order. This reframing—from verbal transgression to ethical reconfiguration—explains why linguistic practices that appear as norm violations from the outside are experienced from within the in-group as affirmations of communal solidarity and honest self-expression (Putri et al., 2021; Viklous, 2022). Digital ethics, in this sense, are not singular and universal but plural and group-differentiated: what constitutes respectful, authentic communication is determined not by formal institutional codes but by the intersubjective consensus of the peer community. This reconfigured ethical order extends into practices of collective accountability, wherein cancellation functions as a

mechanism through which communal standards are publicly renegotiated when perceived violations occur (Ng, 2020). In the Indonesian context specifically, cancel culture operates not only as social sanction but as a site of broader culture war, simultaneously producing emancipatory potential and class antagonisms within digital publics (Ardiyanto et al., 2026). Read through Social Identity Theory, cancellation constitutes an extreme form of out-group derogation deployed to maintain the positive distinctiveness of the in-group's ethical identity—a digital enactment of the same boundary-marking logic that governs everyday slang use, but with higher stakes and public consequences.

The phenomenon of fragmented digital identities is most structurally visible in Gen Z's practice of maintaining multiple Instagram accounts—primary, alter, and tertiary—each curated for a specific audience and governed by distinct normative expectations. Data from users including @fradelsaa alongside @wufflemonade, @nailakh_ paired with @naichiato, and @gitanurftn linked to both @iniennii and @cant.s33 demonstrate that this is not a haphazard practice but a deliberate and architecturally sophisticated strategy of self-presentation management (Huang & Vitak, 2022; Soh et al., 2024), as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2 Layered Identity Strategy

Account Type	Content Characteristics	Ethical Norms Constructed
Primary Account (First)	Aesthetic visuals, minimalist captions, low posting frequency	Public-formal representation, image management, aesthetic consistency
Alter Account (Second)	Personal rants, emotional posts, dark humor, vulgar expressions	Freedom of expression, authenticity, limited-community engagement
Tertiary Account (Third)	Sharp critiques, satirical commentary, "digital diary" style content	Psychological safe space, personalized ethics, selective social privacy



Source: @fradelsaa & @wufflemonade. (Instagram, 2025)

Figure 2 Instagram account, first account @fradelsaa, second account @wufflemonade

Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory provides the most productive analytical framework here, but its explanatory power is fully realized only when applied beyond simple front and

back stage mapping to engage its underlying logic of moral governance. Goffman (1959) argues that impression management is not merely an aesthetic or social act but a fundamentally ethical one: the maintenance of appropriate performances across different regions of social life is what makes collective moral order possible. The front stage is governed by idealized norms—the standards that audiences expect and that performers are morally obligated to uphold. The back stage, by contrast, is the region where those normative obligations are temporarily suspended, allowing performers to engage in the kind of unguarded expression that would disrupt the front stage performance if publicly visible. Applied to Gen Z's multi-account architecture, as illustrated in Figure 2, the primary account functions as a carefully managed public arena in which the individual presents a polished, aesthetically consistent persona subject to the formal ethical expectations of a broad audience. The alter account operates as the back stage: personal rants, dark humor, vulgar expressions, and unfiltered critique appear freely because the audience is limited to trusted peers who share the same communicative norms and for whom emotional transparency is the primary marker of authentic engagement. Where a tertiary account exists, it constitutes what may be termed a deep back stage—a space of near-total expressive freedom governed by highly individualized ethical standards and accessible only to the most intimate social circle, functioning as a psychosocial safe space against the performative demands of broader digital visibility. Content from @joeantyak (see Figure 3) further illustrates how multiple accounts function as a psychosocial survival mechanism, enabling users to establish expressive boundaries across distinct social contexts. What the dramaturgical analysis reveals is not ethical inconsistency but a morally structured architecture—a system in which different ethical codes are deliberately applied in different social regions, each internally coherent and audience-appropriate, and each reflecting a sophisticated, context-sensitive moral rationality (Aldien & Hananta, 2025; Soh et al., 2024).



Source: (X posts @m4retha & @joeantyak, 2024 & 2025)

Figure 3 POV of Owning First & Second Account

The ethical dynamics identified above do not emerge in a socio-technical vacuum but are actively shaped by the algorithmic architectures of the platforms through which Gen Z communicates. Observations from TikTok reveal that content expressing brutal honesty, emotional transparency, or exaggerated relational complaints consistently achieves higher virality than conventionally appropriate posts. This is not incidental: as Gerbaudo (2024) argues, platform algorithms do not merely recommend content but actively restructure the

nature of social publics, shifting user communities from social network logic—organized around pre-existing interpersonal ties—toward interest-cluster dynamics organized around shared affective orientations and communicative styles. For Gen Z, this algorithmic restructuring has direct consequences for the formation of ethical norms: visibility, virality, and peer affective engagement have partially displaced institutional moral authority as the primary feedback mechanism through which communicative conduct is evaluated and reinforced. Read through Goffman's dramaturgical framework, this constitutes a fundamental transformation in the nature of ethical performance itself. The ethical actor is no longer one who adheres to a moral doctrine legible to all audiences but one who successfully commands the specific audience assembled by the algorithm, sustaining emotional resonance and accumulating what Paasonen (2021) terms affective capital. The platform's recommendation system thus functions as a structural determinant of which ethical orientations gain visibility and social legitimacy, a process through which TikTok's systems exert measurable influence on users' self-perceived identities and values (Ionescu & Licu, 2023). Adolescents actively calibrate their self-presentation strategies according to platform affordances, with Instagram encouraging image control and TikTok demanding higher degrees of perceived authenticity (Turvy, 2025)—a differentiation that further complicates any singular account of Gen Z's digital ethics, as moral conduct becomes inseparable from the specific platform logic within which it is performed.

The intergenerational tensions documented in Table 3 are best understood as a direct expression of these competing ethical orders at the level of social comparison. Data from Twitter/X accounts including @fuckingdustbag (Figure 5), @nabiyalarisfa, and @BudiBukanIntel reveal discursive conflicts in which Gen Z is characterized by older users as oversensitive and resistant to critique, while millennials are described by Gen Z users as excessively compliant and oriented toward toxic productivity. Gen Z respondents counter by articulating mental health boundaries as legitimate ethical claims—a moral vocabulary largely absent from preceding generational discourse.

Table 3 Intergenerational Tensions

Theme or Topic	Dominant Platform	Communication Tone	Implied Ethical Position
Conflict between Gen Z and Millennials	Twitter/X	Signaling, sarcasm	Confrontational yet reflective; challenges traditional norms
Mental health & burnout	TikTok	Emotional, supportive	Emphasizes empathy and understanding of personal boundaries
Work stereotypes	TikTok & Twitter/X	Satirical, grievance-based	Rejects overwork culture and toxic productivity expectations

Analyzed through Social Identity Theory, this intergenerational conflict is not merely a clash of preferences but a struggle over the legitimacy of competing ethical frameworks, each deployed to secure positive distinctiveness for its respective generational in-group (Tajfel &

Turner, 1979). Each cohort reinforces its own moral identity by positioning the other as ethically deficient—whether through the register of rudeness and emotional fragility directed at Gen Z, or of compliance and self-exploitation directed at millennials, as illustrated in Figure 4. This dynamic is further complicated by the fact that each generational cohort has developed distinct intuitions about platform-appropriate disclosure, making normative misalignment not merely a matter of values but of structurally different communicative expectations shaped by divergent technological socialization (Taber et al., 2023).



Source: TikTok Account @sundarindah & @AmritsaRaje (TikTok, 2024)

Figure 4 POV Older Generations

Gen Z's communication is further characterized by extensive digital intertextuality: the deployment of memes, audio clips, pop culture fragments, and modified foreign slang to construct social positions and signal group identity. Phrases such as 'gaslighting,' 'insecure mulu,' and 'healing-nya kok ke Shopee?' function not primarily as informational content but as social positioning acts—markers of in-group cultural competency that simultaneously construct belonging and create barriers of intelligibility for out-group members. As documented in Table 4, these intertextual codes serve a dual ethical function: they sustain generational solidarity through shared cultural reference while simultaneously generating ethical friction in pluralistic environments where the same codes may be interpreted as exclusionary or incomprehensible.

Table 4 Digital Communication Pattern

Digital Communication Pattern	Example / Reference	Communication Purpose
Intertextual Memes	Pop culture references / satire of public figures	Satire, light social criticism
Playful & Vulgar Captions	"goblog cakep bener sih", "anjir vibes"	To ease social interaction, express informality and familiarity
TikTok Duets / Remixes	Response to other content (e.g., @dinsha)	Collective social response based on shared digital affect and engagement



Source: TikTok Account @fuckingdustbag (TikTok, 2024)

Figure 5 Gen Z Irony

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Gen Z's digital ethics operate across six structurally interconnected dimensions: they are contextual, varying systematically with platform and audience; collective, formed through horizontal peer consensus rather than vertical institutional authority; emotional, privileging affective authenticity over formal communicative propriety; satirical, deploying irony and humor as legitimate vehicles of social critique; resistant to toxic productivity norms as a generationally specific ethical stance; and segmented, distributing the digital self across architecturally distinct spaces to maintain psychological equilibrium and social integrity. The dual analytical framework of Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory and Social Identity Theory together illuminates why these characteristics constitute not a collapse of ethical life but its reconfiguration—a systematic restructuring of moral order in which performance, group identity, and algorithmic visibility have become the operative structuring principles of ethical conduct in contemporary digital environments. This reconfiguration demands that scholars, educators, and policymakers resist the temptation to evaluate Gen Z's digital ethics against the normative standards of preceding generations, and instead develop analytical frameworks adequate to the emergent, participatory, and platform-contingent character of ethical life in the age of digital disruption.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the communication patterns and ethical frameworks of Generation Z on social media reflect a distinctive and systematic reconfiguration of values driven by digital disruption. Through the analytical lenses of Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory

and Social Identity Theory, the findings reveal that Gen Z's digital ethics constitute a coherent, if fluid, moral order organized across six structurally interconnected dimensions: contextual, in that ethical judgments vary systematically with platform, audience, and account type; collective, in that norms emerge through horizontal peer consensus rather than vertical institutional authority; emotional, in that honest and spontaneous expression is privileged over formal communicative propriety; satirical, in that social critique is characteristically channeled through irony and humor rather than direct confrontation; resistant to toxic productivity, in that overwork norms are actively rejected in favor of balanced living and mental health boundaries; and segmented, in that digital selves are deliberately distributed across multiple accounts to maintain psychological and social equilibrium.

Phenomena such as the normalization of formerly taboo slang as a mechanism of in-group boundary construction, the strategic use of alter accounts as back stage spaces of authentic self-expression, and the algorithmic amplification of emotionally resonant content collectively illustrate that digital disruption does not merely alter communication channels but actively restructures the ethical imagination of an entire generation—shifting the basis of moral authority from universal institutional codes to the participatory, affective consensus of digital peer communities. These insights carry practical implications for digital literacy education, platform content regulation, and intergenerational communication policy, while theoretically advancing the conceptualization of digital ethics as a relational, performative, and platform-contingent phenomenon. Future research is encouraged to pursue comparative studies across generations and cultural contexts, as well as longitudinal investigations into the effects of Gen Z's communicative strategies on mental health, interpersonal relationships, and workplace dynamics, in order to deepen understanding of how structurally disrupted media landscapes continue to reshape the ethical sensibilities of younger generations.

Acknowledgments: This research was supported by funding from Universitas Negeri Malang through its Research and Community Service Institute (Lembaga Penelitian dan Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat – LP2M). The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial and institutional support provided, which made the implementation of this study possible. We also thank the university for facilitating access to academic resources and fieldwork coordination.

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