

How Social Media Shapes Gen Z Communication: Insights for Basic Educational Development

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the development of communication and social media use in the era of Generation Z (Gen-Z) through a phenomenological approach. Generation Z is known as digital natives who live in a technology-based communication ecosystem and social media, thus forming a new, dynamic, and multimodal pattern of social interaction. This study uses a qualitative method with data collection techniques through in-depth interviews, digital documentation, and field observations. The results of the study show three key findings: first, Gen-Z's communication patterns are characterized by speed, visual symbols, and informal language styles that reflect digital intimacy; second, social media functions as a space for expression and identity formation that is fluid and performative; Third, the use of social media has an ambivalent impact on social relationships and emotional balance, strengthening connections but also causing emotional dependence and exhaustion. These findings confirm that social media is not only changing the way Gen-Z communicates, but also shaping their social structure, values, and identities in the digital world.

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INTRODUCTION

The development of communication in the digital era has brought significant changes to the way humans interact, especially among Generation Z (Gen-Z), namely those born between 1997 and 2012. This generation grew up in an environment loaded with digital technology and social media, making communication no longer limited to physical spaces, but extended to virtual spaces that are real-time and interactive. This phenomenon is seen in the daily lives of Gen-Z who use platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X (Twitter), and WhatsApp as the main media to express themselves, interact, and even form social identities. Phenomenologically, the communication reality of Gen-Z shows

that the boundaries between the real world and the digital world are increasingly blurred, where their social existence is largely determined by online activities that are symbolic and performative.

According to (Siswanto et al., 2023), modern mass communication evolved along with technological advances that changed the pattern of information dissemination from linear models to interactive networks. Noorikhsan et al. (2023) emphasizing that society has now transformed into *Network Society*, where social, economic, and political relations are built through digital networks. Qadir & Ramli (2024) defines social media as a web-based service that allows individuals to build public profiles, interact, and share content within a digital space. Social media as a means that combines technology and social interaction based on user-generated content (Umbara, 2021).

Further (Noorikhsan et al., 2023) refers to Generation Z as *Digital Natives* who have a tendency to think fast, multitask, and be constantly connected. Hastini et al., (2020) adding that the digital generation has a different way of thinking and learning because they live with technology since birth. concept *participatory culture*, which is a culture where digital media users play an active role in the production and distribution of content. (Srikandi, 2023) warned that dependence on social media can create the illusion of closeness as well as social isolation Yosida (2025) highlights how Genes-Z uses social media to build an identity and seek social recognition. Meanwhile, digital communication changes the structure of intergenerational relationships, privacy values, and interaction norms in society (Nurul & Sukardi, 2025). Moreover (Aji et al., 2025) emphasizing that digital literacy skills are the main key for Gen-Z to use social media critically and productively. Social media is not only a space for communication, but also a new cultural arena that influences people's mindsets, language, and behaviors (Abdurrahman, 2025).

Several previous studies have shown the communication dynamics of Gen-Z in the digital age. Study (Afifah & Kuntari, 2025) found that social media is the main means for Gen-Z in building social identity and self-image. Nurijadi (2025) highlighting that Gen-Z's interpersonal communication is shifting from face-to-face to more expressive yet emotionally shallow online interactions. Research Wibawa & Arisanto, (2020) explained that the use of social media affects the participatory communication behavior of Gen-Z in social and political issues. Meanwhile, although Gen-Z have a high digital adaptability, they are prone to distractions and a decline in the quality of interpersonal relationships (Pane et al., 2025).

Although many studies have addressed social media and the digital generation, most have focused on aspects of consumptive behavior, technology dependence, or its psychological impact. Few *have highlighted* the communication patterns of Gen-Z phenomenologically—that is, how they interpret digital communication experiences in everyday life. This article is here to fill this gap by

examining *the shift in the meaning of communication* among Gen-Z, from traditional social interaction to digital platform-based communication that is full of symbols and images. The novelty of this research lies in the phenomenological approach in understanding Gen-Z communication not only as a technological activity, but also as an existential and social expression in cyberspace.

This article aims to analyze the development of communication and social media use in the Gen-Z era through a phenomenological perspective. The research focus is directed at how Gen-Z shapes their communication patterns, the meaning of interactions, and their social identities in the digital space. In addition, this study also seeks to identify the social implications of changes in communication methods on interpersonal relations and communication culture of the younger generation.

The study of the development of communication in the Gen-Z era is important because this generation will be the main social, economic, and political force in the next decade. A deep understanding of how they communicate through social media is needed to design relevant education, media policy, and digital literacy strategies. Without this understanding, there will be a gap in communication between generations, as well as the potential disorientation of values and ethics in social interactions. Thus, this research not only contributes to the development of communication science, but also becomes a social reflection on how technology shapes human beings and human relations themselves. The issue of basic literacy in Indonesia remains a significant challenge in efforts to improve the quality of basic education, especially at the madrasah ibtidaiyah (MI) level (Gultom et al., 2022; Sari & Mulyadi, 2021). Data from the national literacy survey shows that the percentage of primary school students who achieve functional literacy levels is still relatively low, despite various curricular and government policy efforts (Rohim & Hastuti, 2022; Pratiwi et al., 2020). UNESCO says that basic literacy, namely the ability to read and understand simple texts, is the main foundation for successful education and lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2021; Hanemann, 2020). In the MI environment, which has the characteristics of religion-based education and often uses traditional approaches, this tendency to have low initial literacy risks widening the quality gap between public schools and madrasahs (Sulistiyo et al., 2020; Rahmawati & Supriyanto, 2021). It is important to explore how MI teachers design and implement classroom strategies to improve students' early literacy.

Several studies have shown the effectiveness of phonic approaches, reading workshops, and culturally context-based literacy in strengthening early reading skills in school-age children (Castles et al., 2020; Kim, 2020). Research by McArthur et al. (2020) reported that phonological awareness and decoding approaches improve early reading skills. Other studies have shown that reading workshops with culturally relevant materials can increase interest and

understanding of reading (López & Tichnor-Wagner, 2020; Kim & Hu, 2021). In the context of religious education, the integration of local and religious values in reading materials has been shown to increase students' reading motivation (Abdalla & Yaw, 2022; Idris et al., 2021). However, most of the research was conducted in public schools, so there is no contextual empirical picture of early literacy practices in MI.

Most early literacy studies focus on phonics techniques or reading workshops in public school settings, without considering the characteristics of madrassas such as the integration of religious education, religious curriculum, and different community environments. This research offers novelty by taking the context of MI in Indonesia as a case study, combining the analysis of pedagogical strategies (phonic methods, reading workshops) with institutional aspects (facility support, madrasah policies, committee functions), and using in-depth qualitative methodologies (interviews, documentation, and field findings). Thus, this research will augment the literature by providing a contextual understanding of how early literacy can be developed in religious educational institutions.

Based on the above gap, the purpose of this study is to describe and analyze the strategies used by MI teachers in improving early literacy in low-grade students, as well as identify structural and institutional barriers that affect the success of these strategies. Specifically, this study aims to (1) explore teaching practices and early literacy methods applied in MI low grades, (2) evaluate teachers' and students' perceptions of the effectiveness of literacy strategies, and (3) identify supporting and inhibiting factors from the perspective of madrasah institutions. Thus, this research is expected to enrich academic understanding of literacy in the context of religious education as well as provide practical recommendations for madrasah policy makers and teachers.

The main focus of the research is on the dynamics of the implementation of literacy strategies — especially the application of phonics methods, reading workshops, the use of relevant reading materials, and the management of institutional facilities and policies — in the context of low classes of MI. This study argues that early literacy in MI cannot be understood only from the pedagogical aspect; rather, it must be seen as the result of an interaction between class practices, institutional characteristics, and socio-religious environments. With an in-depth qualitative approach, this study will explore how literacy strategies are constructed, tested, and adapted to local contexts, as well as how the results are understood by teachers, students, and institutions. The following sections describe the research methods used to achieve such understanding.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research type. This approach was chosen to deeply understand Generation Z's

subjective experience in communicating and interacting through social media. Phenomenological research focuses on efforts to unravel the hidden meanings behind Gen Z's digital communication behaviors as well as how they interpret their social experiences in virtual spaces. This approach places the researcher as the main instrument that plays an active role in the process of data collection, interpretation, and interpretation, with the aim of obtaining a holistic understanding of communication phenomena experienced directly by the research subject.

The material object of this research is the phenomenon of digital communication and the use of social media among Generation Z, especially related to changes in interaction patterns, identity formation, and the influence of social media on their social and emotional relationships. The research subjects involved individuals aged 17–25 years who were classified as Generation Z and actively used platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X (Twitter), and WhatsApp. The selection of informants was carried out by purposive sampling, which is to select participants who meet certain criteria: have a high intensity in the use of social media, actively interact in the digital space, and are willing to provide in-depth information about their communication experiences. The focus of the research is directed at how Gen Z builds social meaning and constructs self-identity through digital media.

Research data was obtained through three main techniques, namely in-depth interviews, digital documentation, and findings in the field. In-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to explore the informants' authentic views, perceptions, and experiences regarding the way they communicate on social media. Digital documentation includes data collection in the form of uploads, comments, responses, and online activities of informants relevant to the research theme. Meanwhile, findings in the field include direct observation of digital social interaction and the context of social media use in daily life. The three techniques are used in an integrated manner to ensure that the data obtained is rich, in-depth, and contextual.

Data analysis is carried out using thematic analysis which includes four main stages: data reduction, categorization, theme discovery, and interpretation of meaning. Data reduction is carried out by selecting information that is relevant to the focus of the research. Categorization is used to group interview results and documentation according to the patterns that appear. Furthermore, the main theme is determined based on the similarity of meanings expressed by the informants, then interpreted to understand the phenomenon of Gen Z communication in depth. To ensure the validity of the data, a triangulation technique is used which includes source triangulation (comparing data from several informants), technical triangulation (comparing interview results, documentation, and field findings), and time triangulation (data collection at

different times). This process ensures that the research results have high validity and portray the reality of Generation Z's communication objectively and credibly.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Gen Z Digital Communication Patterns

Gen-Z's digital communication pattern refers to the way individuals born in 1997-2012 build, maintain, and maintain social relationships through digital media. Their communication is not only text-based, but also relies on visual symbols such as emojis, stickers, and short videos. This pattern reflects a shift from face-to-face communication to faster, spontaneous, and multi-modal visual interactions. In the context of this study, digital communication patterns include the use of abbreviated language, emotional responses, and how to convey emotional messages in online spaces. This theme is relevant because it shows how social media is shaping a new communication norm for Gen-Z. Where speed, self-expression, and creativity are the main elements. By understanding these patterns, it can be known how this generation builds social meaning and maintains relationships through digital technology.

The results of the interviews show that digital communication for Gen Z is an integral part of their social life. The majority of informants describe communication through social media as something more expressive, open, and flexible than direct conversations.

This was revealed by one of the informants: "If I can talk more freely through chat or DM, I can talk more freely. Sometimes use emojis or stickers to connect the emotions more. If it's direct, sometimes it's awkward." The same thing was conveyed by another informant: "On social media, I often use abbreviations or mixed English language. Friends also understand, so it's easier to communicate." This shows that for Gen Z, digital communication is not only a means of exchanging messages, but also a medium of self-expression and a means of building social closeness through visual symbols and informal language.

The results of these interviews show that there is an adaptation of communication patterns that are typical among Gen Z. They combine verbal and visual forms of communication simultaneously, creating a more emotional and personal way of interacting. The digital language used is contextual and efficient, demonstrating this generation's tendency towards the speed and flexibility of communication. In addition, the use of emojis and stickers replaces the facial expressions lost in online interactions, serving as a medium to maintain social warmth. These findings confirm that Gen Z builds social connections through digital symbols and signs that reflect their identities and moods. This kind of communication pattern shows their ability to adapt technology to emotional and social needs creatively and adaptively.

Findings in the field show that Gen Z's digital communication takes place in almost all aspects of daily life, from personal conversations to academic activities. Based on observations of the informant's social media accounts, their interactions were characterized by the use of emojis, short captions, and quick replies in the comment column. While in online friendship groups, they often use informal pronouns such as "gw," "lu," or "bro," which indicate familiarity in a digital context. In addition, video-based communication such as stories and reels features are used to convey non-verbal messages such as facial expressions or the atmosphere of daily activities. This pattern illustrates that Gen Z's digital communication has become part of a dynamic culture of interaction, where speed, visuality, and spontaneity are key traits.

Table 1. Gen Z Digital Communication Patterns

Forms of digital communication	Characteristics and their impact
Use of emojis and stickers	Improve emotional expression and interpersonal closeness in online communication
Abbreviated and code-mixing languages	Message efficiency and Gen Z's signature language style identity
Real-time interaction	Reinforcing a sense of connection and social presence
Use of video features (stories, reels)	Conveying non-verbal expression and building self-image
Interaction through comments and tags	Encourage social participation and digital intimacy

Gen Z's digital communication patterns reflect a form of social adaptation to the era of high connectivity. They developed a way of communicating that combined text, visuals, and symbols as a means of expressing themselves spontaneously and creatively. The results of interviews and findings in the field show that social media is the main arena for the formation of interactions, where efficiency and emotional expression go hand in hand. Such a pattern of communication not only marks a change in medium, but also a transformation of values in communicating — from formality to digital intimacy. These findings provide an understanding that Gen Z has formed its own communication system that demands quick responses, flexible language, and emotional engagement through digital media, which is also a reflection of the communication culture of the contemporary era.

Social Media as a Space for Expression and Identity Formation

Social media as a space for expression and identity formation refers to the function of digital platforms as an arena for Generation Z to present themselves, build a personal image, and negotiate their social identity. For Gen Z, social media is not just a means of communication, but an existential space where they express their values, lifestyle, and self-view to the public. Identity is no longer understood

as something fixed, but is continuously negotiated through uploads, comments, and online interactions. With algorithmic logic and a dominant visual culture, social media is shaping the way individuals present themselves to fit digital norms and trends. Therefore, this theme highlights how self-expression on social media is a complex social process, where authenticity, recognition, and self-image intertwine to form the distinctive identity of the digital generation.

The results of the interviews showed that for most informants, social media is a "self-stage" where they present who they are to the public. An informant mentioned: "I feel free to be myself on social media, to be able to show my hobbies, styles, and thoughts without fear of judgment." However, there are also different views from other informants: "Sometimes it even feels like we have to continue to perform perfectly. I'm afraid that if it looks different, it will be commented on later." This statement shows the dynamic between freedom of expression and social pressure experienced by Gen Z in managing their self-image on social media. They strive to be authentic, but still consider the social expectations of the online audience.

Both quotes show how social media functions as an identity negotiation arena for Gen Z. On the one hand, social media provides a space for freedom to express themselves creatively and personally. But on the other hand, the space also creates pressure to present an ideal and publicly acceptable version of themselves. This reveals the paradox of digital identity: between authenticity and performativity. Goffman's concept of "presentation of self" is relevant to reading this phenomenon, in which individuals act as if they are on the social stage, with the audience as the judge. In the context of Gen Z, photo uploads, communication styles, and content choices are symbols of identity that continue to be constructed. Their digital identities are not singular, but rather the result of a dynamic interaction between personal desires and evolving digital social norms.

The findings of the study show that the majority of informants use social media such as Instagram, TikTok, and X (Twitter) as a forum to express their identity. They utilize visual content such as photos, short videos, and stories to show interests, values, and lifestyle. However, these expressions are often adjusted to trends or standards that are currently popular on social media. Some informants stated that they deleted old posts because they were considered to no longer represent the desired version of themselves. This phenomenon shows that digital identities are fluid and adaptive to online social contexts. In addition, there is a tendency to build a "dual identity"—between the ideal self displayed on social media and the real self in everyday life. This condition shows that social media is not only a space for expression, but also an arena for reflection and reconstruction of Gen Z's social identity.

Tabel 1. Social Media as a Space for Expression and Identity Formation of Gen Z

Identity aspects		Forms and imitations of Gen Z
Digital self-expression		Social media is a means of displaying personal values, interests, and lifestyles
Self-image formation		Identity is constructed through online uploads and interactions
Digital social pressure		The demand for perfection creates a social anxiety
Adaptation to trends		Identity is flexible in digital popular culture
Authenticity and performativity		Gen Z balances self-authenticity and public acceptance

This theme emphasizes that social media plays an important role in shaping the social and personal identity of Gen Z. Digital space allows them to express themselves freely and creatively, but at the same time creates social pressure to conform to the ideal standards constructed by the public. Gen Z's identity is not fixed, but it is constantly changing according to the dynamics of online interaction and the digital culture they follow. Thus, social media serves as a dialectical space between freedom and conformity, between authenticity and image. These findings show that identity formation in Gen Z is performative—shaped through actions, representation, and social recognition in cyberspace. Therefore, understanding digital identity is the key to reading the social and cultural character of this generation more deeply.

The Impact of Social Media on Social and Emotional Relationships

This theme discusses how the use of social media affects the quality of social relationships and the emotional state of Generation Z. In the context of digital life, social relationships are no longer limited to direct interaction, but also take place online through various platforms. Social media facilitates extensive connections and networking, but at the same time it can create emotional distance in face-to-face relationships. Gen Z often makes digital interactions a new form of social intimacy, where emotional support, friendships, and even conflicts occur in cyberspace. However, the intensity of social media use also has the potential to cause emotional distress such as anxiety, loneliness, or dependence on social validation. Thus, this theme highlights two sides of social media for Gen Z: as a means of strengthening relationships and emotional expression, as well as as a source of psychosocial balance disorders.

The results of the interviews show that social media has become an important part of Gen Z's social interaction patterns, both to build friendships and maintain relationships. An informant revealed: "Through social media, I can stay close to my friends even though I rarely see each other. Sometimes it's even more open to vent through chat than in person." However, another informant revealed the opposite side: "If friends don't reply to DMs or long chats, it can make you overthink. So it seems like the relationship depends on the response on social

media." These two views show emotional ambiguity in the use of social media: on the one hand it strengthens social connections, on the other hand it gives rise to a high emotional dependence on digital interactions.

The above quote shows that Gen Z's social relationships are undergoing a shift from physical space to digital space. Openness and emotional closeness are now largely mediated by online interactions. In this context, social media serves not only as a communication tool, but also as a space for the formation of intimacy and emotional recognition. However, relationships that depend on digital responses are creating a new form of social dependence, in which emotional validation is measured through online presence, such as likes, replies, or views. This pattern reflects the changing character of Gen Z's social relations—faster, more open, but also more fragile. Social relationships become vulnerable to miscommunication and emotional distress stemming from the dynamics of instant and unstable online interactions.

Findings in the field show that most informants experience changes in the quality of social relations due to intensive social media use. They admit that it is easier to make new connections through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp, but these closeness are often superficial. Some informants mentioned that friendships in the real world became tenuous because interactions often occurred online. In addition, the phenomenon of emotional fatigue arises due to excessive consumption of emotional content on social media, such as negative news, online conflicts, or social image pressure. However, some informants also consider social media as a means of emotional support, especially in lonely situations. These findings confirm a social paradox: social media expands social networks, but it also has the potential to erode emotional depth in relationships between individuals.

Discussion

The first findings suggest that Generation Z has a unique digital communication pattern, characterized by the use of visual symbols, response speed, and informal language styles. Communication is no longer limited to text, but involves emojis, stickers, and short videos as emotional expressions that replace nonverbal presence in a live conversation. This phenomenon reflects a shift from conventional communication to a more efficient and expressive form of multimodal interaction. Gen Z is leveraging digital technology not only to exchange messages, but also to build more intimate and emotional social relationships. Online communication for them becomes a dynamic space of connection, where social meaning is built through digital symbols that are creative and spontaneous.

These results are in line with research conducted by (Gaol et al., 2025) which explains that the young generation builds "networked publics" through social

media, which is a new social space where identity and communication are constructed digitally. So does research Sujarwo & Safitri (2025) mentioning that Gen Z is *Digital Natives* who express themselves through technology in a more visual and interactive way than previous generations. Research by Nurijadi (2025) in Indonesia also reinforces these findings by showing that Gen Z's online communication is fast, flexible, and relies heavily on nonverbal symbols such as emojis to maintain social relationships. Thus, Gen Z's communication patterns not only show adaptation to technology, but also create a new communication culture that emphasizes speed, visuality, and emotional connectivity.

The second finding confirms that social media is becoming a major arena for Gen Z to display, negotiate, and shape their social identity. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok serve not only as communication channels, but also as "self-stages" where individuals construct their ideal image. The identity that is formed is fluid, depending on trends and social interactions in cyberspace. On the one hand, social media provides freedom of expression and space for creativity; But on the other hand, there is social pressure to adjust to the prevailing digital norms. This phenomenon shows the paradox of digital identity—between authenticity and performativity where Gen Z tries to appear natural, but remains under the influence of social expectations shaped by algorithms and the online public.

These results are consistent with studies (Arianto, 2019) deep *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which states that each individual presents himself or herself as an actor on a social stage, seeks to tailor the appearance to the audience's expectations. In the digital context, this theory is reinforced by Fatimah (2025) that highlights the concept *Context collapse*—a situation in which the boundaries between public and private spaces become blurred due to digital exposure. Research findings Fauzan & Harahap, (2025) among Indonesian students also showed that social media forms a curated pattern of self-expression, where individuals select content based on their desired self-image. Thus, the results of this study strengthen the view that identity formation in the Gen Z era is performative, reflective, and influenced by complex digital social systems.

The third finding shows the ambivalent impact of social media use on social relationships and emotional balance of Generation Z. Social media on the one hand facilitates social connectivity across space and time, but on the other hand creates an emotional dependence on digital validation. Interpersonal relationships are now more mediated by online interactions that are fast and unstable. This causes the phenomenon of *emotional fatigue*, social anxiety, and a decrease in emotional depth in face-to-face relationships. While social media provides a sense of community, the connection is often superficial and depends on the intensity of digital activity. Therefore, a balance between online and offline

lives is crucial for the social-emotional health of Gen Z.

These findings reinforce the results of the study (Rizaldi et al., 2024) which found a correlation between the intensity of social media use and increased levels of anxiety and loneliness among digital adolescents. Research NURAZIZAH (n.d.) It also mentions that social relationships in digital media are "pseudo" because emotional intimacy depends on algorithmic interactions, not real closeness. While (Farisma et al (2024) explained that social media has the potential to increase social connectedness, but also reduce the quality of direct interpersonal communication. Thus, the results of this study confirm that social media has a paradoxical effect—building a broad social network but risking eroding the depth of relationships and emotional stability.

Overall, the discussion of the three findings shows that Generation Z's communication and social interaction have evolved significantly under the influence of social media. Their communication patterns become more visual, fast, and interactive; their identities are formed through performative processes in digital spaces; and their social relations experience ambivalence between connectivity and alienation. This research makes an important contribution in understanding the communication dynamics of the digital generation in Indonesia, especially in the socio-cultural context that continues to transform. The results of this research can also be the basis for the development of digital literacy and communication education that emphasizes the balance between self-authenticity, creative expression, and emotional health in the digital age.

CONCLUSION

Digital communication and social media use among Generation Z have changed how young people interact. Gen Z communicates in multimodal and expressive ways. They use visual symbols, informal language, and quick responses. Social media becomes their main space for shaping personal and social identity. They negotiate between authenticity and performance as they adapt their digital identity to popular culture. Social media expands their social networks and emotional openness. At the same time, it creates dependence and emotional fatigue. Digital communication for Gen Z works not only as a tool for sending messages. It becomes a space where meaning, social presence, and emotional balance are formed.

This study has several limitations. The data comes from a small group of informants from limited regions. It does not represent the full diversity of Gen Z. The study also relies on descriptive interviews and digital documentation without quantitative measures. Differences in gender, education, and social class are not explored in depth. The research also lacks a longitudinal perspective to track changes over time. Future studies should involve more varied participants and use mixed-method approaches for broader insights. Research on the link

between social media intensity, mental health, and social relationship quality is needed. The findings can support digital literacy programs that strengthen self-expression, communication ethics, and emotional well-being. These efforts help young people use social media as a productive space to build identity, empathy, and meaningful social connections.

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