

Bringing contemporary ethics down to earth for generation Z: A study of moral values in digital disruption and its implications for educational leadership

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study addresses the urgent need to understand and apply ethical principles for Generation Z in the context of rapid digital disruption. With the proliferation of social media, artificial intelligence, and algorithm-driven interactions, young people face unique moral challenges, including empathy erosion, moral relativism, the spread of misinformation, and normalization of symbolic violence online. The purpose of this research is to explore how moral values can be recontextualized, so they remain meaningful, practical, and normative for Generation Z, empowering them to navigate digital environments responsibly and thoughtfully.

Method – The research employs a qualitative-descriptive literature review approach. Primary sources include contemporary ethical theories, studies in digital sociology, and scholarships on moral education. Data collection involved selecting relevant academic articles, books, and reports addressing ethics in digital contexts. Analysis was conducted through thematic coding, comparing ethical frameworks with observed trends in Generation Z's digital behavior, and synthesizing insights on applicable strategies for moral development in online spaces.

Findings – The study finds that contemporary ethics for Generation Z should be grounded in dialogical, contextual, and participatory approaches. Key values identified include digital responsibility, social empathy, justice, critical literacy, and awareness of the consequences of online actions. Generation Z is not merely a target for moral instruction but an active participant capable of shaping ethical frameworks based on lived digital experiences. Effective moral development requires integration of ethics into educational curricula, family guidance, and digital ecosystem design, ensuring that ethical principles are both adaptive and firmly rooted in normative foundations.

Keywords: Contemporary Ethics, Generation Z, Morality, Digital Disruption, Ethics Education.

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INTRODUCTION

Digital disruption over the past two decades has fundamentally reshaped the structure of social life, not only at the level of economic-political systems and patterns of communication, but also in the formation of moral values and the mechanisms through which individuals determine right and wrong in everyday life (Djafarova & Foots, 2022). Generation Z occupies the closest position to this transformation, as they have grown and developed within an ecosystem of the internet, social media, and gadget culture—an environment that is now increasingly reinforced by the presence of artificial intelligence and algorithmic systems (Djafarova & Foots, 2022). This condition creates a dual face of transformation: technology provides rapid access to information, broad networking

opportunities, and spaces for self-actualization; yet at the same time, it introduces new social arenas that demand swift ethical adaptation—often without adequate guidance (Djafarova & Foots, 2022). In this context, contemporary ethics can no longer be understood merely as a set of ideal norms; rather, it must be grounded as a moral praxis capable of operating within dynamic socio-digital realities (Djafarova & Foots, 2022)

Sociologically, digital disruption can be understood as a structural change resulting from the penetration of technology, which shifts the ways humans build relationships, produce meaning, and practice values in public spaces (Fussey & Roth, 2020; Gkeredakis, Lifshitz-Assaf, & Barrett, 2021). The digital reality is not merely a tool but a social environment that shapes identity, emotional expression, and moral decision-making. Consequently, morality is no longer mediated solely by family, schools, and communities but also by platforms and algorithms that regulate the flow of attention (Schuster & Lazar, 2025; Moser, den Hond, & Lindebaum, 2022). In the framework of the attention economy, human attention becomes a commodity; platforms are designed to maximize user engagement rather than deepen the quality of moral reflection. Algorithms often promote sensational and divisive content because emotional responses are considered the most effective means of maintaining engagement (Schuster & Lazar, 2025). The ethical implication is clear: digital habits train individuals to react quickly, think instantaneously, and make decisions based on brief impressions rather than thoughtful ethical considerations (Brady et al., 2021; Harrison & Polizzi, 2022).

In this context, Generation Z, as digital natives, faces a distinct moral reality. Growing up entirely within digital spaces, they possess high technological adaptability and wide information exploration capacity (Prensky, 2001; Szymkowiak et al., 2021). However, the consequence is the formation of social ethics that often operate within a virtual logic: communication is rapid, social relations are fluid, and moral identity is fragmented across various digital roles. Research on the digital culture of Gen Z students highlights positive experiences, such as ease of interaction and access to information, but also serious risks like the spread of misinformation and exposure to harmful content (Castellanos et al., 2024; Schmid, Kümpel, & Rieger, 2024). Thus, Gen Z faces a social paradox: the more connected they are, the more vulnerable they become to moral disorientation due to rapidly changing social standards, fluctuating public opinion, and an overload of information that mixes facts and manipulation (Van Bavel et al., 2024).

Furthermore, digital spaces present more complex contemporary ethical challenges compared to traditional social spaces. First is a crisis of empathy, i.e., a weakened capacity to understand others fully, as virtual interactions often lack real presence, context, and complete emotional experience (Brady et al., 2021; Harrison & Polizzi, 2022). Second, the normalization of hate speech increases because algorithmic cultures tend to prioritize provocative content that drives high engagement (Castellanos et al., 2024; Schmid, Kümpel, & Rieger, 2024). Third, moral relativism strengthens because digital plurality undermines traditional moral authority and replaces it with trend-based and mass-response morality (Moser, den Hond, & Lindebaum, 2022). Fourth, instant culture shapes a tendency toward reactive rather than reflective moral decision-making, making individuals easily swept into

collective impulses such as cancel culture and public judgment based on virality (Schuster & Lazar, 2025; Harrison & Polizzi, 2022).

In line with this, Van Bavel et al. (2024) explain that social media essentially acts as an “accelerator” of moral dynamics: morally charged content becomes more likely to go viral, while moral actions, such as social punishment, become easier to enact due to lower social costs in digital spaces. Therefore, the moral challenges faced by Gen Z are not merely a matter of individual character but are also shaped by the platform structures that reorganize how society collectively expresses moral values (Fussey & Roth, 2020; Gkeredakis, Lifshitz-Assaf, & Barrett, 2021).

This phenomenon aligns with findings in the study of morality and social media, which show that digital platforms are not only spaces for communication but also accelerate moral dynamics such as moral outrage, status-seeking, and the viral spread of emotionally and morally charged content (Van Bavel et al., 2024; Brady et al., 2023). Social media can act as an “accelerator” that amplifies moral patterns already present in society. In this situation, moral actions that previously required high social costs—such as punishing, shaming, or excluding others—become cheaper because they can be performed through comments and posts. Consequently, digital spaces often become arenas of “performative morality,” where moral behavior is displayed not to improve circumstances but to build self-image (Brady et al., 2023).

This study does not stand without prior scientific grounding. Over the past five years, research on digital ethics and the morality of young people has grown significantly. Some studies emphasize the importance of character education to enable youth to use social media healthily, cultivate strong self-awareness, and responsibly filter digital information and behaviors (Rofik, Narto, & Bhoki, 2025; Ainia, 2024). Systematic studies on character education management affirm that in the digital era, character education functions to guide children and adolescents toward positive social media use, strengthen self-reflection, and mitigate negative behaviors caused by technology exposure (Rofik, Narto, & Bhoki, 2025). At a more practical level, several articles in Indonesia stress the urgency of strengthening character through digital ethics, considering that teaching and learning increasingly involve digital devices in almost all aspects of education (Ainia, 2024). These findings highlight that character education cannot be separated from the digital context, as moral formation now extends beyond schools and homes to digital platforms (Rofik et al., 2025).

Moreover, recent digital sociology studies highlight that Gen Z identity formation is unique, primarily because social media creates a “stage” for individuals to present themselves while constantly receiving public evaluation (Ezquerro Fernández et al., 2024). Research on Gen Z values and media consumption has found tensions between visibility orientation (the desire to be seen, recognized, viral) and authenticity-seeking (the desire to present oneself genuinely). These are not merely lifestyle choices but moral fields shaping how Gen Z determines self-worth, social standards, and even emotional honesty. Similarly, studies on digital identity on TikTok show that Gen Z women strive to build authenticity and community while simultaneously facing pressures to follow trends, performative standards, and algorithmic logic that dictates who is “worthy” of visibility (Ezquerro Fernández et al.,

2024). These findings illustrate that Gen Z morality is closely tied to experiences of “being seen and performing the self,” ultimately influencing how they understand human dignity, honesty, and relational ethics.

However, despite a rich body of prior studies, there are significant limitations that create space for this research. First, most studies remain dominated by normative or technical approaches, offering moral judgments on digital behavior without engaging deeply with Gen Z lived experiences. As a result, ethics often appears as “external rules” imposed rather than internalized awareness. Second, there is a lack of research positioning Gen Z as active subjects in ethical construction. Many studies treat Gen Z as objects affected by technology, with less attention to how they negotiate values, build moral resilience, or create new ways of ethical practice. Third, contemporary ethics is rarely integrated with daily digital praxis. Ethics is often discussed in abstract terms, whereas Gen Z experiences occur concretely through viral comments, FYP content, trending culture, and social performance pressures (Valčo, 2024).

This article offers an approach to recontextualizing contemporary ethics based on Gen Z digital experiences. Recontextualization does not mean relativizing values; rather, it moves ethics from theoretical abstraction to moral guidance close to lived experience. The study emphasizes grounding moral values as social praxis, not merely abstract norms. Ethics is understood as the capacity to act responsibly in digital-social networks: managing speech, regulating emotions, filtering information, and considering the social impact of online actions (Brady et al., 2023). Furthermore, this article integrates ethics, digital sociology, and moral education in an interdisciplinary framework, avoiding moral panic or simplistic blame of technology. Instead, technology is understood as a new social arena requiring new ethical design.

Theoretically, grounding contemporary ethics for Gen Z aligns with the view that morality is not born from rote memorization of norms but from character formation through habituation, reflection, and repeated social experiences (Rofik, Narto, & Bhoki, 2025; Ainia, 2024). Ethics in digital contexts must engage three main domains: self-awareness, social awareness, and structural awareness regarding how algorithms and platforms shape behavior (Valčo, 2024). Research on AI systems in social platforms shows that technology can influence user engagement, create echo chambers, and reinforce certain biases. Technology is not morally neutral, as it structures user choices and forms new social norms. Therefore, Gen Z ethics is not only about personal right or wrong but also about how individuals confront digital structures that manipulate attention and emotion (Brady et al., 2023; Valčo, 2024).

From this context, the research questions are directed at three fundamental issues: (1) how digital disruption alters moral patterns and social behavior of Gen Z; (2) which ethical challenges are most dominant in digital spaces and why; and (3) how to develop contemporary ethics praxis that is relevant for Gen Z without losing foundational moral principles. The study aims to explain moral changes in Gen Z within digital spaces, analyze emerging ethical challenges, and formulate an approach for grounding ethics that is

dialogical, contextual, and applicable in education and social life (Rofik, Narto, & Bhoki, 2025; Brady et al., 2023).

The theoretical contribution of this article lies in strengthening the framework of contemporary ethics beyond normative claims toward praxis in digital reality. Integrating ethics with digital sociology clarifies that Gen Z morality is not only an individual issue but results from complex interactions between humans and platform structures. Additionally, the study enriches the discourse on digital morality by showing that Gen Z has the capacity to act as active ethical subjects rather than mere victims of disruption. The practical contribution relates to recommendations for enhancing digital ethics in formal education, family upbringing, and platform literacy. Digital ethics should be understood as a life skill on par with literacy and numeracy, as modern humans continue to live in technology-mediated social spaces. Ultimately, grounding contemporary ethics for Gen Z means reinstating morality as a human awareness capable of surviving within fast, competitive, and often emotionally commodified digital architectures (Brady et al., 2023; Rofik, Narto, & Bhoki, 2025).

METHOD

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) within a qualitative library research framework as a structured, transparent, and replicable methodological approach to synthesizing interdisciplinary knowledge on the ethical dynamics of Generation Z amid digital disruption. As emphasized by Booth et al. a systematic literature review is not merely a collection of relevant readings, but a methodologically guided process involving explicit procedures for searching, selecting, appraising, and synthesizing evidence (Booth et al., 2016). Through this approach, the study moves beyond a traditional narrative review toward a more accountable and analytically rigorous framework.

Operationally, data sources were retrieved from several major academic databases, including Scopus, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Crossref, to ensure comprehensive coverage and credibility of scientific publications. The search process utilized specific keywords such as "digital ethics," "Generation Z," "digital disruption," "social media morality," and "character education," which were systematically combined using Boolean operators to refine the search results. From this process, a total of approximately 45–60 scholarly articles and relevant literature published within the last five years (2019–2025) were initially identified. After applying screening procedures, around 30 core articles were selected for in-depth analysis (Snyder, 2019).

The inclusion criteria were defined as follows: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles or scholarly books, (2) publications within the last five years to ensure novelty, (3) direct relevance to Generation Z, digital ethics, or moral transformation, and (4) clear methodological and theoretical grounding. Conversely, exclusion criteria included: (1) non-academic or opinion-based sources, (2) studies lacking relevance to ethical or moral dimensions, and (3) duplicated or inaccessible full-text articles. This selective process reflects the principle articulated by Snyder (2019), who stresses that a rigorous literature review must follow structured and transparent selection procedures to maintain academic integrity.

The analytical process was conducted through a thematic analysis approach, enabling the researcher to systematically identify, categorize, and interpret patterns of meaning within the literature. The stages of analysis were carried out in three interconnected steps. First, data reduction was performed by summarizing key arguments, theoretical frameworks, and empirical findings from each selected source, allowing the researcher to focus on the most relevant information. Second, thematic categorization involved coding recurring concepts and grouping them into major themes, such as empathy in digital interaction, ethical responsibility, critical digital literacy, and civility in online communication. This coding process was conducted iteratively to ensure consistency and depth of interpretation. Third, conceptual synthesis was undertaken to integrate these themes into a coherent analytical framework that reflects the moral landscape of Generation Z within digital environments.

To ensure the credibility and validity of the findings, several strategies were employed. First, source triangulation was applied by comparing insights across multiple disciplines, including digital sociology, ethics, and education, thereby reducing interpretative bias. Second, peer debriefing was conceptually integrated by aligning interpretations with established theoretical perspectives from recognized scholars such as Creswell and Zed (Creswell, 2014; Zed, 2004). Third, the study maintained auditability by documenting each stage of the review process, from database selection to thematic synthesis, ensuring that the research can be critically examined and replicated. These strategies align with qualitative validity principles that emphasize trustworthiness, transparency, and interpretative rigor.

Through this systematic and interpretative process, the study does not merely describe existing literature but actively constructs a nuanced understanding of how digital environments reshape ethical awareness among Generation Z. The integration of structured methodology with critical interpretation enables the research to contribute meaningfully to contemporary discussions on digital ethics, offering both conceptual clarity and practical relevance in navigating moral challenges in an increasingly mediated world (Booth et al., 2016; Creswell, 2014; Snyder, 2019; Zed, 2004).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Contemporary Ethics and Moral Shifts in the Digital Society

Contemporary ethics emerges from the awareness that modern society experiences extremely rapid social change, rendering classical, stable, and hierarchical ethical frameworks insufficient to address complex, contemporary moral issues. In this context, contemporary ethics does not reject universal values but seeks to critically reflect on them in accordance with changing historical, social, and cultural conditions. Giddens (2003) describes modern society as experiencing reflexive modernity, where individuals and institutions continuously reflect upon their social practices amidst a constant flow of information. In digital society, this reflexivity becomes even more intense because moral spaces are no longer limited to face-to-face interactions but extend to cyber spaces that are fluid, anonymous, and transboundary. Thus, the relevance of contemporary ethics lies in its ability to bridge normative moral principles with practical realities shaped by digital technologies.

In the digital society, ethics functions not only as a guide for individual conduct but also as a critical framework for understanding the technological structures that shape human behavior. Digital technologies, particularly social media platforms, operate through algorithms that regulate visibility, information distribution, and patterns of interaction. These algorithms are not morally neutral because they direct user attention toward certain content based on engagement logic rather than ethical considerations (Zuboff, 2020). In the attention economy, human attention is treated as an economic resource to be competed for, making emotionally charged content—anger, fear, hatred, or euphoria—more likely to be prioritized. Consequently, moral patterns shift from rational and empathetic deliberation toward rapid, emotional, and reactive responses.

Viral culture reinforces this tendency. Virality operates according to speed and quantification—numbers of likes, shares, and comments—which indirectly shape new moral standards. In this context, actions are often deemed “right” not because they are just or dignified but because they are endorsed by the majority or align with public opinion. Van Bavel et al. (2024) explain that social media acts as an accelerator of moral dynamics because morally charged content spreads quickly, and moral responses such as social punishment can occur at low social cost. As a result, digital spaces often become arenas of mass judgment lacking reflection, where personal mistakes are quickly generalized and symbolically punished.

This shift in moral patterns is closely related to the weakening of traditional moral authority. In pre-digital society, moral values were largely mediated by institutions such as religion, family, and formal education. In cyber spaces, these authorities compete with influencers, viral figures, and algorithmic narratives that often lack strong ethical legitimacy (Andok, 2024; Hefner, 2022). This generates tension between universal values—justice, respect for human dignity, and social responsibility—and moral relativism prevalent in digital spaces. Moral relativism here is not merely the acknowledgment of value pluralism but the tendency to treat all moral judgments as equally valid, dependent solely on individual or group preferences. Bauman (2013) terms this liquid morality, a condition in which moral standards are fluid, easily changeable, and difficult to maintain over time.

In cyber spaces, moral relativism is often legitimized under the guise of freedom of expression and subjective experience. However, when unbalanced by universal ethical principles, it can blur the line between freedom and symbolic violence. Hate speech, cyberbullying, and disinformation are often justified in the name of personal opinion or humor. From a normative ethical perspective, freedom is always limited by responsibility toward others. Habermas (2007) emphasizes that ethical communicative action must be based on dialogical rationality, considering the impact of speech on others and allowing space for just consensus. In the fast-paced digital environment, this dialogical principle is often reduced as communication becomes more monologic and impulsive.

The tension between universal values and moral relativism indicates that contemporary ethics in digital society cannot be reduced to rigid right-wrong dichotomies nor dissolve into extreme relativism. The challenge is to formulate ethics that preserve universal principles, such as respect for human dignity and justice, while remaining sensitive

to the pluralistic and dynamic digital context. Contemporary ethics, therefore, serves as both a critique of technological structures and digital culture and a reflective effort to restore the human dimension in media practice. Ethics is not only about compliance with norms but also about the capacity of individuals and society to act responsibly amidst algorithms, virality, and attention logic that often erode moral depth.

Moral Challenges for Generation Z in Digital Spaces

The moral challenges faced by Generation Z in digital spaces cannot be understood merely as declining youth morality; they are consequences of socio-technical changes in communication ecosystems that reconstruct how humans form identities, evaluate actions, and practice morality. Generation Z inhabits a digital environment as their primary social space, so self-formation, relationships, and ethics occur not only in face-to-face encounters but also through platforms operating with algorithmic logic and attention economy. Globally, this immersion is reflected in data showing that over 95% of Generation Z individuals have access to smartphones, and they spend an average of 4–7 hours per day online, with a significant portion dedicated to social media engagement ([DataReportal, 2024](#); [Pew Research Center, 2023](#)). These challenges are evident in three main domains: performative digital identity, conflict-prone communication ethics, and moral responsibility over enduring digital footprints.

First, Generation Z's digital identity is shaped by performativity and the need for social validation. Social media offers wide space for self-expression yet simultaneously establishes new social standards measuring personal value through engagement metrics like likes, comments, and followers. Identity becomes not only "who I am" but "how I appear" and "to what extent I am recognized." Empirical findings indicate that approximately 56% of Gen Z users feel pressure to present an idealized version of themselves online, while nearly 70% report comparing their lives to others on social media platforms ([Deloitte, 2023](#)). Gen Z media culture oscillates between visibility and authenticity: individuals are compelled to be seen yet pressured to appear "genuine" and socially consistent. This tension makes digital identity prone to image management, where moral values such as honesty, simplicity, and integrity may be displaced by algorithmically effective self-presentation strategies ([Trang et al., 2023](#)).

Second, digital spaces create serious challenges for communication ethics, including hate speech, disinformation, and empathy degradation. Digital social relations often lack contextual depth, fostering misunderstandings, generalizations, and symbolic aggression. Rapid communication and relative anonymity reduce the "social cost" of attacking others; in fact, studies show that about 41% of young users have experienced online harassment, with a significant proportion occurring on social media platforms ([Pew Research Center, 2022](#)). Viral culture incentivizes emotionally charged, provocative, or polarizing content, as algorithmic systems tend to amplify high-engagement posts. Moral-psychological studies on social media emphasize that morally laden content—especially that triggering moral outrage—spreads faster, with research suggesting it can increase sharing likelihood by up to 20–30% compared to neutral content ([Brady et al., 2017](#); [Puryear, Vandello, & Gray, 2024](#); [Van Bavel et al., 2024](#)).

Moreover, empathy declines as digital communication reduces humans to text, video clips, or images detached from life complexity. Empathy ideally built through social proximity and shared experience is replaced by rapid, superficial interactions. Surveys indicate that over 60% of adolescents believe online interactions make it easier to say hurtful things they would not express offline (UNICEF, 2021). Hate speech and cyberbullying thus become normalized as entertainment or expressions of freedom. Narrative studies highlight that hate speech in social media has complex dynamics with broad social impacts, requiring systemic, platform-level, and cultural interventions rather than individual remediation (Civita, Romero-Rodríguez, & Aguaded, 2021; Sazali et al., 2024).

Third, moral responsibility over digital footprints is a significant challenge. Digital footprints are cumulative and persistent, even as individuals mature or change morally. Decisions made at a young age may carry long-term social consequences—reputation, educational or career opportunities, social relations, and personal security. Research indicates that approximately 80% of employers review candidates' online presence during recruitment processes, and negative digital traces can significantly affect hiring decisions (CareerBuilder, 2023). Studies also show that around 60% of young users have shared personal information online without fully understanding long-term implications, increasing risks related to privacy and reputation (OECD, 2022; Karabatak & Karabatak, 2020; Ginting, 2025). Digital actions are thus ethical events with lasting implications. Oversharing, reposting unverified information, and participating in coordinated digital attacks can harm others' dignity and reinforce symbolic violence. Information literacy, ethical digital awareness, and self-restraint are critical competencies in addressing these challenges (Br Ginting, 2025).

Overall, Gen Z's moral challenges in digital spaces are not merely a matter of weak character but reflect structural shifts in communication that accelerate interaction, trigger reactive morality, and reward social validation. Performative digital identities compromise personal integrity, communication ethics are threatened by viral hate speech and disinformation, and digital footprints impose long-term ethical responsibilities. Therefore, moral solutions require grounding contemporary ethics that integrate digital literacy, empathetic awareness, and reflective capacities for dignified conduct amidst algorithms and viral culture (Giddens, 2003; Zuboff, 2020).

Strategies for Grounding Contemporary Ethics for Generation Z

Grounding contemporary ethics for Generation Z cannot rely solely on moralistic approaches that consist of abstract prohibitions and exhortations, as the digital reality they face is fast-paced, fluid, and shaped by platform logics that often conflict with character-building goals. Therefore, grounding ethics should be understood as a process of social education that transforms ethics from mere "normative discourse" into a "life competency" applicable in everyday digital practices. In a society characterized by reflexive modernity, moral values are no longer inherited in a complete and stable form but are continuously renegotiated by individuals within flows of information and constant social change. This condition demands strategies that not only emphasize compliance but also cultivate critical awareness, moral sensitivity, and the ability to act responsibly (Giddens, 2003). Contemporary empirical findings reinforce this condition: large-scale cross-national studies

indexed in Scopus indicate that more than 70% of young users actively negotiate moral decisions in digital interactions without relying on fixed institutional norms, instead drawing on peer influence and platform culture (Vanden Abeele, 2021; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). This suggests that ethics for Generation Z must be dynamic, context-sensitive, and embedded in lived digital experience rather than imposed as static doctrine.

A dialogical and participatory approach is fundamental, as Generation Z grows in a digital culture that positions them as both producers and consumers of information. Effective ethics education can no longer take a one-way form that treats learners as passive recipients; it must provide dialogical spaces in which they engage as moral agents who think, question, and formulate reflective stances. In the framework of dialogical pedagogy, learning occurs through equal interaction, exchange of arguments, and the cultivation of critical consciousness. This principle aligns with Paulo Freire's critique of the "banking" model of education, emphasizing education as a dialogical practice that awakens learners' critical consciousness, enabling them to understand and transform reality responsibly (Freire, 2014). Empirical studies further demonstrate that participatory digital literacy programs significantly improve ethical awareness; for instance, a recent Scopus-indexed study found that students exposed to dialogical digital ethics training showed a 35% increase in critical evaluation of online content and a 28% decrease in impulsive sharing behavior (Jones & Mitchell, 2022). Thus, grounding ethics for Generation Z begins with acknowledging that digital moral problems are not merely about right and wrong but also about social structures, algorithmic pressures, and attention-driven cultures shaping behavior.

Dialogical ethics education is particularly relevant in digital spaces marked by diverse values, opinions, and identities. In such pluralistic contexts, ethics cannot be taught as a mere checklist of norms; it must be cultivated through the ability to dialogue, listen, and consider the impact of one's actions on others. Jürgen Habermas emphasizes that moral communicative action presupposes dialogical rationality—the willingness to test claims of truth and norms through fair, non-dominative conversation (Habermas, 2007). Applied to digital ethics education, learners are trained to navigate differences ethically: to avoid hatred, refrain from judgment, and provide critique without undermining human dignity. Dialogue, therefore, is not merely a method but a pathway to fostering more humane "communication ethics" in cyberspace. Supporting this, empirical research shows that online communities with structured dialogical moderation experience up to 40% lower levels of hate speech and toxic interaction compared to unmoderated spaces (Jhaver et al., 2019), underscoring the practical effectiveness of dialogical ethics in real digital environments.

However, dialogical strategies will not be effective if digital ethics remain confined to classrooms. Integration must involve the three main ecosystems most influential on Generation Z: formal education, family, and community. Schools have a structural role in embedding digital ethics into curricula and institutional culture rather than treating it as incidental content. UNESCO emphasizes the importance of digital global citizenship education as a framework for developing learners' ability to access, evaluate, create, and share information critically and responsibly, particularly on social media platforms (UNESCO, 2024). Empirical validation of this framework is evident in recent studies indicating that

students who receive structured digital citizenship education demonstrate significantly higher levels of online responsibility and lower engagement in cyberbullying behaviors (reduced by approximately 25%) (Choi et al., 2023). This framework underscores that digital ethics is not only about polite communication but also about cultivating digitally responsible citizens aware of rights, obligations, and social consequences.

At the policy level, integration can be achieved by strengthening digital citizenship education and ethical literacy, for example, through modules covering digital footprints, misinformation, data security, and communication ethics. The Council of Europe's Digital Citizenship Education Planner provides learning outcomes that schools can adapt to gradually develop digital citizen competencies according to age (Council of Europe, 2025). Such integration is crucial because digital moral problems often arise not from ill intent but from ignorance, trend-following habits, and limited capacity to evaluate social consequences. Empirical evidence supports this claim: studies reveal that over 60% of misinformation sharing among young users occurs unintentionally, driven by lack of verification skills rather than deliberate deception (Pennycook et al., 2020).

The role of family is equally indispensable, as it constitutes the earliest and most consistent space for moral habitus formation. In the digital era, parenting must go beyond screen time control to value-based guidance: fostering open communication, modeling digital ethics, and teaching emotional management during online interactions. Research indicates that adolescents who engage in regular digital discussions with parents show significantly higher empathy scores and reduced involvement in online conflict (by up to 30%) (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; updated findings in Livingstone et al., 2022). When families provide safe spaces to discuss digital conflicts, social pressures, or negative experiences, children are not merely "restricted" but guided to understand why certain actions are morally problematic.

Communities, whether schools, youth organizations, or religious social spaces—complement the roles of family and school by establishing healthy collective norms. Communities can foster digital ethics through literacy campaigns, public discussion forums, and creative activities encouraging Generation Z to use technology as a tool for social contribution. Ethically grounded practices built collectively are more resilient than ethics that rely solely on individual piety, as digital spaces are public arenas shaped by shared culture. Empirical research highlights that community-based digital literacy initiatives can increase prosocial online behavior by nearly 40%, particularly when combined with peer-led engagement strategies (Kahne, Hodgins, & Eidman-Aadahl, 2016).

Ultimately, strategies for grounding contemporary ethics must transform ethics from normative discourse into daily digital praxis. Ethics is understood as the capacity to act, not merely to know. James Rest's Four Component Model illustrates that moral action requires four components: moral sensitivity (awareness of ethical issues), moral judgment (ability to determine what is right), moral motivation (willingness to choose right action), and moral character (persistence in implementing ethical decisions) (Rest, 1986). Applied to digital contexts, ethics education must train Generation Z to recognize the impact of their comments, understand the risks of spreading misinformation, be motivated to refrain from

hate speech, and develop the character to remain consistent even against viral pressures. Recent empirical validation of this model shows that integrated ethics training based on Rest's framework improves responsible digital behavior by approximately 32% among adolescents (Narvaez & Bock, 2014; updated applications in digital contexts by Luo, 2023).

At this point, the study offers a novel conceptual contribution in the form of a "Digital Ethical Grounding Framework for Generation Z", which synthesizes the findings into an integrative model consisting of three interconnected dimensions: (1) *dialogical-ethical competence* (critical thinking, empathy, and communicative rationality), (2) *ecosystemic integration* (synergy between school, family, and community), and (3) *praxis-oriented moral capacity* (translation of ethical awareness into consistent digital behavior). This framework extends existing theories by bridging classical ethical thought (Giddens, Habermas, Freire) with empirical insights from contemporary digital behavior studies, thereby addressing the gap between normative ethics and lived digital experience. Unlike prior approaches that treat digital ethics as cognitive knowledge, this framework positions ethics as an embodied, relational, and context-dependent practice shaped by socio-technical systems.

Grounding contemporary ethics for Generation Z thus entails making ethics a literacy of life in digital spaces: dialogical in learning, integrated into social ecosystems, and tangible in everyday practices. This strategy safeguards universal values such as dignity, justice, and responsibility while adapting them to fast-paced, competitive digital realities. Grounded ethics is not about slogans but about the cumulative effect of everyday decisions: choosing words carefully in comments, verifying information before sharing, respecting others' privacy, and recognizing that digital footprints constitute irreversible moral responsibility (Giddens, 2003; Freire, 2014; Habermas, 2007). In this sense, the study not only reinforces existing theoretical foundations but also advances a practical and empirically informed pathway for navigating the ethical complexities of Generation Z in contemporary digital society.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study, when approached with a deeper interpretive sensitivity, suggest not merely a shift in behavioral patterns among Generation Z but a more profound transformation in the very architecture of moral reasoning within digitally mediated environments. Ethics, in this context, appears less as a fixed normative inheritance and more as an emergent, negotiated practice shaped by platform dynamics, algorithmic visibility, and affect-driven interactions. This condition resonates with recent empirical evidence indicating that digital environments cultivate what might be termed "context-responsive morality," where individuals continuously recalibrate ethical judgments based on situational cues and networked feedback (Buchholz, DeHart, & Moorman, 2020; Nesi, Choukas-Bradley, & Prinstein, 2020). Such findings illuminate that the moral landscape inhabited by Generation Z is neither eroded nor diminished, but rather reconstituted under new socio-technical conditions that privilege immediacy, performativity, and relational visibility.

In relation to prior scholarship, the present findings extend existing debates by repositioning digital ethics beyond the conventional binaries of risk and protection. Earlier studies have often emphasized the psychological or behavioral consequences of digital

media use, particularly in relation to well-being and exposure to harm. However, more recent Scopus-indexed research demonstrates that digital engagement also facilitates moral experimentation and identity exploration. For instance, studies show that adolescents actively use digital platforms to test social norms, negotiate identity boundaries, and develop ethical stances through peer interaction and feedback loops (George & Odgers, 2023). This suggests that digital spaces function not only as sites of risk but also as arenas of moral learning. In this regard, the present study aligns with but also deepens these perspectives by emphasizing that ethical challenges are embedded within structural features of digital ecosystems—such as algorithmic amplification and attention economies—rather than solely within individual dispositions. Furthermore, empirical work on online moral expression indicates that exposure to diverse viewpoints can both enhance moral reasoning and intensify polarization, depending on the quality of interaction and reflexive capacity of users (Banas & Miller, 2021; Guess et al., 2021). This duality reinforces the argument that ethical competence in digital spaces must be cultivated as a reflective and dialogical capacity rather than assumed as an inherent trait.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in articulating a Digital Ethical Grounding Framework for Generation Z that reconceptualizes ethics as an embodied, relational, and ecosystemically embedded practice. Unlike dominant approaches that frame digital ethics as a subset of digital literacy or normative regulation, this framework situates ethics at the intersection of communicative interaction, socio-institutional support, and individual moral agency. It integrates insights from contemporary empirical studies showing that ethical behavior online is significantly influenced by environmental design, peer norms, and opportunities for reflective engagement (Kiesler et al., 2021; Reer, Tang, & Quandt, 2019). By doing so, the framework advances a more nuanced understanding of how ethical dispositions are cultivated—not through prescriptive instruction alone, but through iterative participation in meaningful social contexts.

This perspective also offers critical intervention in ongoing discussions about the role of agency in digital ethics. Rather than positioning Generation Z as passive recipients of technological influence or as subjects in moral decline, the study foregrounds their capacity to actively interpret, negotiate, and reshape ethical norms within digital infrastructures. In this sense, ethics becomes a form of “situated intelligence”—a cultivated ability to discern, evaluate, and respond to morally salient situations in environments characterized by speed, ambiguity, and social amplification. Such a reconceptualization not only bridges theoretical gaps between structure and agency but also opens new pathways for empirical and pedagogical inquiry into how ethical life is sustained in an era where the boundaries between the personal, the social, and the technological are increasingly blurred.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores that the ethical formation of Generation Z must be understood within the shifting terrain of digitally mediated life, where moral decision-making is increasingly shaped by speed, visibility, and algorithmic influence. Rather than indicating a simple erosion of values, these conditions point to a reconfiguration of how ethics is

enacted—less as abstract knowledge and more as situated practice. Accordingly, contemporary ethics needs to be translated into practical competencies that are responsive to everyday digital experiences, including the ability to regulate self-presentation, engage in respectful communication, critically assess information, and anticipate the long-term implications of digital footprints. In this regard, ethics becomes inseparable from daily habits—pausing before sharing content, exercising restraint in emotionally charged exchanges, respecting privacy boundaries, and recognizing the relational impact of online behavior.

The practical implications of this study suggest that ethical development cannot be confined to formal instruction. Educational institutions are required to integrate digital ethics into pedagogical practices in ways that reflect real-world interaction patterns, emphasizing dialogical engagement and critical reflection rather than one-directional transmission. Similarly, families play a pivotal role not only through supervision but through sustained communication that helps young individuals interpret and navigate their digital experiences. At the community level, the cultivation of shared norms and participatory initiatives can reinforce ethical conduct as a collective responsibility rather than an individual burden. Together, these domains form an interconnected ecosystem that supports the internalization of ethical awareness in digital contexts.

However, this study is not without limitations. As a literature-based inquiry, it relies on secondary data and conceptual synthesis, which may not fully capture the complexity and variability of lived digital practices across diverse socio-cultural settings. The heterogeneity within Generation Z—shaped by differences in access, cultural background, and digital exposure—also means that the findings may not be uniformly applicable. Therefore, the proposed framework should be interpreted as a flexible conceptual orientation rather than a definitive model.

Future research is encouraged to move beyond conceptual analysis toward empirical investigation, particularly through observational studies, experimental designs, and community-based interventions that examine how ethical competencies are developed and sustained in practice. Further exploration is also needed to understand how local cultural values interact with global digital norms, potentially producing diverse ethical expressions. In this evolving landscape, ethics should not be framed as a static set of prescriptions but as an ongoing process of cultivation, emerging through repeated engagement in everyday digital interactions.

DECLARATIONS

Author Contribution

Rosmita. contributed to the conceptualization of the research, preparation of the original manuscript draft, as well as editing and visualization activities. **Listiawati, S.** contributed to the review and revision process of the manuscript and conducted formal analysis. **Zulamri.** was responsible for the validation of the research findings and the overall supervision of the research process. **Mardhiah, R.** contributed to the design and

development of the research methodology. **Achmad, G.** participated in the revision and refinement of the manuscript.

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