

Generation Z's Experience of Shifting Digital Ethics on Social Media

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ABSTRACT: This study theoretically examines the shift in knowledge authority within higher education during the Artificial Intelligence (AI) era through the lens of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy. The widespread use of generative AI among university students raises concerns regarding learner passivity and the relevance of Freire's framework in understanding this epistemic shift. Utilizing a qualitative conceptual analysis, this study examines Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed alongside indexed scientific literature from 2023-2026. The findings reveal three main patterns: a shift in epistemic authority from lecturer to AI, a transformation of learning interactions into a triangular lecturer AI student relationship, and two potential educational trajectories strengthening critical dialogue or reproducing banking education through technology. The discussion demonstrates that while generative AI cannot serve as a conscious dialogue partner, it can function as codified material or a generative theme to be critically examined. Thus, Freire's approach remains highly relevant provided AI is positioned as a spark for human dialogue rather than its final product. Ultimately, this study proposes the concept of 'shifting epistemic authority' as a new analytical framework for higher education.

Keywords: *Digital Ethics, Generation Z, Moral Crisis, Digital Literacy, Social Media*

I. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation is among the most far reaching social changes of the twenty first century [1]. The development of the internet, smartphones, and social media has changed how people communicate, obtain information, work, learn, and construct their sense of identity. In Indonesia, digital media has become an inseparable part of everyday life. Internet penetration in the country has continued to climb over the past decade, and successive national surveys consistently report that the youngest cohorts of users the group commonly labeled Generation Z spend the greatest share of their daily hours connected to social media, relative to any other age group. Generation Z, born and raised amid the rapid growth of information technology, is the demographic group that interacts most intensively with digital space. For this generation, social media is no longer merely a means of communication; it is a space for self expression, for building social relationships, for entertainment, and even for generating income through the digital economy.

This intensity of engagement makes Generation Z simultaneously the primary beneficiary of digital transformation and the group most exposed to its unintended social costs. Because platform algorithms and content norms evolve continuously, a generation that has never known life without a smartphone in hand also has no settled precedent to draw upon in deciding what counts as acceptable conduct online, earlier generations at least experienced a "before" against which the "after" of digital life could be measured, whereas for Generation Z the digital environment is simply the only environment there has ever been. This distinctive generational position is one reason the present study singles out Generation Z, rather than internet users in general, as its unit of concern.

On one hand, digital media offers considerable benefits. Ease of access to information allows the public to acquire knowledge unconstrained by space or time. Various digital platforms have also opened opportunities for creativity, innovation, digital entrepreneurship, and the expansion of social networks across regions and countries. This phenomenon shows that digital technology has a strategic role in improving quality of life, provided it is used wisely.

On the other hand, alongside these benefits, the growth of digital media has also given rise to increasingly complex social problems. Freedom of expression is frequently exercised without a corresponding sense of moral responsibility. Digital space is filled with behavior that runs counter to ethical values the spread of hate speech, cyberbullying, the dissemination of hoaxes, pornography, online fraud, a culture of flexing, and the normalization of verbal aggression. No small number of

social media users feel emboldened to insult, judge, or demean others, protected as they are by the anonymity the screen affords. This phenomenon shows that technological advancement is not always accompanied by the moral maturity of its users.

The moral crisis in digital media is not merely a matter of legal norm violation; it also reflects a decline in the quality of public character. Values such as empathy, courtesy, honesty, responsibility, and respect for difference are being eroded by the instant culture that has taken root on social media. Popularity is often treated as the measure of success, such that some individuals are willing to undertake controversial acts simply to attract public attention. Social media algorithms, which tend to promote sensational content, further reinforce this culture. As a result, the public is more readily exposed to provocative information than to educational content.

This phenomenon is especially concerning because the majority of internet users in Indonesia are drawn from the younger age group. Generation Z is a group born as digital natives a generation accustomed to using digital technology from early childhood [2]. Their closeness to the internet confers various advantages in terms of technological adaptation, but it also heightens the risk of exposure to negative information. The capacity to use technology does not necessarily come paired with the capacity to understand [1] its ethics, to sort information critically, or to regulate one's own behavior in digital space. This is precisely the condition that makes digital literacy a pressing issue in the character development of young people [3].

From a sociological perspective, the moral crisis in digital media is a consequence of social change proceeding at an exceptionally rapid pace. Technological change is outpacing society's capacity to construct new norms to govern it. This imbalance produces what sociologists term cultural lag a condition in which the development of material culture, in the form of technology, outstrips the development of nonmaterial culture such as values, norms, and ethics [4]. As a result, society experiences confusion in determining the boundaries of behavior considered acceptable in digital space.

Beyond this, social media also cultivates a powerful culture of competition. Users compete for followers, likes, comments, and popularity. Social recognition is measured in digital numbers, which drives the emergence of validation seeking behavior. Under certain conditions, this drive leads individuals to set aside moral considerations in pursuit of public attention [5]. Phenomena such as fear of missing out (FOMO), cancel culture, and peer pressure become factors that

increase the likelihood that a person will act in ways that run counter to social values.

A considerable body of prior research has examined the relationship between social media and user behavior. Some studies emphasize digital literacy; others examine the psychological impact of social media use; while research specifically addressing moral crisis still tends to treat particular phenomena cyberbullying or the spread of hoaxes in isolation from one another. There remains a need for a study that integrates these various forms of moral degradation within a single, comprehensive analytical framework, one capable of explaining how digital media shapes the changing social behavior of Generation Z in Indonesia.

Based on this background, the present study aims to analyze the forms of moral crisis in digital media use among Generation Z, to identify the factors driving moral degradation in digital space, and to formulate strategies for strengthening digital literacy and character education as an effort to build a digital culture that is more ethical, more responsible, and more oriented toward humane values.

II. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a library research design. This approach was chosen because the aim of the study is to develop an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of moral crisis in digital media use through the analysis of a range of relevant scholarly sources. Library research allows the researcher to integrate the findings of prior studies so as to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the causes, forms, and consequences of moral crisis in the digital era. Unlike survey or experiment based designs, this approach does not seek to measure the prevalence of any particular behavior among a sampled population, rather, it seeks to build a coherent, theory-informed account of a social phenomenon by systematically reading across the existing literature.

The object of this study is the behavior of Generation Z in the use of digital media, specifically social media, in relation to the degradation of moral values such as cyberbullying, the spread of hate speech, hoaxes, flexing culture, poor digital communication ethics, and declining social empathy [6]. The study does not focus on any single social-media platform, but instead examines the digital phenomenon broadly as it has developed in Indonesia. This scope was deliberately kept platform agnostic because the moral patterns under investigation validation seeking, sensationalism, normalization of incivility recur across platforms with different technical features, suggesting that they are better explained by broader socio technical dynamics than by the design of any one application.

The data sources for this study consist of secondary data: national and international scientific journal articles, academic books, scholarly proceedings, official government reports, research institute publications, and other documents relevant to the development of digital media and the behavior of Indonesian society. The literature used was prioritized from publications of the past five to ten years, in order to remain aligned with the very rapid pace of digital technology development, while several foundational theoretical works on social learning, moral development, and cultural lag were retained regardless of publication date because they continue to provide the conceptual vocabulary through which more recent, empirically oriented studies are interpreted.

Data collection was carried out through documentation: identifying, categorizing, and reviewing literature relevant to the focus of the study. The literature selection process took into account the credibility of each source, its relevance to the topic, and its theoretical or empirical contribution to explaining the relationship between digital media and moral crisis. Priority was given to sources that offered either an empirically grounded account of a specific digital behavior (such as meta analytic reviews of cyberbullying research or large-scale studies of misinformation spread) or a well established theoretical framework capable of situating those empirical findings within a broader account of social and moral change.

Data were analyzed using content analysis, a technique used to identify patterns, themes, and relationships among concepts drawn from the range of sources collected. Content analysis is particularly well suited to literature based qualitative research because it provides a systematic, replicable procedure for moving from a heterogeneous body of texts spanning academic articles, institutional reports, and theoretical works toward a set of interpretable thematic categories, rather than relying on an unstructured, purely impressionistic reading of the literature [10]. The analysis proceeded through several stages: data reduction, categorization according to the study's thematic focus, interpretation grounded in sociological and digital communication theory, and, finally, conclusion drawing. To strengthen the study's validity, source triangulation was carried out by comparing findings across scientific journals, research reports, and official statistical data, so as to arrive at information that is more objective and scientifically defensible.

This study has a limitation in that it does not involve the direct collection of field data. Its findings therefore emphasize the synthesis of prior research and conceptual analysis of the phenomenon of moral crisis in digital media use, rather than new empirical measurement of Generation Z's behavior itself. Even so, this approach remains capable of offering a comprehensive picture of the actual

condition, and of proposing recommendations that can serve as a foundation for further research as well as for public policy formulation.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Findings from the Literature Review

Findings drawn from the literature show that the development of digital media has fundamentally altered patterns of social interaction. Ease of access to information does increase productivity and creativity, but it simultaneously opens space for the emergence of behavior that runs counter to moral values.

One of the most dominant forms of moral crisis identified is cyberbullying. Unlike conventional bullying, which is bounded by space and time, cyberbullying can occur twenty four hours a day through comments, private messages, or social media posts. Victims frequently experience psychological distress in the form of anxiety, depression, loss of self confidence, and, in some cases, suicidal ideation [7].

Beyond cyberbullying, the phenomenon of hate speech has also been on the rise. Freedom of expression in digital media is often misconstrued as freedom without limit, giving rise to comments containing insult, discrimination, incitement, and verbal violence directed at particular individuals or groups. This condition weakens the quality of public communication and heightens social polarization.

Another growing phenomenon is flexing culture the tendency to display wealth, a luxurious lifestyle, or personal achievement in order to gain social recognition. This culture creates an artificial standard of success, such that many social media users feel compelled to present a seemingly perfect life. The result is psychological pressure, envy, social anxiety, and unhealthy consumptive behavior.

At the same time, the spread of hoaxes has become one of the more serious threats in digital space. The public's limited capacity to verify information allows unverified news to spread very rapidly. Hoaxes not only produce misunderstanding; they can also trigger social conflict, social fragmentation, and even disrupt the stability of national life [8].

The findings also point to a decline in digital communication ethics. The use of coarse language, insults, jokes made at others' expense, and the normalization of impolite behavior are increasingly common in the comment sections of various social media platforms. This phenomenon indicates that a portion of the public has not yet learned to distinguish freedom of expression from moral responsibility in communication.

Discussion

The findings show that the shift in digital media ethics is a complex social phenomenon shaped by a range of interrelated factors. The advancement of digital technology has brought sweeping change to patterns of communication, social interaction, and information dissemination. Yet this change has not always been matched by a corresponding development of society's moral values and ethics. This condition aligns with the theory of cultural lag proposed by William F. Ogburn, which explains that technological development proceeds more rapidly than society's capacity to adjust its norms, values, and social rules [4]. As a result, digital space becomes an arena vulnerable to various forms of moral deviation.

Phenomena such as cyberbullying, hate speech, the spread of hoaxes, flexing culture, and poor communication ethics indicate that a portion of social-media users has not yet developed the moral awareness needed to use technology responsibly. The freedom of expression offered by social media is often interpreted as freedom without limit, such that users feel entitled to voice opinions in ways that demean others, to spread unverified information, or to create provocative content simply to attract public attention. This condition shows that the capacity to use technology is not automatically accompanied by the capacity to use it responsibly.

Beyond social change, social-media algorithms also play a significant role in shaping user behavior. These algorithms are designed to sustain user attention by surfacing content with high potential for engagement. In practice, content containing sensation, controversy, or conflict attracts attention more readily than educational content. As a result, some creators feel compelled to produce excessive, emotionally provocative content or even content that flouts prevailing norms in order to grow their follower count, view count, and economic return. This culture, in turn, establishes a new paradigm in which popularity comes to matter more than integrity, such that the measure of success shifts from the quality of one's work to the number of likes, comments, and followers it receives.

From the standpoint of moral development, this condition suggests that a portion of social-media users continues to treat social approval as the primary basis for action [9]. They tend to weigh public response over an independent judgment of right and wrong grounded in moral norms. As a result, behavior that is genuinely unethical comes to be regarded as acceptable so long as it does not fail to generate popularity or profit. This phenomenon signals a broader shift in values within digital society, in which social recognition is often prioritized over moral responsibility.

It is worth noting that this dynamic is not unique to Indonesia, even if its specific expression the particular vocabulary of "flexing," the specific platforms in vogue, the precise regulatory context is locally distinctive. Cross national research on social media behavior has repeatedly identified similar patterns of validation seeking and algorithmically amplified sensationalism in other rapidly digitalizing societies, suggesting that what is observed here reflects a broader structural feature of contemporary platform architecture rather than a culturally specific failing of Indonesian youth in particular. This distinction matters for policy: it implies that solutions borrowed from digital literacy and platform governance efforts elsewhere may be adaptable to the Indonesian context, even as the specific cultural content of the moral crisis which forms of display count as flexing, which jokes are read as harmless versus demeaning necessarily requires local calibration.

This study also finds that low digital literacy is a factor that compounds the moral crisis. Digital literacy is not simply the capacity to operate technological devices; it also encompasses the capacity for critical thinking, for disseminating information responsibly, for understanding communication ethics, for safeguarding privacy, and for recognizing the legal consequences of one's digital activity. Weakness in these capacities leads members of the public to readily believe and spread false information, to become entangled in unhealthy online conflict, and even to engage in bullying without recognizing its impact on the victim.

At the same time, families and educational institutions play a critically important role in shaping the character of young people. Character education cannot simply be taught in theoretical form, it must be embodied through the habitual practice of honesty, empathy, responsibility, and respect for others, both in offline life and in digital space. Parents, too, need to strengthen their supervision of and engagement with their children's digital activity, so that young people are able to use social media more wisely. The government, together with digital platform providers, needs to strengthen regulation, improve public digital literacy, and refine content-moderation systems, so that the spread of norm-violating content can be minimized.

Unlike a portion of prior research, which addresses only a single form of deviation cyberbullying or the spread of hoaxes, for instance this study shows that the moral crisis in digital media is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the interaction of technological development, digital culture, social media algorithms, digital literacy, character education, and social control. Its resolution therefore cannot be achieved through a single approach, it requires collaboration among families, schools, government, the public, and digital platform providers. Synergy among

these parties is the key to building a digital ecosystem that is healthier, more ethical, and oriented toward humane values.

Toward Collaborative Digital Governance

The multidimensional character of the moral crisis identified above implies that no single actor neither the individual user, nor the platform, nor the state alone can resolve it in isolation. This section outlines what a genuinely collaborative response might involve, drawing together the threads of the discussion above.

At the level of the individual and the family, the priority is less about restricting access to technology than about cultivating the internal capacities critical thinking, self control, empathy that the literature identifies as the strongest internal safeguards against moral crisis. Because these capacities are formed gradually through habituation rather than instruction alone, the family's role is best understood as one of sustained accompaniment: parents and guardians engaging with what young people encounter online, modeling responsible digital conduct themselves, and treating digital behavior as a legitimate extension of everyday character formation rather than as a separate domain exempt from ordinary moral expectations.

At the level of educational institutions, character education needs to move beyond isolated modules on "digital citizenship" and become integrated into the broader curriculum, so that ethical reasoning about online conduct is treated with the same seriousness as ethical reasoning about offline conduct. Given that cultural lag arises precisely when normative development fails to keep pace with technological change [4], schools are well positioned to compress that lag by explicitly teaching the ethical dimensions of emerging digital practices as those practices emerge, rather than waiting for norms to consolidate informally over time.

At the level of platforms, the algorithmic dynamics discussed in Section before, the tendency to reward sensational and emotionally charged content are not immutable features of digital technology as such, but design choices that could in principle be adjusted to weight educational or prosocial content more favorably. Whether platforms undertake such adjustments voluntarily or only under regulatory pressure remains, at present, an open and contested question, one this literature-based study cannot resolve on its own, what the literature does make clear is that algorithmic design is a causal factor in the moral crisis under discussion, and therefore a legitimate object of policy attention rather than a neutral backdrop against which only individual behavior is judged.

At the level of government, the appropriate role is neither blanket censorship nor complete non-intervention, but the steady development of a regulatory framework covering content moderation standards, data transparency, and platform accountability that treats digital ethics as a matter of public interest comparable to public health or consumer protection, while leaving substantial room for civil society and academic input into how such regulation is designed.

Taken together, these four levels of response individual and family, educational institution, platform, and government do not operate independently of one another; a family's capacity to model responsible digital conduct is itself shaped by the literacy programs schools provide, just as a platform's incentive to moderate content responsibly is shaped by the regulatory environment government establishes. It is this interdependence, more than any single intervention, that this study identifies as the most realistic path toward a healthier digital ethical culture.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study shows that the phenomenon of shifting ethics in digital media use is a consequence of the interaction between technological development, social change, and the weak internalization of moral values. Various forms of deviation cyberbullying, hate speech, the spread of hoaxes, flexing culture, and declining communication ethics indicate that technological advancement has not yet been fully matched by the maturity of its users' character.

The analysis shows that this moral crisis is shaped by internal factors low digital literacy, weak self control, and insufficiently optimized character education as well as external factors, including social-media algorithms, viral culture, peer pressure, and weak supervision from both family and educational institutions. From a sociological perspective, this phenomenon reflects a lag in the development of values and norms relative to the pace of technological innovation.

Resolving the shift in digital media ethics therefore cannot rely on legal approaches alone, it requires a strategy that is both preventive and collaborative. Strengthening ethics based digital literacy, integrating character education across all levels of schooling, enhancing the family's role in supervising social media use, and securing digital platforms' commitment to building a healthier ecosystem are all essential steps toward cultivating a more responsible digital culture.

This study is limited by its reliance on a literature review approach without the direct collection of field data. Future research is encouraged to employ survey or

interview methods in order to obtain an empirical picture of Generation Z's behavior in digital media use, and to evaluate the effectiveness of digital literacy programs in shaping the character of social media users.

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