Negotiating Digital Cultural Identity and Tolerance among Indonesian Gen Z: A Cross-Cultural Communication Perspective

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Abstract

Keywords:
Communication, Cross-Culture, Digital Culture, Tolerance, Social Media

The development of digital technology has changed the landscape of public communication in Indonesia, primarily through social media, which has become the main arena for expressing identity and cross-cultural interaction. Generation Z, as a group that grew up in a digital ecosystem, faces challenges in navigating cultural identity, tolerance values, and social norms in a dynamic and diverse online space. This study aims to understand how Indonesian Generation Z negotiates cultural identity and tolerance practices through digital communication. The research uses an explanatory sequential mixed-method approach. The quantitative phase involves an online survey of 500 respondents from various regions in Indonesia to explore communication patterns, cultural openness, and attitudes towards tolerance. The qualitative phase consisted of semi-structured interviews with 20 selected participants to explore personal experiences, identity negotiation strategies, and the meaning of cross-cultural interactions. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify main themes. The results show that social media serves as a space for self-expression and a medium for negotiating cultural identity, where Generation Z combines local cultural symbols with global trends, creating a flexible, hybrid identity. Linguistic creativity through slang, code-switching, and innovative spelling is an important strategy for self-expression, building solidarity, and navigating digital social norms. Exposure to cross-cultural content increases tolerance, though interactions are often limited to similar communities due to platform algorithms. This study emphasises that critical digital literacy and cultural awareness are necessary to maximise the potential of social media as an inclusive means of strengthening social cohesion and intercultural harmony in Indonesia.

Abstrak

Kata kunci:
Komunikasi, Lintas Budaya, Budaya Digital, Toleransi, Media Sosial

Article history:
Received: 30-05-2025
Revised: 12-08-2025
Accepted: 11-10-2025

Perkembangan teknologi digital telah mengubah lanskap komunikasi publik di Indonesia, terutama melalui media sosial yang menjadi arena utama ekspresi identitas dan interaksi lintas budaya. Generasi Z, sebagai kelompok yang tumbuh dalam ekosistem digital, menghadapi tantangan dalam menavigasi identitas budaya, nilai toleransi, dan norma sosial di ruang daring yang dinamis dan beragam. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami bagaimana Generasi Z Indonesia menegosiasikan identitas budaya dan praktik toleransi melalui komunikasi digital. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan metode campuran berurutan eksplanatori. Fase kuantitatif melibatkan survei online terhadap 500 responden dari berbagai wilayah di Indonesia untuk mengeksplorasi pola komunikasi, keterbukaan budaya, dan sikap toleransi. Fase kualitatif dilakukan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan 20 peserta terpilih untuk mendalami pengalaman personal, strategi negosiasi identitas, dan pemaknaan interaksi lintas budaya. Data kuantitatif dianalisis menggunakan statistik deskriptif dan inferensial, sedangkan data kualitatif dianalisis dengan analisis tematik untuk mengidentifikasi tema utama. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa media sosial berfungsi sebagai ruang ekspresi diri sekaligus medium negosiasi identitas budaya, di mana Generasi Z menggabungkan simbol budaya lokal dengan tren global, menghasilkan identitas hibrid yang fleksibel. Kreativitas linguistik melalui slang, code-switching, dan ejaan inovatif menjadi strategi penting untuk mengekspresikan diri, membangun solidaritas, dan menavigasi norma sosial digital. Paparan terhadap konten lintas budaya meningkatkan kesadaran toleransi, meski interaksi sering

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terbatas pada komunitas sejenis karena algoritma platform. Studi ini menegaskan bahwa literasi digital kritis dan kesadaran budaya diperlukan untuk memaksimalkan potensi media sosial sebagai sarana inklusif bagi penguatan kohesi sosial dan harmoni antarbudaya di Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has revolutionized the public communication landscape in Indonesia. Social media is no longer just a means of entertainment, but rather a central arena for people to express opinions, build social networks, and participate in public discourse (Vu et al., 2025). This transformation introduces a new, horizontal, fast, and participatory form of communication, replacing the traditional, hierarchical, one-way model. Indonesia, one of the countries with the most significant number of social media users in the world, is experiencing complex dynamics. On the one hand, social media strengthens multicultural awareness and expands intercultural interaction; on the other hand, various problems arise, such as social polarization, misinformation, and crises in communication ethics (Allathief et al., 2024). In k

In a pluralistic society such as Indonesia, these changes are of interest because they affect social cohesion and tolerance among cultural, ethnic, and religious groups. Several previous studies have examined the relationship between social media and cross-cultural communication in Indonesia. Zonyfar et al. (2022) emphasized that digital media serves as a vehicle for articulating cultural identities and for negotiating tolerance values in virtual public spaces. Putri et al. (2024) found that the digital age enables individuals to express themselves more openly and fluidly, creating inclusive, cross-border cultural spaces. On the other hand, Salsabila et al. (2024) note that globalization and social media have encouraged the emergence of a generation more adaptable to global culture, yet may lead to a shift in local values. These studies show that digitalization plays a dual role, strengthening intercultural connectivity while creating identity ambiguity amid global information flows that continue to run without borders.

However, this study's research design had significant limitations. First, most of the previous research focused on the role of social media as a means of communication or representation of cultural identity, without delving deeply into the process of negotiating identity and tolerance at the level of the younger generation, especially Generation Z. Second, cross-cultural research in Indonesia still tends to place culture as a static entity, rather than as the result of dynamic interactions in a value-laden digital space. Symbols and meanings. Third, there

have been few studies that integrate digital literacy, cultural identity, and the ethics of cross-cultural communication in the context of Indonesia's multicultural society. In fact, understanding the relationship among these three aspects is key to understanding how the younger generation shapes their mindset, communication behavior, and tolerance in cyberspace.

Generation Z is the most intensely involved social group in the digital ecosystem. They grew up in an era of seamless connectivity, in which identity, culture, and social values are constantly negotiated across various media platforms (Salsabila et al., 2024). The cross-cultural interactions on social media are shaping a new reality. This generation is not only a consumer of information but also a producer of meaning, actively reinterpreting global and local cultural symbols. However, such extensive exposure to global culture can lead to cultural homogenization, diminished sensitivity to diversity, and even identity crises. Therefore, it is important to examine how Generation Z balances openness to global culture with the preservation of local cultural values that underpin the nation's identity. Based on this context, this study will critically examine how Generation Z in Indonesia navigates identity and tolerance in a dynamic social media environment. The primary focus of this study is the process of cross-cultural communication in the digital space. How the younger generation constructs, negotiates, and interprets their cultural identity in the midst of information globalization. In addition, this study will examine the extent to which digital literacy shapes communication ethics, tolerance attitudes, and multicultural awareness in online interactions. Thus, this article is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of cross-cultural communication studies in the digital era while offering a practical perspective on how social media can be used to strengthen social cohesion and intercultural harmony in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses an explanatory sequential mixed method design to investigate the complex relationship between digital communication, cultural identity, and tolerance among Indonesia's Generation Z. Quantitative data provides generalizable insights into communication habits and cultural perceptions, while qualitative data deepens understanding by analyzing individual experiences and narratives in more detail (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Asih et al., 2024). This study focuses on Indonesian Generation Z, which is defined as individuals born between 1995 and 2012 (Shin & Choi, 2021).

This group was chosen for its high level of digital engagement and its unique position as a generation simultaneously shaped by and shaping online

intercultural dynamics. Purposive sampling strategies are used to ensure the inclusion of active social media users representing diverse geographic regions, educational backgrounds, and cultural orientations. For the quantitative phase, an online survey was distributed to approximately 500 respondents on Indonesia's main islands—including Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Nusa Tenggara—to achieve broad demographic representation. The qualitative phase involved 20 participants selected from an initial survey pool for semi-structured interviews, allowing for an in-depth exploration of personal experiences related to cultural negotiations, tolerance, and online communication practices (Moslehpour et al., 2024).

The quantitative instrument consisted of a structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale, measuring three main dimensions: (1) intensity of digital communication (frequency, duration, and use of the platform), (2) cultural identity (local ties, cultural pride, and global openness), and (3) intercultural tolerance (empathy, acceptance, and openness to diversity). The validity of this instrument's content is established through expert review by a communication lecturer, and its reliability is verified using Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha \geq 0.80$). Meanwhile, the qualitative instruments consisted of interview guides that encouraged participants to reflect on their cross-cultural experiences, the challenges of maintaining identity in the digital space, and strategies to foster mutual respect and understanding online (Swarna et al., 2024). Data collection was carried out in two consecutive phases. Surveys are distributed via Google Forms, and responses are filtered for completeness and eligibility. The interview phases were selected based on survey responses, ensuring diversity across gender, religion, and region. Interviews are conducted online via Zoom or Google Meet, lasting about 20 to 30 minutes each. For data analysis, quantitative data were processed in SPSS version 27, using descriptive statistics to identify social media usage patterns and inferential tests (Pearson correlation and multiple regression) to analyze the relationships among digital communication, cultural identity, and tolerance. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2021): familiarization, coding, categorization, and theme construction. To improve the credibility and validity of the findings, methodological triangulation is used by matching statistical trends with qualitative narratives, enabling the convergence and complementarity of evidence across datasets.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Result

This study reveals a complex picture of how Indonesia's Generation Z utilizes digital platforms for communication, identity expression, and intercultural interaction. From surveys and interviews, it is clear that social media has become an integral part of daily life, serving as a space for self-expression and a medium through which cultural identities are constantly negotiated. Participants reported that platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube became the center of their social interactions, providing an opportunity not only to connect with peers but also to explore, adopt, and share diverse cultural references. These platforms are used to interact with trends, showcase creativity, and convey values, reflecting the dynamic interaction between individual expression and social participation in the digital space. The pattern of content engagement suggests that Generation Z is actively curating their online presence, often combining local cultural symbols with a global digital aesthetic. Many participants described posting short videos, images, or text that combined traditional elements such as local clothing, language phrases, or references to cultural events alongside popular international trends. Thus, they create hybrid identity expressions that are flexible and adaptable to the expectations of online audiences. The findings also show that this hybrid approach extends beyond visual content to linguistic practices, with participants often using informal language, slang, abbreviations, and code mixes between Indonesian and English. This linguistic creativity allows them to signify group membership, build solidarity, and navigate informal social norms in the digital space.

Analysis of survey data shows that exposure to diverse content has contributed to a general awareness of cultural and religious differences. Many respondents expressed a positive attitude towards tolerance and inclusion, especially in interactions with peers from different cultural or religious backgrounds. However, qualitative insights from interviews suggest that these attitudes are often context-dependent. Participants reported that interactions with different perspectives tended to occur in interest-based communities or algorithmically curated feeds, thus limiting exposure to completely unfamiliar views. While they recognize the importance of respecting diversity, their digital interactions are often influenced by social trends, peer expectations, and specific platform features, rather than by conscious reflection on broader intercultural principles. The findings also highlight the influence of social media on behavioral and aesthetic norms. Participants noted that platforms like TikTok and Instagram not only influenced their communication style but also lifestyle choices, preferences, and perceptions of social acceptance. At the same time, they

reported observing and mimicking conventional social norms, such as gender-based expectations for appearance or behavior, especially in content that garnered higher engagement. In addition, the rapid emergence of new content-sharing formats, including short videos and interactive challenges, has strengthened the preference for visual narratives, simplicity, and creativity, shaping the way younger generations organize their online communication and social interactions.

The data shows that digital communication practices among Generation Z both offer opportunities and pose limitations. While social media offers space for experimentation, cultural hybridity, and self-expression, it also creates subtle pressures to conform to popular trends and community norms. Participants demonstrate adaptability in managing these pressures, selectively displaying aspects of their identity and strategically navigating online interactions. Linguistic innovation, integration of local and global cultural references, and expressions of situational tolerance illustrate the complex and dynamic nature of social identities and behaviors in the digital space. In summary, these findings describe Indonesia's Generation Z as highly engaged, adaptive, and creative digital users. Their communication behavior demonstrates a blend of cultural flexibility, linguistic innovation, and context-specific tolerance. Social media serves as a key arena for negotiating identities, practicing social interactions, and expressing cultural values, highlighting the ever-evolving and complex relationship between digital technologies, young culture, and intercultural engagement.

Aspects	Key Findings	Information
Platform Digital	TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube are the leading platforms	Used for social interaction, self-expression, and the sharing of cultural content
Cultural Expression / Cultural Identity	Integration of local cultural symbols with global trends	Forming a hybrid and flexible identity, presenting itself in a digital social context
Language/Communication Style	Slang, abbreviations, code-mixing, and non-standard spelling	Demonstrate linguistic creativity, informality, and a sign of group identity

Aspects	Key Findings	Information
Tolerance / Cross-Cultural Interaction	Positive attitudes toward differences, but limited to like-minded communities	Cross-cultural interactions are often limited by algorithmically curated feeds and specific interest groups.
Social Norms / Social Media Influences	Influences lifestyle, gender norms, and aesthetic preferences	Social media plays a role in the formation of social norms and conformity pressures
Hybrid Behavior / Digital Adaptation	Be selective in how you display identities, adopt trends, and customize interactions.	Demonstrate high adaptability in a dynamic digital space.

Discussion

The empirical findings of this study show that digital communication among Indonesia's Generation Z is a highly dynamic and multidimensional phenomenon, encompassing linguistic innovation, identity negotiation, and intercultural engagement. The essence of this discussion is the observation that informal language, slang, abbreviations, and creative spelling are not merely stylistic choices but key mechanisms through which youth construct, express, and negotiate their identities in online spaces (Androutsopoulos, 2022; Barton & Lee, 2023). These practices serve as markers of generational membership, peer affiliation, and cultural orientation, suggesting that language use in digital platforms is intrinsically linked to individual expression and the formation of collective identity (Georgakopoulou & Spilioti, 2020). These findings suggest that the digital environment provides an unprecedented arena for youth to experiment with language, while also reflecting broader social shifts and generational preferences (Tagg et al., 2022).

A prominent dimension of this analysis is the flexibility of communication styles among Generation Z. Respondents consistently demonstrate the ability to navigate a wide range of language registers ranging from formal, consultative, and professional to casual and intimate depending on the audience and context (Crystal, 2023). This flexibility highlights the social and technological literacy of this generation, as they strategically adapt their language to meet the normative expectations of different digital environments, including peer groups, family circles, and educational or professional platforms (Blommaert, 2021). Code-switching, in particular, is emerging as an important strategy for managing

relational dynamics, expressing emotions, and negotiating social hierarchies, allowing young generations to align themselves with specific communities while maintaining control over their personal identities (Canagarajah, 2020).

The interaction between individual creativity and collective norms also emerged as a significant finding. Although individual users employ innovative linguistic practices to create personal narratives and unique identities, these practices simultaneously reinforce collective generational identities, strengthen social cohesion, and set cultural boundaries (Page et al., 2022). Digital platforms facilitate this duality by providing features for visual, interactive, and multimodal expression. Features such as short videos, story updates, interactive filters, and algorithm-based content curation encourage rapid linguistic experimentation and style play, encouraging youth to generate new words, hybrid phrases, and contextually tailored syntax (Leppänen & Kytölä, 2020). These findings suggest that digital media acts as a medium for individual expression and a channel for cultural codification, facilitating the co-creation of shared linguistic repertoire and social norms (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2023).

In addition, the study highlights the emergence of hybrid cultural expressions in the digital space. Generation Z participants often integrate elements of Indonesia's local culture such as traditional languages, regional expressions, and visual references to local heritage into global digital aesthetics and trends (Nugroho, 2023). This blend of local and global clues suggests that the construction of online identity involves negotiating between embedded cultural values and global digital cultural pressures (Sari & Hidayat, 2022). Linguistic adaptation, therefore, serves as a functional strategy for communication and a symbolic mechanism through which young generations express a sense of belonging, affirm individuality, and participate in transnational digital communities (Palfreyman & Al Khalil, 2021). Generational differences provide additional insight into the ever-evolving nature of digital communication. Comparisons between Generation Z and younger cohorts, such as Generation Alpha, reveal different patterns of linguistic innovation, including greater lexical compression, creative spelling, and rapid semantic shifts (McCrindle, 2021). Generation Alpha shows a higher sensitivity to visual and multimodal communication cues, creates new neologisms, and experiments with language in ways that challenge traditional sociolinguistic norms (Tagg & Evans, 2023). This generational progression highlights the cumulative impact of technological acceleration, global connectivity, and evolving social conventions on language (Thorne, 2020).

The implications of these findings go beyond linguistic practice and extend to broader dimensions related to identity and tolerance. Informal

language, slang, and code-switching not only serve as tools for self-expression but also as mediators of social relationships, peer cohesion, and group membership (Lee & Lim, 2021). Participants reported using these strategies to navigate social expectations, strengthen peer bonds, and signal compliance or differences within a particular community. At the same time, exposure to diverse cultural content on digital platforms shapes perceptions of intercultural tolerance and engagement (Chen & Wellman, 2022). However, this engagement is often context-dependent and mediated by platform algorithms. Digital communities, while promoting the visibility of differences, simultaneously create an environment of selective exposure, limit interactions with unfamiliar perspectives, and thus shape how tolerance is practiced online (Bucher, 2021).

The platform's technological capabilities play a crucial role in these processes. Interactive features, visually-oriented layouts, algorithmically curated feeds, and trend-driven content amplify the speed, informality, and creative experimentation observed among users (Van Dijck et al., 2023). These capabilities not only facilitate linguistic innovation but also shape patterns of social interaction, driving the adoption of platform-specific norms, styles, and conventions. The strategic use of these features allows Generation Z to build nuanced digital identities, negotiate social hierarchies, and participate in culturally diverse but algorithmically constrained networks (Abidin, 2021). These dynamics highlight the importance of considering the material and structural nature of digital platforms as active agents in shaping communication practices.

Finally, this study's findings show that digital communication serves as a critical site for continuity and transformation in social and cultural life. Through innovative language use and strategic engagement with the platform's features, young people actively shape new linguistic and social norms (Jones, 2022). At the same time, the persistence of local cultural references and selective engagement with global trends suggests a negotiation between continuity and change, reflecting a broader social process in which youth navigate traditions, modernity, and global influences (Heryanto, 2021). These patterns suggest that digital media is not just a means of communication, but a central arena for identity formation, cultural negotiation, and social innovation, shaping both individual experiences and collective cultural trajectories (Couldry & Hepp, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the critical role of digital linguistic practices in shaping the culture and identity of Indonesia's young generation, particularly Generation Z. Digital platforms, especially social media, serve as a

key arena for self-expression, cultural negotiation, and social interaction, enabling young users to build multifaceted identities that combine local traditions with global digital trends. The use of informal language, slang, code-switching, and innovative spelling demonstrates how linguistic creativity serves as a personal and collective strategy to affirm group membership, navigate social norms, and foster a sense of community in diverse online communities. These practices reflect the flexibility and digital literacy of Generation Z, who strategically tailor their communication styles to suit different platforms' audiences, contexts, and conventions, reflecting a sophisticated understanding of digital potential.

While digital communication facilitates exposure to diverse perspectives and intercultural understanding, selective interactions in algorithmically curated spaces can simultaneously amplify echo spaces and limit meaningful engagement with different viewpoints. This duality highlights the importance of developing critical digital literacy and sociolinguistic awareness, enabling young people to navigate the opportunities and challenges of online interaction responsibly. The rapid dissemination of content through social media further strengthens the potential and risks of digital communication. On the one hand, young people can take advantage of online platforms to participate in cultural exchanges, creative expression, and identity negotiations; On the other hand, disinformation, exclusive practices, and normative pressures can shape online behavior and affect social cohesion. Therefore, understanding the interaction among digital linguistic innovation, identity formation, and social dynamics is critical for educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking to support an inclusive, ethical, and culturally sensitive online environment. The practice of digital linguistics among Indonesian youth is not only a means of communication but an active mechanism for identity formation, social negotiation, and cultural expression. They reflect a delicate balance between creativity and compliance, inclusion and exclusion, individual expression and collective norms. Supporting digital literacy and awareness of linguistic and cultural practices is essential to harness the positive potential of this digital space while mitigating its challenges, ultimately contributing to stronger social cohesion, intercultural tolerance, and the sustainable development of digitally mediated young cultures in Indonesia.

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