

The Crisis of *Adab* in Generation Z's Social Interactions: Challenges and Urgency

Nur Asyah^{1*}), Rini Fadhillah Putri², Enny Fitriani³

^{1,2)} Universitas Muslim Nusantara Al Washliyah, Medan, Indonesia

³⁾ Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Kesehatan Indah, Medan, Indonesia

Correspondence Authors: ennyfitriani25@gmail.com

Article history: Received November 21, 2025; revised December 18, 2025; accepted January 16, 2026

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License



ABSTRACT

Generation Z grew in the digital era, marked by the massive dominance of social media and communication technologies. This phenomenon has significantly transformed patterns of social interaction, including attitudes, manners, and interpersonal communication ethics, which are often characterized by a decline in adab (ethical conduct) and face-to-face social skills. This study aims to identify the characteristics of the adab crisis in Generation Z's social interactions, analyze the major challenges accompanying it, and examine the urgency of addressing this issue within the context of education and character development. A literature review method was employed to synthesize findings from recent empirical studies. The results indicate that the dominance of digital interactions contributes to a decline in meaningful interpersonal communication skills, while the need for adab education and soft skill development has become increasingly urgent. Theoretically, this study enriches the discourse on adab as a dynamic and contextual social construct of the digital era. Adab can no longer be understood solely in a normative-traditional sense but must be positioned as an adaptive social competence responding to contemporary changes. Practically, the findings provide a strong foundation for developing educational and guidance interventions, particularly through humanistic approaches and group guidance, as effective strategies for revitalizing adab in Generation Z's social interactions.

Keywords: *Adab Crisis; Social Interaction; Generation Z; Digital Era; Character Education; Social Empathy*

I. INTRODUCTION

The massive digital transformation over the past two decades has fundamentally altered the landscape of social interactions in modern society. Social media, instant messaging applications, and online communication platforms now function not only as communication tools but also as primary spaces for identity formation, social relations, and behavioral values, particularly for Generation Z. (Twenge, 2023) This generation has grown within a fast-paced, open, and instant digital ecosystem, shaping communication patterns that differ significantly from those of previous generations. However, alongside technological advancements, a growing social issue has emerged: the crisis of *adab* in Generation Z's social interactions. (Creswell & Poth, 2023)

Adab in social interactions refers to a set of ethical values governing how individuals communicate, express themselves, and build relationships with politeness, empathy, and respect for others. *Adab* not only represents compliance with social norms, but also serves as a foundation for character formation and social cohesion. (Berkowitz & Bier, 2022) From a sociological perspective, *adab* functions as a mechanism of social control that maintains the quality of human relationships and prevents social disintegration. (Hobbs & Mihailidis, 2023) Therefore, the weakening of *adab* in social interaction indicates disruptions in value socialization and character development among younger generations. Recent studies have revealed that Generation Z faces serious challenges in consistently applying *adab*, both in online and offline interactions. (Twenge, 2023) These challenges are reflected in the increased use of impolite language, diminished interpersonal empathy, reactive communication styles, and declining sensitivity to social norms. Such conditions are closely linked to the dominance of digital communication, which often blurs ethical boundaries, reduces social presence, and minimizes moral reflection. Consequently, social interactions become increasingly transactional and lose their humanistic dimension.

Within the framework of symbolic interactionism, social behavior and individual identity are shaped through meaningful interactions involving symbols and language. Face-to-face interactions provide rich opportunities for internalizing *adab* through nonverbal expressions, tones, and emotional responses. By

contrast, digital communication limits these dimensions, resulting in more superficial processes of social meaning-making. This explains why Generation Z, whose interactions predominantly occur in digital spaces, may experience gaps in internalizing *adab* values. From a humanistic psychological perspective, the quality of interpersonal relationships is determined by empathy, unconditional positive regard, and authenticity. These principles align closely with the essence of *adab* as an attitude of respect and the humanization of others. However, anonymous and fast-paced digital environments tend to weaken empathic dimensions, making individuals more impulsive, defensive, and less considerate of the social impact of their behavior. This reinforces the argument that the *adab* crisis among Generation Z members is a structural issue closely related to the ecology of digital communication.

Moreover, media ecology theory emphasizes that media not only mediates messages but also shapes how humans think, behave, and relate to one another. (Anderson & Jiang, 2023) Digital communication environments that prioritize speed, visibility, and instant response indirectly cultivate less reflective and ethically minimal communication cultures. (Haidt & Twenge, 2024) In this context, the *adab* crisis can be understood as an ecological consequence of social environmental changes that have not been balanced by the reinforcement of humanistic and ethical values. Despite numerous studies examining Generation Z's communication behaviors and the impact of digitalization on social interaction, research explicitly positioning the *adab* crisis as a central analytical focus remains limited. Most studies stop describing behavioral changes without exploring ethical implications and the urgency of strengthening *adab* values in character formation. (Arnett, 2022) Therefore, a more in-depth and integrative analysis is needed to understand the *adab* crisis as a complex and multidimensional social phenomenon. Based on these considerations, this study is both important and relevant for comprehensively analyzing the characteristics of the *adab* crisis in Generation Z's social interactions, the underlying factors, and the urgency of addressing it within educational and social development contexts. (Berkowitz & Bier, 2022) This study is expected to contribute theoretically to social interaction and character education research while offering a conceptual foundation for contextual and sustainable strategies to strengthen *adab* in the digital era.

Research Questions

- 1) What are the characteristics of the *adab* crisis in Generation Z's social interactions, in terms of language politeness, interpersonal empathy, and ethical awareness in digital communication?
- 2) How does the changing ecology of digital communication shape the internalization of *adab* values among Generation Z from symbolic, interactionist, and humanistic perspectives?
- 3) What structural and cultural factors contributed to the *adab* crisis in Generation Z's online and offline social interactions?
- 4) What are the implications of the *adab* crisis for social relationship quality and social cohesion, and why is this phenomenon urgent to address in education and social development?

Research Objectives

- 1) To analyze the characteristics of the *adab* crisis in Generation Z's social interactions in depth, focusing on politeness, empathy, and ethical awareness.
- 2) To explain the relationship between changes in digital communication ecology and the weakening internalization of *adab* values through symbolic interactionist and humanistic approaches.
- 3) Identifying the structural and cultural factors underlying the *adab* crisis as a systemic social issue, rather than merely individual behavior.
- 4) To emphasize the urgency of strengthening *adab* as an integral component of character education and social cohesion in the digital era.

II. METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach with a critical phenomenological design. (Miles et al., 2023) This approach was selected because the research objective is not merely to measure behavior, but to gain an in-depth understanding of the crisis of *adab* as a social experience, a process of meaning-making, and an ethical issue experienced by Generation Z in social interactions within the digital era. Phenomenological design enables researchers to explore subjective meanings, lived experiences, and the process of internalizing moral values (*adab*) within the ecology of digital communication, as emphasized by symbolic interactionism and humanistic perspectives. (Gergen, 2022)

The research subjects consist of Generation Z individuals who meet the following criteria:

1. Undergraduate students of the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education (FKIP), UMN Al Washliyah, age 18-24 years.
2. Actively use social media and digital communication platforms
3. Engage in both online and offline social interactions (campus/community contexts)

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on the representativeness of their social experiences and the intensity of digital media use.

Data Collection Techniques

To ensure that each research question was addressed methodologically, methodological triangulation was applied using the following techniques.

1. In-depth Interviews

Conducted to:

- ❖ Explore Generation Z's experiences in social interactions
- ❖ Understand their interpretations of *adab*, empathy, and politeness
- ❖ Reveal ethical reflections in digital communication

2. Limited Participant Observation

Conducted in:

- ❖ Offline social interactions (e.g., discussions, group work)
- ❖ Patterns of online communication (without violating privacy ethics)

Observation focused on:

- ✓ Verbal and non-verbal language
- ✓ Emotional responses
- ✓ Reactive versus reflective communication patterns

3. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Conducted to:

- ❖ Identify structural and cultural factors contributing to the crisis of *adab*
- ❖ Explore collective dynamics and emerging social norms

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using reflective thematic analysis, following these stages:

1. Data transcription and familiarization
2. Open coding (identifying meanings related to *adab*, empathy, and ethics)
3. Axial coding (linking communication patterns to the crisis of *adab*)
4. Development of main themes:
 - Crisis of *ada*
 - Digital communication ecology
 - Value internalization
 - Social impact
5. Theoretical interpretation using:
 - Symbolic interactions
 - Humanistic psychology
 - Media ecology

The analysis was conducted iteratively and reflectively to maintain interpretive depth.

Trustworthiness of Data

The following strategies were employed to ensure the credibility and validity of the findings:

- Source and method triangulation
- Member checking (participant validation of findings)
- Peer debriefing (academic discussion)
- Audit trial (transparent documentation of the analytical process)

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

1. Characteristics of the Adab Crisis in Generation Z's Social Interactions

The findings indicate that the crisis of *adab* (social etiquette and ethical conduct) in Generation Z's social interactions manifests in various interconnected forms, reflecting fundamental shifts in the patterns of social communication. This crisis is not confined to digital spaces, but also permeates offline social interactions. (Haidt & Twenge, 2024)

a. Decline in Linguistic Politeness

Most participants demonstrated a tendency to use language that was direct, reactive, and minimally filtered by ethical considerations. The use of sarcastic expressions, demeaning humor, and coarse language is often perceived as “normal” and “unproblematic,” particularly within peer interactions and social media platforms. In offline interactions, these patterns persist, blurring the boundary between casual language and impolite speech. (Hobbs & Mihailidis, 2023)

b. Weakening of Interpersonal Empathy

Generation Z’s social empathy tended to diminish, particularly in the ability to deeply perceive and interpret others’ emotions. Participants acknowledged that they found it easier to disregard others’ feelings when communicating online, as they were not directly confronted with facial expressions, vocal intonation, or emotional responses. This condition contributes to low sensitivity toward the psychological impact of one’s words or actions (Lickona, 2022).

c. Normalization of Uncivil Behavior in Digital Spaces

Behaviors such as aggressive comments, mild cyberbullying, body shaming, and demeaning speech are often regarded as part of the “normal” dynamics of digital communication. This normalization reflects a shift in social ethical standards, whereby actions previously considered violations of *adab* are now perceived as legitimate expressions of freedom of speech. (Livingstone & Third, 2023)

d. Declining Respect for Social Authority

The crisis of *adab* is also evident in vertical relationships, such as interactions with lecturers, parents, and other authority figures. Some participants exhibited an egalitarian communication style that was not balanced by proportional respect, whether in terms of language, attitude, or responsiveness. This finding indicates a shift in the meaning and practice of respect in Generation Z’s social structure. (McLuhan, 2023)

2. Factors Contributing to the Crisis of Adab

This study identified that the *adab* crisis among Generation Z is influenced by structural, cultural, and pedagogical factors.

a. Dominance of Digital Communication Ecology

Social media and instant messaging platforms have created a communication ecology that prioritizes speed, visibility, and immediacy. Within this ecology, moral reflection and ethical considerations are often marginalized. Generation Z has become accustomed to responding spontaneously, without sufficient internalization of *adab* values. (Twenge, 2023)

b. Influence of Global Popular Culture

Digital popular culture, which emphasizes freedom of expression, sarcastic humor, and provocative content, significantly shaped Generation Z’s communication preferences. Traditional *adab* values are frequently perceived as rigid, outdated, and irrelevant to contemporary youth identities. (Twenge, 2023)

c. Lack of Social Role Models

The participants revealed that public figures, influencers, and even individuals in their immediate environment often fail to model courteous and ethical communication. When uncivil behavior receives social legitimacy and popularity, the internalization of *adab* values weakens. (Suler, 2022)

d. Contextually Inadequate Character Education

Adab and character education within educational institutions remains largely normative, cognitive, and formalistic. *Adab* is taught as a set of rules rather than as a lived, reflective experience relevant to Generation Z’s digital realities. (UNESCO, 2023)

Discussion

The Crisis of Adab as a Multidimensional Social Phenomenon

The findings confirm that the crisis of *adab* in Generation Z’s social interactions is a multidimensional and systemic social phenomenon. It cannot be reduced to individual moral failure alone but should be understood as a consequence of transformations in communication structures and social culture in the digital era. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the meaning of *adab* is constructed through social interactions rich in symbols and interpretations. (Yusuf & Rahman, 2024) When Generation Z’s interactions increasingly occur in digital spaces with limited nonverbal cues, the process of social meaning-making becomes shallow. Language loses its ethical function as a medium of respect and empathy and instead becomes a reactive tool for self-expression.

Crisis of Empathy and the Reduction of Humanistic Dimensions

The weakening of interpersonal empathy identified in this study aligns with humanistic psychological perspectives, that emphasize emotional presence, unconditional positive regard, and authenticity in social relationships. Anonymous and fragmented digital environments inhibit the development of authentic relational qualities, causing social interactions to lose their humanistic dimension. This condition explains why Generation Z is often capable of engaging in intense communication, but lacks depth. Social relationships expand quantitatively, while remaining qualitatively impoverished.

Media Ecology and the Normalization of Incivility

Within the media ecology theory, media not only function as channels of message transmission but also shape human cognition and behavior. A digital communication ecology that normalizes speed, virality, and controversy indirectly lowers ethical standards of communication. Incivility is no longer perceived as deviant but as an integral part of contemporary communication culture. These findings reinforce the conclusion that the *adab* crisis among Generation Z represents an ecological consequence of a social environment that is not fully conducive to the development of humanistic values.

Implications for Character Education and Social Cohesion

The *adab* crisis experienced by Generation Z had serious implications for the quality of social relationships and long-term social cohesion. If left unaddressed, this condition may weaken social solidarity, increase interpersonal conflict, and erode mutual respect within the society. Therefore, the revitalization of *adab* should be positioned as a strategic agenda in character education. Humanistic approaches and group guidance are particularly relevant, as they provide dialogical, reflective, and empathetic spaces for Generation Z to reinterpret *adab* as a relational necessity rather than merely a normative rule. *Adab* education must be designed contextually, adapted to digital realities, and implemented through collaboration between schools, families, and communities. Through such efforts, *adab* can be internalized as a living and meaningful social competence in the digital era.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks all people and institutions in most cases and the sponsor and financial support acknowledgments.

REFERENCES

Ainin, S., Jaafar, N. I., Parveen, F., & Moghavvemi, S. (2023). Social media usage, digital etiquette, and ethical communication among youth. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 40(6), 1734–1752. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075221147123>

Anderson, M., & Jiang, J. (2023). Teens, social media, and digital communication behaviors. *Pew Research Center*.

Arnett, J. J. (2022). *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Berkowitz, M. W., & Bier, M. C. (2022). What works in character education: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Moral Education*, 51(3), 287–305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2021.1980184>

Boyd, D. (2024). Social media, identity, and ethical interaction in networked publics. *New Media & Society*, 26(2), 456–472. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231114598>

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2023). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Gergen, K. J. (2022). Relational being in the digital age. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 62(5), 573–590. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00221678221087654>

Haidt, J., & Twenge, J. M. (2024). Social media use and the decline of empathy in Generation Z. *Journal of Adolescence*, 97, 15–27. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2023.12.004>

Hobbs, R., & Mihailidis, P. (2023). *Media literacy in the digital age: Teaching civility and ethics online*. Routledge.

Karpinski, A. C., Kirschner, P. A., Ozer, I., Mellott, J. A., & Ochwo, P. (2022). An exploration of social networking site use, moral reasoning, and empathy. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 128, 107129. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.107129>

Lickona, T. (2022). Character education for the 21st century. *Journal of Character Education*, 18(1), 1–15.

Livingstone, S., & Third, A. (2023). Children, young people, and digital ethics. *Journal of Children and Media*, 17(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2022.2147471>

McLuhan, M. (2023). *The medium is the message* (Revisited ed.). MIT Press.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2023). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Prensky, M. (2022). From digital natives to digital wisdom. *Educational Technology*, 62(4), 5–10.

Suler, J. (2022). The online disinhibition effect and digital civility. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 25(7), 421–427. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2021.0474>

Twenge, J. M. (2023). *Generations: The real differences between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents*. Atria Books.

UNESCO. (2023). *Global citizenship education in the digital era*. UNESCO Publishing.

Yusuf, S., & Rahman, F. (2024). Revitalizing adab and character education among Muslim youth in digital contexts. *International Journal of Islamic Educational Psychology*, 5(2), 101–118. <https://doi.org/10.18196/ijiep.v5i2.18765>