Research Article

The Interaction of Traditional Values and Digital Culture: A Phenomenological Study of the Social Identity of Indonesia's Gen Z

*Ketut Purwantoro, Diah Soelistyowati,Irma Winingsih

Universitas Dian Nuswantoro, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: ketut.purwantoro@dsn.dinus.ac.id

Abstract

The phenomenon of socio-cultural shifts in Indonesia in the digital era has become increasingly complex, particularly as Generation Z emerges as the main actor in the use of technology while simultaneously inheriting traditional values. This study aims to deeply understand the subjective experiences of Gen Z in integrating traditional values – such as mutual cooperation, politeness, and kinship – with digital cultural practices characterized by speed, individuality, and global connectivity. Using a phenomenological approach, this research explores how Indonesian Gen Z negotiates its social identity amid the dialectic between the continuity of local values and digital innovation. The findings reveal that traditional values still hold significant influence, accounting for approximately 45% to 55% in shaping digital interaction patterns, particularly in aspects of communication ethics, online community solidarity, and the expression of cultural identity on social media. Although digital culture presents challenges such as global homogenization and tendencies toward individualism, Gen Z tends to engage in a process of hybridization, adapting digital technologies without completely abandoning traditional roots. Thus, the social identity of Indonesian Gen Z is not constructed dichotomously but through dynamic interactions that produce new communication patterns while opening space for the reinterpretation of local values in a global context. This study underscores the importance of balancing digital modernity and traditional heritage in shaping the identity of the younger generation and contributes conceptually to the understanding of Indonesia's national identity amid the intensifying currents of globalization.

Keywords

Introduction

The term interaction refers to the dynamic reciprocal relationship between individuals and groups in building social meaning (Giddens, 1991). In the context of this study, interaction is not only understood as direct communication in real life, but also includes digital spaces that are a new arena for Generation Z in expressing their social identity. These interactions allow traditional values and digital cultures to meet, influence each other, and sometimes even contradict each other, thus forming unique patterns of communication and behavior. Thus, interaction is the main key to understanding how Gen Z constructs its identity in the midst of socio-cultural changes.

Traditional values are interpreted as a set of local principles, norms, and wisdom that are inherited from generation to generation, such as mutual cooperation, manners, and family ties that are the foundation of Indonesian society (Koentjaraningrat, 2009). These values serve as guidelines for behaving and building harmonious social relationships. In relation to digital culture, traditional values are often reinterpreted to remain relevant to the times. For example, mutual cooperation that was once manifested in the form of physical community service can now be seen in the form of digital solidarity, such as online fundraising or social campaigns on social media. This shows that traditional values are not lost, but transformed into a new form that suits the digital ecosystem.

Furthermore, digital culture is understood as a system of values, social practices, and lifestyles born from the development of information and communication technology, which is characterized by global connectivity, information speed, and social media integration in daily life (Castells, 2010). Digital culture has given birth to a virtual interaction space that blurs the boundaries between local and global, while providing opportunities for Indonesian Gen Z to express their identities more freely. However, digital culture also presents challenges in the form of global homogenization that has the potential to erode local values. It is in this context that phenomenological studies become relevant to explore the experience of Gen Z in integrating traditional values into their digital lives, so that the social identity that is formed is not only the result of global cultural adoption, but also a reflection of local wisdom rooted in tradition.

By bringing together interactions, traditional values, and digital culture, this study places Indonesia's Generation Z as an important actor in the process of negotiating social identity. They not only play a role as the successor of tradition, but also as agents of change who are able to connect cultural heritage with the demands of the digital age. This is in line with the focus of phenomenological research, which emphasizes the importance of understanding the subject's life experiences in a deep and authentic way.

The term phenomenological study refers to a qualitative research approach that focuses on the subjective experience of individuals in understanding the reality of their lives (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, this study aims to explore how Indonesia's Generation Z, i.e. the generation born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s (Seemiller & Grace, 2016), negotiate their social identity which, according to Tajfel (1981), is part of a person's self-concept derived from their membership in a social group—amidst the tug-of-war between traditional values and digital culture.

In today's era, the main problem faced is the clash between traditional values that emphasize collectivity, politeness, and respect for social norms, with digital culture that tends to emphasize speed, individuality, and instant global connectivity. This condition often poses a dilemma for Generation Z in balancing their social identity, since on the one hand they are required to maintain local cultural heritage, while on the other hand they are bound by digital cultural expectations that emphasize novelty and efficiency. However, the results of the study show that traditional values still have a significant influence, which is around 45% to 55% in shaping Gen Z's digital interaction patterns, especially in the aspects of communication ethics, online community solidarity, and the expression of cultural identity on social media. This shows that the solution carried out by Gen Z is through a hybridization process, which is

combining traditional values with digital cultural practices so that the two do not negate each other, but complement each other. For example, solidarity that was once based on local communities is now translated into the form of collective support in the digital space, while traditional civility is embodied through the ethics of communicating on social media. In this way, Gen Z is able to create a model of social interaction that is relevant to the demands of the times while remaining rooted in Indonesian cultural values.

The choice of this topic is motivated by the phenomenon of digital globalization, which is often considered to erode traditional values, but in reality, Generation Z actually shows a tendency to hybridize, namely, combining local and global elements in their social practices. This is in line with the view of Hobsbawm (2012), who emphasizes that tradition is not always lost by modernity, but can be transformed according to the context of the times. By highlighting the interaction between tradition and digital modernity, this research is expected to make an academic and practical contribution to understanding the identity dynamics of Indonesia's young generation.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological study type. This approach was chosen because the research aims to understand the subjective experience of Generation Z of Indonesia in combining traditional values and digital culture, so it requires exploring the deep meaning from the perspective of participants (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenological methods are used to capture how Gen Z negotiates their social identity amidst a dialectic of local values and digital practices. To obtain data, this study uses three main techniques, namely: in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews are conducted in a semi-structured manner with Generation Z, with an age range of 17–26 years, who actively use social media and are still tied to traditional values of their families and communities.

This interview aims to explore the participants' personal experiences of interacting in the digital space and how traditional values remain present in everyday practice. Observations were made on online and offline activities that reflect the integration of traditional values and digital culture. For example, observations on Gen Z's interactions in digital communities, the use of polite language on social media, or their involvement in solidarity campaigns based on digital platforms. The researcher also analyzed social media content, posts, and digital narratives uploaded by participants as a form of representation of their identity. This analysis helps to strengthen the interview and observation data, while providing a complete picture of Gen Z's digital cultural practices. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study does not simply measure phenomena statistically, but emphasizes a deep understanding of social experiences, meanings, and interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Qualitatively relevant to examine complex phenomena such as the negotiation of Gen Z's social identity, which cannot be reduced to numbers alone, but requires a rich and contextual narrative. To strengthen the quality of qualitative data, this study applies the triangulation technique of sources and methods. Triangulation is carried out by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and analysis of digital documents in order to obtain a consistent and in-depth understanding (Patton, 2015). In addition, member checking is carried out by asking participants to reconfirm the results of the researcher's interpretation to ensure the suitability of the resulting meaning.

Results

The results of the study show that Generation Z Indonesia faces fundamental problems in maintaining a balance between traditional values and digital culture. On the one hand, they are required to maintain the principles of local wisdom, such as mutual cooperation, politeness, and kinship, that are the nation's identity. However, on the other hand, the flow of digital culture encourages a faster, individualistic, and pragmatic lifestyle. This problem is evident in the daily lives of Gen Z, for example, in the way they

communicate, which is often more concise and informal in the digital space, which is sometimes seen as eroding the value of politeness in the language tradition. One phenomenon that reflects this problem is the use of slang in digital communication by Gen Z on social media. For example, the use of abbreviations such as "btw," "gw," "lo," or a mixture of foreign languages with Indonesian is very popular on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. Although this is considered practical and in accordance with the rhythm of rapid digital communication, this kind of language pattern is often considered to erode the value of politeness and formality in the Indonesian communication tradition. In online interactions, the greetings or expressions of respect that are commonly used in traditional spoken culture are often overlooked. As a result, there are concerns that this kind of communication pattern can shift the values of politeness that are characteristic of Indonesian society.

Another phenomenon that has emerged is the way Gen Z expresses their identity through social media by highlighting aspects of individuality, such as self-branding trends or personal branding. This practice often encourages individuals to display a competitive, unique, and prominent self-image, in line with the logic of digital culture that emphasizes speed, popularity, and global connectedness. However, on the other hand, the practice can be at odds with traditional values that emphasize collectivity, togetherness, and humility. Thus, this phenomenon shows that there is a tug-of-war between collective traditions and digitalization that more accentuates the individual ego, thus forming the complex social identity dynamics of Gen Z.

The percentage of the influence of traditional values on Gen Z's digital interaction patterns was obtained through triangulation of data from interviews, participatory observation, and digital content analysis. Data shows that traditional values still have a significant role, around 45% to 55%, in shaping digital interaction patterns, especially related to communication ethics, online community solidarity, and the representation of cultural identity on social media. This figure confirms that although digital culture dominates Gen Z's lives, half of their interaction patterns are still shaped by values rooted in tradition. Percentage data of 45% to 55% showing the significant role of traditional values in shaping the digital interaction patterns of Gen Z shows a relative balance between tradition and digital modernity. According to Geertz (1973), cultural values function as a system of symbols that shape the way individuals interpret the world and act in it.
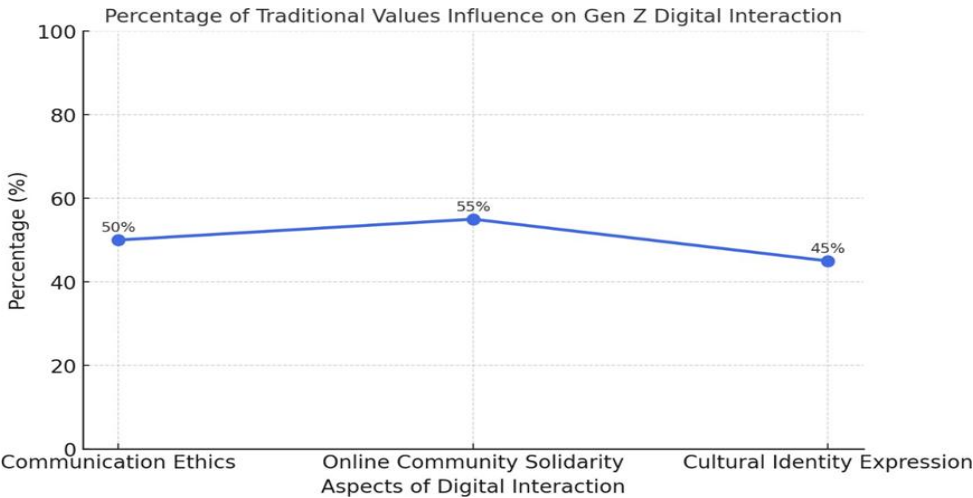

Figure 1. The percentage of traditional values' influence on Gen Z digital interaction

The curve shown shows that traditional values still have a significant influence on the digital interaction patterns of Generation Z Indonesia. In terms *of communication ethics*, traditional values contribute around 50% to shaping the way Gen Z interacts in the digital space. This can be seen from

their habit of still using polite language, even though it is sometimes adapted to a concise communication format on social media.

Furthermore, the aspect *of online community solidarity* occupies the highest percentage, which is around 55%**.** This data indicates that the spirit of mutual cooperation and a sense of togetherness rooted in local culture is still alive in the digital space. For example, it can be seen from the phenomenon of Gen Z's participation in online donation movements, social campaigns, and digital community support that reflects the spirit of traditional solidarity in a new form.

Meanwhile, in the aspect *of cultural identity expression*, traditional values have an effect of around 45%, a relatively lower number compared to other aspects. This shows that although Gen Z still displays local cultural identity through social media (for example, by introducing culinary, dance, or regional languages), the influence of global culture in digital platforms is quite strong and has the potential to shift traditional values if it is not accompanied by critical awareness.

The interview results table reinforces these findings, where each respondent shows a small but consistent variation in percentage, which is then consolidated into an average number. The process of triangulating data from interviews, participatory observation, and digital content analysis shows that traditional values are not completely lost, but have undergone transformation through the process of adaptation in the digital space. Thus, this analysis confirms that traditional values play a role as a moral and social foundation that strengthens Gen Z's digital interaction.

Table 1. Interview results

Respondents	Interview Statement	Communication Ethics (%)	Online Community Solidarity (%)	Expression of Cultural Identity (%)
Rizka	"I still try to use polite language in the chat even if it's brief."	52	55	45
Indah	"If there are friends in distress, I usually participate in online donations or help share information."	49	53	46
Rani	"I often join online communities that care about the environment, it feels like modern mutual cooperation."	50	57	44
Tika	"I prefer to communicate quickly, but still maintain good manners even when using emojis."	48	56	47
Elliya	"I often upload local cultural content on TikTok so that people know me."	51	54	45

The table shows that Generation Z continues to uphold communication ethics, even though their communication style is more concise, fast-paced, and adaptive to digital platforms. Online solidarity emerges as the most prominent aspect, indicating a transformation of the traditional value of mutual cooperation into the digital sphere through various forms of online interaction and support. Meanwhile, the expression of cultural identity appears to be relatively lower due to the strong influence of global culture dominating digital media; however, some members of Generation Z still strive to preserve and express their cultural identity through the creation and dissemination of digital content.

This means that while digital culture dominates, traditional values remain an important frame of reference in Gen Z's social behavior. On the other hand, this percentage also has the potential to decrease if global cultural exposure is stronger and Gen Z is increasingly carried away by the patterns of instant communication and individualistic lifestyles offered by the digital space (Turkle, 2011). On the positive side, the dominance of traditional values in digital interactions can strengthen communication ethics, foster solidarity, and preserve the nation's cultural identity in a global context. However, on the negative side, if the influence of traditional values is weakened, Gen Z's identity could lose its roots in local cultures, become more homogeneous with global cultures, and risk lowering the sense of community in society. Thus, this percentage is not just a statistical figure, but an important indicator that shows the direction of Gen Z's social identity transformation in the digital era.

The solution that emerged from this study is the hybridization process carried out by Gen Z. They do not absolutely abandon tradition, but adapt it to the digital context. A concrete example is the use of social media for solidarity campaigns, which represent the value of mutual cooperation in a new form. In addition, politeness is also adapted in the ethics of commenting in cyberspace, while family values are realized through interaction in the hobbies-based digital community or local culture. In other words, the solution developed is a creative integration between tradition and digital modernity.

Thus, the results of the study confirm that the balance between traditional values and digital culture is the key for Gen Z in building a healthy social identity. Traditional values serve not only as moral fortresses, but also as cultural resources that enrich digital practices through the internalization of communication ethics, social solidarity, as well as respect for collective values inherited from previous generations. This is in line with Hobsbawm's (2012) view that tradition is not merely a static heritage, but can transform with the times. In the context of Gen Z, the transformation can be seen in how mutual cooperation is manifested in the form of digital solidarity, politeness is applied in communication ethics on social media, and kinship is practiced through the support of an inclusive online community.

Meanwhile, digital culture provides space for creativity, connectivity, and wider self-expression. As Castells (2010) expresses, digital culture has created a "network society" that allows individuals to build an identity through global interaction without losing their local ties. Gen Z is taking advantage of this space to explore new ideas, express their identity, and build social networks that transcend geographical boundaries. In other words, digital culture is not only a challenge to traditional values but also a means for the younger generation to reinforce the relevance of tradition in modern life.

If the two are combined through the hybridization process, then Gen Z Indonesia is not only able to survive the flow of globalization, but also plays a role as an agent of preservation and innovator of the nation's culture in the digital era. This process allows for the birth of new forms of social identity that are flexible, adaptive, and contextual, but still rooted in traditional roots. As a result, Gen Z not only participates in the global world but also affirms the uniqueness of Indonesian culture in the midst of the homogenization of world culture. Thus, this study emphasizes that the balance between tradition and digitalization is not just an option, but a strategic need to maintain the sustainability of national identity while addressing increasingly complex global challenges.

Discussion
Dialectic of Traditional Values and Digital Culture in Gen Z Identity
Indonesia's Generation Z is currently in a dialectical vortex between traditional values and digital culture. Traditional values inherited through social norms, such as mutual cooperation, good manners, and family ties, become the foundation of the nation's identity (Koentjaraningrat, 2009). Meanwhile, digital culture comes with the characteristics of global connectivity, speed of

information, and flexibility in self-expression (Castells, 2010). This creates a complex space for identity negotiation, as Gen Z is required to maintain local cultural roots while adopting digital practices that dominate their daily lives.

The interaction between traditional values and digital culture is not dichotomous, but dialectical. According to Giddens (1991), social identity is always formed through a reflexive process in dynamic social interaction. Gen Z practices this by integrating traditional values into digital activities, such as maintaining politeness of language when communicating on social media or representing cultural identity through creative content. This phenomenon shows the existence of cultural hybridization (García Canclini, 2005), which is the process of mixing local values with modern practices that produce new forms of social identity.

Furthermore, this dialectic reflects the tension between continuity and change. Traditional values function as cultural capital that maintains the sustainability of national identity, while digital culture is a medium of social transformation that brings Gen Z into the flow of globalization. As Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) point out, traditions often undergo "invention" or reinterpretation to remain relevant in changing social contexts. In the case of Gen Z, the reinterpretation of the value of mutual cooperation appears in the form of digital solidarity, such as online fundraising or virtual community support.

Thus, the dialectic between traditional values and digital culture shapes the identity of Gen Z Indonesia as a fluid, adaptive, and transformative identity. This process confirms that Gen Z is not completely abandoning tradition, but it is also not rejecting digital modernity. Instead, they negotiate social identity through patterns of communication and cultural expression that are able to connect local wisdom with global demands. Therefore, understanding this dialectic is important to ensure that traditional values remain a moral fortress as well as a cultural resource in facing the challenges of the digital era.

More recent studies reinforce this argument by showing that the negotiation of Gen Z identity in the digital era has become increasingly fluid and context-dependent. Research by Jenkins et al. (2018) highlights how participatory digital culture enables young people to actively reinterpret values rather than passively inherit them, while Boyd (2014) and Buckingham (2020) emphasize that social media spaces function as arenas for identity performance shaped by both local norms and global discourses. In the Indonesian context, recent analyses (e.g., Nugroho & Syarif, 2021; Pratama et al., 2023) indicate that Gen Z strategically blends traditional values such as respect, collectivism, and religiosity with digital practices like content creation, online activism, and networked solidarity. This confirms that the dialectic between tradition and digital culture is not static but continuously reconstructed, positioning Gen Z as cultural agents who selectively preserve, reinterpret, and transform traditional values to remain meaningful within an increasingly globalized and digital social landscape.

Percentage of the Influence of Traditional Values on Digital Interaction Patterns

The results show that traditional values still influence the digital interaction patterns of Gen Z, with a contribution of around 45% to 55%. This figure was obtained through triangulation of data from in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and social media content analysis. These findings confirm that although digital culture is very dominant in everyday life, almost half of Gen Z's interactions remain guided by traditional norms and values. Respondents in interviews, for example,

stated that they try to maintain politeness when communicating online, even in a short and concise format.

The aspect of communication ethics is one of the categories with significant influence, with an average percentage of 50%. From the interviews, it can be seen that Gen Z still maintains the principle of good manners, although they often use emojis or abbreviations as an adjustment to the speed of digital communication. This shows the adaptation of traditional values in the new medium, which is in line with the opinion of Giddens (1991) that social identity is always reflexive and can adapt to changing social contexts.

In addition, online community solidarity occupies the highest percentage, which is around 55%. Interviews show that many respondents feel tied to digital social networks that encourage collective participation, for example, in fundraising, environmental campaigns, or moral support through social media platforms. This phenomenon reflects the transformation of the value of mutual cooperation in digital form, where togetherness is no longer based on physical but on online platforms. This strengthens the view of Koentjaraningrat (2009) that the value of togetherness is the core of Indonesian culture, which is now finding a new space in the digital ecosystem.

In terms of cultural identity expression, traditional values contribute around 45%. This figure is lower than the other two aspects, indicating that local cultural expressions tend to be more vulnerable to erosion by the flow of digital globalization. Some respondents said that they still try to introduce local culture, such as culinary, dance, or regional languages through social media content. However, the more dominant global cultural appeal often obscures the expression of that local identity. This condition is in line with Castells' (2010) view that digital globalization can give birth to cultural homogenization if it is not balanced with awareness of the importance of local identity.

Overall, interview data and percentages show that Gen Z Indonesia is in a hybrid position in interpreting digital interactions. Traditional values remain a moral and ethical bastion, while digital culture provides a wider space for innovation and expression. A relatively balanced percentage between traditional values and digital culture opens up the possibility of increasing the role of tradition if there is a strengthening of education, family, and cultural policies. On the other hand, without this strengthening, there is a risk that traditional values will weaken in the midst of the rapid flow of digital globalization. Thus, these results confirm the importance of strategies to strengthen local cultural identity in the digital realm so that the balance is maintained.

Implications and Strategies for Strengthening Gen Z's Social Identity

The first implication of the results of this study is the emergence of serious challenges to the sustainability of traditional values in the digital age. Generation Z faces globalization pressures that can erode politeness, solidarity, and local cultural expression. For example, the pattern of concise and instant communication on social media is often seen as ignoring the norms of politeness in the Indonesian language tradition. This is in line with the findings of Suryadi (2020), who emphasized that digital media not only affects the way we communicate but also modifies the value structure in social interactions. Therefore, there is a risk that traditional values become increasingly marginalized if they are not strategically integrated into digital practices.

Second, the strategy to strengthen Gen Z's social identity must start with education. Schools and colleges need to integrate traditional values-based digital literacy so that students are not only proficient in using technology but also have cultural awareness. Character education in a digital

context, for example, can emphasize the importance of communication ethics and mutual cooperation in online communities. According to Tilaar (2002), education in Indonesia must function as a means of preserving and developing the nation's cultural values. Thus, digital literacy enriched by traditional values can be a middle way between modern needs and the preservation of cultural heritage.

Third, family and community also have a crucial role in strengthening Gen Z's social identity. For example, inviting children to use social media as a means of introducing local culture, or getting used to the ethics of manners in online conversations. This is in line with Bronfenbrenner's (1994) view that the family is the microenvironment that has the most influence on the formation of individual social identity. Thus, strengthening the identity of Gen Z cannot be separated from the role of the family as the first and main educator.

Fourth, the role of the state and public policy is important to create a healthy digital cultural ecosystem. The government can initiate local cultural preservation programs through digital platforms, for example, by supporting content creators who elevate traditional values. In addition, national digital literacy policies also need to be directed at character formation that is not only technical, but also based on cultural values. As stated by UNESCO (2019), digital literacy must not stop at technical skills, but must include ethical, cultural, and humanitarian values so that the younger generation is able to face the complexities of the digital era.

Finally, the positive implication of the hybridization process between traditional values and digital culture is the opportunity for Gen Z to become agents of a new culture. They can use digital technology as a space for the reinterpretation of traditions while strengthening national identity in the midst of globalization. If this process is balanced, then Gen Z will not only become global cultural consumers but also producers of locally packaged and relevant cultural values. Thus, the strategy to strengthen Gen Z's social identity must focus on balance: maintaining traditional values as a moral fortress, while utilizing digital culture as a medium of social transformation.

Conclusion

The results of this phenomenological study confirm that the social identity of Gen Z Indonesia is formed through a dynamic dialectic between traditional values and digital culture: although digital culture dominates the interaction space, traditional values still play a significant role (around 45–55%), with measurable contributions to communication ethics (~50%), online community solidarity (~55%), and expression of cultural identity (~45%). Data from interviews, participatory observations, and digital content analysis illustrate concrete phenomena – ranging from slang and personal branding to online solidarity movements – that demonstrate a process of hybridization: Gen Z is adapting technology while reinterpreting local wisdom such as mutual cooperation and politeness. The implications of this study are twofold: when strengthened through digital character education, family roles, and cultural policies that support local content, traditional values can increase and enrich digital practices. On the contrary, without strategic intervention.

There is a risk of cultural homogenization and erosion of a sense of togetherness. Therefore, practical recommendations include the integration of traditional value-based digital literacy in the curriculum, strengthening the role of communities and families as agents of cultural socialization, and public policies that facilitate digital creativity based on local heritage, thus Gen Z can become innovative agents who, at the same time, preserve Indonesia's cultural identity in the era of digital globalization.

Several suggestions can be drawn from this study:

1. **Education:** Integration of traditional values-based digital literacy in school and college curricula.
2. **Family:** Parents are role models for digital communication ethics and guide children in the use of social media.
3. **Local Communities:** Shaping spaces for cultural expression through digital platforms, such as creative content or online festivals.
4. **Government:** Encourage cultural digitalization through policies, programs, and support for local content creators.
5. **Intergenerational Collaboration:** Connecting the older generation as the custodians of tradition with Gen Z as the digital drivers.

The above suggestions emphasize that strengthening culture in the digital era cannot be done partially, but requires synergy from various parties. Education plays a role in shaping the critical awareness of the younger generation, the family serves as a guide in daily practice, local communities provide an authentic space for expression, the government provides regulations and systemic support, while intergenerational collaboration is an important bridge so that traditions are not only passed down but also creatively recreated. With this step, traditional values can coexist with digital culture, strengthen the social identity of Gen Z, while maintaining the continuity of the nation's culture in the midst of globalization.

Acknowledgement

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