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-  Mangalam Journal 3
-  Data Analytics for Business and Engineering
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Volume 6 Nomor 1 (2026) Pages 13–30

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Navigating Digital Parenting: Lived Experiences of Generation Z Parents in Early Childhood Care

Zazkia Anzalna Lasifa¹, Wanodya Kusumastuti^{2✉}, Itsna Iftayani³

^{1,2,3} Program Studi Psikologi, Fakultas Psikologi, Hukum dan Ilmu Sosial
Universitas Muhammadiyah Purworejo

Email Corresponden: zazkiaanzalna33@gmail.com¹,
wanodyakusumastuti@umpwr.ac.id^{2✉}, itsnaiftayani@umpwr.ac.id³

Received: 2026-01-27; Accepted: 2026-03-09; Published: 2026-04-13

Abstract

This study aims to gain a deep understanding of the dynamics of early childhood parenting by Generation Z parents in the midst of the digitalization era. The study uses a phenomenological qualitative approach involving four informants from two Generation Z parent couples (aged 20–27 years) who have children aged 3–6 years in Purworejo Regency, Central Java, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed using a phenomenological approach. The results of the study indicate that Generation Z parents have good digital awareness, where technology is not only seen as a source of entertainment for children but can also be used as a source of parenting literacy, implemented through critical selection. The main findings reveal five key themes: (1) parental digital awareness in parenting, (2) the implementation of rules and limits for digital media, (3) monitoring and accompanying children, (4) communication, digital education, and role modeling, and (5) emotional support and adaptation to the challenges of digital parenting. This study contributes the concept of emotional scaffolding in digital parenting, which is the integration of emotional support as the foundation for the effectiveness of digital parenting strategies, a specific parenting framework for Generation Z that expands the definition of digital parenting in early childhood education literature.

Keywords: *Digital Parenting, Generation Z, Early Childhood, Digital Era*

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INTRODUCTION

Parenting patterns are a depiction of the attitudes and behaviors of parents and children in interacting and communicating during the process of caregiving activities (Ningsih, 2022). The parenting style applied by parents will affect the development of children in terms of their character, emotions, and morals according to the values and norms enforced in that environment (Handayani, 2021). The urgency of the quality of parenting becomes increasingly crucial considering that early childhood or the golden age is the most important stage in human development because during this stage rapid development occurs in physical, social, emotional, and cognitive aspects (Mutaqin & Astuti, 2023). According to Hurlock, the early experiences experienced by children at home will determine the formation of their character, socio-emotional development, and behavior in the future (Muzzamil et al., 2021). Therefore, the quality of parents in providing caregiving has a great influence on the growth and development of children at an early age, especially in instilling moral values, independence, and in social interactions as a foundation that will determine the quality of a child's development throughout life (Hapsari & Iftayani, 2016).

In the digital era, young children are now experiencing a new and different situation compared to previous generations. Nowadays, exposure to technology is very significant, affecting the development of young children and certainly bringing both positive and negative impacts. The use of technology without guided parental supervision will allow children to freely access technology, which can reduce the quality of direct interaction and hinder children's social development (Putri, 2024). On the other hand, if the use of technology is guided with parental supervision, it can provide benefits for children, such as serving as an educational medium that supports cognitive development, critical thinking, and children's creativity, as long as the content used is appropriate for the child's developmental stage (Mayasari et al., 2024). However, in fact, the phenomenon in the field shows that some young children use digital media as the main form of entertainment and parents have difficulty controlling the duration and content consumed by their children (Maulidian et al., 2025). This condition emphasizes that the presence of technology is not merely a matter of tools, but has become a new variable that fundamentally changes the ecology of early childhood caregiving.

Children at an early age in this digital era do not yet have good digital literacy skills or the ability to recognize the risks of excessive use of digital media (Rahmawati et al., 2025). Thus, in the use of digital media, children cannot be given complete freedom in using digital media. Therefore, parents must more intensively supervise their children in using digital media. Parents who have parenting rules that give children full freedom in accessing digital media, especially in early childhood, are likely to cause serious problems in the child's growth and development, particularly in experiencing digital media addiction and emotional disturbances (Bening & Diana, 2022). This fact places parents as the main actors who determine whether technology becomes a blessing or a threat to the growth and development of young children.

Based on data from Badan Pusat Statistik (2022), the average mother in Indonesia experiences her first pregnancy at the age of 21.57 years, and data from Kementerian Kesehatan (Kemenkes) show that the majority of Indonesian women become pregnant for the first time under the age of 25 (Yonatan, 2024). This demographic data indicates that significantly, many parents who are currently raising young children are within the age range of Generation Z in Indonesia, born between 1997 and 2012, growing up and developing in a fast-paced digital era connected with technology. Generation Z is known as a creative and open generation, yet

sensitive to pressure, and tends to want things quickly and instantly (Fauzi & Tarigan, 2023). Thus, these characteristics shape thinking patterns and parenting behaviors that differ from previous generations, especially in facing the challenges of digitalization that affect family life and form parenting patterns for children. It is these generational characteristics that make Generation Z a unique group of parents academically to study: they are the first generation that has to raise young children while fully living within a digital ecosystem whose long-term impacts they themselves do not yet fully understand.

In the context of parenting, Generation Z tends to avoid conflict and chooses open communication patterns to create a supportive environment for children (Herianty et al., 2024). Thus, they tend to support children in expressing themselves and provide freedom in decision-making. Generation Z as parents also show a tendency to adopt technology-based parenting approaches that utilize digital platforms as sources of information and interaction with their children. However, with these technological advances, challenges arise regarding character development **in children**, increased **dependence on** using electronic **devices**, and a **lack of** direct social interaction between parents and children (Prameswari & Susanti, 2021). This is where the paradox of raising Generation Z lies: they are the most digitally literate generation, yet at the same time the generation of parents most vulnerable to the dilemma between utilizing and limiting technology for their children.

The 2022 Digital Mum Survey from theAsianparent also revealed that 83% of mothers actively create content on social media, and eight out of 10 mothers rely on recommendations from parenting communities before making purchasing decisions. This phenomenon shows how social media has become a primary source for Generation Z parents in obtaining parenting information, a phenomenon that also reflects how strong the influence of the digital ecosystem is in shaping the parenting practices of this generation. Nowadays, parents often adapt parenting styles shared through social media, as social media becomes one of the easily accessible sources of information (Fitria & Widjayatri, 2022). The existence of parenting pattern adaptation through social media will impact misconceptions in parenting practices if these parenting practices are not accompanied by good literacy and critical understanding regarding children's developmental needs (Rahman et al., 2023). As a result, some Z-generation parents tend to imitate viral parenting trends without adapting to the psychological developmental needs of their children, which can lead to inconsistencies in parenting patterns that affect the child. This phenomenon shows that digital parenting among Generation Z is not just about screen rules, but about how parents construct their parenting identity amidst a flood of digital information that is not always verified.

Generation Z as parents face challenges in managing time and energy when faced with increased work pressure, overtime, and a lack of social support. These challenges will affect the quality of parent-child interactions, which can influence the basic developmental needs of the child (Syahirah & Hendriani, 2023). In this context, **Maslow's hierarchy of needs** perspective becomes **relevant for** understanding **the** impact **of** digital parenting on fulfilling children's basic needs: basic human needs from birth tend to aim for self-actualization, this effort of self-actualization is encompassed in a pyramid-shaped hierarchy, namely **physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, and self-esteem needs** (Rahmi et al., 2022). When the unregulated use of digital media occupies quality time **between parents and children**, the fulfillment of **children's emotional needs** and sense of security within that

hierarchy is potentially disrupted, so poor digital parenting not only affects children's digital behavior but also the foundation of their psychological development as a whole.

With the rapid growth of technology, Generation Z is referred to as the Tech-savvy generation because this generation grows up amidst very rapid technological development (Permana et al., 2023). This generation has an open-minded character, which means they tend to think openly about ideas and concepts. This generation is concerned about the lack of clear information regulation and is not hesitant to be critical of things whose information is unclear (Rodliyah, 2024). Nevertheless, adaptive abilities must be balanced with literacy awareness of the negative impacts of technology use. However, this tech-savvy character actually creates its own complexity; high digital skills do not necessarily correspond with the quality of digital parenting practices applied to children, thus requiring a deeper understanding of how Generation Z actually navigates parenting in the digital era.

Research by Sari and Syawaludin (2024) shows that digital parenting patterns affect the social behavior of early childhood children. The use of technology can enhance children's communication, but it can reduce their socialization skills if there is no parental supervision. Meanwhile, research by Fadilla and Sumanto (2025) found that Generation Y and Z parents apply gentle parenting, which fosters emotional attachment with their children, even though there are challenges such as stress, limited time, differences in values with their partners, and frequent influence from technology use in daily life. Both studies emphasize that the role of parents is very crucial in accompanying children in the digital era. However, the focus of these studies is still limited to the impact of technology use on children or the application of certain parenting styles, thus not fully depicting the parenting experiences carried out by Generation Z parents.

Several international studies also show similar limitations, Livingstone & Blum-Ross (2020) in their study found that parents actively negotiate with technology in everyday life, but have not specifically explored how generational characteristics shape digital parenting strategies. Likewise, Doronila et al. (2024) examined the dynamics of parenting by Generation Z parents toward Generation Alpha children in the Philippines using a qualitative case study approach; however, that study has not specifically explored how the dimensions of lived experiences of Generation Z parents in navigating digital parenting practices for early childhood, particularly in the context of Indonesia, which has different cultural characteristics and parenting values. This research gap indicates the need for a study that specifically explores how Generation Z parents actively navigate, adapt, and construct digital parenting practices in raising young children. Therefore, through this research, the author examines more deeply how Generation Z parents adjust to the changes of the times, especially in balancing technology use with the developmental needs of early childhood.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach. According to Moleong, this qualitative research understands the phenomena experienced by the research subjects, conducted descriptively using words, appropriate language in a certain natural context (Fiantika et al., 2022). The design chosen in this study is phenomenological, aimed at understanding the experiences, challenges, and parenting adaptation strategies felt by Generation Z parents in raising early childhood children in the digitalization era in depth.

10 The phenomenological approach was chosen because this study aims to explore life experiences (lived experiences) in depth and subjectively, rather than measuring frequency or testing relationships between variables. As stated by Moustakas (1994) **Phenomenology seeks to uncover the** deepest meaning **of** an experience directly **lived by** an individual. In the context of this study, the dynamics of digital parenting among Generation Z parents is a very personal, contextual phenomenon and cannot be adequately understood through quantitative approaches or case studies that focus on organizational contexts. Phenomenology allows researchers to capture how Generation Z parents consciously experience, interpret, and respond to the challenges of digital parenting in their daily lives.

This study involved four informants consisting of two married couples who are parents of Generation Z, selected through purposive sampling based on predetermined criteria. The criteria for selecting informants in this study included: (1) parents born between 1997 and 2012 and confirmed as Generation Z; (2) having early childhood children aged 0-6 years at the time the study was conducted; (3) actively using digital technology in daily life; and (4) willing to be informants and provide consent (informed consent) to participate in the study. The determination of the number of informants, totaling four people from two couples, is based on the phenomenological principle that the quality and depth of data are prioritized over the quantity of participants (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2016). This number also allows the researcher to conduct source triangulation within the couples, thereby strengthening the validity of the data obtained.

39 The first participant is a married couple aged 27-28 years, residing in Purworejo, Central Java, with a 3.5-year-old child; the husband works as an administrative staff member and the wife as an inclusive school teacher **with a bachelor's degree as her highest education**. The second participant is a married couple aged 27-28 years, residing in Purworejo, Central Java, with two children aged 4.5 years and 2 years; the wife is a housewife with a vocational high school education and the husband works in the private sector with a bachelor's degree. All informants were confirmed to be born between 1997-2005, thus meeting the definition of Generation Z, and all were actively raising early childhood children at the time the study was conducted. Data collection was carried out from December 2025 to January 2026 in Purworejo Regency, Central Java.

22 The presence of the researcher in this study serves as the main instrument with a role in directly collecting data from the subjects. **Data collection was conducted through semi-structured** interviews carried out **face-to-face** (offline) at each informant's home to ensure comfort and smooth data collection. Each interview session lasted 45-90 minutes and included 15-20 open-ended questions developed based on five main themes, namely: (1) parents' digital awareness in parenting; (2) rules and limits **on children's use of digital media**; (3) monitoring and accompanying children; (4) communication, digital education, and role modeling; and (5) emotional support and adaptation to the challenges of digital parenting. All interview sessions were recorded using a voice recorder with the informants' permission, then transcribed verbatim for analysis purposes.

41 32 The interview guide in this study was systematically developed through three stages. First, the researcher referred to Moustakas (1994) phenomenological interview principles, which emphasize that questions should be open-ended, non-directive, and centered on the informants' lived experiences so that the deepest meanings of the phenomenon being studied can be authentically revealed. Second, question themes were developed **based on the concept of** digital

parenting proposed by Modecki et al., (2022), which includes dimensions of parental digital awareness, mediation strategies, monitoring, educational communication and role modeling, as well as emotional support in facing challenges of digital parenting. Third, specific questions were formulated to address research gaps found in the literature review, namely the lack of comprehensive depiction of Generation Z parents' lived experiences in navigating digital parenting practices with early childhood children.

The data analysis process according to Miles and Huberman (1994 as cited in Nurrissaa et al., 2025) is carried out interactively, involving three main activities: data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions or verification. More operationally, the analysis process is conducted through the following stages: first, the researcher performs open coding on all interview transcripts by identifying meaning units relevant to the informants' digital parenting experiences; second, these meaning units are grouped into initial categories based on thematic similarity; third, the initial categories are condensed and integrated into main themes that reflect the essence of the informants' experiences, in accordance with the principles of Moustakas (1994) phenomenological analysis, namely epoche, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation. The codification process was carried out independently by the researcher and then discussed with the research advisor as a form of peer debriefing to minimize the researcher's subjective bias.

As a Generation Z researcher who has no personal experience as a parent, the author consciously applied the process of epoche (bracketing) according to the principles of transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). This was done by writing personal reflections and initial assumptions about digital parenting in a research journal before conducting interviews. These reflections included generational biases related to technology use and child-rearing practices among Generation Z. The researcher then consciously attempted to suspend these prejudices throughout the interview and data analysis processes to maintain focus on the informants' lived experiences. All themes generated were then reconfirmed with informants through a member checking process to ensure that the researchers' interpretations were aligned with the actual experiences described by the informants. In addition, regular discussions with research advisors were held as a form of peer debriefing to further minimize researcher subjectivity and enhance the objectivity of interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2016 ; Bednall, 2006).

The validity of the findings was tested using source triangulation and method triangulation techniques to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the research results (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data obtained from both husband and wife informants in each couple, so that parenting perspectives could be confirmed and contrasted from two viewpoints within the same family unit. Method triangulation was carried out by comparing in-depth interview data with informal observation results conducted by the researcher during the data collection process at the informants' homes. In addition, the validity of the research was also strengthened through thick description and prolonged engagement through interviews conducted over multiple sessions to ensure that the data obtained had reached the point of saturation (data saturation) (Dado et al., 2023 ; Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024).

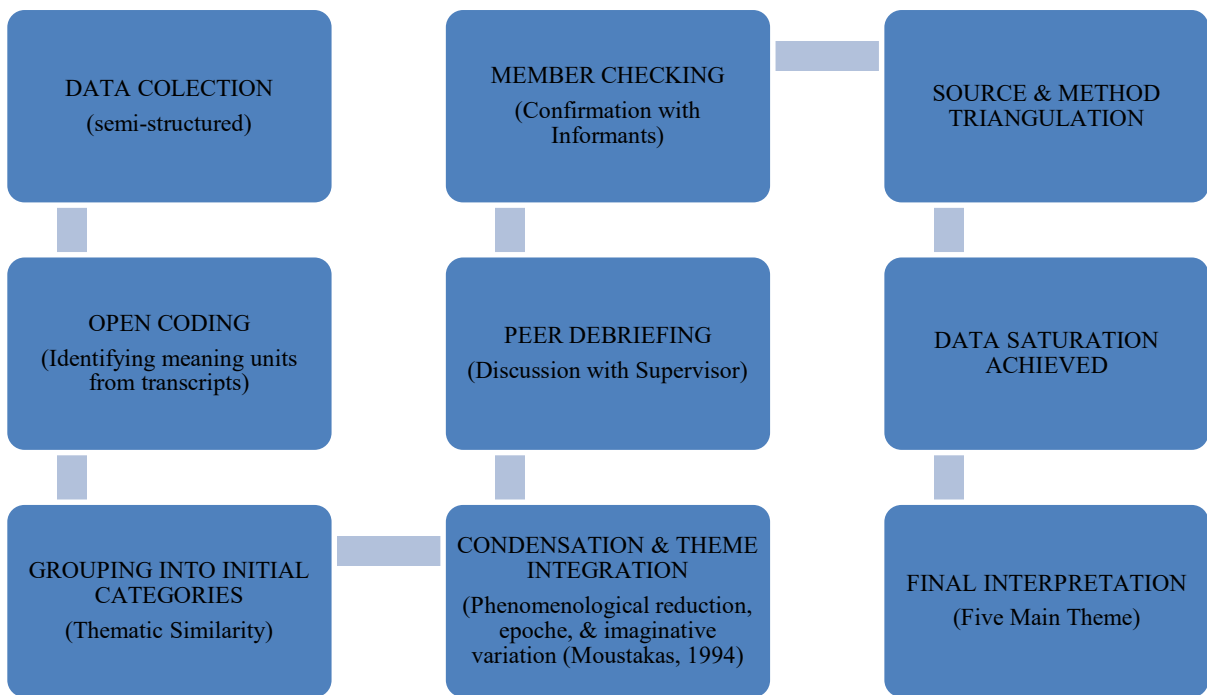


Figure 1. Data Analysis Process Diagram

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study produced five main themes that describe the early childhood parenting experiences of Generation Z parents in the era of digitalization, obtained through **an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences** of two Generation Z parent couples. These five themes include: (1) parents' digital awareness in parenting, (2) the implementation of rules and limits on digital media use, (3) monitoring and accompanying children, (4) communication, digital education, and role modeling, and (5) emotional support and adaptation to the challenges of digital parenting.

Based on the overall interview data, the most dominant and consistently applied strategy by all informants is direct monitoring and mentoring as well as the establishment of flexible rules, which appeared explicitly in every interview session of the four informants. Meanwhile, digital communication and education strategies as well as role modeling seem to vary more in intensity between one informant and another. As for emotional support strategies, they are the most implicit or not always recognized by the informants as a strategy, yet they consistently appear in their narratives of experiences when facing digital parenting challenges.

Digital Awareness of Generation Z Parents in **Early Childhood Parenting**

The findings of this study indicate that the informants have a fairly good level of digital awareness in early childhood parenting practices. This is demonstrated by active efforts to seek parenting information through various digital sources, such as searching for parenting advice on social media, Google, or through artificial intelligence (AI) applications. However, the information obtained by parents is not directly applied to their parenting, but rather goes through a selection process and is adjusted to the child's conditions.

"Biasanya dari internet TikTok gitu, dari.. sekarang malah banyak yaa dari aplikasi cici, terus aplikasi seperti Chat GPT juga ada cara mengasuh anak yang baik itu gimana." (I1Q1)

Interestingly, there is a significant difference in approach between the husband and wife informants in the first couple. While the husband (I1) relies more on digital sources such as AI and TikTok, the wife (I2) relies more on professional networks and sharing with colleagues who have a psychology background.

"Saya lebih seringnya sharing sih ke teman-teman dan kebetulan karena saya juga di inklusi sering hampir tiap minggu ya tiap pekan tuh bareng sama psikolog jadi saya tidak langsung belajar dari situ juga." (I2Q1)

This difference reflects that although coming from the same generation, digital literacy strategies in parenting can be greatly influenced by each parent's educational background and profession. A similar pattern is also seen in the second couple, where the wife (I3) is very active in following parenting content from doctors and influencers on Instagram, while the husband (I4) admits to being more random in consuming parenting content on social media.

"Biasanya kalau dari influencer atau dokter-dokter itu nyaraninkan enggak ngasih anak HP sama sekali ya... atau bahkan sangat minim sehari cuma 10 menit 15 menit." (I3Q8)

"Nggak pilih sih mbak, misalnya kalau...misalnya buka facebook itu ya dari beberapa sekrulan itu kan pasti ada itu... konten parenting kita baca." (I4Q13)

Rules and Limitations of Digital Media Usage

Respondents apply rules and limitations on the use of digital media as a form of control over early childhood activities. The rules created by parents generally relate to the duration of digital media use, the time of use, and the types of content that can be accessed by children.

"Saya membuat aturannya perjanjian dulu sih sama anak misalnya dia mau main HP boleh, tapi yuk mandi dulu...." (I2Q4)

"Kita kasih waktu kalau enggak itu kan pakai wifi nanti tinggal kita matikan wifinya terus nanti udah anaknya, oh udah gak bisa mengakses lagi." (I3Q5)

"Kalo HP biasanya kalo mau tidur sih mbak, anaknya mesti rewel karena apa? Biasanya kalo jam malam itu kan sudah gak ada temennya... nanti kita mainan HP, terus sekitar jam setengah delapan delapan seperempat dia baru main HP." (I1Q7)

An interesting finding that has not been previously explored is the use of digital media as an instrument of reward and punishment in parenting.

"HP kalau habis makan...makan habis HP berhenti, jadi ya pas makannya... pas tetep menghabiskan porsinya dia, kalau posisi udah habis HP juga diminta lagi, atau

mungkin misalnya dia nggak mau ngaji terus ya udah nanti kalau habis ngaji tak kasih HP kamu." (I4Q4)

This pattern indicates that digital media is not merely treated as a threat that must be restricted, but is also used strategically as a tool for negotiation in the dynamics of daily parenting. The rules applied are flexible and contextual, adjusting to the conditions of both the child and the parent.

"Itu saya pas posisi capek banget mungkin Mbak jadi bisa tak, sambil ngerjain yang lain, tapi enggak... misal selama 20 menit itu 15 menit lepas dari pantauan saya, enggak... saya tetep ini 'dek nonton apa itu' tetap masih itu saya mengawasi." (I2Q4)

Monitoring and Guidance of Generation Z Parents on Digital Media for Early Childhood Children

The use of digital media by young children is done under direct supervision by parents. Parents tend to accompany their children when using digital media and ensure that the content accessed is appropriate for their age, needs, and family values.

"Walaupun dia main gadget tetep kita pantau kita damping bahkan kita boleh kok main bareng, misal main game bareng, nonton bareng nanti muncul rasa keingin tahuannya, nanti dia tanya 'nda, kok ni tadi gini? Kok ini gini?' nah itu disini kita berperan menjelaskan." (I2Q17)

"EE sebenarnya sih saya sudahlah, memang sudah tapi dalam pengawasan, ga setiap hari kita melakukan dikasih HP terus mainan itu ndak, kita tetep dalam pengawasan, umpamanya youtube ya kita setelkan YouTube kids bukan yang youtube yang gedhe." (I1Q6)

The monitoring experiences shared by the informants also include critical moments that raise parental awareness. Informant I2 recounted a real experience when their child accidentally encountered age-inappropriate content through YouTube Shorts.

"Tapi ga tahu dia itu pinter banget youtube yang biasa itu udah tak selempet-selempet di folder-folder mbak, tapi ketemu aja, nah disitu ya terus tak ingetin 'dek cari yang anak-anak'... pernah mbak beberapa kali dilalah dia ketemu.. namanya anak-anak hanya meniru, pernah ngomong saru." (I2Q5)

This experience illustrates that monitoring is not merely a technical act of supervising the screen, but rather a process filled with emotional tension for parents.

Digital Communication and Education in Early Childhood Parenting

Respondents in building communication, tend to be open with their children regarding the use of digital media. The communication established is done through simple explanations about the types of digital content that are allowed or not allowed to be accessed by children, as well as the reasons behind the establishment of these rules.

"Ee itu saya jelasin 'Dek, tau gak sih artinya ini, itu tuh gak baik tau, itu gak sopan' nanti dia mengulang 'gak sopan nda' gitu 'tapi kan adik cuma niru di HP itu' 'loh iya, itu gak baik.'" (I2Q16)

"Aturan digital kita misalkan 'tuh kamu adek kan masih kecil masih kecil nih masih PAUD, bolehnya tuh yang YouTube kit, kalau YouTube ini buat orang dewasa' dia udah paham anak kecil dan orang dewasa." (I2Q17)

"Ya dengan pendekatan itu dibilang pelan-pelan dengan salah atau alasan, misalnya mas gak usah nonton, nanti diajak kemana, nanti beli apa." (I4Q11)

A very distinctive finding is the integration of religious values in the digital communication carried out by the informants.

"Kalau adik sering ngomong saru nanti Allah marah adik mau masuk surga atau dari itu sih." (I2Q16)

"Dia apalagi sekarang dia lagi ini lagi gencar-gencarnya surga sama neraka missal ee 'nda kalau dipanggil nggak dengerin itu nanti masuk neraka loh' jadi ya saya di sisi lain ya bersyukur, dia mulai paham antara surga dan neraka." (I2Q13)

This phenomenon shows that for Generation Z parents in Indonesia, digital parenting **cannot be separated from the** context **of cultural** and religious **values** that form the basis of family upbringing.

Parental Role Modelling for Generation Z in Digital Media Usage Behavior

The results of the interviews in this study indicate that Generation Z parents are aware that their behavior when using digital media can be observed and imitated by their children, making parents' use of digital media a focus in daily child-rearing.

"Kita juga habis main HP terus kita kayak ke dunia kita sendiri, kayak saya mengajak anak-anak jangan main HP lagi, kita menyadarkan HP... cuma kita juga menjangankan dia main HP, kayak dia enggak terus-terusan main HP, terus kita ngasih arahan juga." (I1Q12)

"Kalau kita moodnya pas baik pasti sampailah, kalau moodnya beda, ya emang kadang kita mengucapkan kasar tapi tidak begitu kasar...kita sharing, kita ada stop... ya jadi nanti dia pasti meniru." (I1Q11)

The most memorable role modeling experience was narrated by informant I2, who described a moment when he consciously hid his phone as soon as he saw his child approaching:

"Saya habis pegang HP langsung tak umpetin, karena kalau ada dia, dia ini bawaannya happy habis mainan, saya habis pegang HP langsung tak umpetin terus saya main sama dia." (I2Q11)

Emotional Support and Parenting Styles of Generation Z Parents in Digital Parenting

The informants not only apply rules in the use of digital media but also provide space for children to express their emotions. Parents strive to understand the child's emotional condition before taking action.

"Dari kita ya, ngalah biasanya, kalo dia marah kita peluk... kita kasih tau dengan pelan lah, ya usaha kalo saya ga ikut marah, ya namanya usahakan kadang berhasil tergantung momennya." (I4Q12)

"Kalau ada arahan lain 'yok mas kita kesana' yaudah pasti langsung dikasih hpnya, dia gak akan sulit untuk diambil." (I1Q10)

The richest experience of emotional support arises from the dynamics between husband and wife. Informant I2 recounted an experience in which the mother's emotional state directly affected the child's behavior toward digital media.

"Ini katanya kan ngefek banget ibu itu kayak magnet, kalau ibunya lagi posisi kemprungsung, stress... jadi anak... apalagi ke anak cowok tiga kali atau empat kali lebih ngefek." (I2Q9)

Another new finding is the difference in parenting visions between husband and wife in a single couple.

"Kalo visi misi ada pasti, kalau saya lebih tekankan ke dia bersosialisasi, kalau istri mesti di dia lebih menekankan ke yang beh dia mengaji dulu, emang bener sih." (I1Q15)

These differences indicate that digital parenting in Generation Z parents is not always a uniform strategy, but rather an ongoing negotiation between two individuals with different values and priorities.

Discussion

Digital Awareness as the Foundation of Parenting Literacy

The findings of this study indicate that the informants not only play the role of technology users, but also as reflective technology users in parenting practices. This technology use practice aligns with the concept of digital parenting, which emphasizes parents' awareness in understanding the benefits and risks of technology for children (Modecki et al., 2022). In addition, parents' ability to select information for parenting shows a developing digital literacy; in this case, parental digital literacy plays an important role in shaping parenting practices that are adaptive to technological changes. According to Helsper et al. (2025), parents with good digital skills are more active in performing parental mediation, especially parents who are supportive and adaptive to the dynamics of technology.

What differentiates the digital awareness of Generation Z parents from the previous generation is the nativeness of their relationship with technology. Unlike Millennial parents who adopted technology in their teenage or early adult years, Generation Z parents grew up

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with technology since childhood, making them not just technology users but digital natives who have made technology an inseparable part of their identity (Permana et al., 2023). The implications for parenting are significant: Generation Z parents intuitively know where to find parenting information, ranging from ChatGPT, TikTok, to online and offline parenting communities, yet they face a new challenge of information overload and difficulty distinguishing credible sources from non-credible ones.

Flexible Rules as an Adaptive Restrictive Mediation Strategy

The implementation of these rules demonstrates one of the restriction strategies carried out by parents to control access to digital media in order **to protect children from the** negative impacts **of digital** media **use**, or restrictive mediation (Wijaya & Fitriani, 2025). This strategy is used in parenting early childhood because of the child's limited ability to self-regulate in digital media use. However, the rules applied are flexible and contextual. The implementation of flexible and contextual digital media restrictions shows that the effectiveness of restrictive mediation depends on the parents' ability to understand the needs and developmental stages of early childhood (Nilapancuran et al., 2025).

Monitoring as Active Mediation: Different from Mere Restriction

It is important to emphasize that monitoring and guidance found in this study are conceptually fundamentally different from the restriction strategies discussed in the previous sub-theme. If restriction operates preventively, setting limits before children use digital media, monitoring operates actively and in real-time during the usage process. This difference aligns with the concept of active mediation in the parental mediation literature, which emphasizes parents' active involvement while children use media, not just before or after (Modecki et al., 2022). The findings of this study show that informants have intuitively applied both strategies simultaneously and complementarily.

Direct parental accompaniment of children when using digital media allows for real-time guidance. Direct parental supervision demonstrates effective monitoring practices **in early childhood** parenting, **especially in** ensuring content appropriateness **and** minimizing **the** risks **of** digital media use (Puspita et al., 2025). Active parental involvement in accompanying children during digital activities helps minimize **the risk of exposure to content that is not** suitable for **the** child's developmental stage while also enhancing the quality of interaction between parents and children (Shibgohtullah & Furrie, 2024).

Digital Communication and Education in Early Childhood Parenting

Conceptually, the communication patterns found in this study align with the concept of instructive mediation in the parental mediation literature, which is a strategy where parents actively discuss media content with their children, provide context, and build critical understanding (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008 as cited in Modecki et al., 2022). What distinguishes the findings of this study from previous research is the discovery of values and religion as a framework for digital communication unique to Generation Z parents in Indonesia. Unlike Western studies that define instructive mediation solely within the framework of media literacy, the informants in this study intuitively use the concept of heaven and hell as a moral instrument in explaining the boundaries of digital content to children; theoretically, this finding enriches the concept of instructive mediation with dimensions of local and religious values (culturally-grounded instructive mediation). Active involvement of parents in accompanying

and communicating digital usage can serve as the main foundation in shaping character and healthy digital media consumption patterns in children from an early age (Silalahi et al., 2025). This finding reinforces that parental digital communication practices are not only preventive but also educational and adaptive to child development.

Role Modelling through the Mechanism of Observational Learning

In the context of digital parenting, parents have a role as role models for their children in the behavior of using digital media, which indirectly shapes children's digital habits through observing the surrounding environment (Purnamasari et al., 2025). Parents' behavior in using digital media will affect children's emotional regulation and habits in interacting with digital media (Anisah & Fauzi, 2025).

Mechanically, the process of role modelling in digital parenting can be explained through three stages based on Bandura's Social Learning theory (1977): first, observational learning, where children actively observe their parents' digital behavior in daily life; second, internalization, where children absorb and interpret the observed behavior as norms applicable within the family, forming a cognitive representation of the 'right way' to use digital media; and third, behavior imitation, where children replicate the internalized digital behavior in their actual actions. The findings of this study show that informant I1 consciously understands this mechanism: '*Kita ada stop ya... jadi nanti dia pasti meniru*' (I1). This simple statement reflects the informant's intuitive understanding of the mechanism of observational learning, that all parental digital behavior, whether intentional or not, has the potential to become a model that will be internalized and imitated by the child.

Parents who often provide examples of using digital media to their children are more effective than simply giving orders to the children. Thus, parents not only give rules or prohibitions, but also through their daily practices directly with their children, which are conscious and well-controlled.

Emotional Support: Emotional Scaffolding in Digital Parenting

Digital parenting is not only about setting rules alone, but can be seen in how parents provide quality emotional support to children in the digital era. According to research by Rizky & Raissa (2025), supportive and understanding parental emotional responses play an important role in helping children develop emotion regulation skills through daily interactions, including when children engage in digital media activities. Conversely, if parents apply digital media control too rigidly and provide minimal emotional support, it can potentially trigger conflicts and poor media behavior in children (Pratiwi & Hasanah, 2022). This finding represents the most original contribution of this research to the digital parenting literature. Unlike previous studies that defined digital parenting merely as the technical practice of regulating children's use of digital media, this study found that Generation Z parents organically and intuitively integrate an emotional dimension into every aspect of their digital parenting.

This concept can be understood as emotional scaffolding in digital parenting, which is the provision of emotional support as a buffer that enables other digital parenting technical strategies to work effectively. Without a strong emotional foundation, no matter how sophisticated digital rules are, they have the potential to lose their effectiveness. This emotional scaffolding reinforces Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, the emotional support provided by the informants such as giving hugs when the child is angry, understanding the emotional

state before applying digital rules, and negotiation between parents. This directly fulfills the child's basic needs for safety and love and belonging (Rahmi et al., 2022). In this digital era, where quality time between parents and children is often disturbed by gadget activities, fulfilling these two levels of needs becomes crucial so that children do not experience emotional regulation disorders and digital addiction (John & Bates, 2024). Thus, emotional support strategies are not just an addition, but a foundation that enables technical digital parenting strategies.

Challenges and Adaptations in Digital Parenting for Generation Z Parents

The social environment is one of the challenges for Generation Z parents in implementing digital parenting for their children. In practice, the fact that many people are now focused on digital media means that children demand to be given access to digital media when they are in a social environment that intensively uses digital media. Therefore, this becomes a challenge for parents to have the right strategy for parenting by adapting to the surrounding environment.

The social environment becomes one of the challenges for parents of Generation Z in implementing digital parenting for their children. According to Maulidian et al. (2025), digital parenting is inseparable from the culture and family environment in which the child grows and develops. Therefore, parents need to have a digital parenting strategy to be more adaptive to the child's surrounding environment and more flexible in making rules as well as selecting digital media content that aligns with the values implemented in the surrounding environment (Nurdiantara & Maesurah, 2025). Thus, the parenting approach adopted by parents remains relevant and can be effectively applied in the surrounding environment.

Overall, the findings of this study illustrate that the dynamics of digital parenting among Generation Z parents are not linear and planned practices, but rather an adaptive, contextual process full of negotiation, whether with children, with partners, or with the pressures of the wider social environment. The five strategies identified do not operate independently, but rather support each other within a dynamic parenting ecosystem.

It should be noted that the findings of this study have several limitations that must be critically acknowledged. First, with only two pairs of informants, there is a possibility of social desirability bias, where informants provide answers that are considered socially ideal rather than necessarily reflecting actual everyday practices. Second, both pairs of informants have relatively good educational backgrounds, so these findings may not necessarily reflect the experiences of Generation Z parents from different educational backgrounds. Third, this study was conducted in a single geographic location (Purworejo, Central Java), so the findings have limited transferability to different cultural and geographic contexts.

Further research is recommended to: (1) expand the number of informants with variations in educational, economic, and geographical backgrounds; (2) use longitudinal methods to capture changes in digital parenting strategies over time; and (3) specifically explore the role of significant others such as grandparents in the dynamics of digital parenting among Generation Z families in Indonesia. For Generation Z parents, these findings affirm that effective digital parenting is not about how strict the rules are, but about how strong the emotional foundation and role modeling built in daily parent-child relationships are. For educational and psychological institutions, specialized psychoeducation programs are needed for Generation Z parents that integrate digital literacy with the development of parents' emotional competence.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion, this study concludes that parenting by Generation Z parents in the digital era is marked by a shift from conventional parenting patterns toward a more reflective and adaptive parenting style to technology that aligns with the times. Generation Z parents now demonstrate strong digital literacy skills by utilizing various platforms such as social media and artificial intelligence as parenting references, yet as parents, they still filter this information according to what is appropriate and based on the needs of the child's growth and development. This study shows that control over digital access is no longer carried out through strict rules or prohibitions, but rather through two-way communication between parents and children in a flexible manner. Parents actively accompany their children when they access digital media to educate them and monitor the content they access in digital media. In addition, Generation Z parents realize the importance of role models and emotional support as the main foundation in minimizing the negative impacts of using technology or digital media, such as addiction or socio-emotional disturbances in early childhood.

This study provides theoretical contributions in the form of the concept of emotional scaffolding in digital parenting, namely the finding that Generation Z parents organically integrate emotional support as a scaffold that determines the effectiveness of all other digital parenting strategies. This concept expands the definition of digital parenting, which has so far been dominated by a technical-regulative perspective (Modecki et al., 2022), by adding an emotional dimension as a determining variable that has so far been overlooked in the literature. Methodologically, this study contributes as the first exploratory phenomenological study that specifically examines the lived experiences of Generation Z parents as digital natives in navigating digital parenting for young children in Indonesia, a generational perspective that has not been addressed by previous research, both nationally and internationally. Practically, the findings of this study confirm that the success of digital parenting in Generation Z depends on parents' ability to integrate technology literacy with emotional bonding, a framework that can serve as a foundation for developing psychoeducation programs for young parents in the digital era.

Despite these contributions, this study is limited by its small sample, consisting of only two educated Generation Z parent pairs in the urban area of Purworejo, thus providing an in-depth and detailed description rather than broad generalizations. Future research should compare these findings with Generation Z parents in rural areas with lower digital literacy levels to obtain a more comprehensive picture of digital parenting patterns across different socio-economic contexts in Indonesia.

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