

Gen Z's Communication Approach to Resolving Interpersonal Conflicts on Whatsapp

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ABSTRACT: This study aims to examine the communication strategies used by Generation Z in handling friendship conflicts on WhatsApp. As a technology-native generation, Gen Z frequently interacts through instant messaging platforms, yet digital communication often leads to misunderstandings due to limited nonverbal cues and ambiguous symbols. This research employs a qualitative case study approach through in-depth interviews and limited observation involving five Gen Z university students. The Conflict Management Theory is used to identify strategies such as avoiding, accommodating, compromising, competing, and collaborating, while the Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) Theory supports the interpretation of digital interaction dynamics. The findings reveal that Gen Z tends to adopt avoiding and accommodating strategies in the early stages of conflict. However, when the relationship is considered valuable, they shift toward compromise and collaboration. WhatsApp features such as emojis, stickers, and voice notes serve as emotional expression tools and indirect conflict regulators. In conclusion, Gen Z's digital conflict strategies are adaptive and influenced by relationship closeness, message context, and media feature literacy. These insights contribute to a better understanding of digital communication behavior and support the development of digital literacy and interpersonal conflict management.

KEYWORDS: Digital Communication, Conflict Management, Generation Z

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital communication technologies over the past two decades has significantly reshaped how individuals build and maintain social relationships. According to the We Are Social (2023) report, "WhatsApp is the most actively used messaging platform in Indonesia, dominating daily communication routines among young users." This shift reflects what Valkenburg and Peter (2021) describe as a digital immersion, stating that Generation Z "live their social lives almost entirely within digital platforms." Thus, digital spaces are not merely extensions of communication but have become primary arenas for relational interaction.

While digital communication offers convenience, immediacy, and accessibility, it also presents inherent limitations—particularly in conveying emotional nuance and nonverbal cues. Walther (2020) emphasizes that "Computer-Mediated Communication lacks the richness of face-to-face interaction, often resulting in misinterpretations and delayed conflict recognition." This paradox suggests that although digital messaging bridges physical distance, it simultaneously creates emotional distance.

In the context of Indonesian Generation Z, WhatsApp serves not only as a platform for casual conversation but also as a space where interpersonal disagreements and relational tensions unfold. A study by Kurniawan and Ramadhani (2022) revealed that "more than half of college students' interpersonal disputes occur through digital messaging, often triggered by misinterpreted texts or delayed responses." This indicates a shift in the landscape of conflict—from physical interaction to mediated communication.

Interestingly, responses to digital conflict vary considerably among users. Some choose avoidance strategies such as read and ignore or leaving group chats; others engage in passive-aggressive behaviors through ambiguous status updates (subtle aggression), while a smaller group opts for direct confrontation. Putri and Hartati (2021) found that "participants negotiate their feelings through emoticons, stickers, and indirect cues rather than explicit confrontation," highlighting that digital symbols function as emotional negotiation tools.

Given this diversity of responses, a critical question arises: What specific communication strategies are employed by Generation Z in managing digital conflicts? Do they tend to avoid, accommodate, compromise, compete, or collaborate? While extensive literature exists on face-to-face conflict resolution, studies exploring conflict strategies within Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) remain limited.

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Understanding these strategies is essential, as Walther (2020) argues that “conflict in mediated communication cannot be managed using the same approaches designed for face-to-face contexts.” Therefore, digital conflict management requires a tailored approach that considers platform-specific features and user communication habits.

Practically, this research may inform educators, counselors, and digital platform developers in designing more empathetic and responsive conflict intervention models for younger users. Academically, it contributes to the growing discourse on digital interpersonal communication, particularly within the domain of relational conflict.

Grounded in the researcher's interest in emotional expression within digital spaces, this study adopts a qualitative approach to explore how Generation Z navigates friendship conflict on WhatsApp. The focus lies in interpreting how and why users choose strategies such as avoidance, accommodation, compromise, competition, or collaboration in various situational contexts.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design and is grounded in a constructivist paradigm to explore the communication strategies used by Generation Z in managing friendship conflicts on WhatsApp. The constructivist paradigm is adopted because this research views conflict as a socially constructed reality shaped by individual digital communication experiences. Therefore, understanding communication strategies requires contextual interpretation based on each informant's subjective perspective. The case study design allows the researcher to investigate the phenomenon holistically within its real-life setting.

The research was conducted at Universitas Bina Sarana Informatika Pemuda in Rawamangun, East Jakarta, with participants consisting of Generation Z students aged 20 to 22 from the Communication Studies Program, Public Relations concentration, Semester 4. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria, namely individuals who actively use WhatsApp as their primary communication medium and possess firsthand experience with friendship conflicts on the platform. A total of five informants were chosen to represent diverse digital conflict communication experiences.

The unit of analysis in this study focuses on verbal and non-verbal communication patterns during conflict, the conflict management strategies applied—such as avoidance, accommodation, compromise, competition, or collaboration—and their impact on friendship continuity. In this context, WhatsApp is positioned not merely as a medium but as a social interaction space where conflicts occur and are interpreted by users. Features such as emojis, stickers, voice notes, and message response timing are also observed as part of emotional negotiation strategies.

Conceptual definitions are formulated to clarify the key terms used in this research. Communication strategy is defined as a deliberate effort to convey messages in order to manage conflict. WhatsApp is defined as an internet-based instant messaging platform that enables symbolic digital expression. Generation Z is characterized as digital natives who frequently rely on symbolic cues and platform features to express emotions, making their conflict resolution patterns distinct from previous generations.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, limited observation, and documentation, including screenshots of WhatsApp conversations, field recordings, and interaction notes. Interviews were used to explore informants' subjective experiences and interpretations, while observations were conducted to examine digital communication behaviors directly. Documentation served to verify and reinforce verbal data obtained from other techniques.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis combined with Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing carried out cyclically. To ensure data validity, the study applied source triangulation and technique triangulation by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documentation. This approach strengthens the credibility of the findings and provides a comprehensive understanding of how Generation Z manages digital conflict within the WhatsApp environment.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study involved five informants who were active fourth-semester communication science students at Bina Sarana Informatika University, aged 20-22, and included in the mid-level Gen Z category. All informants were active WhatsApp users and had personal experience with friendship conflicts on the platform. Based on this study, conflicts were generally triggered by miscommunication in text messages and differences of opinion. The informants stated that digital communication on WhatsApp often creates ambiguity because it is not supported by nonverbal expressions such as facial expressions, tone of voice, or body movements. The lack of emotional context means that even neutral text messages can be misinterpreted as sarcastic or offensive, especially in sensitive situations such as group conflicts.

This phenomenon is reinforced by observational data from the WhatsApp group "Task 2 trus" which is used as a discussion space for group assignments. The group consists of five members: Informant 1: Arief Danantama, Informant 2: Iqbal Ismail, Informant 3: Bagaskoro, Informant 4: Darma Adiatmaja, and Informant 5: Revinza Marsisca. The group was formed when entering the fourth semester of lectures and became a means of communication within one of the course groups. During the

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interaction process in this group, communication dynamics began to emerge that triggered friendship conflicts, whether due to differences of opinion or related to roles and responsibilities in group work.

These observational findings align with the results of interviews with five informants. Informant 1, Arief Danantama, revealed that conflict in WhatsApp groups typically arises from an imbalance in contributions and a lack of feedback from other members.

"Conflicts usually arise during group work via WhatsApp, primarily due to differences of opinion and lack of response from members. For example, a task is scheduled for today, but someone is busy or only responds hours later. Ultimately, the same people are always active, resulting in unsynchronized coordination and sparking arguments." (Interview with Informant 1: Arief Danantama, June 10, 2025).

His explanation suggests that conflict in WhatsApp groups is often triggered by schedule inconsistencies, differences of opinion, and a lack of responsiveness from group members. He explained that when assignment discussions are conducted via WhatsApp, situations often arise where only a few members.

Some actively responded, while others either didn't respond or responded after a long delay. This put Informant 1 under pressure, especially when the agreed-upon time was unilaterally violated. This imbalance in participation and inconsistent communication led to miscommunication and ultimately led to conflict. This situation emphasizes that coordinating group work through digital platforms like WhatsApp requires active commitment from all members to avoid misunderstandings and delays in completing collective tasks.

Informant 4, Dharma Adiatmaja, expressed a similar sentiment, highlighting the uncooperative attitude of some members as a major trigger for conflict within the group. He stated that this often led to frustration among other members.

"I have, often. Especially friends who are often late. Late in replying or what? Late in arriving. So we meet at 9, he comes at 12. He's too late, and we end up getting tangled up waiting for him. So everyone else is also late." (Interview with Informant 4: Dharma Adiatmaja, June 10, 2025).

This statement aligns with a conversation in the group where Informant 5, Revinza Marsisca, repeatedly tried to schedule a meeting, but received no definitive response from any member. She herself admitted to frequently temporarily muting the group to avoid getting emotional, and would only respond to messages once the atmosphere was more conducive. This reflects that conflict in WhatsApp groups occurs not only due to differences of opinion, but also due to inactivity and unpunctuality, which are seen as a sign of disregard for group cooperation.

Meanwhile, Informant 3: Bagaskoro, admitted that he often only read messages without replying in conflict situations on WhatsApp.

"It's more about reading but not responding." (Interview with Informant 3: Bagaskoro, June 10, 2025)

This explanation shows that passive behavior such as simply reading without responding can trigger misunderstandings and tension in group communication. In the context of the observed group conversation, Informant 3: Bagaskoro himself was one of the members who responded to the group without paying attention, such as when he replied with the excuse of "just waking up" after the discussion had been going on for quite some time. This response, which was considered trivial, triggered emotions among other members, because it showed a lack of involvement and empathy for the coordination efforts that had been carried out previously. Instead of helping to defuse the situation, Informant 3: Bagaskoro's attitude of responding casually and tending not to pay attention to the context of the conversation worsened the group atmosphere. Thus, although he did not directly trigger the conflict through emotional remarks, his passive and uncooperative behavior actually became the root of the problem that sharpened the conflict within the group. This reflects how the act of silence, avoidance, and responding merely in digital communication can trigger serious friendship conflicts, especially in the context of teamwork.

Informant 5: Revinza Marsisca, experienced a more emotional conflict, particularly over differences in assignment distribution. She admitted to arguing in capital letters due to the heated situation.

"Because we had different opinions, we ended up fighting. Fighting. Fighting was like having everything in Caps Lock on each other's chats. It was really heated. So he was hot, I was hot. So we were all in Caps Lock on the chat. That's how it was." (Interview with Informant 5: Revinza Marsisca, June 10, 2025)

This explanation shows that friendship conflicts on WhatsApp can escalate into open fights when emotions get out of control and messages are delivered aggressively. The use of capital letters in conversations indicates high emotional intensity, and as she stated in the interview, the conflict began with the inability to express opinions effectively, then turned into mutual blame. This is also in line with the complaint of Informant 5: Revinza Marsisca, in a group conversation that showed difficulties in managing time and requests for cooperation that were not taken seriously by other members. When repeated attempts at coordination did not receive a commensurate response, frustration arose and eventually turned into a personal conflict. As she stated in the interview, the conflict began with disagreements and ineffective ways of conveying messages, which ultimately led to mutual blame in the group chat.

According to Informant 2: Iqbal Ismail, this is often caused by a misunderstanding of the meaning of the text because not everyone can grasp the meaning of the message correctly.

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"Maybe it's due to a misunderstanding of the wording. Sometimes, for example, people's expressions differ. Because sometimes people take it seriously, while others take it as a joke." (Interview with Informant 2: Iqbal Ismail, June 10, 2025)

This explanation demonstrates that in text-based communication like WhatsApp, the absence of facial expressions, intonation, or body language makes messages more easily misinterpreted. Sentences intended as jokes can be taken seriously or even offensive, depending on how the recipient interprets them. This can then trigger conflict, especially in groups with varying communication styles. When there is no direct clarification, these misunderstandings can escalate into interpersonal conflicts that disrupt friendships within the group.

Based on conversations in the WhatsApp group "Tugas 2 trus," it is clear that there is a friendship conflict triggered by a lack of active participation and unequal contributions among members in completing group assignments. Informant 5: Revinza Marsisca's efforts to organize schedules and ensure all members are present received a slow and unserious response, which led to disappointment. Comments such as "Anjay is the one who gives the most speeches" and the sarcasm from Informant 4: Darma Adiatmaja, "from this you understand who is a real friend and who is just using the name" reinforce the indication that communication in the group has shifted from productive discussions to emotional arguments. This situation shows how a lack of awareness in responding to messages and an uncooperative attitude can trigger interpersonal conflicts that disrupt group solidarity.

The conflict also shows that digital communication media like WhatsApp have limitations in conveying intent and emotion fully. The absence of nonverbal expressions, asynchronous response times, and

The use of stickers or sarcastic comments can lead to misunderstandings. In this situation, tensions extend beyond technical tasks to aspects of friendship, such as mutual trust, appreciation, and fairness in contributions. This conversation reflects the typical Gen Z dynamics of communicating on digital platforms: fast-paced, spontaneous, yet prone to conflict when not accompanied by responsibility and empathy in group interactions.

Therefore, the conflicts that occurred in the WhatsApp group were not only related to task allocation but also demonstrated the distinctive communication styles of Gen Z in dealing with pressure and social dynamics in the digital space. The observational data was then classified based on the interaction, participation, and emotional responses displayed by each member. This grouping served as the basis for analyzing communication strategies, which will be discussed in the discussion section.

Conflict is an unavoidable part of the dynamics of social relationships, especially in the context of fast-paced digital communication with minimal nonverbal expression. In this study, friendship conflicts that occurred in student WhatsApp groups demonstrate the complexity of Gen Z interactions in conveying messages, responding to tensions, and rebuilding relationships. Referring to Conflict Management Theory, conflict is not solely negative but can also trigger adjustment and the formation of healthier relationships when managed with the right strategy. Communication strategies that

The strategies used to address this conflict consist of several main approaches. The Avoiding strategy involves not responding to messages when tension arises, while Competing is seen when individuals express demands firmly. The Accommodating and Compromising strategies reflect an understanding of the situation and seeking a compromise to maintain group work. The Collaborating strategy involves open discussion to achieve shared goals, and the Conglomeration strategy involves flexible communication strategies adapted to the dynamics of the conflict.

By understanding the various strategies in Conflict Management, it is also important to see how these strategies are applied in more specific social realities. One example is the current communication dynamics of Generation Z. In the context of Gen Z, the communication strategies they use in responding to conflict vary widely, depending on their understanding of the situation, their ability to manage their emotions, and their ease of using digital features. Meanwhile, Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) Theory provides a framework for understanding the challenges of non-face-to-face communication, including limitations in emotional expression, response time lags, and the use of digital features and symbols such as emoticons, stickers, and voice notes.

The results of this study indicate that Gen Z handles friendship conflicts in WhatsApp groups in unique ways, influenced by their digital communication style, use of media features, and ability to manage emotions online. Interviews and observations of the "Tugas 2" group identified that conflicts arise from miscommunication, delayed responses, differences in message understanding, and imbalanced contributions between members.

members. This indicates that the conflict that emerged was not solely caused by the content of the task coordination conversations, but rather by a deeper, complex social and emotional dimension. To analyze these dynamics in a more structured manner, the researchers presented their findings in a comparative table representing the variety of communication strategies used by each informant.

Therefore, the author provides a more systematic overview of the forms of interaction and communication strategies used by Gen Z in dealing with friendship conflicts on WhatsApp. The researcher summarized the interview results in a table. These results reveal variations in communication styles, levels of participation, and emotional responses among informants. Patterns such as reading messages without replying, the use of emoticons and stickers, and word choice in conversations are important indicators of how conflicts arise and are responded to. The following table presents a comparison of the communication strategies employed by each informant based on the results of in-depth interviews.

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Table 1. Results of Comparison of Communication Strategies

Informant	Response to Conflict	Whatsapp Features Used	Expression of Emotions	Communication strategy (Conflict Management)	Results of the Implemented Strategy
Informant 1: Arief Danantama	1. Be quiet first, then explain calmly. 2. Actively invite cooperation	Emoticons, cute stickers	1. Firm but polite. 2. Expressing frustration, asking for help, and inviting teamwork.	Collaborating	Informant 1 stated that the strategy he used was quite effective, although sometimes there were still differences.
Informant 2: Iqbal Ismail	1. Reply directly without thinking first. 2. Often tries to defuse the situation	Emoticons, Short text	1. Serious but trying to be neutral. 2. Humor Sarcastic. 3. Avoid major conflicts.	Competing	Informant 2 stated that the strategy he used was less successful, because often not followed by other members.
Informant 3: Bagaskoro	1. Just read without replying. 2. Delayed response.	Explanatory voice note stickers	1. Humor Sarcastic 2. sometimes not taken seriously.	Avoiding	Informant 3 stated that the strategy he used could provide temporary relief but became a source of conflict because he was passive.
Informant 4: Darna Adiatmaja	1. express dissatisfaction directly and firmly. 2. Don't hesitate to criticize members who are considered passive.	Firm voice note, Emoticon	1. Calm but firm 2. sometimes use humor to neutralize conflict	Competing	Informant 4 stated that the strategy used was quite effective in maintaining good relationships.
Informant 5: Revinsa Marsisca	1. Be quiet first then get angry via text 2. After that, joke around to calm down your emotions.	Cute stickers, capslock text	Explosive and funny, but prone to misunderstanding	Compromising	Informant 5 stated that the strategy he used was less successful because it often got more heated.

CONCLUSIONS

This study was conducted to explore how Generation Z builds interaction, expresses emotions, and applies communication strategies when dealing with friendship conflicts on WhatsApp. Based on the analysis of interviews with five informants and observations of WhatsApp group interactions, several key conclusions can be drawn.

First, Gen Z tends to engage in indirect communication during conflicts, avoiding open confrontation. They rely on features such as emojis, stickers, and voice notes to convey emotions and intentions subtly. This indicates that their communication style is highly contextual and dependent on shared understanding within the group.

Second, the conflict management strategies used by Gen Z are diverse. Some participants adopted a Competing strategy by asserting their opinions firmly and directly. Others preferred Avoiding by ignoring messages or choosing silence. There were also those who used Compromising strategies to maintain group harmony, while some initiated Collaborating by expressing their stance clearly and inviting others to find a mutual solution. The choice of strategy was largely influenced by interpersonal closeness and group dynamics.

Third, the emotional expression style of Gen Z in conflict situations tends to be passive-aggressive, characterized by the use of symbolic cues, light sarcasm, or withdrawal from direct conversation. Although this approach may help prevent open confrontation, it can prolong tension if not followed by clarification.

Overall, the findings suggest that Gen Z's communication strategies in handling digital conflicts on WhatsApp are closely linked to media characteristics, generational communication styles, and relational factors within the group. These insights contribute to the broader discussion of Conflict Management Theory and digital communication in the context of social media

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