



Students perspectives on popular narratives of romantic relationships from the perspective of moral values

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ABSTRACT

In the digital era, popular narratives on social media have significantly shaped Generation Z's views on romantic relationships, often promoting temporary interactions such as situationship, toxic relationship, talking stage, and marriage is scary, which potentially conflict with traditional moral values. This study aims to explore students' perspectives on popular narratives of romantic relationships from the perspective of moral values at PGRI Wiranegara University. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation from purposively selected Generation Z students who had romantic relationship experience and exposure to digital narratives. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model with source, methodological, and temporal triangulation to ensure validity. The results show that students are familiar with various popular narratives spread through TikTok and Instagram, yet they do not accept them passively. Moral values especially responsibility, honesty, loyalty, and mutual respect serve as the main filter in evaluating these narratives, strengthened by family, religion, personal experience, peers, and campus character education. In conclusion, students actively use their moral values to critically assess popular narratives, highlighting the importance of strengthening digital literacy and moral education so that Generation Z can navigate digital culture responsibly.

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1. Introduction

Morality refers to the universal aspects that develop within an individual. It also encompasses the values and norms that determine a person's behavior. Anyone who violates these norms is considered immoral (Pramono, 2017). The development of information technology and digital media has brought significant changes to social life, particularly among the younger generation. Social media provides individuals with the opportunity to shape their own identities (Kusuma, 2020). Social media functions not only as an entertainment platform but also as a space for shaping individuals' perspectives, attitudes, and behavioral patterns. Popular narratives regarding romantic relationships need to be examined, as much of the content on digital

platforms has shaped the romantic perceptions and behaviors of the younger generation (Pratami, Putri, Rosiana, Shafwatunnisa, & Jubaedah, 2025).

This phenomenon can be explained by the cultivation theory proposed by George Gerbner. This theory posits that repeated exposure to digital media content shapes the perception that romantic relationships are temporary. Irresponsible use of social media leads to a decline in moral and ethical values among the younger generation (Aprilistya, Azhari, & Pramesti, 2023). Social media has become the primary space for the younger generation to interact and express themselves (Putri, Mayasari, & Arindawati, 2026). Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012), known as digital natives. Among this generation, romantic relationships are often represented through popular narratives circulating online. Circulating narratives such as “toxic relationships,” “situationships,” etc., often depict romantic relationships that emphasize unlimited freedom and the pursuit of fleeting happiness.

Several previous studies have examined romantic relationships and morality among young people. However, research gaps still exist. The first study examined romantic relationships through the lens of moral aspects and behavioral deviance among adolescents using a qualitative approach; however, it focused on high school students and did not examine popular narratives. In contrast, this study focuses on college students and specifically analyzes popular narratives regarding romantic relationship practices (Ndoa & Hia, 2024). Another study investigated dating behavior among college students in early adulthood, also using a qualitative approach but without explicitly highlighting Generation Z or popular narratives, whereas this study places Generation Z and popular narratives as the primary subjects (Nurfatin & Sulistiani, 2025). A subsequent study examined students’ perspectives on cohabitation, focusing on traditional versus modern values using qualitative methods, yet did not address Generation Z or popular narratives, whereas this research emphasizes Generation Z’s popular narratives regarding romantic relationships and moral values as its primary analytical perspective (Setiawan, Gevira, & Sijabat, 2026).

The academic urgency of this study lies in the need to understand how popular narratives on social media influence Generation Z’s views on romantic relationships, which often conflict with traditional and religious moral values in Indonesia. Amid the proliferation of content promoting temporary and non-committal relationships, this research is essential to reveal the role of moral values as a critical filter. In addition to the change in research subjects, the main research gaps that distinguish this study are its specific focus on popular narratives and the use of moral values perspective as the primary evaluation tool, which has not been widely explored in previous studies. The scientific contribution of this research is to enrich studies on Generation Z morality by providing empirical evidence on the role of moral values (responsibility, honesty, loyalty, and mutual respect) in filtering digital cultural influences, while also supporting the strengthening of character education in higher education institutions.

The shift in moral values within Generation Z’s romantic relationships is becoming increasingly evident. Traditional and religious values that emphasize chastity, responsibility, and boundaries in interactions between the sexes often clash with popular narratives promoted through social media. PGRI Wiranegara University, as one of the higher education institutions in Pasuruan, East Java, is no exception to these dynamics. Students, the majority of whom come from East Javanese backgrounds with strong religious and cultural values, are also exposed to popular narratives of romantic relationships through social media. The selection of this location is relevant because this campus represents Generation Z at a regional private university in East Java that focuses on character education. Previous research at Uniwara has demonstrated the impact of social media on Generation Z behavior (Mujiwati & Laili, 2023), but no study has specifically examined moral value perspectives regarding popular narratives of romantic relationship practices. Based on this description, this study aims to gain a deeper understanding of how PGRI Wiranegara University students’ moral values influence their perspectives on

Generation Z's popular narratives of romantic relationships, as well as to examine how students evaluate these phenomena in relation to the moral values they hold.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a descriptive research design. The qualitative approach was chosen because it provides a deep understanding of the meanings, experiences, and individual perspectives regarding the social phenomena under study (Palupi, Ummah, & Larasati, 2025). In this study, the qualitative approach was used to understand students' moral perspectives on popular narratives of Generation Z's romantic relationships. The research was conducted at PGRI Wiranegara University. Research informants were selected using purposive sampling, which involves selecting informants based on specific criteria aligned with the study's objectives. The relevant demographic characteristics of the informants included active students at PGRI Wiranegara University who fall within the Generation Z category, had been or are currently in a romantic relationship, and had been exposed to popular narratives regarding romantic relationships through social media or other digital platforms. The number of informants was not determined precisely at the outset of the study because the selection of informants was conducted flexibly according to data needs. The data collection process was carried out until data saturation was reached that is, the condition where the information obtained had become repetitive and no new data or themes relevant to the research focus were found (Heryana, 2018).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation (Abdussamad, 2021). The types of observation conducted included passive participant observation of student interactions in the campus environment and non-participant observation of popular narrative content on social media. Data were collected until data saturation was reached. The indicators used to determine that data saturation had been achieved were the absence of new information from additional informants, the consistent repetition of categories and themes, and sufficient depth of explanation from the informants.

The research procedure began with the identification of the phenomenon and the determination of the research focus based on the evolution of popular narratives regarding romantic relationships among Generation Z. Next, the researcher selected informants according to predetermined criteria, then collected data through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. The data obtained were then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive analysis model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. Data reduction was performed by selecting and focusing on data relevant to the research objectives. Next, the data were presented in the form of narrative descriptions to facilitate the process of interpretation and pattern discovery. The final stage involved drawing conclusions based on the themes, relationships, and meanings emerging from the research data. Data validity was tested through source triangulation, methodological triangulation, and temporal triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from multiple informants. Methodological triangulation was conducted by comparing results from interviews, observations, and documentation. Temporal triangulation was conducted through data collection at different times. Research results were evaluated based on data consistency, the alignment of information across sources, and their ability to address the research objectives, ensuring that the findings possess credibility and validity that are scientifically accountable.

3. Analysis and Results

This section presents the main findings of a qualitative analysis based on in-depth interviews with Generation Z students at PGRI Wiranegara University. The analysis shows that students actively interpret popular narratives of romantic relationships through the moral values they hold.

3.1. Popular Narratives of Romantic Relationships Among Generation Z

The interview results show that the most prevalent narratives among college students include “situationship,” “talking stage,” “toxic relationship,” “red flags/green flags,” “healing after a toxic relationship,” “marriage is scary,” as well as “mutual understanding” (MU) and “soft launching.” These narratives are widely shared on social media, particularly TikTok and Instagram, which serve as the primary sources of information and references on romantic relationships for Generation Z (Pratami, Putri, Rosiana, Shafwatunnisa, & Jubaedah, 2025). Popular culture, which has evolved through digital media, also influences the formation of identity, behavioral patterns, and value systems among the younger generation as they view romantic relationships (Rahim, 2024). Among these various narratives, “situationships” and the “talking stage” are the most common phenomena. The interview results show that relationships without a clear status are considered normal, although some students believe that such situations can lead to uncertainty and ambiguity regarding commitment. The phenomenon of a “situationship” describes a romantic relationship that is pursued without a clear definition of its status (Pratiwi, Sumadyo, & Rohmah, 2024).

In addition, narratives about toxic relationships often appear in the form of personal experiences or educational content regarding unhealthy relationships. These narratives raise students’ awareness of the importance of maintaining emotional well-being in romantic relationships. Toxic relationships are characterized by manipulative behavior and actions that can have a negative impact on an individual’s mental health (Chairunnisa, Febrianti, Ramadhan, Alkaf, & Khairunnisa, 2025). Meanwhile, the “marriage is scary” narrative reflects students’ concerns about long-term commitment, particularly regarding emotional readiness, responsibility, and financial circumstances. This narrative indicates a shift in Generation Z’s perspective, as they view marriage as a major decision that requires careful consideration (Riswandi, Surahman, & Nugraha, 2025).

3.2. Students' Moral Perspectives on Popular Narratives

From a moral perspective, students tend to use the principles of responsibility, honesty, loyalty, and mutual respect as the basis for evaluating various practices in romantic relationships (Wibowo, Wigena, Sulistyosari, & Sultan, 2024). Moral values serve as guidelines that help individuals distinguish between good and bad behavior in social life (Zebua, Gulo, Gulo, Harefa, & Siahaan, 2023). The interview results show that practices such as ghosting, love bombing, emotional manipulation, and infidelity are rejected because they are seen as contrary to the values of honesty, responsibility, and respect for one’s partner. Healthy romantic relationships must be built on a foundation of commitment, openness, and respect for one’s partner (Wijayanti & Abdurrahman, 2025).

Nevertheless, some students are still open to relationships without a formal commitment as long as they are based on openness, healthy communication, and mutual agreement. Conversely, the “relationship goals” narrative is often viewed critically because it presents an overly idealized picture of relationships that does not always align with reality (Ahmad, Fourqoniah, & Dwivayani, 2020). The research findings also indicate that strong religious and cultural values play a significant role in filtering the various popular narratives circulating on social media. This suggests that college students are not merely consumers of popular culture but also possess the ability to evaluate and consider its impact based on the moral values they hold dear. These internalized moral values serve as a mechanism that helps students navigate the influence of digital culture and the perception of instant relationships (Belgradoputra & Mardani, 2023).

3.3 Factors Influencing Moral Value Perspectives

Based on the interview results, social media is the most dominant factor in shaping students’ perspectives on popular narratives regarding Generation Z’s romantic relationships. Most informants became familiar with terms such as “situationship,” “relationship goals,” “toxic

relationship,” and “marriage is scary” through TikTok, Instagram, or X. Repeated exposure to this content has led these narratives to influence how students view romantic relationships. The power of digital media enables the formation of a popular culture capable of influencing various aspects of daily life (Zahra, Mustaqimmah, & Hendra, 2020).

However, social media becomes the most dominant factor compared to family or campus environment because of its fast, easily accessible, interactive, and continuous nature in presenting content that attracts Generation Z's attention through personalized algorithms. Nevertheless, students do not accept this narrative at face value. Interview results indicate that family and religion remain the primary foundations for evaluating a relationship, particularly with regard to honesty, loyalty, responsibility, and commitment. Moral values serve as guidelines for individuals in determining their attitudes and behaviors in social life (Sakinah, Kamiri, & Anggraini, 2022). In addition, personal experiences and those of peers also influence how students view romantic relationships. Experiences such as ghosting, relationship conflicts, and unhealthy relationships make students more critical of trends emerging on social media. Social environments and interpersonal experiences are key factors in shaping individuals' understanding of romantic relationships (Santika & Permana, 2021).

The campus environment also plays a role in strengthening students' moral perspectives through character education and the instillation of ethical values. Character education helps young people understand and apply moral values in their daily lives (Latifah, M.Z.M, & Suratiningsih, 2022). Overall, social media serves as the primary source for the dissemination of popular narratives, while family, religion, personal experiences, peers, and the campus environment are factors that help students filter and evaluate these narratives based on the moral values they hold. The findings of this study contribute to the development of theory on Gen Z morality by demonstrating that moral values function not passively, but as an active filtering mechanism against digital cultural influences. This enriches Gerbner's cultivation theory with the perspective of active agency among Gen Z who are able to critically assess popular narratives through the lens of morality.

4. Conclusion

This study shows that students at PGRI Wiranegara University are familiar with and interpret various popular narratives regarding Generation Z's romantic relationships such as “situationship,” “talking stage,” “toxic relationship,” “relationship goals,” and “marriage is scary” most of which they encounter through social media. Although exposed to these various narratives, students do not accept them passively but rather evaluate them based on the moral values they hold, particularly responsibility, honesty, loyalty, and mutual respect. The research findings also indicate that social media is the most dominant factor in shaping students' perspectives; however, this influence is filtered through family values, religion, personal experiences, peers, and the campus environment. These findings contribute to the development of studies on the relationship between digital popular culture and the formation of Generation Z's moral perspectives, particularly within the context of character education in higher education. The implications of the research findings for the development of character education policies in higher education institutions are the need to integrate digital literacy and moral education based on Pancasila values into the curriculum, as well as developing character strengthening programs that specifically address the influence of popular social media narratives.

Recommendations that can be given to families are to increase open communication and wise monitoring of children's social media exposure, as well as to strengthen moral value education from an early age so that it becomes the primary filter against popular narratives that conflict with family values. Opportunities for further research that can expand these findings include comparative studies across universities, longitudinal research on the development of Gen Z morality, and quantitative studies to measure the level of influence of popular narratives on romantic behavior. However, this study has limitations because it was conducted only among

students at PGRI Wiranegara University with a limited number of informants, so the results cannot yet be generalized to the entire Generation Z. These limitations can serve as a basis for future research to involve a more diverse group of participants from various regions and backgrounds.

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