

Confucian Social Ethics amid Modernization: An Exploratory Study of Generation Z Adherents in Medan, Indonesia

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Abstract

Modernization and digitally mediated communication have changed the settings in which inherited religious ethics are interpreted and practiced. Existing studies of Confucianism in Indonesia have largely emphasized doctrinal and historical questions, leaving the everyday ethical interpretations of young adherents less examined. This study explores how three Generation Z Confucian adherents in the Jalan Gunung Krakatau community of Medan understand and apply Confucian values in family, community, and digital interactions, as well as how they perceive the challenges of modernization. The study used an exploratory qualitative descriptive design. Participants were selected purposively, and data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted on May 8, 2026, with contextual field notes used to document the interview setting. The data were coded and organized thematically. The participants understood *Ren, Yi, Li, Zhi, Xin, and Xiao* as an interconnected moral framework rather than as abstract doctrine. Filial respect, compassion, practical assistance, tolerance, appropriate communication, considered judgment, and trustworthiness emerged as the main expressions of social ethics in their accounts. Modernization was not described as eliminating these values; it created tensions between personal aspirations and relational duties, traditional propriety and informal communication, and technological opportunity and ethical responsibility. Within this bounded setting, the continuity of Confucian ethics rested on reinterpretation and everyday application rather than unchanged repetition. These findings provide a context-specific account and are not intended to represent Confucian Generation Z more broadly.

Keywords: *Confucian Ethics; Digital Ethics; Generation Z; Modernization; Social Ethics*

A. Introduction

Digitalization, technological development, and globalization have reshaped patterns of communication, social relationships, and value formation in contemporary society. These transformations provide broader access to information and new opportunities for interaction, but they also raise ethical questions concerning how people exercise judgment, maintain relationships, and communicate responsibly in digitally mediated settings (van Dijck 2013; Vallor

2016). Research on modern Indonesian society has similarly associated globalization and technological change with the increasing prioritization of individual interests over communal relationships (Lestari and Achdiani 2024). These developments make social ethics particularly important because technological progress does not automatically ensure responsible conduct, mutual respect, or concern for others.

Generation Z has grown up within this changing social environment. Digital platforms have become closely integrated into how members of this generation communicate, access information, express themselves, and establish relationships. Existing studies describe Generation Z as highly familiar with digital technology and capable of adapting to rapidly changing communication environments (Abdillah and Putro 2022; Muaviah et al. 2023). Research has also examined the relationship between religion and such aspects of Generation Z's lives as motivation, perseverance, and attitudes toward learning (Benny 2024). However, broad descriptions of Generation Z cannot fully explain how young people from particular religious communities interpret inherited ethical traditions or negotiate them within family, community, and digital interactions.

Social ethics refers here to the moral principles that guide conduct toward other people, including respect, honesty, responsibility, compassion, tolerance, and concern for collective well-being. In Confucianism, these principles are expressed through interconnected virtues such as *Ren* (humanity or compassion), *Yi* (righteousness), *Li* (propriety), *Zhi* (wisdom), and *Xin* (honesty and trustworthiness). Confucian teachings place personal moral cultivation at the foundation of harmonious family and social relationships (Zarkasi 2014). Confucian accounts of social justice likewise connect morality, honesty, love, and concern for the public interest (Ashri 2023). Values such as filial piety, appropriate conduct, justice, and tolerance therefore operate not only as abstract doctrines but also as practical expectations governing relationships within families and wider communities (Huda and Sari 2020).

The literature cited in this study addresses several relevant aspects of the subject. Studies have discussed the historical position and recognition of Confucianism in Indonesia (Aprilia and Murtiningsih 2017), its principal moral teachings (Zarkasi 2014), Confucian understandings of tolerance (Huda and Sari 2020), and the influence of religion on Generation Z more generally (Benny 2024). Nevertheless, these strands have usually been examined separately. Within the literature reviewed for this article, limited attention has been given to how young Confucian adherents in a particular urban Indonesian community understand and practice inherited ethical values while responding to digital communication, changing family relationships, individualism, and religious diversity. This limitation creates a need for a context-specific investigation based on the

experiences of young Confucian participants rather than broad assumptions about Generation Z as a whole.

This study examines the social ethics of three Generation Z adherents of Confucianism residing on Jalan Gunung Krakatau, Medan Timur, Medan. It asks how the participants understand and practice Confucian ethical values in family, community, and digital interactions; what ethical challenges they associate with modernization and digital media; and how they interpret the continuing relevance of Confucian virtues in contemporary social life. The study argues that, within this bounded local context, Confucian ethics continue to function as a practical moral resource, although their application is negotiated in response to changing communication patterns, lifestyles, and social expectations.

B. Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with an exploratory orientation to examine how Generation Z adherents of Confucianism understand and practice social ethics in a bounded local setting. Participants were selected purposively according to four criteria: they were born in 2005, identified as adherents of Confucianism, resided on Jalan Gunung Krakatau in Medan Timur, and participated in family or community life that allowed them to reflect on Confucian ethical practices. Three participants met these criteria. The small sample was appropriate to the exploratory purpose of obtaining detailed accounts from information-rich participants within one specific community. It was not intended to establish saturation, measure the prevalence of particular attitudes, or represent the wider population of Generation Z or Confucian adherents in Indonesia.

Primary data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews on May 8, 2026. Contextual field notes were also prepared to record the interview setting and relevant interactional context; they were not treated as an independent observational dataset. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and addressed filial piety, compassion, honesty, responsibility, tolerance, social etiquette, and the influence of digital media on ethical conduct. With the participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Published scholarship was consulted solely to contextualize the participants' accounts and was not treated as empirical data. Before the interviews, all participants received information about the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw. They also consented to the use of the names presented in the manuscript. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian. The quotations presented in English were translated by the authors and checked against the original transcripts to maintain semantic accuracy.

Data analysis followed the interactive procedures of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). Interview transcripts and field notes were coded according to the Confucian ethical categories of *Ren* (humanity), *Li* (propriety), *Yi* (righteousness), *Zhi* (wisdom), *Xin* (honesty and trustworthiness), and *Xiao* (filial piety), together with themes concerning family responsibility, tolerance, digital conduct, and the challenges of modernization. The coded material was organized across the three participants to identify recurring and differing interpretations. Interpretive consistency was checked by comparing the coded accounts across participants and revisiting the corresponding transcript passages and contextual field notes (Sugiyono 2019).

C. Results and Discussion

1. Understanding of Confucian Ethical Values among the Participants

The three participants understood inherited Confucian virtues through their relevance to contemporary social life. When discussing personal conduct, interpersonal relationships, and responsibilities within the family and community, they referred to *Ren* (humanity or compassion), *Yi* (righteousness), *Li* (propriety), *Zhi* (wisdom), and *Xin* (honesty and trustworthiness). They did not present these values merely as religious doctrines to be remembered. Instead, they interpreted them as ethical orientations that could guide everyday conduct amid changing social relationships and the growing presence of digital technology.

Their explanations also indicated that the five virtues were understood as interrelated rather than as separate moral instructions. *Ren* provided a humane orientation toward others, while *Yi* guided judgments about morally appropriate conduct. *Li* regulated respectful interaction, *Zhi* supported considered judgment, and *Xin* sustained honesty and interpersonal trust. Together, these virtues connected moral self-cultivation with conduct toward other people. This relational interpretation is consistent with Wong's account of Confucian personhood as inherently social, developmental, and virtue-based (Wong 2012) and with studies describing Wu Chang as a set of moral dispositions that shapes individual character and social relationships (Kasyfurrahman et al. 2020; Zarkasi 2014). From this perspective, virtues acquire ethical meaning through their enactment within concrete relationships and social roles rather than through abstract assent alone. The participants' accounts reflect this relational orientation, although the interviews do not establish how consistently these virtues were practiced across different situations.

Javelin Gracelia connected *Ren* directly with empathy and concern for others:

“People need to maintain empathy and concern for others because social life is not only about personal success but also about helping and caring for the people around us” (Javelin Gracelia, personal communication, May 8, 2026).

Her account translates *Ren* from an abstract ethical concept into a standard for everyday conduct. Personal achievement was not rejected, but it was expected to remain connected with awareness of other people’s needs. In this sense, *Ren* provides an ethical response to individualistic tendencies by requiring personal aspirations to be balanced with compassion and social responsibility. The account does not establish that modernization or digital technology necessarily diminishes empathy; it shows how one participant used a Confucian virtue to evaluate conduct within a changing social environment.

The continuing relevance of these values was also connected with the settings in which they were encountered and practiced. The participants discussed Confucian ethics through family upbringing, community relationships, religious teaching, and everyday interaction. Their accounts suggest that the continuity of Confucian ethics depends not only on preserving doctrinal knowledge but also on translating it into recognizable practices. Research on Confucian religious education in Indonesia similarly associates the transmission of Confucianism with moral formation, religious practice, and the adaptation of inherited teachings to the Indonesian social context (Hun 2025). Among the participants, this process appeared in the use of traditional ethical concepts to interpret contemporary concerns such as empathy, responsibility, appropriate communication, and the use of technology.

Within this bounded setting, Confucian ethics remained meaningful because the participants could connect inherited virtues with situations they encountered in contemporary life. The values were not described as rigid prescriptions that required resistance to social change. Instead, they offered standards through which changing behavior and relationships could be assessed. This pattern shows how a religious tradition may retain practical relevance through interpretation and application rather than through unchanged repetition. The significance of these values becomes clearer in the participants’ accounts of family obligations, community relationships, and digital interaction.

2. Family and Community Ethics

The participants’ general understanding of Confucian virtues became more concrete when they discussed obligations to parents and conduct toward other community members. Respect for parents, associated with the Confucian principle of *Xiao* (filial piety), was described as an important basis for moral conduct. In their accounts, respect was expressed not only through courteous communication but also through attention to parental advice, practical assistance, and concern for the family’s dignity. This interpretation corresponds

with literature that places *Xiao* within the formation of individual character and harmonious family relationships (Lumbantobing et al. 2025).

Javelin Gracelia discussed this value in relation to changing priorities among young people:

“In modern life, some young people are more focused on their own interests and sometimes forget the importance of respecting their parents. However, in Confucian teachings, respecting parents is the beginning of building good moral character” (Javelin Gracelia, personal communication, May 8, 2026).

Javelin’s account presents modernization as a context in which filial obligations must be consciously maintained. Her statement does not establish a general decline in respect among Generation Z; rather, it reveals how she used *Xiao* to evaluate changing relationships between young people and their parents. Respect for parents was therefore understood not simply as compliance with tradition but as an early setting in which consideration, responsibility, and appropriate conduct are learned.

Contemporary scholarship distinguishes reciprocal filial piety, which is grounded in affection, gratitude, and voluntary care, from authoritarian filial piety, which places greater emphasis on hierarchical obligation and obedience (Yeh and Bedford 2003; Bedford and Yeh 2019). Javelin’s account does not clearly distinguish these dimensions, but its emphasis on respect as moral formation rather than explicit coercion is compatible with the reciprocal dimension. This distinction prevents *Xiao* from being reduced to unconditional obedience and shows how filial responsibility may be maintained while its expression changes.

The participants extended this ethical orientation beyond the family through compassion and practical assistance to others. Javelin’s earlier emphasis on empathy connected *Ren* with awareness of other people’s needs, while Fenti Patricia described social responsibility in terms of concrete action:

“Helping people who experience difficulties, such as assisting older people who need help on the street or providing support to those in need, is one example of applying social ethics in everyday life” (Fenti Patricia, personal communication, May 8, 2026).

Fenti’s example locates social responsibility in ordinary acts of assistance rather than in formal community programs. Her account suggests that ethical responsibility begins with recognizing another person’s circumstances and responding within the possibilities of everyday interaction. In this formulation, *Ren* is expressed through action: concern for others becomes socially meaningful when it informs practical conduct. This relationship between humane concern and social responsibility is consistent with scholarship connecting Confucian virtues with moral conduct and social harmony (Kasyfurrahman et al. 2020).

Tolerance formed another dimension of community ethics in the participants' accounts. Fenti linked social harmony with the willingness to recognize differences in people's backgrounds:

"Every individual needs to respect differences because people have different backgrounds. Living peacefully and appreciating others is part of creating harmony in society" (Fenti Patricia, personal communication, May 8, 2026).

Her account places tolerance within everyday interpersonal conduct rather than treating it only as an abstract response to religious or cultural diversity. Respecting differences was understood as a practical condition for preventing tension and sustaining peaceful relationships. This interpretation is consistent with research on Confucian communities in Indonesia showing that tolerance is practiced through mutual respect, acceptance of difference, and peaceful coexistence in religiously diverse settings (Huda and Sari 2020). In the Indonesian context, this interpersonal emphasis is also compatible with Hoon's (2017) account of religious multiculturalism, which treats religious difference as a substantive dimension of Indonesian diversity rather than merely as an extension of ethnic difference. Fenti's statement resonates at the interpersonal level with this emphasis on recognition and coexistence, although she referred to differences in background generally rather than specifically to religious diversity. Her account therefore cannot demonstrate how religious multiculturalism operates at the institutional or policy level.

Family obligations and community relationships were thus understood as connected domains of ethical practice. *Xiao* oriented conduct toward parents and family, while *Ren*, responsibility, and tolerance extended moral concern to people beyond the household. The participants did not describe these values as eliminating the pressures associated with individualism or changing lifestyles. Their accounts instead show how inherited ethical concepts were used to assess personal priorities and relationships within their immediate social environment. The emphasis on humanity and harmonious coexistence also corresponds with comparative scholarship identifying humane conduct as a central concern within Confucian teaching (Munthe, Nasution, and Zamzila 2023).

3. Digital Ethics and Social Media Behavior

Questions of respect and responsibility extended from face-to-face relationships into digitally mediated interaction. Digital conduct was discussed most explicitly by Winston Yapviro, who associated contemporary communication with increasing informality in interactions between younger and older people:

"Social etiquette is less commonly practiced than before. Many young people now interact with elders more casually, including in the way they address others, speak, and show respect. These changes are influenced by

technological development, globalization, and the freedom of expression in modern society” (Winston Yapviro, personal communication, May 8, 2026).

Winston’s account identifies a perceived change in communicative conventions rather than providing evidence of a general decline in morality. From his perspective, increasingly casual forms of address may weaken the expression of *Li*, particularly when informality is accompanied by diminished consideration for age and social context. However, the interviews do not establish that informal communication necessarily signifies disrespect. Research on networked youth similarly cautions against treating digital technology as a direct cause of deteriorating social relationships. Online interaction can reproduce existing social practices while also creating spaces in which young people maintain relationships, develop identities, and participate in communities (boyd 2014). Winston’s concern is therefore better understood as a tension between established expectations of propriety and changing conventions of communication.

Winston did not portray technology as inherently harmful. He instead emphasized that its consequences depend partly on how people exercise judgment when communicating:

“Technology can provide many benefits, but its use must still be controlled by ethical values. People need to think about the impact of their words and actions, especially on social media” (Winston Yapviro, personal communication, May 8, 2026).

This account connects digital conduct with *Zhi*, *Xin*, and *Li*. *Zhi* concerns the judgment required before producing or sharing content, *Xin* concerns honesty and trustworthiness, and *Li* concerns the appropriateness of expression within a particular relationship or setting. These virtues do not provide platform-specific rules, but they offer criteria through which digital behavior can be assessed. This interpretation corresponds with Vallor’s argument that classical virtue traditions, including Confucianism, can inform moral judgment in technological environments characterized by changing relationships, uncertain consequences, and new forms of communication (Vallor 2016).

Winston’s position also complicates the assumption that Generation Z’s intensive use of social media necessarily results in unethical behavior. A study of Generation Z social media users in Surabaya found that respondents used digital platforms for communication, education, and access to information and tended to verify questionable information before sharing it (Abdillah and Putro 2022). Although that study involved a different population and research design, it shows that frequent social media use and ethical awareness are not mutually exclusive. The relevant distinction is therefore not simply between online and offline interaction, but between forms of digital participation that involve

reflection and those that disregard truthfulness, context, or their possible effects on others.

Research on digital citizenship provides a broader framework for interpreting this distinction. Choi (2016) conceptualizes digital citizenship as involving ethics, media and information literacy, participation, and critical resistance rather than technical competence alone. Jones and Mitchell (2016) identify respectful online behavior and civic engagement as particularly important components of youth digital citizenship. These perspectives support interpreting Winston's statement as a call for reflective and respectful participation, not simply as a demand to restrict the use of technology.

The possibility of using technology to communicate positive values also has support in Indonesian research on religion and digital media. Kustiawan et al. (2025) found that social media enabled young people to access religious content and participate in religious discussions through digital formats. Because their study examined Islamic *da'wah*, its findings cannot be transferred directly to young Confucian adherents. It nevertheless shows that social media can function both as a site of ethical risk and as a medium for transmitting religious values. Winston's account reflects this dual possibility: technology expands communication, but its use still requires ethical judgment.

A focus on individual virtue, however, provides only a partial explanation of digital conduct. Social media platforms also organize interaction through their technical features, visibility mechanisms, and commercial structures, which influence what users encounter and how they respond (van Dijck 2013). The interviews concentrated on personal responsibility and did not examine these institutional dimensions. Within that boundary, Winston's account illustrates how *Li*, *Zhi*, and *Xin* can be reinterpreted as standards for respectful, considered, and trustworthy communication in digital settings. It represents an articulated position within this small group rather than a pattern that can be generalized to Confucian youth as a whole.

4. Challenges of Modernization

The preceding accounts present modernization less as an outright rejection of Confucian ethics than as a change in the situations in which those ethics must be interpreted. Three tensions are particularly visible in the interviews: the relationship between personal aspirations and concern for others, the negotiation between established forms of propriety and increasingly informal communication, and the application of moral judgment in digital environments. These tensions do not indicate that the participants had abandoned Confucian values. They show that inherited ethical concepts were being applied under social conditions different from those in which they were originally learned.

The first tension concerns personal autonomy and relational responsibility. Javelin's accounts of empathy and respect for parents suggest

concern that individual priorities may displace attention to family members and other people. Indonesian literature has similarly associated globalization with increasingly individualistic lifestyles and declining interaction within local communities (Lestari and Achdiani 2024). Individualization, however, should not automatically be equated with selfishness or moral decline. Yan (2010) treats individualization as a socially produced and internally contested process in which greater personal autonomy may coexist with continuing family and community obligations. The participants' accounts reflect this tension: they recognized personal achievement as part of contemporary life but continued to evaluate it through *Ren*, *Xiao*, and social responsibility.

A related tension appears between cultural change and the persistence of inherited values. Winston's account of increasingly informal communication shows that established expressions of *Li* may be renegotiated as communication styles change. Yet less formality does not by itself establish the disappearance of respect. Cross-national research has found that modernization can produce substantial value change while distinctive cultural traditions continue to shape social conduct (Inglehart and Baker 2000). This combination of change and continuity is also evident in the present case. The participants did not reject contemporary communication or personal autonomy, but they continued to use Confucian virtues to assess whether changing practices remained considerate, appropriate, and trustworthy.

Comparative research in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China similarly indicates that filial piety can persist across differently modernized societies even though its components and social implications vary according to context (Yeh et al. 2013). More broadly, Rozman (2002) argues that the continuation of Confucianism under globalization depends on its capacity to retain recognizable ethical commitments without assuming that their previous institutional and cultural forms must remain unchanged. The participants' accounts reflect a comparable adaptive logic at the level of everyday interpretation, although the present study does not establish a broader process of societal or institutional transformation.

Digital media create a further challenge because ethical judgment must be exercised in communication that is rapid, highly visible, and exposed to large amounts of information. Winston's emphasis on considering the effects of words and actions illustrates this concern. The interviews did not contain reports of cyberbullying, hate speech, or misinformation involving the participants; these behaviors should therefore not be presented as empirical findings of this study. The relevant finding is that Winston viewed digital communication as requiring *Zhi* and *Xin*: users should evaluate information, consider possible consequences, and communicate truthfully. Digital literacy research likewise treats critical evaluation, ethical communication, and responsible content production as

competencies rather than automatic consequences of access to technology (Restianty 2018). From a virtue-ethical perspective, the challenge is not technology alone but the cultivation of judgment and conduct appropriate to technologically mediated relationships (Vallor 2016).

Changes in social interaction also need not be interpreted as evidence of a comprehensive moral crisis. Modernization can alter the basis and expression of social solidarity without eliminating social attachment altogether (Fathoni 2024). The participants continued to articulate concern for parents, people in need, peaceful relationships, and responsible communication. Their accounts therefore indicate perceived pressure on established ethical practices rather than a verified collapse of honesty, responsibility, or mutual respect. This distinction is important because the three interviews provide evidence of how the participants interpreted social change, not evidence from which the moral condition of Generation Z as a whole can be diagnosed.

Family, community, and education remain important settings in which ethical values may be learned and reinforced. Existing scholarship supports the contribution of parents and educators to moral development through guidance, example, communication, and habituation (Marsen, Neviyarni, and Murni 2021). However, the present interviews do not show that the participants experienced inadequate parental supervision, reduced family communication, or failed moral education. On the contrary, their familiarity with Confucian concepts suggests that family, religious education, and community interaction continued to provide channels of ethical transmission. Any claim that these institutions have weakened would require additional evidence from parents, educators, or community leaders.

Modernization, in this bounded case, was therefore neither a singular cause of moral decline nor a force that left inherited values unchanged. It created situations in which the meaning and application of *Ren*, *Xiao*, *Li*, *Zhi*, and *Xin* had to be reconsidered. The continuing relevance of Confucian ethics appeared in the participants' efforts to relate these virtues to personal aspirations, changing family relationships, informal communication, social diversity, and digital media. Their accounts suggest that ethical continuity may depend on reinterpretation and practice rather than the unchanged reproduction of traditional forms.

D. Conclusion

Among the three participants, Confucian social ethics operated as a practical framework for interpreting everyday relationships rather than merely as inherited religious doctrine. They understood *Ren*, *Yi*, *Li*, *Zhi*, *Xin*, and *Xiao* as interrelated virtues connecting moral self-cultivation with conduct toward other people. Within family and community life, these values appeared in respect for

parents, compassion, practical assistance, tolerance, and responsibility. In digital interaction, *Li*, *Zhi*, and *Xin* provided standards for appropriate communication, considered judgment, and trustworthiness. Modernization was not described simply as eroding or preserving these values. Instead, it created tensions between personal aspirations and relational obligations, established forms of propriety and increasingly informal communication, and technological opportunities and ethical responsibility. In this setting, the continuity of Confucian ethics depended on their reinterpretation and application to contemporary situations rather than on the unchanged reproduction of traditional forms.

The article contributes a context-specific account of how young adherents within an urban Confucian minority community understood the relationship between inherited ethics and contemporary social life. Its exploratory design and reliance on three participants from one locality do not permit conclusions about the prevalence of these interpretations among Confucian youth more broadly. Future research could compare participants across Confucian communities, age groups, and urban settings and could include parents, religious educators, and community leaders to examine how ethical values are transmitted and negotiated across generations. Such research would clarify whether the patterns identified here also appear in other social and institutional contexts.

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