

Relational conflicts experienced through digital platforms among generation Z sorority women

William Frankenberger, PhD

"[...] participants shared how after the conflict is initiated, the fear of face-to-face conflict is so overwhelming and anxiety provoking they would rather keep the conflict within the digital medium than meet their conflict partner face-to-face."

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of relational conflicts among female Generation Z sorority members occurring over digital platforms and how those women attempted to resolve digital conflicts. Grounded by a multi-theoretical framework, this groundbreaking study linked together relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), conflict styles (Rahim, 2017), and women's cognitive development (Belenky et al., 1986). Guided by an interpretative phenomenological analysis, findings included exploring how conflicts become initiated and escalated digitally, the impact of digital dynamics, how relational and societal influences determine roles and styles women hold within the conflict, and considerations of how to resolve conflicts digitally. The findings of the study support both Generation Z's preference and frequency using digital communication and suggest that an aim of digital conflict is to engage in a more destructive and hurtful discourse often failing to achieve a resolution due to a lack of desire to resolve and an inability of how to resolve the conflict digitally. Findings also suggest a reimagining of the conflict lexicon to reflect the current digital landscape. This study is significant as it explores conflict and digital communication, a continual and developing phenomenon that many generations are facing from children to working adults.

INTRODUCTION

4.9 billion people around the world use social media, which is just under 60% of the world's population of nearly 8 billion; the most active users are millennials or Generation Z (Ruby, 2023). Emerging adults defined as between the ages of 18-25 (Arnett, 2000), prefer using digital media over face-to-face or phone-based conversations for communication because of ease and convenience (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). On average, cross-generational users of social media hold eight accounts across various digital platforms. Concurrently, Generation Z students make up 66% of the current college population and are the newest generation to enter the workforce (Hanson, 2022). Inevitably, when conflict arises over online platforms, digital conflict resolution skills (i.e. conflict resolution achieved digitally) are under-researched and commonly not present in available conflict resolution literature, unlike face-to-face conflict resolution strategies (Tang et al., 2021). Thus, the inability to resolve digital conflicts can impede interpersonal relationships (Wang et al., 2011). The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of relational conflicts among female Generation Z sorority members occurring over digital platforms (i.e. Instagram, GroupMe, texting) and how those women attempted to resolve conflicts digitally. The two questions guiding this inquiry included (1) what is the lived experience of Generation Z sorority women who experience relational conflicts inflicted through digital platforms, and (2) how do Generation Z sorority women attempt to resolve these relational conflicts digitally?

METHODS

Using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology, nine current Generation Z sorority women participated in a 60 minute semi-structured interview followed by an elicitation technique in which the participant would share a screenshot of a conflict and walk through reactions, intentions, decision making, and meaning making

processes. The first interview allowed the participants to share their experience and ideology of conflicts while the second elicitation was a real example that would complement or clash their first interview reflections. Comparing these two experiences against one another, along with the frequent use of a research journal, the researcher maintained a rich data set for analysis. Following all interviews and elicitations, interview transcripts were reviewed and member checked by all participants to ensure accuracy and credibility.

The first round of analysis bore out initial reactions including smaller statements or phrases that encapsulated the participants' experience. The next step required the researcher to take all experiential themes and group them together to create personal experiential themes (PETs) for each participant that highlighted each participants' major findings from the analysis. Finally, the last step in the IPA process required the researcher to take all nine PETs and generate group experiential themes (GETs) that highlighted similar or same experiences from a majority of the participants which formed the main thematic findings of the research. This process required data analysis to occur multiple times which provided further support for the themes and rigor of the study within the qualitative methodology.

The first group theme (GET) that emerged explored how digital conflicts are initiated and how they escalate. With a reliance on digital communication, participants shared that almost all new relational conflicts begin digitally compared to in-person. Further, participants shared how after the conflict is initiated, the fear of face-to-face conflict is so overwhelming and anxiety provoking they would rather keep the conflict within the digital medium than meet their conflict partner face-to-face. One participant shared, "I think that is the biggest thing about being able to text somebody in an argument, you don't have to come up with everything on the spot. I shut down in face-to-face conflict so it's just easier for me to say what I am feeling over text." Additionally, the first group theme highlighted that when a conflict occurs digitally participants were able to be more intentional about their word choice compared to face-to-face conflicts and also indicated the intentionality of words can lead to a personal desire to create digital destruction between conflict partners or groups. These items in totality lead to increased conflict escalation and initiation between all participants.

The second GET highlighted the unique dynamics that the digital medium creates between conflict partners. Almost all participants shared the value and use of "screenshotting" conflicts which is the act of taking photos of the conversation for evidence of the conversation. The motivation for this behavior is varied from use to publicly criticize a conflict partner, hold a conflict partner accountable, or to ensure honesty to what they said or promised. Screenshotting was cited as a vehicle for truth telling or vindication among all nine participants. Another unique dynamic that presented itself was how the participants lost the emotional connection to the person or group they were in conflict with and took a more dominating stance digitally. One participant shared her perspective by stating, "Not seeing the person, like their emotional reactions, but just the screen, makes the person disappear. As sad as it is to say, I lose all sense of the other human being on the other side." This lack of inhibition can produce destructive and harmful communication which participants considered honest and direct communication. These shared experience demonstrated the unique dynamics that digital platforms facilitate.

The third GET explored the influence of their conflict partners relationship and societal expectations as women in shaping their responses and engagement. Overwhelmingly, participants in this study indicated that without the existence of a deep and meaningful friendship, digital conflicts were a factor in ending a relationship without a desire to meet in person or resolve the conflict. When an existing relationship was present, it made the

"During face-to-face conflicts seven participants self-identified as avoiders and two identified as obligers, but in digital conflicts all nine self-identified as dominators."

motivation and likelihood of resolution much higher but typically only resolving the matter when meeting in person or talking face-to-face. A finding of this study that often created dissonance in the experience of the participants was how their gender as women played a role in how they handled the conflict. Participants shared the challenge of balancing their own wishes compared to societal expectations. The desire to stand up for themselves and remove relationships that were not of value to their own mental and emotional health were weighed against the concern that extracting this person out of their life would create a negative self and public perception. This tension was troubled in one participant's interview when comparing her gender versus males in conflict. She shared, "The stereotype is that women can't control their emotions and we are all catty, but I do know there is truth to some stereotypes. For me, if I do get into a fight, I am hyper aware of my emotions so I don't become the stereotype but I do want to stand up for myself. I have to say it sucks for women to balance standing up for yourself and being perceived as a bitch because I am certain that men don't think about that in their conflicts." The meaning made by participants forecasts rising tension between traditional views of women peacekeepers despite the quality of relationships against a new developing era of womanhood that demands friendships to be mutually beneficial and healthy. It further showcases that women continue to trouble the line between assertiveness and self-perception which can negatively impact one's confidence.

The final GET examined conflict styles and possible avenues to resolution. Using Rahim's (2017) conflict styles, participants were provided with a description of the five styles then asked to self-identify their style during face-to-face conflicts compared to their style in online conflicts. The large majority of participants indicated a stark difference in styles. During face-to-face conflicts seven participants self-identified as avoiders and two identified as obligers, but in digital conflicts all nine self-identified as dominators. This finding highlights the stark differences in communication patterns and motivations given the medium of communication. Also, this final GET provided a finding that with the dearth of skills training for resolution strategies for online conflicts, participants could not describe how they would effectively solve a conflict online. Further, they were unable to point to uses for technology to serve such a purpose. This finding showcases that our conflict resolution trainings are not relevant against the technological innovations seen in our modern society.

CONCLUSIONS

Understanding the nuances of conflict resolution strategies applicable within digital media is paramount in an era where digital communication is a part of everyday life, particularly with and among Generation Z individuals. Navigating the complexities of conflict resolution in the digital age presents a formidable challenge with communication dynamics, conflict styles, and resolution strategies undergoing profound transformations within virtual spaces. Technological innovation remains steadfast in the modern era and as our workforce continues to be multigenerational now welcoming Generation Z professionals, conflicts and resolution strategies are often missing from upskilling and training programs. Preparing for increased reliance on technology, organizations should develop policy frameworks and educational resources demonstrating healthy conflict resolution strategies. Research and practice are needed to develop a new lexicon of conflict styles and resolution strategies for the digital space. Conflict resolution trainers, human resource development professionals, and educators must explore strategies and use of technology to support digital conflict resolution to curtail single-sided interpretations and communication breakdowns when conflicts arise. Within the context of higher education, student organizations continue to rely on technology to increase efficiencies but without proper education and training on how and when to use such systems versus face-to-face connections, organizations may continue to see the negative impact these tools can have on the student experience. Finally, the participants in this study challenged previous positionalities that women, within the United

"Technological innovation remains steadfast in the modern era and as our workforce continues to be multigenerational now welcoming Generation Z professionals, conflicts and resolution strategies are often missing from upskilling and training programs."

States, are more willing to stay silent and endure conflicts to remain peacekeepers compared to males. Fresh research on women's cognitive and moral development must explore the changing attitudes among Generation Z women in decision and meaning making. Without innovative research to understand this phenomenon, women will continue to face societal and personal challenges in the navigations of conflicts as shared by the participants in this inquiry.

RESEARCHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the contemporary findings of this study, continued research must occur within this area so that deeper meaning and context can be made to best prepare members of our society for improved digital communication. Consideration and training of communication practices including digital conflict resolution strategies should be considered within the workforce, educational settings, and in personal relationships. Given the paucity of research and application of such trainings on successful resolution strategies, applied practitioners are called upon to develop these trainings and partner with researchers to assess the impact of such education. Finally, given the innovate technological advances made to frequently used devices like cell phones, laptops, and tablets, demonstrations and use cases of how tools like video conferencing and voice memos could be used as the applications for resolution are imperative. The approach of showcasing how to use systems while addressing important coping skills for anxiety and resistance for Generation Z individuals, progress can be made to support the development of improved communications both digitally and face-to-face.

REFERENCES

- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469–480. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.5.469>
- Belenky, M., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind*. Basic Books, Inc.
- Crick, N. R., & Grotpeter, J. K. (1995). Relational aggression, gender, and social-psychological adjustment. *Child Development*, 66(3), 710–722. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.1995.tb00900.x>
- Hanson, M. (2022, July 26). College Enrollment and student demographic statistics. Education Data Initiative. <https://educationdata.org/college-enrollment-statistics>
- Rahim, M. (2017). *Managing conflict in organizations* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Ruby, D. (2023, May 27). Social media users in the world – 2023 demographics. Demandsage. <https://www.demandsage.com/social-media-users/#:~:text=USA%2DSpecific%20Social%20Media%20Statistics&text=The%20USA%20has%20302.35%20million.74.2%25%20of%20adults%20using%20it>
- Seemiller, C., & Grace, M. (2016). *Generation Z goes to college*. Jossey-Bass.
- Tang, Hew, K. F., Herring, S. C., & Chen, Q. (2021). (Mis)communication through stickers in online group discussions: A multiple-case study. *Discourse & Communication*, 15(5), 582–606. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17504813211017707>
- Wang, Y., Chen, N., & Liang, Y. (2011). The effects of social media on college students [Unpublished manuscript]. MBA Student Scholarship, Johnson & Wales University. https://scholarsarchive.jwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=mba_student

CONTACT INFORMATION

To learn more about this research brief and other research endeavors in the College of Education at Kansas State University, please reach out to the Office of External Funding and Research at: coeresearch@k-state.edu

Major Professor: Dr. Susan Yelich-Biniecki

To view the full Dissertation, go here: <https://hdl.handle.net/2097/44190>