

Ethics of Civil Servants in the Digital Realm and Restoring the Trust of Generation Z

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ABSTRACT

The crisis of legitimacy in modern governance is exacerbated by the shift in unethical behavior by government officials from the real world to digital spaces such as TikTok and X. This study aims to analyze the deconstruction of ethical behavior among government officials in the digital public sphere and its implications for restoring the trust of Generation Z. Using a qualitative approach with a Narrative Literature Review method, this study screened literature published between 2020 and 2026 from indexed databases (including Publish or Perish, Google Scholar, Scopus, ScienceDirect, Garuda, and Crossref). From the initial 48 articles, 19 key references were selected for thematic analysis. The results indicate that cyberspace has transformed into an arena of participatory surveillance for Generation Z through the "fluid solidarity" movement (digital ashabiyyah). This study concludes that restoring Generation Z's affective trust requires the reconstruction of the bureaucracy through a servant leadership model and the internalization of Pancasila as living ethics. This conceptual approach is essential for transforming digital criticism into productive social capital for state legitimacy.

INTRODUCTION

Within the framework of modern government governance, public administration ethics have shifted from being a mere “ornament” of bureaucracy to becoming a key foundation for the legitimacy of power (Rahmat, 2026). This paradigm shift serves as evidence of a fundamental transition from classical ethical concepts—which emphasized formal compliance with hierarchies and internal government procedures—toward transparent moral accountability in the public sphere (Rahmat, 2026). In today’s era of information disruption and digital transformation, ethics is no longer understood as a rigid administrative code of conduct, but rather as a way of life in which every public decision carries logical and ethical consequences that impact public trust (Rahmat, 2026). Therefore, strengthening ethical standards is no longer merely a matter of formal compliance with documents but a crucial instrument for maintaining social cohesion and ensuring that public power is always exercised as a trust for the common good in a just manner (Rahmat, 2026).

Current empirical realities show that government governance is facing a deep crisis of legitimacy due to the accumulation of unethical behavior and demoralization within the state apparatus. Widespread practices of abuse of power and maladministration—ranging from corruption to illegal levies—have eroded the quality of the bureaucracy and undermined justice in society. Strong indications of conflicts of interest—also known as conflicts of interest in the regulatory formulation process—exacerbate this phenomenon. The legislative process is often viewed as a tool for “smuggling in the interests” of economic and political elites, which disregards the public interest (Cahyati Fajar, Heridadi, Adi Subiyanto, 2025). Public perception of law enforcement—which is typically harsh on the lower classes but lenient on the upper classes—increasingly highlights the sociological impact of this moral crisis. This perception is often accompanied by repressive actions by authorities against democratic aspirations, leading to a collapse of public trust and a threat to the stability of substantive democracy (Fitria, 2025).

In the real world, the ethical crisis has drastically shifted into the digital public sphere. On platforms like TikTok and X, every instance of unethical behavior by public officials—ranging from lavish lifestyles (“flexing”) and unethical responses to controversial policies—is instantly amplified (Rustanta et al., 2025). This digital ecosystem is driven by algorithms that prioritize user engagement, leading to the phenomenon of emotional hijacking (Hidayat Rahmatul, Sarfan Tabo, 2026). Consequently, cyberspace has transformed into a kind of mass tribunal that fosters deep emotional polarization, where public policy discussions often devolve into identity wars between partisan groups (Hidayat Rahmatul, Sarfan Tabo, 2026). If these virtual conflicts are not addressed with appropriate digital communication strategies, this escalation will not only damage the image of leadership but also substantially erode the legitimacy of state institutions and deepen the public’s distrust of them (Hidayat Rahmatul, Sarfan Tabo, 2026).

Generation Z has emerged as a key player in today’s digital landscape, dominating the information ecosystem and transforming the paradigm of

conventional political participation (Oktari et al., 2023). As digital natives, they possess distinct characteristics that demand the transformation of public services into digital, fast, efficient, and transparent systems, thereby aligning with their technology-dependent lifestyles (Hasanah & Assyahri, 2024). Conversely, this generation is experiencing a crisis of trust or issues regarding the morality and integrity of government officials (Oktari et al., 2023). This stems from accumulated disappointment with the political behavior of elites, which is perceived as unethical and insensitive to the people's aspirations. They readily form temporary digital solidarity or new, project-based *ashabiyyah* when their digital expectations go unmet or moral scandals occur (Hannanda, 2024). Today, this collaboration no longer relies on traditional bonds but rather on fluid digital networks. These networks enable them to collectively share criticism in cyberspace, mobilize public opinion, and perform oversight functions that can exert tangible political pressure on the government (Oktari et al., 2023).

Modern bureaucracy requires a moral anchor that goes beyond mere regulatory compliance to address the complexity of digital challenges and restore Generation Z's crisis of trust. Through the reinternalization of Pancasila values as a "living ethics" – also known as "living ethics" – the ideal solution lies in deconstructing one's understanding of ethics (Adelia et al., 2024). By adopting a character-based approach to prevent corruption and enhance ethical and spiritual aspects of public leadership, the bureaucracy can transform into an institution that is not only technically capable but also possesses strong moral legitimacy to ensure social justice for all citizens (Ardiansyah Rizky Bagas, Subhan Ilham Thareq, 2025).

Studies on public administration ethics have grown rapidly. However, previous research has often limited ethical analysis to conventional physical, hierarchical, and administrative environments. Very few studies have comprehensively analyzed the deconstruction of civil servants' ethical behavior in digital public spaces – particularly on social media platforms such as TikTok and X – and its practical implications for restoring legitimacy in the eyes of Generation Z. The objective of this study is to integrate the concept of the digital governance crisis with the dynamics of Generation Z's digital solidarity.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach using the Narrative Literature Review method, with the aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of the relationship between the digital ethical behavior of government officials, perceptions of government legitimacy, and the level of trust among Generation Z (Marzi et al., 2025). The Narrative Literature Review method was chosen because it allows researchers to identify, compare, examine, and synthesize various theoretical concepts and empirical findings relevant to the research focus from a variety of published scientific sources (Susilawati et al., 2025).

The literature search was conducted systematically through several scientific databases, namely Publish or Perish, Google Scholar, Scopus, ScienceDirect, Garuda (Garba Rujukan Digital), and Crossref. The search utilized a combination of keywords in Indonesian and English, including: public

administration ethics, digital ethics, government legitimacy, public trust, Generation Z, digital public administration, public sector ethics, government communication, and digital governance. The literature selection process involved several stages. One stage involved a full-text review, applying inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were: (1) published journal articles, academic books, or conference proceedings; (2) addressing public administration ethics, the digital behavior of government officials, government legitimacy, public trust, or Generation Z; (3) having conceptual relevance to the research focus; and (4) being available in full text. The exclusion criteria include: (1) articles that have not undergone a peer-review process (non-peer-reviewed); (2) publications that have no direct connection to the research focus; (3) duplicate articles; and (4) sources that do not provide sufficient information for analysis.

The data used in this study consists of secondary data obtained from various selected scholarly documents. A total of 19 reference sources were used for analysis, including public administration textbooks, journal articles discussing public administration ethics, studies on transparency and public trust, research on political legitimacy, studies related to the social and political behavior of Generation Z, bureaucratic reform, anti-corruption character education, and various studies on contemporary socio-political dynamics. The selection of this literature was based on thematic relevance, the credibility of the sources, and their relevance to the research objectives (Susilawati et al., 2025).

Data analysis was conducted using Qualitative Content Analysis and Thematic Analysis. Qualitative content analysis was used to identify various concepts, meanings, and narratives contained in each source examined. Furthermore, thematic analysis was used to identify patterns, relationships, and recurring thematic trends across the literature (Virginia Braun, 2021). The analysis focused on the interrelationships among the research variables: Digital Ethical Behavior, Perceptions of Government Legitimacy, and Trust Among Generation Z.

The analysis process consisted of several stages. The first stage is open coding, which involves identifying key information from each source relevant to the research focus. The second stage is axial coding, which involves grouping codes with similar meanings into conceptual categories. The third stage is selective coding, which involves organizing these categories into main themes that describe the relationships between government officials' digital ethical behavior, perceptions of government legitimacy, and Generation Z's trust. This process yielded several main themes: (1) the digital ethical behavior of government officials, (2) digital transparency and accountability, (3) government legitimacy in the digital public sphere, (4) the characteristics and expectations of Generation Z regarding digital governance, and (5) strategies for restoring public trust through digital ethics.

To enhance the credibility of the synthesis results, the interpretations were validated through a cross-literature comparison and an examination of the consistency of findings across studies, ensuring that each identified theme is supported by more than one scholarly reference. Furthermore, the analysis results are presented descriptively and systematically to explain the relationships

among the research variables and to produce a conceptual synthesis of how the digital ethical behavior of government officials influences perceptions of government legitimacy and impacts Generation Z's level of trust.

Tabel 1. Matriks Ringkasan Sintesis Literatur Utama

No.	Author & Year	Focus of Study	Method	Key Contributions of the Article
1.	Marzi et al. (2025); Susilawati et al. (2025)	Methodological Procedures for Literature Review and Bibliometric Analysis	Methodological Study	Serves as an operational guide for the steps of literature search, selection, and validation.
2.	Rahmat (2026); Sabara & Fauzy (2026)	Paradigm Shifts in Bureaucratic Ethics and the Crisis of Legitimacy of Power	Conceptual Qualitative	Theoretical foundation for the shift from formal compliance ethics toward transparent moral accountability.
3.	Cahyati, Heridadi, & Subiyanto (2025); Fahira (2025)	Unethical Behavior by Officials, Maladministration, and Conflicts of Interest	Documentary Study	Dissecting the anatomy of the bureaucratic moral crisis and the "smuggling of interests" into regulations.
4.	Fitria (2025)	Gen Z's Perceptions of the Legitimacy of Legal Authority and Sociological Compliance	Exploratory Qualitative	Linking injustices in law enforcement to the collapse of Gen Z's legal compliance..
5.	Rustanta et al. (2025); Ananditha et al. (2025)	Communication ethics, regulation, and trust issues in the TikTok/X platform era	Descriptive Qualitative	Mapping the digital public sphere as an instant arena that shapes the reputation of government agencies.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Anatomy of a Legitimacy Crisis

In the real world, the crisis of public trust is rooted in the systemic demoralization of the bureaucracy, where the main causes of public dissatisfaction are maladministration and abuse of authority (Oktari et al., 2023). Corruption, collusion, and nepotism (KKN) have spread to the village level, and unethical behaviors such as illegal fees and convoluted services have transformed the bureaucracy's role from that of a public servant into a tool for

personal or group gain (Oktari et al., 2023). This phenomenon is exacerbated by the mechanism of moral disengagement. This mechanism occurs when officials view their unethical actions—such as accepting excessive housing allowances amid an economic crisis—as a legitimate right, blurring the distinction between public demands and personal desires (Cahyati Fajar, Heridadi, Adi Subiyanto, 2025).

On a larger scale, this crisis is further exacerbated by acute conflicts of interest that arise during the regulatory drafting process (Fahira, 2025). These conflicts of interest often serve as a means for the “smuggling of interests” by economic and political elites. Because there are no clear recusal mechanisms, individuals with business or political interests can undermine legal norms, resulting in policies that are overlapping, inconsistent, and non-universal (Fahira, 2025). Systemically, this leads to a decline in the quality of legal content, which prioritizes the interests of the oligarchy and erodes the state’s institutional legitimacy in the eyes of the public (Fahira, 2025).

From a sociological perspective, the collapse of this ethical foundation negatively impacts public compliance with the law, particularly when law enforcement officials are perceived as dishonest and repressive (Fitria, 2025). When the public realizes that the law tends to be “harsh on the poor but lenient on the powerful” and is tainted by judicial mafia practices, widespread skepticism and distrust emerge. This situation results in what is known as “pseudo-democracy,” where legitimacy is merely formal and lacks moral value. Ultimately, the people turn to street demonstrations as the only available political space (Cahyati Fajar, Heridadi, Adi Subiyanto, 2025).

To summarize the root causes of the problem, see the following table:

Dimensions of the Problem	Empirical Manifestations	Impact on Legitimacy
Individual Ethics	Abuse of power, systemic corruption, and officials’ lavish lifestyles (flexing)	The Emergence of Public Distrust and Resentment Toward Figures of Authority
Organizational Ethics	Mismanagement, extortion, and a culture of bureaucratic sluggishness	Decline in the quality of public services and dysfunction of the administrative system
Policy Ethics	Conflicts of Interest and Reactive Policies	Erosion of the Rule of Law and Collapse of Trust in the Government’s Capabilities
Enforcement Ethics	Unfair Law Enforcement, Judicial Mafia, and Repressive Responses to Criticism	Sociological Erosion of Public Compliance with the Law

The Dialectics of Public Ethics in the Digital Sphere

The digital “snowball” phenomenon—caused by the shift of the bureaucracy’s moral crisis from the real world to cyberspace—has created

unprecedented challenges to legitimacy. TikTok and Twitter, for example, have evolved from entertainment platforms into vast digital public spaces that enable radical criticism of public figures and government policies (Rustanta et al., 2025).

The absence of conventional journalistic safeguards in this space allows any unethical behavior by officials—ranging from displays of luxury (flexing) to unethical responses—to be immediately amplified (Rustanta et al., 2025). With this phenomenon, citizens have become independent producers of information who can instantly shape public opinion without being influenced by conventional bureaucratic administrative processes. Consequently, this digital uproar is gradually eroding public trust in the government (Ananditha et al., 2025).

The algorithmic architecture of platforms that drive the escalation of conflicts in this digital space exploits the public's cognitive vulnerabilities to capitalize on the phenomenon of emotional hijacking (Hidayat Rahmatul, Sarfan Tabo, 2026). Social media algorithms aim to increase user engagement by prioritizing content that provokes widespread anger, fear, or partisan antagonism (Ardiansyah Rizky Bagas, Subhan Ilham Thareq, 2025). Consequently, any controversial policy or ethical scandal involving bureaucrats quickly becomes a source of emotional polarization, reducing discussions about important policy issues to an identity-based battle between groups supporting and opposing the government (Puansah et al., 2026). This situation creates an ecosystem of echo chambers where official clarifications are often perceived as disinformation. Ultimately, this widens the trust gap and triggers open emotional rejection within society (Puspamurti & Najicha, 2023).

This crisis is exacerbated by the government's public relations communication style, which has failed because it remains trapped in a traditional, reactive, and defensive paradigm (Denial (Sabara, D Egi, 2026) After methods of denial and scapegoating have proven ineffective and have instead backfired by fueling public hatred (Sabara, D Egi, 2026), digital conflict management strategies must be completely overhauled and replaced with a digital crisis management paradigm (Wahidin & Aidah, 2025). This new paradigm demands that the bureaucracy humanize itself, alleviate sociopolitical tensions, and reconstruct the foundations of state institutions' legitimacy in the eyes of the digital generation through strategic empathy and radical transparency (Hayani et al., 2024)

Accommodating Generation Z's Expectations for an Accountable Digital Government Generation Z, hailing from the digital generation, is driving a paradigm shift in public service, demanding the comprehensive digitization of government administration to make it faster, more effective, more transparent, and less constrained by bureaucratic barriers (Hasanah & Assyahri, 2024). This shift has emerged in response to conventional service processes, which are perceived as slow, complex, and often hindered by traditional bureaucratic thinking (Hasanah & Assyahri, 2024). However, the demand for easy digital access is accompanied by an acute crisis of trust in the integrity of high-level state institutions, such as the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI) (Ananditha et al., 2025). Research indicates that ethical scandals, corruption, and

the politicization of policies—perceived as insensitive to the people’s aspirations—have led to a loss of affective trust in these institutions (Ananditha et al., 2025).

The decline in Gen Z’s socio-political awareness is driven by the gap between their expectations for public service and the ethics of government officials. They form project- or issue-based digital solidarity—known as “digital ashabiyyah”—(Hannanda, 2024). According to Ibn Khaldun’s theory, this solidarity now relies on fluid digital networks shaped by shared narratives and values of social justice in cyberspace (Hannanda, 2024). Gen Z has recently actualized this ashabiyyah through social media platforms such as TikTok and X, where they use participatory oversight—or checks and balances—to hold bureaucratic power in check, debunk misinformation, and demand radical transparency from the government (Hannanda, 2024).

Deconstruction Strategy

Recalibrating the bureaucratic leadership model is necessary to address the crisis of legitimacy and ethical challenges in the digital age. This requires the integration of political leadership and servant leadership. While servant leadership instills the principles of morality, empathy, and open communication—which form the spirit of an organizational culture based on radical transparency—political leadership provides structural authority and formal policy direction (Puansah et al., 2026). Through this integration, transparency is no longer merely about processing administrative documents; it becomes a tangible moral practice in which leaders prioritize the public interest over their personal or group interests (Puansah et al., 2026). Public trust can be built through more humanistic and participatory relationships within a bureaucracy that facilitates dialogue (Puansah et al., 2026).

Furthermore, the Pancasila ethical system must be revitalized as a way of life or the primary moral filter for the government to combat moral degradation and information disruption caused by globalization (Victor, 2024). Pancasila must be internalized as a social and constitutional ethical system that guides the actions and decisions of officials in the digital world (Victor, 2024). It is not merely a normative slogan. Values such as honesty, social justice, and mutual cooperation protect government officials from unethical behavior, such as “flexing,” or unethical responses that provoke public outrage (Victor, 2024). This internalization is crucial to meeting the critical expectations of Generation Z, who demand consistency between philosophical principles and the practice of governance (Fardani et al., 2026). To address the root causes of a corrupt mindset, the enforcement of repressive laws must be combined with substantive, character-based prevention strategies. The government can demonstrate ethical performance capable of dispelling the acute doubts among Generation Z by building a bureaucratic ecosystem that prioritizes meritocracy and transparency (Ruhadi, 2025).

This deconstruction strategy culminates in the implementation of sustainable corruption prevention through the early strengthening of integrity to set an example for society (Ruhadi, 2025).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study finds that the deconstruction of bureaucratic ethics in the digital public sphere is a key tool needed to restore the government's legitimacy, which has been eroded by various real-world scandals, including conflicts of interest, abuse of power, and maladministration. Empirical analysis shows that the current crisis of public trust – also known as the public trust crisis – is rooted in systemic moral failures that undermine the foundations of substantive democracy. Generation Z views online platforms such as TikTok and X as more than just entertainment sites; they have evolved into new digital public spaces where people directly test the government's morality through critical participation. The success of modern governments in maintaining power depends heavily on public perceptions of leaders' moral behavior, not merely on the fulfillment of formal electoral processes.

Now, public ethics are no longer confined to bureaucracy and rigid administrative rules. Instead, they are now manifested in the Digital Code of Conduct for Civil Servants, which calls for them to act responsively, inclusively, and adaptively in the face of the challenges posed by information disruption. Theoretically, this study contributes to the body of public administration research by demonstrating that if bureaucracies can properly implement the servant leadership model and the Pancasila ethical system, Generation Z's digital solidarity phenomena – such as digital *ashabiyah* – can be mitigated and transformed into beneficial social capital. The internalization of Pancasila values as a way of life serves as a crucial moral tool for addressing digital challenges and maintaining social cohesion amid the tide of globalization. To restore emotional trust among the younger generation, a sustainable, character-based approach to corruption prevention is essential.

The authors acknowledge that this study focuses solely on conceptual and descriptive qualitative literature. Therefore, to enhance the validity of the findings, researchers should conduct quantitative empirical research or adopt a mixed-methods approach.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Future recommendations are aimed at accurately determining how effective the government's digital communication methods are in influencing Generation Z's trust index in real time. Further study is urgently needed on strategic digital crisis governance models that combine strategic empathy and radical transparency as long-term solutions to maintain the legitimacy of state institutions in the virtual age.

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