Experiencing multicultural awareness and affective polarization: A phenomenological inquiry

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Abstract

This study examines how Generation Z students experience multicultural awareness and navigate affective polarization in both everyday life and digital spaces. Using a Heideggerian phenomenological design, it explores how students emotionally respond to cultural, ethnic, and religious differences encountered in their social interactions. Participants were purposively selected from a culturally diverse university in Surakarta, Indonesia, and interviewed in depth. Hermeneutic analysis reveals that students often face emotional ambivalence, tension, and fatigue when engaging with pluralism, leading them to adopt strategies such as emotional withdrawal, selective silence, or ethical self-restraint. At the same time, moments of empathy, recognition, and relational openness emerged as meaningful turning points. These findings show that polarization stems not only from ideological cleavages but also from lived emotional experiences. The study concludes that fostering emotional literacy and ethical reflection is essential in preparing young people to engage meaningfully with difference in increasingly plural and polarized societies.

Introduction

Public discourse in Indonesia has become increasingly emotionally fragmented, particularly through interactions on digital platforms. While ideological disagreement is common, a deeper crisis lies in affective polarization—the intensification of emotional hostility between identity groups (Ali & Eriyanto, 2021; Yilmaz et al., 2024). In communication studies, this concept captures how political and cultural polarization manifest as deep-seated antagonism, not just differing viewpoints (Iyengar et al., 2012, 2018; Tyler & Iyengar, 2023). These emotional rifts extend beyond digital platforms, fueling real-world tensions, eroding public trust, and weakening civic engagement—making affective polarization both a media and societal concern.

The trend of increasing polarization became particularly pronounced in Indonesia following the 2019 presidential election (Sujoko, 2020; Yulianto & Thenarianto, 2020). Online discussions grew more divisive, driven by pandemic governance, identity politics, and political loyalists (Ali & Eriyanto, 2021). While many individuals tend to steer clear of direct political confrontations online, this polarization has emerged more subtly—

expressed through deep emotional connections to group identities rather than direct ideological disputes (Syahputra et al., 2024).

Recent research shows that affective polarization in Indonesia has intensified—not only in public decision-making processes (Gushevinalti & Renaningtias, 2025; Haryanto et al., 2024), but also in the deepening of in-group affiliations (Purboyo et al., 2024; Putri et al., 2023) and the evolving forms through which polarization is experienced and embodied (Syahputra et al., 2024; Wasisto & Pahlevi, 2024; Yulianto & Thenarianto, 2020).

Despite growing scholarly attention to affective polarization, the intersection of emotional experience, digital culture, and youth identity—particularly in the context of multicultural awareness—remains significantly underexplored. This issue holds special urgency in Indonesia, where digital platforms are deeply embedded in everyday social and political life, but civic and political engagement among youth remains limited (Ida et al., 2025; Karim et al., 2020; Tarsidi et al., 2023). The majority of existing research tends to concentrate on electoral political behaviour or conceptualises polarization primarily through institutional and structural frameworks (Asfar et al., 2025; Elislah, 2023; Fox & Menchik, 2023; Harakan et al., 2023; Satriadi et al., 2023; Syaputra et al., 2024). Few have explored the subjective, emotional, and experiential aspects of polarization, especially among young people negotiating multicultural values in their everyday digital lives (Putri et al., 2023; Setianto, 2023).

Amid this political polarization, Generation Z represents both a vulnerable and strategic group. Although they are immersed in digital environments and exposed to polarized content, they tend to adopt a more passive stance—observing rather than participating in open political discussions (Karim et al., 2020; Rupp et al., 2021). This affective ambivalence calls for closer attention to how they feel, interpret, and make meaning of political and cultural encounters—not just what they believe.

In this context, Surakarta (Solo), with its Javanese cultural roots and diverse student population, provides a rich context for this study. Its proximity of multiple houses of worship and lived tradition of pluralism make it a natural setting to examine how youth navigate multicultural awareness and affective polarization, especially amid rising emotional tensions in digital spaces.

While existing studies in communication often focus on normative ethics and cognitive understanding of diversity, they tend to overlook how individuals emotionally and existentially engage with difference in everyday life. This study addresses that gap by exploring how Generation Z students in Surakarta experience multicultural awareness and navigate affective polarization as lived realities, both online and offline.

Rather than centring on polarization arising from partisan politics or electoral behavior, this study focuses on the emotional and cultural dimensions of polarization—how differences in ethnicity, religion, and regional background are felt and negotiated in daily interactions.

By highlighting emotional dissonance, silent withdrawal, and strategies of affective regulation, the study provides insight into how youth experience cultural plurality not only as an idea but as a contested, lived condition in both real and digital spaces. The city's socio-cultural dynamics provide a grounded context for examining how pluralism is embodied and negotiated in relational and affective terms, as elaborated further in the methodology section.

Phenomenological Approaches to Digital Multicultural Experience

Phenomenology, rooted in the foundational work of Husserl (1913/1970) and expanded by Heidegger (1962) and Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), remains a vital approach for exploring

lived experience, particularly in contexts where subjective meaning-making is complex and multi-layered (Paolucci, 2024). In communication studies and digital culture research, phenomenology enables scholars to delve beyond surface-level observations and statistical measures (Frankenberger & Buhr, 2020; Garzia et al., 2023; Renström et al., 2021), focusing instead on how individuals embody, feel, and interpret their social realities.

This study specifically employs Heideggerian phenomenology not only as a methodology but also as a theoretical framework. Heidegger's central concept of Dasein—being-in-the-world—offers a powerful lens to understand how youth experience multicultural difference and affective tension in ways that are relational, embodied, and emotionally situated. Rather than treating polarization as cognitive disagreement or structural imbalance, this study draws on Heidegger's idea of Geworfenheit (thrownness) to reveal how individuals are always already situated within sociocultural contexts they did not choose, yet must navigate emotionally.

In this sense, phenomenology is not merely a means of description but a way of theorizing how affective polarization emerges as an existential condition—felt in everyday encounters, intensified in digital spaces, and negotiated through strategies of emotional engagement, withdrawal, and ethical restraint. By foregrounding emotional experience as a site of meaning-making, this approach aligns closely with the research objective: to explore how Generation Z students make sense of multicultural difference not only intellectually, but through embodied emotional responses.

Contemporary phenomenological research has expanded to examine experiences shaped by digital mediation, recognizing that technology profoundly influences how individuals perceive, feel, and relate to others across cultural boundaries (Bengtsson & Johansson, 2022; Berger, 2023; Childs & Holland, 2022; Nordbrandt, 2023). These studies reveal that digital environments are not neutral zone but active participants in constituting lived experiences, particularly in shaping affective relations and identity negotiations.

Within phenomenological frameworks, the hermeneutic approach pioneered by Heidegger is notable. It emphasizes interpretation as a continuous, context-dependent process, highlighting how individuals reveal meaning through their practical interactions within their environment (Laverty, 2003). Heidegger's concept of *"Dasein,"* which translates to *"being-in-the-world,"* enriches this study by underscoring the inherent connection between human existence and its surrounding context (Frankenberger & Buhr, 2020; Heidegger, 1962). Heidegger posited that individuals are invariably situated within the world, shaped by pre-existing interpretations and understandings (Laverty, 2003). Consequently, his approach prioritizes leveraging pre-conceived notions to facilitate the comprehension of emergent meanings within lived experience, differing from Husserl's emphasis on suspending assumptions.

Building on these concerns, this study examines how Generation Z students in Surakarta experience multicultural awareness and negotiate affective polarization in their everyday lives, both online and offline. The focus is on their emotional engagement, interpretive strategies, and relational dynamics as they encounter cultural and ideological differences in a pluralistic digital society.

Method

Heideggerian Phenomenological Framework

This study aims to understand how affective polarization is experienced by Generation Z students in the context of multicultural interaction, both in everyday life and digital

environments. The central research problem focuses on how emotional tensions arise in encounters with ethnic, religious, and regional diversity, and how these tensions are navigated by youth through strategies such as emotional withdrawal, selective engagement, and interpersonal filtering. The unit of analysis consists of undergraduate students aged 19–22 who actively engage in intercultural communication, both online and offline, within the socio-cultural environment of Surakarta.

Heideggerian phenomenology is employed not only as a methodological approach but also as the theoretical framework of this study. Drawing on Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* (being-in-the-world), this approach allows for the interpretation of how young individuals are affectively and existentially "thrown" (*Geworfenheit*) into social realities they did not choose, yet must emotionally negotiate. In this way, affective polarization is not treated as a purely ideological or cognitive phenomenon, but as a lived, embodied experience shaped by sociocultural expectations, digital encounters, and emotional meaning-making. The findings are interpreted hermeneutically, aiming to disclose how emotional responses to difference reflect deeper existential concerns about belonging, identity, and ethical relationality.

Epistemological Justification for Selecting UNS as Locus Site

Participants were deliberately selected from Universitas Sebelas Maret (UNS) in Surakarta due to its strong epistemological grounding and cultural relevance to the study. As the first public university in Indonesia to establish a shared worship complex with six houses of worship—including a mosque, Catholic and Protestant churches, a Hindu temple, a Buddhist vihara, and a Confucian temple—UNS offers a unique institutional commitment to religious pluralism as a lived experience.(Hariani, 2022; Puspita, 2023). These features offer students daily, embodied encounters with difference and dialogue.

UNS also actively cultivates interfaith harmony through institutional events, intercultural forums, and sustainability initiatives under its identity as a "green and inclusive campus". The university's recent initiative, the *Benteng Pancasila Campus Tourism Program*, exemplifies its commitment to practicing tolerance not merely as a value but as a lived experience (Kurniawan, 2024). This socio-cultural environment provides epistemic access to authentic experiences of negotiating cultural plurality and ideological tension, aligning closely with the interpretive aims of phenomenological inquiry.

Participant Selection

This research employed criterion sampling, selecting UNS students aged 19–22 who are active in both digital and physical public spheres and who have demonstrable experiences related to affective polarization, multicultural awareness, and intergroup dynamics. Criterion sampling is especially suited to phenomenological research, as it ensures the inclusion of participants whose lived experiences are meaningfully connected to the research question (Laverty, 2003).

Ethical Considerations

The research process began with an open briefing for each participant, clarifying the study's goals, procedures, and ethical safeguards, including the right to disengage at any point without consequence. Their involvement was based entirely on informed consent and voluntary agreement, with full assurance that they could withdraw at any time without facing negative consequences (Klykken, 2022). Each participant signed a written consent form to confirm their understanding and willingness to participate. To protect their anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned, and all collected data were stored securely. The interpretive process employed a hermeneutic circle methodology, whereby themes and meanings were

gradually refined through a continuous dialogue between individual accounts and their broader experiential settings (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; Suddick et al., 2020).

Results and Discussion

Our research focuses to explore how individuals interpret, comprehend, and interact within their environment as they actively shape their everyday lives through daily activities and social media.

Multicultural Awareness in Experience

Surakarta (Solo) is widely known as a center of Javanese cultural heritage, where values such as *rukun* (harmony), *tenggang rasa* (social sensitivity), and *tepa selira* (mutual understanding) are deeply embedded in everyday life. These norms shape social expectations around difference—not through confrontation or assertion, but through subtle negotiation, respectful silence, and emotional restraint. In such a cultural landscape, students from various regions of Indonesia—many of whom arrive from more direct or expressive cultural backgrounds—must navigate not only ethnic or religious difference but also the implicit codes of Javanese sociability. This makes Surakarta a particularly meaningful context for studying the lived experience of multicultural awareness.

This study involved 13 undergraduate students from Universitas Sebelas Maret (UNS), Surakarta. Participants were selected based on gender diversity and age range (19–22 years old), representing Generation Z. The table below presents each informant's initials, age, and informants characteristics.

Table 1 Initials, Age and Informants Characteristics (compiled by the authors)

Initial	Age (year)	Informants Characteristics
IKSP	20	A student activist interested in film production, currently managing a film community in an East Java city. His involvement in team-based creative projects has cultivated adaptability to diverse social environments.
GSD	20	A student from a rural-agricultural area in Central Java. His transition from high school in a homogeneous environment to university life in Solo has shaped his perception of diversity as complex and often difficult to unify
KCT	21	A student union activist living in a residential cluster in Solo. Her engagement in student governance reflects a strong orientation toward organizational leadership.
IL	19	A female student from Yogyakarta who experienced cultural differences between her hometown and Solo. Growing up in a culturally homogeneous neighborhood and studying in a more diverse city has broadened her perspective on diversity.
SA	21	A male student originally from Batam. He has adapted to Javanese culture after living in Malang. His experiences across Batam, Malang, and Solo have shaped a nuanced understanding of cultural differences.

Initial	Age (year)	Informants Characteristics
JRA	21	A male non-activist student who lives in a culturally homogeneous neighborhood but maintains a socially diverse circle of friends. His everyday interactions reflect openness despite a less diverse residential setting.
NFU	21	A female student activist with extensive experience in campus organizations. She is an alumna of a traditional Islamic boarding school and continues to live in a student pesantren (Islamic dormitory) during her studies.
HNW	21	A female student with an entrepreneurial spirit, residing in a culturally and religiously diverse residential area.
KKW	20	A female student from Semarang living in a boarding house with a landlord. She comes from a religiously diverse and highly tolerant family background.
FWA	21	A male commuting student who lives with parents in a relatively homogeneous neighborhood.
FNC	21	A female student living near campus, with a personal routine focused on social media and content creation.
JP	22	A male content creator and student activist with a busy schedule. He experienced culture shock due to the contrasting social norms between his village—viewed as socially problematic—and the more positively perceived campus environment.
IAI	22	A female student from Palembang who resides in Solo and socializes with peers from diverse backgrounds.

The study found that participants did not understand multiculturalism merely as a formal value or academic concept, but as something directly encountered in everyday settings. Interactions across difference occurred not only in classrooms or official student forums but more frequently in *kos-kosan* (boarding houses), campus cafeterias, group chats, and spontaneous encounters in religious spaces. In these environments, cultural and religious differences were experienced not as dramatic clashes, but as subtle moments of adjustment, tension, or learning.

IKSP (male, 20) reflects on how coming to live in Surakarta has gradually immersed him in a culturally diverse environment:

> *"Now I live in Surakarta (Solo) because I study at Universitas Sebelas Maret. The environment around me is quite diverse, especially because many students come from different regions and cultural backgrounds … Personally, I feel diversity here is quite noticeable but also peaceful. Even though people are different, they still greet each other, cooperate, and can chat without feeling judged or wrong. I feel more familiar and comfortable in such a diverse environment."*

His experience suggests that cultural familiarity often develops gradually through everyday encounters marked by repeated, embodied interaction. Rather than arising from explicit discussion or formal learning, multicultural awareness appeared to take shape through mundane routines—such as sharing meals, exchanging greetings, or simply spending time together across differences. These seemingly small gestures served as quiet affirmations of mutual recognition, helping participants become more attuned to diversity not through ideology, but through presence and shared rhythms of daily life. For others,

this familiarity with difference was cultivated even earlier—within the intimate space of family. KKW (female, 20) speaks of how her upbringing in a religiously and ethnically diverse household gave her an early sense of openness:

> "My mom's side is more diverse, both in religion and ethnicity, compared to my dad's. Having siblings who are Christian, Catholic, and even Hindu, plus relatives from other islands who often tell stories about different cultures, just feels normal to me. Honestly, it makes me proud, because that's what Indonesia is—so many differences, but still united and full of warmth, like one big family."

Here, diversity is not perceived as a deviation from the norm, but as the very ground of belonging. Her sense of pride reflects a deep emotional investment in pluralism—not as a political stance, but as a lived inheritance. From a phenomenological viewpoint, this story reveals how emotional proximity and early relational dynamics shape a person's fundamental openness toward *the other*. The familiarization with cultural multiplicity is not intellectualized—it is embodied, remembered, and felt as part of one's *"home world."*

Yet, the process of cultivating multicultural awareness is not always seamless. For many participants, engagement with difference involves moments of tension, discomfort, and adjustment. IKSP recounts his initial unease when collaborating with peers from various cultural backgrounds:

> " At first, I felt a bit awkward 'cause I'm the type who likes to get things done quickly, while some of them preferred long chats and discussions. But through that, I really learned to slow down, be more patient, and actually listen to what others had to say."

The narratives above emphasize that multicultural awareness is a situated process, shaped by one's background and by new encounters. Heideggerian phenomenology sees such adaptation as part of *being-in-the-world*, where new meanings emerge not through formal instruction but through lived negotiation with others. JP (male, 22), who identifies as both an ethnic and religious minority in Solo, reflects on how small gestures of recognition from others shaped his sense of inclusion:

> "I live in Solo, and right now, I'm a minority—both in terms of ethnicity and religion. To be honest, my colleagues here are pretty chill about it. …. It makes me feel really welcome, like I'm really part of the group, not just someone they tolerate."

This sense of everyday affirmation, rooted in Javanese norms of tepa selira, reveals that acceptance is often expressed quietly—through timing, attention, or empathy rather than overt inclusion.

These examples suggest that multicultural awareness among Gen Z students in Surakarta is not a static belief but a relational experience. It unfolds gradually in specific cultural settings, shaped by local norms, emotional proximity, and the textures of shared social life. Rather than generalizing or prematurely concluding, this section highlights key patterns and variations in how students encounter and respond to difference, laying the groundwork for deeper thematic interpretation in the sections that follow.

What resonates in this account is not simply the absence of discrimination, but the presence of subtle affirmations. In his words, inclusion is felt not through formal declarations, but through everyday acts of acknowledgment. From a phenomenological standpoint, JP's experience reveals how belonging is co-constituted in the lived world—through gestures, timings, and attunements that communicate: "you are seen." Multicultural awareness here becomes not a distant ideal but an affective ecology, where empathy is not performed, but lived out in the quiet rhythms of social life.

Social Media as a Lived Space: Navigating Awareness and Affective Polarization

For Generation Z students in Surakarta, social media functions not merely as a communication tool or channel for information, but as an affective and existential space in which identity, belonging, and emotional boundaries are continuously shaped. This is particularly salient in the Javanese sociocultural context, where offline interactions are often governed by norms of restraint, politeness, and indirect expression (tata krama). In contrast, digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter offer students greater fluidity in expressing emotional responses, navigating ideological tensions, and engaging with cultural diversity. As Bengtsson and Johansson (2022) observe, social media for Gen Z is a mood-regulating and identity-making environment—one that allows individuals to structure their sense of self through affective engagement. Participants in this study described how exposure to different cultures online often coexisted with feelings of anxiety, fatigue, or even alienation, suggesting that social media operates not just as a site of cultural learning, but as a contested terrain of emotional intensity. In this way, the digital realm becomes a *Lebenswelt*—a lived world—where multicultural awareness is simultaneously fostered and fractured.

Participant SA (male, 21) articulates this complex duality, reflecting on the mixed emotional terrain social media presents:

> *"On Instagram and Twitter, I often see posts about different cultural groups, and sometimes the discussions get heated. I follow accounts that promote diversity and tolerance, but I also see a lot of people posting things that feel really divisive or judgmental. It makes me realize how online spaces can both open my eyes and also make me feel frustrated or even angry at times."*

This statement offers a glimpse into how social media operates as a dynamic emotional landscape. The participant experiences these platforms not as detached information repositories, but as affective spaces where hope and frustration coexist. Exposure to diverse narratives can broaden one's horizon and deepen multicultural awareness, yet the same digital spaces may also provoke emotional resistance and fatigue when hostility or judgment is encountered.

The emotional intensity of mediated social realities is further illustrated by NFU (female, 21), who describes the visceral impact of witnessing cultural and religious conflicts online:

> *"When I see posts about religious or ethnic conflicts, even if I'm not directly involved, it affects me emotionally. I feel anxious or sad, sometimes angry. It feels like the problems are closer, more immediate because of how fast and personal social media makes everything."*

Here, we perceive the embodied dimension of digital affect: social media compresses space and time, making distant conflicts immediate and emotionally present. The participant's feeling of being "affected" reflects how technology mediates not only information but also emotional proximity, transforming abstract social issues into personal experiences. Such digital affectivity deepens the phenomenological understanding of polarization—not merely as intellectual disagreement but as an emotional reality shaping one's mode of being-in-the-world.

However, this digital *Lebenswelt* is not without harm. IKSP (male, 20) voices concern over the algorithmic shaping of social media that fuels stereotyping and quick judgments:

> *"But on the other hand, social media can also form stereotypes that make us quick to judge. Algorithms often show extreme or provocative content because it is considered more interesting,*

and that can sometimes make me have negative assumptions before meeting people directly. So I think social media plays a big role, but it depends on how we filter and manage the information we receive."

This insight reflects a critical consciousness about the structural forces shaping digital affect and cognition. The participant recognizes that the affective dynamics of social media—its tendency to privilege emotionally provocative content—can distort intercultural understanding and perpetuate affective polarization. Phenomenologically, this calls attention to the intentionality of consciousness as it interacts with algorithmically curated content, necessitating an active stance of reflection and emotional regulation to preserve openness and respect.

The emotional toll of digital content is vividly expressed by HNW (female, 21), who recounts how cultural mockery manifests through humor, causing tangible harm:

*"I have a friend from Tegal, even though we are both from Central Java, their accent is different from the Javanese in Solo. My friend is embarrassed to speak in public with **Ngapak** accent for fear of being laughed at. That's because many content creators use **Ngapak** as a joke."*

This testimony highlights the corporeal experience of shame and silencing inflicted by viral ridicule. What may be dismissed as entertainment or humor on social media is, for some, a source of exclusion and emotional pain. It reveals the regulatory power of digital culture in shaping norms of identity and belonging, where linguistic or cultural differences become sites of vulnerability. From a phenomenological perspective, such experiences fracture the sense of homeliness in the social world, producing a felt alienation from one's own cultural self.

Moreover, affective polarization is starkly evident in online political expression. KCT (female, 21) shares the emotional burden of facing hostility for her views:

"I personally received negative responses because of my different political views when I commented on one of the social media platforms, and then they 'attacked' me with inappropriate words like 'stupid'."

This narrative exposes the performative violence embedded in digital discourse, where disagreement often translates into symbolic assaults on identity and dignity. The participant's account brings to light how affective polarization is not only about divergent opinions but also about the degradation of the other, leading to emotional exhaustion and self-censorship. Such dynamics complicate the phenomenology of digital participation, where the desire to engage is mediated by fears of rejection and hostility.

Yet, not all responses to digital affective tensions are passive or resigned. JRA (male, 21) exemplifies a form of ethical agency exercised within these digital spaces:

"Honestly, I'm not the type of person who dares to express my opinion on social media. But usually, I help report content that is disturbing or targeting certain groups."

This reveals a subtler spectrum of digital engagement, where silent yet deliberate acts of resistance and care counterbalance the overt expressions of conflict. The participant's choice to report inappropriate content signals an emergent digital affective literacy—a capacity to intervene ethically in the social media *Lebenswelt* without direct confrontation. Such forms of agency point to possibilities for cultivating more respectful and empathetic online environments.

Expression and Dynamics of Affective Polarization

The affective polarization revealed by the participants did not merely manifest as a rational divergence of opinions, but as deep emotional experiences—a form of inner tension that arose when confronting social identities perceived as different or alien. Within a constantly shifting lived space between the real and digital worlds, participants found themselves thrown into social situations that demanded emotional responses, often without enough room for reflective understanding.

Many participants reported interpersonal encounters that evoked discomfort, leading to feelings of estrangement and eventual withdrawal. As expressed by IKSP (male, 20):

"I feel uncomfortable because it's hard to talk openly. Sometimes, before I can finish talking, I'm already interrupted or dismissed like my opinion doesn't matter…. When I feel unheard, I usually step back—not because I hate them, but because I need to protect my own peace."

This experience reveals that encounters with others are not only physical or verbal but also deeply emotional engagements that can either affirm or wound one's sense of being. From a Heideggerian perspective, this discomfort signals a shift from the *familiar world* (*Zuhandenheit*) to a *present-at-hand world* (*Vorhandenheit*)—a space that once supported being-now becomes one of uncertainty and emotional vulnerability.

KCT expressed that interacting with certain individuals online could be emotionally exhausting and often left her feeling drained.This emotional fatigue does not simply arise from interacting with difference, but from a persistent struggle to maintain one's authenticity in a world that demands constant adaptation or defense of one's identity. In this light, affective polarization is not just a reaction to social differences, but an existential tension—an embodied struggle to remain whole in an emotionally fragmented world.

Some participants acknowledged that their tendency to withdraw from heterogeneous groups stemmed from a desire to maintain emotional stability. IL (female, 19) reflected:

"I think it's human nature. People feel safer with their own group and more cautious around others. If we're not part of that group, it's hard to truly understand their feelings."

This reflection shows how emotional boundaries between 'us' and 'them' are not built solely on objective differences, but on how the social world is presented as one filled with judgment and misrecognition. In this way, polarization emerges as a way of being-in-the-world that has become fractured—the world no longer appears as a shared space, but as emotionally segregated terrains.

This desire for homogeneity also reflects an avoidance of being thrown into unfamiliar social worlds. JP (male, 22) shared:

"If I can choose, I prefer homogeneous environments. I don't have to learn or adapt too much. But I do enjoy seeing diversity. Maybe the most comfortable way for me is to accept differences little by little. If I suddenly enter a very different environment, it takes me a long time to adjust."

This statement reveals the existential dilemma between the desire for authenticity and the social reality that demands perpetual adaptation. Here, affective polarization is rooted in the experience of not-belonging, an ungraspable sense of not being understood that seeps into emotional distance and alienation.

Interestingly, several participants noted that emotional tensions did not arise primarily from ethnic or religious differences, but rather when political issues were brought up. FNC (female, 21) observed:

"Interacting with friends of different religions or ethnicities is usually respectful. But debates often erupt when politics comes up."

In this context, politics has become a heightened locus for emotional identity—perhaps even more sensitive than religion or ethnicity. This suggests that in both digital and real-life spaces, political affiliation has become a core marker of self-understanding, often accompanied by judgment, exclusion, and pressure to defend the 'truth' of one's group.

This tension also affects how participants express themselves in public. IKSP shared how social interactions become emotionally cautious:

"At a community event, there was a heated political discussion, and people immediately started keeping their distance or labeling each other just because of different political views. It made me realize that something as personal as political choice can make social relationships rigid if not communicated properly. Now I'm more careful when talking politics, especially in public. Sometimes I just stay silent—but even silence can be misread."

In this light, silence is not simply withdrawal but an existential response to the tension between the desire to be present and the fear of exclusion. The world they inhabit becomes a space where presence is constantly threatened by affective judgment, creating a social atmosphere that restricts rather than liberates—and gradually fosters alienation.

Nonetheless, not all participants were swept away by emotional impulses. Some demonstrated reflective awareness and resistance to affective reactions. IAI (female, 22) noted:

"I choose not to react emotionally right away. I prefer to check or read more to see if it's a fact or just an opinion designed to provoke conflict. Sometimes people post things just to make others fight. If we get angry easily, we're just falling into their trap. So I try to stay calm, look for other sources, and decide whether or not it's worth responding."

This stance reflects a phenomenological awareness of how emotions are shaped by context. IAI not only avoids impulsive reactions but practices emotional delay—choosing not just to react, but to be. In Heideggerian terms, this reflects a *mode of authenticity* (*Eigentlichkeit*), where the subject does not surrender to the *'they-world'* (*das Man*) of public opinion or digital algorithms, but actively reshapes the field of experience through thoughtful interpretation.

In this digital space, being-in-the-world is no longer neutral, but structured by mechanisms that intensify emotional instability and identity tension. Polarization becomes inevitable when platforms are designed to amplify emotionally charged content.

Some participants adopted strategies of active avoidance. GSD (male, 20) said:

"When I see provocative content targeting a specific group, I just stay silent and don't share it. If I repost or react with anger, it only makes things worse. It's better to just ignore it."

Here, silence is not passivity, but an ethical decision not to participate in destructive emotional spirals. It reflects a non-complicity—a refusal to fuel the very forces that fragment communal space.

Others took a more proactive role in managing their digital environments. FWA (male, 21) stated:

> *"I hit the 'not interested' button when I see provocative content so it won't appear in my feed again. I also unfollow accounts full of hate. That way, I can control what I see and avoid negative things."*

This illustrates the emergence of digital agency, where the subject is no longer merely an object of algorithms but an actor aware of their emotional ecology. They manage not only content but affect—an act that reflects existential mastery in a world of constant emotional provocation. Thus, the affective polarization experienced by Gen Z in this study is not simply an emotional reaction to difference but an existential struggle for authenticity in a fragmented and affectively charged social world—across both real and digital live.

Discussion: Affective Polarization and Situated Meaning

The interpretations arising from this study reveal that the affective experiences of Generation Z toward social differences transcend mere emotional reactions; they are profound processes of *existential disclosure*. From a Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, *affectivity* (*Befindlichkeit*) is not reducible to transient feelings or psychological states. Rather, it is a fundamental mode through which *Dasein*—the being who understands its own existence—encounters its *throwness* (*Geworfenheit)* into a world inherently characterized by social demands, historical contingencies, and ontological limitations (Heidegger, 1962). Affect, in this view, discloses the *mooded* nature of existence, revealing how the individual is always already situated within a horizon of meaning that shapes and constrains possibilities for understanding and engagement.

Feelings such as discomfort, hesitation, or reluctance experienced in encounters with social difference are not accidental or secondary but are *existential disclosures* that bring to light the tension between the self's projected possibilities and the reality of a pluralistic, sometimes conflicting social world. These affective states disrupt the subject's seamless absorption in familiar norms, calling forth a reflective negotiation of being-in-the-world amid competing values and contested meanings. The mood, then, acts as a pre-reflective attunement that shapes the way the world, and others within it, are experientially given.

Building upon this, Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophy of *historical situatedness* and *dialogical understanding* extends the phenomenological insight by emphasizing that all human experience is conditioned by prior *horizons of meaning* formed through history, culture, and tradition. In this fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*), the participants' understanding of "the other"—whether in face-to-face interactions or mediated digital environments—is always interpretative, shaped by their personal backgrounds meeting broader sociocultural narratives (Gadamer, 2004; Laverty, 2003; Vessey, 2009). This dialogical process is dynamic and ongoing, highlighting that understanding is never neutral or immediate but a negotiation between differing worldviews.

Such negotiation becomes especially salient when participants consciously restrain reactive impulses in digital spaces, opting to manage their emotional responses as ethical acts of self-care and social responsibility in fragile communicative contexts. Here, affectivity serves not as a barrier to understanding but as a gateway—an opening through which *Verstehen*, or existential comprehension, unfolds (Gadamer, 2004). This aligns with Gadamer's notion that understanding is fundamentally an event—an act of dialogue with the other and with tradition—that requires openness and humility.

Moreover, a hermeneutic-phenomenological framework allows us to interpret affective polarization not merely as cognitive bias or social division, but as a deeply situated practice of *meaning-making* within contested terrains of identity and belonging. Contemporary affect theorists expand this view by demonstrating that emotions are not

private, internal states but circulatory forces that move through social fields, shaping and reshaping political affiliations, group identities, and intersubjective relations (Fuchs, 2013; van Kleef & Côté, 2022). This perspective illuminates why participants' tendencies to seek homogenous social environments or avoid politicized discourse should be understood as responses to *affective formations* embedded in histories of intersubjective interaction, trauma, and collective memory (Muldoon et al., 2020).

Their choices to disengage, remain silent, or curate their digital environments thus emerge as critical expressions of affective agency—deliberate and embodied orientations toward managing emotional life in a polarized and ideologically charged world. These are active choices reflecting a deep awareness of their emotional and psychological well-being within digital spaces. These acts are not passive retreat but strategic negotiations of presence and withdrawal that articulate a complex ethical stance toward the demands of social coexistence.

By weaving together Heidegger's existential analysis of thrownness, Gadamer's dialogical hermeneutics, and the social-circulatory understanding of affect, this discussion asserts that Generation Z's experiences of polarization and social difference resist reduction to mere social preference or cognitive error. Instead, these experiences are manifestations of *subjectivities*—ongoing, interpretive processes through which individuals continually negotiate their place in a world saturated with power dynamics, affective tensions, and historically inscribed horizons of meaning.

Conclusion

This study reveals that Generation Z students in Surakarta experience multicultural awareness not as an abstract competence or civic value, but as a situated, existential condition deeply entangled with affective dynamics in both digital and offline spaces. Viewed through a Heideggerian lens, their engagement with cultural and ideological difference emerges as an emotionally charged process—marked by negotiation, hesitation, and attunement (Stimmung) to a world saturated with conflicting truths and ambient tension. Strategies such as emotional withdrawal, selective engagement, and digital curation are not merely adaptive behaviors, but expressions of how these students inhabit pluralism within the constraints of cultural norms and algorithmic environments. These findings respond to the research focus by illustrating that, for students in Surakarta, multicultural awareness is not consumed or performed—it is lived through ambivalence, anxiety, and longing, within a context shaped by both Javanese sociocultural values and digital affect. In this way, the study highlights the affective-existential dimensions of intergroup encounters, challenging cognitive models of political tolerance and media literacy.

While the study is limited by its interpretive horizon—bounded by the narratives shared and the researcher's own situated lifeworld—it offers a valuable contribution by highlighting the affective structures of digital pluralism. Rather than seeking statistical generalizability, this research provides phenomenological insight into how young people navigate the emotional complexities of cultural coexistence in a fragmented media landscape. Future research could extend this inquiry by involving participants from broader socio-economic, regional, or underrepresented communities to explore how differing lived contexts shape emotional engagement with diversity. Such exploration may deepen our understanding of how emotional tension, empathy, and withdrawal operate within pluralistic societies and contribute to either social fragmentation or ethical civic engagement. This study underscores the importance of addressing emotional dimensions in multicultural discourse, particularly as societies become increasingly polarized across cultural and ideological lines.

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