

Intercultural Communication in Islamic-Based Medicine: The Role of Spirituality and Digital Health Communication Literacy among Generation Z in Indonesia and Malaysia

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ABSTRACT Islamic-based alternative medicine, including ruqyah, cupping, and the consumption of Sunnah herbs, has recently attracted renewed contemporary public interest. This phenomenon is particularly evident among Generation Z, a cohort distinguished by digital fluency, rapid access to information, and critical engagement with multiple knowledge systems. This research explores Generation Z's literacy regarding Islamic alternative medicine through a comparative analysis of practices and perceptions in Indonesia and Malaysia. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were gathered through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and online observation of popular social media platforms. The question addressed in this research is how intercultural communication relates to Islamic-based medicine in terms of the role of spirituality and how digital health communication and literacy affect Generation Z in Indonesia and Malaysia. The results of this research show that social media plays a role in health communication literacy based on digital literacy among Generation Z, which influences their interest in Islamic-based medicine, leading them to choose herbal medicine and Islamic medicine, motivated by religious community factors. In addition, strong motivation from family influence also plays a role in the choice of treatment, and social media plays an important role in obtaining literacy about Islamic-based medicine and its selection. The results of this study contribute to society by highlighting the importance of social media in influencing the choice of treatment among Generation Z in both Indonesia and Malaysia.

Keywords: Generation Z, Communication, Health, Social Media, Intercultural.

ABSTRAK Medis alternatif berbasis Islam, termasuk ruqyah, bekam, dan konsumsi herbal Sunnah, baru-baru ini menarik minat publik yang semakin besar. Fenomena ini terutama terlihat di kalangan Generasi Z, kelompok yang dikenal dengan kecakapan digital, akses cepat terhadap informasi, dan keterlibatan kritis dengan berbagai sistem pengetahuan. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi literasi Generasi Z terkait medis alternatif Islam melalui analisis komparatif praktik dan persepsi di Indonesia dan Malaysia. Menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, diskusi kelompok terfokus, dan pengamatan online pada platform media sosial populer.

Yang menjadi pertanyaan di dalam riset ini adalah bagaimana terkait dengan intercultural communication di dalam pengobatan berbasis Islam yang dilihat dari peranan peran spiritualitas dan juga bagaimana digital komunikasi kesehatan dan literasinya pada generasi Z baik di Indonesia maupun Malaysia. Hasil yang didapat dari riset ini menunjukkan bahwa peran daripada media sosial punya peranan yang di dalam literasi komunikasi kesehatan berbasis pada literasi digital pada generasi Z, mempunyai peranan dalam hal ketertarikan daripada generasi Z terhadap pengobatan berbasis Islam, sehingga mereka melakukan pemilihan terhadap pengobatan berbasis

herbal dan pengobatan Islam yang tentu dimotivasi oleh faktor-faktor komunitas agama. Dan selain itu juga dipengaruhi oleh motivasi yang kuat dari pengaruh keluarga di dalam pemilihan daripada pengobatan dan media sosial menjadi begitu berperan untuk mendapatkan literasi pengobatan berbasis Islam dan pemilihannya. Hasil penelitian memberikan kontribusi kepada masyarakat akan pentingnya media sosial di dalam mempengaruhi pemilihan pengobatan pada generasi Z di dua negara baik Indonesia maupun Malaysia.

Kata kunci: Generasi Z, Komunikasi, Kesehatan, Media Sosial, Intercultural.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the health system has undergone significant changes. What was once primarily an authority-based approach has now shifted toward an evidence-based approach. The most popular trend is the patient-centered approach, with a greater emphasis on prevention and daily principles that promote human well-being and ecology within the context of One Health, planetary health, and overall well-being (Patwardhan et al., 2023). Traditional medicine is a body of knowledge or practice in the health sector that has long been used from generation to generation. Broadly, this type of medicine is regarded as an alternative to Western medical treatment among Southeast Asian communities in general (Ahmad, 2002).

As the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia has highly diverse religious cultures and practices. Religious beliefs, education, and access to information are other factors that influence the use of Islamic alternative medicine in Indonesia (Elshara, 2024). Local complementary and alternative medicine in Indonesia, from both health and economic perspectives, demonstrates that these practices remain relevant and play an important role in the public health system (Laksono et al., 2024). Within society, Islamic medicine commonly practiced includes ruqyah, cupping (*bekam*), the consumption of honey, and habbatussauda (Isdianto et al., 2025). However, Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, displays distinct pattern in understanding and adopting these practices in today's digital era. Some embrace and apply Islamic alternative medicine, while others prefer contemporary medical approaches (Wirautumi et al., 2025).

Generation Z exhibits new patterns in seeking health information. Whereas in the past, people would consult doctors or formal medical sources, today Gen Z relies more on digital platforms. They are accustomed to quickly searching for answers via social media and comparing traditional medical information with various alternatives circulating online. Recent global surveys also indicate that this group increasingly relies on peers and non-institutional sources when making health decisions. This phenomenon

became more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when individuals were driven to be more independent in finding solutions without always visiting medical facilities (Silver & Johnson, 2023).

Generation Z is coming of age amid rapid advancements in information technology, profoundly shaping how they access and process information, including health-related content (Hudha et al., 2024). This generation is gradually abandoning the use of herbal plants in traditional medicine, often due to limited trust and insufficient knowledge regarding their benefits (Andelina, 2025). A notable example of alternative healing that has captured Gen Z's attention is the practice popularized by Ningsih Tinampi on YouTube. However, the methods of communication and information delivery employed in such content frequently spark controversy and significantly influence Gen Z's perceptions of these practices (Kusuma & Prabayanti, 2022). Although the internet enables Gen Z to explore a wide range of perspectives on Islamic alternative medicine, the abundance of inaccurate or non-scientific information often leads to confusion.

Research on intercultural communication has been widely conducted, particularly in relation to how new technologies in the virtual world have changed and created multicultural relationships and environments across borders, focusing on the virtual global community, which has resulted in numerous changes in behavior and attitudes in the context of communication (Mumtaz & Nadeem 2024). The importance of cross-cultural studies shows how human interaction can lead to good interaction in the context of communication and cross-cultural management in society in terms of understanding (Bertram & Sharma, 2024).

The importance of this understanding is demonstrated by the understanding that intercultural communication gives confidence to individuals who communicate and will certainly provide better quality interactions in the context of cultural performances (Wyant & Cionea, 2024). The importance of understanding cross-cultural communication in understanding relationship strategies in interactions between individuals and communities (Clark & Li 2024).

Another crucial factor sustaining TCM use is the personal and trusting relationship between patients and practitioners (Jamaludin et al., 2024). Health-seeking behavior is shaped by individuals' health perceptions, consistent with health-seeking behavior theory. The choice of traditional medicine is socially and culturally disseminated through daily interactions and community practices. Research has identified at least 25 species of traditional therapeutic plants used to treat common ailments such as coughs and colds. These findings shed light on the variety of plant parts utilized and their preparation methods, offering valuable ethnomedical insights with both local and global relevance (Ekasari et al., 2025).

This indicates that Indonesian families are well-acquainted with the use of plant-based herbal medicine. Consequently, the acceptance of thibbun Nabawi or Islamic healing practices as a family treatment method is relatively seamless, as it is regarded as a holistic approach to health. The slogan "back to nature" has become a significant trend

in modern society, particularly in the digital era, and has reinforced public interest in alternative medicine (Santoso & Sos, 2019).

RESEARCH METHOD

This article uses a qualitative method by conducting in-depth interviews over a period of three months from June to August 2024. The qualitative research was conducted by interviewing informants from families in Indonesia and Malaysia. The informants in this study are Gen Z children, meaning they come from families with Gen Z children, where the families use herbs and practice Thibbun Nabawi medicine. These criteria were used in this study, of course, with a qualitative method that was considered to obtain in-depth information related to herbal medicine and the practice of Thibbun nabawi carried out by families with Gen Z children. This provides information about herbal medicine, including Thibbun Nabawi medicine, which certainly provides in-depth information related to Islamic medicine. Does Generation Z still use this medicine, or do they get information from their parents or social media about herbal medicine and Thibbun Nabawi-based medicine? Thus, data validation can be achieved using qualitative methods employed in herbal-based medicine and Thibbun Nabawi medicine. Observations were carried out to examine how Islamic alternative medicine is applied in everyday life, focusing on health routines, the use of natural ingredients, and the performance of rituals such as prayer. Documentation involved gathering relevant written and audiovisual materials, including books, articles, and educational resources on Islamic alternative medicine.

The study was conducted in two research settings, Indonesia and Malaysia, targeting families with Generation Z members. This comparative design provided a broader perspective on cultural, religious, and social factors influencing the literacy and adoption of Islamic alternative medicine among Generation Z in both countries. Of course, this research is based on qualitative methods, which were conducted through observation interviews and literature reviews. The qualitative methods themselves were carried out through in-depth interviews as well as group discussions to obtain the data expected from this research and to identify the categories from the research. Of course, online observation was also carried out on the social media platforms used by Gen Z. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with family members to explore their understanding of Islamic and herbal medicine.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One of the characteristics of Gen Z is that they are very familiar with technological advances, which certainly shapes Gen Z into people who are adept at obtaining information (Maharani et al., 2025). And of course, their involvement in religious-based medicine will certainly bring many positive things for Gen Z, especially regarding the importance of Islamic-based medicine and herbal medicine (Nurhasanah, 2025). This also influences how they interpret the various sources of information they

obtain regarding Islamic and herbal medicine practices (Zainurrofiq et al., 2024). In other countries, herbal remedies are widely used to prevent various diseases, both in urban and rural areas (Tjandrawinata, 2020). Islamic-based medicine is a form of treatment derived from the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad SAW and is an integrative treatment based on Islam. Many people are now switching to Islamic-based medicine (Harahap & Destiwati, 2023). Indeed, Islamic-based medicine has spread widely since 1980, with many Indonesians practicing Islamic-based medicine (Syukri, 2022). In Malaysia, Islamic medicine has become an integral part of Malaysian society because it has been passed down from generation to generation, especially among the Malay community who are Muslim (Johari et al 2024).

And for the practice and involvement of Generation Z in Islamic-based medicine, it is important because of the large Muslim population in Indonesia and Malaysia, so it is necessary to see how this generation understands Islamic-based medicine. This is a form of providing an understanding of the long historical tradition of medicine based on Islamic principles (Hamzah, 2024). Generation Z, Generation Z, those who were born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, grew up in a completely digital environment. Their constant access to the internet and social media makes health information, including content on Islamic alternative medicine, readily available. However, not all of this information is accurate or evidence-based. Some sources are supported by research, while others consist of unverified claims.

This is reflected in the testimony of an Indonesian family, as follows:

“Since childhood, our parents often treated us with alternative methods before taking us to the doctor when we were ill. This practice is part of Sundanese family traditions, especially when the illness is perceived as spiritual or non-medical. I also once attended religious gatherings discussing prophetic medicine. So, even though our education only reached high school, we learned a lot from our community and local ustaz. Therefore, my family and I are familiar with thibbun nabawi treatments such as cupping, ruqyah, drinking honey, and consuming black seed.”

This perspective resonates with the experience of a Malaysian family, who described their view of Islamic healing practices as follows:

“My family and I live in a very modern and large city. To obtain information about this treatment, we often attend ustaz sermons and read academic articles, yet we remain firm in our faith. My family views Islamic alternative medicine as complementary, not a substitute for modern healthcare. We still go to the doctor if we have fever or flu, but I also drink zam-zam water or pure honey, and occasionally perform ruqyah by ourselves. In our family, it is important to balance scientific knowledge with religious teachings.”

A different perspective emerged from another Indonesian informant, who emphasized a more scientific and selective approach, as illustrated below:

“We come from a family that was always taught to look for scientific evidence. As Javanese, we know that Javanese culture is mixed with many traditions. So for this type of healing, we usually need references or consult with an ustaz. My family knows about Islamic alternative practices such as cupping, ruqyah, and black seed, but we are more selective in using them. For us, it is important to follow modern medical advice, but if Islamic medicine is proven safe and does not contradict scientific health principles, we will consider it.”

The Role of Family in Transmitting Knowledge

Families also influence Gen Z's attitudes and beliefs toward alternative medicine. Several factors were identified as affecting the acceptance or rejection of Islamic alternative medicine, including access to information via social media and other sources, which often expose young people to these practices. Those who actively seek information are more likely to encounter Islamic healing methods. Personal experiences, both positive and negative, also strongly influence attitudes, while testimonies from family members or peers often become decisive in shaping acceptance or rejection. Modernization and globalization further introduce the influence of conventional medicine and other alternatives, sometimes making Gen Z more inclined toward methods perceived as scientific or modern.

Examples of such influences can be seen in the testimonies of Indonesian families, as follows:

“Our child once searched for information about ruqyah and cupping on YouTube and Instagram, but eventually did not trust it because it seemed unscientific. We supported their decision to be selective, since there is so much misinformation nowadays. Without guidance, it can be dangerous.”

As stated by the informant:

“At first, our child was doubtful, but after seeing the results directly, they became convinced. Even though they are very engaged in the digital world, our lived experience strengthened their trust in Islamic medicine.”

A different family highlighted how religious authority influenced their child's attitude toward Islamic medicine, as illustrated below:

“At first, our child was skeptical because they read online that *ruqyah* is only suggestive, but we continued to explain it from a religious perspective. Indeed, children today are different which is they are more critical due to modernization.”

Malaysian family testimonies also reinforce these findings. One family explained the selective approach of their children as follows:

“Our children learned about Islamic medicine from religious schools and social media, but they place greater trust in science. They do not reject Islamic healing outright but only turn to it when modern methods fail. They sometimes question ruqyah practices that lack standardization. So, available information greatly shapes their attitude.”

Another family emphasized the transformative power of personal experience:

“We fully trust Islamic medicine. When our child is ill, we first bring them to an ustaz. Sometimes younger generations question it, but when they personally experience recovery (for example, not cured at the hospital but healing after ruqyah), they begin to believe. Personal experience is key.”

A third Malaysian family described how digital exposure sometimes challenges their children’s faith, as shown below:

“Our children are often exposed to social media. They once saw people mocking ruqyah online and became skeptical. We tried to explain the difference between authentic and false practices. Modern influences sometimes weaken their faith, but with guidance, they become more open.”

Finally, another testimony from Malaysia illustrates a rational and integrative approach to Islamic medicine:

“We teach our children that Islam does not reject science. We encourage them to seek valid sources. They once attended a cupping seminar and became interested because it incorporated scientific explanations. As a result, they accept Islamic alternative medicine, but with a rational and selective approach.”

In order to clarify the variations in Generation Z’s perspectives in Indonesia and Malaysia regarding Islamic alternative medicine, the following interview excerpts are summarized in a thematic table. This table highlights both the differences and similarities in informants’ perspectives related to healing practices, family influence, and the role of digital media.

One of the characteristics of Generation Z is that they are enthusiastic about searching for information online, and of course, they also need to obtain accurate and reliable information (Siswanti, 2025). Field research shows that practices in Indonesia and Malaysia are already familiar with Gen Z’s understanding of Islamic-based medicine, such as cupping therapy and the consumption of honey and other herbal medicines such as habbatussauda, which are widely sold and known to the public, as well as ruqyah,

which is also well known. It turns out that the acceptance of these treatments in Indonesia and Malaysia is due to the fact that the majority of Indonesians are Muslim, as are Malaysians, and Malaysia is also strongly influenced by Malay culture, which certainly contributes to the Islamic traditions that exist in Indonesia.

This is the view of an informal family in Malaysia with strong Islamic traditions who also practice traditional and Islamic medicine. As stated by the informant:

“We strongly practice Islam-based medicine, which also originates from Malay culture and is taught by our parents in relation to medicine derived from Islam. Although we are not highly educated, we prioritize Islamic principles in medicine, and in our village, many people use Islamic medicine.”

From what the informant said, it is clear that the role of the family is very important in providing an understanding of the medicine that must be passed on. In the context of cross-cultural communication in the field of health communication, this certainly provides an understanding to Generation Z to use Islamic-based medicine in their lives.

Although what is happening now is how the modernization of health science has provided a lot of information and influence to the community. You, because of the influence of your family who gave you that understanding, health literacy among Generation Z is spreading as they also get information from social media sites related to Islamic-based medicine. As stated by the informant, when someone finds out that their parents have a chronic illness, they use cupping to cure the illness.

The availability of information from both family and social media and the internet has made Islamic and herbal medicine easier to understand, as there is so much information available on social media and the internet that it reinforces what is learned from family regarding herbal medicine and Islamic medicine.

Table 1. Perspectives of Generation Z in Indonesia and Malaysia on Islamic Alternative Medicine

Country	Interview Excerpts	Interpretation
Indonesia	“Since childhood, our parents often treated us with alternative methods before going to the doctor ... so my family and I have long been familiar with thibbun	Family heritage, generational tradition

	Nabawi practices such as cupping, ruqyah, honey, and habbatussauda.”	
Malaysia	“We see Islamic alternative medicine as complementary, not as a substitute for modern medicine ... we still go to the doctor when having fever or flu, but also consume zam-zam water or pure honey.”	Combination of modern medicine and religious values
Indonesia	“We must first look for scientific references ... if Islamic medicine is proven safe, we will consider it.”	Selective, evidence-based approach
Malaysia	“Malay culture here still strongly practices traditional and Islamic treatments ... disease is not only from the body but also from spiritual disturbances.”	Religious conviction and spirituality
Indonesia	“Our child once searched for information about ruqyah and cupping through YouTube and Instagram, but eventually did not believe because it was considered unscientific.”	Digital media influence and skepticism
Malaysia	“Our children often see ruqyah being mocked online, so they became skeptical ... but when they experienced it themselves, they began to believe.”	Social media and personal experience

Source: Researcher, 2025

Table 1, illustrates that the perspectives of Generation Z in Indonesia and Malaysia regarding Islamic alternative medicine are deeply shaped by their respective social and cultural contexts. Indonesian informants emphasized family traditions and a selective, evidence-based stance, whereas Malaysian informants highlighted the integration of religious conviction with modern medical practices. In both countries, social media exerts significant influence where sometimes fostering skepticism, but also reinforcing trust when personal experiences confirm the perceived efficacy of Islamic alternative medicine.

For many Muslim Gen Z, practices such as cupping, ruqyah, honey, and habbatussauda are more than mere treatments; they function as cultural markers and symbols of spiritual legitimacy. Yet their digital fluency presents both opportunities and challenges. Social media provides a vast repository of knowledge, from peer-reviewed research to unverified emotional testimonials. Although Gen Z is adept at navigating online spaces, their critical evaluation skills do not always match their technical proficiency. Viral or emotionally charged content often appears more credible than scientifically validated information, creating a susceptibility to health misinformation.

For Generation Z, the role of the media is very important in providing an understanding of the importance of Islamic medicine, which is due to the fact that

Generation Z has a close relationship with the media, and this is indeed a characteristic of this generation. This means that knowledge about Islamic medicine is obtained from the media that they constantly engage with and use to seek information, as Generation Z has grown up in an era of massive media information, and doing so has become a way of life for them. This knowledge is reinforced by information obtained from their parents regarding Islamic medicine, so that the information they obtain from the media reinforces their understanding of Islamic medicine. This means that the family plays a role in providing knowledge related to Islamic medicine, and of course there is a culture that provides an understanding of the use of Islamic-based medicine.

The literacy and understanding gained from the media then provides understanding to the younger generation, as well as the things they learn at school that give them an understanding of Islamic medicine and how it should be practiced. Parents also play a role in how Generation Z utilizes Islamic-based medicine. Media channels play an important role for Generation Z in obtaining information, and one of their abilities is certainly to use the media available on social media and how they make the best use of it, so that this role becomes a very important role in providing understanding to Generation Z, who are indeed very close to the media, reinforced with information from parents, schools, and others that strengthen their understanding of Islamic-based medicine.

Notably, Gen Z should not be seen merely as passive recipients of information. Recognizing this complexity opens pathways for health interventions that are not only informative but also humane, addressing both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of young people. To strengthen awareness of Islamic alternative medicine among Gen Z, several strategies can be implemented, such as information campaigns highlighting the benefits of Islamic healing, educational initiatives promoting proper practices, collaborations with religious leaders and Islamic medicine. It can be said that Generation Z has indeed had an effect on the spread of herbal-based and Islamic-based medicine. This is evident from how Generation Z, which is very familiar with social media literacy, will certainly provide an experience and spread awareness of how a treatment can spread and become a treatment within society. This is what has happened and has benefited the spread of herbal medicine and Islamic medicine. It is a good thing and also a positive contribution to the development and literacy of herbal medicine and Islamic medicine in both Indonesia and Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

Literacy in Islamic-based medicine and herbal medicine among Generation Z has provided an alternative medium for holistic Islamic medicine in today's digital and globalized era. The roles of parents and the various information obtained have provided a holistic understanding and broader insight to Generation Z in both Malaysia and Indonesia regarding how to understand the dynamics in developing health literacy

strategies for Generation Z. Of course, the role of parents is quite significant in recognizing their children and influencing them in the selection process, which is also reinforced by the literacy of Generation Z children who obtain information from social media. This will certainly provide complete information related to various treatments available in the community and make it easier for them to decide. Although Generation Z still needs to be guided in the selection process because they are quick to obtain information, they must also be critical in choosing the treatments they receive information about. This research contributes to the literacy of Generation Z in choosing Islamic and herbal-based treatments, thereby helping Generation Z in Indonesia and Malaysia achieve holistic health, both physically and spiritually, through their understanding of Islamic and herbal-based treatments.

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