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Digital Counseling and Social-Emotional Learning Training to Improve Empathetic Communication Among Guidance Counselors with Generation Alpha

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ABSTRACT

Generation Alpha, as individuals raised entirely within a digital ecosystem, is particularly susceptible to mental health disturbances resulting from non-empathic communication in digital spaces. However, the majority of school counselors in Indonesia have yet to develop adequate competencies in empathic digital communication, digital counseling, and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) tailored to the distinctive characteristics of Generation Alpha. This community service program aimed to enhance the empathic digital communication competencies of school counselors within the Guidance and Counseling Teachers' Forum (MGBK) of Maros Regency through an integrated training program combining digital counseling and SEL approaches. The program was conducted on April 22, 2026, at a public junior high school in Maros Regency, involving 15 school counselors as participants. A participatory training method was employed, encompassing lectures, group discussions, simulations, and role-play activities. Data were collected using pretest and posttest instruments comprising 18 Likert-scale items measuring three core aspects: knowledge, attitude, and skills. The results demonstrated a meaningful improvement across all participants, with pretest scores previously distributed within the low and moderate categories shifting entirely to the high and very high categories following the training. These findings confirm that the integrated training program effectively strengthened school counselors' empathic digital communication competencies. Furthermore, this program produced a practical training model that MGBK can adopt as a reference framework for reinforcing empathic and responsive digital counseling services in addressing the needs of Generation Alpha students.

INTRODUCTION

Generation Alpha consists of individuals born between 2010 and 2025. Unlike previous generations, who adapted to technology gradually, Generation Alpha was born and raised entirely within a digital ecosystem (Rose & Thomas, 2024; Kurniawan & Rojabi, 2026). Budau (2024) defines Generation Alpha as the most technologically connected generation, where exposure to digital screens has been occurring since preschool age, long before they learn their first letters.

A Common Sense Media report (2025) reinforces this fact by noting that 40% of children already own a tablet by age 2, and nearly one in four children own a cell phone by age 8, with

their primary activities consisting of online gaming and watching short videos across various platforms. These conditions shape the mindset, communication, and emotional expression of Generation Alpha in ways that are fundamentally different from previous generations, and in turn demand fundamental adjustments in the approach to Guidance and Counseling (BK) services in schools.

Generation Alpha tends to use text messages, voice notes, and short videos as their primary means of emotional communication (Iswatiningsih et al., 2024). This pattern of instant and visually dense communication risks diminishing the quality of emotional expression and interpersonal regulation if not balanced by adequate empathetic communication skills. Piccerillo & Digennaro (2025) found a consistent negative correlation between the intensity of social media use and adolescents' emotional regulation abilities, which directly affects the quality of interpersonal relationships. When facing psychological stress, Generation Alpha tends to express it through the same digital mediums, so their emotional expressions are often unreadable or misinterpreted by the adults around them (Elfasalamah, 2025).

These patterns of digital emotional expression have serious implications for the development of Generation Alpha's capacity for empathy. Empathy the ability to understand, feel, and respond authentically to others' emotional states is the foundation for healthy interpersonal relationships and sustained psychological well-being (Setiyadi & Jumaedi, 2025). However, the digital environment which serves as Generation Alpha's primary habitat actually has the potential to systematically erode this capacity for empathy. Çiğdem & Kaya(2020) found indications of limited empathy, egocentrism, and difficulties with social communication among Generation Alpha, which are associated with high exposure to digital technology. These findings are reinforced by Ćekić (2025), who asserts that the habit of communicating via digital devices which lack nonverbal cues has the potential to reduce emotional depth and weaken effective empathy.

The absence of empathetic communication in Generation Alpha's digital lives not only hinders social-emotional development but also exacerbates already vulnerable mental health conditions. UNICEF (2021) notes in its State of the World's Children report that one in seven adolescents aged 10–19 experiences mental health issues influenced by their social environment, including relationships with parents and peers. This situation demands a serious response from the entire educational ecosystem, and specifically from Guidance and Counseling (BK) teachers as the frontline in supporting students' mental health at school.

Ironically, the current competencies of guidance counselors remain limited in responding empathetically to the emotional needs of Generation Alpha students in the digital space (Anwar, 2022), even though the digital space is the primary venue where students express themselves (Septiani et al., 2025). This issue stems from an accumulation of three interrelated problems. First, students' limited access to counseling services, stemming from their lack of trust in the availability of a safe space to share their stories (Purnomo et al., 2025). Second, there is a generational communication gap between guidance counselors most of whom are from the Millennial and Gen X generations and Generation Alpha students, who possess different emotional language and communication expectations (Amalia & Rahmadania, 2024). Third, the inadequacy of guidance counselors' competencies in empathy-based digital counseling practices, meaning that digital interactions between counselors and students have the potential to distance, rather than bring closer, the counseling relationship that is needed (Oktaviani, 2025). These three issues form the basis for the need for training for guidance counselors in Maros Regency.

Several community service initiatives have been undertaken to address some of the issues related to teachers' competence in supporting students' social-emotional development. Mujiyati et al. (2025) focused on strengthening empathetic communication and meaningful learning for kindergarten and elementary school teachers through a participatory training and mentoring approach. Mulyono & Kusumantoro (2025) focused on strengthening Social Emotional Learning (SEL) capabilities based on the CASEL framework for economics teachers in the Semarang City MGMP. Although both community service initiatives made significant contributions, neither addressed the dimension of digital communication nor was designed within the context of

guidance and counseling services for Generation Alpha. Unlike previous initiatives, which were still partial in scope, this program integrates empathetic communication, digital counseling, and SEL into a single training model specifically tailored to the context of guidance and counseling services for Generation Alpha, thereby offering a more comprehensive and contextual approach.

A number of empirical findings support the urgency and feasibility of this community service program. [Umar et al \(2023\)](#) found that communication patterns insensitive to the social context in educational settings have a negative impact on interpersonal relationships, reinforcing the argument that empathetic communication skills are a fundamental necessity for guidance counselors in addressing the diverse characteristics of Generation Alpha students. [Umar et al. \(2025\)](#) demonstrated that digital technology-based training is proven to significantly enhance the professional competencies of guidance counselors affiliated with the Makassar City Guidance Counselors Association (MGBK), indicating that guidance counselors within the MGBK framework possess high capacity and openness toward digital training programs. Furthermore, [Ayu \(2025\)](#) emphasizes that purposeful and educational digital interactions can serve as an effective means to foster emotional validation, moral reflection, and a supportive learning community. Collectively, these findings reinforce the urgency of the digital empathetic communication training program offered in this community service initiative.

Based on the above description, this community service program aims to enhance the digital empathetic communication skills of guidance counselors affiliated with the Maros Regency Junior High School Guidance Counselors Association (MGBK) through integrated training that combines digital counseling and Social Emotional Learning approaches. The program targets junior high school guidance counselors who directly interact with Generation Alpha students, with the hope that this training will produce a practical model that can be adopted as a framework for strengthening empathetic and responsive digital counseling services.

IMPLEMENTATION METHODS

This community service activity was conducted using a participatory training approach that positions participants as active agents throughout the entire training process. This approach is tailored to the nature of the activity, which is focused on enhancing the professional competencies of guidance counselors in a practical and contextual manner, and facilitates a deeper transfer of knowledge through participants' direct involvement in simulations and exercises in digital empathetic communication. This approach was chosen because digital empathetic communication competencies cannot be adequately taught through lectures alone; rather, they must be practiced directly through simulations of guidance and counseling service cases relevant to the real-life situations participants face in the field.

The target audience for this activity consists of 15 Guidance and Counseling (BK) teachers who are members of the Guidance and Counseling Teachers' Association (MGBK) for junior high schools in Maros Regency. Demographically, the majority of participants belong to Generation X and a small portion to the Millennial generation, with an average of more than 10 years of experience teaching Guidance and Counseling. All participants are active members of the MGBK for junior high schools in Maros Regency and have never participated in a training program that specifically integrates digital empathetic communication, digital counseling, and Social Emotional Learning simultaneously. This profile is relevant to the program's context, given that the generational gap between BK teachers and Generation Alpha students is one of the root causes underlying the need for this training. The selection of the target group was based on three considerations: first, current junior high school guidance counselors are directly interacting with Generation Alpha students; second, the MGBK association has an institutional structure that allows the impact of the training to be disseminated collectively; third, the lack of a similar training program that integrates empathetic communication, digital counseling, and Social Emotional Learning simultaneously in Maros Regency.

The implementation process consists of three phases. The first phase is preparation, which includes initial coordination with MGBK and the schools through official correspondence and preliminary meetings, the development of training materials, the design of evaluation instruments,

and the establishment of an activity schedule. The second phase is the training implementation, using a combination of lectures and material presentations to build conceptual understanding, discussions and Q&A sessions to engage participants' perspectives, as well as simulations and role-plays to practice digital empathetic communication in case scenarios relevant to guidance and counseling services for Generation Alpha. The third phase is evaluation and follow-up, conducted through post-activity online evaluations and monitoring coordinated by the MGBK chair to ensure the sustainability of the training's impact.

Data collection utilized pretest and posttest instruments based on a five-point Likert scale, consisting of 18 statements across three domains knowledge, attitudes, and skills as well as direct observation during training and photographic and video documentation. Data analysis was conducted using quantitative descriptive methods by calculating the average score per aspect, comparing pretest and posttest results, and calculating the percentage of improvement using the gain score formula. The results of the quantitative analysis were supplemented with qualitative descriptions of the observation results to produce a comprehensive picture of the training's effectiveness.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before the training program was designed and implemented, the service team conducted initial coordination with the MGBK SMP Maros Regency board through official correspondence and preliminary meetings. This coordination aimed to identify the actual needs of guidance counselors regarding empathetic communication skills in the context of digital counseling services. The results of the coordination confirmed that the majority of guidance counselors do not yet have an adequate understanding of the characteristics of Generation Alpha, are not yet accustomed to responding to students' emotional needs through digital media in an empathetic manner, and have never received training that specifically integrates empathetic communication, digital counseling, and Social Emotional Learning simultaneously.

To objectively assess the participants' baseline conditions, a pretest instrument was administered to all 15 participants before the training session began. The instrument used a five-point Likert scale with 18 statements covering three main aspects knowledge, attitude, and skills each consisting of two indicators with three statements. The knowledge aspect refers to the Perspective Taking and Empathic Concern dimensions of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (De Corte et al., 2007) as well as the principles of Empathic Communication in Digital Context (Collins et al., 2026). The attitude aspect refers to the concept of empathy in digital text-based communication (Collins et al., 2026), while the skill aspect refers to the *Social Awareness* and *Relationship Skills* dimensions of the CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) framework (Richerme, 2022). The pretest results indicate that all participants fell into the Low and Moderate categories, as presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Distribution of Participants' Pretest and Posttest Score Categories

Interval	Category	Pretest	
		F	P%
74-90	Very High	-	-
60-73	High	-	-
46-59	Medium	6	40%
32-45	Low	9	60%
18-31	Very Low	-	-
Total		15	100%

According to Table 1, 9 participants (60%) were in the Low category and 6 participants (40%) were in the Moderate category. None of the participants were in the High or Very High categories before the training took place. The results of the analysis by aspect showed that the average pretest scores on a 1-5 scale indicated that the knowledge aspect was at 2.83 (fairly knowledgeable), the attitude aspect at 2.67 (fairly agree), and the skill aspect at 2.67 (fairly

capable), all of which fell within the Moderate category. These initial findings confirm the real need previously identified through coordination with MGBK, while also serving as strong justification for the implementation of the integratively designed training program. This situation aligns with findings from the (Mujiyati et al., 2025; Susanta, 2021) which emphasize that many teachers lack empathetic communication skills and strategies that consider students' psychological aspects, particularly in the context of digital-based services.



Figure 1. Training session at the Maros City Junior High School MGBK

The training was held on Wednesday, April 22, 2026, at the UPTD SMP Negeri 18 Lau Maros and lasted a full day. The training utilized a combination of methods designed in stages to progressively build participants' competencies, moving from conceptual understanding to practical skills. The first stage began with a presentation of the material through lectures and presentations covering three main topics: understanding Generation Alpha and its characteristics; communication with Generation Alpha and a comparison with previous generations; and the concept of empathy in digital communication based on the theory of De Corte et al. (2007) and Collins et al. (2026), how guidance counselors develop empathetic communication in digital spaces, and the principles of Social Emotional Learning based on the CASEL framework within the context of digital guidance counseling services. The second phase continued with a discussion and Q&A session that provided space for participants to confront their field experiences with the newly introduced concepts. During this session, various reflective statements emerged from participants acknowledging a gap between how they had previously responded to students digitally and the principles of empathetic communication they had just come to understand. The third stage was a simulation and role-play session where participants directly practiced digital empathetic responses through case scenarios relevant to real-life counseling situations, such as responding to a student's text message expressing emotional distress outside of school hours. This session was the most interactive and demonstrated high participant engagement.

After all training sessions were completed, a posttest was administered to all participants to measure changes in competency. The posttest results showed a significant and comprehensive improvement among all participants. As shown in Table 1 presented earlier, all 15 participants moved up a category: 12 participants (80%) are now in the High category, and 3 participants (20%) are in the Very High category. Not a single participant remained in the Low or Moderate categories after the training. This 100% shift of participants to higher categories is a highly significant finding in the context of a one-day training program.

As shown in Figure 2, the changes in the knowledge aspect showed the greatest increase, from an average of 2.83 (somewhat understand) to 4.17 (understand). The attitude aspect increased from 2.67 (somewhat agree) to 3.83 (agree). Meanwhile, the skill aspect increased from 2.67 (somewhat capable) to 3.5 (capable). All aspects moved from the Moderate category to the High category after the training was conducted. The pattern of greater improvement in the knowledge and attitude aspects compared to skills is a logical finding and can be explained theoretically.

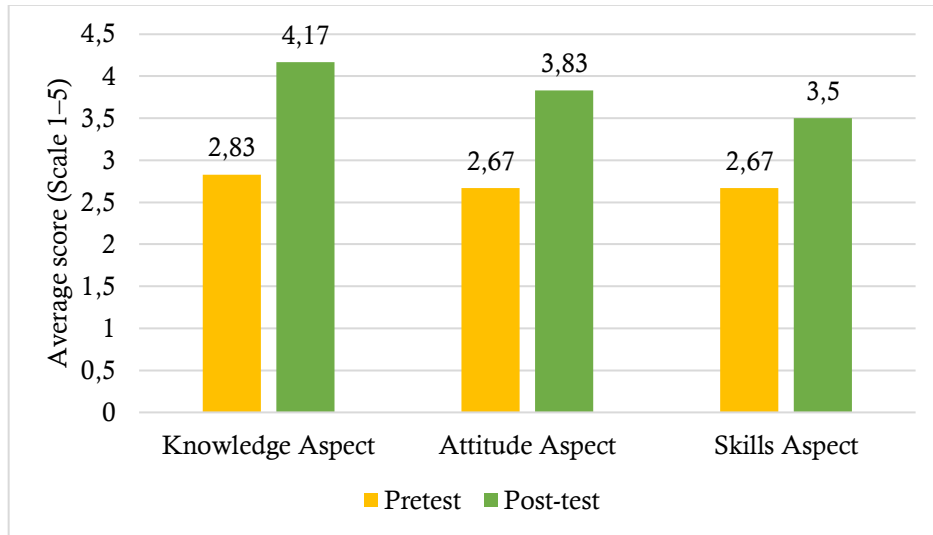


Figure 2. Comparison Chart of Average Pretest and Posttest Scores by Aspect

One-day training sessions based on lectures, discussions, and simulations are more effective at building cognitive understanding and changing attitudes than at developing practical skills that require repeated practice in real-world situations. This aligns with the perspective of that cognitive empathy the ability to understand others' perspectives can be developed through structured interventions, while affective empathy and responsive skills require a longer period of habituation. These findings are also consistent with the results of the community service project by [Mujiyati et al. \(2025\)](#), which found that empathetic communication training successfully shifted teachers' communication patterns from instructive to dialogic; however, some teachers still require further practice to consistently integrate empathetic communication. The following table (Table 2) presents the individual improvement scores of all participants following the training.

Table 2. Pretest and Posttest Gain Scores by Participant

Initials	Pretest		Posttest		Gain Score
	Score	Category	Score	Category	
AN	45	Low	62	High	17
HA	45	Low	73	High	28
MU	58	Medium	73	High	15
NA	58	Medium	68	High	10
AN	43	Low	67	High	24
SA	58	Medium	67	High	9
MA	43	Low	62	High	19
MH	44	Low	78	Very high	34
SU	45	Low	61	High	16
NU	58	Medium	74	Very high	16
AR	54	Moderate	67	High	13
BI	43	Low	62	High	19
IK	44	Low	78	Very high	34
SL	45	Low	61	High	16
HK	58	Medium	73	High	15
Total	741		1026		285
Average	49		68		19

According to Table 2, prior to the training, 9 participants were in the Low category and 6 participants were in the medium category. After completing the training, all participants improved: 12 participants moved to the High category and 3 participants reached the Very High

category. The highest gain score was achieved by participants MH and IK, with an increase of 34 points, while the lowest gain score was achieved by participant SA, with an increase of 9 points. The average pretest score of 49 increased to 68 on the posttest, with an average gain score of 19 points. Not a single participant remained stagnant or experienced a decline, indicating that the training program had an equitable impact on the entire target group.

This finding strengthens the results of Ayu's (2025) study, which emphasized that purposeful and educational digital interaction can serve as an effective medium for fostering emotional validation and empathic competence among educators. In addition, this result is also in line with the community service work of Wijayanto et al. (2026), which found a 34.7% increase in guidance and counseling teachers' competence through digital-based training, although that program focused more on technological infrastructure. From the perspective of strengthening SEL, this finding is consistent with Mulyono and Kusumantoro (2025), who demonstrated that strengthening SEL capabilities through CASEL-based training resulted in high levels of satisfaction and improved understanding among teachers. Overall, the improvement in digital empathic communication competence shown by all participants in this community service program confirms that guidance and counseling teachers have strong capacity and openness to grow when provided with training programs that are relevant, structured, and contextualized to the realities of their services.

Post-training evaluations were conducted through two mechanisms. First, an online evaluation that allowed participants to provide feedback flexibly after the activity concluded. In general, participants reported that the training materials were relevant to the challenges they face daily in supporting Generation Alpha students, and that the simulation and role-play sessions were the most memorable parts because they provided a concrete illustration of the difference between empathetic and non-empathetic responses in digital communication. Second, follow-up monitoring was coordinated through the chair of the Maros Regency MGBK to ensure the sustainability of the training's impact within each participant's workplace. This coordination served as a follow-up mechanism, enabling the service team to monitor the extent to which participants began applying the principles of empathetic digital communication in their counseling practice following the training.

The overall evaluation results indicate that this training program successfully achieved its objective of enhancing the digital empathetic communication competencies of MGBK teachers at the Maros District Office of Education and Culture across all three measured aspects. The shift of all participants from the Low and Moderate categories to the High and Very High categories serves as an empirically verifiable indicator of the program's success. This finding reinforces the argument that guidance and counseling teachers who are members of professional organizations such as MGBK have great potential to significantly improve their digital competencies in a relatively short period of time, as also demonstrated by Umar et al. (2025) in an AI-based training program for MGBK in Makassar City, which resulted in improved digital literacy and high enthusiasm among participants.

Nevertheless, there are several limitations in the implementation of this community service program that need to be acknowledged as points for reflection in the development of future programs. First, the fact that the program was conducted over a single full day limited the depth of participants' practical skill development, as reflected in the lower improvement in skills compared to knowledge and attitudes. To mitigate these limitations, follow-up programs should include ongoing post-training mentoring sessions, drawing on the coaching and mentoring model proven effective in internalizing empathetic communication skills among educators (Mujiyati et al., 2025). Second, there is currently no structured long-term evaluation mechanism to measure the consistency of post-training competency application in daily guidance and counseling practice. Mitigation of this limitation can be achieved through the implementation of field-observation-based evaluation instruments scheduled periodically, as recommended by Fitri et al. (2025) in a four-level training evaluation model that emphasizes the importance of measuring behavioral changes and long-term impacts. Third, the limited number of participants (15) restricts the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of school counselors. Expanding the target audience to include high schools and vocational schools in future programs, accompanied by a

quasi-experimental design with a control group, could serve as a mitigation strategy to strengthen the external validity of the findings. Overall, these limitations do not diminish the significance of the findings but rather provide clear direction for the design of more comprehensive and sustainable community service programs.

CONCLUSION

Community service activities through integrated training that combines empathetic communication, digital counseling, and Social Emotional Learning for MGBK teachers at junior high schools in Maros Regency have proven effective in enhancing the digital empathetic communication competencies of guidance counselors in addressing the challenges of serving Generation Alpha students, as evidenced by the shift of all participants from the low and moderate categories to the high and very high categories across the three measured aspects: knowledge, attitude, and skills. This program has yielded tangible impacts, including the emergence of a new awareness regarding the importance of empathetic communication in digital spaces as an integral part of professional counseling services, as well as the opening of a new paradigm in understanding and responding to the emotional needs of Generation Alpha students needs that had previously not been specifically addressed in professional development programs for guidance counselors in Maros Regency. Moving forward, similar programs need to be strengthened with ongoing post-training mentoring sessions, long-term evaluation mechanisms based on field observations, and an expansion of the target audience to include high schools and vocational high schools. This will ensure that this integrated training model can be replicated and further developed by LP2M UNM and other university community service institutions as a systematic academic response to the challenges of guidance and counseling services in the digital era.

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