

Character Education Values in Adolescents' Upstander Behavior Against Cyberbullying on TikTok

Sofiatul Husna^{1*}, Maemonah²

^{1,2} Department of Islamic Education, Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training, State Islamic University Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta

*Corresponding Author. e-mail: 24204012013@student.uin-suka.ac.id

Abstract

This study aims to examine how character education values, grounded in Lickona's framework of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, shape adolescents' upstander behavior toward cyberbullying on TikTok, particularly within rural contexts. Although adolescents generally recognize cyberbullying as morally wrong, a persistent gap remains between moral judgment and actual intervention in digital environments. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this study involved in-depth interviews with 15 adolescents aged 12-18 in a rural village in Bantul, Yogyakarta, who actively use TikTok and have encountered cyberbullying. The analysis explores how moral understanding, empathy, and behavior interact within socially constrained and digitally mediated settings. The findings indicate that while adolescents demonstrate strong moral awareness and empathy toward victims, these do not consistently translate into upstander behavior. Social pressures, particularly fear of exclusion and conflict, inhibit intervention, while limited digital literacy constrains adolescents' ability to identify safe and effective response strategies. This study highlights that moral capacities alone are insufficient to predict moral action in digital spaces. It suggests the need for integrating character education with practical digital competencies through context-sensitive interventions, such as school-based digital character education programs and community-based digital literacy initiatives, to support adolescents' active roles in addressing cyberbullying.

Keywords: *cyberbullying, character education, adolescent upstander behavior*



This is an open-access article under the [CC-BY-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) license.



INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of information and communication technology has transformed adolescents' patterns of social interaction, with social media becoming a primary space for self-expression and identity construction. However, this shift has also intensified the risk of cyberbullying, which poses significant threats to adolescents' mental health and social development (Chan et al., 2021). Interactive social media platforms, particularly those characterized by rapid public engagement, create environments where demeaning comments, collective mockery, and other forms of digital harassment can easily occur and are often difficult to regulate (Awad & Connors, 2023; Sari, 2025).

According to UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2021), bullying remains a widespread global issue, with approximately one in three learners experiencing bullying at school, while cyberbullying affects around one in ten children, indicating that harmful peer interactions increasingly extend into digital environments. In Indonesia, reports from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission KPAI (2024), similarly show that adolescents remain vulnerable to involvement in cyberbullying, whether as victims, perpetrators, or bystanders. These patterns suggest that digital spaces are not only widespread but also socially complex environments, where harmful interactions persist and may escalate if not addressed appropriately (Inchley et al., 2020).

Research shows that cyberbullying has profound negative impacts on adolescents, who are at a critical psychosocial stage (Lukács J. et al., 2023). Victims often experience low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and an increased risk of suicidal ideation (Chu et al., 2025). These effects extend beyond mental health, also undermining adolescents' social development and trust in digital environments (Shinta & Khilmiyah, 2024). Despite these serious consequences, most research has predominantly focused on victims and perpetrators, while the role of bystanders who witness online harassment remains comparatively underexplored (Mołnika, 2023; Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2021)

Moreover, existing studies have rarely examined how bystander responses are shaped within specific contexts, such as rural communities, platform-specific environments like TikTok, or through the lens of character education frameworks. Yet bystanders, whether passive or active, play a crucial role in disrupting cyberbullying dynamics (Patrick et al., 2019). Evidence suggests that bullying situations can be de-escalated quickly when bystanders intervene, highlighting the importance of understanding the factors that encourage or inhibit adolescents' willingness to act (Murphy, 2009).

Within the social media landscape, TikTok has emerged as one of the most widely used platforms among adolescents, driven by its short-form, interactive, and algorithm-based content that strongly appeals to young users (Montag et al., 2021). Global digital reports further indicate that TikTok has attracted a substantial number of young users, with Indonesia ranking among the countries with the largest user base, highlighting its relevance as a key digital environment in adolescents' daily social interactions (DataReportal, 2025).

The intensity and visibility of interactions on TikTok position the platform not only as a source of entertainment but also as a space where cyberbullying can easily occur through public comment sections and rapid content circulation (Awad & Connors, 2023; Rasyid et al., 2023). In such highly interactive environments, adolescents are frequently exposed to harmful interactions, placing them in situations where they must decide whether to intervene or remain passive observers. While TikTok facilitates diverse forms of creative expression, it also creates conditions in which negative interactions can flourish. Therefore, understanding how adolescents respond as bystanders in these contexts becomes critical for addressing cyberbullying in contemporary digital environments (Richard et al., 2025).

In social media, bystanders who act as upstanders by supporting victims, confronting perpetrators, or reporting content can interrupt digital bullying (Awad & Connors, 2023; Wong et al., 2021). However, studies show a gap between adolescents' recognition that cyberbullying is wrong and their willingness to act (Clark & Bussey, 2020; Y. Liu et al., 2023). This gap indicates that moral understanding alone does not motivate action in complex situations like cyberbullying.

The gap between moral judgment and action is often more pronounced in rural communities, where adolescents tend to live in tightly connected social groups that emphasize harmony and social cohesion. In such contexts, acting as an upstander by confronting perpetrators or defending victims

may be perceived as disruptive to group harmony, leading adolescents to avoid intervention in order to maintain social acceptance. These settings build strong social ties but can also discourage open confrontation, particularly in situations involving bullying (Prabowo, 2024; Priatama et al., 2019). In addition, limited digital skills and uneven access to technology in some rural areas make it more difficult for adolescents to recognize subtle forms of cyberbullying and to utilize platform-based safety features effectively (Ratri & Aviyanti, 2025; Tantri et al., 2023).

To examine these dynamics, this study adopts Thomas Lickona's character education framework, which comprises three core dimensions: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action (Lickona, 1991). In the context of cyberbullying on TikTok, moral knowing refers to adolescents' ability to identify harmful online interactions as inappropriate, moral feeling involves empathy and emotional concern toward victims, and moral action is reflected in behavioral responses such as defending victims, reporting abusive content, or remaining passive. This framework provides a basis for understanding why adolescents may recognize cyberbullying as wrong and feel empathy toward victims, yet still fail to act. In digital environments, such failures are shaped not only by internal moral factors but also by social pressures and limitations in digital literacy that influence adolescents' confidence and capacity to respond effectively (Eshet-Alkalai, 2004; Ng, 2012)

Despite its relevance, the application of Lickona's framework to cyberbullying research on social media, particularly TikTok and rural adolescent populations, remains limited. Existing studies tend to focus on general moral development or formal educational settings, with insufficient attention to how moral dimensions operate in real-world digital interactions shaped by social pressure and platform dynamics (Hukubun et al., 2024; Munawarsyah et al., 2024). Accordingly, this study addresses this gap by examining how character education values shape rural adolescents' upstander behavior toward cyberbullying on TikTok, and how social factors and digital literacy influence the relationship between moral understanding and action.

Specifically, this study aims to analyze how moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action manifest in rural adolescents' responses to cyberbullying on TikTok, as well as to examine the social and digital literacy factors that influence their willingness to act as upstanders. This study contributes to the literature in two main ways. First, it enriches character education theory by contextualizing Lickona's moral framework within digital environments, particularly in relation to adolescents' bystander behavior on social media. Second, it provides practical insights for the development of context-sensitive digital character education programs, especially for adolescents in rural communities.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to examine character education values that shape adolescents' upstander behavior toward cyberbullying on TikTok. Initial coding was conducted inductively to capture emerging themes, while Lickona's framework was subsequently used to organize and interpret these themes in relation to moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. This approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and moral decision-making processes, as well as the capture of complex social and moral dynamics in digital environments that are often inadequately measured by quantitative methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2024).

The study was conducted in a rural area, namely Wanujoyo Lor Village, Bantul Regency, Special Region of Yogyakarta, which is categorized as rural based on its social and infrastructural characteristics. The area is characterized by relatively low population density, the predominance of non-industrial livelihoods, and limited educational and technological facilities compared to urban regions. Nevertheless, the village has adequate internet access, enabling adolescents to actively engage with social media platforms, including TikTok. These conditions make Wanujoyo Lor Village a relevant context for examining the moral dynamics of rural adolescents' responses to cyberbullying in digital spaces, where communal values and limited digital literacy may influence moral decision-making (Priatama et al., 2019; Widodo et al., 2021).

The participants were 15 adolescents aged 12 to 18 years, selected through purposive sampling. To enhance transparency and allow readers to assess the diversity of the sample, detailed participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Participant	Age	Gender	School Level	TikTok Use (Years)	Role in Cyberbullying
P1	14	Female	Junior High	2	Bystander
P2	16	Male	Senior High	3	Upstander
P3	13	Female	Junior High	2	Passive
P4	17	Female	Senior High	4	Upstander
P5	15	Male	Senior High	3	Bystander
P6	14	Female	Junior High	2	Upstander
P7	12	Male	Junior High	1	Passive
P8	16	Female	Senior High	4	Upstander
P9	15	Female	Senior High	3	Upstander
P10	13	Male	Junior High	2	Bystander
P11	17	Male	Senior High	5	Upstander
P12	14	Female	Junior High	2	Passive
P13	16	Male	Senior High	4	Upstander
P14	15	Female	Senior High	3	Bystander
P15	13	Female	Junior High	2	Upstander

The inclusion criteria comprised adolescents who had actively used TikTok for at least six months and who had witnessed or been indirectly involved in cyberbullying situations on the platform. Participant selection was based on the relevance of their experiences to the research focus, while the sample size was determined according to the principle of data sufficiency, namely the point at which the collected data demonstrated recurring thematic patterns and no longer yielded substantially new insights (Campbell et al., 2020).

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews designed to explore adolescents' experiences, moral considerations, and underlying reasons for their decisions when responding to cyberbullying on TikTok, either as upstanders or bystanders. The interview guide was developed based on Lickona's three moral dimensions to ensure that the data could be systematically mapped to the domains of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Interview questions addressed participants' understanding of cyberbullying forms on TikTok, the emotions experienced when witnessing bullying, and the actions they took or considered in such situations, including their knowledge of safe and appropriate reporting mechanisms. The interview guide remained flexible, allowing the researcher to probe more deeply in response to participants' answers and experiences (Sugiyono, 2021).

Data were analyzed thematically using the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles et al. (2014), which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The analysis began with the identification of initial codes from interview transcripts to capture emergent meanings, which were then organized into broader categories. These categories were subsequently synthesized into major themes representing the dynamics of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. The coding process was conducted by the primary researcher and reviewed through analytical discussions with research peers to minimize interpretive bias.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, several strategies were employed. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing responses across participants to identify consistent patterns as well as variations in adolescents' experiences and responses to cyberbullying. Member checking was carried out by sharing a summary of key findings and interpretations with selected participants after the interviews. Participants were invited to confirm whether the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences, and their feedback was used to refine the analysis. In addition, peer debriefing was conducted through discussions with research peers to review the coding process and thematic interpretations, thereby minimizing potential researcher bias (Miles et al., 2014).

This study adhered to ethical principles in social research. Informed consent was obtained from both participants and their parents or guardians prior to data collection. Participants' identities were anonymized using codes, and all data were securely stored. As this study did not undergo formal ethical review by an institutional ethics committee, ethical procedures were implemented internally by ensuring voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and the avoidance of questions that could cause psychological distress.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

Adolescents' Use of TikTok in Wanujoyo Lor Village

The findings indicate that TikTok has become an integral part of daily life for adolescents in Wanujoyo Lor Village, functioning both as a source of entertainment and as a social interaction space. Most participants reported using TikTok regularly to fill their leisure time, follow popular trends, and express themselves through both content consumption and content creation. The most frequently accessed content is related to everyday life, entertainment, and lifestyle, including dance videos, fashion content, mukbang videos, and content depicting personal activities.

In practice, adolescents' levels of engagement on TikTok vary considerably. Some adolescents are actively involved through commenting, sharing videos, or discussing specific content with peers. One participant explained, *"I often read the comments and sometimes reply, especially if I think something is wrong"* (P2). These adolescents tend to perceive TikTok as an extension of their social environment, where interactions resemble everyday social communication.

In contrast, other adolescents choose to remain passive users, primarily watching content without engaging in interactions. A participant stated, *"I usually just watch and scroll, I rarely comment because I don't want to get involved"* (P10). This preference appears to be associated with a desire to avoid attention or potential conflict in public digital spaces.

These differences in engagement levels influence how adolescents interpret social dynamics on TikTok. Adolescents who interact actively tend to be more aware of conversations in comment sections, including the presence of demeaning or attacking comments directed at other users. One participant expressed discomfort when encountering such situations, stating *"Sometimes I feel uncomfortable when I see people being mocked in the comments"* (P4). Conversely, adolescents who adopt a passive stance rarely pay close attention to comment sections and focus more on visual content, which means they are not always aware when bullying occurs.

These variations in engagement also influence adolescents' awareness and sensitivity toward cyberbullying. Participants who actively engaged with TikTok often reported feeling more empathy when observing other users being targeted by negative comments. However, this empathy does not always translate into action, as TikTok is still perceived as a public space that carries a high risk of social conflict. In contrast, adolescents who tend to remain passive prefer to distance themselves from potentially tense social interactions, including avoiding involvement in bullying situations.

Overall, these findings indicate that TikTok use among rural adolescents is not homogeneous, either in terms of intensity or in the social meanings attached to the platform. TikTok is understood not only as an entertainment medium but also as a social space governed by implicit norms that shape adolescents' willingness to engage. The ways in which adolescents position themselves as active or passive users constitute an important initial context for understanding how they subsequently respond to cyberbullying, particularly in deciding whether to assume the role of an upstander or to remain silent.

Understanding of and Responses to Cyberbullying

The findings indicate that adolescents in Wanujoyo Lor Village generally understand cyberbullying as a form of harmful behavior occurring in digital spaces. This understanding primarily refers to overt, explicit forms of bullying, such as direct insults, harsh comments, or unauthorized

dissemination of personal content. One participant explained, *“If someone insults others directly or posts something embarrassing about them, I think that is bullying”* (P6).

However, this understanding does not fully extend to more subtle forms of cyberbullying, including sarcasm, indirect mockery, or demeaning comments that are often framed as jokes. Some participants expressed uncertainty in distinguishing between joking and harmful behavior. A participant stated, *“Sometimes it is hard to tell if people are just joking or actually bullying”* (P12). This ambiguity often leads adolescents to hesitate when determining whether certain interactions on TikTok should be classified as cyberbullying.

These differences in understanding influence how adolescents respond when witnessing cyberbullying. Adolescents with a broader understanding tend to be more sensitive to bullying situations and report a stronger sense of moral responsibility to intervene. One participant stated, *“If it is clearly hurting someone, I think we should do something, like telling them to stop or reporting it”* (P8). They view defending victims or reporting problematic comments as expressions of care and social responsibility as social media users. In contrast, adolescents with a more limited understanding are more likely to remain silent due to uncertainty or fear of misjudging the situation. This hesitation often results in passive responses, even when adolescents recognize that the comments in question may be harmful.

Although many adolescents experience empathy toward victims, these feelings do not consistently translate into concrete actions. Fear of social consequences is a primary reason adolescents are reluctant to act as upstanders. Several participants expressed concerns about being labeled as intrusive, provoking conflict, or becoming the next target of bullying. One participant stated, *“I know it is wrong, and I feel sorry for the person, but I am afraid that I will be attacked if I get involved in the comments.”* (P11). Others also mentioned fears of being labeled as intrusive, provoking conflict, or becoming targets of similar attacks.

These findings indicate that adolescents’ moral responses to cyberbullying are shaped by a tension between empathy and perceived social safety. Consequently, decisions to intervene are influenced not only by moral judgment but also by adolescents’ assessments of the social risks present in digital environments.

Social, Infrastructure, and Digital Literacy Factors in Adolescents’ Moral Responses

The findings suggest that the social environment plays an important role in shaping adolescents’ moral attitudes and actions in responding to cyberbullying on TikTok. Many participants reported that their moral values were shaped primarily by family and peer interactions, rather than formal school-based education. One participant stated, *“My parents always tell me not to hurt others, so I know bullying is wrong”* (P3). Family values and religious teachings were frequently cited as moral foundations that led adolescents to disapprove of bullying behaviors.

These values are closely intertwined with social norms that emphasize group harmony and the avoidance of open conflict. As result, adolescents’ willingness to intervene is often constrained. Several participants expressed hesitation to intervene due to concerns about disrupting social relationships. A participant explained, *“I don’t want to make things worse or create conflict, so I prefer to stay quiet”* (P14). This indicates that while adolescents recognize bullying as morally wrong, social expectations often discourage direct intervention.

Peer social pressure emerges as one of the most influential factors shaping adolescents’ decisions to act or refrain. Participants reported concerns about potential negative reactions from their social environment if they were to openly defend victims. Fears of social exclusion, being labeled as attention-seeking, or being perceived as interfering in others’ affairs led many adolescents to remain silent despite morally opposing the bullying they observed. One participant stated, *“If I defend someone, people might think I am trying to get attention or interfere too much”* (P9).

Beyond social factors, infrastructural conditions and access to technology also shape adolescents’ capacity to respond to cyberbullying. Some participants reported experiencing unstable internet access, which limited both the intensity and quality of their interactions on TikTok. A participant noted, *“Sometimes the internet is slow, so I just watch videos and don’t really interact”* (P7). These limitations affect not only engagement but also access to information about strategies

for responding to cyberbullying. Adolescents with limited access were generally less familiar with platform safety features and reporting mechanisms.

Digital literacy further shaped adolescents' ability to act as upstanders. In this study, limited digital literacy was evident in adolescents' lack of awareness of TikTok's safety features and response options. Several participants reported not knowing how to report problematic comments, being unfamiliar with account-blocking or comment-filtering functions, or feeling reluctant to use these features due to concerns about potential consequences for their own accounts. One participant stated, *"I don't really know how to report comments or block people, so I just ignore it"* (P13). Limited digital literacy was also reflected in the belief that the only way to respond to cyberbullying was through direct confrontation in comment sections, which was perceived as socially risky. These findings indicate that digital literacy in this context extends beyond technical skills to include an understanding of safe and non-confrontational response strategies, such as reporting harmful content, blocking perpetrators, or providing support to victims through private communication.

In contrast, adolescents who demonstrated a better understanding of TikTok features and non-confrontational response strategies exhibited higher levels of confidence in taking action. One participant explained, *"If I see something bad, I can report it or just send a private message to support the person"* (P8). These adolescents were more likely to report harmful comments, block perpetrators' accounts, or provide support to victims through private messages.

Conversely, adolescents with limited digital literacy perceived themselves as lacking safe response options, resulting in a disconnect between their empathy and moral intentions and their actual behavior. These findings indicate that moral action in digital spaces is shaped not only by values and empathy but also by technical competence and adequate access to information. Overall, the findings indicate that adolescents' moral actions in digital environments are shaped not only by values and empathy but also by social expectations, access to technology, and digital literacy. These factors influence whether adolescents feel capable of acting safely and effectively when responding to cyberbullying.

DISCUSSION

Character education plays a crucial role in digital environments, where adolescents' interactions on social media involve rapid and public moral decision-making. In the context of cyberbullying on TikTok, this study reveals a clear gap between adolescents' moral knowledge that bullying is wrong and their actual actions to stop it. This finding supports the view that moral character cannot be understood solely at the cognitive level; it must also be examined as a dynamic relationship between knowledge, emotion, and action. Lickona's framework of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action helps explain why individuals may recognize a behavior as wrong yet still refrain from intervening (Lickona, 1991). However, this study extends Lickona's framework by demonstrating that moral action in digital environments is not solely determined by internal moral capacities but is also significantly shaped by social norms, perceived social risks, and levels of digital literacy. Accordingly, upstander behavior on TikTok should be understood as the outcome of interactions between internal moral factors and broader social and technological contexts.

At the level of moral knowing, adolescents generally demonstrate a clear moral judgment that cyberbullying is unacceptable. However, this moral awareness does not automatically translate into defensive or interventionist action. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that moral awareness alone often fails to result in bystander intervention in digital environments (Clark & Bussey, 2020; Wong et al., 2021). A key barrier lies in adolescents' uncertainty regarding appropriate forms of action and their limited confidence in acting safely. The existing literature further suggests that self-efficacy and the ability to evaluate response strategies play crucial roles in decisions to defend victims (S. Liu et al., 2025; Patrick et al., 2019). Moral knowledge, therefore, functions as a necessary precondition, but not as a primary trigger for moral action on social media platforms.

The gap between moral knowing and moral action becomes more understandable when considering the public and socially uncertain nature of TikTok interactions. Interventions occur in highly visible spaces where audience reactions are unpredictable and may escalate into open conflict. In such situations, adolescents face a moral dilemma between the impulse to act and concerns about negative social consequences, such as ridicule, rejection, or escalated conflict. Previous studies confirm that ambiguity regarding response strategies and low self-efficacy often restrain bystanders from intervening despite clear moral judgments (Leung, 2021). Under these conditions, silence is frequently perceived as the safest social option. This finding suggests that the absence of moral action should not be interpreted as a lack of moral values, but rather as a limitation in adolescents' perceived capacity to act safely within complex digital environments.

At the level of moral feeling, adolescents demonstrate empathy toward victims; however, empathy does not consistently lead to action. This pattern aligns with prior findings indicating that empathy is a necessary but insufficient condition for motivating bystander intervention in cyberbullying situations (Mateus Francisco et al., 2024; Zhao & Yu, 2021). Empathy may remain at an affective level when adolescents perceive intervention as socially risky. Contextual factors, such as peer norms and perceived threats, can disrupt the relationship between empathy and action (Domínguez-Hernández et al., 2018). Thus, empathy should be understood as moral potential that requires supportive conditions to be translated into action.

These perceived risks are particularly salient in social environments that emphasize harmony and the avoidance of conflict. Social norms and peer pressure strongly influence adolescents' willingness to act as upstanders by constraining moral courage when intervention is perceived as socially disruptive (Huang et al., 2023; Leung, 2021). In such contexts, defending victims may be interpreted as interfering or provoking unnecessary conflict. This is especially significant in close-knit communities, where online interactions are closely tied to offline relationships. As a result, adolescents often prioritize social acceptance over moral action. These findings support the argument that moral action is shaped not only by individual values but also by the surrounding social climate (Sanusi & Sugandi, 2020; Shen et al., 2022). Character education, therefore, must be accompanied by efforts to create social environments that provide psychological safety for moral action.

In addition to social influences, digital literacy emerges as a critical factor that shapes adolescents' ability to act as upstanders. Limited digital literacy restricts adolescents' awareness of available response strategies, leading them to perceive intervention as limited to direct confrontation. This perception increases the perceived risks of acting and reinforces passive behavior. Existing literature indicates that low digital literacy constrains individuals' capacity to engage ethically and responsibly in digital environments (Ng, 2012; Tantri et al., 2023). This study further demonstrates that digital literacy functions not only as a technical competence but also as a strategic capacity that enables adolescents to identify safe, non-confrontational response options, such as reporting harmful content, blocking perpetrators, or providing private support to victims.

Moreover, digital literacy should be understood as an evaluative and contextual skill that allows adolescents to navigate complex social interactions in digital spaces. Adolescents who lack this capacity tend to perceive digital environments as unpredictable and risky, which discourages active intervention. Prior research shows that limited access to information and uneven technological infrastructure amplify uncertainty and fear, particularly in rural contexts (Chan et al., 2021). Under such conditions, non-intervention becomes a rational and socially safe choice despite moral disagreement with bullying. These findings position digital literacy as a key structural bridge between moral intention and moral action.

Lickona's framework remains relevant for understanding adolescents' moral responses, but its application in digital contexts requires contextual expansion. Moral knowing and moral feeling may develop, yet moral action is mediated by social norms, perceived risks, and technological competence. Critiques of character education that focus primarily on cognitive and affective dimensions without considering structural conditions are therefore particularly relevant (Berkowitz, 2021; Munawarsyah et al., 2024). In digital environments such as TikTok, moral action is closely linked to platform affordances, the visibility of user actions, and interaction cultures. Socio-cultural dynamics, including peer pressure and relational harmony, further shape adolescents' willingness to

act (Leung, 2021; Shen et al., 2022). Digital character education must therefore integrate moral, social, and technological dimensions as interconnected components of moral development.

Overall, these findings contribute to the literature by demonstrating that the gap between moral awareness and moral action in digital environments is not solely an individual issue, but a contextual phenomenon shaped by social norms, perceived risks, and digital literacy. This finding highlights the importance of developing digital character education that goes beyond the transmission of moral values by equipping adolescents with safe and context-appropriate strategies for action. Strengthening empathy and moral courage must be accompanied by training in non-confrontational response strategies, understanding platform safety features, and fostering group or school norms that support prosocial behavior in digital spaces (Tantri et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2021). Integrating character education with digital literacy aligns with perspectives emphasizing that ethical engagement in digital environments requires critical skills and responsible technology use (Eshet-Alkalai, 2004; Ng, 2012). The focus, therefore, should not only be on knowing what is right but also on understanding how to act safely and effectively in socially complex digital environments, particularly within rural contexts where social norms and structural limitations may further constrain moral action.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings of this study suggest the need for a more integrated approach to digital character education that combines moral development with digital literacy and social awareness. For schools, the findings indicate that character education programs should move beyond the transmission of moral values by incorporating practical training on safe and effective responses to cyberbullying. This includes equipping students with non-confrontational strategies such as reporting harmful content, blocking perpetrators, and providing support to victims through private communication. Schools may also play a role in fostering supportive peer norms that encourage prosocial behavior and reduce the perceived social risks of intervention.

For families and village communities, the findings highlight the importance of strengthening moral guidance while also promoting open discussions about safe ways to respond to online conflicts. In rural contexts, where social harmony is highly valued, upstander behavior can be reframed as a form of collective care rather than social disruption.

For policymakers, the findings underscore the importance of integrating digital literacy into character education policies. Programs should be designed not only to enhance adolescents' technical skills but also to develop their strategic awareness and digital self-efficacy. Policy efforts may also need to address disparities in access to technology and infrastructure, particularly in rural areas.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted in a single rural setting, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Second, the relatively small number of participants reflects the qualitative nature of the study but may not capture the full diversity of adolescents' experiences. Third, the data were based on self-reported interviews without direct observation of interactions on TikTok, which may influence the accuracy of reported behaviors. Future research could expand this study by including multiple rural and urban contexts to compare variations in adolescents' responses to cyberbullying. The use of mixed-method approaches would also provide a more comprehensive understanding by combining qualitative insights with quantitative data. In addition, future studies could examine the effectiveness of digital character education interventions that integrate moral education and digital literacy, particularly in addressing the gap between empathy and action in online environments.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights several important conclusions regarding adolescents' responses to cyberbullying on TikTok within rural contexts. The findings indicate that although adolescents generally possess a clear moral awareness that cyberbullying is wrong, this awareness does not consistently translate into action, reflecting a persistent gap between moral knowing and moral action. This gap suggests that moral understanding alone is insufficient to motivate intervention, as adolescents often remain passive despite recognizing harmful behaviors.

The findings further demonstrate that adolescents' responses are strongly shaped by social factors, including influences from family, peers, and prevailing community norms. In particular, the emphasis on maintaining social harmony within rural communities tends to discourage adolescents from acting as upstanders due to concerns about conflict and social exclusion. At the same time, digital literacy plays a critical role in shaping adolescents' capacity to respond effectively, as limited knowledge of platform features and safe response strategies constrains their ability to take appropriate action in cyberbullying situations.

Overall, these findings highlight the importance of integrating moral development with digital literacy in character education. Effective character education should incorporate Lickona's three moral dimensions; moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, while also equipping adolescents with practical, non-confrontational strategies for responding to cyberbullying. Such an approach is essential for enabling adolescents to act ethically and confidently in socially complex digital environments, particularly within rural contexts where social norms and structural limitations may further constrain moral action.

REFERENCES

- Awad, M. N., & Connors, E. H. (2023). Active bystandership by youth in the digital era: Microintervention strategies for responding to social media-based microaggressions and cyberbullying. *Psychological Services, 20*(3), 423–434. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ser0000749>
- Berkowitz, M. W. (2021). *PRIMED for Character Education: Six Design Principles for School Improvement*. Routledge.
- Campbell, S., Greenwood, M., Prior, S., Shearer, T., Walkem, K., Young, S., Bywaters, D., & Walker, K. (2020). Purposive sampling: complex or simple? Research case examples. *Journal of Research in Nursing, 25*(8), 652–661. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987120927206>
- Chan, T. K. H., Cheung, C. M. K., & Lee, Z. W. Y. (2021). Cyberbullying on social networking sites: A literature review and future research directions. *Information & Management, 58*(2), 103411. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.im.2020.103411>
- Chu, X., Zhao, Y., Gao, L., & Wang, Y. (2025). Moral Identity and Bystander Behavior in Cyberbullying: The Roles of Moral Outrage and Online Interpersonal Trust. *Victims & Offenders, 20*(4), 631–649. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2023.2171170>
- Clark, M., & Bussey, K. (2020). The role of self-efficacy in defending cyberbullying victims. *Computers in Human Behavior, 109*, 106340. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106340>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2024). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Sixth edit). SAGE.
- DataReportal. (2025). *Digital 2025 Global Overview Report*. DataReportal. https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-global-overview-report?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Domínguez-Hernández, F., Bonel, L., & Martínez-González, A. (2018). A systematic literature review of factors that moderate bystanders' actions in cyberbullying. In *Cyberpsychology* (Vol. 12, Issue 4 Special Issue). <https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2018-4-1>
- Eshet-Alkalai, Y. (2004). Digital Literacy: A Conceptual Framework for Survival Skills in the Digital Era. *Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia, 1*(13), 93–106. <http://files/967/Eshet-Alkalai - Digital Literacy A Conceptual Framework for Survival Skills in>

the Digital Era.pdf

- Huang, L., Li, W., Xu, Z., Sun, H., Ai, D., Hu, Y., Wang, S., Li, Y., & Zhou, Y. (2023). The Severity of Cyberbullying Affects Bystander Intervention Among College Students: The Roles of Feelings of Responsibility and Empathy. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management, 16*, 893–903. <https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S397770>
- Hukubun, M. D., Wakhudin, W., & Kasimbara, R. P. (2024). Character Education in the Digital Age: Strategies for Teaching Moral and Ethical Values to a Generation that Grows Up with Technology. *Journal of Pedagogi, 1*(3), 74–82. <https://doi.org/10.62872/8958fk80>
- Inchley, J. C., Stevens, G. W. J. M., Samdal, O., & Currie, D. B. (2020). Enhancing Understanding of Adolescent Health and Well-Being: The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 66*(6), S3–S5. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.03.014>
- KPAI, K. P. A. I. (2024). *Laporan Tahunan KPAI: Jalan Terjal Perlindungan Anak, Ancaman Serius Generasi Emas Indonesia*.
- Leung, A. N. M. (2021). To Help or Not to Help: Intervening in Cyberbullying Among Chinese Cyber-Bystanders. *Frontiers in Psychology, Volume 12*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.483250>
- Lickona, T. (1991). *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility*. Bantam Books.
- Liu, S., Wang, P., Gao, W., Song, M., & Zhang, N. (2025). Virtuous personality and bystander defending behavior among college students: roles of moral identity and friendship quality. *BMC Psychology, 13*(1), 729. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-025-03058-4>
- Liu, Y., Yu, X., An, F., & Wang, Y. (2023). School bullying and self-efficacy in adolescence: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Adolescence, 95*(8), 1541–1552.
- Lukács J., Á., Takács, J., Soósne Kiss, Z., Kapitány-Fövény, M., Falus, A., & Feith, H. J. (2023). The Effects of a Cyberbullying Intervention Programme Among Primary School Students. *Child & Youth Care Forum, 52*(4), 893–911. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-022-09714-9>
- Mateus Francisco, S., Costa Ferreira, P., Veiga Simão, A. M., & Salgado Pereira, N. (2024). Moral disengagement and empathy in cyberbullying: how they are related in reflection activities about a serious game. *BMC Psychology, 12*(1), 168. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-024-01582-3>
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. C. N.-H. . M. 2014. (2014). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (Third edit). SAGE Publications, Inc. <http://files/514/Miles et al. - 2014 - Qualitative data analysis a methods sourcebook.pdf>
- Mołnika, B. (2023). Bystanders in Bullying Situations in Schools. Does it Matter? Literature Review. *Human, Technologies and Quality of Education, 2023*, 117–126. <https://doi.org/10.22364/htqe.2023.08>
- Montag, C., Yang, H., & Elhai, J. D. (2021). On the Psychology of TikTok Use: A First Glimpse From Empirical Findings. *Frontiers in Public Health, Volume 9-2021*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2021.641673>
- Munawarsyah, M., Fakhurridha, H., & Muqowim, M. (2024). Character Education for Teenagers in the Era of Society 5.0 Thomas Lickona's Perspective. *EDUKASIA: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Pembelajaran, 5*(2), 127–138. <https://doi.org/10.62775/edukasia.v5i2.984>
- Murphy, A. G. (2009). *Dealing with Bullying*. Infobase Publishing.
- Ng, W. (2012). Can We Teach Digital Natives Digital Literacy? *Computers & Education, 59*(3), 1065–1078. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2012.04.016>
- Patrick, R. B., Rote, W. M., Gibbs, J. C., & Basinger, K. S. (2019). Defend, Stand By, or Join In?: The Relative Influence of Moral Identity, Moral Judgment, and Social Self-Efficacy on Adolescents' Bystander Behaviors in Bullying Situations. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 48*(10), 2051–2064. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-019-01089-w>

- Polanco-Levicán, K., & Salvo-Garrido, S. (2021). Bystander Roles in Cyberbullying: A Mini-Review of Who, How Many, and Why. In *Frontiers in Psychology* (Vol. 12). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.676787>
- Prabowo, C. D. (2024). Moral Values in Digital Learning: Applying Thomas Lickona's Framework in Online Higher Education. *Journal of Islamic Education Management Research*, 2(2), 165–180. <https://doi.org/10.14421/jiemr.2024.22-07>
- Priatama, R., Onitsuka, K., Rustiadi, E., & Hoshino, S. (2019). Social Interaction of Indonesian Rural Youths in the Internet Age. *Sustainability*, 12(1), 115. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12010115>
- Rasyid, A., Maimanah, Nuqul, F. L., Rahayu, I. T., & Ridho, A. (2023). Cyberbullying ditinjau dari Kontrol Diri dan Regulasi Emosi. *Jurnal Penelitian Psikologi*, 14(2), 75–82. <https://doi.org/10.29080/jpp.v14i2.1044>
- Ratri, S. Y., & Aviyanti, L. (2025). Unlocking Digital Literacy in Indonesia: Insights from the Use of Social Media Platforms. *Jurnal Prima Edukasia*, 13(1), 191–200. <https://doi.org/10.21831/jpe.v13i1.83433>
- Richard, C. M., Musa, N., & Ninggal, M. T. (2025). From Intention To Action: A Conceptual Model Of Cyberstander Intervention In Tiktok Cyberbullying Among Malaysian Youth. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, IX(IX), 4453–4463. <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.909000364>
- Sanusi, H. Z., & Sugandi, M. S. (2020). Peran Komunikasi Keluarga Dalam Perilaku Cyberbullying Pada Remaja. *ETTISAL: Journal of Communication*, 5(2), 271–289. <https://doi.org/10.21111/ejoc.v5i2.4440>
- Sari, D. F. K. (2025). The Influence of TikTok Social Media on Adolescent Social Behavior in the Digital Era: A Case Study in Kendari City. *Sinergi International Journal of Communication Sciences*, 3(2), 127–140. <https://doi.org/10.61194/ijcs.v3i2.757>
- Shen, Y., Yuan, L., Xiong, X., & Xin, T. (2022). Empathy and cyberbystander behavior: The role of moral disengagement. *Current Psychology*, 42, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03015-z>
- Shinta, S., & Khilmiyah, A. (2024). The Poison of Cyberbullying in Destroying Children's Sense of Empathy. In *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Humaniora* (Vol. 13, Issue 3, pp. 602–612). <https://doi.org/10.23887/jish.v13i3.82364>
- Sugiyono. (2021). *Metode Penelitian Kuantitatif, Kualitatif, dan R&D*. Alfabeta.
- Tantri, K. S., Aqilla, N. A., & Sukmawati, A. (2023). Pendidikan Karakter di Era Digital: Mengajarkan Etika dan Tanggung Jawab dalam Penggunaan Sosial Media. In *Anwarul* (Vol. 3, Issue 4, pp. 662–675). <https://doi.org/10.58578/anwarul.v3i4.1278>
- UNESCO. (2021). *Global education monitoring report summary, 2021/2: non-state actors in education: who chooses? who loses?* UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380076>
- Widodo, B. S., Budiati, A. C., Octavianto, D. A., Lestari, A. P., & Silva, P. M. (2021). The Influence Of Social Media On The Resilience Of Rural Communities During The Covid-19 Pandemic. *The Journal of Society and Media*, 5(2), 311–329. <https://doi.org/10.26740/jsm.v5n2.p311-329>
- Wong, R. Y. M., Cheung, C. M. K., Xiao, B., & Thatcher, J. B. (2021). Standing Up or Standing By: Understanding Bystanders' Proactive Reporting Responses to Social Media Harassment. *Information Systems Research*, 32(2), 561–581. <https://doi.org/10.1287/isre.2020.0983>
- Zhao, L., & Yu, J. (2021). A Meta-Analytic Review of Moral Disengagement and Cyberbullying. *Frontiers in Psychology*, Volume 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.681299>