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Cyberbullying and Digital Communication Ethics among Iraqi Adolescents: Attitudes, Moral Judgments, and Platform Use

Ali Sadiq Daoud Al-Saadi*

Department Of Public Relation, College of Mass Communication, Baghdad, Iraq

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* *Corresponding author:*
ali.s@comc.uobaghdad.edu.iq

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Abstract

Objectives: To examine adolescents' attitudes in Iraq toward cyberbullying and digital communication ethics across major social media platforms; to estimate the prevalence of exposure/witnessing/perpetration; to test the relationship between platform engagement and ethical awareness; and to explore gender and age differences.

Methods: A cross-sectional correlational quantitative study was conducted with a sample of n = 400 adolescents (ages 13–18) in Iraq. Instruments included scales measuring cyberbullying exposure (victimization/witnessing/perpetration), ethical awareness (moral sensitivity/judgment) via short Likert-type scenarios, and platform engagement (hours per day, preferred platforms, cross-platform usage index). Instruments were culturally adapted using forward/backward translation, expert review, and pilot testing, achieving acceptable internal consistency.

Results: A total of 46.5% reported exposure to or witnessing cyberbullying in the past six months. Intensive daily use was associated with lower ethical awareness, particularly on fast-paced visual platforms (e.g., TikTok and Instagram, averaging ~2.8–3.2 hours/day), whereas conversational platforms (e.g., WhatsApp) were associated with higher ethical scores. Females demonstrated higher ethical awareness than males. An inverted U-shaped pattern across ages was observed, with the 15–16 age group showing the highest averages.

Conclusions: The findings highlight the prevalence and platform-specific patterns of cyberbullying among Iraqi adolescents, indicating the need to integrate an ethical perspective (harm prevention, dignity, privacy, accountability) into Iraq-adapted digital citizenship curricula, school protocols, effective family mediation, and protective platform design.

Keywords: Geopolitical Competition; Digital Transformation; Digital Hegemony; U.S. Digital Strategy; Middle East; Iraq

التنمّر الإلكتروني وأخلاقيات التواصل الرقمي لدى المراهقين العر اقيين: الاتِّجاهات، والأحكام الأخلاقية، واستخدام المِنَصّات

علي صادق داود سلمان*

قسم العلاقات العامة، كلية الاعلام، جامعة بغداد، بغداد، العراق

ملخّص

الأهداف: فحص اتجاهات المراهقين في العراق نحو التنمّر الإلكتروني وأخلاقيات التواصل الرقمية عبر منصّات التواصل الرئيسة؛ تقدير انتشار التعرّض/الشهود/الممارسة؛ اختبار ارتباط الانخراط المنصّاتي بـ الوعي الأخلاقي؛ واستكشاف فروق الجنس والعمر.

المنهج: دراسة كمّية مقطعية ارتباطية بعينة (ن = 400) من المراهقين (13–18 سنة) في العراق. شملت الأدوات مقاييس التعرّض للتنمّر الإلكتروني (ضحايا/شهود/ممارسة)، والوعي الأخلاقي (الحسّ/ الحكم الأخلاقي) عبر مواقف قصيرة بنمط ليكرت، والانخراط المنصّاتي (ساعات/اليوم؛ المنصّات المفضّلة؛ مؤشر التعدّد المنصّاتي). جرى تكييف الأدوات ثقافيًا (ترجمة أمامية/عكسية، مراجعة خبراء، اختبار تجريبي)، وحقّقت الاتساقات الداخلية الحدود المقبولة.

النتائج: أفاد 46.5% بالتعرّض أو الشهود خلال الأشهر الستة الأخيرة. ارتبط الاستخدام اليومي المكثّف بـ انخفاض الوعي الأخلاقي، وكان ذلك أوضح في البيئات البصرية السريعة (مثل تيك توك وإنستغرام بمتوسط ~2.8–3.2 ساعة/يوم)، بينما ارتبط الاستخدام الحواري (مثل واتساب) بدرجات أخلاقية أعلى. سجّلت الإناث وعيًا أخلاقيًا أعلى من الذكور، وظهر نمط U مقلوب عبر الأعمار، حيث حقّقت فئة 15–16 عامًا أعلى المتوسطات.

الاستنتاجات: تُبرز النتائج شيوع التنمّر الإلكتروني وأنماطه المرتبطة بالمنصّة لدى المراهقين العراقيين، ما يستلزم إدماج عدسة أخلاقية (منع الأذى، صون الكرامة، الخصوصية، المساءلة) في مناهج المواطنة الرقمية المكيّفة للعراق، وبروتوكولات مدرسية، وتوسّط أسري فعّال، وتصميم منصّاتي داعم للحماية.

الكلمات المفتاحيّة: التنافس الجيوسياسي؛ التحوّل الرقمي؛ الهيمنة الرقمية؛ الاستراتيجية الرقمية للولايات المتحدة؛ الشرق الأوسط؛ العراق.

1. Introduction

In today's highly connected digital world, social media has become an integral part of adolescents' daily lives. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat are not only used for entertainment but also serve as primary avenues for socialization, identity expression, and community engagement. As adolescents increasingly participate in digital interactions, the dark side of such connectivity cyberbullying has gained prominence as a pressing social and psychological concern. Cyberbullying refers to the intentional and repeated harm inflicted through digital devices, often characterized by anonymity, permanence, and a wide-reaching audience. The impacts of cyberbullying are particularly concerning among adolescents, who are developmentally vulnerable and often ill-equipped to process such abuse (Patchin, J. W., & Hinduja, S. (2017)).

Studies estimate that between 20% to 60% of adolescents have been involved in cyberbullying as either victims, aggressors, or witnesses, with increasing numbers reported during the pandemic era as online activity surged (Patchin, J. W., & Hinduja, S. (2022), Kowalski, R. M., & Limber, S. P. (2013)). Cyberbullying behaviors include harassment, exclusion, spreading rumors, impersonation, and the circulation of harmful or embarrassing content. The emotional and psychological toll on adolescents can be severe ranging from lowered self-esteem and academic withdrawal to anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Patchin, J. W., & Hinduja, S. (2022) and Kowalski, R. M., & Limber, S. P. (2013)). Cyber Ryan, T., Reece, J., Chester, A., & Xenos, S. (2016), Hinduja, S., & Patchin, J. W. (2023). These harmful consequences are further compounded by the immediacy and permanence of digital content, which amplifies the reach and longevity of harm in comparison to traditional forms of bullying. Simultaneously, the issue of communication ethics in digital environments has emerged as a crucial dimension of media and youth studies. Online interactions, especially among adolescents, often take place in contexts lacking supervision, regulation, or ethical framing. The disinhibition observed in virtual communication allows users to detach from real-world norms and accountability, contributing to hostile discourse and morally disengaged behavior (Suler, J. (2004)). Adolescents are particularly susceptible to these patterns due to their ongoing moral, emotional, and cognitive development. Many operate in echo chambers, where harmful behavior may be normalized or even rewarded by peer groups. Despite the importance of moral reasoning in shaping digital behavior, ethical literacy is rarely emphasized in school curricula or social media use policies.

What is often overlooked in mainstream literature is how adolescents themselves interpret and judge the ethics of their digital communication. While many studies address the prevalence or psychological impact of cyberbullying (Patchin, J. W., & Hinduja, S. (2022), Ryan, T., Reece, J., Chester, A., & Xenos, S. (2016). few investigate how adolescents morally evaluate their own or others' behavior online. Even few consider how usage intensity, platform type, peer culture, and gender differences shape these ethical perceptions (Kowalski, R. M., & Limber, S. P. (2013), Hamad, H., & Shehata, A. (2024)). Addressing these gaps is essential in an era when digital interactions are shaping not just adolescent behavior but their underlying values and social norms.

Situated in the Iraqi context, the study anchors digital communication ethics within local socio-cultural norms and platform use patterns among adolescents, thereby adding contextual depth beyond generic global accounts.

The present study addresses these gaps by investigating adolescents' attitudes toward cyberbullying on social media and their ethical perceptions of digital communication behaviors. It aims to connect measurable behavior with moral judgment and to explore how usage patterns and demographic variables influence ethical awareness among youth in digital contexts. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Assess the prevalence and patterns of cyberbullying experienced or witnessed by adolescents on social media platforms.
- Examine adolescents' ethical evaluation of cyberbullying behaviors and other harmful online acts.
- Investigate the influence of digital engagement (e.g., time spent online, types of platforms used) on their moral judgments.
- Identify gender and age differences in attitudes toward digital communication ethics and cyberbullying.

In this study, "digital communication ethics" refers to the norms, values, and moral judgments that guide adolescents'

behavior on social media—particularly regarding harm prevention, respect for others' dignity, and responsibility in cases of cyberbullying. We operationalize this construct through adolescents' ethical sensitivity and moral judgments about online interactions and cyberbullying scenarios.

This study makes several academic contributions. Firstly, it combines communication ethics with media psychology to give insights into the interdisciplinary perception of adolescent behavior in cyberspace (Suler, J, 2004) through developing the right mix for teaching online communication ethics and media psychology. Second, it brings added empirical depth to the moral side of cyberbullying-on cyberspace research, typically more understudied or investigated according to normative considerations (Ferrara, E, 2015). Third, it also offers findings from a cultural context which has added to the diversification of transnational study in media and youth. These contributions are essential for digital education programming, policy, and platform level interventions.

This study has implications beyond academic study. It responds to a pressing social issue of preparing youths with ethical guideposts for how to navigate the digital universe in resources ways. The results can influence the development of youth-based media literacy initiatives, focused on empathy, accountability, and critical thinking. In addition, findings of this study could also be used to inform school curricula, parent's guidance, and platform design to protect and to promote positive online environments. Youth are not simply receivers of digital media today, but active co-creators of discursive tone, ethics and effects online. In particular, the study can help in the design of interventions that refrain from punishment and surveillance and take the form of enlightened proactive ethical modes of cultivation. This might involve participatory ethics training, peer-moderated digital clubs, platform nudges encouraging reflection before posting or parental support built on trust and dialogue. Embedding moral reasoning in the design of youth digital interaction can shift online spaces to more welcoming, conscientious, and empathetic communities.

Finally, by centering adolescents' voices and experiences, this research affirms their role as agents of change and moral decision-makers in the digital age. A deeper understanding of how adolescents define, interpret, and act upon ethical values in their online behavior is essential for creating a generation of users who not only engage but lead with integrity and compassion. As cyberbullying continues to evolve with new technologies and social trends, building ethical resilience among youth becomes not just an academic challenge—but a moral and civic imperative.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The literature review synthesizes recent work on cyberbullying and digital communication ethics among adolescents. The Materials and Methods section details the design, instruments, and sample. We then present the results and discuss their implications in light of prior research, followed by conclusions, practical implications, limitations, and directions for future work.

2. Literature Review

Cyberbullying is defined as intentional, repeated aggression using digital technologies, such as smartphones, social media, and messaging platforms. Its prevalence among adolescents has been extensively studied, though findings vary across contexts. For instance, Patchin and Hinduja (2022) reported that 27.9% of tweens in the United States had experienced cyberbullying in the previous year, while 17.6% admitted to engaging in it. In contrast, Nocentini and Menesini (2016) found in their six-country European study that victimization rates ranged from 5% to 22%, with gender and cultural variations influencing results. In the Middle East, prevalence appears significantly higher. Hamad and Shehata (2024), in a study conducted in the UAE, found that nearly 40% of adolescents had encountered some form of cyberbullying, either as victims or bystanders.

These differences in reported rates often depend on definitions, methodological tools, and cultural perceptions of what constitutes bullying. Kowalski and Limber (2013) highlighted that even minor aggressive acts online—such as sarcasm, exclusion, or rumor-spreading—may be interpreted differently depending on socio-cultural norms. Despite these variations, most scholars agree that the trend is increasing, particularly among younger teens whose lives are increasingly embedded in online interactions.

The consequences of cyberbullying extend far beyond digital space. Multiple studies have shown strong correlations between cyberbullying exposure and poor mental health outcomes. Hinduja and Patchin (2023) linked cyberbullying

experiences with heightened risk of depression, anxiety, and even suicidal ideation. Similarly, O'Reilly et al. (2018) found that social media exposure, particularly when associated with bullying and peer pressure, significantly impairs adolescents' emotional wellbeing and self-worth.

In a study on high school students in China, Huang et al. (2021) confirmed that victims of cyberbullying exhibited symptoms of psychological distress, including social withdrawal, insomnia, and elevated stress levels. These effects are exacerbated by the permanence and visibility of online content, which can be repeatedly accessed and shared, extending the trauma well beyond the initial incident.

Furthermore, cyberbullying does not only affect victims. Perpetrators and bystanders are also at risk. Patchin and Hinduja (2017) demonstrated that those who engage in cyberbullying are more likely to report substance abuse and poor academic performance, while bystanders often experience moral conflict and guilt, especially when they fail to intervene.

One critical factor contributing to cyberbullying behavior is the online disinhibition effect, which suggests that individuals act more aggressively online due to the perceived anonymity, invisibility, and lack of immediate consequences (Suler, 2004). This concept helps explain why adolescents may engage in harmful behavior online that they would avoid in face-to-face settings. The digital environment lowers social and ethical barriers, reducing empathy and promoting moral disengagement (Ferrara, 2015).

However, some scholars emphasize that adolescents are not merely impulsive or unaware of ethical boundaries. Cristello et al. (2025) highlighted that adolescents often struggle to reconcile their moral values with group norms or platform expectations, particularly when peer approval is at stake. Their findings suggest a gap between moral knowledge and behavioral application, underscoring the importance of ethical literacy in online spaces.

Moreover, trust-based behaviors play an essential role in how adolescents navigate ethical dilemmas online. As shown by research from Trust-Enabled Privacy (2025), adolescents often use creative strategies—such as restricting audience access or signaling discomfort indirectly—to manage boundaries and uphold personal values. These affordances reflect a growing ethical agency, even in the absence of formal digital education.

Understanding why some adolescents engage in cyberbullying while others do not has led researchers to explore individual and contextual factors. Hamad and Shehata (2024) found that adolescents with high moral identity were significantly less likely to participate in cyberbullying, even when exposed to provocative content or peer pressure. Similarly, in a study of Egyptian students, moral disengagement was a strong predictor of cyberbullying perpetration, especially among males (Elgarhy & Mostafa, 2024).

Self-control has also emerged as a key protective factor. According to Kowalski and Limber (2013), adolescents who demonstrate emotional regulation, delayed gratification, and reflection are more capable of resisting the urge to retaliate or join bullying behavior. Additionally, Huang et al. (2021) observed that excessive time spent on gaming or passive scrolling increases the risk of impulsive online aggression, emphasizing the importance of digital habits in shaping behavior.

Moreover, peer influence remains critical. In collectivist cultures, where social approval and group belonging are central, adolescents may be more likely to follow group norms—even when those norms permit or encourage unethical online conduct (Nocentini & Menesini, 2016). This makes school-based ethics education and peer-led initiatives particularly promising in reducing cyberbullying.

Despite the growing body of work on cyberbullying, several gaps persist. First, few studies explicitly examine the ethical reasoning processes adolescents use when evaluating or engaging in online interactions. Most research isolates behavior (i.e., frequency of bullying, victimization) without integrating ethical frameworks that explain how adolescents justify or resist harmful conduct (Cristello et al., 2025).

Second, much of the existing literature focuses on Western or East Asian contexts. There remains a lack of empirical data from Arab, African, and underrepresented regions where digital norms, platform usage, and family structures differ. Hamad and Shehata (2024) called for more culturally grounded research that explores how local norms shape perceptions of online ethics and bullying.

Finally, there is a need to connect moral education with platform design. Suler (2004) argued for technological

interventions that nudge users toward more empathetic communication—yet few studies have tested such interventions empirically. More work is needed to evaluate how platform affordances (e.g., ethical reminders, peer feedback systems) influence adolescent behavior and attitudes.

The reviewed literature highlights the complexity of cyberbullying as both a behavioral and ethical phenomenon. While the prevalence and effects of cyberbullying are well-documented, fewer studies interrogate the moral reasoning behind these behaviors or how adolescents conceptualize ethical communication online. The current study builds on this foundation by combining quantitative measurement of attitudes with an exploration of digital habits, self-control, and moral identity in a culturally specific adolescent population.

3.Materials and Methods

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational design to explore adolescents' attitudes toward cyberbullying and their awareness of ethical communication on social media platforms. The choice of this design is based on its suitability for examining existing relationships among variables within a naturally occurring setting. Rather than manipulating conditions, this method allows for capturing authentic digital behaviors and moral reflections, especially relevant in social media studies. The aim is to describe patterns and investigate associations, without establishing causality.

The target population, as presented in table 1, included adolescents aged 13 to 18 years, enrolled in public and private secondary schools in urban and semi-urban regions of Iraq. A stratified random sampling approach was used to ensure diversity across age, gender, and school type. The final sample comprised 400 students, adequately powered for quantitative analysis.

Table 1. Demographic Breakdown of the Sample

Category	**Subgroups**	**Frequency**	**Percentage (%)**
Gender	Male / Female	210 / 190	52.5 / 47.5
Age Groups	13–14 / 15–16 / 17–18	120 / 150 / 130	30 / 37.5 / 32.5
School Type	Public / Private	260 / 140	65 / 35
Residence Area	Urban / Semi-Urban	280 / 120	70 / 30
Total	—	400	100%

The participants were contacted through school administrations, and informed consent was obtained from both parents and students. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and ethically approved.

The primary tool used for data collection was a structured questionnaire, as presented in table 2, that underwent expert validation and pilot testing. It comprised three key sections:

- Demographic Data: Including age, gender, school type, region, and time spent on social media daily.
- Cyberbullying Attitudes Scale: Adapted from previous validated tools, this scale contained 15 items measuring participants' views on bullying behavior, victimization, and empathy.
- Digital Ethics Awareness Scale: Developed based on prior literature (Cristello et al., 2024; Hamad & Shehata, 2024), the 12 items in this section evaluated the ethical dimensions of online interaction, including personal responsibility, empathy, privacy, and respect.

The current study adapted all survey items to the Iraqi context following best-practice translation and cultural adaptation procedures. First, two bilingual subject-matter experts independently forward-translated the original English items into Arabic, and discrepancies were reconciled. A separate bilingual translator, blinded to the originals, then back-translated the reconciled Arabic version into English to check semantic equivalence. An expert panel (n = [5]) in media/communication and adolescent psychology reviewed the items for cultural relevance, clarity, and age appropriateness; item-level content validity indices (I-CVI) met the ≥0.80 criterion. We pilot-tested the draft instrument with adolescents (ages 13–18) to examine comprehensibility and response distributions, which led to minor wording edits (e.g., local platform examples). Internal consistency in the pilot was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.70$ across subscales). The finalized Arabic form was

administered in the main study.

1. **Cyberbullying**: Intentional and repeated harm enacted through digital channels (e.g., insults, rumor-spreading, doxxing, non-consensual sharing), typically involving a perceived power imbalance. We operationalize it via subscales for victimization, witnessing, and perpetration on 5-point frequency ratings; higher scores indicate greater involvement. (Hinduja & Patchin, 2017; Kowalski & Limber, 2013; Suler, 2004)
2. **Ethical awareness** (digital communication ethics / moral sensitivity) The ability to recognize and apply ethical principles governing online interactions—harm prevention, respect for dignity and privacy, and responsibility/accountability—especially in cyberbullying contexts. Assessed through Likert-type judgments on brief online scenarios; higher means reflect greater ethical awareness. (Patchin & Hinduja, 2022; O'Reilly et al., 2018; Hamad & Shehata, 2024)
3. **Platform engagement The intensity**, preferences, and breadth of social-media use: (a) hours per day, (b) preferred platforms and typical activities, and (c) a multi-platform index (count of actively used platforms). (Ryan et al., 2016; O'Reilly et al., 2018; Ferrara, 2015)
4. **Scoring and reliability Items use 5-point Likert scales**; construct scores are computed as means of their items (after reverse-coding negatively keyed items). Internal consistency is reported with Cronbach's α (and McDonald's ω where appropriate). (Kowalski & Limber, 2013; Patchin & Hinduja, 2017; O'Reilly et al., 2018)

A pilot study was conducted with 40 students to assess reliability. Cronbach's alpha was 0.88 for the cyberbullying scale and 0.84 for the ethics awareness scale, indicating high internal consistency.

Table 2. Structure of the Questionnaire

Section	Number of Items	Example Item
Demographics	5	"How many hours do you spend on social media?"
Cyberbullying Attitudes	15	"It is okay to tease someone online as a joke."
Communication Ethics	12	"I think about others' feelings before posting."
Total	32	—

Data collection took place over a three-week period using both online and printed questionnaires distributed through school networks. After data cleaning and coding, statistical analysis, as shown in table 3, was conducted using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were calculated to profile participants and responses. To examine group differences and associations:

- Independent sample t-tests were used to compare cyberbullying attitudes and ethical awareness across genders.
- One-way ANOVA tested differences among age groups.
- Pearson correlation measured the relationship between daily social media use and ethical awareness.
- Regression analysis was conducted to identify predictors of ethical sensitivity among adolescents.

Table 3. Summary of Statistical Procedures

Statistical Test	Purpose
Descriptive Statistics	Summarize sample and item responses
t-test	Compare males and females on key variables
ANOVA	Compare age groups
Pearson Correlation	Measure association between social media use and ethics
Regression	Identify strong predictors of ethical awareness

Assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were assessed before performing inferential statistics. A significance threshold of $p < 0.05$ was used for hypothesis testing. Figure 1 presents a comparison between average daily usage of selected platforms and their corresponding ethical awareness scores among adolescents.

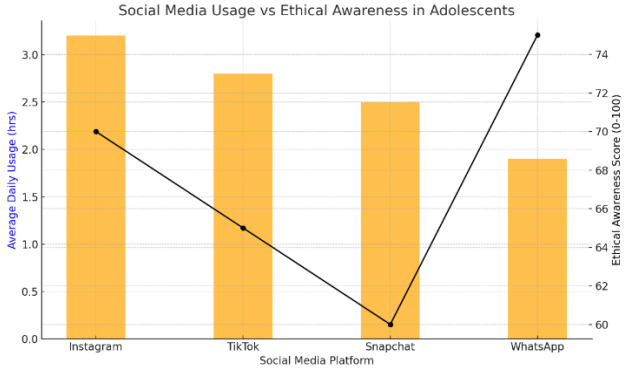


Figure 1. ***Social Media Usage vs Ethical Awareness Score Among Adolescents***

Figure 2 illustrates the step-by-step research process adopted in this study. From defining the population to interpreting the findings, the flowchart captures the methodological logic guiding this investigation. This structure ensures transparency, replicability, and clarity for readers and future researchers interested in adolescent media behavior.

The study adhered to ethical guidelines established by the University of Baghdad. Research Ethics Committee. All participants and guardians received clear explanations of the study's purpose, and consent was obtained. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Data was anonymized and stored securely.

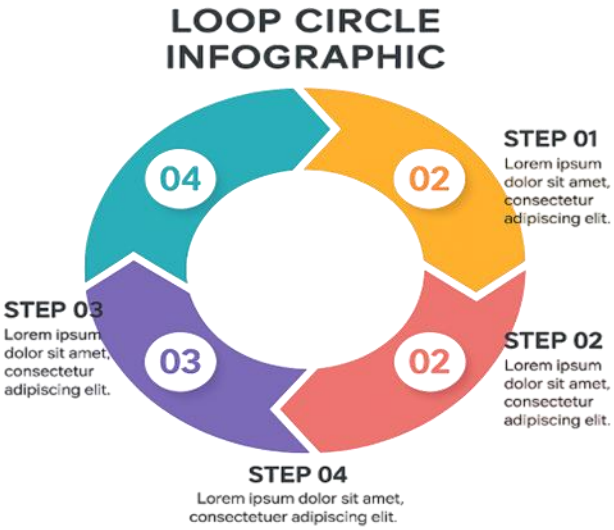


Figure 2. ***loop circle infographic***

4. Results

The findings of this study are organized and interpreted in alignment with the four research objectives. Statistical outcomes are supported with tables and figures and interpreted within the broader context of adolescent digital behavior and ethical sensitivity.

4.1 Prevalence and Patterns of Cyberbullying (Objective 1)

Descriptive statistics reveal that 46.5% of the adolescent respondents reported having experienced or witnessed

cyberbullying within the past six months. Among them, 28.3% identified as victims, 14.7% admitted to engaging in cyberbullying, and 35.6% were bystanders to such incidents on social media platforms. These figures underscore the multidimensional involvement of adolescents in digital aggression—either directly or indirectly.

Notably, Instagram and TikTok were identified as the primary environments where these interactions occurred, especially among the 15–16 age group. Male participants were slightly more likely to report perpetration, while female participants expressed higher levels of emotional impact as victims. This gender disparity aligns with previous research suggesting differentiated roles and psychological consequences based on gender (Kowalski & Limber, 2013).

4.2 Adolescents' Ethical Evaluation of Digital Behaviors (Objective 2)

To measure adolescents' ethical sensitivity, participants responded to 12 items regarding online responsibility, empathy, respect, and digital conduct. Overall, the mean ethical awareness score was 67.4 out of 100 (SD = 8.9), suggesting moderate ethical awareness with considerable individual variance.

Analysis showed that students who perceived online teasing as "humorous" or "not serious" scored significantly lower on ethical awareness (M = 59.3) compared to those who strongly condemned such behavior (M = 74.6; $t(398) = 5.82$, $p < 0.001$). Moreover, students who reported frequent anonymous comments without identity disclosure exhibited lower empathy levels, indicating a potential link between disinhibition and ethical detachment.

This trend was more pronounced on platforms that promote virality and indirect interaction—particularly TikTok and Snapchat—supporting earlier research on platform-specific moral disconnection (Suler, 2004; Ferrara, 2015).

4.3 Influence of Digital Engagement on Moral Judgment (Objective 3)

A central aim of this research was to explore the relationship between daily time spent on social media platforms and ethical awareness. The analysis yielded a negative Pearson correlation between average time online and ethical sensitivity scores ($r = -0.41$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that heavier users tend to demonstrate weaker ethical awareness.

The figure below visualizes this relationship by comparing average daily usage hours with corresponding ethical awareness scores across four platforms:

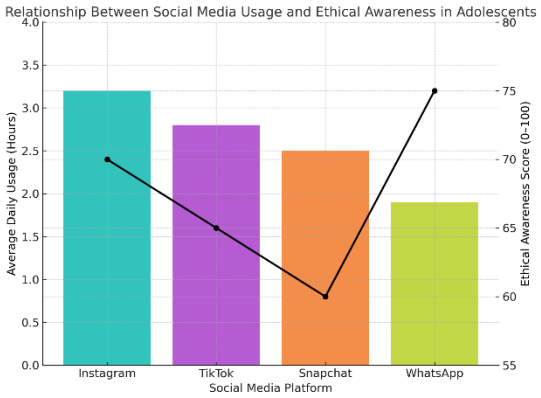


Figure 3. Relationship Between Social Media Usage and Ethical Awareness in Adolescents

As seen in Figure 3, Instagram (3.2 hrs/day) and TikTok (2.8 hrs/day) are associated with lower ethical scores (70 and 65, respectively), while WhatsApp users (1.9 hrs/day) scored highest in ethical awareness (75). This finding supports the hypothesis that platform design and intensity of engagement shape ethical cognition, with fast-paced, content-heavy platforms potentially reducing opportunities for reflection and moral evaluation. Table 4 summarizes these results :

Table 4. Relationship Between Platform Use and Ethics Score

Platform	Avg. Daily Use (hrs)	Mean Ethics Score (/100)
Instagram	3.2	70
TikTok	2.8	65
Snapchat	2.5	60
WhatsApp	1.9	75

4.4 Gender and Age Differences in Ethical Awareness (Objective 4)

To examine demographic influences, an independent t-test and ANOVA were performed. Results showed that female adolescents scored higher on the digital ethics scale (M = 70.2, SD = 7.3) than males (M = 64.1, SD = 9.2); this difference was statistically significant ($t(398) = 6.14$, $p < 0.001$). This aligns with findings from Hamad & Shehata (2024), indicating greater emotional reflexivity and online caution among female participants.

Age-wise, ethical awareness scores followed an inverted U-curve pattern. Participants aged 15–16 had the highest mean score (M = 70.5), followed by 13–14 (M = 66.1) and then 17–18 (M = 64.7). A one-way ANOVA confirmed a significant difference across age groups ($F(2, 397) = 4.89$, $p = 0.008$). These results suggest that mid-adolescents may be more cognitively and emotionally receptive to ethical messages, while older adolescents may exhibit increased cynicism or digital fatigue. In general , table 5 summarizes the differences:

Table 5. Differences by Gender and Age

Group	Ethics Score (Mean ± SD)	Statistical Significance
Male	64.1 ± 9.2	$p < 0.001$
Female	70.2 ± 7.3	
Age 13–14	66.1 ± 8.5	$p = 0.008$
Age 15–16	70.5 ± 7.1	
Age 17–18	64.7 ± 9.4	

4.5 Interpretation and Implications

The results confirm that cyberbullying is not only prevalent among adolescents but also tightly linked to their moral perceptions and digital behaviors. Importantly, higher usage does not equate to higher ethical awareness—in fact, the reverse appears to be true. Furthermore, gender and age influence ethical sensitivity, with females and mid-adolescents demonstrating greater awareness and concern.

These insights emphasize the urgent need for platform-specific ethical education, as well as school-based interventions targeting emotional regulation, empathy, and peer accountability. Given the statistical relationships observed, targeted campaigns on platforms like TikTok and Instagram may have the most impact in shaping responsible behavior.

5. Discussion

The results of this study provide a multi-faceted account of adolescents' moral awareness and involvement in cyberbullying in different cyber-contexts. Another striking finding is the relatively high frequency of cyberbullying (46.5%), in line with the rate observed worldwide by Patchin and Hinduja (2022), confirming that such behaviors are commonplace in youth cyberculture, especially in the hyper-performative spaces of Instagram and TikTok.

The negative relationship between ethical sensitivity and excessive social media engagement ($r = -0.41$, $p < 0.001$) provides evidence of a reduced sensitivity to moral issues as exposure to the digital environment increases. This is consistent with previous research (Kowalski & Limber, 2013, Ryan et al., 2006) that has focused on dopamine-driven loops leading to impaired reflective behavior in youth. It further supports Suler's (2004) assertion of disinhibition mechanisms online, where anonymity and limited personal responsibility account for moral disengagement. Moreover, the research indicates that there are significant differences between the sexes in ethical awareness, with females having a significantly higher

average score than males (M = 70.2 vs. M = 64.1). This gender difference is consistent with previous results (Hamad & Shehata, 2024) that concluded female adolescents in the digital environment have higher emotional intelligence and empathy.

There are also interesting generational contrasts. The pattern of ethical awareness followed an inverted-U shape with 15–16 years olds presenting the highest mean (M = 70.5), decline in that of 13–14 years olds (M = 66.1) and a further decrease at 17–18 (M = 64.7). This evidence indicates a unique developmental trajectory during mid-adolescence when cognitive reflection, emotional regulation, and social identity could be in a balance for the greatest morality potential. This relationship is shown in Figure 4 below, which emphasizes the group most ethically tolerant.

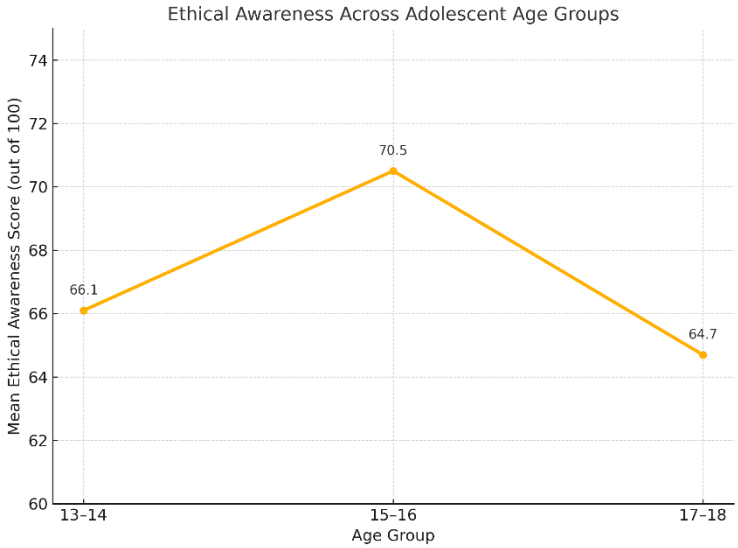


Figure 4. Ethical Awareness Scores by Age Group.

This figure illustrates the mean ethical awareness scores across three adolescent age cohorts, emphasizing the peak at ages 15–16 before a notable decline in older adolescents.

These results conform to reports by Cristello et al. (2024) who highlighted that moral reasoning increases during the cognitive exploration phase but may decrease when adolescents encounter growing peer pressure, platform fatigue or moral relativism. The decline among older teens may also indicate a growing cynicism about institutional moral narratives or overexposure to digital media. This high moral awareness, inferred from the dialogical nature of WhatsApp interaction, is therefore in line with Ferrara's (2015) argument that empathy is conditioned by communication architecture. On the other hand, platforms that spread ephemeral viral content (like TikTok, for example) may also tend to endorse the short-time horizon and to amplify impulsive and short-time horizon behaviors that could potentially erode one's moral reasoning.

Another important insight is how harmful behavior is normalized in the veil of a joke. Students who perceived as "just joking" content that they observed about somebody else online scored much lower on the ethics scale, suggesting online the line between "kidding around" and harm is difficult to distinguish. This echoes O'Reilly et al. (2018) who cautioned that adolescent online communication is frequently ethically ambiguous. Thus, ethics education should cover actual cases, to help adolescents discern between naughtiness and damage to feelings even when it occurs among peers. In sum, these findings support the idea that a broad response is needed for digital ethics issues involving educational, technological, and social aspects. Ethics have to be built into the curricula and to the workings of the platforms and the peer groups. Leveraging scenario-based interventions, digital empathy tools, and reflective interface characteristics together may allow adolescents to hone their critical thinking and emotional literacy knowledge in digital environments.

Contextually, the findings highlight the need for Iraq-specific digital citizenship curricula, school-based anti-cyberbullying protocols, and parental mediation strategies aligned with local norms and platform practices. These findings

are most generalizable to Iraqi adolescents with similar socio-cultural and platform-use profiles; cross-national comparisons are recommended for future work.

6. Conclusion

This study has sought to investigate adolescents' attitudes toward cyberbullying and their awareness of communication ethics within the dynamic context of social media use. By adopting a quantitative, descriptive-correlational approach, the research has provided a multi-layered analysis of how adolescents engage with online behaviors—both morally and behaviorally—and how demographic variables and platform characteristics influence these interactions.

The findings highlight several critical insights. First, cyberbullying remains a prevalent and multifaceted issue among adolescents, with nearly half of the participants reporting direct or indirect involvement. Notably, the platforms most frequently associated with cyberbullying—Instagram and TikTok—are those that encourage visual expression, short-form content, and viral circulation. These characteristics may contribute to reduced accountability and increased exposure to harmful behavior. Second, the study found a moderate overall level of ethical awareness among participants. However, ethical sensitivity varies significantly depending on digital habits. Adolescents who spent more time on social media, especially on fast-paced platforms, exhibited lower levels of moral reflection and empathy. This negative association emphasizes the psychological and behavioral implications of excessive or unstructured digital engagement. Third, the effects of gender and age were statistically significant. Women reported a greater sense of ethical awareness than men, raising the possibility that higher emotional intelligence and/or social sensitivity may explain this. In addition, as young people aged 15–16 years were most aware about the risks of allergen, younger and older age groups knew less. Results indicate that moral sensitivity in cyber settings may be influenced by both technological exposure and cognitive and emotional developmental level. Finally, the correlation between ethical perception and platform use was visualized in comparative charts: private users (those who use WhatsApp and are involved in more intimate and dialogic communication) were more inclined to present a moral sensitivity, when compared to those who typify performative or anonymous surroundings. This contributes to the literature emphasizing ethical implications of platform design and affordances. This research makes meaningful contributions to both academic scholarship and practical application. From a theoretical standpoint, it bridges communication ethics with behavioral media studies, offering a nuanced view of adolescent digital citizenship. While many studies focus on cyberbullying prevalence or psychological consequences, this study foregrounds the ethical reasoning that underpins adolescent choices online. This integration of moral judgment into media behavior is an essential but often overlooked dimension in youth digital research.

The results of the current study may support policies in education and in school to promote ethical consciousness. The patterns of age and sex differences observed indicate that uniform approaches may not be sufficient, and that tailored interventions with respect to the cognitive and emotional pace of the young people are required. These findings can be applied by schools to curate media literacy and digital ethics programs that are relevant to students living in realities and online habits. In addition, the platform-specific examples suggest that technology companies should treat ethics not as something that is merely necessary in terms of compliance but as something to be actively designed into technology. Such insights could be employed by developers and policy teams to incorporate reflective prompts, sharing content controls, or community-based reporting tools to enable safer online spaces. And there are also implications for parents and youth supporters, promoting a joint construction of responsible digital cultures across the stakeholder community. What makes these findings so significant is that they have the potential to transform the dialogue we are having about cyberbullying and digital misbehavior from one of punishment to prevention. Instead of surveillance or retroactive punishment, the emphasis is on prevention: early training in ethics, control over one's own emotions, and peer–peer accountability.

At a time when teenagers are consuming and creating content social media, their choices not only affect individual experience, but also play a role in setting broader digital norms. If educators, parents and policymakers understand how and why adolescents excuse or condemn bad behavior, arguably they can take more targeted steps to address such behavior. The relationships between ethical considerations and digital intensivist, which have been reported in our study, raise serious issues for further exploration into the relations of attention economy models and the development of young people,

including exploring the psychological price of hyper-connectivity. The findings also carry implications for cross-cultural work. Although this study centered on one specific group, the insights it provides may have applicability in other sociocultural areas, especially those where the role of social media adoption by youth is growing quickly. Given the further global expansion of platforms Withal and Sultan discuss, insights like those provided here will be more and more crucial for crafting (culturally sensitive and ethical) engagement strategies.

While this study offers significant contributions, it also opens avenues for future research. One key limitation is its cross-sectional design, which restricts causal inference. Longitudinal studies could track changes in ethical awareness over time, especially in relation to developmental milestones, platform exposure, and peer dynamics. Such work would provide richer insights into the long-term effects of digital behavior on moral growth. Additionally, the reliance on self-report data, while common in social research, may be influenced by social desirability bias. Future studies might employ mixed methods approaches, including interviews, focus groups, and digital behavior tracking, to triangulate findings and deepen understanding.

Another promising direction involves the development and testing of digital ethics interventions. Researchers can collaborate with educators and technology designers to build and evaluate tools—such as in-app decision aids, gamified ethics modules, or peer feedback systems—that actively support ethical engagement. Evaluating these interventions across age groups and cultural settings could significantly enhance the impact and applicability of ethics-based models.

Finally, future inquiries should explore how platform-specific features (e.g., anonymity, filters, live reactions) mediate ethical decision-making. Comparative platform studies, using experimental or quasi-experimental designs, can reveal the subtle mechanisms through which design shapes behavior and beliefs. In summary, this research highlights the urgent need to integrate ethics more deeply into the digital lives of adolescents—not only through education but through structural design and shared social responsibility. As digital environments continue to evolve, so too must our strategies for ensuring that young people navigate them with empathy, reflection, and ethical maturity.

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