Original Article

Internalizing Character Values in the Midst of the Toxic Communication Phenomenon in Adolescent Digital Interaction

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Abstract:

The phenomenon of toxic communication in adolescents' digital interactions, such as cyberbullying, hate speech, and covert verbal aggression is a serious challenge to strengthening character education in the digital era. This study aims to analyze the process of internalizing character values in the midst of the rampant toxic communication in adolescents in the peri-urban area of Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra, which borders the city of Medan. The research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 24 junior high and high school adolescents, 6 teachers, and 5 parents, complemented by digital interaction observation and targeted group discussions (FGD). The analysis was carried out using thematic analysis with stages of data reduction, categorization, and reflective interpretation. The results showed that toxic communication was normalized through a culture of sarcastic humor, peer pressure, and the reproduction of communication patterns from social media. However, the internalization of character values, including empathy, digital responsibility, respect, and self-control is formed through three main mechanisms: dialogical family mediation, school-based character education integration, and the practice of collective reflection between peers. Consistency of strengthening values in the family and school environment has been shown to increase critical awareness and the ability to regulate adolescents' emotions in responding to toxic communication. This research contributes to the development of the study of digital character education by placing the internalization of values as a social process influenced by the structure of relationships and local digital culture, as well as emphasizing the importance of a cross-environmental collaborative approach in building ethical and resilient digital citizenship.

Introduction

Digital transformation in the past decade has fundamentally changed the social interaction patterns of adolescents. Social media, instant messaging applications, and various algorithm-based platforms are now the main spaces for the formation of identities, relationships, and self-expression of the younger generation (Yeasmin, 2024). On the one hand, the digital space opens up opportunities for participation and access to information. But on the other hand, the intensity of online interaction also gives rise to toxic communication phenomena, such as cyberbullying, hate speech, veiled insults, body shaming, and a form of verbal aggression that is legitimized through a culture of sarcastic humor (Çakar-Mengü & Mengü, 2023). This phenomenon not only impacts the psychological health of adolescents, but also affects the construction of social values and norms that they internalize in their daily lives (Hua et al., 2019; Kusumaningtyas et al., 2024).

Conceptually, character education in the digital context can no longer be understood solely as a transfer of values through a formal curriculum, but rather as an internalization process that takes place in complex social interactions, including in the digital space (Dewi & Alam, 2020). Internalization of values is a process in which individuals absorb, internalize, and make values as behavioral guidelines through mechanisms of imitation, reflection, habituation, and social dialogue (Beres et al., 2021). From the perspective of social learning theory, adolescent behavior and communication norms are greatly influenced by observations of peer models and significant figures in online and offline environments. When toxic communication is normalized in a digital social culture, the risk of reproducing aggressive behavior becomes even greater, especially if it is not balanced with the reinforcement of values such as empathy, responsibility, and self-control (Irmayanti & Chusniyah, 2024; Zalukhu, 2025).

Various studies show that exposure to negative content on social media correlates with increased verbal aggressiveness and decreased moral sensitivity in adolescents. However, most studies still focus on the psychological impact or prevalence of cyberbullying, while aspects of the process of internalizing character values in the midst of toxic communication culture have not been explored in depth, especially in the local context of Indonesia. In fact, the socio-cultural characteristics of an area also shape communication patterns, power relations between peers, and social control mechanisms that affect how values are understood and negotiated (Meates, 2020).

The peri-urban area of Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra, which is directly adjacent to the city of Medan, presents unique social dynamics (Sinurat et al., 2021). The combination of urbanization, increasingly widespread digital access, and social heterogeneity creates an intense space for adolescent interaction and is relatively open to global influences. In this context, adolescents are not only faced with academic and social demands, but also with the pressures of perperitivity in the digital space that often blur the boundaries between jokes and aggression (Buckingham, 2015). This condition makes this area relevant as a research locus to understand how character values are internalized in social situations that are undergoing a digital cultural transition (Christiawan & Nguyen, 2024).

Based on this description, this study seeks to answer the question of how toxic communication patterns are formed and normalized in adolescent digital interactions; how the process of internalizing character values takes place in the midst of the communication culture; and what social mechanisms play a role in strengthening or weakening the internalization of character values in adolescents. With a qualitative case

study approach, this study aims to make a conceptual contribution to the development of digital character education by placing the internalization of values as a social process influenced by peer relations, family mediation, and school-based education practices.

Theoretically, this research expands the discourse of character education by integrating the dimensions of digital literacy and emotion regulation in the framework of value internalization. Practically, the research findings are expected to be the basis for strengthening collaborative strategies between families, schools, and peer communities in building ethical and resilient digital citizenship in the midst of contemporary digital communication challenges.

Methods

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. This approach was chosen to gain a deep understanding of the process of internalizing character values in the midst of the toxic communication phenomenon in adolescent digital interactions (Khan, 2019). The case study allows researchers to explore social dynamics contextually in a specific setting, namely the peri-urban area of Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra, which is directly adjacent to the city of Medan. The focus of the research is directed at social processes, relationship patterns, and value mediation mechanisms that take place in the family, school, and peer community (Viera, 2023).

Location and Research Participants

The research was carried out in two secondary schools (junior high and high school) in the peri-urban area of Deli Serdang Regency which have active digital access and high intensity of social media use among their students. The study participants consisted of 24 adolescents (ages 13–17 years), 6 teachers, and 5 parents who were selected using the purposive sampling technique. The criteria for selecting teenagers include: actively using social media on at least two platforms; have been involved in or witnessed toxic communication practices in digital interactions; and willing to participate in interviews and group discussions. Teachers and parents were selected based on their involvement in character development and supervision of adolescents' digital activities.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and digital interaction observations. Interviews were conducted to explore adolescents' experiences as well as teachers' and parents' perspectives on value mediation, while FGD was used to identify digital communication norms and peer influence. Observations were carried out with the consent of participants to the communication patterns in social media groups. In addition, school policy documentation related to character education and digital literacy is analyzed as supporting data (Sukmawati, 2023).

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis with stages: data reduction through the initial transcription and coding process; categorization based on key themes such as the normalization of toxic communication, mechanisms of internalization of values, and strategies for emotion regulation; and reflective interpretation to connect empirical findings with the conceptual framework of character education and digital literacy (Muthiah et al., 2020). To increase the credibility of the data, triangulation of sources (adolescents, teachers, parents), triangulation of techniques (interviews, FGDs,

observations), and member checking of several participants was carried out to confirm the results of the researcher's interpretation (Abdul-Jabbar, 2022).

Ethical Considerations

This research pays attention to the ethical principles of social research, including informed consent, identity confidentiality, and protection of sensitive digital data. All participants' names are anonymized, and the use of screenshots or digital documentation is done after obtaining written permission from the relevant parties. Given that the study subjects were adolescents, parental consent was also obtained before the data collection process was carried out.

Results

Data analysis through open, axial, and selective coding processes resulted in four main themes: the normalization of toxic communication in adolescent digital culture, the dynamics of peer pressure and digital perperitivity, the mechanism of internalizing character values across environments, and patterns of emotion regulation and resistance to toxic communication.

Normalization of Toxic Communication in Adolescent Digital Culture

Of the 24 adolescent participants, 21 adolescents (87.5%) admitted that they had been exposed to communication containing elements of verbal aggression in the digital space in the last three months. The most dominant forms of toxic communication are sarcastic sarcasm and mocking humor that are legitimized as part of social culture.

Table 1. Exposure to Toxic Communication in the Last 3 Months (n=24).

Display Categories	Number of Teenagers	Percentage
Frequent (≥ 3 times/week)	11	45.8%
Sometimes (1–2 times/week)	8	33.3%
Rarely (< 1 time/week)	2	8.3%
Never	3	12.5%

The data showed that nearly half of the participants experienced regular exposure to toxic communication in their daily digital interactions. This exposure is not always in the form of explicit hate speech, but more often appears in the form of sarcasm, condescending comments wrapped in humor, and the use of digital symbols that give the impression of light but have an aggressive charge. The frequency of this kind of communication, especially in class groups and social media, indicates that the practice has become part of a communication culture that is considered "commonplace" among adolescents. A teenager said:

"In the class group, almost every day there are people who insinuate each other. Sometimes use laughing emojis to make it look funny." (R-04, interview, February 14, 2025)

This quote shows the existence of a collective rationalization mechanism against verbal aggression. The laughing (😂) emoji or fire (🔥) symbol that often accompanies sarcastic comments serve as performative markers that soften the message, so that the

veiled aggression is accepted as a joke. In this context, digital symbols are not just a visual element but, become a semiotic device that mediates social meaning and influences how messages are interpreted by group members.

Observations of digital interactions show that the use of these emojis often increases responses from other group members, such as reply to comments or similar reactions, which ultimately reinforces the social legitimacy of the behavior. This pattern suggests that toxic communication does not always appear in a distinctly confrontational form, but rather operates subtly through humorous performativity and the dynamics of collective responses. Thus, the line between jokes and aggression becomes blurred, and the adolescent who is the target of the sarcasm is in an ambiguous position—between accepting it as part of the association or secretly feeling the psychological impact. This phenomenon confirms that toxic communication in the digital space is not only a matter of message content, but also related to the relational context, digital symbols, and interaction structures that make up the norms of group communication.

Peer Group Pressure and Digital Performivity

A total of 17 adolescents (70.8%) stated that they felt compelled to respond, react, or approve to comments with a toxic tone in order to maintain their social position in the digital group. The pressure is generally implicit, but strong enough to influence their communication decisions. In this context, participation in toxic communication is often not based on value approval, but rather on the need to remain considered relevant and "one frequency" with the group.

"If you don't comment or give a reaction, it will be thought that it will not be as frequent. So sometimes just go with it." (R-09, interview, February 19, 2025)

This quote suggests that response absenteeism can be interpreted as a form of social deviation. Adolescents tend to view active participation in the flow of comments—including sarcastic ones—as an unwritten condition for maintaining group solidarity. Another participant added:

"Sometimes I actually disagree, but if everyone laughs, yes, I laugh too. If not, it will be considered baper." (R-13, interview, February 21, 2025)

This statement shows a moral ambivalence. Adolescents are aware of the potential negative impact of such communication but, choose conformity to avoid negative labels such as "too sensitive" or "can't joke". This kind of labeling becomes a social control mechanism that limits the space for the expression of critical attitudes. In the FGD, there is also an acknowledgment of the existence of symbolic competition in the digital space:

"If our comments are replied to or liked the most, it feels like a win. So sometimes people deliberately make something spicier so that it is rame." (R-05, FGD, March 3, 2025)

This quote shows that digital perperitivity is not only concerned with social acceptance, but also with the search for validation through the quantification of responses (likes, replies, emojis). In these situations, verbal aggression can be a strategy to increase the visibility and appeal of the interaction. Another respondent revealed a more explicit dimension of pressure:

"Once I didn't participate in the comment, then someone DM said 'why is it just diem, it's not solid'. So yes, after that I reacted more often." (R-17, interview, February 24, 2025)

This shows that peer pressure is not only symbolic but, can also take the form of personal reprimands that reinforce the norm of active participation. The results of the FGD showed that social status in digital groups was influenced by the intensity of comment participation, the ability to create funny or sarcastic content, and the number of likes or responses obtained. Teens who are active and able to produce engaging comments tend to gain higher recognition, while those who are passive are at risk of being perceived as less solid. Thus, the digital space becomes an arena of symbolic competition that forms an informal social hierarchy.

In this context, the digital space serves as a performative arena where interaction becomes social capital. Teens who consistently produce comments that are considered "sharp" or "entertaining" tend to gain higher legitimacy in informal group structures. Conversely, those who choose to remain silent or be critical have the potential to experience symbolic marginalization.

Thus, peer group pressure in digital interactions not only shapes communication patterns, but also influences the process of internalizing values. Conformance to sarcastic humor norms and collective responses can shift adolescents' moral sensitivity, while amplifying the reproduction of toxic communication as part of a digital social culture.

Table 2. Determinants of Digital Social Status (based on adolescent perception)

Factors	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Actively commenting	15	62.5%
Lots of responses	18	75%
Content is considered funny	16	66.7%
Have a large following	10	41.7%

These findings show that there is a dimension of digital performativity, where social values are reproduced through digital visibility and response.

Mechanism of Internalization of Character Values

Although social pressure is quite strong, research has found that the internalization of values still occurs through three main mechanisms: family, school, and horizontal correction between peers.

1. Family Mediation

A total of 16 adolescents (67%) reported that their parents had actively discussed social media etiquette. Adolescents in this category tended to show higher emotion regulation scores (based on thematic categorization of responses).

"My father always said that digital traces cannot be erased. So, I'm more careful." (R-18, interview, February 22, 2025)

Adolescents who did not receive active mediation (8 people) showed a more permissive tendency to verbal aggression.

2. Character Education in Schools

A total of 20 adolescents (83%) stated that they had participated in digital literacy or character education activities based on case discussions. BK teacher said:

"We invite students to analyze the psychological impact of negative comments. After that, they were asked for written reflections." (G-02, interview, February 26, 2025)

The analysis showed that schools that applied a reflective approach had adolescents with a lower tendency to retaliate against aggression directly.

3. Reflection and Horizontal Correction

A total of 13 adolescents (54%) stated that they had reminded each other of friends when there was excessive communication.

"If it starts to be toxic, usually someone DMs personally, tell them not to overdo it." (R-11, FGD, March 3, 2025)

This shows that the internalization of value also takes place horizontally through the mechanism of peer regulation.

4. Emotion Regulation and Response Patterns

Based on the categorization analysis of responses to toxic communications:

Table 3. Adolescent Response Patterns to Toxic Communication.

Response	Quantity	Percentage
Ignore	9	37.5%
Assertive clarification	5	20.8%
Block an account	6	25%
Aggressive retaliation	7	29.2%

Some respondents have more than one strategy for responding to toxic communication. Adolescents who respond aggressively generally come from groups with high exposure to toxic communication and minimal value reinforcement.

"I replied because I felt that my pride was attacked." (R-02, interview, February 16, 2025)

Instead, some teens choose passive strategies such as ignoring or muting the group.

"If I usually just keep quiet or mute the group." (R-20, interview, February 24, 2025)

These differences in responses show variations in the level of emotion regulation influenced by the quality of value mediation and social environmental support. The results of the study show that toxic communication in adolescent digital interactions in the peri-urban area of Deli Serdang is not merely an individual phenomenon but, is a social construct that is legitimized through sarcastic humor, digital performativity, and peer group pressure. However, the internalization of character values continues through social interactions that are mediative and reflective. Consistency in strengthening values across environments (family-school-peers) correlates with the ability to regulate emotions and

resistance to toxic communication. Conversely, weak value mediation contributes to the reproduction of patterns of verbal aggression in the digital space.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that toxic communication in adolescent digital interaction in the peri-urban area of Deli Serdang cannot be understood as a mere individual behavior, but as a social construct that is reproduced through peer group dynamics and the logic of digital performativity (Surya & Taibe, 2022). The high exposure to sarcastic sarcasm and mocking humor that is legitimized as a joke shows that verbal aggression has normalized in adolescent communication culture. This is in line with the perspective of Social Learning Theory which states that individuals tend to imitate behaviors that obtain social reinforcement (Bandura) (Warini et al., 2023). In this context, responses in the form of likes, reply to comments, or emojis become a form of symbolic reinforcement that strengthens the reproduction of toxic communication.

The use of laughing emojis or certain visual symbols as "humor markers" suggests that verbal aggression is mediated through digital semiotic devices that blur the boundaries between jokes and insults. Thus, the digital space is not just a medium of communication, but a performative arena in which social identity and status are negotiated through visibility and quantitative response (Nuresa, 2025). These findings reinforce the argument that social media algorithms and interactive features also shape communication norms, as content that triggers high responses tends to receive more attention and social legitimacy.

The peer group pressures identified in this study also show a strong social conformity mechanism. Teens feel compelled to participate in the flow of comments so as not to be perceived as different or less solid (Zatrahadi, 2025). This conformity shows that the internalization of values does not always run linearly towards the reinforcement of positive character but, can be distracted by the need for social acceptance. In this condition, digital performativity becomes the social capital that determines the position in the informal hierarchy of the group. Adolescents who are active and able to produce sarcastic humor gain higher legitimacy, while critical attitudes are at risk of being marginalized (Low, 2024).

However, this study also found that the internalization of character values continues through cross-environmental mediation mechanisms. Dialogical family mediation, the integration of digital literacy in school learning, and the practice of peer regulation are significant protective factors. These findings show that the internalization of values is a social process influenced by the quality of relationships and the consistency of strengthening norms in various contexts of adolescent life. Adolescents who obtained simultaneous reinforcement of values from family and school showed better levels of emotional regulation and a lower tendency to reciprocate aggression impulsively.

School involvement through a reflective approach, such as case discussion and analysis of the psychological impact of negative comments, shows that digital character education based on critical reflection is more effective than a normative approach that is purely prohibitive (Burr et al., 2020). This indicates the importance of developing digital literacy that not only focuses on the technical aspects of media use, but also on the ethical dimensions, empathy, and awareness of digital footprints.

In addition, the horizontal correction mechanism between peers shows that character values can also be internalized through egalitarian relations. The practice of reminding each other personally (direct message) when communication is considered excessive indicates the embryo of a reflective culture in the adolescent community (Amar, 2025). In other words, the digital space is not only a place for the reproduction of aggression, but also has the potential

to become a space for social learning if supported by a more ethical communication culture.

Overall, this discussion emphasizes that toxic communication in adolescent digital interactions is the result of interactions between structural factors (platform features and algorithmic logic), relational factors (peer group pressure), and mediative factors (family and school). The internalization of character values in the digital context does not occur automatically but, requires consistency of reinforcement across environments. When the mediation of values is weak, and the performative pressure is high, toxic communication tends to be reproduced. In contrast, when family, school, and peers form a reflective ecosystem, adolescents exhibit stronger capacity for emotional regulation and moral resistance to harmful communication practices. These findings enrich the study of digital character education by emphasizing that the formation of ethical digital citizenship does not only depend on the formal curriculum, but also on the social dynamics that take place in the digital space itself.

Conclusion

This study concludes that toxic communication in adolescent digital interaction in the peri-urban area of Deli Serdang Regency is a structured social phenomenon, not just individual behavior. The normalization of sarcastic satire and aggressive humor is formed through the dynamics of peer group pressure and digital perperitivity that prioritize visibility and quantitative response as a form of social legitimacy. In this context, veiled verbal aggression gains symbolic reinforcement through the mechanisms of collective participation and the logic of digital platform interactions.

Nevertheless, the process of internalizing character values continues through cross-environmental mediation, namely family, school, and horizontal relationships between peers. Dialysis family mediation, critical reflection-based character education in schools, and peer regulation practices have been proven to contribute to increased emotional regulation and moral resistance of adolescents to toxic communication. Consistency in strengthening values in various contexts of adolescent life is a key factor in building ethical and resilient digital citizenship.

Theoretically, this study emphasizes that the internalization of character values in the digital era must be understood as a social process influenced by the structure of relationships and online communication culture. In practical terms, these findings imply the need for a collaborative approach between families and schools in developing digital literacy that is not only technical, but also oriented towards empathy, responsibility, and awareness of digital footprints.

This study has limitations in the specific coverage of the region and the limited number of participants, so generalization of the findings needs to be done carefully. Further research is suggested to expand the geographic context as well as integrate a quantitative approach to test the relationship between the intensity of exposure to toxic communication and the level of adolescent emotion regulation more comprehensively.

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