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Hoaxes, Cyberbullying, the Digital Ethics Crisis, and the Urgency of Character Education

Meirita Sari[1], **Alya Permata**[2], **Mutia Arini**[3], **Nurul Riski Mutmainah**[4], **Zakia Nur Baiti**[5]

[12345] UIN Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu, Indonesia; meiritasari@mail.uinfasbengkulu.ac.id; alyapermata992006@gmail.com; mutiabkl99@gmail.com; nurulriskimutmainah@gmail.com; zakianurbaiti708@gmail.com

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Abstract

Digital communication has expanded educational opportunities while simultaneously intensifying exposure to hoaxes, cyberbullying, hate, manipulation, and other forms of unethical online conduct. This article examines the relationship between information disorder, cyberbullying, the digital ethics crisis, and the need to strengthen character education. Using a narrative literature review, twenty scholarly and authoritative sources were analyzed thematically to identify the mechanisms of digital harm and the educational responses most consistently supported in the literature. The synthesis shows that hoaxes and disinformation exploit rapid sharing, novelty, emotional reactions, and weak verification practices, while cyberbullying extends interpersonal aggression through persistent, networked, and often anonymous communication. Together, these phenomena reveal that technical digital skills are insufficient when they are not accompanied by ethical judgment, empathy, responsibility, respect, and truth-seeking habits. The article argues that character education should therefore be integrated with media and information literacy and digital citizenship rather than treated as a separate moral subject. Schools can operationalize this integration through verification routines, ethical discussion of real digital cases, restorative responses to online harm, reflective sharing practices, and explicit modeling by teachers. A character-centered digital education offers a preventive and developmental strategy for building safer, more truthful, and more responsible online participation.

Keywords Character education; Cyberbullying; Digital ethics; Disinformation; Media literacy

INTRODUCTION

Digital platforms have transformed how students learn, communicate, build communities, and participate in public life. Yet the same environment that makes information abundant also makes harmful content easy to produce, imitate, and circulate. Hoaxes, fabricated stories, manipulated images, misleading headlines, online harassment, and coordinated disinformation can move from one screen to another before users have evaluated their accuracy or ethical consequences. UNESCO describes this wider condition as information

disorder, emphasizing the interaction among misinformation, disinformation, mal-information, digital platforms, and the changing information ecosystem (Ireton & Posetti, 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The problem is therefore not simply that some people encounter false information; it is that digital systems can reward speed, emotional reaction, novelty, and engagement.

Research demonstrates why this environment requires educational attention. Vosoughi et al. (2018), analyzing approximately 126,000 verified news stories shared on Twitter, found that false news traveled farther, faster, and more broadly than true news. However, the scale and distribution of false-news sharing are not uniform. Guess et al. (2019) found that sharing fake-news domains was relatively rare in their Facebook sample, while age and political orientation were associated with differences in sharing behavior. These findings caution against portraying every internet user as equally vulnerable, but they also show that individual judgment matters within a system in which misleading content can receive disproportionate attention. Lazer et al. (2018) consequently argue that responses must combine better individual discernment with institutional and platform-level safeguards.

The terminology also matters. Tandoc et al. (2018) showed that the label "fake news" has been used to describe several different phenomena, including satire, parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising, and propaganda. Treating all false or contested content as one category can obscure differences in intent, evidence, and harm. In this article, the term hoax refers broadly to fabricated or deceptive claims presented as credible, while misinformation refers to false or misleading information shared without necessarily requiring deceptive intent. Disinformation is used for intentionally deceptive or manipulative information. This distinction follows the conceptual approach recommended in information-disorder scholarship (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

At the interpersonal level, the digital ethics crisis is visible in cyberbullying. Online aggression can involve repeated insults, humiliation, rumor spreading, exclusion, impersonation, threats, or the circulation of embarrassing material. A major review and meta-analysis found that cyberbullying is related to traditional bullying and a range of behavioral and psychological outcomes (Kowalski et al., 2014). Patchin and Hinduja (2010) also found a significant relationship between cyberbullying experiences and lower self-esteem, while Hinduja and Patchin (2010) reported associations between bullying or cyberbullying experiences and suicidal thoughts and attempts. Such evidence reinforces the need for prevention and intervention, while also requiring schools to avoid treating online harm as trivial simply because it occurs outside the physical classroom.

The educational challenge is therefore broader than teaching students how to operate devices. Digital competence must include the ability to evaluate claims, recognize manipulation, anticipate consequences, respect others, regulate emotional responses, and act responsibly when witnessing harm. Jones and Mitchell (2016) conceptualize digital citizenship around respectful online behavior and civic engagement, while Choi et al. (2017) demonstrate that digital citizenship includes multiple dimensions of knowledge, attitudes, and

participation. Ribble (2015) likewise frames responsible technology use as a set of teachable practices rather than a natural consequence of growing up with technology.

This article argues that character education provides the missing ethical foundation. Character education is concerned with the development of moral knowledge, moral feeling, and moral action, including respect, responsibility, honesty, fairness, self-control, and care for others. Lickona (1991) emphasizes that schools should intentionally cultivate habits that enable students to act well, not merely know moral concepts. Research-based character education further indicates that effective programs require explicit values, adult modeling, opportunities for moral action, and a supportive school climate (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). Social and emotional learning also contributes to the development of self-management, social awareness, relationships, and responsible decision-making (Durlak et al., 2011).

The purpose of this article is to synthesize literature on hoaxes, cyberbullying, digital ethics, media and information literacy, and character education, and to formulate an integrated educational response. The central proposition is that digital safety cannot be sustained through technical controls or fact-checking skills alone. Students need repeated opportunities to practice truth-seeking, empathy, responsibility, respect, and reflective decision-making in authentic digital situations.

METHODS

This study used a narrative literature review with thematic synthesis. The review was designed to connect three bodies of scholarship that are often discussed separately: information disorder and hoaxes; cyberbullying and online interpersonal harm; and character, digital citizenship, and media and information literacy education. Sources were selected through targeted searches of scholarly and authoritative publications, prioritizing peer-reviewed journal articles, established academic books, and UNESCO resources with clear relevance to the research question. Twenty references were retained for the synthesis. Foundational works were included when they provided widely used conceptual or educational frameworks, while empirical studies were prioritized for claims about digital behavior and educational outcomes.

Analysis proceeded in four stages. First, each source was read for its definition of the problem and its explanation of mechanisms through which digital harm occurs. Second, findings were coded into the themes of information disorder, emotional and social drivers, cyberbullying consequences, digital citizenship, ethical reasoning, and character formation. Third, the themes were compared to identify areas of convergence and tension. Fourth, the findings were translated into an educational framework linking media and information literacy with character education. This procedure does not claim to estimate a pooled effect size; rather, it develops an interpretive model that explains why cognitive verification skills and moral dispositions should be taught together.

Source: Author synthesis based on Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), Jones and Mitchell (2016), Choi et al. (2017), and Berkowitz and Bier (2004).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The thematic synthesis produced five connected findings. First, hoaxes and disinformation are not only problems of false content but also problems of attention, context, and judgment. Second, cyberbullying is amplified by the persistence and reach of networked communication. Third, digital ethics requires attention to both individual conduct and the structures that shape visibility and sharing. Fourth, media and information literacy provides important cognitive tools but becomes more effective when joined to ethical dispositions. Fifth, character education can provide the durable habits needed to translate knowledge into responsible action.

Theme	Core problem	Evidence from literature	Educational implication
Information disorder	False, misleading, or manipulative content can circulate rapidly.	Vosoughi et al. (2018); Tandoc et al. (2018); Lazer et al. (2018)	Teach source checking, lateral reading, context evaluation, and careful sharing.
Cyberbullying	Online aggression can be persistent, public, and psychologically harmful.	Kowalski et al. (2014); Patchin & Hinduja (2010); Hinduja & Patchin (2010)	Teach empathy, bystander responsibility, reporting, restorative response, and help-seeking.
Digital ethics	Technology creates moral choices about data, algorithms, speech, privacy, and harm.	Floridi & Taddeo (2016); Floridi et al. (2018)	Use ethical dilemmas to connect technical actions with human consequences.
Digital citizenship	Competent users also need respectful and participatory online behavior.	Jones & Mitchell (2016); Choi et al. (2017); Ribble (2015)	Develop norms for respectful communication, participation, and accountability.
Character education	Knowledge does not automatically become ethical action.	Lickona (1991); Berkowitz & Bier (2004); Durlak et al. (2011)	Build habits of honesty, responsibility, self-control, empathy, and moral courage.

Table 1. Thematic synthesis of the literature

Source: Author synthesis from the 20 references reviewed.

Hoaxes, misinformation, and the problem of truth

The first finding is that hoaxes should be treated as an educational problem of both epistemic judgment and moral responsibility. Students may forward a claim because it confirms an existing belief, produces surprise, appears to come from a familiar person, or simply looks professionally designed. Pennycook et al. (2020) provide an important cognitive explanation: people can be capable of distinguishing truth from falsehood when directly asked about accuracy, yet may pay insufficient attention to accuracy when deciding what to share. In their experiments, a simple accuracy prompt substantially improved truth discernment in subsequent sharing decisions. The implication for schools is practical: students should be taught to pause before sharing, not merely to memorize lists of unreliable websites.

Correction also requires care. Lewandowsky et al. (2012) show that misinformation can

continue to influence judgments even after people receive corrective information. Therefore, effective instruction should not rely exclusively on repeating that a claim is false. Learners should be guided to identify the original claim, inspect evidence, compare independent sources, understand the correct explanation, and reflect on why the false claim was persuasive. UNESCO's media and information literacy curriculum similarly places critical evaluation, information verification, digital competencies, and responsible participation within a connected educational framework (Grizzle et al., 2021).

The evidence also supports a balanced interpretation of the hoax problem. The finding that false information can spread unusually widely does not mean that most users constantly share fabricated stories. Guess et al. (2019) found that fake-news sharing was relatively uncommon in their Facebook sample. This distinction is important for pedagogy because exaggerated narratives about a generation of careless digital users can undermine trust. Character-centered instruction should instead treat students as developing moral and epistemic agents who can learn to make better decisions through practice, feedback, and modeling.

Cyberbullying and the ethics of interpersonal communication

Cyberbullying demonstrates that digital ethics is relational. A harmful comment is not merely a technical event; it affects a person's dignity, belonging, emotional security, and participation in school life. Kowalski et al. (2014) show that cyberbullying research is connected to traditional bullying and multiple psychological and behavioral outcomes. Patchin and Hinduja (2010) found that students who experienced cyberbullying, whether as victims or offenders, had lower self-esteem than students with little or no experience. Hinduja and Patchin (2010) further identified associations between bullying experiences and suicidal thoughts and attempts. These findings justify school policies that recognize online aggression as part of the wider school climate rather than as a private problem outside school.

Character education adds a preventive dimension to cyberbullying intervention. Rules against bullying are necessary, but rules alone do not guarantee that students will exercise restraint when peers are absent, when anonymity is possible, or when a group rewards ridicule. Students need repeated practice in empathy, perspective taking, self-control, fairness, and moral courage. They also need to learn that being a bystander carries ethical responsibilities. A student who refuses to forward humiliating content, supports a targeted peer, reports serious abuse, or challenges a harmful joke is practicing character in a digital environment.

Digital citizenship research supports this approach. Jones and Mitchell (2016) distinguish respectful online behavior from online civic engagement, while Choi et al. (2017) conceptualize digital citizenship as a multidimensional construct involving attitudes, abilities, and participation. Ribble (2015) similarly presents digital citizenship as a set of responsible practices that can be taught in schools. These perspectives suggest that cyberbullying prevention should move beyond warnings about danger and develop positive norms for how

students speak, disagree, collaborate, and respond to conflict online.

The digital ethics crisis: beyond individual blame

The third finding concerns the meaning of a digital ethics crisis. Ethical problems in digital environments are produced through the interaction of human choices, platform affordances, data practices, algorithms, and institutional incentives. Floridi and Taddeo (2016) argue that data ethics must examine moral problems related to data, algorithms, and the practices through which they are generated, processed, disseminated, and used. Floridi et al. (2018) similarly propose an ethical framework for AI that emphasizes principles such as beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, justice, and explicability. Although these frameworks are broader than school-based digital citizenship, they clarify why ethical education should not be reduced to simple etiquette.

For educators, the implication is to help learners recognize that digital actions have distributed consequences. Posting a photo can affect another person's privacy; forwarding a rumor can alter a peer's reputation; engaging with inflammatory content can amplify its visibility; and accepting an algorithmically recommended claim without scrutiny can reinforce a narrow information environment. A mature digital ethic therefore requires students to ask not only 'Can I do this?' but also 'Should I do this?', 'Who may be harmed?', 'What evidence supports this claim?', and 'What responsibility do I have after I click share?'

This ethical framing also prevents an overly individualistic response to misinformation. Lazer et al. (2018) emphasize that combating fake news requires both individual-level interventions and broader safeguards. Schools cannot redesign platform algorithms, but they can teach students how digital systems influence attention and behavior while developing habits of critical reflection. The goal is neither to make students distrust all digital information nor to place responsibility for systemic problems entirely on children. Instead, education should equip them to participate responsibly while understanding that platforms, institutions, families, and policymakers also have duties.

Why character education is urgent

Character education is urgent because the digital environment repeatedly presents situations in which students must act without immediate adult supervision. The speed of online interaction reduces the time available for reflection, while social rewards can encourage impulsive behavior. Lickona (1991) argues that character education should cultivate respect and responsibility as habits expressed through action. Berkowitz and Bier (2004) likewise emphasize that effective character education is grounded in explicit values, developmental processes, adult modeling, opportunities for practice, and a supportive school environment. These principles fit the digital context because ethical online behavior must become habitual rather than dependent on surveillance.

The urgency does not mean creating another isolated subject with a long list of moral terms. Character education is more effective when embedded in ordinary learning and school culture. A science teacher can ask students to evaluate the credibility of a viral scientific claim;

a language teacher can analyze manipulative headlines and persuasive framing; an Islamic education teacher can discuss honesty, respect, responsibility, and avoiding harm in digital communication; and a homeroom teacher can use anonymized cyberbullying cases to practice bystander responses. Such integration makes character visible as a way of thinking and acting.

Social and emotional learning provides a complementary mechanism. Durlak et al. (2011), in a meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions, found positive effects on social-emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance. In the digital context, self-management can interrupt impulsive sharing, social awareness can increase empathy for targets of online aggression, relationship skills can improve conflict management, and responsible decision-making can support ethical choices. Character education and social-emotional learning should not be treated as identical, but their overlap demonstrates the value of developing internal capacities alongside rules and technical skills.

Integrated educational strategy

The literature supports an integrated strategy with four mutually reinforcing layers: knowledge, judgment, character, and action. Knowledge involves understanding information disorder, cyberbullying, privacy, algorithms, and digital citizenship. Judgment involves verification, source comparison, evidence evaluation, and recognition of emotional manipulation. Character provides the dispositions of honesty, empathy, respect, responsibility, fairness, and self-control. Action means translating those dispositions into concrete behaviors such as pausing before sharing, refusing to participate in harassment, correcting false claims responsibly, protecting privacy, and seeking help when harm occurs.

Educational component	Student practice	Character value	Expected outcome
Verification routine	Check source, date, author, evidence, and independent confirmation before sharing.	Honesty; prudence	Reduced impulsive sharing of hoaxes and misinformation.
Ethical case discussion	Analyze who is affected, possible harms, rights, and responsibilities.	Empathy; justice	Stronger moral reasoning in ambiguous digital situations.
Cyberbullying response	Do not amplify harm; support targets; document and report serious incidents.	Respect; courage	Safer peer norms and more responsible bystander behavior.
Reflective digital practice	Pause, identify emotion, consider consequences, then act.	Self-control; responsibility	More deliberate online participation.
Teacher modeling	Demonstrate source transparency, respectful disagreement, and responsible correction.	Integrity	A consistent school culture of ethical digital behavior.

Table 2. Character-centered educational responses to digital risks

Source: Author synthesis based on the reviewed literature.

The integrated model also requires assessment. Traditional tests can measure whether students know definitions of misinformation or cyberbullying, but they do not necessarily

show whether students will behave responsibly online. Assessment should therefore include scenario-based tasks, source-verification exercises, reflective journals, collaborative case analysis, and observation of classroom norms. Students can be asked to explain why a source is trustworthy, identify an ethical dilemma in a digital case, propose a response to cyberbullying, and justify whether they would share a particular post. Such tasks assess both cognitive and moral dimensions of digital competence.

Finally, implementation should be whole-school. UNESCO (Ireton & Posetti, 2018; Grizzle et al., 2021) emphasizes the importance of media and information literacy across educational settings. Schools should therefore align classroom instruction, student guidance, parent communication, reporting procedures, and teacher professional development. The objective is not to eliminate all digital risk, which is unrealistic, but to build a community in which truthfulness, dignity, responsibility, and care are normal expectations.

CONCLUSION

This literature review shows that hoaxes, cyberbullying, and the wider digital ethics crisis are interconnected educational challenges. Hoaxes and disinformation exploit weaknesses in attention and verification; cyberbullying demonstrates how digital communication can magnify interpersonal harm; and algorithmic and data-driven environments introduce ethical questions that cannot be solved through technical competence alone. The evidence also shows that the problem should not be exaggerated into a claim that all users are careless or that technology is inherently harmful. Instead, digital behavior is shaped by individual judgment, social norms, platform conditions, and educational experiences.

Character education provides an essential foundation for a sustainable response. When honesty, empathy, respect, responsibility, fairness, self-control, and moral courage are practiced together with media and information literacy and digital citizenship, students gain both the capacity and the disposition to act responsibly. Schools should therefore integrate verification routines, ethical case analysis, cyberbullying prevention, restorative responses, reflective sharing practices, and teacher modeling into everyday learning. Future research should test this integrated framework empirically across different educational levels and cultural contexts, including studies that measure whether character-centered digital education produces lasting changes in students' verification behavior, bystander action, and ethical decision-making online.

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