

DIGITAL MORALITY: ETHICS, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND HUMAN BEHAVIOUR ONLINE

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Abstract

The rapid diffusion of digital technology has redefined the moral texture of modern life, influencing the way individuals interact, communicate, and express identity. While social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok, WhatsApp, Telegram have expanded human connection, they have also generated complex ethical challenges ranging from misinformation and cyberbullying to moral disengagement and narcissistic self-presentation. This paper interrogates the relationship between ethics, social media, and online behaviour with emphasis on the African, particularly Nigerian context. Anchored on Social Learning Theory, Technological Determinism, African Communitarian Ethics, and the Ethics of Care. The study adopts a conceptual and integrative review approach. It engages both global and African scholarship to examine how cultural values, technological structures, and moral reasoning shape online conduct. This paper further argues that digital morality must be grounded in relational ethics that reflect both Christian pastoral sensitivity and African communal consciousness. It concludes with pastoral and educational recommendations for promoting ethical digital citizenship among young people in Nigeria universities and the wider Church community.

Keywords: Ethics, Morality, Social Media, Online Behaviour, Digital Culture, Nigeria, Africa, Pastoral Ethics

1. Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed a dramatic shift in the human moral environment as technology becomes an extension of human consciousness. The digital world through social media has collapsed spatial and temporal boundaries, creating what McLuhan (1964) once called the global village. Yet, in this village, moral distance has also widened. People communicate more but understand less; they “follow” many but imitate few virtues.

In Nigeria and across Africa, social media has become both a site of moral expression and moral erosion. It mirrors the socio-political tensions, youth restlessness, and identity quest of a generation negotiating tradition and modernity (Eke & Uzochukwu, 2024). The enthusiasm for digital expression among Nigerian youths has often been accompanied by ethical lapses, hate speech, cyber fraud, online sexual exploitation, and fake news circulation (Ajibade, 2024; Okeke & Ibe, 2022). While these vices are global phenomena, their intensity in African contexts is shaped by historical, cultural, and religious dynamics (Nwachukwu, 2023).

Within this digital terrain, the moral question resurfaces: What does it mean to be ethical online? How do religious, cultural, and philosophical traditions guide or fail to guide the moral compass of young people navigating cyberspace? For the Church and society alike, this is not merely a technological question but a pastoral and anthropological one. As Pope Francis (2020) observed in *Christus Vivit*, digital spaces have become part of the existential terrain where young people “live, love, and dream.” Thus, engaging the ethics of social media is tantamount to engaging the moral soul of the present generation.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to interrogate how ethics, social media, and human behaviour intersect in shaping moral agency in the digital age. The discussion boards on interdisciplinary insights from psychology, communication studies as well as theology and situates them within the African moral universe where the self is defined not in isolation but through community (Mbiti, 1969; Gyekye, 1997).

2. Conceptual Clarifications

2.1 Ethics and Morality

Ethics refers to the philosophical reflection on human conduct in relation to what is good, right, or justifiable (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019). Morality, on the other hand, refers to the lived expression of these ethical principles in social practice. In African contexts, ethics and morality are inseparable from community life; moral failure is not simply an individual defect but a breach of communal harmony (Eze, 2021). Hence, when one behaves

immorally online by deceiving, insulting, or exploiting others, the injury transcends the individual and affects the moral ecosystem of society.

From a Christian moral standpoint, ethics involves aligning human behaviour with divine and natural law (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994). Online actions as posting, commenting and sharing are moral acts that either promote or diminish love, truth, and justice. Thus, digital behaviour falls squarely within the domain of moral theology and social ethics.

2.2. Social Media and Online Behaviour

Social media can be defined as interactive, internet-based communication platforms that enable users to create, share, exchange information, ideas, and emotions (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Online behaviour encompasses the patterns of communication, self-presentation, and relational engagement that occur in virtual environments (Anwar & Ekarini, 2025).

While social media offers spaces for community and evangelization, it equally fosters performative morality; a tendency to display virtue for visibility rather than conviction (Taylor et al., 2023). Studies indicate that online behaviour is often shaped by algorithmic reinforcement and social validation, producing cycles of narcissism and moral indifference (Cheong, 2023; Odetola, 2023).

In Nigeria, the moral ambivalence of social media is evident in both its power to mobilize social change (as seen in the #EndSARS movement) and its capacity to propagate misinformation and hate (Ajibade, 2024). Thus, understanding online behaviour demands both psychological and cultural analysis.

2.3 Digital Morality

Digital morality refers to the ethical principles guiding behaviour in technologically mediated environments (Hajli, 2018). It involves accountability, truthfulness, empathy, and respect for human dignity in digital interaction. In African moral philosophy, digital morality must reflect *Ubuntu* of Bantu language which means *I am because we are*. This relational ethic calls for digital actions that sustain human solidarity rather than undermine it (Gyekye, 1997; Eke & Uzochukwu, 2024).

3. Theoretical Framework

The study is conceptually anchored on four interrelated theoretical lenses that together illuminate the dynamics of ethics and online behaviour.

3.1 Social Learning Theory (Albert Bandura, 1977)

Bandura's theory posits that individuals learn behaviours through observation, imitation, and modelling. Online platforms amplify this process where and when users observe influencers, peers, and role models whose behaviours (positive or negative) are constantly displayed. When harmful behaviours like cyberbullying or deceptive posting receive attention and reward, they are more likely to be replicated. Conversely, digital spaces that celebrate empathy and authenticity promote moral growth.

Recent studies (Im et al., 2023; Anwar & Ekarini, 2025) show that university students' online habits are influenced less by institutional codes and more by peer norms. Thus, digital morality is socially learned and culturally transmitted.

3.2 Technological Determinism (Marshall McLuhan, 1964; Neil Postman, 1985; Cheong, 2023)

Technological determinism argues that technologies are not neutral tools but structures that shape human perception and moral reasoning. Social media algorithms, for example, privilege speed, emotion, and visibility over truth and reflection. The result is an attention economy that rewards controversy rather than virtue. Postman (1985) warned that when technology becomes culture's dominant metaphor, it redefines what counts as good, true, or beautiful.

Cheong (2023) extends this thesis to the digital age, noting that social media platforms subtly dictate moral priorities through their design logic likes, shares, and trends. For pastoral ethics, this calls for discernment: Christians and educators must ask not only what technology allows but what kind of people it makes us become.

3.3 African Communitarian Ethics (John Mbiti, 1969; Kwame Gyekye, 1997; Eze, 2021)

African moral philosophy emphasizes relationality, solidarity, and communal flourishing. The maxim “*a person is a person through other persons*” (Mbiti, 1969) challenges the individualistic ethos that dominates online culture. Social media, though inherently social, often promotes self-promotion over community-building. Reclaiming African communitarian ethics online means fostering digital spaces where respect, dialogue, and accountability prevail. Eze (2021) reminds that African ethics is not merely traditional but dynamic—it can dialogue with modern technologies to articulate a culturally grounded digital humanism.

3.4 Ethics of Care (Carol Gilligan, 1982; O'Reilly et al., 2020)

The Ethics of Care emphasizes empathy, responsiveness, and the moral significance of relationships. In the online environment, where anonymity and distance can breed cruelty, the ethic of care calls users to recognize the human face behind every screen. O'Reilly et al. (2020) apply this theory to digital contexts, arguing that moral education must cultivate emotional intelligence and compassionate communication online.

From a pastoral viewpoint, this resonates with Christ's teaching on love of neighbour. In cyberspace, the neighbour is both near and unseen yet no less deserving of dignity and care.

4. Review of Related Literature (2020–2025)

Scholarly engagement with digital ethics has grown exponentially in the last decade, reflecting both optimism and anxiety about the moral consequences of online life.

Globally, Hajli (2018) highlighted the need for trust, transparency, and social responsibility as essential conditions for ethical interaction in virtual communities. Taylor et al. (2023) found that the architecture of social-media platforms encourages performative ethics—users signal moral concern primarily to gain social validation rather than to effect real change. Similarly, Cheong (2023) argues that algorithmic mediation reconfigures moral reasoning by rewarding speed, outrage, and spectacle.

In the Asian context, Im et al. (2023) demonstrated how the anonymity afforded by digital media increases harassment and moral disengagement, particularly among adolescents. Anwar and Ekarini (2025) observed that among Indonesian university students, ethical behaviour online correlates strongly with resilience, parental monitoring, and religious commitment, suggesting that offline moral formation remains decisive for digital conduct.

African and Nigerian Perspectives

In Africa, research increasingly emphasizes the intersection of digital culture, moral education, and socio-religious values. Okeke and Ibe (2022) found that most Nigerian University students acknowledge the moral ambivalence of social media, they use it for learning and evangelization but admit to lapses such as misinformation and cyber-flirtation. Eke and Uzochukwu (2024), examining southeastern Nigeria, argue that social media has become a *parallel moral classroom* where youths negotiate identity, faith, and sexuality outside formal supervision.

Ajibade (2024) described how fake news and moral panic during political seasons in West Africa reveal deeper ethical fragilities: citizens share unverified claims not out of malice but as acts of tribal loyalty or emotional solidarity. Adebayo and Chukwu (2023) examined Christian communicators in Nigeria and observed a tension between evangelization and self-promotion, warning that the Gospel risks dilution when online ministry adopts the metrics of entertainment.

Oduah (2025) developed a *pastoral ethics of cyberspace*, proposing that African clergy must treat digital platforms as mission territories requiring formation in truth, temperance, and prudence. Nwachukwu (2023) extended this by

linking online moral decadence to breakdowns in traditional mentorship and the family's declining role as a moral incubator.

Collectively, these studies show that while the ethical challenges of social media are global, their manifestations are contextual. The African moral imagination, rooted in community, kinship, and spirituality, offers an alternative grammar for digital ethics one that prioritizes relationship over self-projection and solidarity over visibility.

5. Ethical Issues in Online Behaviour

Ethical dilemmas in digital environments are not merely technical breaches but reflections of underlying moral dislocations. Five dominant issues recur across the literature and pastoral observation.

5.1 Fake News and Misinformation

The ease of sharing information online has made truth fragile. Ajibade (2024) describes Nigeria's social-media landscape as a "*marketplace of half-truths*." Misinformation thrives on emotional appeal and confirmation bias. From a moral-theological standpoint, spreading falsehood violates the Eighth Commandment and erodes communal trust. Truth-telling thus becomes a digital virtue (John Paul II, 2002).

5.2 Cyberbullying and Hate Speech

Anonymity emboldens aggression. Studies (Im et al., 2023; Okeke & Ibe, 2022) show that online hostility often mirrors offline frustrations. In Nigeria, political and ethnic rivalries are amplified through toxic exchanges. The Church's social teaching insists that communication must build communion, not destroy it (Inter Mirifica, 1963). Cyberbullying contradicts both the ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982) and the African ethic of respect for personhood (Mbiti, 1969).

5.3 Pornography and Moral Corrosion

Digital pornography constitutes a silent epidemic. Odetola (2023) notes its growing normalization among university students. Theological ethics interprets pornography as a distortion of love which reduces persons to consumable objects. Its addictive dynamics mirror idolatry, turning pleasure into captivity.

5.4 Privacy, Surveillance, and Data Exploitation

Technological determinism (McLuhan, 1964; Postman, 1985) warns that tools reshape human values. The commodification of personal data by corporations raises ethical concerns about autonomy and consent. In Africa, where digital literacy remains uneven, users often surrender privacy without comprehension. Ethical digital citizenship requires awareness, consent, and regulation grounded in human dignity (Cheong, 2023).

5.5 Digital Narcissism and Moral Indifference

The performative nature of social media encourages the curation of idealized selves. Taylor et al. (2023) describe this as *moral exhibitionism* virtue signalling without substance. In African moral thought, this self-referential posture contradicts the communal ontology of ubuntu. As Eze (2021) explains, authentic personhood emerges through interdependence, not isolation.

6. Digital Ethics and the African Moral Universe

6.1 Ubuntu as Digital Hermeneutic

The philosophy of Ubuntu *I am because we are*—offers a corrective to the hyper-individualism of online culture. Gyekye (1997) and Mbiti (1969) affirm that African ethics sees community as the matrix of moral identity. Applied digitally, ubuntu invites users to treat others not as avatars but as co-bearers of dignity. It demands that online communication sustain harmony rather than humiliation.

6.2 Christian–African Synthesis

Pope Francis’s *Fratelli Tutti* (2020) envisions global fraternity that transcends borders which is an aspiration resonant with ubuntu. In Nigeria, where faith communities dominate digital discourse, pastoral leadership must translate this vision into online praxis. Oduah (2025) proposes diocesan guidelines encouraging priests and lay ministers to embody virtues of truth, humility, and digital silence when necessary.

6.3 Toward a Relational Digital Morality

Digital morality, from an African–Christian lens, cannot rely solely on rules; it must be relational. Eke and Uzochukwu (2024) call for “digital neighbourliness”—users exercising empathy and responsibility. This complements the Ethics of Care (Gilligan, 1982; O’Reilly et al., 2020) by contextualizing compassion within communal narratives.

6.4 Education and Character Formation

Fidiyani et al. (2024) argue that moral formation in the digital age must integrate spirituality, emotional intelligence, and technological competence. In Nigerian universities, ethical instruction often remains theoretical. Embedding ubuntu-based modules in general-studies curricula could reshape online behaviour through reflective learning.

6.5 The Prophetic Role of the Church

The Church, as both moral teacher and communicator, bears prophetic responsibility. By modelling transparency and restraint in its digital communications, it can restore credibility. Adebayo and Chukwu (2023) stress that pastoral communication should privilege witness over popularity.

7. Pastoral and Educational Implications

7.1 Pastoral Formation and Digital Discipleship

The Church must recognize cyberspace as part of its pastoral frontier. As Pope Francis (2018) notes in *Christus Vivit*, evangelization must inhabit the *digital continent*. Many Nigerian parishes still approach media ministry as publicity rather than catechesis. Pastoral agents therefore need systematic training in digital discipleship which births a spirituality of presence, prudence, and truthfulness online.

Oduah (2025) recommends diocesan media commissions to train clergy and lay communicators in media literacy and cyber-ethics. Homilies and catechetical sessions should integrate reflection on online morality: gossip, pornography, hate speech, and fake news are not *virtual* sins but real acts with communal effects.

7.2 Community and Accountability

African moral thought affirms that wrongdoing injures the whole community. Parish communities can embody this principle by forming small digital-ethics circles that reflect on weekly online behaviour. Nwachukwu (2023) suggests such circles could use scriptural meditation (e.g., Phil 4:8) alongside indigenous proverbs to internalize truth-telling and restraint.

7.3 Youth Formation and Educational Responsibility

Since young people constitute the majority of social-media users, universities and secondary schools should integrate Ethics and Responsible Technology courses into general studies. Research by Okeke & Ibe (2022) and Eke & Uzochukwu (2024) confirms that explicit moral instruction, when contextualized, correlates with reduced cyber-misconduct.

Teachers must move beyond moral policing toward mentorship, guiding students to see online spaces as extensions of vocation and witness.

7.4 Family as Moral Seedbed

Digital ethics begins at home. The African family remains the *first school of social virtue*. Parents should model moderation, guide content choices, and share online narratives of faith and integrity. Anwar & Ekarini (2025) found that parental monitoring mediates ethical resilience among university students; this insight can inform parish parenting workshops.

7.5 The Role of Government and Policy

While legislation cannot create virtue, it can restrain vice. Nigeria's Cybercrime Act (2015) needs renewed moral framework emphasizing restorative justice, not only punitive control. Collaboration between faith-based institutions and regulators can promote human-centered digital policy.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

Digital technology is neither angelic nor demonic, it is a mirror that amplifies human intention. Social media's moral turbulence stems from a deeper spiritual vacuum where truth and empathy yield to speed and spectacle. This paper has examined how ethical engagement online must integrate philosophical, theological, and African communitarian insights.

Four theoretical lenses- Social learning theory, Technological determinism, African communitarian ethics, ethics of care provided a framework for balancing duty, character, and community. Empirical studies across Nigeria and beyond (Okeke & Ibe 2022; Eke & Uzochukwu 2024; Adebayo & Chukwu 2023) demonstrate that ethical conduct online improves when users possess moral literacy, social support, and faith-based resilience.

The Church and academy in Africa must therefore:

1. Should develop contextual curricula on digital ethics grounded in *ubuntu* and Catholic social teaching.
2. Encourage pastoral transparency and humility on social platforms.
3. Foster family and community mentorship to counter algorithmic isolation.
4. Strengthen empirical research linking moral formation and digital wellbeing.
- 5 Advocate policies protecting users' dignity and privacy.

Ultimately, ethical digital citizenship is discipleship: to be truthful, compassionate, and accountable online is to participate in God's creative communication. The future of moral civilization will depend not merely on faster networks but on wiser hearts.

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