

## University Student Responses to Ethical Violations on Social Media: A Case Study from Banggai Regency

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Received : April 05, 2025

Accepted : May 19, 2025

Published : May 31, 2025

Citation: Aquarini, Suffianor, & Yopiannor, F.Z., (2025). University Student Responses to Ethical Violations on Social Media: A Case Study from Banggai Regency. Sinergi International Journal of Communication Sciences. 3(2), 113-126.

<https://doi.org/10.61194/ijcs.v3i2.756>

**ABSTRACT:** In the rapidly evolving digital landscape, university students increasingly confront ethical violations on social media platforms, ranging from privacy breaches to cyberbullying and misinformation. This study investigates how students in Banggai Regency, Indonesia, perceive and respond to unethical content encountered online. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through in depth interviews and digital observations with active social media users across multiple platforms. Thematic analysis guided by Miles and Huberman's model revealed that students employ a combination of cognitive appraisal and avoidance strategies, including skipping, unfollowing, reporting, blocking, and content filtering, to navigate unethical digital environments. Findings highlight the role of psychological resilience, digital literacy, peer norms, and platform design in shaping student behaviors. Furthermore, student led initiatives such as digital ethics campaigns and peer fact checking groups emerged as critical interventions promoting responsible digital engagement. These insights underscore the transformative potential of youth agency in fostering ethical online cultures. The study contributes to the broader discourse on digital citizenship by emphasizing the need for integrated digital ethics education and collaborative policy interventions.

**Keywords:** Digital Ethics, Social Media Behavior, University Students, Digital Citizenship, Ethical Violations, Student Agency, Content Regulation.



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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, university students have increasingly faced ethical violations on social media platforms, fueled by the rapid growth of digital technology and its pervasive impact on youth culture. Common types of ethical violations encountered include breaches of privacy, cyberbullying, and academic dishonesty. Students often navigate platforms in ways that inadvertently disregard ethical guidelines, such as sharing unauthorized images or engaging in sexting, which risks consent and privacy violations for both themselves and others (Ridder, 2018; Setty, 2019). Further, issues surrounding academic integrity have been exacerbated by the availability of digital tools that facilitate cheating, such as

plagiarism and unauthorized assistance during examinations, undermining the academic environment (Friedman et al., 2016; Rogach et al., 2024).

The impact of social media on the ethical landscape for youth cannot be overstated. The proliferation of digital platforms fosters both positive and negative behaviors. On the one hand, social media can empower students to create and engage with content promoting ethical awareness (Brough et al., 2020). On the other hand, it normalizes behaviors such as sexting and glamorization of risky activities, including substance abuse, leading to desensitization towards ethical standards and a disregard for personal boundaries (Curtis et al., 2018). The omnipresent nature of these platforms means that negative behaviors can be amplified and perpetuated across wider audiences, creating cultures that condone or overlook ethical violations, such as harassment or sharing sensitive information without consent (Stevens et al., 2018).

University students encounter a wide range of ethical challenges on social media. This reality calls for effective educational interventions and digital citizenship programs. Students often face dilemmas involving breaches of privacy, exposure to cyberbullying, dissemination of fake news, and violations of academic integrity (Isdendi et al., 2023; D. M. Sari & Syam, 2024). Without sufficient training in ethical decision making and critical thinking, students are vulnerable to unethical behaviors that can negatively impact both their academic and personal lives (Tangkish et al., 2024; Αγάπογλου et al., 2021). As such, nurturing critical digital literacy and promoting ethical media engagement have become pivotal objectives for educational institutions.

While some students actively resist unethical content, others may unwittingly contribute to its spread. General solutions proposed in the literature include enhancing digital literacy, integrating ethics into educational curricula, promoting critical thinking skills, and encouraging responsible content creation (Manh, 2024; Nidhi et al., 2024; Wong et al., 2021). These interventions aim to empower students to identify, reject, and counteract unethical content across digital platforms.

More specifically, several studies advocate for service learning initiatives and experiential learning projects as effective means to foster ethical awareness among students. Madanu et al. (2024) demonstrate that service learning enhances students' leadership, teamwork, and ethical competencies, while Kolotouchkina et al. (2020) argue that experiential projects integrated with communication courses foster activism and digital responsibility. Furthermore, students as digital natives are uniquely positioned to promote ethical standards by using their social networks for positive advocacy and by challenging unethical online behaviors (Purnama & Asdlori, 2023).

Complementary research has highlighted the psychological risks associated with digital engagement. Exposure to unethical digital content has been shown to harm self esteem, body image, and mental health among students (Tufail et al., 2024). The transition to remote learning environments during global crises has further exacerbated digital fatigue and emotional stress, diminishing students' academic performance and psychological resilience (Honnakatti, 2024). Studies such as Sattarpanahi et al. (2024) indicate that continuous exposure to idealized portrayals of life on social media fosters

anxiety and dissatisfaction with body image. These insights highlight the critical importance of equipping students with digital literacy skills that include not only technical competencies but also emotional resilience and ethical reasoning.

Building strong digital literacy among students is key to combating the ethical challenges of social media. Fonseca & Tiago (2024) and Hussain & Phulpoto (2024) emphasize that critical digital literacy fosters cognitive skills essential for evaluating information credibility, detecting biases, and recognizing unethical behaviors. It also strengthens the ability to responsibly create, consume, and share digital content. Diepeveen & Pinet (2022) argue that such skills act as a safeguard against the rapid spread of misinformation and unethical conduct, thereby promoting healthier digital ecosystems. In the context of fast evolving online environments, individuals must navigate complex ethical dilemmas, making critical literacy skills even more vital Tarsidi et al. (2023).

Global strategies aimed at strengthening digital ethics among youth in developing countries have increasingly emphasized integrated, collaborative approaches. Embedding digital ethics into both formal education and community based learning initiatives is recognized as essential. Regulatory frameworks, such as those emerging in East Africa, now incorporate digital ethics and literacy as foundational components of educational reform Mutua & Zhang (2020). Civic engagement programs and peer led initiatives complement these strategies, empowering young adults to engage ethically and responsibly with digital content (Fonseca & Tiago, 2024; Hussain & Phulpoto, 2024). International collaborations also play a critical role by sharing best practices and supporting the development of comprehensive digital education programs worldwide (Fonseca & Tiago, 2024; Hussain & Phulpoto, 2024).

Despite these advancements, a significant gap remains in understanding the nuanced ways in which university students in specific local contexts perceive and respond to unethical content. In particular, there is limited research on how students in semi urban and developing regions, such as Banggai Regency, navigate ethical dilemmas online. While much of the global literature focuses on urban and highly developed regions, less attention has been paid to areas with distinct socio cultural dynamics that influence digital behavior.

The present study addresses this gap by exploring the reception and behavioral strategies of university students in Banggai Regency toward unethical content on social media. It aims to provide a nuanced understanding of student agency in mitigating digital ethical challenges and to assess the efficacy of their strategies. The study introduces a novel local context into the broader discourse on digital ethics, offering insights that may inform educational interventions, policy formulation, and digital literacy initiatives.

Thus, this study seeks to answer critical questions regarding how students perceive unethical content, the factors motivating their responses, and the variations across different social media platforms. The findings aim to contribute to the global effort to strengthen digital citizenship and promote ethical engagement online, particularly in underserved and developing contexts.

## METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the reception and behavioral strategies of university students in Banggai Regency towards unethical content on social media. Qualitative descriptive research is recognized as an effective approach for capturing rich, detailed insights into participants' experiences and interpretations in naturalistic contexts (Naila & Rohimi, 2024). The methodology aligns with best practices for qualitative research on social media behavior, emphasizing clear research design, purposive sampling, rigorous data collection, and systematic analysis.

Participants in this study were undergraduate students enrolled in several higher education institutions in Banggai Regency, including Universitas Tompotika Luwuk, STIE Luwuk Banggai, and STIKES Banggai. The inclusion criteria required participants to be active users of at least three social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (X). The use of purposive sampling ensured a diverse representation of students from different academic disciplines and social backgrounds, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the topic (Setty, 2019).

Data were collected through in depth, semi structured interviews designed to elicit detailed narratives about students' experiences encountering unethical content online. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted either face to face or via online video conferencing platforms to accommodate participant preferences and accessibility. The interviews focused on students' perceptions of unethical content, their emotional and behavioral responses, and the strategies they employed to manage exposure to such content.

To complement the interviews, limited digital ethnographic observations were conducted, involving the examination of participants' publicly accessible social media activities (e.g., comments, shared posts) to contextualize their self reported behaviors. Observational notes helped triangulate the data and added depth to the thematic analysis, enhancing credibility and transferability (Brough et al., 2020).

Thematic analysis following Miles and Huberman's (2014) model guided the data analysis process. This iterative approach involved three key stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. During the data reduction phase, interview transcripts and observation notes were carefully read and coded. Codes were initially generated deductively based on concepts identified in the literature, such as "skip behavior," "reporting unethical content," and "adaptive strategy," but inductive coding was also employed to allow emergent themes to surface from the data itself (Fonseca & Tiago, 2024).

Data were managed and coded using qualitative analysis software NVivo to ensure systematic organization and to maintain a clear audit trail. Constant comparison methods were applied, where coded segments were continuously compared across interviews to refine and validate emerging themes (D. M. Sari & Syam, 2024). Themes were then organized into higher order categories reflecting the major findings: behavioral patterns toward unethical content, motivations underlying behaviors, platform specific ethical challenges, and proposed solutions.

The validity and credibility of the findings were strengthened through several strategies. Triangulation of interview data with observational evidence provided a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study (Diepeveen & Pinet, 2022). Member checking was employed by summarizing preliminary findings and seeking feedback from selected participants to ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected their perspectives. Peer debriefing sessions among the research team further enhanced the credibility of the analysis by encouraging critical reflections and minimizing researcher bias (Tangkish et al., 2024).

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their data. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. Data storage complied with ethical standards, ensuring secure, password protected storage of electronic files and anonymization of all personal identifiers in transcripts and publications.

In line with the research objectives, the qualitative approach adopted in this study allowed for an in depth exploration of how students navigate the complexities of ethical decision making in digital spaces. The flexibility of thematic analysis, coupled with rigorous data collection and validation techniques, provided a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of students' reception patterns and strategic behaviors. This methodology was particularly appropriate given the dynamic and evolving nature of social media environments, where meanings, norms, and user practices are constantly negotiated and redefined (Isdendi et al., 2023).

Overall, the research design, participant selection, data collection, and analysis procedures adhered to high standards of qualitative inquiry. These methodological choices were instrumental in capturing the subtle, varied, and evolving strategies students employed to respond to unethical content on social media, thereby contributing meaningful insights into the field of digital ethics and youth behavior.

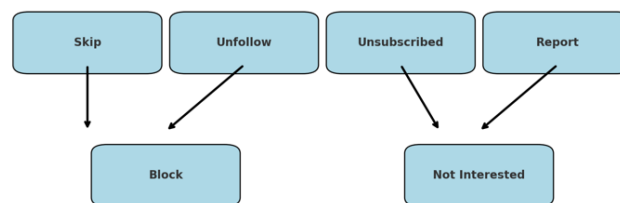
## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

This study examined the behavioral responses of university students in Banggai Regency toward unethical content encountered on social media platforms. Drawing on thematic analysis of interview data and digital observations, several key patterns and insights emerged, structured according to the primary thematic categories identified.

The behavioral strategies adopted by students align with broader theoretical understandings of self regulation in digital environments. As Simão et al. (2021) suggest, when faced with aggressive or unethical content online, young people often employ cognitive and emotional self regulation strategies. In this study, students demonstrated a range of actions to mitigate exposure to harmful content, including skipping inappropriate posts, unfollowing or unsubscribing from accounts associated with unethical behavior, reporting offensive content, blocking offenders, and using the "not interested" function to train platform algorithms.

These avoidance strategies correspond with findings by Al-Shatti et al. (2022), who emphasized the importance of impression management and emotional self protection in online interactions. By choosing to skip or block content, students proactively controlled their digital spaces, reducing stress and maintaining a positive online environment. This strategic disengagement also reflected their desire to preserve psychological well being amidst the constant information overload typical of social media ecosystems.

Behavior Scheme of Students in Minimizing Ethical Violations on Social Media



**Figure 1.** Student Behavior Scheme for Minimizing Ethical Violations on Social Media

In interview narratives, many students described their actions as instinctive. One student from Universitas Tompotika explained, "If I see posts that spread hoaxes or offend SARA, I usually report them immediately. If it happens repeatedly, I just block the account." Such sentiments underline the prevalence of immediate, personal interventions as the first line of defense against unethical content.

The motivations underlying student behavior are deeply rooted in psychological resilience, digital literacy, and personal experience. Students indicated that awareness of digital ethics and prior exposure to cyberbullying or online harassment shaped their cautious approach to content engagement. This is consistent with findings by Grau et al. (2019) and Chen et al. 2022, who highlighted that experiences of online victimization sharpen critical awareness and emotional defenses.

Moreover, social influences were also found to play a critical role. Students reported that peer norms within their social media networks influenced their responses to unethical content. While some communities encouraged ethical vigilance, others promoted a culture of indifference or even valorization of aggressive behaviors, echoing observations by Ünlü & Kotonen (2024).

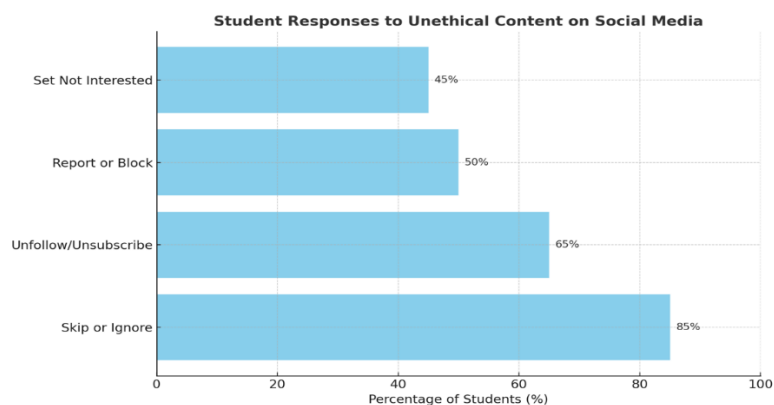
A small subset of students displayed a passive attitude, choosing not to intervene when encountering unethical posts. This behavior often stemmed from a perception that "it is everyone's personal choice," as one respondent from STIE Luwuk Banggai noted. This highlights the nuanced interplay between personal ethics and collective digital culture in shaping online behaviors.

The analysis revealed significant variation in the type and frequency of ethical violations across different social media platforms. Students consistently identified Facebook and TikTok as platforms with high incidences of hoaxes and prank content. Instagram was commonly associated with subtle forms of bullying, such as body shaming, while Twitter (X) was seen as a hotbed for political hate



speech and SARA related offenses. These patterns are aligned with the observations of Barroso Moreno et al. (2023) and Zulli & Zulli (2020), who attributed such phenomena to the distinct affordances and content modalities of each platform.

Platform design features played a pivotal role in either amplifying or mitigating unethical behavior. Algorithmic recommendation systems, as discussed by Barroso Moreno et al. (2023), often prioritize emotionally engaging or polarizing content, inadvertently promoting unethical posts. Students noted that viral content on TikTok, driven by imitation culture and algorithmic reinforcement, often perpetuated unethical trends unless quickly countered by community reporting or platform moderation.



**Figure 2.** Student Responses to Unethical Content on Social Media

The student driven solutions proposed to combat unethical digital content were particularly innovative and proactive. Students suggested enhancing peer led initiatives focused on digital ethics education, such as organizing workshops, creating digital literacy campaigns, and forming fact checking groups within their campuses.

Research by Hidayat et al. (2024) and Kim (2024) supports the efficacy of integrating hands on ethical training into educational programs. Students proposed the expansion of curriculum based interventions, such as mandatory media ethics courses that combine technical skills with ethical reasoning. Similarly, extracurricular initiatives, including the formation of digital ethics clubs and student led online awareness campaigns, were recommended as ways to foster a culture of accountability and responsible digital engagement (Pramesti, 2023).

Several participants emphasized the importance of "positive content creation" as a proactive strategy. Rather than solely reacting to unethical content, students advocated for producing and promoting ethical narratives, educational materials, and inspirational stories through their social media channels. This aligns with findings by Purnama & Asdlori (2023) on the role of positive content in countering the normalization of unethical behavior online.

Peer driven fact checking initiatives were highlighted as particularly effective. Students noted that misinformation, especially on platforms like Facebook and Twitter (X), could be swiftly countered by collaborative verification efforts. Studies by Adjin Tetey & Amenaghawon (2024) confirm that peer led fact checking groups significantly enhance critical media literacy and reduce the circulation of false or harmful information.

In summary, the findings of this study reveal that students at Banggai Regency actively engage in various self protective and proactive strategies when navigating unethical content on social media. Their behavioral responses encompass both immediate avoidance mechanisms and longer term initiatives aimed at fostering a healthier digital environment. Through self regulation, peer collaboration, and ethical content creation, students demonstrate resilience and agency in confronting the ethical challenges of contemporary digital communication.

The findings of this study demonstrate that university students in Banggai Regency exhibit complex, strategic responses when confronted with unethical content on social media platforms. These behavioral patterns reflect broader theoretical frameworks on student agency, self regulation, and the cultivation of digital citizenship. As Al-Abdullatif & Gameil (2020) argue, student agency plays a transformative role in fostering ethical online environments. Through proactive behavior and critical engagement, students act not only as consumers but also as co creators of a digitally ethical culture.

The behavioral strategies observed in this study, such as skipping inappropriate content, unfollowing or blocking unethical accounts, reporting offensive material, and using algorithmic controls like "not interested" settings, illustrate active cognitive appraisal and deliberate behavioral regulation. Simão et al. (2021) emphasized that students exposed to aggressive or unethical communication often engage in self regulatory behaviors to mitigate emotional and cognitive harm. Figure 1 visually captured these patterns, highlighting the multi layered mechanisms students employed to preserve their psychological well being and maintain a positive digital landscape.

Moreover, these self regulatory practices align with the literature on digital impression management and social media fatigue, which asserts that users actively curate their online environments to protect against emotional exhaustion Al-Shatti et al. (2022). By deploying avoidance strategies, students assert control over their digital experiences, demonstrating a nuanced understanding of how to manage the risks associated with unethical content.

Beyond individual level behaviors, the findings revealed that student responses were influenced by psychological and social dynamics. Students' prior experiences with online harassment and exposure to misinformation significantly shaped their attitudes toward unethical content. Those with personal experiences of cyberbullying displayed heightened vigilance and quicker adoption of self protective strategies, reflecting the emotional regulation mechanisms discussed by Chen et al. (2022). Concurrently, peer norms and group dynamics played pivotal roles in either reinforcing ethical vigilance or normalizing passive acceptance, supporting Ünlü & Kotonen (2024) findings on the impact of digital community cultures on online behavior.



A critical observation emerging from this study is the platform specific variation in ethical violations. Students identified Facebook and TikTok as sites where hoaxes and prank content proliferate, Instagram as a hub for covert bullying and body shaming, and Twitter (X) as a breeding ground for political hate speech. These findings corroborate Barroso-Moreno et al. (2023) assertion that platform design features significantly influence the type and frequency of unethical content. The rapid dissemination capabilities, algorithmic reinforcement, and content modalities particular to each platform either exacerbate or moderate ethical challenges.

Figure 2 illustrated how students' responses varied across platforms, suggesting that platform affordances necessitate tailored ethical interventions. For example, TikTok's emphasis on viral replication demands proactive community reporting mechanisms, while Twitter's brevity and retweet culture require critical engagement and content verification practices.

Furthermore, the proposed solutions articulated by students reinforce the pivotal role of student led initiatives in promoting digital ethics. By advocating for peer driven digital literacy campaigns, fact checking collaborations, and positive content creation, students mirrored the transformative agency highlighted by Wulandari et al. (2021). These initiatives exemplify how youth can bridge the gap between theoretical ethical principles and practical digital behaviors, thus fostering a culture of accountability and critical media literacy.

The effectiveness of such student driven interventions is supported by existing research. D. I. Sari et al. (2020) emphasized that workshops, advocacy campaigns, and collaborative projects led by students significantly enhance digital citizenship competencies within educational institutions. Similarly, Pramesti (2023) documented the success of peer led content moderation efforts on platforms like TikTok, where ethical norms established through grassroots initiatives foster healthier digital ecosystems.

The integration of ethical literacy into formal higher education curricula is another key recommendation derived from these findings. As outlined by Al-Abdullatif & Gameil (2020) and Wulandari et al. (2021), a multidimensional educational approach combining technical proficiency, ethical reasoning, and experiential learning is essential for preparing students to navigate complex digital environments. Embedding digital ethics across disciplines, fostering faculty development in digital responsibility, and establishing cross disciplinary collaborations are vital strategies for cultivating ethically aware graduates who can meaningfully engage with evolving digital landscapes.

Moreover, the findings align with broader policy interventions that aim to enhance ethical standards in social media usage among youth. Initiatives such as stringent platform regulations, supportive online communities, and systematic digital ethics education, as documented by Berg et al. (2023) and Escobar-Viera et al. (2020), offer valuable frameworks for scaling the student driven efforts observed in this study. Throuvala et al. (2019) further highlight that early digital ethics education, integrated into school curricula, can build foundational competencies that persist into higher education and beyond.

The active engagement of students in ethical content creation and moderation underscores the emergence of a democratized model of moral governance in digital spaces. Students, acting as creators, curators, and moderators, contribute to distributed ethical regulation that is dynamic, inclusive, and responsive to technological evolution. This grassroots model, as discussed by Al-Abdullatif & Gameil (2020), represents a promising pathway toward building resilient, participatory digital societies.

Thus, the proactive behaviors and initiatives demonstrated by university students in Banggai Regency not only reflect their individual resilience but also reveal their collective potential to shape ethical digital environments. Their actions exemplify how informed, critically engaged youth can drive systemic change in online ecosystems, ultimately reinforcing the imperative of integrating digital ethics education and supporting youth led digital governance structures.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the behavioral strategies of university students in Banggai Regency in responding to unethical content on social media. The findings revealed that students actively employ a combination of cognitive appraisal and avoidance tactics, such as skipping, unfollowing, reporting, blocking, and content filtering to manage their digital environments. Motivations for these behaviors stem from a combination of digital literacy awareness, personal experiences with online harassment, and a desire for psychological well being. Platform specific variations highlighted the differentiated nature of ethical violations, emphasizing the role of platform design in shaping online behaviors. Student driven initiatives, including digital ethics campaigns and peer led fact checking groups, demonstrated proactive agency in promoting ethical digital citizenship.

The implications of these findings extend to the enhancement of digital ethics education and the development of participatory frameworks for ethical governance online. By illustrating students' resilience and proactive engagement, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on youth digital citizenship and ethics. Future research could explore comparative studies across different cultural and socio economic contexts to deepen the understanding of digital ethics behaviors globally.

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