



Cyberbullying and Online Ethics: An Islamic Response

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Abstract

In today's interconnected digital landscape, cyberbullying has emerged as a pervasive threat to psychological health and social well-being. This exploratory study examines the causes and consequences of online harassment through an Islamic ethical framework, focusing on how religious moral values can mitigate digital harm. Grounded in core Islamic principles such as Akhlaq (virtuous character), Adab (proper manners), Amanah (trust and responsibility), and Hurmah (the sanctity of human dignity), the paper analyzes the contradiction between Islamic teachings and negative online behavior. Utilizing a quantitative survey administered to a pilot sample of 33 students at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), the research evaluates direct exposure to cyberbullying, witness rates, and awareness of religious ethical restraints. The empirical findings reveal a high awareness of Islamic ethics among respondents (78.8%) alongside widespread exposure to cyberbullying (over 93%), indicating a notable gap between ethical knowledge and online practice. Furthermore, participants identified faith-based reminders and moral education as the most effective countermeasures against digital harassment. The paper concludes by outlining practical digital citizenship guidelines aligned with Islamic values to foster a safer, more respectful, and morally accountable online community.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Islamic Ethics, Digital Citizenship, Akhlaq, Amanah, Digital Literacy.

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of social media platforms and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has fundamentally reshaped human communication, enabling instantaneous global connectivity. However, this digital transformation has also introduced severe ethical challenges, most notably cyberbullying - defined as the deliberate use of digital platforms to harass, intimidate, insult, or inflict psychological harm on individuals (MacDonald and Roberts, 2010). Beyond its social disruptions, cyberbullying severely impacts mental health, promotes hostility, and degrades fundamental human dignity (Hamid, 2021). While digital harassment affects individuals across various demographics, its manifestation within educational and religious communities calls for a nuanced examination of how moral values govern behavior in virtual spaces.

Despite the pervasive presence of technology, unethical online behaviors persist even among Muslim users who are exposed to religious moral frameworks (Hinduja and Patchin, 2021). A primary issue lies in the operational gap between theoretical religious knowledge and practical digital conduct. Many individuals possess a basic awareness of Islamic morals, yet fail to extrapolate these values into their daily online interactions. This raises a critical question: *How can Islamic moral teachings effectively guide responsible conduct in cyberspace to counteract cyberbullying?*

In Islamic discourse, digital conduct is not exempt from traditional moral jurisprudence. Islam places paramount emphasis on *Akhlaq* (virtuous character), *Adab* (proper social etiquette), and *Hurmah* (the sanctity and inviolability of individual dignity), all of which explicitly prohibit electronic harassment, slander, and backbiting. Examining cyberbullying through an Islamic ethical lens allows researchers to understand how Muslim users can internalize moral accountability (*Taqwa*) and digital trust (*Amanah*) in an era characterized by online anonymity.

The primary objective of this research is to align digital citizenship with Islamic ethical principles. Specifically, this study aims to:

1. Investigate the prevalence, causes, and psychological consequences of cyberbullying within a university environment.
2. Examine core Islamic teachings related to communication ethics and evaluate their relevance to contemporary digital interactions.
3. Propose practical, faith-based guidelines for ethical digital citizenship that assist users in maintaining *Akhlaq* and *Amanah* in online spaces.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Modern digital environments offer unprecedented opportunities for communication, learning, and social interaction; however, they also expose users to various forms of online antisocial behavior. Cyberbullying—manifested through targeted digital harassment, public humiliation, and derogatory messaging—presents severe threats to psychological health and institutional integrity (Hinduja and Patchin, 2021). This section critically reviews contemporary research on ICT ethics, outlines the foundational Islamic ethical framework governing virtual conduct, and highlights the research gap addressed by this study.

2.1. The Current State of ICT Ethics and Digital Harassment Cyberbullying presents unique ethical challenges due to the structural characteristics of digital platforms, notably user anonymity, wide audience reach, and the permanence of online content. Scholars emphasize that these factors significantly reduce personal accountability and amplify psychological harm among victims (Al-Qahtani, 2022). A critical phenomenon identified in digital ethics literature is the online bystander effect, wherein individuals witness digital abuse but refrain from intervening due to a diffusion of responsibility in virtual spaces (Ahmad and Hussin, 2020). While technical mechanisms (such as content moderation and blocking algorithms) exist, empirical studies show that technical interventions alone are insufficient to curb online misconduct without underlying moral regulation (Al-Qahtani, 2022) (Ahmad and Hussin, 2020).

2.2. Islamic Ethical Framework for Digital Conduct Islamic jurisprudence provides a holistic framework for human interaction that extends seamlessly into digital spaces. This framework, often conceptualized as *Digital Akhlaq*, is anchored in several foundational principles:

- **Akhlaq (Virtuous Character and Respect):** In Islam, moral character is an intrinsic obligation that dictates polite, empathetic, and respectful communication (Arif, et al., 2024). Cyberbullying and public mocking directly violate the fundamental dignity (*Hurmah*) guaranteed to every individual in Islamic ethics (Arif, et al., 2024).
- **Amanah (Trust and Responsibility):** The principle of *Amanah* requires users to handle digital platforms responsibly. This encompasses verifying information before dissemination and abstaining from harmful practices such as backbiting (*Gheebah*),

defamation, and spreading unverified rumors (Ahmad and Hussin, 2020) (Gohal et al., 2023).

- **Taqwa (God-Consciousness and Accountability):** Islamic morality emphasizes self-regulation through *Taqwa*, reinforcing the belief that all actions—whether physical or anonymous in cyberspace—are observed by Almighty Allah and subject to moral accountability (Ahmad and Hussin, 2020).

2.3. Faith-Based Interventions and Ethical Awareness Literature on faith-based behavioral interventions demonstrates that internal, moral-driven motivators are significantly more effective in promoting long-term ethical conduct than external punitive measures (Choirun Nisa' and Fatah, 2022). When religious teachings are framed as practical guidelines for daily life rather than abstract doctrines, they cultivate intrinsic self-restraint (Choirun Nisa' and Fatah, 2022). Consequently, integrating Islamic ethical reminders into digital literacy programs offers a promising strategy to mitigate online harassment by activating individual conscience and moral responsibility (Ahmad and Hussin, 2020) (Choirun Nisa' and Fatah, 2022).

2.4. Research Gap and Study Rationale While existing literature establishes the theoretical importance of *Digital Akhlaq* and recognizes the strong religious awareness among Muslim youth, a critical research gap remains: the disconnect between theoretical ethical knowledge and actual online behavior. Few studies empirically examine why high religious awareness does not consistently translate into active bystander intervention or the prevention of cyberbullying in university settings. This study addresses this gap by assessing the prevalence of cyberbullying among university students, evaluating their awareness of Islamic ethics, and identifying faith-aligned countermeasures to foster responsible digital citizenship (Noh and Hj Ab Rahman, 2020).

3. Methodology

This study employed an exploratory quantitative research design utilizing a structured online questionnaire to assess cyberbullying experiences, bystander awareness, and the perception of Islamic digital ethics among university students. Given the exploratory nature of the study, a pilot sample was utilized to collect preliminary empirical insights from students at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM).

The research instrument was developed using Google Forms and comprised four primary sections:

- **Section 1: Demographic Profile:** Collected baseline participant demographic information, including gender, academic level (undergraduate/postgraduate), and faculty (*Kulliyyah*).
- **Section 2: Cyberbullying Exposure and Experience:** Assessed respondents' frequency of witnessing and directly experiencing various forms of online harassment over the preceding six months. Items were evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Never") to 5 ("Very Often").
- **Section 3: Islamic Ethics and Online Conduct:** Evaluated students' awareness, internal adherence, and perceived applicability of core Islamic ethical constructs—namely *Akhlaq* (virtuous character), *Amanah* (trustworthiness), and *Taqwa* (God-consciousness)—in digital interactions using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree").

- **Section 4: Prevention and Recommendations:** Gathered participant evaluations on preventive countermeasures (such as religious reminders, institutional policies, and reporting mechanisms) and included an open-ended question for qualitative participant insights on improving digital ethics.

Data were gathered anonymously from a pilot sample of 33 IIUM students who participated voluntarily. Complete anonymity was maintained to encourage candid and honest self-reporting regarding online experiences. Descriptive statistical analysis -including frequency distributions, percentages, and central tendency metrics- was conducted using Google Forms analytical tools and Microsoft Excel to generate data visualizations and elucidate key empirical patterns. Figure 1 outlines the sequential flow of the research methodology.

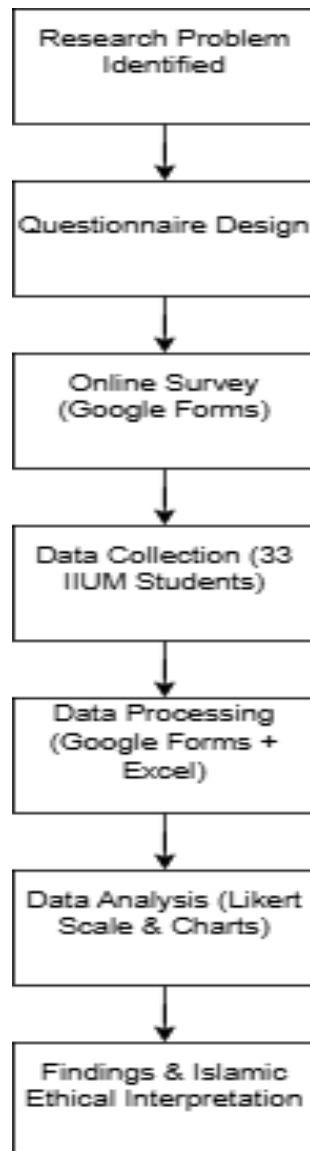


Figure 1: Research Methodology Flowchart

4. Findings

4.1 Cyberbullying Experiences

I have seen others being bullied on social media.
33 responses

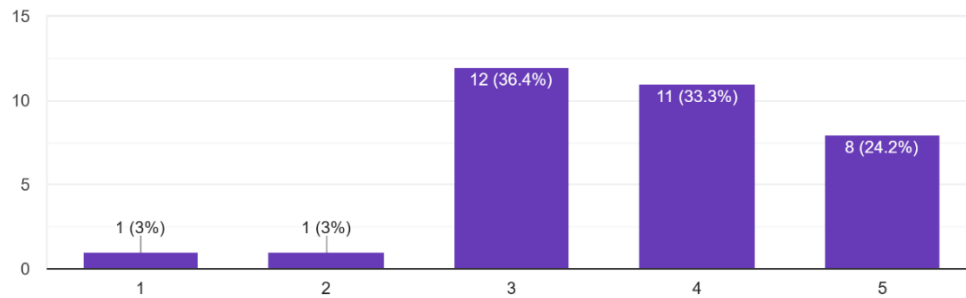


Figure 1: Seen others being bullied online

As seen in Figure 1, many of the students who answered claimed they have seen cyberbullying on social media. More than 93% of the people who answered chose 3 (Sometimes), 4 (Often), or 5 (Very Often), which demonstrates that IIUM students see cyberbullying happen a lot. Only 6% of persons who answered choose 1 (Never) or 2 (Rarely) instead. It also means that even if students aren't the main targets, they are nevertheless exposed to inappropriate online activity all the time. This shows how often cyberbullying happens online.

I have received insulting or mocking messages online.
33 responses

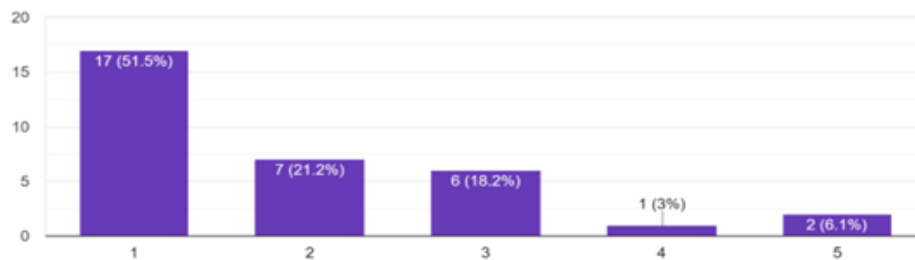


Figure 2: Received insulting or mocking messages

Figure 2 shows that most respondents reported low levels of receiving insulting or mocking messages online. A majority of students indicated that they had not experienced this type of cyberbullying, while a smaller group reported experiencing it occasionally or frequently. However, about one-quarter of the respondents still reported being exposed to insulting or mocking messages, showing that direct cyberbullying is present among a noticeable minority of IIUM students. This indicates that although many students are not directly targeted, online harassment remains a real concern within the student community.

4.2 Islamic Awareness and Online Behavior

Islam teaches respect and good character (akhlaq) in all forms of communication, including online.
33 responses

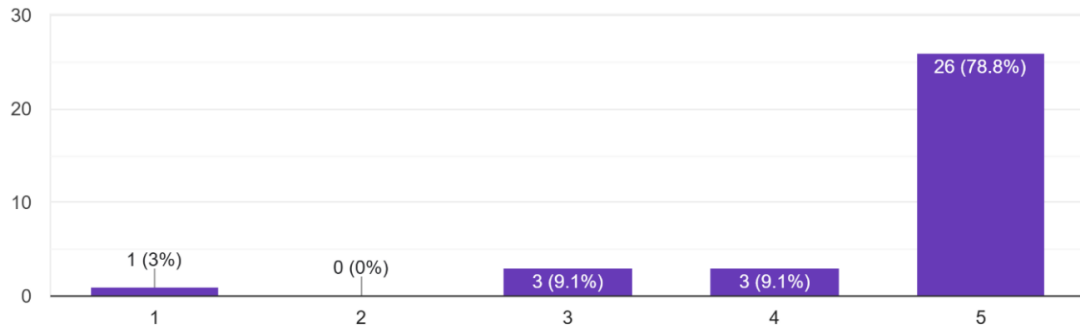


Figure 3: Belief in Islamic ethics in online communication

The results in Figure 3 show that a strong majority of respondents agree that Islam teaches respect and good character (Akhlq) in all forms of communication, including online interactions. Most students selected the higher response categories, indicating a high level of awareness not only in face-to-face communication but also in digital spaces such as social media and messaging platforms. This suggests that IIUM students clearly recognize that ethical behavior in Islam extends to online conduct and that harmful or disrespectful online behavior contradicts Islamic values.

4.3 Prevention and Recommendations

Which of the following do you think is the most effective way to reduce cyberbullying?
33 responses

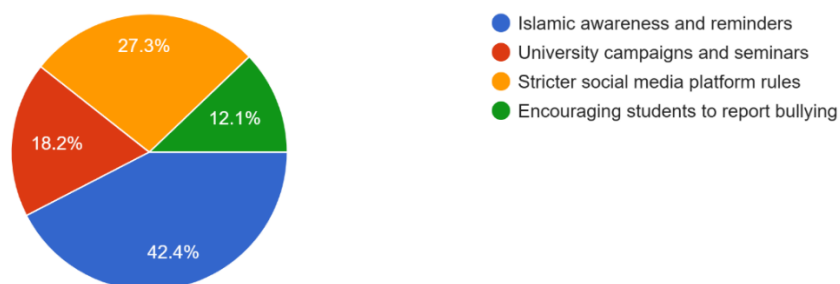


Figure 4: Perceived most effective method to reduce cyberbullying

Figure 5 shows that Islamic awareness and ethical education were selected by the most significant proportion of respondents as the most effective ways of reducing cyberbullying. This indicates that many students believe internal moral guidance, such as reminders of Islamic values, plays a more critical role than punishment or technical controls alone. Other respondents also highlighted the importance of clear rules and institutional policies, suggesting

that both moral education and formal regulation are needed to address cyberbullying effectively.

4.4 Open-Ended Insights

Participants emphasized:

Reporting abusive content and using online platforms to develop knowledge.

One practical step student can take to improve online ethics is to always verify information before sharing it. By checking the credibility of sources and avoiding the spread of false or misleading content, students help create a more trustworthy and respectful online environment.

Students should verify information before sharing it. By stopping the spread of false or harmful content, we can prevent misunderstandings, protect others' reputations, and create a more respectful online environment.

5. Discussion and Recommendations

5.1. Discussion

The empirical findings of this study demonstrate a substantial alignment between students' awareness of Islamic ethical principles and their theoretical understanding of digital behavior. A primary insight from the data is the pronounced disparity between high ethical knowledge—where 78.8% of respondents strongly affirm that Islam mandates respect and *Akhlaq* in digital spaces—and the high prevalence of witnessed cyberbullying (over 93%). This gap suggests that while religious education effectively instills moral principles, these principles do not automatically translate into active bystander intervention or the total suppression of digital harassment.

Furthermore, the data highlights that respondents primarily perceive cyberbullying through the lens of individual moral responsibility rather than merely institutional regulation. Participants explicitly associated online ethical behavior with core Islamic constructs such as *Taqwa* (God-consciousness), *Amanah* (trustworthiness in sharing information), and the avoidance of *Gheebah* (backbiting) and *Hurmah* (infringing upon others' dignity). This finding is encapsulated in the prophetic tradition: "*A true Muslim is the one from whose tongue and hand people are safe*" (Sahih al-Bukhari). In a digital context, "tongue and hand" directly correspond to text messaging, commenting, posting, and content dissemination.

The preference expressed by 42.4% of respondents for faith-based awareness over strict social media rules or punitive actions underscores the necessity of internal moral regulation (*Self-governance*). When digital ethics are anchored in Islamic values, individuals process online behavior not out of fear of platform bans, but out of spiritual accountability before Almighty Allah.

5.2. Practical Recommendations

Based on the integrated empirical and theoretical insights, the following strategic actions are proposed to foster ethical digital citizenship:

- **Integration of Digital Akhlaq in Academic Curricula:** Higher education institutions should embed modules on "Digital Citizenship and Islamic Ethics" within university-wide ICT and Islamic studies courses, translating abstract ethical principles into actionable digital guidelines.

- **Institutional Awareness Campaigns:** Universities and student organizations should conduct interactive workshops, seminars, and Friday sermons (*Khutbahs*) addressing contemporary digital issues, specifically emphasizing the prohibition of digital *Gheebah*, cyberbullying, and unverified news sharing (*Amanah*).
- **Establishing Safe Reporting Mechanisms:** Institutions must implement confidential, transparent, and accessible reporting channels for victims of online abuse, paired with counseling services to mitigate the psychological impact of cyberbullying.
- **Platform Cooperation and Moral Governance:** Technical administrators and policy-makers should collaborate to enforce clear community standards that align platform rules with ethical conduct, ensuring strict measures against harassment while encouraging peer support and positive bystander intervention.

6. Conclusion

This study examined cyberbullying and digital ethics from an Islamic perspective among university students at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). The empirical findings reveal that while students demonstrate a high awareness of Islamic ethical principles- such as *Akhlaq* (virtuous conduct), *Taqwa* (God-consciousness), *Amanah* (trustworthiness), and *Hurmah* (human dignity)- there remains a persistent exposure to cyberbullying and online harassment in digital spaces. This highlights a critical operational gap between theoretical religious knowledge and actual digital conduct.

The study underscores that faith-based interventions and internal moral self-regulation are perceived by students as the most impactful mechanisms for curbing digital misconduct. Integrating Islamic moral values into ICT education and digital literacy initiatives provides a powerful framework to foster ethical digital citizenship, ensuring that online interactions align with Islamic teachings.

Limitations and Future Research: A key limitation of this study is its reliance on a small pilot sample ($N = 33$), which restricts the generalizability of the findings across broader demographic populations. Future research should expand the sample size across multiple institutions and integrate qualitative methodologies- such as semi-structured interviews or focus groups- to gain deeper empirical insights into the psychological drivers of digital bystander behavior and the long-term efficacy of faith-based digital literacy programs.

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