

The virality of public figures' personal conflicts as a challenge to upholding digital communication ethics

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ABSTRACT

When personal conflicts are publicly disclosed and circulated on social media, they often attract widespread attention and trigger diverse responses from netizens. Which Simultaneously raising ethical concerns regarding privacy, reputation, disclosure of personal matters, and responsibility in digital communication. This study aims to describe the process by which personal conflicts and the ethical violations that emerge in netizens' comments regarding viral personal conflicts on social media. This study is grounded in the synthesis of Jonah Berger's Virality theory, Wan Ng's digital literacy framework, and Immanuel Kant's ethical philosophy, and examines how emotional triggers on Instagram interact with users' cognitive and socio-emotional capacities to shape online moral boundaries. This study employs a qualitative case study approach, with data collection techniques including interviews and digital observation of several netizens' comments responding to viral personal conflicts, which generally begin when individuals involved publicly share their issues on social media, which are then amplified by media exposure and netizen participation. These findings show that the escalation of personal conflicts begins when public figures publicly share their personal issues on social media, which are then amplified through media exposure and netizen participation. The main ethical violations identified in netizens' comments include personal attacks, insults, hate speech, disrespect for human dignity, and judgmental remarks. These findings highlight the need to strengthen digital literacy, ethical awareness, and responsible communication practices to promote a healthier digital environment.

Keywords: *Cyber Ethics, Digital Literacy, Netizen Participation, Online Shaming*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of social media has transformed personal conflicts into public consumption within the digital sphere. In Indonesia, domestic and interpersonal disputes such as infidelity, divorce, and relationship breakdowns are increasingly exposed through digital platforms and frequently become viral discussions among netizens. Cases that were initially private are now amplified through algorithmic circulation, online reposting, and intensive public interaction, blurring the boundaries between private and public communication.

One example can be seen in several viral cases involving public figures and their partners, where personal disputes triggered massive public reactions, online shaming, hate comments, and digital judgment from netizens. These phenomena indicate that social media is not only functioning as a communication platform, but also as a space for public surveillance and moral judgment. The increasing participation of netizens in commenting on personal conflicts has raised ethical concerns regarding privacy violations, reputational damage, cyberbullying, and irresponsible dissemination of information.

Previous studies on digital communication ethics have largely focused on cyberbullying, hate speech, and misinformation in social media. However, limited studies specifically examine how personal conflicts become viral in the digital public sphere and how ethical violations emerge through netizens' interactions in the comment sections. Existing research also tends to discuss social media ethics in general, without exploring the communicative process that transforms interpersonal conflicts into collective public spectacles. In this study, personal conflict refers to interpersonal disputes involving emotional, domestic, or relationship-related issues that are publicly disclosed and circulated through social media platforms. Therefore, this research aims to analyze the virality process of personal conflicts, identify forms of ethical violations in netizens' comments, and examine the challenges of upholding digital communication ethics in the contemporary digital environment.

The research is important because the phenomenon of viral personal conflicts on social media has increasingly shifted private interpersonal issues into public digital consumption. Although studies on digital ethics and online communication continue to grow, limited research specifically examines the communicative process through which personal conflicts become viral and generate ethical violations in netizens' interactions. The urgency of this study lies in the increasing number of viral personal conflict cases in Indonesia, which often lead to online shaming, reputational damage, cyberbullying, and privacy violations. Therefore, this study is necessary to strengthen the understanding of digital communication ethics and encourage more responsible communication practices in the digital public sphere.

Personal conflict in this study refers to interpersonal disputes involving emotional, domestic, marital, or relationship-related problems between individuals, particularly those that are publicly disclosed and circulated through digital media platforms. In recent years, personal conflicts have increasingly shifted from private matters into public digital consumption through social media exposure, reposting activities, and netizen participation. This phenomenon reflects the blurring of boundaries between private communication and the digital public sphere.

The exposure of personal conflicts in digital spaces has also raised ethical concerns regarding online shaming, hate comments, cyberbullying, privacy violations, and reputational damage. This condition is closely related to the increasing intensity of digital interactions in contemporary society. In the digital age, private conflicts have spilled over into the public sphere via social media. A report by the Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network notes that in 2024, there were approximately 134 viral cases in the public sphere, some of which were related to personal conflicts. (Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network, 2024). These phenomena indicate that viral personal conflicts are no longer merely private interpersonal issues, but have evolved into broader challenges of digital communication ethics in the contemporary digital environment.

One example can be seen in the viral case by the end of 2025 involving an influencer and public figure in Indonesia, specifically Wardatina Mawa, Insanul Fahmi, and Inara Rusli. This attracted extensive public attention across social media platforms. One of the discussions uploaded on Denny Sumargo's YouTube channel featuring Inara Rusli attracted significant public engagement, as reflected in the high number of views and thousands of netizens' comments discussing issues related to infidelity, morality, family relationships, and public judgment. The content was posted from January 8, 2026, to March 4, 2026, and has been viewed over 5.3 million times, with 53,000 likes and 134,000 comments. These phenomena indicate how personal conflicts that were

initially private can rapidly transform into public digital consumption and trigger ethical issues within online interactions. This personal post escalated into a widespread debate, sparking thousands of comments, online news coverage, and sensationalized reposting by irresponsible social media accounts, while netizens imposed social sanctions, resulting in reputational damage and job loss for both parties accused of the affair. This phenomenon demonstrates that social media can function as a space for shaping public opinion and response to issues that were previously private in nature.

Berger and Milkman (2022) found that content that elicits a strong emotional response is more likely to go viral. Papacharissi (2020) introduced the concept of the affective public where digital spaces go viral due to the influence of collective emotions. Furthermore Hou, Wang, and Xie (2021) found that personal and emotional content on social media spreads faster than neutral content. Building on this, this study specifically examines the challenges in upholding communication ethics within the virality of personal conflicts, particularly from a digital literacy perspective. Studies examining the challenges of upholding communication ethics within the virality of personal conflict are relatively limited. However, digital literacy encompasses not only technological skills but also awareness and responsibility regarding every from of communication and content sharing in the digital space.

Low awareness of communication responsibility can accelerate the spread of conflicts and amplify their impact in the digital space. Based on this background, this study aims to identify the types of ethical challenges arising from viral personal conflicts, map the processes of ethical violations, and uncover the challenges faced by digital literacy advocates in controlling various forms of communication ethics violations in the digital space.

Most previous research has focused on the dissemination of information, and few have specifically examined how the virality of personal conflicts relates to violations of digital communication ethics and digital literacy in the context of Indonesian culture. Research on digital communication ethics and netizens' communication behavior on social media has continued to develop in various contexts, both in Indonesia, Anshar and Aarsal, (2023) found that digital communication ethics are closely related to honesty, politeness, and responsibility in online interactions. Furthermore, Wulandah (2023) explained that cyberbullying and hate comments on Instagram emerge due to the low level of ethical awareness among netizens in using social media. Martha, (2024) Also revealed that cyberbullying on social media has continued to increase alongside weak digital ethical control and the high level of public participation in commenting on viral issues. Meanwhile, Rovida and Sasmini (2024) emphasized that the development of digital technology and social media culture has further intensified cyberbullying and violations of communication ethics in digital spaces.

In the International context, Harrison and Polizzi (2022) found that low moral reasoning and limited digital awareness may encourage aggressive behavior and incivility in online interactions. Similarly, Lee and Jun, (2024) demonstrated that low media literacy and exposure to risky online content can increase cyberaggression among digital users. In addition, they explained that personal and situational factors on social media contribute to the emergence of cyberaggressive behavior in digital communication. Furthermore, confirms that exposure to digital violence and a limited understanding of communication ethics can influence users' communication behavior on social media, particularly among adolescents.

Based on these previous studies, research on digital communication ethics has generally focused on cyberbullying, cyberaggression, and digital literacy. Zulkarnain

(2024). However, studies specially examining the challenge of holding communication ethics amid the virality of personal and domestic conflicts which evolve into public digital consumption through netizen participation remain relatively limited. This study offers a new perspective by shifting the focus from general online behavior to the unique cultural and digital landscape of Instagram in Indonesia, where the culture of social media virality often triggers collective public judgment and irrational commentary. Therefore, this study seeks to analyze the process through which personal conflicts become viral, identify specific forms of communication ethics violations in netizens' comments, and examine the challenges of maintaining digital communication ethics within the contemporary Indonesian digital public sphere.

In understanding this phenomenon, this study is grounded in Immanuel Kant's communication ethics theory, which emphasizes moral duty and respect for humanity as fundamental principles in communication Lo Re (2022) Furthermore, this study also refers to contemporary discussions on digital ethics which argue that communication in digital environments should uphold human dignity, responsibility, and justice in online interactions. Hanna and Kazim (2021). In addition, this study employs Jonah Berger's virality, which explains that emotional engagement, audience attention, and social sharing significantly influence the rapid spread of content in digital environments (Berger et al.,2023)

Freedom of expression in the digital space should not be interpreted as unlimited freedom; rather, it must take into account social norms, human values, and moral responsibility, just as in real-world interactions. Communication ethics refers to the moral principles that govern the process of conveying messages, whether verbally or in writing. These principles emphasize the importance of mutual respect, honesty, and responsibility in every communicative interaction.(Hollingsworth, 2025). The open nature of online platforms regularly allows hostile behaviors to thrive. This issue often shows up as direct personal attacks, subtle insults, and coordinated cyberbullying among social media users. Such toxic interactions are more than just a case of bad internet manners. When people continuously share harsh comments without constraint. it points to a serious breakdown in communication ethics, making it hard to separate real public discussion from pure digital aggression. (Astajaya, 2020)

Violations of communication ethics in the digital space are often exacerbated by the viral nature of social media, which enables the rapid and widespread dissemination of information. The development of digital technology also creates opportunities for defamation and the misuse of media by irresponsible parties (Kumar, 2024). Comments that are insulting or demeaning to a person's dignity can have serious consequences, such as damaging reputation, lowering self-esteem, and causing psychological stress and anxiety in the targeted individual (Isnawan, 2025)

Berger explains that content spreads easily when it evokes emotions and captures the public's attention, thereby encouraging people to share it with others. In the context of social media, this phenomenon is also linked to the "Fear of Missing Out" (FOMO). On platforms like Instagram on YouTube, FOMO creates a form of social pressure that forces users to constantly follow and react to trending stories, including private domestic disputes. Netizens often feel that if they do not participate in the comments section of a viral post, they are being left out of the cultural conversation. Consequently, this anxiety drives individuals to quickly post harsh or unreflective comments simply to stay relevant, which directly contributes to the breakdown of digital communications ethics. Recent studies have shown that FOMO is closely associated with excessive social media engagement, emotional participation, online comparison, and problematic digital

behavior (Akbari et al., 2021; Elhai et al., 2021). In viral personal conflict cases, FOMO may encourage netizens to continuously follow, comment on, repost, and emotionally engage with trending issues in digital spaces.

In Indonesia, this tendency also intersects with a cultural inclination toward stories or gossip about others' lives; this social practice has shifted to the digital realm, causing personal conflicts to attract public attention and go viral. Social media also encourages some users to seek validation and a sense of self-worth in the digital space, prompting them to comment on or spread conflicts that are currently trending.

According to Rathje and Van Bavel (2025), four factors can influence the spread of viral content on social media: first, negative content that triggers emotions is preferred and easily shared; second, content expressing moral outrage; third, the spread of content is influenced by social conditions; and fourth, algorithms

Digital literacy plays a crucial role in how users navigate and evaluate communication behaviors in the digital space. As argued by Wan Ng. (2012), digital literacy extends beyond technical skill, heavily relying on cognitive and socio-emotional dimensions. Within the context of Instagram in Indonesia, these dimensions determine whether a user can critically filter viral information or blindly join public shaming. Consequently, a lack of robust digital literacy correlates with the erosion of communication ethics as users often react emotionally to viral personal conflicts without considering the moral consequences. This study aims to fill this gap by integrating ethical perspectives with digital literacy frameworks to evaluate how viral personal conflict are publicly consumed in contemporary digital environments, digital literacy extends beyond technical skill. It responsibly involves online communication. (Tinmaz et al., 2022). Within this study, these literacy dimensions are specifically applied to analyze netizens' behavior on Instagram. By focusing strictly on how low digital literacy and user FOMO diminish this ethical awareness, this research examines the exact mechanism through which unchecked public participation transforms private domestic disputes into toxic digital commentary. In this context, low digital literacy reinforces this tendency, leading social media users to respond without ethical considerations. Therefore, this study examines the virality of personal conflict as a result of the interaction between emotional factors, the structure of the digital platform, and users' digital literacy capacity.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with an instrumental case study method to explore challenges in upholding digital communication ethics amidst the virality of personal conflicts on social media. The instrumental case study is considered appropriate because the selected case is not studied solely for its uniqueness, but as a means to understand broader issues related to digital communication ethics, information virality, and user interactions in a connected digital environment. To operationalize this approach, this research examined the prominent viral conflict involving public figures Inara Rusli, Wardatina Mawa, and Insanul Fahmi. Specifically, the analysis focuses on the perspectives and comments of netizens extracted from a major YouTube podcast featuring a public figure entangled in a highly publicized domestic dispute and alleged infidelity, a story that initially achieved peak cross-platform virality on Instagram before transitioning into extended public discourse on YouTube. The empirical data, consisting of netizens' comments, was systematically

collected during an observation period spanning from January 8, 2026 to March 4, 2026. The selection of comments followed strict purposive public shaming, or interactive patterns heavily driven by user FOMO (Creswell & Poth, 2024 ; Meriam & Tisdell, 2024)

In conducting observations, the researcher positions themselves as a non-participant observer, which means data is collected through passive observation of digital interactions available publicly without involvement. The data collection techniques used in this study include interviews and digital observations, specifically the analysis of posts, netizens' comments that violate ethics, and public interactions on social media platforms. Data were collected from archived screenshots of online comments and interviews with five purposively selected informants. These informants include : (1) the Head of the Digital Monitoring Unit at the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology of Indonesia (2) a Communication studies academic (3) a representative from the Indonesia Ulema Council (MUI), and (4) two social media influencers. They were selected based on their expertise and relevance to digital ethics.

Regarding the research focus, this study focuses solely on the viral case of Inara Rusli, Wardatina Mawa, and Insanul Fahmi, as it serves as a clear example of cross-platform virality from Instagram to YouTube. For the data analysis, we used the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2024) First, data by filtering out useless YouTube comments and transcribed the interviews with our five informants. This helped us focus only on the data that mattered. Second, we organized this sorted data into a data display (matrices) based on Jonah Berger's virality ideas.

Wan Ng's literacy concepts and Immanuel Kant's ethics. Finally, we drew our conclusions by connecting netizens' habits with the informants' expert views to explain the digital ethics crisis in Indonesia. The collected data from interviews, observations, and social media content were analyzed continuously throughout the research process to identify communication ethics violations, forms of netizen participation, and challenges in maintaining ethical communication within viral digital interactions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section examines the phenomenon of the viral spread of personal conflicts from the perspective of the digital public's response, or that of netizens. The analysis does not focus on determining the right or wrong of the parties involved in the conflict, but rather on how netizens' participation through comments, reinterpretations, and the sharing of content contributes to amplifying and shaping the dynamics of the conflict within social media spaces. Thus, the primary focus of this study lies on the ethical dimensions of communication and digital literacy in public behavior within digital spaces.

Conflicts that were initially personal have transformed into public issues and discourse after being published on social media. In this process, there is an exchange of narratives, the formation of opinions, and diverse emotional responses from netizens. Therefore, the discussion in this chapter focuses on three main aspects: types of communication ethics violations in netizen comments, the process of the virality of personal conflicts on social media, and the challenges faced by literacy advocates in upholding communication ethics in the digital space.

In this study, the analysis will focus on the perspectives or comments of netizens on a YouTube channel specifically, a major podcast hosted by public figure Deni Sumargo—during an episode in which he interviewed a public figure rumored to be having an affair with a married man, a story that went viral. The content was posted

from January 8, 2026, to March 4, 2026, and has been viewed over 5.3 million times, with 53,000 likes and 134,000 comments. The researcher selected several examples of netizen comments. This focus was chosen because netizen comments often amplify virality, introduce new framing, and reflect violations of digital communication ethics. From a population of over 134,000 YouTube comments, samples were filtered using a criterion-based selection. First, spam and bot advertisements were removed. Second, the remaining data was screened to isolate comments with the most prominent and high-density text patterns regarding the conflict. Finally, 16 comments were selected based on these prominent keywords. Of the 16 comments analyzed, several were judgmental comments and reflective or neutral comments. These comments or expressions from netizens were then linked to principles of communication ethics, such as upholding honesty, maintaining dignity and respect for others, and exercising responsibility in disseminating information. This phenomenon can be explained through the perspective of Immanuel Kant's communication ethics, which emphasizes that a moral action must be able to be made a universal law (Kant, 2012). In the context of digital communication, insulting acts cannot be justified because if they were made a general norm, they would undermine the order of rational communication and mutual respect. The following is a categorization of netizen responses in the comment section on the DS podcast's YouTube account:

The findings indicate that the majority of netizen comments consist of personal attacks and emotional insults. Examples include comments such as "I feel sick, I want to spit," "Jin Dasim," and "Acting so wise," "Acting so pious." These comments directly target individuals, degrade their dignity, and damage their reputation. Such behavior or harsh comments from netizens constitute an ethical violation—specifically, a breach of the principles of maintaining dignity and respecting others. Comments that insult a person's character or physical appearance are clearly unethical, even when there are alleged facts related to a conflict. This indicates that netizens often prioritize personal emotional expression over responsible communication in the digital space. Kant emphasized that humans should always be treated as ends, not as means (Kant, 2012), so the practice of demeaning judgment in comment sections represents a violation of human dignity. In the context of digital ethics, Kant's principle is relevant to the ethical perspective of information, which emphasizes respect for individual identity and dignity in digital spaces (Floridi, 2013; Himma & Tavani, 2021).



Figure 2. This is a screenshot of the “Judgment” comment

Although the researcher’s findings indicate that social media comments were predominantly negative regarding the conflict involving a public figure with the initials IR, the researcher also found several reflective or neutral comments, such as “Let’s not comment too much; we all have our own problems.” These comments encourage restraint, respect for privacy, and refraining from spreading negative opinions. When viewed through the lens of digital communication ethics, this upholds the principle of respecting others’ dignity and taking responsibility for the information disseminated. This further demonstrates that not all netizens are caught up in the cycle of virality and judgment.

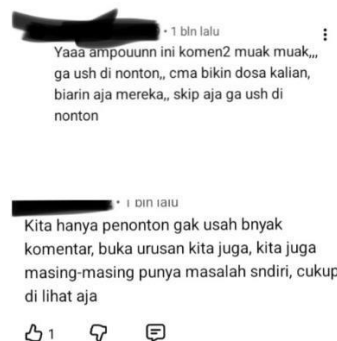


Figure 3. This is a figure screenshot of reflective comments

To clarify the classification of findings as outlined above, the researcher presents a summary of the analysis of netizens’ comments in tabular form. The purpose of this table is to illustrate the dominant patterns of public response, the categories of ethical violations that emerged, and the ethical principles violated in each comment. Through the following table, one can systematically see how each comment is categorized based on the type of response (personal attacks, unverified accusations, or reflective comments) as well as the related principles of communication ethics, such as dignity and respect, honesty, and informational responsibility. This table also reveals a tendency toward the dominance of negative comments compared to reflective comments, there by reinforcing the research findings regarding the strong culture of public judgment in the digital space.

Table 1. This is a table Comment from a Netizen Based on the Principles of Communication Ethics

No	Examples of Netizen Comments	Category	Analysis of Communication Ethics Violations
1.	"He is not a public figure among humans, sis, he has a management team of the same group as the genie Dasim..."	Emotional Abuse/Personal Attacks	Violating the principle of maintaining individual dignity
2	"We are just spectators, no need to comment much, it's none of our business, we each have our own problems, just watch."	Reflective Comments	Netizens do not attack, do not judge, but rather encourage self-restraint (digital literacy)
3	"Leave him on all social media, don't watch him on TV or on YouTube, he will disappear on his own, so he knows the law for home wreckers is much crueler than for netizens."	Judgmental Comment	Violating the principles of honesty and caution in judging someone
4	Same... until I didn't realize my mouth said "yuck" because I was so disgusted. Even though I've never commented on the issue of infidelity before, but seeing this, I swear... I'm so disgusted, even though I used to like IR, but since this case, I swear I'm really disgusted.	Emotional Abuse/Personal Attacks	Violating the principle of maintaining individual dignity
5.	Yes, ampouuun, these comments are disgusting - you don't have to watch them, they're just causing your sin, just leave them alone, you don't have to watch them.	Reflective Comment	Netizens do not attack, do not judge, but rather encourage self-restraint (digital literacy)
6.	Humans are playing the victim, sis. They're really hypocritical, man.	Judgmental Comment	Judging behavior, violating the principles of honesty and responsibility of information
7.	After 45 years, this comment truly represents me. It's not disgusting, more like nausea. May karma come soon. Amen.	Emotional Abuse/Personal Attacks	Judging behavior, violating the principles of honesty and responsibility of information
8.	In my 24 years of life, I've never been this angry with a public figure.	Emotional Abuse/Personal Attacks	Judging behavior, violating the principles of honesty and responsibility of information
9.	He said that to be a mistress you don't need to be beautiful, the important thing is that you don't know yourself. Hahaha	Emotional Abuse/Personal Attacks	Violating the principle of politeness in public communication and violating the principle of respecting the dignity of others
10.	One more thing, itchy..I don't know myself and itchy	Emotional Abuse/Personal Attacks	Violating the principle of politeness in public communication and violating the principle of respecting the dignity of others
11	Add more...Shameless	Emotional Abuse/Personal Attacks	Violating the principle of politeness in public communication and violating the principle of respecting the dignity of others

12.	Her pussy is itchy, so she wants someone else's husband	Emotional Abuse/Personal Attacks	Judging individuals violates the principle of respecting others/mockng
13.	Not stupid, but when it was itchy, a burglar came along and it lasted for 2 hours.	Emotional Abuse/Personal Attacks	Judging individuals violates the principle of respecting others/mockng
14	Not stupid, but when it was itchy, a burglar came along and it lasted for 2 hours.	Emotional Abuse/Personal Attacks	Judging individuals violates the principle of respecting others/mockng
15	Pretending to be wise, pretending to be pious, really disgusting, disgusting, I want to spit on you	Emotional Abuse/Personal Attacks	Violating the principle of maintaining individual dignity
16.	Cancel Culture, boycott them both	Judgmental	Violating the principles of honesty and responsibility of information

The viral spread of personal conflicts begins with personal issues between partners being brought into the digital space—through uploading photos, videos, or sharing chat conversations. This content then attracts public attention and is widely shared by social media users. Content containing conflict is more likely to be recommended by algorithms to social media users. This aligns with Berger's assertion that content triggering emotions, curiosity, or specific sensations tends to more easily capture attention and encourage people to share it with others.

The content then attracts public attention and is widely shared by social media users. Content containing conflict may attract greater attention because it can trigger emotional responses and encourage users to share it with others. This is consistent with Berger's virality theory, which explains that emotionally engaging content is more likely to attract attention and be shared.

These findings also show that the personal conflict gained wider public attention through repeated discussions, comments, and sharing on social media. In this process, netizens actively participated by commenting on and responding to the conflict, contributing to its continued visibility in the digital space.

The case also received wider exposure through mass media, podcast YouTube, and social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. These findings indicate that social media can function not only as a space for information sharing but also as a space where citizens participate in discussing and interpreting personal conflicts. Based on these findings, the study outlines a conceptual model of the virality of personal conflicts on social media.

Findings from the previous subtheme indicate that violations of communication ethics in the digital space involving netizens' responses are dominated by personally attacking and judgmental comments made without sufficient verification. This finding is also reflected in the interview with Yossie Sesbania Gewap, Chair of the Digital Oversight Division at Kominfodigi. She explained that maintaining communication ethics in the digital space requires balancing freedom of expression with regulatory and ethical responsibilities. According to her, excessive leniency may allow harmful content to circulate while excessive restriction may limit users freedom to express their opinions (interview with Yoie Sesbania Gewap, November 19, 2025)

The interview with figure public Vicky Prasetyo also provides a relevant

perspective in the impact of personal conflicts that become public on social media. He emphasized that social media users need to consider the consequences of exposing personal matters online because such content can affect the people involved and their future digital footprints. He also highlighted the importance of maturity and responsible behavior when using social media (Interview with Vicky Prasetyo, May 9, 2025)

Digital literacy is therefore not limited to the ability to use digital technology. It also involves understanding the ethical consequences of producing, sharing, and responding to information online. The interview with Yossie Sesbania Gewap emphasized the importance of verifying information before sharing it, particularly because unverified information can contribute to misinformation, hoaxes, and hate speech (Interview with Yossie Sesbania Gewap, November 19, 2025)

This issue was also highlighted by an academic in communication who explained that social media can blur the boundaries between private and public spaces. Personal conflicts that would normally remain private can become public spectacles when shared online. According to the interviewee, this situation may encourage public judgment based on incomplete information and reflects the need for greater awareness of ethics, privacy, and the long-term consequences of digital content (Interview with Tryas Pyrenia Iskandar, May 19, 2026)

This perspective is supported by public figure Augie Fantinus, who emphasized the importance of using social media responsibly and ethically. He argued that social media users can influence others through the content they share, making it important for them to consider the messages and examples they provide to the public. Therefore, responsible social media use requires awareness of both the potential benefits and consequences of online communication (Interview with Augie Fantinus, May 9, 2025)

Ethical Dimensions and Virality Mechanics in Digital Literacy: An Analytical Discussion

Current digital literacy initiatives must transcend technical proficiency and focus on users' moral responsibility in producing and sharing information (Wan Ng, 2012). In the Indonesian context, this moral responsibility is formally codified through institutional frameworks, such as Fatwa MUI No. 24 of 2017 regarding guidelines on social media interactions. This religious and legal framework strictly prohibits *ghibah* (backbiting), slander, and cyberbullying, while mandating the ethical obligations of *tabayyun* (verification before sharing) and the preservation of *ukhuwah* (social brotherhood). To ethics, these structural guidelines manifest the Categorical Imperative. Within this deontological framework, respecting others' privacy and refusing to distribute harmful content constitutes an absolute moral duty, rather than a choice predicated on fleeting popularity.

However, institutional guidelines often clash with the raw mechanics of information diffusion on social media. According to Jonah Berger's Virality Theory, personal conflict and gossip spread exponentially because they possess high social currency and trigger high arousal emotions. The empirical findings indicate that viral personal conflicts escalate rapidly because the initial disclosure of private issues triggers widespread public attention, accelerating negative virality. Once the content becomes viral, netizen engagement shifts away from neutral or constructive dialogue, operating instead through personal attacks, moral judgment, and early-stage condemnation. This pattern demonstrates that social media comment sections frequently function as spaces of collective judgment rather than ethical deliberation.

These dynamics are partially consistent with (Harrison and Polizzi, 2022) as well as (Zhao and Yu, 2021), who argue that low digital moral awareness and moral disengagement contribute to cyberbullying. However, while previous studies primarily frame such behaviors as individual psychological tendencies, this study extends the analytical scope by demonstrating that cyber aggression is structurally amplified through viral dynamics and the highly participatory engagement of netizens. Furthermore, while (Lee and Jun, 2024) highlight media literacy directly breeds impulsive, unethical commenting practices. Similarly, the absence of empathy in viral situations challenges the digital ethics of care proposed by (O'Reilly et al, 2024). In the Indonesian context, while this study supports (Martha, 2024) findings on the normalization is severely narratives accelerate public engagement and reinforces moral polarization.

Theoretically, these findings extend the study of digital communication ethics by emphasizing that virality does not merely function as a mechanism for information dissemination, but also as an active social process that shapes moral judgment and ethical boundaries in online interactions.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that viral dynamics also reinforce the construction of collective moral judgment, which is often emotional in nature and tends to lead to public shaming of individuals involved in conflicts. In addition to these theoretical implications, this study also has important practical implications. It highlights the importance of strengthening digital literacy as a preventive framework to encourage more reflective and responsible participation in digital spaces, particularly in reducing tendencies toward instant judgment and personal attacks in comment sections. Moreover, the findings imply that individuals should be more cautious and considerate when exposing personal issues in public social media spaces, given the potential consequences such as conflict escalation, the spread of negative opinions, and an increased risk of ethical violations in digital communication practices.

CONCLUSION

These findings suggest that the viralization of personal conflicts on social media is not merely a communication phenomenon, but rather reflects a structural condition of digital interaction in which visibility, emotionality, and participatory engagement intersect to shape public discourse. In

such contexts, ethical boundaries of communication become increasingly fluid, as netizen participation tends to prioritize emotional expression and moral judgment over deliberative ethical reflection. Specifically, this study reveals that collective moral judgment is driven by an emotional domino effect. First, platform virality rapidly amplifies the visibility of personal conflicts. This immediate exposure triggers high-arousal emotional responses from the public, which then fuels massive, impulsive netizens' participation in the comment sections. Consequently, instead of hosting rational or ethical discussions, comment sections transform into digital arenas for collective condemnation. Through this interactive process, the study proves that the intersection of technology and emotion structurally reshapes how moral boundaries are enforced online. Ultimately, the study highlights the necessity of strengthening critical digital literacy and ethical awareness as part of broader efforts to foster more responsible participation in social media environments, particularly in contexts where personal issues are transformed into public spectacle through virality.

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