The Influence of Social Experience on Student Character in the Digital Era

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ABSTRACT

The transformation of social interaction from physical spaces to digital environments has created new and complex dynamics in the process of students' character formation. This study aims to analyze the influence of peer interactions in the digital era on students' morality and behavior, as well as to formulate relevant mitigation strategies. The study employed a literature review method by examining 15 scholarly articles and reference books published between 2018 and 2025. Data were analyzed using content analysis to synthesize patterns of relationships between digital interactions and changes in student character.

The findings indicate that social media–based peer interaction has become a dominant agent of socialization, triggering the phenomenon of digital conformity. This condition contributes to character vulnerability, including the erosion of self-control, gadget addiction, and diminished empathy resulting from the normalization of cyber bullying. These findings suggest that conventional forms of supervision are no longer sufficient to counteract the negative impacts of online interactions. Therefore, this study recommends a reorientation of character education through the integration of digital literacy and the cultivation of internet ethics (*netiquette*) within school curricula to strengthen students' moral resilience amid the global flow of information.

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Introduction

Character education is a fundamental pillar of the national education system, aiming to develop future generations who are not only intellectually competent but also morally resilient. Conceptually, character education is defined as a conscious and systematic effort to create learning environments and processes that enable students to actively develop their spiritual strength, self-control, personality, intelligence, noble character, and the skills needed for personal and social life (Salim et al., 2022). However, character formation does not occur in a vacuum; it is strongly influenced by external environments, particularly social interactions with peers. Traditionally, peer groups have played a crucial role in adolescents' social and emotional development, where acceptance within a group often becomes a primary motive for behavioral conformity (Faulintya et al., 2025; Margaretha et al., 2024).

Entering the third decade of the 21st century, the landscape of adolescent social interaction has undergone a radical transformation due to the rapid advancement of information technology. The digital era has shifted patterns of socialization from face-to-face interactions to virtual interactions that transcend spatial and temporal boundaries. This shift has introduced new dynamics in students' character formation. On the one hand, technology offers unprecedented access to information; on the other hand, it presents serious challenges related to moral degradation (Hidayat & Subando, 2024). Social media addiction, for instance, has been shown to weaken adolescents' self-control, making them more vulnerable to impulsive behavior and the neglect of ethical values in real-life contexts (Nazariskina & Selian, 2025). Intensive digital interactions with minimal supervision often foster new forms of antisocial behavior, such as cyberbullying, which have destructive implications for students' mental health and academic motivation (Wulandzari & Surawan, 2025).

A fundamental issue emerging in this context is the gap between the rapid adoption of technology by adolescents and their limited mental readiness and digital ethics. Many students become trapped in negative online peer environments due to insufficient digital literacy and a lack of understanding of responsible online behavior (Terttiaavini & Saputra, 2022). Previous studies, such as those conducted by Mahendra et al. (2025) and Ganta and Soetjiningsih (2022), have widely examined the influence of peer groups on adolescent morality and delinquency in general

contexts. However, studies that specifically synthesize how the transition from physical to digital peer interactions contributes to the deconstruction of student character, as well as how digital literacy strategies can serve as an antidote to such degradation, remain limited.

Therefore, this study aims to comprehensively analyze the influence of peer interactions in the digital era on students' character through a literature review approach. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the dual influence of peer interactions in both physical environments (offline conformity) and virtual spaces (social media interactions), as well as the integration of digital literacy–based solutions as a form of moral defense. By reviewing recent literature published between 2022 and 2025, this article is expected to provide new insights into the urgency of reorienting character education to be adaptive to contemporary challenges, particularly in mitigating the negative impacts of digital peer interactions.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using a literature review method. This approach was chosen to explore and synthesize the complexity of the relationship between adolescent peer interactions and character formation, which is increasingly mediated by technology, without direct field observation. The data sources consisted of secondary data in the form of scholarly journal articles, reference books, and national and international conference proceedings. Data were collected from reputable academic databases, including Google Scholar, Portal Garuda, and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), to obtain comprehensive perspectives on digital peer interaction from multiple academic disciplines, such as psychology, education, and sociology.

Data collection was conducted systematically through keyword-based searches, including terms such as peer influence, character education in the digital era, adolescent moral degradation, cyberbullying, and digital literacy. To ensure the relevance and timeliness of the data, the literature was limited to publications from the past five to seven years (2018–2025), with particular emphasis on studies published between 2023 and 2025. The inclusion criteria required that the selected literature explicitly address the relationship between social interactions (both online and offline) and students' behavioral or character-related variables. Titles and abstracts were screened to ensure alignment with the research objectives.

Data analysis was conducted using content analysis. The process began with data reduction by identifying key points from selected literature relevant to the influence of digital peer interactions. The next stage involved data display by organizing findings into thematic categories, such as forms of social interaction transformation, psychological impacts, and mitigation strategies. The final stage involved conclusion drawing and verification through synthesizing findings across sources to construct new arguments addressing the research objectives. Data validity was ensured through cross-checking findings among multiple sources (source triangulation) to confirm the consistency of conclusions regarding the impact of peer interactions on student character in the digital era.

Result and Discussion

Results

1. Transformation of Peer Influence Patterns: From Physical to Digital Conformity

The literature review indicates that peers remain the most influential agents of socialization for adolescents; however, the medium through which this influence operates has changed. Traditionally, students engaged in conformity to gain social acceptance within their peer groups. Recent studies have demonstrated a significant positive correlation between peer interaction and the development of students' moral behavior and discipline (Mahendra et al., 2025). The more intensive and positive the peer interactions, the better students' moral conduct; conversely, negative interactions are associated with poorer moral outcomes (Faulintya et al., 2025).

In the digital era, however, this pattern has evolved. Interactions that were once confined to physical spaces have expanded into social media environments, giving rise to what is commonly referred to as digital conformity. Ginting et al. (2024) found that social media reshapes adolescents' social behavior, making them more passive in offline contexts while more aggressive in online

interactions. A comparison of the characteristics of peer influence in physical and digital contexts is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Synthesis of the Shift in Characteristics of Peer Influence

Aspect	Conventional Peer Interaction (Offline)	Digital-Era Peer Interaction (Online)
Interaction Medium	Direct face-to-face interaction	Social media platforms (WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram)
Mechanism of Influence	Direct conformity and physical group pressure	Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), algorithms, virality
Psychological Impact	Solidarity, physical conflicts, school gangs	Cyberbullying, narcissism, social anxiety
Social Control	Easier monitoring by teachers and parents	Difficult to monitor (high anonymity)
Reference Sources	Ganta & Soetjiningsih (2022); Margaretha et al. (2024)	Wulandzari & Surawan (2025); Nazariskina & Selian (2025)

2. Mechanisms of Character Degradation: Cyberbullying and the Loss of Self-Control

The analysis indicates that unguided digital peer interaction has become a primary catalyst for moral degradation among students. Revalina et al. (2023) identified that the use of digital devices without value-based filters grounded in Pancasila principles leads to serious ethical erosion. Two specific phenomena were consistently found to undermine students' character.

First, cyberbullying. Wulandzari and Surawan (2025) highlighted that online peer interactions often lack empathy due to the anonymity afforded by digital platforms. This anonymity provides perpetrators with a false sense of security, enabling them to harass peers without immediate consequences. Such behavior has severe implications for victims' mental health, including depression and anxiety, as well as a decline in academic motivation. These findings indicate that toxic digital peer environments can severely damage students' psychological resilience.

Second, self-control deficits. Nazariskina and Selian (2025) found that social media addiction significantly weakens adolescents' ability to regulate impulses. Students who are excessively engaged in online interactions tend to procrastinate on academic responsibilities and gradually lose the character traits of discipline and responsibility. This finding is reinforced by Hidayat and Subando (2024), who argued that moral degradation in the digital era is exacerbated by unrestricted access to negative content that contradicts religious and social norms.

3. Integrating Digital Literacy as a Strategy for Character Strengthening

In response to these challenges, the literature consistently agrees that restricting access to technology is not an effective solution. Instead, character strengthening must be pursued through the integration of digital literacy and digital ethics. Hendayana et al. (2024) emphasized that schools should implement programs that not only teach students how to use technology technically, but also how to behave ethically in digital spaces.

Character education in the digital era therefore requires an adaptive approach. Terttiaavini and Saputra (2022) proposed the socialization of digital ethics that includes an understanding of digital footprints, the dangers of misinformation, and appropriate online communication etiquette. Through this approach, digital peer interaction can be transformed from a threat into a new space for students to actualize positive character traits on a global scale (Gunawan, 2024).

Discussion

1. Peer Hegemony in the Construction of Identity and Morality

In educational discourse, character is not formed instantaneously, but rather through a prolonged process of value internalization. According to character education literature, character refers to patterns of thinking and behavior that distinguish individuals in their ability to live and collaborate within families, communities, and broader society (Salim et al., 2024). During adolescence, the primary agent of socialization shifts from parents to peers. The reviewed literature confirms that peer groups are not merely supplementary social actors, but are key determinants in

the formation of moral behavior.

Recent studies by Mahendra et al. (2025) and Faulintya et al. (2025) consistently demonstrate a strong positive correlation between the quality of peer interaction and students' moral conduct. Adolescents who associate with peers who are religious and rule-abiding tend to adopt similar moral dispositions. This phenomenon is explained by the psychological mechanism of conformity. Margaretha et al. (2024) argued that adolescents possess a strong need for self-esteem, which is often fulfilled through group acceptance. To gain such acceptance, individuals are willing to adjust their behaviors, habits, and moral values to align with group norms.

However, this mechanism is inherently ambivalent. When conformity is directed toward deviant peer groups, it leads to delinquent behavior. Ganta and Soetjiningsih (2022) found a significant relationship between peer conformity and delinquency tendencies among male adolescents. In the school context, Muhammad (2025) further demonstrated that student misconduct often results from imitation of undisciplined peers. Thus, from a behavioral theory perspective, peer interaction functions as a hidden curriculum whose pedagogical influence may surpass that of formal classroom instruction.

2. Cultural Contradictions: The Dilemma Between School Regulations and Group Solidarity

Beyond internal psychological factors, students' character formation is shaped by external tensions between formal regulations (school rules) and informal peer norms. Normatively, school regulations are designed as behavioral control instruments to cultivate discipline and moral integrity. However, Mahendra et al. (2025) identified a strong "tug-of-war" between adherence to school rules and loyalty to peer groups. Their findings revealed that despite strict sanctions, ethical violations persist when peer culture does not support compliance.

Students are often faced with a moral dilemma: choosing between being a "rule-abiding student" and a "loyal friend." Miladi (2025) emphasized that peer interaction exerts a significant influence on the formation of disciplinary character. In many cases, behaviors such as truancy, smoking, or uniform violations are not due to ignorance of school rules, but rather serve as rituals of group acceptance. This phenomenon aligns with Margaretha et al. (2024), who explained that adolescents' need for self-esteem is frequently satisfied through conformity to group standards, even when those standards contradict institutional norms.

From a sociological perspective, peer groups operate as a hidden curriculum that often transmits values more rapidly and effectively than formal moral instruction. Faulintya et al. (2025) empirically demonstrated that the intensity of peer interaction is linearly correlated with the quality of students' moral actions. When peer narratives frame rule-breaking as "cool" or obedience as "cowardly," students' character development follows these narratives, disregarding school-imposed moral boundaries.

3. Digital Disruption: Character Erosion in Virtual Spaces

As social interaction migrates to digital environments, fundamental changes occur in adolescent social structures. Sagala et al. (2024) identified the erosion of social supervision as one of the most significant challenges in contemporary character education. In physical settings, deviant behavior can be immediately corrected; in digital spaces, anonymity offers a deceptive sense of security that facilitates norm violations.

Ginting et al. (2024) described a behavioral paradox among adolescents: they tend to be passive and apathetic in offline community life, yet aggressive and expressive on social media. This shift has led to what Revalina et al. (2023) termed systemic moral degradation, where Pancasila values are increasingly displaced by global popular culture and unfiltered negative content.

Two principal mechanisms through which digital peer interaction undermines character were identified in the literature:

a. Self-Control Deficits and Addiction

Social media platforms are designed with algorithms that foster addictive behavior. Nazariskina and Selian (2025) found that adolescents experiencing social media addiction exhibit a significant decline in self-control, becoming impulsive, unable to delay gratification, and neglectful of academic responsibilities. Such deficits directly contradict the character traits of discipline and

responsibility emphasized in national education goals.

b. Normalization of Verbal Violence (Cyberbullying)

The most extreme manifestation of toxic digital interaction is cyberbullying. Wulandzari and Surawan (2025) demonstrated that cyberbullying has more destructive consequences than physical bullying due to its permanent digital footprint and unlimited audience. Victims often suffer severe mental health crises, including anxiety and depression, which directly erode self-confidence and learning motivation. Ironically, perpetrators frequently experience diminished guilt because they do not witness victims' emotional reactions directly, reflecting a dangerous erosion of empathic character.

Hidayat and Subando (2024) further noted that moral degradation is intensified by the lack of positive role models in digital spaces, where students are more exposed to influencers promoting hedonistic and pragmatic lifestyles than to educational content.

4. Erosion of Pancasila Values within Digital Algorithms

The transformation of peer interaction in the digital era affects not only individual behavior but also deeper ideological foundations. Literature analysis reveals that social media algorithms often operate in opposition to national philosophical values. Revalina et al. (2023) highlighted that current moral degradation reflects the weakening internalization of Pancasila values, particularly the principles of Just and Civilized Humanity and National Unity.

A prominent manifestation of this erosion is the decline of civility in online communication. Hate speech, body shaming, and cancel culture have become normalized in digital discourse, contradicting principles of human dignity. Continuous exposure to such interactions leads to moral desensitization, where verbal abuse is perceived as acceptable in pursuit of visibility or virality. This condition is exacerbated by the easy access to pornography, violence, and hedonistic content without moral or religious filters (Hidayat & Subando, 2024).

Moreover, digital peer interaction undermines collective values such as gotong royong (mutual cooperation). Ginting et al. (2024) observed a troubling paradox in rural contexts: adolescents become increasingly apathetic in real-world community life while highly active online. Physical social solidarity is gradually replaced by symbolic expressions of concern, such as "likes" or emojis.

5. The Supervision Gap: Teachers and Parents as Digital Immigrants

The complexity of moral degradation is further intensified by a technological competence gap between students and adult authorities. Often described as the divide between digital natives (students) and digital immigrants (teachers and parents), this gap creates significant blind spots in character education. Sagala et al. (2024) argued that the greatest challenge is not curricular content, but educators' limited access to students' authentic digital lives.

Misconduct that once occurred in visible physical spaces now takes place in private digital environments, such as closed chat groups, anonymous accounts, or secondary profiles. Hidayat and Subando (2024) emphasized that educators frequently fail to detect behavioral changes due to limited familiarity with current digital trends. Consequently, social control functions become ineffective, leaving students vulnerable to algorithm-driven exploitation.

Field studies by Ginting et al. (2024) further revealed parental unpreparedness, particularly in rural settings, where smartphones are often provided without clear rules or monitoring. In such cases, digital devices function as "digital babysitters," replacing parental presence. The absence of adult authority in digital spaces allows global popular culture to overshadow family values.

6. Revitalization through the Integration of Digital Literacy and Ethics

In response to these challenges, repressive approaches such as banning devices are increasingly viewed as ineffective. Gunawan (2024) argued that the digital era is inevitable; thus, the appropriate strategy is navigation rather than isolation. The literature consistently proposes the integration of ethically grounded digital literacy into school curricula.

Hendayana et al. (2024) demonstrated that digital literacy must extend beyond technical skills to encompass socio-emotional competencies. Programs such as digital ethics workshops and anti-hoax campaigns have been shown to enhance students' awareness of the legal and social consequences of online behavior. Terttiaavini and Saputra (2022) further emphasized the importance of netiquette, including privacy awareness, respect for intellectual property, and critical thinking prior to information sharing.

Overall, the synthesis of findings confirms that while peer influence is unavoidable, its direction can be reshaped. Through robust digital literacy education, schools can help students cultivate positive digital peer environments in which mutual encouragement replaces moral degradation.

Conclussion

This study concludes that the dynamics of peer interaction in the digital era have fundamentally transformed the landscape of student character formation, in which peer interactions in virtual spaces now play a determinant role comparable to that of physical interactions. A significant impact identified in this study is the emergence of new forms of character vulnerability, particularly the erosion of self-control and the blunting of empathy as a result of cyber bullying and social media addiction. These findings imply that conventional character education approaches that rely solely on physical supervision are no longer sufficient to curb the tide of digital moral degradation.

Therefore, this study recommends a reorientation of pedagogical strategies through the curricular integration of digital literacy and internet ethics (netiquette). Such integration is crucial for building students' cognitive immunity and moral resilience, enabling them to navigate digital peer environments wisely without losing their identity and core human values.

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