

The Failure of Normative Ethics to Counter Disinformation in the Campus Ecosystem: A Case Study of Students at Jakarta State University

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Abstract: The rapid proliferation of cyberspace has precipitated an epistemological crisis that demands analytical and ethical competencies beyond instrumental digital skills. This article deconstructs the perceptions of university students regarding the application of *akhlakul karimah* (noble character) as a foundational framework for critical social media literacy. Employing a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, this study utilized a preliminary quantitative survey (N=45) to map normative claims, followed by in-depth qualitative interviews (N=7) with informants representing extreme behavioral anomalies. Findings reveal a profound epistemological paradox: while students demonstrate high conceptual awareness of digital politeness, they fundamentally reduce *akhlakul karimah* to passive normative compliance and conflict-avoidance strategies. Consequently, these ethical values fail to translate into critical evaluation skills, such as empirical source verification (*tabayyun*) and logical autonomy amidst disinformation. Further analysis indicates that this cognitive dissonance is exacerbated by confirmation bias, the Dunning-Kruger effect, and sociological repression within peer echo chambers. This study concludes that character education in higher learning institutions requires a radical pedagogical paradigm shift. *Akhlakul karimah* must be reconstructed from a passive metric of piety into an emancipatory analytical methodology, integrating scientific skepticism to fortify students' rational autonomy against the hegemony of algorithmic manipulation.

Keywords: *Akhlakul Karimah*; Critical Digital Literacy; Disinformation; Echo Chambers; Character Education.

Abstrak: Perkembangan pesat ruang siber telah memicu krisis epistemologis yang menuntut kompetensi analitis dan etis melampaui sekadar kecakapan digital instrumental. Artikel ini mendekonstruksi persepsi mahasiswa mengenai penerapan *akhlakul karimah* sebagai kerangka fundamental bagi literasi media sosial yang kritis. Menggunakan desain metode campuran eksplanatori sekuensial (*sequential explanatory mixed methods*), penelitian ini memanfaatkan survei kuantitatif awal (N=45) untuk memetakan klaim normatif, dilanjutkan dengan wawancara kualitatif mendalam (N=7) bersama informan yang merepresentasikan anomali perilaku ekstrem. Temuan mengungkap sebuah paradoks epistemologis yang mendalam: meskipun mahasiswa menunjukkan kesadaran konseptual yang tinggi terkait kesantunan digital, mereka secara fundamental mereduksi makna *akhlakul karimah* menjadi kepatuhan normatif yang pasif dan strategi penghindaran konflik. Akibatnya, nilai-nilai etis ini gagal bertransformasi menjadi keterampilan evaluasi kritis, seperti verifikasi sumber empiris (*tabayyun*) dan otonomi logis di tengah

pusaran disinformasi. Analisis lebih lanjut mengindikasikan bahwa disonansi kognitif ini diperparah oleh bias konfirmasi, efek Dunning-Kruger, dan represi sosiologis dari ruang gema (echo chambers) kelompok sebaya. Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pendidikan karakter di perguruan tinggi memerlukan pergeseran paradigma pedagogis yang radikal. Akhlakul karimah mutlak direkonstruksi dari metrik kesalehan pasif menjadi metodologi analitis emansipatoris yang mengintegrasikan skeptisisme saintifik guna membentengi otonomi rasional mahasiswa dari hegemoni manipulasi algoritmik.

Kata Kunci: Akhlakul Karimah; Literasi Digital Kritis; Disinformasi; Ruang Gema; Pendidikan Karakter.

1. Introduction

The transformation of the communications landscape in the 21st century represents not merely a change in technical tools, but an epistemological shift in the production and consumption of information. In the midst of a post-truth ecosystem, digital literacy focused on operational skills has proven insufficient to stem the tide of algorithmic manipulation and disinformation.¹ For students, who are traditionally viewed as intellectual agents, the challenges of cyberspace require a balance between analytical acuity and moral integrity.² The need for this ethical anchor is becoming increasingly urgent, given that social media platforms tend to capitalize on sensationalism and fuel polarization through the online disinhibition effect.³

Within Indonesia's sociocultural context, *akhlakul karimah* offers a relevant theoretical framework for navigating the digital ethics crisis. Conceptually, *akhlakul karimah* not only governs interpersonal courtesy but also encompasses intellectual integrity, such as the thoroughness of data verification (*tabayyun*) and honesty in disseminating the truth (*shidq*).⁴ However, the dynamics of contemporary social media driven by attention metrics often undermine these noble values. Students face pressure to conform to the group⁵ and become trapped in echo chambers that amplify

¹ laire Wardle dan Hossein Derakhshan, *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2017), 15–22.

² Douglas Kellner dan Jeff Share, "Toward Critical Media Literacy," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 26, no. 3 (2005): 369–386

³ John Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect," *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 7, no. 3 (2004): 321–326; Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 340–355

⁴ Syekh Muhammad bin Shalih al-Utsaimin, *Makarimul Akhlaq* (Riyadh: Darul Wathan, 1990), 45–50. Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 89–104.

⁵ Cass R. Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 78–85.

confirmation bias, thereby hindering the emergence of rational autonomy—the very essence of critical thinking.⁶

Although the discourse on digital literacy and ethics has developed rapidly, the existing literature still leaves a theoretical gap (research gap). Most previous studies have examined digital literacy from a technical-quantitative perspective or discussed religious ethics solely at a normative-philosophical level, without investigating how specific religious doctrines, such as *akhlakul karimah*, are operationalized epistemologically by students when confronting the architecture of information manipulation.⁷

This study aims to bridge this gap by deconstructing the perceptions of students at the University of Jakarta (UNJ) regarding the application of *akhlakul karimah* on social media. This higher education institution was selected based on its role as a representative of the urban intellectual demographic and as a producer of future educators. This study argues that character education in the digital age will face structural failure if *akhlakul karimah* is interpreted merely as rhetorical politeness, without being transformed into a methodology for critically evaluating content.

2. Methods

This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design.⁸ to examine the disparity between cognitive claims and actual behavior. The first phase was exploratory and quantitative in nature, involving 45 active UNJ students selected through purposive sampling. Although the sample size was limited, this phase served specifically as a preliminary screening to measure the normative variables of *akhlakul karimah* (the dimensions of *shidq* and *tabayyun*) and susceptibility to cognitive bias. The instruments were measured using a Likert scale that had been internally validated.⁹

Based on preliminary tabulation results indicating data anomalies, the second (qualitative) phase was conducted by selecting seven informants based on extreme case sampling criteria. These informants were individuals who claimed a high level of cyber civility but had a poor track record in verifying information. Qualitative data collection was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews to mitigate

⁶ Henry Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 28–35; Rulli Nasrullah, *Media Sosial: Perspektif Komunikasi, Budaya, dan Siosoteknologi* (Bandung: Simbiosis Rekatama Media, 2015), 112–120.

⁷ Firman Kurniawan Sujono, *Era Post-Truth: Media Sosial, Hoax, dan Manipulasi Psikologis* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2018), 56–63.

⁸ John W. Creswell dan Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, Edisi ke-3 (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018), 215–219.

⁹ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*, Edisi ke-4 (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2015), 268–272.

social desirability bias and uncover the rationalizations behind disinformation dissemination practices.¹⁰

Analytical integration was conducted during the interpretation phase (mixing during interpretation). Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics to identify common trends, while interview data were examined using thematic analysis.¹¹ This study adheres to academic ethics protocols, including informed consent and pseudonymization, to ensure the psychological well-being of the participants.¹²

3. Results and Discussion

Epistemological Reduction: From Critical Methodology to Passive Piety

The survey results reveal a striking paradox regarding the understanding of digital ethics. The majority of respondents (>80%) claim a high level of consistency in practicing good moral conduct, the primary indicator of which is measured by their reluctance to use hate speech. However, in the epistemological dimension—specifically, methodological rigor in verification—fewer than 30% of respondents cross-checked information before sharing it. This gap indicates that students have reduced *akhlakul karimah* to “passive virtue” (merely refraining from harming others), yet fail to adopt it as an analytical responsibility.¹³

Qualitative data confirms that the absence of the practice of *tabayyun* is heavily influenced by the authority heuristic and the speed of information transmission. Informants justify the dissemination of unverified news if the message originates from a hierarchical figure (professor, senior) or a group sharing the same ideology. In this context, *akhlakul karimah* becomes dysfunctional; rather than serving as an instrument for the liberation of reason, it is instead interpreted as a sociocultural prohibition against criticizing authority. This aligns with Bourdieu’s thesis on the reproduction of *habitus*, where hierarchical compliance overrides intellectual autonomy.¹⁴

Confirmation Bias and Vulnerability to Algorithmic Manipulation

This paralysis of critical thinking becomes even more systematic when confronted with the commercial architecture of social media. Algorithms designed to capitalize on the attention economy exploit emotions and minimize the space for logical

¹⁰ Svend Brinkmann dan Steinar Kvale, *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, Edisi ke-3 (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2015), 150–156.

¹¹ Virginia Braun dan Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (London: SAGE Publications, 2022), 75–85.

¹² Paul Oliver, *The Student's Guide to Research Ethics*, Edisi ke-2 (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2010), 118–124.

¹³ Sam Wineburg et al., *Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning* (Stanford: Stanford History Education Group, 2016), 4–15.

¹⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1960), 230–238.

reflection.¹⁵ The interviews revealed that students' intention to seek clarification often fades when the narratives they receive resonate with their communal identity or primordial beliefs (latent confirmation bias).¹⁶

Furthermore, the findings reveal a specific vulnerability to "truth-tweaked" content (linguistic camouflage). Informants acknowledged that they were more likely to believe disinformation framed with religious terminology or quotations from sacred texts. This suggests that current ethics education only trains students' sensitivity to verbal aggression, rather than to logical fallacies or emotional manipulation. This failure to analyze persuasive texts reflects the Dunning-Kruger effect,¹⁷ where students feel literate because of their mastery of technical applications, yet remain unaware of their own cognitive biases.¹⁸

Sociological Repression and the Abandonment of Moral Responsibility

The failure to translate the value of *shidq* (objective honesty) into digital practice is largely driven by peer pressure within echo chambers. Students opt for the pragmatism of image management and avoid correcting misinformation in chat groups due to an irrational fear of social sanctions or cancel culture from their peers.¹⁹

This social dysfunction gives rise to what Bandura refers to as moral disengagement.²⁰ Students detach their actions from their personal moral identity behind the screens of their devices, separating the destructive consequences of spreading misinformation from their own moral identity. They mistakenly interpret inaction (the bystander effect) as a form of tolerance,²¹ which ultimately serves to normalize the dominance of disinformation in the public sphere.

Based on these findings, there appears to be a systemic failure in character education pedagogy in higher education, which tends to rely on a mechanical-instrumental approach (such as memorizing laws or rules of etiquette).²² This pedagogy fails to equip students with the hermeneutical tools needed to dismantle the biases of power structures.²³ Therefore, the concept of *akhlakul karimah* must be fundamentally redefined. *Tabayyun* must not merely serve as a supplementary moral

¹⁵ Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 340-355.

¹⁶ C. G. Lord, L. Ross, dan M. R. Lepper, "Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37, no. 11 (1979): 2098-2109.

¹⁷ Justin Kruger dan David Dunning, "Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77, no. 6 (1999): 1121-1134.

¹⁸ Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect," 321-326.

¹⁹ Sunstein, *#Republic*, 78-85.

²⁰ Albert Bandura, "Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 3, no. 3 (1999): 193-209

²¹ John M. Darley dan Bibb Latané, "Bystander Intervention in Emergencies: Diffusion of Responsibility," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 8, no. 1 (1968): 377-383.

²² Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 24-35.

²³ Henry A. Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 66-72.

guideline, but must be institutionalized as an academically rigorous methodology of digital forensic literacy.

4. Conclusion

This study confirms the structural failure of the operationalization of traditional normative ethics in curbing the pathology of disinformation among young academics. An epistemological paradox has emerged in which students' claims of adherence to *akhlakul karimah* actually undermine the very essence of that value. Ethical understanding is confined to the level of superficial politeness and conflict-avoidance strategies, resulting in the paralysis of reason in conducting empirical verification (*tabayyun*). This moral shield has proven ineffective against confirmation bias, the illusion of competence (Dunning-Kruger effect), and the hegemony of algorithmic manipulation that hides behind the camouflage of religious narratives.

These findings have crucial implications for the restructuring of higher education curricula. Character education can no longer rely on pedagogies of passive compliance or be limited to instrumental literacy aimed at preventing cybercrime. Higher education institutions are required to organically integrate *akhlakul karimah* with critical discourse analysis and scientific skepticism. *Tabayyun* and *shidq* must be re-established as methodologies for dissecting information that demand the autonomous courage to deconstruct the manipulation of communal majority narratives. The limitation of this study lies in the scope of the quantitative sample, which focuses on an initial mapping within a single institution. Future research is recommended to conduct large-scale structural modeling to test the sociological and algorithmic variables mediating this critical literacy failure in a more representative manner.

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