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PROBLEMS OF ENSURING STUDENTS' SPIRITUAL AND MORAL EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract. The widespread use of social media has significantly transformed the ways university students communicate, acquire information, develop personal identities, and establish moral and social attitudes. Although digital platforms provide opportunities for learning, intercultural communication, and civic participation, they also create challenges for students' spiritual and moral development. This article examines the principal problems associated with moral education in the social media environment, including exposure to misleading information, online hostility, superficial communication, value conflicts, digital dependency, and the influence of virtual social approval on personal behavior. Particular attention is given to the role of higher education institutions in developing critical thinking, digital responsibility, empathy, self-regulation, and respect for cultural diversity. The article employs a theoretical and analytical approach based on relevant educational literature and international policy documents. It argues that effective spiritual and moral education requires cooperation between universities, families, educators, and students themselves. Integrating ethical reflection, media literacy, responsible digital participation, and culturally responsive teaching into university education can contribute to the development of socially responsible and morally conscious graduates.

Keywords: social media, university students, spiritual education, moral development, digital ethics, media literacy, critical thinking, personal values, higher education, digital responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital communication technologies has created a new social environment in which university students establish relationships, express opinions, acquire knowledge, and construct their personal identities. Social media platforms are no longer used exclusively for entertainment or interpersonal communication. They have become influential spaces for educational interaction, cultural exchange, public discussion, and the formation of social attitudes. Consequently, the educational responsibilities of higher education institutions increasingly extend beyond traditional classroom instruction to include the development of students' ethical judgment and responsible participation in digital society.

Spiritual and moral education occupies an important position in the development of a well-rounded individual. In this article, spiritual education refers to the development of personal meaning, moral reflection, cultural awareness, inner responsibility, and respect for human dignity. Moral education concerns the formation of ethical judgment, honesty, empathy, fairness, accountability, and responsible conduct. These dimensions are closely connected because a person's values become socially meaningful when they are reflected in decisions and everyday behavior. The influence of social media on students' moral development cannot be described as exclusively positive or negative. Digital platforms allow young people to encounter diverse perspectives, participate in charitable initiatives, exchange educational resources, and engage in discussions about social problems. At the same time, the rapid circulation of information, the visibility of online approval, and the possibility of anonymous communication can create conditions in which irresponsible behavior spreads with limited reflection on its consequences. The educational

challenge is therefore not simply to restrict students' access to social media but to help them use digital technologies in ways consistent with ethical principles and social responsibility. Research on digital youth culture emphasizes that online environments have become integrated into young people's everyday relationships and identity formation. Boyd (2014), for example, demonstrates the importance of understanding networked publics as social environments rather than treating them merely as technological tools. This perspective is relevant to university education because students' online experiences can influence their perceptions of friendship, recognition, privacy, authority, and belonging. Another important issue concerns the relationship between information access and the ability to evaluate information critically. The availability of large amounts of online content does not automatically provide students with the knowledge and judgment necessary to distinguish reliable information from misleading claims. When emotional messages, unverified information, and hostile commentary circulate rapidly, students may face difficulties in making reasoned judgments and maintaining respectful communication. In this context, higher education institutions have a responsibility to integrate digital competence with broader educational objectives. Students need not only technical skills but also the ability to evaluate sources, recognize manipulation, understand the consequences of online actions, respect cultural differences, and reflect on their own behavior. These competencies are particularly important in societies where preserving cultural identity and developing openness to global communication are both educational priorities. The problem addressed in this article is the gap that may emerge between the moral principles promoted through formal education and the patterns of communication and behavior encountered in digital environments. Addressing this gap requires a systematic approach that combines ethical education, critical media literacy, practical experience, and cooperation among educational stakeholders.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the main challenges of ensuring students' spiritual and moral education in the context of social media and to identify educational approaches that can strengthen students' ethical awareness, digital responsibility, and personal development.

METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a theoretical and analytical research approach. Relevant academic literature on digital youth culture, moral development, social media, media literacy, and educational practice was examined to identify the principal challenges associated with students' spiritual and moral education. Conceptual analysis was used to clarify the relationship between moral values, digital behavior, and educational responsibility. Comparative analysis helped distinguish the educational opportunities offered by social media from the risks that may arise when digital participation is not accompanied by critical reflection and ethical awareness. International educational frameworks were also considered to identify approaches relevant to responsible digital participation and inclusive education. The resulting analysis was organized around several interconnected dimensions: information evaluation, interpersonal communication, personal identity, self-regulation, cultural values, and institutional responsibility. Since no original survey, experiment, or statistical investigation was conducted for this article, the conclusions are presented as theoretically grounded interpretations and recommendations rather than as empirical findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The transformation of students' moral development in the social media environment

Social media has changed the conditions under which students encounter social expectations and develop their understanding of acceptable behavior. In traditional educational environments, moral norms are often communicated through family relationships, classroom interactions, institutional rules, and direct social experience. In digital environments, students encounter an additional and continuously changing set of influences, including influencers, online communities,

anonymous users, algorithmically recommended content, and public reactions to individual behavior. This transformation creates a more complex environment for moral development. Students may encounter competing interpretations of honesty, success, responsibility, respect, and personal freedom. Some online communities encourage mutual support, educational participation, and constructive discussion, whereas others may normalize humiliation, aggressive disagreement, discrimination, or the pursuit of attention at the expense of ethical considerations. The central educational problem is not the existence of different opinions. Exposure to diverse perspectives can help students question assumptions, broaden their understanding, and develop independent judgment. The difficulty arises when students lack the analytical skills necessary to evaluate those perspectives and instead adopt attitudes primarily because they are popular, emotionally appealing, or widely repeated.

Moral education in the digital age should therefore emphasize the ability to assess the reasons behind an opinion rather than merely determine whether it is socially accepted. Students should learn to distinguish popularity from credibility, disagreement from hostility, and freedom of expression from the deliberate humiliation of others. Universities can address this challenge by incorporating ethical questions into ordinary learning activities. Discussions about online communication, academic integrity, privacy, and social responsibility can help students connect abstract moral principles with situations they encounter in everyday life. This approach allows moral education to become an ongoing component of university learning rather than an isolated series of formal activities.

2. Information overload and the weakening of critical evaluation

One of the major challenges associated with social media is the continuous exposure to information of varying quality. Students can access educational materials, professional advice, news, cultural discussions, and scientific information almost instantly. However, the same environment also contains misleading claims, manipulated images, emotionally charged narratives, and content presented without adequate evidence. The ability to access information should not be confused with the ability to evaluate it. A student may be technologically proficient but still experience difficulties in identifying the original source of a claim, distinguishing factual statements from personal interpretations, or recognizing the persuasive techniques used in online content. This problem has a direct moral dimension. Sharing unverified information can damage reputations, intensify social tensions, and contribute to the spread of stereotypes. Even when students do not intend to cause harm, forwarding content without checking its reliability may have consequences for other individuals and communities. Media literacy should therefore be treated as an essential component of spiritual and moral education. Students need opportunities to examine the origin of online materials, compare different sources, identify emotional manipulation, and distinguish evidence-based arguments from unsupported assertions. They should also understand that correcting misinformation and acknowledging uncertainty are signs of intellectual responsibility rather than weakness. A practical educational strategy is to introduce source-evaluation exercises into university courses. Students can compare several reports about the same event, identify differences in evidence and interpretation, and explain which claims can reasonably be accepted. They can also analyze hypothetical cases involving the circulation of rumors, misleading headlines, or edited visual materials. The educational objective is not to make students suspicious of all digital information. It is to develop a balanced attitude in which curiosity is accompanied by verification, openness is supported by evidence, and freedom of communication is connected with responsibility for the information shared.

3. Online hostility, cyberbullying, and the decline of respectful communication

The development of communication through social media has expanded opportunities for interaction but has also created new contexts for interpersonal conflict. Insults, public humiliation, discriminatory language, cyberbullying, and the deliberate circulation of private information can affect students' psychological well-being and their sense of belonging within an educational community. Digital communication can make the consequences of aggressive behavior less visible to the person responsible. In face-to-face interactions, emotional reactions and immediate social feedback may encourage individuals to reconsider their words. Online communication, particularly when anonymous or conducted at a distance, can reduce awareness of the harm experienced by others. Public visibility and the rapid circulation of messages may further intensify the consequences of a single hostile interaction. From an educational perspective, these problems reveal the importance of empathy and accountability. Students must understand that online communication involves real people whose dignity and rights deserve respect. The absence of physical proximity does not remove the moral responsibility associated with one's words or actions. Universities should establish clear procedures for reporting and addressing cyberbullying, harassment, discriminatory behavior, and unauthorized sharing of personal information. However, institutional rules alone cannot create a respectful digital culture. Students also need opportunities to discuss the emotional consequences of online aggression, practice constructive disagreement, and learn how to respond appropriately when they witness harmful behavior. Case-based learning can be particularly useful in this area. Students may be asked to analyze a hypothetical situation in which a group chat becomes a space for mocking a classmate. They can examine the responsibilities of the original participants, those who forward the messages, and those who observe the situation without intervening. Such discussions encourage students to recognize that ethical responsibility may extend beyond the person who initiates harmful conduct. Respectful communication should consequently become a practical educational expectation, supported by consistent institutional standards and opportunities for reflection.

CONCLUSION

Ensuring students' spiritual and moral education in the context of social media is a complex educational challenge that requires attention to both the opportunities and the risks of digital communication. Social media can support learning, cultural exchange, civic participation, and the development of social connections. However, when students lack critical evaluation skills, ethical awareness, or self-regulation, digital environments may also expose them to misinformation, online hostility, harmful social pressure, and conflicts between personal values and external expectations. The analysis indicates that spiritual and moral education should not be limited to theoretical instruction or the formal promotion of desirable values. Its effectiveness depends on whether students can understand ethical principles, evaluate difficult situations, recognize the perspectives of others, and translate their convictions into responsible behavior. Media literacy, critical thinking, empathy, academic integrity, and digital self-regulation should therefore be treated as interconnected educational objectives.

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