

# From Bystanders to Upstanders: Cultivating Digital Citizenship to Combat Cyberbullying among Vocational High School Students

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## ABSTRACT

The penetration of digital technology has heavily disrupted adolescent interaction patterns. The pervasive use of social media, when lacking adequate moral literacy, triggers the normalization of cyberbullying within school environments. This community service initiative aimed to fortify students' digital communication ethics and cognitive empathy through a novel framework: the Upstander-Based Digital Ethics Intervention. Involving 39 twelfth-grade students from SMK Kesuma Bangsa 2 Depok, the intervention utilized a Participatory Communication Approach. The program's stages encompassed baseline mapping, interactive digital citizenship education, case study analysis, role-playing simulations, and comprehensive evaluations. Quantitative outcomes revealed a substantial cognitive transformation, with the average literacy score surging by 60% (from 55 to 88). Psychomotor evaluations via role-play demonstrated that students successfully exercised assertive communication, shifting their behavioral tendencies from passive spectators (bystanders) to active defenders (upstanders). The findings were scrutinized using social learning and behavior change theories. Despite the potential for short-term observational bias, this program successfully laid the groundwork for a healthy cyber ecosystem through collective ethical commitments and the provision of a sustainable educational module to the institution.

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## 1. Introduction

The proliferation of information technology has fundamentally disrupted the social interaction landscape of younger generations. Cyberspace currently serves as the primary arena for adolescents to express themselves and negotiate their identities. However, technical proficiency in hardware and software is frequently not matched by the maturity of their digital communication ethics (Nguyen & Vu, 2022). This cultural lag creates an empathy void that acts as a primary catalyst for social friction, hate speech, and cyberbullying.

The absence of nonverbal cues in computer-mediated communication significantly diminishes users' awareness of moral consequences. Consequently, adolescents are highly susceptible to the *online disinhibition effect*, shedding psychological boundaries and engaging in aggressive acts typically avoided during face-to-face interactions (Kowalski, Limber & McCord, 2021). This vulnerability was starkly reflected among students at SMK Kesuma Bangsa 2 Depok. Preliminary observations indicated that 85% of the students spent more than three hours daily purely accessing social media. Alarmingly, 60% of these students normalized toxic online behaviors—such as body shaming, doxing, and deliberate exclusion—brushing them off as mere "jokes" due to intense peer pressure. Unlike traditional bullying,

cyberbullying inflicts asymmetrical damage and persistent privacy invasions, triggering severe anxiety and depression (Agustin & Fauzan, 2024).

A review of existing literature (*state of the art*) reveals that previous community service programs primarily focused on digital literacy education (Budianto & Faoji, 2025), (Santoso, Tirtaji, Pradana & Sabiq, 2023). Nevertheless, the majority of these interventions relied on one-way communication (lectures), focused heavily on legal-formal risk mitigation, or simply applied punitive approaches. Very few programs have specifically targeted the sociological transformation of adolescents' roles from passive spectators (*bystanders*) to active defenders (*upstanders*) within the digital realm.

Therefore, the novelty of this community service project lies in the application of the *Upstander-Based Digital Ethics Intervention* model. This initiative focused not only on enhancing cognitive understanding of legal frameworks but was also meticulously designed as an affective incubator to strengthen students' empathy and conflict resolution skills, ensuring that ethical comprehension translates into tangible behavior.

## 2. Method

This community service project employed an experiential learning framework driven by a Participatory Communication Approach. The justification for this method stems from the psychological characteristics of Generation Z, who tend to resist patronizing instructional methods. By positioning students as active subjects, the participatory approach embraces the principles of social learning Bandura, where value internalization and behavior change occur far more effectively through observation, direct experience, and role simulation.

The event was conducted on April 9, 2026, at SMK Kesuma Bangsa 2, Depok. The participants were purposively curated, comprising 39 twelfth-grade students from the Visual Communication Design (DKV) department who were active social media users ( $\geq 3$  hours/day) and held organizational positions (Student Council/Extracurriculars). This selection utilized a peer education strategy so that participants could evolve into "Digital Ambassadors" who disseminate ethical values organically.

The five-hour intervention consisted of: (1) Initial cognitive mapping (*pre-test*); (2) Interactive education on digital citizenship concepts; (3) Focus group discussions analytically dissecting anonymous cyberbullying case specimens; (4) Role-playing simulations where students took turns acting as perpetrators, victims, and upstanders; and (5) Final evaluation (*post-test*) alongside a digital ethics declaration. Success was measured quantitatively by comparing pre-test and post-test scores, as well as evaluating psychomotor skills using a Likert-scale (1-4) observation rubric during the role-play sessions.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The implementation of the participatory model generated high interaction dynamics and surpassed the established performance indicators. The results are analyzed across two dimensions: cognitive literacy enhancement and empathetic communication skill transformation.

### 3.1. Cognitive Literacy Enhancement

Analysis of the cognitive data demonstrated a significantly measurable transformation in understanding, as visualized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Enhancement of Digital Ethics Literacy (*Pre-test* vs. *Post-test*)**

Evaluation Indicator	Average Score	Comprehension Percentage	Category
<i>Pre-test</i> (Before Intervention)	55	55%	Poor
<i>Post-test</i> (After Intervention)	88	88%	Excellent
Improvement (Delta)	33	60%	Significant

The initial pre-test data extracted from the 39 respondents revealed a baseline average score of 55. During the early stages, a significant majority of the students struggled to differentiate between legitimate freedom of expression and cyber-harassment. Following the interactive educational intervention and the focus group case dissections, the post-test evaluation demonstrated a dramatic surge, with the average score reaching 88.

The 60% score improvement serves as concrete evidence of the intervention model's effectiveness. Initially, students were trapped in cognitive biases that blurred the boundaries between freedom of expression and cyber-harassment. Drawing upon the concept of digital citizenship, this leap in understanding occurred because students were made aware that cyberspace is not a value-neutral zone (Choi, 2022). Through critical discourse, the echo chambers that normalized bullying were successfully dismantled, compelling students to reconstruct their understanding regarding the accountability of digital footprints.

### 3.2. Empathetic Skill Transformation (*Role-Play*)

The role-playing simulations served as a powerful catalyst for cognitive dissonance and affective incubation. According to the performance rubric measuring case comprehension, verbal empathy, solution formulation, and communication posture, the results were highly satisfactory. Out of the four participating groups, all four achieved outstanding results; three groups secured scores within the "Very Good" range (86–92), while one group obtained a "Good" score (80). No group fell into the category requiring further disciplinary guidance.

**Table 2. Group Psychomotor Evaluation Results (*Role-Play*)**

Assessment Category (Score)	Number of Groups	Percentage
Excellent (86-92)	3 Groups	75%
Good (75-84)	1 Group	25%
Needs Guidance (<75)	0 Groups	0%

The data in Table 2 can be analyzed using Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Yuniawati, 2026). By forcing students to internalize the victim's perspective and practice assertive vocabulary as helpers, the simulation method successfully activated their latent empathy. Students successfully utilized assertive phrases to de-escalate conflicts without provoking new arguments. This intervention precisely addressed the core issue: the fear of becoming the next target, which frequently forces students into silence. Through behavioral conditioning (*behavior change*), the students' self-efficacy increased, allowing them to firmly transition from bystanders to upstanders who actively disrupt the cycle of aggression.

### 3.3. Critical Analysis and Program Limitations

Despite the program's claimed success, a critical analysis must be presented. This community service project is not entirely free from potential social desirability bias during the role-play observation sessions, where students might exhibit ideal behaviors solely because they are being monitored by facilitators. Furthermore, as a short-term intervention, the sustainability of this attitudinal shift necessitates longitudinal testing to observe long-term memory retention in their natural environment. Recognizing this, these weaknesses were mitigated by inaugurating the students as "Digital Ambassadors" and handing over the Digital Communication Ethics Module to the school's Counseling Unit (BK) to ensure the institution can independently monitor and replicate the program.

## 4. Conclusion

The *Upstander-Based Digital Ethics Intervention* program at SMK Kesuma Bangsa 2 successfully transformed the cognitive perspectives and cyber behavioral tendencies of its students. Experiential learning effectively deconstructed the normalization of toxic behaviors, evidenced by a 60% surge in the average digital literacy score (from 55 to 88). Through empathetic role-playing, students developed assertive communication skills, shifting their passive behavior (*bystanders*) to responsive defenders (*upstanders*). The module handover and the inauguration of Digital Ambassadors established a robust foundation for an inclusive and sustainable school ecosystem. For future initiatives, expanding the intervention into the realm of digital parenting is highly recommended to align ethical support from the household environment to the educational institution.

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### Declarations

**Author contribution.** The first author conceptualized the community service idea, designed the primary module, and led the intervention. The second author facilitated the focus group discussions and coordinated with the school partners. The third and fourth authors assisted in the role-play simulations, data collection, and drafting of the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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