

Verbal Abuse in Virtual Spaces Among University Students: Reconstruction of Communication Ethics from the Perspective of Islamic Education

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the issue of verbal abuse within students' virtual interactions from the standpoint of Islamic educational ethics. The increasing use of virtual communication platforms, particularly WhatsApp, has reshaped the way university students engage in academic and social communication. Despite offering efficiency and accessibility, virtual interaction also creates ethical vulnerabilities, including the emergence of ridicule, degrading remarks, offensive expressions, and other forms of verbal aggression in online conversations. This study adopts a qualitative library research design employing normative and thematic interpretative approaches. The data were obtained from Qur'anic verses, contemporary tafsir literature, academic books, and previous studies concerning virtual communication, cyber interaction, and Islamic education. The analysis was conducted using content analysis by synthesizing perspectives from communication theory, the online disinhibition effect, and Islamic ethical principles. The study reveals that verbal aggression in students' virtual spaces is influenced by the weakening of social restraint in online environments, the text-oriented nature of digital communication, and insufficient ethical awareness in media engagement. From the perspective of Islamic education, QS. Al-Hujurat verse 11 emphasizes the prohibition of mockery, humiliation, and derogatory labeling because such behavior undermines human dignity and social harmony. Contemporary interpretations proposed by Wahbah al-Zuhaili, Muhammad al-Tahir Ibn Ashur, and Sayyid Qutb demonstrate that Islamic communication ethics remain highly relevant in responding to verbal misconduct within contemporary virtual environments. This study highlights the importance of integrating digital literacy with moral and character education to encourage a more respectful, ethical, and civilized academic communication culture.



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Introduction

The development of digital technology has brought significant changes to the communication patterns of modern society, including within higher education environments (Mishna et al., 2018). The presence of the internet and various instant messaging applications has enabled communication processes to take place quickly, practically, and without the

limitations of space and time (Bussu et al., 2024). Among university students, WhatsApp is not only used as a medium for academic coordination but also serves as a space for social interaction where students engage in discussions, exchange information, and build interpersonal relationships (Shaikh et al., 2020). This condition demonstrates that digital media has become an important part of the academic life of the younger generation.

Behind these conveniences, digital communication also presents increasingly complex ethical issues. Virtual conversation spaces are often characterized by the use of language containing sarcasm, ridicule, insults, and comments that demean others (Alkhaddam, 2023). This phenomenon indicates that digital media functions not only as a means of information exchange but also as a space for reproducing symbolic violence through language. In the context of university students, verbal abuse frequently appears in the form of offensive jokes, negative labeling, sarcastic remarks, and body shaming that are normalized as part of group communication culture (E-Sor et al., 2025). This phenomenon cannot be separated from the characteristics of digital communication, which differ from face-to-face communication. Text-based communication has limitations in conveying nonverbal elements such as facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice, making messages more susceptible to subjective interpretation by recipients (Suyani & Usiono, 2025). As a result, comments intended as humor may be perceived as insults when read under certain emotional conditions. In such situations, virtual communication spaces become more vulnerable to conflicts and misunderstandings compared to direct communication.

Furthermore, the emergence of verbal abuse in digital media is also related to the concept of the online disinhibition effect proposed by Suler (2004). This concept explains that individuals tend to display freer behavior in virtual spaces due to reduced social control, psychological distance, and minimal direct interpersonal contact. Such conditions cause some digital media users to express verbally aggressive comments, insults, and sarcasm more easily behaviors that they would most likely avoid in face-to-face communication. Thus, digital media can create spaces that encourage the normalization of offensive language in social interactions. In the context of academic life, verbal abuse not only affects individuals' psychological conditions but also influences the quality of communication culture within higher education environments (Asriani & Wahyudi, 2026). The use of degrading language has the potential to create emotional pressure, reduce self-confidence, and hinder students' courage to express their opinions. If such conditions continue, virtual academic spaces may lose their educational function as places for healthy, open, and civilized exchanges of ideas (Setiawan et al., 2025).

These issues indicate that the development of communication technology must be balanced with the strengthening of ethics in the use of digital media. From the perspective of Islamic education, communication is viewed as an essential part of human moral development. Islam places the use of language as a reflection of morality and the quality of one's character; therefore, every form of communication should be built upon respect for human dignity. Accordingly, the Qur'an pays great attention to the ethics of speech and prohibits verbal humiliation in social life. One verse that emphasizes this issue is QS. Al-Hujurat verse 11, which prohibits mocking, insulting, and giving others offensive nicknames. Sayyid Qutb, in *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān*, explains that insulting and degrading others can damage social brotherhood and lead to moral deterioration within society. According to him, Islam builds social life upon respect for human honor; therefore, all forms of verbal humiliation are considered contrary to the values of brotherhood and Islamic morality (Hanifah et al., 2026).

In a contemporary interpretation, Wahbah al-Zuhaili, in *Al-Tafsīr al-Munīr*, explains that the prohibition against insulting, ridiculing, and assigning offensive nicknames in QS. Al-Hujurat verse 11 aims to protect human dignity and create social harmony within society. According to him, the use of language that demeans others constitutes a form of moral deviation that contradicts the values of brotherhood and Islamic ethics. This view demonstrates that communication ethics in Islam are not merely related to linguistic politeness but also to the protection of human dignity in social life, including within digital

communication spaces. In addition, Muhammad al-Tahir Ibn Ashur, in *Al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr*, emphasizes that the prohibition against mocking one another in the verse contains a dimension of social education aimed at building a society that respects one another and avoids behavior that may psychologically harm others. Thus, the principles of Islamic communication possess strong relevance in addressing the phenomenon of verbal abuse in the era of digital media.

Research on cyberbullying and digital communication ethics has generally been widely conducted, particularly from the perspectives of communication psychology and digital media literacy. However, most studies still focus on social media user behavior and the psychological impacts experienced by victims, while studies integrating the phenomenon of verbal abuse among university students with the perspectives of Qur'anic exegesis and Islamic education remain relatively limited. In addition, research related to students' digital communication generally emphasizes language politeness toward lecturers or formal communication ethics in online learning rather than the dynamics of verbal violence in horizontal communication among students in virtual spaces. Therefore, this study seeks to present an integrative approach between digital communication theory and Islamic ethical values in understanding the phenomenon of verbal abuse within virtual academic environments.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach based on library research using normative and thematic interpretation approaches. The normative approach is used to analyze the values of communication ethics from the perspective of Islamic education, while the thematic interpretation approach is employed to understand the relevance of QS. Al-Hujurat verses 11–12 to the phenomenon of verbal abuse in students' digital communication. The research data sources consist of primary and secondary data. The primary data include Qur'anic verses related to communication ethics, particularly QS. Al-Hujurat verses 11–12, as well as several relevant contemporary tafsir literatures. Meanwhile, the secondary data are obtained from books, journal articles, and previous studies discussing digital communication, cyberbullying, verbal abuse, and Islamic education.

Data collection techniques were carried out through documentation studies by examining various references related to the research theme. The collected data were then analyzed using content analysis techniques to identify patterns of verbal abuse in digital communication and relate them to the principles of Islamic communication ethics. The analysis was conducted descriptively and analytically by integrating digital communication theory, the concept of the online disinhibition effect, and the values of Islamic education in understanding the phenomenon of students' virtual communication. To maintain data validity, this study applies source triangulation through comparisons among various literatures, tafsir works, and previous research findings related to the research topic.

Result and Discussion

Verbal Abuse in Students' Digital Communication

The transformation of digital communication has changed the patterns of student interaction within academic life. The presence of instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp has made communication processes faster, more flexible, and more efficient compared to conventional communication (Muizzudin et al., 2024). In practice, digital conversation groups are not only used as media for delivering academic information but have also developed into social spaces that bring together various student characteristics, backgrounds, and communication patterns (Oksanen et al., 2021). However, these developments are not always accompanied by increased ethical awareness in language use, so virtual spaces are often characterized by communication practices containing elements of insult and verbal violence (Munawaroh & Marlina, 2025).

The phenomenon of verbal abuse in students' digital communication generally appears through the use of degrading words, sarcastic remarks, offensive jokes, body shaming, and

negative labeling directed at certain individuals (Misman et al., 2021). In many cases, such behavior is often normalized as a form of humor and group intimacy. In fact, degrading language still has psychological impacts on message recipients, especially when repeatedly carried out in public communication spaces. This condition indicates that digital communication is not entirely a neutral space but can instead become an arena for reproducing symbolic violence through language (Assyabirra & Mulia, 2025).

From the perspective of digital communication, the emergence of verbal abuse is closely related to the characteristics of text-based communication, which lacks nonverbal elements. The absence of facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language makes messages more easily interpreted subjectively by recipients. Walther (2011) explains that media-based digital communication has a greater potential to create misunderstandings because the meaning of messages largely depends on individual interpretation. As a result, comments intended as jokes by the sender may be perceived as insults by others. This situation demonstrates that virtual communication is more vulnerable to interpersonal conflict compared to face-to-face communication.

In addition to being influenced by the characteristics of digital media, the phenomenon of verbal abuse can also be understood through the concept of the online disinhibition effect proposed by Suler (2004). This concept explains that individuals tend to behave more freely in virtual spaces due to anonymity, psychological distance, and weak social control. Under such conditions, digital media users are more likely to express verbally aggressive comments without considering the moral or psychological impacts on others. Freedom of expression without ethical control ultimately gives rise to communication behavior that tends to be offensive and destructive. This phenomenon demonstrates a connection between weak social control in virtual spaces and the increasing use of aggressive language in student communication. In WhatsApp groups, for example, individuals can easily write comments that they would not express directly in face-to-face communication. This shows that digital media not only influences communication patterns but also affects how individuals build social relationships. When freedom of expression is not balanced by ethical awareness, digital communication spaces have the potential to become psychologically unsafe environments for some users.

On the other hand, the practice of verbal abuse is also related to the dynamics of power relations within digital groups. In many situations, certain individuals or groups dominate conversations and are therefore able to influence the direction of communication within the group. Such dominance may arise from factors such as popularity, verbal ability, or social position within the academic environment (Yusuf & Putri, 2025). As a result, digital communication can become a medium for legitimizing symbolic power that allows some parties to demean others through language. This phenomenon indicates that verbal violence in digital spaces is not only related to communication issues but also to social relations and group culture. If these conditions continue, the impact will not only be felt by individuals who become victims but will also affect the overall quality of academic culture (Ilham & Madum, 2025). Higher education environments, which should function as spaces for healthy exchanges of ideas, may instead become communication spaces filled with psychological pressure. In the long term, such situations have the potential to hinder students' courage to express opinions, reduce self-confidence, and weaken the quality of academic interactions among students. Therefore, the issue of verbal abuse in digital communication cannot be viewed as a simple matter but rather as part of the moral challenges of modern academic life.

The Perspective of Islamic Education on Verbal Abuse

From the perspective of Islamic education, communication is not merely understood as an activity of conveying messages but also as part of the formation of human morality (akhlaq). Islam places language as a moral instrument that has a significant influence on social relationships. Therefore, the use of language cannot be separated from ethical responsibility to protect the honor and dignity of fellow human beings. This principle demonstrates that

communication in Islam is not simply a matter of effective information delivery but is also closely related to values of manners (adab) and humanity (Rahim et al., 2024). The prohibition against insulting, ridiculing, and degrading others is explicitly emphasized in QS. Al-Hujurat verse 11. The verse forbids individuals from mocking other groups, assigning offensive nicknames, and engaging in verbal humiliation that may injure human dignity. In the context of social life, the verse demonstrates that Islam views respect for others as the primary foundation for building harmonious social relationships.

Sayyid Qutb, in *Fī Zilāl al-Qurʾān*, explains that the prohibition against insulting one another in QS. Al-Hujurat verse 11 is part of the moral education of Islamic society. According to him, a healthy society can only be built through respect for human dignity and self-restraint in the use of language. Mocking and degrading others are viewed as forms of moral deviation that have the potential to damage social brotherhood and create conflict within society. A similar interpretation is also presented by Wahbah al-Zuhaili in *Al-Tafsīr al-Munīr*. He emphasizes that the prohibition against giving offensive nicknames aims to preserve human dignity and create harmonious social life. The use of insulting language is considered contrary to the principles of brotherhood and Islamic etiquette because it can cause emotional pain, hostility, and the breakdown of social relationships. In the context of digital communication, this perspective demonstrates that Islamic communication ethics has strong relevance in addressing the phenomenon of verbal abuse in virtual media.

Furthermore, Muhammad al-Tahir Ibn Ashur, in *Al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr*, explains that the prohibition against mocking and insulting in QS. Al-Hujurat verse 11 contains a dimension of social education aimed at shaping a society that respects one another. According to him, degrading others not only harms individuals psychologically but also damages the social order by creating hatred and hostility among people. This interpretation shows that Islamic communication has a social orientation that emphasizes respect for human values. The principles of communication ethics in Islam are also reflected in the concepts of *qaulan sadīdan*, *qaulan layyinan*, and *qaulan maʾrūfan*. The concept of *qaulan sadīdan* emphasizes honesty and responsibility in conveying information so that communication must be free from insults and language manipulation. Meanwhile, *qaulan layyinan* teaches the importance of gentleness in speech, including when expressing criticism and differences of opinion. In addition, *qaulan maʾrūfan* emphasizes the use of good, polite, and proper language in social interaction. These three concepts indicate that communication in Islam is measured not only by the content of the message but also by the manner in which it is delivered.

When connected to the theory of the online disinhibition effect, Islamic communication principles can be understood as a form of moral control over freedom of expression in virtual spaces. Freedom of communication in digital media cannot be interpreted as unlimited freedom but must still consider the social and psychological impacts on others (Abror & Noviani, 2025). Thus, Islamic communication ethics functions preventively in limiting the emergence of aggressive and destructive communication behavior in digital media. In the context of university students, the internalization of Islamic communication ethics values becomes important as part of strengthening character education in the digital era. Higher education institutions not only have the responsibility to develop students' intellectual abilities but also to cultivate moral awareness in the use of communication media. Therefore, strengthening digital communication ethics based on Islamic education can become a strategic step toward building a more humane, polite, and civilized academic culture.

Reconstruction of Digital Communication Ethics from the Perspective of Islamic Education

The development of digital communication demonstrates that technological advancement does not always progress alongside the development of ethics in language use. Therefore, a reconstruction of digital communication ethics is needed one that is oriented not only toward technical skills in using media but also toward the formation of moral awareness in virtual interactions. In this context, Islamic education offers an ethical foundation that can serve as the basis for building a more humane and civilized culture of digital communication (Myers &

Cowie, 2017). The reconstruction of digital communication ethics can be carried out through the integration of Islamic moral values into students' virtual communication practices. The principle of qaulan sadīdan emphasizes honesty and responsibility in conveying information so that every form of communication must avoid insults, slander, and language manipulation. Meanwhile, qaulan layyinan teaches the importance of gentleness in communication, including when expressing criticism and differing opinions in digital spaces. In addition, qaulan ma'rūfan affirms that communication must be built upon the use of good, polite, and respectful language that upholds human dignity.

In practice, reconstructing digital communication ethics cannot rely solely on a normative approach but also requires the formation of an academic culture that supports healthy communication within higher education institutions. Universities need to provide ethics-based digital literacy education, strengthen character education, and cultivate polite communication habits in virtual academic activities. In this way, digital spaces become not only means of exchanging information but also media for shaping students' social morality. Furthermore, the reconstruction of digital communication ethics needs to position students as moral subjects who possess social responsibility in the use of virtual media. Freedom of expression in digital spaces must be understood proportionally while still considering the psychological and social impacts on others. In this regard, Islamic communication ethics functions as a mechanism of moral control over digital communication behavior that has the potential to generate verbal violence and social conflict.

Strengthening digital communication ethics can also be achieved through the integration of media literacy with moral education in the learning process within higher education. Digital literacy should not merely be interpreted as the ability to operate technology but should also include the ability to understand the moral consequences of using communication media. Therefore, higher education institutions need to develop a paradigm of digital literacy that is oriented not only toward technical competence but also toward ethical responsibility in virtual interaction. Thus, the reconstruction of digital communication ethics from the perspective of Islamic education aims not only to reduce verbal abuse in virtual media but also to build a more inclusive, polite, and humane academic communication culture that respects human dignity.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of verbal abuse in students' digital communication demonstrates that the development of communication technology has created increasingly complex ethical challenges in modern academic life. The ease of interaction through virtual media is not always accompanied by moral awareness in the use of language, making digital communication spaces vulnerable to insults, ridicule, and verbal violence. This condition is influenced by the characteristics of text-based communication, weak social control in virtual spaces, and the emergence of the online disinhibition effect, which encourages individuals to express verbally aggressive behavior more freely in digital media. From the perspective of Islamic education, the practice of verbal abuse contradicts the principles of communication ethics taught in the Qur'an, particularly in QS. Al-Hujurat verse 11. The interpretations of Sayyid Qutb, Wahbah al-Zuhaili, and Muhammad al-Tahir Ibn Ashur demonstrate that Islam places respect for human dignity as the primary foundation of social life. Therefore, insulting, ridiculing, and assigning offensive nicknames are viewed as actions that can damage social relationships and are contrary to Islamic moral values.

This study emphasizes that Islamic communication ethics possesses strong relevance in addressing contemporary issues of digital communication. The principles of qaulan sadīdan, qaulan layyinan, and qaulan ma'rūfan can serve as moral foundations for building a more polite, responsible, and civilized culture of digital communication. In the context of higher education, strengthening digital communication ethics should be carried out through the integration of digital literacy and moral education so that students not only possess technical skills in using digital media but also develop moral awareness in maintaining ethical

communication within virtual spaces.

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