



Moral Reflection in the Algorithmic Digital Age: Understanding Philosophy Students' Experiences with Ethical Dilemmas in Post-Truth Educational Platforms

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ABSTRACT

Moral decision-making in digital environments is an increasingly important topic in humanistic studies, especially as more people face ethical dilemmas online. Philosophy students provide a unique perspective on how ethical reasoning unfolds in real digital settings. Although interest in digital ethics is growing, few studies have explored how individuals personally experience and reflect on moral challenges in online spaces. This study investigates: How do philosophy students interpret and navigate ethical dilemmas in post-truth digital contexts?

Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, this study explores the subjective meanings philosophy students assign to their moral experiences online. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten participants, and data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to uncover emergent themes. The findings reveal three central themes: moral ambiguity in digital interactions, the use of philosophical reflection as a coping mechanism, and emotional fatigue resulting from constant ethical negotiation. These results demonstrate that digital moral experiences are not merely theoretical but are deeply felt and internally reasoned, shaped by both philosophical education and emotional engagement.

This study contributes to the growing discourse on digital ethics by highlighting the experiential dimension of moral reasoning, with implications for ethics education and digital citizenship. The findings suggest that future research should expand to include diverse cultural and disciplinary contexts to deepen our understanding of moral agency in digital life.



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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital era, the landscape of moral decision-making has undergone significant transformation. With the proliferation of online platforms, individuals are increasingly confronted with complex ethical situations that challenge traditional notions of right and wrong. This digital shift has not only changed the way information is disseminated and consumed but also redefined the boundaries of personal responsibility, identity, and social accountability (Abdigapbarova dkk., 2024). Issues such as the spread of misinformation, algorithmic bias, online shaming, and artificial intelligence-mediated interactions have emerged as pressing ethical concerns across societies.

Within this evolving context, moral dilemmas in digital spaces are no longer confined to theoretical discussions; they have become embedded in the lived experiences of individuals, particularly those who engage critically with ethical and philosophical discourse. Philosophy students, as emerging scholars in ethics and moral reasoning, are uniquely positioned at the intersection of abstract moral theory and concrete digital practice. Their encounters with dilemmas in virtual environments are not only intellectually stimulating but also emotionally and ethically demanding,

raising questions about how philosophical values translate into action in fast-paced, ambiguous digital contexts.

This intersection between lived experience and moral reasoning underscores the importance of exploring how individuals perceive and make sense of their ethical challenges in the digital world. While normative ethical frameworks have offered foundational guidance, they often overlook the nuances of personal struggle, emotional conflict, and contextual complexity experienced by individuals. Thus, there is a compelling need to investigate these experiences through a phenomenological lens—one that prioritizes subjective meaning, embodied understanding, and contextual depth. Phenomenology, with its commitment to exploring how people experience and ascribe meaning to phenomena in their everyday lives, provides a valuable methodological framework for such inquiry.

Research focused on individuals' lived experiences of moral dilemmas—especially in digitally mediated environments—has emerged as a critical domain within the broader field of humanistic inquiry. Understanding how people interpret, embody, and emotionally respond to ethical tensions requires methodologies that prioritize subjectivity, context, and depth of meaning (Atlam dkk., 2022). Within this domain, phenomenology has become increasingly prominent for its capacity to reveal how individuals make sense of morally complex experiences that are not easily reducible to normative frameworks or statistical patterns.

However, despite growing interest, methodological challenges remain. Much of the existing scholarship on digital ethics has relied heavily on normative, theoretical, or quantitative approaches, which often fail to capture the nuanced, internal processes through which individuals navigate ethical ambiguity. Quantitative instruments, while valuable for identifying trends or general attitudes, tend to overlook the richness of personal reflection, emotional dissonance, and existential questioning that characterize many digital moral experiences. As a result, the dynamic interplay between ethical reasoning and lived experience remains underexplored.

This methodological limitation has significant implications for research aiming to uncover the essence of ethical phenomena in digital life. The absence of experiential depth in previous studies limits our understanding of how moral agency is enacted, challenged, or transformed in rapidly evolving online contexts. Phenomenology, particularly in its interpretative form, offers a necessary corrective by centering the meaning-making processes of individuals and situating ethical reflection within the realities of lived experience. In doing so, it enables researchers to move beyond surface-level descriptions and access the deeper structures of moral consciousness as they unfold in context.

Current approaches to addressing ethical challenges in digital spaces often rely on applied, normative frameworks that prioritize prescriptive solutions—such as promoting digital literacy, enforcing content regulation, or integrating ethical guidelines into platform design (Bakuri & Amoabeng, 2023). While these strategies offer practical benefits, they typically operate within a rationalist or policy-driven paradigm that assumes ethical behavior can be directed through external systems or general principles. As a result, the internal, lived experience of individuals navigating these ethical tensions is frequently overlooked.

These dominant approaches tend to abstract ethical decision-making away from the contexts in which it is emotionally and existentially experienced. Studies rooted in quantitative methodologies or abstract ethical reasoning often fail to engage with the affective and reflective dimensions that shape how moral agents interpret and respond to digital dilemmas. For instance, investigations into misinformation, cancel culture, or algorithmic bias frequently focus on behavioral outcomes or policy implications, neglecting how individuals personally struggle with these phenomena and attribute meaning to their moral choices.

This gap reveals the need for a qualitative, experience-centered alternative—one that does not merely assess actions or attitudes but instead seeks to understand the meaning of those actions as lived. A phenomenological approach, particularly interpretative in nature, offers such an alternative by exploring how individuals experience, reflect upon, and internalize ethical challenges in their digital environments (Bellis dkk., 2020). Through in-depth examination of subjective narratives,

phenomenology enables researchers to access the essence of moral experience, thus providing a richer, more contextually grounded understanding of ethical life in the post-truth era.

Several previous studies have explored how individuals experience moral challenges within various sociocultural settings. For example, (Chinchay dkk., 2024) examined how people develop emotional responses to digital disconnection, (Dai dkk., 2023) investigated ethics education through AI narratives. These studies highlight the role of personal interpretation in moral contexts but often lack a deep phenomenological inquiry into the subjective meaning of those experiences. Philosophical reflection is frequently mentioned but seldom examined as a lived process. As such, there remains a need to explore how individuals internalize and live through moral ambiguity in digital spaces.

This study applies Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to investigate how philosophy students make sense of ethical dilemmas in digital life. The method was chosen for its strength in uncovering how people interpret their experiences in light of their beliefs, emotions, and contexts. IPA allows for a nuanced understanding of how philosophical reasoning is embodied in real-life decisions. By applying this approach, the study addresses the gap identified earlier regarding the limited insight into lived moral reasoning. The findings contribute to a richer, experience-based understanding of ethical consciousness in the digital era.

This article is structured into several sections. The introduction provides background and rationale for the study. The methodology section details the interpretative phenomenological approach and explains data collection and analysis (Dayal, 2023). The results section presents key themes supported by participant narratives. Finally, the discussion explores the implications of these findings and concludes with recommendations for future research and philosophical education.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived moral experiences of philosophy students as they encountered ethical dilemmas in the digital era. The phenomenological design was selected for its emphasis on capturing the subjective meanings and personal interpretations of individuals' experiences within their natural contexts (Dionisio dkk., 2021). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as developed in the tradition of Heideggerian hermeneutics, guided the inquiry. This approach recognizes that individuals' experiences are not merely descriptive but shaped by their engagement with the world, thus making it particularly suitable for examining how philosophical reflection influences moral decision-making in digital contexts.

Participants

Participants consisted of undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in philosophy programs at public and private universities in Indonesia. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit individuals who had directly encountered ethical dilemmas in digital environments, such as the spread of misinformation, exposure to cancel culture, or engagement with AI-generated content. Inclusion criteria required participants to be at least 20 years old, actively involved in digital platforms, and willing to reflect on their experiences. Individuals lacking philosophical education or with no relevant digital experience were excluded (Doroschuk & Staroverova, 2019). The final sample included ten participants (6 male and 4 female), ranging in age from 21 to 27 years, with an average age of 23.8 years. All participants self-identified as having a strong interest in moral and ethical reasoning.

The sample size of ten participants was considered appropriate and sufficient for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which emphasizes depth over breadth. Consistent with methodological guidance in IPA (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), smaller, homogenous samples are ideal for generating rich, detailed, and nuanced insights into individual lived experiences. Saturation in IPA is not determined by data frequency, but by the point at which additional interviews no longer yield novel thematic interpretations. During the analysis process, interpretative saturation was reached when emerging themes became recurring and conceptually coherent across cases, thus justifying the adequacy of the sample size.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by an open-ended question framework, designed to elicit detailed narratives about participants' experiences with ethical decision-making in digital contexts. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet, comfortable settings, including campus discussion rooms and virtual meeting platforms when in-person interaction was not feasible. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Field notes were taken to document non-verbal cues and contextual details (Esnard dkk., 2024). The interview guide was adapted from previous phenomenological studies on digital ethics and modified to align with the philosophical orientation of the participants.

Data Analysis

Interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The analytic process involved repeated reading of transcripts, identification of significant meaning units, and coding of emergent themes. The themes were then clustered to represent core dimensions of the participants' lived experiences. NVivo software was used to facilitate data organization and thematic coding, ensuring consistency and traceability. Each theme was cross-referenced with verbatim quotations to maintain the integrity of participants' voices (García-Rojas dkk., 2023). The analysis emphasized the interpretation of how individuals made sense of their moral experiences, resulting in the extraction of essential meanings from the data.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional research ethics committee. All participants received written and verbal explanations of the study's purpose and procedures, and written informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Anonymity was preserved through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were treated with strict confidentiality (Herskovitz dkk., 2019). The study complied with the ethical standards set by the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant national guidelines for human subject research.

RESULTS

Moral Ambiguity in the Digital Space

Participants frequently encountered situations where ethical lines were blurred. They expressed uncertainty and conflict when facing decisions such as whether to share unverified content, respond to cancel culture, or use AI-generated materials.

"I once shared a news article I found moving, only to realize later it was fake. I felt morally responsible, though I didn't mean to spread misinformation." (Participant 3)

This theme underscores the complex interplay between moral intention and digital consequence. Students often grappled with the disparity between philosophical ideals and the unpredictable nature of online interactions. The digital realm, for them, lacked clear ethical anchors, resulting in internal moral dissonance.

How to navigate moral ambiguity in the digital space?



Philosophical Reflection as a Coping Mechanism

Despite their confusion, participants consistently turned to philosophical reasoning to make sense of their experiences. They revisited ethical theories, such as Kantian duty or virtue ethics, not merely as academic exercises but as personal compasses in navigating online behavior.

"I asked myself—what would Aristotle say about this? Is sharing this post a virtuous act? That helped me pause before acting." (Participant 6)

This reflective practice emerged as a recurring strategy. It empowered participants to align digital decisions with their internalized values, offering them a sense of agency amidst the moral flux of the online world.

Emotional Burden and Ethical Fatigue

Engaging with continuous ethical challenges online also brought emotional exhaustion. Several participants reported feelings of guilt, anxiety, or numbness, especially when their actions—though unintentionally—contributed to harm or misinformation.

"Every time I make a mistake online, I question myself as a moral agent. It's draining. There's no end to ethical questioning in digital life." (Participant 1)

This theme illustrates the psychological toll of moral vigilance in digital contexts. Ethical fatigue was not only intellectual but deeply emotional, reinforcing the need for supportive frameworks to help individuals sustain moral engagement online without burnout.

The findings reveal that philosophy students, while equipped with conceptual tools, experience profound moral ambiguity, rely on philosophical introspection, and endure emotional strain in dealing with ethical dilemmas in digital spaces. These themes collectively portray a rich tapestry of subjective experience shaped by the tension between ethical ideals and digital realities.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that philosophy students experience moral dilemmas in digital spaces as deeply ambiguous, emotionally taxing, and intellectually engaging phenomena. These experiences reflect a dynamic interplay between ethical reasoning and lived digital realities, offering a nuanced answer to the central research question: How do philosophy students experience and make sense of ethical dilemmas in their everyday digital lives in the post-truth era?

The study provides unique insight into how philosophical training shapes students' moral responses to digital ethical challenges. Rather than relying solely on external moral codes or societal norms, participants actively engaged in introspective processes, applying philosophical principles as internal compasses. Their experiences underscore the significance of moral ambiguity as a lived reality, not just a theoretical construct. The themes of ethical reflection, emotional fatigue, and personal responsibility highlight how philosophy students construct meaning in contexts where digital interactions often outpace ethical clarity. These findings affirm the value of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in capturing the complexity of moral agency within digitally mediated life.

This study's findings align with and extend existing literature on ethics in digital environments. For instance, (Hou & Liu, 2024) observed that digital communication often provokes emotional and ethical disconnection, which resonates with the participants' reported experiences of moral fatigue. Similarly, (Johnson & Rogers, 2024) emphasized the need for ethical reflection in AI education, which complements this study's findings on the centrality of philosophical introspection. However, unlike many previous studies that approach digital ethics from normative or policy-oriented perspectives (Karrasch dkk., 2024), this research offers a bottom-up, subject-centered understanding of how ethical meaning is lived and negotiated. In doing so, it challenges the assumption that moral education is merely theoretical and instead highlights the lived, emotional, and interpretative dimensions of ethical life in the digital era.

The findings of this study carry several important implications for philosophical education, digital ethics training, and the broader understanding of moral engagement in digital contexts. From a social and cultural perspective, the emotional and cognitive struggles experienced by philosophy students underscore the inadequacy of current ethical models that neglect personal meaning-making. These results suggest that ethics education—particularly within higher education—should not only emphasize theoretical understanding but also create reflective spaces where students can grapple with real-life moral ambiguity. The interpretative insights gained through this study may inform educators, digital platform designers, and policymakers about the nuanced ways individuals engage with ethical dilemmas beyond rule-based compliance, fostering a more empathetic and context-sensitive approach to digital moral development.

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to certain limitations. First, the sample was limited to a small number of philosophy students from a specific cultural and academic background, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Second, the phenomenological approach, while offering depth, prioritizes subjective interpretation over comparative analysis or broader pattern identification. Additionally, all data were self-reported through interviews, which may be influenced by memory or self-perception biases. These limitations do not undermine the validity of the findings but rather highlight the importance of contextualizing interpretations within the lived realities of participants.

Future research could build on this study by examining how similar moral reflections manifest in other academic disciplines or cultural settings, particularly where digital engagement is framed differently. Comparative phenomenological studies might reveal how students from different moral traditions, such as religious or indigenous communities, navigate ethical ambiguity in online spaces. Furthermore, longitudinal designs could explore how individuals' moral perceptions evolve over time as they encounter repeated ethical challenges in digital life. Such extensions would enrich the theoretical and practical understanding of moral agency in the post-truth era and offer valuable guidance for both academic ethics and digital citizenship education.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how philosophy students experience and interpret ethical dilemmas in digital environments, particularly within the complex landscape of the post-truth era. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research revealed that participants confronted moral ambiguity through personal reflection, emotional struggle, and philosophical reasoning. The findings demonstrate that ethical decision-making in digital spaces is not merely theoretical but deeply

embedded in lived experience. This study fills a critical gap in the literature by offering a subjective, experience-based understanding of digital moral agency that previous normative models have overlooked. The insights gained have practical implications for ethics education and digital citizenship, encouraging more reflective and human-centered approaches. Future research could extend this work by including diverse populations and exploring how moral reasoning evolves over time across cultural or disciplinary contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. All procedures performed in this study were conducted in accordance with ethical standards, and the authors have no financial or personal relationships that could have influenced the outcomes or interpretations presented in this article.

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