



Reinterpreting the Buddhist Five Precepts for Digital Ethics in Contemporary Vietnam: A Moral Education Perspective

Nguyen Thuy Chi^{1*}, P. D. Satya Pal Kumar²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam – 53003, Andhra Pradesh, India

²Research Director, Department of Anthropology, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam – 53003, Andhra Pradesh, India.

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the application of the Buddhist Five Precepts to digital ethics in modern Vietnam, focusing on moral education for youth. Traditionally religious guide-lines, the Precepts can be reinterpreted to address contemporary digital challenges like cyberbullying, misinformation, digital theft, and online addictions. By integrating social philosophy concepts from thinkers like Rawls and MacIntyre, and drawing parallels with Confucian digital ethics, the paper argues for reframing the Precepts as universal ethical tools for fostering responsible digital citizenship in pluralist societies. Vietnam's cultural blend of Buddhism and rapid digitalization offers a unique case for incorporating these principles into educational curricula. Empirical case studies from Vietnamese youth so- cial media usage and ethical consumption behaviors are analyzed to illustrate real-world applications. This approach not only enhances character education but also contributes to global discussions on ethical technology use.

Keywords: Buddhist ethics, Five Precepts, digital ethics, Confucian ethics, moral education, Vietnamese youth.

1 Introduction

In the digital age, Vietnam has experienced rapid technological advancement, with inter- net penetration reaching over 70% and widespread social media usage among its youth

(11). While this connectivity offers opportunities for learning, social interaction, and eco- nomic growth, it also presents ethical challenges such as cyberbullying, misinformation spread, digital privacy violations, online addictions, and ethical dilemmas in data usage. Buddhism, deeply ingrained in Vietnamese culture since the 2nd-3rd centuries through trade and cultural exchanges (12), provides a rich ethical framework through the Five Precepts that can be adapted to these modern issues.

The Five Precepts—abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicants—traditionally guide lay Buddhists toward moral living rooted in compassion, wisdom, and mindfulness (4). In contemporary digital contexts, they can address specific harms: non-killing extends to avoiding online harassment that causes emotional distress, non-stealing to respecting intellectual property and data privacy, non-lying to combating fake news and misinformation, and abstaining from intoxicants to managing digital ad- ditions like excessive social media use. This paper reinterprets the Precepts for digital ethics, proposing their integration into moral education programs in Vietnam to cultivate mindful and responsible digital citizens.

Drawing on social philosophy, including Rawls's concept of public reason for shared ethical norms in pluralist societies (15) and MacIntyre's virtue ethics for character development through habitual practices (9), we argue that the Precepts can serve as accessible ethical values. Furthermore, to enrich the discussion, we incorporate insights from Confucian digital ethics, which emphasizes role-based responsibilities and harmonious relationships in technological contexts (22). Vietnam's syncretic cultural heritage, blending Buddhist compassion with Confucian relational ethics, provides a fertile ground for this hybrid approach (8). Empirical case studies, such as patterns of social media use among Vietnamese youth and their implications for psychological well-being (3), and ethical consumption behav- iors influenced by digital platforms (13), highlight the urgency of ethical interventions. Additionally, studies on digital health ethics, including adverse drug reaction monitoring in low-resource settings (10), underscore the need for ethical frameworks in digital

health applications popular among youth.

The study aims to demonstrate how Buddhist principles, complemented by Confucian perspectives, can mitigate digital ethical dilemmas, contributing to sustainable social development and youth moral education in Vietnam.

2 Methodology

This qualitative study employs documentary analysis of Buddhist texts, such as the Dhammapada and Sigālovāda Sutta (2; 1), alongside modern literature on digital ethics, Confucian philosophy, and education in Vietnam. We synthesize core Precept values and link them to digital issues like misinformation and cyberbullying (20). To incorporate empirical elements, we review case studies from recent surveys on Vietnamese youth, including social media patterns and ethical behaviors (3; 13).

Informal observations from Vietnamese online communities, youth retreats, and digital education programs inform the analysis, providing contextual insights into Precept applications in digital settings. Confucian sources, such as discussions on role ethics in technology (23), are integrated for comparative depth.

3 The Five Precepts and Their Digital Ethical Implications

The Five Precepts form the basis of Buddhist ethics, promoting compassion, equality, and mindfulness to prevent harm and cultivate good (2). In the digital realm, they offer practical guidelines for ethical online behavior, adaptable to modern challenges.

3.1 Abstain from Taking Life: Non-Violence in Cyberspace

This precept emphasizes compassion and respect for all sentient beings, extending beyond physical harm to mental and emotional well-being (17). In digital contexts, it prohibits cyberbullying, online harassment, and hate speech that can lead to psychological distress or even suicide among youth. For instance, anonymous trolling or doxxing violates this precept by inflicting harm remotely.

3.2 Abstain from Taking What is Not Given: Digital Property Rights

Encouraging honesty and respect for others' possessions, this precept applies to digital theft, such as piracy, hacking, or unauthorized data sharing (21). In Vietnam's growing e-commerce and content creation scene, it promotes ethical practices like crediting sources and protecting intellectual property.

3.3 Abstain from Sexual Misconduct: Responsible Online Relationships

This precept advocates fidelity and consensual relationships, translating to digital spaces as avoiding online exploitation, revenge porn, or non-consensual sharing of intimate content (7). It encourages respectful interactions on dating apps and social platforms popular among Vietnamese youth.

3.4 Abstain from False Speech: Truth in the Digital Age

Prohibiting lies, exaggeration, or divisive speech, this precept is vital for combating misinformation and fake news on social media (6). In an era of viral content, it urges users to verify information before sharing, fostering trust and harmony online.

3.5 Abstain from Intoxicants: Mindful Digital Consumption

This warns against substances that cloud the mind, extending to digital "intoxicants" like addictive algorithms on platforms such as TikTok or Facebook, which can lead to loss of productivity and mental health issues (4). It promotes mindful usage to maintain clarity and avoid dependency.

4 Integration with Confucian Digital Ethics

Confucian ethics, with its emphasis on role-based morality (*ren-li-yi*), complements Buddhist Precepts by focusing on harmonious relationships and social responsibilities in technological contexts (22). In digital ethics, Confucianism views technology as an extension of human roles—e.g., as a student, parent, or citizen—requiring rituals (*li*) for proper conduct online (23).

For instance, the Buddhist non-lying precept aligns with Confucian *yi* (righteousness) in promoting truthful digital communication to maintain social harmony. Empirical studies show that Confucian values influence ethical online behaviors in East Asian youth, reducing misinformation spread through emphasis on familial and communal duties (16).

In Vietnam, where Confucianism historically shaped education and society (19), integrating it with Buddhist compassion creates a robust framework for digital moral education, addressing both individual mindfulness and relational ethics.

5 Empirical Case Studies: Digital Ethics Among Vietnamese Youth

To ground the theoretical reinterpretation, we examine empirical case studies from Vietnam.

A 2025 study on social media patterns among Vietnamese youths (aged 15-24) found four clusters: "problematic users" (high addiction risk), "active connectors" (social-focused), "passive lurkers," and "minimal users" (3). Problematic users exhibited higher rates of ethical lapses, such as sharing unverified information (violating non-lying) and cyberbullying (non-killing), with 25% reporting mental health impacts.

Another case involves ethical consumption via digital platforms: A 2023 survey of 500 Vietnamese youths identified three behaviors—ethical buying, eco-boycotts, and CSR boycotts—influenced by psychological factors like moral identity (13). Digital misinformation affected 40% of decisions, highlighting the need for Precept-based education.

In digital health, a study on child influencers in Vietnam revealed ethical concerns in content creation, with young creators facing exploitation and privacy issues (5). This ties to non-stealing and responsible relationships.

Additionally, research on adverse drug reaction monitoring in low-resource settings, including digital reporting tools, emphasizes ethical data handling to prevent harm (10). In Vietnam, youth using health apps for substance information must navigate ethical pitfalls like misinformation on intoxicants.

These cases illustrate the practical relevance of reinterpreted Precepts, showing gaps in current digital ethics that moral education can address.

6 Practical Applications of the Five Precepts in Digital Education in Vietnam

To expand practical applications, we propose multifaceted integrations into Vietnamese education systems, leveraging both Buddhist and Confucian ethics.

1. Curriculum Integration: Incorporate Precepts into civic education classes via modules on digital citizenship. For example, teach non-violence through anti-cyberbullying workshops, using case studies like the 2021 Vietnam cyberbullying incidents affecting 15% of students (20). Confucian role ethics can be added by discussing online responsibilities as "digital filial piety" toward family and community.

2. Extracurricular Programs: Organize mindfulness-based digital detox retreats at pagodas, combining Buddhist meditation with Confucian group activities to build harmonious online habits. Empirical evidence from similar programs shows reduced addiction rates by 20% among participants (18).

3. Digital Tools and Apps: Develop apps like "Mindful Scroll" that prompt users with Precept reminders before posting (e.g., "Is this truthful?"). Pilot studies in Ho Chi Minh City schools could measure impacts on ethical behaviors, drawing from Confucian harmony to encourage positive interactions.

4. Teacher Training and Policy: Train educators on hybrid Buddhist-Confucian frameworks for digital ethics, advocating policy inclusion in Vietnam's national curriculum. Collaborations with the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha and Confucian institutes can facilitate this.

5. Community and Family Engagement: Extend applications to families via workshops on monitoring youth digital use ethically, preventing intoxicant-like addictions. Case studies indicate family involvement boosts ethical adherence by 30% (14).

These expanded applications, supported by empirical data, ensure culturally resonant and effective moral education.

7 Reframing the Five Precepts within Social Philosophy for Digital Ethics

Using Rawls's overlapping consensus, the Precepts and Confucian ethics can form public norms for digital governance in pluralist Vietnam (15). MacIntyre's virtues support habitual ethical practices online, while Confucian role ethics adds relational depth (9; 22). This hybrid lens positions Vietnam as a model for East Asian digital ethics.

8 Conclusion

Reinterpreting the Buddhist Five Precepts, integrated with Confucian digital ethics, offers a comprehensive tool for moral education in Vietnam's digital landscape. Empirical case studies underscore the urgency, while expanded applications provide actionable pathways. Future research should evaluate implementations empirically, potentially extending to regional contexts. This approach honors Vietnam's heritage while addressing global ethical challenges in technology.

Abbreviations

AN – Āṅguttara Nikāya DN – Dīgha Nikāya MN – Majjhima Nikāya SN – Saṃyutta Nikāya

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