frontiers | Frontiers in Communication

TYPE Review
PUBLISHED 04 February 2026
DOI 10.3389/fcomm.2026.1745680

OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY
Pradeep Nair,
Indo Pacific Studies Center, Australia

REVIEWED BY
Nurul Asikin,
Raja Ali Haji Maritime University, Indonesia
Petrus Dwi Ananto Pamungkas,
Universitas Tarakanita, Indonesia

*CORRESPONDENCE
Erman Anom
✉ erman.anom@esaunggul.ac.id
Saddam Rassanjani
✉ saddam.rassanjani@usk.ac.id

RECEIVED 13 November 2025
REVISED 20 January 2026
ACCEPTED 22 January 2026
PUBLISHED 04 February 2026

CITATION
Anom E and Rassanjani S (2026) Digital ethics, cultural values, and self-regulation of social media activities in Indonesia and Malaysia. *Front. Commun.* 11:1745680. doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2026.1745680

Digital ethics, cultural values, and self-regulation of social media activities in Indonesia and Malaysia

Erman Anom[1]* and Saddam Rassanjani[2]*

[1]Faculty of Communication, Universitas Esa Unggul, Jakarta, Indonesia, [2]Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Syiah Kuala, Banda Aceh, Indonesia

The rapid expansion of social media in Indonesia and Malaysia has generated new ethical challenges that dominant digital ethics and self-regulation frameworks, grounded mainly in Western individualistic assumptions, cannot adequately explain. While existing studies focus on legal regulation, digital literacy, or normative prescriptions, they rarely examine how cultural values shape individual self-regulation in non-Western digital contexts. This study addresses this gap by critically analysing the relationships between digital ethics, cultural values, and self-regulation in social media practices in Indonesia and Malaysia. Drawing on a structured narrative literature review and thematic analysis of recent scholarly sources, the study demonstrates that digital ethical behaviour in both countries is deeply embedded in collectivist norms, religious morality, and culturally specific mechanisms such as shame, social harmony, and communal accountability. Based on this analysis, the article proposes a novel conceptual framework—Contextual Digital Self-Regulation—which conceptualises ethical digital behaviour as emerging from the interaction of three interconnected layers: the individual layer (moral reflection and personal agency), the social layer (culturally embedded norms and collective expectations), and the structural layer (policy frameworks, educational systems, and platform architectures). The study advances existing digital ethics and self-regulation theories by offering a culturally grounded, non-Western perspective that challenges Universalist and individual-centred models. The findings highlight the importance of developing digital ethics education and governance frameworks that are context-sensitive and rooted in local value systems, particularly in Southeast Asian societies.

KEYWORDS

cultural values, digital ethics, Indonesia, Malaysia, self-regulation, social media

1 Introduction

Over the past 20 years, advances in digital communication technology have significantly changed how people interact, engage, and express themselves (Firanti et al., 2020). In Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, social media has become a significant part of daily life. According to a We Are Social (2025), roughly 143 million Indonesians (50.2%) and 25.1 million Malaysians (70.2%) are active on social media. These platforms function not only as sources of entertainment and communication but also as new public arenas for social, political, and cultural debates (Parker and Bozeman, 2018). This rapid expansion is not merely a technological trend but has significantly intensified ethical challenges in the digital public sphere. As social media becomes an increasingly central space for social, political, and cultural interaction, the risks of misinformation, hate speech, privacy violations, and moral polarisation

also escalate, making digital ethics and self-regulation more urgent and socially consequential.

This phenomenon suggests that advances in digital technology do not automatically translate into ethical maturity among users. Digital ethics is broadly defined as a set of moral principles guiding behaviour in the digital domain (Floridi et al., 2019). It becomes increasingly important in a highly interconnected society. In Indonesia and Malaysia, issues of digital ethics are becoming more complex as they intersect with local cultural values, religious norms, and social structures. Despite shared cultural foundations such as collectivism, politeness, and spirituality, variations in political systems, media policies, and social dynamics yield diverse expressions of digital ethics.

Indonesia and Malaysia face similar challenges in developing ethical digital ecosystems. In Indonesia, common issues include the spread of political hoaxes, religious hate speech, and misuse of personal data (Dewi et al., 2023). In Malaysia, online debates often revolve around balancing freedom of expression with respect for religious and ethnic values (Shukri, 2023). Both countries have implemented policies such as Indonesia's Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Act and Malaysia's Communications and Multimedia Act to regulate online behaviour. However, legal measures alone, such as these laws, frequently fail to change individual online conduct (Appazov, 2017), highlighting the need for approaches based on values education, moral guidance, and self-awareness.

In this context, cultural values are essential as a moral basis for shaping digital ethics (Salehan et al., 2018). Values such as cooperation, politeness, respect for elders, and social harmony can serve as normative guidelines for ethical behaviour online. However, cultural changes driven by globalisation and digital modernisation threaten the endurance of these values. Digital culture, marked by anonymity, limitless freedom of expression, and algorithmic logic, often blurs the lines between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, privacy and publicity, and criticism and personal attacks (Ungerer, 2021). Therefore, digital ethics in the social media age involves not just following rules but also reflecting on the moral implications of one's actions.

Previous research indicates that studies on digital ethics in Indonesia and Malaysia are scattered and primarily normative. Most focus on policy (Nilgiriwala et al., 2024), digital character education (Ashari et al., 2023), or media literacy (Lee et al., 2025), but few explore how these relate to cultural and psychological factors influencing personal self-regulation. Cross-cultural studies suggest that collectivist values common in Southeast Asian societies can promote social responsibility in digital ethics, but they may also create conformity pressures that limit personal expression (Ong, 2021). Therefore, a conceptual study is needed to understand how cultural values impact individual self-regulation in the digital space and how both countries navigate the balance between freedom of expression and ethical concerns and responsibility.

While prior studies on digital ethics in Indonesia and Malaysia have primarily focused on legal regulation, policy frameworks, and digital literacy initiatives, limited attention has been given to the cultural–psychological mechanisms through which individuals regulate their behaviour in everyday social media practices. Existing research tends to treat users as passive subjects of regulation or education, rather than as active moral agents embedded in specific cultural contexts. This study addresses this gap by positioning self-regulation as a central analytical lens, arguing that ethical digital behaviour cannot be adequately explained by formal regulation or media literacy alone. Instead, it must be understood through the interplay of individual moral reflection, culturally grounded norms, and social expectations that shape users' everyday online conduct, particularly in collectivist Southeast Asian contexts such as Indonesia and Malaysia.

Building on this background, this study aims to critically analyse the relationship between digital ethics, cultural values, and individual self-regulation in social media activities in Indonesia and Malaysia. The selection of Indonesia and Malaysia is theoretically grounded rather than merely descriptive. While both societies share broad cultural characteristics such as collectivism and politeness, they also represent distinct socio-political and governance contexts that enable meaningful analytical comparison. These shared cultural orientations can be understood through the broader Asian concept of face-saving and social harmony, in which individuals regulate their behaviour to maintain social cohesion and avoid public embarrassment. This cultural logic provides a theoretically relevant foundation for examining self-regulation in digital communication. At the same time, differences in media regulation, political culture, and governance approaches between Indonesia and Malaysia offer contrasting structural environments in which these cultural values are enacted. This combination of cultural similarity and institutional difference strengthens the study's comparative design. It enhances understanding of how digital ethics and self-regulation are shaped across different governance contexts.

2 Methodology

The research employs a qualitative approach, grounded in a structured narrative literature review. Rather than aiming for exhaustive coverage, as in fully systematic reviews, this approach emphasises conceptual depth and theoretical relevance. The literature was selected purposively for its relevance to the research questions on digital ethics, cultural values, and self-regulation in Indonesia and Malaysia. This approach is particularly appropriate for concept-building research that seeks to advance theoretical understanding rather than to produce statistical generalisations. Moreover, by employing a cross-national perspective, the research aims to identify patterns of similarity and difference in how digital ethics are interpreted and how individuals regulate themselves. Rather than aiming to produce universal laws, the analysis seeks to offer contextual insights that can enrich theoretical discussions of digital ethics in non-Western societies.

This study utilises secondary data from academic sources. These data were chosen because they correspond to the research's conceptual and interpretive aims and aid in cross-disciplinary analysis (Irwin, 2013). Source selection was purposive, based on thematic relevance and academic credibility. The literature search was conducted using Google Scholar because of its open access and broad coverage (Martín-Martín et al., 2018). It was also deliberately selected to ensure the inclusion of locally grounded scholarship from Indonesia and Malaysia that may not always be fully captured in globally indexed databases, yet remains highly relevant for culturally contextual analysis.

Although Google Scholar was used as the primary search platform for its broad coverage and accessibility, several measures

were applied to ensure the academic rigour and quality of the included literature. Only peer-reviewed journal articles were considered, with priority given to studies published in reputable academic journals, including those indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, or recognised in national journal rankings. Articles were further assessed for conceptual relevance, theoretical contribution, and clarity of methodology, rather than solely on availability. Studies with weak academic grounding, unclear sources, or non-scholarly formats were excluded. To enhance transparency, a summary table of the included studies has been added, outlining key characteristics, including publication year, country focus, and thematic emphasis. Figure 1 below illustrates the process of the structured narrative literature review in this article.

Once all the intended articles were gathered, data analysis was performed following the thematic analysis method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), a method that helps identify, organise, and interpret key themes from the literature. The analysis was inductive, focusing on patterns that emerged within the local contexts of Indonesia and Malaysia. This approach effectively integrates global theories with the unique social practices of Southeast Asia.

As a conceptual exploration study, this research has limitations in the extent to which its findings can be applied empirically. It relies entirely on secondary data, meaning it does not include the personal experiences of social media users. Additionally, even though it compares two culturally similar countries, internal societal differences, such as those among different generations or ethnic groups, can be substantial. Nonetheless, these limitations do not diminish the scientific significance of the research, since its primary goal is to create a cross-cultural conceptual framework that can underpin future empirical studies.

3 Results and discussion

This section presents the findings and their interpretation. To make the comparative contribution explicit, Table 1 summarises the key similarities and differences in self-regulation mechanisms between Indonesia and Malaysia across key analytical dimensions. This comparative synthesis aims to give readers an at-a-glance understanding of how shared cultural orientations interact with diverse social and structural conditions to shape distinct forms of digital self-regulation.

As shown in Table 1, Indonesia and Malaysia share broadly similar ethical foundations rooted in collectivism, religiosity, and social harmony, yet differ in how these values are enacted in their digital environments. In Indonesia, self-regulation tends to be shaped by expressive public interaction, community-based monitoring, and moral peer pressure. In contrast, in Malaysia, it is more strongly associated with restraint, face-saving behaviour, and sensitivity to legal and political boundaries. These contrasts show that self-regulation is not merely an individual psychological process but a socially embedded and structurally conditioned practice. The comparison therefore reinforces the central argument of this study: that ethical behaviour in digital public spheres emerges from the dynamic interplay of cultural norms, social mechanisms, and governance environments, rather than from individual moral agency alone.

3.1 Digital ethics of social media in Indonesia and Malaysia

Digital ethics concerns individuals' and communities' capacity to apply moral principles in online activities (Sari et al., 2024). In social

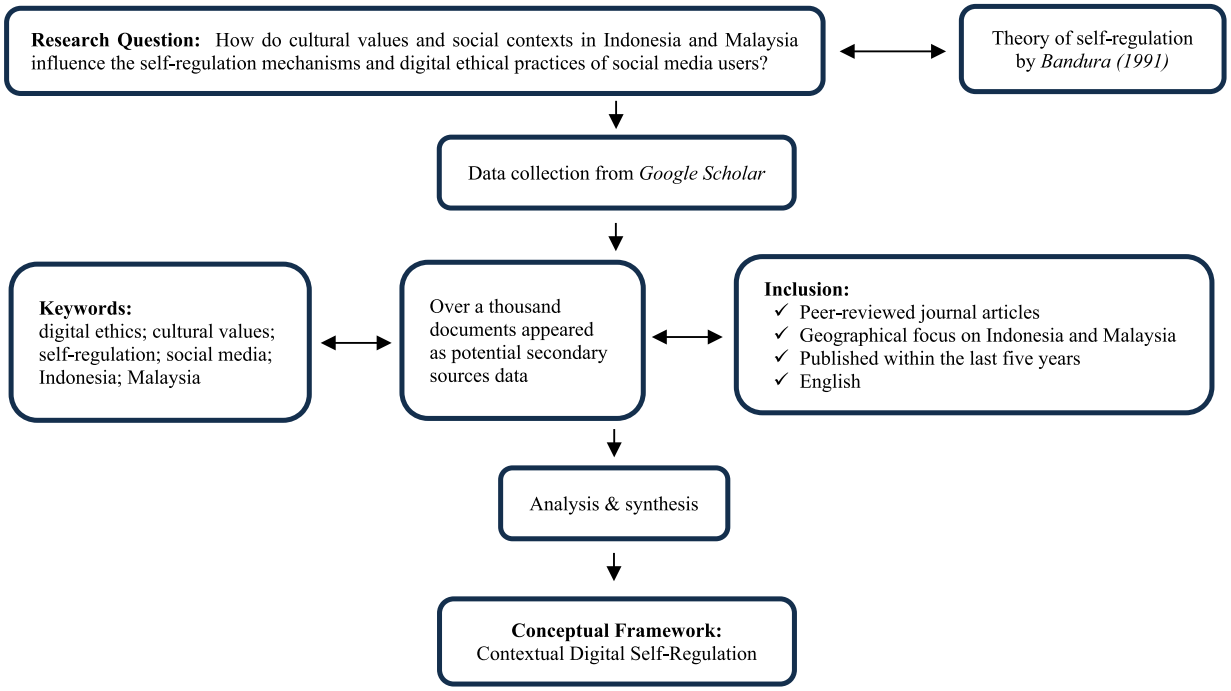

FIGURE 1
The process of the structured narrative literature review (Authors, 2025).

TABLE 1 Comparative summary of self-regulation mechanisms in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Analytical dimension	Indonesia	Malaysia
Ethical foundations	Firmly grounded in religious morality and local cultural values (e.g., *gotong royong*, politeness, communal harmony). Digital ethics is linked to moral responsibility rather than legal compliance.	Firmly grounded in religious morality and the principle of inter-ethnic harmony, informed by Rukun Negara. Ethical behaviour is framed around maintaining social stability and respect for diversity.
Core cultural values shaping online behaviour	Collectivism, social harmony, shame (*malu*), politeness (*unggah-ungguh*, *tepa selira*), communal responsibility.	Collectivism, social harmony, respect for authority, sensitivity to ethnic and religious boundaries, and face-saving behaviour.
Dominant social mechanisms of self-regulation	Community monitoring, crowd correction, "netizen policing," reputational concern, social shaming, and role modelling by influencers.	Heightened self-restraint, sensitivity to offence, avoidance of controversial speech, face-saving, reputational concern.
Forms of social control	Informal sanctions such as public criticism, online shaming, boycotts, and community reprimands often serve as external control mechanisms.	Strong tendency towards self-censorship, driven by concern for harmony and fear of crossing sensitive political, ethnic, or religious boundaries.
State initiatives and governance approach	Emphasis on digital literacy campaigns (e.g., Siberkreasi, #BijakBersosmed, #TurnBackHoax) that focus on ethics, culture, and social responsibility, but are often reactive and instructional.	Stronger institutional regulation through agencies such as MCMC; emphasis on legal enforcement to protect national unity (e.g., restrictions on content related to 3Rs: religion, race, royalty).
Literacy orientation	Digital literacy is framed as moral awareness, cultural sensitivity, and ethical responsibility in communication.	Digital literacy is framed more as protection against risks (cybercrime, misinformation) and compliance with norms and regulations.
Key obstacles to ethical self-regulation	Algorithmic amplification of sensational content, hoaxes, polarisation, and the pursuit of online popularity undermines reflective behaviour.	Over-cautious self-restraint, fear of social and legal repercussions, and limited openness in public debate.
Overall implications for the digital public sphere	Strong communal ethics exist, but public discourse is vulnerable to fragmentation due to virality, emotional expression, and algorithmic incentives.	Public discourse tends to be more orderly, but risks becoming constrained by excessive caution and limited critical deliberation.

Source: Authors (2025).

media, it encompasses not just legal compliance but also moral awareness, social responsibility, and respect for human values (Rozehnal, 2022). Indonesia and Malaysia, with their collectivist and religious cultures, exemplify how Southeast Asian societies navigate the digital world while maintaining local values. Social media has fostered a new form of public morality that formal institutions do not fully regulate. In digital spaces, users enjoy significant freedom to express opinions, yet this is often not matched by adequate moral awareness (Barque-Duran et al., 2017). As Floridi et al. (2019) noted, the digital realm is an infosphere—a moral environment in which every act of sharing, uploading, or commenting carries ethical significance. Consequently, the actions of social media users should be viewed as moral acts with real social consequences, even when they occur in online settings.

In Indonesia, digital ethics are often connected to moral and religious values that influence social behaviour (Munawaroh and Marlina, 2025). Issues such as political hoaxes, religion-based hate speech, and online harassment have ignited active public ethical discussions (Abdullah et al., 2024). For example, during Indonesia's COVID-19 pandemic, provocative content and disinformation spread rapidly through WhatsApp and Facebook (Kundhalini et al., 2023). In response, the government and civil society launched campaigns like #BijakBersosmed and #TurnBackHoax, emphasising the moral responsibility of internet users. However, these efforts are mainly reactive, addressing misconduct after it occurs rather than promoting a lasting awareness of moral principles.

Meanwhile, in Malaysia, digital ethics primarily focus on respectful communication and promoting inter-ethnic harmony. Given the country's diverse ethnic and religious communities, online debates on sensitive topics can sometimes spark social tensions (Senin et al., 2024). The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) enforces rules against content that may threaten national unity, such as insults to the 3Rs—Religion, Race, and Royalty (Shukri, 2023). This suggests that digital ethics in Malaysia prioritise safeguarding social stability and public order over individual freedom of expression.

A key challenge in digital ethics in both Indonesia and Malaysia is the tension between locally grounded cultural norms and globally circulating digital values embedded in platform architectures. Social media platforms, designed mainly within Western liberal traditions, prioritise visibility, engagement, and individual expression through algorithmic mechanisms (Cotter, 2019), often rewarding provocative or sensational content rather than socially responsible behaviour. Empirical studies reviewed in this article illustrate how this tension manifests in practice. In Indonesia, Mahy et al. (2022) show that influencer culture increasingly incentivises attention-seeking performances that conflict with traditional norms of modesty and social responsibility, while Dewi et al. (2023) document how algorithmic amplification has contributed to the rapid circulation of political hoaxes and hate speech. Similarly, Hartini et al. (2023) demonstrate that cultural expectations of politeness shape online communication patterns in Indonesia and Malaysia, yet these norms are frequently challenged by the expressive styles encouraged by social media environments. In Malaysia, Shukri (2023) further illustrates how the state responds to these tensions by imposing stricter content regulations and prioritising social harmony over unrestricted expression. These studies collectively suggest that the ethical challenges faced by users are not merely abstract moral dilemmas but

concrete outcomes of the interaction between global digital infrastructures and locally embedded value systems.

Both countries acknowledge that legal policies alone are insufficient to advance digital ethics. Therefore, digital literacy education is crucial in cultivating long-term ethical awareness (Santhosh and Thiyagu, 2024). Indonesia, through its Siberkreasi programme, focuses on the four pillars of digital literacy—ethics, security, culture, and skills—and emphasises manners and social responsibility (Pambudi and Prihantoro, 2023). Malaysia has established the CyberSAFE (Cyber Security Awareness for Everyone) module to teach students ethical online behaviour, aiming to raise awareness of cyber threats and ways to protect against digital crime among children and youth (Hariana et al., 2025).

The effectiveness of both programmes remains limited due to their instructional, top-down approach. Digital ethics education often focuses on "dos and don'ts" instead of explaining the moral reasons behind actions. As Bandura (1991) explains, moral development involves reflective learning and real-life examples. Thus, future digital ethics education should incorporate approaches that consider local cultural values and encourage personal moral reflection to strengthen self-regulation capacity.

3.2 Local cultural values in social media activities in Indonesia and Malaysia

Digital ethics in Southeast Asian societies are deeply connected to their cultural value systems. Culture acts not only as a symbolic heritage but also as a moral framework that influences individual behaviour, including online conduct. For example, Indonesia and Malaysia, which share Eastern cultural principles, consistently practice politeness as a moral foundation that develops in social media activities (Hartini et al., 2023). However, digital globalisation presents challenges by increasing freedom of expression and individualism, which can sometimes conflict with the region's collectivist traditions and ethos.

Indonesian cultural values such as *gotong royong* and Javanese norms of *unggah-ungguh* (politeness) are not merely social ideals but culturally embedded mechanisms that shape individual self-regulation in everyday online practices. Interpreted through Bandura's (1991) framework, these values actively structure processes of self-monitoring, self-judgement, and self-reaction in social media use. The collectivist orientation inherent in *gotong royong*—voluntary cooperation oriented towards the collective good—encourages users to continuously monitor their online behaviour for its potential impact on others. This fosters a form of self-monitoring grounded not only in fear of social sanctions but also in an internalised moral commitment to solidarity, social harmony, and responsibility towards the wider community.

Similarly, the norm of *unggah-ungguh* guide's self-judgement, whereby individuals evaluate their language, tone, and expressions against culturally embedded standards of appropriateness and respect. This often leads to self-restraint in digital interactions, such as avoiding confrontational language or controversial opinions to preserve social harmony (Fernando et al., 2022). These values also shape self-reaction, as users frequently adjust, revise, or suppress their online behaviour in anticipation of social consequences, embarrassment, or loss of social standing. In this way, *gotong royong* and *unggah-ungguh* function not merely as descriptive cultural traits but as culturally grounded self-regulatory mechanisms that directly structure ethical behaviour in digital environments.

Religiosity is a key aspect of Indonesian culture. Most Indonesians strongly associate morality with religious teachings, which influences their online behaviour. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok are rich with Islamic sermons, quotations, and moral guidance. Many digital influencers and religious teachers actively use social media to share religious messages (Syafaah et al., 2024). This trend illustrates how religious values are merging with digital technology. However, it also brings new challenges: heightened moral competition online, where traditional institutions no longer hold exclusive religious authority and are now also shaped by algorithmic popularity.

Meanwhile, Malaysian culture is rooted in collectivism, politeness, and religiosity, expressed through distinctive forms shaped by a multi-ethnic society and Malay Islamic values. The concepts of *adab* and *budi bahasa* capture their core principles. *Adab* involves moral politeness and conduct aligned with Islamic standards, while *budi bahasa* highlights respectful communication and social manners (Ali, 2022). In the digital realm, these values are vital for social media users to foster harmony and avoid offensive language, particularly in a society that is sensitive to racial and religious issues.

National initiatives like Klik Dengan Bijak demonstrate how the Malaysian government encourages civility online (Omar et al., 2022). These programmes emphasise the need for digital respect, which involves honouring different opinions while maintaining decency. On platforms such as Facebook and TikTok, Malaysians tend to communicate more cautiously and adhere to social norms more than Indonesians do (Hartini et al., 2023). This pattern is also influenced by a high awareness of legal standards and strict oversight by the MCMC of content that might breach public norms (Mustafa et al., 2025).

In the Malaysian context, self-censorship should be understood not merely as a restriction on freedom of expression but also as a contextually adaptive form of self-regulation within a multi-ethnic society. As Anuar et al. (2025) argue, the emphasis on inter-ethnic harmony rooted in the Rukun Negara philosophy encourages individuals to prioritise social cohesion and mutual respect in public communication, including in digital spaces. This social orientation shapes users' decisions to restrain their expression to avoid offending religious or ethnic sensitivities, suggesting that self-censorship can function as an ethically motivated form of self-restraint.

At the same time, this adaptive function generates normative tensions. Yussoff and Nordin (2021) show that heightened sensitivity to race, religion, and authority can lead individuals to avoid expressing legitimate criticism on public issues. This suggests that self-censorship may become problematic when driven less by internalised moral reflection and more by fear of legal consequences or social backlash. Taken together, these findings indicate that self-censorship in Malaysia functions as a culturally embedded form of self-regulation, and its ethical value depends on whether it is grounded in reflective moral agency or shaped primarily by external coercion.

Despite the downsides, digital globalisation offers opportunities to revive local values (Poddar, 2024). Many Indonesian and Malaysian content creators leverage social media to showcase their cultural identity, promote batik and traditional foods, or share local wisdom. This exemplifies glocalisation—adapting global influences on local contexts. Essentially, digital culture does not replace traditional values;

instead, it creates new platforms for their negotiation and reinterpretation.

Cultural values play a key role in shaping self-regulation or self-control among social media users. In collectivist societies like Indonesia and Malaysia, this regulation primarily stems from social awareness and a sense of shame, rather than from legal rules alone. Users often evaluate their actions based on how they are perceived publicly or how they might affect their social group. For instance, they might refrain from sharing content that could embarrass their family or community.

However, this kind of self-regulation driven by social pressure has its limits: it may lead to external compliance without promoting genuine moral reflection. The primary challenge is to transition from shame-based self-regulation to self-regulation rooted in moral understanding. Essentially, cultural values should be internalised via reflective education, enabling individuals to think ethically and independently in a progressively complex digital environment.

3.3 Self-regulation of social media communities in Indonesia and Malaysia

Self-regulation is essential in digital ethics. It involves an individual's capacity to control their thoughts, feelings, and actions in accordance with personal and social moral standards; this process primarily includes self-monitoring, self-judgement, and self-reaction (Bandura, 1991). On social media, this regulation manifests as thoughtful posting, fact-checking, emotional control during discussions, and responsibility for the social impact of content.

Both individual awareness and cultural norms, as well as social pressures, influence self-regulation in Indonesia and Malaysia. Both societies, rooted in collectivist values, emphasise harmony, social shame, and group responsibility. As a result, digital self-regulation in Southeast Asia is uniquely influenced by social and cultural factors rather than personal reflection alone.

Users typically consider public perception and potential social repercussions before posting (Purboningsih et al., 2023). The fear of going viral or becoming a gossip acts as an informal social control, promoting restraint. For instance, breaches of decency or hate speech often led to mass shaming, account boycotts, or being reported to authorities by the community. Although these responses effectively discourage bad behaviour, they are external pressures—people act out of fear of social sanctions rather than from an internal moral compass. A more deliberate type of self-regulation is emerging among young Indonesians. Many are embracing the idea of "think before posting" as part of personal awareness, not just as social conformity (Iskandar et al., 2025). Consequently, a generation of users is forming that is more mindful of their digital reputation and the lasting impact of their online footprints.

Self-regulation extends beyond individuals to communities, where social norms and control mechanisms are standard. Many social media groups in both countries have established guidelines to promote positive interactions. For instance, the Indonesian influencer community within Siberkreasi, also known as the Indonesian Content Creator Society, follows an unwritten code emphasising honesty in promotions, anti-hoax efforts, and respect for audience privacy (Widyasari and Allert, 2019). Breaking these norms often results in social exclusion or a loss of trust from followers.

Apart from official communities, self-regulation occurs naturally through online cultural behaviours such as crowd correction and digital accountability. When false information is shared or hate speech occurs, other internet users often act as "norm enforcers" by clarifying, reprimanding, or reporting the offender. In Indonesia, this is called netizen policing, while in Malaysia, it is referred to as digital civility enforcement. Although this helps uphold public ethics, it can also cause issues such as digital persecution and cancel culture. Therefore, striking a balance between social oversight and digital empathy is crucial for sustaining healthy online communities.

Based on Bandura's (1991) social cognitive theory of self-regulation, people mainly learn moral behaviour by observing others—imitating actions they see as appropriate or valued in their community. On social media, role models such as influencers, public figures, and religious leaders greatly influence how users develop their ethical conduct (Mahy et al., 2022).

In Indonesia, influencers like Najwa Shihab, Jerome Polin, and Gita Wirjawan are often seen as role models who exemplify positive, respectful, and socially responsible behaviour. Their way of communicating—blending openness with politeness—helps guide the younger generation in striking a balance between self-expression and ethical considerations. Conversely, influencers who display extreme lifestyles or spread sensational content tend to provoke strong reactions from the public (Megantari et al., 2025). This shows that society uses social rewards and punishments to regulate online behaviour by highlighting actual examples and their consequences.

Meanwhile, in Malaysia, figures such as Ebit Lew and Asma' Harun have a significant influence on online ethics. They combine Islamic principles, kindness, and modern communication to promote digital social responsibility. The increasing popularity of religious social media influencers on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok has garnered substantial followings and social interaction. This has resulted in behavioural changes and positive effects, particularly in areas such as religiosity and spirituality, subjective well-being, and self-regulation within an Islamic context (Ramlan et al., 2024). Their success demonstrates that ethical conduct can serve as social capital in online environments. Consequently, observational learning bridges cultural values and digital behaviour—strengthening self-control through role modelling rather than rules.

Self-regulation is essential for digital ethics; however, structural barriers hinder its implementation. Digital anonymity lets individuals act irresponsibly, as invisible identities weaken social controls and can lead to hate speech and cyberbullying (Ungerer, 2021). Social media algorithms tend to promote attention-grabbing content over ethical considerations, rewarding impulsive and extreme behaviour with popularity while minimising reflective content (Cotter, 2019). Additionally, the pressure to conform to virtual social standards—such as likes, followers, and comments—can cause users to constantly compare themselves, thereby diminishing their capacity for reflection.

In Indonesia, the blend of expressive culture and viral algorithms leads users to prioritise popularity over integrity. Conversely, in Malaysia, social pressure to uphold a moral reputation online fosters a culture of ethical perfectionism, where minor errors can provoke significant condemnation. In both countries, external social control frequently replaces individual self-regulation, rather than relying on personal reflection.

3.4 Towards a contextual digital self-regulation model in Indonesia and Malaysia

Based on a comparative analysis of digital ethics, cultural values, and self-control mechanisms in Indonesia and Malaysia, a conceptual framework called the' contextual digital self-regulation model' can be developed. This framework shows how social media users' ethical behaviour arises from the interplay of three layers: (1) individual, (2) social, and (3) structural. Each layer complements the others, highlighting the distinct nature of Southeast Asian societies that blend personal moral conscience with collective cultural norms and public regulations.

Building on the comparative analysis, this article proposes the Contextual Digital Self-Regulation model as a conceptual contribution that extends existing theories of self-regulation. While Bandura's (1991) social cognitive theory conceptualises self-regulation primarily as an intra-individual psychological process, and frameworks such as the Social Online Self-Regulation Theory focus primarily on behavioural dynamics within online environments, the present model foregrounds the cultural and structural embeddedness of ethical digital behaviour. It explicitly situates self-regulation within broader socio-cultural norms and institutional–technological contexts, which are often under-theorised in dominant individual-centred approaches.

Figure 2 illustrates the proposed Contextual Digital Self-Regulation model, which conceptualises ethical digital behaviour as emerging from the dynamic and reciprocal interaction of three interconnected layers: the individual layer (moral reflection and personal agency), the social layer (culturally embedded norms and collective expectations), and the structural layer (policy frameworks, educational systems, and platform architectures). The model differs from dominant individual-centred self-regulation frameworks by explicitly foregrounding the cultural and structural embeddedness of self-regulation. The arrows indicate that influence flows in multiple directions, rather than hierarchically, emphasising that each layer both shapes and is shaped by the others. In this way, the model offers a context-sensitive framework for understanding digital self-regulation, particularly in collectivist and non-Western settings such as Southeast Asia.

The initial layer emphasises the psychological and moral facets of the individual. Here, self-regulation is driven by reflective skills, digital empathy, and a sense of personal responsibility in online environments. According to Bandura's (1991) framework, self-regulation involves three processes: self-monitoring (being aware of one's behaviour), self-judgement (evaluating actions based on moral standards), and self-reaction (aligning behaviour with personal values). In Indonesian and Malaysian contexts, this aspect is heavily shaped by religious principles and traditional morals. Individuals with spiritual and reflective awareness are more capable of resisting impulsive behaviours, such as anger, the spread of misinformation, or online attacks on others. Nonetheless, difficulties occur when personal morality remains superficial, serving only as symbolic adherence to social norms rather than fostering genuine critical reflection. Consequently, this layer underscores the importance of reflective education that fosters intrinsic moral awareness, rather than mere external compliance. Digital ethics should be seen as a deliberate choice to act rightly, driven by a sense of moral duty as a digital citizen, rather than fear of social or legal repercussions.

The second layer illustrates the socio-cultural factors that influence digital behaviour. In collectivist nations like Indonesia and Malaysia, social control and cultural norms strongly influence how people behave online. Shared values such as *gotong royong*, *tepa selira*, *adab*, and *budi bahasa* function as moral guides that promote *rasa malu* (shame culture), respect, and group responsibility. These norms often lead to self-regulation within communities, such as crowd correction, netizen oversight, and social monitoring, all grounded in a sense of shared responsibility and solidarity. When ethical standards are breached, the community typically responds with reprimands, criticism, or boycotts. While these mechanisms effectively uphold morality, they can also lead to excessive social pressure if not balanced with empathy and fairness. Therefore, the social layer acts as a mediator between individual morals and external influences, reinforcing cultural norms but requiring careful guidance to avoid superficial moral conformity. For example, in Indonesia, cooperation and digital courtesy can evolve into a participatory ethic fostering online empathy. Similarly, in Malaysia, manners and politeness can be expanded into digital civility principles that promote a balance between freedom and social responsibility.

The third layer encompasses the macro context that shapes digital behaviour, including legal policies, digital literacy education, and the social media platform ecosystem itself. Regulations like Indonesia's ITE Law and Malaysia's Communications and Multimedia Act set legal boundaries to prevent digital misuse. However, laws alone are insufficient without an ethical education

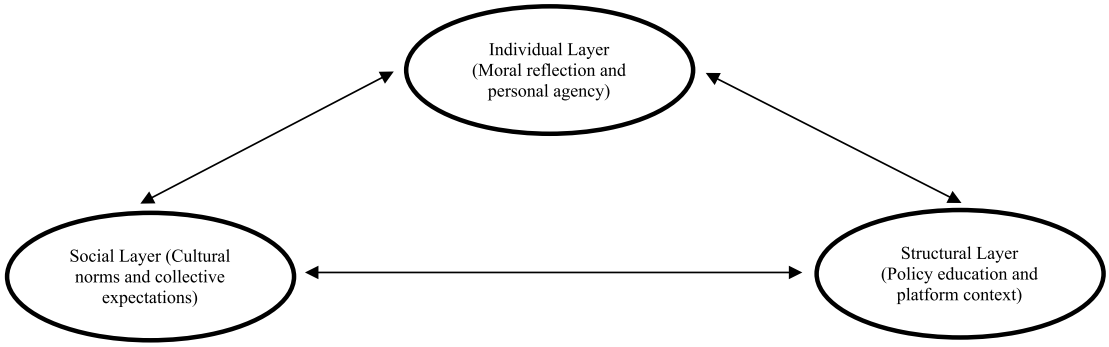

FIGURE 2
Contextual digital self-regulation (Authors, 2025).

system and thoughtful technology design. Digital literacy programs grounded in local cultural values are vital. Initiatives such as Siberkreasi in Indonesia and Klik Dengan Bijak in Malaysia are notable. However, they should focus more on cultivating moral reasoning and digital social awareness, rather than just listing rules. Additionally, the structural layer involves designing ethical digital platforms. Social media algorithms must consider their social influence. Continuing to promote extreme or provocative content undermines users' ability to regulate themselves. Ultimately, ethical responsibility rests not just with users but also with technology companies and policymakers.

This model significantly advances cross-cultural research on digital ethics by highlighting the role of local context and social values in shaping digital behaviour. It encourages us to examine how cultural factors, traditions, and social norms influence interactions in the digital space. Additionally, it questions universal approaches to digital ethics, which usually emphasise Western-centric, individualistic values. Overall, this model can facilitate the development of practices and policies that are better aligned with the specific needs and values of diverse local communities.

4 Conclusion

This study argues that digital ethics in Indonesia and Malaysia must be understood through a contextual lens that recognises the cultural, social, and structural conditions shaping participation in contemporary digital public spheres. Drawing on a structured narrative review, the findings show that ethical digital behaviour is deeply embedded in collectivist values, religious moralities, and culturally grounded norms, thereby challenging individual-centred and Universalist approaches to digital ethics.

As its main scholarly contribution, this article proposes the Contextual Digital Self-Regulation model, which conceptualises ethical behaviour as emerging from the dynamic, reciprocal interplay among three interconnected layers: the individual layer (moral reflection and personal agency), the social layer (culturally embedded norms and collective expectations), and the structural layer (policy frameworks, educational systems, and platform architectures). By foregrounding the cultural and institutional embeddedness of self-regulation, the model contributes to debates on media governance and the digital public sphere, particularly in non-Western contexts.

The study offers practical implications for media governance. Digital ethics education should prioritise cultivating reflective moral agency rather than rule-based compliance alone. Policy interventions should combine legal regulation with attention to the socio-cultural dynamics that shape public participation. Platform governance must recognise the role of algorithms and design choices in structuring visibility, voice, and ethical conduct in the public sphere.

As a conceptual contribution, this study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources. Future research should extend the framework using empirical methods, including digital ethnography, in-depth interviews, and comparative studies across countries and platforms, to further refine and validate the model.

Author contributions

EA: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. SR: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was not received for this work and/or its publication.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. Grammarly for grammar checks, language refinement, and clarity improvements; and ChatGPT to help refine wording and enhance the clarity of explanations.

Any alternative text (alt text) provided alongside figures in this article has been generated by Frontiers with the support of artificial intelligence and reasonable efforts have been made to ensure accuracy, including review by the authors wherever possible. If you identify any issues, please contact us.

Publisher's note

References

Abdullah, I., Jubba, H., Qudsy, S. Z., Pabbajah, M., and Prasojo, Z. H. (2024). The use and abuse of internet spaces: fitna, desacralization, and conflict in Indonesia's virtual reality. *Cosmopol. Civil Soc. Interdiscip. J.* 16, 1–12. doi: 10.5130/ccs.v16.i3.8962

Ali, K. K. (2022). A discourse on the Malay cultural identity within the Malaysian society. *Kajian Malays.* 40, 83–107. doi: 10.21315/km2022.40.1.5

Appazov, A. (2017). In the jungle of the unregulated: towards extra-legal regulatory approaches in addressing 'cybercrime'. *Int. Comp. Law Rev.* 17, 83–107. doi: 10.2478/iclr-2018-0003

Ashari, M. K., Faizin, M., and Shiddiq, J. (2023). Religious digital literacy of students in Indonesia and Malaysia. *TADRIS J. Pendidik. Islam* 18, 189–210. doi: 10.19105/tjpi.v18i1.8794

Anuar, H., Anas, N., Ab. Aziz, S., Abd Karim, R., and Ismail, M. M. (2025). The Value of Patriotism based on the Principles of the Rukun Negara in Islam: The Reality of a Plural Society in Malaysia 2018-2024. *Intellectual Discourse* 33, 255–276. doi: 10.31436/id.v33i1.2212

Bandura, A. (1991). Social cognitive theory of self-regulation. *Organ. Behav. Hum. Decis. Process.* 50, 248–287. doi: 10.1016/0749-5978(91)90022-L

Barque-Duran, A., Pothos, E. M., Hampton, J. A., and Yearsley, J. M. (2017). Contemporary morality: moral judgements in digital contexts. *Comput. Hum. Behav.* 75, 184–193. doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2017.05.020

Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qual. Res. Psychol.* 3, 77–101. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Cotter, K. (2019). Playing the visibility game: how digital influencers and algorithms negotiate influence on Instagram. *New Media Soc.* 21, 895–913. doi: 10.1177/1461444818815684

Dewi, P. A. R., Dharmawan, A., Aji, G. G., Winata, M. D., and Wahyuni, J. (2023). Mapping hoaxes, disinformation, and hate speeches in Indonesia. *Tech. Soc. Sci. J.* 50, 559–565. doi: 10.47577/tssj.v50i1.9943

Fernando, Z. J., Pujiyono, P., Rozah, U., and Rochaeti, N. (2022). The freedom of expression in Indonesia. *Cogent Soc. Sci.* 8:2103944. doi: 10.1080/23311886.2022.2103944

Firanti, D., Darmawan, B., and Firdausah, L. 2020. "Changes in the trend of communication in interaction in the digital millennium." In: *Proceedings of the First Brawijaya International Conference on Social and Political Sciences, BSPACE, 26–28 November, 2019, Malang, East Java, Indonesia*. Gent: EAI Innovating Research

Floridi, L., Cath, C., and Taddeo, M. (2019). "Digital ethics: its nature and scope" in The 2018 yearbook of the digital ethics lab. eds. C. Öhman and D. Watson (Cham: Springer International Publishing).

Hariana, R. R., Hadi, E. N., and Jamal, A. P. (2025). Strengthening cybersecurity: a comparative analysis of agile governance in preventing data leakage in Indonesia and Malaysia. *Agile Gov. Innov. Meas. J.* 2, 40–58. doi: 10.18196/agimjournal.v2i1.23

Hartini, N., Arbi, D. K. A., Ahmed Tharbe, I. H., and Sumari, M. (2023). Written language politeness (of short messages on social media) and emotional intelligence: a study in Indonesia and Malaysia. *Psychol. Res. Behav. Manag.* 16, 1141–1147. doi: 10.2147/PRBM.S400783

Irwin, S. (2013). Qualitative secondary data analysis: ethics, epistemology and context. *Prog. Dev. Stud.* 13, 295–306. doi: 10.1177/1464993413490479

Iskandar, D., Suratno, G., and Raharjo, D. H. (2025). Navigating faith online: social media and religious literacy among women's religious groups. *KOMUNIKA: J. Dakwah Dan Komunikasi* 19, 149–164. doi: 10.24090/komunika.v19i1.12085

Kundhalini, A. S., Afifuddin, M., and Widodo, P. (2023). Infodemic threat as an obstacle in the Covid-19 pandemic handling in Indonesia. *Int. J. Human. Educ. Soc. Sci.* 3:378. doi: 10.55227/ijhess.v3i2.609

Lee, N. A. A., Tazijan, F. N., Adam, A. F. M., Ikhsanudin, I., and Bakar, R. A. (2025). Comparative analysis of digital literacy and 21st-century skills among university graduates in Malaysia and Indonesia: the role of collaboration, critical thinking, communication, and creativity. *J. Nusant. Stud.* 10, 166–191. doi: 10.24200/jonus.vol10iss1pp166-191

Mahy, P., Winarnita, M., and Herriman, N. (2022). Influencing the influencers: regulating the morality of online conduct in Indonesia. *Policy Internet* 14, 574–596. doi: 10.1002/poi3.321

Martín-Martín, A., Costas, R., Van Leeuwen, T., and Delgado López-Cózar, E. (2018). Evidence of open access of scientific publications in Google scholar: a large-scale analysis. *J. Informetr.* 12, 819–841. doi: 10.1016/j.joi.2018.06.012

Megantari, K., Nugroho, H., and Arymami, D. (2025). Revealing the Indonesian crazy rich prisoner on social media: a multimodal discourse analysis. *Qual. Rep.* 30, 3342–3370. doi: 10.46743/2160-3715/2025.6996

Munawaroh, S., and Marlina, N. S. (2025). Ethics of social media communication from an Islamic perspective: a qualitative study of Muslim practices in Indonesia. *Islamic J. Commun. Public Discourse* 2, 44–53. doi: 10.59784/ijcpd.v2i1.10

Mustafa, M. S. A., Othman, Y., Naimat, N., Mahat, I. R., Malib, M. A., Shah, M. A. M. M., et al. (2025). Malaysian communication and multimedia commission's (MCMC) law enforcement spectrum: exploring arrest authority. *Malays. J. Syariah Law* 13, 325–338. doi: 10.33102/mjsl.vol13no2.1102

Nilgiriwala, K., Mahajan, U., Ahmad, R., De Castro, R., Lazo, L., Kong, J. D., et al. (2024). Navigating the governance of artificial intelligence (AI) in Asian nations: a focus on India, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. *SSRN Electron. J.* doi: 10.2139/ssrn.4735279

Omar, N. N., Zainal, C. N. A. S. C., Ras, S., and Basit, A. (2022). A study on participants' feedback on program delivery of Klik Dengan Bijak (KDB) organized by Malaysian communications and multimedia commission. *Asian J. Res. Educ. Soc. Sci.* 4, 72–80. doi: 10.55057/ajress.2022.4.3.7

Ong, E. (2021). Online repression and self-censorship: evidence from Southeast Asia. *Gov. Oppos.* 56, 141–162. doi: 10.1017/gov.2019.18

Pambudi, S. H. A., and Prihantoro, E. (2023). Kominfo's cybercreation digital literacy in social media. *Int. J. Sci. Res. Sci. Technol.*, 10:79–86. doi: 10.32628/IJSRST5231066

Parker, M. A., and Bozeman, B. (2018). Social media as a public values sphere. *Public Integr.* 20, 386–400. doi: 10.1080/10999922.2017.1420351

Poddar, A. K. (2024). Impact of global digitalization on traditional cultures. *Int. J. Interdiscip. Soc. Community Stud.* 20, 209–232. doi: 10.18848/2324-7576/CGP/v20i01/209-232

Purboningsih, E. R., Massar, K., Hinduan, Z. R., Agustiani, H., Ruiter, R. A. C., and Verduyn, P. (2023). Perception and use of social media by Indonesian adolescents and parents: a qualitative study. *Front. Psychol.* 13:985112. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.985112

Ramlan, A. F., Ridzuan, A. R., Mohideen, R. S., and Ilyas, I. Y. (2024). Influence of religious social media influencers' credibility on followers' religiosity and spirituality in Malaysia: a conceptual model the use of Da'wah strategies in social media networking. *E-J. Islamic Understand.* 7, 1–13. doi: 10.24191/ejitu.v7i1.6047

Rozehnal, A. (2022). Digital media ethics. *Law Identity Values* 2, 161–173. doi: 10.55073/2022.1.161-173

Salehan, M., Kim, D. J., and Lee, J.-N. (2018). Are there any relationships between technology and cultural values? A country-level trend study of the association between information communication technology and cultural values. *Inf. Manag.* 55, 725–745. doi: 10.1016/j.im.2018.03.003

Santhosh, T., and Thiyagu, K. (2024). Fostering responsible behavior online-relevance of cyber ethics education. *Malays. Online J. Educ. Technol.* 12, 32–38. doi: 10.52380/mojet.2024.12.1.428

Sari, H. B., Ningsih, N. M. A. P. C., Kristina, N. M. Y., Rismayanti, N. P. I., Thalib, E. F., Meinarni, N. P. S., et al. (2024). Digital ethics and citizenship challenges in cyberspace: an overview from perspective morals and laws. *NOTARIIL J. Kenotariatan* 9, 33–39. doi: 10.22225/jn.9.1.2024.33-39

Senin, N., Ismail, N. B., and Amat Misra, M. K. (2024). Factors contributing to religious sensitivity issues: Malaysian religious leaders' perspective. *Int. J. Acad. Res. Bus. Soc. Sci.* 14, 1138–1145. doi: 10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i3/20955

Shukri, S. (2023). Digital authoritarianism: protecting Islam in multireligious Malaysia. *Religion* 14:87. doi: 10.3390/rel14010087

Syafaah, D., Barizi, A., and Sumbulah, U. (2024). From pulpit to screen: the evolution of Islamic scholars' roles in the digital age. *Cakrawala J. Stud. Islam* 19, 11–25. doi: 10.31603/cakrawala.10760

Ungerer, L. M. (2021). "Cybershaming never rests: suggestions for dealing with Cybershaming in a digital culture" in Shame 4.0: investigating an emotion in digital worlds and the fourth industrial revolution. eds. C.-H. Mayer, E. Vanderheiden and P. T. P. Wong (Cham: Springer International Publishing).

We Are Social 2025 DIGITAL 2025: global overview report. Available online at: https://wearesocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/GDR-2025-v2.pdf (Accessed October 07, 2025).

Widyasari, W., and Allert, H. (2019). Understanding online media literacy in diverse society: criticism of #Siberkreasi movement in Indonesia. *MedienPädag. Zeitschrift. Theorie. Praxis. Medienbildung* 2019, 101–125. doi: 10.21240/mpaed/00/2019.11.23.X

Yussoff, S. F. B. C., and Nordin, R. (2021). Freedom of expression in Malaysia: compatibility with the international human rights standard. *Bestuur* 9:44. doi: 10.20961/bestuur.v9i1.51637