



Representation of Ethics in Student Profiles: A Qualitative Study with a Thematic Analysis Approach

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to identify and analyze the ethical themes represented in student profiles that were conducted on one of the domestic educational platforms. This study was conducted qualitatively using the thematic analysis approach of Brown and Clark (2006). Using the convenience sampling method, 80 active student profiles in cyberspace were examined. The data included biographies and meaningful usernames, from which 103 codes were extracted through repeated reading and initial coding. Finally, six main themes were identified: emotional-relational ethics, ethics of resistance and preservation, religious-spiritual ethics, ethics of self-actualization and agency, social-patriotic ethics, and warning and critical ethics. The findings of this study showed that student profiles are not only a reflection of traditional values, but also carry signs of a redefinition of morality within the framework of lived experiences, social realism, and individual activism. This study showed that student profiles are not simply tools for introducing or recording information, but are a meaningful platform for representing the moral identity of the adolescent generation. These results can help redesign educational profiles as a moral education tool.

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Introduction

Ethics, as one of the main pillars of education, plays a decisive role in the formation of students' individual and social identities. Recent research has shown that ethical education has long-term effects not only on the development of ethical identity, but also on students' mental health and academic performance ([Tian, Tang, 2023](#)). Also, new approaches to ethics education emphasize the self-development and agency of adolescents and introduce ethical modeling as one of the main paths of ethical development ([Sanderse, 2024](#)). Ethics, as one of the most fundamental educational constructs, has always played a pivotal role in the formation of students' individual and social identities. Educational systems around the world, in addition to transferring knowledge and skills, are responsible for cultivating ethical identity and strengthening value-based behaviors ([Nucci, 2017](#)). The Basic Education Development Document was approved as one of the most important documents in the field of education in 2011. This document pays special attention to the ethical aspects of teachers and their development (Goals 1, 2, 4, 5). In this document, special attention is paid to the ethical aspects of teachers and their development ([Gholampour et al., 2010](#)). Meanwhile, the tools that schools use to evaluate, classify, and describe students play an important role in shaping their perceptions of themselves and their place in the educational system. "Student profiles" are one of these key tools that has expanded significantly in recent years.

In recent years, with the expansion of educational information systems and the use of educational data, the concept of "student profile" has attracted the attention of researchers as an important tool for a more comprehensive understanding of students. A student profile is not simply a collection of academic data such as grades or educational progress, but rather a multidimensional reflection of the learning characteristics, behavior, participation, attitudes, and performance patterns of students in an educational context. Research based on learning analytics shows that educational data can be used to identify different dimensions of student profiles. By analyzing data from student interaction with educational environments, this approach allows for the extraction of patterns that represent the learning style, level of participation, responsibility, self-regulation, and other individual characteristics of students. From this perspective, the student profile is considered a dynamic and multi-layered construct that can encompass the cognitive, behavioral, and social dimensions of the student. ([Gonzalez-Nucamendi et al., 2022](#)) The importance of student profiles lies in the fact that these texts or data do not only have a descriptive role, but in many cases they are the basis for educational judgments, educational decisions, and the design of educational interventions. In other words, profiles not only reflect the status of students, but can also play a role in shaping their educational and social identity. The way data is organized, indicators are selected, and the way students' characteristics are expressed in these profiles carry meanings and values that are sometimes implicitly reproduced. ([Gonzalez-Nucamendi et al., 2022](#))

These approaches do not only emphasize the non-neutrality of platforms, but also try to clarify the mechanism of this influence. According to this view, a student profile in cyberspace does not play the role of a simple mirror. Rather, it should be seen as an arena of interaction in which the student's activities and choices are combined with the technical framework of the platform and the cultural space of society, producing a specific moral image of the individual. As mentioned, morality is one of the aspects represented by these profiles. However, what has been neglected so far is a detailed examination of how morality is represented in these documents, what dimensions and components are highlighted, and what consequences it has for students' identities. Moral research has usually focused on moral development or moral identity ([Hardy, Carlo, 2011](#)), but has less focused on how morality is represented in official educational documents. This has led to a serious gap between the literature on moral education and the literature on official representation. On the other hand, studies of identity and representation show that language and formal descriptions play an important role in the construction of educational reality. Educational documents produce a kind of power-knowledge; that is, they both define and control reality. Therefore, any moral representation in profiles can carry implicit messages about desirable behaviors, acceptable roles, and even acceptable moral identity.

By proposing the concept of critical data literacy, they show that educational data carry moral and social implications and should be considered as part of moral education. The problem-solving approach also emphasizes that data ethics should be seen as an interdisciplinary and critical arena, not simply a set of rules for solving problems. Recent studies also emphasize the role of moral role models in adolescents, which can be helpful in better understanding moral representations in student profiles ([Sanderse, 2024](#)). These views double the importance of analyzing moral representations in student profiles, because they show that educational data themselves are part of the process of moral and identity education.

However, no systematic research has been conducted to analyze the representation of ethics in student profiles. It is not yet clear how exactly ethics is defined in these documents, or which features are highlighted and which are ignored. At the same time, the educational, identity, and attitudinal consequences of these representations also remain unknown. Therefore, this research gap is of particular importance, because if ethics are represented in a reduced, limited, or labeling way, it can have a negative impact on students' moral identification and categorize them into specific value groups. For this reason, and given that student profiles are influential tools in educational decision-making, it is doubly important to understand precisely how ethics are represented in them. Due to the complex and multi-layered nature of ethics in the digital context, this research requires a qualitative approach. Interpretive and qualitative approaches can reveal the complexities of meaning, context, and discourse. In this regard, thematic analysis, as a flexible and systematic method, allows for the identification of common themes and semantic patterns in textual and multimedia data. This method has been widely used in recent educational studies to examine the identity, values, and experiences of learners in digital environments, and its effectiveness has been confirmed in the analysis of data derived from online profiles and interactions. How ethics is represented in them is of particular importance. ([Braun & Clarke, 2008](#)). This method allows the researcher to study ethics not as a predefined variable, but as a phenomenon formed in the context of students' digital experiences. Thematic analysis approach ([Braun, Clarke, 2008](#)) allows for an in-depth examination of the concepts, patterns, and implicit meanings present in moral descriptions and can help clarify this issue.

Therefore, this research seeks to answer the main question of how moral concepts and themes are represented in student profiles and what educational and identity implications does this representation have for students? Considering the research objective, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

What are the moral concepts and themes represented in student profiles?

How are these concepts represented in educational discourses?

What implications do these representations have for students' moral identification?

Research Methodology

This study aimed to investigate the representation of ethical concepts in student profiles, using a qualitative approach and thematic analysis method, which is an appropriate method for conducting textual analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative and inductive method in which the researcher achieves a coherent analytical framework by classifying data and identifying input and output patterns. This method, by systematically coding the data, tries to discover and extract the main concepts and themes hidden in the data. In fact, thematic analysis seeks to find meaningful patterns in the data ([Mohammadpour, 2013](#)). Given the purpose of this research, which is to explore and explain the representation of ethical concepts in student profiles, thematic analysis method was chosen as the main data analysis strategy. The research population consisted of active student profiles in one of the domestic educational platforms. Therefore, in the first stage, using the convenience sampling method, 41 profiles with meaningful biographies or usernames were selected. A preliminary analysis was conducted on this set, which led to the identification of 5 primary themes. Subsequently, to enhance the richness of the data and ensure that theoretical saturation was reached, 19 other profiles were also examined, thus increasing the total number of samples to 60. The analysis of this stage and the 19 new profiles led to the emergence of a new main theme entitled “warning and critical

morality”, which indicated the need to continue sampling. Therefore, considering this event and reaching a new theme that indicated the need to continue sampling, sampling was conducted for the third time with 20 more profiles. A total of 80 profiles were analyzed. The examination of this set did not lead to the creation of any new themes and only led to the consolidation, refinement, and deepening of the six extracted themes. Therefore, with the assurance of achieving theoretical saturation, the data collection process was stopped.

Data collection was carried out through careful and repeated reading of the biographical texts and usernames of these profiles. Data analysis was carried out according to Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step model:

1. Familiarization with the data: Repeated reading of the profiles and initial note-taking to gain a general understanding of the content.
2. Generating initial codes: Extracting semantic units and labeling them; 103 initial codes were identified in this stage.
3. Searching for themes: Grouping the codes into sub-themes; 15 initial sub-themes were formed in this stage.
4. Revising themes: Re-examining themes and refining conceptual boundaries to ensure internal coherence.
5. Defining and naming themes: Selecting precise and scientific titles for the themes and determining the distinctive features of each; ultimately, 6 main themes were established.
6. Writing the final report: Compiling the findings with documented examples and theoretical analysis.

To increase the internal validity of the study, multiple strategies were used, such as peer review, detailed descriptions of the analysis steps, and matching themes with documented examples. Also, to ensure reliability, parts of the initial coding were conducted independently by two researchers. The level of agreement between coders was calculated using the Holst reliability formula and was 0.82, indicating acceptable reliability and good agreement between coders.

In line with ethical principles, all identifying information, including contact numbers, identifiable usernames, and other sensitive data, was removed or changed from the profiles. Also, to maintain the authenticity of the data, phrases, sentences, and vocabulary were reported exactly as the participants stated them.

Results

Analysis of 80 student profiles led to the identification of six main themes, each representing a part of the students’ moral landscape in the digital space. Based on frequency and representational strength, these themes range from affective-relational ethics to critical ethics, and show how adolescents express their everyday experiences, religious beliefs, social perceptions, and emotions in the form of moral models. The main themes and their subthemes are presented below, along with salient examples and interpretive analysis.

Table 1. Extracted themes

Main content	Sub-theme	Key concepts	Extracted samples
Emotional Relationship Hey	Emotional intelligence Or bitter realism	Love as a luxurious and impractical emotion	Love is for a chicken , a ,hungry wolf doesn't care give it six
	Emotional intelligence and self – care	Protecting yourself from repetitive strain injuries	. n't let them hurt you again
	Regret and learning from mistakes	Admitting mistakes and moving past them as a moral value	We weren't bad, we just didn't know how
	Longing and reflection on authenticity	Searching for depth in relationships, longing for permanence	I wish I was permanent, not a souvenir
The ethics of resistance and preservation	Setting a clear moral red line	Adherence to principles, non "surrender to " inhumanity -	I will make it with every pain except cowardice
	Moral judgment and boundary maintenance	" Awareness of the "essence of individuals , diagnosis of moral competence	Don't expect to be loved by someone whose nature is ruined
	Persistence and commitment to the goal	Perseverance, fighting for one 's dreams and goals	Fight for the goal
Religious - spiritual ethics	Taking refuge in religious values	Religion as a source of security and peace	Under the sign of the safest place in the world is the feeling of life
	Trust and faith as the basis for action	Belief in the divine will to make the impossible possible	God willing, the impossible will become possible
	Waiting for deliverance and clinging to the Imamate	Adherence to religious ideals loyalty ,	"...O Lord of the Time "
The ethics of self actualization and agency	Agency , creativity , and accepting responsibility for life	The individual as the architect and painter of his own life	Life is the color you paint
	Perseverance, hope , and perseverance	, Determination for success patience and perseverance	I will succeed, not immediately, but definitely
Social ethics	Mutual respect and patriotism	National belonging, respect for others along with love for the homeland	The world is small ... We must respect those who love us . Iran
	Commitment to a collective ideal	,Commitment to group ideals readiness to serve	I'm waiting for you, little soldier
Warning and critical ethics	Ethical warning in communication	,The moral power of words the responsibility of speech	Words are much more ... powerful than bullets
	Critical ethics in relationships	Criticizing annoying behaviors	Do n't act like we 'd rather you were n't there
	Moral conservatism	Reaction to social immorality	In the world of the hard-hearted; I wish I could be a stone

Emotional-Relational Ethics: The Transition from Ideal Love to Emotional Realism

This theme, which includes 34% of the total data, had the highest frequency and shows that emotional relationships are an important arena for the formation of moral identity for adolescents. In many profiles, love and relationships are depicted not as a romantic and ideal experience, but in the context of realism, self-care, and emotional boundaries. An example such as the sentence “Love is for a chicken, a hungry wolf is not important to it” is a telling metaphor for the pragmatic attitude of today's generation. This proposition states that in situations where an individual is faced with serious life challenges, dealing with delicate emotions such as love may take a secondary place. Such a view shows the transition from “ideal love” to “situational love” and expresses a kind of emotional economy in which adolescents operate based on emotional cost and benefit. Subthemes such as “emotional self-care,” “emotional freedom,” “regret and learning,” and “authenticity longing” also show that students pay attention to issues such as vulnerability, moving past mistakes, recognizing harmful behavior, and yearning for authentic relationships in their relationships. Such an approach is a sign of emotional maturity on the one hand, and on the other hand, it reflects a kind of de-escalation of traditional romantic idealism.

The Ethics of Resistance and Preservation: Moral Individualism in the Face of Difficulties

This theme, which includes 25 percent of the data, shows that a serious part of adolescents' moral identity is formed based on resistance, persistence, and maintaining personal principles. This generation tries to maintain its individual moral standards in the face of pressures and challenges and use them as a criterion for decision-making. A phrase such as “I will make it through any pain except cowardice” well expresses the individual-centered morality of adolescents; Morality in which “red lines” are defined by the individual and loyalty, fairness, and non-betrayal are considered unchangeable values. This statement also indicates that adolescents consider interpersonal immoral behavior—especially betrayal and injustice—to be the most important moral threat. Subthemes such as “moral judgment of others,” “constancy of purpose,” and “awareness of the intentions of others” indicate that adolescents employ a combination of social realism and moral resistance. For example, the statement “Don't expect someone with a broken nature to be immune” suggests a quasi-essentialist view that, while morally conservative, is likely rooted in traumatic experiences or social insecurities.

Religious-spiritual morality: Religion as an emotional and meaningful refuge

18 percent of the data were related to religious and spiritual statements; But the important point is that religion was not represented in these profiles as a set of behavioral rules, but rather as a refuge, peace, and source of meaning. Students see religion as a point of support and a force for personal hope and power. The sentence “Under your knowledge is the safest place in the world, O Hussein Jan” is a clear example of this approach. Here, “knowledge” is not only a religious symbol, but also a metaphor for existential security. Such statements show that religious experience for adolescents plays a greater role as a mechanism for regulating emotions, relieving anxiety, and providing hope. Subthemes such as “active trust,” “hope for divine intervention,” “faithful loyalty,” and “anticipation of salvation” also indicate that religious beliefs in the lifeworld of adolescents have taken on a combined form of tradition and personal experience. Religion has moved away from the task-oriented framework and acts more as a spiritual companion and emotional support.

Self-actualization and agency ethics: self-development as moral responsibility

This theme, which constitutes 13% of the data, reflects the influence of the discourse of personal growth and self-efficacy among adolescents. In many profiles, success, motivation, effort, and building the future are expressed in the form of moral values. The sentence “Life is the color you paint it” is a clear example

of this view, in which the individual is introduced as the creator of his or her own destiny. These types of metaphors show that adolescents consider agency, choice, and effort not only rational behaviors, but also moral responsibility. Subthemes such as “responsibility,” “hope for success,” “progress-oriented,” and “creativity” indicate that the concept of ethics for today’s generation is tied to the “personal development project.” Results-oriented and personal growth-based ethics, although they can be empowering, also carry the risk of reducing attention to social responsibility.

Socio-patriotic ethics: combining national identity and responsible communication

Despite the smaller share of this theme (10%), its conceptual importance is high. Some profiles show that adolescents consider national values, collective belonging, and social respect as part of ethics. This approach is indicative of the connection between national identity and civic ethics in the new generation. For example, the sentence “The world is small... We must respect those who love Iran” is a combination of digital cosmopolitanism and patriotism. In this theme, adolescents refer to universal values such as respect and coexistence on the one hand, and highlight national identity on the other. Subthemes such as “readiness to serve,” “social loyalty,” and “mutual respect” present a picture of collectivist ethics that can be rooted in cultural, educational institutions, or social events.

Warning and critical ethics: sensitivity to moral errors and social harm

This theme, which includes 5% of the data, reflects the formation of a “critical ethics” among adolescents. In this type of ethics, students not only reflect values, but also criticize incorrect behaviors and warn about the moral consequences of speech and actions. The sentence “Words are much more powerful than bullets...” shows that adolescents are aware of the destructive or constructive power of language. This view is reminiscent of dialogic ethics, in which the responsibility of speech is an important part of moral behavior. Subthemes such as “criticism of harmful behavior”, “communicational warning” and “moral conservatism” show that adolescents feel responsible for social immorality and sometimes adopt a defensive stance; for example, the phrase “In a world of hard-hearted people; I wish I were a stone” reflects a conservative reaction to violence or coldness of social relations.

Discussion & Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that student profiles carry a wide range of ethical themes that were categorized into six main themes: emotional-relational ethics, ethics of resistance and preservation, religious-spiritual ethics, ethics of self-actualization and agency, social-patriotic ethics, and warning and critical ethics. These themes reflect the moral world of the new generation; in this world, ethics are not limited to formal school norms or traditional values, but are shaped by lived experiences, personal relationships, individual resistance, and social sensitivity. These findings show that the digital educational space is not only a reflection of ethics, but has become an environment in which ethical identity is formed. When adolescents have the opportunity to be seen and to present themselves, they consciously choose what to show, what to emphasize, or what to leave out; and in this way, they measure and reconstruct their values and ethical identity. The theme of “emotional-relational morality” was the most frequent and shows that adolescents use a realistic approach in their relationships. In contrast to the idealistic view of love in previous generations, this generation emphasizes agreement, clear boundaries, self-care, and risk recognition in relationships. This finding is consistent with the research of [Hardy and Carlo \(2011\)](#), who highlight the role of personal experiences in the development of moral identity, but on the contrary, it distances itself from virtue-based models based on empathy. This distance can be explained by the view of [Fletcher \(2016\)](#), who believes that empathy is a pragmatic virtue that cannot be properly formed without moral imagination and practical wisdom. However, in this study, the results showed something else: adolescents were less likely to seek to cultivate empathy as an ideal trait and were more involved in the

daily management of their relationships with all their complexities through agreement and boundaries. Adolescents' emotional realism can be considered a mechanism for psychological adaptation; A mechanism that has also been reported to be effective in longitudinal studies ([Tian, Tang, 2023](#)). The theme of "morality of resistance and preservation" also reveals a kind of moral individualism by emphasizing persistence, moral boundaries, and judgment of others' behavior. This finding is consistent with the higher stages of moral development in Kohlberg's theory (1981), where moral independence and personal judgment are highlighted. However, students' emphasis on concepts such as "cowardice" and "individual essence" shows a tendency towards moral conservatism that is less seen in classical models and is rooted in the social experiences of today's generation. This finding is consistent with the higher stages of moral development in Kohlberg's theory (1981), where moral independence and personal judgment are highlighted. In the theme of "religious-spiritual morality," religion appears as a source of comfort, meaning, and emotional support rather than being represented as a set of duties. This finding indicates a transition from duty-based to experience-based religiosity, a development that is consistent with [Nucci, Turiel, & Roded's \(2017\)](#) studies on developmental changes in moral judgments, as adolescents emphasize personal and emotional experiences alongside duty-based rules as they grow.

"Ethics of self-actualization and agency" is a reflection of today's society, which places great emphasis on individual success and self-improvement. Students see themselves as responsible for their own success, future, and personal growth. This view is consistent with the views of Likona (2012) as well as recent Iranian research ([Hashemi-Nejad and Ghanbari, 1403](#)). However, excessive emphasis on individuality and outcome-orientedness can lead to the neglect of social responsibility; an issue that has also been addressed in critical research on learning analytics and data-driven learning (Slade and Prinsloo, 2013). On the one hand, agency-oriented ethical individualism shows hope and individual responsibility, and on the other hand, it raises concerns that competitive and performance standards of society will be less important and will be considered only as criteria for moral value. In other words, being good will be limited to being successful.

The theme of "Socio-patriotic morality" shows that some adolescents highlight national and social values alongside communicative morality. From their perspective, respect for others is tied to a sense of belonging to society and history, and this combination creates a new form of national identity and digital citizenship. This finding is consistent with the digital citizenship literature in Williamson's studies (2017) and domestic research ([Lavanifard and Rahmani, 1403](#)).

This study showed that student profiles are not simply tools for introducing or recording information, but rather a meaningful platform for representing the moral identity of the adolescent generation. Data analysis revealed that students reproduce moral values in the form of personal experiences, individual resistance, spirituality, social criticism, and collective identity. The emergence of six main themes, from emotional ethics and resistance to critical ethics, indicates that ethics is a living, active, and changing concept for today's generation.

These results emphasize the importance of student profiles not being viewed as labeling or selective tools, but as educational opportunities. The intelligent design of these profiles can help strengthen moral identity, increase moral agency, and cultivate students' critical skills. Similarly, research findings show that, contrary to popular belief, the digital space does not necessarily lead to a weakening of morality, but can even provide a new opportunity for redefining and internalizing moral values.

In addition to these achievements, the present study also has limitations. First, the data were collected from only one domestic platform, which limits the generalizability of the results. Second, the analysis was based only on short written content (biographies and usernames), and therefore deeper layers of moral identity that are accessible through interviews or observations were not included in this study. Also, the lack of demographic data such as age, gender, or educational background reduced the possibility of a more detailed analysis of differences. Based on the findings, it is suggested that biological, emotional, and social dimensions of morality be included in the design of student profiles alongside academic information. It is

also necessary to observe the principles of justice, transparency, and data ethics to prevent the creation of unfair labels or structural biases. Future research could study the impact of educational platforms on the formation of adolescents' moral identity longitudinally and with mixed methods, and also consider gender, cultural, and class differences. Using algorithmic analysis and artificial intelligence to examine ethical patterns on a larger scale could also open up new avenues in this field.

Overall, this research shows that the ethics of the adolescent generation in the digital age is a combination of personal experiences, agency, spirituality, and social sensitivity, and digital profiles can be a valuable mirror for understanding this new ethical landscape. In conclusion, this research shows that the process of moral education in the digital age requires a shift from teaching to facilitation. The role of the educator is to help the student critically read these personal representations, recognize their internal tensions, and build a bridge between individual ethics and social responsibility. The profile is no longer the end point of assessment, but the starting point of an ethical dialogue.

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