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Social Control Measures in the Use of Social Media Toward the Virtual Community in Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The complexity of social media demands behaviors that must be acknowledged while using it. Therefore, social control measures are crucial to ensure the well-being of the virtual community while navigating social media environments. This paper aims to discuss the social control measures that virtual community members need to understand and practise. The key criteria examined include ethics, values, integrity, filtering and monitoring, punishment, and law enforcement. A quantitative study was conducted through an online survey using Google Forms, targeting Malaysian citizens aged 18 to 57, and analyzed using SPSS software. A total of 374 valid responses were obtained. The findings indicate that the implementation of all key criteria elements is highly significant for enhancing social control in social media use. All elements recorded high mean scores, approaching a significance level of 5.0. In conclusion, awareness and consistent practice of social control measures must be emphasized and taken seriously by all parties, including parents, community members, educators, and relevant authorities. Such efforts will foster a digitally literate, ethically responsible, and socially secure online environment, contributing to national cohesion and digital citizenship.

KEY WORDS

Ethics. Control Measures. Media Users. Online Community. Social Control.

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1 Introduction

In the contemporary digital landscape, the expansion of virtual communities has significantly transformed social interaction and information dissemination. As these online spaces become increasingly central to individuals' lives, implementing social control measures becomes critical for shaping responsible user behavior and ensuring platform safety. Social media has revolutionized modern communication, becoming essential for engagement with societal issues, emotional expression, and economic participation (Sarifin et al., 2025). In today's interconnected world, social media platforms are foundational to communication and community-building. As virtual communities grow in complexity and influence, the role of social control – including ethical norms, content regulation, and legal enforcement – has become increasingly vital (Forestal, 2024).

Virtual spaces no longer serve as passive forums; they shape social norms, amplify behaviors, and influence public opinion. Therefore, understanding how communities regulate behavior through internal norms and external enforcement is essential. Social control in these spaces involves mechanisms such as content moderation and privacy policies, all aimed at maintaining ethical standards, user safety, and digital order (Damota, 2019; Forestal, 2024; Gruzd & Haythornthwaite, 2013). The rapid evolution of social media demands a robust understanding of how social control measures affect virtual communities. Media literacy education programs focus on training conscious media users who can critically evaluate media content (Eserol, 2025). These mechanisms aim to balance promoting a positive online environment with safeguarding the rights of diverse users. Within this context, social control measures offer vital frameworks for fostering responsible and ethical interactions (Abbas et al., 2019).

The term social media (SM) was first introduced in 1994 in a Tokyo-based digital environment called Matisse. This period marked the early phase of the commercial Internet, during which the first SM platforms emerged (Aichner et al., 2021). The "place" of the virtual community, while non-physical, establishes the context for shared behaviors and engagement. The diversity and ubiquity of social media platforms raise new questions about the effectiveness, perception, and ethical implications of social control. While these measures aim to ensure order and safety, unresolved challenges persist – particularly regarding user autonomy, content oversight, and the limits of regulation (Anonymous, 2018). The tension between platform-imposed standards and users' rights illustrates the ongoing complexity of governing virtual spaces.

Despite policy efforts and digital education in Malaysia, social media continues to face threats, such as cyberbullying, disinformation, and unethical behavior (Barrett-Maitland & Lynch, 2020). This highlights a critical gap in understanding how social control is internalized and operationalized by users in culturally specific contexts. Investigating how Malaysian users perceive and adopt such control mechanisms is essential for shaping future digital literacy and governance models. As social control within virtual communities undergoes rapid transformation, the evolving interplay between technology, user behavior, and platform governance demands comprehensive academic attention. This study addresses a specific knowledge gap by analyzing Malaysian users' perceptions and practices across six core domains: ethics, values, integrity, filtering and monitoring, punishment, and law enforcement. The research contributes to scholarship on digital governance and media literacy by situating the inquiry within Southeast Asia's socio-cultural and legal framework.

This study is grounded in Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969), extended through a digital citizenship lens. The theory posits that societal compliance is maintained by strong internal and external bonds. When applied to online environments, the framework helps explain how personal values, community surveillance, and institutional enforcement influence user behavior. In digital spaces, virtual communities act not only as communication networks, but also as environments where normative behaviors are shaped and regulated. This necessitates a dual understanding of social control: internal mechanisms (e.g., self-regulation, cultural norms) and external systems (e.g., laws, platform policies).

Building on this foundation, the study proposes the Integrated Social Control Framework for Digital Citizenship, encompassing six interconnected domains:

1. Ethics – personal principles guiding digital conduct.
2. Values – cultural or societal beliefs that support responsible engagement.
3. Integrity – honesty and accountability in digital actions.
4. Filtering and Monitoring – oversight by platforms, institutions, or guardians.
5. Punishment – formal and informal sanctions for misconduct.
6. Law Enforcement – legal and policy-based regulation of digital behavior.

This framework helps explain how Malaysian citizens interact with, respond to, and possibly resist various forms of digital governance. Internal elements reflect Hirschi's concept of social bonds, while external mechanisms enforce behavioral norms through deterrents and accountability. As such, the model offers both theoretical insight and practical direction for education, policymaking, and platform design. To provide a clearer conceptual understanding, the Integrated Social Control Framework is visually illustrated in Figure 1. It depicts the dynamic interplay between internal dimensions (ethics, values, integrity) and external mechanisms (filtering and monitoring, punishment, law enforcement) that shape responsible digital behavior. This framework supports both theoretical modelling and future empirical testing across diverse online communities.

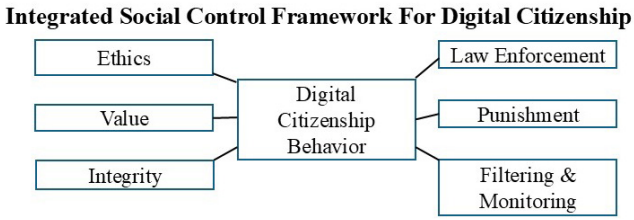

Figure 1: *Integrated social control framework for digital citizenship, showing the relationship between internal (ethics, values, integrity) and external (filtering and monitoring, punishment, law enforcement) controls shaping digital behaviour*

Source: own processing, 2025

2 Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Definitions: Social Media, Virtual Community, and Social Control

Social media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on Web 2.0 technologies and allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). According to Kietzmann et al. (2011), it comprises seven functional building blocks: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. Kapoor et al. (2018) emphasize that social media is made up of various user-driven platforms that facilitate content diffusion, dialogue creation, and community engagement across personal, professional, political, and societal spheres. Some scholars define social media in terms of virtual communities. Romm et al. (1997) describe them as people who communicate via electronic media and share common interests. Hagel (1999) adds that virtual communities are driven by shared needs, demographics, or geographic concerns. Ridings et al. (2002) further define them as structured digital communities that communicate regularly through common digital spaces, such as forums, chatrooms, or mailing lists.

In parallel, social control in these digital environments refers to internal and external measures that guide behavior. These measures are critical in shaping safe, ethical, and productive virtual communities (Damota, 2019; Forestal, 2024). They include personal ethical codes, platform rules, state laws, and communal expectations.

2.2 Social Control Theory and Its Relevance to Digital Citizenship

Social Control Theory, first introduced by Hirschi (1969), asserts that individuals conform to norms when they possess strong internal and external social bonds. In digital spaces, these bonds translate into ethical self-discipline and external mechanisms like platform governance or legal penalties. The theory helps explain why some users act responsibly online, while others engage in deviant or harmful behavior. This study applies Social Control Theory within the context of digital citizenship, which involves ethical participation, civic responsibility, and regulatory compliance in virtual communities. When individuals internalize moral values and understand the consequences of digital misconduct, they are more likely to contribute to safe online ecosystems. This theoretical grounding supports the proposed Integrated Social Control Framework for Digital Citizenship introduced in this study.

Recent studies have recontextualized Social Control Theory to address contemporary challenges in online governance. Gagrčin et al. (2022) observed that discursive norms in digital platforms emerge through participatory engagement, yet these norms often lack formal enforcement structures. The study found that community members implicitly regulate acceptable behavior through collective discourse, but the absence of transparent external oversight can lead to fragmented norms of digital citizenship. This supports the notion that internalized values alone are insufficient without institutional scaffolding. Moreover, governance dynamics in online communities increasingly reflect hybrid control systems, combining participatory self-governance with algorithmic or legal enforcement. Bulat (2025) categorized social control into three interacting layers: participatory control (e.g., reporting tools), formal rules (e.g., platform policies), and social norms. These findings suggest that a balanced integration of internal and external controls – similar to the six-domain framework proposed in this study – is necessary to ensure sustainable and ethical behavior within virtual communities.

2.3 Dimensions of Social Control: Internal and External Mechanisms

Ethical practice in social media use is essential to ensure users consistently adhere to established norms. According to Aïmeur et al. (2023), ethical conduct is especially important in preventing the spread of false or misleading information. Promoting internal social control helps foster responsible online behavior and reduces misuse over time. Advocacy, particularly media advocacy, plays a key role in strengthening accountability. Bowen et al. (2017) explain that digital platforms enhance advocacy by accelerating communication and encouraging user feedback. Pawlak et al. (2023) recommend personalization, visual storytelling, and interactive tactics to maximize advocacy outcomes.

Values and cultural norms are also central. Ayub et al. (2021) argue that incorporating religious values into digital interaction promotes social well-being. Syed Abdul Rahman et al. (2022) support this, showing how Islamic teachings can prevent unethical online acts such as cyberbullying and hate speech. Without ethical guidance, users may unknowingly violate societal standards or damage digital trust. Integrity reinforces this internal framework. Halevy et al. (2022) note that those with strong personal integrity avoid violating legal or ethical standards. Honesty in content sharing is key to preventing disinformation and maintaining civic trust.

Meanwhile, external mechanisms are equally vital. Filtering, moderation, and monitoring help regulate digital spaces. Scott and Maryman (2024) suggest that online actions should be supported by offline efforts to strengthen social order. Regulatory oversight must also evolve. Halevy et al. (2022) emphasize the need for constant updates to cybercrime law, as new digital threats emerge. Ismail (2020) recommends enhancing media control through ethical journalism and capacity-building. Michikyan and Suárez-Orozco (2016) call for tougher penalties – like account suspensions and repeat-offender bans – to curb deviant behavior. The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) supports high-tech filtering to combat online vice. Meanwhile, Arpaci et al. (2025) advocates strong passwords, reporting systems, and user awareness to promote security habits. Social media's impact also reaches workplaces. Mohd Nadzri and Hassan (2021) suggest that organizations need robust social media policies, employee training, and digital literacy to minimize legal risks.

While Hirschi's (1969) Social Control Theory emphasizes attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief as the primary bonds regulating individual conduct, the digital environment introduces new mechanisms that complicate this framework. Algorithmic control, embedded within recommendation systems and content moderation technologies, functions as an infrastructural form of governance that operates independently of users' moral bonds. Instead of relying on internalized values or interpersonal attachments, algorithms nudge behavior by shaping information exposure and determining which interactions are amplified or suppressed (Bastick, 2021).

This raises a critical tension in the theory's application to virtual communities: rather than strengthening Hirschi's bonds, algorithmic governance may bypass them altogether by enforcing compliance through technological design. For instance, personalized feeds can reinforce conformity without users consciously committing to social norms, while automated moderation suppresses deviance through systemic filtering rather than belief in shared values. As Borgesius (2020) argues, this infrastructural power challenges traditional assumptions of social control, suggesting that future theoretical models must account for hybrid forms of regulation where moral and algorithmic mechanisms intersect.

2.4 Literature Gap in Regional and Malaysian Context

While international scholarship on digital ethics and media governance is expanding, empirical research in Southeast Asia – and Malaysia in particular – remains limited. Despite initiatives such as digital literacy campaigns, content regulation, and cybercrime laws, challenges like misinformation, cyberbullying, and ideological polarization persist (Barrett-Maitland & Lynch, 2020). What is lacking is a nuanced understanding of how Malaysian virtual community members internalize and practise social control across both internal mechanisms (ethics, values, integrity) and external ones (monitoring, punishment, law enforcement). This study addresses that gap by examining six interrelated domains of social control, thereby contributing to the localized development of digital citizenship models while advancing theoretical applications of Social Control Theory.

At the regional level, comparable challenges highlight important contrasts. Singapore's Smart Nation program embeds algorithmic surveillance into civic life as a tool of efficiency and compliance (Anthony, 2023; Shaker, 2025), while Indonesia's anti-hoax legislation criminalizes misinformation, but raises concerns about censorship and political contestation (Suci Sekarhati, 2024). These cases illustrate the diversity of governance strategies across Southeast Asia and emphasize the need to situate Malaysia within broader comparative debates. By framing Malaysia's hybrid model – where cultural norms intersect with formal regulation – against these regional approaches, this study extends insights beyond domestic boundaries and contributes to global discussions on digital citizenship and governance in the Global South.

3 Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine how social control measures influence user behavior on social media. A total of 374 valid responses were obtained from Malaysian adults who use at least one social media platform daily. Purposive sampling was used to ensure inclusion of digitally literate individuals across varied demographics. This non-probability technique was appropriate for studying behaviors within virtual communities, where general sampling may underrepresent high-engagement users (Etikan et al., 2016). A structured questionnaire was designed to measure perceptions of six domains of social control using a 5-point Likert scale, selected for its simplicity, reliability, and consistency with prior social media research (Joshi et al., 2015). The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27, supporting descriptive analysis, linear regression, and moderation testing. Additionally, the research adhered to the STROBE (Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology) checklist to enhance transparency in design, sampling, instrument use, and data analysis steps. This ensures replicability and reporting quality for future studies

3.1 Study Design

A cross-sectional survey was conducted between June 15 and September 1, 2023, targeting members of online communities in Malaysia. Virtual community participation was defined as sustained engagement in online discourse with relational or identity-based continuity (Rheingold, 1993). Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee, Sultan Idris Education University (Ref: 2022-0541-01). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was acquired digitally. The survey was distributed via Google Forms across academic networks, NGOs, university email lists, and professional organizations. Participants were directed to an online portal where they were briefed on the research purpose, confidentiality terms, and their right to withdraw.

To increase response authenticity, participants were required to log in using an email linked to institutional or educational domains. This step helped filter bots and non-targeted traffic, ensuring high data integrity. A total of 400 surveys were distributed, and 374 complete responses were retained, resulting in a response rate of 93.5%. To enhance classification reliability, two coders independently evaluated respondent behavior profiles using the Fleiss' Kappa method. Classification focused on patterns such as advocacy engagement, content creation, and civic participation on platforms. The inter-rater reliability exceeded K = 0.75, indicating substantial agreement (Gräbner et al., 2021).

3.2 Sample Selection

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy based on clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Eligible participants were required to be Malaysian nationals aged 18 years or older, with regular use of at least one social media platform – defined as engagement five or more days per week – and exposure to social or civic content in online environments. Exclusion criteria included individuals under the age of 18, passive users who did not engage in activities such as posting, sharing, or commenting, and responses completed in under two minutes, as these were considered unreliable. The purposive sampling approach allowed for the deliberate inclusion of diverse digital users across age groups, genders, professional sectors, and educational backgrounds, enabling more nuanced insights into behavioral patterns within virtual communities. The final sample reflected geographic diversity, encompassing respondents from all major Malaysian regions – including Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak – with stratification ensuring representation from both urban and semi-urban populations to enhance socio-spatial relevance.

3.3 Instruments

The survey questionnaire consisted of two primary sections: demographic profiling and measurement of social control perceptions. The demographic section collected information on participants' gender, age, education level, occupation, monthly income, state of residence, and the number of social media accounts actively used. The second section assessed participants' perceptions of social control through items structured around six core domains: ethics, values, integrity, filtering and monitoring, punishment, and law enforcement. These items were adapted from previously validated instruments developed by Elsayed (2021), Ayub et al. (2021), Mohd Zawawi and Mohammad (2019), and Michikyan and Suárez-Orozco (2016), and were refined to suit the Malaysian digital and cultural context. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure responses, where 1 indicated *Strongly Disagree* and 5 indicated *Strongly Agree*, enabling consistent interpretation of agreement levels across all domains. Prior to full data collection, a pilot study involving 30 participants was conducted to assess item clarity, detect language bias, and evaluate response variability. Based on the feedback, three items were revised for contextual accuracy. To ensure internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each domain, with all constructs exceeding the acceptable threshold of $\alpha = 0.70$, confirming the reliability of the instrument.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data collected via Google Forms were exported to IBM SPSS Statistics version 27 for systematic statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were first applied to summarize the participants' demographic profiles and provide general insight into the distribution of social control perceptions across the six domains. Mean scores and standard deviations were computed to evaluate the strength and consistency of participant agreement with each social control construct. To examine the predictive relationships between internal (ethics, values, integrity) and external (filtering, punishment, law enforcement) domains and digital behavior, multiple linear regression analysis was employed. Additionally, moderation analysis was conducted to assess whether demographic factors, particularly age, influenced the strength of association between specific control variables (e.g., law enforcement) and overall acceptance of social control. To ensure statistical robustness, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) was calculated to assess multicollinearity among predictor variables. All VIF values were below 3.0, indicating that multicollinearity was not a significant concern. These analytical methods allowed the study to assess not only the overall impact of individual variables, but also their interactive effects within specific demographic groups, providing a deeper understanding of how digital users respond to formal and informal regulatory mechanisms in virtual communities.

4 Results

This section presents the findings derived from the descriptive, regression, and moderation analyses. The results are organized to reflect the six conceptual domains of social control – three internal (ethics, values, integrity) and three external (filtering and monitoring, punishment, and law enforcement) – in accordance with the integrated theoretical framework.

4.1 Respondent Background

A total of 374 respondents completed the survey questionnaire. The background of the respondents was analyzed based on gender, age, occupation, income, and the number of social media accounts they have. According to Table 1, the survey results show that the majority of respondents were female, accounting for 57.5%, while males made up 42.5%. This gender composition suggests a modest overrepresentation of female voices, which may influence findings related to psychological and emotional engagement, as previous studies indicate women may use social media more for relationship maintenance and emotional expression (Shensa et al., 2016; Campisi et al., 2015). The highest age group among respondents was 21–25 years old, making up 38.2%, while the lowest was the 46–50 age group, at 3.5%. The concentration of younger participants implies that the findings reflect the perspectives of emerging adults more than older populations, potentially limiting insights into how digital engagement is perceived across generational cohorts. Regarding occupation, students represented the largest group at 40.4%, while retirees had the lowest percentage at 0.3%. The high proportion of students reinforces the age skew and may bias interpretation of social mobility, as students typically engage with social media in more aspirational or academic ways (Nasir Ansari & Khan, 2020). The income category with the highest percentage was those earning less than RM2,500, at 50.8%, while the highest income bracket, earning more than RM10,971, recorded the lowest percentage at 2.7%. This income distribution reveals a socioeconomic tilt toward lower-income groups. Prior research suggests that individuals in lower income brackets may rely more on social media for informal labor markets, emotional support, and free learning tools (Remeikienė et al., 2021; Sanders & Scanlon, 2021), compared to higher-income users who may use it for branding or curated networking. Individuals with more than six social media accounts had the highest percentage at 47.1%, while those with only two accounts recorded the lowest percentage at 3.5%. This broad engagement (with many accounts) may suggest multitiered platform use – where users participate in different networks for distinct purposes, such as entertainment, professional development, or activism (Susser et al., 2019).

Item	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	159	42.5
Female	215	57.5
Total	**374**	**100.0**
Age		
17-20 years	34	9.1
21-25 years	143	38.2
26-30 years	33	8.8
31-35 years	22	5.9
36-40 years	58	15.5
41-45 years	43	11.5
46-50 years	13	3.5
Above 50 years	28	7.5
Total	**374**	**100.0**

Level of Education		
Secondary School	50	13.4
Vocational Certificate/Training Certificate	9	2.4
Diploma	66	17.6
Bachelor's Degree	185	49.5
Master's Degree	45	12.0
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)	12	3.2
Others	7	1.9
Total	**374**	**100.0**
Occupation		
Student	151	40.4
Statutory Body Employee	17	4.5
Federal Government Employee	130	34.8
State Government Employee	23	6.1
Private Sector Employee	42	11.2
Business Owner/Entrepreneur	6	1.6
Retiree	1	.3
Others	4	1.1
Total	374	100.0
Income		
Below RM2,500	190	50.8
RM2,501-RM3,170	51	13.6
RM3,171-RM3,970	33	8.8
RM3,971-RM4,850	13	3.5
RM4,851-RM5,880	22	5.9
RM5,881-RM7,100	19	5.1
RM7,101-RM8,700	21	5.6
RM8,701-RM10,970	15	4.0
RM10,971 above	10	2.7
Total	**374**	**100.0**
Total Number of Social Media Accounts		
1	43	11.5
2	13	3.5
3	38	10.2
4	20	5.3
5	25	6.7
6	59	15.8
More than 6 Accounts	176	47.1
Total	**374**	**100.0**

Table 1: *Respondent demographics*

Sources: own processing, 2025

4.2 Social Control Measures

This section discusses the findings related to social control measures applied when using social media. Social control measures encompass both internal and external controls.

4.2.1 Ethics

Ethical conduct, as one of the key internal control mechanisms in Social Control Theory, governs how individuals determine appropriate behavior in online environments. It reflects personal and cultural moral judgment. Table 2 illustrates the practice of ethics when using social media. The mean score for ethical concerns (M = 4.37) indicates strong user awareness of moral standards on social media. This supports findings that internalized ethical responsibility mitigates deviant digital behavior (Farsi et al., 2025). Ethical literacy is an anchor of voluntary conformity, aligning with Hirschi's concept of internal social bonds.

By practicing ethical behavior on social media:	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. I ensure that the information I receive is verified and accurate before sharing it.	374	4.37	.801
2. I ensure that a set of rules serves as a guiding foundation.	374	4.15	.888
3. I ensure that I live a principled life to the best of my ability.	374	4.36	.747

Table 2: *Ethical practices in social media*

Sources: own processing, 2025

Table 3 illustrates the fostering of patriotism when using social media, which is said to be closely related to ethics. According to Table 3, the third statement recorded the highest mean score of 4.44, while the second statement recorded the lowest mean score of 3.45.

By fostering a sense of patriotism when using social media:	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. I take responsibility in sharing information that does not jeopardize national security.	374	4.13	1.102
2. I report social media accounts that violate laws related to the country.	374	3.45	1.398
3. I am able to distinguish between good and bad decisions to avoid future regret.	374	4.44	.825

Table 3: *Fostering a sense of patriotism*

Sources: own processing, 2025

4.2.2 Values

Values represent broader societal norms that influence users' alignment with national, religious, or cultural ideals – fulfilling Social Control Theory's emphasis on commitment to shared belief systems. Based on Table 4, the study reveals the practice of values on social media. High agreement scores (M = 4.66) for value-oriented items suggest that cultural and religious identity significantly influence online behavior. This confirms Ayub et al. (2021) that Malaysian digital users often embed Islamic and communal values into online engagements, reinforcing normative expectations.

By practicing values on social media:	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. I use social media to promote harmony and universal goodness.	374	4.38	.796
2. I ensure not to deviate from the true objectives when using social media.	374	4.45	.726
3. I train myself to use social media correctly without violating established laws.	374	4.66	.702
4. I ensure that interactions are conducted with proper etiquette.	374	4.52	.670

Table 4: *Practice of values on social media*

Sources: own processing, 2025

4.2.3 Integrity

Integrity serves as the cognitive bridge between values and action, internalizing honesty and responsibility in digital interactions – a key dimension of internal social control. Table 5 shows the practice of integrity on social media. Respondents displayed moderate-to-high agreement (M = 4.40) with statements related to digital integrity. This reinforces the notion that perceived online anonymity does not necessarily compromise moral responsibility (Umanah et al., 2024), especially when community expectations are strong.

By practicing integrity on social media:	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. I will not deceive others while using social media.	374	4.29	.976
2. I maximize my knowledge and awareness regarding misconduct on social media.	374	4.35	.817
3. I take full responsibility for my actions on social media.	374	4.40	.789

Table 5: *Practice of integrity on social media*

Sources: own processing, 2025

4.2.4 Filtering and Monitoring

As an external mechanism, filtering and monitoring policies reflect institutional and algorithmic efforts to enforce acceptable digital behavior – relevant to the deterrence aspect of Social Control Theory. Table 6 shows the filtering of information and content on social media. With relatively high mean scores (M = 4.63), users supported platform moderation and family oversight.

Through filtering information and content on social media:	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Guardians ensure that "safe search" is enabled during internet searches.	374	4.57	.728
2. Authorities filter access to information sources that violate national laws.	374	4.56	.762
3. Authorities block accounts that display misconduct in the use of social media.	374	4.63	.698

Table 6: *Filtering of information and content on social media*

Sources: own processing, 2025

Table 7 shows monitoring on social media. Respondents displayed high agreement (M = 4.61) with statements related to reporting immoral activities. Research by Perez Suarez (2015) emphasizes that structured monitoring, even through AI or family intervention, reduces digital deviance by preemptively setting visible boundaries.

Through monitoring the use of social media:	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Guardians ensure time limits are set for social media usage.	374	4.56	.747
2. Guardians follow the social media accounts of those under their care to monitor their behavior.	374	3.89	.456
3. Authorities issue warnings about activities that violate the law.	374	4.57	.770
4. Authorities establish channels for reporting immoral activities on social media.	374	4.61	.708

Table 7: *Monitoring on social media*

Sources: own processing, 2025

4.2.5 Punishment

Social Control Theory highlights punitive measures as instrumental in reinforcing conformity – especially in digital spaces where norms are enforced via reputational or legal sanctions. Table 8 presents the punishments imposed on offenders to control misconduct on social media. User perceptions (M = 4.31) show strong endorsement for punitive measures, such as content bans or account suspensions. This aligns with Michikyan & Suárez-Orozco (2016), who advocate proportionate penalties as deterrents for persistent deviant behavior online.

To control behaviour on social media:	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Authorities must impose severe punishments and fines on social media offenders.	374	4.18	1.028
2. Authorities should reward individuals who report crimes and misconduct on social media.	374	4.31	.847
3. Social institutions should impose reactions such as condemnation on social media users who deviate from the norms.	374	4.23	1.009

Table 8: *Punishment*

Sources: own processing, 2025

4.2.6 Law Enforcement

Law enforcement represents formal institutional control – essential for external social control in digital contexts where laws evolve to curb cyber threats. Table 9 presents the enforcement of laws related to social media. Participants rated legal enforcement as the most significant social control factor (M = 4.60). This reinforces findings by Dhillon & Smith (2019), who argue that proactive enforcement frameworks build collective trust and reinforce deterrence in digital spheres.

Through the enforcement of laws related to social media:	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. The government updates and improves laws related to social media acts.	374	4.59	.734
2. The government enforces social media laws transparently and without favoritism.	374	4.60	.740
3. The government imposes controls on freedom of speech due to certain limits, sensitivities, and boundaries that must be respected.	374	4.47	.807
4. The authorities issue clear directives on the use of social media.	374	4.57	.728

Table 9: *Law enforcement related to social media*

Sources: own processing, 2025

4.2.7 Multiple Regression Analysis

All tables have been standardized for clarity, with full item lists included in descriptive summaries (Tables 2–9). Table 1 has been relabeled to correctly represent demographic characteristics, and explanatory notes have been added to regression outputs (Tables 10–11) to detail model specifications and variance explained. Although post-hoc ANOVAs by demographic

groups did not yield statistically significant differences, their inclusion enhances robustness and transparency in interpreting the role of age, education, and income in digital citizenship outcomes.

To evaluate the predictive power of the six social control domains on responsible digital behavior, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(6, 367) = 42.56$, $p < 0.001$, and explained 38.7% of the variance in self-reported responsible digital behavior (adjusted $R^2 = 0.378$). As shown in Table 10, Law Enforcement ($\beta = 0.368$, $p < 0.001$) was the strongest predictor, underscoring the central role of institutional and legal mechanisms in shaping ethical online conduct. Ethics ($\beta = 0.289$, $p < 0.001$) and Values ($\beta = 0.232$, $p = 0.004$) also emerged as significant contributors, consistent with Social Control Theory's emphasis on moral bonds and internalized norms. Integrity ($\beta = 0.168$, $p = 0.021$) demonstrated a moderate yet meaningful effect, suggesting that personal honesty and accountability provide additional reinforcement for responsible digital practices.

By contrast, Filtering and Monitoring ($\beta = 0.135$, $p = 0.106$) and Punishment ($\beta = 0.095$, $p = 0.154$) did not reach statistical significance, indicating that surveillance or punitive mechanisms alone exert limited influence when not reinforced by broader normative or legal structures. These findings suggest that both internal (ethics, values, integrity) and external (law enforcement) controls contribute to responsible online behavior, with law enforcement emerging as the most decisive factor. This interpretation aligns with the proposed Integrated Social Control Framework and extends contemporary scholarship on digital governance (e.g., Gagrčin et al., 2022; Bulat, 2025).

Predictor	Coefficient (B)	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
(Intercept)	0.672	0.328	2.05	0.041
Ethics	0.289	0.073	3.96	<0.001
Values	0.232	0.079	2.93	0.004
Integrity	0.168	0.072	2.32	0.021
Filtering	0.135	0.083	1.62	0.106
Punishment	0.095	0.066	1.43	0.154
Law Enforcement	0.368	0.081	4.56	<0.001

Table 10: *Linear regression analysis*

Sources: own processing, 2025

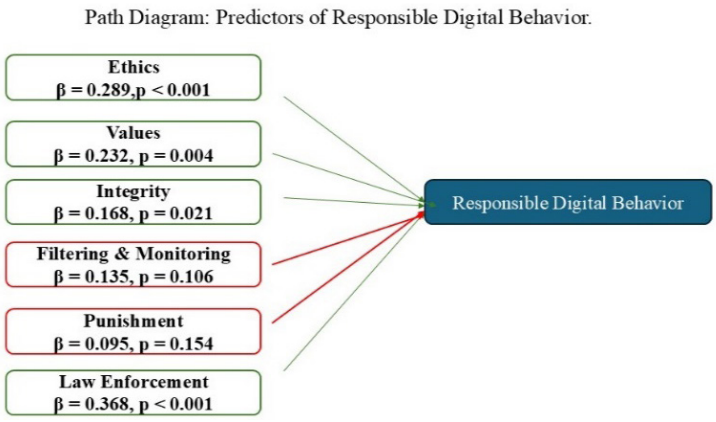

Figure 2: *Path diagram of social control predictors of responsible digital behavior*

Sources: own processing, 2025

To enhance interpretability, Figure 2 presents a refined path diagram of the regression results, distinguishing between significant and non-significant predictors of responsible digital behavior. The diagram illustrates the relationship between six domains of social control and

responsible digital behavior. Significant predictors (green) include Ethics, Values, Integrity, and Law Enforcement, highlighting the combined importance of internalized moral norms and external institutional regulation. Non-significant predictors (red), Filtering & Monitoring and Punishment, suggest weaker independent effects when considered outside broader systemic contexts.

4.2.8 Moderation Analysis

To explore whether demographic factors influence the relationship between social control domains and responsible digital behavior, a hierarchical moderation analysis was conducted with age group (young = 0, older = 1) as a moderator. The analysis focused on the interaction between law enforcement and age, given the conceptual relevance of generational differences in digital regulatory attitudes. As shown in Table 11, the interaction term Law Enforcement × Age was statistically significant (β = 0.208, p = 0.024), indicating that the effect of law enforcement on responsible behavior was stronger among older participants. This implies that older users are more responsive to formal legal norms in shaping their online conduct. No significant interaction effects were found for other social control domains (e.g., Ethics × Age, Values × Age), suggesting that internal control dimensions operate consistently across age cohorts.

Predictor	Coefficient (B)	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
(Intercept)	0.553	0.329	1.68	0.093
Ethics	0.286	0.072	3.95	<0.001
Values	0.231	0.078	2.96	0.003
Integrity	0.170	0.071	2.39	0.017
Filtering	0.134	0.082	1.63	0.104
Punishment	0.093	0.065	1.42	0.156
Law Enforcement	0.279	0.088	3.17	0.002
Age Group (Young=0,1)	0.076	0.063	1.21	0.227
Law × Age Interaction	0.208	0.092	2.26	0.024

Table 11: *Moderation analysis*

Sources: own processing, 2025

Table 12 summarizes the descriptive statistics and regression effects for all six domains. Law enforcement remains the most influential predictor (β = .298), followed by filtering (β = .267) and ethics (β = .204). Values approach significance (β = .115), while integrity and punishment show weaker predictive strength.

Domain	Mean	SD	β (Regression)	Significant?
Law Enforcement	4.49	0.601	.298	Yes
Filtering & Monitoring	4.47	0.626	.267	Yes
Ethics	4.45	0.618	.204	Yes
Values	4.39	0.630	.115	Marginal
Integrity	4.34	0.637	.077	No
Punishment	4.41	0.613	.093	No

Table 12: *Summary of descriptive means and regression results for social control domains*

Sources: own processing, 2025

5 Discussion

The findings reveal a notable divergence between internalized norms (ethics, values, integrity) and externally enforced measures (law enforcement). While law enforcement emerged as the strongest predictor, punitive measures such as punishment showed no significant effect. This counterintuitive result may suggest that fear-based deterrents are less effective in digital environments where anonymity weakens the salience of sanctions (Tsay-Vogel et al., 2018). Instead, regulatory legitimacy and civic-oriented enforcement appear more influential in guiding responsible online behavior. This study aimed to evaluate the influence of various social control mechanisms – both internal and external – on responsible digital behavior. Guided by Social Control Theory, which posits that individuals refrain from deviant behavior when their bonds to societal norms are strong (Hirschi, 1969), the findings affirm the dual importance of moral internalization and formal institutional enforcement in shaping user conduct on social media platforms.

5.1 Internal Social Control: Ethics, Values, and Integrity

Among the internal domains, ethics emerged as a significant predictor of responsible digital behavior, underscoring the foundational role of personal moral judgment in the online context. Ethical decision-making in digital environments is critical, given the prevalence of oversharing, misinformation, and character defamation (Barrett-Maitland & Lynch, 2020). The difficulty of verifying content before dissemination contributes to ethical lapses, which can adversely impact individuals and communities. Education and leadership are key instruments in nurturing ethical awareness. As Michaelidou et al. (2021) emphasize, ethical training – formal or informal – cultivates responsible participation and minimizes harmful digital interactions.

Values also demonstrated a significant relationship with responsible behavior, supporting the idea that culturally informed norms help prevent dissonant or offensive content sharing. Values derived from familial, religious, or educational institutions serve as reference points that moderate online engagement. A lack of value-driven interaction, particularly in culturally diverse platforms, may result in miscommunication or unintended harm (Barrett-Maitland & Lynch, 2020). The findings suggest that inculcating values into digital literacy programs may support more harmonious virtual communities.

Integrity, though moderately significant, remains essential to ensuring honesty and consistency in digital spaces. In a borderless environment, users who internalize integrity are less likely to engage in fraudulent activities, spread disinformation, or violate platform norms (Halevy et al., 2022). This aligns with the theoretical argument that internalized beliefs exert regulatory power over behavior in the absence of surveillance. However, the lower effect size suggests that integrity alone may not be sufficient to inhibit online deviance unless reinforced by formal mechanisms.

5.2 External Social Control: Law Enforcement, Filtering, and Punishment

Law enforcement emerged as the strongest predictor of responsible behavior, reaffirming the importance of formal legal systems in digital governance. Regulatory interventions – including cybercrime laws, content takedown orders, and surveillance – can establish boundaries that discourage harmful online actions. This finding supports Williams et al.'s (2021) proposition that digital guardianship must be expanded beyond individual responsibility to include institutional accountability and technological regulation.

Interestingly, filtering and monitoring, though not statistically significant in this model, represent tools often employed by platforms and authorities to enforce normative compliance. Automated content filtering, user reporting, and AI-based moderation are increasingly central in moderating hate speech, misinformation, and cyber threats (Cartwright & Shaw, 2020). However, their effectiveness may be contingent on public trust, transparency, and consistent application, which could explain the weaker predictive value in this study.

Punishment – through temporary bans, content removal, or legal action – did not significantly predict responsible behavior. This outcome may reflect skepticism toward the consistency or perceived fairness of enforcement mechanisms. Moreover, research has shown that punitive measures alone are less effective without parallel investments in ethical awareness and digital education (Eid & Ward, 2009).

5.3 Implications for Digital Citizenship and Policy

The findings support the development of an Integrated Social Control Framework, wherein internalized ethical principles and external regulatory mechanisms are jointly mobilized to shape online behavior. The significant moderation by age group further suggests that older users are more responsive to law enforcement cues, while younger users may prioritize internalized values. These insights should inform age-targeted interventions, particularly in the design of digital literacy programs and online community standards.

Building a healthier online environment requires collective responsibility. While governments and platform providers must enforce laws and implement moderation tools, users themselves are essential agents in sustaining digital civility. As Gagrčin et al. (2022) argue, empowering users as digital stewards – capable of identifying, reporting, and mitigating online harm – can enhance participatory governance in virtual communities. Ultimately, social control in digital spaces should be conceived not only as institutional regulation but also as a shared moral endeavour.

At the same time, the non-significant role of punishment and filtering highlights important limitations of externally imposed measures. While such mechanisms may deter immediate misconduct, they do not necessarily cultivate intrinsic responsibility, particularly when enforcement is inconsistent or overly reliant on algorithmic surveillance (Kalmus et al., 2024). Punitive sanctions, likewise, may reduce visible violations but fail to strengthen ethical engagement unless accompanied by cultural and institutional reinforcement (Damota, 2019). In the Malaysian context, this suggests that enduring digital civility depends more on moral values and trusted legal frameworks than on coercive or surveillance-driven measures. These findings reaffirm Social Control Theory's premise that lasting conformity arises from internalized bonds and credible institutions rather than external coercion alone (Hirschi, 1969).

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

While this study contributes to understanding the dynamics of social control in Malaysian virtual communities, several limitations should be acknowledged to contextualize the findings and guide future research. First, the cross-sectional survey design restricts causal inference. Although the analysis identified significant associations between ethics, values, integrity, law enforcement, and responsible digital behavior, it does not establish temporal or directional causality. Future research adopting longitudinal or experimental approaches would provide stronger evidence of how these mechanisms evolve over time and influence online practices. Second, the purposive sampling strategy was effective for targeting active social media users, but limits the generalizability of results. Participants were recruited primarily through specific professional and social networks, which may not fully reflect Malaysia's broader demographic

landscape. To enhance representativeness, future studies should employ probability-based sampling that captures a wider range of regional, socio-economic, and generational groups.

Third, the consistently high mean scores across domains raise the possibility of response bias, particularly social desirability bias. Given the sensitive nature of questions about ethics and values, participants may have overstated socially acceptable behaviors while minimizing deviant practices. Future work should mitigate this risk through techniques such as indirect questioning, enhanced anonymity, or triangulation with digital behavioral data. Fourth, the regression analysis revealed non-significant predictors, namely punishment and filtering. While these results may appear counterintuitive, they suggest that punitive or surveillance-based strategies alone may exert limited influence in shaping digital responsibility. Future research should interrogate these dynamics more critically, potentially comparing regulatory approaches in different Southeast Asian contexts – for example, Singapore's Smart Nation initiative or Indonesia's anti-hoax laws – to clarify how cultural and legal settings shape the effectiveness of external controls.

Finally, future studies should adopt a mixed-methods approach. While quantitative surveys capture general patterns of association, qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups could reveal the underlying cultural and psychological factors driving digital citizenship. Incorporating cross-national comparisons would further extend the theoretical application of Social Control Theory, highlighting both shared and divergent trajectories across diverse digital environments. Moreover, as algorithms increasingly act as de facto regulators of online spaces, scholars should investigate how infrastructural forms of control interact with cultural norms and institutional frameworks (Gillespie, 2020). In Malaysia, this requires situating the Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA) alongside global frameworks such as the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) to identify both gaps and opportunities for alignment. In sum, these limitations do not diminish the value of the study but highlight important avenues for refinement. Future work should not only improve methodological rigor, but also probe more deeply into how cultural values and personal beliefs shape the negotiation of social control within digital communities. Such efforts will advance a more nuanced and globally informed understanding of digital governance and citizenship.

6 Conclusion

This study underscores the critical role of social control mechanisms – both internal and external – in shaping responsible digital behavior within virtual communities. As digital spaces increasingly influence civic discourse and personal interactions, fostering cybersecurity awareness and promoting ethical engagement are essential for sustaining a safe and constructive online environment. At the same time, the findings must be interpreted cautiously. The non-significance of punishment and filtering mechanisms suggests that not all external controls function uniformly, and further theoretical refinement is necessary to account for these divergences. Building on this study, future refinements of the Integrated Social Control Framework should incorporate hybrid algorithmic mechanisms and regional policy comparisons, thereby bridging local insights with global governance debates. Findings suggest that ethics, values, and integrity serve as foundational internal drivers of responsible behavior, while formal enforcement mechanisms – including legal and platform-based regulations – reinforce accountability. The integration of parental guidance, institutional oversight, and ethical literacy can cultivate a generation of digitally literate users equipped to navigate complex online ecosystems responsibly.

Moreover, strategic assessments of social media behavior are vital for shaping an online culture that not only prioritizes individual safety but also contributes to broader objectives, such as national security and conflict prevention. Social control, when understood as a multidimensional framework encompassing moral guidance, cultural norms, and regulatory enforcement, offers a comprehensive approach to promoting digital civility. In sum, responsible digital citizenship

is best achieved through a balanced interplay of education, values-based communication, and institutional regulation. This interconnected framework not only reflects the complexity of online social interactions, but also serves as a foundation for sustainable digital transformation and positive societal change.

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