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Digital Values and Reported Online Practices Among Early Adolescents in Malta: Student and Professional Perspectives

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Abstract

Digital media are settings in which early adolescents negotiate privacy, respect, consent, responsibility and care. This focused mixed-methods secondary analysis brings together responses from 612 Year 8 students in Malta and interviews with 19 education and youth-support professionals. Students strongly endorsed privacy and respectful communication: 96.0% considered online privacy important, 90.3% agreed that they tried to communicate respectfully, 77.2% reported always or often seeking permission before sharing another person's image, and 80.0% reported always or often checking information before sharing it. Responses were more varied for cyberbullying and screen-time self-regulation: 24.4% selected ignoring online bullying as their most representative response, and 22.4% were unsure whether they prevented screen time from interfering with important activities. Students' open responses foregrounded kindness, non-harm, privacy, consent and reflection. Professionals highlighted peer belonging, visibility, social validation and reduced inhibition in adolescents' digital environments. Bringing these perspectives together identifies common concerns alongside tensions between endorsed values, reported practices and the social settings of online interaction. The findings position digital citizenship as a relational dimension of applied values education and indicate directions for further student-centred research.

Keywords: digital citizenship; values education; early adolescence; cyberbullying; mixed methods; PSCD; ethics; Malta

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1. Introduction

Digital media are integral to how adolescents communicate, form relationships, seek recognition and make decisions affecting others. Questions of privacy, image-sharing, misinformation, online bullying and screen-time management are therefore not only matters of safety or technical competence; they are also questions of values, including respect, care, honesty, responsibility and fairness.

Early adolescence is particularly important in this respect. In this article, the term refers approximately to ages 11–14; the present student sample comprised Year 8 students with a mean age of 12.32 years. During this period, young people become increasingly

capable of reasoning about abstract principles while remaining sensitive to peer approval, belonging and social risk (Crone and Konijn 2018; Tomova et al. 2021; Vecchione et al. 2020). Digital participation forms part of this developmental context because identity, reputation and relationships increasingly extend across online and offline settings (Floridi 2015; Avci et al. 2025).

Digital media can support friendship, self-expression, learning and participation while also creating settings in which comparison, visibility, conflict and exposure to harm are intensified (Livingstone and Third 2017; Orben et al. 2024). Their ethical significance lies partly in the conditions of communication: online actions can be rapid, persistent, widely circulated and open to peer evaluation. These features make questions of responsible conduct inseparable from the social settings in which young people make choices.

Values guide judgement but do not determine conduct independently of context and competing priorities (Schwartz 2012). Digital citizenship education has accordingly expanded beyond online safety towards ethical participation, rights, responsibility and critical engagement (Choi 2016; Richardson and Milovidov 2019). Harrison and Polizzi (2022) further connect digital literacy with moral judgement and character, arguing that rule knowledge alone cannot resolve ambiguous situations involving consent, harm or competing loyalties.

Malta provides a useful educational context for examining these questions. In the national school structure, Years 7 and 8 form the middle-school phase before students progress to Years 9–11; Year 8 is therefore a transition point immediately before senior secondary study and subject specialisation (Government of Malta n.d.). Ethics and Personal, Social and Career Development (PSCD) are among the subjects with Year 8 syllabi and learning outcomes which deal with digital responsibility, which is also addressed through wider school practices. Recent Maltese research with PSCD teachers found that students were often familiar with online-safety messages but did not necessarily apply them in real-life choices; teachers emphasised reflection, decision-making and experiential learning and identified rapid technological change as a continuing curriculum challenge (Fenech and Zammit 2026). What remains comparatively limited is evidence from Maltese early adolescents themselves, particularly their own reports of digital values and practices, their descriptions of online respect and care, and how those accounts sit alongside professional interpretations of the social contexts surrounding digital conduct.

The present study addresses that empirical gap through a focused secondary analysis of Year 8 student survey data and professional interviews collected within the wider Learning to Live Together: Values for Cohesive Living project (Zammit et al. 2026). Building on the published item-level survey findings, this article brings together seven digital-values items, students' open-ended accounts of respect and care online, and professional perspectives on the social contexts of digital conduct. Their integration illuminates how digital responsibility is articulated by students and interpreted by professionals within the relational environments of early adolescence. Four research questions guide the analysis: (RQ1) How do Year 8 students in Malta endorse selected digital values and report practices relating to privacy, consent, respectful communication, online harm, self-regulation and information sharing? (RQ2) How do students describe respect and care in online contexts? (RQ3) How do education and youth-support professionals describe the social and communicative contexts surrounding early adolescents' digital conduct? (RQ4) Where do the student and professional accounts converge, complement one another, diverge or leave important questions unanswered?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Values, Identity and Belonging in Digital Adolescence

Values are relatively enduring, trans-situational goals that guide how people evaluate situations and select actions (Schwartz 2012). They are not equivalent to rules governing a single behaviour. Respect, care, honesty and responsibility may be endorsed across contexts, yet their expression depends on the situation, the people involved and the presence of competing values. During early adolescence, value priorities remain open to development as young people relate broad principles to emerging identities, relationships and social roles (Vecchione et al. 2020; Murcia-Álvarez et al. 2026).

Digital media have become embedded within this developmental process. Social-media participation provides spaces for self-presentation, experimentation and feedback, making online interaction part of identity formation rather than an activity separate from "real" life (Gardner and Davis 2014; Avci et al. 2025). Floridi's (2015) concept of the "onlife" condition similarly emphasises the increasingly blurred distinction between online and offline experience. For adolescents, posts, photographs, group chats and platform interactions can affect friendships, reputation and belonging beyond the moment of use.

Peer evaluation is especially important during adolescence. Sensitivity to acceptance, rejection and status increases during this period, while belonging becomes closely connected with emotional well-being and the avoidance of social risk (Crone and Konijn 2018; Tomova et al. 2021). Platform affordances can amplify these concerns because communication may be visible, persistent, replicable and open to immediate evaluation. Likes, comments, forwarding and exclusion from group chats can turn moral decisions into public performances before peers. A student may understand that sharing an image without permission is wrong or that a targeted peer should be supported, yet hesitate when acting risks ridicule, conflict or exclusion.

The communicative affordances of digital environments are also ethically significant. Suler's (2004) online disinhibition effect proposes that anonymity, invisibility, reduced social cues and delayed responses may weaken restraints that operate in face-to-face encounters. Disinhibition is not invariably harmful, since it may support disclosure and identity exploration, but toxic forms can facilitate hostility, harassment and cyberbullying. A recent systematic review similarly links online disinhibition with adolescent cyberbullying while emphasising the importance of individual and contextual factors (Wang et al. 2024). These accounts help explain why reflection, empathy and awareness of consequences may require more deliberate effort in digitally mediated communication.

Privacy and consent illustrate the overlap between personal protection and responsibility towards others. Children's capacity to manage online data is uneven, and privacy decisions take place within commercial and social environments that are difficult for young users to understand fully (Stoilova et al. 2020). Yet privacy is not only a technical matter. Asking before sharing another person's image, respecting refusal and limiting the circulation of personal information involve dignity, autonomy and relational trust. Digital values therefore concern not simply safe use but how young people recognise and respond to the rights and vulnerabilities of others.

2.2. Digital Citizenship as Moral and Values Education

Digital citizenship emerged partly from efforts to define appropriate and responsible technology use. Ribble et al. (2004) identified areas including etiquette, communication, responsibility, rights, safety and security, helping to establish digital citizenship within school curricula. Later frameworks broadened the concept beyond protection and compliance. Richardson and Milovidov (2019) present digital citizenship as competent and positive engagement in digital environments, while Choi (2016) incorporates ethics, media and in-

formation literacy, participation and critical resistance. These formulations position young people not merely as users who must avoid risk, but as members of digital communities whose choices affect others.

Early digital citizenship programmes have nevertheless been criticised for being overly procedural and individualised. Prescriptive rules and multiple-choice notions of correct behaviour can reduce complex ethical problems to personal compliance while giving insufficient attention to platform structures, power relations and the continuity between online and offline life (Mattison 2016). Telling students to protect passwords, verify information or report abuse remains necessary, but it does not fully prepare them for situations in which values conflict: whether to forward content that is amusing but humiliating, how to support a friend without escalating a dispute, or when loyalty should give way to disclosure.

A values-based approach asks why a practice matters, whom it affects and what dispositions are required to act well. Privacy can be connected with dignity and autonomy; information verification with honesty; consent with respect for agency; and bystander action with care, justice and moral courage. Vallor (2016) argues that life in technologically mediated societies requires the cultivation of virtues capable of guiding action amid new and changing conditions. Harrison and Polizzi (2022) similarly connect digital literacy with moral judgement and character, arguing that online civility cannot be reduced to technical knowledge or rule-following.

The Maltese context provides direct support for this educational framing. Digital citizenship is addressed principally through subjects including Personal, Social and Career Development (PSCD) and Ethics. Interviews with Maltese PSCD teachers found that students were often already familiar with online-safety information, yet did not necessarily apply it when making real-life choices. Teachers therefore emphasised processing, decision-making and experiential learning, while also identifying rapid technological change, online influences and the need for updated resources and professional development (Fenech and Zammit 2026). This suggests that the educational challenge is not simply to supply more information, but to help students relate familiar principles to evolving digital situations.

2.3. From Value Endorsement to Reported Ethical Action

The relationship between values and conduct is not a straightforward progression from knowing what is right to acting accordingly. Moral psychology distinguishes judgement from action: recognising or endorsing an appropriate response does not ensure enactment when action also requires motivation, prioritisation, confidence and practical capacity (Blasi 1980; Rest 1986). Agreement with an abstract principle, a stated intention and a report of customary conduct represent distinct dimensions of ethical decision-making.

Several theoretical perspectives illuminate the demands of acting on endorsed principles. Moral disengagement describes ways of reinterpreting responsibility or harm (Bandura 1991); cyberbystander research highlights empathy, perceived responsibility, relationships, anticipated consequences and self-efficacy (DeSmet et al. 2014; Hu et al. 2023; Cayzer-Haller et al. 2026); and the theory of planned behaviour emphasises attitudes, perceived norms and behavioural control (Ajzen 1991). Together, these perspectives foreground the interaction between moral judgement and the social conditions of action.

Endorsement of abstract principles, accounts of customary behaviour, single-choice bystander responses and judgements about ongoing habits such as screen-time regulation involve different kinds of self-assessment. Their comparison can highlight questions about how adolescents understand and negotiate responsibility across situations, while requiring attention to the wording and format of each measure.

These perspectives provide a framework for interpreting digital responsibility as an interaction between values, relationships, perceived norms and situational demands.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Study Design

This article presents a focused mixed-methods secondary analysis of data collected through the wider Learning to Live Together: Values for Cohesive Living project. The survey component of that project comprised separate cross-sectional surveys of Year 7 and Year 8 students (Zammit et al. 2026). The present article uses the Year 8 survey because the relevant digital-values items were contained in that instrument and combines those data with two components not analysed in the published parent survey article: students' open-ended responses concerning respect and care online and semi-structured interviews with education and youth-support professionals. The complete Year 8 questionnaire comprised 57 respondent-facing items—seven demographic/background questions and 50 substantive items—and the present analysis uses seven digital-values items: six closed-response questions and one open-ended question.

The study adopted a convergent, contextual mixed-methods design. Student closed-response items were analysed descriptively, open-ended responses through qualitative content analysis, and professional interviews through focused thematic reanalysis. The three evidence components were analysed separately before being integrated to identify convergence, complementarity, divergence and questions for further investigation. As the participants were different people, professional interviews provide contextual perspectives rather than direct evidence of the surveyed students' experiences or behaviour.

3.2. Student Survey

3.2.1. Student Participants and Recruitment

The Year 8 survey received 615 submissions, of which three were excluded as invalid, leaving 612 valid responses. The national Year 8 population was approximately 4589 students; the valid sample therefore represented approximately 13.3% of the target population. All schools in the State, Church and Independent sectors with Year 8 students were invited through national educational channels, with Heads of School acting as gatekeepers (Zammit et al. 2026). Parents or guardians received study information and could opt their child out; the requirement for written parental informed consent was waived for the anonymous, low-risk survey, and participating students provided assent before beginning the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. School identifiers were not retained in the analytical dataset, so the number and distribution of participating students within individual schools and any clustering of responses by school cannot be reconstructed.

Age was reported by 608 students, with a mean age of 12.32 years (SD = 0.48; range = 11–14). Among the 609 students who reported gender, 301 identified as boys, 299 as girls and nine selected "prefer not to say". School sector was reported by all 612 students: 361 attended Church schools, 207 State schools, 24 Independent schools and 20 did not know their school sector. These distributions are reported to describe the sample, not to support sector comparisons. Church-school students were over-represented, while State- and Independent-school students were under-represented relative to the national Year 8 population. The findings should therefore not be interpreted as statistically representative of all Year 8 students in Malta.

3.2.2. Data Collection and Survey Instrument

Data were collected through an electronic questionnaire administered using Google Forms. The survey was available in English and Maltese, with questions and response

categories displayed side by side in both languages. Students generally completed it individually during school time using government-issued devices under teacher supervision. Completion took approximately 20–25 min. Students were informed that participation was voluntary, that they could omit individual questions and that they could leave the survey before submission (Zammit et al. 2026).

The questionnaire addressed a broad range of values and experiences rather than digital conduct alone. The Year 8 instrument included inclusion, equality, belonging, cultural identity, moral and religious values, digital responsibility, privacy, personal agency, decision-making, relationships, consent, personal boundaries, safety and financial responsibility (Zammit et al. 2026). The seven items used here were selected for this secondary analysis because their wording explicitly concerned values or practices in digital environments. They are treated as stand-alone indicators rather than as a single latent or psychometrically validated digital-citizenship scale.

Questionnaire development followed an iterative review and pretesting process. Draft items were reviewed by members of the author team, with attention to content relevance and coverage, developmental appropriateness, wording, readability and response categories. The questionnaires were informally piloted, and cognitive interviewing was used to examine how participants understood questions and formulated responses. The English and Maltese versions also underwent bilingual review for clarity and conceptual equivalence. These procedures supported face and content validity, readability and age appropriateness but did not establish construct validity, reliability or measurement invariance (Zammit et al. 2026).

3.2.3. Digital-Values Items

The present analysis focuses on seven questions addressing values and reported practices in digital environments. Six closed-response items concerned:

1. The importance of keeping personal information private online;
2. Kind and respectful communication when posting or chatting;
3. Obtaining permission before sharing another person's photograph or video;
4. Usual responses to witnessing a mean message or online bullying;
5. Preventing screen time from interfering with sleep, schoolwork or family time;
6. Checking whether online information was trustworthy before sharing it.

Response formats varied by item. Importance was measured on a four-point scale, agreement items used five-point scales, and behavioural-frequency items were measured based on five-point scales that ranged from "always" to "never". The cyberbullying item asked: "If you see a mean message or bullying online, what do you usually do?" Students selected the response that best represented what they usually did: report or block the account, tell a trusted adult, ignore it, support the person being targeted, or join in. The nominal response options were not ranked or treated as an ordinal scale. Because only one response was selected, the item identifies the option students considered most representative rather than the full range of actions they might undertake.

An open-ended item asked students to write one way in which they showed respect and care for others online. It generated 561 non-blank responses, which formed the qualitative coding corpus. Because students were asked for one example, category frequencies indicate the relative salience of different forms of respect and care rather than behavioural prevalence.

The complete wording and response options for the seven items are provided in Supplementary Appendix A.

3.2.4. Quantitative Analysis

The six closed items were analysed descriptively using frequencies and valid percentages. Denominators varied slightly because students could omit questions, and percentages are reported to one decimal place. Items were examined separately because their wording and response formats differed; no composite score or inferential subgroup analysis was calculated. The cyberbullying responses were treated as nominal categories.

The published parent survey reports exploratory demographic comparisons (Zammit et al. 2026). The present article concentrates on descriptive item distributions and their integration with qualitative findings.

3.3. Analysis of Students' Open Responses

The 561 non-blank responses were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) to identify how students described online respect and care.

Coding began inductively. Responses were read repeatedly and assigned concise descriptive codes, including communicating kindly, avoiding insults, asking permission, respecting privacy, thinking before posting, supporting someone experiencing harm and reporting harmful content. Related codes were grouped into broader categories and category definitions were refined through repeated comparison with the response set. Differences in interpretation were discussed within the research team and addressed through iterative review and refinement of the coding and thematic structure.

A response could receive more than one code when it contained more than one distinct idea. Blank responses were excluded before coding; irrelevant or uninterpretable non-blank responses were not assigned to substantive categories. Category frequencies were used only to indicate relative prominence. Short quotations were selected to illustrate categories, with minor spelling and punctuation corrections where necessary without changing intended meaning.

3.4. Professional Interviews

3.4.1. Professional Participants and Data Collection

The qualitative strand included 19 professionals purposively selected to provide complementary perspectives on young people aged approximately 11 to 14. The sample comprised seven Subject Education Officers, two school Heads or Assistant Heads, six representatives of youth organisations and four members of psychosocial teams. For the present secondary analysis, the sample size was fixed by the 19 professional interviews available in the parent qualitative corpus rather than determined anew by statistical saturation. The original purposive rationale was variation of professional vantage point—curriculum/system, school leadership, community/youth work and psychosocial support—rather than numerical balance across groups or statistical representation.

The four groups provided different professional perspectives. Subject Education Officers contributed curriculum and system-level perspectives; school leaders discussed school culture, relationships and discipline; youth-organisation representatives drew on voluntary and community settings; and psychosocial professionals contributed experience of supporting young people during periods of difficulty.

Semi-structured interviews explored the values professionals observed among young people, the influences they perceived as shaping those values, tensions between principles and behaviour, and changing or emerging concerns. Questions addressed family, peers, schools, digital environments, belonging, identity, online conduct and social pressures.

Interviews were conducted through Microsoft Teams or Zoom and lasted approximately 45 to 60 min. They were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Most interviews were conducted in English; three were conducted in Maltese.

Maltese extracts used in the analysis were translated into English while preserving their intended meaning.

3.4.2. Focused Thematic Reanalysis

The parent study used reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase approach. Transcripts were read repeatedly and coded manually; an initial set of 110 codes was refined through iterative comparison, review and interpretation. Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, coding was not treated as a reliability exercise requiring inter-rater agreement statistics. Interpretive variation was addressed through repeated review of extracts, code meanings and theme definitions during the analytical process.

For the present article, the interview material was revisited through a focused digital-values lens covering digital media, peer visibility, social validation, identity performance, privacy, cyberbullying, online communication and perceived influences on conduct. The reanalysis was guided by RQ3 and by the boundaries of the available interview evidence. Relevant extracts were considered in the context of the complete transcripts rather than identified solely through keyword searches; theoretical labels such as "online disinhibition" or "social cost" were applied at the interpretive stage rather than treated as directly measured interview constructs.

Codes were compared across professional groups and organised into themes describing how interviewees interpreted digital environments and value-related conduct. Differences between professional perspectives were retained rather than forced into consensus. Participant codes indicate professional group and participant number: SubEO = Subject Education Officer, SHAH = school Head/Assistant Head, YOR = youth-organisation representative and PST = psychosocial-team member.

Members of the research team had professional and academic experience within Malta's education system and in values and ethics education. This provided contextual knowledge but may also have shaped the interpretation of the data.

3.5. Mixed-Methods Integration

Integration took place during interpretation through side-by-side comparison of the three forms of evidence: student closed-item data, student open-response data and professional interview data (Fetters et al. 2013). A joint display was constructed to support systematic comparison across these evidence components and to identify areas of convergence, complementarity, divergence and silence.

Convergence was identified where two or more sources indicated a substantively consistent pattern. Complementarity referred to instances in which one source elaborated, contextualised or extended a finding from another. Divergence was identified where the sources suggested contrasting or potentially incompatible interpretations, while silence referred to issues raised in one source that could not be examined in another because equivalent evidence was not available.

The joint display organised interpretative comparisons across the three evidence components, retaining differences in their focus and the questions they raised.

Alternative considerations, including item format, perceived efficacy, situational ambiguity, developmental self-regulation and peer visibility, informed interpretation of the relationships shown in the display.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The parent study received ethical approval from the University of Malta Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee and the relevant educational authorities. For the student survey, the requirement for written parental informed consent was waived because the research was anonymous and presented no foreseeable risk or harm; parents

or guardians received detailed study information and could opt their child out, while participating students provided assent. Professional interviewees provided informed consent for participation and recording. The published survey protocol provides further procedural detail (Zammit et al. 2026).

Student responses were collected anonymously without direct or technical identifiers. Pseudonyms and group codes were used during transcription and reporting of professional interviews to protect participants' identities.

Recordings, transcripts and consent documentation were stored separately on encrypted devices and secure servers. Access was restricted to the research team, and data were managed in accordance with University of Malta research procedures and the General Data Protection Regulation. The present secondary analysis remained within the aims and scope of the original study and examines specifically the digital-values items and related professional interview material.

4. Results

4.1. Students' Reported Digital Values and Practices

The six closed digital-values items were answered by between 600 and 606 of the 612 students. Table 1 presents the complete response distributions using valid percentages. These distributions were reported in the parent survey publication (Zammit et al. 2026) and provide the quantitative component of the present mixed-methods analysis.

Table 1. Year 8 responses to the closed digital-values items.

Item	Valid *n*	Missing *n*	Response Distribution, Valid %
Importance of keeping personal information private	602	10	Very important (1) 74.3; important (2) 21.8; not so important (3) 3.3; not important at all (4) 0.7
"I try to be kind and respectful when I post or chat online"	606	6	Strongly agree (1) 53.0; agree (2) 37.3; not sure (3) 7.1; disagree (4) 1.8; strongly disagree (5) 0.8
Asking permission before sharing another person's photograph or video	600	12	Always (1) 51.5; often (2) 25.7; sometimes (3) 11.5; rarely (4) 6.5; never (5) 4.8
Usual response to a mean message or online bullying	602	10	Report or block 38.2; tell a trusted adult 26.4; ignore 24.4; support the person targeted 10.1; join in 0.8
"I try to use self-control so that screen time does not interfere with important things"	604	8	Strongly agree (1) 29.1; agree (2) 40.4; not sure (3) 22.4; disagree (4) 4.0; strongly disagree (5) 4.1
Checking whether online information is trustworthy before sharing it	601	11	Always (1) 43.4; often (2) 36.6; sometimes (3) 16.0; rarely (4) 3.2; never (5) 0.8

Privacy received the strongest endorsement: 96.0% considered keeping personal information private important or very important. Similarly, 90.3% agreed or strongly agreed that they tried to communicate respectfully online. More than three-quarters reported always or often seeking permission before sharing another person's image (77.2%), and 80.0% reported always or often checking information before sharing it.

Responses were less uniform for screen-time regulation and online bullying. Although 69.5% agreed that they used self-control to prevent screen time from interfering with sleep, schoolwork or family life, 22.4% were unsure. In the cyberbullying item, reporting or blocking was the most frequently selected response (38.2%), followed by telling a trusted adult (26.4%). Almost one-quarter selected ignoring the incident (24.4%), 10.1% selected supporting the person targeted and 0.8% selected joining in.

4.2. Students' Understandings of Respect and Care Online

The open-ended question generated 561 non-blank responses. Students' examples emphasised several interrelated meanings of respect and care.

Students commonly described respect through positive communication and non-harm. Examples included offering encouragement, checking how someone was feeling, avoiding insults and refraining from hurtful comments:

"I ask them how they are feeling and I try to help them feel better."

"If you have nothing nice to say, don't say anything."

Privacy, consent and boundaries formed another prominent understanding. Students referred to asking permission before posting another person's image, protecting personal information and respecting another person's space:

"Always ask for permission before posting something about another person."

"Respect someone's privacy and personal information."

A further theme concerned reflection and self-regulation. Students described pausing before posting, considering how a message might be interpreted and anticipating its effects:

"Always think before you post something."

Some responses also referred to reporting harmful content, telling a trusted adult or supporting someone experiencing online bullying. Intervention thus appeared alongside kindness, consent and reflection in students' own descriptions of responsible conduct.

4.3. Professional Perspectives on Digital Media and Value Enactment

Three connected themes were identified across the professional groups: belonging and peer visibility, reduced inhibition and reflection, and digitally performed identity. Their emphasis varied by professional position. Subject Education Officers focused particularly on curriculum and peer influence; school leaders on conflict, circulation and family–school boundaries; youth-organisation representatives on immersion and changing forms of interaction; and psychosocial professionals on identity, vulnerability and social validation. Participant codes used below identify the professional group and participant number (SubEO, SHAH, YOR and PST, respectively). Table 2 summarises the three themes, their representation across professional groups, and illustrative quotations from the interviews.

Table 2. Summary of professional themes and illustrative evidence.

Theme	Main Idea	Professional Groups Represented in the Theme/Illustrative Material	Illustrative Quotation
Belonging and peer visibility	Professionals described acceptance, peer evaluation and public visibility as contextual pressures that may shape choices.	Most explicit in Subject Education Officers and school leaders; the theme was considered comparatively across the full professional corpus.	"to please others instead" (SubEO6)
Reduced inhibition and reflection	Distance, speed, circulation and reduced face-to-face cues were described as conditions that may weaken reflection or escalate conflict.	Evidence was identified across all four professional groups, with illustrative extracts from Subject Education Officers and school leaders.	"would you say it if you were saying it face-to-face?" (SubEO2)
Digital identity and social validation	Professionals linked digital participation with identity performance, continuous connection, influencers and peer/platform feedback.	Illustrative material came from youth-organisation, psychosocial and Subject Education Officer participants; emphases differed by role.	"an extension of your arm" (YOR3)

4.3.1. Belonging and Peer Visibility

Professionals consistently described belonging as important during early adolescence. They did not treat it as inherently negative, but some believed that the desire for acceptance could make choices conditional on peer approval. SubEO6 described situations in which a young person could recognise that something was wrong but still feel a need "to please others instead"; SubEO3 similarly suggested that values could be "changed and twisted" in efforts to secure acceptance.

Online visibility was perceived to intensify this pressure because conduct could be immediately evaluated, recorded and circulated. School leaders also linked peer visibility with pressure to display the appropriate appearance, brands and devices. These accounts framed online conduct as socially exposed rather than simply individual.

4.3.2. Reduced Inhibition and Reflection

Professionals across the four groups contrasted online communication with face-to-face interaction. SubEO2 summarised this through the question:

> *"What you're writing online—would you say it if you were saying it face-to-face?"* (SubEO2)

School leaders similarly described online disputes as more easily escalated because messages or calls could be overheard, recorded and redistributed beyond those involved in the original exchange. SHAH1 described some young people as able to "throw fire" online because they felt protected from face-to-face consequences. This illustrates how professionals interpreted distance and circulation as altering the interpersonal conditions of communication.

These accounts complemented students' spontaneous references to thinking before posting. Professionals interpreted the pause before action as a form of emotional and ethical regulation made more difficult by speed, distance and reduced access to another person's immediate reaction.

4.3.3. Digital Identity and Social Validation

Professionals also described digital environments as settings in which identity and social worth were negotiated. YOR3 characterised the mobile phone as "an extension of your arm", capturing the perceived continuity between digital participation and everyday life. PST4 described influencers as "so-called new prophets", an intentionally strong metaphor for the authority that some adults perceived social-media figures to hold when reinforced by peer attention and platform feedback.

This interpretation was not uniform. Some professionals emphasised comparison, appearance and dependence on approval, whereas others resisted a narrative of value decline. SubEO1 argued that traditional values had "taken another dimension, the online dimension", extending respect, responsibility and trust into digital citizenship. These differing perspectives present digital participation both as a source of new social pressures and as an extension of established values into online environments.

4.4. Integration of the Findings

Table 3 compares the principal relationships across the three evidence components.

The joint display highlights common concerns around privacy, consent, kindness and reflection. Students endorsed and illustrated these values in their accounts, while professionals drew attention to the relational and communicative settings in which they are negotiated. Responses concerning cyberbullying and self-regulation introduced further questions about peer relationships, visibility and the demands of responding to online harm.

Table 3. Joint display integrating student survey and professional interview findings.

Domain	Student Closed-Item Data	Student Open-Response Data	Professional Interview Data	Relationship
Privacy and consent	Strong endorsement and reported permission-seeking	Permission, privacy and boundaries were salient examples	Concern about oversharing and blurred boundaries	Convergence
Respectful communication	Strong reported commitment	Kind communication and non-harm were prominent	Online disinhibition and rapid escalation were emphasised	Complementarity and tension
Responses to online harm	Reporting or blocking and telling an adult were most common; ignoring was selected by 24.4%	Some students mentioned supporting, reporting or seeking help	Peer approval and visibility were raised as possible contextual constraints; students' reasons were not measured	Complementarity; students' reasons remain a silence
Self-regulation	Most reported screen-time control, but 22.4% were unsure	Thinking before posting was salient	Speed, visibility and continuous connection were described as possible challenges to reflection	Complementarity; no direct behavioural evidence

The strongest points of complementarity concern how ethical choices occur amid rapid communication, social evaluation and competing responsibilities. The perspectives also differ in emphasis: students described values and practices positively, whereas professionals drew attention to tensions and pressures that may accompany digital participation.

5. Discussion

The findings reveal three interconnected dimensions of digital responsibility among early adolescents in Malta. First, students articulated a clear vocabulary of digital values, particularly privacy, consent, respect and care. Second, their responses to online bullying and screen-time regulation were more varied, highlighting the complexity of applying these values in particular situations. Third, professional accounts foregrounded the social conditions of online conduct, especially peer belonging, visibility, identity and changing communication dynamics. Together, these findings position digital citizenship as a relational and context-dependent dimension of values education.

5.1. Digital Values as an Existing Moral Resource

Students strongly endorsed privacy and respectful communication and commonly reported seeking consent and checking information before sharing it. Their open responses gave these principles practical form through kindness, non-harm, permission, privacy and reflection. These findings show that a vocabulary of digital responsibility was readily available within students' descriptions of online conduct.

Digital responsibility was expressed in relational as well as protective terms. Privacy referred not only to personal safety but also to another person's control over images and information. This is consistent with rights-based accounts that position young people as digital participants entitled to expression, privacy and protection while recognising responsibilities towards others (Livingstone and Third 2017), and with research showing that children's privacy management involves social relationships and judgement rather than settings knowledge alone (Stoilova et al. 2020).

Respect was expressed through encouragement, attention and avoidance of harmful language, supporting conceptions of digital citizenship as ethical and participatory engagement (Choi 2016). Reports of checking online information also suggest an orientation towards responsible sharing, linking digital judgement with honesty towards others.

5.2. Value Endorsement and Reported Action

Students' responses showed strong endorsement of privacy and respectful communication alongside greater variation in reported approaches to cyberbullying and screen-time regulation. These patterns draw attention to the situational demands of digital responsibility. Responding to online harm, for example, may involve competing considerations of personal safety, peer relationships, responsibility and confidence in available courses of action.

Reporting or blocking and telling a trusted adult were the most frequently selected responses to online bullying, while almost one-quarter selected ignoring the incident. The latter response could reflect uncertainty, avoidance of escalation, perceived inefficacy, fear of consequences or reluctance to intervene. Students' accounts of supporting others add an important relational dimension to this pattern, without establishing which considerations guided individual responses.

Cyberbystander research connects intervention with empathy, responsibility, relationships, anticipated consequences and self-efficacy (DeSmet et al. 2014; Hu et al. 2023; Cayzer-Haller et al. 2026). Moral disengagement emphasises the reframing of responsibility and harm (Bandura 1991), while the theory of planned behaviour attends to perceived norms and behavioural control (Ajzen 1991). These perspectives offer complementary ways of examining why ethical action may be difficult in socially complex online situations.

This variation suggests a productive direction for future research: pairing students' value judgements with matched online scenarios and accounts of their decision-making would help clarify how perceived norms, efficacy, relationships and situational pressures shape responses.

5.3. Social Cost as a Contextual Hypothesis: Belonging, Visibility and Online Disinhibition

The professional interviews highlighted interpersonal and reputational considerations associated with ethical decision-making in peer-visible digital settings. Belonging, acceptance and social validation were recurring concerns, suggesting that the perceived social consequences of an action may be relevant to how adolescents negotiate digital responsibility. We use 'social cost' to describe these potential interpersonal consequences. This interpretation connects with research on adolescent belonging and social risk (Crone and Konijn 2018; Tomova et al. 2021), social-media identity development (Avci et al. 2025), and the continuity of online and offline life expressed through the 'onlife' concept (Floridi 2015).

The theory of planned behaviour suggests how perceived norms and behavioural control might interact with an endorsed attitude (Ajzen 1991). Cyberbystander research likewise foregrounds efficacy and anticipated consequences, whereas moral disengagement provides a distinct account centred on how responsibility and harm are interpreted. Together, these approaches offer avenues for investigating the social dynamics identified in professional accounts.

Interviewees also described rapid escalation, distance from recipients and weakened face-to-face cues. Their accounts resonate with Suler's (2004) description of online disinhibition and with review evidence associating disinhibition with adolescent cyberbullying (Wang et al. 2024). They draw attention to how speed, distance and circulation may affect opportunities for reflection in digitally mediated encounters.

5.4. Convergence, Divergence and Silence

Across the integrated findings, students and professionals recognised respect, privacy and responsibility as central to digital conduct. Yet their emphases differed: students described familiar values and everyday practices, while professionals foregrounded the peer and communication environments within which such choices take place. This

contrast broadens the discussion from individual attitudes to the relational character of digital citizenship.

Professionals' more cautionary accounts of peer pressure, conflict and social validation stand alongside students' generally positive self-reports. These perspectives may reflect different positions within adolescents' digital lives: students describe their own intentions and customary practices, while professionals encounter situations through curriculum, school leadership, youth work and psychosocial support. Their differing emphases invite closer investigation of the circumstances under which digital values are enacted.

The interviews also suggest questions that students could explore directly in future research, including how they assess the social consequences of intervening, respond to competing loyalties and judge the safety and efficacy of available actions.

6. Educational Implications

The findings position digital citizenship as a form of applied values education rather than solely a matter of technical rules or compliance. Students' familiarity with privacy, consent, respectful communication and responsible sharing provides a basis for discussing how values guide judgement when digital situations are ambiguous. This interpretation is consistent with critiques of narrowly rule-based approaches (Mattison 2016) and accounts connecting digital literacy with moral judgement and character (Vallor 2016; Harrison and Polizzi 2022).

Teaching could therefore include realistic scenarios in which values compete or the safest response is not obvious. Structured dialogue, role play and reflective writing can provide opportunities to consider, for example, how to support a peer without escalating a conflict, how to refuse circulation of humiliating content, or when to seek adult assistance. The educational aim would be to practise judgement and identify safe courses of action rather than simply rehearse a single "correct" answer.

Bystander education may usefully present several safe responses, including private support for the person targeted, reporting or blocking content, seeking adult assistance and avoiding further circulation. Digital consent can likewise be addressed as a relational practice involving permission, refusal, image-sharing and forwarding. Information verification can be connected with honesty towards others, while self-regulation can include pausing before posting and reflecting on how messages may be interpreted.

These practices could be reinforced through Ethics, Personal, Social and Career Development, and whole-school approaches. Their effectiveness would benefit from evaluation in future classroom-based research.

Sustained support for educators is also important, since Maltese teachers have identified rapid technological change, emerging online influences and limited access to updated training and resources as continuing challenges for digital citizenship education (Fenech and Zammit 2026).

7. Limitations

The findings are based on self-report and may reflect aspiration, social desirability, moral self-presentation or difficulty in accurately assessing one's own customary behaviour. Completion took place at school with staff present, which may have strengthened socially desirable responding. No observational, behavioural or matched knowledge–behaviour measures were included.

The six closed items came from a wider values survey and used different wording and response formats. They do not form a validated scale or equivalent measures of one construct. Cross-item contrasts may therefore reflect measurement design, abstraction and response constraints. The single-choice cyberbullying item captured only the response

students considered most representative, not all actions they might take, and the study did not directly measure the reasons for that choice.

Although all eligible schools and students were approached, anonymous participation meant that a response rate and school-level clustering structure could not be calculated. The 612 valid responses provided substantial national coverage but were not statistically representative: Church-school students were over-represented, while State- and Independent-school students were under-represented. School-sector comparisons were therefore not used in the revised interpretation.

The open-ended item requested one example, so its themes indicate salience rather than prevalence. The professional interviews provided situated adult interpretations; classroom teachers were not directly represented, professional groups were uneven in size, and the interviewees did not observe the surveyed students in the situations addressed by the questionnaire. Professional roles may also shape what kinds of incidents become visible to them. Social pressure, peer approval, fear of exclusion and anticipated interpersonal consequences were not directly measured from the students; professional interviews can contextualise these possibilities but cannot substitute for students' own accounts of them.

Finally, the cross-sectional secondary analysis focused on a limited set of items and cannot establish whether value endorsement predicts subsequent action. Future research could combine matched value-and-scenario measures, student interviews, repeated or longitudinal designs, and direct measures of norms, efficacy, belonging and anticipated social consequences to examine the proposed social-cost interpretation alongside competing explanations.

8. Conclusions

This study highlights the place of digital values in the everyday moral understandings of early adolescents in Malta. Students expressed strong commitments to privacy, respect, consent and responsible information sharing, while their responses to cyberbullying and screen-time regulation showed greater variation. Their open-ended accounts illustrated how these values were understood through practices of kindness, non-harm and reflection.

Professional perspectives enriched these findings by drawing attention to the social environments in which digital choices occur. Belonging, peer visibility, social validation and altered communication conditions emerged as important considerations in interpreting the complexities of digital responsibility.

Together, these findings contribute to an understanding of digital citizenship as applied values education, in which ethical judgement involves relationships, responsibilities and sometimes competing considerations. They also offer a basis for educational approaches that move beyond communicating rules towards helping young people consider values and make informed decisions in complex digital situations.

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Appendix A. Digital-Values Items

1. Online privacy

How important is it to respect yourself by keeping your personal information private online?

Response options: Very important (1); Important (2); Not so important (3); Not important at all (4).

2. Respectful communication

Do you agree or disagree? "I try to be kind and respectful when I post or chat online."

Response options: Strongly agree (1); Agree (2); Not sure (3); Disagree (4); Strongly disagree (5).

3. Permission before image-sharing

How often do you ask the person first before you post or share their photo or video?

Response options: Always (1); Often (2); Sometimes (3); Rarely (4); Never (5).

4. Response to online bullying

If you see a mean message or bullying online, what do you usually do?

Response options: Select one: Report or block the account; Tell a trusted adult; Ignore it; Support the person being targeted (e.g., send a kind message); Join in.

5. Screen-time self-control

Do you agree or disagree? "I try to use self-control so that screen time does not get in the way of important things like sleep, schoolwork, or family time."

Response options: Strongly agree (1); Agree (2); Not sure (3); Disagree (4); Strongly disagree (5).

6. Information verification

How often do you try to be honest and responsible by checking if information online is trustworthy before sharing it?

Response options: Always (1); Often (2); Sometimes (3); Rarely (4); Never (5).

7. **Open-ended respect and care**

Can you write one way you show respect and care for others online?
Response options: Open-ended response.

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