

## The Relationship between the Moral Orientation of Decisions Made in Situations of Potential Cyberbullying and the Students' Individual Psychological Characteristics<sup>□</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

**Background.** The Internet environment creates a special reality for communication where the systems of norms and values accepted in society often cease to operate. When conflict situations arise, the anonymity of Internet communications can reduce the personal moral responsibility for a person's "digital actions" and lead to unethical behavior, including cyberbullying. Identifying the system of cognitive and personal factors involved in regulating the moral orientation of behavior within online communication is an urgent scientific task.

**Objective:** to study the relationship between the moral orientation of decisions made by students in situations of potential cyberbullying and their individual psychological characteristics.

**Design.** The study involved 85 respondents from 18 to 26 years old ( $M = 21$ ;  $SD = 1.8$ ) students. The following techniques were used: *Justice Care* test by S. Molchanov, L. Mikhelson's communication skills test (adapted by Y. Gilbukh), and the authors' *Open Questions* and *Case Method* tests. These techniques aimed to identify the content of ideas about cyberbullying and the decision-making orientations (i.e. ethical/unethical) in situations of potential cyberbullying.

**Results.** Significant positive correlations were revealed (Spearman's  $\rho$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) between the ethical choices in situations of potential cyberbullying, the subscales of moral development levels ("Self-sacrifice", "Self-respect") and the basis of ideas concerning cyberbullying. Results also indicated significant negative correlations (Spearman's  $\rho$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) between unethical choices in the situations under study, the *preconventional* moral development level subscale and communication skills.

**Conclusion.** It was revealed that the moral orientation of decisions made in situations of potential cyberbullying is significantly related to the following individual psychologi-

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cal characteristics of students: (1) students who more often choose ethical decisions have well-formed ideas about cyberbullying as a phenomenon, do not prioritize their interests exclusively and take into account other people's values; and, (2) students who choose unethical decisions have a low level of communication skills development level and tend to seek personal gain without taking into account the values of other people.

**Keywords:** Cyberbullying, moral development, communication skills, decision making, the concepts' formation process, moral orientation, moral dilemmas

#### Highlights:

- Communication in the Internet environment is fundamentally different from communication in real life. Moral norms and rules applied in everyday life often cease to operate in virtual communication. To understand the characteristics of moral choice in the digital environment, it is necessary to identify the system of cognitive and personal factors involved in the regulation processes that influence a person's moral orientation within online communication, particularly when making decisions in situations of potential cyberbullying.
- Students with well-developed communication skills are more likely to identify all the signs indicative of cyberbullying and have a clearer understanding of how to behave in situations of potential cyberbullying and avoid harming themselves or their interlocutor.
- A fully formed understanding of the phenomenon of cyberbullying, including the ability to identify its necessary and necessary signs and to recognize it, increases the likelihood of choosing ethical decisions in situations of potential cyberbullying.
- Students who are more likely to make ethical decisions in situations of potential cyberbullying tend to interact with others while considering their values.
- Students who make unethical decisions in situations of potential cyberbullying are more likely to prioritize only their own interests and seek personal gain from communication.

#### АННОТАЦИЯ

**Актуальность.** Интернет-среда создает особую реальность для коммуникации, в которой принятые в обществе системы норм и ценностей часто перестают действовать. При возникновении конфликтных ситуаций анонимность интернет-коммуникации может снижать степень личной моральной ответственности человека за свои «цифровые поступки» и приводить к выбору неэтичных способов поведения, к которым, в частности, относится кибербуллинг. Выделение системы когнитивных и личностных факторов, включенных в процессы регуляции моральной направленности поведения при онлайн-коммуникации, – актуальная научная задача.

**Цель.** Изучить связь моральной направленности принимаемых студентами решений в ситуациях, содержащих возможность кибербуллинга, с их индивидуально-психологическими особенностями.

**Организация исследования.** Выборка. В исследовании принимали участие 85 респондентов в возрасте от 18 до 26 лет ( $M = 21$ ;  $SD = 1,8$ ) – студенты разных лет обучения. Методы. Используются методики «Справедливость – забота» С.В. Молчанова, тест коммуникативных умений Л. Михельсона (в адаптации Ю.З. Гильбуха), авторские методы «Открытые вопросы» и «Кейс-метод» на выявление содержания представлений о кибербуллинге и направленности принятия решений (этичные/неэтичные) в ситуациях потенциального кибербуллинга.

**Результаты.** Установлены значимые положительные связи ( $p$  Спирмена;  $p < 0,05$ ) между этичными выборами принимаемых решений в ситуациях потен-

циального кибербуллинга, субшкалами уровней морального развития («Самопожертвование», «Самоуважение») и содержанием представлений о кибербуллинге. А также значимые отрицательные связи ( $r$  Спирмена;  $p < 0,05$ ) между неэтичными выборами в изучаемых ситуациях, субшкалой «Доконвенционального» уровня морального развития и коммуникативными умениями.

**Выводы.** Выявлено, что моральная направленность принимаемых решений в ситуациях потенциального кибербуллинга значимо связана со следующими индивидуально-психологическими особенностями студентов: 1) у студентов, чаще выбирающих этичные решения, полностью сформированы представления о кибербуллинге как явлении, они не ставят в приоритет только свои интересы и учитывают ценности других людей; 2) студенты, выбирающие неэтичные решения, обладают низким уровнем развития коммуникативных умений, ищут личную выгоду в общении и реже учитывают ценности других людей.

**Ключевые слова:** Кибербуллинг, моральное развитие, коммуникативные умения, принятие решений, процесс образования понятий, моральная ориентация, моральные дилеммы

#### **Ключевые положения:**

- Коммуникация в интернет-среде носит иной характер, нежели общение в реальной жизни. Моральные нормы и правила, применяемые в повседневности, в виртуальной коммуникации часто перестают действовать. Для понимания особенностей морального выбора в цифровой среде необходимо выделение системы когнитивных и личностных факторов, включенных в процессы регуляции моральной направленности поведения при онлайн-коммуникации, в частности, при принятии человеком решений в ситуациях содержащих потенциальную возможность кибербуллинга.
- Студенты с развитыми коммуникативными умениями чаще выделяют все признаки кибербуллинга и лучше представляют, как себя вести в ситуациях, потенциально содержащих возможность кибербуллинга, чтобы не навредить себе и собеседнику.
- Полностью сформированное у человека представление о явлении кибербуллинга (способность выделять систему необходимых и достаточных признаков кибербуллинга как явления и распознавать его) повышает процент выбора этичных решений в ситуациях, содержащих возможность кибербуллинга.
- Студенты, чаще выбирающие этичные решения в ситуациях, содержащих потенциальную возможность кибербуллинга, стремятся взаимодействовать с другими людьми, учитывая их ценности.
- Студенты, выбирающие неэтичные решения в ситуациях потенциального кибербуллинга, чаще ставят в приоритет только свои интересы и ищут личную выгоду от общения.

#### **RESUMEN**

**Relevancia.** El entorno de Internet crea una realidad particular para la comunicación, en la que los sistemas de normas y valores aceptados en la sociedad a menudo dejan de funcionar. En situaciones de conflicto, el anonimato de la comunicación en Internet puede reducir el grado de responsabilidad moral personal de una persona por sus «actos digitales» y llevar a la elección de comportamientos no éticos, entre los que se encuentra el ciberacoso. La identificación de un sistema de factores cognitivos y personales implicados en los procesos de regulación de la orientación moral del comportamiento en la comunicación en línea es una tarea científica relevante.

**Objetivo.** Estudiar la relación entre la orientación moral de las decisiones que toman los estudiantes en situaciones que contienen la posibilidad de ciberacoso y sus características individuales y psicológicas.

**Organización de la investigación.** Muestra. En la investigación participaron 85 estudiantes encuestados, de entre 18 y 26 años ( $M=21$ ;  $DE=1,8$ ), de diferentes años de estudio. Métodos. Se utilizaron las metodologías «Justicia – Cuidado» de S.V. Molchanov, la prueba de habilidades comunicativas de L. Michelson (adaptada por Y.Z. Gilbukh), y los métodos originales «Preguntas abiertas» y «Método de casos» para identificar el contenido de las ideas sobre el ciberacoso y la orientación de la toma de decisiones (éticas/no éticas) en situaciones de potencial ciberacoso.

**Resultados.** Se establecieron relaciones positivas significativas ( $\rho$  de Spearman;  $p < 0,05$ ) entre las elecciones éticas de las decisiones tomadas en situaciones de potencial ciberacoso, las subescalas de los niveles de desarrollo moral («Autosacrificio», «Autoestima») y el contenido de las ideas sobre el ciberacoso. También se encontraron relaciones negativas significativas ( $\rho$  de Spearman;  $p < 0,05$ ) entre las elecciones poco éticas en las situaciones estudiadas, la subescala del nivel de desarrollo moral «Preconvencional» y las habilidades comunicativas.

**Conclusiones.** Se reveló que la orientación moral de las decisiones tomadas en situaciones de potencial ciberacoso está significativamente relacionada con las siguientes características psicológicas individuales de los estudiantes: 1) los estudiantes que eligen con más frecuencia decisiones éticas tienen una comprensión completa del ciberacoso como fenómeno, no priorizan solamente sus intereses y tienen en cuenta los valores de otras personas; 2) los estudiantes que eligen decisiones poco éticas tienen un bajo nivel de desarrollo de habilidades comunicativas, buscan un beneficio personal en la comunicación y con menor frecuencia tienen en cuenta los valores de otras personas.

**Palabras clave:** Ciberacoso, desarrollo moral, habilidades comunicativas, toma de decisiones, proceso de formación de conceptos, orientación moral, dilemas morales

**Disposiciones clave:**

- La comunicación en el entorno de Internet tiene una naturaleza diferente a la interacción en la vida real. Las normas y reglas morales aplicadas en la vida cotidiana a menudo dejan de funcionar en la comunicación virtual. Para comprender las características de la elección moral en el entorno digital, es necesario identificar un sistema de factores cognitivos y personales involucrados en los procesos de regulación de la orientación moral del comportamiento en la comunicación en línea, en particular, al tomar decisiones en situaciones que contienen la posibilidad potencial de ciberacoso.
- Los estudiantes con habilidades comunicativas desarrolladas identifican con mayor frecuencia todos los signos de ciberacoso y tienen una mejor idea de cómo comportarse en situaciones que potencialmente contienen la posibilidad de ciberacoso para no dañarse a sí mismos ni a su interlocutor.
- La comprensión completa por parte de una persona del fenómeno del ciberacoso (la capacidad de identificar un sistema de signos necesarios y suficientes del ciberacoso como fenómeno y reconocerlo) aumenta el porcentaje de elección de decisiones éticas en situaciones que contienen la posibilidad de ciberacoso.
- Los estudiantes que eligen con más frecuencia decisiones éticas en situaciones que contienen la posibilidad potencial de ciberacoso, se esfuerzan por interactuar con otras personas teniendo en cuenta sus valores.
- Los estudiantes que eligen decisiones poco éticas en situaciones de potencial ciberacoso, a menudo priorizan solamente sus intereses y buscan un beneficio personal de la comunicación.

## RESUME

**Origines.** L'environnement Internet crée une réalité particulière pour la communication, dans laquelle les systèmes de normes et de valeurs acceptés dans la société cessent souvent de fonctionner. Lorsque des situations de conflit surviennent, l'anonymat des communications sur Internet peut réduire le degré de responsabilité morale personnelle d'une personne pour ses « actions numériques » et conduire au choix de comportements contraires à l'éthique, qui incluent notamment le cyberharcèlement. L'identification du système de facteurs cognitifs et personnels inclus dans les processus de régulation de l'orientation morale du comportement dans la communication en ligne est une tâche scientifique actuelle.

**Objectif.** Le but de ce travail est d'étudier le lien entre l'orientation morale des décisions prises par les étudiants dans des situations contenant la possibilité de cyberharcèlement avec leurs caractéristiques psychologiques individuelles.

**Méthodes.** Echantillonnage. L'étude a porté sur 85 répondants âgés de 18 à 26 ans ( $M=21$  ;  $SD=1,8$ ), les étudiants de différentes années d'études. Méthodes. Les méthodes suivantes sont utilisées : la méthode « Justice – Soins » de S.V. Molchanov, le teste de compétences en communication de L. Michelson (adapté par Yu. Z. Gilbukh), les méthodes de l'auteur « Questions ouvertes » et « Méthode de cas » pour identifier le contenu des idées sur le cyberharcèlement et l'orientation de la prise de décision (éthique/non éthique) dans des situations de cyberharcèlement potentiel.

**Résultats.** Des liens positifs significatifs ont été établis ( $\rho$  de Spearman ;  $p < 0,05$ ) entre les choix éthiques de décisions prises dans des situations de cyberharcèlement potentiel, les sous-échelles de niveaux de développement moral (« dévouement », « respect de soi ») et le contenu des idées sur le cyberharcèlement. Ainsi que des liens négatifs significatifs ( $\rho$  de Spearman ;  $p < 0,05$ ) entre les choix immoraux dans les situations étudiées, la sous-échelle du niveau « préconventionnel » de développement moral et de compétences en communication.

**Conclusions.** On a révélé que l'orientation morale des décisions prises dans des situations de cyberharcèlement potentiel est étroitement liée aux caractéristiques psychologiques individuelles suivantes des étudiants : 1) les étudiants qui choisissent plus souvent des décisions éthiques ont des idées bien formées sur le cyberharcèlement en tant que phénomène, ils ne donnent pas la priorité uniquement leurs intérêts et prendre en compte les valeurs des autres ; 2) les étudiants qui choisissent des décisions contraires à l'éthique ont un faible niveau de développement des compétences en communication, recherchent un gain personnel en communication et sont moins susceptibles de prendre en compte les valeurs des autres.

**Mots-clés:** Cyberharcèlement; développement moral; compétences en communication; prise de décision; processus de formation de concepts; orientation morale; dilemmes moraux

### Points principaux:

- La communication dans l'environnement Internet est d'une nature différente de la communication dans la vie réelle. Les normes et règles morales appliquées dans la vie quotidienne cessent souvent de s'appliquer dans la communication virtuelle. Pour comprendre les caractéristiques du choix moral dans l'environnement numérique, il est nécessaire d'identifier un système de facteurs cognitifs et personnels inclus dans les processus de régulation de l'orientation morale du comportement dans la communication en ligne, en particulier lorsqu'une personne prend des décisions dans des situations contenant le potentiel de cyberharcèlement.
- Les étudiants ayant des compétences de communication développées sont plus susceptibles d'identifier tous les signes de cyberharcèlement et d'avoir une meilleure idée de la façon de se comporter dans des situations pouvant potentiellement

contenir la possibilité de cyberharcèlement, afin de ne pas se blesser ni nuire à leur interlocuteur.

- Une compréhension complète du phénomène du cyberharcèlement (la capacité d'identifier un système de signes nécessaires et suffisants du cyberharcèlement en tant que phénomène et de le reconnaître) augmente le pourcentage de choix de décisions éthiques dans des situations contenant un risque de cyberharcèlement.
- Les élèves qui sont plus susceptibles de prendre des décisions éthiques dans des situations présentant un potentiel de cyberharcèlement ont tendance à interagir avec les autres en fonction de leurs valeurs.
- Les élèves qui prennent des décisions contraires à l'éthique dans des situations de cyberharcèlement potentiel sont plus susceptibles de donner la priorité uniquement à leurs propres intérêts et de rechercher un gain personnel grâce à la communication.

## Introduction

Interaction in the Internet environment is of a different nature than communication in real life. Moral norms and rules applied in everyday life often cease to operate in virtual communication. As a result of the rejection of societal norms adopted at this stage of societal development, antisocial Internet behavior arises (Pogozhina et al., 2020), leading to the nullification of socially significant values and the anonymization of a person (Vinogradov et al., 2020).

The research on the specifics of digital behavior is based on characteristics related to communication formation and the cognitive, motivational, and emotional spheres of Internet users (Pogozhina et al., 2020). Digital mediation of behavior creates a *new normal* that restructures established rules and dictates new ones. Users remain connected to the Internet most of their time and, through constant interaction, they enter a mixed reality. As a result, the boundaries between the two environments (offline and online) gradually blur. The integration of Internet technologies in everyday life fundamentally changes the personality (Soldatova et al., 2021; Skarbez et al., 2021).

The foundation of digital communication lies in its anonymity, which has both positive and negative elements. On the one hand, anonymity promotes liberation, but on the other, it can provoke conflict and reduce personal responsibility when engaged in unethical acts (Soldatova, Yarmina, 2019) including the emergence of cyberbullying (Belsey, 2019).

Deliberate cyberbullying is characterized by the following (Soldatova, Yarmina, 2019): (1) anonymity; (2) impunity; (3) round-the-clock access to online communication; (4) inability to observe the victim's emotions; (5) repeated exposure to different social networks; (6) temporary asynchrony; (7) increasing the number of witnesses who either come to the rescue or speak-out against the victim.

These features, including the lack of reliable information about the interlocutor and the inability to observe each other's emotions, can create uncertainty when making decisions about how to react to another's words. In such cases, one must rely on incomplete information concerning the moral orientation of both the interlocutor and the context of the circumstance (Kornilova, 2015). Decision-making is un-

derstood as an evaluation of alternatives and choosing the optimal course of action (Kornilova, 2016).

The choice of behavioral strategy in a potential cyberbullying situation can be influenced not only by the remote presence of users enabled by information technology but also by the moral norms accepted in society. Internet users often encounter contradictory patterns of online behavior that distort ideas about social and moral norms of interaction in virtual settings and change behavioral patterns formed in real life (Soldatova et al., 2013).

Morality, as a system of norms and values, serves as a source of moral judgments and motives for individual behavior (Zaikin, 2012). Moral development, including the development of moral judgment, occurs alongside intellectual development. At its initial stages, the behavioral driver encompasses the morality of submission, characterized by the acceptance of all instructions from a significant attachment figure and the desire to create a positive impression. At its final stages, moral development transitions to the morality of cooperation, which involves critical judgments about societal rules and norms — recognizing that they may change and are not absolute; this includes a consideration of the interests of others (Molchanov, 2011). As cognitive attributes develop, and social experience accumulates, the level of moral development also evolves. There are two established periodizations of moral judgment development: (1) one based on the features of the moral justification (principle) in moral decision making (justice); pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional development levels (Kohlberg, 1984). And (2), the degree of moral orientation towards the interests of others when making a moral decision (care), this includes self-care, self-sacrifice and self-respect (Gilligan, 1976).

It was revealed that different levels of moral development in Internet users affect their attitude towards adhering to ethical standards of communication in the online environment. Respondents with high levels of moral development demonstrate a positive attitude towards ethical standard; for example, in their willingness to comply with copyright protections for published photographs and recordings, while respondents with low levels of moral development demonstrated a willingness to violate rules regarding privacy and indicated a lower degree of personal responsibility concerning actions taken online (Karabanova et al., 2019).

Based on the results of studying the connections between the characteristics of a person's behavior in ambiguous moral circumstances and their moral development level, decision-making models are constructed (Kornilova, 2016; Gonzalez Alonso et al., 2020). It has been established that the decision-making process in such situations is influenced by a person's intellectual and personal potential (cognitive assessment based on personal values) (Kornilova, 2016) and their readiness to make a choice (Leontyev et al., 2011). This also applies to situations of choice when solving moral dilemmas (Chigrinova, 2015).

Thus, it was revealed that Machiavellianism is a predictor of a manipulative behavioral strategy, which is associated with the pre-conventional moral development level according to L. Kohlberg (1984) and the self-care level according to C. Gilligan (1976). At this stage, a person complies with norms to avoid punishment. Conversely, people who are at the post-conventional morality level according to L. Kohlberg

(1984) and at the self-respect level according to C. Gilligan (1976) are guided by universal ethical principles and treat other people as an immediate value (Kornilova et al., 2010).

The uncertainty level in ambiguous situations decreases as the process of analyzing information unfolds which includes increased awareness of the goals of one's choice and the principles of decision-making (Kornilova, 2016). By increasing moral awareness, education in ethical principles and behavior has been found to promote ethical decision making (Kim, 2021). Additionally, The formation of moral behavior in children, via educational measures, foster an increase in personal responsibility and decrease of moral alienation, which leads to a reduction of antisocial behavior, including bullying and cyberbullying (Zych et al., 2020). Low moral awareness is associated with unethical behavior. People who view mild immoral acts as acceptable have been shown to be less aware of the harmful consequences, including more serious moral violations (Reynolds et al., 2015). Instances of unintentional unethical behavior have been attributed to ethical blind spots, where individuals are not fully aware of the ethical consequences of their decisions. This may occur due to implicit biases, temporary detachment from decision making, a failure to notice the unethical behavior of others, and a tendency to downplay its negative impact on an anonymous group of people rather than on a specific victim (Sezer et al., 2015).

Also, a person's inability to transfer ethical standards realized in real life to the online environment may be a consequence of insufficient moral flexibility, which is an unethical Internet behavior predictor. Studies of Internet behavior such as deception, scamming, theft, sending spam, and similar actions have demonstrated that Internet users who exhibit such behavior are characterized by moral immaturity and an inability to foresee the consequences of their actions, which in most cases are negative (Voiskunsky, 2010).

Studies of cross-cultural differences in the values underlying moral choice comparing two approaches (cognitive and empathy) confirm that moral choice is regulated by components from the cognitive sphere as well as the personal spheres (Kornilova, 2016; Arutyunova et al., 2019). It is demonstrated that an individual's moral orientation towards the principle of justice or the principle of care is determined by the cultural context. Thus, in most cases, the justice strategy is preferred by American teenagers, while the care strategy is preferred by Russian and Kazakh teenagers (Molchanov, 2007).

The research of cognitive and empathic approaches demonstrates that one's behavior is derived from moral assessment is influenced by both rational intuitive judgments. The regulation of the latter includes an emotional component, which contributes to the *good* actions or the avoidance of *bad* actions. At the same time, it has been shown that emotions affect the regulation of moral behavior in different ways: they form their foundation, accompany the process, or emerge after the act (Arutyunova et al., 2019). Therefore, both the emotional and cognitive spheres can influence the moral orientation of decision making.

So, a negative association has been identified between aggressive antisocial behavior and empathy, defined as the ability to understand and share the emotions and feelings of others. Research exploring the relationship between cyberbullying and



adolescents' empathic responsiveness found that perpetrators of harassment exhibit less empathic responsiveness compared to victims or those not involved in cyberbullying (Steffgen et al., 2011).

An analysis of research papers demonstrates that a person's moral choice is influenced by both cognitive and personal-motivational components. At the same time, studies of the moral orientation of decision making on the Internet, in situations of potential cyberbullying, have not yet been found.

## Methods

To evaluate the developmental indicators of the studied variables, the following diagnostic techniques were used.

**1. Moral development level.** The *Justice — Care* test by S. Molchanov (Molchanov, 2003; Podolsky, 2005). Participants were required to evaluate their agreement level with 38 statements on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated “definitely disagree” and 5 indicated “definitely agree”. Based on two periodizations, those of L. Kohlberg and C. Gilligan, moral development levels were identified along the *Justice scale*, which reflects the moral principle a person relies on when making decisions. These include:

1. *Preconventional*: an instrumental exchange *quid pro quo*, orientation towards the power of the leader and fear of being punished.
2. *Conventional*: reliance on social law and order; focusing on other people's opinions of oneself to make a good impression on them.
3. *Postconventional*: reliance on universal ethical principles and the desire to consider the personal rights of all participants in the conflict.

On the *Care scale*, which reflects the degree of orientation towards the interests of another person when making moral decisions, the following levels were identified:

1. *Self-care*: orientation towards oneself, one's interests, a good opinion of oneself and others.
2. *Self-sacrifice*: conscious orientation towards others, protection of their rights based on internal values.
3. *Self-respect*: conscious choice between fairness and caring based on internal values.

**2. Communication skills development level** — Communication skills test by L. Mikhelson (adapted by Y. Gilbukh) (Gilbukh, 1995). Participants were required to evaluate twenty seven communicative situations, selecting the behavior options that best aligned with their likely response in each given situation, choosing from five given options. The test is structured as an achievement test, meaning it includes a correct answer that represents a standard or optimal communication style, indicating a competent approach to interaction.

Based on the results of participants' behavioral chooses in each situation, the percentage of correct reactions was determined, with the maximum possible indicator being 100%. The higher the percentage, the greater the level of communication skill,

indicating that participants respond more effectively to both positive and negative statements made by the interlocutor, support the conversation more proficiently, and demonstrate a better understanding of the interlocutor's feelings.

**3. The content of ideas about cyberbullying as a phenomenon** was assessed using the authors' methods: "Open Questions and the Case Method.

The Open Questions test included two tasks: (1) define cyberbullying ("What is cyberbullying?") and (2) "give an example of cyberbullying".

Case Method included 3 cases that underwent a peer review procedure to ensure consistency, achieving a Kendall's  $W = 0.965$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), which needed to be analyzed and (1) assessed whether the situation is a manifestation of cyberbullying (Yes/No/) is impossible to draw a conclusion) and, (2) "explain your choice".

Based on completion of the tasks, conclusions were drawn regarding the respondent's understanding of cyberbullying as a phenomenon:

- 1) Fully Formed (normative idea) – scored 3 points, indicating a clear and accurate understanding of cyberbullying.
- 2) Partially Formed – scored 2 points, reflecting some knowledge but with incomplete or partially accurate ideas.
- 3) Not Formed (erroneous idea) – scored 1 point, signifying misconceptions or a lack of understanding about the concept.

The completion of the test was evaluated on two scales:

- 1) Signs Scale: assessed the participant's ability to identify a system of necessary and sufficient characteristics of cyberbullying as a phenomenon (normative definition) and ability to give an example. This scale showed a reliability coefficient of Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.672$ .
- 2) Cases Scale: Measured participants' ability to recognize situations of cyberbullying and justify their answer. The reliability for this scale was Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.628$ .

**4. Moral orientation of decision-making in situations of possible cyberbullying** was assessed using the — "Case Method test which includes 5 cases based on the principle of moral dilemmas (developed by the authors, passed the peer review consistency procedure, achieving a Kendall's  $W = 0.954$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Each dilemma presented in the Case Method test models a situation of potential cyberbullying and offers four possible answer options. These options correspond to different moral orientations as described by L. Kohlberg and C. Gilligan:

1. Ethical, Justice-Oriented (EJ).
2. Ethical, Care-Oriented (EC).
3. Unethical, Justice-Oriented (UJ).
4. Unethical, Care-Oriented (UC).

Based on the results of participant responses to the array of cases, the number of choices (decisions) made by each respondent was assessed, and the sum of preferred choices, reflecting the tendency to make ethical or unethical decisions focused on justice or care.

### **Participants**

The study involved 85 respondents (N = 85) from 18 to 26 years old (M = 21; SD = 1.8), consisting of students from various academic years.

### **Procedure**

The studied variables were assessed via an anonymous survey that utilized the Google Internet platform. Data obtained were analyzed using primary descriptive and non-parametric statistics (Spearman's correlation coefficient) and recorded in the Microsoft Excel 2010 and the SPSS 23.0 software package.

### **Results**

Table 1 shows that respondents' ideas about cyberbullying as a phenomenon are partially formed. Not all respondents have high communication skills development level, but most of the study participants have adequate skills. Overall, ethical choices

Table 1

*Descriptive statistics of the studied variables*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>min</b>	<b>max</b>
Case studies (recognising CB)	85	2.38	0.55	3	9
Signs of a CB	85	2.25	0.58	0	6
Common perceptions of CB	85	2.32	0.56	3	15
Ethical justice	85	2.16	1.08	0	4
Ethical care	85	2.09	1.01	0	4
Unethical justice	85	0.18	0.39	0	1
Unethical caring	85	0.55	0.56	0	2
Communication Skills	85	71.47	12.99	35	98
Power of authority (Preconventional)	85	6.70	2.06	3	11
You-me I-you exchange (Pre-Conventional)	85	6.96	2.27	3	14
Orientation to the opinion of others (Conventional)	85	8.67	2.08	3	13
Social Law and Order (Conventional)	85	8.48	2.34	4	14
Social contact (Postconventional)	85	11.55	2.20	7	15
Ethical Principles (Postconventional)	85	10.62	2.10	5	15
Self-orientation (Self-Care)	85	9.00	2.11	3	15
Focusing on the interests of others (Self-Care)	85	10.72	2.20	5	15
Protecting the rights of others (Self-sacrifice)	85	10.85	2.17	5	15
Empathic orientation (Self-sacrifice)	85	10.72	2.20	5	15
Consideration of internalised values (Self-esteem)	85	20.63	3.13	11	28

prevail when making decisions in situations of potential cyberbullying (CB). Mostly, the respondents' judgments are dominated by the Postconventional level as well as by the Self-sacrifice and Self-respect levels. However, judgments at the Self-care and Preconventional levels are also present.

As a result of correlation analysis, significant associations were identified between the content of ideas about cyberbullying and communication skills (see Table 2). The data obtained indicate that respondents who better recognize cyberbullying situations more often identify all the features of the concept and have more developed communication skills.

Table 2

Significant associations between the content of ideas about cyberbullying and communication skills

Variables	Case studies (recognising cyberbullying)	Signs of cyberbullying	Communication Skills
Case studies (recognising cyberbullying)	1.000		
Signs of cyberbullying	0.377**	1.000	
Communication Skills	0.283**	0.042	1.000

Note. \*\* –  $p \leq 0.01$ ; \* –  $p \leq 0.05$

The results of the analysis of the decisions' moral orientation in possible cyberbullying situations and the studied variables of the students' intellectual and personal potential system demonstrated that there are significant associations (see Table 2):

- Between ethical choices (*Ethical Justice, Ethical Care*), subscales of moral development level (*Preconventional, Self-sacrifice, Self-respect*) and the content of ideas about cyberbullying (*General ideas about CB* referring to the ability to identify its defining characteristics recognize CB situations).
- Between unethical choices (“Unethical Justice,” “Unethical Care”), subscales of moral development levels (“Preconventional,” “Self-respect”) and communication skills (see Table 3).

The findings indicate that respondents who are more likely to make ethical decisions are less likely to seek to interact with people solely for personal gain, they are more understanding of other people's values, and they believe that everyone has the right to be protected. At the same time, these respondents have a high-level understanding of cyberbullying.

Respondents who more often choose unethical decisions have low communication skills development levels, are less likely to account for the values of other people,

Table 3

*The association between the choices' moral orientation and subscales of moral development levels, communication skills, and ideas about cyberbullying*

Переменные	Ethical Justice	Ethical Care	Unethical Justice	Unethical Care
Communication Skills	0.160	0.160	0.053	<b>-0.239*</b>
Common perceptions of CB	-0.040	<b>0.220*</b>	-0.143	-0.201
Power of authority (Preconventional)	-0.130	0.053	<b>0.256*</b>	-0.005
You-me I-you exchange (Pre-Conventional)	<b>-0.246*</b>	0.120	0.081	<b>0.236*</b>
Protecting the rights of others (Self-sacrifice)	<b>0.236*</b>	-0.161	-0.133	-0.088
Consideration of internalised values (Self-esteem)	<b>0.230*</b>	-0.134	<b>-0.266*</b>	-0.048

Note. \*  $p \leq 0.05$

seek personal benefit from communication and believe that order in society can only be ensured with the help of force or authority.

## Discussion

A significant association was identified between the content of ideas about cyberbullying, the ability to identify its signs, and to recognize such behavior when analyzing cases (see *Table 2*). This is consistent with findings regarding the relationship between the respondents' conceptual understanding of economic crimes, such as corruption, and their ability to recognize such crimes in a situation of uncertainty. It is demonstrated that, the more complete a students' ideas about corruption, the better developed their ability to both identify its essential features and recognize corrupt behavior (Pogozhina et al. 2021).

A significant relationship between communication skills and the content of ideas about cyberbullying was identified (see *Table 1*) indicates that respondents who communicate more and, therefore, have more developed communication skills are more likely to recognize situations of cyberbullying, identify signs of its manifestation and have a better idea of how to deal with it without harming themselves or others involved. The findings are consistent with research linking social and emotional competence to cyberbullying. Participants who apply knowledge and skills to manage their emotions and those of others, build and maintain desirable interpersonal relationships while simultaneously making responsible decisions, exhibit low aggressive and antisocial behavior levels (Marin-Lopez et al., 2020).

The discovered significant negative association between ethical choices and the Preconventional level subscale — “quid pro quo” indicates that respondents who frequently choose ethical decisions are less likely to interact with others purely for personal gain. They avoid prioritizing their own interests exclusively and account for

the values of other people. This is also confirmed by a significant positive association between ethical choices and the Self-sacrifice and Self-respect level subscales — *Protecting the rights of others* and *Conscious consideration of internalized values* (see *Table 3*). These results correlate with research on Machiavellianism as a predictor of manipulative behavioral strategies. A positive association with the pre-conventional level indicates compliance with prescribed norms solely to avoid punishment. A negative association with postconventional morality (according to L. Kohlberg) and Self-respect (according to C. Gilligan) indicated adherence to universal ethical principles and, as a result, a view of another person as an immediate value (Kornilova et al., 2010). Also, the obtained data correlates with the identification of empathy (as one of the grounds for making a moral decision in Gilligan's periodization) as comprising both affective and cognitive components (Kornilova, 2022). In addition, teaching ethical behavior increases moral awareness and leads to ethical decision-making (Kim, 2021). While low moral awareness leads to more immoral behavior (Reynolds et al., 2015).

The negative association between unethical choices and communication skills shows that poor communication skills may contribute to wrong or unethical responses in cyberbullying situations (see *Table 3*). This correlates with research on schoolchildren's communicative competence, where the development of linguistic, discursive, sociocultural and strategic knowledge and skills contributes to effective conflict resolution in the classroom (including bullying) and, in general, to friendly relationships between children (Gonzalez-Alonso et al., 2020).

The discovered positive correlation between unethical choices and the subscales of the Preconventional level (such as "quid pro quo" and "The power of authority and fear of punishment") points to the desire of respondents who choose an unethical style to seek personal benefits from communication and believe that order in society can only be achieved through force or authority (see *Table 3*). The established association aligns with research on ethical standards in Internet communication, demonstrating that respondents with a level of moral understanding have a positive attitude towards ethical standards and are ready to comply with them. In contrast, respondents with a low level of moral development may justify violations in the rules in various ways (Karabanova et al., 2019).

## **Conclusion**

Significant associations have been established between the moral orientation of decision making (i.e. ethical/unethical) in situations of potential cyberbullying, and mental indicators of students' intellectual and personal potential, including moral development level, communication skills, and the content of ideas about the phenomenon of cyberbullying. Therefore, the research hypothesis is confirmed.

The study results allow us to draw the following conclusions:

1. Students with well-developed communication skills are more likely to recognize situations of potential cyberbullying, identify signs of its manifestation, and effectively understand how to behave in such situations without causing harm to themselves or their interlocutor.

2. The fully formed and normative content of ideas about the phenomenon of cyberbullying increases the likelihood of choosing ethical decisions in situations of potential cyberbullying.

3. Students who more often choose ethical decisions do not seek to interact with people solely for personal gain; they do not prioritize their own interests exclusively but consider the values of other people.

4. Students who select unethical decisions in situations of potential cyberbullying are more likely to seek personal gain from communication and believe that order in society can only be ensured through force or authority, which is indicative of the pre-conventional moral development level.

The data obtained suggest that the formation of a complete understanding of the phenomenon of cyberbullying, enhancing students' communicative competence, and fostering moral development among Internet users, can reduce the rates of unethical decisions in situations of potential cyberbullying. This will be a key focus for further research.

### **Ethics Statement**

All research procedures followed the ethical standards of the Russian Psychological Society.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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