

SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SINCERE FRIENDSHIP ON THE INTERNET

Percepciones del alumnado de secundaria acerca de la amistad sincera en internet

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Abstract

This article explores the perceptions of fourth-year secondary school students regarding the influence of Digital Technologies (ICT) on the development of the social and civic virtue of sincere friendship. For this purpose, a questionnaire including both open and close-ended questions was administered to 131 Spanish secondary students, whose responses were analyzed using AtlasTi 8.4 and SPSS 25. Along with a theoretical framework for understanding the meaning of the virtue under study, an analysis of the students' perceptions of this virtue on the web was conducted, as well as of their views on the contribution of ICT to personal growth and the development of virtues. Among the results, the students tend to perceive themselves as sincere but think this is not generally the case on the web. In addition, for most of them, social media strengthen friendships. However, when asked about the kind or quality of the relationships facilitated by these technologies, their perceptions are not so positive. In conclusion, an explicit focus on virtues when engaging with ICT not only fosters better practice in online environments but also generates a positive perception of the digital context when virtuous behaviors are identified and explored within it. Therefore, we strongly recommend adopting an explicitly virtue-based approach to digital education programs.

Keywords

Communication Technology, Interpersonal Relationships, Moral Education, Secondary Education, Philosophy of Education, Sociology of Education.

Resumen

Este trabajo explora las percepciones de un grupo de estudiantes de cuarto curso de educación secundaria acerca de la influencia de las tecnologías digitales (TIC) en el desarrollo de la virtud social y cívica de la amistad sincera. Para ello se aplicó un cuestionario a 131 jóvenes españoles con preguntas abiertas y cerradas, cuyos resultados se han analizado mediante AtlasTi. 8.4 y SPSS 25. La reflexión acerca de la virtud objeto de estudio como marco teórico se complementa con el análisis de las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre esta virtud en la red, así como sobre la capacidad de las TIC de contribuir tanto a la mejora personal como al desarrollo de virtudes. Como resultados, se observa que los estudiantes tienden a percibirse a sí mismos como sinceros, pero consideran que, en general, esto no ocurre en internet; además, para una amplia mayoría, las redes sociales refuerzan la amistad. No obstante, al preguntar por la cualidad de las relaciones que las TIC facilitan, la percepción no es tan positiva. Se concluye que un enfoque explícito en virtudes al enfrentarse a las TIC no solo fortalece la práctica *online* de estas, sino que genera una percepción positiva del medio digital, cuando en este se detectan y exploran comportamientos virtuosos. Se sugiere, por tanto, adoptar explícitamente este enfoque educativo (*virtue-based*) en los programas de educación digital.

Palabras clave

Tecnologías de la comunicación, relaciones interpersonales, educación moral, educación secundaria, filosofía de la educación, sociología de la educación.

Introduction

Contemporary society has been described in many ways, considering some of its features—knowledge without borders, open communication, unlimited interaction, interdependence—as fundamental to understanding its complexity and making sense of it. Consequently, it has been characterized as a “global society” (McLuhan, 1963) or, as Bell (1980) calls it,

“communicated” (computerized and communicated), of “communicative action” (Habermas, 1988), “network society” (Castells, 2006), and in some cases it is described with more disturbing connotations: “risk society” (Beck, 1997), “society of disappointment” (Lipovetsky, 2008), “society of fatigue” (Han, 2012), or “liquid society” (Bauman, 2015). Many of these descriptions highlight the impact that information and communication technologies (ICT) have on the transformation of society (Haidt, 2024), as they are present in all aspects of the individual and social lives of its members, including in the field of education. The problem lies in the fact that both its possibilities and its risks are part of the digital configuration of the culture of the new generations, also in terms of their integral and moral development, which may be compromised. For today’s students, digital natives, the internet is an unavoidable educational medium. But how does it affect their willingness to live in society and relate to others and, consequently, their social and political character? In light of the results of this study, it will become clear to what extent it is necessary to focus education not so much on the technical possibilities that ICTs open up for learning, but rather on the ethical and moral competencies that these technologies could be promoting or hindering.

The aim of this article is to explore how a group of students in their final year of compulsory education perceive the impact of ICT on one of the social and civic virtues most appreciated in adolescence: sincere friendship. We will tentatively explore whether young people consider that ICTs help to generate quality interrelationships, consisting of openness to sincere dialogue with other individuals, and to generate bonds of friendship between them for their own socialization interests. This will be done through an exploratory descriptive empirical study, based on the analysis of students’ responses to open and closed questions in a questionnaire.

Sincere friendship is a social virtue, although it is also fundamental in the political sphere. According to Berkowitz (2021), social and civic character can be defined as the set of dispositions to think, want, and contribute to the common good of different social groups and political society, and is made up of certain traits, strengths, or virtues that a person can freely develop from their inherited personality. Therefore, social virtues, those required for satisfying and humanizing social relationships, can be extended to the realm of citizenship. The two are not mutually exclusive; rather, some social virtues are essential in the political sphere, such as sincerity. As Shields (2011) mentions, social and civic virtues constitute a positive dimension of character, together with intellectual, performative, and moral virtues, all of which can be promoted through education.

As Espinosa and Plaza de la Hoz (2024) point out, the need for a virtue-based approach in education, also applied to the use and appropriation of ICT (virtue-based digital education approach), is related to the decline of modern pedagogy when it seeks student autonomy from all indoctrination of values, based on a supposed teaching neutrality. However, as Ibáñez Martín (2021) points out, there is a clear need to recover critical thinking in the field of education.

Approaches from both philosophy (character education, personalized education, values education) and psychology (positive psychology, positive youth development) promote attention to the various dimensions of learning (cognitive, volitional, emotional, behavioral), corresponding to the different human dimensions, and their integration into the classical notion of virtue or the more current notion, from the field of psychology, of character strengths, the acquisition that goes beyond a purely cognitivist approach (Kohlberg, 1984).

Virtue education as character education based on Aristotelian virtue ethics has gained new momentum since the last decade of the 20th century, coinciding with the rise of neo-Aristotelianism. Both the theoretical foundation and the practical application of this education in virtues is being carried out globally in response to the need to comprehensively address the educational needs of human beings in order to fulfill the ultimate educational goal, which is to contribute to human flourishing (Kristjánsson, 2019). In the digital society, character education must specifically address the development of virtues in the virtual context. An explicit focus on virtue when dealing with ICTs allows us to understand them as a sphere of action for their practice, as well as generating a perception of the positive value that the digital environment contributes when virtuous behaviors are detected and explored in it.

This text is structured in four main parts. First, a theoretical framework is presented that delves into the meaning of the social and civic virtue under study. Next, the method used for the empirical work is explained. Then, the results obtained after analyzing the responses of a group of 131 students who completed the research instrument are presented. Finally, these are analyzed and discussed to understand their implications.

Theoretical basis

Since ancient times, friendship has been the subject of philosophical theorizing. Plato (2014) connected it with goodness, truth, and beauty,



conceiving it as a higher form of relationship. Aristotle (1985) distinguished several types of friendship, based on pleasure, utility, or virtue; certainly, the latter constituted the highest form of friendship as it was oriented toward mutual moral perfection.

The Middle Ages, especially through St. Augustine (2017) and Thomas Aquinas (2006), gave a new focus to friendship by relating it to Christian *caritas*, participation in divine love and, therefore, a virtue that tends towards transcendent moral good, embodied in evangelical brotherhood and the ideal of community life of the *mandatum novum*.

In modernity, the emphasis is placed on the intimacy, affection, and freedom shared by friends (Montaigne, 2016), affirming the uniqueness and authenticity of the bond of interpersonal friendship. The social and affective aspects of virtue, sympathy, and civil coexistence are features highlighted in the Enlightenment (Hume, 2005). In Romanticism (Schelling, 2015; Novalis, 1985), the centrality of the self, its aesthetic sensitivity, and its emotional intensity are added to the establishment of friendships.

Today, the political and social perspective of friendship (Arendt, 2020) is gaining relevance, as is its importance in the development of free and democratic dialogue, balanced critical judgment, and the construction of shared public space.

Finally, technological society introduces digital forms of relationship that disrupt the practices and values associated with intimacy, sincerity, and reciprocity, all of which are aspects related to friendship.

One of these components (sincerity) is directly related to the truth of things. It implies a willingness to recognize oneself and things as they are. Also called «truthfulness,» it consists of an openness to reality that respects it in its own being, without manipulating it for any interest, showing oneself as one and declaring the reality of things. According to Polo (2016), there are two types of truthfulness: linguistic-communicative and social. Communicative truthfulness, consisting of truthful language, allows for trust, friendship, communication, and coexistence among people. Social truthfulness derives from this, since no community or society is possible without a minimum of sincere cooperation. On the contrary, insincerity has four dimensions: error, lying, silence, and duplicity. According to the same author, lying is the one that most corrupts social life, since the error-falsehood component is combined with the will to deceive, which implies ethical deterioration and degradation of the individual (Selles, 2020).

Internet expands the possibilities for communication and creating freely available content. Web 2.0 allows for two-way communication, so



everyone can contribute to presenting themselves and showing reality digitally. The increase in social relationships and cooperation that this entails goes hand in hand with opportunities to deceive, be deceived, and be misled (Fanjul et al., 2019; Kucharski, 2016; Pérez, 2018). The intention to deceive determines the essence of the digital phenomenon of disinformation, which is distinct from misinformation, even though both refer to false semantic content (Voinea et al., 2020). Paradoxically, the democratization of knowledge has generalized the threat of the dissolution of truth in appearance or feeling, to the point of talking about post-truth (Espinosa, 2019; D'Ancona, 2017; Keyes, 2004); Furthermore, the Internet of Things (Web 3.0) adds a greater degree of expectation and uncertainty (Tascón, 2020).

If the spread of false information on the internet is identified as one of the major global threats of today, along with climate change (Pew Research Center, 2022), it seems appropriate to ask how young people perceive ICTs in relation to sincerity, both in their personal use and in the possibilities they offer for distorting the truth, both their own and that of others.

On the other hand, friendship is a type of interpersonal relationship that contributes to the realization of the dialogical human essence (Buber, 2018). According to Aristotle (1985), of the various kinds of friendship (for utility, for pleasure, and for virtue), only friendship for virtue is perfect. All are based on benevolence, «reciprocal goodwill» (sec. 1155b32-5), although in the imperfect types, this goodwill lasts only as long as the benefit or pleasure obtained from it lasts.

Friendship is a social virtue whereby the individual is capable of wanting the good of the other as if it were his own. It is the middle ground between two erroneous extremes, flattery and harshness, and, like all virtues, it is a disposition that can be developed through practice. Although the usual consideration of the term friendship refers to the realm of private interpersonal relationships, friendship can also be understood in a civic sense (*philia politiké*), consisting of the ability of people to recognize each other as equals, belonging to the same family (Nussbaum, 2014), thus providing a solid basis for civic coexistence.

Wagner (2019) has distinguished various functions that friends can perform to a greater or lesser extent: help, intimacy, stimulating company, trusted alliance, self-validation, and emotional security. According to Aristotle, perfect friendship is based on love for the character of the friend, understood as the set of virtues they possess. It requires shared activities and an understanding of the friend as intrinsically valuable to the point of understanding them «as irreplaceable, not just painfully re-



placeable, as is the case in some evolved forms of utilitarian friendship» (Kristjánsson, 2020a, p. 134).

Given that adolescents make friends and experience their friendships through digital media, it is interesting to investigate whether ICTs contribute to strengthening these relationships in any of the aspects pointed out by Aristotle (pleasure, utility, or virtue) (Healy, 2021) or whether they contribute to intensifying any of the functions of friendship. For example, whether they constitute a means of reinforcing intimacy between friends or whether the emotional security provided by a friend increases when the relationship with them occurs via the internet (Pérez, 2018).

Contribution of character education approaches

This theoretical framework takes into account the growing relevance of the character education approach at the international level (Bernal et al., 2015). In this sense, educating in virtues does not depend on cultural views, as Arthur (2016) explains, and, on the other hand, as Brooks et al. (2019) point out, the context and teachers educate character whether they want to or not through their example. Hence, it is necessary for this training to take place in a conscious and deliberate manner.

In Spain, researchers such as Ahedo et al. (2020) advocate Aristotle's proposal of cultivating and practicing virtues until they become habits, in order to help students grow as individuals. This growth is especially important in childhood and adolescence, as pointed out by Naval and Bernal (2017), who add as roots of this new emphasis on character education the spiritual plane of the person, the integration of emotions and will, as well as humanistic training. Various programs are currently being implemented that seek to integrate character education into the curriculum at different educational levels in Spain (Domingo & Fernández, 2025; Cohen de Lara et al., 2024).

In a recent systematic review focusing on the issue of friendship from the perspective of character education, Espinosa et al. (2023) identified a predominance of the psychological approach in the 52 papers retrieved on this topic between 2007 and 2021. This viewpoint is oriented toward the instrumental treatment of friendship in terms of the benefits it brings to the health and well-being of the subject, and is more common than the philosophical-moral approach, which was only found in 36.54% of the studies analyzed. However, even in the psychological approach, friendship was indirectly recognized as a good in itself, although limited



in scope, focusing on well-being and functional utility. The studies analyzed the links between friendships and character development, noting that this connection is reciprocal. On the one hand, friendship can contribute to character development under certain conditions; on the other hand, some character qualities or strengths are more relevant than others in forging and maintaining friendly relationships. It is also noteworthy that 32.69% of the studies reviewed addressed this issue in relation to secondary education, the population that is the subject of this study.

From a psychological perspective, positive psychology contributes to character education by emphasizing the importance of cultivating human relationships, both to prevent psychosocial problems and to build individual happiness. In fact, in the PERMA model (Seligman, 2012), the R (positive relationships) indirectly refers to the virtue-strength of sincere friendship, since a good life requires a sense of belonging, mutual support, reciprocal trust, and the forging of healthy social bonds that enrich shared well-being.

On the other hand, from the perspective of character education with an ethical focus, Berkowitz et al. (2017) also talk about fostering meaningful relationships between school agents, such as friendships, because people learn more and better when they cultivate correspondence and emotional bonds with others. The PRIMED reference model also includes the R for relationships (Berkowitz, 2021), as the need to generate strong bonds and a positive support environment.

Along the same lines, the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2022) identifies strengthening friendships among students as a virtue that improves character. Friendship thus has a great transformative influence, as it impacts the ability to act, the socialization process, and the determination of actions that develop character, an influence, however, that is modulated by the qualities of friends (Kristjánsson, 2020b).

For all these reasons, it is important to consider whether ICT, as a vital context for youth development, contributes or not, and in what ways, to the personal development of students, through the effective improvement of the social and civic virtue proposed, at least from the subjective perception of the students.

Methodology

The work is based on a type of non-experimental descriptive research (Bourque, 2004), both qualitative and quantitative. A 40-question ques-



tionnaire was administered anonymously to a group of 131 students in their final year of secondary education.

The quantitative research method was used, based on an empirical descriptive study with an exploratory scope on adolescent behavior and perception. Taking into account the characteristics of the sample and the number of closed responses obtained, the results cannot be generalized because, to do so, the sample would need to be larger, include more varied profiles, and have been obtained randomly rather than by chance. The questionnaire included 17 open-ended questions which, through qualitative analysis, provide comprehensive knowledge that can complement and enrich the quantitative data in relation to previous studies (Corbetta, 2003; Yin, 2006). To this end, the narrative responses of the selected group were specifically analyzed (Stake, 2007) to gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions and propose results that could be useful to the scientific community. Open-ended questions give voice to participants, their arguments, and reflections, allowing for the study of experiences and meanings (Fink, 2003).

The research was aimed at students in their final year of secondary education, a middle stage of adolescence in which peer relationships, groups of friends, critical thinking, and sincerity in personal relationships take on special importance. In addition, these adolescents are expected to show a certain maturity and responsibility due to the need to decide their immediate future (Álvarez Justel & Álvarez González, 2021). The experience at the end of a stage enables responses based on a certain reflectiveness typical of a more relaxed adolescence. Hence, it is relevant to investigate how digital culture affects young people.

The questionnaire was applied to 153 students from eight schools located in six Spanish provinces in different autonomous communities. After an initial review, four surveys were eliminated because they were answered by high school students, and 18 were eliminated because they were duplicates, leaving 131 valid questionnaires for their analysis.

To select the schools, a type of non-probabilistic purposive sampling was used, based on a general sample of more than 100 private and state-subsidized schools recognized by the newspaper *El Mundo* (2021) during the 2019 and 2020 academic years as offering the highest educational quality according to 27 criteria.

The sample shows some features, as can be seen in the typological table (Table 1). First, there is a large overrepresentation of females (67.9%), which may reflect a greater willingness on the part of girls to share their habits and behaviors. In addition, subsidized schools (68.7%)

outnumber private schools, which corresponds to the greater extent of the subsidized network in Spain (Ministerio de Educación, 2021). A majority of students are 16 years old (67.9%) compared to those who were 15 at the time of completing the survey (29%), which may indicate greater autonomy among older students. Finally, the participating students have an average grade of 7.64, with the largest group receiving a B (71.75%), between 7 and 9.

Table 1
Sample typology box

Autonomous community		School ownership		Grade	Average
C-León	3.8	Subsidized	68.7	10	7.6
Biscay	3.8	Private	31.3	9	24.4
Madrid	13.7			8	23.7
Canary Islands	14.5	Age		7	23.7%
La Rioja	32.9%	15	29.0	6	11.5
Andalusia	41.3	16	67.9	5	7.6
				4	1.5
		Gender			
		M	32.1		
		F	67.9		

An ad hoc questionnaire, «Educational factors in the character formation of digital adolescents,» was designed to collect data. Professors from three universities participated in its preparation, refining the initial proposal after several revisions. The criterion «Character formation and the internet,» referring to sincere friendship, was considered for applying the survey.

The questionnaire was administered online to students at each participating center using Google Forms. SPSS 25 was used to obtain the results of the closed-ended questions; the open-ended questions required the Atlas.Ti 8 program.

Results

The responses are organized according to the semantic fields involved in the social and civic virtue under study: sincere friendship. Respon-



ses to three additional questions (20, 39, and 40) on perceptions of the contribution of ICT to personal development and the growth of virtues, and online experiences that have helped students in this regard are also included. The contributions obtained in these open-ended questions add greater understanding of meaning to the quantitative responses.

In terms of sincerity (Table 2), at the individual level, a large majority of students (87.8%) say they show themselves as they are on social media (question 29), although 59% acknowledge that they improve their online image (question 30). Overall, just over half (52%) believe that people are generally not sincere on the internet (question 31). When asked about the truthfulness of content, 72.5% are concerned about fake news (question 32), and a similar percentage (73.3%) call for more objective regulation (question 33).

Table 2
Items on sincerity in online interpersonal relationships

Pregunta 29: ¿Es cierto lo que ud. sube a redes sobre sí mismo?			
	<i>F</i>	Valid %	Cumulative
Yes, always	63	48.1	48.1
In general, yes	52	39.7	87.8
Only sometimes	15	11.5	99.2
No. Everyone "lies"	1	0.8	100.0
Total	131	100.0	
Pregunta 30: ¿Utiliza filtros que le favorecen, aunque camuflen su realidad?			
	<i>F</i>	Valid %	Cumulative
Always	10	7.6	7.6
In general, yes	28	21.4	29.0
Only sometimes	39	29.8	58.8
Not generally	54	41.2	100.0
Total	131	100.0	
Pregunta 31: ¿Piensa que la gente es sincera en internet?			
	<i>F</i>	Valid %	Cumulative
Overall, yes	2	1.5	1.5
Only sometimes	43	32.8	34.4

Not generally	68	51.9	86.3
No, but it does not influence you	18	13.7	100.0
Total	131	100.0	
Pregunta 32: ¿Le preocupa que se difundan falsedades en las redes?			
	<i>F</i>	Valid %	Cumulative
Yes, something should be done	95	72.5	72.5
It gives you publicity and fame	15	11.5	84
It is not that serious	11	8.4	92.4
I do not care if it does not affect me	10	7.6	100.0
Total	131	100.0	
Pregunta 33: ¿Con qué afirmación está más de acuerdo?			
	<i>F</i>	Valid %	Cumulative
Lack of regulation against abuse	96	73.3	73
Less regulation and more freedom	29	22.1	95.4
I do not care; I hack what I can	6	4.6	100
Total	131	100.0	

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The responses referring to friendship (Table 3) show that for a large majority of students (74.6%), social networks reinforce this virtue (question 37); for the rest, they either have not influenced or, in any case, do not have a negative influence, since no one chose this last option.

When asked about the type or quality of relationships facilitated by social networks, the perception is not as positive as in the previous question. As the answers to question 38 show, only 40% continue to call them «friendships» or associate them with this, while the rest appreciate these contacts more for their interesting or useful nature (25.2%), or even doubt that they contribute anything due to their superficial nature (25.2%). However, only a minority (9.9%) view online relationships negatively.

These results can be supplemented with the responses to question 20—on the relationship between social media and personal development—and with the narratives obtained in the open-ended questions (39 and 40), in which students are asked to describe experiences of how social media has influenced them personally.

The responses to question 20 show that more than three-quarters of students (76.3%) view social media positively in terms of their perso-

nal improvement. As for the open-ended questions about experiences on social media that have contributed to their personal development, Table 4 shows some evidence: 42 students say they either do not have any, do not know, or do not want to share them; in addition, 14 leave the answer blank. Of those who provide more information, 59 refer to positive situations, compared to 15 who refer to rather negative ones.

Table 3
Items on online friendships

Pregunta 37: ¿Qué opina sobre el influjo de las redes sociales en la amistad?			
	<i>F</i>	Valid %	Cumulative
Strengthen and maintain friendships	91	69.5	74.6
No influence at all	31	23.7	25.4
Negative influence	0	0	0
Total	122	93.1	100.0
Lost system	9	6.9	
Total	131	100.0	
Pregunta 38: ¿Cuál es su percepción del tipo de contactos que fomentan las redes sociales?			
	<i>F</i>	Valid %	Cumulative
Positive, for making friends	52	39.7	39.7
Interesting and useful	33	25.2	25.2
Superficial, does not contribute to it	33	25.2	25.2
Negative and unrealistic	13	9.9	9.9
Total	131	100.0	100.0

Among the positive responses, codes emerge that have to do with friends (21)—made (9), kept (8), or regained (3)—and secondly with acts of support (17)—to others (11) or from others (7). They also add the empathy of others (7) and their example (7). Finally, the possibility of gaining new knowledge (6). As for negative experiences (15), only fake identity (4) is repeated, and the rest are scattered among: wasting time, insulting, provoking, being scammed, pretending, criticizing, showing intolerance, suffering obscenities, and being silenced.

Table 4
Frequency of codes on experiences of the impact of the internet on personal growth

Category 1: positive influence of social networks	<i>f</i>	Sample text
To make friends, restart or maintain friendships	21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I met a girl from Madrid who had very different opinions to mine, and we became friends. • Maintaining relationships with distant friends. • I contacted my friends from a camp I used to go to when I was little, and we all got together to spend time together again.
They encourage mutual support	17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A friend of mine got dumped by his girlfriend, and all of us helped him with whatever he needed. • Once I had a personal problem, I talked about it through a video game, we shared our social media accounts, and that is how it helped me solve it.
They offer good examples to follow	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are videos that make me think about what I would do in a given situation.
They promote empathy	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes I have seen other people's points of view and it has helped me understand what others are going through.
They provide new knowledge.	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any type of video that helps me reflect or expand my knowledge.
Category 2: Negative influence of social media	<i>f</i>	Sample text
Identity theft	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In my case, none, but I know someone who was tricked into meeting up with someone using a fake account. This makes you reflect and think that you should not trust anyone.
Other negative uses		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am more critical of what I read; I do not believe everything the media says. • When someone disagrees with an opinion and makes offensive comments about it.

The last question in the questionnaire (Table 5) completes the information by asking participants for details of how this experience contributed to their personal growth. Some now add a positive impact from a negative experience. In this case, the responses have been categorized according to the virtue to which they refer. Leaving aside 23 blank responses, 38 reiterate that they have not had any remarkable experiences or that they do not know or do not remember them, 9 repeat what was said in question 39, and 2 do not wish to say, there are 66 students left. Their responses highlight references to being supportive (19), followed by im-



proving friendships (14), being prudent (12), more open (7), strong (7), or enjoying themselves (3).

Table 5
Frequency of values-virtues that the internet helped to develop

Category: value-virtue that is strengthened	<i>f</i>	Sample text
Solidarity	19	Seeing how people you don't know, even in real life, are willing to help you with your problems. Because I care about others.
Friendship	14	Because I've learned that your circle of friends doesn't have to be just from school. Because getting someone you love back is always a good thing.
Prudence	12	Because I thought and reflected and saw if my behavior was appropriate. Because you can learn from everything bad.
Openness	7	Because it showed me that there are many different people in the world.
Strength	7	Because I learned to ignore all the nasty comments made by people I didn't even know. To feel more confident and stand up for myself.
Enjoy	3	Because it was related to something I like to do.

Discussion

In today's modern, digitally mediated world, which presents a fragmenting, disintegrating, and individualistic tendency (Bauman, 2022; Giddens, 2007; Lipovetsky, 2004 and 2008; Lobo, 2019), i.e., whose structures incline toward isolation, the expansion of social and political capacities is an urgent task. It is necessary to direct additional efforts towards educating human relationships, through educational actions that deliberately or intentionally aim to cultivate bonds of intimacy with significant others based on authentic (sincere) openness and mutual benevolence and the pursuit of the good of the other for its own sake and not only for the utility it may bring.

The tendency toward the dissolution of social relationships and the erosion of their quality, transforming them into liquid, superficial, and instrumental—and therefore self-referential—relationships is not only

due to the liberal configuration of contemporary societies, but also to the predominant use of ICTs that orient them toward individual consumption for the satisfaction of desires and entertainment as distraction (Dans et al. 2022), as opposed to active and prosocial uses (Ferreira & Rodrigues, 2017; Tena & Merlo, 2017).

This article has sought to analyze young people's perceptions of whether ICTs facilitate their social relationships of friendship—contributing to a more humanizing experience—or whether they add difficulties, as well as whether they facilitate a sincere way of presenting oneself to others. As Cáceres et al. (2009) point out, the intentional appearance with which the subject presents themselves is the starting point from which to build bonds with others. Authentic openness is only possible from a personal intimacy that is honestly revealed in its reality, i.e., from the development of sincerity.

The impact that ICTs have on the understanding of virtues is remarkable, as they have transformed their meaning to a certain extent, as Caro (2015) points out, adding new dimensions to them, to the point that some have proposed the creation of new virtues that respond to the peculiar reality of the virtual world. Thus, for example, there is talk of cyberphronesis or cyber wisdom (Polizzi & Harrison, 2020), digital responsibility (Aznar et al., 2024), and digital critical thinking (Gozálvez et al., 2022).

Without entering into the debate on whether or not to expand the list of classical virtues (Fuentes and García Gutiérrez, 2021), it is a fact that the digitization of human processes has added new demands to the traditional education of social and civic virtues (Dabdoub et al., 2021) Furthermore, a virtue-based approach to digital education shows promise.

In the case of friendship, Kristjánsson (2021) analyzes the possibility of online friendship based on character or virtue in the Aristotelian sense. Categorizing it as an interpersonal relationship allows it to be distinguished from other as less enduring bonds—which more than 50% of the students surveyed in this study perceive on the internet—which is consistent with the consideration of friendship as a virtue, which, once forged, tends to endure as a stable disposition, although it is not unbreakable.

As for the sincerity required in personal friendships, in the infodemic or information overload of the internet, where all content is presented in a homogeneous manner, there is fake news, which spreads faster than the truth (Vosoughi et al., 2018) because it is designed to exploit human vulnerabilities: «Attention is captured by novelty, and fake news, misinformation, or disinformation are novel» (Voinea et al., 2020, p. 2352). This issue concerns young people: 72.5% of the students in this



study believe that something must be done about it, which coincides with the 73.3% who demand more regulation for this purpose. The need for regulation to restrict false information online, even if this means a certain reduction in the freedom to access and publish content, is recognized by a growing number of people, according to a study by Mitchell and Walker (2021) in the US, especially in the postpandemic context. In this regard, cognitive assistants have been developed to guide web browsing (Noor, 2015; Voinea et al., 2020), training users in active and critical use to help them discriminate between information.

Indeed, in the digital world it is particularly easy to lie (for example, buying followers or «likes,» altering one's own reality to make it more pleasant, or changing one's identity), so it includes a very significant element of unreality (Siurana, 2022). In addition, the internet has a structure that does not classify information according to quality criteria, but rather according to market criteria (distraction by design) (Voinea et al., 2020), which encourages the exposure of one's own identity in a way that is also marketable or attractive. In the study by Hernández Prados et al. (2015a) on the values perceived and practiced by young people on the internet, honesty was among the least frequent; 65.6% of those surveyed in this study also think that people in general are not sincere on the internet, although this percentage drops when asked about their own behavior regarding the use of filters that camouflage their reality. In our study, only 29% say they always or generally use them, similar to the 26% of American young people who said they gave false information to protect their privacy in the study by Madden et al. (2013).

These results coincide with those of the study on identity and young people on the internet by Cáceres et al. (2009), who found that young people see themselves as authentic and sincerely transparent in their relationships, somewhat less so with their friends, and much less so with other people. In other words, respondents tend to define themselves as sincere, as opposed to what they perceive to be happening on the internet in general. Similarly, in Conde et al. (2002), a majority of respondents considered themselves sincere: «61% of the sample say they never lie, 31% say they lie sometimes, and only 8% say they lie almost always or always» (p. 141). This can be attributed to a social desirability effect, as indicated by Cáceres et al. (2009), whereby socially reprehensible behaviors are masked or avoided.

The way young adolescents present themselves to others online is mediated by their need for recognition from peer groups, above and beyond their families, a circumstance that is particularly acute in adoles-



cence. However, recognition and empathy are achieved more effectively through the exposure of one's own vulnerability (Andolina & Conklin, 2021) rather than by hiding it, bearing in mind that other individuals can also recognize themselves in the limits or vulnerability that a person expresses and shares. However, for this fragility to be revealed, it is necessary to create safe spaces of trust where people can show themselves as they are, without fear of being ridiculed (Plaza de la Hoz, 2022). While this environment in the classroom depends largely on teacher mediation, in virtual reality it is something beyond the control of the individual. In this regard, Conde et al. (2002) found that the percentage of young people who perceived the internet as a safer space for communicating their intimacy than real life was practically equal to those who perceived it as less safe.

If we now focus the discussion on friendship, the students surveyed hold this virtue in high regard when rating their online relationships. Three-quarters of them believe that social media strengthens their bonds of friendship, while none chose the option of negative impact. In this sense, they contradict the conclusions of Torres and Juárez (2017), who limit the scope of technologies to the creation of less solid bonds, but they confirm other findings (Antheunis et al., 2016; Plaza de la Hoz, 2018; De Stasio et al., 2019) in which ICTs improve friendships among young adolescents. Along these lines, Valkenburg et al. (2017) agree on the importance of networks in increasing social self-esteem, especially among older adolescents, such as those in this sample, and this is related to one of the functions of friendship. Conde et al. (2002) also found that «of the feelings experienced through chat contacts, the most widespread is friendship: 86% of subjects acknowledge having felt it» (p. 142).

The comments of the students surveyed in this study about the online experiences that have contributed most to their personal development indicate that what is most positively valued about the use of networks is the experience of making, maintaining, or reconnecting with friends thanks to the internet. This continues to be the main attraction of these networks, as Del Río et al. (2010) and Dans et al. (2022) pointed out.

What these authors report does not suggest a naive view of online contacts, but rather an ambivalent one (Livingstone et al., 2012; Vandoninck et al., 2013). In line with the observations of Martín Martín et al. (2021) and Ballesteros and Picazo (2018), adolescents see social media both as a channel for strengthening relationships and as a context for cold and impersonal relationships: it should be remembered that 10% of respondents rate virtual contacts as negative or unreal, a quarter consider them superficial, and another 25% consider them merely useful.



Conclusions

Regarding the objective set out at the beginning of this article on young people's perceptions of how ICTs impact their sincere friendships, the results of this study coincide with previous research on the relative maturity of adolescents when it comes to managing relationships through ICTs. Although they tend to experience them as a means of facilitating communication and personal relationships, aspects that are highly valued by young people in this age group, 60% acknowledge problems arising from the type of virtual contacts and mediation. The novelty of this study lies in addressing this issue by relating these experiences of ICT use to character formation and the impact of the network on personal improvement (a virtue-based digital education approach).

In terms of the sincerity of relationships, the data collected shows that young people perceive themselves as personally honest, but express concern about the general lack of respect for the truth on the internet, even so around a third still admit to not being entirely sincere on the internet. As a result, on the one hand, of the fragility inherent in adolescence, because the image before the peer group weighs more than reality and, on the other hand, of the technical possibilities of anonymity and concealment offered by the virtual environment.

An explicit virtue-based approach to ICT can help solve these problems. This approach considers the virtual world as another sphere of action for the practice of virtues and, therefore, as a field of moral development (or deterioration). In addition, it allows for the generation of a perception of the positive value of the digital environment when virtuous behaviors are detected and explored in it (Hernández Prados et al., 2015b). To achieve this, guidance from teachers is needed, not only to warn of the dangers and risks of ICT or its purely technical possibilities, but above all of the virtues that digital behaviors can help to forge.

Methodologically, it is suggested that future research use larger and more diverse samples of students. In terms of content, the study could be extended to other social and civic virtues such as cooperation and justice, which take on a new scope in the digital environment. The line of research on social and civic virtues and ICT is yet to be developed and serves to empower students in the ethical and prosocial use of the internet, as opposed to passive and consumerist uses.

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Declaration of Authorship - CRediT Taxonomy	
Author(s)	Contributions
Jesús Plaza de la Hoz	Conceptualization, data collection, formal analysis, methodology, supervision, initial draft proposal, writing, revision, and editing.
Zaida Espinosa Zárate	Conceptualization, data collection, formal analysis, methodology, supervision, initial draft proposal, writing, revision, and editing.

Declaration on the use of artificial intelligence
The authors Jesús Plaza de la Hoz and Zaida Espinosa Zárate of the article entitled «Secondary School Students' Perceptions of Sincere Friendship on the Internet» DECLARE that the document was not created with the support of Artificial Intelligence (AI).

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