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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Prevention Strategies for Online Moral Deviance Among Left-Behind Children in Rural China

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ABSTRACT

Left-behind children in rural China are minors who remain in their rural hometowns under the care of their grandparents or other relatives while one or both parents migrate to urban areas for employment, face an elevated risk of online moral deviance amid near-universal internet access, prolonged parental absence, and caregiving by grandparents with limited digital competence. Existing prevention strategies, however, were developed for general populations and typically presuppose co-resident parents and well-resourced schools, conditions that left-behind families rarely enjoy. This qualitative study explored prevention strategies that the adults closest to these children perceive as feasible and effective. Semi-structured interviews with seven teachers and seven guardians at two rural schools in Sichuan Province were analyzed thematically and triangulated with document analysis of the Chinese Ministry of Education's Implementation Manual of the Guidelines for Moral Education in Primary and Secondary Schools. Five interlocking strategies emerged: ensuring adequate teacher provision and professional curriculum instruction; embedding prevention in daily school practices as micro-preventive mechanisms; enhancing guardians' supervisory competence; strengthening school–family collaboration and guardian accountability; and building a protective external ecology through government, community, and platform support. The findings portray prevention as a layered, context-embedded system whose effectiveness depends on enabling the adults, institutions, and environments surrounding the child rather than on changing the child alone. The study extends research on preventing online deviance to an overlooked population and offers practical implications for rural schools, guardian

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training, community provision, and platform regulation.

1. Introduction

Amid China's rapid and large-scale urbanization, a young generation of rural parents has migrated to cities as laborers in pursuit of employment opportunities (Keung Wong et al., 2007) and higher household income (Fellmeth et al., 2018). Urban and rural China, however, remain two structurally distinct social systems, with rural areas lagging markedly behind cities in educational, medical, cultural, and social welfare resources. This divide is institutionalized in the household registration (huji) system, which has long excluded rural migrant workers and their children from a range of state-funded social welfare programs (Mallee, 1995). The children of rural migrants, for example, often cannot access quality public education in the cities where their parents work (Mallee, 1995), and they remain eligible to sit the national college entrance examination only in the locality of their hukou registration (Qian et al., 2020). Compounded by work schedules that leave migrant parents little time for childcare (Li et al., 2019), the instability of urban employment (Gao et al., 2010), and the need to contain living costs (Xiao & Liu, 2023), these barriers lead most young migrant parents to leave their children in their rural hometowns (Xiao & Liu, 2023). The result is a distinctive family structure characterized by prolonged parent–child separation, which has given rise to a large population of left-behind children in rural China: children who remain in rural areas while one or both parents migrate for work and who are commonly cared for by grandparents or other relatives (Chan, 2010).

Digital technology occupies a paradoxical position in the lives of these children. Statistics from the China Internet Network Information Center (2023) indicate that rural China now has 308 million internet users and that internet penetration among Chinese minors has reached 96.8%. To maintain contact with their migrant parents, left-behind children are typically equipped with internet-enabled smartphones (Liu & Leung, 2017), which in turn draw them into the use of social media (Wu et al., 2022). Yet the very conditions that make the smartphone indispensable also leave its use largely unsupervised: parents are absent for extended periods, and grandparent caregivers often lack the digital competence to understand what children do online, let alone monitor it. Under these circumstances, left-behind children are exposed to harmful online content and face an elevated risk of engaging in online moral deviance. Online moral deviance refers to problematic online behavior that violates widely accepted moral norms within a specific mainstream sociocultural context and that may inflict physical, psychological, or social harm on targeted internet users; its principal manifestations include cyberbullying, online harassment, internet trolling, online flaming, and internet plagiarism and related academic misconduct (Chen et al., 2025).

Although research on this phenomenon, which has been variously studied under the labels of online moral deviance, online deviant behavior, online deviance, and cyber deviance, has grown, three gaps remain salient. First, with respect to population, existing studies concentrate mainly on college students (e.g., Zhang et al., 2024; Zheng et al., 2024), with a smaller body of work addressing adolescents in general (e.g., Chen et al., 2021; Udris, 2017); left-behind children, a vulnerable and marginalized group whose family structure and caregiving arrangements differ fundamentally from those of their peers, have received scant scholarly attention. Second, with respect to method and discipline, the field is dominated by quantitative research conducted within psychology;

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qualitative inquiry that captures how the adults closest to rural left-behind children understand and respond to the phenomenon in everyday life remains rare. Third, with respect to focus, few studies specifically examine prevention, and the strategies that have been proposed, such as parental monitoring and school-based media literacy interventions, typically presuppose co-resident parents and well-resourced schools, conditions that left-behind families and rural schools frequently do not enjoy.

In response to these gaps, the present study explores strategies for preventing online moral deviance among left-behind children that are grounded in the distinctive sociocultural context and left-behind family structure of rural China. It addresses the following research question: What strategies for preventing online moral deviance among rural left-behind children do the adults closest to them, namely their teachers and guardians, perceive as feasible and effective under the realities of parental out-migration, intergenerational caregiving, and resource-constrained rural schooling? To answer this question, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with seven teachers and seven guardians at two rural schools in Sichuan Province, which has one of the largest concentrations of left-behind children in China (All-China Women's Federation, 2013), triangulated with document analysis of the Implementation Manual of the Guidelines for Moral Education in Primary and Secondary Schools issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2017).

The study makes two contributions. Theoretically, it extends research on the prevention of online deviance to a population whose living circumstances challenge the assumptions underlying existing strategies, and it reframes prevention as a question of enabling the adults, institutions, and environments that surround the child rather than of changing the child alone. Practically, the findings can help parents, teachers, school administrators, community workers, policymakers, and platform designers to understand more deeply how online moral deviance arises among rural left-behind children and to adopt educational measures and formulate targeted policies that cultivate healthy online behavior, thereby promoting the behavioral health and well-being of this group.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Search Strategy and Literature Selection

Given that online moral deviance is an emerging research topic and that existing studies have employed several conceptually proximate terms, this study first searched the Web of Science (WoS) database for literature published within the past five years using four core keywords, namely online deviance, cyber deviance, online deviant behavior, and online moral deviance, linked by the Boolean operator OR. To achieve more comprehensive coverage of relevant literature, combined searches were also conducted, linking these terms and the term digital behavior with the term moral through Boolean operators.

The retrieved literature was then systematically analyzed to identify the principal categories of online deviant behavior that constitute online moral deviance, that is, behaviors that violate widely accepted moral expectations within the mainstream cultural context of a given society and entail negative consequences for targeted internet users (Chen et al., 2025). The identified categories subsequently served as related keywords for a further round of retrieval in WoS, namely Internet plagiarism or online

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plagiarism, Internet trolling or online trolling, cyberbullying, online harassment or Internet harassment, academic misconduct, online cheating, and online flaming.

Literature screening in WoS proceeded in three steps. First, the titles and abstracts of the records retrieved through the core and combined keywords were reviewed against the criterion of topical relevance: to be retained, a publication had to address online moral deviance as a social phenomenon. Second, the full texts of the retained records were read, and studies were selected if they discussed one or more categories of online deviant behavior that can be regarded as constituting online moral deviance. Third, studies directly relevant to the present research were selected, namely those proposing prevention strategies targeting online moral deviance as a whole or one or more of its constituent categories of online deviant behavior.

In addition, given that very few WoS-indexed publications focus specifically on strategies for preventing online moral deviance, representative literature was further retrieved through Google Scholar using the related keywords listed above. To qualify as representative, a publication had to concern prevention strategies for online moral deviance. Because some representative works were published more than five years ago, the peer-reviewed English-language literature retrieved through Google Scholar was not restricted to the five-year time frame.

2.2. Prevention Strategies for Online Moral Deviance

The reviewed studies have proposed a range of strategies for preventing online deviant behavior among adolescents and children. Although these strategies were developed from different theoretical perspectives, they can be organized into five levels of action: the family, the individual, the school, the platform, and public policy.

At the family level, parental monitoring has been identified as a protective factor. In an empirical study, Rea and Izzaty (2025) found that increased perceived parental monitoring could reduce adolescents' tendency toward Dark Triad personality traits, thereby lowering the incidence of online deviant behavior. Accordingly, they recommended strengthening parental supervision and enhancing adolescents' perceived parental monitoring as preventive strategies for mitigating Dark Triad traits and, ultimately, preventing online deviant behaviors.

At the individual level, research has targeted the psychological mechanisms underlying online deviance. Drawing on their 23-item Online Disinhibition Scale, Cheung et al. (2021) recommended that system designers and online administrators use the scale as a checklist to assess users' levels of online disinhibition, so that system designs can be adjusted to prevent deviant behaviors on their platforms. Consistent with this logic, empirical evidence from Chu et al. (2023) indicated that reducing online disinhibition may be an effective means of preventing adolescents from engaging in cyberbullying. Relatedly, Kim et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of early-life interventions for cyberbullying prevention, particularly strategies that enhance self-control and reduce association with deviant peers, and argued that such strategies should be incorporated into intervention programs and policies.

At the school level, media literacy interventions have emerged as a promising educational strategy. Media literacy refers to the set of skills required to access, analyze, evaluate, and create information in mass media (Livingstone, 2004), with critical

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thinking as its core component (Xie et al., 2019). A media literacy intervention is accordingly defined as an educational process aimed at equipping individuals with media literacy skills (Ivanović, 2014). By fostering media literacy, adolescents can develop the critical thinking needed to understand media content and to make more rational decisions (Xie et al., 2019). Moreover, because media literacy education provides individuals with theoretical knowledge about mass media, reduces the likelihood of media misuse (Ivanović, 2014), and enhances information-analysis skills (Austin et al., 2006), Xie et al. (2019) advocated the adoption of media literacy interventions to prevent individuals from being misled by deviant online messages and to reduce deviant behaviors and attitudes. Their empirical findings further revealed that such interventions exerted a sustained effect on reducing deviant behaviors. Although their study focused on offline deviant behavior, it nonetheless offers important insights into the prevention of online moral deviance in the context of digital media use. In a similar vein, Susanto (2021) emphasized cultivating students' digital literacy through specialized programs, the integration of learning materials, the provision of learning resources, and the exemplary conduct of teachers and staff, so as to help students avoid harmful online content and develop anti-bullying capabilities.

At the platform level, studies have proposed governance-oriented strategies targeting specific forms of online moral deviance. With respect to online trolling, Sanfilippo et al. (2017) suggested interventions such as blocking trolls, deleting their posts, ignoring them, revealing their true identities, establishing strict rules, employing peer evaluation through tribunal systems, and implementing governance and peer-review systems to closely monitor trolls' behavior. Together with Cheung et al.'s (2021) recommendation that disinhibition assessment be embedded in system design, these measures illustrate how technological and community governance can complement prevention efforts implemented by families and schools.

Finally, at the policy level, Williams (2024) proposed several implications: improving regulatory measures aimed at reducing adolescents' online deviant behaviors; advancing educational policies and optimizing educational programs to identify early risk factors and redirect adolescents away from deviant pathways; developing a deeper understanding of changes in adolescents' attitudes, including personality-related tendencies such as risk-taking and sensation-seeking, as well as attitudes toward online deviance; and supporting the development of advanced skills training and abilities in conflict management.

2.3. Summary and Research Gap

Taken together, the reviewed literature suggests that preventing online moral deviance requires coordinated efforts across multiple levels, from parental monitoring and individual psychological regulation to school-based literacy education, platform governance, and public policy. Nevertheless, three limitations of the existing research are particularly salient for the present study.

First, existing prevention strategies have been developed for, and tested on, general populations of adolescents and children; to date, little attention has been paid to left-behind children in rural China, whose developmental circumstances differ markedly from those of their peers. Second, several of the proposed strategies presuppose conditions that rural left-behind children may not enjoy. Parental-monitoring approaches (Rea & Izzaty, 2025), for instance, assume the everyday presence and

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involvement of parents, whereas left-behind children are, by definition, separated from one or both migrant parents (Chan, 2010). Similarly, school-based media and digital literacy interventions (Xie et al., 2019; Susanto, 2021) presuppose educational resources and professional capacities that may be unevenly distributed between urban and rural schools (Xiang & Stillwell, 2023). Third, none of the studies identified in this review has systematically addressed the prevention of online moral deviance among left-behind children in rural China.

The present study responds to these gaps by focusing on left-behind children in rural China and proposing prevention strategies adapted to their distinctive family structures, caregiving arrangements, and educational contexts.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design informed by the interpretive paradigm, which holds that social phenomena are best understood through the meanings that individuals attach to their lived experiences (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). This approach was well suited to the present study, which sought to explore how teachers and guardians perceive and make sense of online moral deviance among rural left-behind children. To capture both the lived experience of these adults and the policy context within which they operate, the study drew on two complementary sources of qualitative data: semi-structured interviews with teachers and guardians, and an authoritative national policy document governing moral education in Chinese primary and secondary schools. The interview data were examined through thematic analysis, and the policy document through document analysis. Drawing on the two sources in tandem enabled data and methodological triangulation: an analytic strategy that proved essential for interpreting participants' proposals as responses to, and departures from, the prevailing policy framework.

3.2. Research Setting

The study was conducted at two public schools, a primary school ("School A") and a junior middle school ("School B"), located in the same rural town in Luxian County, Luzhou City, Sichuan Province, in southwestern China. Sichuan Province was selected because it has one of the highest concentrations of left-behind children in China, with more than 2.99 million such children, accounting for 8.5% of the national total (National Bureau of Statistics of China, UNICEF China, & UNFPA China, 2023). The two schools are typical of rural educational settings in the region: according to school administrators, left-behind children constitute more than 90% of the student population at each school.

3.3. Participants and Sampling

Participants were identified through purposive sampling, a strategy commonly used in qualitative research to select information-rich cases relevant to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). Two groups of participants were recruited sequentially.

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3.3.1. Teachers

Seven teachers were recruited: one homeroom teacher from each of Grades 4 through 6 at School A (plus one information-technology teacher) and one homeroom teacher from each of Grades 7 through 9 at School B. Teachers were eligible if they (a) had extensive experience conducting home visits; (b) were familiar with left-behind children's daily behavior at school and their peer interactions; and (c) had served as a homeroom teacher or information-technology teacher for more than three years, ensuring sustained observation of children's behavior.

3.3.2. Guardians

Drawing on their day-to-day classroom observations, home visits, and routine home–school communication, the seven teachers identified left-behind children who had displayed salient manifestations of online moral deviance and referred the researchers to these children's guardians. Seven guardians, each of whom was either a parent or a grandparent of the child concerned, were subsequently recruited. Guardians were eligible if they (a) were the guardian of a left-behind child who had exhibited online moral deviance, and (b) co-resided with the child in a rural household and provided long-term daily care, and therefore had direct, first-hand knowledge of the child's everyday behavior. In addition, guardians were purposively selected to vary in educational background, thereby broadening the range of perspectives represented in the sample. The demographic characteristics of the guardian and teacher participants are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively; pseudonyms are used throughout.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the guardian participants

Guardian ID	Gender of the Child under Care	Age of the Child under Care	Grade level of the Child under Care	Migrant parent(s)	Duration of the child's separation from parent(s)	Relationship to Child	Guardian's educational level
G01	Boy	10	Grade 4	Both parents	1 year	Grandmother	No formal education
G02	Boy	11	Grade 5	Father only	2 years	Mother	Junior high school degree
G03	Girl	11	Grade 5	Both parents	3 years	Grandmother	Elementary school degree
G04	Boy	12	Grade 6	Both parents	3 years	Grandmother	No formal education
G05	Boy	13	Grade 7	Both parents	3 years	Grandmother	No formal education
G06	Boy	14	Grade 8	Father only	3 years	Mother	Junior high school degree
G07	Boy	15	Grade 9	Both parents	3 years	Grandmother	No formal education

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Table 2: Demographic characteristics of the teacher participants

Teacher's ID	Teacher's role	Grade(s) taught	Experience in role	Guardian referred by the teacher
T01	Homeroom teacher	Grade 4	10 years	G01
T02	Homeroom teacher	Grade 5	17 years	G02
T03	Information-technology teacher	Grade 5	13 years	G03
T04	Homeroom teacher	Grade 6	10 years	G04
T05	Homeroom teacher	Grade 7	6 years	G05
T06	Homeroom teacher	Grade 8	10 years	G06
T07	Homeroom teacher	Grade 9	16 years	G07

3.4. Data Collection

Data were drawn from two sources: semi-structured interviews and a national policy document.

3.4.1. Semi-structured interviews

The interviews were conducted between March and May 2025, with participant recruitment taking place from 3 March to 13 May 2025. Given the sensitivity of the research topic, semi-structured interviews were considered an appropriate strategy, as they enable researchers to understand the world from participants' own perspectives and to elicit the meanings embedded in their lived experiences (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Two parallel interview guides, one for teachers and one for guardians, were developed on the basis of the research questions and the relevant literature; both were tested in a pilot study and subsequently refined through discussion among the research team (see Appendices A and B). The researchers first interviewed the seven teachers. These interviews were conducted one-on-one and face-to-face in a quiet meeting room at each school and lasted 50–70 minutes. Interviewing teachers first served two purposes: it provided contextual understanding of the children's behavior, and it facilitated the identification of, and access to, the guardian participants. The researchers then interviewed the seven guardians; of these interviews, four were conducted face-to-face and three via WeChat video call, each lasting 60–90 minutes. All interviews were conducted in the local dialect. Recruitment and interviewing ceased when data saturation was judged to have been reached, defined as the point at which successive interviews yielded no new codes or themes (Saunders et al., 2018). With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

3.4.2. Documentary data

To complement the interviews and to situate participants' accounts within the governing policy context, the study purposively analyzed the Implementation Manual of the Guidelines for Moral Education in Primary and Secondary Schools (hereafter the Implementation Manual), an official guidance document issued by the Department of Basic Education of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. The Implementation Manual was selected for three reasons. First, it is the authoritative

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national policy instrument that defines the aims, content, and organizational requirements of moral education in Chinese primary and secondary schools, the institutional setting under study, and therefore represents the official framework within which the two sampled schools are expected to operate. Second, its provisions bear directly on the domains that emerged as central to prevention in the interviews, including the goals of moral education, the cultivation of students' psychological and interpersonal competence, the staffing and professional capacity of teaching teams, family education training, and home–school cooperation; the document thus provided a formally mandated benchmark against which participants' accounts of what currently exists and what is still needed could be compared. Third, as an official, publicly issued policy text, it constituted a stable data source that was not elicited from participants and therefore did not depend on participant self-report, thereby strengthening the credibility of the findings through triangulation.

3.5. Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase procedure: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Coding was conducted manually rather than with qualitative data analysis software, a choice that facilitated the researchers' immersion in the data and supported the generation of well-organized and sufficiently grounded codes (Krippendorff, 2019). All authors had prior experience with thematic analysis. The first and corresponding authors analyzed the data collaboratively, engaging in iterative cycles of coding, comparison, and discussion; discrepancies were resolved through consensus, and the emerging codes and candidate themes were repeatedly checked against the original transcripts.

The Implementation Manual was analyzed using document analysis, a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documentary material that integrates elements of content and thematic analysis (Bowen, 2009). The document was first read in full to establish an overall understanding of its structure and intent. Passages pertaining to the study's focus, namely the aims of moral education, students' psychological and interpersonal development, information technology and digital competence, the staffing and professional capacity of teaching teams, parent training, and cooperation between homes and schools, were then identified, extracted, and coded using the same analytic lens applied to the interview data. Finally, the documentary codes were mapped onto and integrated with the themes derived from the interviews. This integrative step was iterative: the document was used both to corroborate and elaborate the themes derived from the interviews and to identify points of divergence, most notably the gap between the responsibilities that national policy assigns to schools and the resources and professional capacities actually available in the rural settings studied. In this way, the two data sources were analyzed not in parallel but in dialogue, with each informing the interpretation of the other.

3.6. Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to enhance the credibility, analytical rigor, and interpretive accuracy of the findings and to mitigate researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, investigator triangulation was achieved through collaborative coding and sustained analytic dialogue between the first and corresponding authors. Second,

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triangulation of data sources and methods was built into the study design: the analysis drew on teachers' accounts, guardians' accounts, and an official policy document, allowing the same phenomenon to be examined from the complementary vantage points of school, home, and national policy and reducing reliance on any single informant or source. Third, member checking was conducted. Preliminary findings were shared with teachers in the form of written summaries and with guardians through follow-up telephone calls, and participants were invited to confirm, refine, or contest the researchers' interpretations.

4. Results

Thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews with seven guardians of left-behind children and seven teachers (six homeroom teachers and one information-technology teacher) in rural Sichuan Province, triangulated with document analysis of the Implementation Manual of the Guidelines for Moral Education in Primary and Secondary Schools issued by the Department of Basic Education of the Chinese Ministry of Education, generated five themes. Together, the themes portray prevention as a multi-level undertaking that runs from the school's structural capacity, through its daily routines and the family–school relationship, to the community and the wider digital environment: (1) ensuring adequate teacher provision and professional curriculum instruction; (2) daily school practices as micro-preventive mechanisms; (3) enhancing guardians' supervisory competence; (4) school–family collaboration and guardian accountability; and (5) government, community, and platform support as a protective external ecology. A thread running through all five themes is feasibility under the conditions of the rural Sichuan left-behind context: participants framed prevention less in terms of ideal programs than in terms of what can realistically be built and sustained amid parental out-migration, intergenerational caregiving, and scarce educational resources.

4.1. Theme 1. Ensuring adequate teacher provision and professional curriculum instruction

The first theme concerns the structural preconditions of school-based prevention. Teachers regarded moral education, mental health education, and information-technology literacy education as three functionally distinct yet complementary curricular foundations for preventing online moral deviance among rural left-behind children, and they insisted that none of the three could be delivered effectively without adequate, specialized staffing, a condition their schools did not yet meet. One homeroom teacher described the current shortfall in mental health provision:

> *Mental health education courses can increase children's psychological knowledge and help them acquire skills to improve their mental well-being… In reality, with regard to moral and mental health education, our school only offers the Morality and Rule of Law course. We do not have a dedicated mental health education course, nor do we have specialized teachers for it… We hope that higher-level education authorities can provide support by introducing this course in schools and recruiting full-time teachers*. (T04)

The same shortage marked information-technology literacy education: "*I teach mathematics while also teaching information technology literacy part-time… I hope that*

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higher-level education authorities can allocate positions for recruiting full-time teachers for this course" (T03). Teachers were equally clear about why these under-resourced courses mattered, describing quality instruction in moral education as "*the most basic guarantee" of left-behind children's moral development* (T07). One teacher articulated the complementary preventive functions of the three domains:

> *Computer classes help cultivate good habits in using the internet. Mental health education, tailored to the experiences of left-behind children, helps them understand the emotional and psychological impact of deviant online behavior on others, thereby fostering empathy and discouraging unconscious participation in such behavior. Moral education helps students recognize that online behavior falls within the domain of moral responsibility, encouraging them to align their digital conduct with socially accepted ethical standards*. (T01)

Document analysis corroborated this pattern. The Implementation Manual expects moral education in primary and secondary schools to cultivate responsibility, awareness of social norms, moral judgment, and personality development, highlighting interpersonal competence and psychological regulation, the very capacities teachers attributed to mental health education. The Manual likewise emphasizes strong institutional support and robust teaching teams as the necessary basis for implementing moral education, aligning with teachers' insistence that staffing is not a secondary administrative matter but a preventive precondition.

Taken together, these accounts define an explicitly structural and sequenced strategy: before rural schools can be expected to implement sophisticated programs targeting online moral deviance, they must first be equipped with the basic curricula, staffing, and professional capacity on which any such program depends. Participants thus located the preventive priority not in adding advanced interventions but in securing these foundations.

4.2. Theme 2. Daily school practices as micro-preventive mechanisms

The second theme captures how, in the absence of systematic intervention programs and professional psychological support, prevention was embedded in the ordinary routines of school life. Teachers wove moral guidance into everyday contact with students: "*We integrate moral education into routine interactions such as daily conversations, class meetings, and the 'First Lesson of the Semester,' ensuring moral instruction becomes a normalized part of school life*" (T01). Others described constant informal reminders about proper internet-use habits (T05), as well as targeted conversations that named unacceptable conduct directly: "*First, I make it clear that deviant online behavior is unacceptable. Second, I remind them that I understand their academic level and explicitly discourage plagiarism*" (T07).

Beyond individual interaction, teachers relied on ritualized and internally coordinated practices to keep preventive messaging consistent. Morning meetings functioned as coordination mechanisms: as one teacher put it, "*We hold morning meetings to discuss how to guide students in a way that they can understand and accept*" (T06). Ceremonial occasions such as the First Lesson of the Semester, meanwhile, made expectations about online conduct visible and collective at the start of each term. Where resources allowed, schools also drew on outside expertise:

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> *We invited local police officers and lecturers from the Sichuan Police College to educate our students on internet safety. Topics included how to prevent online fraud, avoid suspicious links or pop-up ads, refrain from viewing inappropriate videos, steer clear of online quarrels, and not use vulgar language or recklessly comment on online topics*. (T05)

Teachers noted, however, that such external lectures remained infrequent, and that the depth of daily moral education was constrained by tight curricular schedules and insufficient resources, a limitation that ties this theme back to the staffing foundations of Theme 1. What the data describe, then, is a distinctive preventive modality: low-intensity but continuous guidance, delivered through relationships and routines that rural schools can actually sustain, which clarifies norms, corrects misconduct in real time, and repeatedly counterbalances the online and peer influences on left-behind children. These daily practices also reached beyond the school gate through communication with families, a linkage examined in Theme 4.

4.3. Theme 3. Enhancing guardians' supervisory competence: from willingness to capability

The third theme concerns the gap between guardians' willingness to supervise children's internet use and their capability to do so. Guardians, and grandparent guardians in particular, were generally aware that unsupervised internet use carried moral and behavioral risks, and they expressed a clear sense of responsibility for managing it. Their accounts nonetheless indicated that this willingness could rarely be translated into effective supervision, because they lacked the basic digital knowledge needed to understand what children were doing online. One grandparent guardian described the difficulty directly:

> *If I knew a bit about mobile phones or the internet, I could at least check what he's doing online. But I really don't understand those so-called apps or software on the phone, so I truly don't know where to start when it comes to managing him*. (G01)

As this account illustrates, the barrier was one of competence rather than motivation. Where guardians could not operate smartphones, recognize applications, or interpret children's online activity, supervision tended to remain symbolic and fragmented, confined to general verbal warnings whose effect guardians themselves doubted. Consistent with this diagnosis, guardians did not primarily ask for stricter rules; they asked to be taught:

> *…If community workers could come to the village and explain to us elderly people how to use the internet, teach us how to use smartphones, and show us what children are doing online, that would be wonderful… We adults could also learn some internet knowledge, which might make managing these children easier.* (G01)

Teachers were already improvising this training in rudimentary form, transmitting concrete protective tools through their communication with families:

> *We inform parents to supervise their children's mobile phone use and ask them to install the 'Parent Protection Assistant' app. If the guardians*

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> *cannot operate it, we recommend that they seek help from local professionals to set the phone to 'Teen Mode'*. (T01)

Another teacher advised guardians to steer children toward healthy offline hobbies, such as table tennis or badminton, to reduce the time available for online entertainment (T07). Document analysis indicated that such capacity-building carries an explicit policy mandate: the Implementation Manual identifies parent training as a core component of family-education guidance, observing that parents often lack sufficient understanding of children's physical and psychological development, scientific discipline methods, ways of improving parent–child relationships, effective parental role performance, and strategies for cultivating healthy values and behaviors, and it places responsibility on schools to provide such training (p. 209). Read alongside the interview data, this suggests that enhancing guardians' supervisory competence should extend beyond technical instruction to parent education oriented toward communication, support, and guidance, equipping guardians to respond to children's online conduct relationally as well as technologically.

4.4. Theme 4. School–family collaboration and guardian accountability

Both participant groups treated collaboration as indispensable: as one teacher put it, "Educating and guiding [left-behind children] requires joint efforts from both families and schools, rather than relying solely on formal classroom teaching" (T01). Yet their accounts also showed how difficult substantive cooperation was to enact. In practice, guardians described the school as the initiating engine of prevention and themselves as relays, sustained through low-threshold channels. WeChat parent groups were mentioned most often:

> *The homeroom teacher has set up a WeChat group. If the school needs parents' cooperation, the teacher posts messages in the group to inform parents… Before each new semester starts, the homeroom teacher reminds parents in the group to control children's use of computers, mobile phones, and television*. (G02)

Teachers created these channels deliberately: "*I created a parent group on WeChat to inform them about how to supervise their children's internet use*" (T02). They also extended them into households through home visits, as one guardian recalled: "Our teacher visited our home to understand how the child uses the internet during non-school hours" (G04). Yet the resulting cooperation could be thin. For some guardians it amounted to little more than passing messages on: "*usually it just means that I pass on whatever the teacher says in the group to the child and remind him a bit more. Beyond that, I really don't know how to cooperate with the teacher*" (G01). Others faced concrete constraints, such as distance, seasonal farm work, and limited schooling, while revealing a relay of accountability that reached migrant parents:

> *If you ask me to cooperate with the school, I honestly can't do much… It's not convenient for me to go to school, and during busy farming seasons I'm completely tied up… We can only rely on teachers to put in more effort. If something happens, they can call me. I'll say a few words to the child if I can, or pass the message on to his parents if needed*. (G05)

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Teachers located the greatest challenge on the family side: "*Communication with some parents is extremely difficult. Some of them are unaware of the potential harm caused by prolonged internet use among children*" (T04). Others pointed to divergent educational perspectives, with some parents not understanding or supporting the school's digital supervision efforts (T06), or observed that a small number of parents lacked basic awareness of their supervisory and caregiving responsibilities (T03).

Against these barriers, participants argued for two moves. The first is to operationalize guardian accountability as concrete, feasible conduct rather than abstract duty: "*Guardians must take part in digital supervision with a strong sense of responsibility*" (T02), which in participants' accounts included monitoring and caring for children and modeling proper internet use as positive examples (T01). The second is to adapt collaboration downward to the realities of left-behind families: one school was promoting an app called "Smart Primary and Secondary School" as a platform for home–school communication and learning-resource sharing (T03), and teachers stressed the need to understand each child's family environment to keep communication effective (T07). Document analysis reinforced the direction of both moves: the Implementation Manual places strong emphasis on home–school communication and cooperative education mechanisms, framing guardian responsibility as part of a jointly built preventive structure rather than an individual family matter.

4.5. Theme 5. Government, community, and platform support: building a protective external ecology

This theme locates prevention outward, in the environments surrounding school and family. Participants connected children's immersion in their phones to the scarcity of offline alternatives in rural Sichuan villages. As one teacher put it:

> *If local government departments could build some recreational infrastructure for children in rural communities, at least they wouldn't have to stare at their phones all the time. For rural left-behind children, underdeveloped infrastructure, lack of recreational activities, and scarcity of learning resources are important reasons why they are forced to focus on the online world*. (T05)

Guardians described the same vacuum from inside it: villages without resources such as libraries, sports equipment, or recreational facilities, and with no cultural activities awaiting children after school (G06). The most consequential account came from a grandparent who linked the absence of community guidance to her grandson's disengagement from school:

The community doesn't manage children's internet use at all… My grandson spends all day watching videos and playing games on his phone, and no one from the community has ever asked about it… If the community could offer lectures, organize activities, and help children spend less time on their phones, things would definitely be better… If the community had provided more guidance, my grandson might not have ended up dropping out of school. (G07)

Participants therefore called for institutional attention at both levels. Teachers wanted education authorities to "pay more attention to rural schools" by sending expert teams and expanding training opportunities for local teachers (T02), and urged village

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committees and township governments to "invest more resources in the well-being of left-behind children," a group they described as sensitive, marginalized, and easily overlooked (T06). Guardians called on rural communities to take an interest: "*Rural communities rarely organize activities for children, and no one teaches them how to use the internet properly. Without supervision, children easily lose their way*" (G05).

Finally, teachers hoped internet regulators would "*cultivate a healthy online atmosphere, purify the digital environment, and introduce strict laws and penalties to curb cyber violence, online pornography, and cyberbullying*" (T03), and warned that game developers "should not prioritize profits by designing games with borderline content or violent themes" (T06); a grandparent observed simply that "some platforms don't filter their content at all" (G01). Alongside this outward demand for source control, teachers reported what rural communities could contribute to the local moral ecology:

> *The connection between community workers and guardians is direct and close, which means the community can play an active role. For example, village offices can use bulletin boards to promote positive social norms and appropriate online behavior, organize the selection of 'Outstanding Guardians,' screen open-air movies, and hold offline activities to enrich the lives of rural left-behind children and strengthen their moral education in digital contexts*. (T02)

In these accounts, government, community, and platform support form a protective external ecology: enriched offline provision reduces children's compensatory reliance on the online world, institutional support strengthens the basic resources of schools and the caregiving capacity of guardians, and online content regulation provides a level of online safety that schools and families cannot ensure on their own.

5. Discussion

This study examined how guardians and teachers, the adults closest to rural left-behind children, understand and implement the prevention of online moral deviance, drawing on their accounts and on document analysis of the governing policy framework. The five themes reported above depict prevention not as a set of discrete programs but as a layered system in which under-resourced rural schools and under-equipped guardians, the two parties formally responsible for children's conduct, must themselves be enabled before any child-focused strategy can operate. In what follows, we consider how these findings corroborate, extend, and depart from existing prevention research, and why the rural Sichuan left-behind context gives them their particular shape.

The first theme reorders the priorities of the intervention literature. Existing strategies presuppose delivery capacity: media literacy interventions require trained deliverers (Xie et al., 2019), digital literacy cultivation relies on specialized programs, integrated learning materials, and exemplary teachers (Susanto, 2021), and policy proposals call for optimized educational programs that identify early risk factors (Williams, 2024) and for intervention programs that build self-control (Kim et al., 2022). In the rural schools of this study, those preconditions were absent: no dedicated mental health course, information-technology literacy taught part-time by a mathematics teacher, and chronic shortages of specialized staff. The teachers' accounts thus suggest that effective school-based prevention is sequential: schools must first establish an adequate curricular and staffing base before other preventive strategies can be meaningfully pursued. Document

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analysis sharpens the point: the Implementation Manual already mandates robust teaching teams and institutional support, so this strategy exposes an implementation gap between national policy and rural provision rather than a gap in policy itself.

The second theme identifies a preventive strategy that differs from the program-centered, scaled-up approaches advocated in the existing literature and that is grounded in the realities of limited teaching resources in rural Chinese schools. Media literacy interventions are typically discrete, curricularized programs whose sustained effects are then measured (Xie et al., 2019), and early-life prevention is likewise framed in terms of programs and policies (Kim et al., 2022). The daily practices documented here, namely informal conversations, class and morning meetings, the First Lesson of the Semester, and occasional expert lectures, constitute instead a low-intensity, low-cost, continuous, and relationally embedded form of prevention that resource-scarce rural schools can actually sustain. This micro-preventive mode is not merely a stopgap: it supplies the consistent adult feedback that supports self-control (Kim et al., 2022) and enacts moral guidance as everyday routine rather than formal program.

The third theme corroborates the emphasis on parental supervision found in existing research, but it places greater emphasis on cultivating the supervisory capacity of parents, and of grandparent caregivers in particular. Rea and Izzaty (2025) demonstrated that increased perceived parental monitoring can reduce adolescents' Dark Triad tendencies and thereby lower the incidence of online deviant behavior, and they proposed strengthening parental supervision as a preventive strategy. Participants in this study shared the underlying premise. What their accounts relocate, however, is the binding constraint: in rural left-behind families, the scarce resource is not willingness to monitor, nor children's perception of being monitored, but guardians' competence to monitor at all. For a grandparent who cannot operate a smartphone or recognize an application, the injunction to supervise more closely has no operational content. The findings therefore suggest a shift of emphasis from the quantity of monitoring to its capability conditions: prevention in left-behind contexts must begin by making supervision possible through practical digital training, protective defaults that low-literacy guardians can actually use, and guidance delivered in forms that presuppose little prior knowledge.

Whereas the existing literature emphasizes media literacy education for children, this study extends such education to grandparent caregivers as well. Media literacy interventions, which equip individuals to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media content (Livingstone, 2004) and have been advocated as durable means of reducing deviant behaviors and attitudes (Austin et al., 2006; Ivanović, 2014; Xie et al., 2019), uniformly position the child, adolescent, or student as the recipient of literacy education. The guardians' accounts reveal a gap prior to that starting point: an intergenerational digital divide in which the adults expected to mediate children's media use lack the very literacy such interventions presuppose within the home. The findings therefore argue for a two-generation model of literacy intervention in left-behind contexts, one that extends media and digital literacy education to guardians through village-level, face-to-face channels as a precondition for child-focused programs to take hold. The document analysis indicates that this extension aligns with the Implementation Manual, which already assigns schools responsibility for conducting parent training.

The fourth theme shows that teachers regarded home–school communication as the greatest challenge to implementing preventive strategies. Unable to supervise effectively

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under prevailing constraints, some grandparent caregivers saw themselves merely as conduits transmitting the school's guidance to the child rather than as supervisors in their own right, and supervision so reduced risks becoming superficial and symbolic. Caregivers and teachers alike reported that schools reached into out-of-school hours through parent WeChat groups, telephone contact, and home visits, and had thereby fulfilled their supervisory responsibilities to a considerable extent. Models predicated on active parental involvement, however, do not fit rural left-behind families, whose circumstances are shaped by parental labor migration, geographical distance, and grandparents' seasonal labor and limited education. Grounded in these realities, this study contends that preventive strategies should minimize technological demands, incorporate concrete and actionable channels of supervision, and keep migrant parents continuously embedded in processes of oversight and accountability, an approach consistent with the collaborative education mechanisms emphasized in the Implementation Manual.

The findings also diverge from the reviewed literature in the level at which prevention is conceived. Existing strategies operate chiefly at two levels: at the level of the person, they target monitoring, self-control, literacy, and attitudes, including personality tendencies such as risk-taking and sensation-seeking (Williams, 2024); at the level of the platform, they equip administrators with design and moderation instruments, from disinhibition assessment (Cheung et al., 2021; Chu et al., 2023) to moderation repertoires against trolling (Sanfilippo et al., 2017). Participants in this study added a third level and reframed the second. The added level is the offline environment: children gravitate to their phones, teachers and guardians argued, because impoverished villages offer little else and no institution attends to left-behind children outside school hours. Prevention, in this account, includes libraries, sports facilities, organized activities, bulletin boards, guardian-recognition schemes, and open-air films, an upstream, ecological strategy largely absent from existing research on online deviance, one that recasts such deviance, in part, as a problem of environmental scarcity and displaced belonging rather than of individual traits or skills alone. Read through a social identity theory lens (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), a richer offline life supplies legitimate venues for recognition and belonging, thereby reducing the appeal of deviant online avenues to status and inclusion. The reframing concerns platforms: where the literature works inside the platform, participants, often unable even to see the content stream that children inhabit, demanded outside-in, state-backed source control through filtering, penalties, and compulsory child-protective defaults. The difference reflects position rather than disagreement: strategies feasible for administrators are invisible and unusable to the least digitally capable households, suggesting that platform-level prevention should also be evaluated by the protection it affords families who cannot operate any tool at all.

These findings owe their shape to their setting, and therein lies their transferability logic. Each strategy answers a specific structural feature of the rural Sichuan left-behind context: foundational strengthening answers rural staffing scarcity; micro-prevention answers the absence of formal programs and specialized support; guardian capacity-building answers intergenerational caregiving by grandparents with little digital literacy; school–family collaboration answers households constrained by parental out-migration, distance, and seasonal farm labor; and external ecological support answers the scarcity of offline resources in rural areas. The strategies should therefore transfer best to settings that share these structural features, and least well to urban, co-resident, well-provisioned contexts.

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The primary contribution of this study is thus to articulate a context-embedded, multi-layered prevention system grounded in participants' accounts, one in which enabling the surrounding adults, institutions, and environments precedes and conditions any child-focused strategy.

Several practical implications follow. Provincial and county education authorities could give effect to the Implementation Manual's staffing mandate by allocating full-time positions for mental health and information-technology literacy teachers in rural schools and expanding professional training for existing staff. Schools could consolidate micro-prevention: protecting time for daily moral guidance, coordinating messaging through morning meetings, and formalizing low-threshold outreach built on executable instructions, scheduled home visits, and relay procedures that include migrant parents. Education and civil affairs authorities could commission village-based digital parenting workshops for guardians, above all grandparent guardians, covering smartphone operation, protective modes, and the recognition of risky content, alongside communication and guidance oriented parent education. Local governments could invest in children's offline infrastructure, including libraries, sports facilities, and organized holiday activities, with left-behind children as a designated priority group, while village organizations mobilize low-cost moral education vehicles such as bulletin boards and guardian-recognition schemes. Regulators and platforms, finally, could strengthen default youth protections and content filtering, evaluated against the benchmark of the low-literacy rural household rather than the digitally fluent urban one. This study has several limitations. It reports the perceptions and proposals of guardians and teachers, not evaluations of strategy effectiveness; at this stage, the accounts of what works are accounts of what is needed. Children's own perspectives on what would restrain or redirect their online conduct were not examined and may weight these strategies differently. The sample, seven guardians and seven teachers in a single province, supports qualitative depth rather than claims about prevalence. Social desirability may also have led participants to overstate their own engagement or their institutions' responsiveness. Future research could give children a direct voice on prevention; co-design and trial guardian digital training and two-generation literacy programs; evaluate longitudinally whether offline community provision reduces online moral deviance; and investigate the policy–implementation gap this study surfaced, namely why staffing and parent-training obligations mandated nationally fail to materialize in rural schools.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to identify feasible strategies for preventing online moral deviance among left-behind children in rural China, a vulnerable and marginalized group that research on online deviance has largely overlooked. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with seven teachers and seven guardians at two rural schools in Sichuan Province, triangulated with document analysis of the Chinese Ministry of Education's Implementation Manual of the Guidelines for Moral Education in Primary and Secondary Schools, the study identified five interlocking strategies: ensuring adequate teacher provision and professional curriculum instruction; embedding prevention in the daily practices of school life; enhancing guardians' supervisory competence; strengthening family–school collaboration and guardian accountability; and building a protective external ecology through government, community, and platform support.

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Taken together, these findings portray prevention not as a set of discrete, child-focused programs but as a layered, context-embedded system whose effectiveness depends on the capacity of the adults, institutions, and environments surrounding the child. In the rural left-behind context, the binding constraints on prevention are structural: schools lack specialized staff, grandparent caregivers lack basic digital competence, migrant parents are geographically absent, and villages offer children few offline alternatives to the smartphone. The central contribution of this study is therefore a reordering of preventive priorities. Whereas existing strategies typically ask how the child can be changed, the present findings ask what must first be true of teachers, guardians, families, communities, and platforms for any child-focused strategy to take hold. Viewed in this way, preventing online moral deviance among left-behind children is as much a matter of rural educational provision, intergenerational digital equity, and community development as it is of individual behavior change.

The strategies articulated here are not offered as a universal template; each responds to the structural features of the rural Sichuan left-behind context and is therefore expected to transfer best to settings that share them. Realizing these strategies will require aligned action across the entire preventive system: education authorities staffing rural schools with specialized teachers, schools sustaining low-cost daily moral guidance and accessible home–school channels, civil affairs departments and village communities equipping guardians and enriching children's offline lives, and regulators and platforms designing child protections that low-literacy rural households can actually use. As digital life becomes ever more deeply embedded in the everyday lives of rural children, safeguarding the moral development of left-behind children mainly depends on empowering the adults and institutions that support and care for them.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects, Universiti Putra Malaysia (Approval Number: JKEUPM-2024-660). All participants were informed of the study's purpose and procedures, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and all provided written informed consent, including consent to audio recording. The interviews concerned minors' behavior; accordingly, all identifying information was removed during transcription, and pseudonyms were assigned to participants, children, and schools. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare there are no conflicts of interest.

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