



Normlessness in Transition: An Ethical Analysis of Anomie from Emile Durkheim to the Digital Era with Moral and Social Transition

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Abstract

Anomie, a foundational concept in sociology, describes what happens to individuals and groups when shared social norms weaken or break down. This paper drops the concept from Durkheim’s original analysis to the conditions of contemporary digital society, drawing on empirical research to examine how anomie has evolved and how ethics can respond to it. The analysis yields three main findings. First, anomie in traditional societies arose largely from structural upheaval, particularly industrialization and urbanization, which outpaced the development of new moral regulation. Second, digital technologies such as algorithmic governance and social media have deepened the fragmentation of moral cognition, replacing shared normative frameworks with fragmented, competing ones. Third, cultural context shapes both how anomie manifests and how it can be addressed: the tension between individualism and collectivism produces distinct patterns of normlessness and calls for different governance approaches. The paper concludes that future ethical research should concentrate on three areas: technology governance, cross-cultural adaptation, and institutional repair. Together, these offer a path toward addressing the moral crisis of the digital age which is creating social transition in our everyday life.

Keywords: Structural, Industrialization, Urbanization, Anomie, Collectivism.

1. Introduction

The term “anomie” comes from the Greek *anomia*, combining *a* (without) and *nomos* (law). The French philosopher Guyot is credited with first using it in an academic sense, but its theoretical roots lie in Durkheim’s *Suicide* (1897). Durkheim described it as a condition in which people lose behavioral guidance because social norms suddenly break down. He stressed that this differs from ordinary moral decline: it is a structural problem of periods of rapid social change. Studying industrializing Europe, he found that when religion and community ties eroded before new values took their place, suicide rates rose sharply (Durkheim, 1951). This established the social integration-anomie behavior framework in various ways.

Later scholars tested and extended the idea. Lockwood (1992) introduced “normative coupling,” arguing that as modern society splits into subsystems, their norms clash, for instance when the efficiency logic of the economy collides with the emotional logic of the family. Merton argued in *Social Structure and various types of Anomie*, revised Durkheim’s account: when a society prizes economic success but denies people legitimate ways to reach it, deviance is systematically produced. This became his “cultural goals–institutional means” framework.

Digital technology has introduced a new variety of anomie. Floridi (2018) proposed “information entropy”: when information exceeds what a person can process, moral judgment collapses into emotional reaction. Neuroscience offers apparent support, with fMRI work reporting a 40% drop in prefrontal cortex activation (linked to complex moral reasoning) and heightened amygdala activity under information overload (J. D. Greene, 2021).

Research on social media points to Five mechanisms:

1. **Algorithmic moral narrowing.** Personalized recommendations on Twitter reportedly cut users’ exposure to differing views by 62% (Pariser 2011).
2. **Virtual identity as exemption.** Meta surveys found anonymous users 3.2 times as likely to post hate speech as those using real names (Meta Ethics Team 2022a, 2022b).
3. **Speed eroding moral reflection.** On short-video platforms like TikTok, the window for moral decisions shrinks to under 3 seconds, encouraging impulsive responses (Zhou and Liu 2021).
4. **Rewarded outrage and distorted collective effervescence.** Platforms reinforce moral expression through visible social feedback. Brady et al. (2017) found that moral-emotional language substantially increased the spread of political messages on Twitter. Brady et al. (2021) showed that users who received likes and shares for outrage expressed more outrage afterwards. Durkheim’s *collective effervescence* (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1912) produces solidarity and renews shared values. Platform outrage reproduces the emotional intensity of effervescence but tends to integrate users into antagonistic in-groups rather than a wider moral community.
5. **Context collapse and normative anomie.** On social media, audiences that are normally separate (family, colleagues, strangers, opponents) merge into a single audience. Marwick and boyd (2011) called this “context collapse”. Users can no longer tell which norms apply, because every message is read against several moral codes at once. This closely parallels Durkheim’s *anomie* (*Suicide*, 1897), a condition in which norms become unclear or contradictory, leaving individuals without stable moral guidance.

Bangladesh offers a sharp illustration of digital disembedding, because the shift from face-to-face moral regulation to platform-mediated interaction has been unusually rapid. Moral life in much of the country has traditionally been regulated through the *samaj*, kinship networks, the mosque or temple community and local *shalish* (village arbitration). These are institutions of what Durkheim called mechanical solidarity, in which shared beliefs and close mutual surveillance restrain individual conduct. Mass mobile internet access, overwhelmingly through Facebook, has drawn millions of users out of these local moral settings into a communicative space where such restraints do not operate. No equivalent digital norms have yet taken their place.

The 2019 “Padma Bridge” rumours show this clearly. Facebook posts claimed that child abductors were collecting heads for human sacrifices to support construction of the Padma Bridge, and at least

eight people were killed in vigilante mob attacks within two weeks. Police stated that none of those killed or injured had in fact been a child abductor. The best-known victim, Taslima Begum Renu, was beaten to death in Uttar Badda, Dhaka, after going to a school to ask about admission for her children. Videos showed young men kicking and trampling her while several hundred people, most of them silent spectators, looked on. The rumour itself drew on an older folk belief. Similar human-sacrifice rumours about bridge construction had led to attacks in 2010, but digital circulation gave it a speed and reach that local rumour never had.

A second pattern is rumour-driven violence against religious minorities. Roy, Singh and Kamruzzaman (2023) examined five cases between 2011 and 2022 in which social media rumours were used to mobilise mobs against minority groups. They identified religious extremism, weak legal safeguards and a culture of impunity as the main triggers. Al-Zaman's research points the same way. As reported by the fact-checking organisation Dismislab, his study of religious misinformation found that 69.3% of users tended to believe false information, while only 25.9% could identify and reject it. The same research suggests that such violence may have stronger political than religious connections. A similar pattern appeared during the 2024 political transition. Fabricated stories, such as claims about abductions of Hindu women and out-of-context videos from India, were cross-posted across Facebook, YouTube and X in a coordinated way.

1. **Foundations Theory:** It used Moral Foundations Theory to show that different groups weigh moral foundations differently (care, fairness, loyalty, authority, sanctity). This explains *why* fragmented feeds produce fragmented moral judgement and not only fragmented information. (Graham, Haidt and Nosek, 2009)
2. **Distributed morality in an information society:** Luciano Floridi argues that in networked systems, moral outcomes emerge from many small actions, none of which is individually blameworthy. This captures *diffused* responsibility better than anonymity alone. ("Distributed morality in an information society", 2013)
3. **Shoshana Zuboff** argues that the US market model treats human experience as raw material for prediction. This is the ethical logic the GDPR partly resists. (*The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 2019)

To address contemporary ethical dilemmas and build a theoretical basis for moral governance in a technological society, this issue needs deeper study. This article therefore begins by tracing how anomie theory evolved from classical sociology to contemporary digital ethics, clarifying the path of that development.

One caution if you plan to publish this: a few details look shaky and are worth verifying against the original sources. The French thinker usually credited with the term's early use is Jean-Marie Guyau, and some of the statistics and attributions don't match sources can confirm.

2. Theoretical Discussion

Durkheim's paradigm: social integration and normative Ways

Durkheim's theory of anomie grew out of his study of Europe's social upheaval in the 19th century. He saw anomie, in societies and in individuals, as a state of instability that arises when standards and values collapse or when purpose and ideals are missing. In *The Division of Labor in Society*, he distinguished two basic forms of integration: "mechanical solidarity," based on similarity among members of traditional societies, and "organic solidarity," based on the functional interdependence of modern ones. If a society shifts from the first to the second too fast, it enters a "normative vacuum," in which collective consciousness loses its certainty and new norms have yet to form. Suicide data illustrate this. Durkheim argued that suicide rose during economic crises not because of poverty itself but because social regulation suddenly stopped working (Durkheim 1897).

Later scholars have refined his account. Lockwood's (1992) "system coupling" theory holds that modern society's subsystems (economy, politics, culture) are integrated to uneven degrees. The pull between a globalizing economy and a localized culture, he argued, breeds new forms of anomie (Lockwood 1992).

Research on Chinese urbanization seems to bear this out: Li et al. (2006) reported that migrant workers caught between urban norms and local values showed 42% more psychological distress than urban residents.

Merton's structural theory: goals versus means issues

Merton rebuilt Durkheim's framework around the tension between "cultural goals" and "institutional means." For him, anomie comes not only from missing norms but also from a rupture between culturally prescribed goals and the institutionally approved ways of pursuing them (Merton 1938). In *Social Structure and Anomie*, he set out five modes of adaptation (Table 1) and treated "innovation" (accepting the goals but rejecting the legitimate means) and "rebellion" (rejecting both and substituting new ones) as the most disruptive (Merton 1938). The theory fits deviance under the "American Dream" ideology well: when material success is held up as a universal goal but routes to upward mobility are restricted, lower-class groups are more likely to turn to illegitimate paths such as crime.

Scholars working in Asian contexts have adapted anomie and strain theories to local cultural conditions. Zhao and Cao (2010), using cross-national survey data, found that rapid social change is associated with higher levels of anomie. This supports Durkheim's original link between transformation and normative breakdown, and is directly relevant to fast-changing Asian societies. Bao, Haas and Pi (2004) tested Agnew's (1992) general strain theory among Chinese adolescents. They found that strain produced negative emotions which in turn predicted delinquency, though the pathways reflected the strong role of family and school in Chinese youth's lives. China's college entrance examination, the *gaokao*, offers a clear case of Mertonian strain. Where admission to an elite university is treated as almost the only legitimate route to success, organised cheating is a classic form of what Merton called *innovation*: pursuing a culturally prescribed goal through illegitimate means. The problem became serious enough that China made organised cheating in national examinations a criminal offence in 2015.

Bangladesh shows a comparable pattern. The intense value attached to GPA-5 results and to admission to a small number of public universities and medical colleges creates heavy pressure on students and families. Recurrent leaks of public examination question papers, often circulated through Facebook and messaging apps, can be read as Mertonian innovation on a collective scale. Here digital platforms do not create the strain, but they lower the cost of illegitimate adaptation and spread it rapidly. Such cases suggest that Merton's framework must be adapted to its cultural setting: what counts as success, and which means are seen as legitimate, are shaped by local institutions and values, not universal ones.

TABLE 1 | Merton's methods of adaptation

	Cultural goals	Institutional means
Conformity	+ Accept	+ Accept
Innovation	+ Accept	– Reject
Ritualism	– Reject	+ Accept
Retreatism	– Reject	– Reject
Rebellion	± Substitute	± Substitute

■ Accept (+) ■ Reject (–) ■ Substitute (±)

Note: “+” = acceptance, “–” = rejection, “±” = substitution of new goals or means (Merton 1938).

Contemporary Research: how digital world reshapes anomie

In *Crime and the American Dream*, Messner and Rosenfeld (1994) put forward “institutional anomie theory” (IAT). They argued that American society lets the economy dominate so thoroughly that other institutions, such as schools and families, lose normative authority: when everything is valued in money terms, non-economic norms stop binding people (Messner and Rosenfeld 1994). The theory rests on five propositions:

1. Economic goals dominate the culture.
2. Non-economic institutions are subordinate.
3. Economic norms spread into other spheres.
4. Social control weakens overall
5. **Other institutions accommodate and absorb economic norms.** (Messner and Rosenfeld 2001).

Comparative research gives the theory some support. One study found that each one-unit rise in an IAT index was linked to a 0.83% increase in financial crime ($p < 0.01$), though Savolainen (2000) showed the relationship is much weaker in welfare states.

Floridi’s (2018) information ethics offers a fresh lens on digital anomie. He describes an “infosphere” in which traditional moral norms confront three challenges:

1. **Fluid identity.** Virtual avatars make it harder to assign responsibility.
2. **Reversibility of action.** The permanence of digital traces changes how consequences are perceived.
3. **Environmental intelligence.** Algorithms actively steer behavioral choices (Floridi 2013).

Empirical work also points to “moral unloading”: when information outstrips what people can process, they hand moral judgments to algorithms, and their own ethical sensitivity falls by 37% (Floridi et al. 2021). This offers one explanation for moral indifference on social media.

3. Three turning points in the theory

Tracing anomie theory from classical sociology to contemporary digital ethics reveals three key shifts.

First, a move from structural determinism toward agency. Durkheim (1897) stressed how strongly social structure shapes individuals, whereas Archer (2003) proposed “reflective anomie,” in which people in late

modernity continually rework their relationship to norms through internal dialogue. This invites us to ask how people and algorithms together produce anomie today.

Second, a move from macro-level analysis to micro-level foundations. Neuroethics now offers a biological basis for the concept. J. Greene (2005) and colleagues found that when people face moral dilemmas, an imbalance between prefrontal and limbic activity may cause “moral cognitive dysfunction.” This calls for multi-level models that link social structure to neural mechanisms.

Third, a move from single to cross-cultural comparison in several ways. Using Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, individualist societies tend to show anomie as value confusion (the US opioid crisis, for example), while collectivist ones show it as ruptured relationships (such as the “breaking of kin ties” in rural China) (Hofstede 2011; Zhou 2020). That difference complicates any attempt to build a universal theory.

A few points deserve checking before you rely on this text. “Reflective anomie” is not a term I can attribute to Archer, whose work centers on “reflexivity.” The Greene (2005) paper on moral dilemmas does not, as far as I know, use the phrase “moral cognitive dysfunction.” The Floridi “moral unloading” figure (37%), the IAT coefficient (0.83%), and the 42% and $2.3\times$ statistics could not be matched to sources I can confirm. Floridi is also cited as both 2013 and 2018 for the same ideas. Check all of these against the originals.

4. The manifestation of contemporary anomie

This section looks at how digital technology reshapes anomie through three technology-mediated mechanisms: the rewriting of norms by algorithmic governance, the polarization of moral emotion on social media, and the blurring of responsibility in the metaverse.

Algorithmic governance and the reconstruction of norms

Chen (2021) shows that food delivery platforms use “datafication” to reduce the ethics of labor to measurable performance metrics. This “digital Taylorism” creates a new kind of anomie. Riders are expected to obey traffic laws, a traditional norm, yet must break them to meet the algorithm’s demands, a technical norm.

Algorithmic decision-making has also produced new forms of institutional discrimination. Chen (2021) is cited as finding that the COMPAS recidivism tool used in US courts is systematically biased against Black defendants. Even after controlling for criminal history and demographics, Black defendants were wrongly classed as high-risk 45% more often than white defendants ($p = 0.003$). O’Neil (2016) calls this “mathematical racism,” which arises when historical bias in training data is amplified by the algorithm.

On privacy, Zuboff’s (2019) “surveillance capitalism” describes how platforms harvest “behavioral surplus.” She is cited as reporting that a smartphone user is logged by data collection points roughly 15,000 times a day. This constant monitoring fuels what Lupton (2020) calls “digital survival anxiety.”

The GDPR has improved transparency, but users still have little real control. Degeling et al. (2020) found that only 12% of users read privacy terms and fewer than 3% understand them correctly. Being informed but powerless is a dilemma specific to the digital age.

5. Moral emotion and polarization on social media

Zhou and Liu (2021) analyzed sentiment in Weibo data and found that moral debates flare up and fade quickly, with a hot topic lasting 11.3 days on average. Moral anger follows a “volcanic” pattern: it takes about 4.3 hours to reach its peak after an event breaks, and it subsides almost as fast. The quick turnover favors shallow, emotional judgments. Two consequences follow:

1. **Moral fatigue.** Constant emotional stimulation dulls people’s reactions to later events. In experiments, willingness to participate fell by 62% ($p < 0.01$) after five controversial events in a row.
2. **Performative justice.** Of “moral condemnation” posts, 73% led to no follow-up action within 24 hours, producing a cheap morality of clicking to take part (Zhou and Liu 2021).

Ribeiro et al. (2020) studied YouTube’s recommendation system and found that viewers stay 42 seconds longer on morally extreme content than on neutral content. The platform thus has an incentive to amplify conflict, which reshapes the structure of public moral discourse.

6. The role of cultural differences

Western individualist societies: value nihilism. Following Bauman (1993, 2000), Western society is moving from “solid” normative modernity to a fluid one. This creates three dilemmas:

1. **The paradox of choice.** Unlimited consumer options paralyze value judgment. In a well-known supermarket experiment, raising the number of jams from 6 to 24 cut purchases by 60% (Schwartz 2004).
2. **Individualized responsibility.** Social risks are recast as personal burdens. Case and Deaton (2020) are cited for the claim that 76% of those caught in the US opioid crisis first received legal prescriptions from doctors.
3. **Memory loss.** The immediacy of digital media fragments historical awareness. Only 11% of American college students could give the year the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted (Pew Research 2021).

The quiet quitting trend illustrates this nihilism. Harter (2022) reports that 52% of young Americans refuse to tie their self-worth to work, which suggests deep doubt about traditional measures of success.

East Asian collectivist societies: ruptured relationships. Zhou (2020) argues that China’s rapid transformation has put traditional ethical relationships into systemic crisis. A longitudinal study found three trends:

1. **Intergenerational distance.** Contact between left-behind rural elders and their migrant children fell from about 3.2 times a week in 2005 to 1.5 times a month in 2018.
2. **Shrinking trust.** Urban residents’ “core circle of trust” shrank from an average of 12 people in the 1980s to 4.3 in the 2010s.
3. **Hollowed rituals.** Traditional festivals have lost normative force. The median time spent visiting relatives at Spring Festival dropped from 6 days in 1990 to 2 in 2020.

Japan shows a similar pattern. A Cabinet Office survey (2021) found that the share of young people who feel they have no close friends rose from 9% in 1985 to 27% in 2020, a “no-connection society” that signals structural loosening in a collectivist culture. South Korea’s intense competitiveness adds its own strain: in a 2022 survey, 42% of Seoul high school students had deliberately ended friendships because of academic rivalry (J.-H. Chung and Park 2024). This instrumentalization of relationships is reshaping the moral ecology of East Asia.

7. Blurred responsibility in the metaverse

The Meta Ethics Team (2022a, 2022b) reports that 78% of users in virtual environments admitted to doing things they would never consider in real life, chiefly because they did not feel the consequences. Digital identities there are often multiple and changeable, which complicates the usual assignment of moral responsibility. The team’s study also says that anonymity and decentralization make it easier for users to ignore the long-term effects of their actions, weakening their sense of responsibility.

Decentralization worsens the problem. In traditional societies, clear rules and recognized authorities define and enforce moral responsibility, but the openness and autonomy of the metaverse make those mechanisms hard to apply. Hurka (2021) similarly argues that without clear regulation, responsibility is even harder to attribute in decentralized virtual worlds.

Differences in how consequences are perceived online add to the blur. The problem affects individual behavior and also threatens society’s moral order. If responsibility cannot be anchored in virtual spaces, they may become breeding grounds for anomie that spill over into real-world moral consensus. Redefining and strengthening moral responsibility in the metaverse is therefore a pressing question for ethics research.

8. Ethical response strategies

To address the problems above, this article proposes an “institution-culture” dual track. One track uses firm legal and policy constraints, and the other uses gentler cultural and educational shaping. From an ethical standpoint, it develops three governance paths: institutional repair (the technology-embedding path), a digital ethics governance framework (the institutional innovation path), and cultural adaptation (the moral capacity-building path).

9. Institutional repair: embedding ethics in technology

Floridi's (2018) "design ethics" holds that moral principles should be built into algorithms themselves. One example is a "moral buffer zone" in recommender systems that automatically lowers the visibility of content when hate speech is detected (O'Callaghan et al. 2022). Algorithms also need to be more transparent and accountable (Lessig 2006). Lessig's "code is law" idea has been updated for the digital era, with recent work calling for a "four-dimensional accountability framework":

1. **Explainability.** Algorithmic decisions should come with evidence people can understand. The EU AI Act requires high-risk systems to supply clear and adequate technical documentation (Article 13).
2. **Auditability.** New York City's Local Law 49 is said to require annual third-party audits of public-sector algorithms. A 2022 audit reportedly found discriminatory bias in 37% of systems (Groves et al. 2024).
3. **Reviewability.** GDPR Article 22 lets people request human review of automated decisions, though only 8.3% of cases are actually reviewed (Wachter et al. 2021).
4. **Recoverability.** Australia's AI Ethics Framework suggests an algorithm liability insurance pool, which has been piloted in medical AI (CSIRO 2023).

10. A digital ethics governance framework: institutional innovation

Drawing on Chinese tradition, Fan (2020) proposed an "algorithm village compact" in which platforms, users, and government jointly set community norms. Pilot data reportedly show that this participatory approach cut violations by 41%. China's New Generation AI Ethics Code introduced "agile governance," including a regulatory sandbox in Shenzhen where firms can test new products under controlled conditions (CAICT 2021).

UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of AI (2021) describes a three-tier model of prevention, mitigation, and relief:

Prevention means impact assessments. Korea's K-ETHICS standard, for instance, asks companies to assess 11 types of ethical risk during development.

Mitigation means real-time monitoring. The EU Fundamental Rights Agency's ALGO-CARE system is said to detect algorithmic discrimination as it happens (FRA 2022).

Relief means dispute resolution. In 2022, 42% of cases handled by Japan's "AI Complaints Handling Window" ended in mediation (Sugeno 2015).

Cultural adaptation: building moral capacity

Building on the "moral enhancement" theory of Persson and Savulescu (2012), a digital ethics course for teenagers was developed. In early trials, 12 weeks of training raised the consistency of students' moral judgments by 29% ($p < 0.05$).

Wang and Mei (2021) put forward a "new ritual order" theory based on the possibility of restoring traditional ethical communities (Wan 2015). It calls for creatively transforming traditional ethical resources, with three examples:

Digital village compacts. Zhejiang's "Future Community" project put village rules online and let residents vote on changes through blockchain. Disputes in the pilot communities fell by 53% (Chai et al. 2019).

Virtual ancestral halls. A metaverse ancestral hall built by Taiwan's Cultural and Technological Development Association lets scattered relatives take part in rituals together, raising users' sense of family identity by 28% ($p < 0.05$) (CTDA 2023).

A moral memory project. Beijing Normal University's "Chinese Ethics Database" holds nearly 10,000 traditional moral narratives for training AI on ethics (BNU 2021).

Japan's reform is also notable. The Ministry of Education made moral education a formal subject ("Special Education Morality") and produced a digital textbook with 176 moral dilemma cases (Nakayama 2019). Consistency in students' moral judgments reportedly rose from 58% to 78% ($p < 0.01$).

11. Conclusion

This study has argued that Durkheim's sociology remains a powerful lens for understanding the ethical problems of digital society, provided it is extended and grounded in local contexts. Durkheim located the sources of moral breakdown in two social conditions: the strength of individuals' attachment to groups and the effectiveness of collective regulation. Digital life unsettles both at once. Platforms connect users more densely than ever before, yet they loosen the regulation that once came from face-to-face communities, shared institutions and a common moral horizon.

The analysis has traced three shifts in how this breakdown should be understood. First, anomie can no longer be explained by social structure alone. It emerges from the interaction of technology and culture, as algorithms amplify divisions already present in society rather than creating them from nothing. Second, digital environments may fragment moral judgement by detaching it from stable communities and settled norms. The empirical evidence for this remains incomplete, however, and calls for careful research rather than confident claims. Third, culture shapes the consequences of technology, so the same platforms produce different moral outcomes in different societies.

The Bangladeshi case gives these arguments particular force. Rapid digital expansion has drawn millions of people out of the *samaj*, kinship networks and local religious communities that traditionally regulated conduct, without yet providing norms suited to online life. Rumour-driven mob violence, attacks on religious minorities and the circulation of leaked examination papers show how platforms can lower the cost of illegitimate action and turn strong in-group attachment into a source of harm. Bangladesh thus complicates the assumption that collectivist cultures are naturally protected against digital anomie. Strong integration without inclusive regulation can intensify moral breakdown rather than prevent it.

These findings have implications for governance. Punitive legislation alone cannot restore moral order, as Durkheim recognised when he distinguished repressive law from the deeper solidarity of modern societies. His call for intermediate groups suggests a more promising direction. Universities, professional associations, religious organisations, civil-society fact-checkers and digital literacy programmes could help build the shared norms that digital life currently lacks. Platforms, meanwhile, should be held responsible for designs that reward outrage and speed over reflection.

Future research should test these arguments empirically, especially in the global South, where digital change is fastest and sociological evidence remains thin. The digital age has not answered Durkheim's question of what holds a society together morally; it has made that question more urgent.

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