

Vol. 6, No. 2 | 2026

ARJEAD

ARTÍCULO

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Fredy Orlando Salamanca González

Recepción: 28-04-2025 | Aceptación: 06-11-2025

Recepción: 28-04-2026 | Aceptación: 06-01-2026

Digital Citizenship in University Students: Perspectives and Experiences

Ciudadanía Digital en Estudiantes Universitarios: Perspectivas y Experiencias

Fredy Orlando Salamanca González ¹

¹ Foreign Languages Program, Universidad de Cartagena, Cartagena de Indias, Colombia,
email: fsalamancag@unicartagena.edu.co

Abstract

The concept of digital citizenship is little known in society in general. Digital information networks have transformed the way people interact and also the way they live as digital citizens. Despite the limited theoretical understanding about digital citizenship, digital users experience it in their daily interactions. Consequently, this article presents an analysis of the understandings and experiences of digital citizenship among university students in a foreign language program at a public university in the Colombian Caribbean Coast. Students' voices are fundamental for establishing their considerations of digital citizenship and gathering information regarding specific theoretical gaps. This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using content analysis. Participants had limited education, as well as conceptual and practical gaps, nevertheless, their sense of ethics was high. None of the participants had previous education about citizenship in digital environments. This meant that they learned to

exercise their duties, rights, and obligations through practice. Finally, there is an urgent need to integrate digital citizenship as a transversal competence in higher education.

Keywords: digital citizenship, digital technologies, higher education, phenomenological research, student experiences, university students

Resumen

El concepto de ciudadanía digital es poco conocido en la sociedad en general. Las redes de información digital han transformado la manera en que las personas interactúan y también la forma en que viven su ciudadanía digital. A pesar de la limitada comprensión teórica sobre este tema, los usuarios digitales la experimentan en sus interacciones cotidianas. En consecuencia, este artículo presenta un análisis de las comprensiones y experiencias relacionadas con la ciudadanía digital de estudiantes universitarios de un programa de lenguas extranjeras en una universidad pública

de la costa Caribe colombiana. Las voces de los estudiantes son fundamentales para establecer sus concepciones sobre la ciudadanía digital y recopilar información relacionada con vacíos teóricos específicos. Este estudio cualitativo adoptó un enfoque fenomenológico. Los datos fueron recopilados mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas y analizados por medio de análisis de contenido. En relación con los resultados, los participantes contaban con una formación limitada, así como con vacíos conceptuales y prácticos, no obstante, demostraron un alto sentido ético. Ninguno de los participantes había recibido formación previa sobre ciudadanía en entornos digitales. Esto significó que aprendieron a ejercer sus deberes, derechos y obligaciones a través de la práctica. Finalmente, existe una necesidad urgente de integrar la ciudadanía digital como una competencia transversal en la educación superior.

Palabras clave: ciudadanía digital, estudiantes universitarios, tecnologías digitales, educación superior, experiencias estudiantiles, investigación fenomenológica

Introduction

Daily life depends largely on access to digital information networks. Bank accounts, news, legal processes, education, and more activities can be carried out remotely via the internet. Likewise, digital environments require people to comply with the rights and duties of digital citizens. However, the digital citizenship concept is unfamiliar to many people, and therefore, digital citizens exercise their rights intuitively. Jones-Jang (2021), argues that in digital networks, there is a lot of harmful information, and people often

lack the digital literacy required to identify and avoid misinformation. Young people immersed in educational environments must understand what it means to be a digital citizen, especially when they are permanent users, producers, and consumers of the information stored online.

Based on the above, it would be expected that people in general, especially youngsters, known as digital natives, have received instruction or education related to digital citizenship. However, it is common to find institutions in which training on this subject is not included in their curricula. For Öztürk (2021), it is necessary to follow rules for the responsible and appropriate use of technology in order to redirect the digital world toward education and the principles of digital citizenship. This creates a gap in students' knowledge about an aspect that is practiced daily and at all times. This absence of information about digital citizenship suggests that students can expose themselves to different threats found in online environments. Without training on digital citizenship, people are easily prone to be affected by scammers, cyberbullies, identity thieves, and other online threats. Consequently, this paper analyses how students understand and practice their digital citizenship in university environments, their role as digital citizens, and the implications this has for education.

Although digital citizenship has received increasing scholarly attention in recent years, most studies have focused on conceptual frameworks, digital competencies, technological access, and the responsible use of digital media. However, limited research has explored how university students understand and experience digital citizenship from their own perspectives, particularly in Latin

American contexts. In Colombia, and especially in public higher education institutions, little is known about how students construct meanings related to ethics, social justice, and digital identity through their daily interactions in digital environments. This gap is significant because university students are active users of digital technologies and are continuously involved in the production, consumption, and dissemination of online information. Understanding their experiences can contribute to the development of educational strategies that promote critical, ethical, and responsible participation in digital societies. Therefore, this study aims to analyze how university students understand and practice digital citizenship in university environments, their role as digital citizens, and the implications this has for education.

Conceptual Analysis of Digital Citizenship

Digital citizenship is the ability to safely and responsibly access digital technologies, as well as to be an active and respectful member of society, both online and in physical contexts (Marcial et al. 2022). Generally, citizens have rights, duties, and obligations, that are established by their place of birth or residence and which they must adhere to for healthy coexistence and social benefit. With the arrival of the internet, many of the responsibilities and guidelines that operate in the physical world were transferred to virtual media, forging the concept of digital citizenship.

Anyone who has access to virtual environments can belong to groups or sites who they feel affiliated to, thereby exercising their right to choose. However, these choices cannot violate the safety or well-being of others. Digital citizenship functions in a way that those who

are online apply basic values of coexistence in a bidirectional manner, that is, to respect and to be respected. Richardson et al. (2021) assert that digital citizenship is a practice of online respect and tolerance to increase civility. Digital citizenship is also related to educating in the digital age, since the modern world integrates digital citizens. A digital citizen contributes positively to society, whether physically or virtually. Citizenship in the real context is the basis for digital citizenship to be exercised respectfully.

The term digital citizenship refers to the traditional term of citizenship and shares attributes such as tolerance and respect, which are part of the interaction in both contexts, digital and physical. Digital citizenship, literacy, and rights are related and change according to social dynamics, when citizenship is digital, principles of governance, control, authority, among others combine (Pangrazio and Sefton-Green 2021). Being a digital citizen demands responsibility and commitment, its basic principles underlie the need to improve societies, ensuring well-being and healthy coexistence.

When exercising digital citizenship, digital users follow parameters for interacting safely. They also have to safeguard the security of other digital citizens, just like in the physical world. Fernández-Prados et al. (2021) suggest that digital citizenship encompasses aspects such as technological management, social justice, emancipation, and the right to participate in online events to bridge the digital divide. Digital citizenship, understood as the simple use of digital information media, is a limited concept, as technological tools alone do not guarantee appropriate citizen behavior when users are online.

Digital Citizenship and Socio-Emotional Skills

Lane and Smith (2021) assert that socio-emotional skills are the ability to process information, understand one's own emotions, and infer how others feel in the different situations they face. The current world, depends on the internet, its pace is accelerated and people, as social beings, must coexist in contexts where socio-emotional skills are needed and valuable. Before mentioning or expressing an opinion on a topic, it is necessary to reflect. In practice, socio-emotional skills define personal characteristics, ways of living together, acting, and reacting to what happens to oneself and others.

Socio-emotional skills are part of human interactions, they are acquired and strengthened throughout life, but concerns arise when relationships with others are not established positively in virtual interchanges. Consequently, online content threatens people's socio-emotional development, sexual or violent content, bullying, or the presence of digital predators disrupts a person's well-being (Jeffery, 2020). Digital citizenship is related to socio-emotional skills therefore, it is important to be aware of the risks found online and to know how to respond to those situations.

Digital citizens have created socio-emotional ties on digital information networks, especially on social media. These interactions have generated situations that have impacted their family or friends in the physical world. The socio-emotional well-being of the physical world is interrupted by the virtual world. The time people spend on chats or social media consumes and degrades peoples' interpersonal ties. Youngsters use social media during the day, which isolates them from their families, virtual connections deteriorate

physical relationships and consequently, socio-emotional ties (Small et al. 2022). Digital citizens must be aware that the digital world can affect their physical environment. It is each individual's responsibility to find a balance between the digital contexts where they choose to belong and their physical environments.

The Role of Ethics in Digital Citizenship

Varkey (2021) defines ethics as the study of moral norms that guide behaviors and that are socially accepted. Some norms vary according to culture, religion, customs, etc., others are general, e.g., do not kill, do not steal, be honest, etc. Digital citizens must follow parameters dictated by ethics and inherent to their very nature. For example, fake profiles, defamation, and violent messages violate ethics. People, in their free will, need ethics to define their behavior within the societies in which they operate, and thus they practice and adopt coherent conducts.

Ethics is concerned with human acts, the ways of behaving vary from person to person, and one's own actions can affect or alter others' positively or negatively. Han (2022) states that digital ethics analyzes the moral use of technology, reflects on the generation, organization, propagation, and use of data, and is concerned with the moral problems caused by technology. Therefore, digital ethics promotes behaviors in accordance with morality and with the benefit of people who use digital networks. Likewise, according to ethics, a digital citizen seeks that the dissemination of information is relevant, beneficial, and authentic.

People share videos, photographs, or messages, this interaction happens automatically, and they do not consider whether the content

shared violates ethical standards. Online groups promote ideas, support or reject initiatives, and express their views on religion, gender, economics, politics, or any topic that is currently trending. Education about manipulation of information is vital, the ethical dimension must be done along with the digitalization processes, the problem lies in the irresponsible use of digital tools. (Novella-García & Cloquell-Lozano, 2021).

Digital Rights

Digital rights are citizens' rights in the digital world, they include the right to access, use, create, and publish digital material, to have access to computers, electronic devices, and information networks, such as the internet (Mehmonov and Musaev, 2021). Nowadays, people who possess a smartphone or tablet with internet access can be part of the digital citizens population. Likewise, among digital rights, people are allowed to comment or give impressions in favor of or against events that happen worldwide. Digital networks facilitate the dissemination of information, support social organization, and enable the expression of agreements and disagreements regarding measures taken by governments (Lin & Kant, 2021). Access to information is a fundamental right, and currently, much of the data is found on digital platforms, suggesting that digital citizens also follow the guidelines that digital citizenship demands.

Among the rights that people have, they should promote coexistence as well in order to maintain healthy relations and to protect communities. In the digital context, communities also work around respect, tolerance and looking for mutual benefits. Contemporary empowerment is expressed through the convergence of physical

and virtual communities, which transcend borders and foster a collective identity opposing issues such as oppression, segregation, and violence (Lozano-Díaz & Fernández-Prados, 2021). From another perspective, social digitalization also requires digital rights that complement the fundamental ones to ensure the necessary protection. Custers (2022) proposes that, in the virtual world, one should have the right to disconnect, to access the internet, to change one's mind, to a clean digital environment, to a safe digital environment, to digital education, among others.

The pandemic was one of the events that caused online information to spread in an unsafe manner. In the data traffic that occurred, there was inaccurate communication that, in some cases, threatened regional or national security. Citizens turned into digital citizens, thus without knowing, data was created in which biased and false information was mixed with authentic one. On the other hand, the population in general could manage social and health services by means of the internet, it became a platform to visualize emerging situations. Through exercising the digital rights, the citizens achieve self-realization by the application of fundamental rights, and being recognized by the state as both a provider and recipient of educational, financial, health, and social protection services (Masiero & Bailur, 2021). The fragility of people during COVID-19 revealed digital risks and, with it, the need for political regulations regarding the right for expression, access to information, privacy, and other ethical considerations (Calzada, 2021). Since the spread of digital media, citizens have faced challenges, and life has changed, and ways to be protected were required.

Social Justice in Digital Citizenship

Social justice means that members of society have the same opportunities and access to basic services regardless of their origin, however, when gaps exist, social justice is also the search for change (Gümüş and Oplatka, 2020). Inequality generates conflict, backwardness, and underdevelopment, which is why some communities seek to overcome inequality. New technologies require certain prerequisites to participate in globalization and also demand that users continually update their skills, which leads to significant problems, challenges, and inequalities (Milenkova et al. 2020). In the digital era, limited or null access to the internet causes inequality, information is not received, and educational or job opportunities are lost. People suffer from many academic, educational, technological, and other deficiencies, which result in poverty, illiteracy, and a lack of benefits. The advent of technology has imposed a different order in which injustices are also found in virtual media.

Technology, with its advances and possibilities, seems to offer citizens the opportunity to participate actively through social networks. When digital users participate, their comments can cause reactions and adhesion from others towards an idea or initiative. Technology always brings changes to communities, and with the arrival of the internet, tensions have emerged between social mobilization and the principles of equality (Tomasello, 2022). Through the internet, ideologies are visible and impact society positively or negatively, thus social justice is reflected in the actions of people. Activists have shown that social injustice is present in many places and has been

revealed through digital information networks, which has created new social movements (Aanestad et al., 2021). In this case, the globalization of digital networks contributes to the spread of ideals in relation to social justice.

The role of digital media is to connect people, and their ideas, perceptions, and opinions about what is happening in their contexts, where injustice is present. People make sense of the world through interaction on digital networks, where labor exploitation, domination, and economic inequality are evident (Fuchs, 2021). Political dissent, wars, corruption, or any evidence of global rejection through the internet, create groups or collectivities to support social welfare. Digital users rely on digital information networks to demonstrate the oppression or inequality by their governments or by any other institution that seems to violate rights.

Digital Identity

According to Engeness (2021), digital identity is a dynamic process that involves the meaning and reinterpretation of beliefs, values, and experiences through contexts and relationships in digital society. The way people interact, the words they use, and the expressions they use to refer to situations are inherent to their personality. The forms of interaction impact identity, each new learning experience or new person they meet changes perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors in oneself and in others. The multiple ways in which digital users think and comment provide stimuli that, through affinity or rejection, influence others and their identities.

When digital citizens use their rights, they contribute to global society and, through their actions, promote positive attitudes. Likewise, digital identity means citizen protection and

well-being, that allow them to demand respect for themselves and their communities. Digital identity represents the self-realization of citizens, the awareness of fundamental rights, and being seen by the state as both a sender and recipient of education, financial help, health support, and social protection services (Masiero & Bailur, 2021). This multidimensionality of digital identity is an idealization, as it is actually a term that few people know. Following the precepts of digital citizens is a responsibility for personal development and healthy coexistence.

Digital identity is also understood as the one projected to digital users and reflected by most people through their profiles. According to Pennycook (2021), online information can foster false beliefs among people, leading to disagreements and conflicts, even in matters of ideology or politics, falsehoods tend to be more credible. This understanding of digital identity is the one that causes harm because it involves deception or extortion through false identities that violate all the premises of digital citizenship. Digital identity is represented by personal data in cyberspace, this identity may be related to a person's real life or may exist only online (Michalkiewicz-Kadziela and Milczarek, 2022). This conception of digital identity warns that a person can have more than one identity. From this situation, the ambiguity of digital identity arises. When interacting with someone, it is not possible to determine whether the information online is coherent to reality. .

Method

This study adopted a qualitative approach, which seeks to understand

social phenomena through the meanings individuals assign to their experiences. Qualitative research is a process that seeks to give the scientific community understanding of social phenomena through immersion in those contexts and examining the object of study (Small 2021). Qualitative research is the methodology for this research since digital citizenship is forged from personal experience and based on the interactions that people have on digital information networks.

This research is based on the phenomenological approach, since the experiences of participants in digital networks are created through real interaction. For Alhazmi and Kaufmann (2022), the phenomenological study is related to the fact that people make sense of their context through their experiences in a complex process due to its multidimensionality. People can access information networks through the internet, they belong to groups, share data, or support proposals. This dynamic suggests that digital users learned to use information networks through experience. For Van Manen and Van Manen (2021), a fundamental issue of phenomenology is to reveal people's views on their existence, which means that phenomenological design gives relevance to people's routine situations. In this sense, phenomenology aims to elucidate participants' experiences in relation to their digital citizenship.

18 students participated voluntarily in this study. They were from a public university located in the Caribbean coast in Colombia. Their ages ranged between 19 and 22 years old. Participants came from different regions of Colombia, but they live in the same city where this research was carried out. Students' cultural diversity is an added value in terms

of what they consider as digital citizenship. These participants are permanent users of digital information networks, therefore, they provided valuable data in which their digital citizenship was practiced. All participants voluntarily agreed to participate in this study and signed an informed consent form prior to data collection. The consent form explained the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, the voluntary nature of participation, and the

participants' right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Confidentiality, anonymity, and data protection were guaranteed throughout the study. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms and identification codes (e.g., EN01, EN02) were used in the presentation of results. All data were stored securely and used exclusively for research purposes, following the ethical principles for research involving human participants.

Table 1
Socio Demographic Information

Variable	Description
Number of participants	18
Age range	19-22 years
Institution	Universidad de Cartagena
Academic program	Foreign Languages
Country	Colombia
Data collection instrument	Semi-structures interviews

The setting for this research was a public university located in the Colombian Caribbean. This is the only public university in the Bolívar department and offers programs in engineering, accounting, medicine, law, foreign languages, among others. This university was founded in 1827, it is a very important institution for the region and for the country. This university is characterized by the multiculturalism of its students and faculty, which represents a significant contribution to social diversity and development.

The instrument applied in this research was an interview. The interview consisted of 10 open questions. The main themes to cover in the interview were ethics, social justice, and digital identity. The instrument for this research was validated through the review of three experts, each of whom reviewed the instrument and suggested

adjustments. All the experts held doctoral titles and had more than 20 years of experience. After correcting the instrument, it was reviewed again to determine the final adjustments and approve its application. The participants were recruited in a meeting held during class time, and they were informed of the instrument to be applied to collect data, the purpose of the research, and the way they would be involved. Each interview lasted between 15 and 20 minutes in which a script guided the questions.

For the analysis of data, content analysis was taken into account. First, the interviews were transcribed and organized in an Excel format. Second, the responses given by students were analyzed and coded using different colors depending on the content to develop, for example, digital citizenship, ethics, education, responsibility,

activism, identity, and some others. Third, the topics mentioned were selected and organized to infer the categories. Finally, all the samples were included in the data analysis, and they were supported by the interpretation of the researcher.

Results

From the participants' responses and after organizing and coding data samples, categories emerged. The three categories inferred from the data samples are people need to be aware of the ethical use in social networks, digital citizens amplify their social concerns through social media, and some digital users hide their real selves behind distorted profiles online. These categories explain how some university students experience digital citizenship from their own practice. Besides, for the participants, social justice is a matter to pay attention to, these students are aware of their role as citizens, and they have grown side by side with digital technologies and with the expansion of citizen movements. Similarly, their voices reveal their insights in relation to the link between social media and formal education. In this aspect, the participants showed their critical analysis about the current situation that students live in and how their instruction is decontextualized from the current digital environments. In the coming paragraph the three categories previously mentioned are going to be developed.

People Need to be Aware of the Ethical Use in Social Networks

Participants' comments regarding digital citizenship are related to ethics on digital networks, where some participants mention the lack of this aspect in interactions on digital networks. For

example, EN03 asserts that "ethics is absent because anonymity acts as a shield because people act differently than in real life." This opinion is supported by EN15, who states, "Ethics in digital environments has evolved, however, more work still needs to be done to guarantee the safety of all users of these platforms."

More than half of the interviewees explained the relevance and necessity of ethics in virtual environments. In this sense, they emphasize the need for tolerance, respect, trust, and honesty. In this sense, EN06 asserts that "ethics is very important for users of digital technologies, as it means respecting the rights of others and avoiding the spread of misinformation." Participants recognize the need to consider ethics in virtual environments as part of digital coexistence and as a relevant aspect for the digital networks users. As EN09 explains, "ethics is useful to prevent fake news and misinformation, as well as to be safe and to regulate one's behavior, for example, on social media or online sites in general." Therefore, ethics is a value that must be taken into account when interacting, benefiting citizens who are part of the digital network.

Digital Citizens Amplify Their Social Concerns Through Social Media

Participants were also asked about the impact of disagreements about social or political events through digital media. Consequently, most of them stated that digital media is an effective medium for addressing public objections. For EN01, "digital media can be a space for expressing a social issue that is negatively affecting society." Participants also mentioned real-life cases in which social media was helpful for expressing opposition

and allowing them to propose social changes. EN06 stated that "disagreements on social media have had a social impact, for example, online protests against police violence in the United States, which contributed to the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement."

There were comments about the influence that nonconformities can have on other people, which creates a collective mentality towards a political or social issue. In this case, EN04 explained that "a person who posts any nonconformity with a political candidate can influence the thinking of others, it can create a collective mindset that can be both positive and negative." Similarly, posting nonconformist comments is an inherent aspect of social media because, in social networks people know what happens and they feel that they must reply. EN05 suggested that "we cannot stay behind without commenting because that would be out of fashion, so we always post something about social or political issues." The previous assertion means that, people may be more persuaded to follow the thread of comments rather than demanding social or political changes.

Participants were questioned about the influence of social media on social justice. Participants were divided on this aspect, as many believe that social media actually promotes social justice. For EN07, "it was crazy to think that an action or petition made in a social media platform could reach the authorities, but there have been cases like those, so I think that seeking justice through social media does have an impact." Consequently, digital media maximizes the relevance of justice in the general population. Through internet, demands are shared and people can gather faster and easier.

According to EN11, "people use platforms to share problems and gain support, social media allows the propagation of information, which impacts public awareness and the encouragement for equality and justice." Consequently, social media is a means by which social justice is collectivized, and from there, shared ideas emerge in support of social welfare.

In contrast, participants indicated that digital media does not always achieve visibility or execution of social justice. For EN13, "justice cannot be achieved through social media, the most that you can do is to affect the image of a person who made a mistake, but there is not much social justice on social media." This assertion explains that digital media can affect people's reputations, but it would not have a meaningful impact on social change. From her view, EN10 emphasized this by saying that "when social justice is sought, people can assume anything is right, and it may not be." For these participants, social justice is not achieved through social media. Therefore, comments on digital networks affect individuals, not communities.

Some Digital Users Hide Their Real Selves Behind Distorted Profiles Online

The interaction in digital networks is related to the identities projected online and the identities people reflect in their daily lives. All interviewees asserted that online identities differ from real world identities, as they are intended to portray situations that reflect a certain status or comfort. For example, for EN02, "people select positive aspects of their lives and personality, that is what they want you to see on the internet, the image they project is a creation because they are not going to show you bad moments or the negative side of their

lives." Similarly, for EN07, "you begin to create the image you want to reflect, it could be money, a good physique, so within social media, we have this opportunity, we have several tools to reflect that identity." Young people are more influenced to use digital media, and this influence leads them to adopt identities that are inconsistent with their daily lives.

Other participants support the idea that social media does not reflect the reality they live and that the decision to display certain characteristics is due to external factors. For EN08, "the identities reflected on social media are not faithful to what people are in their daily lives, this is because many people are seeking approval from people outside their lives." Another participant reflected on the specific characteristics that people want to display. Sometimes, they expose themselves by living unique experiences or seeking recognition from their followers. EN09 commented, "there are people who show certain aspects of their daily identity, this is called selective identity, they show what should be shown, there are also people who present an idealized version of themselves, hiding their reality or the negative aspects." Interestingly, these digital media users reflect and analyze the identities of the people they interact with online, this means they are aware that what is exposed can be distorted. The following summarizes the information already provided.

Table 2
Analytical categories, main themes, and representative quotations

Analytical Category	Main Theme	Representative Quotation
People need to be aware of the ethical use in social networks	Ethics is essential for safe and respectful interaction in digital environments. Students associate digital citizenship with respect, honesty, responsibility, and the prevention of misinformation.	"Ethics is very important for users of digital technologies, as it means respecting the rights of others and avoiding the spread of misinformation." (EN06)
People need to be aware of the ethical use in social networks	Lack of ethical behavior is facilitated by anonymity online.	"Ethics is absent because anonymity acts as a shield because people act differently than in real life." (EN03)
Digital citizens amplify their social concerns through social media	Social media provides opportunities to express social and political concerns and promote collective action.	"Digital media can be a space for expressing a social issue that is negatively affecting society." (EN01)
Digital citizens amplify their social concerns through media	Social media can support social justice and public social awareness.	"People use platforms to share problems and gain support; social media allows the propagation of information, which impacts public awareness and the encouragement for equality and justice." (EN11)

Analytical Category	Main Theme	Representative Quotation
Digital citizens amplify their social concerns through social media	Some students question the real impact of social media on social justice.	"Justice cannot be achieved through social media; the most that you can do is affect the image of a person who made a mistake." (EN13)
Some digital users hide their real selves behind distorted profiles online	Online identities are often selective representations of reality.	"People select positive aspects of their lives and personality; the image they project is a creation." (EN02)
Some digital users hide their real selves behind distorted profiles online	Social media encourages idealized identities and the search for approval.	"The identities reflected on social media are not faithful to what people are in their daily lives because many people are seeking approval from people outside their lives." (EN08)
Some digital users hide their real selves behind distorted profiles online	Users are aware that online identities may be distorted.	"There are people who present an idealized version of themselves, hiding their reality or the negative aspects." (EN09)

The categories emerged through content analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted with 18 university students. Quotations were selected as representative examples of participants' perspectives

Discussion and Conclusions

Los his study sought to analyze how university students understand and practice digital citizenship in university environments, their role as digital citizens, and the implications this has for education. The findings revealed that participants strongly associated digital citizenship with ethical behavior in online environments, particularly with respect, honesty, responsibility, and the prevention of misinformation. These findings are consistent with the work of Richardson et al. (2021), who argue that digital citizenship involves respectful and responsible participation in digital spaces. Similarly, the emphasis participants placed on preventing misinformation supports the arguments

of Jones-Jang et al. (2021), who highlight the importance of critical engagement with online information to reduce the impact of fake news. However, participants also expressed uncertainty regarding the limits of civic action in digital environments, suggesting that ethical awareness does not necessarily translate into a comprehensive understanding of digital citizenship.

Another important finding was that participants perceived social media as a powerful tool for expressing concerns, supporting social causes, and promoting collective action. This result aligns with the perspectives of Lin and Kant (2021), who describe digital platforms as spaces that facilitate citizen participation and empowerment. Likewise, the findings support Lozano-Díaz and Fernández-Prados (2021), who argue that digital environments can strengthen civic engagement and social mobilization. Nevertheless, some participants questioned the real capacity of social media to generate meaningful social

justice outcomes. This tension suggests that digital participation may increase visibility and awareness of social issues without necessarily producing structural social change, a concern also discussed by Tomasello (2022).

Regarding digital identity, participants consistently reported that online identities often differ from those presented in everyday life. This finding is consistent with Engeness (2021), who conceptualizes digital identity as a dynamic and evolving construction shaped by social interactions and digital contexts. Participants' perceptions also support the arguments of Michalkiewicz-Kadziela and Milczarek (2022), who note that digital identities may represent selective or alternative versions of the self. The awareness demonstrated by participants regarding the distortion and idealization of online identities suggests a critical understanding of the risks associated with self-presentation in digital environments.

For the participants, digital citizenship is experienced daily, it is not a theory they are familiar with. Students reported knowing about the term digital citizenship, although their definitions were related to the responsible use of social media rather than to a formal concept. Likewise, for the participants, digital citizenship is what they do every day, for example, taking care of their personal data, being ethically responsible with the information they share, or promoting justice for the community. Baydar (2022), suggests that it is necessary to create a sense of responsibility in digital users in relation to the information that their age allows them to know, find out, and distribute. Although digital citizenship is practiced, it requires some formal education and knowledge about it.

It is urgent to incorporate the study of digital citizenship as part of the transversal content for the professional development of students. Educational institutions need to teach topics related to ethics, values, civic competencies, and digital citizenship. These topics are applied to every daily life situations, which would result in better people and a better society. Education is essential in communities, as it is essential to have education on digital citizenship as well. In addition, the spreading of this concept is also recommended. It is necessary to design and implement teaching strategies that promote critical thinking, digital ethics, and active participation in virtual environments. It is essential that all stakeholders in educational settings, both teachers and students, be actively aware of digital citizenship.

Limitations

This study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample consisted of only 18 students from a single public university and one academic program in Colombia, which limits the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts. Second, the study was based on participants' self-reported experiences and perceptions, which may not fully reflect their actual practices in digital environments. Third, although the phenomenological approach provided an in-depth understanding of students' experiences, the findings should not be generalized to all university students. Future research could include participants from different academic disciplines, universities, and regions to explore similarities and differences in the ways digital citizenship is understood and practiced.

Further Research

Future research should examine digital citizenship in a wider range of educational contexts

and disciplines to determine whether students from different academic backgrounds share similar understandings and experiences. Comparative studies involving public and private universities, as well as institutions from different regions or countries, could provide a broader perspective on how digital citizenship is constructed across contexts. Additionally, quantitative and mixed-methods studies could complement these findings by examining the prevalence of specific attitudes and practices related to digital citizenship. Future research may also evaluate the effectiveness of educational interventions designed to strengthen digital ethics, critical thinking, media literacy, and civic participation in digital environments.

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