

A Socio-Conceptual Reading of the Reality and Landscape of Digital Citizenship

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Abstract:

Digital citizenship has gained growing attention in contemporary sociology due to the digital revolution and the rapid advancement of communication technologies. These developments have introduced new notions of identity and behavior in the digital space. This article adopts a socio-conceptual approach, grounded in Marc Prensky's concept of the "digital native," to examine digital citizenship as a set of behaviors and standards guiding ethical, responsible, and safe technology use. It highlights key dimensions and challenges of digital citizenship, particularly amid the strong influence of social media on youth. The article concludes with practical recommendations to encourage conscious and constructive engagement on digital platforms.

Keywords: Digital citizenship, Digital behavior, Digital space, Social media, Youth and technology

1. Introduction:

One of the key indicators of advancement in modern societies is the increasing level of citizenship among individuals, groups, and

institutions. Citizenship, in this context, represents a comprehensive concept encompassing the principles, values, ideologies, and philosophies that define a society. High levels of citizenship reflect a heightened degree of social and political maturity and awareness that go beyond mere legal affiliation to the state. They embody the individual's recognition of their rights and responsibilities toward their society and environment through active, positive participation in promoting social development, cohesion, progress, and stability.

In light of the rapid social and cultural transformations shaped by the dominance of technology—particularly with the emergence of new digital platforms and the widespread influence of social media—citizenship has resurfaced as a central concept, though no longer in its traditional sense. Rather, it has taken on a new dimension shaped by the very tools and technologies that define interaction and communication in today's world. This shift has brought to the forefront the concept of *digital citizenship*, a natural and complementary extension of traditional citizenship.

Marc Prensky, an American technology expert, coined the term *digital native* to describe individuals who were born into the digital era and have been immersed in digital technologies since early childhood, making these tools an integral part of their daily lives. This digital evolution has given rise to a generation of *digital citizens*—individuals who adopt various technological practices to contribute to the advancement of their nations.

Digital citizenship refers to a set of norms and standards that guide both individual and collective behavior in the digital world. It defines how technology and the internet should be used ethically, safely, and legally, based on principles of responsible, optimal, and conscious usage in the modern age.

All of this necessitates a deeper exploration of the concept of digital citizenship: its definitions, dimensions, objectives, significance, as well as the challenges it faces and the influence of social media on its development. The article also examines the main fields of digital citizenship and concludes with practical recommendations for its application on social networking platforms.

Before defining *digital citizenship*, we will first clarify the notion of the *digital citizen*.

2. Defining the Digital Citizen:

A digital citizen is characterized by the ability to use information and communication technologies effectively for research purposes and to seek out practical opportunities that yield impact. This individual is literate not only in traditional reading and writing but also in digital symbols and electronic texts, which they actively employ within the digital space. A digital citizen communicates positively with others through various technological means, participates in diverse activities, and manages their time efficiently. (Nagy , 2019, p 71)

The digital citizen is someone who has grown up alongside the rise of digital technologies—intuitively understanding them as part of the so-called "digital generation." A digital citizen is also defined as an individual who uses the internet regularly and effectively, was born during or after the technological revolution, and has developed the awareness and knowledge necessary to engage with technology meaningfully. One is described as a digital citizen when they demonstrate competence in using digital devices. (AlKahtani, 2018, p.26)

-Asman Gungoren summarized the characteristics of the digital citizen as reflected in their respect for the cultural values of societies within the digital environment, their understanding of human, cultural, and social issues related to technology, their adherence to legal and ethical behavior, their secure and lawful use of digital tools, their responsibility toward digital information, and their engagement in leadership initiatives in digital citizenship. (İşman & Güngören, 2014, p.p73-77)

- Al-Qahtani further emphasized the distinct characteristics of the digital citizen, describing them as individuals who uphold ethical behavior, enjoy freedom of expression, respect privacy in the digital world, and take a stand against cyberbullying. (AlKahtani, 2018, p.p 57-97)

3. Definition of Digital Citizenship: Starting with the Concept of Citizenship:

3.1. Definition of Citizenship:

The linguistic origin of the term *citizenship* in Western civilization raises questions about the appropriateness of its equivalent in Arabic (*muwatana*) to convey the same conceptual meaning. According to *Al-Mu'jam Al-Wajiz* (The Concise Lexicon), the term *muwatana* is derived from the root “waṭana – yaṭīnu – waṭanan,” meaning “to settle in a place” or “to reside.” The verb *awṭana* refers to the act of taking a place as a homeland. *Wāṭana nafsahu ‘ala al-amr* means “he committed himself to something,” and *tawaṭṭana* indicates “settling or preparing oneself.” *Al-mawṭin* denotes any place where a person resides, and *al-waṭan* refers to the place of one’s residence or home, whether it is one’s birthplace or not. Its plural is *awṭān* (homelands). (Zayed, 2011, p 34)

It is clear from the above that the term *citizenship* (*muwāṭana*) is linguistically derived from the Arabic root *waṭana* or the expression *waṭana bil-makān*, which means "to reside in a place." The verb *awṭanahu ‘alā al-amr* conveys the sense of internalizing an action and consenting to it. (Arabic Language Academy, 2004; p1042)

Hilal and others define it from a psychological perspective as the feeling of belonging and loyalty to the homeland and political leadership, which represents a source of satisfaction for basic needs and a means of self-protection against existential threats.(Hilal,2000,p 25)

Citizenship is a lived practice exercised by the citizen, who fulfills their duties in exchange for receiving the rights guaranteed by the constitution and the law. It reflects the bond and mutual commitment between the individual and the state, enabling the citizen to integrate into society and participate actively and positively at all human and social levels, driven by a strong sense of belonging, loyalty, and love for their homeland.

Effective citizenship pertains to social processes and community practices, and is closely linked to both formal and informal social institutions such as schools and families, as well as

informal entities like media, peer groups, and neighbors. Citizenship involves individuals performing complex roles as producers and consumers of goods and services, contributing to the economy and cultural development, while also engaging in social and personal development and enhancing their professional lives. (ElKhoulie,2012,p27)

Citizenship also refers to the mutual obligations between the individual and the state, highlighting the rights and duties of both parties. It represents a status or social relationship between an individual and a political community—a relationship defined by the laws of the state, encompassing rights and responsibilities for both the individual and the state. (Abdel-Kawi, 2016; p. 399)

3.2. Dimensions of Citizenship:

Citizenship encompasses several dimensions, including—among others—the social, political, legal, and cultural-behavioral dimensions, which can be summarized as follows:

3.2.1. The Social Dimension:

The individual's identification with the homeland is rooted in a sense of belonging to a group of people within a defined and internally and externally recognized geographic space. This sense of belonging represents an effort to construct identity, which in turn informs one's loyalty based on their understanding of that identity and its characteristics.

3.2.2. The Political Dimension:

Today, citizenship is increasingly understood as a form of civic behavior involving active and daily participation in community life, rather than merely a legal status linked to the granting of nationality. A good citizen engages fully in public life, including the right to form political parties, to protest and assemble, and to contribute to shaping the political system.

3.2.3. The Legal Dimension:

This dimension refers to a set of rights and freedoms that citizens should enjoy without restrictions, except those imposed by the community. Legally, citizenship implies a relationship between the citizen and the state as a geopolitical entity governed by constitutional

and legal texts. These legal frameworks establish, on the basis of equality, the various rights and duties of individuals toward society, as well as the mechanisms through which these rights are exercised and duties fulfilled. Nationality is often considered the primary criterion for defining who is a citizen, and upon it rest all associated political, civil, economic, and social rights and obligations.

3.2.4. The Cultural–Behavioral Dimension:

The practical exercise of citizenship is closely linked to the prevailing cultural system within a society. Customs, values, traditions, and social norms contribute—often unconsciously—to the integration of the individual into social life. These cultural elements shape the conditions under which rights and duties are understood and practiced on the ground.(Aljazzar,2014,p401)

4. Digital Citizenship:

The concept of digital citizenship is considered one of the contemporary notions that emerged in parallel with the rise of social networking platforms. Numerous factors influence digital citizenship, which is regarded as a set of competencies that should be cultivated among students within educational settings. These competencies are shaped by digital tools in general, and by social media in particular. They include the importance of acquiring digital security skills, fostering intellectual resilience, developing essential digital literacy skills, mastering the art of dialogue, promoting mutual understanding and tolerance, rejecting rumors, combating cybercrime, and distancing oneself from deviant ideologies.(Al-Qahtani & Yahya, 2018, p86)

Mike Ribble and his colleagues define digital citizenship as: “The norms of appropriate, responsible behavior with regard to technology use.” Four years later, he offered a more developed definition of digital citizenship as “Students’ understanding of human, cultural, and societal issues related to technology, and their practice of legal and ethical behavior in relation to it.” (Ribble, & Bailey, 2007, pp 6-7)

Digital citizenship, as defined by Mossberger et al. (2008), is the use of technological resources to accomplish tasks and responsibilities related to the individual and their nation. A digital citizen is someone who possesses the ability to read, write,

comprehend, and navigate through information available via modern technological means.

Digital citizenship is also defined as: *“a set of standards, principles, and methods that an individual must possess while interacting with others through digital tools and platforms, such as email, blogs, and information networks like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and other forms of social media”* (Mossberger, & Caroline & Ramona, 2008, p103)

"Digital Citizenship is defined by the Social Encyclopedia as a set of behavioral norms governing the use of various technologies for electronic information exchange, full digital participation in society, and online commercial transactions"

5. Objectives of Digital Citizenship:

1- Promoting a culture of civilized engagement with advanced technology and awareness of the legal dimensions of its use.

2- Integrating into digital life to participate in social, educational, cultural, and economic activities.

3- Harnessing technology, modern digital communication, and work skills, and using them safely in the information age to maximize professional, academic, social, cultural, and spiritual benefits—thus enhancing communities’ chances of success across various aspects of life.

4-Reinforcing respect for the concepts of privacy and freedom of expression in the digital world while linking them to national identity.

5-Adopting a preventive policy against the risks of technology and a motivational approach to optimize its benefits.

6- Emphasizing the positive aspect of the digital revolution, which opens broad horizons of hope for the citizen's future.

7- Raising awareness of rights, duties, and responsibilities in the digital world.

8-Encouraging positive and effective participation in the digital world to contribute to the advancement of society.

9- Preparing students to face the challenges of the digital world with

confidence, competence, and innovative approaches. 10- Fostering teaching and learning through the use of digital technologies (Abdel-Raouf,2018,pp93-94).

6.The Importance of Digital Citizenship:

The importance of digital citizenship lies in its ability to guide ethical digital behavior and promote meaningful engagement with real-life issues. It plays a crucial role in shaping individuals—especially from childhood—who can critically understand the cultural, social, and human dimensions of technology. One example of this is (Al-Musallamani,2014; pp 37-38):

- Safe practice and the responsible, legal, and ethical use of information and technology.
- Adopting positive behaviors in technology use, characterized by collaboration, learning, and productivity.
- Assuming personal responsibility for lifelong learning.
- Digital citizenship contributes to preparing individuals capable of positive and effective participation in the development and advancement of society.

The growing importance of digital citizenship in the present era stems from several key reasons:

- The increasing rate of crimes associated with the use of modern technological devices, such as bank account hacking, cyber extremism and terrorism, and digital espionage.
- Users' deviation from the primary and constructive purposes of modern technology, manifesting in phenomena such as digital drugs, electronic addiction, and neglect of social responsibilities.
- The emergence of negative habits related to modern communication tools, such as walking while using mobile phones, or using phones in inappropriate or restricted places.
- The appearance of physical and psychological health issues, including eye dryness, joint pain due to poor posture, and psychological conditions like withdrawal and social isolation—especially among those addicted to digital devices.

- Significant time loss in front of electronic screens, which has negatively impacted overall productivity.
- Electronic addiction, where technology no longer simply serves us but, rather, directs our behavior—even shaping public opinion.

(El-Moghawi ,2017,pp42-43)

7. The Nature and Classification of Exchanged Information in the Context of Digital Citizenship:

As a digital citizen, the individual participates in a continuous exchange of information within virtual environments. In this participatory context, computers and the internet often act as modern tools of surveillance, collecting digital data from various users—reminiscent of traditional espionage practices. In response, many countries have established centers and developed software systems dedicated to automated network surveillance, aiming to obtain both communication and data-related information. Accordingly, members of society must be aware of the value of the information they disseminate and ensure it is framed within boundaries of respect, privacy, and particularly, protection of personal data.

The information exchanged within digital citizenship can be classified into five major categories:

- Social Information:

This refers to sensitive data on a society's social and class structure, including political and religious affiliations, education, public health, minority groups, and human rights—information vital to the societal identity and potentially exploitable for conflict.

- Intellectual and Political Information:

This category covers data on political and intellectual elites, including leaders, ministers, activists, and journalists. Such information can be used to influence their positions, potentially reshaping national policy and political discourse.

- Economic and Service-related Information:

This includes data on economic conditions and public services—such as education, healthcare, banking, and investment—which constitute the foundation of a state's functionality and sustainability.

Scientific and Research Information: Scientific and research information includes data on academic research, innovation, methodologies, and researcher profiles, including their affiliations and working conditions within key institutions and industries.

- Military and Security Information:

This refers to data about military organization and structure, personnel numbers, training qualifications, weaponry, deployment strategies, and internal security systems, including intelligence services and other security agencies. (Aljazzar,2014,pp404-405)

8. The Main Challenges and Difficulties Facing Digital Citizenship:

Despite the opportunities and enabling environments offered by the virtual space to realize and embody the principles of digital citizenship, this concept still faces numerous challenges and difficulties in terms of practice and implementation. These challenges span both intangible cultural dimensions and tangible material factors, as detailed below:

8.1. Cultural and Intangible Challenges:

While digital citizenship fosters diversity, it also reveals cultural and civilizational tensions shaped by globalization. A key challenge lies in the "technology culture"—its accessibility, societal integration, and awareness—highlighted by the digital divide between developed and developing countries

8.2. Material Challenges:

These challenges involve inadequate infrastructure, limited digital access, and disparities in user skills and digital literacy. In many developing countries, poor connectivity, government restrictions, and language barriers exacerbate the digital divide and hinder broad societal integration into the digital environment. (Al-Kout,2015,pp71-72)

9. The Impact of Social Media on Digital Citizenship:

9.1. Positive Impacts:

Digital citizenship has introduced a new positive dimension to the lives of millions of people, bringing about cultural, social, political, and economic transformations across entire societies—primarily

through the influence of social media platforms. Among the most significant positive effects are the following:

- **Promoting Citizenship Values Among Individuals**

Social media can serve as a powerful communication tool for government institutions and influential public figures to highlight national achievements and reinforce civic values on a wide scale. These platforms help instill patriotic principles either directly or indirectly across broad segments of their user base.

- **A Window to the World**

Millions of users from both Arab and non-Arab societies have found in social networks an open window to explore global ideas, values, and cultures freely and interactively.

- **Opportunities for Self-Empowerment**

For individuals who lack opportunities to express themselves or establish an identity in their local communities, social media offers a digital space to build and present a globalized self-image through personal profiles and interactions.

- **Greater Openness to Others**

Interacting with individuals of different religions, beliefs, cultures, traditions, races, and appearances on social platforms fosters acceptance and intercultural dialogue. These connections may be local or span thousands of miles across different continents, reinforcing mutual understanding and respect.

- **A Platform for Diverse Opinions**

One of the defining features of digital citizenship is the freedom to contribute content that reflects personal beliefs and viewpoints, even if they differ from others. Social media thus functions as a powerful tool for expressing personal attitudes, orientations, and stances toward various social and political issues.

- **Reducing the Clash of Civilizations**

Digital citizenship helps ease cultural tensions linked to globalization by fostering shared communication norms on social media. It enables a more authentic representation of Arab perspectives to Western audiences, promoting mutual understanding across individuals, communities, and nations.

- **Strengthening Family Bonds**

With the advancement of communication technologies, it has become easier for families to stay connected and updated on each other's lives through social media platforms. These tools are often more affordable than traditional means of communication, thus encouraging more frequent and meaningful interaction among family members.

- **Providing a Valuable Opportunity to Reconnect with Old Friends**

Social media platforms offer users the ability to search for and reconnect with former schoolmates or colleagues whose contact has been lost due to distance or the demands of daily life. This rekindling of past relationships contributes to social cohesion and personal well-being.

(Al-Salmi, 2020; pp12-13)

9.2. Negative Impacts

Just as digital citizenship brings positive effects. It also carries significant negative consequences—making it a double-edged sword. Among these negative impacts are:

- **Reduced face-to-face interpersonal communication skills**

While social media platforms facilitate easy communication, they tend to reduce the time spent on direct personal interactions. Verbal communication skills differ greatly from digital ones. In real life, initiating or ending conversations is more complex than simply clicking a "cancel" button.

- **Time-wasting**

The constantly evolving features and services offered by these platforms are often so engaging that users may lose track of time completely.

- **Addiction to social media**

Frequent use of social networking sites as a primary daily activity can make it extremely difficult to quit or replace the habit. These platforms often fill extended periods of free time, making them particularly addictive.

- **Erosion of Arab cultural identity and its replacement with a globalized digital identity**

Cultural globalization, viewed by many as a major negative consequence of social media, can undermine local traditions and values.

- **Lack of privacy**

Social platforms pose significant privacy risks, especially for youth, potentially leading to emotional harm or financial exploitation. Personal data and shared content can be misused for defamation, manipulation, or ideological influence.

- **Formation of suspicious or exaggerated friendships**

The term "friend" is often loosely applied online, even though true friendships take time to develop. This environment can foster connections with suspicious individuals or those with harmful intentions.

- **Identity theft and impersonation**

Many users remain anonymous or conceal their true identities, which allows some to engage in impersonation, blackmail, spreading misinformation, or organizing illegal activities (such as prostitution, theft, or kidnapping). It also facilitates recruitment by extremist or terrorist groups—an alarming trend on social media networks.

- **Threats to intellectual security**

Social platforms often expose users to content from vastly different cultures, which can influence values and beliefs, leading to conflicting or radical ideologies. This threatens the intellectual and cultural security of individuals and communities, particularly among youth lacking cultural and national awareness.

- **Conceptual confusion and ideological distortion**

As misguided concepts and terminology spread through social platforms, users may adopt terms without understanding their true meanings—fueling sectarianism or extremism. Misconceptions like “jihad in Muslim lands” may be used to manipulate youth and destabilize communities.

- **A tool for spreading violence and extremism:**

Extremist groups exploit social media to spread propaganda and recruit followers through emotional appeals. They manipulate political and social frustrations, particularly among disillusioned youth, leading to violence and actions that contradict authentic religious teachings.

(Al Salmi,2020,pp15-17)

10. Fields of Digital Citizenship:

There are nine general domains that constitute the framework of digital citizenship, as defined by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE). These domains are as follows:

10.1. Digital Access:

This refers to full electronic participation in society. Digital citizenship promotes equal opportunities for all individuals to access and use technology, ensuring equal digital rights, supporting electronic inclusion, and rejecting digital exclusion, which hinders growth and prosperity while widening the digital divide between those who can access and utilize technology and those who cannot.

10.2. Digital Commerce:

This involves the buying and selling of goods electronically. Today, a significant portion of the global market economy operates through technological channels. Digital citizenship educates individuals on the legal and safety issues surrounding the use of technology, particularly those related to e-commerce and national legislation. Despite the many advantages of online trade, caution must be exercised when engaging in electronic transactions.

10.3. Digital Communication:

This encompasses the electronic exchange of information. One of the most notable advancements in modern technology is in the field of communication, which has transformed the world into a "global village." Digital communication enables individuals to connect and collaborate with others anywhere and anytime.

10.4. Digital Literacy:

This refers to the process of teaching and learning about technology and how to use it effectively. In today's world, literacy is increasingly measured by an individual's ability to use digital tools. Therefore, promoting digital literacy is both an individual and collective responsibility.

10.5. Digital Etiquette:

These are the standards of conduct and proper procedures in the digital environment. Just as people strive to be polite in face-to-face interactions, digital etiquette involves training individuals to behave

responsibly and respectfully online, adhering to shared values and appropriate digital behavior. Digital citizenship encourages the dissemination of digital etiquette culture to foster civility in the digital world.

10.6. Digital Laws:

These concern the ethical and legal responsibilities associated with digital actions and behaviors. Digital laws address issues such as intellectual property rights, privacy, ethics, and piracy. The responsible digital citizen respects and promotes these laws and encourages others to comply. According to Mike Ribble's framework, digital citizenship consists of three categories:

-Dimensions affecting student learning and academic performance:
(Digital Communication – Digital Literacy – Digital Access)

-Dimensions affecting the school environment and student behavior:
(Digital Rights and Responsibilities – Digital Etiquette – Digital Security)

-Dimensions impacting students' lives outside the school context:
(Digital Law – Digital Commerce – Digital Health & Wellness)

10.7. Digital Rights and Responsibilities:

These are the freedoms and duties of every individual in the digital world. Just as constitutions grant citizens specific rights, digital citizens are entitled to rights such as privacy and freedom of expression. These rights come with responsibilities; therefore, digital citizens must understand how to use technology appropriately to become effective and productive members of the digital society.

10.8. Digital Health and Wellness:

This pertains to the physical and psychological well-being in the digital age. Improper use of technology can lead to various health issues. The emerging field of human factors engineering (ergonomics) seeks to harmonize the physical and psychological interface between humans and machines. Digital citizenship promotes awareness of healthy and balanced use of technology.

10.9. Digital Security (Self-Protection):

This involves the precautions taken to ensure safety in digital environments. Just as there are laws to deter unlawful acts in physical

societies, the digital world also requires protective measures against threats like theft or defacement. Responsible digital citizens must back up data, use antivirus software, and apply cybersecurity protocols to safeguard their privacy and digital assets. (Mnasr,2019,pp210-211)

Recommendations for Digital Citizenship on Social Media Platforms:

1. Activating the role of media in promoting digital citizenship and allocating awareness-raising programs.
2. Integrating digital citizenship into university students' training by developing their digital technology skills.
3. Encouraging and guiding university students to spread the culture of digital citizenship within society.
4. Raising awareness among specialists on how to deal with disinformation campaigns targeting the state on social media platforms.
5. Organizing training workshops for university students to develop critical thinking in navigating digital platforms.
6. Encouraging students to engage in electronic communication, cooperation, and information exchange with peers from other universities.
7. Helping students confront inappropriate behaviors in digital communities.

Raising awareness among female students about the risks of interacting with or browsing suspicious websites (Edmonton,2002; p.11).

11. Conclusion:

The revolution in digital communication has played a pivotal role in promoting the culture of digital citizenship across societies worldwide. Digital citizenship has become one of the fundamental pillars of success for many governments and nations, regardless of their ethnicity, culture, or stage of development. This is largely due to the continuous evolution of technology, which has equipped populations with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate the digital world and utilize digital tools in a positive and constructive manner.

A digital citizen not only consumes digital content but also actively participates, communicates, and contributes positively within the digital society. Such a citizen is capable of discerning right from wrong, engages thoughtfully and responsibly within their community, uses technology mindfully, and makes informed decisions. Digital citizenship thus represents an active and ongoing commitment to the nation and its higher interests across all circumstances and times.

The digital communication revolution has also given rise to a new form of media—referred to by some as "alternative media" or the "media of the current generation," particularly because both its drivers and its target audience are predominantly youth. Just as parents, families, schools, and mosques bear a vital responsibility in shaping responsible individuals, the media—especially modern digital media—must likewise shoulder its responsibility in promoting the values of digital citizenship and safeguarding future generations from the risks associated with modern communication technologies.

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