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DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION AS PATHWAY FOR CULTIVATING SOCIAL MEDIA NETIQUETTE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN PLATEAU STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Digital citizenship education is now a vital and indispensable component of the present digital culture. The digital age has led to a widespread use of the internet and social media, and most young people are drawn to social media. Digital citizenship education can be a useful tool for building good social media behaviour in Plateau State. There is growing interest in digital citizenship education research because it is a current and rich area. However, little literature focuses on the nexus between digital citizenship education and how it can shape social media netiquette. Therefore, this article highlights the importance of digital citizenship education in terms of cultivating social media netiquette among young people, using the qualitative narrative review method, anchored on the development communication theory. The article shows that teachers have a big role in informing students and young people about social media netiquette. Accordingly, teachers, administrators, technology leaders, and parents should be supported to obtain the information they need to help young people use digital technologies correctly. The article concludes that it is pertinent for young people to be well educated about the importance of responsible social media behaviour, and digital citizenship education can serve as a framework for entrenching a positive and morally constructive online community.

Keywords: Development Communication, Digital Citizenship Education, Digital literacy, Netiquette, Social Media, Young People

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Introduction

Digital citizenship education has become a vital and indispensable component of the present digital culture. The rise of the digital age has led to a widespread use of the internet and social media, and most young people are drawn to social media in particular. Technological developments are rapidly changing and transforming every sphere of our lives. With these fast developments, the concept of digital media literacy has become increasingly important in a world where we are constantly confronted with media messages (Gezman, 2022). Ribble et al. (2004) state that digital citizenship can be defined as the norms of behaviour with regard to technology use. Gezman (2022) also explains that in today's digital world, all our posts on social media such as Instagram, Twitter (now X) and Facebook remain for many years as digital footprints. With an increase in interactions between individuals on the internet comes an increase in the societal importance of these interactions. The channel of interaction influences the pathways in which the social and psychological fabric of societies evolve (Acerbi, 2019; Cohn et al., 2022). Just like in other parts of the world, young people in Plateau State ought to have good knowledge of social media and online netiquette, so as to safely, wisely and respectfully navigate the digital space. It can be said that interactions on social media in particular and the internet in general have an impact on the social and psychological fabric of our society, and this impact may be positive or negative. It is therefore important for individuals to know the implications of their actions and inactions within the social media community as well as other internet forums. Oral (2023) points out that etiquette rules are social behaviour rules that apply in every aspect of our lives. There are rules of etiquette that we must follow when we talk on the phone, eat, sit or stand; in short, in every step we take.

In our technology-rich society, children are confronted with a multitude of opportunities, obstacles and influences unbeknown to citizens just a generation ago (Richardson & Milovidov, 2019). Gezman (2022) explains that the new generation of digital natives, who were born into technology, use technology very actively. This new age also shows the need for rules that can serve as a guide to all users. Richardson and Milovidov (2019) further point out that a digital citizen is someone who, through the development of a broad range of competences, is able to actively, positively and responsibly engage in both online and offline communities, whether local, national or global. Digital and social media have a lasting influence on the lives of children, adolescents, and adults. The digital world is interdependently connected with the individual, the society and politics. It is reasonable to infer that digital citizenship education is a useful tool for building good social media behaviour among young people in Plateau State. Also, researchers have emphasized the importance of helping students to become good digital citizens (Farmer, 2010). Hollandsworth et al. (2017) point out that digital citizenship should be taught at a young age, and it is important to raise awareness of digital citizenship among educators and administrators.

Education can be defined as the training, teaching, sensitization and socialization of a learner towards effective and result-oriented performance of roles (Nnenna, 2013). Okocha et al. (2020) assert that digital literacy is very important for the beneficial engagement and participation of digital citizens in both online and offline spaces, as it is a tool of great importance for achieving a wide range of positive outcomes. Ribble et al. (2004) point out that digital citizenship speaks to several levels of responsibility for technology. Some issues may concern technology leaders more, while others may concern teachers more. Digital citizenship education promotes the maturity of citizens in the digital world, and the necessary requirements for this are:

> 1. Technical skills as a prerequisite for the reflective use of digital media; 2. Digital analysis competences to move in the new political spheres; 3. Digital evaluation skills to be able to critically reflect on changed relations between public and the new constellations of power and authority; 4. Digital participation skills to articulate and represent the (sic) own interests (Kenner, 2020, p. 131).

Heitmayer and Schimmelpfennig (2023) explain that research on netiquette has been growing steadily and may soon become a major strand of research in the field of human computer interaction. Although there is growing interest in digital citizenship education as a research field, because it is a current and rich area for academic research, little literature focuses specifically on the nexus between digital citizenship education and how it can shape social media netiquette among young people. Furthermore, most of the existing research on the link between social media and the spread of netiquette among young people was conducted in Western countries, and so it does not provide a Nigerian perspective to the discourse. Teaching how to use technology has not grown proportionally to the growth of digital technology itself (Ribble et al., 2004). It may also be said that government, education boards and policy makers have a low level of awareness about digital citizenship and netiquette. For instance, Abubakar and Bello (2022) point out that most Nigerian educators hardly undergo formal training in Digital pedagogy. Recent studies have focused on other sub-dimensions of digital citizenship, while highlighting the fact that participants still do not have enough information about the concept of digital citizenship education. Other studies have shown that teacher candidates' and teachers' understanding of digital citizenship is still weak (Kaya & Kaya, 2014; Engin & Sarsar, 2015; Kabataş, 2019; Özer, 2016; Takavarasha et al., 2018; Vural & Kurt, 2018; Yalçınkaya & Cibaroğlu, 2019; Issembayeva et al., 2026). This article explores the concept of digital citizenship education in terms of its potential to cultivate social media netiquette among young people in Plateau State Nigeria. It uses the qualitative narrative review method and offers recommendations on the way forward.

Research questions

This research seeks to find answers to the following questions:

1. What is the relationship between digital citizenship education and social media netiquette?
2. What are the potential strategies within digital citizenship education, which can enhance social media netiquette among young people?
3. What are the barriers to effective digital citizenship education?

Research objectives

This research has the following specific objectives:

1. Examine the relationship between digital citizenship education and social media netiquette in Plateau State.
2. Explore the potential strategies that can enhance social media netiquette among young people in Plateau State.
3. Identify the obstacles to effective digital citizenship education in Plateau State.

Methodology

This article employed the qualitative narrative review method to narrow existing research gaps, through a specific objective that probed the concept of digital citizenship education in terms of its potential to cultivate social media netiquette among young people in Plateau State, Nigeria. The researchers relied on secondary data such as book chapters, academic journals, research papers, published literature, and reports on development communication, digital

citizenship, netiquette, and social media. The researchers searched for related literature from two social networking platforms (ResearchGate and Academia.edu), these sources were selected due to the fact that they host a wide range of relevant peer-reviewed research articles, conference papers, preprints, and book chapters. The first step involved a systematic search for thematically related literature using keywords which were entered into the search-bars of ResearchGate and Academia.edu. Titles and abstracts were screened, and relevant documents were subsequently downloaded. The next step involved a review of thematically related literature published between 2002 and 2026, the review was in line with the objectives of the study. This provided a grounded framework for a literature review that helped synthesize thematic concepts.

Conceptual review

1. Digital citizenship education

Studies have defined digital citizens as people who can use the internet regularly and who know their rights and responsibilities on the internet (Choi, 2016; Thomas, 2018). The definition of digital citizenship has changed over time. Early definitions of the concept focused on the use of digital technologies. However, more recent studies focus on the responsibilities that arise during the use of digital technologies (Aliasan et al, 2024; Japar et al., 2024). Digital citizenship education aims at propagating positive and inclusive digital culture, respect for others during online interactions, understanding and promoting digital rights and responsibilities, as well as safeguarding personal information. Digital citizenship education can be considered as one of the effective ways of propagating a conducive and responsible online community. Development communication often aims at the sharing of knowledge towards reaching a consensus for action, taking into account the interests, needs and capacities of all concerned, thus achieving the much needed goal of social development which in this case concerns the propagation of social media netiquette among young people. Some of the ways in which young people can be encouraged to be responsible digital citizens are educational programmes (using media), workshops, awareness campaigns and advocacy amongst others.

2. Netiquette

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines netiquette as the "etiquette governing communication on the Internet" (Merriam-Webster, 2023). Heitmayer and Schimmelpfennig (2023) argue that it is useful to conceptualize netiquette as digital social norms that regulate digitally mediated interactions. The word netiquette combines the word "network" (from internet) and the French word "etiquette", which means good manners (Oral, 2023). When students see adults using technologies inappropriately, they can assume it is the norm. This leads to inappropriate technology behaviour on the part of students (Ribble et al., 2004).

Educating young people on the importance of online etiquette helps them use the digital world in a responsible way. Several negative behaviours on social media go against netiquette, such as overexposure or addiction, cyberbullying, abuse, and harassment amongst others. Ahmad et al. (2021) point out that factors such as having digital security, digital literacy, and digital health and wellness may minimize a student's chance of getting addicted, cyberbullied, victimised or harmed as a result of the online risk and challenges of being a digital citizen.

3. Social media

Social media refers to a network where internet users can easily join and access information, and use the information they access, thanks to the technology the internet has brought about in recent years (Aziz, 2016). Okocha and Dapoet (2022) assert that social media provides interactive features such as feeds and profiles that enhance access and promote visibility to widen the network of common interest. Asemah et al. (2013) also point out that the

new media (internet) has greatly improved human interaction, but its use comes at a cost. Social media is a double-edged sword with benefits as well as drawbacks, and this raises questions about the proper etiquette, or rules, for its good use.

Social media, which is also known as the 'participatory internet', is an important aspect of digital communication (McGloin & Eslami, 2015). Boztepe (2014) explains that every individual who is a user of the new media assumes the role of a consumer as well as that of a producer. Okocha and Dapoet (2022) point out that social media refers to platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and Snapchat, amongst others, which enable information sharing as well as connection with like minds towards collective change in society. Social media helps to break the barriers of time and space (geographical barriers), and this promotes progress in society. The late 1990s and early 2000s saw the emergence of the second generation of the internet known as the 'Web 2.0.' This era allowed feedback, interactivity and multimediality (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). It is reasonable to infer that the move to 'Web 2.0' led to the emergence of social media as we know it today. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) point out that social media refers to a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, by allowing the creation and exchange of user-generated content.

Theoretical framework

Development communication emerged in the 1940s, mainly after the Second World War. Its growth as an academic field was led by scholars like Daniel Lerner, Wilbur Schramm, E. M. Rogers, Lawrence Kincaid, amongst other scholars (Singh & Bharti, 2021). According to Bajracharya (2018), the main idea behind development communication theory is the use of media for the development of people in a nation, or to help a target population. Development communication seeks to serve the population without manipulation, and encourages genuine response. There is no propaganda or ulterior motive. In essence, development communication is about the:

> Sharing of knowledge aimed at reaching a consensus for action that takes into account the interests, needs and capacities of all concerned. It is thus a social process. Communication media are important tools in achieving this process but their use is not the main aim in itself – interpersonal communication too must play a fundamental role (Servaes & Malikhao, 2002, p. 3).

Wilbur Schramm (1964) was the first scholar to publicly recognize the important role that can be played by communication in the national development of third world countries (Singh & Bharti, 2021). Development communication has weaknesses; for example, it does not always consider the specific social, political and cultural context, and this sometimes limits its efforts. Even so, development communication strives to bring forth social change through the use of communication strategies that are aimed at addressing social issues in ways that will lead to directed change and in essence development. While development has led to the digital age, the digital age is in turn influencing development. Takavarasha et al. (2018) point out that the focus of information systems (IS) has been centred on the potential of IS to improve people's livelihoods using ICTs. Development communication is all about improving people's lives through effective communication strategies. In the context of digital citizenship education for social media netiquette among young people in Plateau State, development communication can be used to foster responsible social media behaviour. There are development communication channels such as educational programmes (on radio and internet), workshops, awareness

campaigns and advocacy amongst others, that can help young people to become responsible users of social media.

Development communication is a tool for bringing change and the adoption of new technologies; it is equally important for the propagation of soft skills such as social media netiquette. The activities of young people on social media are an appropriate unit of analysis for assessing the development of digital citizenship (Takavarasha et al., 2018). It is therefore reasonable to infer that the degree of digital citizenship education may be used to gauge the level of development in a given location. For instance, factors such as the rate of adoption, as well as the digital divide often point to contrasting angles of development, and can be used for comparative analysis purposes. The role of communication in fostering digital literacy among young people cannot be overstated. It can be said that development communication has the potential to provide a sound framework for designing and implementing digital citizenship education programmes that are focused on equipping young people with better knowledge, in terms of the implications of social media netiquette.

Review of related literature

The digital citizenship education and social media netiquette nexus

Communication has been a crucial tool from time immemorial. Gallager (2008) affirms that people require communication to create social cohesion, educate younger generations, and express countless emotions, thoughts, and needs. As a result, effective communication has always been at the heart of the characterization of civilized societies. Gezman (2022) points out that we can reach information very quickly today, and interact by sharing the same information very quickly. While social media has made the flow of information open to all, it has also highlighted the importance of being a responsible digital citizen by shaping how we interact with others. Kapoor et al. (2018) affirm that social networks have been the leading drivers of a digital revolution that has created a clear before and after in terms of how people communicate and collaborate.

There are nine general areas that make up digital citizenship:

> 1. *Etiquette:* electronic standards of conduct or procedure 2. *Communication:* electronic exchange of information 3. *Education:* the process of teaching and learning about technology and the use of technology 4. *Access:* full electronic participation in society 5. *Commerce:* electronic buying and selling of goods 6. *Responsibility:* electronic responsibility for actions and deeds 7. *Rights:* those freedoms extended to everyone in a digital world 8. *Safety:* physical well-being in a digital technology world 9. *Security* (self-protection): electronic precautions to guarantee safety (Ribble et al., 2004, p. 7).

Etiquette (netiquette), communication and education are the first three areas on the list by Ribble et al., perhaps because of how important they are to the concept of digital citizenship, and their inherent ability to shape the digital landscape in distinct ways. It is also reasonable to infer that with the present technological revolution as well as the emergence of online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (now X), amongst others, digital citizenship has become an indispensable part of digital communication.

The social impacts of social media are evident across several countries of the world (Mohammed, 2021). Social media does not exist in a vacuum, since our activities and interactions on social media can have real life consequences. Some of the common challenges that lie in the intersection between social media and netiquette include issues such as cyber bullying or harassment, social media addiction, the sharing of harmful content, rude and

disrespectful communication, sharing of explicit content, the sharing of inappropriate information, and privacy issues amongst others. Gezman (2022) points out that those who know the rules as well as culture of the digital world gain more advantages than those who do not know these rules. Furthermore, observing ethical rules on the internet allows us to act without harming or disturbing others. The link between education and technology is therefore worth investigating. This is because it points out the necessity of raising the awareness level of children and adults about the adverse effects of media (Uysal, 2016).

Strategies for propagating social media netiquette among young people

There is no doubt that educating young people about digital citizenship in the context of social media netiquette requires a strategic approach. Social media netiquette is important to the general population, and more so to children and young people who, more often than not, are unaware of the rules of engagement on the internet or social media. It is worth noting that formulating and implementing well informed strategies will ensure an effective approach. For instance, it is important to determine whether digital citizenship education in the context of boosting social media netiquette among young people will take the formal education route, the non-formal route, or the informal route. Scholars have also highlighted the need for adopting the concept of digital citizenship from an early age, while stressing that raising awareness on this issue is important for reducing the problems that children and young people experience in a virtual environment (Karaduman & Öztürk, 2014; Palfrey & Gasser, 2011). It can be argued that one of the effective strategies towards teaching digital citizenship and in essence social media netiquette to young people is to inculcate the culture of social media netiquette at an early age so as to ensure good habits from the roots. It should not be forgotten that teachers have a big role in informing students and young people correctly. Accordingly, teachers, administrators, technology leaders, and parents should be supported to obtain the information they need to use digital technologies correctly (Gazi, 2016).

The vehicle for communicating social media netiquette is also an important ingredient that determines the strategy to be adopted. For instance, the internet in general, and social media in particular can be useful for awareness campaigns and advocacy campaigns that are focused on educating young people about social media netiquette. Accordingly, online platforms can be used for knowledge sharing in the form of instructional voice-overs, videos and posters. Other ways in which young people can be encouraged to be responsible digital citizens include educational programmes (on radio, television, and internet), workshops, awareness campaigns and advocacy amongst others. Furthermore, the importance of critical thinking to digital citizenship education in the context of social media netiquette cannot be overstated. Richardson and Milovidov (2019) explain that critical thinking is invaluable for young learners, who need to be able to solve problems, find information, form opinions, and evaluate sources, given the amount of truthful and erroneous information that is available online. In essence, it is important to encourage young people to question the information they see on social media, and critical thinking makes this possible. Ribble et al. (2004) assert that it is good to encourage students to use digital communication, and it is at the same time important to correct them when they are doing something inappropriate. In this regard, Gezman (2022) notes that:

> Most media literacy and digital media literacy education activities are based on analytical approaches. Information should be given about the types of cyberbullying, which is the digital form of traditional bullyings (sic), such as the threats that children and young people may face on social media channels, fake

> identities, fraud, theft of private information, and disclosure of information from many privacy areas (Gezman, 2022, p. 133).

Gezman thus highlights other issues that should be included in any digital citizenship education programme especially if its aim is to propagate social media netiquette among young people. Richardson and Milovidov (2019) point out that children and young people are confronted with all types of content and they should be able to discern what is of value and what is not; what is real and what is not. Discernment goes beyond fake news and relates to their ability to process and interpret information. It is also reasonable to infer that breaking down the components of social media netiquette such as respect, empathy, and privacy, amongst others, helps young people to understand each of these interrelated concepts. Furthermore, it is important to provide up-to-date information, since the digital world is not static.

Obstacles to effective digital citizenship education

Technology has intricately woven itself into almost every strand of our daily life, making it essential for citizens to be constantly aware of the challenges it brings (Richardson & Milovidov, 2019). However, digital citizenship education faces challenges, which often create bottlenecks to the process of propagating social media netiquette among young people in Plateau State. These challenges include the following:

The digital divide

Digital transformation has created what is now referred to as a network of inequality (Thimm, 2016). It can be argued that this has in turn created an internet of inequality. This inequality becomes visible in two digital divides. The first digital divide is characterized by unequal access to digital media in the information society. The society is divided into those who use digital media in everyday life and those who do not. In addition, a distinction has to be made between self-directed non-use and external exclusion. Okocha et al. (2020) explain that in terms of digital access, the main problem is narrowing the digital divide, as there are people with little or no access to digital facilities such as smart phones, computers and internet in Nigeria, a situation that reduces digital participation, be it on a broad scale or in terms of digital education.

Access to computers and the internet as well as the facilities to effectively use this technology are becoming increasingly important for full participation in economic, political, and social life (Tarman, 2003). Eke (2011) points out that the Nigerian digital divide signifies the disparity among individuals who have Internet accessibility and computers and those who do not. Computers and the Internet are present in the homes of the rich but not the poor because of the high cost of computers and expensive Internet access. Van Dijk (2017) narrows down the problem of access to three areas. The first is physical access to these facilities. The second is skills access, which can only be solved through digital or media literacy. The third is usage access, which can be measured through the amount of usage time as well as frequency of usage. Presently, the non-user of digital technologies is positioned outside society, and is unable to enact citizenship (Rahm, 2018).

Integrating digital citizenship into school curriculum

One of the big obstacles to the growth of digital citizenship education in Nigeria as well as Plateau State is that of integrating it into the school curriculum. Ribble et al. (2004) assert that digital citizenship has become a priority for schools that see technology integration as a major teaching and learning strategy for preparing students to live and work in the 21st century. Unfortunately, digital citizenship education has not been fully integrated into the school curriculum (Abubakar & Bello, 2022). It can easily be argued that Plateau State is a microcosm of a widespread national issue. Also, components of digital citizenship such as social media and

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online netiquette have not been given special attention by administrators or policy makers. There is also a lack of awareness among educators of the importance of digital citizenship competence development for the well-being of young people growing up in today's highly digitized world, and a limited number of suitably targeted pedagogical resources available (Richardson & Milovidov, 2019).

Parents are also part of the problem, as many hardly help children balance the social and interpersonal effects of using online technology. They also hardly communicate with their children and schools in order to help develop the required skills. Another pressing issue is digital wellness or well-being. It is important to teach it in schools, but it is even more important to ensure that young people apply it in real life. Another issue is that educational agencies have not actively pushed for the integration of digital citizenship education into school curriculum, both locally and nationally.

Conclusion

Based on the literature reviewed, it is reasonable to conclude that young people must be well educated about the importance of responsible social media behaviour. Digital citizenship education can serve as a framework for building a positive and morally sound online community and, by extension, society. Digital citizenship education provides young people with a broad range of competences which can be used positively in both online and offline communities. Accordingly, teachers, administrators, technology leaders, and parents should be supported to obtain the information they need to help young people use digital technologies correctly.

Recommendations

Based on the literature reviewed, the following recommendations are put forward:

1. Teachers have a big role in informing students and young people about social media netiquette. Accordingly, teachers, administrators, technology leaders, and parents should be supported to obtain the information they need to help young people use digital technologies correctly.
2. The government should integrate digital citizenship education and social media safety education in the primary and secondary school curriculum, so as to increase the awareness and understanding of social media netiquette among young people in Plateau State.
3. Relevant agencies should study digital laws closely, so as to draw up policies and laws that will counter the present threats that the digital space poses to young people, as well as threats that are likely to emerge in the near future.
4. Government, schools and private partners should provide affordable internet access and digital facilities in schools and communities across Plateau State, so as to narrow the digital divide.

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