

Examination of social studies teacher candidates' views on digital citizenship

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to reveal prospective teachers' understanding of the concept of digital citizenship. This study utilized a qualitative research model, employing phenomenological design to identify pre-service teachers' understanding of digital citizenship. The study group consisted of 100 prospective teachers enrolled in the Social Studies Education Department of the Faculty of Education at a university in Türkiye during the 2025-2026 academic year, selected according to convenient sampling. A semi-structured interview form consisting of five questions was prepared. Content analysis was used in the analysis of the study's data. Based on the research findings, it was determined that prospective teachers defined digital citizenship, digital ethics, digital security, digital bullying, and digital literacy. Findings reveal that participants defined digital citizenship across dimensions such as digital literacy, ethics, security, bullying and identity, though often superficially. Results indicate partial awareness but limited competencies, highlighting the need to strengthen teacher education programs in digital citizenship.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In a globalizing world, digitalization is increasingly evident across all areas of life. From education to healthcare, and from politics to social life, the scope of digitalization continues to expand. This process has led to a significant transformation in social life and introduced new concepts into everyday discourse, one of which is digital citizenship. Citizenship may be defined as the relationship between individuals and the state [1]. Digital citizenship, however, is generally defined not by formal statuses such as belonging to a nation-state or the rights and responsibilities associated with it, but rather by individuals' actions. In this sense, it refers to citizens' ability to create and fulfill their roles within society [2]. Digital citizenship is a broad concept. In recent years, the growing societal acceptance and widespread use of digital technologies have further expanded its scope. It encompasses several dimensions, including individual, educational, commercial, and social components [3]. These components may be outlined as digital access, digital commerce, digital communication, digital literacy, digital etiquette, digital law, digital rights and responsibilities, digital health and well-being, and digital security [4]. Collectively, these dimensions illustrate how the increasing prevalence of digital citizenship has broadened its areas of application within society.

The widespread use of the internet in many aspects of daily life may be characterized as an electronic revolution [5]. This electronic revolution represents a form of digital transformation that has influenced virtually all practices of individuals within social life [6]. Moreover, this transformation has

altered the way citizenship is exercised. The concept of the digital citizen stands out as one of the most prominent outcomes of this electronic revolution. Within the framework of digital citizenship, individuals fulfill their civic responsibilities through digital tools [7]. The concept of digital citizenship has gained increasing importance due to factors such as rapid technological advancements, the ability to transcend national borders through these technologies, globalization, and the growing need for individuals to utilize technological tools and platforms to meet their needs and exercise their rights [8].

Digital citizenship is not limited to the fulfillment of civic duties through digital means. It also requires individuals to respect the existing rights of others while exercising their freedoms in digital environments and to act within established legal boundaries [9]. This development, brought about by digitalization, has also led to the adaptation of national laws and regulations accordingly.

The widespread use of technology has facilitated individuals' access beyond national border [8]. Technology has also introduced a new dimension to interpersonal communication [10]. These digital technologies have influenced the ways in which individuals present themselves to others [11]. Moreover, digital environments shape how individuals exchange information [12]. Collectively, these developments underscore the growing importance of digital citizenship.

In recent years, the importance of digital citizenship in education has been increasingly emphasized, and numerous studies have been conducted in this area. For the successful attainment of digital citizenship goals, factors such as the student's school environment, out-of-school context, and academic achievement play a significant role [13]. Various activities may be implemented within the school setting to enhance students' digital citizenship skills. In this regard, students' digital development should be addressed from both cognitive and behavioral perspectives [14]. Active participation in the learning process, along with individuals' real-life experiences, is of particular importance in digital citizenship education [15]. Digital citizenship education should be incorporated into school curricula; otherwise, students may lack awareness of legal and ethical principles in digital environments [16]. Therefore, educational initiatives related to digital citizenship should be included in schools. As the primary provider of knowledge and awareness, schools make a substantial contribution to the implementation of such initiatives [17].

This study examined teacher candidates' perceptions of digital citizenship in depth using qualitative research methods. It aimed to fill the limited qualitative gap in the literature on digital citizenship. The research comprehensively reveals teacher candidates' awareness and perceptions of digital literacy, digital security, digital ethics, digital bullying, and digital citizenship through semi-structured interview questions. The examination of multiple sub-dimensions in the research broadens the scope of the findings. In this respect, the research is important both for the development of teacher training programs and for raising awareness about digital citizenship. This study contributes to the literature by not only raising awareness among teacher candidates about digital citizenship but also by thoroughly examining digital citizenship and its dimensions. The scientific question of the research is: what are prospective teachers' perceptions of digital citizenship? The present study aims to determine teacher candidates' awareness of digital citizenship. Accordingly, the following research questions were addressed:

- What are teacher candidates' views on digital literacy?
- What are teacher candidates' views on digital ethics?
- What are teacher candidates' views on digital security?
- What are teacher candidates' views on cyberbullying?
- What are teacher candidates' views on digital citizenship?

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design

This study used qualitative methods to examine teacher candidates' perceptions of digital citizenship. Qualitative research examines the meanings that individuals attribute to events and phenomena [18]. In this context, a phenomenological design was utilized to explore the meanings teacher candidates assign to the concept of digital citizenship. Phenomenology aims to reveal individuals' lived experiences and perceptions regarding a particular phenomenon [19]. Phenomenology, also known as the study of lived experiences, refers to individuals' experiences and interpretations of a particular phenomenon throughout their lives [20]. Thus, prospective teachers' holistic understanding of digital citizenship and its sub-dimensions has been examined in depth.

2.2. Data collection instrument and data collection process

A set of five interview questions was prepared as the data collection instrument for the study. In developing the research questions, the elements of digital citizenship identified by Ribble [4] were taken

into consideration. Open-ended interview questions were distributed to the teacher candidates in written form, and approximately 30 minutes were allotted for completion. Participation was entirely voluntary. The use of open-ended questions during the interview process allows for their systematic presentation to participants while also facilitating the collection of rich data by enabling participants to establish relationships among concepts [21].

2.3. Study group

The study group consists of 100 teacher candidates—31 male and 69 female—enrolled in the Department of Social Studies Education at the Faculty of Education of a university in Türkiye during the 2025–2026 academic year. Participants were selected through convenience sampling. Convenience sampling may be defined as the selection of a readily accessible group as the research sample [18].

2.4. Data analysis

Content analysis was used to analyze the data collected in the study. Content analysis allows for an in-depth examination of the data obtained from the research [22]. During the analysis process, a code was first assigned to each response provided by the teacher candidates. Invalid or incomplete questionnaires were then excluded from the analysis. The data obtained from the participants' responses were subsequently organized into categories and codes based on their content.

2.5. Validity and reliability

To ensure the validity of the study, detailed information about the analysis process was provided. For reliability, the formula proposed by Miles and Huberman [23] was used:

$$\text{Reliability} = \frac{\text{Number of Agreements}}{\text{Number of Agreements} + \text{Number of Disagreements}} \times 100$$

A reliability level of 90% was achieved. In order to support the study's validity, the data analysis and research process were described in detail.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are supported by a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with prospective teachers. The interviews also include prospective teachers' views on digital literacy, digital ethics, digital bullying, digital security, and digital citizenship. The findings of the study are presented in Tables 1-5.

Table 1 presents teacher candidates' responses to the question "what is digital literacy?" across different grade levels. The results indicate that first-year candidates most frequently described digital literacy as active and instructive, whereas second-, third-, and fourth-year candidates primarily defined it as skills. This suggests that perceptions of digital literacy shift from activity-based descriptions to a broader skills-based understanding in later years. The following are teacher candidates' statements regarding digital literacy:

A1: *"The ability of an individual to question information available on the internet."*

A8: *"Having knowledge about technology."*

A13: *"Being digitally competent."*

A19: *"Accessing desired books through social networks."*

A31: *"Learning information from digital environments."*

A45: *"Interpreting posts on social media and the internet correctly."*

Table 2 presents teacher candidates' responses to the question "what is digital ethics?" across different grade levels. First-year candidates most frequently associated digital ethics with respect and value, whereas second-year candidates primarily defined it as social rules. Third- and fourth-year candidates also emphasized respect and social rules, indicating that digital ethics is understood as social norms. The following are teacher candidates' statements regarding digital ethics:

A16: *"Rules in digital environments."*

A22: *"Exhibiting correct behavior in the digital domain."*

A39: *"Sharing accurate information on the internet."*

A44: *"Not using others' content without permission."*

A69: “Acting correctly and respectfully in digital environments.”

A71: “The classification of behaviors as good or bad.”

Table 1. Teacher candidates’ responses to the question: “what is digital literacy?”

Class level	Category	Code	f
Class 1	Digital literacy	Instructive	11
		Internet	2
		Active	11
		Distance learning	5
		Timely	1
		Access	1
Total			31
Class 2	Digital literacy	Active	2
		Distance learning	1
		Awareness	1
		Skills	16
		Education	2
		Awareness	4
		Knowledge	1
Access	1		
Total			28
Class 3	Digital literacy	Skills	13
		Awareness	1
		Consciousness	3
		Active	1
Total			18
Class 4	Digital literacy	Skills	8
		Consciousness	5
		Active	1
Total			14

Table 2. Teacher candidates’ responses to the question: “what is digital ethics?”

Class level	Category	Code	f
Class 1	Digital ethics	Value	5
		Acceptance	1
		Respect	5
		Behaviors	4
Total			15
Class 2	Digital ethics	Behaviors	3
		Social rules	10
		Respect	5
		Tolerance	1
		Correctness	1
Total			20
Class 3	Digital ethics	Correctness	5
		Value	1
		Consciousness	2
		Copyright	1
		Respect	6
		Social rules	2
Total			17
Class 4	Digital ethics	Consciousness	1
		Correctness	1
		Social rules	3
		Respect	3
Total			8

Table 3 presents prospective teachers’ responses to the question “what is digital security?” across different grade levels. First-year candidates most frequently cited data privacy, while second-year candidates emphasized general security. Third- and fourth-year candidates also highlighted data privacy and security, indicating that digital security is understood as general security. The following are teacher candidates’ statements regarding digital security:

A69: “Protection of personal information in online environments.”

A78: “Protection of our personal posts in digital environments.”

A88: “Safeguarding personal information against threats.”

A89: “Protecting our information from unauthorized individuals.”

A96: “Securing accounts and devices in digital environments.”

Table 3. Teacher candidates’ responses to the question: “what is digital security?”

Class level	Category	Code	f
Class 1	Digital security	Data privacy	16
		Law	1
		Trust	11
		Password	3
Total			31
Class 2	Digital security	Security	11
		Data privacy	9
		Password	2
Total			22
Class 3	Digital security	Data privacy	9
		Security	5
		Consciousness	1
		Password	1
Total			16
Class 4	Digital security	Theft	1
		Data privacy	5
		Security	5
Total			11

Table 4 presents prospective teachers’ responses to the question “what is cyberbullying?” across different grade levels. First-year candidates most frequently described it as an attack, while second- and third-year candidates emphasized humiliation and disturbance. Fourth-year candidates highlighted threats, indicating that cyberbullying is generally perceived as harmful behavior in digital environments. The following are teacher candidates’ statements regarding cyberbullying:

A1: “Causing harm to someone using digital tools.”

A76: “Any form of bullying occurring in digital environments.”

A96: “Making disrespectful posts targeting people in virtual environments.”

A44: “Acts of humiliation between people through social networks.”

A52: “Bullying carried out using digital technologies.”

A66: “Treating unknown individuals poorly in online environments.”

Table 5 presents teacher candidates’ responses to the question “what is digital citizenship?” across different grade levels. First- and second-year candidates most frequently mentioned maintaining a digital profile, whereas third- and fourth-year candidates emphasized responsibility. Overall, the results indicate that perceptions of digital citizenship range from managing an online profile to fulfilling responsibilities. The following are teacher candidates’ statements regarding digital citizenship:

A21: “Acting with awareness of rights and responsibilities in digital environments.”

A41: “Using digital resources consciously.”

A53: “The digital form of citizenship.”

A69: “The digital version of our citizenship in real life.”

A77: “Our presence on the internet.”

A95: “All of our behaviors in virtual environments.”

When asked what digital literacy is, first-year teacher candidates most frequently described it as active and instructive. This indicates that they perceive digital literacy primarily in terms of actively using digital technologies and recognizing its educational aspects. In contrast, second-, third-, and fourth-year teacher candidates most often defined digital literacy as skills, suggesting that they approach it from a broader perspective. The concept of “skills” encompasses a range of competencies, including both behavioral and affective dimensions. This finding indicates that prospective teachers have limited perceptions of digital literacy. This suggests that digital citizenship is not sufficiently emphasized in teacher training programs. The 21st-century digital skills factor provides a broader view of digital literacy beyond the educational context [24]. These findings reveal that teacher candidates possess limited knowledge of digital literacy, which involves not only supporting learning but also the effective use of technology [25].

Table 4. Teacher candidates' responses to the question: "what is cyberbullying?"

Class level	Category	Code	f
Class 1	Cyberbullying	Abuse	1
		Disturbance	6
		Criticism	1
		Threat	3
		Attack	7
		Insult	6
		Misuse	2
		Spyware	1
		Lynching	1
		Harassment	1
		Total	
Class 2	Cyberbullying	Threat	6
		Misuse	1
		Disrespect	1
		Disturbing	2
		Abuse	1
		Violence	1
		Spyware	1
		Humiliation	5
		Attack	2
		Oppression	2
		Insult	4
Total		26	
Class 3	Cyberbullying	Oppression	1
		Willful	1
		Disturbing	6
		Spyware	1
		Threat	3
		Attack	2
		Insult	2
Total		16	
Class 4	Cyberbullying	Disturbing	2
		Insult	1
		Oppression	2
		Threat	3
		Exclude	1
		Harm	1
Total		10	

Table 5. Teacher candidates' responses to the question: "what is digital citizenship?"

Class level	Category	Code	f
Class 1	Digital citizenship	Technology	1
		Identity	1
		Digital profile	18
		Consciousness	1
		Responsibility	7
		Socialization	2
Total		30	
Class 2	Digital citizenship	Responsibility	10
		Digital profile	12
		Effective	1
		Communication	1
		Consciousness	1
		Sensitive	1
Total		26	
Class 3	Digital citizenship	Responsibility	4
		Active	3
		Consciousness	8
		Digital profile	3
Total		18	
Class 4	Digital citizenship	Digital profile	1
		Consciousness	3
		Active	1
		Responsibility	7
		Person	1
Total		13	

When asked what digital ethics is, first-year teacher candidates most frequently described it as respect and value. Respect is actually a component of values; however, their responses indicate that they perceive digital ethics primarily as respect alone. The same pattern was observed among third-year teacher candidates, who also most frequently defined digital ethics as respect. Second-year teacher candidates, in contrast, most often described digital ethics in terms of social rules. Fourth-year teacher candidates most frequently mentioned both social rules and respect. These findings suggest that teacher candidates possess limited knowledge of digital ethics. The fact that prospective teachers talk about respect and social rules indicates that their ethical awareness is developing. In the digital age, it is important that teachers not only transmit information but also set an example with ethical behavior. The extent to which such awareness is reflected in teacher training programs and practice should also be investigated. Digital ethics refers to the etiquette that everyone should follow in online environments and is considered a fundamental part of digital citizenship [26]. This explanation aligns with the teacher candidates' responses regarding digital ethics.

When asked what digital security is, first-, third-, and fourth-year teacher candidates most frequently described it as data privacy. Second- and fourth-year teacher candidates most often defined it as security. This indicates that they approach digital security from a broader perspective. The fact that prospective teachers discuss data privacy and security shows that they are aware of digital risks. This is important not only for themselves but also for raising this awareness among students in the educational environment. Practical studies can be conducted to further investigate this. The primary purpose of digital security is to create a safe environment for operations, communication, data processing, and storage [27]. This definition in the literature aligns with the teacher candidates' responses regarding the protection and storage of data in digital environments.

When asked what cyberbullying is, first-year teacher candidates most frequently described it as an attack. Second-year candidates defined it primarily as humiliation, while third-year candidates described it mainly as disturbance. Fourth-year candidates most often mentioned it as a threat. These responses indicate that teacher candidates hold a limited perspective on cyberbullying. This situation highlights the need to improve the competencies of prospective teachers in responding to any cyberbullying they may encounter in the school environment. Cyberbullying does not occur in a confined area but takes place across a wide range of environments [28]. Its scope extends far beyond bullying conducted via emails [29]. An examination of the teacher candidates' responses shows that they were able to identify some of the elements associated with cyberbullying.

When asked what digital citizenship is, first- and second-year teacher candidates most frequently described it as a digital profile. This indicates that they perceive digital citizenship primarily as the digital form of citizenship. In contrast, third- and fourth-year candidates most often defined digital citizenship in terms of responsibility, suggesting that they understand it narrowly as fulfilling the duties of a citizen. The way prospective teachers define digital citizenship shows that they lack a holistic perspective on it. This leads to the conclusion that they may guide their students with a narrow perspective on digital citizenship in the future. Digital citizenship should be presented in teacher training programs with a broad perspective, both theoretically and practically. Digital citizenship involves the responsible use of technology to learn, create, and participate [30]. It requires consistent and effective internet access as well as the ability to use technology proficiently [31]. Based on the teacher candidates' responses, it can be concluded that they tend to define digital citizenship in terms of maintaining a digital profile and using the internet effectively. The widespread use of digital devices has made it necessary to implement educational programs addressing both their use and associated risks [32]. Therefore, teaching digital citizenship in terms of knowledge and skills is especially important in teacher education.

4. CONCLUSION

The finding of the study was that prospective teachers generally have limited knowledge regarding digital citizenship and its sub-dimensions. They have particular deficiencies in the areas of digital security, digital bullying, and digital ethics. This situation is consistent with the existing literature. The limitations in the practical application of digital citizenship also coincide with the existing literature. This research has revealed that prospective teachers have limited perceptions of digital citizenship. This highlights the need to re-evaluate the theoretical and practical dimensions of teacher training programs. It also indicates that the practical dimension needs to be enhanced. Furthermore, digital citizenship needs to be clearly defined within the teacher training curriculum as part of teacher competencies. The research also provides an opportunity to compare the understandings of digital citizenship held by prospective teachers studying at different universities. The findings of this research contribute to the development of teacher training programs aimed at increasing prospective teachers' awareness of digital citizenship and its sub-dimensions. At the same time, it strengthens prospective teachers' awareness of digital ethics and digital security, thus laying an important foundation for creating digital awareness in the field of education and in the wider community.

In conclusion, it can be said that prospective social studies teachers' level of knowledge regarding digital citizenship and its dimensions is insufficient in terms of their professional teaching competencies. This study examined prospective social studies teachers' perceptions of digital citizenship. The findings revealed that participants had limited awareness and a superficial understanding of digital citizenship. These results highlight the importance of integrating digital citizenship content into teacher education programs to develop digital skills and promote responsible digital behavior. For future research, curriculum-based interventions can be particularly implemented. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendation can be made. Courses on digital citizenship should be included in the curriculum for teacher candidates during their first semester at university. Additionally, in subsequent semesters, opportunities should be provided for teacher candidates to reinforce and apply the knowledge they have acquired. Because the research was conducted with prospective teachers at a specific university, the generalizability of the findings is limited. However, the findings suggest that teacher training programs should focus more on digital citizenship and also provide an important resource for future research.

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C : **C**onceptualization

M : **M**ethodology

So : **S**oftware

Va : **V**alidation

Fo : **F**ormal analysis

I : **I**nvestigation

R : **R**esources

D : **D**ata Curation

O : **O**riginal Draft

E : **E**diting

Vi : **V**isualization

Su : **S**upervision

P : **P**roject administration

Fu : **F**unding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The research related to human use has been complied with all the relevant national regulations and institutional policies in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration and has been approved by the authors' institutional review board or equivalent committee.

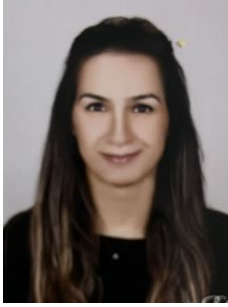
DATA AVAILABILITY




The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article [and/or its supplementary materials].

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