Beyond Netiquette:
Digital Citizenship as Participation

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Abstract. Digital citizenship research has been on the agenda of scholars and practitioners since 1999 and has been trending since 2015. A plethora of approaches and definitions have been arising, with two major directions: a theoretical-methodological and a practical-educative. The present critical literature review is aimed at advocating for a more civic approach to the issue of digital citizenship and at presenting arguments in favour of *a research agenda focused on the participatory components of digital life*. Our desk research operated with both original studies and meta-analyses related to the concept of digital citizenship. While being technically savvy and well-behaved online is a key requirement for today's netizen, becoming a citizen in virtual spaces requires more. Beyond netiquette, civic participation online is becoming a core competence.

Keywords: digital citizenship, digital life, participation, critical literature review

1. Rationale and Methodology

Why the increasing interest towards the issue of digital citizenship? As the Internet is becoming part of our lives, opportunities and challenges of an overwhelmingly digital life take up significant space within the public arena (Council of Europe, 2018; Frau-Meigs et al., 2015; Pathways for Prosperity Commission, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2014; Ram et al., 2020; Suzor, 2019).

With such a wide palette of approaches, from the theoretical and methodological to the practical-educational ones, why another review article? Our experience as researchers and educators has shown that basic and advanced digital literacy skills are necessary yet not sufficient for a competent and ethical engagement in digital life: a civic attitude and the ability to critically understand online interactions is necessary. A well-rounded approach to digital citizenship should be part of the research agenda, and a critical literature review might be instrumental to advocate for it.

The present critical literature review operates with both original research studies and with meta-analyses summarizing articles on the topic of digital citizenship. It is a desk research carried out from 15 July to 31 October 2021. Articles were selected upon relevance using the Google Scholar database, with the keywords "digital citizenship" and "digital life". The first search keyword was chosen as *digital citizenship* is the key concept of the present critical review, while "digital life" was one of the most overarching concepts encountered while studying information society topics since 2007 onwards, whence the selection.

The process of selecting literature review studies (meta-analyses) and original research articles consisted of two steps: firstly, the 50 most relevant articles were chosen and categorized for the *digital citizenship* concept; secondly, the 50 most relevant articles were gathered and categorized for the *digital life* concept. Based on the quality of the topic analysis, a number of 25 articles were included in the critical literature review, as shown in *Table 1* below.

Table 1. *Articles included in the review, by relevance categories*

Articles	Relevance categories
Atif and Choi, 2018; Choi, 2016; Council of Europe, 2018; Frau-Meigs, O'Neill, Soriani, and Tomé, 2017; Işikli, 2015; Pathways for Prosperity Commission, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2014; Ribble, 2015; Suzor, 2019; Webler and Tuler, 2000	Thorough theoretical analysis
Al-Zahrani, 2015; Choi, Glassman, and Cristol, 2017; Ram, Yang, Cho, Brinberg, Muirhead, Reeves, and Robinson, 2020	Thorough methodological analysis
Buchholz, DeHart, and Moorman, 2020; Lozano-Diaz, Figueredo-Canosa, and Fernández-Prados, 2020; Yue, Nekmat, and Beta, 2019	Timely, specific analysis
Chen, Mirpuri, Rao, and Law, 2021; Fernández-Prados, Lozano-Diaz, and Ainz-Galende, 2021; Öztürk, 2021	Thorough meta-analysis
Emejulu and McGregor, 2019; Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal, 2008; Ohler, 2010; Ribble and Bailey, 2007; Richards, 2010	Part of a thorough meta-analysis

Suzor (2019: 39) warns that the Internet has no immune system to protect users against abuse, wherefore it is critical to rely on educated users since online platforms often present themselves as neutral spaces and push responsibility on content creators. However, many of the Internet users are underage, unprepared to take responsibility for their communication practices and online content creation. Children and teenagers are immersed in the digital world yet not fully engaged in it (Bakó, 2019). Their parents and educators are even less connected to digital cultural spaces due to the lack of digital literacy (Bakó–Tőkés, 2018). No wonder

that education for digital literacy takes up a significant space in conceptualizing and operationalizing "digital citizenship".

2. Conceptualizing "Digital Citizenship"

Several research articles and books define digital citizenship with a focus on users' skills (Mossberger–Tolbert–McNeal, 2008; Ribble–Bailey, 2007; Ribble, 2015), while more holistic approaches look into knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values of the digital agora stakeholders (Choi, 2016; Ohler, 2010; Richards, 2010; Emejulu–McGregor, 2019).

In a comprehensive literature review, Fernández-Prados et al. (2021) highlight digital citizenship definitions used by theoretically and methodologically sound studies, as summarized in *Table 2* below.

Table 2. *Defining digital citizenship*

Authors	Definitions
Ribble and Bailey, 2007: 10	"norms of appropriate, responsible behavior with regard to technology use. Digital citizenship is a concept which helps teachers, technology leaders, and parents to understand how to use technology appropriately."
Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal, 2008: 1–2	"those who use the Internet regularly and effectively, that is, on a daily basis […] digital citizens are those who use technology frequently, who use technology for political information to fulfill their civic duty, and who use technology at work for economic gain"
Ohler, 2010: 187	"character education for the digital age"
Richards, 2010: 518	"practices conscientious use of technology, demonstrates responsible use of information, and maintains a good attitude for learning with technology"
Choi, 2016: 565	"Ethics, Media and Information Literacy, Participation/Engagement, and Critical Resistance."
Emejulu and McGregor, 2019: 140	"as a process by which individuals and groups committed to social justice deliberate and take action to build alternative and emancipatory technologies and technological practices"

Source: selected from Fernández-Prados et al. (2021: 2) upon variety of approaches

The selected definitions highlight the normative component and the complexity of the "digital citizenship" concept, with technological, educational, and civic activist aspects connected to the digital literacy of the users.

Research focused on educational aspects rely on Ribble's "nine elements of digital citizenship" (2015: 23) providing a practical teaching guide for schools on digital access, digital commerce, digital communication, digital literacy, digital etiquette, digital law, digital rights and responsibilities, digital health and wellness, and digital security. The guide is comprehensive and provides examples of dos and don'ts – hence its popularity.

Methodological approaches were also well received by reviewers and researchers, with a highlight on Choi, Glassman, and Cristol's model of measuring digital citizenship (2017) on a reliable and valid five-factor scale, using a questionnaire with 26 items. The five factors, as presented in *Table 3*, are structured on three levels or conditions of complexity: *technical skills* represent a basic, necessary yet not sufficient condition for developing digital citizenship; on the second layer, *local and global awareness* is an important communicative condition, whereas on a more complex level *networking agency*, *Internet political activism*, and a *critical perspective* is a "collaborative and cooperative condition" of digital citizenship (Choi et al. 2017: 111).

Table 3. *Three conditions of complexity when developing digital citizenship*

Factors	Description	Level of complexity
Technical skills	Lower levels of media literacy and basic open source intelligence skills	Necessary but not sufficient condition
Local and global awareness	Ethical consumption of information that deals with local and global issues	Distributed and communicative condition
Networking agency	Higher levels of media and information literacy	Collaborative and cooperative condition
Internet political activism	Action-/transformation-oriented participation	
Critical perspective	Rethinking online participation and the Internet	

Source: based on Choi, Glassman, and Cristol's visual model (2017: 111)

The measurement scale, be it complex and valid, has its limitations, as the authors themselves admit: the ethical aspects of participation are not detailed enough. Indeed, when it comes to public participation as an important component of democracy and citizen involvement in decision making, competence is a necessary yet not sufficient condition. Ethical conditions of participatory processes have also an important role in creating an inclusive socio-cultural environment for social actors.

The Choi, Glassman, and Cristol (2017) model is a good example of how digital citizenship research should be conducted, by looking both at the basic and advanced digital literacy skills, complemented with participatory attitudes and a critical

understanding of how the Internet works. If complemented with more comprehensive ethical criteria, such as the Webler–Tuler approach (2000) adapted for online spaces, a well-rounded research agenda could emerge.

Webler and Tuler (2000) have developed a model of competence- and fairness-based conditions for public participation in decision making, which could and should be integrated into conceptualizing digital citizenship. A well-organized public hearing event, for instance, be it offline or online, should take the following into consideration: are the rules of interaction comprehensive and created in a participatory manner? Is the space of dialogue organized in an inclusive, smooth, accessible manner? The system of fairness and competence rules for a proper participatory process are available in the *Appendix* section of this article.

3. Participation as Civic Engagement

While narrow definitions of online participation focus on active user behaviour on different platforms (Ribble–Bailey, 2007; Mossberger et al., 2008), broader approaches entail the civic component of digital life (Choi, 2016; Choi et al., 2017; Frau-Meigs, 2017).

As the Council of Europe defines it in a series of programmatic documents, digital citizenship is:

> the ability to engage competently and positively with digital technologies (creating, working, sharing, socialising, investigating, playing, communicating and learning); participating actively and responsibly (values, skills, attitudes, knowledge and critical understanding) in communities (local, national, global) at all levels (political, economic, social, cultural and intercultural); being involved in a double process of lifelong learning (in formal, informal and non-formal settings); and seamlessly defending human rights and dignity. (Frau-Meigs et al., 2015: 11–12)

This comprehensive definition entails a complex palette of normative criteria focusing on values, attitudes, skills, knowledge, and critical understanding necessary for living in a digital world. Connected to this approach, another key programmatic document, of the Council of Europe (2018), elaborated the context, concept, and model of competences for developing a democratic culture based on dialogue, inclusion, and participation. The model gives a set of values, attitudes, skills as well as knowledge and critical understanding of what is needed for a democratic culture, an ideal type of a citizen. Since our daily lives are increasingly digital, a model of offline citizen should also be applied online.

Table 4. *The 20 competences model for a democratic culture*

Competence	Description
Values	Valuing human dignity and human rights
	Valuing cultural diversity
	Valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality, and the rule of law
Attitudes	Openness to cultural otherness, beliefs, and practices
	Respect
	Civic-mindedness
	Responsibility
	Self-efficacy
	Tolerance of ambiguity
Skills	Autonomous learning skills
	Analytical and critical thinking skills
	Skills of listening and observing
	Empathy
	Flexibility and adaptability
	Linguistic, communicative, and plurilingual skills
	Co-operation skills
	Conflict resolution skills
Knowledge and critical understanding	Knowledge and critical understanding of the self
	Knowledge and critical understanding of language and communication
	Knowledge and critical understanding of the world: politics, law, human rights, cultures, religions, history, media, economies, environment, and sustainability

Source: based on the Council of Europe Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (2018: 38)

Online and offline interactions are strongly connected in civic spaces (Choi, 2016; Ribble, 2015), wherefore education for participation has a key role in developing responsible netizens (Al-Zahrani, 2015; Buchholz et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2021; Hennig-Manzuoli et al., 2019; Işikli, 2015; Öztürk, 2021; Yue et al., 2019). More complex approaches (Choi, 2016; Frau-Meigs et al., 2016; Choi et al., 2017, Lozano-Diaz et al., 2019) enable developing more inclusive and responsive digital citizenship programmes.

Schools and civil society organizations can and should have an active role in promoting digital citizenship programmes for all individuals and groups since the Internet and its complex platforms develop rapidly, and even the savvy individuals need to learn continuously in order to be competent and ethical actors of the cyber-sphere.

4. Conclusions

Digital citizenship research is gaining space both in scholars' and practitioners' scientific dialogue. Despite the variety and complexity of approaches, well-received books and articles, comprehensive meta-analyses reveal clear trends: when it comes to topical focus, educational approaches prevail; methodological approaches are highly appreciated and included in literature reviews. Meanwhile, a tendency to define digital citizenship mainly as digital literacy – with a greater focus on digital skills rather than on values and attitudes – still prevails.

A research agenda focusing on competent and ethical citizen participation online is needed since the difference between merely being civilized and having a civic attitude online is significant. Such an approach would go beyond netiquette and look into the civic attitudes and participatory practices online.

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Appendix 1. Rules of fairness and competence for public participation (Webler–Tuler, 2000: 570, 572)

Discursive Standard Criteria for Fairness

<u>Agenda and the process rules</u>

Does everyone have an equal chance to:

– put their concerns on the agenda and approve or propose rules for discourse?

– debate and critique proposals for the agenda and the rules?

– influence the final decision about the agenda and the discourse rules?

<u>Moderator and rule enforcement</u>

Does everyone have an equal chance to:

– suggest a moderator and a method for facilitation?

– challenge and support another's suggestion for a moderator and a method for facilitation?

– influence the final selection of moderator and moderation method?

<u>Discussion</u>

Does everyone have an equal chance to:

– be present or represented at the discourse?

– put forth and criticize validity claims about language, facts, norms, and expressions?

Is the method chosen to resolve validity claim redemption dispute consensually chosen before the discourse began?

Discursive Standard Criteria for Competence

<u>Comprehensibility validity claims</u>

– Does everyone have equal access to the sources for commonly agreed-on standards and definitions?

– Do all participants have an understanding of each others' terms, definitions, and concepts?

– Do disputes about definitions, terms, and concepts take advantage of pre-established reference standards?

<u>Truth validity claims</u>

– Does everyone have equal access to available and relevant systematic knowledge about the objective world?

– Does everyone have equal access to available and relevant anecdotal and intuitive knowledge about the objective world?

– Is uncertainty of factual information considered along with content?

– Are factual claims consistent with the prevailing opinion in expert and local knowledge?

– Can participants delegate determinations of factual truth to an outside expert panel?

– Are cognitive legal claims examined by legal experts?

<u>Normative validity claims</u>

– Are there implicit barriers that will bias the distribution of interests that participate?

– Is the affected population identified through objective criteria?

– Are people in the general region permitted to decide for themselves if they are affected?

– Is the discovery and the development of mutual understandings of values among all the participants promoted?

– Are factual implications of normative choices considered in practical discourse?

– Do discourse procedures build compromises and the discovery and development of mutual understandings?

– Are normative choices checked for internal consistency?

– Are normative choices checked against laws?

– Are normative choices checked against present expectations?

<u>Truthfulness validity claims</u>

– Is discussion about the authenticity of the speaker's expressive claims promoted?

– Is an examination into the speakers' sincerity promoted?

– Is an examination into the qualities of the situation promoted?

– Are individuals allotted enough time to accurately state and defend their expressive claims?

– Is the scheme used to translate expressive validity claims into regulative or constantive ones acceptable to everyone?

<u>Overarching rules</u>

– Are misunderstandings reduced before reaching for agreement?

– Is the decision as to which validity claims are redeemed by the group made using a technique that was consensually preapproved?

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