



## Everyday Digital Citizenship among Slovak University Students: Ethics, Privacy, and Social Responsibility on Social Media

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### Abstract

This study explores digital citizenship practices among Slovak university students in their use of social media, with particular attention to communication ethics, privacy, and social responsibility. Using a qualitative descriptive case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, in-depth observation, and documentation involving three Slovak university students who actively used Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. The data were analysed thematically through transcription, repeated reading, initial coding, theme development, and interpretive synthesis. The findings show that social media functions as an everyday space for communication, information seeking, social connection, entertainment, and learning. Participants' digital citizenship practices were reflected in communication ethics centred on the principle of not harming others, including avoiding insults, harsh language, cyberbullying, and personal attacks. Privacy awareness was also evident through the use of private accounts, close-friends features, selective sharing of personal information, and reluctance to post images of others without consent. However, students' social responsibility remained largely personal and protective, as they tended to ignore or block problematic accounts rather than engage in collective or corrective action. The study concludes that digital citizenship among the participants has developed at the level of interpersonal ethics, privacy protection, and self-control, but requires further strengthening in terms of active participation and collective social responsibility in digital spaces.

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## INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of information and communication technologies has transformed the ways individuals interact, construct social identities, access information, and negotiate their roles as citizens in everyday life. Social media can no longer be understood merely as a tool for interpersonal communication; it has become a digital social space in which individuals present themselves, build networks, share experiences, express opinions, and respond to social events. In this context, citizenship has undergone

conceptual expansion. It is no longer limited to legal status, political rights, and formal obligations to the state, but also includes how individuals behave ethically, responsibly, and reflectively in digital environments.

This expanded understanding is commonly referred to as digital citizenship. Digital citizenship positions technology users not simply as consumers of information but as social subjects who carry moral responsibility in communicating, sharing information, protecting privacy, respecting the rights of others, and considering the social consequences of their digital actions. A good digital citizen is therefore not defined solely by technical proficiency, but also by the ability to engage respectfully, avoid harmful behaviour, protect oneself and others, and contribute to a safe, inclusive, and responsible digital environment.

University students are a particularly important group in the study of digital citizenship. As young people who live closely with digital technologies, students use social media for communication, entertainment, learning, information seeking, networking, and self-expression. However, frequent use of social media does not automatically correspond to ethical readiness in dealing with the complexities of digital interaction. Harsh comments, cyberbullying, privacy violations, unverified information, peer pressure, and the blurred boundaries between private and public spaces indicate that social media produces not only opportunities but also moral and social challenges for students.

In the context of civic education, digital citizenship has become increasingly significant because digital spaces have become arenas in which civic character is formed. Saputra (2022) emphasises the importance of integrating digital citizenship into civic education courses in order to cultivate netiquette among university students. Ulfah, Firmansyah, Nuraeni, and Kius (2025) similarly argue that civic education plays a role in strengthening students' digital ethics and social awareness in the era of social media. Mas'ud et al. (2025) further highlight the need to balance freedom of expression with digital responsibility. These studies suggest that digital citizenship should not be reduced to technical digital skills; rather, it should be understood as part of ethical, character, and social responsibility education.

Slovakia provides a relevant context for this study because it is situated within a European digital landscape marked by technological transformation, digital literacy challenges, information security concerns, and the need to strengthen citizens' digital

competences. The Slovakia 2024 Digital Decade Country Report indicates progress in the digitalisation of public services and e-health, while also identifying challenges related to gigabit connectivity and basic and advanced digital skills. Data associated with the Digital Decade agenda indicate that the proportion of people in Slovakia with basic digital skills is approximately 51.3%, slightly below the European Union average of 55.6%. This condition suggests that strengthening digital competences in Slovakia remains important not only at the technical level but also in relation to ethics, privacy, safety, and social responsibility in digital media use.

Media literacy and the safe use of new media are also significant concerns in Slovakia's youth and non-formal education policies. The European Commission Youth Wiki notes that Slovakia's approach to media literacy and safe use of new media is integrated into broader digital education and inclusion policies, particularly through the National Digital Skills Strategy and Action Plan 2023–2026. This policy context indicates that digital ethics, online safety, and media literacy have become important components of Slovakia's digital policy direction, even though their implementation in students' everyday experiences still requires further qualitative investigation.

In addition to digital skills, Slovakia has drawn scholarly attention in relation to disinformation, information manipulation, and artificial intelligence. The article "Beyond the Deepfake Hype: AI, Democracy, and 'the Slovak Case'" in HKS Misinformation Review discusses Slovakia as a relevant case for understanding the relationship between deepfakes, disinformation, low public trust, and information ecosystem vulnerability. The article does not claim that deepfakes directly determine political outcomes, but it highlights how disinformation operates within socially vulnerable contexts. This broader context suggests that digital challenges in Slovakia are not merely technological; they are also connected to communication ethics, social trust, media literacy, and citizens' digital responsibility.

A further study published in Taylor & Francis Online, "Understanding the Factors Facilitating Pro-Russian Disinformation in Slovakia: A Qualitative Case Study of Expert Perspectives," shows that vulnerability to disinformation in Slovakia is related to social, historical, educational, public trust, media literacy, and geopolitical factors. Although the study focuses on geopolitical disinformation, it supports the argument that the quality of digital space depends substantially on citizens' capacity for critical thinking, ethical communication, and responsible social media use.

Attention to young people in Slovakia's digital environment is also reflected in GLOBSEC's Youth and Digital Democracy event held in Bratislava on 27 February 2024. The event addressed the role of young people in digital spaces, particularly in relation to information, disinformation, and youth participation. GLOBSEC's project document indicates that the audience consisted mainly of young people, students, and experts working on digital and disinformation issues. This reinforces the relevance of studying Slovak students in relation to digital citizenship.

Nevertheless, this study does not focus on electoral politics, ideology, or political preferences. The broader context of disinformation, deepfakes, and digital democracy in Slovakia is used only as a macro-level background to demonstrate the urgency of studying digital citizenship. The study instead focuses on dimensions closer to students' everyday experiences: communication ethics, privacy, and social responsibility on social media. Communication ethics refers to how students use language, express opinions, respond to others, manage difference, and avoid harmful behaviour. Social responsibility refers to students' awareness of the consequences of posting, their protection of their own and others' privacy, their caution before sharing content, and their responses to unethical behaviour such as cyberbullying, offensive comments, or misuse of social media.

Previous studies have underlined the importance of digital citizenship in higher education and student life. Fatmawati and Habibah (2023) discuss students' netizenship practices within the framework of good digital citizenship in Indonesia. Prasetyo, Naidu, Tan, and Sumardjoko (2021) identify digital citizenship as an important educational trend, while Hawamdeh (2022) reviews methods used in digital citizenship studies. Huschle, Kindlinger, and Abs (2024) propose a more comprehensive conceptualisation of digital citizenship competences that moves beyond personal responsibility. However, much of the existing literature remains conceptual, focuses on digital literacy in general, or is situated outside the Slovak context.

Meanwhile, studies on Slovakia tend to focus on disinformation, deepfakes, digital democracy, and geopolitical vulnerabilities. These studies are important, but relatively few examine how Slovak university students as everyday social media users make sense of communication ethics, privacy, and social responsibility in their daily digital practices. The quality of digital citizenship cannot be understood only through technical indicators or digital skill statistics; it also requires attention to subjective experience, moral judgement, and social practice.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyse digital citizenship practices among Slovak university students through three dimensions: communication ethics, privacy, and social responsibility on social media. Specifically, it explores how students understand ethical communication, consider the consequences of posting, protect their own and others' privacy, and respond to unethical behaviour in digital spaces. By adopting a qualitative approach, this study contributes to digital citizenship scholarship by foregrounding the perspectives of Slovak university students as members of a European digital society.

## **Method**

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design. This design was selected to explore Slovak university students' experiences and meanings of digital citizenship, particularly in relation to communication ethics, privacy, and social responsibility on social media.

Participants were selected purposively according to three criteria: they were Slovak citizens, they were university students, and they actively used social media. Data were obtained from three Slovak students from different academic backgrounds: Mass Media and Communication, Teaching of English and Art, and Applied Biology. This variation was intended to provide diverse perspectives on students' digital citizenship practices.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, in-depth observation, and documentation. The interviews explored participants' experiences of using social media, their understanding of ethical communication, their consideration of the consequences of posting, their privacy practices, their responses to unethical online behaviour, and their understanding of being a good digital citizen. Observation was used to complement interview data by attending to social interaction contexts relevant to digital ethics and social responsibility. Documentation consisted primarily of field notes and interview transcripts.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The process involved transcription, repeated reading, initial coding, grouping codes into themes, interpretation, and conclusion drawing. Emerging themes were then interpreted in relation to the concepts of digital citizenship, communication ethics, social responsibility, and digital privacy.

Trustworthiness was maintained through technique triangulation, source triangulation, and participant checking of the researchers' interpretations. Ethical

principles were observed by obtaining participant consent, maintaining confidentiality, using participant codes, and avoiding the use of private social media data without permission.

## Results and Discussion

This study explored digital citizenship practices among Slovak university students, particularly in relation to communication ethics, privacy, and social responsibility. Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with three Slovak students who actively used social media. To protect confidentiality, the participants are referred to as P1, P2, and P3. They came from different academic backgrounds—Mass Media and Communication, Teaching of English and Art, and Applied Biology—and used Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok.

Through repeated reading, initial coding, and thematic grouping, five major themes were identified: social media as an everyday student space, communication ethics as the practice of not harming others, digital privacy as protection of self and others, social responsibility as predominantly personal-protective, and self-control as the core of being a good digital citizen.

**Table 1. Themes derived from the thematic analysis**

<b>Main theme</b>	<b>Initial codes</b>	<b>Meaning of the finding</b>
Social media as an everyday student space	communication, entertainment, information, social connection, YouTube learning	Social media is embedded in students' social and academic lives.
Communication ethics as not harming others	politeness, no insults, no harsh words, no bullying, no attacks on creators	Digital ethics is understood as a moral boundary in online interaction.
Digital privacy as protection of self and others	private accounts, close friends, selective sharing, consent before posting photos	Privacy is understood in both personal and relational terms.

Personal-protective social responsibility	considering post impact, asking permission, ignoring, blocking accounts	Social responsibility is stronger as self-protection than collective action.
Self-control as the core of good digital citizenship	controlling behaviour, expressing opinions without hurting others, behaving online as offline	A good digital citizen is understood as someone able to regulate online behaviour.

### 3.1 Social Media as an Everyday Student Space

The interviews show that social media has become part of students' everyday lives. It is used not only for entertainment but also for communication, information seeking, social networking, and learning. In this sense, students' digital citizenship practices are formed through routine digital activities close to their daily experience.

P1 used social media mainly to communicate with classmates, access entertainment, and search for information: "I use social media mainly to communicate with my classmates. Besides that, I also use social media for entertainment and to look for information." P2 similarly understood social media as a means of accessing new information and building social connections. P3 emphasised a more academic function of social media, particularly through YouTube videos and educational creators in science and education: "I really like educational videos on YouTube because they help me understand certain topics better."

These findings indicate that social media operates simultaneously as a social and learning space. Digital citizenship in this study therefore appears not as a formal concept, but as a practice shaped through students' everyday habits of communicating, learning, and interacting online.

### 3.2 Communication Ethics as the Practice of Not Harming Others

The second theme concerns how participants understood ethical communication. The participants did not define communication ethics in abstract conceptual terms; instead, they described it through concrete behaviours such as avoiding insults, harsh words, bullying, malicious comments, and personal attacks.

P1 emphasised that freedom of communication on social media has moral limits: "We are free to communicate on social media, but there are still boundaries. We should

not use harsh words or bully others.” P2 understood ethical communication as communication without conflict and without insulting others. P3 similarly stressed the importance of politeness, especially when responding to creators or other users: “We should be polite, not leave hateful comments, and not attack creators or other users.”

This pattern suggests that digital communication ethics among the participants centres on a non-harm principle. Ethics is understood as self-restraint in the use of expressive freedom on social media. However, the findings also show that this understanding remains predominantly interpersonal and preventive. Participants emphasised avoiding harmful behaviour more than actively building healthy dialogue, mediating digital conflict, or supporting victims of unethical behaviour.

### 3.3 Digital Privacy as Protection of Self and Others

Digital privacy emerged as one of the strongest themes in the interviews. All participants showed awareness of the need to limit personal information shared on social media. Two participants also explicitly addressed the privacy of others, especially when posts involved friends or family members.

P1 protected privacy by not posting everything from everyday life: “I do not post everything I do in my daily life.” This statement indicates that privacy was understood as the ability to decide what should be shared and what should remain private. P2 demonstrated a more technical and relational privacy strategy by using a private account and the close-friends feature: “My account is private so I can control who follows me. I also use close friends so that my friends’ privacy is protected.” P3 also used a private account and did not post family or friends without permission: “My Instagram account is private and only followed by close friends. I also do not post my family or friends without their permission.”

These findings show two dimensions of digital privacy: personal privacy and relational privacy. Personal privacy refers to limiting information about oneself, whereas relational privacy refers to the awareness that others should not be exposed without consent. Relational privacy is particularly important because social media posts often represent not only the self but also other people who appear in photos, stories, or comments.

### 3.4 Social Responsibility as Predominantly Personal-Protective

The fourth theme concerns students' social responsibility when posting and responding to content. The interviews show that participants considered the consequences of their posts, but their responsibility tended to be stronger at the personal and protective level than at the collective level.

Before posting, P1 considered personal comfort and the possible impact of a post on others. P2 showed a broader form of responsibility by considering whether a post might offend others and by ensuring consent from friends appearing in a photo: "I consider whether the post could offend someone. I also make sure I have permission from my friends if they are in the photo." P3 highlighted the importance of choosing appropriate wording before commenting or posting: "I think about how to express my comment properly."

Responsibility was also visible in participants' responses to unethical behaviour, although these responses tended to be protective. P1 usually ignored unethical behaviour: "Usually I ignore it." P2 would express an opinion if needed, but would block an account if the situation became too negative: "I would express my opinion, and if the situation was too bad, I would block the account." P3 also preferred blocking or ignoring content perceived as unhealthy.

This pattern shows that social responsibility among the participants remains largely personal-protective. Students try to protect themselves and those close to them from negative effects of social media, but they rarely describe collective actions such as reporting harmful content, supporting victims of cyberbullying, or educating other users. The findings therefore reveal a distinction between ethical awareness and ethical participation.

### 3.5 Self-Control as the Core of Being a Good Digital Citizen

The final theme concerns self-control. When asked about the main challenge of being a responsible social media user, all participants referred to the ability to regulate behaviour, comments, and the way opinions are expressed.

P1 stated, "The biggest challenge is how someone can control their own behaviour on the internet." P2 similarly identified the challenge as "controlling oneself." P3

connected self-control with the ability to express opinions without hurting others: “The challenge is how to express an opinion without hurting other people’s feelings.”

The participants’ definitions of a good digital citizen were consistent with this theme. P1 described a good digital citizen as someone who does not behave badly toward others online. P2 defined it as someone who does not insult others and respects other social media users. P3 offered a more reflective statement: “Behaving on the internet the same way we behave in real life.”

These findings show that the participants did not separate digital life from social life. Ethical norms that apply offline were considered relevant online. Self-control therefore functions as the foundation connecting communication ethics, privacy, and social responsibility in students’ digital citizenship practices.

### 3.6 Synthesis of the Findings

Overall, the findings show that digital citizenship practices among Slovak university students are shaped through everyday experiences of social media use. These practices are reflected in polite communication, avoidance of insults and bullying, protection of personal and relational privacy, consideration of post impact, and regulation of online behaviour.

The central finding is that participants’ digital citizenship is stronger in the dimensions of interpersonal ethics and privacy protection than in collective social responsibility. Students understand the importance of not harming others, maintaining boundaries around personal information, asking consent before posting content involving others, and regulating their behaviour online. However, when encountering unethical behaviour, their responses remain dominated by ignoring or blocking rather than active efforts to improve the digital environment.

Thus, digital citizenship practices among the participants can be characterised as interpersonal, reflective, and protective. These practices indicate ethical awareness in social media use, but also point to the need for stronger forms of active social responsibility so that students become not only cautious users but also digital citizens who contribute to safe, healthy, and respectful online spaces.

## Discussion

### 4.1 Digital Citizenship as Everyday Practice

The findings indicate that digital citizenship among Slovak university students is formed through everyday social media use. Participants used social media to communicate with friends, search for information, build social connections, access entertainment, and support learning. This shows that digital citizenship is not limited to formal political participation or visible public engagement. It also emerges in routine practices such as communicating, learning, posting, responding to comments, and maintaining social relationships online.

This finding supports the view that digital citizenship should be understood as a social practice rather than merely a technical competence. Prasetiyo et al. (2021) argue that digital citizenship in education increasingly concerns learners' competences in responding to technological change. Huschle, Kindlinger, and Abs (2024) similarly stress that digital citizenship should move beyond personal responsibility toward a broader competence that includes ethical reflection and social responsibility. The present study extends this view by showing how everyday acts—choosing words carefully, limiting personal information, asking consent before posting, and thinking before sharing—constitute meaningful forms of digital citizenship.

### 4.2 Communication Ethics and the Non-Harm Principle

A key finding is that participants understood digital communication ethics through the principle of not harming others. Ethical communication was associated with avoiding harsh words, insults, cyberbullying, attacks on creators, and hateful comments. This suggests that digital ethics among the participants is grounded in interpersonal morality.

This finding is consistent with Saputra's (2022) emphasis on netiquette in digital citizenship education. It also resonates with Ulfah et al. (2025), who argue that civic education can strengthen students' digital ethics and social awareness. In this study, however, ethics appears primarily as a practical norm rather than formal knowledge. Students knew that communication should be polite and non-harmful, but their ethical orientation remained largely preventive.

This distinction is important. Preventive ethics refers to avoiding harmful behaviour, while participatory ethics requires active involvement in improving online interaction. The findings suggest that students' communication ethics has developed at a

basic interpersonal level but still needs to be expanded toward more active digital engagement, such as supporting victims of online harm, reporting harmful content, or helping create healthier digital conversations.

#### 4.3 Privacy as Personal and Relational Responsibility

Privacy was a particularly strong dimension of students' digital citizenship practices. Participants protected privacy by limiting what they posted, using private accounts, applying close-friends features, and avoiding the posting of friends or family members without permission. These practices suggest that privacy is not understood only as individual protection but also as relational responsibility.

Personal privacy refers to controlling information about oneself. Relational privacy refers to recognising that one's posts may affect the rights, comfort, and representation of others. This relational aspect is particularly important in social media environments, where photos, stories, and comments often include people beyond the account owner.

This finding contributes to digital citizenship scholarship by showing that privacy is not merely a security issue but also an ethical and social issue. Putri, Rahmawati, and Zainudin (2025) argue that digital ethics in the twenty-first century requires awareness of users' responsibility in digital spaces. The present study supports this argument by demonstrating that asking permission before posting others is a concrete form of social responsibility in everyday digital life.

#### 4.4 From Self-Protection to Collective Digital Responsibility

Although participants showed awareness of communication ethics and privacy, their social responsibility remained predominantly personal-protective. When encountering unethical behaviour such as offensive comments, bullying, or gossip, they tended to ignore, block, or distance themselves from the situation. These strategies protect the individual from unhealthy digital interactions, but they do not necessarily improve the digital environment collectively.

This finding reveals a distinction between self-protection and collective responsibility. Self-protection appears in actions such as blocking or ignoring problematic accounts. Collective responsibility would involve reporting harmful content, supporting victims, responding constructively, or educating other users. The findings

suggest that participants have developed ethical awareness, but this awareness has not fully translated into active social participation.

This point is relevant to Alvinca's (2025) discussion of civic engagement in digital citizenship. Digital citizenship requires not only personal awareness but also participation in creating healthier and more democratic digital spaces. Nevertheless, students' protective strategies should not be dismissed as indifference. In environments characterised by conflict, negativity, and psychological risk, blocking or ignoring may be an understandable strategy for maintaining digital well-being. The challenge is to complement such strategies with constructive forms of ethical action.

#### 4.5 Self-Control as the Foundation of Digital Citizenship

Another strong finding is that students identified self-control as central to responsible social media use. Participants associated good digital citizenship with controlling behaviour, avoiding harmful comments, expressing opinions without hurting others, and behaving online as one would behave offline. This suggests that digital citizenship is not only a matter of knowing rules but also of regulating emotions, language, and action.

Self-control connects the three core dimensions identified in this study: communication ethics, privacy, and social responsibility. Without self-control, knowledge of digital ethics may not become responsible behaviour. Fatmawati and Habibah (2023) similarly highlight the importance of netizenship practices in shaping good digital citizenship. In the present study, self-control is the practical mechanism through which students transform ethical awareness into digital conduct.

#### 4.6 Implications for Digital Citizenship Education

The participants differed in their views on whether universities should teach digital citizenship. Some viewed digital ethics as a personal responsibility, while others saw it as an educational need, particularly to protect students from bullying and social media misuse. This variation indicates that digital citizenship is not yet uniformly understood as a formal competence to be developed in higher education.

In the Slovak context, this implication is especially relevant given the challenges identified in the European Commission Digital Decade agenda and the integration of media literacy and safe use of new media in Slovakia's broader digital skills policies. The

findings suggest that digital citizenship education should go beyond technical competence and include communication ethics, privacy, self-control, social responsibility, and constructive responses to online harm.

The broader Slovak context of disinformation, deepfakes, and AI-enabled information manipulation further reinforces this need. Although this study does not examine political disinformation directly, the findings on caution before posting, privacy awareness, and self-control point to ethical foundations that are essential for resilience in more complex digital environments.

#### 4.7 Contribution of the Study

This study contributes to digital citizenship scholarship by showing that Slovak students' digital citizenship is expressed primarily through small everyday actions rather than explicit digital activism or political participation. Interpersonal ethics, relational privacy, protective responsibility, and self-control are central to the participants' digital citizenship practices.

The study also identifies a critical limitation in these practices: the weak orientation toward collective digital responsibility. Participants understood the importance of respecting others and protecting privacy, but they rarely described active efforts to improve the digital environment. The study therefore suggests the need to move from personal responsibility toward collective digital responsibility in higher education.

### **Conclusion**

This study shows that digital citizenship practices among Slovak university students are formed through everyday experiences of communication, social connection, information seeking, and learning on social media. Digital citizenship was not understood by participants as a formal concept, but as an ethical practice expressed through careful language, respect for others, consideration of post impact, privacy protection, and self-control in digital environments.

The findings indicate that students' communication ethics centres on the principle of not harming others. This is reflected in their awareness of avoiding harsh words, insults, bullying, attacks on creators or other users, and impolite interaction. Privacy also emerged as a significant dimension of digital citizenship, as participants limited personal

information, used private accounts and close-friends features, and avoided posting friends or family members without permission.

However, students' social responsibility on social media remained largely personal and protective. When encountering unethical behaviour such as offensive comments, bullying, or gossip, participants tended to ignore or block the relevant account. These strategies show awareness of self-protection, but they do not yet constitute collective social responsibility such as reporting harmful content, supporting victims, or educating other users.

Overall, the study concludes that digital citizenship among the participants has developed at the level of interpersonal ethics, privacy protection, and self-control, but still needs strengthening at the level of active participation and collective social responsibility. Digital citizenship education in higher education should therefore address not only technical skills, but also communication ethics, privacy awareness, digital empathy, ethical courage, and shared responsibility for creating safe, healthy, and respectful digital spaces.

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