

## Research article: Digital Citizenship Perceptions and Practices among Iranian EFL Learners: A Netnographic Inquiry

Khadijeh Karimi Alavijeh<sup>1</sup>  
Atefeh Abdollahi<sup>2</sup>

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### Abstract

With the accelerating pace of technological enhancements such as high-speed Web services, smartphones, high-tech apps, and social networking sites, appropriate and effective methods of applying technology is an urgent need. This need is more imperative in EFL/ESL contexts since a large amount of education relies on digital sources. One way to address this need, is through introducing to the field the postmodern concept of digital citizenship which can briefly be defined as the principles of responsible and appropriate behavior in applying technology. Since Iranian EFL learners are involved in using technology more than ever before, this study aimed to investigate how they perceive and practice digital citizenship.

This was carried out through a netnographic inquiry in the context of a social networking site, called Telegram. The participants comprised 1126 female and male Iranian learners who were members of three Telegram groups. They were within an age range of 15 to 22, and from a variety of ethnicities and proficiency levels. There were two main sources of data, including Telegram group participant observations and interviews. Through the netnographic observations, about 700 screen pages of text chats were collected. Moreover, the transcripts of voice files exchanged in Telegram groups, along with research field notes and memos obtained through observations over a period of one year were added.

To address triangulation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 EFL learners from the investigated groups. Inspired by Ribble's (2001) digital citizenship model, these interviews helped the researchers scrutinize into aspects of the research which could not be traced through observations alone. Accordingly, Ribbles' components including *digital etiquette, access, law, communication, literacy, commerce, rights and responsibilities, health and wellness, and safety and security*, were used as a tentative benchmark for designing interview guiding questions, to probe deeply into the issues which had proved to need more

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Alzahra University (corresponding author); [karimi@alzahra.ac.ir](mailto:karimi@alzahra.ac.ir)

<sup>2</sup> MA Graduate, Department of English Language and Literature, Alzahra University; [a.abdolahi@student.alzahra.ac.ir](mailto:a.abdolahi@student.alzahra.ac.ir)

clarifications in the course of observations. While conducting the interviews, we learnt about some points which had been left unnoticed in the observations; they made up the emerging questions which helped us enrich our findings. Since data collection procedure led to obtaining a huge body of data, for manageability reasons, only textual data were used for analysis, and other types of data such as images, videos and emojis were excluded from our analysis.

Relying on grounded theory and adopting qualitative content analysis, the obtained data were probed through the initial, axial and focused coding procedures, and emerging patterns were classified into various themes and subthemes. Ultimately, the themes extracted from the observations were decided to be: *incongruence with netiquette, misconducts in academic settings, and redundant posts*. Similarly, the main themes derived out of the in-depth interviews included *proper application of digital technology, effective application of digital technology and demand for digital citizenship education*. In all, the analysis of the entire data suggests that Iranian EFL learners are not well aware of the rules, regularities and norms of digital citizenship in spite of their wide use of digital technologies. In fact, the illusion of absolute freedom and the possibility of being *anonymous* on the Web were among the main reasons for assuming fake personalities, and behaving improperly when on the Web. More instances of their insufficient control of the topic included their lack of recognition of reliable and safe sources from fake and unreliable ones. They were unaware of cyber safety and security issues, and felt helpless in case of being threatened by/exposed to cyberbullying, hacking and cyber fraud. So far as language usage was concerned, they often used colloquial, harsh, sarcastic or disrespectful language which did not suit the digital context of formal, academic groups. Moreover, sending posts which included trivial requests, illegal debates, disappointing issues, and redundant or irrelevant topics—usually in incorrect spelling—was among their chief misconducts.

These findings highlight the need for teaching digital citizenship skills right from the early ages of schooling— rather than offering limited education of digital literacy at high schools— to keep learners safe from the threats of digital settings, and enable them to make proper, effective and responsible use of digital technologies. The findings of the present study can be useful for policy makers, ELT professionals, curriculum developers, English teachers, learners and parents. Accordingly the implementation of relevant programs into the mainstream and EFL education, and in the development of related curricula, as well as in computer assisted language leaning (CALL) and teacher education programs is highly recommend. The findings also helps teachers promote their self-awareness and appreciate the need for raising their students' digital awareness in order to become technologically literate and ethically responsible users, resisting negative consequences and hazardous risks of digital environments. Moreover, since the contemporary models of digital citizenship are rooted in foreign cultures with their particular economic, political and social policies and priorities, developing local models of digital citizenship is urgently called for.

**Keywords:** Digital Citizenship, Virtual Setting, English Language Teaching, Netnography, Qualitative Content Analysis