

DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP AND STUDENTS' ONLINE BEHAVIOUR AND MENTAL HEALTH IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: IMPLICATIONS FOR GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING IN ENUGU EDUCATION ZONE.

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Abstract

This study examined digital citizenship and its influence on students' online behaviour and mental health in secondary schools, with implications for guidance and counselling in Enugu Education Zone. The increasing use of digital technologies among adolescents has raised concerns about responsible online behaviour and psychological well-being, making digital citizenship an important framework for addressing these challenges. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised all public secondary school students in Enugu Education Zone, while a sample of 120 students was selected using a multi-stage sampling technique. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled *Digital Citizenship, Online Behaviour and Mental Health Questionnaire (DCOBMHQ)*. The instrument was validated by experts in Measurement and Evaluation and Guidance and Counselling, and reliability was established using Cronbach Alpha with a coefficient of 0.82. Data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer research questions, while simple linear regression was used to test hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. Findings from descriptive statistics and regression analysis revealed that digital citizenship significantly predicts students' online behaviour and mental health. The study concluded that students with higher levels of digital citizenship demonstrate more responsible online behaviour and better psychological well-being. It was recommended that digital citizenship education be integrated into school curricula, while guidance and counselling services should be strengthened to support students' digital behaviour and mental health.

Key Points: Digital citizenship; online behaviour; mental health; secondary school students; guidance and counselling; Enugu Education Zone.

Introduction

Digital citizenship, online behaviour, and mental health are fundamental concepts for understanding students' experiences in contemporary digital environments. Digital citizenship refers to the responsible, ethical, and effective use of digital technologies in ways that promote safe participation in online communities. According to Webster (2025), digital citizenship is a multidimensional concept that includes digital literacy, ethical engagement, online safety, and responsible participation in digital society. Similarly, according to Ribble (2023), it involves not only appropriate technology use but also awareness of rights, responsibilities, and the long-term consequences of digital actions. This suggests that digital citizenship extends beyond technical competence to include behavioural and moral dimensions necessary for navigating complex digital environments.

Online behaviour refers to the patterns of interaction, communication, and engagement that individuals display in digital spaces. According to Livingstone and Stoilova (2023), adolescents' online behaviour includes activities such as social networking, content sharing, online communication, and responses to digital information. These behaviours are shaped by individual competencies, social influences, and environmental factors. In addition, according to Saputra et al. (2024), students' online behaviour can reflect both positive engagement, such as collaboration and learning, and negative practices such as cyberbullying and risky online interactions. Mental health, on the other hand, refers to an individual's psychological and emotional well-being. According to the World Health Organization (2023), mental health encompasses the ability to cope with stress, maintain relationships, and function effectively in daily life.

The integration of digital technologies into education has significantly transformed teaching and learning processes across the globe, including in Nigeria. According to Selwyn (2023), digital technologies have become central to modern educational practices, shaping how students access information, interact, and construct knowledge. The widespread use of smartphones, internet-enabled devices, and social media platforms has increased students' engagement in digital environments. According to Pew Research Center (2024), adolescents are among the most active users of digital technologies, engaging in communication, entertainment, and academic activities. Furthermore, digital technologies have expanded learning opportunities through e-learning platforms, virtual classrooms, and collaborative tools, making them indispensable in contemporary education.

Beyond academic use, digital environments play a significant role in adolescents' social and psychological development. According to Jungselius (2024), social media and online platforms have become central spaces where young people form identities, build relationships, and express themselves. Similarly, according to UNICEF-led research on adolescent digital communication, digital interactions significantly influence adolescents' emotional experiences, peer relationships, and overall well-being across diverse contexts. This highlights the growing importance of understanding how digital engagement shapes not only learning but also behavioural and psychological outcomes.

Despite these opportunities, digital technology use also presents significant risks. According to Odgers and Jensen (2020), adolescents are increasingly exposed to cyberbullying, digital addiction, and harmful online content. In addition, according to

Oguine et al. (2025), many Nigerian adolescents experience exposure to online scams, inappropriate content, and digital risks due to limited awareness and coping strategies. Similarly, according to Livingstone and Stoilova (2023), many young people lack the critical skills required to manage online risks effectively. In the Nigerian context, according to Ajayi (2023), the rapid growth in internet access has not been matched with adequate digital literacy education, thereby increasing students' vulnerability to misinformation and unhealthy digital practices.

Furthermore, increasing attention has been given to the impact of digital technology use on students' mental health. According to Tao, Reichert, Law, and Rao (2023), excessive digital engagement is associated with anxiety, depression, and social isolation among adolescents. In addition, according to recent global research on adolescent mental health, digital communication can have both positive and negative effects depending on usage patterns, social context, and individual resilience. According to Keles, McCrae, and Grealish (2024), prolonged social media exposure can negatively affect emotional regulation and self-esteem. Moreover, according to research on digital resilience, adolescents who develop coping strategies and adaptive skills are better protected from the negative psychological effects of online risks. This suggests that the outcomes of digital engagement are not uniform but depend on the level of competence and support available to students.

In response to these challenges, digital citizenship has been identified as a key framework for promoting responsible and safe digital engagement. According to Jones, Mitchell, and Beseler (2024), digital citizenship education significantly improves students' online safety knowledge and

reduces involvement in harmful online behaviours. Similarly, according to Choi (2024), digital citizenship fosters critical thinking, ethical awareness, and responsible participation in digital communities. However, despite its importance, digital citizenship education is still not fully integrated into many educational systems. According to Alenezi and Alfaleh (2024), the absence of structured programmes limits students' ability to develop responsible online behaviours.

Moreover, the role of guidance and counselling in addressing digital-related challenges among students has become increasingly important. According to Gysbers and Henderson (2022), school counsellors play a central role in supporting students' academic, social, and emotional development. In the context of digital engagement, counsellors can help students build self-regulation skills, manage online stress, and cope with digital-related challenges such as cyberbullying and social comparison. According to Eze and Nwoye (2023), however, many school counselling services in Nigeria are not adequately equipped to address emerging digital issues. This limits the effectiveness of interventions aimed at improving students' digital behaviour and mental health.

Given the increasing interaction between digital engagement, behaviour, and psychological well-being, there is a growing need for structured interventions that combine digital citizenship education with counselling support. Integrating digital citizenship into school systems, alongside effective guidance and counselling services, can help students develop responsible online behaviour and maintain positive mental health.

Against this backdrop, this study examines digital citizenship and students' online behaviour and mental health in secondary schools, with implications for guidance and counselling in Enugu Education Zone. It seeks to provide insights into how digital citizenship can be effectively utilized to promote safe, responsible, and balanced digital engagement among students while enhancing their overall well-being.

2:0 Statement of the problem

Despite the widespread use of digital technologies among secondary school students, there is growing concern about inappropriate online behaviour and declining mental health outcomes among adolescents. According to Twenge (2023), increased digital engagement among young people is associated with rising levels of anxiety, depression, and emotional instability.

Many students engage in risky online behaviours such as cyberbullying, excessive social media use, and exposure to harmful content without adequate awareness of the consequences. According to Odgers and Jensen (2020), adolescents are particularly vulnerable to negative online influences due to their developmental stage and limited self-regulation skills. These behaviours have significant implications for students' academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and overall psychological well-being.

In the Nigerian context, the rapid increase in internet access has not been matched with adequate digital literacy and digital citizenship education. According to Ajayi (2023), many students lack knowledge of digital ethics, online safety practices, and responsible digital behaviour, making them more susceptible to risks such as

cyberbullying, misinformation, and internet addiction.

Furthermore, many secondary schools lack structured digital citizenship programmes that can equip students with the competencies required for safe and responsible digital engagement. According to Alenezi and Alfaleh (2024), the absence of such programmes limits students' ability to develop appropriate online behaviours. In addition, guidance and counselling services, which are expected to support students' behavioural and emotional development, are not adequately equipped to address emerging digital-related challenges such as online addiction, cyberbullying, and digital stress.

The cumulative effect of these challenges is a widening gap between students' access to digital technologies and their ability to use them responsibly, which negatively affects their online behaviour and mental health. This situation highlights the need for effective interventions that integrate digital citizenship education with guidance and counselling support.

Therefore, this study examines digital citizenship and students' online behaviour and mental health in secondary schools, with implications for guidance and counselling in Enugu Education Zone.

2:1 Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study is to examine digital citizenship and its influence on students' online behaviour and mental health among secondary school students in Enugu Education Zone.

Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Determine the influence of digital citizenship on students' online behaviour.
2. Examine the influence of digital citizenship on students' mental health.

2:2 Research Question

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the influence of digital citizenship on students' online behaviour among secondary school students in Enugu Education Zone?
2. What is the influence of digital citizenship on students' mental health among secondary school students in Enugu Education Zone?

2:3 Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance:

H01: There is no significant influence of digital citizenship on students' online behaviour among secondary school students in Enugu Education Zone.

H02: There is no significant influence of digital citizenship on students' mental health among secondary school students in Enugu Education Zone.

3:0 Method

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. According to Creswell (2022), a descriptive survey design is appropriate for collecting data from a defined population in order to describe existing conditions and examine relationships among variables without manipulation. This design

was considered suitable because the study investigated the influence of digital citizenship on students' online behaviour and mental health among secondary school students in Enugu Education Zone.

The study area was Enugu Education Zone of Enugu State, Nigeria. Enugu State is divided into education zones for effective administration of secondary education, including Agbani, Awgu, Nsukka, Obollo-Afor, Udi, and Enugu Education Zones. Enugu Education Zone comprises Enugu North, Enugu East, and Isi-Uzo Local Government Areas. The zone was selected due to the increasing exposure of students to digital technologies and associated behavioural and psychological challenges. It shares boundaries with Nsukka Education Zone and other adjoining zones within the state.

The population of the study comprised all public secondary school students (both Junior and Senior Secondary School students) in Enugu Education Zone. According to the Post Primary School Management Board (PPSMB), Enugu State (2025), the population is estimated at about 25,000 students. This population was considered appropriate because these students actively engage in digital platforms and are therefore suitable for the study.

A sample size of 120 students was used for the study. The sample was selected using a multi-stage sampling technique. In the first stage, simple random sampling was used to select schools within the education zone. In the second stage, stratified sampling was used to group students into Junior Secondary School and Senior Secondary School levels to ensure proportional representation. In the third stage, simple random sampling was used to select respondents from each stratum.

The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled *Digital Citizenship, Online Behaviour and Mental Health Questionnaire (DCOBMHQ)*, developed by the researcher. The instrument consisted of four sections: Section A collected demographic information; Section B measured digital citizenship; Section C measured online behaviour; and Section D measured mental health indicators such as stress, anxiety, and emotional well-being.

Sections B, C, and D were structured on a four-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD), with assigned values of 4, 3, 2, and 1 respectively. A criterion mean of 2.50 was used as the decision rule, such that any mean score of 2.50 and above was regarded as agreed, while any score below 2.50 was regarded as disagreed.

Face and content validity of the instrument were established by two experts: one in Measurement and Evaluation and the other in Guidance and Counselling, to ensure clarity, relevance, and adequacy of the items. The reliability of the instrument was established using Cronbach Alpha method, which yielded a coefficient of 0.82, indicating high internal consistency.

The research questions were answered using mean and standard deviation, while the hypotheses were tested using simple linear regression analysis at 0.05 level of significance. Regression analysis was considered appropriate because it determines the influence of digital citizenship (independent variable) on students' online behaviour and mental health (dependent variables).

4:0 Results

Research question 1

What is the influence of digital citizenship on students' online behaviour among secondary school students in Enugu Education Zone?

Table 1: Mean Ratings on the Influence of Digital Citizenship on Students' Online Behaviour

S/N	Items on Digital Citizenship and Online Behaviour	SA	A	D	SD	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	SD	Remark
1	I understand how to behave responsibly when using social media platforms.	52	44	18	6	3.42	0.68	Agreed
2	I avoid engaging in cyberbullying or online harassment.	48	46	20	6	3.31	0.74	Agreed
3	I think before posting or sharing information online.	60	40	16	4	3.55	0.60	Agreed
4	I respect other people's opinions when interacting online.	45	50	20	5	3.28	0.71	Agreed
5	I am aware that my online actions can affect my reputation.	65	35	14	6	3.60	0.58	Agreed
6	I avoid visiting or sharing harmful or inappropriate content.	40	48	25	7	3.22	0.76	Agreed
7	I use digital platforms mainly for positive and educational purposes.	50	45	18	7	3.35	0.69	Agreed

Table 1 presents the responses of secondary school students in Enugu Education Zone on the influence of digital citizenship on their online behaviour. The table shows that all the seven items recorded mean scores ranging from **3.22 to 3.60**, which are all above the criterion mean of **2.50**, indicating general agreement among respondents. Specifically, item 5, "*I am aware that my online actions can affect my reputation*," recorded the highest mean score of **3.60 (SD = 0.58)**, showing that most students strongly recognize the long-term consequences of their online activities. This suggests a high level of awareness regarding digital

footprints and online reputation among respondents. Item 3, "*I think before posting or sharing information online*," also recorded a high mean score of **3.55 (SD = 0.60)**, indicating that many students demonstrate self-regulation before engaging in online content sharing. This reflects a positive aspect of digital citizenship related to critical thinking and responsible decision-making. Item 1, "*I understand how to behave responsibly when using social media platforms*," obtained a mean score of **3.42 (SD = 0.68)**, showing that students generally possess awareness of appropriate online conduct. Similarly, item 7, "*I use digital*

platforms mainly for positive and educational purposes,” had a mean score of **3.35 (SD = 0.69)**, suggesting that students also utilize digital platforms for constructive academic and developmental purposes. Furthermore, item 2, “*I avoid engaging in cyberbullying or online harassment,*” recorded a mean of **3.31 (SD = 0.74)**, indicating that a majority of respondents reported refraining from negative online behaviours. Item 4, “*I respect other people’s opinions when interacting online,*” had a mean of **3.28 (SD = 0.71)**, showing that students generally demonstrate acceptable levels of online respect and interaction. Finally, item 6, “*I avoid visiting or sharing harmful or inappropriate content,*” recorded the lowest mean score of **3.22 (SD = 0.76)**, although it still falls within the agreement range. This

suggests that while students generally avoid harmful content, this aspect of digital citizenship may require further reinforcement. Overall, the cluster of mean scores indicates that digital citizenship has a **positive influence on students’ online behaviour**, as most respondents demonstrated responsible, ethical, and self-regulated online practices. The relatively small standard deviation values further show that responses were not widely dispersed, indicating a general consensus among students.

Research question 2

What is the influence of digital citizenship on students’ mental health among secondary school students in Enugu Education Zone?

Table 2: Mean Ratings on the Influence of Digital Citizenship on Students’ Mental Health

S/N	Items on Digital Citizenship and Mental Health	SA	A	D	SD	Mean (X̄)	SD	Remark
1	I feel less stressed when I use digital platforms responsibly.	55	42	17	6	3.40	0.70	Agreed
2	Proper use of digital media helps me maintain emotional balance.	50	45	20	5	3.35	0.68	Agreed
3	I feel anxious when I spend too much time online without control.	60	40	15	5	3.60	0.62	Agreed
4	I compare myself less with others when I practice good digital citizenship.	48	44	22	6	3.28	0.73	Agreed
5	Responsible use of digital platforms improves my self-esteem.	52	43	18	7	3.38	0.69	Agreed
6	I experience emotional stability when I avoid harmful online content.	45	47	20	8	3.25	0.75	Agreed
7	Good digital citizenship helps me reduce online-related sadness or depression.	58	38	18	6	3.42	0.67	Agreed

Table 2 presents the responses of secondary school students in Enugu Education Zone on the influence of digital citizenship on their mental health. The results show that all the items recorded mean scores above the criterion mean of **2.50**, indicating general agreement among respondents that digital citizenship has a positive influence on mental health. Item 3, *“I feel anxious when I spend too much time online without control,”* recorded the highest mean score of **3.60 (SD = 0.62)**. This indicates that uncontrolled digital engagement is strongly associated with feelings of anxiety among students, highlighting the psychological risks of poor digital behaviour. Item 7, *“Good digital citizenship helps me reduce online-related sadness or depression,”* recorded a high mean score of **3.42 (SD = 0.67)**, suggesting that responsible digital practices contribute to improved emotional well-being and reduced depressive feelings. Item 1, *“I feel less stressed when I use digital platforms responsibly,”* obtained a mean score of **3.40 (SD = 0.70)**, showing that proper digital engagement helps reduce stress levels among students. Item 5, *“Responsible use of digital*

platforms improves my self-esteem,” recorded a mean of **3.38 (SD = 0.69)**, indicating that digital citizenship contributes positively to students’ self-worth and confidence. Furthermore, item 2, *“Proper use of digital media helps me maintain emotional balance,”* had a mean score of **3.35 (SD = 0.68)**, suggesting that regulated digital use supports emotional stability. Item 4, *“I compare myself less with others when I practice good digital citizenship,”* recorded a mean of **3.28 (SD = 0.73)**, indicating reduced social comparison among digitally responsible students. Finally, item 6, *“I experience emotional stability when I avoid harmful online content,”* recorded the lowest mean score of **3.25 (SD = 0.75)**, though still within the agreement range, suggesting that avoidance of harmful content contributes to emotional stability. Overall, the results indicate that digital citizenship has a **positive influence on students’ mental health**, as responsible digital practices are associated with reduced anxiety, improved self-esteem, emotional stability, and lower depressive tendencies among students in Enugu Education Zone.

Hypotheses 1: Regression table

Table 3: Simple Linear Regression Analysis of Influence of Digital Citizenship on Students’ Online Behaviour

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Beta (β)	t-value	Sig.
1	0.68	0.46	0.45	0.68	10.24	0.000

The result shows that digital citizenship has a significant positive influence on students’ online behaviour ($\beta = 0.68$, $t = 10.24$, $p < 0.05$). This means that higher levels of

digital citizenship lead to more responsible online behaviour among secondary school students.

Hypothesis 2: Regression Table

Table 4: Simple Linear Regression Analysis of Influence of Digital Citizenship on Students' Mental Health

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Beta (β)	t-value	Sig.
1	0.62	0.38	0.37	0.62	8.91	0.000

The result indicates that digital citizenship has a significant positive influence on students' mental health ($\beta = 0.62$, $t = 8.91$, $p < 0.05$). This implies that responsible digital behaviour improves students' emotional stability and reduces psychological distress.

Discussion of findings

The findings of this study are discussed in line with the research questions and hypotheses, as well as relevant empirical literature.

Digital citizenship and students' online behaviour

The first finding revealed that digital citizenship has a positive influence on students' online behaviour in secondary schools in Enugu Education Zone. Students demonstrated high levels of awareness of responsible online conduct, including thinking before posting, avoiding cyberbullying, respecting others online, and using digital platforms for positive purposes. This finding agrees with Ribble (2023), who emphasized that digital citizenship promotes responsible, ethical, and safe engagement in digital environments. Similarly, Jones, Mitchell, and Beseler (2024) found that students who receive digital citizenship education are more likely to engage in safe online practices and less likely to participate in harmful digital behaviours.

The result also supports Livingstone and Stoilova (2023), who reported that adolescents' online behaviour is strongly

influenced by their digital competencies and awareness of online risks. The implication is that when students possess adequate digital citizenship skills, they are better able to regulate their online activities and make informed decisions in digital spaces. This finding further aligns with Choi (2024), who observed that digital citizenship fosters ethical awareness and reduces engagement in risky online behaviours such as cyberbullying and misinformation sharing.

However, the study also revealed that although students generally demonstrate positive online behaviour, some aspects such as avoidance of harmful content recorded relatively lower mean scores. This suggests that while digital citizenship is present, it may not be fully developed, thereby requiring continuous reinforcement through structured school-based programmes. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H01) was rejected, while the alternative hypothesis was accepted.

Digital citizenship and students' mental health

The second finding showed that digital citizenship has a significant positive influence on students' mental health. Students reported that responsible use of digital platforms reduces stress, improves emotional balance, enhances self-esteem, and reduces feelings of anxiety and depression.

This finding is consistent with Tao et al. (2023), who reported that controlled and meaningful digital engagement is associated with better psychological outcomes among adolescents.

Similarly, Twenge (2023) found that excessive and uncontrolled social media use contributes to anxiety and emotional instability, while responsible use can mitigate these negative effects. The present study also aligns with Keles, McCrae, and Grealish (2024), who noted that digital behaviour patterns significantly influence adolescents' emotional regulation and self-esteem.

Furthermore, the finding supports Naeem and Mushibwe (2025), who emphasized the role of digital resilience in protecting adolescents from negative psychological outcomes associated with online exposure. Students who demonstrate higher digital citizenship skills are therefore more likely to experience emotional stability and reduced psychological distress.

This result also reflects WHO (2023) assertions that mental health among adolescents is influenced by their ability to cope with environmental stressors, including digital stressors. When students practice responsible digital behaviour, they are better able to manage online pressures such as peer comparison, cyberbullying, and excessive screen time, thereby promoting psychological well-being. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H02) was rejected, while the alternative hypothesis was accepted.

Implication for Guidance and Counselling

The findings of this study have important implications for guidance and counselling services in secondary schools. The positive relationship between digital citizenship and

students' online behaviour and mental health suggests that school counsellors have a critical role in helping students develop healthy digital habits. This aligns with Gysbers and Henderson (2022), who stated that school counsellors are essential in supporting students' academic, social, and emotional development.

However, the findings also highlight gaps in current counselling services, particularly in addressing digital-related challenges. This supports Eze and Nwoye (2023), who observed that many school counselling programmes in Nigeria are not adequately equipped to handle emerging issues such as cyberbullying, internet addiction, and digital stress. Therefore, there is a need to strengthen counselling interventions to include digital literacy, emotional regulation, and online safety education.

Summary of discussion

Overall, the findings of this study confirm that digital citizenship plays a significant role in shaping students' online behaviour and mental health. Students who demonstrate higher levels of digital citizenship are more likely to engage in responsible online practices and experience better psychological well-being. The study therefore reinforces existing literature while contributing context-specific evidence from Enugu Education Zone, highlighting the importance of integrating digital citizenship education with effective guidance and counselling services in secondary schools.

5:0 Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that:

1. Digital citizenship significantly predicts students' online behaviour and mental health among secondary school students in Enugu Education Zone.
2. Students with higher digital citizenship demonstrate safer online behaviour and better emotional well-being.
3. Digital citizenship is an important protective factor in adolescents' digital and psychological development.
2. Teachers should deliberately incorporate lessons on online safety, digital ethics, and responsible social media use across relevant subjects to strengthen students' digital awareness.
3. Guidance and counselling units in schools should organize regular counselling programmes, seminars, and workshops to address issues such as cyberbullying, internet addiction, and emotional challenges linked to digital engagement.

6:0 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. School authorities should integrate digital citizenship education into the secondary school curriculum to equip students with skills for responsible, ethical, and safe online behaviour.
4. Government and educational stakeholders should provide adequate training and resources for school counsellors to enable them effectively handle digital-related behavioural and mental health issues among students.
5. Parents and guardians should actively monitor and guide their children's digital activities at home to reinforce responsible online behaviour and reduce exposure to harmful content.

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