

Empowering young minds: Transforming social studies education to foster digital ethics in elementary schools

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Article History

Submitted : 21-09-2024
Revised : 04-11-2024

Accepted : 14-12-2024
Published : 10-02-2025

Abstract

The rapid development of digital technology demands integrating digital ethics skills into the education process, including at the elementary school level. The study explores the transformation of social science teaching in elementary schools to build students' digital ethics skills. This study uses a qualitative method as a literature study, including analysing various relevant academic sources, such as journal articles, books, and previous research reports. The focus lies on how the pedagogical approach in Social Sciences can be adjusted to instil digital ethics values, such as responsible use of technology, privacy awareness, and critical thinking skills towards digital information. The study results indicate that teaching social Sciences has excellent potential as an effective medium for introducing the concept of digital ethics to students. Students can better understand the importance of ethical behaviour in the online environment through project-based learning methods, group discussions, and case studies related to social issues in the digital world. In addition, the role of teachers as facilitators is vital in guiding students to develop a critical understanding of the information they encounter online. The transformation of social science teaching integrated with digital ethics improves students' technological literacy and forms character as responsible technology users. The study's implications are expected to be a reference for educators in designing a curriculum relevant to the needs of the digital era.

Keywords: Digital Ethics, Educational Transformation, Elementary School, Social Sciences Student Character.

Introduction

Social studies encompass interactions with the physical world and its laws. Elementary social studies teachers need a new approach to navigating social studies teaching (An, 2017). A practical approach encourages student-centred, dialogic discussions, thereby increasing active participation in the learning process (Hughes & Marhatta, 2022). Problem-based historical inquiry in social studies helps transfer knowledge and develop a deeper understanding of elementary social studies teaching and learning (Howell & Saye, 2018). Elementary social studies play an important role in shaping students' understanding of the social and cultural environment from an early age. Through this learning, students are introduced to basic concepts about society, history, geography, and the rights and obligations of citizens. Social Studies also helps develop critical thinking, analytical, and empathy skills, aiming to facilitate students' understanding of diversity and the importance of tolerance in everyday life.

With a contextual and interactive approach, social sciences enrich students' knowledge and build their character as individuals who care about the social and cultural environment



around them. The digital era has become inseparable from everyday life, including education. Ramirez-Valles (2025) stated that we are at the peak of a transformative era in digital progress, changing how we interact with information. Zhou et al. (2025) added that the ease and usefulness of digital technology greatly influence students' attitudes and skills, especially in developing critical and analytical thinking skills. According to Belladonna et al. (2024), integrating technology in education accelerates access to information. It demands an understanding of digital ethics to ensure technology's wise and responsible use. In this context, Social Sciences plays an important role in instilling digital ethics skills, teaching students how technology can be used responsibly, and equipping them with the ability to assess information critically. The transformation of social studies teaching that integrates digital ethics improves technological literacy. It helps shape a young generation that is not only smart in using technology but also wise and responsible in the digital world.

As a subject that shapes students' understanding of society, values, and culture, social studies are important in instilling digital ethics skills. Students are invited to understand how technology affects social life and how to become wise and responsible users of technology. Hartwick et al. (2016) emphasised that teaching social studies aims to hone critical thinking skills, which are increasingly vital in the information age. With the integration of digital ethics, social studies enrich students' knowledge of society and become the key to forming a technologically intelligent and ethical generation using digital media.

Technology opens opportunities for innovative learning; without proper ethical guidance, its use can pose various risks, such as spreading false information, violating privacy, and unethical behaviour in cyberspace. As Auman et al. (2020) expressed, ethical standards that cover a global audience are essential in the digital world. The transformation of social studies teaching in elementary schools is a solution that improves students' technological literacy and equips them with the skills to face moral and social challenges in the digital era. With the right approach, social studies can be a bridge that connects citizenship concepts with responsible technology usage practices. This will create a generation that understands their rights and obligations in the real world and the digital space so that they can act wisely and ethically in every digital interaction they do. Social studies in primary schools is designed to help students understand the social, cultural, economic and political environment around them. According to Brandmayr (2021), Social Studies is also seen as a critical endeavour in uncovering social facts, which helps students develop a deeper understanding of the dynamics of society and the world in which they live. Through learning social science, students are invited to get to know various aspects of social life, starting from the family and school to the wider environment such as the nation and state. Social Studies provides knowledge of history, geography, and civics and shapes students' awareness of their role as part of a larger society.

Social studies in elementary schools are not only limited to theory but also encourage students to participate in various practical activities. For example, through community-based projects, field trips, or simulations of community life, students can directly experience and understand the social concepts learned in class. This approach not only makes learning more interesting but also forms social and leadership skills that are useful for their personal development in the future. With a strong foundation of social studies learning, elementary school students are prepared to become responsible citizens who are aware of their social environment. They understand their rights and obligations as individuals in society and can actively contribute to creating a harmonious social life. Practical social studies education at the elementary level is key to building a critical, caring generation ready to face future global challenges. The study explores how social studies teaching can be transformed to build digital ethics skills in elementary school students. Previous studies have explored various approaches to teaching social studies in elementary schools. Schroeder (2021) highlighted how approaches to elementary social studies can inform and transform teaching methods. Hubbard & Odebiyi (2021) explored dispositional thinking in social studies pedagogy through artefacts as teaching aids.

Meanwhile, Bauml (2023) examined how elementary school teachers integrate learning content into social studies. Bousalis (2022) connected social studies with citizenship education, strengthening students' understanding of their societal roles. Furthermore, Ollila & Macy (2019) emphasised the importance of classroom projects and activities in improving the quality of social studies education and the positive impact of instilling citizenship competencies.

The contributions of these studies enrich the teaching methods of social studies, no study explicitly discusses the transformation of social studies teaching to build the digital ethics skills of the younger generation. In fact, in today's digital era, students' ability to understand and apply ethics in the use of technology is as important as their understanding of social and civic concepts. Therefore, a study on the transformation of social studies teaching in elementary schools to build the digital ethics skills of the younger generation is very much needed. This research will not only fill the gap in the existing literature but also provide practical guidance for educators in designing a curriculum relevant to today's digital challenges while shaping students into competent and responsible digital citizens. The main problem in transforming social studies teaching in elementary schools to build digital ethics skills is integrating digital ethics values into the existing curriculum so that students not only understand technology technically but also take responsibility for its use. According to Patterson (1962), social studies is very much needed by society, but it is still lacking in the school curriculum.

Meanwhile, Savage (1991) stated that social studies offer excellent flexibility among other disciplines, providing opportunities to incorporate digital ethics in learning. Given the rapid advancement of technology, many students are exposed to various information in cyberspace, but often without sufficient understanding of the social impacts, privacy, and ethical behaviour in the digital space. This requires teaching more than just technical aspects; it also requires character building and critical thinking skills towards the information received. This challenge becomes even more remarkable considering the role of teachers as facilitators who must be able to guide students in facing the complexity of the ever-growing digital world.

The study uses an innovative approach to teaching social studies in elementary schools by integrating digital ethics into the social studies curriculum, a strategic step to address the increasingly complex needs of social studies education in the technological era. This integration not only focuses on improving students' understanding of social concepts but also plays an important role in equipping them with the ethical skills needed to face the challenges of the digital world, such as wise use of social media, privacy protection, and respect for copyright. This is in line with the views of Hakimi et al. (2021) emphasised that ethical issues and attitudes in the future are urgent because the learning ecosystem significantly influences the ethical values of preschool and school-age children. This study emphasises that early childhood education must be designed to transfer knowledge and shape students' character as responsible technology users.

Teaching Citizenship Education (CE) makes an important contribution by broadening the understanding of citizenship in the real world and the digital space. Children are invited to understand that being a good citizen also means being responsible for what they do online. They learn to respect others on social media, maintain privacy, and think before sharing information. With this approach, Civics is no longer just about teaching rules and norms but also shaping students' character so that they are ready to face challenges in the real and digital worlds. The hope is that they will grow into a generation that is not only technologically literate but also has strong moral values.

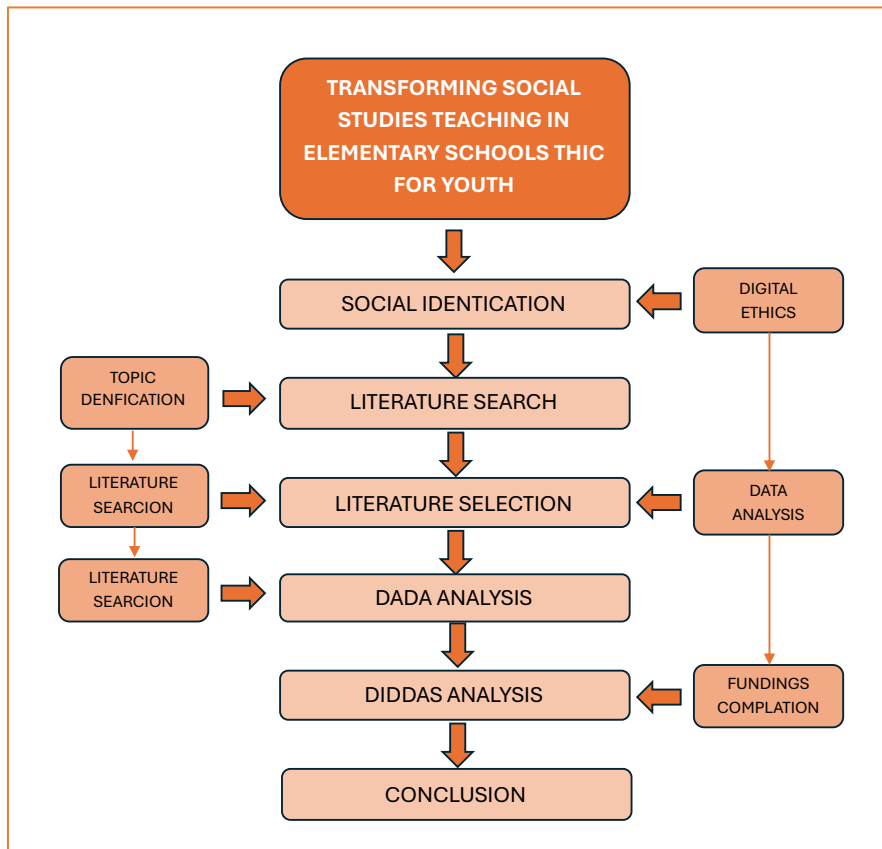
Method

The study adopted a qualitative approach with a literature study method to explore how the transformation of social studies teaching in elementary schools can contribute to building students' digital ethics skills. The qualitative approach was chosen based on the opinion of

Creswell (2016), that qualitative research aims to explore and understand the meaning produced by individuals or groups from a social problem. Through literature studies, researchers collect, analyse, and synthesise relevant academic sources, such as journal articles, books, and previous research reports discussing teaching Social Studies, digital ethics, and elementary education. This process provides a strong theoretical foundation and enriches the understanding of integrating digital ethics in the Social Studies curriculum at the elementary school level. Figure 1 summarises the research flow visually, showing how each stage is interconnected to achieve the research objectives.

Figure 1.

Literature Study Process of Research on the Transformation of Social Studies Teaching in Elementary Schools to Build Digital Ethics Skills of the Young Generation



Resource: Research Data, 2024.

Figure 1 on the transformation of social studies teaching in elementary schools to build the digital ethics skills of the younger generation consists of six main steps arranged vertically and connected by arrows indicating the sequence of the process. The first step is Topic Identification, where researchers determine relevant topics. Next, a Literature Search is conducted to find related references, followed by a Literature Selection to select the most relevant sources. Then, the data is analysed at the Data Analysis stage, which is compiled in Findings Compilation. Finally, all findings are summarised in the Conclusion to answer the research objectives.

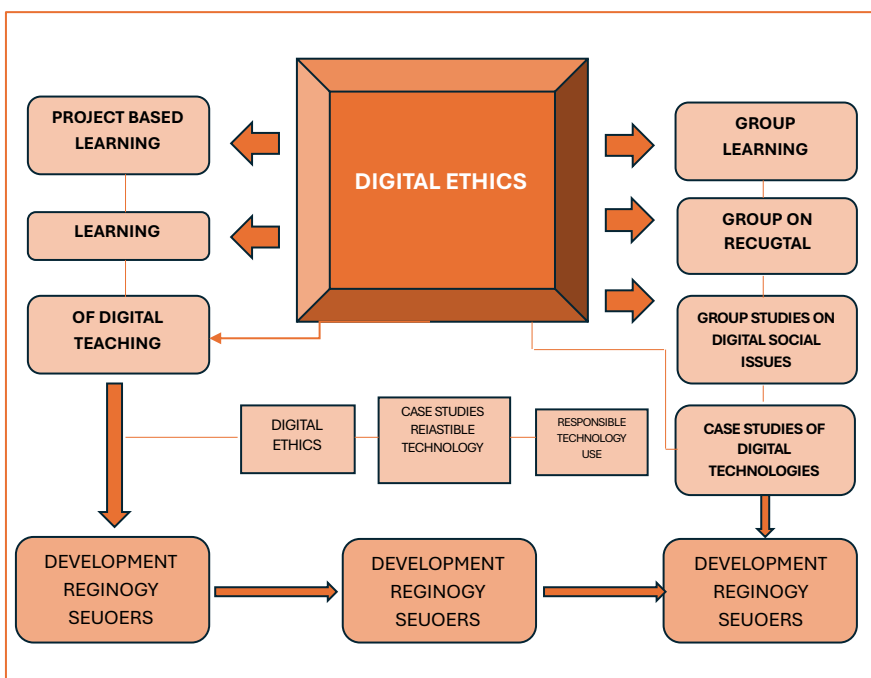
Result and Discussion

The study results show that social studies teaching has excellent potential as an effective medium for introducing the concept of digital ethics to elementary school students. Through an innovative approach, students learn social concepts theoretically and understand the importance of ethical behaviour in the online environment. Bhattacharya (2022) emphasised that the success of online learning media is highly dependent on student interactivity and engagement, such as debates, role-playing, exploring online links, and participating in quizzes and polls. Although online learning can reduce direct social interaction, strategies such as

simulations, team-based projects, and reflective discussions can help students develop collaborative skills and awareness of digital ethics. Thus, teaching Social Studies in elementary schools can adopt more active and participatory learning methods to form critical and responsible digital citizens. Teachers not only act as transmitters of material but also as mentors who help students develop critical thinking about the information they encounter online. Teachers play a role in shaping students' character as responsible digital citizens by assessing the truth of information, understanding the social impacts of digital activities, and recognising ethical challenges in cyberspace. Thornton (2001) emphasised that traditional methods of teaching Social Studies often provide less opportunity for students to participate actively. This concern encourages the need for a more integrative and interactive approach so that teachers are better prepared to teach digital ethics effectively. In more detail, the results of this study are illustrated in Figure 2, which shows the flow of digital ethics integration in teaching Social Studies. This chart illustrates how digital ethics is applied in learning, from understanding social values to implementing responsible attitudes in the digital ecosystem. Students learn about cyberspace rules and norms through this approach and develop critical, reflective, and empathetic skills in interacting digitally.

Figure 2.

Integration of Digital Ethics in Social Studies Teaching in Elementary Schools



Resource: Research Data, 2024.

Figure 2 illustrates the integration of digital ethics in teaching social studies in elementary schools through the Project-Based Learning method, group discussions, and case studies on digital social issues. This method encourages active student involvement, strengthening their understanding of ethical behaviour in the digital world, with the role of teachers as facilitators in guiding students to think critically about online information. This approach produces two primary outcomes: increasing digital literacy and developing responsible technology use. As a result, students improve their technical skills and form ethical characters in cyberspace. The simple and structured curriculum design chart provides a practical guide for educators and researchers, confirming that teaching Social Studies integrated with digital ethics prepares students to face the challenges of the digital world with high ethical awareness. Teaching Social Studies in Elementary Schools has excellent potential to be an effective means of introducing the concept of digital ethics to students, especially in equipping them with critical thinking skills about technology.

This finding aligns with the opinion of Matz (2016), who stated that in the social science collaboration symposium, the study of social studies is transdisciplinary, covering various perspectives and disciplines to enrich understanding. David (2012) research states that social science studies can use four main approaches: historical, case study methodology, author ideology, and disciplinary focus, all of which can be adapted to insert the concept of digital ethics into the elementary school curriculum in a comprehensive and relevant manner.

Meanwhile, in the view of Suhardiyanto (2025), this approach is strengthened by integrating technology as a learning tool that improves conceptual understanding and forms students' ethical awareness in using digital media responsibly. By utilising Social Science as a medium, the younger generation can be taught to think critically about the information they receive, respect privacy, and understand the importance of responsibility in using technology. The role of teachers as facilitators is crucial in guiding students to develop a critical understanding of the information they encounter in cyberspace, especially in teaching Social Science integrated with digital ethics. Teachers not only function as conveyors of material but also as guides who help students analyse and evaluate information wisely, according to Chung et al. (2016), the social epigenome is considered a conceptual space for translating practical and ethical issues in social sciences, which is relevant in today's digital context. Teachers who act as facilitators can create an immersive learning atmosphere where students learn about society and culture and are equipped to face social challenges in the digital era wisely and ethically.

The transformation of social sciences teaching that integrates digital ethics improves students' technological literacy and shapes their character as responsible technology users. Till (2013) highlights the importance of understanding new subjectivities in the impact of the internet and digital culture. Meanwhile, Mišić (2021) emphasises that the convergence of ethics and policy is an urgent need. Hidayah (2020) added that early digital ethics education strengthens students' critical awareness of cyber risks. According to Mazid et al. (2025), this integration makes social sciences an important tool in forming a digital generation that is critical, ethical, and aware of social responsibility. In an increasingly connected digital era, students must understand that technology is not only a means of communication and access to information but also a space where ethical behaviour and responsibility are essential. This transformation equips them with the skills to filter information, maintain privacy, and interact positively on digital platforms. Thus, education that integrates digital ethics produces technologically savvy individuals and builds a young generation aware of social and ethical responsibility in using technology, ensuring that they can face the challenges of the digital world wisely and responsibly.

Social studies teaching in elementary schools plays an important role in shaping the character and skills of the younger generation, especially when facing the challenges of the digital era. Talbot and Briggs (2022) emphasise that digital media can support social relationships, self-actualisation, and well-being. As a critical discipline, Social Studies helps students understand digital ethics through a contextual approach that links social values with technology, making them wiser in interacting in cyberspace. This learning introduces norms and rules in digital interactions and fosters critical attitudes, responsibility, and empathy towards fellow internet users. Thus, social studies have become an effective means of building a strong foundation of digital ethics from an early age. This aligns with Bhattacharjee (2012), who emphasised that investigation in social studies is a methodical process of finding solutions to various problems, including digital ethics. In addition to introducing fundamental concepts of rights and obligations in the digital world, Social Studies teaching can be applied through practical activities such as group discussions, case studies, and online situation simulations.

According to Goodchild et al. (2000), this approach strengthens students' understanding of the relationship between space, society, and technology. Törnberg and Uitermark (2021) also emphasise the importance of integrating spatial perspectives in Social Sciences, which

encourages students to learn through hands-on practice and understand social dynamics in the context of their environment. This approach helps students hone digital ethics skills in a more contextual and relevant way. This activity allows students to hone their skills in filtering information, respecting the privacy of others, and understanding the impact of their actions in the digital space. By integrating digital ethics into the curriculum from an early age, schools can create a young generation who are academically intelligent, wise, and responsible in utilising technology. The transformation of social science teaching in elementary schools is key to building the digital ethics skills of the younger generation. According to Faris (2016), social studies must innovate in adapting to changes in skills and learning paradigms in the 21st century, which are characterised by information disclosure, computing, automation, and communication principles. This requires integrating technology into learning to equip students with relevant skills in the digital era. Vodă et al. (2022) found that social science majors' communication skills, critical thinking, problem-solving, and technical digital skills were more prevalent.

Meanwhile, other digital skills, such as creativity and information management, were more dominant in students from the humanities. These findings indicate that the learning approach in social sciences has been able to develop digital technical skills needed in modern society. Therefore, a similar approach can be adopted in teaching social sciences in elementary schools to build a strong foundation for mastering digital ethics and broader digital competencies from an early age. Through a contextual approach that links social values with technology and the application of practical activities such as discussions, case studies, and spatial perspectives, students not only understand their rights and obligations in the digital world but also develop critical, responsible, and empathetic attitudes. Thus, social sciences play an important role in forming a digitally intelligent generation and wise in utilising technology for a better life.

Conclusion

The transformation of social studies teaching integrated with digital ethics improves students' technological literacy and contributes significantly to shaping their character as responsible technology users. This integration helps students understand how to use technology and the importance of ethical values in their digital interactions, such as maintaining privacy, respecting copyright, and behaving politely in cyberspace. The implications of these findings are expected to be an important reference for educators in designing a curriculum that aligns with the challenges and needs of today's digital era. Through this study, the researcher suggests adopting an interdisciplinary approach that combines social studies lessons with real case studies of digital ethics in students' daily lives. In addition, developing project-based learning materials that encourage students to explore and reflect on their digital behaviour can be an effective strategy. Further research is also recommended to test the effectiveness of this teaching model in various school contexts and educational levels to enrich the understanding of the broader application of digital ethics.

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Competing interests

The authors have declared no competing interests.