

Exploring Parental Mediation in the Digital Age: Linking Literacy, Citizenship, and Attitudes

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Abstract – Nowadays, children's interaction with digital technologies has kept growing, thus knowledge of how family dynamics affect their online behaviour represents a crucial topic. The present paper explores parental digital mediation, and through a sequential framework, investigates how it supports children's digital maturity and, hence, their growth as responsible digital citizens. This study proposes that in the development of children's digital skills, technical, critical, and ethical, which in turn support online civility, parental digital mediation might have a role. To investigate how digital literacy, digital citizenship, and attitudes towards technology relate to the mediation strategies they use, the present study investigated 318 parents of children aged 6 to 11 years. Higher digital literacy and stronger citizenship values seem to correlate with parents who are more likely to use active and participatory mediation techniques. These findings highlight the need for intergenerational effects on digital citizenship and imply that ethical and civil digital participation is greatly promoted by both parental support and children's competencies.

Keywords – Digital citizenship, digital literacy, mediation strategies, digital maturity, elementary school children.

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1. Introduction

The online presence of children is increasing nowadays, with young children spending significant amounts of time on the internet [1], either for schoolwork, content creation, or participation in online communities, all of which allow children to acquire digital skills and create online identities [2]. But, in addition to these benefits, the digital realm poses some challenges that require careful regulation and guidance. Prior studies often examined risks or opportunities separately but rarely integrated the role of parental factors. Therefore, there is a need to look at parents' digital competencies, their attitudes towards technology, and the specific mediation strategies they employ when guiding their children. All these elements were addressed in previous research separately; for example, studies focused on digital literacy but without considering parental attitudes [3]. Furthermore, studies focused on mediation strategies but failed to integrate parental digital citizenship [4]. Furthermore, participatory learning as a mediation strategy remains overlooked in empirical studies, despite its benefits on the technical and ethical dimensions of children's digital development [5]. Research on parental mediation practices seems to be unevenly spread across Europe, there are fewer studies coming from Central and Eastern European countries, even though these countries have their own cultural and digital adoption contexts [6]. By investigating the relationship between digital literacy, digital citizenship, and attitudes towards digital use in parents of children ages 6 to 11, the present study addresses this gap.

2. Theoretical Background

The following section presents the theoretical foundations of the study, focusing on key constructs related to digital citizenship, digital literacy, and parental attitudes toward technology, and parental mediation.

2.1. Digital Citizenship, Digital Literacy, and Attitudes Towards Internet Use

Digital citizenship represents the norms of behavioural conduct related to the use of technology and Internet for online activity that protects and promotes well-being [6]. It generally includes digital skills, critical perspective, and global awareness. Previous research [7] indicates that digital citizenship requires skills that allow people “to fully participate academically, socially, ethically, politically, and economically in the rapidly evolving digital world”. Thus, individuals must be proficient in multiple fields to be digital citizens. They must be tech-savvy, media-literate, and have a good moral system [8]. The complexity of digital citizenship related to technology use, abuse, and misuse was explained by its nine elements: digital access (equity in the distribution of digital resources), digital commerce (tools used to assist the commercial process in the digital environment), digital communication (sharing and developing information), digital etiquette (accepted behavioural norms), and digital fluency. Digital literacy defines an individual’s capacity to access, assess, and properly and critically use digital technologies [9], [10]. For parents, this includes knowing digital content, safely navigating platforms, and modelling responsible use. Higher degrees of digital literacy among parents enable them to be more confident in leading their children through challenging digital environments. Whether parents see technology as helpful, dangerous, or both, that is, whether their attitudes towards digital use mirror their emotional and evaluative posture on it, these attitudes determine how often parents use co-experiential, limiting, or supportive mediation techniques.

These constructs were selected as predictors based on both theoretical and empirical arguments. Digital literacy equips parents with the skills to navigate and evaluate digital environments confidently [10], digital citizenship provides the normative and ethical framework for shaping responsible online behaviour [6], [8], and attitudes towards technology influence whether parents choose to engage collaboratively or set restrictions [9], [4]. It is more probable that mediation strategies are shaped by several complementary dimensions such as, skills, values and dispositions.

2.2. Active Mediation and Participatory Learning

The present research is based on the parental digital mediation model [11], which shows how parents model children’s engagement with digital media through various strategies. Parental digital mediation refers to specific actions that parents use to manage and guide children’s behaviour in the digital environment [12].

From this perspective are described two broad mediation strategies, restrictive and active mediation. In the first one, parents limit or control the digital use, whereas in the latter, parents guide children’s behavior through dialogue and joint use of technology [13]. Mediation strategies shape more than children’s technology behaviour, they impact the way they internalise digital experiences. In this sense, the present study explores how active mediation and participatory learning contribute to the development of children’s digital maturity, understood as a combination of technical, emotional, and ethical competencies in digital contexts [14]. The study hypothesized that higher levels of digital maturity facilitate positive digital behaviours, such as online civility, as expressions of digital citizenship. By connecting these theoretical concepts, the current research outlines a sequential pathway from parental digital mediation to digital maturity and ultimately to the behavioural manifestation of digital citizenship in children. While digital literacy reflects the parents’ own digital skills, digital mediation strategies refer to their actions in guiding or supervising their children’s digital engagement [9]. Active mediation includes discussions between parents and children about safe and responsible internet use. These discussions might assist children in gaining digital literacy and behaving positively online. In turn, restrictive mediation mostly includes technical restrictions, such as filters, to control the duration of exposure. In this case, parents supervise and technically monitor their children’s online activities [4]. Further, parents’ knowledge, skills, and attitudes regarding digital and technology usage significantly influence their mediation practices. Hence, parents exhibiting robust digital skills and a positive attitude towards the Internet and technology often use active mediation strategies, while parents perceiving the Internet as harmful or risky tend to impose restrictive strategies [10]. The child’s age and gender influence the selection of strategies employed to mediate digital activities. In addition to employing such strategies, parents use participatory learning to instruct their children on safe Internet usage. This strategy calls for more parental involvement since they interact with their children about internet experiences and join them in such activities [15]. A variation of active mediation, participatory learning helps parents and children engage in shared activities so strengthening their relationship using common experiences. This approach helps parents and children to share knowledge about the internet, so improving their digital skills [5]. The mediation strategies used differ according to the age of the children. Early on in life, parents usually use strict rules; as their children grow and start their education, they move to more active or participatory strategies [16].

Online guidance helps a strong and healthy parent-child relationship to help the child navigate online risks and acquire effective digital skills [3]. Furthermore, parents and children may use digital content to acquire understanding and knowledge. By means of teaching and guidance, parents and children can jointly improve their awareness of digital issues [5]. These mediation techniques help children learn to interact with digital environments, building their digital maturity, and limiting or enhancing their access to digital tools [17].

2.3. Present Study

Based on the revised theoretical framework, the study proposes a developmental pathway in which parental digital mediation practices shape children's digital maturity, understood as a set of technical, critical, and ethical digital competencies. These skills, in turn, underpin digital citizenship behaviours such as online civility and responsible participation in the digital environment. This framework underlines that parental influence moves beyond control to include the development of mindful and ethical online interaction. The study examined parents of children aged 6 to 11 years, on how their digital literacy, digital citizenship, and attitudes digital technologies relate to the mediation strategies they use, especially active mediation and participatory learning. Specifically, the current paper investigated the link between digital citizenship, literacy, and attitudes concerning two parental mediation strategies: active mediation and participatory learning mediation.

Active mediation includes evaluative discussions between parents and children regarding their digital access and use.

Participatory learning mediation utilises co-learning activities that promote engagement from both parts, as parents collaborate with their children in media activities motivated by shared interests [10]. Thus, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1. Parents' digital citizenship positively predicts the use of active mediation strategies.

H2. Parents' digital citizenship positively predicts the use of participatory learning strategies.

H3. Parents' digital literacy positively predicts the use of active mediation strategies.

H4. Parents' digital literacy positively predicts the use of participatory learning strategies.

H5. Positive attitudes toward digital technologies are associated with increased use of both active mediation (H5a) and participatory learning strategies (H5b).

In addition, the mediating role of parental attitudes in these relationships was tested:

H6. Attitudes toward digital technologies mediate the relationship between digital citizenship and both active mediation (H6a) and participatory learning (H6b).

H7. Attitudes toward digital technologies mediate the relationship between digital literacy and both active mediation (H7a) and participatory learning (H7b) (Figure 1).

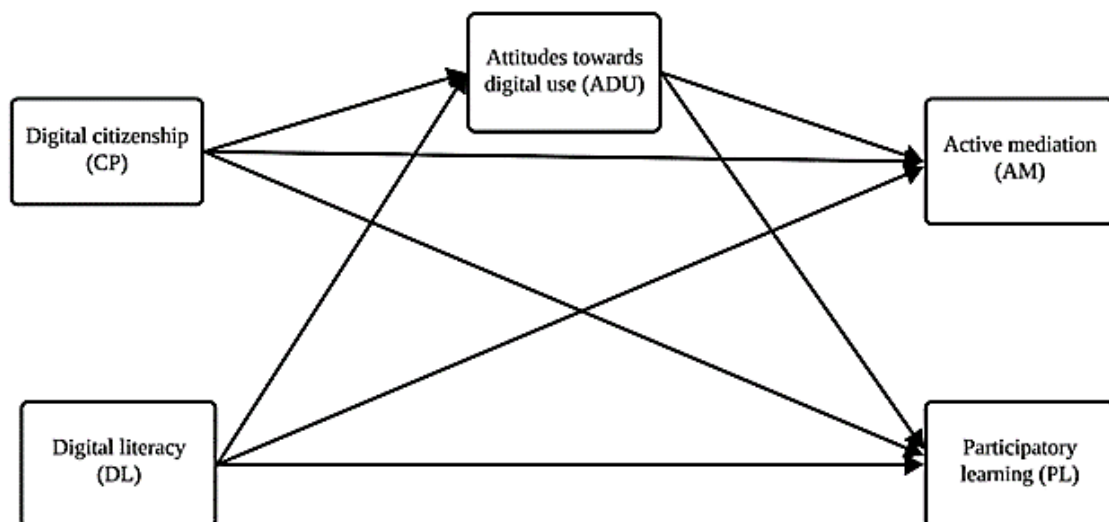


Figure 1. The proposed model

3. Methodology

The study design, participants, instruments, and data analysis are described.

3.1. Participants and Procedure

Participants were parents of elementary school children. In this study, participated three hundred eighteen ($N = 318$) parents. To be eligible to participate, they should have had at least one child aged 6–11 years in their care. More than half of the parents were mothers (80.2%) between the ages of 25 and 55 years old, and 19.2% fathers. Most often, the questioned parents had more than one child (75.5%), and almost half of them (46.5%) reported higher-education studies as the last level of education. The gender of the children was equally distributed, so the questioned participants were parents of girls (47.8%) and boys (52.2%). All the collected demographic information is reported in Table 1. The study received approval from the University Ethics Department (no. 165/17.01.2025). The data was gathered with the support of the directors of four elementary schools in the city. Initially, they were contacted to request their assistance in distributing the questionnaires to the parent groups. All participants took part voluntarily and provided written informed consent. For each question in the online form, parents had to choose a response from a prepared list of possibilities. This method avoided submitting forms with blank fields and missing data. The sample consisted primarily of mothers (80.2%) and a smaller number of fathers (19.8%). Independent samples t-tests on mediating strategies and attitudes towards children's internet use variables made it possible to investigate possible variations between these two groups. Regarding these variables, the results revealed no statistically significant variations between mothers and fathers. Therefore, data from all participants were kept in the analyses to preserve sample size and variability. The term '*parents*' is used throughout the manuscript to reflect the composition of the sample.

Table 1. Parents' characteristics

Participants' characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
Parental role		
Mother	257	80.2
Father	63	19.8
Age (years)		
25-29	49	15.4
30-39	146	45.9
40-49	112	35.2
50-55	11	3.5
Education level		
High school	70	22.0
Post-secondary non-tertiary	99	31.1
Bachelor level or higher	149	46.9
Marital status		
Married	286	89.9
Not currently in a relationship	16	5.0
Divorced	16	5.0
Number of children		
1	78	24.5
2	178	56.0
3	42	13.2
4	9	2.8
5	5	1.6
More than 5	6	1.9
Gender of children in care		
Girl	152	47.8
Boy	166	52.2
Age of children in care		
6 - 8	211	66.4
9- 11	107	33.6

3.2. Measures

For both studies, the process of scale translation from English into Romanian followed the back-translation method, in accordance with the specific guidelines for scale translation and adaptation [18], [19]. This approach involved two independent teams of experts, each with knowledge of the constructs measured, who developed separate Romanian versions of each scale. Later on, these versions were compared and discussed; only one version was chosen per instrument. A qualified translator, blinded to the original instruments, translated the versions back into English. Differences between the back-translated and original versions were examined and addressed, ensuring conceptual equivalence. This process protects the conceptual and linguistic integrity of the adapted instruments.

Digital citizenship was assessed using the critical perspective sub-scale of the digital citizenship scale (DCS; [20]). This measure includes 6 items (e.g., “*I think online participation is an effective way to make a change to something I believe to be unfair or unjust.*”). The assessment is conducted using a 7-point Likert-type scale, which ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). This scale looks at the ability to view issues from different perspectives [21] and consider online activities part of decolonising knowledge to challenge the status quo [22]. Hence, users with a strong critical perspective see the Internet not just as a tool for communication but as a platform for rethinking biases and exploring, comparing, and exchanging ideas rather than accepting it as an authoritative source [23].

Digital literacy was assessed by using five Likert-type items developed by prior research [9], [10]. Digital literacy refers to the skills and knowledge that parents have regarding digital technologies and how they use it to effectively guide and monitor their children’s online activities. Each item (e.g., “*I explain to my child how to navigate from one type of online activity to another.*”) was evaluated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 4 (Always).

Parents’ attitudes towards the advantages and disadvantages of digital technology usage [24], [25] were assessed using the scale with the same name; it includes ten Likert-type items that analyse the positive or negative attitudes towards the usage of digital technologies. Each item (e.g., “*Despite all dangers, I believe children should be taught how to use the internet.*”) was evaluated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Mediation strategies measures were used in previous studies [26], [9] and adopted for this study. Each item was reported on a four-point scale with answers ranging from never to always. The active mediation strategies included three items (e.g., “*I help when my child when is using digital technology.*”) while the participatory learning strategies included three items (e.g., “*I Participate in online activities (e.g., Games, chatting, etc.) with my child while he/she is online*”).

4. Data Analysis and Results

The data analysis procedures used to test the study hypotheses are presented. The PLS-SEM model analysis and interpretation were carried out in two stages. The first stage consists of verifying the measurement model factor loading, validity, and reliability. During the second stage, the path coefficients for direct and indirect effects, regression coefficients, and quality criteria of the structural model were assessed.

4.1. Convergent Validity and Reliability

The validity and reliability of the measures are assessed following established methodological guidelines. PLS-SEM and SmartPLS 4.1.1 were used to analyse the data to investigate the study hypotheses. The established guidelines [27] stress the importance of evaluating factor loadings for each construct, convergent validity, and internal reliability indicators. Also, several thresholds for ensuring a satisfactory model fit are recommended. Consequently, items’ reliability and the loadings of each item within the reflectively specified constructs were assessed. To ensure that all latent factors explained over 50 percent of the item variance, the loading value of each item needed to exceed 0.50 [28], [29]. Internal consistency was assessed using two indicators (Cronbach’s alpha and Composite Reliability), for both, acceptable values must exceed 0.70 [28]. Furthermore, the factor loadings for latent factors were bound between 0 and 1 [28]. In this study, Cronbach’s alpha and Composite Reliability spanned from 0.617 to 0.871, thereby demonstrating optimal internal consistency and reliability. The convergent validity was tested by means of average variance extracted (AVE) and in this case, satisfactory results require an AVE value surpassing 0.50 for composite construct within the measurement model [27]. The outcomes revealed that AVE values fluctuated between 0.535 and 0.689, whereas CR values varied from 0.802 to 0.919. Consequently, the outcomes employed in this study meet the specified requirements for both reliability and validity. Furthermore, even when AVE values are lower, convergent validity can still be demonstrated, provided that the CR value exceeds 0.60 [27]. Although some Cronbach’s alpha values were lower than in the original validation studies, all coefficients remained within acceptable limits, particularly in cross-cultural settings [30]. The table that displays the reliability indicators, factor loadings, and validity indicators of the measurement model is displayed in the online repository (OSF repository).

4.2. Explanatory Power of the Model

The explanatory power of the model is evaluated as part of the data analysis. The R^2 , which estimates the overall variance explained for each endogenous construct, is shown in Figure 2 of the endogenous variables to assess the model’s explanatory power, also known as in-sample predictive power [31]. In the first study are included three endogenous variables are included: attitudes towards the use of digital technology ($R^2 = 0.212$), active mediation ($R^2 = 0.335$), and participatory learning mediation ($R^2 = 0.332$). The results show (OSF repository) that R^2 values for two endogenous variables surpass the 0.20 threshold; this indicates a substantial explanatory power of the model [32].

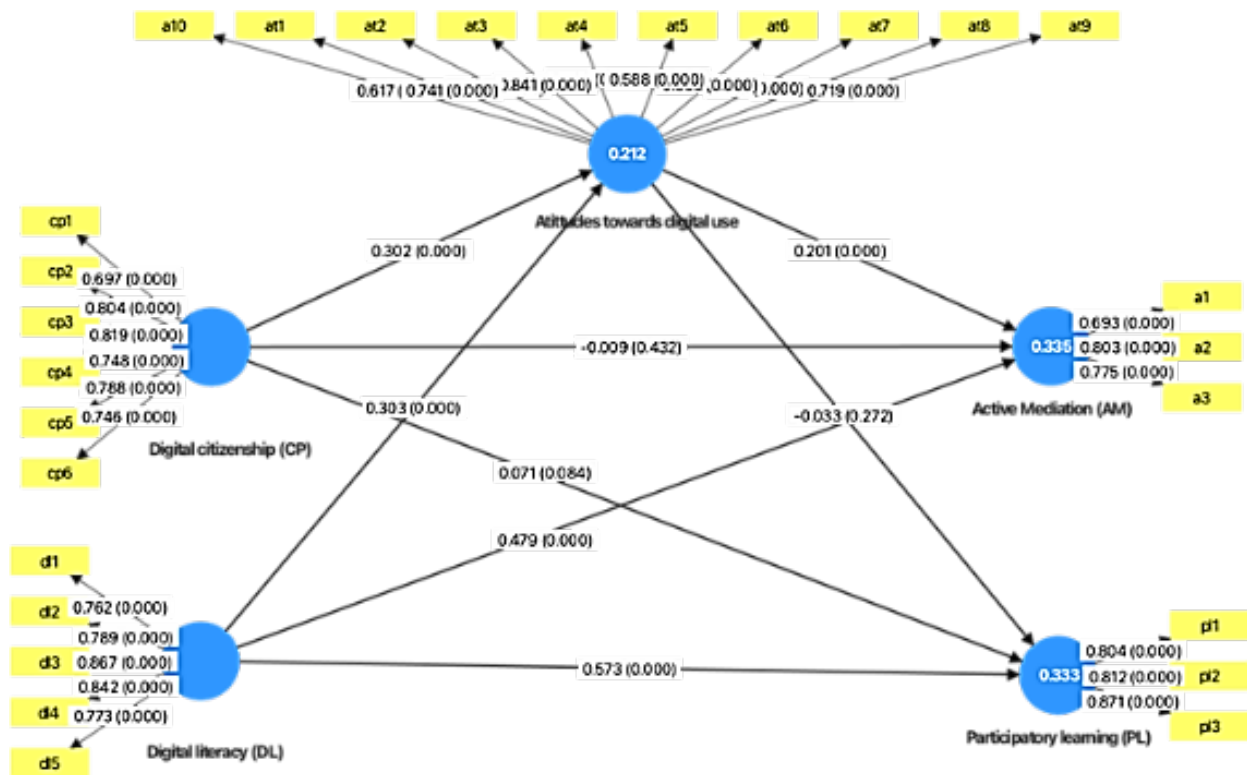


Figure 2. The resulted structural model

To estimate the explanatory power of exogenous constructs in the tested model, the change in R^2 is measured when an exogenous construct is taken out of the model (effect size). Effect size (f^2) describes the extent to which independent variable affects the dependent variable. Values that exceed 0.35 show a high effect size, while values around 0.15 indicate a moderate effect size [32]. To put it simply, effect size examines the degree to which the latent variables are related. The findings indicate that the f^2 impact size varied from 0.001 (insignificant) for digital citizenship regarding active mediation to 0.431 (high) for digital literacy related to participatory learning mediation. The Q^2 values for the endogenous constructs exceeded 0, hence confirming predictive relevance (OSF repository).

4.3. Direct Relationships

The results presented in Table 2 show the path analysis for testing the direct hypotheses (H1 – H7) by illustrating the path coefficients, T-statistic, and P-values. The direct relationships of digital citizenship to active mediation ($\beta = -0.009$, $t = 0.172$, $p = 0.432$), and participatory learning ($\beta = 0.071$, $t = 1.379$, $p = 0.084$) were not significant. Hence, Hypotheses 1 and 2 are not supported.

The direct effect of digital literacy towards active mediation ($\beta = 0.479$, $t = 9.391$, $p < 0.000$), participatory learning ($\beta = 0.573$, $t = 13.406$, $p < 0.000$) was significant, supporting hypotheses 3 and 4.

Furthermore, positive attitudes towards the use of digital technology support active mediation ($\beta = 0.201$, $t = 3.358$, $p < 0.000$), but do not support participatory learning ($\beta = -0.033$, $t = 0.608$, $p = 0.272$). Consequently, the results support hypothesis 5a, while hypothesis 5b lacks support (Table 2).

Table 2. The direct relationships in the study

Direct relationships	Coefficient	T-values	p-values
H1: Digital citizenship (DC) -> Active mediation	-0.009	0.172	0.432
H2: Digital citizenship (DC) -> Participatory learning	0.071	1.379	0.084
H3: Digital literacy -> Active mediation	0.479	9.391	0.000
H4: Digital literacy -> Participatory learning	0.573	13.406	0.000
H5a: Attitudes -> Active mediation	0.201	3.358	0.000
H5b: Attitudes -> Participatory learning	-0.033	0.608	0.272

4.4. Mediation Analysis

The mediation was tested to examine the relationships among the study variables. Mediation analysis was conducted to investigate the effect of attitudes towards digital technologies on the relationship between digital citizenship and the two mediation strategies (Hypotheses 6a and 6b), as well as between digital literacy and the two mediation strategies (Hypotheses 7a and 7b). The findings indicated a significant indirect effect of digital citizenship on active mediation through attitudes towards digital use ($\beta = 0.061$, $t = 2.814$, $p < 0.050$), and a significant indirect effect of digital literacy on active mediation through attitudes towards digital use ($\beta = 0.061$, $t = 2.658$, $p < .050$). The results of the mediation analysis are reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Mediation analysis results

Hypothesis	Coefficient	T-value	p-value	Percentile bootstrap 95% confidence interval	
				Lower	Upper
H6a: DC->ADU->AM	0.061	2.814	0.002	0.029	0.100
H6b: DC->ADU->PL	-0.010	0.587	0.279	-0.038	0.018
H7a: DL->ADU->AM	0.061	2.658	0.004	0.030	0.106
H7b: DL->ADU->PL	-0.010	0.587	0.279	-0.040	0.017

Note. DC: digital citizenship; ADU: attitudes towards digital technologies; DL: digital literacy; AM: active mediation; PL: participatory learning

The path analysis revealed that digital citizenship significantly and positively influenced attitudes towards digital use. However, it did not have a significant effect on active mediation or participatory learning, hence not supporting Hypotheses 1 and 2. But, digital literacy showed a substantial positive connection with active mediation, participatory learning, and attitudes towards digital usage. Also, positive attitudes towards digital technology were shown to significantly affect active mediation but did not facilitate participatory learning. The results of the mediational analysis indicated that attitudes towards digital use significantly served as a mediating mechanism linking digital citizenship and digital literacy to active mediation strategies. These suggests that digital literacy and attitudes towards digital use are critical predictors of effective mediation strategies. Furthermore, it might be necessary to reconceptualize or integrate digital citizenship with additional factors to fully understand its potential impact on parental mediation.

5. Conclusion

This section summarizes the main findings of the study and highlights the role of parents in the development of children's digital maturity. The findings emphasise the implications of parental digital literacy and technological attitudes on their mediation practices, particularly concerning active mediation and participatory learning approaches. In this context, parental digital mediation strategies are essential for guiding children's digital behaviour and supporting their responsible engagement in the digital environment. Furthermore, the results imply that a new understanding of digital citizenship might develop, shaped by digital identity and cultural globalisation. The interplay between offline and online experiences is clear in this analysis. Neither active mediation nor participatory learning was directly predicted by digital citizenship as measured by a critical perspective on Internet use. Thus, abstract values of digital citizenship may not automatically translate into concrete mediation behaviors. According to the findings, digital citizenship influences parenting attitudes toward technology, which in turn predicts active mediation. Taking an ethical or critical perspective on the Internet may not suffice on its own. Other factors, such as a positive attitude toward technology and confidence in digital literacy, may be necessary before parents are able to implement these values into their daily practices. Skills-based factors appear to outweigh values-based orientations when predicting actual mediation practices. In a similar vein, previous research concluded that parents' critical awareness of online risks is also important when investigating mediation strategies. Still, it is their practical competencies and attitudes that are more likely to predict children's active involvement in their digital lives. In general, the present results indicate that digital literacy and attitudes are possible contributors to behaviour, while digital citizenship is a possible distant or background cause. This study aims to improve the comprehension of how digital citizenship is encouraged within the framework of family life. The present study suggests that parents should be encouraged to use active mediation and participatory learning strategies to promote children's positive citizenship behavior in the digital environment. Also, by implementing these strategies, parents and children can further develop positive relationships. Parental mediation strategies related to technology use appear to be associated with children's digital maturity and online civility. In terms of practical implications, the present results suggest that digital mediation practices should combine supervision with open conversations about the ethical use of technology, ideally through interactive interventions involving both parents and children.

While these findings are promising, they should be interpreted with caution. There must be an acknowledgement of certain limitations of the current research. First, the cross-sectional design constrains the interpretation of causal relationship between variables. Second, the use of convenience sampling and the fact that most of the participants came from urban areas may make it hard to generalise the results to populations that are more diverse or have less access to technology. Third, the use of self-reported measurements may have generated bias, as parents might not objectively perceive their mediation practices or digital proficiency. Therefore, future studies should assess parent training interventions that integrate digital skill enhancement with reflective discussions on values and ethics, potentially yielding a more sophisticated comprehension of fostering responsible digital citizenship within familial settings. Finally, this paper highlights parents' essential role in promoting positive digital behaviours in children and the need for a more collaborative approach that actively involves children in discussions about online responsibility. Through open communication and participatory engagement, parents and educators can help children navigate the digital world ethically, respectfully, and confidently.

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