

Rethinking the Theory of Upbringing in the Digital Age: A Mixed-Methods Investigation of Values, Character Development, and Digital Citizenship

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Abstract: Children and adolescents increasingly develop values, identities, relationships, and moral judgments across interconnected family, school, peer, and digital environments. Yet theories of upbringing have only partially accounted for how digital platforms and online communities reshape these formative processes. This paper proposes a Digital-Age Upbringing Framework that integrates educational theories of upbringing with research on character and values education, digital citizenship, parental mediation, and young people's digital experiences. Drawing on diverse educational traditions including *Erziehung* and *Bildung*, Islamic *tarbiyah*, and Confucian traditions of cultivation the framework conceptualizes upbringing as a culturally situated process of human formation rather than the transmission of predetermined values. It addresses a central theoretical gap: scholarship on upbringing, character and values education, family influence, and digital citizenship has largely developed across partially disconnected research traditions, leaving their interactions insufficiently theorized. To examine these relationships empirically, the paper specifies a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design involving adolescents aged 12–17 across culturally distinct educational contexts. The quantitative phase examines relationships among school-based upbringing, parental mediation, digital experiences, values orientation, character development, and digital citizenship; the qualitative phase investigates how adolescents, parents, and educators interpret the mechanisms underlying these relationships. Integration across phases is designed to identify convergence, divergence, and context-dependent explanations. Particular attention is given to cross-cultural interpretation and the ethical requirements of research involving minors and digital behavior. The principal contribution is a theoretically grounded and empirically testable model that conceptualizes family, school, and digital environments as interacting contexts of upbringing, providing a basis for examining how contemporary educational environments shape values, character, and responsible participation in digital society.

Keywords: upbringing; digital-age upbringing; digital citizenship; character education; values education; adolescence; parental mediation; moral development; mixed methods; cross-cultural education

1. Introduction

The formation of young people's values, character, and conduct has long been a central concern of educational thought. Across philosophical traditions, upbringing refers broadly to the ways families, schools, communities, and cultural practices shape how young people understand themselves, relate to others, and participate in society (Dewey, 1916; Kant, 1803/1960; Peters, 1966; van Manen, 1991). Different traditions express this formative task through concepts such as *Erziehung*, *Bildung*, and *tarbiyah* (Biesta, 2002; Halstead, 2004; Mollenhauer, 2014).

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Digital environments complicate this established picture. Adolescents now encounter values, identities, relationships, and moral claims through social media, online communities, gaming environments, and algorithmically mediated content as well as through family, school, and peers. Research has produced mixed conclusions. Some studies emphasize risks to well-being and development, whereas others indicate that associations between digital technology use and adolescent outcomes are often small, heterogeneous, and context-dependent (Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017). Claims that young people constitute a uniformly competent “digital native” generation have also been challenged (Bennett et al., 2008; Hargittai, 2010).

The central question is therefore not whether digital environments are inherently beneficial or harmful, but how they interact with family practices, school environments, peers, and cultural expectations in shaping young people’s values and character. This paper proposes a Digital-Age Upbringing Model (DAUM) that conceptualizes family, school, and digital environments as interacting contexts of formation. It also specifies a sequential explanatory mixed-methods protocol for examining these relationships across culturally distinct educational settings. Because the study has not yet been conducted, the manuscript is presented as a research protocol and reports no empirical findings.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Digital-Age Upbringing

Upbringing concerns the formation of young people through relationships, institutions, practices, and cultural expectations. Kant emphasized discipline, cultivation, and moral formation, while Dewey located development in experience and participation (Dewey, 1916; Kant, 1803/1960). Peters (1966) understood education as initiation into worthwhile forms of knowledge and conduct, whereas phenomenological and care-based perspectives emphasized the ethical and relational character of adult–child interaction (Noddings, 1984; van Manen, 1991).

Two features are particularly relevant to the digital age. First, upbringing is ecological: formation occurs through interactions among family, school, peers, community, and wider cultural structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986). Second, upbringing involves a continuing relationship between adult guidance and young people’s emerging autonomy and self-formation.

The concept is also culturally situated. German educational thought distinguishes *Erziehung* from *Bildung*, Islamic traditions emphasize holistic formation through *tarbiyah*, and Confucian traditions stress moral self-cultivation and relational responsibility. These differences may shape expectations concerning parental authority, school responsibility, autonomy, and moral education. In this study, upbringing is therefore defined as the intentional and unintentional formation of young people’s values, character, judgment, and conduct through interacting family, educational, social, and cultural environments.

Family, school, and peers remain major formative contexts, but digital environments increasingly interact with all three. Digital media extend peer interaction, reshape parental mediation, influence school-based citizenship education, and expose adolescents to algorithmically curated communities and content (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Digital environments are therefore treated not simply as a

separate sphere but as contexts that can amplify, modify, or compete with existing formative influences.

3. Values, Character, and Digital Citizenship

Research on moral development and character education provides an important basis for understanding these processes. Classical theories emphasized moral reasoning, while later approaches incorporated care, relationships, moral sensitivity, motivation, and behavior (Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1984; Rest, 1986). Character education similarly emphasizes that values and dispositions develop through school climate, relationships, exemplars, reflection, and opportunities for responsible action (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Kristjánsson, 2015).

Values theory provides a complementary perspective. Schwartz (1992, 2012) conceptualizes values as organized motivational priorities that influence judgment and behavior. Although value structures show cross-cultural regularities, their priorities and expressions vary across individuals and contexts. Values and character should therefore be understood as developing through interaction among personal interpretation, relationships, educational experience, and cultural influence.

Digital citizenship represents a contemporary domain in which these formative processes become visible. It concerns responsible, ethical, critical, and participatory engagement in digitally mediated society, including respectful conduct, digital literacy, civic participation, rights, and responsibilities (Choi, 2016; Council of Europe, 2019; Ribble, 2011). Parental mediation and school-based digital citizenship education may shape how young people interpret online opportunities and risks and how they behave toward others online (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013).

Digital citizenship is therefore treated here not simply as a technical competence, but as part of broader values and character formation.

4. Research Gap

Research on upbringing, character and values education, family socialization, digital citizenship, and adolescent digital experience is substantial, but these areas remain only partially integrated. Upbringing theory provides a broad account of human formation but has not sufficiently incorporated digitally mediated environments. Character and values education research focuses primarily on family and school contexts, while digital citizenship research often emphasizes competencies, behaviors, and risks without embedding them within a broader theory of formation. The key gap is therefore the limited theoretical explanation of how family, school, and digital environments interact in shaping adolescents' values, character, moral judgment, and digital citizenship.

The Digital-Age Upbringing Model addresses this gap by integrating these formative contexts within a single framework and proposing testable relationships among parental mediation, school-based guidance, digital experiences, values orientation, character development, and digital citizenship. The mixed-methods design is intended to test these relationships quantitatively and explain their underlying mechanisms qualitatively.

5. Conceptual Framework: The Digital-Age Upbringing Model

The Digital-Age Upbringing Model (DAUM) integrates ecological systems theory, theories of upbringing, values theory, character education, and digital citizenship research (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Schwartz, 1992, 2012; Berkowitz, 2011; Choi, 2016).

The model proposes three interacting formative contexts: family, school, and digital environments. The family context includes parental mediation and values transmission; the school context includes school climate, teacher guidance, and values or digital-citizenship education; and the digital context includes online communities, peer networks, media practices, and platform-mediated exposure.

These contexts are hypothesized to relate to three adolescent outcomes: values orientation, character development, and digital citizenship. Importantly, the digital environment is not treated as an isolated influence. Rather, its effects are expected to vary according to parental mediation, school guidance, peer relationships, and cultural context.

DAUM therefore conceptualizes upbringing as an ecological process in which young people interpret and negotiate multiple, sometimes competing, formative influences.

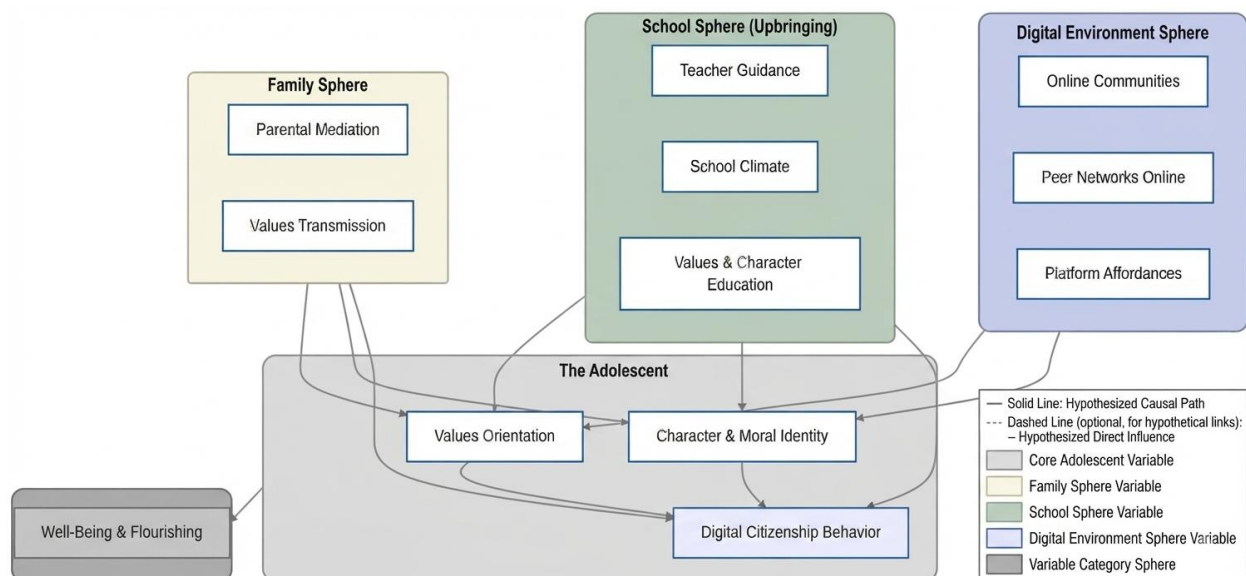


Figure 1. The Digital-Age Upbringing Model (DAUM): interacting formation spheres and adolescent outcomes.

Table 1. Construct blocks, variables, and instruments of the Digital-Age Upbringing Model.

Construct block	Variables	Primary source/measure
Family sphere	Parental mediation (active, restrictive, co-use); parent-child value congruence	Perceived Parental Media Mediation Scale (Valkenburg et al., 2013)
School sphere	School climate; teacher guidance; values/character/digital-citizenship education exposure	Delaware School Climate Survey-Student (Bear et al., 2011); study-specific teacher guidance scale
Digital environment	Daily digital engagement (type, intensity); online community membership; exposure to values-relevant content	Study-specific media use inventory (EU Kids Online tradition; Livingstone et al., 2011)

Table 1. Construct blocks, variables, and instruments of the Digital-Age Upbringing Model.

Construct block	Variables	Primary source/measure
Values orientation	Self-transcendence, self-enhancement, openness, conservation	Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ-21; Schwartz et al., 2001)
Character & moral identity	Character strengths; moral identity salience	VIA-Youth (Park & Peterson, 2006)
Digital citizenship behavior	Respectful online behavior; online civic engagement	Youth Digital Citizenship Scale (Jones & Mitchell, 2016)
Outcomes	Subjective well-being; flourishing; school engagement	SWLS (Diener et al., 1985); WEMWBS (Tennant et al., 2007)

6. Research Questions and Hypotheses

The study addresses three research questions:

RQ1. How are family, school, and digital-environment factors associated with adolescents' values orientation, character development, and digital citizenship?

RQ2. How do adolescents, parents, and teachers explain the influence of digital environments on values and character formation?

RQ3. How do qualitative findings explain, extend, or challenge the quantitative relationships identified in the DAUM?

The following hypotheses guide the quantitative phase:

H1. Positive school climate and teacher guidance will be positively associated with character development and responsible digital citizenship.

H2. Active parental mediation will be positively associated with responsible digital citizenship and will moderate the relationship between digital engagement and online behavior.

H3. Digital engagement will show context-dependent rather than uniformly positive or negative relationships with adolescent well-being and values-related outcomes.

H4. Values orientation and character development will partially explain the relationships between family and school influences and digital citizenship.

Cross-cultural differences will be explored rather than specified as strong directional hypotheses unless sufficient theoretical and empirical justification is available.

7. Mixed-Methods Design

The study will employ a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (QUAN → qual) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). A quantitative survey will first test the major relationships proposed by DAUM. Qualitative inquiry will then be used to explain unexpected, contrasting, or particularly important quantitative patterns.

The quantitative phase will include adolescents aged 12–17 recruited from secondary schools across selected culturally distinct contexts. Sampling will seek diversity in school type, socio-economic background, age, and gender. Sample size will be determined through model-based power analysis rather than fixed numerical rules.

The survey will assess parental mediation, school climate and teacher guidance, digital engagement, values orientation, character-related attributes, and digital citizenship. Established measures will be used where appropriate, with translation, adaptation, and psychometric evaluation conducted for each context.

Quantitative analysis will include descriptive statistics, reliability assessment, confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation modelling. Measurement equivalence across cultural groups will be examined where sample size permits. Because the design is observational, associations will not be interpreted as causal effects.

The qualitative phase will draw a purposive subsample from the quantitative participants. Semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups will include adolescents and, where feasible, parents and teachers. Sampling will emphasize contrasting quantitative profiles for example, adolescents with similar levels of digital engagement but different digital-citizenship outcomes.

Qualitative analysis will use reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), combining theory-informed and inductive coding. Themes will focus on mechanisms such as parental negotiation, teacher guidance, online peer influence, platform exposure, moral decision-making, and conflicts among family, school, and digital norms.

Integration will occur by connecting quantitative results to qualitative sampling and by comparing findings across both phases. Joint displays will be used to identify areas of convergence, expansion, and disagreement. Discordant findings will be treated as opportunities to refine DAUM rather than as methodological failure.

Research involving minors and digital behavior requires particular ethical safeguards. Parental consent and adolescent assent will be obtained, confidentiality and its safeguarding limits will be explained clearly, and procedures will be established for responding to disclosures of significant harm. Data will be pseudonymized and securely stored, and no private digital messages or surveillance data will be collected.

8. Planned Analysis and Reporting

No empirical data have yet been collected. The quantitative phase will report sample characteristics, descriptive statistics, reliability and measurement-model results, and the structural relationships specified in the DAUM. Where appropriate, measurement equivalence across cultural groups, moderation effects, and indirect relationships will also be examined. Effect sizes, confidence intervals, and model-fit indices will be reported alongside significance tests.

The qualitative phase will report the principal themes emerging from adolescents', parents', and teachers' accounts, supported by carefully selected de-identified quotations. Particular attention will be given to mechanisms that may explain quantitative patterns, including parental negotiation, teacher guidance, peer influence, online communities, and platform-mediated experiences. Integration will be conducted through joint displays connecting quantitative patterns with qualitative themes and interpretations. Convergent, complementary, and discordant findings will be reported transparently. The final DAUM

will be retained, modified, or simplified according to the combined evidence rather than assumed to be confirmed in advance.

9. Discussion

The central theoretical question is whether established theories of upbringing can be meaningfully extended to digitally mediated environments. If the proposed relationships are supported, the findings would suggest that digital environments do not replace traditional formative contexts but interact with family, school, and peer influences in shaping adolescent development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986).

Such findings would move the debate beyond simple distinctions between beneficial and harmful technology. Digital influence may depend on the social and educational conditions surrounding its use, including parental mediation, teacher guidance, peer norms, and opportunities for critical reflection (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Selwyn, 2012).

A second contribution concerns the relationship between upbringing and digital citizenship. If values orientation and character help explain differences in responsible digital behavior, digital citizenship could be understood partly as an expression of broader formative processes rather than as an independent set of technical competencies. This would connect digital citizenship more directly with research on moral development, values, and character education (Berkowitz, 2011; Kristjánsson, 2015; Schwartz, 2012).

The qualitative findings will be particularly important for explaining how these processes are experienced in everyday life. Adolescents, parents, and teachers may interpret digital influence differently, revealing tensions concerning authority, autonomy, responsibility, and appropriate digital conduct. Findings that contradict the proposed model will be used to refine its assumptions and boundaries rather than treated as failures of confirmation.

10. Implications

The study has potential implications for educational theory, research, and practice. Theoretically, DAUM extends the concept of upbringing beyond conventional family and school settings by incorporating digitally mediated experiences into an ecological account of formation. It also connects theories of upbringing with character, values, and digital citizenship research. For educational practice, the framework suggests that digital citizenship should not be treated solely as technical competence or as an isolated curriculum topic. Instead, it may be more effectively integrated with school climate, character and values education, and opportunities for ethical reflection. Similarly, parental guidance may be most productive when it moves beyond restriction toward active discussion and mediation of young people's digital experiences. More broadly, the framework encourages greater coordination among families, schools, and young people themselves in addressing the formative challenges and opportunities associated with digital environments.

11. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, this paper presents a research protocol, and the proposed relationships remain to be tested empirically. Second, the quantitative

component relies substantially on self-report measures, which may introduce recall and social-desirability biases. Objective digital-behavior data are not included because of ethical and privacy considerations. Third, the observational design limits causal inference. Although the proposed pathways are theoretically informed, longitudinal and experimental research will be required to establish developmental and causal relationships. Fourth, the selected cultural contexts cannot represent the full diversity of upbringing traditions, and cross-cultural comparisons may be affected by linguistic and measurement-equivalence challenges. Finally, DAUM necessarily simplifies a complex developmental process. Values, character, and digital citizenship are shaped by broader social, economic, cultural, and technological forces that cannot be fully represented within a single model.

12. Future Research

Future research should extend DAUM through longitudinal designs examining how family, school, peer, and digital influences change across adolescence. Intervention studies could test whether active parental mediation, teacher guidance, or character-integrated digital citizenship education produces changes in values-related and digital-citizenship outcomes. Further cross-cultural research is also needed to examine whether the framework operates similarly across different educational and cultural traditions. Future studies could additionally incorporate ethical forms of behavioral digital data and examine platform characteristics, algorithmic exposure, and emerging AI-mediated environments as potential influences on upbringing.

13. Conclusion

Digital environments have not replaced the traditional problem of upbringing; they have changed the contexts in which it occurs. Young people now develop values, character, judgment, and patterns of conduct through interactions that extend across family, school, peers, and digitally mediated environments. This paper proposes the Digital-Age Upbringing Model (DAUM) as an integrative framework for understanding these interactions. By connecting theories of upbringing with research on values, character, and digital citizenship, the model reframes digital influence as part of a broader ecological process of human formation. The proposed sequential explanatory mixed-methods study provides a means of testing and refining this framework empirically. Rather than assuming that digital technologies independently determine adolescent development, DAUM directs attention to a more educationally consequential question: how families, schools, and digital environments interact in shaping the kinds of persons and citizens young people are becoming.

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