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Original Article

Digital Responsibility of Public Administration Students: Challenges and Coping Strategies

Alvin Cuares*, *Karen Grace Casaña

Author Information:

Department of Public Administration, College of Business and Management, North Eastern Mindanao State University, Tandag City, Surigao del Sur, Philippines

Correspondence:
acuares@nemsu.edu.ph

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Abstract. The rapid expansion of digital technologies in public service highlights the growing need for future public administrators to demonstrate strong digital literacy and ethical online behavior. This study examines how Bachelor of Public Administration students at North Eastern Mindanao State University–Tandag Campus manage online risks, evaluate the credibility of digital information, and practice responsible and ethical conduct on various platforms. Using a qualitative single-case study design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten students across different year levels. A thematic analysis of the data identified four primary challenges faced by the students. These challenges included their inability to address online threats, difficulty assessing the reliability of information, overreliance on social media for academic and governance-related content, and limited awareness of digital citation practices. Students sought to counter these by familiarizing themselves with cyber laws, implementing basic security measures, reporting offensive content, and seeking assistance from peers and instructors. Unfortunately, these methods were neither always nor only self-initiated and self-directed. To avoid these problems, the Public Administration curriculum should include well-designed units on digital literacy, security awareness, and ethical digital behavior. By strengthening institutional support, we ensure that the next generation of public servants possesses the necessary skills for effective and ethical engagement in digital governance.

Keywords: *Digital literacy; Online behavior; Cybersecurity awareness; Information credibility; Digital ethics; Digital governance; Qualitative case study.*

Due to the digitization of government systems, the interaction of people with these systems has changed. Thus, the public servants who will follow will need to be technologically skilled and able to use technology responsibly and ethically. Wessels (2023) emphasizes that the transformation of public administration requires an understanding of technology alongside ethical principles. These changes have highlighted the growing importance of skills such as digital literacy, cybersecurity awareness, responsible online behavior, and critical evaluation of information, which have become fundamental competencies for governance in the 21st century.

Being responsible digitally means having the skills to interact with the internet and to use it ethically. One must possess the skills to manage network risks, protect personal information, respect copyright, and verify the trustworthiness of information sources. One exemplary framework that embodies these skills is the Digital Citizenship Literacy Knowledge Model (Mahadir et al., 2021). Still, there is insufficient research-based insight into how pupils in governance-curriculum programs acquire such skills in practice. Much of the existing literature

focuses on technologically oriented disciplines or general student populations (Al-Abdullatif & Gameil, 2020), leaving a notable gap in studies centered specifically on Public Administration students who will eventually handle sensitive public data and engage with digital government platforms.

The Philippine context also addresses government-level e-government, digital inclusion, and cybersecurity initiatives, calling on future civil servants to exhibit digitally responsible behavior and make sound decisions when using online systems. Consequently, Universities offering Public Administration degree programs have become significant in preparing students for future governance and familiarizing them with the use of technology (Neder, 2024). Nevertheless, the ground observations reveal that students rely heavily on social media for academic and governance-related information, are confused about the veracity of online content, and have not received instruction in cybersecurity and digital ethics.

In this scenario, the study examines how students in the Bachelor of Public Administration program at North Eastern Mindanao State University-Tandag Campus understand and implement the concept of digital responsibility. The study is designed to achieve the following: first, to investigate students' comprehension of digital responsibility. Second, the goal is to determine the challenges students face when using digital platforms, and third, to understand and explain the strategies these students use to address the risks and ethical issues associated with the online environment. Once these issues are clarified, the research serves as a tool for curriculum development, institutional policy enhancement, and the promotion of responsible digital citizenship in public administration education (Jalagat et al., 2023).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative single-case design, appropriate when the aim is to explore an issue within a bounded system, in this case, Bachelor of Public Administration (BPA) students at North Eastern Mindanao State University, Tandag Campus. Creswell and Creswell (2018) posit that qualitative research is primarily aimed at understanding participants' meanings, experiences, and perspectives, and that a case study is a detailed investigation of a particular group, event, or phenomenon. The single-case design was selected because digital responsibility among Public Administration students remains underexplored and warrants thorough investigation within its natural academic context. The researchers examined real-life situations related to digital literacy, online behavior, cybersecurity awareness, and information evaluation through the design. Such an approach is consistent with descriptive qualitative traditions that aim to provide rich, detailed descriptions of phenomena without altering the variables.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The participants were ten (10) students who are studying the Bachelor of Public Administration program and the Academic Year 2024–2025. These students were selected through purposive sampling, consistent with the nature of qualitative research, which requires participants to have firsthand experience of the phenomenon under study. Qualitative research generally uses non-probability sampling. Nevertheless, the researchers personally selected the participants and ensured that the sample spanned the first through fourth years. Essentially, purposive sampling is justified by its ability to yield the most illuminating cases, thereby providing a deeper understanding. As noted in qualitative methodology literature, sampling is based on relevance and depth of information rather than numerical representativeness (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

The participants should have met the following inclusion criteria:
(1) Being officially enrolled in the BPA program.
(2) Using digital platforms actively for academic and governance-related purposes.
(3) Being willing to participate in an in-depth interview.

The criteria ensured that each participant had significant engagement with the digital tools essential to the study of digital responsibility.

Research Instrument

Information was gathered through a semi-structured interview guide that allowed exploration of students' experiences while maintaining a consistent process. Providing a framework that ensures key topics are covered while enabling researchers to probe more deeply, ask follow-up questions, and pursue new leads to gain an in-

depth understanding of a participant's experiences and perspectives (George, 2023).

The instrument consisted of open-ended questions that focused on:
(a) Online Behavior
(b) Management of Digital Risks
(c) Evaluation of Information Credibility
(d) Coping Strategies

The instrument underwent a multi-stage validation process, in accordance with standard qualitative research protocols, to enhance its quality:

Expert Review. An interview guide for the study was assessed by three experts in digital governance, qualitative research, and public administration for clarity, relevance, and consistency with the study's conceptual framework.

Content Validation. Experts used content validity checklists to assess the relevance of each question. Changes were implemented in accordance with their advice, ensuring that each question mirrored not only core topics such as digital literacy, ethics, and information evaluation but was also validated through pilot testing. A pilot interview with two non-participating BPA students was conducted to check the clarity, sequencing, and flow of questions. Their feedback led to improvements in wording and organization. This multi-step validation process ensured that the interview guide was contextually appropriate and methodologically sound.

Data Gathering Procedure
The research involved a series of methodical and morally correct steps:

Getting the Green Light. The researchers, through proper channels, sought the go-ahead from the Department of Public Administration and other campus authorities to conduct the interviews.
Participant Recruitment. Invitations were distributed in person to eligible students. Each prospective participant was provided with an information sheet explaining the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and confidentiality provisions.
Informed Consent. Written consent was obtained before participation, in accordance with university ethics protocols and general research ethics principles.
Interview Administration. Conducted face-to-face in a quiet, designated room on campus, each session lasted 20–30 minutes. An audio recorder was used with permission to ensure accuracy, and Field notes captured non-verbal cues and contextual details.
Secure Storage of Data. All recordings and transcripts were stored in encrypted folders accessible only to the researchers. This sequence ensured systematic, respectful, and ethically compliant data collection.

Data Analysis Procedure
The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the systematic process described by Braun and Clarke (2006):

Familiarization with Data. The researchers transcribed all interviews and reread them repeatedly to develop a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences.
Generating Initial Codes. Codes were extracted from meaningful segments in the transcripts, focusing on recurring ideas related to digital responsibility.
Searching for Themes. Related codes were clustered into potential themes, including online risk management, information credibility, social media dependency, and coping strategies.
Reviewing Themes. Themes were introduced in the story through direct quotations and references to pertinent literary works.
Defining and Naming Themes. Each theme was clearly defined, refined, and structured to accurately represent underlying patterns.
Producing the Report. Themes were integrated into a narrative supported by direct quotations and linked to relevant literature. To increase the trustworthiness of the analysis, peer debriefing, audit trails, and member checking were conducted.

Ethical Considerations
Member checking was used in the study to keep trustworthiness. Interviewees were allowed to review summaries of their interview responses to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations. In addition, peer debriefing and audit trails were maintained to ensure openness in data collection and interpretation. Participants' privacy was ensured by removing their identifiers (e.g., P1, P2, P3).

Results and Discussion

This section presents the themes that emerged from the interviews with the Bachelor of Public Administration students. Through thematic analysis, two major thematic clusters surfaced: Challenges in Practicing Digital Responsibility and Coping Mechanisms Employed by Students. Analysis was conducted by identifying recurring patterns across participants, grouping codes into larger categories, and confirming themes through peer review and member checking. To illustrate the students' lived experiences, we have included a few representative quotations (P1, P2, P3…).

Challenges Encountered by the Public Administration Students in Digital Responsibility
The students identified four significant issues that limited their capacity to act as digitally responsible citizens.
(1) Managing Online Risks
(2) Assessing the Trustworthiness of Digital Information
(3) Over-Reliance on Social Media for Academic and Governance Content
(4) Problems with Digital Citation and Referencing

These topics were evident in the participants' responses across all years.

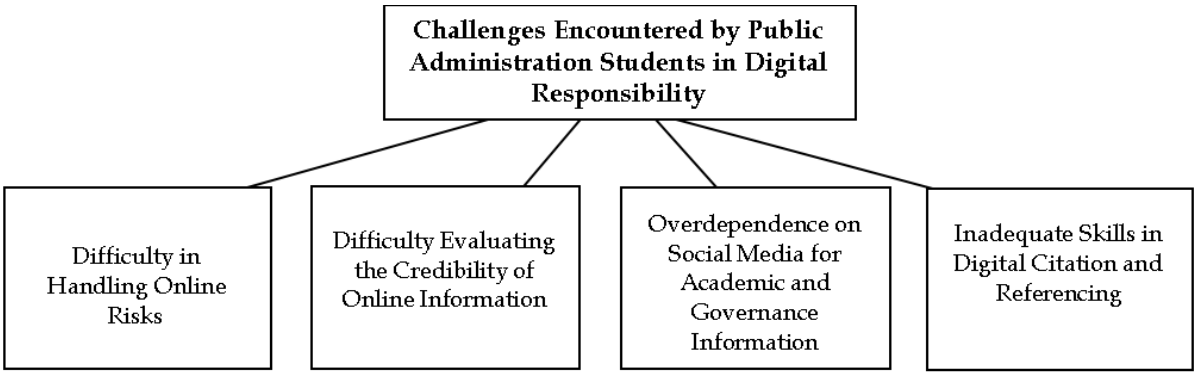

Figure 1. *Challenges Encountered by Public Administration Students in Digital Responsibility*

Difficulty in Handling Online Risks
Participants reported repeatedly encountering online risks, including phishing links, fraudulent pages, and suspicious messages. However, they lack the confidence and knowledge to handle such situations effectively. Students frequently encounter online risks, including phishing links, fraudulent pages, and suspicious messages; however, they lack the confidence and skills to manage these situations effectively (Tazi et al., 2023). More than 70% of students are unaware that phishing attacks can occur to them (Okokpujie et al., 2023). P3 said: "*I usually have no idea how to react when I get suspicious links or messages.*" In the same vein, P7 described feeling ill-equipped when encountering online threats: "*I understand that scamming is everywhere, but I still do not know what I should do when I come across it.*" Such accounts point to a broader issue: students have only a fundamental understanding of the risks in the cyber world, yet they have never received formal instruction in cybersecurity. This is consistent with research indicating a distinction between being involved in the digital world and being truly prepared to manage its risks, particularly for students pursuing governance-related fields.

This, in turn, underscores the immediate need for cybersecurity training, simulated risk exercises, and formal modules within the Public Administration curriculum. It is essential to develop these abilities to protect public data and preserve public trust in digital governance systems, as the next generation of public servants will be responsible for sensitive government information (Blogs, 2025).

Difficulty Evaluating the Credibility of Online Information
Participants reported difficulty identifying credible sources, particularly when information spreads rapidly online. Struggling to identify credible sources during times of rapid information spread is a common challenge, driven by social media algorithms that amplify sensational content and a general "truth bias" in human communication (Identify Reliable Sources of Information, n.d.). P1 stated: *"Sometimes I rely on the first information I see online because I am not sure how to check if it is really accurate."* P9 added: *"It is hard to know what sources to trust, especially when many posts look convincing."* Students often reported having trouble distinguishing between misleading information and information vetted by the government. This trend illustrates that public administration programs require structured instruction in digital literacy and information evaluation.

The findings emphasize that these skill sets, including information literacy, source evaluation, and fact-checking, should be central to Public Administration education. To succeed in future employment in public communication and policy analysis, students need to learn to verify sources and facts and consult the latest government websites (Research Guides: Databases: Public Policy: Public Policy Databases, n.d.).

Overdependence on Social Media for Academic and Governance Information
Social media was the most frequently used news source among participants. Although this method of obtaining news is convenient, such reliance reduces the risk of exposure to incorrect information. This causes social media fatigue and poses a serious risk to users' well-being and productivity. Students may become victims of compulsive social media use, which can lead to declines in academic performance (Singh et al., 2023). P5 acknowledged: "*No matter what it is, school or government, I always look up the latest news on Facebook first. It is the most convenient source for me."* Similarly, P8 expressed: "*In case I want information as soon as possible, I get it from social media, because it is much faster than looking up academic sources."* The theme shows that people most often choose convenience over trustworthiness. Such conduct may be detrimental to the gradual acquisition of vital skills for critical information processing, which are indispensable for future public administration.

This behavior can weaken the development of analytical and research skills needed for public service. Academic programs should encourage students to use official public sector databases, scholarly journals, and verified government sources to strengthen evidence-based decision-making (Lemmens & Ntshabele, 2021).

Inadequate Skills in Digital Citation and Referencing
Many students expressed uncertainty about how to cite online sources properly. P10 admitted: *"I still get confused about how to cite websites or online articles correctly."* P6 echoed this sentiment: *"Sometimes I do not cite at all because I am not confident that I am doing it right.* "This indicates the need for explicit instruction in digital scholarship, especially given the frequent use of online documents, reports, and policy materials in digital governance. This weakness has ethical implications, as improper citation creates risks of plagiarism and misinformation. Public Administration programs should incorporate digital scholarship workshops focusing on APA citation, ethical use of information, and academic integrity (APA Formatting and Style Guide (7th Edition) - Purdue OWL® - Purdue University, n.d.).

Coping Mechanisms Used by the Public Administration Students in Digital Responsibilities
Students described several strategies they use to navigate digital challenges. Although these coping mechanisms are promising, they are not yet consistently practiced across the group.

Familiarization with Cyber Laws and Digital Policies
Some students reported attempting to understand the laws and university policies governing online behavior. According to the findings, students exhibit a high level of awareness and are socially responsible in their online interactions. They also show a strong positive relationship between their knowledge of netiquette and their responsible conduct of online interactions (Abadilla et al., 2024). P2 emphasized: "*So that I would know my limits online, I read about the Cybercrime Prevention Act and the school's digital policies."* P4 explained further: "*Knowing the laws makes me more cautious when posting or sharing my information."* Although the idea is sound, many students have admitted that their understanding remains at a very elementary level. Therefore, they have emphasized the need for formal classes on digital ethics and legal frameworks. This demonstrates initiative but also reveals the lack of structured instruction on digital ethics and legal frameworks. Integrating these topics into coursework would strengthen responsible online participation.

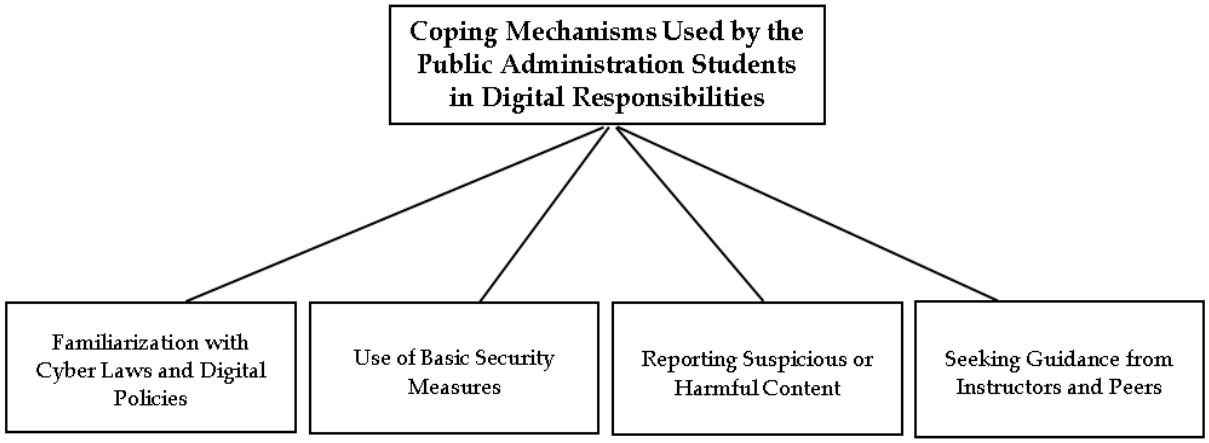

Figure 2. *The Coping Mechanisms Used by the Public Administration Students in Digital Responsibilities*

Use of Basic Security Measures

Many participants in the study reported installing antivirus software, enabling two-factor authentication, and regularly updating their devices. Installing antivirus software, enabling two-factor authentication (2FA), and regularly updating their devices are among the specific steps students have taken to strengthen their cybersecurity (Syahputri et al., 2023). P3 stated: "*I have antivirus software, and I keep it updated, but I do not follow other security steps regularly.*" Similarly, P9 said: "*I enable two-factor authentication as it is the simplest way to secure my accounts.*" Although these actions are beneficial to some extent, individuals rarely apply them consistently and usually limit themselves to basic tools. Students demonstrate only surface-level cybersecurity awareness, underscoring the need for broader awareness and hands-on digital safety workshops.

Reporting Suspicious or Harmful Content

Several students reported encountering harmful content; however, many were reluctant to report it because they were unsure of the proper channels. It says that the current rules for reporting harmful and offensive content on platforms are not clear, consistent, or fair, and that users from marginalized groups are the ones who feel this the most because they are the ones who are most likely to be targeted by such content (Flynn et al., 2025). P7 explained: "*If I see something dangerous, I block it or report it, but sometimes I do not know the exact place where I should report it.*" P5 furthered this point by saying: "*I report fake messages that are trying to scam me, but only when I am entirely sure that it is really a scam.*"Their behavior indicates a gap between the institution's local regulations and their understanding of them, which, in turn, signals a tacit call for additional institutional procedures and campaigns to raise awareness of reporting online threats. This gap signals the need for institutional reporting protocols, orientation campaigns, and more straightforward digital safety guidelines to empower students to respond effectively to online threats.

Seeking Guidance from Instructors and Peers

When faced with digital challenges they do not understand, a few students seek help from their teachers or fellow students. Although enhancing performance has been a primary goal, it is becoming increasingly clear that technology has effects that extend beyond objective measures. Trainees' motivation and involvement are crucial to improving learning outcomes and effectiveness (Dhiman et al., 2024). P8 shared: "*When I am confused, I generally ask my classmates or teachers as they could be more knowledgeable.*" Likewise, P1 also declared: "*Occasionally, I take my instructors under advisement when I am doubtful of my online conduct or need for sources.*" This suggests that guidance and support from peers may serve as a bridge to the effective implementation of moral digital habits when institutional training is scarce. This indicates the potential of peer mentoring and faculty-led digital literacy programs to serve as bridges to institutional digital responsibility strategies (Thandayuthapani & Thirumoorthi, 2025).

Conclusion

The findings indicate that although students are aware of the basic principles of digital responsibility, they consistently struggle to apply them in real-world online contexts. Throughout the interviews, students reported the following challenges: managing online risks appropriately; limited skill in assessing the credibility of information sources; overreliance on social media for academic and governance information; and insufficient knowledge of digital citation and referencing. These problems, in turn, expose the lack of adequate instruction in cybersecurity, information literacy, and ethical digital conduct, which have been integrated into the Public Administration curriculum. Despite these hardships, students are using various strategies to address the situation, such as learning about cyber laws, taking basic security measures, reporting suspicious content, and seeking help from their teachers and friends. Overall, these tactics are largely self-instructional, lack continuity, and are insufficient to address low digital literacy at a deeper level.

Implications of Curriculum Development

The results are sufficiently accurate to justify updating the BPA curriculum by incorporating well-organized learning units on digital ethics, cybersecurity awareness, data protection, and the evaluation of critical information. Students will learn to manage digital systems responsibly and to lead the implementation of evidence-based governance approaches, building on these subjects.

Implications for Governance and Public Sector Practice

As the next generation of public servants, BPA students should be able to assess information available online, safeguard confidential data, and maintain high ethical standards when using digital platforms. Elevating instruction on digital accountability is one of the many governance changes being implemented; these changes extend beyond this aspect to include openness, responsibility, and the provision of digitally secure services.

Implications for Institutional Policy

The results emphasize that the university should implement clearer, simpler digital safety rules, reporting procedures, and digital literacy programs. Students can significantly improve their functional digital skills with the institution's support, teachers' guidance, and training seminars. To sum up, managing one's digital footprint should be reckoned as a must-have skill in the education of Public Administration. After dealing with the issues raised by this survey and improving the ways of handling them via changes in the curriculum and local regulations, NEMSU has the potential to shape a future of public administrators that will be aware of the digital world and, at the same time, moral, accountable, and equipped for the dynamic environment of digital governance.

Contributions of Authors

Author 1: conceptualization, data gathering, data analysis, and manuscript writing
Author 2: data analysis, data gathering

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Conflict of Interests

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