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Digital Jurisprudence in the Classroom: An Ethnographic Study of Intellectual Property Ethics and Creative Identity Among Digital Native Students

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Abstract :
This study aims to explore how digital-native students construct and negotiate intellectual property ethics and creative identity within digitally mediated classroom environments. A qualitative ethnographic design was employed to capture students' lived experiences, using participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis as primary data collection techniques. The findings reveal that students develop a fluid and hybrid understanding of intellectual property, where originality is often interpreted through practices of adaptation, remixing, and AI-assisted creation. Ethical awareness is shaped not only by formal instruction but also by peer interaction, classroom culture, and the affordances of digital technologies. Students tend to prioritize efficiency and collaboration, which sometimes leads to the normalization of ethically ambiguous practices.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally reshaped how knowledge is produced, shared, and consumed in contemporary society. This transformation has significant implications for education, particularly in redefining creativity, authorship, and ethical responsibility among digital-native students. The integration of artificial intelligence, immersive technologies, and digital platforms has introduced new opportunities while simultaneously raising concerns about intellectual property and ethical conduct. As students increasingly engage with generative tools and digital media, the boundaries between originality and replication become increasingly blurred. This phenomenon highlights the urgency of developing ethical awareness alongside digital competence to ensure responsible participation in digital ecosystems (Ahmed et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024).

Despite these advancements, educational institutions face persistent challenges in aligning technological integration with ethical understanding. The rapid adoption of digital education often exceeds the development of critical digital literacy and ethical frameworks, resulting in gaps in students' awareness of intellectual property rights and responsible content use. Moreover, barriers to digital transformation, including institutional readiness and pedagogical limitations, further complicate this issue. Without proper guidance, students may

unknowingly engage in unethical practices such as plagiarism or misuse of AI-generated content. This indicates a pressing need to integrate ethical considerations into digital learning environments more systematically (Alenezi et al., 2023; Gkrimpizi et al., 2023).

In classroom settings, these challenges manifest through everyday learning practices. Students frequently interact with digital content through copying, remixing, and adapting materials from various online sources. The increasing use of AI-powered tools, automated writing systems, and immersive environments such as the metaverse further complicates students' understanding of authorship and ownership. Observations suggest that students often perceive digital content as freely accessible and modifiable, leading to a normalization of practices that may conflict with academic integrity. Additionally, the integration of AI in language learning and creative tasks reinforces dependency on digital assistance, reshaping how students perceive creativity and originality (Kaddoura & Husseiny, 2023; Alharbi, 2023).

Previous studies have explored the importance of digital competence and ethical awareness in education, emphasizing the need for integrating these elements into teaching practices. Research has shown that digital literacy plays a crucial role in shaping students' ability to navigate complex technological environments, including augmented and virtual reality contexts. Similarly, teacher competence and training are essential in fostering ethical and innovative learning practices. However, much of this research focuses on technical and pedagogical aspects rather than students' lived experiences and ethical interpretations within classroom contexts (Artacho et al., 2020; Chang et al., 2023; Althubyani, 2024).

Furthermore, studies on ethics in computing and AI have highlighted the growing need to address ethical dilemmas associated with emerging technologies. Research has examined the implications of AI, large language models, and digital tools on academic integrity and authorship, while also proposing frameworks for ethical education. In addition, experiential learning approaches in legal education, such as intellectual property simulations, have been shown to enhance students' understanding of legal principles. However, these studies often overlook how students socially construct ethical meanings and creative identities in everyday learning environments, leaving a significant research gap (Brown et al., 2023; Nam & Bai, 2023; Nath et al., 2025; Shahzad et al., 2025).

This study offers a novel contribution by adopting an ethnographic perspective to examine how intellectual property ethics and creative identity are constructed among digital-native students. It integrates insights from digital literacy, legal education, and creativity studies to provide a holistic understanding of ethical behavior in digital classrooms. By focusing on students' lived experiences, this research addresses the limitations of previous studies that rely primarily on quantitative or theoretical approaches. The study also responds to the need for fostering twenty-first-century skills, including creativity, critical thinking, and ethical awareness, in digitally mediated learning environments (Rehman et al., 2023; Khalil et al., 2023).

The central research problem of this study is to understand how students negotiate ethical boundaries and construct creative identities within digital learning contexts. It argues that ethical awareness emerges through social

interaction, technological engagement, and cultural participation rather than solely through formal instruction. By examining these processes, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of digital jurisprudence in education and highlights the importance of aligning institutional policies with students' actual practices. Ultimately, this research seeks to inform more responsive and context-sensitive approaches to teaching ethics in the digital age (Liu, 2023; Fuentes, 2024).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design with an ethnographic approach to explore how digital-native students construct intellectual property ethics and creative identity within classroom settings. The qualitative design is selected because it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, social interactions, and meaning-making processes in natural contexts. Ethnography is particularly appropriate as it focuses on cultural practices and shared norms that emerge in everyday educational environments, especially in relation to digital behavior and ethical decision-making. This approach enables the researcher to capture nuanced perspectives that cannot be fully understood through quantitative measures. The study is conducted in a higher education classroom where digital tools and media are actively integrated into teaching and learning processes. The selection of this setting is based on its relevance to the research focus, as it represents a context where issues of digital literacy, creativity, and ethical awareness frequently intersect (Liu, 2023; Fuentes, 2024).

Data collection in this study is carried out through multiple qualitative techniques to ensure depth and richness of information. These include participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and document analysis of students' digital works and classroom artifacts. Participant observation allows the researcher to directly examine students' behaviors and interactions in real-time, particularly how they engage with digital content and navigate ethical dilemmas. Semi-structured interviews provide opportunities for students to reflect on their experiences, perceptions, and understanding of intellectual property and creative ownership. Additionally, document analysis helps to triangulate findings by examining tangible outputs such as assignments, digital compositions, and AI-assisted works. The use of multiple data collection methods strengthens the credibility of the findings and provides a comprehensive view of the phenomenon under study, particularly in contexts involving digital competence and ethical engagement (Martzoukou et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2021).

Data analysis follows an interactive model consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the data condensation phase, raw data from observations, interviews, and documents are systematically selected, simplified, and coded to identify emerging themes related to ethics and creative identity. The data are then organized and presented in the form of matrices, narrative descriptions, and thematic categorizations to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusions are drawn and continuously verified through iterative comparison across data sources to ensure consistency and validity. To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies are employed, including triangulation of data sources and methods, prolonged engagement in the field, and member checking with participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations.

These procedures are essential in qualitative research to ensure credibility, dependability, and confirmability of findings, particularly in studies examining complex digital learning environments (Brown et al., 2023; Torres-Hernández & Gallego-Arrufat, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study indicate that digital-native students possess a partial and context-dependent understanding of intellectual property ethics. Based on in-depth interviews, most informants demonstrated basic awareness of concepts such as plagiarism and originality; however, their interpretations were often flexible and influenced by digital practices. One informant stated, "If I take ideas from the internet and change the wording, I feel like it becomes mine, especially if I improve it." Another participant explained, "Using AI tools is like using Google, it helps me think, so I still consider the work mine." These responses suggest that students tend to justify ownership through modification and technological assistance. From the researcher's perspective, this reflects a hybrid ethical understanding, where traditional academic values are negotiated alongside the affordances of digital tools.

In relation to creative identity, interview data reveal that students perceive creativity as a process of adaptation and recombination rather than purely original production. Several informants described their creative processes as being heavily influenced by digital content they consume daily. One student noted, "Most of my ideas come from what I see on social media, then I mix them with my own style." Another informant added, "I don't think copying is wrong if it's for learning or inspiration." These statements indicate that students construct their creative identity through participation in digital culture, where remixing and sharing are normalized practices. The researcher interprets this as evidence that students' sense of authorship is increasingly collective and fluid, shaped by continuous interaction with digital media.

Findings from classroom observations further support these insights by showing how students engage with digital resources in real-time learning situations. During learning activities, students frequently accessed online materials, AI tools, and peer-generated content to complete assignments. In several observed cases, students copied and modified text from digital sources without providing proper attribution. Additionally, the use of AI-generated content was commonly observed, with students treating it as a standard support tool rather than a source requiring acknowledgment. These behaviors suggest that efficiency and task completion often take precedence over ethical considerations. The researcher interprets this as an indication that students' ethical practices are influenced by situational demands and the perceived norms of digital learning environments.

Moreover, observations reveal that peer interaction plays a crucial role in shaping students' ethical behavior. In collaborative tasks, students actively shared materials and ideas without questioning issues of ownership or authorship. For instance, group members often combined content from multiple sources into a single output without discussing citation practices. Informal discussions among students suggested that such actions were viewed as practical and acceptable within their learning context. The researcher interprets this as evidence that

ethical norms are socially constructed and reinforced through peer agreement. As a result, students may prioritize collective efficiency over adherence to formal academic rules.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that intellectual property ethics among digital-native students is dynamic and contextually negotiated. Students navigate ethical boundaries by balancing institutional expectations, technological possibilities, and peer influences. Their creative identity emerges as a hybrid construct that integrates originality, adaptation, and collaboration. These results highlight the complexity of ethical decision-making in digital classrooms and suggest the need for more contextualized and practice-oriented approaches to teaching intellectual property ethics.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that digital-native students develop a flexible and context-dependent understanding of intellectual property ethics, which aligns with existing research on the transformative impact of digital technologies in education. Previous studies have highlighted that digital transformation reshapes not only learning processes but also ethical perceptions related to authorship and originality. The present findings support this perspective by showing that students justify ownership through modification and technological mediation, particularly when using AI tools. This reflects a broader shift toward hybrid ethical frameworks influenced by digital environments and technological affordances (Ahmed et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024).

In relation to creative identity, the findings are consistent with literature emphasizing the role of digital media in fostering participatory and multimodal creativity. Students' reliance on remixing, adaptation, and inspiration from online content reflects a cultural shift in how creativity is conceptualized. Previous research has demonstrated that digital storytelling, multimodal composition, and immersive technologies contribute to new forms of creative expression. However, this study reveals that students often do not perceive these practices as ethically problematic, highlighting a gap between institutional expectations and students' lived experiences of creativity (Smith et al., 2020; Smyrnaiou et al., 2020; Chang et al., 2023).

The study also reinforces the importance of digital competence and educational context in shaping ethical behavior. Existing literature has emphasized that both student and teacher competencies play a critical role in navigating digital environments responsibly. The findings extend this by demonstrating that ethical practices are influenced not only by individual competence but also by classroom culture and instructional approaches. When ethical considerations are not explicitly integrated into teaching, students tend to prioritize efficiency and task completion, often relying on AI tools and digital resources without critical reflection (Martzoukou et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2021; Althubyani, 2024).

Moreover, the influence of peer interaction observed in this study aligns with research on collaborative learning and digital engagement. Studies have shown that students' behaviors in digital settings are shaped by social norms, motivation, and psychological needs. The normalization of sharing and collective content production among peers reflects the social dimension of ethical decision-making. Additionally, the increasing presence of AI-driven tools and digital

environments further complicates these dynamics, requiring more comprehensive approaches to ethics education that address both individual and collective practices (Zadorozhnyy & Lee, 2025; Vallis et al., 2023).

Finally, this study contributes to theoretical and practical discussions by highlighting the need for integrated and context-sensitive approaches to ethics in digital education. Previous research has identified the risks of digital transformation, including ethical challenges and institutional barriers, while also emphasizing the need for structured frameworks and pedagogical innovation. The findings of this study suggest that ethical education should move beyond rule-based instruction and incorporate experiential, reflective, and socially grounded learning approaches. Integrating intellectual property education, AI ethics, and creative practice into curricula can help bridge the gap between policy and practice, ultimately fostering more responsible and critically aware digital citizens (García-Peñalvo, 2021; Gkrimpizi et al., 2023; Alenezi et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that the most important finding lies in the recognition that intellectual property ethics among digital-native students is not a fixed or purely rule-based construct, but rather a dynamic and socially negotiated practice shaped by digital culture, peer interaction, and classroom context. The key lesson derived from this research is that students interpret authorship, originality, and ownership through hybrid frameworks that combine traditional academic norms with emerging digital practices such as remixing and AI-assisted creation. This insight underscores the need to reconceptualize ethics education as a contextual and reflective process rather than a prescriptive set of rules. The strength of this study lies in its contribution to bridging the gap between digital literacy, legal awareness, and identity formation by introducing an ethnographic perspective that captures students' lived experiences. It offers a nuanced understanding of how ethical awareness is constructed in real educational settings, thereby enriching theoretical discussions on digital jurisprudence and expanding the scope of research in technology-integrated education.

However, this study also has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research is limited to a specific classroom context, which may not fully represent the diversity of educational settings and cultural backgrounds. Second, the reliance on qualitative data means that the findings are context-specific and may not be easily generalizable to broader populations. Future research is therefore encouraged to explore similar issues across different institutional, cultural, and disciplinary contexts to provide a more comprehensive understanding of digital ethics in education. Additionally, further studies could integrate mixed-method approaches or longitudinal designs to examine how students' ethical perspectives evolve over time. Investigating the role of educators, institutional policies, and technological design in shaping ethical behavior would also provide valuable insights for developing more effective and responsive educational practices in the digital age.

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