

Digital Etiquette in Student–Faculty Communication: A Qualitative Study of University Students' and Faculty Members' Perspectives

Ayça Bakiner

ABSTRACT:- Digital communication has become an integral part of student–faculty interaction, yet expectations regarding appropriate communication may not always be shared by students and faculty members. This qualitative study explored how university students and faculty members perceive digital etiquette and examined where their expectations converge and diverge. Data were collected from 20 students and 20 faculty members at a state university in Türkiye using separate semi-structured interview questions and analysed through Template Analysis. The analysis focused on eight themes: communication platforms, forms of address, message timing, response expectations, emojis and other digital cues, voice messages, writing style and level of formality, and communication boundaries. The findings revealed considerable agreement between the two groups regarding respect, clarity, appropriate timing, and professional distance. Differences were more apparent in how these principles were applied to specific communication practices, particularly platform choice, response expectations, formality, and personal boundaries. Participants also differed in the extent to which they considered university-wide digital communication guidelines necessary. Overall, the findings suggest that digital etiquette in higher education is shaped by both shared expectations and context-dependent interpretations of appropriate communication.

Keywords: student–faculty communication; higher education; digital communication; netiquette; academic communication

I. INTRODUCTION

Communication between university students and faculty members increasingly extends beyond the physical classroom through digitally mediated interaction. Email, learning management systems, instant messaging applications, and social networking platforms have become routine means of academic communication, enabling students and faculty members to exchange information, discuss academic matters, provide feedback, and maintain ongoing interaction regardless of time and place. The growing integration of these communication environments into university life has expanded opportunities for interaction while simultaneously creating new expectations regarding how communication should be conducted in academic contexts. Consequently, digital communication is no longer understood simply as the transmission of information through technological channels but as a social and interpersonal process shaped by participants' roles, communication goals, and contextual expectations (Baym, 2015; Herring et al., 2013; Walther, 1992, 1996).

This shift reflects a broader development within research on computer-mediated communication (CMC). Early CMC research primarily focused on the characteristics of communication technologies and the differences between online and face-to-face interaction. More recent scholarship, however, has increasingly examined how individuals establish interpersonal relationships, negotiate meanings, and construct appropriate communicative behaviour through digitally mediated interaction. Rather than viewing communication technologies as neutral tools, contemporary CMC research recognises that communication practices emerge through the interaction between technological affordances, institutional contexts, and participants' shared understandings of appropriate behaviour (Clark & Brennan, 1991; Daft & Lengel, 1986; Herring et al., 2013). This perspective is particularly relevant in higher education, where communication simultaneously reflects institutional roles, interpersonal relationships, and academic responsibilities.

Within higher education, digital communication has become an essential component of student–faculty interaction. Students routinely contact faculty members to seek academic guidance, clarify course requirements,

request feedback, discuss administrative issues, and communicate about learning activities. Likewise, faculty members rely on digitally mediated communication to organise courses, provide instructional support, supervise students, and sustain communication beyond scheduled classroom interaction. As these interactions have become embedded in everyday academic practice, questions concerning how communication should occur have become increasingly significant alongside questions concerning what is communicated (Brunner et al., 2008; Duran et al., 2005; Kelly et al., 2001; Waldeck et al., 2001).

Existing research demonstrates that student–faculty communication is shaped by considerably more than the communication platform itself. Instead, communication practices are influenced by participants' perceptions of institutional roles, interpersonal relationships, communicative expectations, and contextually appropriate behaviour. Consequently, previous studies have examined diverse aspects of digital interaction, including academic email, forms of address, politeness strategies, request behaviour, pragmatic appropriateness, response practices, and communication through social networking sites (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Bolkan & Holmgren, 2012; Chejnová, 2014; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Lewin-Jones & Mason, 2014; Linek & Ostermaier-Grabow, 2018; Merrison et al., 2012). Although these studies differ in their theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches, they consistently suggest that appropriate digital communication is constructed through the interaction of institutional expectations and interpersonal communication norms rather than through the communication medium alone.

The concept of digital etiquette, often discussed alongside netiquette, provides a useful framework for understanding these communication practices. Contemporary scholarship generally approaches digital etiquette not merely as a collection of rules governing polite online behaviour but as a broader set of expectations concerning respectful, context-sensitive, and responsible communication in digitally mediated environments (Shea, 1994; Soler-Costa et al., 2021). Systematic reviews further indicate that digital etiquette has been examined across a wide range of educational contexts and communication platforms, reflecting the diversity of communication practices that characterise contemporary digital interaction (Soler-Costa et al., 2021). Accordingly, digital etiquette is increasingly understood as a dynamic system of communication norms negotiated within particular institutional and relational contexts rather than as a universal set of behavioural rules.

Previous research has explored these communication norms through different communicative practices. A substantial body of literature has focused on academic email, demonstrating that greetings, forms of address, politeness strategies, levels of directness, and closing expressions influence how students' messages are interpreted by faculty members (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Bolkan & Holmgren, 2012; Chejnová, 2014; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011;). Other studies have extended this discussion to students' perceptions of email appropriateness (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2023), communication through social networking sites (Linek & Ostermaier-Grabow, 2018), and the interpersonal functions of digital cues such as emoticons, which may simultaneously communicate warmth and shape perceptions of professionalism (Dresner & Herring, 2010; Marder et al., 2020;). Collectively, these findings suggest that digital etiquette is enacted through multiple, interconnected communication practices rather than through any single communicative behaviour.

Taken together, the existing literature has considerably advanced understanding of digital communication in higher education by examining particular communication practices and their implications for student–faculty interaction. Previous research has demonstrated that appropriate digital communication is influenced by linguistic choices, interpersonal expectations, institutional roles, and the affordances of different communication environments. At the same time, this body of work has largely approached these issues through specific communication practices, such as email requests, politeness strategies, forms of address, social networking sites, or digital cues, each contributing valuable insights into particular aspects of digitally mediated interaction (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011, 2023; Lewin-Jones & Mason, 2014; Linek & Ostermaier-Grabow, 2018; Marder et al., 2020).

Although these studies have enriched our understanding of student–faculty communication, comparatively less attention has been devoted to how students and faculty members themselves conceptualise appropriate digital communication across the broader range of communication practices that characterise everyday academic interaction. In addition, much of the existing literature has relied on surveys, experimental designs, or analyses of naturally occurring digital messages. While these approaches have generated important knowledge about communication behaviour, they provide relatively limited insight into how participants themselves explain, justify, and negotiate their expectations regarding appropriate communication. Exploring these perceptions qualitatively offers an opportunity to understand not only what communication practices are considered appropriate, but also why participants attach particular meanings to them.

This issue is particularly relevant because communication norms are not static. Expectations concerning appropriate communication develop through everyday interaction and are shaped by institutional culture, interpersonal relationships, and evolving communication technologies. Behaviours that are considered appropriate in one context may be interpreted differently in another, and students and faculty members may not

always evaluate the same communicative practice in similar ways. Understanding these similarities and differences is therefore important for developing a more comprehensive understanding of digital etiquette as a communication phenomenon rather than as a fixed set of behavioural prescriptions.

Against this background, the present study explores digital etiquette from the perspectives of both university students and faculty members. Rather than focusing on a single communication platform or one specific communicative behaviour, the study examines how participants perceive appropriate digital communication across a range of everyday academic communication practices. By comparing the perspectives of students and faculty members, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how communication norms are interpreted, negotiated, and experienced within digitally mediated student–faculty interaction.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How do university students and faculty members perceive appropriate digital etiquette in student–faculty communication?

RQ2. In what ways do students' and faculty members' perceptions converge and diverge regarding digital etiquette in student–faculty communication?

II. METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how university students and faculty members perceive digital etiquette in student–faculty communication. The study focused on participants' views and experiences of digitally mediated communication. A qualitative approach was therefore considered appropriate, as it allowed participants to describe their experiences, expectations, and interpretations in their own words.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This interview format provided a balance between consistency and flexibility by allowing the researcher to address common topics with all participants while also giving participants the opportunity to elaborate on issues they considered important. As recommended in qualitative interview research, the interview protocol served as a guide rather than a fixed script, enabling participants to explain their views in detail while ensuring that all interviews addressed the same broad topics (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Kallio et al., 2016; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

The study included two participant groups: university students and faculty members. Examining both groups made it possible to explore digital etiquette from the perspectives of those who take part in the same communication process but occupy different roles within it. Rather than treating these perspectives separately, the study considered them together to identify areas of similarity and difference in how digital communication is understood and experienced.

Development of the Interview Questions

The interview protocols were developed after reviewing previous research on student–faculty digital communication and digital etiquette. The review focused on studies examining communication practices in higher education, including digital communication platforms, message writing practices, response expectations, communication boundaries, politeness, and online communication norms. The recurring topics identified in the literature provided the basis for the interview questions.

Separate interview protocols were prepared for students and faculty members. Although the wording of some questions differed to reflect the participants' roles, both protocols addressed the same broad topics so that the perspectives of the two groups could be examined together. The student interview protocol consisted of eight open-ended questions, while the faculty member interview protocol included ten open-ended questions.

The interview questions were designed to encourage participants to describe their own experiences, opinions, and expectations regarding digital communication. Rather than following a fixed sequence of predefined responses, the open-ended format allowed participants to explain the reasons behind their views and to provide examples from their own experiences. The development of the interview protocols was informed by recommendations for designing semi-structured interviews in qualitative research (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Kallio et al., 2016).

The study adopted Template Analysis as the analytical approach. In Template Analysis, researchers may begin the analysis with a set of themes developed before coding while remaining open to modifying the template as they become familiar with the data (King, 2012). Consistent with this approach, the themes identified through the literature review informed both the development of the interview protocols and the initial coding template used during data analysis. The initial template included themes related to communication platforms, forms of address, message timing, response expectations, the use of emojis and voice messages, writing style and formality, and communication boundaries. The coding process remained flexible, allowing the

initial template to be refined and new sub-themes to be developed when participants introduced perspectives that were not adequately represented by the preliminary framework.

Participants

The participants were university students and faculty members from a state university in Türkiye. Participation was voluntary, and individuals who agreed to take part in the study completed the interview form prepared for their group. Separate interview protocols were used for students and faculty members in order to reflect their different roles in digital communication while allowing the two groups to be examined within the same analytical framework.

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants who had experience communicating through digital platforms within the university context. Since the study focused on student–faculty communication, participants were expected to have direct experience of this form of communication in their academic lives. The study included 20 university students and 20 faculty members (N = 40).

Data Collection

Data were collected using two semi-structured interview protocols administered through Google Forms. One protocol was prepared for university students and the other for faculty members. Both protocols consisted of open-ended questions designed to encourage participants to describe their experiences and opinions regarding digital communication in student–faculty interaction. The student protocol included eight questions, whereas the faculty protocol included ten questions.

The interview forms were distributed online, and participants completed the questions individually at a time convenient for them. Before beginning the interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and that participation was voluntary. No personally identifying information was requested, and the responses were analysed anonymously.

Trustworthiness

Several steps were taken to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Throughout the analysis, the interview responses were read repeatedly to ensure that the coding remained closely connected to the participants' accounts. Although the analysis was conducted by a single researcher, the coding template was reviewed and refined throughout the analytical process as the researcher moved back and forth between the data and the developing interpretation. This iterative process helped ensure that the themes reflected the data rather than isolated responses.

The findings are presented with direct quotations from both students and faculty members. These quotations were selected to illustrate the themes identified during the analysis while preserving the meaning of participants' responses. To protect participants' privacy, no identifying information is reported.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using Template Analysis (King, 2012). The initial template was developed from the themes identified through the literature review and used in the preparation of the interview questions. It included eight themes: communication platforms, forms of address, message timing, response expectations, the use of emojis and other digital cues, voice messages, writing style and level of formality, and communication boundaries. These themes provided a starting point for the analysis rather than a fixed coding structure.

The student and faculty responses were first examined separately. Each response was read in full and coded in relation to the initial template. Within the eight themes, more specific codes were developed to capture recurring views, experiences, and expectations in the participants' accounts (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Responses that did not fit within the initial template were not forced into an existing category; the template was revised where necessary as the analysis progressed. This combination of an initial deductive structure and openness to patterns arising from the data is consistent with approaches that combine deductive and inductive coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

After the two sets of responses had been coded, the patterns identified for students and faculty members were compared within each theme. Particular attention was paid to areas in which the two groups expressed similar expectations as well as those in which their views differed. The analysis therefore retained the same thematic framework for both groups while allowing group-specific patterns to remain visible. Representative extracts were then selected to illustrate the main patterns reported in the findings.

As the analysis was conducted by a single researcher, consistency was addressed through repeated reading and comparison of coded responses throughout the process. Earlier coding decisions were revisited as the template developed, and similar responses were checked against one another to ensure that the codes were being applied consistently. The final template was established after the full dataset had been reviewed and the coding structure no longer required substantive revision.

III. FINDINGS

The analysis showed both common ground and differences in how students and faculty members approached digital communication. The eight themes in the initial template provided a useful structure for organising the data, although the responses within these themes varied considerably between and within the two groups. The findings are presented comparatively, with attention to points where students' and faculty members' views converged as well as where their expectations differed.

RQ1. How do university students and faculty members perceive appropriate digital etiquette in student–faculty communication?

Communication Platforms

WhatsApp and email were the two platforms most frequently discussed by both groups, but the reasons given for using them were not always the same. Students often described WhatsApp in practical terms. It was seen as easy, familiar, and suitable when quick communication was needed. Several students gave very short and direct reasons for choosing it, such as its convenience and ease of use. Others distinguished between platforms according to the purpose of the communication. One student, for example, preferred email because WhatsApp felt more personal, while another stated that email was more appropriate for non-urgent matters and WhatsApp for urgent communication.

Faculty members also valued convenience, and several reported using WhatsApp because it allowed faster communication with students. However, email was more often associated with formality, record keeping, control over response time, and the maintenance of professional boundaries. Some faculty members therefore used more than one platform, choosing the channel according to the purpose of the message. Email was preferred for formal or individual communication, while WhatsApp groups, LMS platforms, or Google Classroom were used for announcements, urgent matters, course materials, and communication with an entire class.

The contrast was particularly visible in the way the two groups talked about WhatsApp. For students, its immediacy was generally an advantage:

“I prefer WhatsApp because it is more practical than other platforms.” (S7)

For some faculty members, however, the same immediacy could make it difficult to maintain a distinction between academic communication and personal availability. One faculty member explained why institutional email was preferred:

“I generally prefer my institutional email and the university’s official platforms. The main reason is to maintain personal boundaries and keep communication organised. Instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp and social media feel too personal to me and tend to remove the sense of time.” (FM8)

This did not amount to a simple division in which students preferred WhatsApp and faculty members preferred email. There was considerable variation within both groups. Some students explicitly preferred email because they regarded it as more formal, whereas several faculty members regularly used WhatsApp or class WhatsApp groups because of their speed and accessibility. Rather, the main difference concerned what participants expected a communication platform to provide. Students tended to emphasise ease and speed, while faculty members more frequently referred to formality, professional boundaries, traceability, and control over when communication took place.

Forms of Address

Forms of address emerged as an important part of how participants understood appropriate digital communication. Students generally associated appropriate address with respect and with maintaining the distance expected in student–faculty communication. Their responses suggested that greater care was needed when writing to a faculty member than in ordinary online conversation. This was reflected not only in the form of address itself, but also in the use of greetings and in the overall tone of the message. One student explained this distinction simply:

“It is not like talking face to face, so I pay extra attention to how I address the instructor and to being respectful.” (S11)

Faculty members placed similar importance on appropriate forms of address, but their responses provided more detail about what they expected a message to look like. Polite openings such as “Dear Professor,” “Hello,” or other appropriate greetings were viewed positively, particularly when they were followed by a clear introduction and a respectfully worded request. Some faculty members contrasted such messages with those that began immediately with a demand or question, without any greeting or indication of who the student was. One faculty member described the difference as follows:

“Messages that begin with a polite greeting such as “Dear Professor, I hope you are well,” where the student introduces themselves and explains their question properly, make the communication much more

pleasant. In contrast, receiving a one-line message with no greeting, written as if making a demand, can be discouraging.” (FM9)

There was therefore considerable agreement between the two groups on the importance of respectful address. The difference was mainly one of emphasis. Students tended to describe appropriate address as part of showing respect to a faculty member, whereas faculty members more often discussed it as one element of a complete and recognisable academic message. For them, a greeting, an appropriate form of address, the student’s identification, and a courteous closing could work together to establish the tone of the interaction. This expectation was also reflected in suggestions for university-wide communication guidelines, where appropriate openings and closings were explicitly mentioned as practices students should be introduced to.

Message Timing

Timing was one of the clearest areas in which participants connected digital etiquette with personal boundaries. Students commonly regarded daytime or working hours as the most appropriate period for contacting faculty members. Several explicitly referred to working hours, while others proposed their own time ranges, such as 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. or avoiding evening and late-night messages. At the same time, students did not all draw the boundary at the same point. Some considered early evening acceptable, and one participant regarded any time other than nighttime as reasonable.

One student expressed the more restrictive view clearly:

“I contact them between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. on weekdays. Unless I have to, I do not contact them outside those hours.” (S1)

Faculty responses similarly showed that the time at which a message was sent could affect whether it was regarded as appropriate. Late-night messages were mentioned as a behaviour that could make digital communication difficult, and some faculty members linked appropriate timing to clearer expectations about availability outside working hours and at weekends. One faculty member argued that expectations about timing should be made explicit rather than left for students to infer:

“I would put boundaries concerning time and expectations first. Clearly stating when communication should take place and how soon instructors can be expected to respond, particularly outside working hours or at weekends, would relieve a great deal of stress for both students and instructors.” (FM14)

The two groups therefore largely agreed that the timing of digital communication matters. What varied was where participants placed the boundary. Students proposed different acceptable time ranges, while faculty responses drew greater attention to the relationship between message timing and expectations of availability. In this sense, the issue was not simply whether a message could technically be sent at a particular hour, but whether sending it created an expectation that the faculty member should also be available to respond at that time.

Response Expectations

Expectations about response time varied considerably among students. Some expected a reply within a relatively short period, ranging from 15–30 minutes to a few hours, whereas others considered one or two days reasonable or preferred not to set a specific time limit at all. Several students explicitly acknowledged that faculty members might be busy and said that they were comfortable waiting until the recipient was available. Delayed responses nevertheless carried different meanings for different students. For some, they caused little concern unless the matter was urgent. For others, waiting produced frustration or uncertainty. One student described how a delay could lead to self-questioning:

“I usually get the response I need during working hours. When the reply is late, I automatically start wondering whether I said something wrong.” (S15)

Faculty members generally described their own response practices in terms of availability rather than a fixed response period. Some reported replying as soon as they saw a message, while others emphasised that the urgency and importance of the issue affected how quickly they responded. Their accounts also showed that differences in expectations became particularly visible when students interpreted a message being seen as an indication that a reply should follow immediately.

One faculty member gave a direct example:

“I reply as soon as I am available. Sometimes that is immediately, and sometimes it takes a few hours. There are times when I read a message but cannot reply, and students say, ‘You saw my message but didn’t answer.’” (FM17)

The responses therefore suggest a shared expectation that messages should not simply be ignored, but less agreement about what constitutes a reasonable response time. Importantly, the difference was not simply between students wanting immediate replies and faculty members wanting more time. Student responses themselves ranged from expectations of very rapid replies to considerable willingness to wait. The more noticeable tension concerned availability: digital platforms make it possible to see or receive a message

immediately, but participants did not necessarily interpret this accessibility in the same way. For some students, a delayed response could create uncertainty; for faculty members, the expectation of a rapid response could create a sense of being continuously available. One faculty member explicitly identified constantly messaging students and the expectation of continuous accessibility as particularly difficult aspects of digital communication.

Use of Emojis and Other Digital Cues

The use of emojis and other informal features of digital messaging was viewed less uniformly than issues such as respectful address or appropriate timing. Faculty members, in particular, differed in how they evaluated emojis. Some considered them inappropriate in student–faculty communication or felt that they created a negative impression, especially in more formal exchanges. Others were more accepting and did not regard occasional emoji use as a problem as long as it did not become excessive.

For some faculty members, the appropriateness of emojis also depended on the platform and the function they served. Emojis were seen as more natural in WhatsApp communication than in formal email and, when used sparingly, could help convey an emotional tone that might otherwise be missing from written communication. One faculty member explained:

“They can use emojis in WhatsApp messages. They help them express their feelings better, and I don’t find this strange.” (FM11)

At the same time, acceptance did not mean that all forms of emoji use were considered equally appropriate. The amount and tone of use mattered. Another faculty member described a single smile emoji as something that could soften an otherwise impersonal exchange, while regarding a message filled with emojis as overly familiar and inconsistent with the professional nature of the relationship. This distinction suggests that emojis themselves were not necessarily the issue; rather, participants evaluated them in relation to the platform, the degree of familiarity, and the overall tone of the message.

Student responses placed much less explicit emphasis on emojis. When describing what they paid attention to while writing to faculty members, students more often mentioned respectful language, wording, spelling, punctuation, clarity, and keeping an appropriate distance. In other words, the students’ accounts did not present emoji use as a central concern in the same way that some faculty responses did. Their attention was directed more broadly towards how the written message would be perceived.

The difference between the groups was therefore not a straightforward disagreement over whether emojis were acceptable. Faculty responses ranged from rejection to conditional acceptance, while students rarely singled emojis out as an important issue. Across the faculty accounts, however, a common boundary could still be seen: informal digital cues were more readily accepted when they remained limited and did not make the interaction appear excessively familiar. Thus, the perceived appropriateness of these cues depended less on their mere presence than on how, where, and to what extent they were used.

Voice Messages

Voice messages were another area in which participants did not share a single view. Student responses ranged from seeing no particular problem with voice messages to preferring that they not be used at all. One student stated that voice messages were acceptable alongside telephone communication and social media, whereas others explicitly said that they did not use them or would rather avoid them in communication with faculty members.

For some students, avoiding voice messages appeared to be part of maintaining a boundary in communication with faculty members. One student expressed this preference very directly: “I don’t think there should be voice messages.” (S10)

Faculty members showed similar variation, although reservations about voice messages were more clearly articulated in their responses. Some accepted them when a matter was urgent or would take too long to explain in writing, and one faculty member considered them acceptable as long as the form of address remained appropriate. Others preferred written communication and regarded voice messages as less suitable for academic interaction.

The reasons given for this preference went beyond formality. Written messages could be read quickly in different settings and could be returned to later, whereas listening to a voice message required an appropriate environment and could delay communication. One faculty member described both concerns:

“I don’t like sending voice messages myself, and I don’t find them professional. By their nature, voice messages feel more casual and personal. A written message can be read immediately in a meeting, class, or noisy environment, whereas listening to a voice message may require headphones or moving somewhere more suitable. In short, I prefer communication that is written and clear.” (FM20)

Other faculty responses similarly linked written communication to the ability to keep a record of what had been discussed. One participant noted that previous written exchanges could easily be revisited, whereas this traceability was reduced with voice messages.

Overall, neither group treated voice messages as universally acceptable or unacceptable. Their appropriateness depended on the situation, although faculty members provided more explicit reasons for preferring written communication. Urgency or difficulty explaining something in writing could make a voice message acceptable, but routine use was more likely to be associated with informality, reduced traceability, or practical inconvenience.

Writing Style and Level of Formality

Writing style was closely associated with respect in both groups. Students frequently referred to tone, spelling, punctuation, clarity, and the need to express themselves appropriately when contacting a faculty member. Their responses suggest that formality was not necessarily understood as using elaborate language; rather, appropriate communication involved being respectful and making the purpose of the message clear. Messages that were difficult to understand were also identified as a source of discomfort.

One student summarised this concern simply:

“I pay attention to my tone and spelling.” (S14)

Faculty members expressed similar expectations but described them in greater detail. Appropriate messages were expected to use respectful language, clear wording, appropriate spelling and punctuation, and a level of formality suited to an academic relationship. Some faculty members also mentioned structural features of email, such as using an informative subject line, introducing oneself, writing in complete sentences, and ending the message appropriately.

A recurring concern among faculty members was the transfer of everyday messaging habits into academic communication. Short, informal messages were not necessarily viewed negatively in themselves; indeed, concise communication could be practical. The problem arose when brevity was accompanied by a loss of clarity, appropriate form, or awareness of the academic context. One faculty member described this distinction particularly clearly:

“Sometimes expressing themselves briefly and clearly rather than using long, convoluted sentences can be practical. On the other hand, I see that students have difficulty distinguishing between everyday messaging language and the language used in academic or institutional communication.” (FM11)

This concern was also reflected in observations about email practices. Some faculty members reported receiving emails written as though they were instant messages, with empty subject lines or the entire message placed in the subject field. Others observed increasing use of abbreviations, social-media language, lower-case writing, and limited punctuation in academic messages.

Overall, students and faculty members largely agreed that respectful and understandable language mattered. The difference lay more in the level of detail with which they described appropriate writing. Students tended to refer broadly to respect, tone, spelling, and clarity, whereas faculty members articulated more specific expectations concerning message structure and the distinction between conversational and academic communication. Importantly, the faculty responses did not suggest that greater formality was always better. The central issue was whether the style of the message was appropriate to the academic context while remaining clear and natural.

Communication Boundaries

Communication boundaries were discussed by both groups in relation to the distinction between academic and personal communication. Students differed in where they drew this boundary. Some considered phone or WhatsApp communication acceptable but regarded social media as too personal, while others were comfortable with communication across different platforms as long as respect was maintained. Social media nevertheless appeared repeatedly as an area in which greater distance was expected. One student stated:

“A phone number is enough as a means of communication. Anything beyond that feels too personal to me. I think everything should have a boundary.” (S15)

This view was not shared by all students. Some saw no need for strict platform-based boundaries and instead placed the emphasis on respectful behaviour, suggesting that the nature of the interaction mattered more than the particular channel being used. Others explicitly identified social media itself as an important boundary. Faculty members also varied in their approaches to personal contact. Some shared their telephone numbers with students and used WhatsApp for course-related communication, while others preferred institutional channels because they allowed a clearer separation between professional and personal spaces. Social media was treated more cautiously than telephone or messaging contact. Some faculty members were willing to connect with students on social media only after the teaching relationship had ended, while others preferred not to use social media for student communication at all.

One faculty member explained this distinction clearly:

“I haven’t had any problems sharing my phone number with students. It is possible to set clear boundaries and maintain professional distance. However, I prefer not to communicate with students through social media because I think this can make it more difficult to separate personal and professional spaces. I postpone personal social media follow requests from students I would like to stay in contact with until after graduation.” (FM19)

Across the two groups, then, maintaining boundaries did not necessarily mean avoiding direct digital contact. Participants often accepted relatively immediate channels such as telephone or WhatsApp while still recognising limits on how and when they should be used. Social media was more likely to be associated with the personal sphere, although views were not uniform. The responses also suggest that boundaries were understood in more than one way: they concerned not only which platform could be used, but also the degree of familiarity, the timing of contact, and expectations of availability.

Taken together, the eight themes show that appropriate digital etiquette was not understood as a fixed set of rules shared uniformly by all participants. There was broad agreement around respect, clarity, appropriate timing, and some degree of professional distance, but participants differed in how these principles should be applied to particular platforms and practices. These patterns are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of Key Patterns Across Student and Faculty Responses

Theme	Students	Faculty members
Communication platforms	Emphasised convenience, speed, and accessibility; WhatsApp was frequently preferred, while email was associated with more formal communication.	Considered convenience but placed greater emphasis on formality, record keeping, professional boundaries, and the purpose of communication.
Forms of address	Associated appropriate address mainly with respect and maintaining suitable distance.	Expected respectful address as part of a complete message, often including a greeting, self-introduction, and appropriate closing.
Message timing	Generally favoured daytime or working hours, although views differed on the exact acceptable time range.	Emphasised appropriate timing together with boundaries concerning availability outside working hours and at weekends.
Response expectations	Expectations ranged from relatively quick replies to willingness to wait until the faculty member was available.	Response time depended on availability and urgency; expectations of immediate replies could create pressure.
Emojis and other digital cues	Focused more on tone, spelling, punctuation, and respectful wording than on emojis themselves.	Views on emojis ranged from avoidance to conditional acceptance depending on platform, frequency, and level of familiarity.
Voice messages	Views varied; some accepted voice messages, while others preferred not to use them with faculty members.	Often preferred written communication for reasons of professionalism, convenience, clarity, and traceability, while allowing voice messages in some situations.
Writing style and level of formality	Emphasised respectful tone, appropriate wording, spelling, and clarity.	Emphasised respectful and clear language as well as message structure and the distinction between everyday messaging and academic communication.
Communication boundaries	Varied in the boundaries they preferred, although social media was often regarded as more personal than other channels.	Varied in willingness to share personal contact channels but more often emphasised separating personal and professional communication.

Table 1 shows that the two groups were not positioned at opposite ends of digital etiquette expectations. In many areas, they shared similar underlying concerns, particularly respect, clarity, and appropriate distance. The differences were more apparent in how these principles were interpreted in practice, especially in relation to platform choice, availability, informal digital cues, and the boundary between personal and academic communication. These similarities and differences are examined more directly in relation to the second research question.

RQ2. In what ways do students' and faculty members' perceptions converge and diverge regarding digital etiquette in student–faculty communication?

Convergence and Divergence in Student and Faculty Perceptions

The comparison of the two groups revealed considerable common ground in their general understanding of appropriate digital communication. Respect was particularly prominent in the student responses, often accompanied by references to appropriate tone, clear wording, spelling, and attention to the time at which a message was sent. Faculty members expressed similar expectations, although they tended to describe them in more specific terms, including appropriate forms of address, clear message structure, and a distinction between everyday messaging and academic communication. Thus, the two groups largely agreed on the principles underlying appropriate communication even when they described them differently.

There was also broad agreement that digital communication should have some temporal boundaries. Students frequently referred to working hours or specified periods during the day as appropriate times for contacting faculty members. For example, one student limited contact to between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. on weekdays unless there was a particular need to communicate outside these hours. Faculty members similarly raised timing as an area in which expectations should be clear. The difference was less about whether timing mattered and more about what sending a message implied. Faculty responses placed greater emphasis on the possibility that continuous digital access could be interpreted as continuous availability.

More noticeable differences emerged in platform choice and the boundary between personal and academic communication. Many students valued WhatsApp because it was practical and easy to access, although this preference was not universal. Some students preferred email precisely because WhatsApp felt more personal, and others selected the platform according to the urgency or nature of the issue. Faculty members also used instant messaging, but their responses more often raised questions of professional distance, formality, and keeping academic communication separate from personal spaces. The difference was therefore not simply a preference for different platforms; it concerned what those platforms represented in the student–faculty relationship.

Response expectations showed a similar pattern. Student responses ranged widely, from expectations of a fairly quick reply to acceptance of waiting several days. Some students were not particularly troubled by a delay, while for others a delayed or absent response could create uncertainty. Faculty members, by contrast, more explicitly discussed the pressure associated with rapid response expectations. One faculty response linked expectations of quick replies with anxiety when no reply arrived and with repeated messaging. This suggests that the difference concerned not only the length of an acceptable response period but also the meaning attached to digital availability.

The groups were less clearly divided over informal practices such as emojis and voice messages. Views varied within each group, and neither practice was regarded as uniformly acceptable or unacceptable. The same was true of communication boundaries more generally. Some students were comfortable with several forms of direct contact, while others regarded social media or communication beyond a telephone number as too personal. These within-group differences are important because they show that student and faculty perspectives cannot be treated as two internally uniform positions.

Shared Guidelines as a Practical Response

The final interview question asked participants whether universities should establish common guidelines for digital communication between students and faculty members and, if so, what such guidelines should include. Responses to this question brought together several of the concerns that had emerged across the preceding themes. Among students who supported the idea, the suggestions were generally brief and focused on basic expectations such as respectful communication and appropriate contact hours. For example, one student identified “respect and working hours” as the main elements that should be included, while another regarded messaging hours as the most important issue.

Support for formal guidelines was not universal among students. Some questioned whether such rules were necessary at university level. One student stated that university students should already know how to communicate appropriately, while another preferred less rigid boundary and framed the problem in terms of mutual consideration rather than formal rules. These responses suggest that students did not necessarily reject appropriate communication norms, but differed in whether they believed those norms needed to be formally defined by the institution.

Faculty members who supported common guidelines tended to propose a more detailed framework. Their suggestions extended beyond general expectations of respectful behaviour to include the platforms through which students should make contact, appropriate communication hours, expected response periods, and examples of appropriate email formats. One faculty member summarised these expectations as follows:

“I think such a set of guidelines should be developed. The boundaries of the platforms through which students can communicate should be defined, communication hours should be specified, faculty response times should be established, and sample email formats should be provided.” (FM 6)

The responses to the final question therefore reinforced both the convergence and divergence identified elsewhere in the findings. There was common concern with making student–faculty communication respectful

and manageable, particularly in relation to timing. The main difference concerned the degree of formalisation participants considered necessary. Student suggestions tended to remain at the level of broad expectations, and some students saw little need for institutional rules. Faculty members who favoured guidelines were more likely to envisage explicit institutional expectations concerning channels, timing, response practices, and message format. Common guidelines, in this sense, were viewed by some participants not as a replacement for individual judgement but as a way of making expectations that might otherwise remain implicit more visible.

Overall, the strongest convergence concerned the underlying principles of respectful, clear, and appropriately timed communication. Divergence became more apparent when these principles had to be translated into everyday practices: which platform to use, how quickly a reply should be expected, how informal a message could be, and where professional availability should end. In this respect, the findings point less to disagreement over the importance of digital etiquette itself than to different interpretations of how its boundaries should operate in practice. Table 2 summarises these areas of convergence and divergence.

Table 2. Areas of Convergence and Divergence Between Students and Faculty Members

Theme	Convergence	Divergence
Communication platforms	Both groups recognised that platform choice could depend on the purpose and urgency of communication.	Students more often emphasised convenience and speed; faculty members more often raised formality, professional distance, and record keeping.
Forms of address	Both groups associated appropriate address with respect.	Faculty members articulated more specific expectations concerning greetings, introductions, and message structure.
Message timing	Both groups generally regarded timing as an important part of appropriate communication.	Students differed in the hours they considered acceptable; faculty members placed greater emphasis on limits to availability outside working hours.
Response expectations	Both groups recognised that immediate responses were not always possible.	Students varied considerably in how quickly they expected a reply, while faculty members more often described pressure associated with expectations of rapid availability.
Emojis and other digital cues	Both groups showed awareness that the tone of digital messages matters.	Students rarely treated emojis as a central issue; faculty views ranged from avoidance to conditional acceptance depending on context and degree of use.
Voice messages	Neither group regarded voice messages as universally appropriate or inappropriate.	Faculty members more explicitly associated written communication with professionalism, convenience, and traceability.
Writing style and level of formality	Both groups valued respectful, clear, and understandable messages.	Faculty members more often distinguished between everyday messaging practices and academic or institutional communication.
Communication boundaries	Both groups recognised a need for some degree of distance or limits in digital interaction.	Students varied in what they considered too personal, while faculty members more often framed boundaries in terms of separating professional and personal spaces.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that students and faculty members broadly agreed on the principles of appropriate digital communication, particularly respect, clarity, appropriate timing, and professional distance. The differences became more visible when these principles were applied to specific practices such as forms of address, platform choice, response expectations, informal cues, and personal boundaries. This supports approaches that view politeness and digital etiquette as context-sensitive rather than fixed sets of rules (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Soler-Costa et al., 2021; Shea, 1994; Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

This pattern was particularly clear in message construction. Students generally referred to respect, tone, spelling, and clarity, while faculty members described more specific expectations concerning greetings, forms of address, self-identification, subject lines, and closings. Earlier research similarly shows that such linguistic and structural choices influence perceptions of appropriateness in student–faculty communication (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Bolkan & Holmgren, 2012; Chejnová, 2014; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Merrison et al., 2012). The present findings suggest that students may understand the general need to be respectful without

necessarily sharing the same expectations about how an academic message should be structured, a distinction also reflected in research on email appropriateness and style (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2023; Lewin-Jones & Mason, 2014).

Platform choice, timing, and response expectations were closely connected. Students often valued WhatsApp for speed and accessibility, whereas faculty members more frequently associated email and institutional channels with formality, traceability, and professional distance. However, both groups varied in their preferences. Earlier research has shown that digital communication expands student access to faculty and serves different academic purposes (Brunner et al., 2008; Duran et al., 2005; Kelly et al., 2001; Waldeck et al., 2001). The present findings indicate that this increased accessibility does not necessarily produce shared expectations about availability. A message can be delivered immediately without requiring an immediate response. This distinction is consistent with the different communicative constraints and affordances associated with mediated interaction (Clark & Brennan, 1991; Daft & Lengel, 1986; Herring, 2007; Herring et al., 2013).

A similar contextual pattern appeared in the use of emojis and voice messages. Neither practice produced a clear student–faculty divide. Faculty members differed in their acceptance of emojis, while students focused more on the overall tone of messages. This is compatible with work showing that emoticons can shape pragmatic meaning and interpersonal impressions rather than functioning simply as decorative cues (Dresner & Herring, 2010; Marder et al., 2020). Voice messages were likewise evaluated according to context. Faculty members more often preferred written communication because it was easier to access, revisit, and document. These findings support broader CMC research showing that communicative behaviour develops in relation to the affordances of particular media rather than simply reproducing face-to-face interaction online (Walther, 1992, 1996).

Communication boundaries further showed that appropriateness was relational rather than platform-specific. Some participants accepted WhatsApp or personal phone numbers, while social media was more often treated as part of the personal sphere. This is consistent with research showing that online norms depend on both perceived social expectations and the nature of the relationship between participants (Baym, 2015; Linek & Ostermaier-Grabow, 2018). Importantly, neither students nor faculty members formed internally uniform groups. Some students preferred formal channels and greater distance, while some faculty members were comfortable with relatively informal practices. This within-group variation reinforces the idea that digital etiquette is negotiated across roles, relationships, and communication contexts.

The final interview question adds a practical dimension to these findings. Participants who supported university-wide guidelines commonly referred to communication hours, respectful language, appropriate channels, response expectations, and message format. Faculty members tended to favour more detailed institutional guidance, whereas student suggestions were generally broader and some students questioned whether formal rules were needed at all. This difference mirrors the wider pattern in the data: faculty members more often articulated etiquette through specific conventions, while students more often framed it through general principles of respectful behaviour. Rather than supporting rigid rules, the findings suggest that limited institutional guidance could make otherwise implicit expectations more visible while still allowing communication to remain context-sensitive (Lewin-Jones & Mason, 2014; Linek & Ostermaier-Grabow, 2018; Shea, 1994; Soler-Costa et al., 2021).

Overall, the main challenge in student–faculty digital communication appears to lie not in a lack of shared values but in different interpretations of how those values should operate across platforms and situations. Respect, clarity, and consideration were widely shared expectations, but their practical meaning varied according to medium, timing, purpose, and relationship. Digital etiquette in higher education may therefore be better understood as the negotiation of common principles across changing communication environments rather than adherence to a single, universally understood set of rules.

V. CONCLUSION

This study examined university students' and faculty members' perceptions of digital etiquette in student–faculty communication, with particular attention to the points at which their expectations converged and diverged. The findings revealed substantial common ground between the two groups. Respectful language, clarity, appropriate timing, and professional distance were widely regarded as important, suggesting that students and faculty members do not necessarily approach digital communication with fundamentally different expectations. Differences became more apparent when these general principles were applied to everyday practices, including platform choice, response time, levels of formality, the use of emojis and voice messages, and communication through more personal digital spaces. Variation within each group further showed that appropriate digital communication cannot be understood simply as a contrast between student and faculty preferences.

Taken together, the findings highlight the contextual nature of digital etiquette in higher education. The appropriateness of a particular communication practice depends not only on the message itself but also on the

platform, timing, purpose, relationship, and expectations of those involved. Participants' views on university-wide guidelines also suggest that making some of these expectations more explicit may help reduce uncertainty, although not all participants considered formal rules necessary. Rather than prescribing detailed rules for every interaction, universities may benefit from providing general guidance on communication channels, appropriate contact times, response expectations, message conventions, and professional boundaries. Such guidance could provide a shared point of reference while allowing sufficient flexibility for the different contexts in which student–faculty digital communication takes place.

VI. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the participants were drawn from a single state university in Türkiye. Although the findings provide insight into how students and faculty members perceive digital etiquette within this context, these perceptions may vary across institutions and educational settings. Future research could therefore examine student–faculty digital etiquette across different universities and institutional contexts.

Second, the study focused on participants' self-reported experiences and perceptions rather than their actual digital communication practices. While this approach provided insight into how students and faculty members understand and evaluate appropriate communication, it did not allow for direct examination of how these expectations are reflected in everyday interaction. Future studies could complement participants' accounts with analyses of authentic digital communication, such as email exchanges or messaging conversations, while taking appropriate ethical considerations into account.

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Appendix A. Interview Questions for Students

1. What does appropriate digital communication with a faculty member mean to you? Could you give an example? In your opinion, what is the most important aspect of appropriate digital communication?
2. Which digital platforms do you usually prefer when communicating with your faculty members? Why? In what situations does your preference change?
3. What do you pay attention to when writing a message to a faculty member?
4. In your opinion, what is an appropriate time to send a message to a faculty member?
5. How long do you expect to wait for a response from a faculty member? How do you feel if the response is delayed?
6. What kinds of behaviours in digital communication make you uncomfortable? Could you describe an experience, if any?

7. In your opinion, what boundaries should exist in digital communication between students and faculty members?
8. Do you think universities should establish common guidelines for digital communication between students and faculty members? If so, what do you think such guidelines should include?

Appendix B. Interview Questions for Faculty Members

1. What does digital etiquette mean to you? Why do you think digital etiquette is important in student–faculty communication?
2. Which digital platforms do you usually prefer when communicating with your students? What are the main reasons for your preference?
3. What aspects of students' digital messages do you pay the most attention to? What influences your evaluation?
4. At what times or on which days do you think it is appropriate for students to contact you? Have you established any personal boundaries regarding this?
5. How quickly do you think it is appropriate to respond to students' messages? Have you experienced differences between your own expectations and those of your students? Could you give an example?
6. What are your views on students sending you voice messages? In what situations do you consider this appropriate or inappropriate?
7. How do you approach personal boundaries in digital communication with students? What are your views on sharing your phone number or communicating through social media?
8. What student behaviours in digital communication do you find most positive, and which do you find most challenging? Could you give examples?
9. Have you noticed any changes in the way students communicate digitally in recent years? If so, how would you describe these changes?
10. Do you think universities should establish common guidelines for digital communication between students and faculty members? If so, what do you think should be included in such guidelines?

Ayça Bakıner