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FULL PAPER

Digital Etiquette in Academic Communication Principles, Challenges, and Impact on Student Engagement

Abstract:

This paper aims to highlight the concept of digital etiquette and its significance in online education environments by exploring the behavioral and communicative principles that ensure mutual respect between learners and instructors within digital platforms. It discusses the challenges associated with digital interaction, including the absence of nonverbal cues, cultural variation, and the generational gap between digital natives and digital immigrants. The paper is grounded in Social Presence Theory, which illustrates how appropriate digital behavior fosters human connection and a sense of belonging in virtual classrooms.

The study concludes that promoting digital etiquette through institutional policies and training programs enhances the quality of learning, reduces negative behaviors, and supports more effective and inclusive digital educational environments.

Keywords:

Digital Etiquette, Online Education, Netiquette, Student Engagement, Digital Citizenship, Social Presence Theory

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1. Introduction to Digital Etiquette

- In today's digital world, etiquette is still important but is evolving to adapt to new ways of communication - Digital etiquette involves understanding manners, norms, morals, and legal aspects of digital interactions - It demands its own distinct set of rules different from traditional face-to-face interactions - Established digital etiquette norms have shifted and should be regularly revisited and questioned - Educators must establish inclusive learning environments with communication and collaboration practices that suit their community's norms - Communication is now heavily intertwined with technology, impacting how people communicate and teach - Tools and platforms used for communication also influence the norms and standards for communication - For example, the ability to edit and revise text can impact how people respond to others' words - Simple elements like subject lines and bullet points in emails have larger implications for organization and logic - It is important to consider how digital tools construct or inform communication practices - It's important to consider how the tools we use impact the interactions we facilitate - We must also consider how we communicate these choices to others - It's crucial to think about how our educational or work community navigates digital territory issues - Reflect on the choices made regarding the relationship between the tools we use and the interactions we facilitate. (Al-Rahmi et al.2020)

1.1. Definition and Importance

Digital etiquette online is a vast and intricate realm, governed by a set of rules distinct from those dictating offline communication. Digital etiquette encompasses the principles and guidelines one ought to adhere to when engaging with digital media platforms, be it the vast expanse of the internet or the realm of social media. These rules extend to various aspects of digital interaction, ranging from online conversations in chat rooms to the exchange of personal messages. It is only logical to recognize that practicing politeness and demonstrating good manners in this new virtual world is merely an extension of one's inherent character. If a person possesses a disposition of courtesy and politeness in their everyday life, it is highly probable that these qualities will seamlessly translate into their online interactions. By fostering a culture of good netiquette within online learning environments, participants are likely to engage in more meaningful and productive conversations, benefiting from enhanced collaborative efforts (Culpeper & Tantucci, 2021). The principles governing digital etiquette not only serve as a compass but also as a roadmap for individuals navigating the vast and ever-evolving digital landscape. As technology continues to advance, it becomes increasingly important for individuals to navigate the digital realm with grace and empathy. Understanding the intricacies of digital etiquette is essential for fostering positive and constructive online environments. By embracing digital etiquette, individuals can promote inclusivity, respect, and open-mindedness in their interactions. In this new era of digital connectivity, it is crucial to recognize the impact of our words and actions online. Every message we send, every comment we make, and every post we share contributes to the overall digital atmosphere. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to engage in thoughtful and considerate online communication. This means refraining from harmful or offensive language, actively listening to others' perspectives, and treating everyone with respect and dignity. (Zhao et al., 2020)Moreover, digital etiquette extends beyond individual interactions and encompasses the broader social implications of our online behavior. It calls for responsible online citizenship, which includes respecting others' privacy, verifying facts before sharing information, and

promoting digital literacy. Being mindful of our online presence and the repercussions of our actions can help create a safer and more harmonious digital society. In conclusion, digital etiquette is a fundamental aspect of our online interactions. It serves as a guide for navigating the complexities of the digital world, promoting respectful and meaningful engagement. By practicing digital etiquette and embracing the principles it encompasses, individuals can contribute to a positive and inclusive online culture. Let us strive to be conscientious digital citizens, fostering an environment where empathy, understanding, and collaboration thrive. (Blau et al., 2020)

Whether you're using the telephone, email, chat, blog, or social networking sites to communicate with friends, family members, or classmates, there are certain behaviors one should always avoid in order to keep it respectful. It's a way to practice good digital citizenship. In many cases, polite online behavior encourages people to engage in pleasant conversations and thoughtful interactions. Setting an example of politeness and digital etiquette can foster collaboration and a greater sense of community among users. It gives a general understanding to everyone of what to expect from the users in a virtual environment. This is sometimes known as common courtesy, which is expected in all social online environments. Students today are equipped to create a professional netizen presence both inside and outside of class and also encourage a positive culture of digital etiquette among their peers. By emphasizing the importance of treating others with respect and promoting positive interactions, students can contribute to a more inclusive and harmonious online community. Moreover, developing a strong sense of digital etiquette can be beneficial not only academically but also in the professional world. Employers value individuals who can communicate effectively and respectfully in digital spaces, and being mindful of one's online behavior can help cultivate a positive personal brand. As technology continues to evolve and shape our lives, honing our digital citizenship skills becomes increasingly important. By embracing the principles of digital etiquette, we can create safer and more respectful online environments for everyone. Let us strive to be responsible digital citizens and make a positive impact in the digital realm (Wadden et al.2021) (Lee & Lee, 2022).

2. Online Education: A Growing Trend

While once considered a mere extension of face-to-face learning, online education has fast become a strategic and indispensable component of learning for numerous institutions of higher education. Recent statistics show that online education continues to grow at an astonishing rate, surpassing all expectations. For example, a staggering 1 in 6 students is now enrolled in at least one online course, highlighting the undeniable shift towards virtual education. Furthermore, it is eye-opening to note that more than 6.7 million Americans actively participated in online courses in the year 2013 alone, signifying a paradigm shift in the realm of education. Moreover, an impressive 77% of academic professionals firmly believe that online education is at least equal to, if not superior to, face-to-face instruction, validating its significance and efficacy. (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021) The upgraded Campus Computing Survey, which meticulously analyzes the current state of education technology, has highlighted a pivotal change in regards to online learning. The report characterizes online learning as a strategic investment, emphasizing the indispensable role it plays in shaping the future of education. Notably, the field of online education has matured, evolving with remarkable speed. The technologies, tools, and services required for online education have now become readily available and standardized, paving the way for its imminent rise to prominence. As one insightful researcher aptly stated, "We're ideal for primetime." (Chen et al., 2020)

Several fundamental factors underpin the exponential growth of online education. Technological advancements have revolutionized the delivery software, rendering it more seamless, efficient, and user-friendly. Additionally, improved broadband connectivity and an array of delivery options have further propelled the expansion of online education, offering students unparalleled accessibility and convenience. Institutions have embraced the capacity for alternative means of administration, allowing for greater adaptability and customization to meet the ever-changing educational needs of both traditional and non-traditional learners. Furthermore, the increased competition provided through worldwide educational offerings has created a stimulating environment, fostering innovation and driving improvements in online education. (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023) At the student end, the demands of nontraditional students for education without limitations of place or time have decisively influenced the surge of online learning. This phenomenon can be traced back to the late 1970s when distance education began to gain traction. As the new World Wide Web and social media gained momentum, distance education has undergone a significant transformation, becoming increasingly social and interactive. The advent of various social media tools has enabled campuses to connect with students effortlessly, creating a seamless, interconnected learning experience. This trend shows no signs of slowing down; on the contrary, it continues to expand rapidly, drawing together students and educators in a vibrant virtual community. (Xie et al. 2020) In conclusion, online education has transcended its initial perception as a mere extension of traditional learning. It has emerged as an indispensable and pivotal component of higher education, shaping the way learning is delivered and experienced. The exponential growth of online education can be attributed to a multitude of driving forces, including technological advancements, improved connectivity, institutional adaptability, and the changing demands and expectations of students. As we embrace the transformative power of online education, it is essential to recognize its immense potential in revolutionizing the future of learning, enabling students to access education anytime, anywhere, and empowering them to reach their full potential.

2.1. Navigating Benefits, Challenges, and Critical Gaps

The ease of digital communications, while offering significant benefits, has simultaneously increased their susceptibility to misuse, thereby necessitating clear digital etiquette guidelines, commonly referred to as 'netiquette.' Online education epitomizes this duality by presenting substantial opportunities and notable challenges that underscore the importance of digital etiquette. Among its primary benefits is the flexibility afforded to learners, allowing access to educational materials across various formats and timeframes suitable to diverse learning styles and personal schedules (Esterhazy et al., 2021). However, digital etiquette in these educational contexts faces multiple complexities and critical gaps. Cultural variations in norms regarding politeness, respect, and communication styles frequently cause misunderstandings among users from differing backgrounds (Gunawardena et al., 2009). Additionally, generational differences contribute significantly to disparities in digital communication behaviors; digital natives often prefer informal, rapid interactions, while digital immigrants may favor formal and structured communication, leading to friction or confusion in educational settings (Prensky, 2001). The rapid advancement and emergence of new digital platforms further complicate the establishment and standardization of etiquette guidelines, perpetuating ongoing gaps in adherence and understanding (Ribble & Park, 2022). Compounding these issues is the absence of structured digital etiquette training

programs, causing reliance on informal and inconsistent learning methods that can unintentionally encourage inappropriate online behaviors. Addressing these identified challenges comprehensively is vital for cultivating inclusive, respectful, and effective digital communication environments in education (Clark & Mayer, 2023; Ahmed et al, 2024).

3. Understanding Digital Etiquette in the Context of Online Education

Digital Etiquette and Its Role in Online Education: Nurturing Courtesy in the Virtual Classroom In today's digital age, where online education is rapidly gaining popularity, it is essential to acknowledge the significance of digital etiquette. With e-learning taking the forefront, it becomes crucial to foster a sense of courtesy and respect within the virtual classroom. Digital etiquette plays a pivotal role in creating a harmonious and productive online learning environment, ensuring that all participants can fully benefit from this innovative approach to education. Embracing digital etiquette entails understanding and adhering to a set of guidelines and practices specifically tailored for the online realm. Just as in traditional educational settings, respectful and considerate behavior is essential for a smooth learning experience. However, the digital landscape presents a unique set of challenges and demands particular attention to ensure a positive and constructive virtual classroom. (Hignasari & Wijaya, 2020) Firstly, one must practice active listening in online education. This involves giving undivided attention to fellow participants, instructors, and course material. Additionally, utilizing appropriate language and tone when communicating digitally is of utmost importance. The absence of nonverbal cues in online interactions renders written language as the primary mode of communication, making it crucial to be mindful of word choice, tone, and context. Another key aspect of digital etiquette is maintaining professionalism within the virtual classroom. This includes refraining from engaging in disruptive behaviors such as side conversations, multitasking, or sharing irrelevant content. Encouraging collaborative discussions, respecting differing opinions, and recognizing the value of diverse perspectives are also vital to foster a supportive learning environment. (Neuwirth et al.2021) Online education does not exempt individuals from the social rules of engagement. Respecting privacy and confidentiality, obtaining necessary permissions, and acknowledging intellectual property rights are pillars of digital etiquette. Furthermore, being mindful of one's online presence and portraying oneself in a respectful and responsible manner is crucial for building meaningful connections in the online learning community. Digital etiquette is not solely the responsibility of students—the role of instructors and educational institutions is vital as well. Instructors must lead by example, effectively communicate expectations, and provide guidance on the dos and don'ts of online interactions. Similarly, institutions must establish clear policies and guidelines regarding digital etiquette, ensuring a consistent and supportive learning environment for all participants. (O'Keefe et al., 2020) (Bender, 2023) (Zhou et al., 2020) In conclusion, the importance of digital etiquette in online education cannot be overlooked. As this mode of learning continues to expand and evolve, it is crucial for each participant, be it a student or an instructor, to embrace and uphold digital etiquette principles. By nurturing courtesy, respect, and professionalism within the virtual classroom, we empower ourselves and others to engage fully in the transformative world of online education.

Understanding the importance of digital etiquette as it applies to online education cannot be overstated. Etiquette, after all, serves as established principles that ensure we interact with others in a polite, considerate, respectful, and inclusive manner. These principles have the potential to positively shape and

nurture interactions between students and instructors. They accomplish this by reminding us to be attentive to the feelings and experiences of others, especially in virtual forums that present challenges and distances in confirming tone and intention. For example, etiquette asks us to consider the talents and perspectives of others when we are working as part of a collective in an online chat. Even if what they say doesn't align with your own opinions or perspectives, and even if you strongly disagree, the rules of etiquette suggest that you should avoid disparaging, rude, or disrespectful comments that would serve to alienate that individual online. (Ribble & Park, 2022)

Online educational environments should resonate with the principles of digital etiquette. They must show respect by acknowledging that diverse perspectives of co-learners and others in the virtual commons have value. To accomplish these goals, digital etiquette should be at the core of the mission. Polite, respectful, and thoughtful dialogue must be made part of the lexicon here - a system of mutual kindness, trust, and respect that encourages participation, creation, and innovation in online learning communities. The following scenarios illustrate the ways in which the above three principles play out in eLearning: in email and online discussions, during teleconferencing sessions, and even in conferencing software or webinars. In the end, the principles of digital etiquette can help create the kind of online environment that supports the success of learners and the mission of the university.

3.1. Key Principles and Guidelines

The proper conduct in online courses entails various principles and guidelines: (Clark & Mayer, 2023)

1. Be clear in your communications. Write and speak clearly about the expectations and requirements of tasks. Be explicit in your directions and communications in online postings. Ensure that all instructions are clear and easy to understand for online learners.

2. Mind your manner. Demonstrate to your instructor and fellow students respect and an air of professionalism. In online education, it is important to adhere to key principles and guidelines for digital etiquette. This helps maintain a respectful and professional environment for everyone involved.

3. Be mindful of tone. It's easy for our tone to be misunderstood in electronic communication. To prevent misunderstandings, word your communication in a polite and respectful manner. When discussing topics related to online education, it is important to remember to be clear and concise in your communication. Avoid using ambiguous language that could lead to misunderstandings.

4. Use correct language. Electronic communications include reading students' and instructors' posted messages. Electronically posting written messages is one of the primary ways to communicate in each class. So, present your ideas in a well-organized and coherent fashion. When discussing digital etiquette in online education, it is important to consider key principles and guidelines to ensure a respectful and productive learning environment. One key principle is to always be mindful of your tone and language when communicating with others online.

5. Be mindful of schedules. Keep outside deadlines in mind when coordinating group project meetings, so as not to conflict with another group member's class schedules or obligations. Some key principles to keep in mind when coordinating group project meetings include setting clear goals and expectations, communicating effectively, and being respectful of others' time.

Being an active contributor in the learning process serves to enhance the overall quality of teaching and learning within a course, thereby fostering a captivating and intellectually stimulating environment that promotes cooperative learning. Through the exchange of valuable feedback amongst peers, individuals can identify areas for improvement and gain a deeper understanding of the practical applicability of their newly acquired knowledge. Within group settings, it is vital to maintain these fundamental concepts, as they contribute to the creation of an optimal learning environment that encourages active participation and engagement. In the context of online classes, demonstrating active involvement and contribution becomes even more significant, as it showcases to both colleagues and professors your continued dedication and commitment despite physical separation. For instructors, receiving individual emails from students serves as a valuable tool for gauging the effectiveness of their instructional materials in a non-traditional classroom setup. By providing constructive responses in online discussion boards, students further contribute to the collective learning experience, as the valuable insights they offer can assist fellow students in addressing questions raised by instructors. Moreover, it aids in framing comprehensive and thoughtful responses to other ongoing discussions within the weekly topic threads, thereby enriching the overall knowledge exchange within the virtual learning community. (Ahmed et al.2024)

The following table summarizes the key principles of digital etiquette and their manifestations of adherence and violation:

Principle	Manifestations of Adherence	Manifestations of Violation
Respect	- Using polite and courteous language- Valuing diverse opinions	- Using offensive or rude language- Engaging in digital bullying
Privacy	- Protecting personal privacy and others'- Asking permission before sharing personal data	- Sharing private information without consent- Violating others' privacy
Responsibility	- Taking responsibility for shared content- Sharing meaningful and accurate content	- Spreading rumors or false information- Ignoring the consequences of sharing inappropriate content
Integrity	- Crediting sources and respecting intellectual property rights- Avoiding plagiarism	- Stealing others' work without attribution- Publishing content without proper source citation
Cybersecurity	- Using strong, secure passwords- Avoiding suspicious links and regularly updating software	- Neglecting cybersecurity practices- Exposing oneself or others to digital risks
Digital Empathy	- Practicing empathy and understanding online- Being mindful of others' feelings	- Ignoring others' feelings and responding harshly- Engaging in cyberbullying and emotional abuse
Professionalism	- Communicating clearly and professionally online- Maintaining punctuality in responses	- Using informal or inappropriate language in professional contexts- Delayed responses or ignoring important messages
Self-Control	- Avoiding impulsive and emotional responses- Managing emotions effectively online	- Reacting impulsively or angrily- Getting involved unnecessarily in online conflicts
Equality & Non-discrimination	- Avoiding discriminatory or biased language- Respecting diversity in opinions, culture, gender, and race	- Using discriminatory or biased language against individuals or groups- Practicing racism or prejudice online
Academic & Scientific Interaction	- Engaging respectfully in academic discussions- Providing constructive and evidence-based feedback- Crediting academic and research contributions clearly- Encouraging collaborative research and respectful debates	- Engaging in aggressive academic arguments- Diminishing or undermining others' academic efforts- Plagiarizing or falsifying academic information- Ignoring collaborative and ethical research standards

3.2. Cultural Considerations in Digital Etiquette

Digital etiquette is not a one-size-fits-all framework; it is heavily shaped by cultural and social norms that vary across communities and regions. What is considered respectful or appropriate digital behavior in one context may be perceived differently in another. For instance, direct communication styles may be valued in Western educational systems, while indirect, more formal expressions are preferred in Middle Eastern or Asian cultures. Therefore, promoting digital etiquette requires a culturally sensitive approach that takes into account students' linguistic, social, and generational backgrounds. Universities should consider embedding digital communication guidelines that reflect their students' cultural values and expectations, fostering more inclusive and respectful online learning environments.

4. Impact of Digital Etiquette on Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes

Adhering to digital etiquette, or netiquette principles, can have a long-lasting and profound impact on both a student's level of engagement and their overall learning outcomes. In the ever-evolving online classroom, following digital etiquette not only promotes effective and efficient communication and collaboration among students but is equally important for facilitating harmonious and respectful interactions where students feel their contributions are genuinely valued and appreciated. It is crucial to note that motivation plays a pivotal role in predicting student engagement, and extensive research demonstrates that students immersed in a positive and supportive learning environment (characterized by respectful and disaffection-free interactions) are not only more prone to being motivated to succeed academically but also exhibit higher attendance rates. Moreover, numerous studies have unequivocally shown that digital etiquette can noticeably manifest in both teachers' and students' academic performance, providing compelling evidence of its profound influence on the educational journey. (Reguera & Lopez, 2021)

Good digital behavior achieves good outcomes. The following case studies recount students who transitioned to progress well after their instructors effectively moderated online classroom behavior. Students were experiencing difficulties at the beginning of their online studies, with students being abrasive and unkind, which was affecting the learning processes of all students. However, as preventative moderators stepped in, behavior improved significantly, the majority of the students started posting respectfully and supporting each other's learning journey. Consequently, their marks had increased as evidence of their enhanced understanding and application of the lessons. These are clear and remarkable examples that emphasize the transformative power of digital etiquette in fostering a positive educational environment. Finally, in addition to promoting positive learning environments, practicing and upholding digital etiquette principles can play a crucial role in reducing the risk of cyber harassment, including cyberbullying and libel, ultimately contributing to a safer and more inclusive online space for all users (Gabielli et al.2021).

4.1. Practical Evidence of Digital Etiquette Impact

In a case study, a science student who followed a "rudimentary form of netiquette" in discussions and emailing early in an indigenous learning community was requested by her elders to not use the "public

discussion forum" because of the inappropriate words she was using in her discussion postings, and she soon stopped emailing her instructors altogether. She failed the course, but the following term, the student retook the course using a different email, rekindled relationships with family and community members, and did all of her assignments. "She continued to engage in discussion and group work with her classmates" and passed the course. In his work with students online, it was found that teaching students netiquette had a significant impact on their classroom interactions and increased their learning success. In a 1999 Pilgrim sorghum marketing course, students who practiced good netiquette techniques and exhibited good netiquette in their papers accumulated more points than students who practiced good netiquette techniques but did not exhibit good netiquette, who in turn accumulated more points than students who practiced neither good netiquette nor netiquette techniques. (Soler-Costa et al.2021)

In an educational ethics course, students who used email to communicate grew tired of reading trivia and of mass email, so they "stopped checking email, clicking off after a sentence, one-word answer, or invitation to a chat room." In surveys, students indicated it is "too easy for other students to be rude in anonymous ways" and "email had a, 'Hey, professor! Look at me! I have an email address because I am modern and forward thinking' kind of vibe that students both resented and reveled in." Paragraphs of guidance presented earlier helped participants in a distance education course think about how to behave in the online classroom, though they also said the information could be intimidating. Teachers, students, and experts on cybernetiquette acknowledge that writing a message in all caps indicates shouting, but that not all-caps shouting qualifies as "yelling" and is therefore inappropriate, annoying, and more predictable than shouting itself. Studies of these results also include research on the authors of some of the works cited, and analysis of related ancillary research, approaches, and literature. Challenges in these studies reveal that practitioners often need to spend time and resources on reallocating work, and can even change informal practices before implementing new guidelines, strategies, and recommendations. (Colenbrander et al., 2020)

5. Conclusion and Practical Recommendations

The increasing reliance on digital learning has made digital etiquette an essential pillar of effective and inclusive online education. Throughout this paper, we have explored the principles, challenges, and cultural nuances that shape respectful and mindful communication in virtual classrooms. When educators and students practice appropriate digital behavior, educational environments evolve into spaces characterized by empathy, professionalism, and mutual respect.

Digital etiquette, or netiquette, enhances student engagement by fostering clarity, reducing misunderstandings, and encouraging participation. As online learning continues to grow, adherence to these principles not only supports learning outcomes but also contributes to a safer, more inclusive digital space.

5.1. Practical Recommendations

- **For Institutions:**

Integrate digital etiquette guidelines into academic policies and orientation programs. Offer training workshops that address communication styles across cultures and generations.

- **For Instructors:**

Model respectful digital behavior, provide feedback on students' online communication, and foster open discussion about digital expectations.

- **For Students:**

Practice active listening, use appropriate tone and language, and be mindful of cultural and generational diversity in communication.

By institutionalizing digital etiquette education, universities can cultivate digital citizens who are prepared to engage ethically, respectfully, and effectively in the online academic sphere.

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