



## **Nurturing Social Trust through Students' Digital Communication Ethics: Sustainable Strengthening Based on Digital Culture**

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### **Abstract**

Digital transformation in higher education expands students' academic communication while also presenting challenges to digital ethics. This study aims to analyze the strengthening of digital communication ethics based on digital culture and its contribution to the formation of social trust. Using a qualitative approach and constructivist grounded theory design, data were obtained through interviews, digital observations, and document analysis. The results show the separation of personal and academic spaces, ethics through reprimands and role models, negotiation of norms across various platforms, and the formation of social trust through consistent communication. The novelty of this study lies in the "corrective habituation based on digital culture" model, which explains the internalization of communication through correction, reflection, habituation, and role models until it becomes a sustainable campus culture. These findings expand the study of digital ethics from a knowledge perspective to a continuous socio-cultural process.

**Keywords:** social trust; ethics; digital communication; students; sustainability; digital culture.

### ***Abstrak***

*Transformasi digital di perguruan tinggi memperluas komunikasi akademik mahasiswa sekaligus menghadirkan tantangan etika digital. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis penguatan etika komunikasi digital berbasis digital culture dan kontribusinya terhadap pembentukan social trust. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif dan desain grounded theory konstruktivis, data diperoleh melalui wawancara, observasi digital, dan analisis dokumen. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya pemisahan ruang personal dan akademik, pembelajaran etika melalui teguran dan keteladanan, negosiasi norma di berbagai platform, serta terbentuknya social trust melalui komunikasi yang konsisten. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada model “corrective habituation based on digital culture”, yang menjelaskan internalisasi etika komunikasi melalui koreksi, refleksi, habituasi, dan keteladanan hingga menjadi budaya kampus yang berkelanjutan. Temuan ini memperluas kajian etika digital dari perspektif pengetahuan menuju proses sosial-budaya yang berkesinambungan.*

***Kata Kunci:*** kepercayaan sosial; etika; komunikasi digital; mahasiswa berkelanjutan.

#### **A. Introduction**

Digital transformation has changed how universities establish academic relationships. Communication that previously relied primarily on face-to-face interaction has increasingly shifted to platform-based spaces such as WhatsApp, email, learning management systems (LMS), and academic social media. As a result, the quality of students' digital communication can no longer be understood merely as a technical matter. It has become part of academic culture, university social responsibility, and digital citizenship practices that influence trust, engagement, and the effectiveness of learning interactions. In this context, digital communication ethics is important because it determines how students position themselves, interpret situations, use language, respect time, and manage their digital footprints in relationships with lecturers and institutions (Ali et al., 2023; Li, 2024; Petre et al., 2025).

This phenomenon is not only global; it is also visible in local university contexts. At Universitas Muhammadiyah Mataram (UMMat), a 2025 preliminary study involving interviews with five lecturers of Pancasila Education showed that many students still contacted lecturers through WhatsApp without considering appropriate timing, without introducing their identity, and with a questioning style that appeared directive. This situation was especially common among first-year students and was considered to contribute to the decline of social trust in digital academic relationships. The same finding also revealed that students basically understood the importance of digital communication

ethics, but their everyday practice still showed a gap between normative understanding and actual behavior (S. Saddam, Hermanto, et al., 2025b).

In the literature, discussion of students' digital ethics has developed rapidly over the last five years. Ali et al. (2023) show that studies of digital citizenship in education have emphasized variables and factors shaping digital citizenship. Bal & Akcil (2024) demonstrate that a specifically designed online course can improve students' digital citizenship skills. Li (2024) argues that digital ethics and data-security knowledge are related to university social responsibility, while Petre et al. (2025) show that digital communication in higher education is closely associated with students' satisfaction, engagement, and behavior in digital learning ecologies.

However, despite the growing body of research on digital ethics among university students, several important limitations remain. Much of the existing literature relies on cross-sectional surveys that measure attitudes, perceptions, or self-reported levels of ethical awareness, providing only a partial understanding of how ethical communication is actually practiced in everyday academic interactions. For example, Marreiros et al. (2024) identify differences in students' perceptions of information ethics across countries, yet their comparative approach does not explain how students negotiate ethical dilemmas, interpret communication norms, or develop ethical communication habits within specific educational contexts. Similarly, Adi et al. (2025) demonstrate that institutional environments, life experiences, and social interactions influence ethical information use; however, their analysis focuses primarily on information ethics and leaves unexplored the processes through which ethical principles are translated into routine digital communication practices among students. Consequently, existing studies offer limited insight into the lived experiences and social mechanisms that sustain ethical communication behavior in higher education.

Recent research on students' digital communication ethics can generally be classified into three streams. The first examines digital citizenship by identifying factors associated with responsible online behavior. The second focuses on digital and information ethics, exploring students' understanding of privacy, information use, and ethical technology practices. The third approaches digital communication in higher education as a social practice influenced by digital platforms, institutional support, and campus environments. While these studies have contributed valuable knowledge, they share several shortcomings. Most emphasize competence measurement, awareness levels, behavioral determinants, or the effectiveness of educational interventions, often treating ethics as an individual attribute rather than a socially constructed and continuously reproduced practice. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to the habituation processes through which ethical digital communication becomes embedded in students'

daily interactions and evolves into a shared campus culture. As a result, the dynamic relationship between digital culture, everyday communicative practices, and the formation of social trust remains insufficiently understood (Ali et al., 2023; Bal & Akcil, 2024; Li, 2024; Marreiros et al., 2024; Petre et al., 2025). This gap highlights the need for qualitative inquiry that examines how students experience, negotiate, and internalize digital communication ethics within their specific campus environment.

The systematic review by Ali et al. (2023) indicates that research on digital citizenship in education has primarily focused on identifying variables that influence the development of digital citizenship. Bal & Akcil (2024), Ribble & Park (2019), Rogers (2019) demonstrate that a specifically designed online curriculum can improve students' digital citizenship attitudes. Prasetyo et al. (2024) propose a digital citizenship model. Existing studies primarily view ethical digital behavior as competencies and measurable constructs, offering limited insight into how digital ethics is socially formed and habituated through everyday academic interactions.

A similar limitation appears in the digital ethics literature. Li (2024) highlights the relationship between age, educational level, and digital ethics awareness, while Marreiros et al. (2024) identify variations in students' information-ethics perceptions across countries. Adi et al. (2025) further show that information privilege and ethical information use are shaped by institutional context, life experiences, and social interactions. Petre et al. (2025) demonstrate that institutional factors significantly influence students' digital communication experiences in higher education. Despite these valuable contributions, existing studies generally focus on awareness, perceptions, ethical information use, or communication outcomes rather than examining how ethical norms are internalized and enacted in routine academic communication practices. As a result, the literature has not yet adequately explained the social processes through which students learn, negotiate, and sustain ethical communication behaviors in digital academic environments.

Addressing this gap, the present study advances the discussion beyond digital citizenship competencies and digital ethics awareness by conceptualizing academic digital communication ethics as a form of socially constructed habitus that develops through repeated interactions within the campus digital culture. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of habitus and field, complemented by Bandura's social learning perspective, this study proposes that ethical digital communication is not merely an individual competence or moral disposition but a collectively reproduced practice shaped by observation, interaction, institutional norms, and shared experiences. This perspective offers a theoretical contribution by explaining how digital culture functions as a mechanism through which ethical communication behaviors become normalized and subsequently

contribute to the development of social trust in higher education. In doing so, the study links digital communication ethics, campus digital culture, and social trust within a single explanatory framework that remains largely absent from previous research.

The study by Saddam shows that students, lecturers, staff, and university leaders in Mataram recognize the importance of values such as netiquette, digital literacy, and digital citizenship, but implementation remains inconsistent and insufficiently structured. Meanwhile, research at UMMat confirms efforts to integrate digital-culture values through Pancasila education, campus habituation, workshops, communication guidelines, and evaluation and feedback regarding violations of digital communication ethics. Nevertheless, those studies more strongly describe strategies and forms of intervention than explain the social process through which digital communication ethics can persist, be repeated, be negotiated, and eventually become a sustainable campus culture (Saddam, 2022, 2025; Saddam et al., 2025a, 2025b; Saddam).

This is where the present research gap lies. Although previous studies have shown that students' digital ethics is influenced by education, environment, institutional responsibility, and digital learning design, limited research explains how digital communication ethics is formed and sustained as an ongoing social process within a specific campus culture. Existing literature rarely examines students' lived experiences and meanings of digital communication ethics, integrates digital culture, campus habituation, and social trust within a single explanatory framework, or focuses on regional private Islamic universities such as UMMat. To address these gaps, this study develops a grounded theory model for strengthening students' digital communication ethics based on digital culture at UMMat and explains its contribution to the development of social trust in the digital academic environment.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the process of sustainably strengthening students' digital communication ethics based on digital culture at UMMat and to explain its contribution to the formation of social trust in the digital academic environment. The focus is directed toward students' experiences in interpreting digital communication ethics, the factors that shape or weaken such practices, and the habituation mechanisms that allow ethics to develop into campus culture. The study is expected to offer a theoretical contribution in the form of a conceptual model for strengthening digital communication ethics based on digital culture and a practical contribution as a basis for university policy, new-student orientation, the strengthening of Pancasila Education, and the development of contextual and sustainable guidelines for academic digital communication.

## **B. Research Methods**

Digital transformation has changed how universities establish academic relationships. Communication that previously relied primarily on face-to-face interaction has increasingly shifted to platform-based spaces such as WhatsApp, email, learning management systems (LMS), and academic social media. As a result, the quality of students' digital communication can no longer be understood merely as a technical matter. It has become part of academic culture, university social responsibility, and digital citizenship practices that influence trust, engagement, and the effectiveness of learning interactions. In this context, digital communication ethics is important because it determines how students position themselves, interpret situations, use language, respect time, and manage their digital footprints in relationships with lecturers and institutions (Charmaz, 2024; Creswell & Poth, 2024).

This phenomenon is not only global; it is also visible in local university contexts. At Universitas Muhammadiyah Mataram (UMMat), a 2025 preliminary study involving interviews with five lecturers of Pancasila Education showed that many students still contacted lecturers through WhatsApp without considering appropriate timing, without introducing their identity, and with a questioning style that appeared directive. This situation was especially common among first-year students and was considered to contribute to the decline of social trust in digital academic relationships. The same finding also revealed that students basically understood the importance of digital communication ethics, but their everyday practice still showed a gap between normative understanding and actual behavior (Maemunah et al., 2024; Saddam et al., 2024; Saddam, Hardati, et al., 2025a; Saddam, Hermanto, et al., 2025b).

Participants were selected using purposive sampling in the initial stage and theoretical sampling as the analytical categories developed. The study involved 20 participants: 14 active students, four lecturers, and two educational staff members who regularly engaged in digital interaction with students. Students were selected from early, middle, and final semesters so that variations in experience could be represented more richly. Lecturers and educational staff were included to broaden perspectives on digital communication ethics within academic relationships.

Data were collected through three main techniques: semi-structured in-depth interviews, limited non-participant digital observation, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with all participants for approximately 45-75 minutes per session to explore experiences, ethical considerations, reluctance, tensions, and students' strategies when communicating via WhatsApp, email, LMS, and social media related to academic activities. Digital observation was conducted in a limited manner in communication spaces that had received participant permission, such as class groups, anonymized academic messages, and interaction patterns in learning forums. Document analysis

covered course contracts, academic guidelines, student regulations, campus orientation materials, and institutional documents containing digital communication norms.

Data were analyzed concurrently with data collection using constructivist grounded theory procedures, including initial coding, focused coding, category development, memo writing, and theoretical integration. Initial coding involved line-by-line examination of data to identify actions, meanings, and experiences expressed by participants. Focused coding was then applied to select the most significant and recurring codes and organize them into conceptual categories. Throughout the analysis, analytical memos were written to capture reflections, category relationships, and emerging theoretical insights. In the final stage, categories were integrated into a substantive model of strengthening students' digital communication ethics based on digital culture. NVivo 14 supported data organization and management.

Data trustworthiness was maintained through the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was developed through triangulation of sources and techniques, comparison of interview data with observations and documents, and limited member checking with several participants to ensure that the researchers' interpretations did not deviate from their experiences. Transferability was pursued by providing thick descriptions of the campus context, participant characteristics, and digital communication dynamics. Dependability was maintained through an audit trail consisting of methodological decisions, category development, and the coding process, while confirmability was strengthened through reflective memos and peer discussion (Ahmed, 2024).

Research ethics received particular attention because this study involved sensitive digital communication spaces and potential academic power relations. All participants received an explanation of the study's aims, the form of their involvement, their right to refuse or withdraw at any time, and the guarantee of data confidentiality through written informed consent. Participant names were replaced with codes such as M1, M2, D1, and so forth. All message archives, screenshots, and communication documents analyzed in the study were anonymized by removing names, contact numbers, class identities, and other personal identifiers. Digital data were stored in encrypted folders accessible only to the researchers.

### **C. Results and Discussion**

Students' digital communication ethics were not formed primarily through normative knowledge. Instead, it emerged through ongoing processes of negotiation, correction, habituation, and reinforcement of the campus digital culture. These processes converged into four main themes: digital ethics as a boundary between personal

familiarity and academic propriety; ethical learning through reprimands, reluctance, and role modeling; different ethical rules across digital platforms; and the development of social trust through consistent digital communication ethics.

Table 1. Characteristics of Research Informants

<b>Code</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Semester/Position</b>	<b>Intensity of Academic Digital Communication</b>	<b>Dominant Platform</b>
M1	Student	2	High	WhatsApp, LMS
M2	Student	2	High	WhatsApp
M3	Student	2	Moderate	WhatsApp, Instagram
M4	Student	4	High	WhatsApp, Email
M5	Student	4	Moderate	LMS, WhatsApp
M6	Student	4	High	WhatsApp
M7	Student	4	Moderate	WhatsApp, LMS
M8	Student	6	High	Email, WhatsApp
M9	Student	6	High	WhatsApp, LMS
M10	Student	6	Moderate	WhatsApp
M11	Student	8	High	Email, WhatsApp
M12	Student	8	High	WhatsApp, Google Meet
M13	Student	8	Moderate	Email, LMS
M14	Student	8	High	WhatsApp
D1	Lecturer	General Course Lecturer	High	WhatsApp, Email
D2	Lecturer	Program Lecturer	High	LMS, WhatsApp
D3	Lecturer	Thesis Advisor	High	WhatsApp, Email
D4	Lecturer	Academic Advisor	Moderate	WhatsApp
T1	Educational Staff	Academic Administration	High	WhatsApp, Academic System
T2	Educational Staff	Student Affairs Service	Moderate	WhatsApp, Email

Table 1 shows that academic digital communication was most intensive among students across early, middle, and final semesters, with WhatsApp serving as the most dominant platform. This finding strengthens the assumption that digital communication ethics on campus cannot be understood only from formal policies, because everyday practice is largely shaped by a platform that is fast, informal, and easily accessible.

### **1. Digital Communication Ethics as a Boundary between Personal Familiarity and Academic Propriety**

Students did not define digital communication ethics merely as the use of polite language. Rather, they understood it as the ability to read boundaries: when they may communicate familiarly, when they should be formal, when they need to introduce themselves, and when they should postpone sending a message. The findings show that first-year students often perceived digital spaces as more relaxed than classroom spaces; consequently, they tended to bring personal communication styles into academic contexts. However, after receiving correction or encountering cold responses from lecturers, they began to realize that academic digital spaces have different norms of propriety.

One student participant stated, "At first, I thought chatting with a lecturer was the same as chatting with a senior; the important thing was to get straight to the point. After my message was not answered, I realized that perhaps my way was wrong because I did not greet the lecturer, did not introduce myself, and sent the message at night" (M2). Another student explained, "I used to think that WhatsApp was more flexible, so I would sometimes ask directly about assignments. But after entering the fourth semester, I began to understand that the way we speak digitally still reflects our attitude as students" (M4). From the lecturers' perspective, one participant emphasized, "Most cases are not caused by bad intentions. Students often have not yet learned to distinguish familiar language from language that is appropriate for academic communication" (D1).

These findings indicate that the main problem is not simply the absence of rules, but the insufficient maturity of students' ethical sensitivity to the digital academic context. In grounded theory terms, the initial categories emerging in this theme can be summarized as reading boundaries, bringing personal habits into academic spaces, and realizing propriety after correction.

### **2. Students Learn Ethics through Reprimands, Reluctance, and Role Modelling**

The strongest internalization of digital communication ethics emerged from students' corrective experiences. Students repeatedly stated that they began to change not after reading formal rules but after experiencing embarrassment, reluctance, being ignored, or receiving a gentle reprimand from a lecturer. At the same time, this change

became stronger when students encountered role models from lecturers, senior students, or classroom cultures that demonstrated appropriate, clear, and orderly communication.

One student stated, "I once sent a very short message, and the lecturer replied, 'Please introduce yourself first.' Since then, I have always kept a more polite message format" (M1). Another student noted, "If it is only explained at the beginning of the semester, sometimes we forget. But when we see a friend being corrected or see a lecturer replying neatly, it is easier to understand" (M7). A thesis advisor also observed, "Students usually learn quickly when the correction is directly related to their experience. A small reprimand can sometimes be more effective than a long explanation" (D3).

This shows that the formation of digital communication ethics takes place through affective and relational mechanisms, not only cognitive ones. Reluctance, embarrassment, concern about being perceived as impolite, and the desire to be seen as academically appropriate become important drivers of behavioral change. This theme, therefore, produces subthemes such as reprimand as a turning point, reluctance as self-control, and role modeling as an accelerator of habituation.

### **3. Digital Platforms as Spaces for Negotiating Different Norms**

Students did not apply the same ethical standards to every platform. They tended to view WhatsApp as fast and flexible, email as formal, LMS as an official academic space, and social media as a semi-public but ambiguous space. As a result, communication propriety shifted depending on the platform used. This difference often caused confusion, especially when one academic matter moved from LMS to WhatsApp or from email to private messages.

One student reported, "In the LMS, I am more careful because it feels official. But on WhatsApp, I sometimes automatically write very briefly" (M5). Another student said, "I consider email to be for important matters, such as supervision or formal letters. But in reality, lecturers respond faster on WhatsApp, so we often still choose WhatsApp" (M8). From the perspective of educational staff, one participant stated, "Students often assume that when the medium is informal, the language can also be informal. In fact, the content remains an academic matter" (T1).

These findings show that platforms are not merely technical channels; they also shape the atmosphere of communication. Therefore, the strengthening of digital ethics will be less effective if it only formulates general principles without considering platform ecology. Students need contextual guidelines, including ethics for sending WhatsApp messages to lecturers, academic email etiquette, LMS forum etiquette, and ethics for using campus social media.

**4. Consistent Digital Communication Ethics Generates Social Trust in Academic Relationships**

This theme represents the peak of the process identified in the study. When students became able to read boundaries, learn from correction, and adjust themselves across platforms, the outcome was not merely more appropriate, orderly, and clear communication. It also produced social trust in digital academic relationships. Lecturers felt more comfortable and more willing to respond to students who communicated clearly, respectfully, and systematically. Conversely, students felt safer, more confident, and more respected when digital interactions occurred within an ethical framework that was mutually understood.

One academic advisor emphasized, "When students introduce themselves, explain their purpose clearly, and understand appropriate timing, I am more open to helping them. There is a sense that they respect the academic process" (D4). Another student said, "When we know the proper way to send a message, we feel more confident. We are not afraid of disturbing the lecturer or being misunderstood" (M10). An educational staff member also noted, "When communication patterns are good, administrative matters are completed more quickly because there is less misunderstanding" (T2).

These findings indicate that digital communication ethics functions as relational infrastructure. It reduces potential misunderstanding, lowers tension, clarifies identity, and makes academic interaction more predictable. Thus, social trust does not emerge abstractly; it grows from small details of daily communication: how students greet others, explain their purpose, maintain consistent language, and demonstrate awareness of time.

Table 2. Development of Codes, Categories, and Themes

<b>Initial Code</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Main Theme</b>
Message without greeting	Failure to read propriety	Theme A
No self-introduction	Academic identity does not appear	Theme A
Perceiving WhatsApp as informal	Blending personal and academic spaces	Theme A
Reprimanded by lecturer	Direct correction	Theme B
Embarrassed because the message was not answered	Affective experience that changes behavior	Theme B
Imitating senior/lecturer message formats	Learning through role modelling	Theme B
Different language on each platform	Norms shaped by medium	Theme C
Email perceived as official	Medium-based formality	Theme C
WhatsApp perceived as fast and flexible	Efficiency pressure versus propriety	Theme C
Lecturers more comfortable responding	Ethics facilitates response	Theme D
Students feel safe	Trust from norm certainty	Theme D
Administrative matters proceed more smoothly	Trust strengthens service effectiveness	Theme D

Table 2 shows that the findings did not emerge randomly but moved from micro-level incidents toward more conceptual categories. Minor violations such as failing to greet or failing to identify oneself were not merely matters of format; they indicated the instability of students' interpretation of academic digital norms. Conversely, experiences such as being reprimanded, imitating role models, or feeling safer when communicating demonstrated the pathway from correction to internalization.

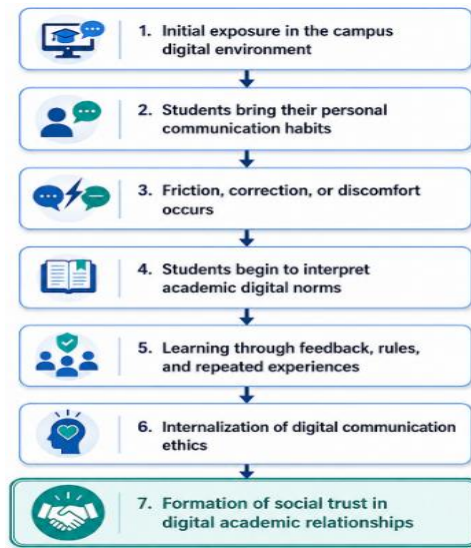


Figure 1. Process Model for Strengthening Digital Communication Ethics

Figure 1 shows that the strengthening of digital communication ethics occurs as a layered process rather than an instant change. Students initially enter campus digital spaces while bringing communication habits from friendship circles and social media. A corrective moment then forces them to reread the academic context. Through repetition, reprimands, and role modeling, ethics become internalized and culminate in the formation of social trust.

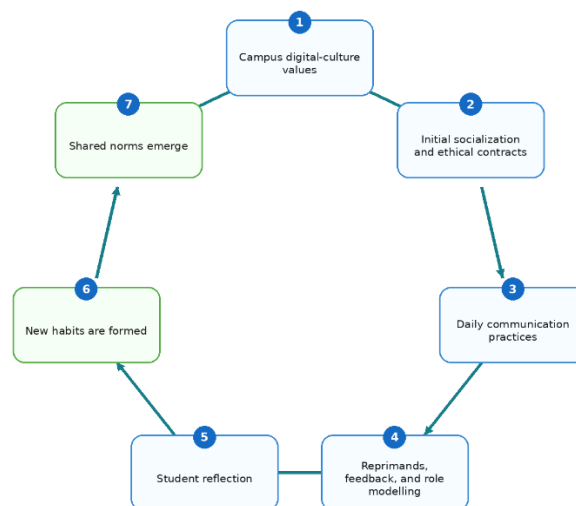


Figure 2. Sustainable Strengthening Cycle Based on Digital Culture.

Figure 2 emphasizes that sustainable strengthening of digital communication ethics is circular rather than linear. Digital-culture values do not stop as socialization material; they are tested in practice, reinforced through feedback, and revived as shared norms.

Table 3. Map of Communication Ethics by Platform.

<b>Platform</b>	<b>Students' Perception</b>	<b>Common Ethical Risks</b>	<b>Academic Ethical Expectations</b>
WhatsApp	Fast, close, flexible	Too brief, no identity, messages sent outside appropriate hours	Greeting, identity, clear purpose, appropriate timing
Email	Official, formal	Too rigid or rarely used	Clear subject line, orderly structure, academic language
LMS	Official and class-related	Slow response, messages with minimal context	Polite language, academic focus, clear discussion records
Instagram/DM	Semi-personal and ambiguous	Blurred personal-academic boundaries	Limited to public or non-formal information

Table 3 demonstrates that digital communication ethics cannot be separated from the characteristics of each platform. The main problem does not lie in a particular platform but in students' tendency to adjust propriety based on the atmosphere of the platform used rather than on the status of the academic relationship.

Across all themes, the core category that can be developed is that the strengthening of students' digital communication ethics takes place through corrective habituation based on digital culture, gradually transforming individual propriety into collective social trust. This core category integrates the findings by showing that students learn through corrective experience, test that learning across different platforms, and stabilize it through habituation supported by campus culture.

Students' digital communication ethics does not grow primarily from normative knowledge taught once and then completed. Instead, it develops through repeated social processes. Students enter campus digital spaces with personal communication habits, experience friction or correction, and gradually build new forms of propriety through habituation, role modeling, and adjustment to academic culture. In this sense, digital communication ethics in the UMMat context are better understood as the outcome of corrective habituation based on digital culture than as an isolated individual skill. This finding extends literature that has predominantly emphasized factors shaping digital

citizenship or the effectiveness of instructional interventions (Ali et al., 2023; Bal & Akcil, 2024; Saddam et al., 2025).

The core issue for students is not simply a lack of politeness but the instability of their ability to read context (Johns, 1997; Leech, 2014; Setiawan et al., 2024). At this point, the findings enrich the idea of digital culture by showing that campus digital culture functions as a field in which students learn to distinguish personal spaces from academic spaces, speed from propriety, and closeness from professionalism. This finding is consistent with Feng & Tan (2024) who position digital cultural and social capital as shaped through context, support, and social practice. It also aligns with Chen et al. (2021), who demonstrate that digital citizenship is conceptualized differently across disciplines.

The strongest internalization of digital communication ethics emerges through reprimands, reluctance, and role modeling. This finding is important because it enriches Bal & Akcil's (2024) emphasis on the effectiveness of online digital-citizenship courses. The present study does not reject the importance of formal intervention; instead, it shows that in campus practice, behavioral change is often triggered by corrective experiences that are affective and relational. This result also aligns with Zvereva (2023), who emphasizes that digital relationships should be supported by self-discipline, shared responsibility, and respect.

From a digital culture perspective, students' digital communication ethics are shaped through social habituation within academic digital environments. Collaborative learning fosters communication, collaboration, and critical thinking skills (Fazriyani et al., 2025), while positive communication is rooted in cultural values, collectivity, and religiosity (Purnama et al., 2025). Therefore, social trust in digital academic relationships develops through sustained ethical, participatory, and supportive communication practices between students and lecturers rather than emerging spontaneously.

Digital communication ethics cannot be understood uniformly. Students tend to interpret WhatsApp as a fast and flexible space, email as formal, LMS as an official learning space, and social media as more ambiguous. This finding extends Petre et al. (2025) by showing that platforms do not merely influence behavior; they also shape different ethical expectations. Consequently, ethical guidelines that are too general risk failing to be internalized because they do not respond to the everyday reality of students who move across platforms.

Consistent digital communication ethics generates social trust in academic relationships. Ethics is not only a matter of surface politeness but a foundation for comfort, reliability, openness, and smooth interaction among students, lecturers, and campus service units. This finding is consistent with Saddam, Hermanto, et al. (2025),

who place digital communication ethics as part of social capital and trust formation in the campus environment. It also intersects with Adi et al. (2025) and Li (2024) who emphasize the relationship between digital ethics, social responsibility, and institutional context.

From a broader theoretical perspective, this study integrates digital culture, digital citizenship, or digital etiquette, and social trust into a single processual framework. Digital culture serves as the social context in which norms are negotiated and learned, while digital citizenship and etiquette provide behavioral guidance that is internalized through corrective habituation. Social trust emerges as the relational outcome of the consistent practice of these norms. The study proposes a substantive theory in which students' digital communication ethics develop through a cycle of exposure, correction, reflection, habituation, internalization, and trust, emphasizing the importance of affective, relational, and institutional dimensions beyond knowledge-based approaches.

Reflectively, the findings should also be read by considering the participants' socio-cultural background and the researchers' position. UMMat is an institution that emphasizes politeness, moral responsibility, and respect for academic relationships. Therefore, the meaning of ethics that emerges from participants may be influenced by Islamic institutional culture, seniority relations, and expectations toward lecturers as academic figures. At the same time, the researchers are not entirely neutral observers, because interpretations of what is polite, appropriate, or overly informal may be influenced by generational position, academic experience, and communicative preferences.

Practically, the findings indicate that universities need to shift strategies for strengthening digital communication ethics from a one-time socialization approach to an ecosystem approach. Ethical strengthening should appear in new-student orientation, course contracts, concrete examples from lecturers, cross-platform guidelines, feedback on violations, and integration into relevant courses such as Pancasila Education, Civic Education, and Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah. In this way, digital communication ethics can directly contribute to digital literacy, the quality of campus social relationships, and the formation of social trust that supports academic life in the digital era.

#### **D. Conclusion**

This study concludes that students' digital communication ethics are developed not primarily through formal instruction, but through a continuous process of negotiation, correction, reflection, and habituation within the campus digital culture. The findings identified four interconnected themes: understanding the boundaries between personal and academic communication, learning ethics through reprimands and role modeling,

adapting ethical behavior across different digital platforms, and developing social trust through consistent ethical communication practices.

The study further demonstrates that social trust in academic digital relationships emerges from repeated ethical interactions that reduce misunderstanding, strengthen mutual respect, and improve communication effectiveness. Based on these findings, the study proposes the substantive model of “corrective habituation based on digital culture,” which explains how digital communication ethics becomes internalized through corrective experiences, social learning, and institutional support. This model contributes to the literature by linking digital culture, communication ethics, and social trust within a single processual framework while providing practical implications for universities to strengthen ethical digital communication through habituation, role modeling, contextual guidelines, and sustainable campus culture initiatives.

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