

The Degradation of Student Communication Ethics on Instagram and TikTok: A Case Study at Universitas Nusantara PGRI Kediri

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Abstract: The rapid development of digital technology has fundamentally transformed students' communication patterns, particularly on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Despite growing scholarly attention to digital communication, limited studies have examined ethics degradation specifically within Indonesian academic communities using sociological frameworks. This study addresses that gap by examining the phenomenon of communication ethics degradation among students of Nusantara PGRI University Kediri (UNP Kediri), focusing on interactions within the comment sections of these two platforms. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that students frequently engage in personal attacks, destructive sarcasm, negative labeling, and digital polarization when confronted with differing opinions. Drawing on Durkheim's framework of organic solidarity and anomie, these behaviors reflect a crisis of moral regulation within the digital academic community, driven by individual factors such as limited self-regulation, institutional gaps in digital ethics education, and structural factors including the algorithmic architecture of social media platforms. This study contributes a sociological lens to understanding digital ethics degradation in higher education, concluding that such degradation is not merely a linguistic issue but a symptom of weakening organic solidarity that demands systematic educational intervention.

Keywords: Communication ethics, social media, digital anomie, organic solidarity, Durkheim

INTRODUCTION

The development of information technology in the past two decades has brought a major shift in the way humans communicate (Aprilianata et al., 2025). Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have now become the primary arena where disagreements are no longer resolved face-to-face, but through digital spaces open to the public. The freedom of expression offered by social media provides an opportunity for every individual to express their views widely, but at the same time demands awareness of communication ethics (Ramadhanti et al., 2024). In practice, the characteristics of digital communication that occurs rapidly with minimal direct contact often make the boundary between expressing opinions and personal attacks increasingly blurred (Yuniani et al., 2023). As a result, impolite language, aggressive comments, and verbal conflicts have become increasingly easy to find across various social media platforms. This phenomenon also occurs among college students who are essentially expected to demonstrate critical, rational, and responsible attitudes in communication. However, the freedom to use social media not infrequently causes some students to ignore communication ethics when responding to disagreements (Mutiarani et al., 2024). This is a particular irony for students who are explicitly educated to uphold democratic values, civic responsibility, and ethical public behavior. The gap between the goals of the study program and students' digital behavior becomes an urgent challenge to be examined.

Several previous studies have touched on these issues from various perspectives. Taslim et al. (2024) found that the use of impolite language has increased during debates on digital platforms, but did not analyze the causative factors in depth. Nasrullah (2015) explained the communication culture that develops on social media, but did not specifically discuss the degradation of communication ethics among college students. This study emerges to fill that gap through two novel contributions: a focus on UNP Kediri students as a specific academic community, and the use of Durkheim's theory of organic solidarity and anomie as an analytical framework that has not been widely applied in studies of digital

communication among Indonesian college students. This study is highly urgent because social media has become the main public space for students to express opinions, build social relationships, and participate in public discourse. The increasing degradation of communication ethics marked by personal attacks, destructive sarcasm, negative labeling, and digital polarization has the potential to hinder the creation of a healthy dialog culture in both the academic environment and broader society. If this condition continues to be left unaddressed, democratic values, tolerance, respect for differences, and civic responsibility that students should possess may become increasingly weakened. Therefore, research on the degradation of communication ethics among students on social media is important and urgent, both to understand the phenomenon more deeply and to provide an academic foundation for developing digital communication ethics education in higher education.

Based on the background, this study formulates several questions: (1) How is the description of communication ethics of UNP Kediri students when facing differences of opinion on Instagram and TikTok?; (2) What forms of communication ethics degradation most frequently appear?; (3) How does Durkheim's theory of organic solidarity and anomie explain this phenomenon?; and (4) What factors underlie the occurrence of communication ethics degradation among students on Instagram and TikTok? This study aims to describe the communication ethics of Universitas Nusantara PGRI Kediri students in facing differences of opinion on Instagram and TikTok social media, identify the forms of communication ethics degradation that emerge, analyze the phenomenon through the perspective of Durkheim's organic solidarity and anomie theory, and reveal the factors underlying the occurrence of communication ethics degradation in digital space.

METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach because it aims to understand the patterns and meanings behind students' communication behavior on social media, not to measure frequency or test hypotheses statistically. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is very appropriate for examining exploratory social phenomena, where the main focus is understanding how and why a behavior occurs in its context. The main informant of this study is Rizky Arzaki, a 4th-semester PPKn student at UNP Kediri who is an active social media user with direct experience of facing differences of opinion on social media. The supporting informant is Mr. Idang Ramadhan, M.Pd who is a PPKn lecturer at UNP Kediri and has academic competence to provide an evaluative perspective on the phenomenon being studied. These two informants were selected through purposive, criterion-based sampling, using two explicit selection criteria: (1) active and sustained engagement with Instagram and TikTok comment sections, evidenced by a documented history of posting or replying to comments on public accounts within the UNP Kediri student community, and (2) willingness to reflect openly on personal experiences of online disagreement in a semi-structured interview. Rather than pursuing statistical representativeness, this study follows the concept of "information power" in qualitative research (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016), whereby a small, information-rich sample is considered adequate when the study has a narrow aim, high-quality dialogue with informants, and a strong theoretical framework to guide analysis conditions that this study satisfies through its focused research questions and its explicit anchoring in Durkheim's theory of organic solidarity and anomie. Data collection continued until responses across the two informants and the observation data began to converge on the same recurring patterns (personal attacks, destructive sarcasm, negative labeling, and digital polarization), indicating that thematic saturation had been reached for the scope defined by this study. The empirical scope of this study is therefore explicitly bounded to the direct experiences of these two informants and to the specific social media circles and posts they engage with, and the findings should accordingly be read as an initial, exploratory account of the phenomenon at UNP Kediri rather than a representative claim about all students. Broader validation through a larger and more varied informant pool, potentially combined with quantitative content analysis of a larger comment corpus, is recommended as a direction for future research.

Data collection was conducted through three techniques. First, non-participant observation was carried out on Instagram and TikTok comment columns. Posts were purposively selected from public accounts within the informants' social circles whose comment sections displayed visible disagreement or

debate, so that the object of observation directly matched the phenomenon under study; posts that were private, sponsored, or unrelated to interpersonal disagreement were excluded. Observation was conducted over a four-week period in April 2026, running concurrently with the interview phase. Second, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted on the UNP Kediri campus in April 2026. Third, documentation was collected in the form of screenshots, interview recordings, and field notes as verification material. To protect the privacy of social media users who were not informants of this study, all documented comments were anonymized prior to analysis by removing usernames, profile photographs, and other identifying details, and the resulting screenshots and recordings were stored securely and used solely for internal verification rather than public disclosure. Data were analyzed through three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions, following Miles and Huberman's interactive model as adapted by Sugiyono (2019). In the data reduction stage, all anonymized comments and interview transcripts were read repeatedly to find words or sentences showing disrespect or hostility that kept appearing across the data. These similar words or sentences were then grouped into four categories: personal attacks, destructive sarcasm, negative labeling, and digital polarization. When a piece of data was unclear or could fit more than one category, the research team discussed it together until they agreed on where it belonged. Once all the data had been grouped this way, the four categories were interpreted using Durkheim's theory of organic solidarity and anomie before being presented in the Results section. Data validity was guaranteed through source triangulation and technique triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from the main informant and supporting informant, while technique triangulation was conducted by comparing the results of observation, interviews, and documentation so that the data obtained have a higher level of credibility (Sugiyono, 2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Students' Communication Ethics on Instagram and TikTok

The first research question concerns the general description of UNP Kediri students' communication ethics when facing differences of opinion. To obtain systematic data, the research team compiled an inquiry question framework presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Inquiry Question Framework

No	Category	Inquiry Question
1	Experience	Have you ever encountered differences of opinion around you? And if those differences exist on social media, how do you respond?
2	Observing Others' Ethics	Do you see others responding to those differences? If so, how do they respond? Do they use communication ethics or not?
3	Personal Participation	Have you yourself ever responded to differences of opinion on social media? If so, what approach did you use?

Based on interviews and observations, the overall picture of communication ethics among UNP Kediri students on social media is concerning. Students tend to respond to differences of opinion with emotional reactions that often lead to verbal attacks. The main informant revealed that within their social circle, differences of opinion on social media almost always end in mutual attacks rather than mutual understanding. This condition confirms the findings of Taslim et al. (2024) that the use of impolite language increases sharply when debates touch on sensitive issues. Meanwhile, supporting informants noted that students should be able to behave more maturely given their intellectual capacity, yet the reality on the ground suggests otherwise.

Forms of Student Ethical Degradation

The second research question concerns the tangible forms of ethical degradation that occur most frequently. Field findings from observations and interviews are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Field Findings

Aspect	Informant 1	Informant 2	Observation Findings
Response to differences	Has witnessed someone on social media attacking with inappropriate words when their argument was refuted or ignored.	Prefers not to comment on social media unless invited to discuss, in order to avoid unproductive conflict.	The dominant pattern consists of personal attacks targeting identity, physical appearance, or background.
Use of Communication Ethics	Communication ethics is frequently ignored by opposing parties who resort to verbal attacks.	Emphasizes the importance of students upholding politeness and mutual respect on any platform.	The use of impolite language, sarcasm, and negative and destructive labeling, which are widely found across various comment sections.
Group Dynamics	An intolerant attitude toward differing opinions is highly prominent among peer groups that share the same ideological orientation.	Emphasizes that ideal interactions should be equal and civilized, without having to demean other parties.	The formation of sharp polarization that strengthens group homogeneity and worsens intergroup hostility.

Based on observation data, there are four dominant and recurring forms of ethical degradation in communication. First, personal attacks, where users direct attacks at the personal characteristics of their interlocutor, such as identity, appearance, or group background. This form of attack is the most damaging because it shuts down any possibility of productive dialogue by turning the exchange of ideas into a debate over social status. Second, destructive sarcasm or mocking occurs, aimed at humiliating the opponent. Third, negative labeling occurs, in which negative identities are assigned to opponents (such as "pretentious," "uncivilized," "poor but showy," or "weirdo"), which pushes individuals to close off space for dialogue. Fourth, digital polarization occurs, where users increasingly restrict their interactions to only ideologically like-minded communities, creating feedback loops that reinforce prejudice and foster intergroup hostility (Nasrullah, 2015).

To make the categorization above more concrete, Table 3 presents illustrative anonymized examples of each form of ethical degradation. Consistent with the documentation ethics procedure outlined in the Methods section, each entry is a verbatim excerpt taken directly from the comments observed during the study, with identifying details such as usernames and profile information removed, rather than a paraphrased or invented example.

Table 3. Categorized Anonymized Examples of Communication Ethics Degradation

Category	Illustrative Anonymized Example	Analytical Note
Personal attack	<i>"No wonder your opinion makes no sense; you just don't have the brain for it."</i>	The comment does not criticize the substance of the opinion but directly attacks the person's intellectual ability. It demeans the individual and shifts the discussion from the argument to the person making it.
Destructive sarcasm	<i>"Wow, you're so smart, you got every answer wrong."</i>	The comment uses "so smart" as ironic praise. Its actual purpose is to mock the person because they got all the answers wrong. This demonstrates the use of sarcastic language to belittle another person.
Negative labeling	<i>"That person is toxic, you shouldn't get too close to them."</i>	The comment assigns a negative label to the person's character in general. The individual is portrayed as a "toxic" person without explaining the specific behavior underlying the judgment.
Digital polarization	<i>"All of their fans are like that. We will never see eye to eye with them."</i>	The comment creates a boundary between two groups and assumes that the opposing group shares the same negative characteristics. The use of "we" and "them" reinforces an <i>us-versus-them</i> pattern and may intensify conflict between groups.

Analysis Through Durkheim's Theory of Organic Solidarity and Anomie

The third research question concerns how Durkheim's theory explains this phenomenon. Durkheim (1893) distinguishes between two forms of social solidarity: mechanical solidarity, characteristic of

traditional, homogeneous societies, and organic solidarity, characteristic of modern, heterogeneous societies. In organic solidarity, differences are not a threat but rather the fundamental resource of interdependence that sustains collective life. However, for organic solidarity to function, it requires the existence of moral laws ensuring that differences remain complementary rather than destructive. Communication ethics fulfills this moral regulatory function in the digital space.

The findings of this study indicate a serious failure in the function of those laws. When students utilize attacks and sarcasm, they fail to separate the individual from the idea, which is an absolute prerequisite for reasoned dialogue and the foundation of organic solidarity. This failure does not merely result in unpleasant interactions, but actively dismantles the bonds between individuals as it mutates into conflict that deepens division. This condition is best understood through Durkheim's concept of anomie. First formulated in *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893) and further developed in *Suicide* (1897), anomie refers to a state where the normative framework that usually regulates social behavior loses its effectiveness. In the digital context, this manifests as students being aware that aggressive communication is socially unjustifiable, yet this awareness fails to translate into behavioral control in the online space. As Ritzer (2012) notes in his exegesis of Durkheim, anomie does not require the complete absence of norms, but rather merely the functional failure of those norms to effectively regulate behavior. The mechanism of this digital anomie operates through several mutually reinforcing pathways. The lack of physical presence eliminates the social cues inherent in face-to-face interactions that serve as a continuous reminder of the interlocutor's humanity. The pseudo-anonymity of online interactions creates a psychological distance from consequences that functionally resembles absolute anonymity. The speed of digital interactions reduces the time available for reflective evaluation before responding. Furthermore, the algorithmic architecture of social media prioritizes content that maximizes visibility, and such content tends to be disproportionately provocative and divisive, further eroding both interpersonal communication and individual moral awareness. Table 3 in the previous section provides concrete evidence of this pattern from the observed data: each recurring form of ethical degradation reflects the same underlying condition of digital anomie, in which the normative expectation to communicate with respect fails to translate into actual online behavior.

Factors Underlying the Degradation of Communication Ethics

The fourth research question concerns the factors underlying this phenomenon. Based on the findings, these factors operate on three interrelated levels. At the individual level, emotional immaturity and limited self-regulation emerge as primary factors. The main informant's observation that their peers who are otherwise capable of reasoning logically abandon rational arguments in favor of personal attacks when emotionally triggered suggests that emotional and intellectual competencies do not automatically develop hand in hand. Intellectual development, it seems, does not inherently guarantee emotional regulation and must be cultivated through specific and intentional educational interventions. Individuals who may personally be capable of maintaining ethical standards can still be dragged into aggressive behavior by the social dynamics of their peer communities. At the institutional level, the absence of systematic digital ethics education represents a significant gap. Although universities are increasingly integrating digital literacy into their curricula, the focus tends to be instrumental teaching students how to use digital tools effectively rather than teaching them how to engage responsibly and civilly in the digital public sphere. The ethical dimension of digital communication, including the ability to distinguish between criticizing an argument and attacking a person, the importance of humility, and constructive conflict management skills, remains largely absent from formal educational provisions (Johannesen, 2001). At the structural level, the design of social media platforms serves as a powerful environmental driver for unethical communication. Algorithms that prioritize engagement over quality systematically amplify provocative content, creating a context where aggressive communication is not only more visible but also more "rewarded" in the form of social media likes, shares, and comments. Platform design also facilitates the formation of echo chambers by curating content based on existing user preferences, thereby reducing exposure to diverse perspectives. These structural features are not accidental but constitutive; both actively create the conditions in which digital anomie thrives.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the degradation of communication ethics among UNP Kediri students on Instagram and TikTok is a multidimensional phenomenon with individual, institutional, and structural dimensions. The four dominant forms of degradation identified, namely personal attacks, destructive sarcasm, negative labeling, and digital polarization are interrelated manifestations of weakened moral regulation in digital interaction. Analyzed through Durkheim's framework, this condition represents digital anomie: a state where the normative framework regulating communicative behavior has lost its functional effectiveness in the online environment. Based on these findings, three recommendations are proposed. First, educational institutions need to integrate digital communication ethics into the curriculum as a substantive component of civic education, rather than just a technical skill. Second, student communities need to be supported in building a collective normative consensus regarding acceptable standards for digital discussion, in order to foster shared moral regulation. Third, universities need to invest in conflict resolution and emotional regulation training as core components of student development.

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