Managing Communication Boundaries: A Lecturer's Approach to Privacy and Professinalism on Discord

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Abstract

Digital transformation in higher education has reshaped how lecturers and students communicate, shifting from classroom-based interactions to more fluid online spaces. Discord, originally used by gaming communities, now functions as an alternative academic environment that integrates coordination, discussion, and social interaction. This study aims to understand how a lecturer manages the boundary between professional and personal domains when interacting with students via Discord, and the reasons behind these practices. The study employs an interpretive paradigm with a single-case study design. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation of digital conversations on the Discord server "KEWIRAUSAHAAN – A MOR." The analysis was conducted using interpretive thematic procedures with Communication Privacy Management theory as the conceptual lens. Four main themes were identified. First, the structure and division of Discord channels create an organized system for academic communication. Second, professional–personal boundaries are managed through spatial, temporal, and interactional norms. Third, privacy is understood as control over access and the rhythm of communication. Fourth, digital professionalism is reflected in consistent values of integrity and responsibility across interactional contexts. This study affirms that academic communication practices on Discord center on boundary maintenance. Boundaries function as a means for lecturers to organize relational dynamics, protect personal space, and sustain professionalism within an increasingly open digital ecosystem.

Keywords:	Communication Privacy Management, Discord, Communication boundaries, Lecturer privacy, Generation Z, Interpretive case study

Introduction

In recent years, a clear shift has occurred in communication practices between lecturers and students in higher education, in parallel with the digital transformation of the educational system. Communication that was previously centered in the classroom now also involves digital platforms that facilitate various academic and social activities. This shift has become increasingly evident in the post–COVID-19 period, in which the use of digital platforms such as Zoom, Google Classroom, WhatsApp, and Learning Management Systems (LMS) has become an integral part of daily academic routines, as demonstrated in several studies (Adamoli Matteo et al., 2023; Faustyna, 2024; Wulan et al., 2025). Within this context of change, the researcher identified an emerging phenomenon: new academic practices that use

Discord as an alternative academic interaction space. Preliminary research conducted by the researcher found that Discord, a platform initially used by gaming communities, is now also used by lecturers and students for academic activities such as discussion and coordination, as well as for the development of social relations beyond academic contexts, such as chatting or playing games outside class hours. These findings are consistent with the results reported by (Wulansari, 2025).

This emerging phenomenon is noteworthy because it illustrates a shift in how academic communication in higher education is conceptualized, particularly in the Indonesian context. Platforms such as WhatsApp and LMS have long reflected patterns of interaction that are more instructive and structured, in which lecturers maintain primary control over the communication process (Annese et al., 2022; Simon et al., 2025). Discord occupies an intermediate position, offering a form of interaction that is more natural and dialogic. Research indicates that Discord now functions as a collaborative pedagogical space (Munibi et al., 2024; Wulansari, 2025), with the lecturer's role shifting toward that of a facilitator who encourages student initiative (Ghazali, 2023; Salehudin et al., 2023). This condition produces a reality in which teaching–learning practices become more open and participatory, fostering a sense of community among class participants (Craig & Kay, 2023; Wiles & Simmons, 2022).

Discord allows lecturers to communicate with students in a more social, informal context. However, this flexibility also introduces new challenges for lecturers, particularly in distinguishing and managing professional academic communication from personal communication. At the same time, the presence of Generation Z students, the largest population in higher education, adds further complexity. Generation Z is accustomed to fast and informal digital communication (A. Buzzetto-Hollywood et al., 2024; Chuah et al., 2025; Thuy Thi Nguyen et al., 2025), requiring lecturers to adapt to more fluid communication styles (Binabise et al., 2024; Čekrlija, 2024; Koolsriroj et al., 2022; Pistón, 2023).

Although the use of digital platforms in education has been extensively studied, few have examined how lecturers interpret and manage the boundary between professional and personal domains within fluid digital spaces such as Discord. Most existing studies emphasize technical or effectiveness-related aspects, such as improved learning outcomes or the potential of the platform (AlGhamdi, 2025; Ghazali, 2023; Sakti et al., 2024; Wulansari, 2025). Furthermore, nearly all prior research originates from Western contexts, which possess communication norms and academic hierarchies that differ from those in Indonesia. The lack of exploration into the cultural and professional dimensions of Discord use in Southeast Asian contexts indicates a conceptual gap that this study seeks to address. This study seeks to understand lecturers' subjective experiences in establishing and maintaining privacy boundaries in online academic spaces, as well as the reasons underlying their communicative choices. A single-case study approach is employed to examine these practices contextually, with Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory serving as the interpretive lens for analysing the meanings embedded in lecturers' communicative decisions and actions.

Methods

This study adopts an interpretive paradigm to explore how a lecturer manages communication and privacy boundaries in digital spaces, particularly within a Discord server used for academic interaction. Using a qualitative single-case study approach (Yin, 2018), the research focuses on interpreting the lecturer's lived experience through an interpretive–descriptive lens (Thorne, 2017) guided by Communication Privacy Management Theory (Petronio & Durham, 2014). Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation over three months with AMR, MBA (pseudonym), a Business Administration lecturer in Bandung. Thematic analysis was used to identify meaning patterns related to privacy and communication practices, supported by triangulation and member checking to ensure validity. This approach provides contextual insights into how

lecturers construct, maintain, and interpret privacy boundaries between professional and personal domains in digital academic environments.

Results and Discussion

Context of Discord in Academic Communication

Discord was used as a secondary communication platform in the informant's interactions as a lecturer with students enrolled in the Entrepreneurship course in the 2025 academic year. The Entrepreneurship course is project-based, in which students learn through a business incubation process and produce a final output assessed for its business feasibility. Within this context, Discord functions as the primary space for coordination and interaction throughout the entire sequence of course activities.

The Discord server managed by the informant consists of three main channels: Information, Text Channels, and Voice Channels. These were established based on the informant's awareness as the course instructor to organize communication in a structured and efficient manner. Each channel serves a specific function to separate message contexts and avoid overlapping conversations. Within the server structure, each member holds a role that distinguishes their function and authority: "Lecture" as the main administrator, "Bot" as an automation system supporting activity management, and "Member" as students participating in the server. This categorization reflects a hierarchical approach to managing academic communication in digital spaces, in which role configuration serves as a structural boundary between information providers and recipients..

The Information channel consists of two sub-channels: #info-link-dan-materi-penting and #pengumuman. Both are used to deliver centralized academic information, such as the Semester Learning Plan (RPS), instructional materials, and technical announcements related to coursework and business projects (see Figure 1). In this channel, the informant restricts upload access to members with the "Lecture" role, which includes lecturers, to prevent the information

flow from mixing with student messages. This policy represents a form of communicative control that reinforces the channel's function as the center for official information distribution. In this way, the structure of the "Information" channel becomes a symbolic representation of how the digital space is constructed to resemble a formal academic administrative system, albeit within a more dynamic medium.
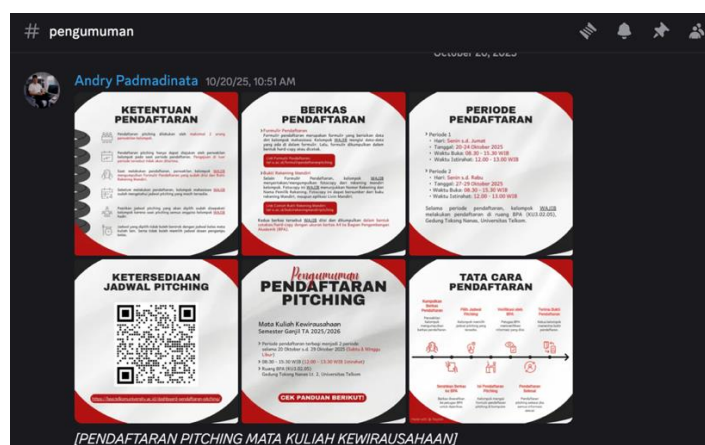

Figure 1. Messages in the #pengumuman sub-channel

The Text Channels category contains nine sub-channels divided into two primary functions: academic coordination spaces and interactive discussion spaces. Four thread-type sub-channels, such as #diskusi-kelompok and #pengumuman-kelas-kwu-(Senin, Selasa, Rabu), are used to facilitate interaction and monitor class activities on the scheduled day. The main function of this category is to coordinate group-based academic activities and monitor project progress. Although the format technically allows two-way interaction, observations show that students rarely respond to the lecturer's messages in announcement spaces, suggesting that communication remains vertical even in the digital environment.

In contrast, in the sub-channels #diskusi-dan-pertanyaan-kelas-kwu-(Senin, Selasa, Rabu), two-way interaction occurs more intensively. The lecturer and students participate actively through text and emoji, and even use the polling feature to organize course activities (see Figure 3). In this context, Discord functions as a collaborative space that enables more direct student engagement while still maintaining the lecturer's authoritative structure. Several

informal channels, such as #off-topic-curcol and #promosikan-produk-anda-disini, are also provided by the informant to accommodate non-academic interactions. However, within the scope of this theme, the presence of these two channels is noted primarily as evidence of Discord's flexibility in separating academic and social contexts. The aspects of professional boundaries and adaptation to student characteristics will be discussed further in the subsequent theme.
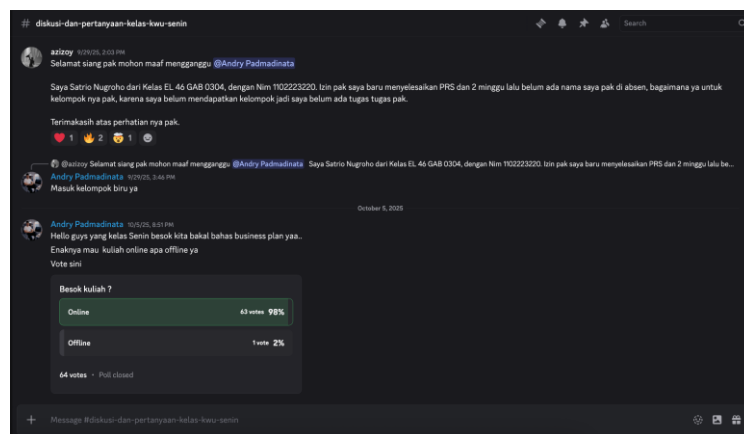

Figure 2. Messages in the #diskusi-dan-pertanyaan-kelas-kwu-senin sub-channel

The Voice Channel category is an audio and video-based space that facilitates real-time communication. It contains three sub-channels: Lounge, Study Room 1, and Study Room 2. The Lounge sub-channel is used for informal interactions such as listening to music, casual conversation, or playing games (see Figure 3), whereas the two Study Rooms function as group discussion spaces and substitutes for online classes. Based on observation and interviews, this category represents the most active interaction space. The informant frequently uses the Voice Channel for alternative meetings when face-to-face classes are not possible. For example, the lecturer organizes evening discussions through Study Room 1 to maintain continuity in project work. This tendency indicates that Discord serves both as a communication medium and as a flexible alternative platform, particularly for project-based instruction.
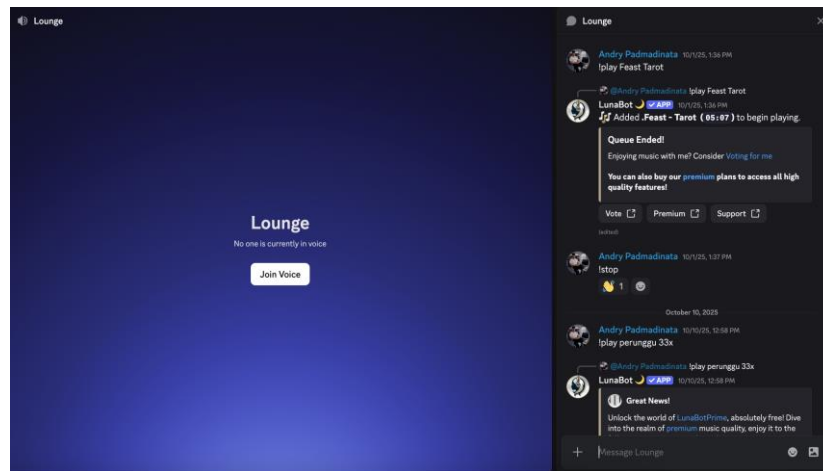
Figure 3. Messages in the #lounge sub-channel

Management of Professional and Personal Boundaries

After outlining how Discord functions as an academic communication space, this theme examines how the lecturer manages the boundary between professional and personal domains within that space. In using Discord, the informant applies several strategies to regulate this boundary through the structure of the digital environment, interaction patterns, and the values upheld in communication with students. Discord becomes a medium in which these boundaries are maintained through rules, temporal arrangements, and social awareness constructed and evolving among its users.

The Discord server, as a digital space, is organized so that each channel has a clear context. As described in the previous theme, the informant groups are organized by function. This grouping keeps the communication flow orderly and aligned with the purpose of each space. In the interview, the informant explained:

> "If it's about venting, I separate it. For example, some students like to seek attention, but I worry they might do that in the discussion channel. The information would get buried. That's why I created a venting channel; if they want to unload something, they can do it there."

The curcol sub-channel functions as a buffer space that accommodates students' social expressions without disrupting academic communication. This spatial structure demonstrates contextual regulation: each message is placed within its appropriate domain. Within the framework of Communication Privacy Management theory, this form of arrangement reflects the practice of coordinating informational boundaries in digital spaces. Boundary management is also enacted through time and medium. The lecturer determines response schedules and designates Discord as the primary channel for academic communication, while other media, such as WhatsApp, are viewed as more personal platforms and are rarely used for course-related matters. The informant stated:

> "I always log in to Discord after nine at night; messages will definitely be read and replied to at night. Since WhatsApp is more personal, it's better to keep everything on Discord."

Time regulation and media selection indicate a form of digital discipline. The lecturer structures the rhythm of communication to align with role demands and situational needs. This finding illustrates the distinct character of Discord use when positioned as an academic platform. Boundaries are also maintained through social norms that develop within the server. From the first face-to-face meeting, the lecturer explains Discord usage rules to students, including prohibitions on discussing sensitive issues such as ethnicity, religion, race, pornography, or misinformation. However, most control does not rely on direct reprimand but on shared understanding of appropriate behavior. The informant explained:

> When it comes to communication boundaries, there's no need to explain them in detail; just emphasize them so they figure it out on their own. They start asking themselves, 'Is this kind of joking too much?' In my classes, they usually know on their own."

Students in the server learn to read contextual cues within an open digital environment. With more than 400 members, the Discord space carries natural social surveillance, where

every message is visible to many people. Shame or reluctance thus becomes a behavioral regulator. This statement is supported by observational data across all channels, which show that no student shares permission-related information in a personal context. This mechanism produces collective discipline that keeps the space professional without requiring rigid rules.

In the context of lecturer–student relationships on Discord, observational and interview data show that the relationship is close, yet professional boundaries and role distinctions are maintained. All interactions within the channels, except for the #off-topic-curcol sub-channel, remain grounded in the course's functions and objectives. The lecturer is open to communication but simultaneously maintains emotional distance. The informant illustrated this as follows:

> "If someone reacts to my posts, it's nothing special; it doesn't affect anything as long as it's in the context of bonding. Usually, the people closest to me are students with certain skills. For example, if someone can build a website, I usually ask for their phone number in case I need it."

Security and Privacy in Digital Interaction

Privacy in digital interaction is a central concern for the informant. Past communication experiences across different platforms shaped new understandings of security, distance, and comfort when interacting with students. Discord was chosen because it provides a sense of control over space and working relationships. For the informant, security is tied to personal control over access and the rhythm of communication, rather than solely to technical aspects such as data protection. The informant also described discomfort when communicating through WhatsApp. At one point, the informant received a message from a student during a teaching session and was later reported to the head of the study program for not responding immediately. This incident became a turning point that influenced the decision to choose a communication platform. In a reflective account, the informant stated:

> "There was a supervised student who texted me on WhatsApp at nine in the morning
> while I was teaching. I didn't reply because I was in class, and the student reported me
> to the head of the study program. Since then, I decided not to use WhatsApp anymore
> for coordinating with students."

For the informant, this incident demonstrated that WhatsApp as a platform is too intrusive, allowing the lecturer's personal space to be easily breached. Discord is perceived as offering a more controlled environment, with interactions occurring within a centralized server rather than through personal phone numbers or email. In this way, the informant feels protected from unwanted communication pressure outside working hours. Interview and observational data indicate that the informant schedules logins at night and rarely opens other applications, such as WhatsApp, for student matters. This pattern shows that privacy is understood as the organization of space and time that provides structure to digital interaction.

Meanwhile, for the informant, security is associated with a sense of ease in carrying out professional roles without disruption. Discord provides a communicative distance considered ideal, allowing students to interact without crossing into the lecturer's personal domain. The informant explained:

> "Because other platforms are more personal, like WhatsApp, which exposes your phone
> number, you can end up getting harassed. So it's better like this, on Discord. They also
> don't know my phone number."

In this context, security arises from socially constructed boundaries rather than digital mechanisms, created through communicative limits. When students do not have access to personal identifiers, such as phone numbers, interactions remain within the academic domain without opening the lecturer's private space. Observational data show that students communicate formally in public channels and use Direct Messages (DMs) only for permissions or clarifications of a more personal nature. This pattern reinforces the notion that Discord

provides a safe space for lecturers to interact without losing control over interpersonal proximity.

Reflection on Professionalism in Digital Media

All communication management practices on Discord lead the informant to reaffirm professional values already held prior to the use of digital media. For the informant, professionalism is a principle established before the emergence of digital platforms. Discord becomes a space that reveals how this principle is enacted within a different communicative context. For lecturers, professionalism means maintaining one's role, behaving appropriately, and adhering to ethical standards even as forms of interaction shift into digital domains. The informant emphasizes the importance of understanding one's position and maintaining integrity in any setting. Discord merely provides a new medium through which the same principle is enacted.

"Professionalism and integrity. We must know what our role is, and integrity is tied to principles that cannot be compromised."

In practice, the informant organizes the communication structure, sets time boundaries, and establishes conversational ethics to maintain politeness. All of this is carried out as an expression of work discipline that has become habitual. The digital space also enables faster and more open forms of closeness. The informant recognizes this but continues to situate interactions within academic boundaries.

"What matters is staying friendly while still adhering to existing ethics and norms."

The informant views friendliness as something that can be expressed without erasing professional distance. Responses are given as needed, the tone of communication is controlled, and the relationship is framed by the learning objectives. Observational data show that the informant consistently maintains this balance in both public server interactions and private conversations.

Conclusion

This study examines how Discord mediates academic communication practices and the formation of professional boundaries within digital pedagogy. The central finding is that communication on Discord is shaped through a dynamic relationship among technological structures, social norms, and professional awareness. These interactions produce an order of communication in which closeness, control, and professionalism operate simultaneously to structure the interactional space. Thus, Discord is more than a communication platform; it becomes a space that organizes how academic roles, social relations, and ethical values are enacted in digital environments. Through channel management, timing of communication, and shared understandings of interactional ethics, the lecturer regulates the rhythm of message exchange so that it continues to reflect professionalism while also providing space for meaningful social interaction. Within the framework of Communication Privacy Management, privacy is understood as a relational coordination process that helps maintain balance between openness and self-regulation. This boundary management functions as a reflective practice that evolves alongside communicators' experiences and awareness in digital spaces.

This study has implications across multiple levels. At the individual level, educators need to develop ethical and digital literacy, which involves understanding how technology shapes interaction and how professionalism is maintained. At the institutional level, communication policies are needed that support awareness of boundaries and digital responsibilities in higher education. At the theoretical level, the study contributes to understanding the platformization of professional ethics, illustrating how integrity and professionalism are enacted through technological design and reflective communicative habits.

The limitations of this study include the restricted observation setting and the small number of participants, suggesting that the findings require further examination in broader contexts. Future research may expand the scope by involving more lecturers or incorporating student perspectives to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of boundary management

in academic relationships. Comparative approaches across multiple platforms may also provide insights into how different technologies influence academic communication. As a conceptual reflection, Discord illustrates shifting practices of professionalism in education, where boundary management and responsibility no longer rely solely on formal rules. Professionalism in digital spaces emerges from a balance between closeness and control, in which communication management involves ethical considerations attuned to technological dynamics and social change.

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