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Netiquette as Digital Social Norms

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ABSTRACT

Human interactions are guided by rules, guidelines, and social norms—a tacit understanding of what is adequate in a given context. With interactions being increasingly digitally mediated, understanding how behavior is regulated in these environments becomes imperative. In this paper, we provide an overview of the literature on netiquette and how usage of the term developed over time. We then present findings from five exploratory focus groups, discussing general characteristics of netiquette, how users acquire and adapt netiquette, as well as the social dynamics associated with netiquette. Findings suggest that netiquette dynamically interacts with social, psychological, and environmental factors. We thus propose integrating the netiquette literature with research on social norms and conceptualize netiquette as *digital social norms*. The paper identifies five areas for further research that will deepen our understanding of how netiquette evolves, how it is perceived by users, and how it impacts their everyday experiences.

KEYWORDS

Digital social norms; netiquette; etiquette; remote work; focus groups

1. Introduction

Interactions, communication, and social learning between humans shape our culture (Henrich, 2015). As interactions between individuals on the internet increase, so does the relative societal importance of these interactions. The channel of interaction influences the pathways in which the social and psychological fabric of societies evolves (Ascerbi, 2019; Cohn et al., 2022). These differences in interactions are influenced by various psychological and social factors, ranging from social norms and habits to status and social capital. This paper focuses on what we call digital social norms, the general rules of conduct and a tacit understanding of what is adequate behavior in online interaction. In the literature, these rules have often been loosely referred to as “netiquette” (Scheuermann & Taylor, 1997; Shea, 1994; Soler-Costa et al., 2021). Research on netiquette has been steadily growing (see Figure 1) and may subsequently become a major strand of research in the field of human-computer interaction. While netiquette is a broad term that historically also includes formal laws and regulations, as well as technological determinants, we argue that it will be useful to conceptualize netiquette as *digital social norms that regulate digitally mediated interactions*.

Several attempts have been made to define common standards of netiquette (Scheuermann & Taylor, 1997; Shea, 1994), and a recent systematic literature review (Soler-Costa et al., 2021) summarizes the discourse in the field. An

important caveat, represented in the very term *netiquette*—“netiquette” is a portmanteau of “internet” and *etiquette*—is the perception of online culture as a derivative of offline culture. That is, *etiquette* online is a subset of the *etiquette* offline, and should thus be perceived in relation to its counterpart. Here we argue that to understand the conventions of digitally mediated interactions, we need to emancipate netiquette from *etiquette* and conceive of it as an independent entity. Establishing netiquette as digital social norms will be conducive to this. Put differently, online interactions are influenced by a broad network of external and environmental factors, of which offline culture is one. Digital social norms are dynamic and change over time. They depend on the affordances, institutions, and embodied competences of the digital installations and users they regulate, such as the platform on which interactions take place (e.g., TikTok vs LinkedIn), the goal and the nature of the interaction (work, pleasure, etc.), as well as the actors’ backgrounds and skills (Lahlou et al., 2021, 2022).

We thus argue that netiquette can but may not overlap with *etiquette*. Indeed, some developments in netiquette will be orthogonal to *etiquette* and in some areas *etiquette* may be shaped by netiquette. A better understanding of how these factors influence netiquette will help to grasp how perceptions of netiquette change in different situations. These insights will also enable individual users, organizations, and communities of practice to reflect upon, and potentially

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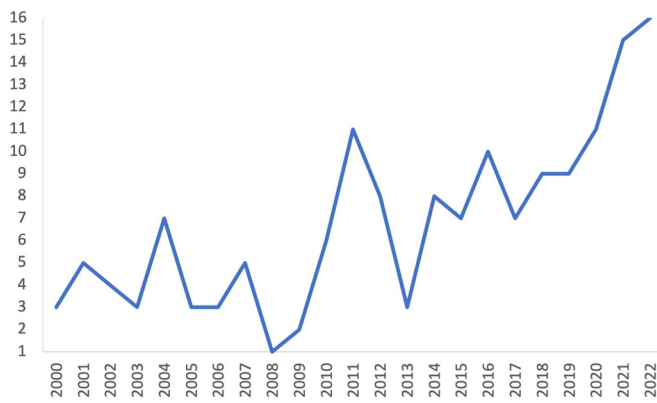


Figure 1. Publications on netiquette per year since 2000.

intervene in the digital social norms they have implicitly created and are operating in. We, therefore, believe that a large and multi-faceted, mixed-methods research effort is needed to develop a better understanding of how the perception of netiquette is constructed.

This paper aims to open up the discussion and serve as an anchoring point for future research into netiquette. We first provide an overview of the relevant literature on netiquette conceptualized through the lens of digital social norms. We then report findings from focus groups discussing user perceptions of netiquette. Based on these findings, we discuss the key characteristics of netiquette, how users acquire and manage it, and which social dynamics are at play. Finally, we formulate five key directions for future research that will enable researchers working in the field to develop our understanding of netiquette further.

2. Literature review

2.1. Conceptualizing netiquette

Digitalization and widespread adoption of the internet have had a dramatic impact on the way we work, collaborate (Beigi & Otaye-Ebede, 2021; Heitmayer & Lahlou, 2021; Lahlou et al., 2021), play (Anderson, 2017; McCauley et al., 2017; Woodcock & Johnson, 2019), and form intimate relationships (Everri, 2017, 2018; Whitty & Carr, 2006a), but also on the way we consume media (Damme et al., 2015; Munger, 2020). An understanding of the technologies that enable digitally mediated interactions, as well as skills and embodied competences, is becoming essential to fully participate in the economic reproduction of, and the cultural exchange in, society. Both research and policy decisions give testimony to this, with older generations and less tech-savvy users constrained in their societal participation (Ito et al., 2001; Martin et al., 2016), and individuals reporting feelings of being “left behind” (Seifert et al., 2018). Similarly, skills for the use of digital technology have become a fixed element in educational curricula and children are exposed to digital education at an early age (e.g., Holloway et al., 2013), see (Pettersson, 2018) for a review.

Discussions around the rules of engagement for social behavior in online interactions have been revolving around two key areas, digital competence (sometimes also called

digital literacy), and netiquette (i.e., the digital social norms around behavior in a given setting).

Digital competence focuses on the individual capacities of using digitally mediated interactions (Spante et al., 2018), often taking an educational angle or focusing on the personal development of users (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2021; Iglesias-Rodríguez et al., 2021; Pescott, 2020). The importance of digital competence is recognized by employers, education providers, and even governmental bodies. The European Commission, for example, includes it as one of eight key competencies for its citizens (Council of the European Union, 2018; Vuorikari et al., 2022) and defines it the following way:

Digital competence involves the confident, critical and responsible use of, and engagement with, digital technologies for learning, at work, and for participation in society. It includes information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, media literacy, digital content creation (including programming), safety (including digital well-being and competences related to cybersecurity), intellectual property related questions, problem solving and critical thinking. (Council of the European Union, 2018, p. 10)

In contrast to the usage focused concept of digital competences, netiquette focuses more on the social and cultural skills involved in digitally mediated communication, in the sense of Bourdieu’s social capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1989) and akin to traditional forms of offline etiquette. Unfortunately, the term netiquette has been used somewhat loosely in the literature and has never been formally established as a concept or an area of research. Nonetheless, there has been a steady stream of research on the topic since it emerged. The 2022 update of the EU Digital Competence Framework for Citizens now includes netiquette in the competence area of communication and collaboration (Vuorikari et al., 2022), and a keyword search for “netiquette” using the Scopus and Web of Science search engines returned 140 unique publications since the year 2000, with an increasing frequency of yearly publications since 2010 (see Figure 1; search carried out October 17, 2022). Together, this suggests that it is an appropriate moment to formally frame the discussion of this developing field.

Early work on netiquette pioneering the definition of the concept (Hambridge, 1995; McMurdo, 1995; National Science Foundation Network, 1992; Shea, 1994), and providing early guidelines (Ekeblad, 1998; Hambridge, 1995; Rinaldi, 1996; Scheuermann & Taylor, 1997; Shea, 1994; Spinks et al., 1999) dates back to the 1990s. These works often define netiquette as a set of guidelines that govern interactions on the internet:

“Netiquette” is derived by merging the words “network” and “etiquette.” By its very construction, netiquette means net-etiquette or etiquette of the Network. In general terms, this refers to etiquette on computer networks. More specifically the term “netiquette” has been described by Netcom Services as “The conventions of politeness recognized on Usenet and in mailing lists.” (Scheuermann & Taylor, 1997, p. 1)

[W]e use the term netiquette to mean a body of conventions and manners for using the Internet as a tool for communication or data exchange, practiced or advocated by a group of people. In this sense, netiquette includes laws, regulations, as well as good manners and practices. (Tedre et al., 2006, p. 368)

The majority of theoretical work on netiquette aims to detail proper conduct, for example, when writing Emails, or

engaging in digitally mediated Business to Business exchanges (Ekeblad, 1998; Hambridge, 1995; Hammond & Moseley, 2018; Hills, 2011; McCartney, 2000; Scheuermann & Taylor, 1997; Schlabach & Fuller, 2004; Spinks et al., 1999; Sturges, 2002; Thompson & Lloyd, 2002). A notable exception to this is the contribution by Preece; she argues that the development of “better processes and tools for supporting etiquette [online]” will eventually become necessary (Preece, 2004). But since her call to action, little has changed in the literature. Prior works on netiquette share in common i) a pragmatic approach, usually aiming to provide concrete guidance for practitioners, and ii) an understanding of netiquette as being derived from pre-existing norms and rules for interactions outside the digital sphere. Netiquette has thus been characterized as a “product of the internet-popularization era”:

[The] creation of the first netiquette was more pragmatic than altruistic, but it helped significantly in integrating Internet beginners with the already rich (and “newbie-sensitive”) infrastructure, as well as with savvy and usually very competent veterans. (Pregowski, 2009, p. 355)

While the focus of the early netiquette literature on providing guidance for users may have been correct historically (Shea, 1994), this creates two complications: First, by treating netiquette as derivative of etiquette, guidelines that are formulated can only provide a momentary snapshot of what is considered good practice at the time of writing, and that is also closely tied to the medium or field to which they refer. In this sense, netiquette must constantly play catch-up with the fast-paced and ever-changing online landscape, and for every new iteration, netiquette must again be positioned vis-a-vis rules and norms outside the digital sphere. This approach to netiquette, secondly, precludes thinking abstractly and scholarly about the social contract in digital spaces, and the naturally emerging and evolving rules that are created intersubjectively in these spaces.

We argue that netiquette is not purely derivative of etiquette. On the contrary, it has acquired its own dynamics resulting in the creation of new norms of intersubjective activity specific to digitally mediated human interaction. These norms now also feed back into how individuals engage with each other outside the digital sphere, given how much we engage with each other and how intimate and direct our digitally mediated interactions have become (Heitmayer & Lahlou, 2021; Lahlou et al., 2021). Indeed, in recent years, digitally mediated interactions have become more frequent than face-to-face interactions for many people.

2.2. Netiquette as digital social norms

In this paper, we, therefore, conceptualize the customary behavioral code for digitally mediated interactions prescribed by netiquette as digital social norms. Such norms shape a tacit understanding of a setting and its associated expectations similar to how norms help us to maneuver situations in the real world. On one hand, descriptive norms are what we perceive as the standard behavior, “what the

majority of people around us do” (Bicchieri, 2017; Cialdini et al., 1991; Linek & Ostermaier-Grabow, 2018). Injunctive norms, on the other hand, relate to the behavior that is expected of us, that should be done in a given situation (Chung & Rimal, 2016). Observing that everyone around you uses a Zoom background and that this seems to be the norm in your organization is descriptive. Everyone turning their camera on in a zoom meeting and expecting you to do the same is injunctive. While previous research has primarily associated netiquette with injunctive social norms (Linek & Ostermaier-Grabow, 2018), we argue that both types of norms, descriptive and injunctive, support the formation of netiquette and the system of digital social norms in any given context and situation. While descriptive norms guide individuals towards implicitly understanding what behaviors are expected of them, as they observe others engaging in them, injunctive norms shape behavior via more explicit social pressure. Netiquette is not only an explicit, written-down injunctive rule, it is also something that dynamically forms through behavior and interactions.

How people react to a given social norm and how they socially learn from observing others adhering to such norms is not random but influenced by tendencies and biases in social learning. For example, we tend to copy the behavior and look for norm cues from successful or prestigious individuals (Jiménez & Mesoudi, 2019) and are more likely to conform to the majority (Efferson et al., 2008; Muthukrishna et al., 2016). The spread of a new digital social norm in a group will be driven by such learning biases, which enable researchers to study not only the status quo of netiquette but also its emergence and diffusion (Young, 2015). The important nuance we want to emphasize with this research is that thinking about netiquette must take a step beyond the literacy and skills-based notion. It is not sufficient to use netiquette as a label for “how to” and “tutorial” style guidelines that provide training for a specific skill, i.e., behaving properly on a forum or in email conversations. Rather, we define netiquette as a complex, networked order of various intermeshing digital social norms that govern the way humans interact with each other in digital contexts.

Another issue to consider is that rules of conduct for private and public engagement cannot be perfectly translated from the offline into the online context, both because of technical and physiological differences between digitally mediated and in-person interactions (Herrera et al., 2018; Hollan & Stornetta, 1992; Lahlou et al., 2021; Sklar, 2020; van Loon et al., 2018), and, importantly, because of perceived differences in context, such as different levels of trust (Cohn et al., 2022), as well as lower levels of common cultural context as the frame of reference given the global scale of interactions. Moreover, it is also unclear whether the basic values underlying social norms in the offline world will still be relevant in the online context (Pregowski, 2009).

Secondly, as an increasing number of individuals are forced to heavily rely on the internet for personal and work communication, it has further become clear that beyond the ability to participate in digitally mediated communication,

the most pressing question now seems to be how online environments and interactions can be integrated with the offline lives of users without being too intrusive and disruptive, as well as what constitutes acceptable behavior on the internet in the first place (Baym & Boyd, 2012; Turkle, 1995, 2017). We, therefore, argue that to create an operational concept of netiquette that is not subject to chronic revision, and to carve out the nuances between online and offline interactions between humans at a level that is not bound to a specific medium or form factor, netiquette must be understood as a set of norms and rules independent and on equal footing with traditional etiquette.

2.3. Previous studies

While netiquette has rarely been the explicit subject of empirical research, several studies have looked into digital social norms and user perceptions of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors in online contexts. We have identified different strands of the literature around the topics of appropriateness in digitally mediated communication, guidelines and emergent norms for digital communities of practice.

Firstly, several studies have looked at contexts and prevalence of politeness and civility in online interactions (Duskaeva, 2020; Galimullina et al., 2022; Hatzidaki, 2020; Haugsbakken, 2016; Maia & Rezende, 2016; Oyadiji, 2020), acceptable practices of self-presentation and communication (Helsper & Whitty, 2010; Ostermaier-Grabow & Linek, 2019), as well as interactions between students and teachers (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Buelens et al., 2007; Knight & Masselink, 2008; Linek & Ostermaier-Grabow, 2018; Mazer et al., 2007; Mistretta, 2021; Teclehaiamot & Hickman, 2011), psychiatrists and clients (Kumar et al., 2020), or work communication (Karl & Peluchette, 2011; O’Kane & Hargie, 2007; Peluchette et al., 2013; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Walther & Bunz, 2005; Whitty & Carr, 2006b). Buelens and colleagues, for example, have investigated how making netiquette rules explicit impacts the quality of conversations in online asynchronous group discussions. According to their participants, a good discussion on the Internet is marked “by the absence of ungrounded statements and by the presence of arguments and questions” (Buelens et al., 2007, p. 715). The authors furthermore find that supplying formal netiquette guidelines in combination with didactic guidelines resulted in longer, more substantiated statements and that a lack of ungrounded statements also correlated with participants’ appraisal of the quality of discussions. In a similar vein, linguistic analyses of speech etiquette in digital contexts describe how specific communities create norms to enable free and creative expression, and to ban and sanction disruptive or undesired types of behavior (Duskaeva, 2020; Hatzidaki, 2020; Locher & Watts, 2005).

Looking at self-presentation and interactions with previously unknown partners, users seem to prefer objective, unemotional language without using excessive formalities or polite phrases, however, the length of the discussion appears

to be related to increased use of emotional expressions and colloquial language (Ostermaier-Grabow & Linek, 2019).

Turning towards the effects on the work and business environment, workers reported mixed feelings towards the effects of remote communication at work (O’Kane & Hargie, 2007). Further studies also report ambivalent feelings of users regarding the acceptability of befriending one’s boss or professors on social media networks (Karl & Peluchette, 2011; Peluchette et al., 2013).

Secondly, some studies develop guidelines for specific communities of practice based on empirical evidence, document how rules and guidelines emerge from these communities, and which effects they have on users (Bauler, 2021; Kumar et al., 2020; Mistretta, 2021; Snyder, 2015), and which effects they have on users (Bailey et al., 2022a, 2022b; Barber & Santuzzi, 2015; Brown et al., 2014; Derks et al., 2014; Gadeyne et al., 2018; Marsh et al., 2022). Sharon Mistretta, for example, provides an updated list of guidelines for teachers facing the difficulty of switching from in-person to remote provision of education during the pandemic in a matter of weeks (Mistretta, 2021). Kumar and colleagues outline 13 guidelines for a netiquette of Telepsychiatry that aims to support practitioners to deliver effective treatment to their patients even in remote settings (Kumar et al., 2020), and Bauler provides netiquette guidelines for teachers to effectively educate their students with online remote learning technologies (Bauler, 2021).

Snyder (Snyder, 2015) provides an interesting overview of the formation of digital culture paying specific attention to team communication and work. Further studies investigating organizational contexts have found that normative pressure to reply to messages quickly (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015; Brown et al., 2014), as well as to separate private and professional activities (Derks et al., 2014; Gadeyne et al., 2018) can lead to experienced pressure and negative well-being outcomes for individuals see (Marsh et al., 2022) for an overview of the dark side of the digital workplace.

More abstractly, overuse of digital communication tools can lead to exhaustion (e.g., “Zoom fatigue”; Fosslien & Duffy, 2020; Sklar, 2020) and frequent meetings can lead to dissatisfaction (Hacker et al., 2020). In this context, studies have found that exposure to self-view in video calls can lead to frustration when having the camera turned on is prescribed normatively (Kuhn, 2022) and that clothes worn and expectations around them affect the efficacy of and satisfaction with video calls (Bailey et al., 2022a, 2022b).

2.4. An empirical approach to understanding netiquette

Overall, the literature on digital social norms and netiquette is evolving but is still in its early stages. Empirical work is scarce, and conceptual work which aims to unify different approaches in the field overall is scarcer still. A recent meta-review on netiquette points out a “lack of a clear line of research” (Soler-Costa et al., 2021, p. 6) in the field. Echoing this judgment based on our discussion of the theoretical and empirical literature, we see a large scientific opportunity to synthesize the study of netiquette and digital social norms as a

field of research and to establish a clear research agenda. Bottom-up, participatory work to understand the perceptions of netiquette and digital social norms that users hold is needed first. In the second step, larger-scale validations will be necessary, particularly natural-, field- and controlled online experiments. In addition, observations of communities of practice will become increasingly relevant. As suggested by Buelens and colleagues: “One way of doing so might be by not ‘providing’ guidelines, but by opening discussion forums with a contribution that is completely in line with the guideline it stands for. Thus, future research might look for the effect of prototypical examples” (Buelens et al., 2007). An overview of the reviewed literature is provided in Table 1.

A large amount of work is required to create a firm, scientific understanding of netiquette and the processes and mechanisms involved. In a second step, this understanding can then be used by scientific and professional communities to purposefully shape individual digital social norms or the current netiquette overall. In this paper, we aim to stimulate this research agenda with a human-centered analysis by developing our understanding of how users engage with digital social norms in their daily lives, what they perceive as proper netiquette—and what not. We therefore formulate the following research question: What are users’ perceptions of and everyday experiences with netiquette?

3. Methods

To provide an initial overview of the most important digital social norms in the lives of users, as well as their perceptions and thoughts on netiquette more abstractly, we conducted five focus groups with four to six participants attending each focus group. For this exploratory project, we aimed to create a typical case sample of young adults (e.g., roughly aged between 20 and 40 and balanced in terms of gender) who are the first generation characterized by intense use of the internet and digital technologies from an early age onwards. Participants were recruited via institutional mailing lists (in the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and Germany), social media, and the researchers’ personal network using a convenience-sampling method. This generated

an international sample of 23 participants in total¹. The age of participants ranged from 22 to 39 (mean 29.4) years with 10 female and 13 male participants. All participants can be broadly classified as knowledge workers, who held at least one university degree, had at least 2 years of work experience and worked in a wide range of roles as consultants, business developers, lawyers/judges, doctors/therapists, business developers, data analysts, policymakers, managers, and researchers. Four participants were also enrolled as students at the time of data collection. Data collection took place from May to September 2021 via Zoom. Focus groups were conducting using a semi-structured question schedule (see Appendix A1) and lasted 75 min on average, ranging between 63 and 83 min. The focus groups were transcribed literally and analyzed using directed Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) to describe emerging themes and ideas systematically and coherently (Mayring, 2000, 2015; Schreier, 2014). Coding of themes took place iteratively over three rounds with both authors contributing to the coding process and detailed reflexivity discussions between each round of coding. The full coding frame is provided in Appendix A2.

As this paper represents a first approach to formalizing the field of digital social norms, it is bound to be incomplete and we wish to highlight several methodological shortcomings: First of all, our sample, albeit international, represents a specific community of people living in a highly urbanized, Western context. Further studies investigating cultural variation across cultures, but also specific communities will be crucial to delineate the concept of digital social norms further (Schimmelpennig et al., 2023). Similarly, while focus groups are a useful tool to understand perceptions and shared values of groups and communities, a more varied methodological approach including representative, cross-sectional as well as longitudinal techniques will be required to validate the initial findings presented here.

4. Findings

The focus groups covered a broad range of topics relating to behavior, communication, and social norms in the digital world. For this analysis, we have focused specifically on the

Table 1. Overview of the different approaches to Netiquette in the literature over time.

Understanding of Netiquette	Literature
Netiquette provides general, formal rules & guidelines that govern interactions on the internet. These rules derive from existing offline rules or emerge “naturally” from technological factors.	Ekeblad (1998), Hambridge (1995), Hammond and Moseley (2018), Hills (2011), McCartney (2000), McMurdo (1995), National Science Foundation Network (1992), Rinaldi (1996), Scheuermann and Taylor (1997), Schlabach and Fuller (2004), Shea (1994), Spinks et al. (1999), Sturges (2002), Thompson and Lloyd (2002).
Rules of conduct for private and public engagement cannot be perfectly translated from the offline into the online context. Social interactions on the internet determine the way in which local norms and rules develop. Specific communities require specific rules.	Biesenbach-Lucas (2007), Duskaeva (2020), Galimullina et al. (2022), Hatzidaki (2020), Haugsbakken (2016), Helsper and Whitty (2010), Karl and Peluchette (2011), Knight and Masselink (2008), Kumar et al. (2020), Linek and Ostermaier-Grabow (2018), Maia and Rezende (2016), Mazer et al. (2007), Mistretta (2021), O’Kane and Hargie (2007), Ostermaier-Grabow and Linek (2019), Oyadiji (2020), Peluchette et al. (2013), Sproull and Kiesler (1986), Tecléhaimanot and Hickman (2011), Walther and Bunz (2005), Whitty and Carr (2006a).
Netiquette affects and is affected by users. Processes & tools to understand and shape digital social norms are needed. These processes emerge naturally and should be governed by the rules they aim to establish from the get-go.	Bailey et al. (2022a), Barber and Santuzzi (2015), Brown et al. (2014), Buelens et al. (2007), Derks et al. (2014), Fosslien and Duffy (2020), Gadeyne et al. (2018), Marsh et al. (2022), Herrera et al. (2018), Hollan and Stornetta (1992), Lahlou et al. (2021), Preece (2004), Pregowski (2009), Sklar (2020), Snyder (2015), van Loon et al. (2018), Whitty and Carr (2006b).

Characteristics of Netiquette	Acquiring & Managing Netiquette	Social Dynamics of Netiquette
Style & formalities	Individual-level learning	The influence of personal connections
Spillover between netiquette & etiquette	Group-level learning	Social status & power
Platform dependency	Adapting to pressures & expectations	Interactions with existing inequalities
Mismatches & friction	Learning to manage impressions	Attention & multi-tasking
	Implicit adaptation	

Figure 2. Overview of the themes and subthemes emerging from the thematic analysis.

discussions around netiquette, which yielded three major themes with four to five subthemes, respectively: *Characteristics of Netiquette*, *Acquiring & Managing Netiquette*, and *Social Dynamics of Netiquette*. See Figure 2 for an overview.

4.1. Characteristics of netiquette

The first major area of discussion that participants engaged in during the focus groups encompasses concrete examples of digital social norms and experiences with netiquette.

4.1.1. Style & formalities

The Participants often discussed norms around formats and styles of digital interactions. Particularly Emails have been described as “their own language” in this regard. The use of GIFs, Emojis or Memes, as well as inside jokes, on the other hand, enabled a more loose and personal interaction, typically in chat, but also within Emails. Interestingly, several participants felt that digital social norms prescribed more formal exchanges than their analogue equivalents, which they perceived as detracting from the quality of experience:

I think it’s overly sanitized and formal. And I think that’s, sometimes worse than being uncivil. (P13)

Many participants shared the sentiment that digital interactions tend to be more purpose-driven than offline ones, and that initiating an interaction in a digitally mediated context therefore usually required a “cause” or an “agenda” (such as an exchange of information or a request).

I also think that maybe when you are right next to the other person, you could ask little questions that are not as important. But if you’re going to book a meeting, or send an email, or like, it has to be more important for you to do that kind of interaction. Obviously, you have chat or WhatsApp, that could be a more immediate interaction. But still, I feel like it has to be worth it. (P7).

Moreover, participants reported fewer incentives to fill “scheduled time” with professional or social activities once the main purpose of a meeting had been fulfilled:

Whereas, when I meet people, say, for lunch for an hour. Then you have that one hour and you have to fill it. Unlike with a

video call where you would hang up if you’re done after 10 minutes. [...] And when you are together for an hour, sometimes there are empty spaces that need to be filled, perhaps with new and creative ideas, which results in a completely different quality of communication that I rarely encounter in digital formats. (P23)

Participants also discussed that short, informal interactions (e.g., “watercooler talk”) were not just more complicated to organize in digital settings, but also perceived as less permissible. This created distance at the individual, and inefficiencies at the organizational level:

And those micro interactions you have with your team have been much more formalised through calls and things like that, which can often mean that you might not want to bother somebody in a weird way, creating more inefficiency than if you did just book in that time to do 15 minutes and talk it through. (P9)

Further to this, creating an agenda or a purpose for digital interactions (particularly meetings), as well as administrative tasks around them were generally regarded as the responsibility of the initiator of digital interactions (“you have invited us, and therefore you also have the responsibility for the meeting and take the lead, guiding us through it” P15). In this context, a need for formal moderation to ensure the appropriate digital social norms were upheld was mentioned by several participants as informal mechanisms of surveillance were less present or enforceable in online interactions:

And I think more moderation is required online, because if you were sitting in a room together and everyone’s eating and playing with their phone and what not. You would just see that nobody is actually present and think to yourself “Okay, this meeting is rubbish”. But this is completely accepted [online]. (P16)

Moreover, as mentioned above, participants also expressed their doubts and frustrations around changing norms of including more people in digital interactions (Email chains, meetings) because the technology afforded the possibility to do so.

Finally, participants frequently highlighted differences in digital social norms around using cameras or virtual backgrounds, as well as multi-tasking or initiating meetings, between their social circles or teams and others. The social

and professional environment of participants, and more concretely the closeness of the participant and the frequency of their contact with others in digital contexts further influenced digital social norms and the “level of formality” that constituted appropriate netiquette:

If the CEO is on the call, obviously there’s a level of formality. So, I think it’s just like your inner unit. And then the further out you go, the more formal you get. (P2)

4.1.2. Spillover between netiquette and etiquette

Some social norms translate directly from the analogue to the digital context, especially clothing rules or considerations of timeliness. Participants further agreed that digital interactions usually required a warning, and completely unannounced interactions were seen as disruptive and a source of stress:

I think I would get a mini heart attack if somebody calls me without a prior agreement that we will have a call at this time. Only my mother can do that. (P1)

But digital interactions also hold the opportunity to update social norms outside the digital sphere, for example regarding the use of time and ending an interaction (e.g., a meeting when its goal has been achieved before the originally anticipated time). It was therefore noted that while a physical context would prescribe to fill the time and continue a meeting until the scheduled ending time, “just ending the interaction” was more acceptable in digital contexts (P21). While beyond the scope of this research paper, participants also discussed some social norms around online dating, the practices and acceptability of which have evolved significantly in recent years. On the other hand, participants also highlighted moments where social norms do not translate easily from the offline to the online context. Humor was an often-cited issue that could lead to problems as participants were not sure where it was acceptable in online interactions, and further did not have access to the same type of “feedback from the room” as in physical interactions:

I think sometimes when I make a joke it just doesn’t come across as a joke. And I feel like I need to elaborate, which kills the whole idea of the joke. And then I’m like: might as well not say anything. (P3)

Similarly, social norms around interactive elements of feedback and communication that are readily available in in-person interactions need detailed and careful translation into digital interactions, and are often not utilised by both speakers and audiences to the same degree as in in-person interactions:

But I think that the interactive elements of some of these technology platforms like polls or chats, or like the little clapping thing on teams, are underused. I just strongly encourage people to use them, because then at least you got some form of interaction in both ways. And also, I think it reduces the likelihood that people on the other end are multitasking. (P9)

4.1.3. Platform dependency

Participants also discussed online platforms as a factor in determining which social norms apply in various digital contexts. They described how different platforms not only

determine the framework of digital interactions through their architecture but how this also prescribes certain behaviors and creates specific norms and expectations.

The platform itself determines your behaviour a little bit and creates a sort of expected behaviour. For example regarding speed of replies. Or they’re like mediators for social conventions, yeah. (P22)

At the same time, by prescribing and enforcing certain social conventions, platforms were seen as reducing complexity and creativity in social interactions.

Relating to the discussion of personal connections above, platforms were also used as a separating factor based on the intimacy of the relationship participants had with someone else. Participants thus generally distinguished more private and professional platforms, and they described that “the relationships you build in each space pretty much determine the way you present yourself and the way you talk and the topics you talk about,” (P7). Boundaries between private and professional contexts often get blurred with digital communication, and many participants reported how they used chat applications and social media for communication with professional connections as well. On one hand, this afforded them ease of communication, for example where immediacy was needed, or where a traditionally more private channel served as a “backchannel” for communication during an important meeting. On the other hand, this also raised questions around boundaries and social norms regarding connecting with colleagues, and particularly superiors through channels that were perceived as more private:

There are particular expectations around what it means to be professional. Now, my bosses follow me on Instagram, which is a little bit strange. And it definitely makes me think differently about how I post content... I don’t think you can not accept your boss following you, right? (P6)

4.1.4. Mismatches & Friction

Lastly, participants also discussed their experiences with moments of transgression and mismatches of expectations as formative moments for the creation of digital social norms. Resistance to digital social norms can take different forms and focus on various aspects that were discussed. A common cause of resistance was explicit rules or hardware and software functions that created inconveniences for participants, which usually resulted in collective transgression action, whether orchestrated or not:

We had multiple trainings for teams at my institute and everyone theoretically knows how it works. But 95% of people refuse to communicate via teams. Everyone still writes Emails and uses it exclusively for video calls. (P14)

On the other hand, individual transgressions often seemed difficult to solve for our participants, so that escalation and recourse to another authority was the only effective means to resolve conflict; in these moments a lack of formal and explicit digital social norms was usually mourned:

And I also have colleagues who receive so many Emails, they just don’t reply at all. You simply do not reach them, not by pinging them on teams either and so on. So, you can only call

them or immediately reach out to the boss; so via an escalation. And so there sometimes just are people who do not stick to the common formats of communication, and since this is not regulated anywhere this can create problems. (P15)

4.2. Acquiring & Managing netiquette

The second thematic area participants talked about was how they acquire and adapt their understanding of netiquette. Netiquette is the result of several processes, including individual-level learning, group-level learning, implicit adaptations, adapting to pressures and expectations, and learning to manage impressions.

4.2.1. Individual-level learning

A recurring element of discussion throughout all focus groups was learning through practice. The notion of “trial and error” was mentioned in this context, and participants described that they developed a “sense” for what is acceptable and not acceptable in specific contexts, for example regarding the composing of Emails:

I think you just need to write Emails for 10 years or so. Everyone around me has been in the job for 20 years and they write Emails without batting an eyelid. (P19)

In this context, particularly elements of social learning have been highlighted. Participants described that their behavior changes depending on their professional context (e.g., transitioning from one job to another, or from university to work), and that it is “role-modelled by people around you” (P6). Many participants reported basing their behaviors on observations of superiors or successful others:

Sometimes I see seniors doing things and think to myself: “Ah, that’s how I should do it too.” And then I force myself to do it when I write the next Email. (P19)

4.2.2. Group-level learning

This leads to the second key point for learning, where participants described processes of group-level adaptation. From our participants’ discussions, processes of group-level learning have emerged as being driven by path dependency and group experiences. Digital social norms can therefore develop based on an explicit initial decision that is simply being carried forward: “Hey, let’s turn on our cameras during our meetings because this feels more engaged” (P17). At the same time, most participants shared the view that there are usually no explicit digital social norms that formally prescribe behaviors in groups:

There aren’t like codified rules of communication, at least not at my workplace. There is like an Email Netiquette, and general Etiquette, but there aren’t any formal rules written down somewhere, at least for me. (P15)

Nonetheless, group-level adaptation of desired or undesired behaviours is often enforced through indirect and informal processes of group surveillance or exchange:

Or someone says: “Enjoy your meal”, something like that and that’s the culture here. You wouldn’t say: “Hey, can you please

stop eating”, but it’s more like ... if you attract attention, what you are doing is already beyond what’s cool. (P17)

Interestingly, these group processes can also drift towards unwanted outcomes, which then require intervention and the institution of formal norms:

When we had in-service trainings online and it somehow became common that people were lying on their sofas with comfy blankets, halfway asleep. And the instructor got rather annoyed at this eventually and sent an Email with the bottom line that we should all sit at a desk, or rather that one cannot properly follow along a training from one’s bed. (P18)

4.2.3. Adapting to pressures & expectations

Third, participants discussed the pressures and expectations that followed from the digital social norms around them. A key recurring notion in this context was being reachable. On one hand, the multiplicity of channels afforded by digital communication, and particularly the ease and the asynchronous nature of Emails or Messenger applications were described as a factor for lowering barriers to sending more requests and communication to others, and expecting fast responses by others:

And I have the feeling that those people who would usually only have sent me an Email now immediately go like “Yo, I have this question”, and then expect an answer relatively quickly. So, the behavior seems to have adapted, although without being more synchronous. (P17).

But having to be reachable, having to answer every question immediately in a work context and optimizing processes or so. I dislike this quite a bit. (P18)

In contrast to this, participants also expected others to be reachable and to respond to their requests relatively quickly. They further based their behaviours on their prior knowledge and experience with how quickly someone usually responds, as this can create a domino effect on their own ability to adhere to relevant digital social norms.

On the other hand, participants generally felt, especially in professional contexts, that the incentive structures deriving from the combination of digital social norms and digital communication technologies were geared towards rewarding those who appear present and reachable:

The sense of being reachable, the quick replies, the responsiveness - they’re a bit of a currency in many organisations to show how hard you work. (P16)

In this context, participants also admitted that they make use of the capacity for surveillance afforded by digital communication tools:

When I get a message on teams then I or the other person see of course whether the other is online and how many minutes they have been away from the screen. (P17)

Further to that, participants expressed feelings of guilt and self-monitoring when they were not reachable or did not reply quickly (“It takes so much effort like I just got a text from somebody and I ... I haven’t replied, I feel bad,” P1), and when they did not focus their full attention on work activities:

And also, because we’re not in a physical office, I mean, I’m guilty of checking my phone a little bit more during the

workday. And maybe sending a cheeky GIF or something like that. (P4)

Interestingly, participants appeared to be very aware that their habits and behaviours contributed to the salience of those expectations and norms that created pressures for them:

Oh, I think this also happens when you reply regularly because you maybe have the time. And then when there's a phase where you don't because you don't have time or don't want to. Well then there can be some sort of general expectations that you have created yourself. (P15)

4.2.4. Learning to manage impressions

Fourth, participants described how digital social norms influenced their strategies for impression management. Overall, digital social interactions emerged as being driven by the desire to avoid mistakes. Participants thus described a sense of perfectionism both about the form and the content of their communication or actions in digital contexts and likened mistakes in this regard to losing face. Self-confidence and worries about mistakes seemed to drive this sense of perfectionism more so than positive aspirations:

And regarding self-confidence: I am very confident in personal discussions but not with digital comms media. So, with Emails I just doubt myself a lot. Before I send an Email, I check it three times. (P19)

And I'm always afraid that I forgot to turn on my digital background and then have someone coming out of the shower walk through the screen. This has happened before. Or when you dial in via your phone and accidentally hit the camera button. These moments are very awkward. (P15)

Many participants, therefore, shared that they spend a lot of time reviewing their writing and pre-emptively label messages and documents as drafts to render them less of a target for critique by others. Another element of impression management in digital contexts is related to the different communication channels that participants used. The relevant digital social norms that apply changed for different channels, and every channel seemed to have a unique set of norms and expectations. Unsurprisingly, private, and professional differences were particularly salient:

If you open up my inbox on LinkedIn, the words I use, the way I talk, the way I chat is completely different from the messages I have in the direct section of my Instagram. And it's super weird. But I don't know why it happens. I guess it's related to how I portray myself on one social media compared to the other one. (P8)

In this vein, participants also discussed the performative element of digital interactions with regards to "taking on different parts of yourself on different media" (P2), and how users follow a curatorial approach when "creating these avatars online, or these personas they identified with" (P5) on platforms such as LinkedIn or Instagram.

Several participants also described a sense of curiosity when it came to the impression management strategies of others, and whether certain formal netiquette practices were

used to hide what was considered transgressions of other (digital) social norms:

When people put up a background, you do wonder, like, why they have a background, because so few people have those. Where the hell are they? You know, how messy is their house? What sort of slob are they? (P4)

4.2.5. Implicit adaptation

Finally, participants also frequently mentioned not having explicit reasons for behaving in a certain way online but rather described forms of implicit adaptation. Participants thus shared the perception that a feeling or a sense of guidance or orientation can be read from a given situation or that emerges organically, although there usually is no "golden recipe" (P21) for doing so successfully. As one participant lucidly explained:

When I enter a meeting and everyone has their screens turned off, I immediately know it's gonna be one of these situations: Everyone's sort of listening with one ear, but it's not going to be productive. But when it's clear in advance that we're a group that wants to swiftly take care of a problem, then you would often have your camera on. I think this 'camera on, camera off' thing is a question of how present you want to be, and how much you want to show it. (P16)

At the same time, participants also discussed that it is often difficult to pinpoint exactly where a practice originates from, and they acknowledged that all members of the group "somehow reproduce these practices and develop them further in a certain form" (P14). This feeling of a natural and organic development of digital social norms was the common element connecting all discussions during the focus groups.

4.3. Social dynamics of netiquette

The third and final thematic area participants engaged with in their discussion revolves around the social dynamics of netiquette, and how they guide and shape their interactions.

4.3.1. The influence of personal connections

When talking about the dynamics of digital social norms, participants emphasized the importance of personal connections with other people they engaged with. A recurring concept was the idea of "knowing who is on the other side," which was a key determinant of the digital social norms that needed to be observed in a given situation for participants. While video calls did mitigate the loss of personal connection and context cues for participants compared to phone calls or written communication, prior exchanges, and experiences with the other person (often, but not exclusively, offline) were cited as the key determinant:

Knowing who's sitting on the other end and being able to add a personal layer to an Email, like putting in an inside joke, or asking "how was your vacation", that's important to me. (P21)

Seeing short snippets of colleague's lives at home, their children, partners, pets, etc., can lead to closer bonding with

friends or colleagues with whom one does not share prior experiences, and participants did report that they bonded more closely with colleagues with whom they regularly interacted via video calls:

I found that I've gotten to know my colleagues in an entirely different capacity, because we were seeing into people's homes and, you know, babies come on the screen, or cats or puppies and things. (P6)

At the same time, personal and professional distance, and the social norms that they entail, were cited as an enabling factor for participants to fulfil their roles:

Especially when I work which causes a certain sort of formality that I need, because I don't actually speak to them as much and I don't really know what to expect. So there needs to be a sort of safety barrier that I put in place when I'm having those conversations. (P1)

Not seeing the other or being physically co-present with the other thus enables participants to engage in "harsher and more direct interactions" (P14), but also demands more restraint at times as the ability to read the other and repair misunderstandings or faux pas was perceived as reduced in digitally mediated interactions.

4.3.2. Social status & power

In this context, participants also described how social status and power influence digital social norms. Status and power appeared to act as mediating factors for considerations of impression management and digital social norms. Especially the desire to avoid mistakes, and the previously mentioned perfectionism often only applied to interactions with superiors, while the appropriate netiquette for digital conversations with equals was perceived as less demanding. Interestingly, participants themselves also reported engaging differently with others based on their relative position of power:

I think it's also the confidence that comes with the job. I'm noticing it as well now, when I wrote Emails to the partners as a lawyer I would write completely differently compared to now when I get in touch with some lawyers as a judge because I just don't care anymore. I can write what I want and have the authority to get what I want that comes with such a position, so to say. (P20)

In relation to the previously discussed point around being reachable, participants also described how job security and competition with other (junior) colleagues can amplify pressures to do more—which disproportionately affects those in less powerful positions.

4.3.3. Interactions with existing inequalities

Conversely, digital communication has also been characterized as the "great equalizer" by several participants, pointing out that digital group interactions were often more equitable, and that there was "no more playing favorites or, like, trying to become besties with your boss" (P4). Another striking account by P17 provides further insight into how social power dynamics can be reversed in digital settings:

I feel like I'm much less intimidated by context factors, and from what I've heard this is true for others too, who would not

speak up as much. So, this creates the opportunity for those people to talk a little bit as well. And some people have advantages and a kind of power because of all of these digital interactions. Because a lot of people who usually are in positions of power are often unable to handle the tech. And all of a sudden you are a factor that cannot be ignored and more because you're the only person who manages to get things done, to be a little bit cynical. But I do believe that the balance has shifted a little bit, which I found quite interesting as an experience. (P17)

Nevertheless, participants also described how inequalities interact with and shape what is acceptable (and even feasible) netiquette. Most importantly, participants discussed how digital interactions hinge upon hardware and environmental factors—those who do not have up-to-date technology, a fast internet connection, or an appropriate space sometimes cannot use the full range of technological affordances available to others, and therefore cannot comply with digital social norms at times—this can range from turning on a camera to participating actively in discussions due to delay. Of course, discussions around remote working in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis also touched upon the fact that professional interactions opened up a "window" into people's private homes, making inequalities outside the digital sphere more visible as well:

I think that again, it comes back to the point of dynamic inequality I was talking about. It's so easy for people who have got, you know, like a big house, five different rooms, and they've got a working room, they've got a library that they can work out of. Oh, crap, I've literally got my trousers drying in the background if I don't put a virtual background. (P1)

In this context, participants also emphasized how digital social norms create a sense of psychological safety and accountability for them:

Our team has a very strong 'video on' culture. And I do have clients that don't use their camera, and I find it really challenging. Of course, everybody has to do what's right for them. But I find that it's much easier to establish rapport and also psychological safety with a group when you're co-creating and brainstorming and things. And the other, like, norm that we have is at the beginning of the call to all have a warm up question of some kind. (P6)

4.3.4. Attention & multi-tasking

A fourth recurring element described by participants was the importance of paying undivided attention to the other. While participants acknowledged that digital interactions afforded the opportunity to multi-task in a bid to increase efficiency or escape boring interactions, they also mentioned how common behaviors such as using a second device (e.g., phone, tablet) while being in a meeting or talking to a friend via the computer, or writing Emails during a call would be perceived as impolite and improper in offline contexts:

But I think what's interesting with hangouts is usually at my company, we tend to show the face camera, but then there are also opportunities where you don't show your face camera, right? As soon as the video switches off, I put on my headphones and I go into the kitchen, I cook something because I can listen to what people are talking about. But I'm trying to

multitask, because I'm trying to use the time as efficiently as possible, because I know the meeting is not necessarily relevant for me. (P3)

Some participants did highlight, however, that in some groups and contexts the use of “screens” or “second screens” during interactions was more accepted. When travelling on a train with friends or during work meetings, for example, engagement in other interactions was not necessarily regarded as a transgression of norms. Participants also discussed how effective communication can be when most people involved in the interaction do not actively participate in it, and whether interactions then become superfluous ultimately. Beyond mere politeness, the importance of “giving time” and undivided attention was thus discussed as an important factor for social cohesion and business resilience:

And I think that process is really the glue that binds effective teams together. If you have somebody multitasking and writing emails and responding to Teams messages at the same time as you're trying to have a conversation... Even though on a practical level, we can all understand that we're all busy and trying to do a lot in a little bit of time, I think that's damaging to the relationship. Whatever scale that relationship is, whether it's your boss, or whether it's somebody that you might be looking to work with, or an intern. (P6)

5. Discussion

5.1. General discussion

Research in the field of netiquette is often concerned with the formulation of concrete rules that guide behavior and perceptions on the internet (Linek & Ostermaier-Grabow, 2018; Ponce et al., 2022; Scheuermann & Taylor, 1997; Soler-Costa et al., 2021). Such rules can range from how much time should pass before a response to an Email is written, whether it is ok to befriend your boss on Instagram, or expectations about attire or video call background when working from home.

Individual digital social norms which make up the netiquette in a given setting are highly flexible and adaptable. Netiquette can vary based on the platform on which the exchange occurs (“technology is not neutral”; see chapter 4.1.3). While your boss sending messages via Instagram can be acceptable, the very same message via another channel, for example in an Email, can lead to a breach of netiquette (“platform dependent,” e.g., (Peluchette et al., 2013) Similarly, as discussed in the literature and supported by the focus groups, communication via one medium, for example Email, can range from formal to wholly informal content (content-dependent). Thus, the formulation of a clear rule for what emails can be used, or how they *ought to be* sent can be useful for individuals who are learning how to communicate online, but it will quickly be outdated and often contradictory to how people use the medium in real-world situations. Furthermore, our data show that what is deemed appropriate highly depends on who interacts with each other, and when power differences or hierarchical structures are involved, digital social norms are adapted implicitly. Netiquette thus emerges as dynamic and constantly moving.

Conceptualizing netiquette as not set in stone also allows for a different dynamic in the case of a breach of norms. A fixed golden rule will inevitably lead to an explicit conflict between involved parties. While one party can justify their position with the codified rule, the other party may resort to arguments of feasibility, habit, and evolved norms in the situation. A fluid conceptualization of social norms allows involved subjects to acquire an understanding of the digital social norms present in a situation, and to renegotiate what they perceive to be ok, appropriate, or adequate. This naturally requires more dialogue to resolve breaches of netiquette but enables a dialectic engagement with digital social norms and, thus, ultimately an organic evolution of netiquette. Understandings of netiquette, furthermore, appear to be negatively determined. It is much more intuitive for users to recognize a breach of digital social norms than to proactively formulate what constitutes proper netiquette in a given situation. This negative conceptualization focusing on intuition and responses to moments of transgression, again, allows for a more fluid and adaptable code of conduct in digital social interactions, and further supports organic evolution and incremental drifts of digital social norms rather than abrupt and incisive steering through the proactive introduction of reformulation of rules.

We, therefore, suggest that a focus on the social dynamics of netiquette, as well as processes and tools that help support users and administrators to make the correct choices, is the way forward in the field.

5.2. Next steps for research

Based on our findings, and feeding forward the limitations of the present work, we have identified five key research questions that need to be addressed in the future to improve our understanding of netiquette and digital social norms:

5.2.1. How does netiquette develop and disseminate?

Netiquette has thus far been treated as a direct translation of etiquette into the internet, taking into account some formal elements dictated by the medium. Initial behaviors at the dawn of the internet were significantly influenced by the offline experiences of users. The discussions with our participants have shown, however, that existing social norms and rules of conduct often do not perfectly translate from the outside to the digital sphere and that this is not purely due to the digital mediation of activity. Contemporary netiquette, thus, did of course not develop in a vacuum, but it is also far from being purely derivative. It deals with important sociological and psychological topics such as emotions, perspective taking, learning, social hierarchies, and status, as well as impression management in the digitally mediated context of the internet. And as such, it develops and adapts together with its users – sometimes slowly and progressively, sometimes with a jolt as many of us experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic. Similar to the argument Hollan & Stornetta have made about physical presence (Hollan & Stornetta, 1992), thinking, constructing, and evaluating

netiquette purely in categories and terms of etiquette precludes the opportunity for digital social norms to foster new ways for social interaction.

What is more, since many of our daily interactions with others are digitally mediated (for some individuals, in fact, more than those which are not), digital social norms and behavioural patterns also exert an influence on how we interact with each other outside the digital sphere. The relationship between etiquette and netiquette must therefore be understood as a circular and interdependent one. Consequently, netiquette as the rules of the game for digitally mediated human lives, interactions, and culture must become an object of priority of scientific analysis, firstly because a significant and constantly increasing portion of the lives of many individuals takes place in digitally mediated contexts, and secondly because digitally mediated interactions affect and have very real consequences for our lives outside the digital sphere as well.

What is needed next are further empirical studies into the netiquette of various communities of practice of any size to develop a body of evidence. While we acknowledge that some universally valid norms are required as the backbone structure of social interactions in both offline and online contexts, we encourage this research to not prioritise identifying specific “golden rules” in the hopes of generalising them. What is needed now is rather a focus on the processes that surround the development, acquisition, and enforcement of digital social norms (see also [section 5.2.5](#)). For this, a range of methodologies from further qualitative work on specific communities and in situ observations of individual behaviour, to large-scale surveys capturing perceptions and opinions of entire organisations or conversational analyses of naturally occurring interactions on various digital platforms. As a whole, this research effort will help us understand better how netiquette evolves. Perhaps more importantly, however, it will enable anyone, from individuals to large public and private organisations to gain a more purposeful understanding of digital social norms, and to maintain—and in certain spaces reclaim—civility, inclusivity, and friction-free conduct in digitally mediated interactions.

5.2.2. What pressures does netiquette create for individuals?

From our participants’ discussions, and echoing the literature (e.g., Barber & Santuzzi, 2015), social norms around timely responses appear to be central for digitally mediated communication. When the time frame is asynchronous and responses are decoupled on temporal and local dimensions (Giddens, 1990), dealing with a request in a timely manner becomes a matter of respect to the other and exhibits how important an issue is. Being seen as someone who replies quickly also conveys social capital in the sense that fast replies are implicitly associated with the notion of being on top of work, doing a lot of work, and doing work well. It also is a source of pride and self-efficacy for participants, or it can be a source of self-doubt or feelings of guilt when one fails to adhere to the appropriate social norms around response times, which can add stress and additional

pressure, particularly for individuals in less powerful positions in these digital interactions.

These pressures vary by platform and medium, for private and professional contexts, and importantly depending on the proximity and intimacy of the relationship with the other and living up to them can be complicated—a delayed response by a close person can be interpreted as “they must be busy” rather than “they don’t work hard/they do not care,” but also as “they must be upset since they usually respond more quickly.” Importantly, deviations from a common pattern are attributed meaning according to our participants rather than being treated as incidental: “they must be upset, because they usually respond more quickly” rather than “they must not have found the time to answer yet.” Pressures around digital social norms to respond quickly or participate actively have further been linked to feelings of exhaustion or inability to cope in our focus groups, replicating findings from earlier work on digital communication (Fosslien & Duffy, 2020; Hacker et al., 2020; Sklar, 2020).

More abstractly, focused attention is becoming increasingly valuable and difficult (Franck, 2019; Goldhaber, 1997; Lanham, 2006), both in an economic sense for large conglomerates that benefit from the time and attention of the users of their soft- and hardware products, but also for the individual with her time taxed by professional and private demands dramatically increasing in frequency. Discussions exhibited the intellectual tension participants found themselves in: On one hand, they tried to live up to the demands of a world of fast-paced digitally mediated interactions, and therefore seeking to divide their attention wherever possible to achieve more. On the other hand, they struggled with their often-failed attempts to give undivided attention in certain situations, and more importantly to attract undivided attention for their concerns wherever possible. Beyond exhaustion and stress, multi-tasking in digitally mediated contexts has also been shown to reduce cognitive performance (Jeong & Hwang, 2016; Uncapher et al., 2016) as well as the overall ability to focus on tasks (Baumgartner & Sumter, 2017; Ophir et al., 2009; Yeykelis et al., 2014). This lowered performance can feed into the pressure to respond timely again, creating mutually reinforcing pressures for users.

Paradoxically while participants acknowledged the pressures these expectations to respond quickly created for themselves, they nonetheless mentioned that they want others to respond in a timely manner as soon as possible, thus contributing to the overall pressures themselves rather than trying to shift the culture towards a more relaxed approach to “timekeeping” (and some participants did indeed mention this themselves). A similar dynamic can be observed with working long hours, which is often used as a signal for showing dedication and skills. For work that happens in the digital sphere, however, these signalling behaviours change, as effort and work provision cannot be observed directly. Thus, instead of being the first person to be in the office in the morning, and the last to leave, long work hours are signalled via sending e-mails outside of work hours or keeping one’s activity status on team software

on “active” as long as possible (sometimes even with the help of software that feigns activity on the device although the user is away from keyboard). Put differently, the pressure to work long hours does not disappear in the digital sphere—actors just need to find new ways to signal their work and assess the work hours of others.

Being reachable and doing as much as possible in as little time as possible signals high performance. Being quick is synonymous with being a high performer. This digital social norm emerged as the strongest source of pressure from our participants’ discussions, but it is only one of many that can and do create maladaptive outcomes for users in specific contexts (e.g., turning on your camera, connecting with colleagues on personal social media, etc.). While netiquette holds the chance to make digitally mediated interactions more fluent, we must not overlook the negative externalities it can create for users and particularly vulnerable groups. Netiquette can support systematic inequalities. Future research into netiquette should, thus, be particularly sensitive to the pressures and unintended consequences that digital social norms can cause and investigate how users cope with them, as well as how these can be mitigated potentially even before they become entrenched too deeply into digital culture.

5.2.3. Can netiquette help address existing issues around status, hierarchy, and inequalities, or will it exacerbate or create entirely new problems?

The descriptions of digital social norms that emerged from discussions with our participants further strongly exhibit leadership and role-model effects, where behaviours of those seen as competent are adopted by others. Perceived competence can thus go along with traditional structures of power, but can also emerge from case-based evaluation, and junior “adept” users seem to have gained agency in these contexts as well, suggesting an interesting interaction between digitally mediated communication, hierarchies, and inequalities. Skills, traditional forms of social capital, and structures of favouritism do not necessarily translate easily into digitally mediated contexts. While traditional status hierarchies, capital, and power often increase along with seniority and age, digital competence, i.e., the skills needed to expertly manoeuvre the technical and social norms challenges presented by digitally mediated communication, tends to be lower in these groups. This opens up an opportunity for junior members to fulfil vital roles and to be heard and seen more in exchanges, both metaphorically and literally. This further holds true for participation; it is easier to include people in digital interactions (e.g., physical distance, carbon-copy in an Email).

On the flip side, digitally mediated communication can also perpetuate inequalities, and certain expectations of proper netiquette can exacerbate the situation for some individuals. A slow internet connection or a lack of one effectively prevents individuals from participating fully in the professional and social lives of their peer groups. It, thus, lowers their ability to be a friend who is always there or to fulfil their professional duties, which can lead to social

exclusion. Beyond hardware and software problems, rules that require certain forms of engagement (e.g., turn your camera on, leave your microphone on) create problems for those who do not have access to calm and presentable spaces, be it private or professional, and make inequalities more visible. As digital social norms are malleable and often rather prescriptive, quick fixes like virtual backgrounds do not necessarily deliver the desired effect as they, too, become associated with social stigma (“What are they up to so that they cannot show where they are?”). Netiquette, thus, holds the opportunity to serve as a levelling factor for inequalities, but can also become a perpetuating factor, and requires further scientific attention, especially in professional contexts (Bailey et al., 2022a, 2022b).

What is more, research on digital social norms should also consider the “dark side” of netiquette that emerges in some communities. This can become particularly problematic when disruptive, contrarian, or discriminatory behaviors become tolerated or even the norm. Research on malicious online behaviors such as cyberbullying (Caplan, 2018; Kumazaki et al., 2011), trolling (Buckels et al., 2014; Howard et al., 2019; Sest & March, 2017), and verbal violence in general (Gauduchau, 2019) can serve as a starting point.

5.2.4. How does netiquette support the quality of interaction?

Netiquette is ultimately aimed at ensuring fluency and quality of human interactions in digital contexts. This is achieved by imposing rules and standards that are simple and general enough to be easily understood and applied in a wide range of interactions in digital contexts, while still prescribing behavior clearly enough so that adherence to desirable characteristics—or qualities—of interactions can be upheld. Bearing in mind the discussions of transgressions and inequalities, as well as our call for a focus on process rather than on fixed golden rules (see also section 5.2.5), it will be important to investigate the relationship between netiquette and interaction quality further. When and how does netiquette improve interaction quality? When does it hinder the fluency of conversations?

The literature around the quality of human interactions, particularly those of a dialogical nature, is vast and generally organised around descriptive and prescriptive approaches to dialogue (Stewart & Zediker, 2000). Discussions of the quality of dialogical interactions often take recourse to the ideal of deliberation as suggested in Habermas’ model of the ideal speech situation (Habermas, 1990; Im et al., 2018), and there is a variety of concrete indicators of quality such as rationality, civility, equality, etc., that is used in the literature (Goddard & Gillespie, n.d.; Khazraie & Talebzadeh, 2020).

Behaviours prescribed by netiquette revolve around the same indicators used to assess quality, and longitudinal research suggests that norms in specific digital communities, for example on Wikipedia, help ensure consistent interactions and tend to stabilise over time (Beschastnikh et al., 2021; Butler et al., 2008). Conversely, interactions that do not follow netiquette can lead to lowered interaction quality

and often requires repair or external moderation (Jaidka et al., 2021; Khazraie & Talebzadeh, 2020; Towne et al., 2013).

It does not follow automatically from this, however, that interactions that adhere to rules of netiquette are high-quality, and vice versa. Interactions can follow netiquette in terms of general civility, for example, but may thus end up feeling “overly sanitised” to those involved in it. As described by P13 (see section 4.1.1), this can prevent the establishment of rapport between parties, and in consequence a more intimate level of exchange taking place. Similarly, the quality of digital interactions can be high despite and even because of transgressions of netiquette in certain situations:

We've had months of just casual conversation. I mentally noted the first time that my boss swore on a zoom call. And since then, it's just been smooth sailing. I love it. I mean, I'm probably biased, I like it when people swear because it gives me a sense of ease around them. So, for me I think it's been more a tension breaker than anything else. (P2)

The literature on formal and informal conduct in professional contexts supports these sentiments, suggesting that a loosening of formal rules in favour of pragmatism, time efficiency, or behaviours that feel more natural is appreciated by individuals and can also lead to increased productivity (e.g., Morand, 1995).

The success of netiquette as an enabler of high-quality digital social interactions depends on a firm normative understanding of what is needed in the first place, and how this can be achieved through social regulation. This provides a clear indication that an understanding of the quality of digital interactions, as well as the intended and unintended influences of netiquette on this quality, is needed to better understand the procedural and the axiomatic elements of netiquette

5.2.5. Where and how do people resist and change netiquette, and how are transgressions dealt with?

Because netiquette is aimed at ensuring seamless and civil interactions in digital contexts, some spaces or contexts require the formalization or even the enforcement of netiquette rules and the potential sanctioning of transgressions—just like for interactions outside the digital sphere (Li et al., 2021). For interactions with a small number of individuals involved that know, or at least know *of* each other in personal and professional contexts, participants located the responsibility for moderating and maintaining netiquette with the person initiating the interaction. Participants often referred to a specific culture in social groups, teams, and companies that guided acceptable behaviors. For large-scale, multi-sided interactions that are increasingly common in digital contexts and that often also include strangers, figuring out appropriate netiquette can be more complicated, particularly for new users entering a space with a firmly established code of conduct (e.g., Lampe & Johnston, 2005; Li et al., 2021).

Because digital social norms are usually not firmly fixed due to the evolving digital landscape and infrastructure,

institutional and societal actors, or leaders within a professional or private network, may want to formally instate rules of conduct. This can also arise through the introduction of new hardware or software solutions for digitally mediated communication. Unlike “naturally-grown” social norms, these may be met with fierce resistance from users, which can sometimes turn antagonistic, but often takes a pragmatic format of disregarding or non-engagement according to our participants. Open-source software and wiki communities, for example, have been proactive about establishing, formalizing, and enforcing digital social norms to govern interactions of users that cannot rely on a personal connection or common background. But research also points to challenges and push-back on this form of netiquette regulation in open-source software networks (Li et al., 2021).

Friction and explicit confrontation around digital social norms are a chance for creativity and social progress. Subtle resistance to digital social norms points more towards the ritualization of particular norms and elements of netiquette. Being on a call with the microphone and camera switched off, engaging in a different activity for example is in itself superfluous, but signals presence and participation in shared social and cultural expectations. This shows the resilience and adaptive capacity of social systems and will be an interesting object for study in the future, as systems for digitally mediated interactions are introduced in more aspects of our lives, and existing ones are continuously being updated.

In this context, we have also found that digital social norms hold the potential to revisit and update conventions outside the digital sphere. Naturally, many conceptions of what is considered proper behavior originally derive from analogue interactions. Nonetheless, as we frequently interact with each other in digitally mediated contexts, sometimes more than in analogue contexts, and as the technologies we use to do so afford us new ways to interact, new trends and standards can emerge. Our participants' discussion of the necessity of business flights is one of the most illustrative examples, but also the discussion of pragmatically ending meetings early, or taking a training session with a blanket on the sofa (see section 4.2.2) shows the variability and potential for both slow drift and rapid social change that is introduced by these new modes of interaction.

Thinking about netiquette as the rules for digital interactions more broadly leads to regulatory questions of both technical and policy nature. Governments and corporate actors supplying the tools for digital interactions have an interest in ensuring oversight over digital spaces, be it to ensure compliance with the law or to maintain civility, usability, and socio-cultural values. The natural evolution of netiquette as digital social norms *from and for* the community thus clashes with economic reason and regulatory imperatives. Technological solutions such as upload filters or artificial intelligence and algorithmic content moderation to monitor and regulate the digital sphere (Prem, 2022; Sartor & Loreggia, 2020) will thus interact with and influence digital social norms emerging from the community. Further research is needed to understand the interactions between regulatory action and community-based behaviors,

ultimately connecting the netiquette literature to the discourse around freedom of expression on the internet (Cowls et al., 2020). As a caveat to this, several participants pointed out their dissatisfaction with the fact that the tools and the architecture for digital interactions, and in consequence the way we interact with each other is controlled by private, for-profit companies. Resistance to and transgression of mainstream digital social norms becomes complicated, if not impossible, when the mediating framework within which users operate is controlled by a third party with varying allegiances and political or commercial interests. Organic developments of digital social norms that run counter to these interests will, thus, likely not receive the technical support required, or be outright suppressed.

Overall, studying regulation and resistance to netiquette, or how change of digital social norms is initiated through associated actors, will be relevant not only to better understand dominant practices and how parties can more easily resolve conflict associated with a breach of netiquette but also to uncover where struggles and the development of new practices may be underway.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we investigated user perceptions of netiquette. We explored how netiquette guides what is appropriate and what is inappropriate for human interactions in digital contexts. We have drawn connections between the not yet formalised literature around netiquette and the social norms literature, suggesting that netiquette should be conceptualised as digital social norms that guide digitally mediated interactions. We have further argued that netiquette must not simply be seen as a fixed list of “dos and don’ts” that are derived from the rules that govern offline interactions but as a complex and dynamic set of social regulations that are an entity sui generis. From the discussions with our participants, important elements of style and taste in digital social norms, but also elements of friction and transgression became evident. Participants also shared relevant insights into how netiquette can be acquired, and which social dynamics unfold around specific digital social norms. The findings clearly show that netiquette is situative, influenced by contextual factors such as the platform, power imbalances, and social relationships. Importantly, we observe a strong, interdependent, and cyclical relationship between netiquette and etiquette; while netiquette is of course not fully independent from social norms outside the digital sphere, an influence in the other direction can also be observed. With human interactions increasingly occurring in digitally mediated contexts, a growing influence of netiquette on etiquette may unfold.

An increasing number of social interactions take place in digitally mediated contexts. It is therefore not only important to study digital social norms more closely to understand which rules govern these interactions, but the influence of behaviors considered appropriate or inappropriate under the light of netiquette will increasingly also influence offline interactions. We have further presented an initial set of

discussions and processes from one community with a particular culture and group norms only. We, therefore, have raised five key questions that should be investigated in the next step to further our understanding of both the specificities of the most important digital social norms, as well as the social dynamics of netiquette as a whole at a more abstract level. As societies become increasingly networked and interconnected by technology, it will be crucial to understand the guiding framework and to establish a vocabulary for the practices of digital interactions and digital (communication) culture, and netiquette is the first steppingstone towards such a competent understanding.

Note

1. Germany (10), UK (4), USA (3), China (1), India (1), Iran (1), Lebanon (1), Pakistan (1), Peru (1).

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Appendix A1

Focus group topic guide

Ice breaker/warm-up

Today we want to talk about communication on and through the internet a bit, how you make decisions, and how you think and feel about it. To get us started, can you please do three things: (1) Introduce yourself, (2) say what field you are working in, (3) think of all the ways in which you communicate with your work/people at work. (Lead with an example)

- Now, we all know we're currently in a pandemic, let's acknowledge the elephant in the room. Most of you are probably working remotely, is anybody working in person?
- Has the way you communicate with and at work changed because of the switch to remote? How/what?
 - Follow up: different channels, blurring boundaries between public, private
 - Follow up: time zone/ work colleagues see home, boundaries blurring
 - Was there anything you felt you 'lost' when we moved online?
 - Was there anything you felt you 'gained' when we moved online?
 - What is acceptable? Was there a moment where you felt this crossed a boundary?
- And how about your private lives, how has the way you interact with other people changed because of the lockdown?

- Follow up: can't see friends and family
- Follow up: new apps, tools, dating, meeting friends, etc.
- Was there anything you felt you 'lost' when we moved online?
- Was there anything you felt you 'gained' when we moved online?
- Is there anything in general that we just discussed that you would like to keep, even if in-person meetings are again possible in the future? If so, what?

Core: Netiquette

Okay, thank you very much for sharing these insights on your personal "remote experience," so to say. We would now like to talk a bit more broadly about digital communication, communication on the internet to be precise.

- Do you feel communication via the internet is different from in-person communication?
 - Follow up: What do you mean by "via the internet"? -> have participants list
 - "Yes it is because ..." In which way?
 - "No it's actually mostly similar" -> What is it exactly that is similar?
 - Different types of communication, synchronous asynchronous, platforms
 - Return to previous discussion on what is acceptable/not acceptable/ what Ps liked and didn't like -> Do you have an experience with a breach of netiquette?
 - civil/uncivil -> communication culture question
 - Does netiquette also influence your offline behaviour?
- How do you navigate this? Are there any guiding rules or concepts you follow? How do you make sure you don't make mistakes? / Aren't you worried to make mistakes?
 - [Description of strategy] Oh, that's interesting! Where did you learn that? Did you invent that yourself? What is this based on?
 - Who do you turn to for guidance? Other users? Active search on the internet?
 - Have developed skill over time] Oh, that's really interesting. How do you think this has happened? Since when are you using the internet? Do you feel this has changed over the years? Changes over platforms
 - What are factors that matter. Do you actively change, or is this happening automatically?
- Ok, let's discuss these differences a bit. You mentioned (work/private divide), and you discussed (platform divide)/ (synchronous/asynchronous divide). How are these different? Why are these different? How do you differentiate?
 - Are there other factors that you think influence how people behave, or what is perceived as ok?
 - How did the shift to remote working affect your relationship with co-workers? Your staff? Your superiors?

Wrap-up

Thank you all for this wonderful discussion, this has been really insightful! We have three final questions for you, you can say anything that comes to mind.

- What would you say is the biggest problem with communication on the internet at the moment?
- What is the one feature you would wish for that would make your / everyone's communication experience on the internet better?
- Do you know other people that have relevant things to say about this, might be interested to be interviewed/focus group?

Appendix A2

QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS: DIGITAL SOCIAL NORMS: THE CONSTRUCTION OF NETIQUETTE IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

Topic	Theme	Subtheme	Content	Example
Netiquette	Characteristics of Netiquette	Style & Formalities	Participants describe digital social norms around style and formalities in online communication	I do notice that even groups within an organisation have different etiquettes, so to say. In my team it's normal to have your camera on in a call. When I work with another team everyone has it off, and so on (P17). The only thing I probably do is if I have a meeting with a client or super senior people, I would maybe wear a button down shirt, and I guess that's reflected in the conversations as well. (P1)
		Spill over between netiquette & etiquette	Participants describe digital social norms grounded in the analogue world	The platform itself determines your behaviour a little bit and creates a sort of expected behaviour. For regarding speed of replies or they're like mediators for social conventions, yeah. (P22)
		Platform Dependency	Participants describe how different platforms and channels affect digital social norms	We had multiple trainings for teams at my institute and everyone theoretically knows how it works. But 95% of people refuse to communicate via teams. Everyone still writes Emails and uses it exclusively for video calls. (P14)
		Mismatches & Friction	Participants describe transgressions or resistance to digital social norms, and how perceptions of what is acceptable can change	I think you just need to write Emails for 10 years or so. Everyone around me has been in the job for 20 years and they write Emails without batting an eyelid (P19)
		Individual-level Learning	Participants describe their experience with acquiring relevant digital social norms through individual (trying)- and social learning (observing others)	I think this got established because someone 'stood out' negatively by eating on the call, and someone said 'Oh well, seems like we are not doing this.' (P17)
		Group-level Learning	Participants describe how group processes influence a shared understanding of digital social norms	Something about it. This was the cue for all of us to go: 'The sense of being reachable, the quick replies, the responsiveness - they're a bit of a currency in many organisations to show how hard you work (P16)
		Adapting to Pressures & Expectations	Participants describe incentive structures that influence their behaviours	If you open up my inbox on LinkedIn, the words I use, the way I talk, the way I chat is completely different from the messages I have in the direct section of my Instagram. And it's super weird. But I don't know why it happens. I guess it's related to how I portray myself on one social media compared to the other one. (P5)
		Learning to manage impressions	Participants describe how considerations of social norms influence the way they try to manage the impressions others have of them online	I think we always look for anchoring points automatically and it doesn't really happen consciously. Not sure how to describe this. It is not a conscious choice that people adhere to a specific pattern that becomes evident, which everyone sticks to, but nobody knows why (P16)
		Implicit Adaptation	Participants describe that they have no explicit reason for behaving in some ways	Especially when I work which causes a certain sort of formality that I need, because I don't actually speak to them as much and I don't really know what to expect. So there needs to be a sort of safety barrier that I put in place when I'm having those conversations. (P1)
		Social Dynamics of Netiquette	The Influence of Personal Connections	Participants describe how digital social norms change based on the nature of the relationship with the other
	Social Status & Power	Participants describe how social status influences digital social norms		

(continued)

Appendix A2. Continued.

QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS: DIGITAL SOCIAL NORMS.THE CONSTRUCTION OF NETIQUETTE IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

Topic	Theme	Subtheme	Content	Example
		Interactions with existing Inequalities	Participants describe how inequalities shape what is considered acceptable netiquette	<p>some lawyers as a judge because I just don't care anymore. I can write what I want and have the authority to get what I want that comes with such a position, soto sav. (P20)</p> <p>I think that again, it comes back to the point of dynamic inequality I was talking about It's so easy for people who have got, you know, like a big house, five different rooms, and they've got a working room, they've got a library that they can work out of. Oh, !,;:11 I've literally got my trousers drying in the bacround if I don't put a virtual bacound (P1)</p>
	Attention & Multitasking		Participants describe the importance of presence and attention for digital social norms	<p>But I think what's interesting with hangouts is usually at my company, we tend to show the face camera, but then there are alsoopportunities where you don't showyour facecamera, right? As soon asthevideo switches off, I put on my headphones and I go into the kitchen, I cook something because I can listen to what people are talking about But I'mtryingto multitask, because I'm tryingto use the time asefficiently as oossible, because I know the meetine: is not necessarily relevant for me. (P3)</p>