Too Much Communication?": Investigating Communication Fatigue and Digital Overload Among University Students

Ayça Bakiner [1]

Abstract

In an era defined by constant digital connectivity, university students are increasingly expected to remain available and responsive across various communication platforms, both academically and socially. This continuous exposure to messaging, notifications, and online interactions creates an environment of communication overload and emotional fatigue. This study explores how students experience, interpret, and manage communication fatigue and digital overload in their daily lives. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 17 preparatory-year students enrolled at a public university in Türkiye, the research uses thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and insights. Three major findings emerged: (1) students experience emotional exhaustion and cognitive overload due to incessant messaging, platform-switching, and blurred academic-personal boundaries; (2) they adopt communicative strategies, such as muting notifications, delaying responses, or withdrawing temporarily as forms of emotional regulation and self-protection; (3) silence is not merely absence or disinterest but is perceived by students as a strategic and meaningful communicative act. However, their silence is often misunderstood by others as apathy or social rejection, leading to relational tension. These findings challenge conventional interpretations of silence and disengagement in digital contexts, reframing them as expressions of communicative agency, boundary-setting, and emotional resilience. By centring students' experiences, the study contributes to communication theory in three key areas: (a) expanding definitions of engagement to include digital silence and inaction; (b) emphasizing emotional labour in maintaining online social presence; and (c) illustrating how identity performance is managed under constant digital visibility. The study highlights the need for institutions and educators to cultivate more empathetic communication environments that respect students' emotional boundaries and allow for intentional disconnection as part of healthy digital engagement.

Keywords: Communication Fatigue, Digital Overload, Strategic Silence, Social Presence, Digital Well-Being, Emotional Labour

Date of Submission	01.08.2025
Date of Acceptance	17.03.2026
Date of Publication	31.03.2026
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Üniversite Öğrencileri Arasında İletişim Yorgunluğu, Dijital Sessizlik ve Aşırı Yüklenmenin İletişimsel Yansımaları

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Öz

Sürekli çevrim içi olma hali, üniversite öğrencilerini çoklu dijital platformlarda her an erişilebilir ve yanıt vermeye hazır olmaya zorlayan bir iletişim ortamı yaratmaktadır. Bu durum, özellikle akademik ve sosyal yaşamın iç içe geçtiği üniversite ortamlarında öğrencilerde ciddi bir iletişim yorgunluğu ve dijital aşırı yüklenme duygusu yaratmaktadır. Bu çalışma, üniversite öğrencilerinin bu dijital yüklenmeyi nasıl deneyimlediklerini, anlamlandırdıklarını ve yönettiklerini incelemektedir. Türkiye'deki bir devlet üniversitesinin hazırlık programına kayıtlı 17 öğrenciyle yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yoluyla elde edilen nitel veriler, tematik analizle değerlendirilmiştir. Analiz sonucunda üç temel bulgu ortaya çıkmıştır: (1) öğrenciler, sürekli mesajlaşma, platformlar arası geçiş ve akademik-özel yaşam sınırlarının belirsizleşmesi nedeniyle duygusal ve zihinsel olarak kendilerini tükenmiş hissetmektedir; (2) bu yüklenmeyle başa çıkmak amacıyla sessiz kalma, yanıtları geciktirme, bildirimleri sessize alma gibi stratejik iletişim davranışları geliştirmektedirler; (3) öğrenciler için sessizlik, ilgisizlikten ziyade sınır çizme, öz bakım ve iletişimsel özne olma anlamı taşıyan bilinçli bir tercihtir. Ancak bu sessizlik sıklıkla çevreleri tarafından yanlış anlaşılmakta ve ilişkisel gerilimlere neden olmaktadır. Çalışma, dijital ortamda verilen gecikmeli tepkiler, sessizlik ve geri çekilme gibi davranışların iletişimsizlik değil, aksine duygusal dengeyi koruma ve ilişkisel beklentilerle baş etme adına geliştirilen bilinçli iletişim stratejileri olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu bağlamda çalışma, kurumların ve eğitimcilerin öğrencilerin duygusal sınırlarına saygı gösteren, aynı zamanda sağlıklı dijital katılımın bir parçası olarak bilinçli biçimde bağlantıyı kesmeye de alan tanıyan daha empatik iletişim ortamları geliştirmeleri gerektiğine dikkat çekmektedir. Araştırma, iletişim kuramına dijital yorgunluk, stratejik sessizlik ve kimlik performansı gibi güncel kavramlar üzerinden kuramsal katkılar sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İletişim Yorgunluğu, Dijital Aşırı Yüklenme, Stratejik Sessizlik, Dijital İyi Oluş, Duygusal Emek

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Introduction

In today's hyper-connected world, communication extends beyond scheduled exchanges to an always-on digital environment. University students are bombarded daily with messages, notifications, and interaction demands from peers, instructors, administrative systems, and social networks. While these tools enhance immediacy and flexibility, they also create a communication climate characterized by overload, obligation, and emotional strain (Barley, Meyerson, & Grodal, 2011, p. 889; Gergen, 2002, p. 230). The pervasive pressure to remain available across platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, and institutional portals reshapes how students manage their attention and emotional boundaries. This form of "digital stress" is increasingly linked to reduced mental well-being and attention fragmentation in student populations (Reinecke & Aufenanger, 201 p. 101).

Unlike stress from screen time or workload alone, communication overload is a relational phenomenon. It involves the expectation of perpetual availability, emotional labour in responding appropriately, and the pressure to maintain social presence across multiple channels (Turkle, 2015, p. 330; Vorderer & Kohring, 2013, p. 190). For students, this can result in communication fatigue marked by withdrawal, strategic silence, or muted notifications. These responses, though often perceived as disengagement, may be meaningful communicative acts aimed at preserving well-being and managing identity.

Although digital fatigue has been studied in psychology and information systems, communication fatigue remains underexplored in communication studies-especially from the perspective of students as emotionally aware communicators. Most existing studies focus on professional or technological environments, overlooking the emotional and relational implications of excessive digital messaging in student life (Eppler & Mengis, 2004, p. 340; Duffy et al., 2021, p. 210).

This study addresses this gap by examining how university students experience and interpret communication fatigue and digital overload in their academic and interpersonal communication. Silence and non-responsiveness are not viewed as passivity, but as strategic communication choices influenced by emotional, social, and technological pressures. By exploring how students navigate these tensions, the study contributes to communication scholarship by foregrounding mediated relationality, strategic silence, and emotional labour in digital student life.

1. Research Problem

In contemporary university life, communication is no longer episodic or confined to classroom hours-it is perpetual, mediated, and multi-channelled. Students navigate academic and social exchanges through platforms, such as WhatsApp, Instagram, institutional LMS systems, and email, often simultaneously. While these tools enhance access and flexibility, they also produce an environment of communication overload, where students feel obligated to remain constantly available, responsive, and socially "present" across platforms (Karr-Wisniewski & Lu, 2010, p. 1061; Turkle, 2015, p. 331). These demands can undermine students' emotional well-being and disrupt their attention, leading to fatigue and disengagement.

Communication fatigue-distinct from general digital fatigue-refers specifically to the emotional, relational, and behavioural consequences of excessive communicative input.

It includes not only the cognitive burden of information processing, but also the emotional labour involved in maintaining responsiveness and managing perceptions of availability (Ndasauka et al., 2016, p. 752; Gogan et al., 2022, p. 1280). Students may delay responses, mute group chats, ignore academic messages, or withdraw from digital participation altogether-not as a sign of apathy, but as a self-protective communication strategy.

Although digital overload has been explored in workplace and educational technology contexts, few studies have examined how students themselves make sense of, and respond to, the pressures of constant communication. As Duffy et al. (2021, p. 211) argue, students are active agents who deploy digital disconnection and silence to reclaim emotional space, yet their communicative agency is often overlooked. Furthermore, existing research rarely addresses the relational implications of delayed responses, or the identity dilemmas students face in balancing responsiveness with self-care.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating university students' experiences of communication fatigue in digitally saturated academic and interpersonal environments. Drawing on qualitative interviews, it explores how students interpret message pressure, how it affects their relationships and learning, and what communicative strategies they adopt to resist hyper-responsiveness. By centring students' voices, the study contributes to communication research by reframing silence and disengagement not as communicative failure, but as meaningful acts of boundary-setting and emotional regulation.

In light of the gaps, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do university students experience communication fatigue in their academic and social digital interactions?

2. What communicative strategies do students use to manage digital overload and maintain emotional well-being?

3. How is silence interpreted and utilized by students as a strategic response in hyper-connected communication environments?

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three interrelated communication theories to interpret students' experiences of digital communication fatigue: communication overload theory, social presence theory, and strategic silence. These perspectives provide a framework for understanding how relational expectations, emotional regulation, and digital behaviour interact in shaping communicative choices.

2.1. Communication Overload Theory

Communication overload refers to the condition where the volume or frequency of messages exceeds one's capacity to process them meaningfully (Karr-Wisniewski & Lu, 2010, p. 1068). Originally developed in organizational contexts, the concept has evolved to address personal and academic domains as digital engagement intensifies. Overload is not simply about quantity, but also about the perceived obligation to respond, emotional depletion, and fragmented attention (Barley et al., 2011, p. 890; Eppler & Mengis, 2004, p. 331). In academic environments, students encounter frequent messaging

from peers, instructors, and systems, often resulting in avoidance behaviours, such as delayed replies or muting-responses that themselves constitute communicative actions.

2.2. Social Presence and Relational Expectations

Social presence theory explains how individuals perceive others as "real" and emotionally available in mediated environments (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976, p. 196). In high-presence platforms, such as WhatsApp or Instagram, students may feel an implicit demand to appear constantly responsive. Silence or delay can be interpreted as indifference or rejection, which increases relational anxiety (Lowenthal, 2010, p. 130; Tu & McIsaac, 2002, p. 141). This tension between well-being and responsiveness lies at the heart of many students' digital communication dilemmas. Baym (2015, p. 181) also emphasizes that digital presence management is central to how individuals curate identity and social belonging online. Managing social presence is thus not only technical but relational and emotional, often requiring difficult negotiation of boundaries and identity.

2.3. Strategic Silence and Communication Resistance

Traditionally framed as absence or disengagement, silence is increasingly recognized as a meaningful communicative strategy (Bruneau, 1973, p. 37; Jaworski, 1993, p. 254). As Tannen (1985, p. 98) argues, silence is not the absence of communication, but rather a form of expressive interaction that carries meaning in context. Strategic silence can function as resistance to the norms of constant connectivity and hyper-responsiveness (Baltezarević, 2022, p. 16; Kurzon, 1998, p. 197). Saville-Troike (1985, p. 14) also emphasized that silence serves communicative and social functions, depending on the relational and cultural context. For students, choosing not to reply or delaying communication may serve as a method of emotional regulation, boundary-setting, or self-preservation. This aligns with critical communication theories that redefine inaction as an active and agentive form of meaning-making (Butler, 1997, p. 121). In this study, silence is positioned not as a failure to communicate, but as a deliberate act shaped by emotional needs and social expectations. By integrating these theories, the study frames communication fatigue as a deeply communicative experience-embedded in identity performance, relational management, and emotional labour across digital platforms.

In addition, the meaning of silence carries important cultural implications in high-context communication cultures such as Türkiye. Drawing on Hall's (1976) cultural framework, silence in Turkish communicative practice often functions not merely as the absence of speech but as a relational cue, signalling respect, attentiveness, emotional control, or strategic ambiguity. Turkish speakers may therefore use silence to soften disagreement, maintain harmony, or manage face-sensitive situations, which gives strategic silence a richer social meaning compared to low-context cultures where silence is more easily interpreted as disengagement or withdrawal. Recognizing these culturally embedded interpretations helps contextualize how university students in Türkiye mobilize silence as a deliberate communicative strategy in digital settings.

The three theoretical perspectives discussed above collectively provide an integrated framework for understanding how communication fatigue emerges within digitally saturated university environments. Communication overload establishes the structural layer of pressure created by message frequency, multitasking demands, and expectations of constant accessibility. Social presence theory adds a relational layer, illustrating how

this structural pressure becomes emotionally consequential: students worry about appearing unresponsive, impolite, or disengaged, which intensifies the perceived obligation to remain visible and available. Thus, digital overload is not only cognitive but deeply relational, shaping how students manage identity, emotions, and interpersonal expectations online.

Within this interplay of structural and relational pressures, strategic silence operates as a form of communicative agency. Rather than signalling withdrawal or disinterest, silence becomes a deliberate strategy through which students regulate emotions, assert boundaries, and resist the norms of hyper-responsiveness. In this integrated perspective, communication overload generates pressure, social presence norms transform that pressure into emotional labour, and strategic silence constitutes the individual's agentic response. This synthesis forms the conceptual foundation for the model proposed in this study, illustrating how digital silence emerges at the intersection of structural constraints, relational expectations, and emotional self-management. The key components of this integrated framework and their interrelationships are summarized in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Digital Silence as Communicative Agency Model

Theoretical Component	Core Idea	Role in the Integrated Model
Communication Overload Theory	Excessive message volume, constant accessibility demands, multitasking pressure	Creates the structural pressure that triggers emotional and cognitive fatigue
Social Presence Theory	Expectations of visibility, responsiveness, and online "presence"	Converts structural pressure into relational and emotional obligations
Strategic Silence	Intentional non-response, delayed messaging, muting/withdrawing	Functions as communicative agency—boundary-setting, emotional regulation, and resistance to hyper-responsiveness
Integrated Outcome	Interaction of structural load, relational expectations, and agentic response	Produces digital silence as a meaningful communicative act

To enhance the clarity of the theoretical integration and to make the underlying conceptual structure more explicit, the following table summarizes how the three theoretical perspectives jointly contribute to the study's analytical framework. Presenting these relationships in a tabular form provides a more systematic overview of the theoretical inputs, the cognitive–emotional mechanisms they activate, and the communicative outcomes they help explain. This structured presentation strengthens the transparency of the theoretical model and clarifies the rationale through which digital silence is conceptualized as a form of communicative agency.

Table 1. Digital Silence as Communicative Agency Framework

Integrated Theoretical Inputs	Cognitive–Emotional Mechanisms	Communicative Outcomes (Digital Silence as Agency)
Social Presence Theory	Perceived expectations of immediacy and continuous availability	Silence as resistance to normative expectations of constant responsiveness
Digital Stress / Information Overload Theory	Emotional saturation, mental fatigue, and cognitive overload caused by message density and platform switching	Silence as a strategy for emotional protection and cognitive relief
Silence as Communication Theory	Silence interpreted as intentional meaning-making and relational management	Silence becomes an active communicative choice that asserts boundaries and preserves agency

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design situated within the interpretivist paradigm, which prioritizes participants' experiences and the meanings they assign to communication practices. Given the study's aim to explore how university students (1) experience communication fatigue in digital academic and social contexts, (2) manage digital overload through communicative strategies, and (3) interpret silence as a strategic response, a qualitative approach is particularly well-suited. Rather than attempting to quantify predefined variables, the study seeks to uncover rich, nuanced insights into students' emotional labour, relational boundaries, and strategic inaction within digitally saturated environments.

To address these research questions, semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method. This approach provides both flexibility and thematic focus-allowing students to reflect on their digital communication behaviours, describe the pressures they face, and articulate the reasoning behind their choices to delay, mute, or disengage from interactions. The design aligns with emerging communication research that explores mediated identity performance and emotional self-regulation through students' own narratives.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

The participants in this study consisted of 17 undergraduate preparatory-year students enrolled in an English language program at a public university in Türkiye. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants who were actively engaged with digital communication platforms and willing to reflect on their academic and social communication experiences. This sampling approach was chosen to ensure alignment with the research questions, which required participants to articulate their experiences of communication fatigue, describe their coping strategies, and share relational interpretations of digital silence.

To capture diverse perspectives, attention was paid to variation in gender, academic orientation, and patterns of digital engagement. Participants were required to meet several inclusion criteria. First, they needed to be enrolled in the preparatory English program at the university. In addition, participants were expected to regularly use at least two digital communication platforms, such as WhatsApp, Instagram, or the institutional learning management system (LMS), ensuring that they had sufficient experience with digitally mediated communication. Finally, participation was entirely voluntary, and individuals agreed to share personal reflections regarding their experiences of communication overload and the strategies they used to manage it. Regularly use at least two digital communication platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Instagram, institutional LMS),

A sample size of 17 was sufficient to reach thematic saturation, consistent with standards in qualitative interview-based research (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). Participants' profiles reflected a wide range of digital communication behaviours and differing levels of emotional response to message volume and relational demands-thereby supporting in-depth exploration of all three research questions. A summary of the participant profile is presented in Table 1.

Table 2. Participant Profile Summary

Variable	Description
Number of participants	17 university students
Age range	18–38 years
Gender distribution	10 female, 7 male
Academic program	English Preparatory Program (undergraduate-level)
Frequently used digital platforms	WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok
Frequency of digital communication	Daily use reported by all participants
Data collection method	Semi-structed interviews

Note. The age range includes one mature student (38 years old), while the majority were traditional-age undergraduates.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through individual, semi-structured interviews conducted in the office of the researcher on the campus. Each interview lasted between 20 and 25 minutes and was guided by a thematic interview protocol designed to address the three research questions. The protocol included prompts related to (1) students' experiences of communication fatigue in academic and social settings, (2) the emotional and behavioural strategies they employ to manage digital overload, and (3) their interpretations of silence in digital communication environments.

The interviews encouraged participants to reflect on specific messaging situations, emotional responses, and decision-making processes, such as muting notifications, delaying replies, or avoiding certain digital interactions. The flexible format allowed the

researcher to follow emergent lines of thought while maintaining a consistent thematic structure across interviews. All interviews were conducted in Turkish, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also taken to document nonverbal cues, tone, and contextual observations that could enrich the interpretation of the data.

3.4. Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 79) six-phase approach to thematic analysis: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. An inductive coding strategy was used to allow patterns and meanings to emerge organically from the data, while remaining sensitive to the study's conceptual framework and research questions.

The analysis was structured around the three research questions. First, codes related to students' experiences of message volume, emotional pressure, and digital saturation were mapped to Research Question 1. Second, data describing students' behavioural and emotional strategies-such as muting notifications, delaying replies, or avoiding interactions-were analysed in response to Research Question 2. Third, narratives regarding how silence was used, interpreted, or misinterpreted in digital contexts were aligned with Research Question 3.

Coding and theme development were supported using qualitative analysis software, and an audit trail was maintained to ensure analytic transparency. Themes were refined through an iterative process involving code merging, rechecking against transcripts, and peer debriefing to ensure alignment between the data and the research aims.

Table 3. Sample Coding Framework Used in Thematic Analysis

Initial Codes	Code Description / Category	Theme
"Too many messages," "constant notifications," "platform switching," "mentally full"	Experiences of emotional and cognitive overload caused by message volume and multi-platform communication	Emotional Pressure and Mental Saturation
"Late-night academic messages," "weekend notifications," "no personal time," "class follows me everywhere"	Academic communication intrudes into personal time, creating pressure to remain constantly available	Blurring of Academic and Personal Boundaries
"Muting groups," "delaying replies," "archiving messages," "leaving messages unopened"	Silence used intentionally as a boundary-setting and self-regulation strategy	Strategic Silence as Boundary-Setting
"Replying only when emotionally ready," "avoiding negative tone," "short, low-effort replies"	Responses adjusted according to emotional state and relational concerns	Emotionally Regulated Response Patterns

Initial Codes	Code Description / Category	Theme
"Silence to signal need for space," "resisting constant availability," "intentional quietness"	Silence understood as a meaningful communicative act rather than avoidance	Silence as a Meaningful Communicative Act
"Friends misinterpreting silence," "being seen as rude," "fear of offending others," "guilt after delayed replies"	Relational tension caused by misreading digital silence	Misinterpretations and Relational Tension

Note. This table illustrates how initial codes derived from participant interviews were organized into analytic categories and subsequently clustered into the six themes presented in the Findings section. It demonstrates the progression from raw data to thematic structure, supporting methodological transparency.

3.5. Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, multiple strategies were employed in line with qualitative research standards. Credibility was enhanced through member checking: a subset of participants reviewed summarized findings and confirmed that the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences-particularly regarding their emotional responses, communicative strategies, and interpretations of silence. Transferability was supported by providing rich, contextualized descriptions of the participants' communication environments and the institutional setting in which the study was conducted.

Dependability was addressed by documenting all steps of the data collection and analysis process, including interview protocols, coding decisions, and theme development procedures. The use of an audit trail and analytic memos ensured that decisions made during the coding process were traceable and transparent. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive journaling by the researcher and peer debriefing sessions that allowed for critical reflection on potential biases-especially in interpreting emotionally charged data related to communication fatigue and relational misunderstandings. These measures ensured that the analysis remained grounded in participants' perspectives while maintaining coherence with the study's research questions and theoretical lens.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The study received formal ethical approval from the Bilecik Şeyh Edebali University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (Decision No: 15/2, Date: 15.05.2025; Document Issued: 23.05.2025). All procedures were conducted in accordance with the institutional ethics guidelines, and participation was entirely voluntary. Prior to data collection, all participants were informed in detail about the purpose, scope, and procedures of the study, including their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Informed consent was obtained in writing from each participant.

Given the study's focus on students' emotional well-being, interpersonal communication, and digitally mediated relational experiences, particular attention was paid to creating a safe and respectful interview environment. Participants were advised that they could

skip any question they found uncomfortable or emotionally taxing. The interview topics, such as digital fatigue, social pressure, and communicative silence were treated with sensitivity, and the researcher maintained an empathetic and nonjudgmental stance throughout the data collection process.

All data were anonymized during transcription, and pseudonyms were used in all reports and publications. Audio recordings, transcripts, and field notes were stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher. These procedures were designed to ensure confidentiality and uphold the dignity and emotional safety of participants throughout the research process.

3.7. Researcher Positionality

As a researcher, I do not use social media at all and have never maintained any personal accounts on platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, or similar digital communication environments. This complete non-use places me at a considerable distance from the everyday practices described by students. Throughout the analysis, I remained reflexively aware that my lack of exposure to digital communication norms (e.g., constant notifications, rapid message exchanges, or platform-based interaction pressures) could influence how I interpreted participants' experiences. To minimize this potential bias, all coding and thematic decisions were strictly grounded in participants' own words, without relying on personal assumptions about digital communication. I repeatedly re-checked interpretations against the raw data to ensure that the findings represented students' realities rather than any projections stemming from my outsider position. This reflexive approach enhanced the analytical transparency and trustworthiness of the study.

4. Findings

Based on thematic analysis of student responses, four major themes emerged regarding digital communication fatigue: (1) Perceived Pressure and Emotional Strain, (2) Strategic Silence and Boundary Management, (3) Academic Communication Overload, and (4) Relational Misinterpretations and Identity Concerns. These themes capture how students navigate the tensions between availability, well-being, and relational expectations in hyper-connected university environments.

4.1. RQ1: How do university students experience communication fatigue in their academic and social digital interactions?

This research question explores how students perceive and emotionally respond to the demands of continuous digital communication in both academic and social spheres. Analysis revealed two key themes that illustrate the subjective experience of communication fatigue: (1) Emotional Pressure and Mental Saturation and (2) The Blurring of Academic and Personal Boundaries.

4.1.1. Theme 1: Emotional Pressure and Mental Saturation

Students frequently described feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of digital messages, particularly from WhatsApp and Instagram group chats. While many messages were not urgent, the implicit expectation of quick responsiveness created psychological strain. Participants noted that being contacted across multiple platforms by the same individuals exacerbated this feeling.

"One friend sends TikTok videos, then starts a conversation on WhatsApp, and then tags me on Instagram. I just can't keep up. It exhausts me." (P4)

"Messages arrive so quickly that I can't decide which one to check first. Not being able to keep up with them is extremely exhausting." (P14)

"Throughout the day, messages come from so many different platforms that I constantly feel like I'm missing something. It becomes mentally overwhelming." (P15)

Students equated this constant digital presence to being "mentally full", highlighting how digital interaction became emotionally and cognitively draining over time.

4.1.2.   Theme 2: The Blurring of Academic and Personal Boundaries

Another frequent source of fatigue was the invasion of academic messages into personal time, especially when messages were sent late at night or over the weekend. This temporal intrusion caused stress and made students feel perpetually "on call."

"Even on weekends, if a message comes from a course group, I feel guilty if I don't read it right away." (P9)

"Sometimes academic messages arrive late at night, and I feel pressured to check them immediately. It makes it hard to separate my personal time from school." (P16)

"I feel like classes follow me everywhere because there is always a new announcement or assignment on my phone. Even when I want to rest, my mind stays in 'school mode.'" (P17)

This perceived obligation to stay connected at all times contributed significantly to students' sense of fatigue. Several participants expressed that the classroom had extended into their private lives through continuous digital messaging, leaving little space for rest or disconnection.

4.2.   RQ2: What communicative strategies do students use to manage digital overload and maintain emotional well-being?

This question examines how students actively respond to the challenges of digital overload by employing deliberate communicative behaviours. Two prominent themes emerged: (1) Strategic Silence as Boundary-Setting and (2) Emotionally Regulated Response Patterns.

4.2.1.   Theme 1: Strategic Silence as Boundary-Setting

Many students reported using silence intentionally—not as neglect, but as a tool to regain emotional control and protect mental space. Common strategies included muting group chats, archiving messages, or intentionally delaying responses. These behaviours were described as necessary to manage stress and avoid burnout.

"If a message stresses me or the topic feels too much, I mute the group or take time to respond. It's my way of keeping peace." (P6)

Participants emphasized that silence should not be equated with disengagement. Instead, it represented a conscious act of emotional preservation.

"Being silent online doesn't mean I don't care. Sometimes I just need to step back so I don't burn out." (P13)

"When I feel overwhelmed, I intentionally leave messages unopened so I don't feel pressured to answer immediately. It gives me a sense of control." (P18)

Such responses reflect a shift away from normative expectations of instant responsiveness toward more intentional, self-protective communication patterns.

4.2.2.   Theme 2: Emotionally Regulated Response Patterns

Students also described their message reply strategies as emotion-driven decisions, rather than passive delays. Many were aware of the relational implications of their silence and developed nuanced strategies for navigating those tensions. For instance, some sent short, low-effort replies when emotionally drained, while others delayed responses until they felt able to communicate with the "right tone."

"Sometimes I feel like even a short reply takes effort. I wait until I'm in the mood to sound polite or positive." (P8)

"If I'm not in the right emotional state, I delay replying because I don't want my message to sound tense or negative. I answer only when I can express myself properly." (P19)

Rather than disappearing from conversations entirely, students often adapted their responses to balance social presence with emotional self-regulation.

4.3. RQ3: How is silence interpreted and utilized by students as a strategic response in hyper-connected communication environments?

This question explores how students make sense of their own silence as well as how they perceive others' silence in digital communication. The data revealed two interconnected themes: (1) Silence as a Meaningful Communicative Act and (2) Misinterpretations and Relational Tension.

4.3.1.   Theme 1: Silence as a Meaningful Communicative Act

Participants described silence not as passive withdrawal but as an intentional and meaningful form of communication. Students emphasized that choosing not to respond—or delaying a response—was often the result of self-awareness and emotional need, not neglect.

"Not replying is my way of setting a limit. It doesn't mean I don't care—it means I need space." (P2)

Some students even viewed silence as a way of resisting the expectation of constant availability, especially when they felt emotionally exhausted or socially overwhelmed.

"People think you're always online and available. Silence is my way of saying: I need a break." (P12)

This reframing of silence as a communicative tool highlights students' agency in managing their digital presence.

4.3.2.   Theme 2: Misinterpretations and Relational Tension

Despite their own intentional use of silence, many students acknowledged that when they were on the receiving end of silence, or when their silence was noticed by others, it was

often misunderstood. They reported being perceived as rude, distant, or disinterested—even when their silence was grounded in emotional fatigue.

"Once, I didn't respond to my professor quickly and later found out they thought I was ignoring them. I wasn't—I just didn't see the message on time." (P7)

This theme reveals a relational dilemma: while silence may serve individual emotional needs, it can also create tension, guilt, or misalignment in interpersonal dynamics.

"My friends thought I was upset with them because I stopped replying. But I was just exhausted and needed a break." (P10)

Overall, students' narratives highlight the complex social meanings attached to silence, and their efforts to manage not just their own emotions, but also how their communication choices are perceived by others.

The following table summarizes the alignment between each research question and the corresponding thematic findings.

Table 4. Summary of Research Questions and Emergent Themes

Research Question	Emergent Themes	Brief Description
RQ1: How do students experience communication fatigue in academic and social life?	1. Emotional Pressure and Mental Saturation	Students feel overwhelmed by constant messaging and platform switching.
	2. The Blurring of Academic and Personal Boundaries	Academic communication intrudes into personal time, causing stress and fatigue.
RQ2: What communicative strategies do students use to manage digital overload?	1. Strategic Silence as Boundary-Setting	Students intentionally delay or avoid replies to protect emotional energy.
	2. Emotionally Regulated Response Patterns	Message replies are shaped by mood, energy, and the perceived need to maintain tone.
RQ3: How is silence interpreted and used as a strategic communicative act?	1. Silence as a Meaningful Communicative Act	Silence is reframed as intentional communication rather than avoidance.
	2. Misinterpretations and Relational Tension	Silence is often misread as disinterest or rejection, leading to interpersonal strain.

Table 1 provides a synthesized overview of the alignment between each research question and the thematic findings identified through the interviews. It illustrates how students' narratives map onto broader categories of communication fatigue, coping strategies, and relational dynamics in digital contexts. The table not only clarifies the analytical structure

of the study but also highlights the interconnectedness of emotional, behavioural, and interpretive dimensions of students' communication experiences. This thematic framework guided the subsequent organization and interpretation of the findings in greater depth.

5. Discussion

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how university students experience, interpret, and manage communication fatigue in digitally saturated academic and social contexts. Through qualitative analysis of student narratives, the findings reveal not only the emotional toll of message overload, but also the communicative agency students exercise through strategic silence and personalized coping strategies. These insights both affirm and extend existing research in the field of digital communication studies.

Consistent with prior studies on digital overload, students in this study described being emotionally and cognitively overwhelmed by the volume and frequency of messages received across platforms (Ndasauka et al., 2016, p. 753; Barley et al., 2011, p. 901). The pressure to remain constantly connected and responsive—particularly within academic WhatsApp groups—echoes findings by Gogan et al. (2022, p. 1280), who observed how temporal overload in online learning disrupts students' ability to rest and recover. However, while these studies primarily frame overload as a cognitive and time-based issue, the current study underscores its relational and emotional dimensions. Students reported feelings of guilt, anxiety, and relational strain arising not only from message content but from the expectations tied to response timing and tone. These experiences echo findings by Brooks (2015, p. 30), who linked excessive personal social media use with emotional strain and decreased cognitive efficiency.

A central contribution of this study lies in its exploration of strategic silence as a form of communicative action. While prior literature often treats silence as disengagement (Jaworski, 1993), or occasionally as resistance (Butler, 1997, p. 247; Bruneau, 1973, p. 33; Saville-Troike, 1985, p. 11), participants in this study articulated silence as a deliberate tactic to manage emotional energy and assert boundaries in hyper-responsive environments. Their narratives align partially with Duffy et al. (2021, p. 203), who conceptualize digital disconnection as a form of agency. However, unlike the planned, long-term digital detox practices described in earlier research, the silences observed here were situational, subtle, and emotionally driven—often occurring within ongoing conversations and interpreted contextually. While Duffy et al. (2021) emphasize deliberate and often long-term digital disconnection as a proactive strategy to regain autonomy, the present study identifies a more situational and emotionally driven form of silence. Unlike Duffy et al.'s participants—who framed disconnection as a conscious lifestyle choice—students in this study employed silence in short, context-dependent moments primarily to regulate emotional burden rather than to achieve sustained disengagement. Another key divergence concerns relational framing: whereas Duffy et al. highlight disconnection as a form of empowerment, the students here experienced silence as both protective and risky, often fearing relational misinterpretation. These contrasts suggest that strategic silence is not a uniform phenomenon but varies according to emotional urgency, social context, and academic expectations, thereby extending Duffy et al.'s framework toward more micro-level, interactional dynamics.

The study also highlights a key tension between self-protective silence and social presence. According to social presence theory (Short et al., 1976, p. 212), delayed responses or digital absence are frequently interpreted as disinterest or rejection, a pattern confirmed in the current findings. Several students described being misjudged by peers or instructors when they failed to respond quickly, despite their silence being rooted in fatigue rather than disregard. This tension illuminates the emotional labour involved in maintaining digital identities, particularly in educational settings where responsiveness is informally tied to perceptions of responsibility and engagement.

Although gender was not a primary analytic focus of the study, some subtle patterns emerged in how male and female students described their use of silence. Female participants tended to frame silence as a relationally protective strategy—used to avoid escalation, maintain emotional balance, or prevent misinterpretation—whereas male participants were more likely to describe silence in terms of disengagement or momentary withdrawal from overwhelming digital demands. However, these tendencies were not consistent enough to constitute a strong gendered pattern, and several participants across genders employed silence for similar reasons, including emotional regulation and boundary-setting. Therefore, while small gender-related nuances appeared, the overall findings suggest that strategic silence is shaped more by situational and relational factors than by gender alone.

Furthermore, the study offers a nuanced understanding of emotionally regulated communication. Participants described adjusting their response patterns—delaying replies, muting notifications, or sending minimal messages—based on their mental and emotional states. These behaviours reflect an adaptive approach to communication overload that is rarely captured in binary models of connection versus disconnection. They also reflect the kind of emotional labour that Hochschild (1983, p. 308) originally theorized as central to maintaining acceptable social roles. By foregrounding students' self-awareness and strategic decision-making, the study reframes digital inaction not as failure, but as intentional communicative behaviour shaped by relational awareness.

Overall, the findings suggest that communication fatigue is not merely a function of message volume or platform design, but a complex, emotionally embedded experience influenced by social norms, academic expectations, and identity performance. While previous research has explored communication overload in workplace or system-level terms, this study brings a student-centred, relational lens to the topic—emphasizing how young adults navigate, resist, and reinterpret the norms of perpetual connectivity.

These insights have important implications for communication theory, especially in relation to silence and presence. They invite scholars to expand definitions of communicative engagement to include silence, delay, and digital absence as meaningful acts. Building on these implications, the findings suggest several concrete steps universities can take to reduce communication fatigue and support healthier digital engagement. First, institutions could establish clearer communication guidelines, including designated response-time expectations for instructors and administrative units, which would reduce students' perceived pressure to reply immediately. Second, universities may incorporate "digital quiet hours" into their learning management systems or messaging platforms, limiting non-essential notifications during evenings or peak academic stress periods. Finally, orientation programmes and first-year courses

could explicitly teach digital well-being strategies—such as boundary-setting, notification management, and emotional regulation—to help students develop sustainable communication habits. Together, these policy-oriented recommendations translate the study's findings into actionable practices that can enhance students' emotional well-being and communicative autonomy. In doing so, the study contributes to broader conversations in communication studies about how responsiveness, attention, and disengagement are negotiated in everyday digital life.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how university students experience, interpret, and manage communication fatigue in digitally saturated academic and social environments. Drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 17 preparatory-year students, the analysis revealed that communication fatigue is not merely a function of message quantity, but a relational and emotional condition shaped by social expectations, institutional norms, and digital presence.

Three key insights emerged. First, students reported emotional exhaustion and mental saturation due to the constant pressure to remain responsive across multiple platforms. Second, they employed a range of communicative strategies—most notably strategic silence—as a means of boundary-setting and emotional regulation. Third, silence itself was revealed to be a complex communicative act, often misunderstood by others and fraught with relational tension. These findings highlight the need to expand existing models of digital communication to include inaction, delay, and disengagement as deliberate and meaningful practices.

By foregrounding students' own voices, the study contributes to a richer understanding of communication overload and social presence in educational contexts. It challenges deficit-oriented views of digital silence as disengagement, and instead reframes it as an adaptive response to emotional and relational pressures. Furthermore, it extends theoretical discussions by situating digital fatigue within the lived, affective realities of student life.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that in an era of hyper-communication, the ability to pause, disconnect, or remain silent is not a sign of failure—but rather a subtle and powerful act of communicative agency.

7. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into students' emotional and relational experiences of communication fatigue, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was drawn from a single public university in Türkiye and focused exclusively on preparatory-year students. Although this offers rich, context-specific findings, it may limit the transferability of results to students from different academic levels, institutions, or cultural backgrounds. Future research could adopt comparative designs across universities, regions, or countries to explore how institutional norms and sociocultural factors shape communicative expectations and fatigue.

Second, the study relied on self-reported narratives gathered through interviews. While this method captured personal perceptions and meaning-making processes, it is subject to recall bias and may not reflect real-time communicative behaviours. Future studies could incorporate additional methods, such as digital diaries, platform analytics, or

participant observation to triangulate findings and provide a more dynamic picture of communication practices.

Third, while gender and disciplinary diversity were considered in sampling, the study did not systematically examine how identity variables—such as gender, age, or digital literacy—might influence students' strategies or interpretations of silence. Further research could explore these intersections to uncover how communication fatigue is experienced differently across identity groups.

Finally, this study focused primarily on academic and peer-related digital communication. Future investigations could extend the scope to other relational contexts such as family, romantic partnerships, or part-time work environments to examine how communication fatigue manifests across students' broader digital lives.

Taken together, these limitations also offer promising directions for future inquiry. As digital communication continues to evolve, understanding the emotional labour, relational dynamics, and silent forms of resistance embedded in everyday interactions remains an important agenda for communication research. Future research could explore how these communicative strategies vary across cultural, institutional, or generational contexts, or examine how power dynamics between students and instructors influence expectations of availability. Comparative studies and longitudinal designs could further illuminate how perceptions of digital silence evolve over time or across life stages. In parallel, institutions should consider how communication policies and instructional practices might reinforce overload, and how cultivating a culture of digital empathy could improve students' emotional well-being.

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APPENDIX A. Interview Questions

The following appendix provides the interview questions used during data collection.

Section 1. Digital Communication Intensity

1. Which communication platforms do you use most frequently in your daily life? How many group chats or digital channels are you actively part of?

2. How often do you feel overwhelmed by the number of messages or notifications you receive?

3. When someone messages you, do you feel pressure to respond immediately—even if you do not want to? Which types of messages or platforms create this pressure?

Section 2. Emotional and Behavioural Effects

4. When you receive too many messages or communication requests at the same time, how would you describe that situation? How do you feel at that moment?

5. Have you ever avoided responding even to messages you considered important? Why? What goes through your mind when you delay or choose not to respond?

6. Do you mute or archive chats to manage communication overload? Which types of messages or situations make you feel the need to "disconnect"?

Section 3. Relational and Academic Communication

7. Has communication fatigue affected your relationships with friends, classmates, or instructors? Have you ever worried that your silence might be misunderstood?

8. Does digital communication in academic settings (e.g., class groups, online courses) increase your communication load? How do you feel about receiving academic messages at night or on weekends?

Section 4. Coping Strategies and Communication Choices

9. Do you have any strategies for coping with excessive communication? Do you set digital boundaries—for example, checking messages only at certain times?

10. Do you think staying silent in digital environments (not replying, going offline) can be a form of self-protection? Why or why not? Do you view silence as a strategic communication choice?

11. If you could change something about communication practices at university, what would it be?