

Original Article

Professional Boundaries in Digital Communication: A Qualitative Study of High School Teachers

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Abstract. This study examined how high school teachers manage professional boundaries when communicating with students via online messaging platforms, a growing concern in digital education, where expectations of constant access may blur personal and professional roles. It aimed to describe the challenges teachers face, the strategies they use, and the support they need in handling digital communication with students. Using a basic qualitative design, the study gathered data through in-depth interviews with purposively selected high school teachers who had experience using online messaging platforms for student communication. The interview data were analyzed thematically. Findings showed that online messaging improved teacher-student communication and made interaction more accessible. However, it also created problems such as pressure to reply at all times, overly informal exchanges, and difficulty separating work from personal time. Teachers addressed these concerns by setting communication boundaries, maintaining a professional tone, and using clear, structured communication practices. The study concludes that while online messaging can support learning and communication, it also requires clear limits. Schools should develop clear policies and provide support from administrators and parents to help teachers maintain professional boundaries in digital spaces.

Keywords: *Digital communication; High school teachers; Online messaging platforms; Professional boundaries*

Technology has greatly changed how teaching and learning take place. Through digital tools and online messaging platforms, teachers and students can now communicate more quickly and more easily than before. These tools support the sharing of instructions, feedback, reminders, and learning materials even outside the classroom. Because of this, communication in education is no longer limited to school hours or physical spaces. However, this shift has also created new demands for teachers, who are often expected to remain reachable, responsive, and supportive in digital spaces beyond their formal work time.

This growing use of digital communication has raised concerns about teachers' professional boundaries. Professional boundaries refer to the limits that help teachers maintain proper, respectful, and ethical relationships with students. In online settings, these limits may become harder to manage because messaging platforms allow fast, direct, and continuous contact. Recent studies suggest that digital communication can improve access and efficiency, but it can also increase teachers' workload and blur the line between work and personal life. In the Philippine context, Tan et al. (2025) found that many teachers view their responsibility to students as extending beyond regular working hours because students can contact them at any time. In a related way, Juric et al. (2026)

explained that constant pressure to use and adapt to digital tools may lead to technostress and burnout. Wahyuni et al. (2026) further noted that teachers in under-resourced areas may face added strain because they must manage both limited connectivity and expectations of constant availability. Together, these studies show that digital access may create not only opportunities for communication but also pressure on teachers to stay continuously connected.

Studies also show that teachers face practical difficulties in managing technology. These include limited training, lack of institutional support, and difficulty adjusting to new platforms and communication practices (Astari & Dwi, 2025; Mulyani et al., 2025). Such challenges may weaken teachers' confidence in handling online interactions properly and professionally. At the same time, some studies show that teachers try to protect themselves by creating strategies such as setting communication schedules, using official platforms, and asking for support from colleagues (Peñas et al., 2025). These strategies help teachers create structure in communication and reduce the risk of role confusion. This suggests that while teachers are not passive in facing digital demands, they still need clearer support in managing boundaries in online communication.

Constant online interaction may also affect teachers' emotional well-being. When teachers feel the need to respond at all times, they may experience fatigue, stress, and difficulty separating work from personal life (Tan et al., 2025). Galve et al. (2025) also showed that teachers who already handle complex teaching demands may experience greater strain when responsibilities continue through digital communication. These findings are similar in showing that technology can extend teachers' duties beyond formal work hours. However, much of the existing literature focuses on workload, technology integration, or general well-being, rather than on how teachers personally experience and manage professional boundaries in direct communication with students through online messaging platforms. This leaves an important gap in understanding how boundary challenges happen in everyday school practice and how teachers respond to them.

Given this gap, the present study explores high school teachers' experiences of managing professional boundaries when communicating with students via online messaging platforms. Specifically, it examines the challenges they face, the strategies they use, and the support they need. This study is important because it can help schools and education leaders develop clearer guidelines, support systems, and communication practices that protect both teacher professionalism and teacher well-being. It may also contribute to a more balanced and respectful digital learning environment for teachers and students.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, using a phenomenological approach, to explore the lived experiences of high school teachers who encountered professional boundary challenges when communicating with students via online messaging platforms. Phenomenology aims to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was anchored in transcendental phenomenology as proposed by Clark Moustakas (1994), which emphasizes describing participants' experiences while setting aside researcher bias through bracketing. The research aimed to understand both what teachers experienced and how they experienced these challenges, in order to capture the essence of the phenomenon rather than merely identify common themes.

Research Participants

The participants of the study were twelve (12) high school teachers who actively communicated with students through online messaging platforms such as Messenger or group chats. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who could provide rich, relevant information about the phenomenon. Inclusion criteria: Participants had to be (a) currently teaching in high school, (b) using online messaging platforms to communicate with students, and (c) have experienced situations where professional boundaries were challenged in online communication. Exclusion criteria: Teachers who (a) do not use online messaging platforms for student communication, (b) have no experience of boundary-related challenges, or (c) provided incomplete or insufficient responses during the interview were excluded from the study. Participants were identified with the assistance of school administrators and voluntarily agreed to participate. The final number of participants was determined through data saturation, which was achieved when no new meanings or insights related to the lived experiences emerged from the data.

Research Instruments

The primary instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit in-depth descriptions of participants' lived experiences. The questions focused on (a) their actual experiences of boundary challenges, (b) how they responded to these situations, and (c) the meanings they attached to these experiences. The interview guide was reviewed for clarity and relevance prior to data collection. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accurate representation of their experiences.

Data Gathering Procedure

Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from school administrators. Participants who met the criteria were informed about the purpose of the study and their rights as participants. Written informed consent was secured. Interviews were conducted at a time and place convenient for the participants, ensuring privacy and confidentiality. During the interviews, participants were encouraged to describe their experiences in detail, while follow-up questions were used to deepen and clarify their responses. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. The researchers reviewed the transcripts for accuracy before proceeding to the analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed following the phenomenological procedures of Moustakas (1994). The researchers first conducted bracketing to set aside personal biases and assumptions. Significant statements related to the participants' lived experiences were identified through horizontalization. These statements were then clustered into meaning units and used to develop textural descriptions (what the participants experienced) and structural descriptions (how they experienced it in context). Through this process, the researchers synthesized the essence of the phenomenon, capturing the shared meaning of professional boundary challenges as experienced by the participants.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the rigor of the study, the researchers applied measures of trustworthiness:

Credibility: Achieved through member checking, where participants reviewed and validated the accuracy of their responses.

Dependability: Ensured by maintaining a clear and detailed documentation of the research process, including data collection and analysis procedures.

Confirmability: Established by grounding findings in participants' actual statements and maintaining neutrality through bracketing.

Transferability: Supported by providing rich and detailed descriptions of the research context and participants, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to other settings.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards in conducting research involving human participants. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms and removing identifying information, such as school names. All data, including audio recordings and transcripts, were securely stored and accessible only to the researchers. The findings were presented honestly and transparently.

Results and Discussion

This study explored high school teachers' experiences of managing professional boundaries when communicating with students via online messaging platforms. Seven major themes emerged, reflecting the challenges teachers encountered, the strategies they employed, and the forms of support they perceived as necessary from schools and parents.

Blurred Communication Boundaries

This theme reflects the difficulty teachers face in separating their professional responsibilities from their personal time when using online messaging. Participants described a daily reality in which work-related communication continues beyond school hours, making it difficult to maintain clear boundaries between school and home. For

many of them, digital communication has created a sense of constant accessibility, allowing students to reach them at almost any time of day.

This experience is evident in the accounts of T10 and T2, both of whom described how online messaging allows students to contact them even during times traditionally reserved for rest. T10 shared, *"There are times that some of my students message me late at night, like 10 p.m. onwards, and expect a reply from me, immediately."* Similarly, T2 stated, *"Students sometimes message me on my personal social media account to ask about their grades or lessons, even on weekends."* These accounts suggest that teachers are often placed in situations where they feel continuously available because digital tools make communication immediate and highly accessible.

The nature of messaging applications themselves further reinforces the blurring of boundaries. Because mobile phones are constantly within reach, work-related concerns can easily enter teachers' personal spaces and routines. Communication through messaging platforms may also feel informal or private, leading students to become overly comfortable and less aware of the professional limits that should govern teacher-student interactions. As a result, teachers may feel pressured to respond promptly to avoid appearing neglectful or unresponsive, even during evenings or on weekends. This creates the sense that work is ongoing and never fully ends.

Levy et al. (2024) found that students tend to view boundary-blurred behaviors more favorably than teachers, suggesting that each has a different understanding of appropriate digital interaction. What students may interpret as friendliness or accessibility may be experienced by teachers as a loss of professional distance. Juric et al. (2026) further explained that technology can extend work demands into the home, contributing to stress and fatigue. In addition, Taggart et al. (2023) noted that digital environments may push teachers into a state of constant visibility and readiness, where responsiveness becomes tied to perceptions of professional commitment.

This highlights the importance of establishing clear communication limits in digital learning environments. Teachers may benefit from setting expectations at the beginning of a course regarding appropriate messaging hours, acceptable concerns for online communication, and expected response times. Clearly communicating and consistently reinforcing these boundaries may help students develop greater respect for teachers' personal time and support a healthier professional balance.

Interpersonal Challenges

This theme highlights the interpersonal difficulties teachers face when students communicate in overly familiar, overly informal, or overly intrusive ways. Participants described experiences in which professional distance was reduced as students shifted from formal school-based language to a more casual, personal style of interaction. For teachers, this created challenges in maintaining authority and preserving appropriate boundaries in digital communication.

One important concern raised by participants was students' tendency to ask personal or inappropriate questions through private messages. As T8 shared, *"Some students ask about my personal life; some force me to know the answer."* This account suggests that the private, less-structured nature of online messaging may encourage students to ask questions they would be less likely to raise in a face-to-face classroom. For teachers, such interactions create tension between wanting to remain approachable and needing to protect their personal lives and professional roles.

The findings suggest that these challenges arise partly because digital communication blurs the boundaries between school interaction and social media culture. When communication occurs through platforms commonly used for personal exchanges, students may begin to view teachers less as authority figures and more as ordinary contacts within their social space. Because students often send messages from their homes or personal environments, the usual structure and formality of the classroom may become weaker. As a result, teachers may find it difficult to sustain the same level of authority that is more naturally established in face-to-face settings.

For teachers, these experiences can be emotionally demanding. They often feel the need to carefully manage their responses so as not to be too strict or too friendly. This constant need for self-monitoring can make digital interaction tiring and stressful. The absence of immediate nonverbal feedback also complicates communication, as teachers cannot rely on facial expressions, tone, or posture to signal boundaries or disapproval.

Taggart et al. (2023) argued that students may become more disinhibited in digital spaces because they cannot directly see the teacher's reaction to inappropriate comments or overly familiar behavior. In the Southeast Asian context, Peliño (2026) emphasized that digital communication differs from face-to-face interaction because it lacks visual cues that normally help signal authority and guide appropriate behavior. Without these cues, students may struggle to shift from informal social communication to more respectful academic interaction, leading to what may be understood as a gap in digital etiquette.

These findings show the importance of balancing friendliness with professionalism in online teacher-student communication. Teachers need clear communication strategies to remain approachable while maintaining respect and authority. Schools can support this by providing policies and practical guidance for managing overly familiar or informal online interactions. The use of group chats, official messaging channels, or school email accounts may also help preserve professionalism. In addition, teachers can guide students by modeling and teaching proper digital communication, which may help foster more respectful and appropriate online interactions.

Time Boundary Issues

This theme reflects the ways teachers actively try to protect their personal time amid the constant demands of online communication. Participants shared that they often feel pressure to remain available, which has led them to adopt deliberate strategies for setting limits on when and how they respond to students. Unlike earlier experiences in which boundaries were often unclear, these teachers described efforts to create clearer communication rules to manage their time more effectively.

This concern is evident in the account of T8, who stated, *"One of the biggest challenges I face is the lack of clear boundaries. Students tend to message outside school hours."* This response highlights how online messaging can extend school-related concerns into times meant for rest and personal life. In response to this challenge, some teachers use more structured communication practices. For example, T4 shared, *"I usually communicate through students' group chats for class announcements or assignments, questions, or even modules."* This suggests that teachers attempt to maintain clearer limits by channeling communication into more formal and organized spaces rather than allowing it to spread into personal messaging platforms.

For these participants, boundary-setting is not simply about limiting access but also about repeatedly communicating expectations to students. Teachers described the need to remind students that their time is limited and that they cannot always respond immediately. However, even when such rules are established, maintaining them remains difficult because messages may continue to arrive during meals, rest periods, or family time. As a result, teachers experience an ongoing tension between their need for rest and students' expectations for quick replies. This makes protecting personal time an active, ongoing effort rather than a one-time decision.

Time Management Strategies

This theme reflects how teachers actively manage the demands of online messaging by checking, filtering, and prioritizing which messages require immediate attention. Participants shared that one of their daily challenges is dealing with messages sent at inappropriate times or messages that are not urgent but are treated by students as if they require an immediate response. For teachers, this creates added pressure in deciding which concerns must be addressed right away and which can wait until the next school day.

This experience is illustrated in the account of T10, who stated, *"Some students chat very late at night, even if it's not important. It really challenges my professional boundaries as a teacher."* Similarly, T9 shared, *"I experienced a situation where a student would send multiple follow-up messages outside working hours if I didn't reply immediately. It made me feel stressed and challenged my professional limits."* These accounts show that teachers are not only managing the volume of messages they receive, but also the repeated demands for immediate attention, even outside working hours.

For these teachers, online messaging becomes a daily struggle that requires constant judgment and self-control. They must decide which messages are urgent, which can be postponed, and how to respond in a way that remains professional without sacrificing their own rest and peace of mind. This creates a sense that teachers must continuously guard their personal time. Repeated follow-up messages, especially those sent late at night or for non-urgent concerns, may test their patience and make it difficult to maintain a balance between being approachable and setting firm limits. Over time, this can also become mentally exhausting, as teachers are constantly evaluating the importance of each message and considering how to respond appropriately.

Yang and Du (2024) argued that when educational institutions establish clear communication strategies, teacher well-being is strengthened and the online learning environment becomes more manageable and effective. In the Philippine context, Peliño (2026) emphasized the need to guide students to distinguish between urgent and non-urgent concerns to protect teachers' work-life balance. Such responses allow teachers to acknowledge students' concerns without reinforcing the expectation of constant availability.

This highlights the importance of practical strategies for managing message overload and response expectations. Teachers may benefit from monitoring the kinds of messages that consume unnecessary time and from using structured response practices that prioritize urgent concerns. At the institutional level, schools can support teachers by developing guidelines, templates, and communication policies that help make online messaging more organized and sustainable. These measures may allow teachers to focus on important concerns while reducing avoidable stress.

Professional Communication Practices

This theme highlights how teachers intentionally choose their words, tone, and manner of communication in order to remain professional in online interactions with students. Participants reported making conscious efforts to use formal and respectful language, even when students communicate in a casual or overly familiar manner. For these teachers, professionalism in digital communication is not only a personal practice but also a way of setting the tone for appropriate teacher-student interaction.

This is evident in the account of T10, who explained, *"I use our GC to primarily share special announcements and remind students of important deadlines. I make sure messages are clear and concise, so students can easily stay on track. I also encourage them to ask brief questions in the chat when needed."* This response demonstrates how teachers use structured, purposeful communication to keep interactions focused on academic concerns. Similarly, T11 stated, *"Based on my experience, the guidelines on respectful language and tone messaging would help prevent misunderstanding or inappropriate messages. Also, there should be policies on managing group chats, including what is acceptable."* This suggests that teachers view formal communication not only as a personal strategy but also as something that shared rules and expectations should support.

For these participants, maintaining a formal style of communication serves as a way of modeling proper online behavior for students. Their messages do not merely deliver information; they also communicate professional boundaries and expectations. By remaining formal, teachers reinforce their role and remind students that digital communication, even when conducted through familiar platforms, is still part of the educational environment. In this way, formal communication helps preserve authority, prevent misunderstandings, and reduce the risk of overly personal or inappropriate exchanges.

Teachers also described the importance of consistency in maintaining this professionalism. A single overly casual response may be interpreted differently by students and may weaken the professional distance that teachers are trying to preserve. As a result, teachers often feel the need to maintain a communication style that is clear, respectful, and slightly detached to protect their credibility and maintain appropriate boundaries. This highlights how online professionalism becomes part of teachers' broader efforts to manage their digital presence.

Mata (2022) identified inappropriate language and the failure to respect teachers' private time as common concerns in student-teacher digital communication. In this context, the consistent use of formal language may serve as a preventive strategy. This underscores the value of formal communication in protecting teachers' professional identity and promoting respectful digital interaction. Schools can strengthen this practice by developing clear policies on professional messaging and by providing training for both teachers and students on appropriate online communication. Such efforts may help create a digital environment where expectations are clear, professionalism is maintained, and respectful interaction becomes a shared responsibility.

Administrative and Parental Support

This theme highlights teachers' recognition that maintaining professional boundaries in online communication requires support not only from teachers themselves but also from school leaders and parents. Participants emphasized that they cannot manage digital boundaries on their own. Instead, they viewed boundary-setting as a shared responsibility, in which their personal efforts become more effective when supported by school policies

and reinforced at home.

This is reflected in the account of T12, who stated, *“It would be helpful if the administration gave parents and students a clear handbook on digital etiquette so the responsibility of enforcing boundaries doesn’t fall solely on the teacher.”* Similarly, T11 suggested, *“Schools should conduct orientations for teachers and students on proper online communication.”* These responses show that teachers do not merely want individual coping strategies; they also want formal systems that clearly communicate expectations and distribute responsibility among all those involved in the learning process.

For these participants, support from administrators and parents creates a greater sense of protection and legitimacy. When teachers set their own boundaries, these limits may be interpreted by students or parents as a personal choice or even as a lack of concern. However, when schools establish clear rules, and parents understand and support them, boundaries become part of a larger institutional framework rather than a personal decision made by the teacher alone. This allows teachers to feel less isolated and more confident in maintaining their professional role. In this way, institutional support transforms boundary-setting from a potential source of conflict into a shared practice that promotes teacher well-being and respectful communication.

Batram (2025) noted that involving parents in school policy development can promote accountability and strengthen a supportive school environment. In the Philippine context, DepEd Order No. 002 (2026) highlights the growing policy attention given to teacher well-being and the responsibility of school leaders to help reduce work-related stress. Similarly, RAND Research (2026) emphasized that without clear administrative guidance on communication expectations and workload limits, teachers remain vulnerable to stress and burnout. Taken together, these studies support the participants’ view that orientations, policy guidance, and administrative backing are necessary for sustaining healthy professional boundaries.

This underscores the importance of collective responsibility in managing digital communication in educational settings. Schools may strengthen boundary-setting by providing clear handbooks, conducting regular orientations, and engaging parents in conversations about respectful online communication. Such efforts can help ensure that teachers are not left to manage these challenges alone and can instead work within a system that supports both their professionalism and their well-being.

Clear Communication Protocol

This final theme highlights teachers’ strong call for formal and standardized rules to guide their everyday digital communication with students. Participants emphasized that, in the absence of school-wide policies, they are often left to create and enforce their own boundaries, which may lead to inconsistency, confusion, and added stress. For them, the need is not simply for personal strategies but for official protocols that clearly define how online communication should be managed in the school context.

This concern is reflected in the account of T8, who stated, *“Schools should provide policies on the proper use of communication platforms to ensure professionalism and accountability in all interactions.”* Similarly, T2 shared, *“Schools can support teachers by providing official communication platforms...”* These responses show that teachers view institutional protocols as essential in creating a more structured and professional system of communication. They believe that clear school policies on messaging hours, platform use, and response expectations would help establish a common standard for students and parents to follow.

For these participants, the absence of formal rules creates uncertainty in everyday practice. Each after-school message may feel like an individual decision that the teacher must handle on their own, making boundary-setting more difficult and emotionally taxing. In contrast, when official protocols are in place, teachers experience a greater sense of order and legitimacy. They no longer have to rely solely on personal judgment when deciding whether to respond immediately or delay a reply. Instead, the responsibility shifts from the individual teacher to the school’s established system, allowing teachers to feel supported and more confident in protecting their personal time while maintaining professionalism.

These findings are supported by related literature. Yeung et al. (2023) emphasized that clear guidelines on messaging channels and communication practices are necessary to avoid privacy concerns and maintain focus in digital learning environments. In the Philippine context, Peliño (2026) argued that fixed messaging hours are among the most effective ways to address professional boundary challenges in online communication. Juric et al.

(2026) likewise found that schools with official handbooks for digital communication report lower levels of teacher exhaustion. Ampo (2025) further noted that effective online communication also depends on access to appropriate digital resources and stable internet connectivity, since communication expectations may be difficult to meet when students or teachers face technological limitations. Similarly, Pendijito et al. (2025) highlighted that clear priorities and structured schedules can help teachers manage instruction, student communication, and administrative work more effectively despite such constraints.

This underscores the importance of formal communication policies in making digital interaction more organized, respectful, and sustainable. Schools may support teachers by developing simple but clear handbooks or guidelines that explain proper messaging practices, acceptable platforms, response timelines, and communication boundaries. Visible reminders and consistent implementation of these protocols may also help students and parents better understand expectations. In this way, formal institutional rules can provide the structure needed to make online communication more professional, effective, and supportive of teacher well-being.

Conclusion

This study showed that high school teachers face real difficulties in managing professional boundaries when communicating with students through online messaging platforms. Online communication makes teachers more accessible, but it also blurs the line between work and personal life, increases pressure to respond quickly, and poses challenges for maintaining authority and professionalism. A key contribution of this study is its clear view that boundary management in digital communication is not only a personal struggle for teachers but also a professional issue shaped by school practices and expectations.

The study also showed that teachers use different strategies to protect their time and maintain professionalism, such as setting response schedules, using formal language, and organizing communication through proper channels. However, these efforts are not enough without support from schools and parents. The findings suggest that clear institutional policies, official platforms, and shared rules for digital communication are necessary to promote respectful, sustainable interactions between teachers and students. Future studies may explore this issue at other educational levels, including students' and parents' views, or examine how different digital platforms affect professional boundaries.

Contributions of Authors

Author 1: conceptualization, manuscript writing, data gathering, coding and thematic analysis

Author 2: data gathering, coding and analysis

Author 3: proposal writing, data gathering

Author 4: data gathering, manuscript consultation

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Conflict of Interests

No conflict of interest.

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