

The Teacher-Student Relationship in the Digital Era: A Bioethical Analysis of Professional Boundaries among Medical Students

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Abstract

Introduction: The digital transformation of higher education, accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, has significantly reshaped the teacher–student relationship. In medical education, where mentorship, role modelling, and professional identity formation are essential, the transition to online platforms has introduced new ethical challenges. While digital tools enhance accessibility and flexibility, they may also blur professional boundaries and amplify power asymmetries. From a bioethical perspective, maintaining clear limits is crucial to protect student autonomy, prevent exploitation, and ensure a respectful academic environment. This study explores medical students' perceptions of professional boundaries in digitally mediated education.

Materials and Methods: A cross-sectional, anonymous questionnaire-based study was conducted among undergraduate medical students (years I–VI). The instrument included 22 items across four domains: communication practices, boundary clarity, experiences of discomfort, and attitudes toward institutional regulation. Responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, alongside multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Data were analyzed descriptively and comparatively across study years.

Results: A total of 214 students participated. While 78% reported increased accessibility to faculty, 64% indicated that digital communication blurred boundaries. Over half (52%) found interaction via personal social media inappropriate, and 71% preferred institutional platforms. Additionally, 39% reported discomfort with overly informal communication, and 46% felt pressure to respond outside academic hours. Senior students expressed greater concern regarding boundary ambiguity, and over 80% supported formal institutional guidelines.

Conclusion: Digitalization enhances access but introduces ethical vulnerabilities in academic relationships. Clear communication norms, institutional policies, and ethical training are essential to maintain professional boundaries, ensure fairness, and protect both students and educators in medical education.