Chapter 12
Present but Withheld: Everyday Practices of Digital Minimalism in Academic WhatsApp

Harika Suklun
http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1016-268X
Batman University, Turkey

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how academics in Turkey use WhatsApp groups in ways that reduce visibility and interaction, forming a subtle practice of digital minimalism. These groups often encourage openness and responsiveness, yet many members stay silent, do not upload photos, use vague or symbolic names, and avoid status updates. While such behavior may seem passive, it often reflects a deliberate strategy to manage emotional effort, presence, and exposure in academic communication. Rather than interpreting this as disengagement, the chapter sees it as a meaningful form of agency. Drawing on observations from student, research, and professional WhatsApp groups, the chapter identifies patterns such as passive membership, minimal identity disclosure, and limited availability. These strategies show how users handle group norms while preserving boundaries. By viewing these behaviors through communication culture and institutional dynamics, the chapter reframes digital silence as an intentional form of participation on one's own terms.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary academic life, WhatsApp groups have become central tools of coordination, collaboration, and community. They mediate communication between

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-4531-4.ch012

students and instructors, enable research teams to organize tasks, and sustain informal networks among colleagues. Yet, behind the constant stream of messages and digital connectivity, a quieter set of practices exists: those of withdrawal, silence, or minimal presence. This chapter investigates these subtle yet significant behaviors through the lens of digital minimalism, focusing on how academic users in Turkey negotiate visibility, availability, and attention in WhatsApp group settings.

As mobile messaging applications become increasingly embedded in the fabric of academic work and sociality, users are expected to be constantly reachable, responsive, and expressive. These expectations are not simply social but are structurally embedded in what has been termed algorithmic culture, an environment where engagement is not only encouraged but normalized through technical affordances such as read receipts, online status indicators, and ranking algorithms (Striphas, 2015; Bucher, 2020). In such environments, refusal to engage, or the choice to remain digitally silent, can be interpreted as deviant, inattentive, or even antisocial.

However, this chapter argues that digital silence and minimalism should not be dismissed as mere neglect or personal idiosyncrasy. Rather, they can be understood as everyday tactics of resistance, self-preservation, and meaning-making. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation, Scott's (1985) notion of infrapolitics, and Bauman's (2000) insights into the liquid conditions of modern identity, digital minimalism appears not as disengagement per se, but as a recalibration of engagement. Users are not absent; they are present but withheld, strategically choosing when and how to signal their participation.

Beyond mere identity management, digital minimalism in professional contexts often manifests as strategic silence, a deliberate act of non-participation that carries pragmatic significance (Dakoru, 2025). Unlike physical silence, digital silence is a timestamped and socially legible act that allows users to navigate high-stress academic environments by managing emotional regulation and boundary setting (Ali et al., 2024). This form of 'withheld presence' acts as a resource-saving mechanism where silence is reimagined as a strategic communicative tool shaped by institutional power dynamics.

In the Turkish academic context, where both institutional and cultural expectations shape communicative behavior, these choices become especially nuanced. Academic WhatsApp groups often blur the boundaries between professional obligations and personal space, between peer collaboration and hierarchical surveillance. As such, practices like using a flower emoji instead of a personal photo, maintaining a blank status message, or muting notifications for months at a time, emerge not simply as practical decisions but as ideological gestures, ways of reclaiming autonomy in hyperconnected spaces.

This chapter builds on emerging scholarship in digital sociology and media studies that emphasizes how silence, invisibility, and minimal engagement function within