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Negotiating Face and Morality in Cross-cultural WhatsApp and Campus Interactions: Politeness among University Students and Implication for Inclusive Education (SDG 4)

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ABSTRACT

Objective: *To examine how university students from diverse ethnic backgrounds negotiate face and moral expectations through politeness responses in WhatsApp and related campus interactions, and what these practices imply for inclusive education supporting SDG 4.* ***Method:*** *A qualitative descriptive design with sociopragmatic discourse analysis was applied to 107 interaction excerpts from students at universities in Malang, covering WhatsApp chats and face-to-face talk among peers, between students and lecturers, and between juniors and senior organization members. We coded speech acts, politeness strategies, and moral evaluations.* ***Results:*** *Politeness responses varied with the relationship between interlocutors. Peers relied on positive politeness, humor, and regional address terms to build solidarity. In contrast, students writing to lecturers combined religious greetings, self-identification, regional deference markers such as Tabe, and apologies for imposing. They mitigated face threats through explanations, circumstance-based refusals, and repair. These choices reflected moral evaluations of respect, reluctance to impose, solidarity, inclusiveness, and conditional honesty.* ***Novelty:*** *The study integrates face and moral order in one analytic frame for Indonesian cross-cultural digital and campus talk and links pragmatic competence to SDG 4 (targets 4.7 and 4.a), with supporting relevance for SDG 10 and SDG 16.*

INTRODUCTION

Universities are among the few places where people from many regions and cultures interact daily, and the 2030 Agenda expects education to prepare learners for this diversity. Sustainable Development Goal 4 calls for inclusive and equitable quality education. Target 4.7 stresses global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity, and Target 4. a stresses safe, inclusive, and effective learning environments (United Nations, 2015). Communicative competence, and specifically the ability to be polite in ways that others recognize as appropriate, is a practical part of intercultural competence, and interest in developing students' intercultural pragmatic competence is growing (Kecskes & Dinh, 2025).

In Indonesian universities, this diversity is highly visible. A single class in Malang may include students from Java, Madura, Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Nusa Tenggara, Maluku, and Papua, each bringing regional languages, address terms, and expectations about how to request, refuse, and show respect. Much of the coordination of academic life, from asking a supervisor for a meeting to borrowing notes from a classmate, now takes place on WhatsApp, where written messages carry the social work that intonation, gesture, and physical distance carry in speech.

Politeness is not only a set of linguistic strategies. It is also a judgment about what is proper, respectful, or fair in a given relationship (Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Haugh, 2015). Face-based accounts explain how speakers protect their self-image and others' (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967). Rapport management adds sociality rights and

interactional goals to face (Spencer-Oatey, 2008), and research on linguistic accommodation explains why speakers converge toward, or diverge from, their interlocutors' speech (Giles et al., 1991). In the Indonesian campus setting, these concerns intersect with religious propriety, regional politeness markers, and hierarchical relationships among students, lecturers, and senior organization members.

Research on politeness in WhatsApp has expanded. Studies in Indonesian and Malaysian universities describe the forms and strategies students use in WhatsApp messages to lecturers and in group chats, where politeness varies with closeness and power (Aritonang et al., 2025; Bustam et al., 2024; Febrianti & Yuneva, 2023; Ismail et al., 2023; Maharani et al., 2022), and work on technology-assisted student-lecturer interaction shows the same concern with language politeness (Sudar et al., 2025; Triyono et al., 2026). Outside education, researchers have examined WhatsApp interaction for the relational work done by small interactional particles (Marmorstein, 2021), the sequencing of text and audio postings (König, 2024), and sharing and caring in group chats (Maíz-Arevalo, 2024). Researchers have also studied politeness in other digital spaces, such as Twitter and online support communities (Burnette & Calude, 2022; Federici, 2025).

Theoretical work has revisited reciprocity and moral order, the distinction between first-order and second-order politeness, and interaction ritual in politeness research (Culpeper & Tantucci, 2021; House & Kádár, 2023; Kádár & House, 2021), and has re-examined how face is conceptualized in everyday interaction (Arundale, 2024). Studies of ritual politeness in Persian communication link it to social hierarchy (Ghaderi, 2025), and experimental and corpus-based studies address the dynamics of politeness and its sociopragmatic variation (Gretenkort & Tylén, 2021; van Dorst et al., 2024). Bibliometric work shows that speech act research remains active internationally (Afzaal et al., 2024).

In Indonesia, cross-cultural and regional studies have examined pre-request speech acts in Minangkabau (Revita et al., 2025), criticism in Japanese and Minangkabau films (Haristiani et al., 2023), off-record politeness and cultural values in Belis negotiation (Daar et al., 2023), compliment responses of Indonesian and Pakistani university students (Bibi & Sartini, 2023), traditional communication in the Mandailing community (Zulkarnain et al., 2023), politeness principles in political speech acts (Mulyono et al., 2025), and communication accommodation among international students (Bibi & Hamida, 2024). Studies elsewhere describe hedging in Fijian Hindi (Singh et al., 2024), face maintenance and relationships in Kenyan motorbike-taxi talk (Kathukya et al., 2025), and the mix of politeness and mock conflict in Ghanaian market bargaining (Monson, 2022).

Despite this literature, three gaps remain. First, studies of student politeness often classify strategies or maxims without examining the moral evaluations behind them, so face and morality are rarely analyzed together. Second, researchers seldom compare digital and face-to-face interactions within the same student community. Third, studies tend to concentrate on one or two languages, communities, or media, while multi-ethnic campus talk receives less attention.

This study addresses these gaps. It aims to analyze how university students from diverse ethnic backgrounds negotiate face and morality through politeness responses in WhatsApp and related campus interactions, and to discuss the implications for inclusive education (SDG 4). Four research questions guide the analysis: (1) Which politeness responses do students use when requesting, refusing, apologizing, thanking, praising, and reprimanding? (2) How do they negotiate face and rapport according to

their relationship: peer, student-lecturer, or junior-senior? (3) Which moral evaluations underlie these choices? (4) What do the findings imply for inclusive education?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive design and sociopragmatic discourse analysis, which suits its aim of interpreting how participants use language in context and how they evaluate what is appropriate. The analysis is interpretive, and the excerpts are treated as situated social action, not as isolated sentences.

Participants and data

The corpus consists of 107 excerpts collected from university students in Malang, including Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang and Universitas Tribhuwana Tunggadewi. It includes WhatsApp chats (private and group) and face-to-face conversations on campus. Participants come from more than 15 ethnic and regional backgrounds, including Javanese, Madurese, Batak and Medan Malay, Banjar, Makassar and Bugis, Manggarai, Sumba, Minangkabau, Ambonese, Papuan, Balinese, and Dayak. Interlocutors relate as peers, student-lecturer, and junior-senior in student organizations (Table 1).

Instrument and procedures

For each excerpt, the corpus records a transcript and a context note that gives the participants' regional origin, their relationship, the place and time, and the purpose of the exchange. The WhatsApp excerpts are written exchanges reproduced from the participants' own chats, and the face-to-face excerpts are written transcripts of conversations on campus. The analysis is based on these transcripts and their context notes; no audio material was analyzed. We purposively selected excerpts for requests, refusals, apologies, thanks, praise, reprimands, and address terms, and removed duplicates. Participants gave informed consent for the use of their messages and conversations in the research. We replaced names, student numbers, and other identifiers with codes before analysis. Each excerpt carries a standard code combining mode, relationship, institution, and ethnic background, and is cited in the text by its item number in the corpus appendix. Original Indonesian and regional forms are given in italics, followed by English translations in brackets.

Data analysis

Analysis proceeded in six steps: (1) segmenting excerpts into exchanges; (2) coding speech acts; (3) coding politeness strategies, following Brown and Levinson (1987) and the rapport orientation of Spencer-Oatey (2008); (4) coding moral evaluations, namely respect, reluctance to impose, solidarity, reciprocity, inclusiveness, honesty, and religious propriety (Kádár & Haugh, 2013); (5) comparing patterns by mode, relationship, and ethnic background; and (6) interpreting the patterns in context with reference to the participants' communicative goals. We recorded coding decisions in a coding sheet and then validated them with the second and third authors. Excerpts whose mode or relationship was not stated in the context note (Items 24, 26, 27, 38, 79, and 80), or whose context note did not match the transcript (Items 99 and 104), were coded from the transcript itself, and each such decision was recorded. We interpreted regional forms with the help of the context notes and the language explanations that accompany several excerpts in the corpus (for example, Items 9 and 22).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section reports the patterns found in the corpus. Item numbers refer to the corpus appendix, and the author provides the translations. Counts and percentages come from manual coding of the corpus.

Corpus overview

Table 1 shows the corpus composition by mode and relationship. We assigned each of the 107 excerpts to one mode and one relationship. Most excerpts come from WhatsApp (82 of 107; 76.6%), comprising 71 private chats and 11 group chats, while the remaining 25 are face-to-face conversations. Peer-peer talk accounts for 55 excerpts (51.4%), student-lecturer talk for 44 (41.1%), and junior-senior talk for eight (7.5%).

Table 1. Composition of the corpus by mode and relationship (n = 107 excerpts)

Mode	Peer-peer	Student-lecturer	Junior-senior	Total
WhatsApp, private	28	39	4	71
WhatsApp, group	6	4	1	11
Face-to-face	21	1	3	25
Total	55	44	8	107

Requests are the most frequent speech act. They occur in 71 of the 107 excerpts (66.4%), ahead of thanks (56 excerpts; 52.3%) and apologies (42; 39.3%). Thanks and apologies mostly accompany requests as mitigation, especially in student-lecturer messages, where 40 of 44 excerpts contain a request, 38 contain thanks, and 36 contain an apology such as *mohon maaf mengganggu waktunya* [sorry to disturb your time]. Complaints (5 excerpts), praise (3), and refusals (2) are much rarer. An excerpt can contain more than one act, so the percentages sum to more than 100%. We coded requests, complaints, praise, and refusals by hand, and identified thanks and apologies by fixed expressions such as *terima kasih*, *makasih*, and *maaf*.

Face work among peers

Among peers, requests were softened by making them smaller, turning them into shared activities, or withdrawing them to spare the other person. In Item 60, an Ambonese student answers a request for company in the rain by recasting it as a joint action:

> A: *Bro, hujan deras gini. Temenin aku ke kantin depan boleh nggak?* [Bro, it's pouring. Can you go with me to the canteen?]
> B: *Iyo seng apa-apa beta temani ale. Katong pi sama-sama saja.* [Sure, no problem, I'll go with you. Let's go together.]
> B: *Santai saja, katong teman.* [Relax, we're friends.]

The inclusive first-person plural *katong* turns a favor into a shared activity. Item 65 shows the same move by a Kupang student (*katong jalan sama-sama*). In Item 4, care takes the form of withdrawing the request: A invites B to come along to collect a motorbike, then offers, *Nga papa lah aku naik grab aja kamu istirahat aja* [It is fine, I will take a Grab, you rest], because B is tired. Humor works similarly. In Item 80, a student who complains about the workload is told, *ini tugas bukan monster* [these tasks are not monsters], and the exchange ends with an agreement to divide the work.

Deference toward lecturers

Student messages to lecturers follow a recognizable sequence: religious greeting, apology for disturbing, self-identification, a request phrased as a request for permission, and thanks. Item 31, a group chat, illustrates this:

> A: *Assalamualaikum bapak, mohon maaf mengganggu waktunya. Saya [P01] dari kelas E ingin konsultasi dengan bapak perihal Proposal saya hari ini, sekali lagi mohon maaf mengganggu waktunya bapak.* [Peace be upon you, sir. Sorry to disturb your time. I am [P01] from class E and would like to consult you about my proposal today. Again, sorry to disturb your time, sir.]
> B (lecturer): *Wassalam.... Jam 3 di Lab.* [Peace be upon you too. Three o'clock at the lab.] (abridged)

The asymmetry in length and elaboration between the student's message and the lecturer's reply is itself a visible marker of hierarchy. Several students added the regional politeness marker *Tabe*, which is associated with Makassar and eastern Indonesia. In Item 36, a Makassar student writes to a Javanese supervisor, *Tabe Pak*, ... *kesiapan bapak sangat saya harapkan* [Excuse me, sir, ... I sincerely hope you will be available], and in Items 44 and 45 the marker is combined with self-identification and a request for permission to ask (*izin bertanya*). Students also justify their requests by stating their academic status, as in Item 102: *ijin mengkonfirmasi bahwa proposal saya sudah di acc sama pembimbing 1* [I would like to confirm that my proposal has been approved by supervisor 1]. Lecturers also attend to students face-to-face. In Item 33, a lecturer who postpones a consultation writes: *Mohon maaf mbak, bimbingannya ibu tunda besok pagi ya* [Sorry, the consultation is postponed to tomorrow morning].

Face threat and repair

Face threats appeared in reprimands, complaints, and refusals. In Item 85, a student reprimands a friend for not answering in a group chat and briefly threatens the friend's face:

> A: *Kok sombong amat, mau balas aja susah.* [Why so arrogant? Is replying really that hard?]
> B: *Maaf maaf ... pegang hp saya na soalnya ada yang pinjam hp dari pagi.* [Sorry, sorry ... someone has been borrowing my phone since morning.] (abridged, spelling normalised)
> A: *Iyah GPP jangan kayak gitu lagi na.* [It is okay; do not do that again.]

B apologizes and gives a reason, and A accepts with *GPP* [never mind] while stating a mild future expectation. Refusals showed a similar pattern. In Item 78, a Kupang student asks a Lamongan student to lend a motorbike, and the answer is, "*Sorry teman, motor saya belum bisa jalan karena belum ganti oli*" [sorry friend, my motorbike cannot run because the oil has not been changed]. The refusal cites a situational obstacle and does not suggest that the requester is unworthy.

Not every exchange ended in repair. In the group chat of Item 88, students complain that they were told to hurry to a village hall with no clear task and no time to eat. The complaint is padded with reasons and a prayer-hands emoji. The reply, *Setidaknya baca. Jeli.* [At least read. Be observant.], is curt and threatens the complainants' face.

Moral evaluations in participants' talk

Five moral orientations recur in the data. First, messages to lecturers show respect for hierarchy and religious propriety through religious greetings, apologies for disturbing, and self-identification (Items 31, 36, 44, 45). Second, students recognize and release reluctance to impose. In Item 61, a Banjar student replies to a request for a lift with *Santai pang, jangan sungkan pian* [Relax, do not feel reluctant]. Third, solidarity and reciprocity appear in joint framing, humour, and offers to share work (Items 60, 65, 80). Fourth, inclusiveness is stated explicitly in Item 2, where a Madurese student says a Javanese conversation is too fast to follow and the group agrees on a norm:

> D: *Kalau temen nggak bisa Bahasa Jawa, ya ngomong Bahasa Indonesia* [if a friend cannot speak Javanese, speak Indonesian].
> C: *harus mengerti dengan keadaan takutnya kesinggung atau apa gitu kan nggak enak* [you have to understand the situation, you might offend someone, and that's not nice].

Fifth, honesty about limits is accepted when it is warm. In Item 64, a Batak student agrees to accompany a friend but adds a condition: *Ada bah, tapi jangan lama kali ya* [Sure, but do not take too long].

Identity maintenance and accommodation

Regional forms appeared as resources for identity and closeness. Some speakers adopted the interlocutor's address terms, as when a Javanese student addresses a Minangkabau friend as *Wak* (Item 63) or a Balinese friend as *Bli* (Item 66). Others kept their regional forms while the interlocutor used Indonesian, as with the Balinese speaker's *tiang* and *sing* (Item 66). In Item 28, a Makassar student and a Javanese student discuss speech style directly, and the Javanese student explains that unggah-ungguh (linguistic etiquette) makes loud speech sound like anger. Indonesian functioned as a neutral code when comprehension was at stake (Item 2). Table 2 summarises the patterns.

Table 2. Summary of politeness patterns by relationship

Relationship	Dominant Strategies	Typical Markers	Moral Orientation
Peer-peer	Positive politeness, humour, withdrawal of requests, joint framing	Regional address terms, *katong*, informal particles	Solidarity, reciprocity, release from *sungkan*
Student-lecturer	Ritualised opening, justification of the request, thanks	Religious greeting, *Tabe*, *mohon maaf mengganggu*	Respect for hierarchy, religious propriety
Junior-senior	Hedged requests, reassurance, deference	*Kak*, *Permisi*, regional particles	Respect combined with warmth
Face threat and repair	Apology plus reason, circumstance-based refusal, acceptance of repair	*Maaf*, *GPP*, *sorry*	Fairness, preserving the relationship

Discussion

Peer interactions fit Brown and Levinson's (1987) positive politeness. However, the data also show sociality rights in the sense of Spencer-Oatey (2008): friends expect help without formality, and a helper who turns a favor into a joint activity, as with *katong*, protects the requester's sense of equality. The give-and-take in these exchanges also echoes the principle of (im) politeness reciprocity (Culpeper & Tantucci, 2021). The

withdrawal of a request in Item 4 shows that face concern can lead speakers to give up their own goal for the sake of the relationship.

Deference toward lecturers corresponds to negative politeness, but the fixed, ritualized order of greeting, apology, identification, and request suggests that it expresses discernment of social position (Ide, 1989) as much as strategic face protection. This ritualized order is in line with the ritual character of politeness (Kádár & House, 2021) and its link to social hierarchy (Ghaderi, 2025), and with reports that Indonesian students open messages to lecturers with greetings, indirect requests, and appreciation, in a way shaped by power and social distance (Bustam et al., 2024; Maharani et al., 2022). Politeness is also two-way: lecturers who apologize when changing arrangements, as in Item 33, protect students' face; Sudar et al. (2025) likewise note that politeness in lecturer-student WhatsApp exchanges should be mutual. The contrast with curt replies in group chats, as in Item 88, suggests that a group audience raises the cost of a face threat and makes justification more important. This differs from Spanish WhatsApp groups, where members share positive news and humor to build rapport, even in work groups (Maíz-Arevalo, 2024).

The clearest support for treating politeness as moral evaluation comes from Item 2, where students state a norm about language choice and justify it by the risk of offending an interlocutor. This shows that language choice in multi-ethnic groups is a moral matter, not only a matter of comprehension. It supports approaches that treat politeness as an evaluation of what people owe one another in a relationship (Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Haugh, 2015; Culpeper, 2011) and is compatible with recent arguments that the divide between participants' and analysts' concepts is too binary and that moral order deserves attention (House & Kádár, 2023). Cultural values behind politeness have likewise been described for Belis negotiation (Daar et al., 2023) and for pre-request speech acts in Minangkabau (Revita et al., 2025). The release of *sungkan* in Item 61 and the conditional honesty in Item 64 show that moral expectations differ by relationship and by the interactional goal at stake. Some ethnic groups appear only once or twice in the corpus, so the study does not claim ethnic differences and treats regional forms as resources used in specific relationships (Giles et al., 1991; compare Bibi & Hamida, 2024, on accommodation among international students in Indonesia; Arundale, 2024, on face in everyday interaction).

The findings have four implications for inclusive intercultural education. First, orientation and character-education courses can include short modules on intercultural politeness, using authentic excerpts, in line with target 4.7. Second, universities can publish brief guidelines for WhatsApp communication between students and lecturers, covering greetings, self-identification, a clear purpose, and thanks, and encouraging lecturers to acknowledge requests, since terse replies may be read differently by students from different backgrounds. Third, staff and students can be made aware of *sungkan* and of ways to release it, so that students feel safe to ask for help, which supports target 4.a. Fourth, explicit norms about language choice in multi-ethnic groups can reduce exclusion and misunderstanding, which is relevant to SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) and SDG 16 (peaceful and inclusive societies).

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: Students from different ethnic backgrounds negotiate face and moral expectations through politeness responses that vary with speakers' relationship. Peers build solidarity through positive politeness, humor, and regional address terms; students writing to lecturers use ritualized deference and religious greetings; and they

manage face threats through apology, circumstance-based refusal, and repair. These choices reflect moral evaluations of respect, reluctance to impose, solidarity, inclusiveness, and conditional honesty. **Implication:** Face and moral order can be analyzed together, so that politeness is understood both as a strategy and as a judgement of what people owe one another. Universities can support SDG 4, and secondarily SDG 10 and SDG 16, through intercultural politeness modules, brief WhatsApp guidelines for student-lecturer communication, and explicit norms for language choice in multi-ethnic groups. **Limitation:** The corpus mixes chat and face-to-face data and includes a limited number of group chats; the face-to-face excerpts are available as written transcripts with context notes, so prosody is not analyzed; some ethnic groups appear only once or twice; the data come from universities in one city; and the interpretation relies on the researcher's reading, validated with the co-authors, without an inter-coder statistic. **Future Research:** Future studies can analyze larger corpora of group chats, add interviews about participants' moral evaluations, and compare universities across regions.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Muhammad Yusi Kamhar was responsible for conceptualising the study, designing the methodology, collecting and analysing the data, conducting the investigation, reviewing the literature, preparing the visualisations, and drafting the manuscript. **Kisyani Laksono** took part in the conceptualisation and provided supervision, validation, critical review, and revision of the manuscript. **Mulyono** provided supervision and validation and contributed to the critical review and revision. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors have no financial, professional, or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this manuscript.

ETHICAL COMPLIANCE STATEMENT

This manuscript complies with research and publication ethics. The authors affirm that the work is original, conducted with academic integrity, and free from any unethical practices, including plagiarism.

STATEMENT ON THE USE OF AI OR DIGITAL TOOLS IN WRITING

In writing this scientific article, the author used Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based tools to assist with language editing, grammar correction, sentence structure refinement, and improving the readability of the manuscript. AI was not used to generate research data, conduct analyses, draw scientific conclusions, or replace the author's academic judgment. All ideas, methodologies, research results, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions are entirely the responsibility of the author. The author has reviewed, verified, and revised all content generated or assisted by AI before the manuscript was finalized.

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