



POLITENESS MAXIMS AND THE PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF EMOJIS IN STUDENT-LECTURER WHATSAPP COMMUNICATION

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Accepted :
18 July 2026

Published :
20 July 2026

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how politeness is realized in digital academic communication by examining the use of politeness maxims and the pragmatic functions of the folded hands emoji in WhatsApp interactions between students and lecturers. The increasing use of digital communication in higher education has created a need to balance the informal nature of messaging platforms with institutional expectations of respect and professionalism. Despite growing interest in digital communication, limited research has explored how the folded hands emoji functions within politeness strategies in hierarchical academic contexts. This study addresses that gap through a qualitative pragmatic analysis of 50 authentic WhatsApp messages exchanged between English Department students and lecturers at the University of Pekalongan. The findings show that seven politeness maxims were identified, with the Obligation (Speaker to Other) Maxim occurring most frequently (50%), followed by the Tact Maxim (29.49%). The folded hands emoji mainly served three pragmatic functions: weakening (46.30%), enhancing (31.48%), and filling (22.22%), while no instances of challenging or substituting functions were observed. Overall, the results indicate that the folded hands emoji has become an established digital marker of politeness, helping students express respect, deference, and interpersonal sensitivity in academic communication with lecturers.

Keywords: *Politeness Maxims, Student-lecturer Communication, Emoji, WhatsApp*

1. INTRODUCTION

The massive adoption of digital platforms has fundamentally transformed human communication. Interactions that once required physical presence and real-time conversation now occur asynchronously and globally through applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Line. This shift has not only affected how people communicate but also introduced new linguistic and social challenges, particularly in maintaining politeness and interpersonal relationships in the absence of non-verbal cues (Sudeni, 2022; Fauziah et al., 2025; Nurjanah et al., 2023). In educational contexts, instant messaging applications have

grown from informal social tools into essential academic infrastructure, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic (Pathanasin & Eschstruth, 2022). Students and lecturers frequently use these platforms for scheduling, announcements, feedback, and urgent questions (Sembiring et al., 2021; Batubara et al., 2024; Williyen et al., 2025). While this offers flexibility and efficiency, the informal, fast-paced nature of digital communication often clashes with the norms of respect and politeness expected in student-lecturer interactions (Kayed et al., 2024; Arti Halai, 2023; Rakha, 2023).

Politeness, a central concept in pragmatics, concerns how language is used to

manage interpersonal relationships and minimize conflict (Brown et al., 1987; Leech, 1983). In high power-distance cultures such as Indonesia, politeness is particularly important in academic settings, where students are expected to show respect towards lecturers (Pasaribu et al., 2021). However, the absence of non-verbal cues in digital communication such as facial expressions, gestures, and intonation often leads to pragmatic failure, where messages may be perceived as rude or blunt despite the sender's polite intentions. To overcome these challenges, users increasingly rely on graphic symbols such as emojis. Emoji plays crucial role in conveying sender's feelings, nuanced meaning, and maintaining interpersonal relationships (Caspi & Raz, 2025; Arafah & Hasyim, 2019). Among emojis, the folded hands emoji has become a common marker of respect, gratitude, and apology in Indonesian digital communication, especially when students message their lecturers.

Despite many studies on politeness in computer-mediated communication (CMC) and on emojis, there remains a gap at these two. Most emoji research focuses on peer-to-peer or social media interactions (Ali-Chand & Naidu, 2024; Yang et al., 2025), semiotic (Nyakana & Smith, 2023), sociological (Sun et al., 2023), and psychological perspectives (Caspi & Raz, 2025; Kirshner & Whitson, 2021), while politeness studies in academic CMC tend to focus on textual strategies without considering multimodal elements such as politeness in WhatsApp communication between students and lecturers (Nurdiyani & Sasongko, 2022), pragmatic features of academic digital communication (Daulay et al., 2022; Mantra et al., 2022; Sembiring et al., 2021), and linguistic politeness in educational settings (Aporbo et al., 2024; Manurung et al., 2026; Syting & Gildore, 2022). Moreover, earlier studies employing Leech's politeness maxims have used the 1983 model, the revised 2014 framework which reclassifies maxims into ten pairs and addresses cultural

criticisms, has not been applied to analyse emoji use in academic digital communication.

This study aims to address this gap by addressing two research questions: first, what types of Leech (2014) politeness maxims do students employ in their WhatsApp messages to lecturers? Second, what pragmatic functions do commonly used emojis, particularly the folded hands emoji, serve in reinforcing or modifying the politeness contained in text messages?



Figure 1. Folded Hands

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have explored how students and lecturers employ politeness strategies in online learning environments. Using Sapitri et al. (2019) face theory, Sudeni (2022) found that Indonesian students used politeness strategies more frequently than their lecturers, reflecting the high power distance culture where younger interlocutors are expected to show respect to older, authoritative figures. Similarly, Mulyono (2019) reported that students in WhatsApp exchanges employed a greater variety of politeness strategies than teachers, which they attributed to students' awareness of their lower institutional status. However, both studies focused predominantly on verbal strategies and did not examine how graphical elements such as emojis contribute to politeness.

In contrast, studies using Leech's politeness maxims have produced varying results. Nurdiyani and Sasongko (2022) applied Leech's (1983) six-maxim framework to student WhatsApp messages and found that the Modesty maxim was most

frequently used, indicating that students prioritized self-deprecation and humility to reduce social distance. Meanwhile, Daulay et al. (2022) analysed lecturer-student interactions in online classes and reported that the Tact maxim dominated, suggesting that lecturers sought to minimise burden on students. Mantra et al. (2022) also employed Leech's six maxims and found that all were present in online learning, with Tact, Appreciation, Agreement, and Sympathy appearing most often.

These differences point to a limitation of the older framework. The 1983 model does not distinguish Obligation as a separate category, conflating expressions of apology and gratitude with Modesty or Tact. Leech's (2014) revision addresses this by introducing ten maxims organised into five pairs, including the Obligation (S to O) maxim, which captures the speaker's recognition of their own duty toward the hearer. The present study adopts this revised framework, enabling a more precise categorisation of students' apologetic and grateful expressions.

Beyond Indonesia, cross-cultural studies have highlighted how contextual factors shape politeness. Pathanasin and Eschstruth (2022) found that Thai students' proficiency in English influenced their politeness strategies, with lower proficiency leading to more direct (bald on-record) requests. Kayed et al. (2024) reported that Jordanian EFL students overused the politeness marker "please" and transferred Arabic address norms into English emails, resulting in pragmatically inappropriate messages. AlAfnan and Cruz-Rudio (2023) compared Malaysian and Filipino students' email requests and observed that Filipino students employed more indirect strategies and longer justifications, reflecting culturally specific communication styles. These studies collectively demonstrate that politeness in digital academic communication is shaped by proficiency, culture, and power relations, yet

none examined how emojis interact with these strategies.

A smaller body of research has specifically investigated politeness in WhatsApp interactions between students and lecturers. Pasaribu et al. (2021) found that students used positive politeness strategies during thesis consultations, while lecturers tended to use bald on-record directives. Kusmanto and Widodo (2022), using a cyberpragmatic lens, identified six positive politeness strategies in online learning, including paying attention, using identity markers, and creating humour. However, like the other studies, they treated emojis as peripheral or did not analyse them at all. This omission is significant because in text-based CMC, emojis often serve as substitutes for non-verbal cues that are essential for conveying tone and mitigating face-threatening acts.

Leech (1983) initially proposed six politeness maxims as a complement to Grice's cooperative principle. However, this model faced criticism for maxim proliferation, Western bias focusing on individualistic volition, and inapplicability to collectivist cultures. In response, Leech (2014) reworked his model into ten maxims organised as five pairs, distinguishing between pos-politeness (attributing high value to the other) and neg-politeness (attributing low value to the self). The General Strategy of Politeness (GSP) underlies all maxims: give a favourable value to the other or an unfavourable value to the self. The ten maxims are:

1. Generosity Maxim

This maxim directs the speaker to give a high value to O's wants. This maxim is typically seen in "convivial" speech acts such as offers, invitations, and promises.

2. Tact Maxim

This maxim directs the speaker to give a low value to S's wants. It is central to requests and directives, where S uses indirectness or tentativeness to minimize the imposition on the hearer, such as asking, "Could I help myself to a tiny sip?"

3. Approbation Maxim

This maxim directs the speaker to give a high value to O's qualities. It involves praising or complimenting the hearer while muting or hedging any potential criticisms.

4. Modesty Maxim

This maxim directs the speaker to give a low value to S's qualities. It is characterized by self-deprecation or the deflection of compliments to avoid appearing boastful.

5. Obligation (S to O) Maxim

This maxim directs the speaker to give a high value to S's obligation to O. It is manifested in apologies and expressions of gratitude, where the speaker explicitly acknowledges a fault or a debt, such as saying "I'm terribly sorry" or "Thank you very much".

6. Obligation (O to S) Maxim

This maxim directs the speaker to give a low value to O's obligation to S. It is used when responding to thanks or apologies by minimizing the favor or the offense with phrases like "No problem" or "It was nothing".

7. Agreement Maxim

This maxim directs the speaker to give a high value to O's opinions. It encourages wholehearted agreement and makes disagreement a "dispreferred" response that usually requires hesitation or hedging (e.g., "Yes, but...").

8. Opinion-reticence Maxim

This maxim directs the speaker to give a low value to S's opinions. It involves softening the force of one's own views to avoid appearing opinionated, often using hedges like "I think," "I guess," or "It might be that...".

9. Sympathy Maxim

This maxim directs the speaker to give a high value to O's feelings. It is used in "intrinsically courteous" speech acts like congratulations, good wishes, and condolences to share in the hearer's joy or sorrow.

10. Feeling-reticence Maxim

This maxim directs the speaker to give a low value to S's feelings. It encourages speakers to suppress or play down their own negative feelings or misfortunes, often resulting in routine answers to "How are you?" such as "Oh, fine"

Research on emojis has expanded rapidly across semiotic, psychological, and sociological perspectives. From a semiotic standpoint, Ali-chand and Naidu (2024) and Nyakana et al. (2023) showed that emojis function as digital paralanguage, replacing gestures and facial expressions to enhance emotional clarity. Psychologically, Caspi and Raz (2025) demonstrated that emojis can alter the perceived tone of messages and maintain social harmony, while Holtgraves (2024) found that recipients' interpretations of standalone emojis often exceeded senders' intentions, revealing inherent ambiguity.

In educational settings, several studies have examined the effects of emojis on student perceptions and outcomes. Kim et al. (2022) used an experimental design to show that a lecturer's use of emojis in a welcome letter increased students' perceived authenticity and intimacy, leading to higher learning motivation and sustained attention. Similarly, Sia et al. (2024) found that

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instructors' emoji use enhanced perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and likability, which in turn positively affected students' motivation and performance. These studies, however, focused on instructor-to-student communication and measured perceptions via surveys rather than analysing actual emoji use in naturalistic student-to-lecturer messages.

Tian and Liu (2025) proposed a more analytically concise model of emoji functions, comprising five categories:

1. Filling

Adding emotional expression to neutral text or emotionless. The emoji provides the necessary mental state for the receiver to perceive the sender's feelings.

2. Enhancing

Amplifying or intensifying an emotional expression already present in the verbal message. This is a harmonious case where both the text and emoji share the same valence (e.g., a happy text with a happy emoji).

3. Weakening

Mitigating or softening the illocutionary force of a speech act. The emoji typically appears in sensitive contexts, such as requests or commands, to make the message appear more cooperative and less forceful. It is used as a "hedging" device to avoid "face-threatening" behavior.

4. Challenging

Contradicting the explicit content of an utterance to signal irony, satire, or joking. This is the most incongruent case, where the emoji's prototypical meaning is the opposite of the text. It works to "erase" the literal contextual assumption.

5. Substituting

Replacing verbal elements entirely to manage the flow of conversation. These are

stand-alone emojis that perform as social etiquette markers for turn-taking, backchanneling, or closing an interaction.

This framework is particularly suitable for politeness analysis because the Weakening function directly relates to mitigating face-threatening acts, a core concern of negative politeness strategies. The present study applies Tian and Liu's model to examine how the folded hands emoji operates in student-initiated WhatsApp messages, an area that has received little empirical attention.

3. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative-descriptive research design with a pragmatic analysis approach. A qualitative design was appropriate because the objective was to explore and interpret how politeness is realised in naturally occurring digital communication, rather than to measure variables or test hypotheses quantitatively. Pragmatic analysis focuses on how meaning is constructed through language use in context, considering speaker intention, interpersonal relations, and situational factors.

The study was conducted at University of Pekalongan, Central Java, Indonesia. The participants were 28 English Department students. The primary data consisted of 50 WhatsApp messages exchanged between students and lecturers in academic contexts, such as requesting permission, asking for clarification, submitting assignments, or discussing academic matters. Non-academic or purely social interactions were excluded. The unit of analysis was individual and group message, considered as a pragmatic unit comprising both textual content and emojis. Messages were collected voluntarily from students who provided informed consent. Participants submitted screenshots of their WhatsApp conversations with lecturers. To be included, messages had to involve student-lecturer

communication and be written predominantly in English.

Data were analysed using qualitative pragmatic analysis in six steps. First, messages were transcribed and organised into a corpus. Second, each message was read repeatedly to understand its communicative context, purpose, and conversational sequence. Third, the textual content was coded according to Leech's (2014) ten politeness maxims. An utterance could be coded for more than one maxim if multiple strategies were present. Fourth, emojis in each message were coded using Tian and Liu's (2025) five functions: filling, enhancing, weakening, challenging, and substituting. Fifth, the relationship between politeness maxims and emoji functions was examined to identify patterns of multimodal politeness. Finally, simple frequency counts were used to indicate the distribution of maxims and emoji functions, but these counts served only to support qualitative interpretation, not statistical generalisation.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1) Results

Types of Leech's Politeness Maxims Used by Students

The analysis of 50 WhatsApp messages revealed that students employed seven out of the ten Leech (2014) politeness maxims. Three maxims, Modesty, Obligation (O to S), and Feeling-reticence, did not appear. Table 1 presents the distribution.

Table 1. Frequency of Leech's (2014) Politeness Maxims in Student Messages

Politeness Maxim	Frequency	%
Generosity	3	3.85%
Tact	23	29.49%
Approbation	2	2.56%
Modesty	0	0%
Obligation (S to O)	39	50.00%
Obligation (O to S)	0	0%
Agreement	3	3.85%
Opinion-reticence	3	3.85%
Sympathy	5	6.40%
Feeling-reticence	0	0%

Total	78	100%
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The Obligation (S to O) maxim was the most frequent (50%), realised through expressions of apology and gratitude. The Tact maxim appeared 23 times (29.49%), realised through prefatory expressions ("I would like to ask," "May I ask"), indirectness ("Is it okay if we request to postpone the deadline?"), and avoidance of imperatives. No direct imperatives were found.

The Sympathy maxim appeared five times, when students responded to lecturers' illness or family problems: "*get well soon maam 🙏*" and "*Hope everything okay sir! Get well soon for your daughter 🙏*". Other maxims occurred less frequently: Generosity (3 times, e.g., offering help), Approbation (2 times, praising lecturer's feedback), Agreement (3 times), and Opinion-reticence (3 times, e.g., negotiating a deadline using hypothetical questions). Most messages combined two or more maxims simultaneously.

Realization of Obligation Maxim (S to O)

The Obligation Maxim (S to O) appeared 39 times (50%), making it the most dominant maxim. This maxim requires the speaker to place a high value on their own obligation toward the hearer. In practice, this maxim was realized through speech acts of apologizing and expressing gratitude.

Message 1 is an example of this maxim:

"Assalamualaikum Mr. D1, good evening, I am M1. I am sorry to bother you in this night. I would like to confirm that I have submitted the assignment of English for Tourism in the email. Thank you, once again I am sorry to bothering you, Mr. D1 🙏" — **Excerpt 1**

In this short message, the student apologizes twice. The first apology ("I am sorry to bother you in this night") acknowledges that contacting the lecturer at night violates the academic norm that communication should take place during

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working hours. The second apology (“once again I am sorry to bothering you”) repeats the expression of regret to emphasize sincerity.

Message 19 also demonstrates the dominance of this maxim in the context of administrative lateness:

“Assalamualaikum maam good afternoon. i’m sorry for the late submission of the permissions. this is the medical excuse letter from my doctor for today. thank you, ma’am

 ” — **Excerpt 2**

The student acknowledges the late submission of the permission letter as a form of negligence. By apologizing before giving the reason (the doctor’s letter), the student shows awareness of their obligation to comply with administrative procedures.

Besides apologies, expressions of gratitude are also a dominant realization of the Obligation Maxim. Message 11:

“thank you maam for the information  ” — **Excerpt 3**

Although the message is brief, this message contains an acknowledgment that the lecturer has provided something valuable (information), and the student has an obligation to appreciate it.

Realization of Tact Maxim

The Tact Maxim appeared 23 times (29.49%). This maxim is O-oriented/negative politeness, meaning that speakers minimize the value of their own wants so as not to burden the hearer. In the data, the Tact Maxim was realized through three main strategies: the use of prefatory expressions, indirect sentences, and the avoidance of imperative forms.

Expressions such as “I would like to ask,” “I would like to inform you,” “May I ask,” and “Is it okay if” function as indicators that the speaker does not wish to impose on the hearer. Message 12 states:

“I would like to ask whether we are allowed to wear neat casual attire for the

microteaching session this Thursday, or if we are still required to wear the designated microteaching outfit?” — **Excerpt 4**

The Tact Maxim was also realized through the use of indirect sentences. Message 9 states:

“Is it okay if we request to postpone the deadline? I mean, what if the deadline isn’t next thursday, (march 6th) on the day of our class? but instead three or four days later  ” — **Excerpt 5**

Instead of saying “Please postpone the deadline”, the student uses the question “Is it okay if we request to postpone?” which leaves the decision entirely to the lecturer. The phrase “what if” is followed by a suggestion presented as a hypothesis rather than a demand. According to Leech (1983), the more indirect a speech act is, the more polite it becomes, because indirectness gives the hearer room to refuse without losing face.

Realization of Sympathy Maxim

The Sympathy Maxim (O-oriented/positive politeness) appeared 5 times (3.85%). This maxim requires the speaker to place a high value on the hearer’s feelings. In the academic context, this maxim appeared when students responded to lecturers who were sick or experiencing family problems.

Message 25:

“Walaikumsalam sir, Hope everything okay sir! Get well soon for your daughter  ” — **Excerpt 6**

The student expressed wishes for the lecturer’s family member, specifically his daughter. This demonstrates a higher level of empathy and concern for the lecturer’s personal sphere.

Realization of Approbation Maxim

The Approbation Maxim appeared in Message 20:

"Thank you for the review, ma'am. It means a lot for me to improve my teaching 🙏" — **Excerpt 7**

This maxim places a high value on the hearer's qualities. In this message, the student praises the lecturer's review by stating that it is very meaningful and useful for improving their teaching ability.

Realization of Generosity Maxim

The Generosity Maxim (S-oriented/positive politeness) appeared in Message 4:

"Understood, Ma'am. Thank you for the information. I will help send the group list Ma'am, and for further coordination, you can reach out to X 🙏" — **Excerpt 8**

This maxim places a high value on the hearer's wants, even at the expense of the speaker's own wants (Leech, 2014). In this message, the student not only acknowledges the information provided by the lecturer but also actively offers assistance ("I will help send the group list"). This act of offering help goes beyond what the lecturer requested, making it a realization of the Generosity Maxim.

Furthermore, the student provides another person's contact (X) for further coordination, so that the lecturer does not need to search for it independently. This action reduces the lecturer's burden, which is the core of the Generosity Maxim.

Realization of Opinion-reticence Maxim

The Opinion-reticence Maxim (S-oriented/negative politeness) appeared in Message 9:

"I want to ask a question about the next assignment for making the lesson plan, ma'am. Is it okay if we request to postpone the deadline? I mean, what if the deadline isn't next thursday, (march 6th) on the day of our class? but instead three or four days later 😊 because most of the schools we will visit have a holiday during the first month of

ramadan and will only start on wednesday or thursday, march 5th or 6th." — **Excerpt 9**

In this message, the student proposes a change to the assignment deadline. However, the student does not explicitly state the opinion as "I think the deadline should be postponed," which would be a direct expression of opinion. Instead, the student uses questions such as "Is it okay if we request" and "what if" to present the suggestion as a hypothetical scenario. This is a form of opinion-reticence because the student places a low value on their own opinion. The student does not claim that the opinion is correct or must be followed. By hiding the opinion behind questions and hypothetical scenarios, the student protects the lecturer's face and avoids potential conflict.

Realization of Agreement Maxim

Agreement Maxim appeared in Message 26:

"Thank you maam. We'll inform you maam if we need extra time, for now please stick with first plan to presented this week 🙏 😊" — **Excerpt 9**

In this message, the student agrees with the lecturer's initial plan to have the presentation this week. The expression "stick with first plan" implicitly gives high value to the lecturer's decision. The student does not reject the option of extra time, but rather affirms the preference to remain with the original schedule.

Most of the messages contain more than one maxim simultaneously. This combination indicates that politeness is not a single strategy, but rather a blend of multiple complementary maxims. Leech (2014) acknowledges that politeness maxims can interact with one another and may sometimes overlap or even conflict. In practice, pragmatically competent speakers tend to employ several maxims at the same time in order to achieve the maximum politeness effect.

Emoji Functions in Students' Messages

Table 2. Frequency of Emoji Functions in Student Messages (Tian & Liu, 2025)

Emoji Function	Frequency	%
Filling	12	22.22%
Enhancing	17	31.48%
Weakening	25	46.30%
Challenging	0	0%
Substituting	0	0%
Total	54	100%

The 🙏 emoji was the most frequently used, followed by 😊, 😄, 😁, and 😊. The weakening function was most common (46.30%), used to soften requests, corrections, complaints, and unpleasant notifications. For example, a student correcting a lecturer's error wrote: "I am sorry Ma'am D3, I noticed a small mistake. The name M1 should be class X, but it is written as XI. Thank you 🙏". Another student softened a request for deadline extension: "Is it okay if we request to postpone the deadline? ... what if the deadline isn't next thursday ... but instead three or four days later 😊". The filling function (22.22%) added emotional sincerity to neutral text, as in "thank you maam for the information 🙏" where the emoji visually replaced the gesture of clasped hands. The enhancing function (31.48%) intensified already strong emotions, such as "Thank you for the review, ma'am. It means a lot for me to improve my teaching 🙏" and "Sorry sir my email isn't match with my name 🙏 😊". No challenging or substituting functions were identified, indicating that students avoided ironic, contradictory, or standalone emoji use in this hierarchical context.

Weakening Function

Weakening was the most frequently occurring function (25 Times). This function occurs when emojis reduce the illocutionary force of potentially face-threatening speech acts, such as requests, corrections, complaints, or unpleasant notifications. Tian and Liu (2025) refer to this as the mitigation of illocutionary force.

Message 12 uses 🙏 to soften a request for permission:

"I would like to ask whether we are allowed to wear neat casual attire... Thank you very much in advance for your kind response. 🙏"

— **Excerpt 4**

The 🙏 emoji at the end functions like a soft exclamation mark. It emphasizes that the speaker hopes for a favourable response, but not in a demanding way. Without 🙏, the request is still polite because of the phrase "I would like to ask," but with 🙏, the request becomes humbler.

Message 5 involves corrections to information provided by lecturers. Corrections are highly face-threatening acts because they imply that the lecturer made a mistake, thereby threatening the lecturer's positive face. In the data, students used a combination of verbal strategies, apologies and minimizing the seriousness of the mistake, along with the 🙏 emoji to soften the correction.

Message 5:

"I am sorry Ma'am D3, I noticed a small mistake. The name M1 should be class X, but it is written as XI. Thank you 🙏"

— **Excerpt 10**

The student describes the error as "a small mistake" to minimize its seriousness, apologizes first, and ends the message with 🙏. The emoji functions as weakening because it visually reinforces the meaning: "I do not intend to blame you." Without 🙏, the message would still be polite, but sounds more assertive.

Message 21:

"Sorry maam D4, I wanna inform you that my score didn't appear in the leaderboard. But I have finished the quiz 🙏"

— **Excerpt 11**

The student informs the lecturer that the score did not appear. This could potentially be interpreted as a complaint

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about the system or the lecturer's negligence. By beginning with "Sorry maam" and adding 🙏, the student softens the complaint so that it does not sound accusatory. The phrase "But I have finished the quiz" also emphasizes that the student has fulfilled their responsibility, making the complaint reasonable.

Filling Function

The researcher identified 12 filling function in the messages. This function occurs when emojis add emotional expression to a text whose verbal meaning has already been conveyed. In other words, the emoji does not change the cognitive meaning of the message but enriches its affective nuance, making the message feel more sincere, warm, or personal.

Message 11 is the simplest example:

"thank you maam for the information 🙏" — **Excerpt 3**

Textually, this message is already polite and contains the Obligation Maxim (S to O). However, the text feels rather flat because it only consists of words without tone or facial expression. The folded hands emoji functions as filling by adding a visual representation of respect and sincerity. In face-to-face communication, gestures such as bowing or clasping hands would normally accompany expressions of gratitude. The folded hands emoji replaces these gestures.

"Assalamualaikum Mr. D1, good evening, I am M1. I am sorry to bother you in this night. I would like to confirm that I have submitted the assignment of English for Tourism in the email. Thank you, once again I am sorry to bothering you, Mr. D1 🙏" — **Excerpt 1**

In Message 1, after apologizing verbally twice, the student adds folded hands at the end of the message. The emoji functions as a visual marker indicating that the apology is sincere rather than merely formulaic.

Enhancing Function

Enhancing (17 times) occurs when emojis strengthen the intensity of emotions or attitudes already expressed verbally. Unlike filling, which simply adds emotional nuance, enhancing increases the degree of emotion.

Message 20:

"Thank you for the review, ma'am. It means a lot for me to improve my teaching 🙏" —

Excerpt 7

The phrase "It means a lot for me" already indicates strong gratitude. The 🙏 emoji functions as enhancing because it intensifies the appreciation expressed in the message. The visual image of folded hands adds a nuance of prayerfulness or hope that the feedback will truly be beneficial.

Message 2 uses a combination of 🙏 and 😞:

"Sorry sir my email isn't match with my name 🙏 😞" — **Excerpt 12**

The 😞 emoji (loudly crying face) functions as enhancing because it intensifies the embarrassment and regret already implied in the apology. Without 😞, the apology feels ordinary. With 😞, the student shows that they feel deeply embarrassed and regretful.

Messages 24 uses 🙏 to strengthen expressions of sympathy:

"get well soon maam 🙏" — **Excerpt 13**

Without folded hands, the wishes for recovery would still be polite but rather ordinary. With folded hands, the prayers feel more sincere and heartfelt, as though the student is genuinely praying for the lecturer. In Indonesia's religious culture, the gesture of folded hands is strongly associated with prayer, making folded hands especially appropriate in this context.

2) Discussion

The findings reveal that the Obligation (S to O) maxim was the most dominant, requiring the speaker to place a high value on their own obligation towards

the hearer. This maxim was realised through expressions of apology (e.g., "I am sorry to bother you") and gratitude (e.g., "Thank you"). This finding has similarity with several previous studies on student-lecturer communication. Using Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, Sulistya Sudeni (2022) found that students preferred positive politeness and bald-on-record strategies, while teachers favoured negative politeness and off-record strategies. Similarly, Algiovani (2022) reported that students predominantly used positive politeness in thesis consultations. While the present study also identified positive politeness as dominant, no bald-on-record utterances were found, suggesting that general academic WhatsApp communication may encourage more careful and formal language use than spoken interactions.

The dominance of Obligation maxim contrasts with studies employing Leech's (1983) framework. Nurdiani and Sasongko (2022) found the Modesty maxim to be dominant, while Daulay et al. (2022), Mantra et al. (2022), and Bustam et al. (2024) reported Tact or Agreement as the most frequent maxims. These differences largely arise from theoretical distinctions. In Leech's (2014) revision, apologies and gratitude are categorised under Obligation rather than Modesty. The absence of the Modesty maxim in the present study therefore reflects theoretical recategorization rather than a lack of politeness. This finding empirically validates the separation of Obligation as a distinct category in the revised framework and demonstrates its applicability to digital, text-based communication in a high power-distance culture.

The Tact maxim was the second most frequent maxim. Students minimised imposition through indirect requests, modal questions, and avoidance of imperative forms. This finding aligns with studies in other Asian contexts, such as Pathanasin and Eschstruth (2022), who found that Thai students mitigated requests through indirectness, and Kayed et al. (2024), who reported that indirect requests were perceived

as more polite. The predominance of Tact also reflects Indonesia's high power-distance culture, where students are expected to show deference to lecturers. Unlike the Jordanian students in Kayed et al. (2024), who relied heavily on "please," participants in the present study employed a wider range of pragmatic strategies, indicating relatively strong pragmatic competence. The findings further support Kusmanto and Widodo (2022) argument that politeness strategies often work together rather than independently. Students frequently combined positive politeness through Obligation with negative politeness through Tact in a single message, such as opening with an apology and then presenting a request indirectly.

The Sympathy maxim appeared when students responded to lecturers' personal difficulties, such as illness or family-related concerns. This contrasts with Nurdiani and Sasongko (2022), who found no instances of Sympathy, and highlights the importance of situational context in politeness research. In the present research, students expressed empathy and support, often reinforced by the folded hands emoji, which functions as a culturally valued expression of prayer and concern in Indonesia. Other maxims such as Approbation, Generosity, Agreement, and Opinion-reticence occurred less frequently. The low occurrence of Approbation consistent with Mantra et al. (2022), who found praise to be common in lecturer discourse but not in students. This similarity may be explained by hierarchical relationships, as students rarely praise lecturers directly. Opinion-reticence, meanwhile, was realised through hypothetical suggestions and indirect disagreement, consistent with Handayani et al. (2022), who found that students tend to avoid direct disagreement in online communication.

Cross-cultural comparisons reveal both similarities and differences. Pathanasin & Eschstruth (2022) argued that language proficiency influences politeness strategy choice, and the present findings support this

claim, as English Department students demonstrated sophisticated uses of positive and negative politeness. Indonesian students also resembled Filipino students in AlAfnan and Cruz-Rudio (2023) by favouring indirectness, while differing from the Jordanian students in Kayed et al. (2024), who relied more heavily on formulaic markers. Consistent with Culpeper & Pat (2021), the findings also demonstrate that obligation is particularly salient in hierarchical relationships, where students proactively express apologies and gratitude to acknowledge institutional authority.

Regarding emoji use, the folded hands emoji primarily served a Weakening function, followed by Enhancing and Filling, as classified by Tian and Liu (2025). Weakening reduced the force of potentially face-threatening acts such as requests, corrections, and complaints, thereby complementing the Tact maxim. This finding aligns with Yang et al. (2025), who found that emojis soften requests and maintain social harmony. The Enhancing function intensified gratitude, sympathy, and regret, thereby supporting the Obligation and Sympathy maxims. This finding is consistent with Tian and Liu (2025), who argued that emojis add emotional meaning beyond verbal content. The Filling function, meanwhile, increased sincerity and emotional warmth, supporting findings by Nyakana & Smith (2023) and Telaumbanua et al. (2024). While Nyakana et al. (2023) found cultural variation in the interpretation of folded hands, the present study suggests that in Indonesia the emoji has become a conventional marker of both gratitude and prayer.

The absence of Challenging and Substituting functions further indicates that students use emojis conservatively in academic communication. Rather than replacing text, emojis consistently accompanied verbal expressions to reinforce politeness and avoid ambiguity. This pattern supports Shen (2025) and Holtgraves (2024), who argue that hierarchical contexts discourage ambiguous emoji use. Overall, the findings suggest that the folded hands emoji

has undergone a process of pragmatic extension or grammaticalisation within Indonesian digital communication. Furthermore, Kim et al. (2022) and Sia et al. (2024) demonstrated that instructor emojis positively influence students' perceptions, the present study shows that students likewise employ emojis strategically to manage impressions, protect lecturers' face, and maintain harmonious academic relationships.

Theoretically, this study demonstrates that Leech's (2014) revised politeness maxims are applicable and productive in analysing digital, text-based communication in a high power-distance culture. The separation of Obligation from Modesty and Tact is validated by the empirical dominance of Obligation in student-to-lecturer messages. Moreover, integrating Tian and Liu's (2025) emoji function framework with Leech's maxims offers a robust model for multimodal politeness analysis, showing that emojis are not mere decorations but active pragmatic resources.

5. CONCLUSION

The study revealed that students employ seven out of ten Leech's (2014) politeness maxims, with the Obligation (S to O) maxim being the most dominant, followed by the Tact maxim. The dominance of the Obligation maxim indicates that Indonesian students are acutely aware of their institutional position and social debt toward lecturers, expressing politeness primarily through apologies and gratitude. This finding contributes a novel perspective to politeness research, as previous studies using Leech's (1983) framework identified the Modesty or Tact maxims as dominant. The theoretical advancement of Leech (2014), which separates Obligation as a distinct category, is empirically validated in the context of digital, text-based communication in a high power-distance culture.

The analysis of emoji functions using Tian and Liu's (2025) framework demonstrated that the folded hands emoji serves three pragmatic functions: weakening,

enhancing, and filling. The weakening function is particularly significant, as it shows that emojis can mitigate face-threatening acts such as requests, corrections, and complaints in the absence of paralinguistic cues. This finding bridges a gap in existing literature, where most emoji studies focused on semiotic or psychological perspectives without systematic integration with politeness theory. The absence of challenging and substituting functions further indicates that students avoid ambiguous or ironic emoji use in formal academic communication.

The integration of Leech's (2014) politeness maxims with Tian and Liu's (2025) emoji functions offers a robust analytical framework for multimodal pragmatics. Theoretically, this study demonstrates that classical politeness theory remains resilient and adaptable to evolving digital language practices, and it extends the framework by incorporating visual paralinguistic markers. Methodologically, the study contributes to the development of multimodal digital discourse analysis methods. Despite its contributions, this study has limitations, including a small sample size (50 messages) from a single university, exclusive focus on one emoji folded hands, and analysis limited to student-initiated messages without systematic comparison with lecturer responses. Future research should expand the sample across multiple institutions, include a wider range of emojis, conduct cross-cultural comparative studies, and employ experimental designs to measure the causal effects of emoji use on perceived politeness.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researcher expresses the deepest gratitude to Allah SWT for the completion of this study. Special thanks are addressed to Rizka Hayati, S.S., M.Hum for her invaluable guidance. The researcher is also profoundly grateful to the all participants who voluntarily participated in this study. Finally, heartfelt thanks go to the researcher's family for their continuous

prayers, encouragement, and moral support, which made this study possible.

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