



ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Digital Politeness as Communicative Scaffolding: Emojis and the Batak Angkola Dialect in WhatsApp-Based Academic Communication

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ABSTRACT

Academic communication through WhatsApp requires students to negotiate institutional hierarchy, interpersonal relationships, and linguistic choices within a digital environment where nonverbal cues are limited. This study examines how emojis and the Batak Angkola dialect function as relational and pragmatic resources in students' academic communication and how their use varies by participant relationships and academic purposes. The study used a qualitative case study design with a digital pragmatics approach and involved 80 students from the Indonesian Language Education Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Tapanuli Selatan. The primary data consisted of 58 conversation threads comprising 185 messages obtained from eight course-based WhatsApp groups between September and December 2025. The data were complemented by semi-structured interviews with 16 students and 6 lecturers and were analyzed through pragmatic coding, relational analysis, and thematic development. The findings indicate that digital politeness is relational and adaptive rather than determined by isolated linguistic forms. Student-lecturer interactions more consistently employed greetings, academic forms of address, mitigation, explicit communicative purposes, and appreciative closings, whereas student-student communication tended to use a more familiar and direct register. Emojis functioned contextually as resources for mitigation, appreciation, affection, solidarity, humor, and emotional response, while the Batak Angkola dialect contributed to interpersonal closeness, solidarity, clarification, emphasis, and group identity. These resources did not automatically reduce academic formality; participants adjusted them according to the interlocutor, communicative purpose, and interactional context. The findings demonstrate that digital politeness can function as communicative scaffolding by helping participants manage social distance, preserve interpersonal relationships, and facilitate academic coordination in WhatsApp-based learning environments.

ABSTRAK

Komunikasi akademik melalui WhatsApp menuntut mahasiswa untuk menegosiasikan hierarki institusional, hubungan interpersonal, dan pilihan bahasa dalam lingkungan digital yang memiliki keterbatasan isyarat nonverbal. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana emoji dan dialek Batak Angkola berfungsi sebagai sumber daya relasional dan pragmatik dalam komunikasi akademik mahasiswa serta bagaimana penggunaannya menyesuaikan hubungan antarpartisipan dan tujuan akademik. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif dengan pendekatan pragmatik digital yang melibatkan 80 mahasiswa Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Indonesia Universitas Muhammadiyah Tapanuli Selatan. Data utama terdiri atas 58 rangkaian percakapan yang mencakup 185 pesan dari delapan grup WhatsApp berbasis mata kuliah yang dikumpulkan pada September hingga Desember 2025. Data tersebut didukung oleh wawancara semi-terstruktur terhadap 16 mahasiswa dan 6 dosen serta dianalisis melalui pengodean pragmatik, analisis relasional, dan pengembangan tema. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kesantunan digital bersifat relasional dan adaptif, bukan ditentukan oleh bentuk bahasa yang berdiri sendiri. Interaksi mahasiswa-dosen lebih konsisten menggunakan salam, sapaan akademik, mitigasi, kejelasan tujuan komunikasi, dan penutup apresiatif, sedangkan komunikasi antarmahasiswa cenderung menggunakan register yang lebih akrab dan langsung. Emoji berfungsi secara kontekstual sebagai sumber daya untuk mitigasi, apresiasi, afeksi, solidaritas, humor, dan respons emosional, sedangkan dialek Batak Angkola berkontribusi dalam membangun kedekatan interpersonal, solidaritas, klarifikasi, penegasan, dan identitas kelompok. Penggunaan sumber daya tersebut tidak serta-merta mengurangi formalitas akademik, tetapi disesuaikan dengan lawan tutur, tujuan komunikasi, dan konteks interaksi. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa kesantunan digital dapat berfungsi sebagai *communicative scaffolding* yang membantu partisipan mengelola jarak sosial, mempertahankan hubungan interpersonal, serta mendukung koordinasi akademik dalam lingkungan pembelajaran berbasis WhatsApp. Temuan tentang perbedaan pola komunikasi mahasiswa-dosen dan antarmahasiswa serta fungsi kontekstual emoji dan dialek Batak Angkola juga konsisten dengan data pada naskah penelitian sebelumnya.

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Keyword: academic communication; Batak Angkola dialect; communicative scaffolding; digital politeness; emojis; WhatsApp

INTRODUCTION

Academic interaction in higher education has increasingly extended beyond face-to-face settings into instant-messaging environments, making WhatsApp an important space for instructional communication, academic coordination, peer connectivity, and student–lecturer interaction. Systematic evidence indicates that WhatsApp is widely used across educational levels because it enables rapid information exchange, interaction among learners and instructors, and continuity of learning activities beyond formal classroom boundaries (Suárez-Suárez-Lantarón et al., 2022; Mulyono et al., 2021). In the Indonesian higher-education context, students have demonstrated strong acceptance of WhatsApp as a learning-support platform because of its accessibility, connectivity, and usefulness for maintaining academic interaction, while naturally occurring WhatsApp conversations also reveal diverse speech functions for conveying information, instructions, responses, requests, and other academic needs (Mulyono et al., 2021; Sudar, 2024). Consequently, WhatsApp should not be regarded merely as a technical channel for transmitting academic information, because the platform simultaneously functions as an interactional environment in which participants negotiate relationships, purposes, linguistic choices, and institutional expectations (Sudar, 2024; Suárez-Suárez-Lantarón et al., 2022). This development matters because higher-education communication through a platform commonly used for personal interaction brings formal academic norms into contact with informal digital practices, requiring students to continuously adjust how they formulate messages based on interlocutors, academic purposes, and situational expectations (Mulyono et al., 2021; Sudar, 2024). Thus, digital academic communication has become an important pragmatic issue because effective coordination depends not only on message delivery but also on how participants maintain appropriate relationships while communicating through digitally mediated environments (Sudar, 2024; Suárez-Suárez-Lantarón et al., 2022).

The major problem emerging from this transition concerns the difficulty of maintaining appropriate academic politeness when the same communication platform accommodates both institutional and personal interaction. Student–lecturer relationships retain differences in power, status, social distance, and degree of imposition, even though WhatsApp encourages brief, immediate, and relatively informal exchanges; therefore, a linguistically understandable message may still become pragmatically inappropriate when its formulation does not correspond to the recipient, timing, or academic purpose (Sudar et al., 2025; Wahyuni et al., 2025). Empirical studies show that students communicating with lecturers commonly employ greetings, questions, apologies, expressions of gratitude, respectful forms of address, and other mitigating strategies to reduce pragmatic pressure, whereas inappropriate openings, excessive directness, poorly timed messages, and disregard for institutional hierarchy may negatively affect perceptions of politeness (Jaya et al., 2025; Rohali et al., 2024; Wahyuni et al., 2025). The challenge becomes more complex because digital messages lack many face-to-face cues, while emojis, language mixing, and local linguistic forms add layers of interpretation whose meanings depend on interactional context rather than fixed linguistic values (Manganari, 2021; Was & Hamrick, 2021). Within multilingual academic communities, students must consequently negotiate at least three interconnected demands: communicating academic intentions clearly, respecting hierarchical and interpersonal relations, and selecting verbal or visual resources appropriate to particular interactional situations (Menggo et al., 2023; Rohali et al., 2024). These challenges indicate that digital politeness cannot be evaluated merely by identifying ostensibly polite words; rather, it must be understood through participant relationships, message purposes, degree of directness, forms of address, timing, language choice, emojis, and the overall organization of interaction (Jaya et al., 2025; Sudar et al., 2025; Wahyuni et al., 2025).

Previous empirical research from 2020–2025 has addressed important aspects of this problem, although each strand remains limited in scope when compared with the relational and multimodal focus required in the present study. Abaya et al. (2020) examined politeness in student–lecturer WhatsApp interaction, but the emphasis remained primarily on verbal politeness strategies rather than the integrated interaction of local language and visual resources; Mulyono et al. (2021) established students’ acceptance of WhatsApp for learning, yet platform acceptance did not explain how politeness is negotiated within individual academic exchanges. Manganari (2021) demonstrated that emojis convey emotions, reinforce messages, and manage relationships, although the review was broader than the specific hierarchical conditions of academic WhatsApp interaction; similarly, Was and Hamrick (2021) demonstrated variability in the interpretation of 105 emojis, but did not integrate local dialect choice and institutional hierarchy into the same relational analysis. Hasibuan et al. (2021) showed that Batak Angkola Mandailing imperative forms can perform requests, pleas, permission, suggestions, and prohibitions, but their analysis was not specifically situated within digital student–lecturer communication. Suárez-Suárez-Lantarón et al. (2022) synthesized 192 studies concerning WhatsApp in education, providing broad evidence of educational use while offering less detail on local pragmatic negotiation. Menggo et al. (2023) identified solidarity, familiarity, clarification, and group identity in university students’ WhatsApp language mixing, yet did not specifically integrate emojis and academic hierarchy. Rohali et al. (2024) identified impoliteness involving timing, greetings, complaints, opinions, and responsibility, while Sudar (2024) described speech functions in academic WhatsApp interaction; nevertheless, these studies primarily foregrounded verbal behavior. Finally, Jaya et al. (2025), Sudar et al. (2025), and Wahyuni et al. (2025) clarified the importance of greetings, hierarchy, power, social distance, and request mitigation, but did not simultaneously examine diverse emojis and Batak Angkola linguistic resources across multiple academic relationships.

The novelty of the present study therefore does not lie in introducing WhatsApp, emojis, politeness, or regional-language use as entirely new phenomena; instead, it lies in bringing these previously separated analytical domains together in a single relational examination of naturally occurring academic communication. Previous studies have separately demonstrated that hierarchy influences student–lecturer politeness, that emojis can contribute to interpersonal meaning, that code-mixing can signal solidarity and identity, and that Batak Angkola linguistic forms

can acquire different pragmatic functions according to context (Hasibuan et al., 2021; Manganari, 2021; Menggo et al., 2023; Sudar et al., 2025). The present research advances this literature by simultaneously examining Indonesian, Batak Angkola forms, and emojis across student–lecturer, student–student, and mixed-group interactions, while also differentiating the academic actions of asking for permission, asking about assignments, submitting assignments, and confirming class schedules (Menggo et al., 2023; Rohali et al., 2024; Wahyuni et al., 2025). Its methodological and conceptual contribution is consequently relational and multimodal: emojis are not assigned universal pragmatic meanings, Batak Angkola expressions are not treated merely as instances of code-mixing, and verbal politeness is not interpreted independently from the sender–recipient relationship and the surrounding conversational sequence (Manganari, 2021; Was & Hamrick, 2021; Hasibuan et al., 2024). The study also shifts attention from isolated linguistic forms toward conversation threads as contextual units of interaction, enabling linguistic, visual, relational, and situational information to be interpreted together rather than fragmented into independent variables (Rohali et al., 2024; Sudar et al., 2025). In this respect, the intended contribution is a contextual Digital Academic Communication Politeness Framework, rather than a universal numerical index detached from the actual communicative setting.

This novelty emerges from a specific research gap visible across the existing literature. Research on student–lecturer WhatsApp politeness has predominantly investigated verbal strategies, greetings, requests, hierarchy, social distance, and impoliteness, demonstrating that relationships strongly affect message formulation but leaving visual and local-linguistic resources comparatively underintegrated (Abaya et al., 2020; Rohali et al., 2024; Jaya et al., 2025; Sudar et al., 2025; Wahyuni et al., 2025). Emoji studies show that visual symbols may convey emotions, reinforce verbal meaning, mitigate interpersonal pressure, or shape relational interpretation, yet emoji meanings remain context-dependent and cannot be automatically transferred from general digital communication to hierarchical academic interaction (Manganari, 2021; Was & Hamrick, 2021). Sociolinguistic research, meanwhile, shows that language mixing can establish familiarity, solidarity, clarification, and group identity, while studies of Batak Angkola indicate that linguistic functions shift with participants and communicative contexts (Hasibuan et al., 2021; Hasibuan et al., 2024; Menggo et al., 2023). What remains insufficiently addressed is how these verbal, visual, local-linguistic, relational, and academic-action dimensions operate together within the same naturally occurring WhatsApp interaction. The difference between the present investigation and earlier research is therefore not simply the addition of another politeness dataset, but the integrated examination of how Indonesian, Batak Angkola, emojis, academic hierarchy, interpersonal closeness, and communicative purposes jointly shape judgments and realizations of politeness (Menggo et al., 2023; Rohali et al., 2024; Wahyuni et al., 2025). This gap requires a contextual approach that explains not only which resources occur, but also why similar resources can serve different functions across academic relationships.

This study is grounded in digital pragmatics, relational or face-work perspectives, and sociolinguistic understandings of language choice, which together make it possible to interpret politeness as a contextual interpersonal process rather than a fixed inventory of polite expressions. Contemporary work on digitally mediated interaction emphasizes that participants manage relationships, identities, power, and impressions through linguistic choices even when communication occurs without direct face-to-face contact, meaning that social face remains relevant in technologically mediated academic settings (Zhang, 2022; Virtanen & Lee, 2022). This relational perspective is consistent with recent evidence showing that power, social distance, age, degree of imposition, and institutional expectations influence how students formulate requests, greetings, apologies, gratitude, and other academic messages to lecturers (Jaya et al., 2025; Sudar et al., 2025; Wahyuni et al., 2025). Digital pragmatics provides the analytical basis for interpreting utterances and emojis according to their conversational sequence, communicative purpose, participant relationship, and technologically mediated context, whereas sociolinguistics explains why Indonesian and Batak Angkola choices may signal different degrees of formality, identity, closeness, solidarity, or interpersonal positioning (Hasibuan et al., 2021; Menggo et al., 2023). These theoretical orientations are complementary rather than competing: relational face-work explains why

participants manage interpersonal expectations; digital pragmatics explains how meaning is negotiated through verbal and visual resources in WhatsApp interaction; and sociolinguistics accounts for the social meanings attached to multilingual language choices (Menggo et al., 2023; Virtanen & Lee, 2022; Zhang, 2022). Accordingly, this research conceptualizes politeness as relational, adaptive, and contextually negotiated rather than an automatically measurable property of individual words or symbols.

On that theoretical basis, the study employs several interrelated concepts that preserve the original research's analytical orientation: digital politeness, academic relationships, academic actions, language choice, Batak Angkola dialect use, emoji functions, mitigation, appreciation, relational appropriateness, and contextual appropriateness. Digital politeness is understood as managing interpersonal and institutional relationships through verbal and visual resources whose appropriateness depends on participants, purposes, message sequences, and situational expectations rather than on isolated linguistic forms (Jaya et al., 2025; Rohali et al., 2024; Sudar et al., 2025). Academic relationships distinguish student–lecturer communication from student–student and mixed-group interaction because hierarchy and social distance create different pragmatic demands, even when the academic purposes are similar (Sudar et al., 2025; Wahyuni et al., 2025). Emoji use is conceptualized as context-sensitive because the same visual form may contribute to mitigation, appreciation, affection, solidarity, humor, or another emotional response depending on the accompanying utterance and interactional environment (Manganari, 2021; Was & Hamrick, 2021). Likewise, Batak Angkola forms such as local lexical choices and expressions are understood as sociopragmatic resources that may index closeness, solidarity, clarification, emphasis, or group identity rather than as automatically informal or impolite elements (Hasibuan et al., 2021; Hasibuan et al., 2024; Menggo et al., 2023). The analytical concepts are therefore connected through the principle that appropriateness emerges from relationships among resources and contexts, not from decontextualized counts of words, emojis, or dialectal forms (Manganari, 2021; Menggo et al., 2023; Rohali et al., 2024).

This research is particularly important because it empirically examines the intersection of institutional formality and local communicative practice within a specific Indonesian higher-education environment. The original dataset includes 80 students from Semesters I, III, V, and VII (20 students per semester), interacting through eight course-based WhatsApp groups associated with Listening Skills, Indonesian Phonology, Prose Fiction, Indonesian Language Workshop, Editing Skills, Literary Criticism, Sociolinguistics, and Indonesian Language Outreach. Within these naturally occurring exchanges, communication with lecturers tended to preserve formal academic address forms such as *Bu*, *Ibu*, *Pak*, or *Bapak*, whereas peer communication allowed greater use of Indonesian–Batak Angkola mixing and emojis; the documented interactions also included overly direct requests, messages sent at less appropriate times, and emojis whose appropriateness varied according to the academic relationship. These patterns are analytically significant because previous research already demonstrates that hierarchy affects request formulation and greeting practices, emojis require contextual interpretation, and multilingual choices can signal solidarity and identity, yet these dimensions have rarely been examined simultaneously within naturally occurring academic threads (Manganari, 2021; Menggo et al., 2023; Sudar et al., 2025; Wahyuni et al., 2025). The study is therefore interesting not because local dialect or emojis inherently produce politeness, but because their functions may change according to who communicates with whom, for what academic purpose, and within what conversational sequence. This relational variability provides an empirical basis for understanding how students reconcile professional academic conduct with culturally embedded and digitally mediated forms of interpersonal expression (Hasibuan et al., 2024; Menggo et al., 2023; Rohali et al., 2024).

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze how students realize politeness in academic communication through WhatsApp, explain the contextual and pragmatic functions of emojis and the Batak Angkola dialect across different academic relationships, and identify how these resources are adjusted according to communicative purposes and interactional situations. The investigation focuses on naturally occurring communication rather than

reconstructed messages, retaining the original empirical scope of 58 conversation threads comprising 185 messages from eight course-based WhatsApp groups collected between September and December 2025, supported by semi-structured interviews with 16 students and 6 lecturers. The analysis is directed specifically toward student–lecturer, student–student, and mixed-group interactions involving the academic actions of asking for permission, asking about assignments, submitting assignments, and confirming class schedules, because previous studies demonstrate that hierarchy, social distance, communicative purpose, and message organization influence digital politeness, while emoji meanings and multilingual choices remain dependent on interactional contexts (Manganari, 2021; Menggo et al., 2023; Sudar et al., 2025; Wahyuni et al., 2025). Rather than treating politeness as a universal numerical property, the study aims to develop a contextual Digital Academic Communication Politeness Framework based on relational patterns emerging from the authentic corpus. This objective addresses the identified gap by integrating verbal language, Batak Angkola linguistic resources, diverse emojis, academic hierarchy, interpersonal relationships, and communicative situations within a single pragmatic analysis, thereby providing a culturally sensitive account of how academic politeness is negotiated in WhatsApp-based higher-education communication (Hasibuan et al., 2024; Rohali et al., 2024; Sudar et al., 2025).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative case study design with a digital pragmatics approach to systematically examine digital politeness while interpreting the contextual functions of emojis and the Batak Angkola dialect in academic WhatsApp interactions. The design retains the analytical emphasis of the current manuscript on semiotic resources and instructional communication, but it treats politeness as a relational and context-sensitive practice rather than as a numerical index. The analysis therefore integrates authentic conversation evidence with pragmatic interpretation of participant relationships, academic purposes, language choice, emoji use, and response sequences within naturally occurring digital communication (Herring, 2020; Aritonang et al., 2026). The following section details the research design, data collection, analytical procedures, research instrument, trustworthiness procedures, and participant context using the original dataset documented in the study.

2.1 Research Methods

The research design utilizes a qualitative case study framework in which authentic WhatsApp conversation threads constitute the primary unit of interpretation. The case is bounded by a specific institutional setting, participant group, communication period, and set of academic activities. Digital pragmatics is used to interpret how verbal forms, emojis, and Batak Angkola expressions acquire meaning in relation to the interlocutor, communicative purpose, message sequence, and response. This approach suits computer-mediated communication because the pragmatic value of a linguistic or visual form cannot be separated from the interactional context in which it occurs (Herring, 2020; Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015).

The study was conducted within the Indonesian Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Tapanuli Selatan. The communication corpus was drawn from eight course-based WhatsApp groups from September to December 2025. Four recurring academic actions were retained as the focus of analysis: asking for permission, asking about assignments, submitting assignments, and confirming class schedules. The number of threads and messages describes the corpus, while the primary analytical orientation remains qualitative and interpretive (Aritonang et al., 2026). Figure 1 summarizes the overall research design and analytical sequence.

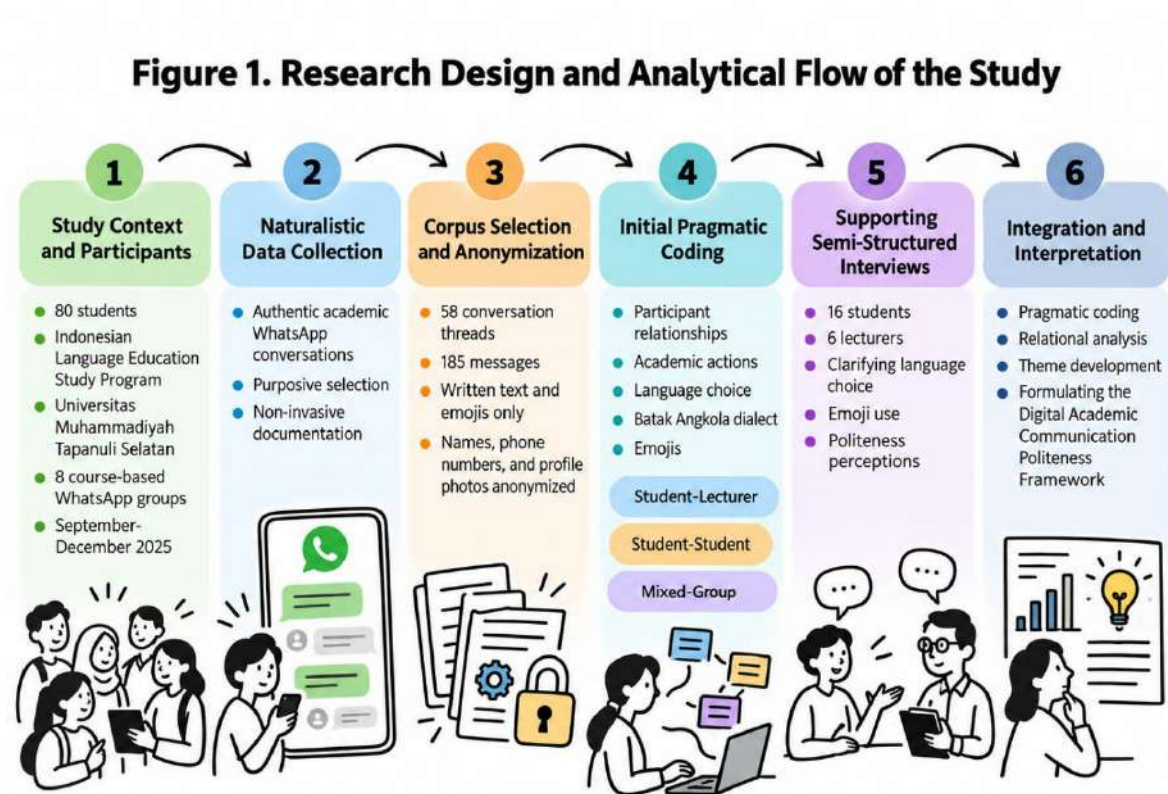


Figure 1. Research design and analytical flow of the study. The diagram summarizes the original methodological sequence from participant context and authentic WhatsApp data collection to corpus selection, anonymization, pragmatic coding, supporting interviews, and integrated qualitative interpretation.

2.2 Data collection

The data collection process focuses on non-invasive documentation of naturalistic WhatsApp academic conversations to preserve the integrity of the original interactional sequences. The final corpus consists of 58 conversation threads comprising 185 messages from eight course-based WhatsApp groups. A conversation thread is defined as a sequence of messages centered on one identifiable academic focus and ending when the communicative purpose is achieved or the topic shifts. The corpus includes written messages and emojis; voice messages, stickers, GIFs, photographs, and videos are excluded from the analytical dataset because this analysis focuses on verbal language, the Batak Angkola dialect, and emoji-based pragmatic resources.

We obtained supporting data through semi-structured interviews with 16 students and 6 lecturers. The interviews clarified participants' reasons for language choice, emoji use, the use of Batak Angkola expressions, perceptions of politeness, and adjustments in communication according to the interlocutor. The interview data therefore serve as contextual support for interpreting the WhatsApp corpus rather than as an independent quantitative dataset. Personal identifiers were removed during corpus organization, and identifying information was excluded from the analytical coding in accordance with ethical considerations for internet-based research (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

Table 1. Research Corpus and Supporting Data

Component	Original study data	Analytical role
Participants	80 undergraduate students; 20 each from Semesters I, III, V, and VII	Primary participant group

WhatsApp sources	Eight course-based WhatsApp groups	Naturalistic digital communication
Corpus	58 conversation threads; 185 messages	Primary qualitative data
Observation period	September-December 2025	Bounded research period
Academic actions	Permission, assignments, assignment submission, and schedule confirmation	Interactional contexts
Interviews	16 students and 6 lecturers	Contextual clarification and triangulation

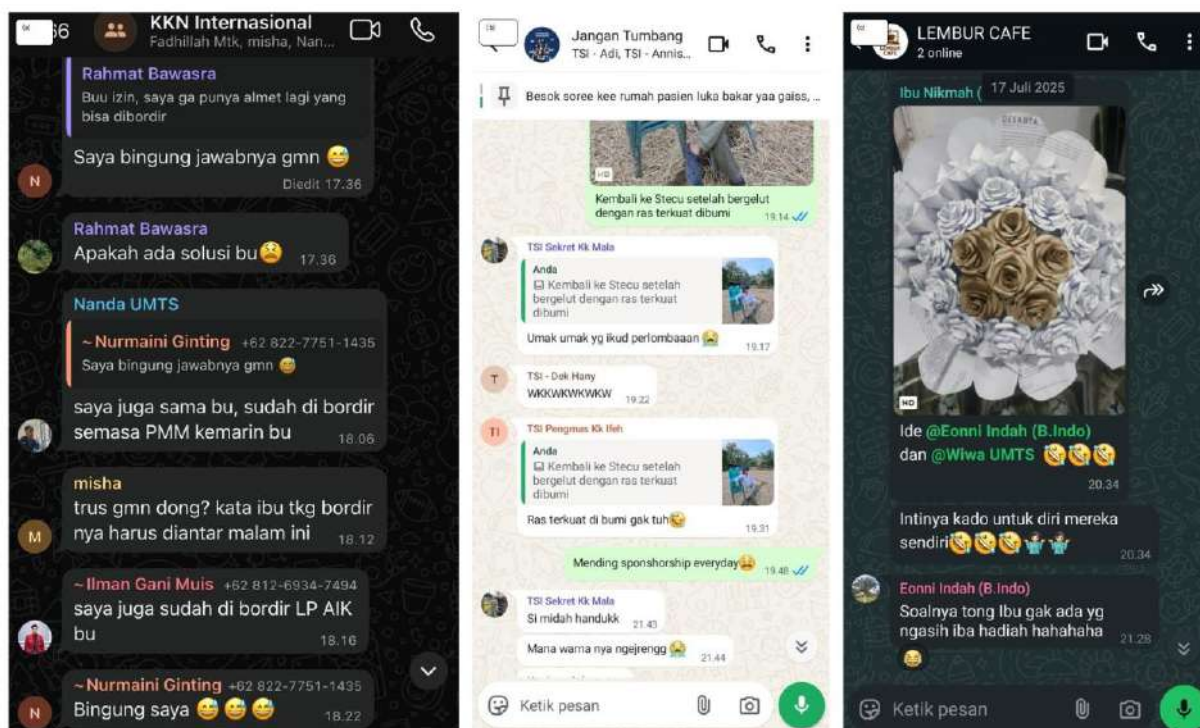


Figure 2. Examples of authentic WhatsApp academic communication used as research data: (a) student-lecturer coordination, (b) group-based peer interaction, and (c) informal academic interaction with emoji use. The panels are derived from the original research documentation and are not AI-generated.

2.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis phase involves a multi-stage interpretive process consisting of pragmatic coding, relational analysis, and theme development. Each conversation thread was read as a complete interactional sequence so that verbal forms, emojis, and Batak Angkola elements could be interpreted in relation to participant relationships, academic purposes, message timing, preceding utterances, and subsequent responses. Initial coding classified the data according to academic relationship, type of academic action, language choice, use of local dialect, emoji occurrence, forms of address, greetings, mitigation, appreciation, directness, and other communicative features that emerged from the corpus. Codes were subsequently compared across student-lecturer, student-student, and mixed-group interactions to identify recurring and contrasting patterns. Pragmatic functions such as respect, mitigation, appreciation, clarification, solidarity, closeness, affection, and humor were interpreted contextually rather than assigned automatically to particular words or emojis. The themes were developed through iterative review of the coded threads and were then compared with the interview data to clarify the reasons underlying language choice, emoji use, and communicative appropriateness. Frequencies of messages, emojis, or dialect forms may be used descriptively to characterize the corpus, but they are not used to calculate a Digital Politeness Index or to determine a numerical level of politeness.



Figure 3. Original documentation of the research-data evaluation and interpretation process. The photograph is taken from the researchers' field documentation and is not AI-generated.

2.4 Research Instruments

The research instrument functions as a structured coding framework for organizing and interpreting the pragmatic features found in the WhatsApp corpus. The coding sheet records the thread code, participant relationship, academic action, relevant verbal expression, Batak Angkola element, emoji, interactional context, participant response, and interpreted pragmatic function. The instrument does not assign fixed meanings to emojis or dialect tokens. Instead, the meaning of each semiotic resource is determined from its relationship with the accompanying utterance and the wider conversational sequence. This procedure maintains the contextual orientation of digital pragmatics while allowing the analytical decisions to remain traceable across the corpus.

Table 2. Analytical Coding Framework for Digital Academic Communication

Analytical component	Operational focus	Examples of interpretation
Academic relationship	Student-lecturer, student-student, mixed group	Hierarchy, familiarity, social distance
Academic action	Permission, assignment inquiry, submission, schedule confirmation	Purpose and degree of imposition
Verbal resources	Greetings, address forms, mitigation, gratitude, directness	Respect, mitigation, appreciation
Batak Angkola dialect	Contextual local-language forms	Solidarity, closeness, identity, clarification
Emojis	Emoji interpreted with the accompanying utterance and response	Mitigation, appreciation, affection, humor, emotional response

2.5 Validity and Reliability

To maintain the rigor and scientific integrity of the qualitative analysis, the study applies data-source triangulation, member checking, an audit trail, and coding consistency checks. Triangulation is conducted by comparing interpretations from the WhatsApp conversations with explanations obtained from student and lecturer interviews.

Member checking is used for selected interpretations, particularly when the pragmatic function of an emoji, a Batak Angkola expression, or a message's appropriateness may be ambiguous. The audit trail records anonymized data, coding decisions, category revisions, analytical notes, and theme development so that the path from the original conversation to the final interpretation remains traceable. The study maintains coding consistency by applying the same operational guidelines throughout the corpus and repeatedly comparing assigned codes with the original conversation threads before finalizing themes. This procedure strengthens credibility, dependability, and confirmability without turning the study into a statistical inter-rater reliability design. Combining authentic digital evidence with interview-based contextual clarification also reduces the risk of interpreting emojis or dialect expressions independently of the meanings intended in the actual interaction.

2.6 Research Subjects and Locations

This study included 80 active undergraduate students from the Indonesian Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Tapanuli Selatan. The participants represented four semester levels, with 20 students each from Semesters I, III, V, and VII. They were purposively selected because they were members of the course-based WhatsApp groups examined in the study, used WhatsApp for academic communication, and were relevant to the linguistic context of the Batak Angkola dialect. The interaction corpus included messages from eight course lecturers, while 6 lecturers participated in the supporting interviews. The institutional setting provides a relevant context for examining the intersection of academic hierarchy, digital communication, and local linguistic resources. The study therefore does not claim statistical generalizability from the number of conversation threads. Instead, the bounded case design is used to provide a context-sensitive account of how students adapt politeness strategies, emojis, and Batak Angkola expressions across different academic relationships and communicative purposes

RESULTS RESEARCH

This section presents the empirical findings derived from the analysis of 58 authentic academic WhatsApp conversation threads comprising 185 messages. The findings are organized to show how digital politeness is realized across academic actions and participant relationships, how emojis and the Batak Angkola dialect function as contextual pragmatic resources, and how these verbal, visual, and local linguistic resources integrate into academic communication. The analysis remains qualitative and relational: frequencies describe the corpus, while politeness is interpreted through participant relationships, communicative purposes, message organization, language choice, emoji use, timing, and responses within the conversation sequence.

3.1 Characteristics of Academic Communication Threads

The corpus consisted of 58 conversation threads covering four academic actions: asking for permission, asking about assignments, submitting assignments, and confirming class schedules. Each thread was assigned an identification code from T001 to T058 to maintain traceability across the coding and interpretation process. Messages were additionally coded within each thread, while participant identities were anonymized using student and lecturer codes. The corpus distribution shows that asking about assignments was the most frequently identified academic action, with 23 threads, followed by asking for permission (14 threads), confirming schedules (13 threads), and submitting assignments (8 threads). Based on participant relationships, 38 threads occurred between students and lecturers, while 10 threads each occurred in student-student and mixed-group interactions. Table 1 presents this distribution.

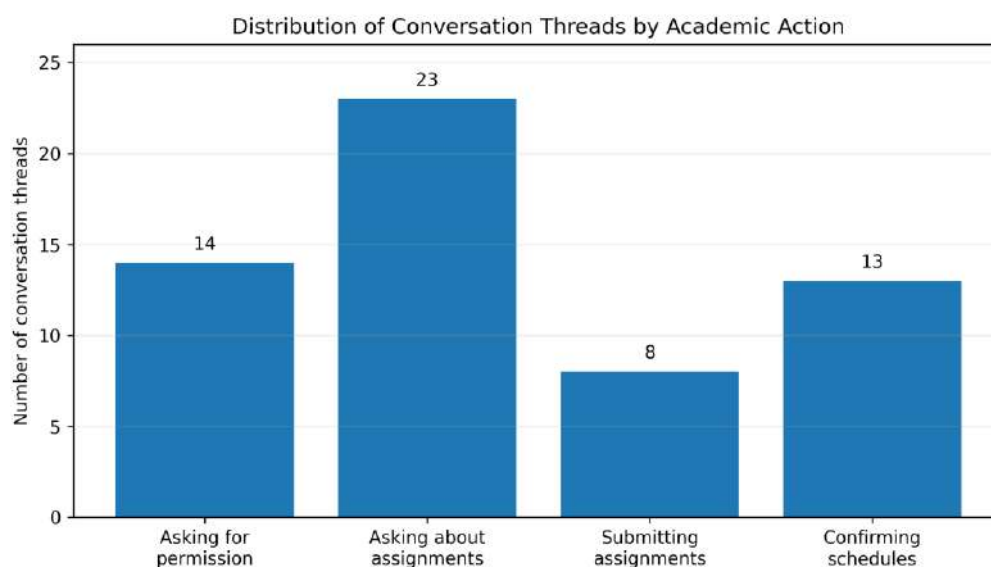


Figure 2. Distribution of conversation threads by academic action.

Corpus Characteristics Based on Academic Actions and Relationships see in table 1

Table 1. Corpus Characteristics Based on Academic Actions and Relationships

ACADEMIC ACTION	STUDENT–LECTURER	STUDENT–STUDENT	MIXED-GROUP INTERACTION	TOTAL THREADS
Asking for permission	9	1	4	14
Asking about assignments	15	4	4	23
Submitting assignments	7	0	1	8
Confirming schedules	7	5	1	13
TOTAL	38	10	10	58

Table 1 shows that student–lecturer interactions were dominated by asking for permission, asking about assignments, and submitting assignments. Schedule confirmation was more dispersed because students also coordinated directly with peers. These frequencies were not used to rank or score politeness. Instead, relationship type and academic action provided the contextual basis for examining greetings, forms of address, mitigation, degree of directness, message structure, timing, register, and responses within each thread.

3.2 Politeness Realization Across Academic Actions and Relationships

Politeness realization differed by both academic action and participant relationship. In student–lecturer interactions, messages more consistently included greetings, academic forms of address such as Bu, Ibu, Pak, or Bapak, expressions of permission, explanations, mitigation, and appreciative closings. Student–student interactions were generally more direct and used a more familiar register. Mixed-group interactions required participants to adjust their register dynamically depending on whether the message was directed to a lecturer or to peers within the same conversational space. In permission-seeking threads, hierarchy was particularly visible. Thread T011 combined a greeting, an academic form of address, an explicit request for permission, a reason for absence, and an appreciative response after the lecturer replied. By contrast, T003 retained an academic form of address but expressed the request more directly and with limited mitigation. This contrast indicates that politeness cannot be inferred from a single marker; it emerges from the sequential combination of opening, form of address, request formulation, explanation, and response.

Questions about assignments constituted the largest category, with 23 threads. In student–lecturer interactions, these questions commonly used formal openings and mitigated formulations, whereas peer interactions allowed direct questions and familiar expressions. Assignment submission likewise functioned as an academic action rather than merely a technical transfer of files: clarity of purpose, appropriate address, and acknowledgment of receipt contributed to communicative appropriateness. Schedule-confirmation threads further showed that the same academic purpose was formulated differently depending on whether the recipient was a lecturer or a peer. Message timing also emerged as part of contextual appropriateness. In T036, a student explicitly apologized for contacting a lecturer at night before asking an assignment-related question. Interview data similarly indicated that lecturers considered timing and how a message was opened when evaluating appropriateness. The findings therefore show that digital academic politeness is relational and adaptive, not reducible to a fixed set of polite words (Jaya et al., 2025; Rohali et al., 2024; Sudar et al., 2025; Wahyuni et al., 2025).

Table 2. Representative Patterns of Politeness Realization

THREAD	RELATIONSHIP / ACTION	REPRESENTATIVE FEATURE	PRAGMATIC FOCUS
T011	Student–lecturer / Asking for permission	Greeting + academic address + permission request + reason + thanks	Respect and mitigation
T003	Student–lecturer / Asking for permission	Academic address with more direct request	Limited mitigation
T002	Student–lecturer / Asking about assignments	Formal opening with molo inserted in the question	Respect, mitigation, clarification
T044	Student–student / Asking about assignments	Familiar register with au and direct clarification	Closeness and peer coordination
T043	Student–lecturer / Confirming schedules	Formal opening and mitigated confirmation	Respect and confirmation
T036	Student–lecturer / Asking about assignments	Apology for contacting at night before asking	Timing-related mitigation

3.3 Pragmatic Functions and Contextual Appropriateness of Emojis

Emojis were identified in 39 of the 58 conversation threads and appeared in student–lecturer, student–student, and mixed-group interactions. The analysis did not assign a fixed meaning to each emoji or use emoji frequency to determine a politeness score. Instead, emoji functions were interpreted in relation to the verbal message, participant relationship, academic action, position within the message, and the response that followed. Thread-level analysis identified functions including mitigation and respect, appreciation and affection, closeness, emotional emphasis, mild complaint, humor, and irony. Importantly, the same emoji could shift function across contexts. The folded-hands emoji (🙏), for example, reinforced mitigation in a request and could support appreciation in a closing. The smiling face (😊) could signal positive affect in peer coordination but did not substitute for verbal mitigation in a hierarchical request. Emojis such as 🤔 and 😂 were more strongly associated with humor and familiarity, making their appropriateness more dependent on the recipient and academic situation.

Table 3. Pragmatic Functions of Emojis in Academic Communication

EMOJI	THREAD / RELATIONSHIP	ACADEMIC ACTION	CONTEXTUAL USE	PRAGMATIC FUNCTION
🙏	T043 / Student–lecturer	Confirming schedules	Accompanies a mitigated request and appreciative closing	Mitigation, respect, appreciation
😊	T028 / Student–student	Confirming schedules	Appears in familiar peer coordination	Positive affect and closeness
😊	T015 / Student–lecturer	Asking for permission	Softens a direct request with limited verbal mitigation	Affective softening

🙏	T044 / Student–student	Asking about assignments	Accompanies admission of confusion and later thanks	Softening, awkward reaction, closeness
👉	T048 / Student–student	Confirming schedules	Adds emotional emphasis to peer coordination	Emotional emphasis / mild complaint
👍	T005 / Student–lecturer	Asking for permission	Occurs alongside a verbally structured academic request	Contextual emphasis; verbal form remains primary
📄	T010 / Student–student	Request / coordination	Accompanies peer task coordination	Light humor and solidarity
😓	T045 / Student–lecturer	Submitting assignments	Humor-oriented emoji in a formal academic action	Less appropriate in the hierarchical context

These patterns demonstrate that emoji use in academic communication is context-sensitive. Emojis can support a message's interpersonal tone, but they do not independently determine politeness. Their function emerges from the interaction between visual form, verbal structure, participant relationship, and communicative situation (Manganari, 2021; Morsi, 2026; Putra & Hayati, 2026; Was & Hamrick, 2021). The supplementary field screenshots in Figure 5 further illustrate the qualitative interpretation. These screenshots document naturally occurring WhatsApp interactional patterns and are presented as visual examples of the communicative tendencies identified in the study. Identifying information has been anonymized, and the screenshots are not used to modify the coded corpus totals reported above.

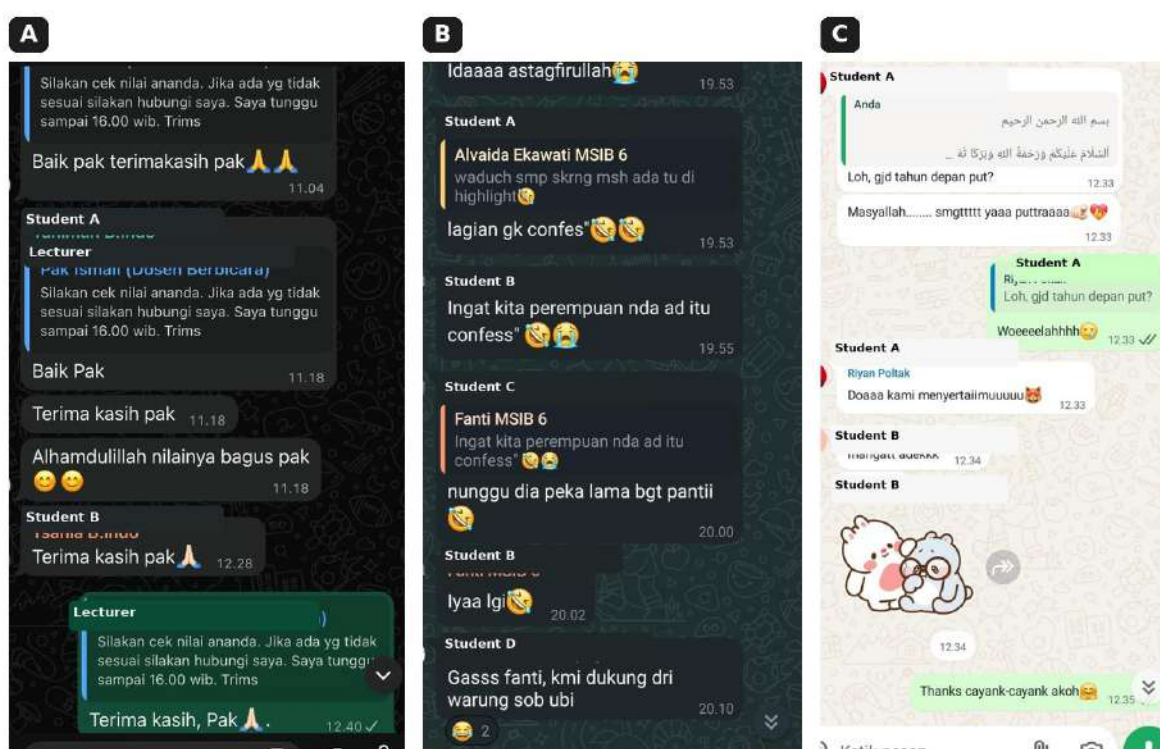


Figure 5. Supplementary anonymized WhatsApp documentation illustrating (A) lecturer-student appreciation and respect, (B) peer humor and solidarity, and (C) peer support and positive affect.

Panel A demonstrates how appreciation and respect are realized in a hierarchical lecturer-student interaction. After the lecturer provides an instruction concerning grade verification, students respond with acknowledgment expressions such as “Baik Pak” (“All right, Sir”) and “Terima kasih Pak” (“Thank you, Sir”), accompanied by folded-hands and smiling-face emojis. The interaction shows that politeness is primarily constructed through verbal acknowledgment, the academic form of address Pak, and gratitude, while emojis strengthen the appreciative interpersonal tone. Panel B displays a contrasting peer register characterized by abbreviated expressions, repeated laughter, and laughing emojis. The absence of formal greetings and academic forms of address does not by itself indicate impoliteness. Instead, the interaction reflects a horizontal relationship in which humor and playful responses serve as resources for solidarity, familiarity, and maintaining group rapport.

Panel C illustrates another peer-oriented pattern in which encouragement, supportive expressions, affective emojis, and reciprocal responses contribute to interpersonal closeness. In this type of exchange, politeness is realized less through formal hierarchy and more through solidarity, positive affect, and emotional alignment. The contrast among Panels A-C reinforces the finding that the same digital platform supports different politeness practices depending on participants' relationships and the immediate communicative purpose.

3.4 Batak Angkola Dialect as a Relational Resource

The Batak Angkola dialect was identified in 24 of the 58 conversation threads. Its use was not restricted to student–student communication; selected Angkola forms also occurred in student–lecturer interactions. The difference lay in how these forms were positioned within the message. Peer interactions were more open to Angkola pronouns and relational terms as part of a familiar register, whereas student–lecturer messages generally retained Indonesian as the primary academic structure and inserted Angkola elements selectively. The analysis therefore treated dialect forms as relational and pragmatic resources rather than as a simple list of local vocabulary. Forms such as *au*, *hamu*, and *ito* were associated with closeness and group orientation in horizontal relationships, while *molo*, *harana*, *sude*, and *hami* appeared within vertically structured messages that continued to preserve greetings, academic forms of address, mitigation, and clarity of purpose.

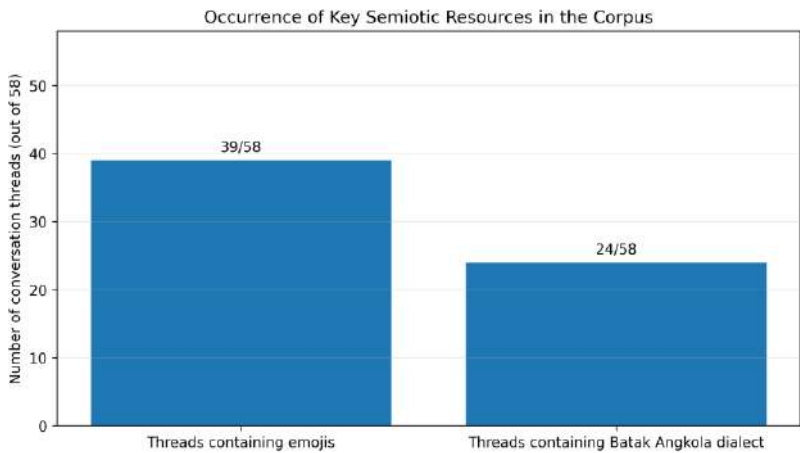


Figure 4. Occurrence of emojis and Batak Angkola dialect across the 58 conversation threads.

Table 4. Selected Batak Angkola Forms and Their Pragmatic Functions

FORM	LEXICAL MEANING	RELATIONSHIP	CONVERSATIONAL ROLE	PRAGMATIC FUNCTION
molo	if / when	Student–lecturer	Inserted in an assignment-related question	Clarification within a respectful academic structure
au	I / me	Student–student	Used while expressing confusion to peers	Relational closeness and self-reference
hamu	you (plural)	Student–student	Directs a request toward the peer group	Solidarity and group orientation
ito	familiar form of address	Student–student	Used in schedule coordination	Social closeness and horizontal relationship
harana	because	Student–lecturer	Introduces a reason within a formal message	Providing a reason while preserving formality
sude	all	Student–lecturer	Emphasizes the scope of information	Emphasis in academic confirmation
hami	we / us	Student–lecturer	Represents a group in an academic submission	Collective identity

These findings show that the use of Batak Angkola does not automatically indicate informality, just as Indonesian does not automatically indicate politeness. In horizontal relationships, the dialect more strongly supports familiarity, solidarity, and group identity. In vertical relationships, it can occur without removing institutional hierarchy when it remains embedded in a message structure that maintains respect, clarity, and appropriate forms of address (Menggo et al., 2023; Siregar et al., 2026).

3.5 Relational Adjustment in Mixed-Group Interaction

Mixed-group interaction accounted for 10 of the 58 conversation threads and provided evidence of register adjustment within a shared communication space. In these interactions, students could maintain formal linguistic markers when addressing lecturers while shifting to a more familiar register when responding to peers. This pattern shows that digital academic politeness is not attached to the WhatsApp group as a whole; it is negotiated message by message according to the immediate recipient, the academic action, and the message's position within the ongoing thread. The mixed-group findings strengthen the relational interpretation of digital politeness because they show that the same participant may employ different combinations of Indonesian, Batak Angkola, emojis, directness, and forms of address within one interactional environment. The relevant unit of interpretation is therefore the conversation thread and its internal relational shifts, not an isolated linguistic form.

3.6 Integration of Interview Evidence

Semi-structured interviews with 16 students and 6 lecturers clarified interpretations derived from the WhatsApp corpus. Students reported that communication with lecturers was generally more formal, whereas communication with peers allowed greater spontaneity, dialect use, and emoji use. They also described the Batak Angkola dialect as more natural in peer interaction and indicated that they adjusted their language choice when the topic became more formal or when greater clarity was required. Lecturer perspectives similarly emphasized message openings, clarity of purpose, appropriate forms of address, timing, and a non-demanding manner of delivery. Emoji use was considered acceptable when it supported the intended tone and remained appropriate to the situation, while humor-oriented emojis required greater caution in hierarchical academic communication. The interviews therefore did not replace the corpus analysis; rather, they provided participant-based explanations for patterns identified through pragmatic coding.

3.7 Digital Academic Communication Politeness Framework

The synthesis of the conversation data and interview findings indicates that digital academic politeness emerges from the interaction of several contextual components rather than a single linguistic formula. The empirical pattern can be summarized as a Digital Academic Communication Politeness Framework in which participant relationship and academic action shape the selection of verbal politeness markers, language choice, emoji use, message timing, degree of directness, and responses within the interaction. Within this framework, greetings, academic forms of address, mitigation, appreciation, and clarity of purpose are especially salient in vertical student–lecturer interaction. Peer communication permits greater directness, familiar register, and more extensive use of local linguistic and visual resources. Mixed-group interaction illustrates that these resources are dynamically recalibrated when the immediate interlocutor changes. The resulting model conceptualizes politeness as relational, adaptive, and context-sensitive: communicative appropriateness emerges from the alignment between the message, the participant relationship, the academic purpose, and the surrounding interactional sequence.

Table 5. Components of the Digital Academic Communication Politeness Framework

COMPONENT	EMPIRICAL BASIS	ROLE IN INTERPRETATION
Participant relationship	Student–lecturer, student–student, mixed-group	Determines hierarchy, social distance, and register adjustment
Academic action	Permission, assignment questions, submissions, schedule confirmation	Defines the communicative purpose and degree of imposition
Verbal politeness markers	Greetings, forms of address, mitigation, appreciation	Structures respect and interpersonal management
Language choice	Indonesian and Batak Angkola elements	Signals formality, closeness, solidarity, clarification, or group identity
Emoji use	Contextual visual resources	Supports tone, affect, mitigation, appreciation, humor, or emphasis
Timing and sequence	When the message is sent and how responses unfold	Shapes contextual appropriateness and interpretation

The framework in Figure 6 summarizes the principal relationships identified across the conversation corpus and interview evidence. Digital academic politeness emerges from the interaction among participant relationships, academic actions, verbal politeness markers, language choice, emoji use, message timing, and the responses that develop within the conversational sequence. None of these components is interpreted as a fixed politeness score; their meaning is established relationally and contextually.

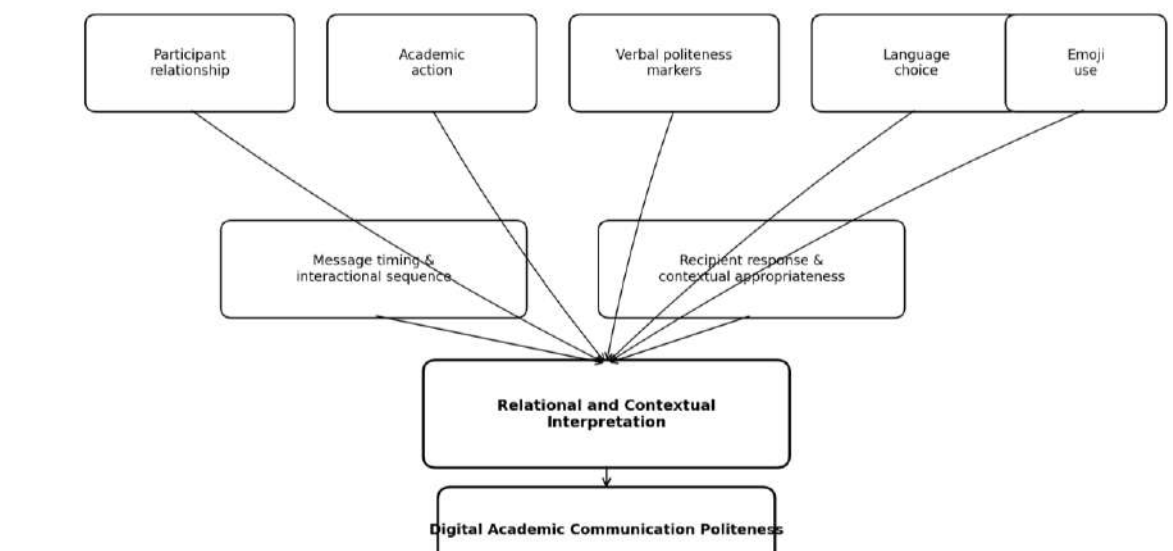


Figure 6. Synthesis of the Digital Academic Communication Politeness Framework.

Taken together, the visual and textual evidence indicates that digital academic politeness is adaptive rather than formulaic. Student-lecturer communication places greater emphasis on hierarchy-sensitive resources such as greetings, academic forms of address, mitigation, clarity of purpose, and appreciation. Peer interaction allows greater directness, humor, emotional expression, and locally marked language, while mixed-group communication requires participants to shift register according to the immediate recipient. This relational adjustment constitutes the central empirical pattern linking the separate findings on academic actions, emojis, the Batak Angkola dialect, and interview perceptions.

DISCUSSION

4.1 Relational Politeness, Hierarchy, and Academic Actions

The present findings demonstrate that digital academic politeness cannot be explained solely by the presence or absence of conventional politeness markers. Instead, politeness emerges from the interaction between participant relationships, academic purposes, and message organization. This pattern is consistent with a substantial body of research on student–lecturer WhatsApp communication. Shalihah and Zuhdi (2020) showed that sociopragmatic context influences students’ language choices when messaging lecturers, while Paramitha (2021) found that politeness in WhatsApp interaction functions to preserve respect and solidarity. Munthe (2021) reported that negative politeness predominates among students communicating with lecturers, reflecting awareness of age and status differences. Pasaribu et al. (2022) similarly found that lecturers and students adopted substantially different strategies because of unequal power and social status. More recently, Bustam et al. (2024) demonstrated that indirectness, mitigation, gratitude, and support contribute to positive digital interaction, while Lukman (2024) identified clear asymmetries in addressing strategies between lecturer-to-student and student-to-lecturer communication. Sudar et al. (2025) further confirmed that students were more likely than lecturers to initiate interaction with greetings and stronger positive politeness strategies, whereas Jaya et al. (2025) found that 53.3% of lecturer respondents regarded greetings as one of the most important components of polite messaging. Arsita et al. (2025) likewise showed that positive politeness commonly appeared in message openings and negative politeness softened requests.

However, the present study extends these findings in an important way. Previous studies predominantly categorized politeness strategies, whereas the current findings show that the same student may realize politeness differently depending not only on hierarchy but also on the academic action being performed. Asking permission, asking about assignments, submitting assignments, and confirming schedules generate different pragmatic demands. Thus, greetings or respectful forms of address cannot be treated as self-sufficient indicators of politeness. This finding is better explained through a relational-work perspective than through a checklist model of etiquette: politeness emerges through alignment among speaker, recipient, communicative goal, imposition, and sequential context. In theoretical terms, the findings refine Brown and Levinson's power–distance–imposition logic by showing that these variables operate dynamically across different academic actions, rather than producing one stable style of student politeness. The new contribution is therefore the proposition that academic action mediates the relationship between hierarchy and politeness realization.

4.2 Greetings, Mitigation, Directness, and Timing

The present findings also demonstrate that greetings, forms of address, mitigation, appreciation, directness, and message timing should be interpreted as an interconnected pragmatic configuration rather than as separate politeness markers. Earlier studies provide substantial evidence for each component. Shalihah and Zuhdi (2020) found that student messages remained shaped by sociopragmatic expectations even in semi-formal WhatsApp environments. Paramitha (2021) demonstrated that pragmatic meaning depends on context rather than linguistic form alone. Pasaribu et al. (2022) associated differences in strategy with social power and position. Bustam et al. (2024) identified mitigating language, indirect speech acts, politeness markers, and gratitude as central resources in virtual lecturer–student interaction. Lukman (2024) found that forms of address and strategy choice differ systematically by communication direction. Sudar et al. (2025) showed that hierarchy and age influence message formulation, while Jaya et al. (2025) demonstrated the specific importance lecturers attach to message openings and greetings. Arsita et al. (2025) further showed that indirectness specifically softens students' intentions.

The new element in the present study is temporal appropriateness. Existing work has richly discussed greetings, hierarchy, directness, and mitigation, yet far fewer studies treat when a message is sent as part of the pragmatic construction of politeness. In the present corpus, apologizing before contacting a lecturer at night illustrates that timing itself becomes socially meaningful. This suggests that politeness in asynchronous mobile communication involves not only linguistic mitigation but also temporal mitigation: speakers recognize that the imposition created by a request may increase because of the time at which the request is delivered. This extends conventional face-work theory because the threat to face is not located solely in propositional content; it may also arise from the technological affordance that makes recipients potentially reachable at any time. Theoretically, the finding therefore supports a broader model of contextual appropriateness in which timing, recipient, purpose, message structure, and subsequent response jointly determine pragmatic evaluation.

4.3 Emojis: From Fixed Meaning to Contextual Pragmatic Function

A comparable development appears in the emoji findings. Earlier studies consistently show that emojis contribute meaningful non-verbal and pragmatic information in academic WhatsApp communication. Concessa (2021) argued that emojis compensate for the absence of facial expression and body language in online lecturer–student communication. Firdiani and Kahar (2022), drawing on Media Richness Theory, similarly treated emojis as resources that enrich lecturer–student interaction. Felisha (2022) found that emojis could participate in multiple politeness strategies and speech acts, but also emphasized that not every emoji is equally acceptable when addressing lecturers. Prasaja et al. (2024) found that emojis help communicate politeness, emotional tone, and communicative clarity. Cahyani et al. (2025), focusing specifically on the thumbs-up emoji, showed that even an apparently straightforward emoji can generate different interpretations and implications in lecturer–student WhatsApp

interactions. Studies of broader digital academic discourse likewise show that emojis can strengthen interpersonal meaning while creating interpretive ambiguity when sender and receiver attach different meanings to them. The current findings move beyond whether emojis are “polite” or “impolite.” Their more important contribution is demonstrating that the same emoji may perform different pragmatic functions within different thread positions. The folded-hands emoji, for instance, may reinforce mitigation in a request, signal respect in an opening, or function as appreciation after a lecturer’s response. Conversely, humor-oriented emojis may be acceptable in horizontal peer exchanges but less appropriate in formal submission to a lecturer. This challenges any one-to-one interpretation of visual forms and is consistent with a digital-pragmatic view of indexical meaning, in which semiotic resources acquire meaning through co-text, sequence, interlocutor, and communicative action. The novel proposition is therefore not simply that emojis support politeness, which previous studies have already established, but that emoji function and emoji appropriateness vary relationally and sequentially.

4.4 Batak Angkola Dialect and the “Hierarchy Paradox”

For local-language use, the most relevant comparison is with research on multilingualism, code-mixing, and sociolinguistic identity in digital communication. Menggo et al. (2023), examining university WhatsApp group chats, found that code-mixing served functions including solidarity, intimacy, clarification, interjection, and group identity. Their findings demonstrate that multilingual choices are communicative strategies rather than random deviations from a dominant language. Tarigan et al. (2024), examining Indonesian–Batak code-switching and code-mixing among university students, likewise found that switching frequency varied with the formality of the interaction and that Batak elements could clarify meaning and strengthen social relationships. Research on student academic WhatsApp communication more generally has also established that differences in status and formality strongly influence students’ language choices (Pasaribu et al., 2022; Bustam et al., 2024; Lukman, 2024; Sudar et al., 2025).

Yet the current findings reveal something more specific: the appearance of Batak Angkola does not necessarily collapse academic hierarchy. Indonesian remains the primary academic register, while Angkola forms are selectively embedded according to relationship and communicative purpose. Among peers, local forms can foreground solidarity, intimacy, and spontaneity; in lecturer-directed interaction, dialect elements may coexist with greetings, *Pak/Bu/Ibu/Bapak*, apologies, or other mitigation. This creates what may be termed a hierarchy-preserving localization pattern: participants introduce local identity into the interaction without necessarily abandoning institutional deference. This differs from a simple formal-versus-informal model of code choice. In sociolinguistic terms, the finding suggests that the social meaning of dialect is indexical rather than categorical. Batak Angkola does not inherently mean informality; instead, its meaning emerges from its placement inside a larger interactional frame. This is one of the clearest areas where the study can make a new contribution.

4.5 Mixed-Group Interaction and Recipient-Triggered Register Shifting

The mixed-group finding may actually be one of the most original components of the paper. Most previous research treats lecturer–student and student–student communication as separate datasets or stable relationship categories. Shalihah and Zuhdi (2020), Paramitha (2021), Munthe (2021), Pasaribu et al. (2022), Bustam et al. (2024), Lukman (2024), and Sudar et al. (2025), for example, primarily analyze communication according to relatively stable speaker–recipient relationships. Studies of student WhatsApp group code-mixing, such as Menggo et al. (2023), instead concentrate primarily on peer interaction. The current mixed-group data reveal a more dynamic pattern: one participant can shift register within the same conversation thread when the addressee changes. A student may use formal Indonesian, greetings, and mitigation when addressing a lecturer, then shift immediately toward local dialect, directness, or more familiar emojis when responding to peers. This cannot be fully explained by identifying an individual as generally “formal” or “informal.” Instead, the evidence supports a recipient-triggered register-shifting interpretation. From an audience-design or accommodation perspective, linguistic style shifts in response

to the current recipient's social identity. Thus, the new finding is that digital academic politeness operates at a micro-relational level inside the thread, not merely between separate groups of speakers. That is a stronger novelty claim than simply reporting that lecturers and students communicate differently.

4.6 Interview Evidence: From Corpus Pattern to Participant Interpretation

The interview component also differentiates the present study from many text-only studies. Some previous investigations use naturally occurring messages alone, whereas others combine message data and participant perspectives. Felisha (2022), for example, combined WhatsApp archives with student interviews and concluded that emoji acceptability depends on social power, conversational context, and receiver knowledge. Cahyani et al. (2025) used interviews alongside online observation to examine interpretations of the thumbs-up emoji. Menggo et al. (2023) combined documentation, interviews, and field observation to identify code-mixing functions. Other studies, such as Bustam et al. (2024), emphasize discourse patterns themselves, while survey-based work such as Jaya et al. (2025) captures lecturers' evaluations rather than naturally occurring thread interpretation. The strength of the present study lies in using interviews not as a second independent dataset but as an interpretive check on corpus-derived pragmatic meanings. This matters especially for emoji and dialect interpretation. A researcher might infer solidarity from a local-language expression or humor from an emoji, yet participant explanations can confirm, qualify, or contradict that interpretation. The key theoretical result is that pragmatic meaning is jointly reconstructed from observable discourse behavior and participants' metapragmatic awareness. Thus, the interviews strengthen the claim that politeness is not recoverable from textual form alone.

4.7 What Is Actually New?

The synthesis of the findings indicates that digital academic politeness cannot be adequately explained through a single linguistic feature, a fixed politeness strategy, or an isolated semiotic resource. Previous studies have commonly examined student–lecturer politeness, emoji use, code-mixing, local-language practices, or academic WhatsApp communication as separate analytical domains. The present findings show that these elements operate simultaneously and that their pragmatic value changes according to the relationship between participants, the academic action being performed, the communicative purpose, message timing, conversational sequence, and subsequent interactional response. Accordingly, this study proposes the Digital Academic Communication Politeness Framework as a relational and context-sensitive model for understanding politeness in WhatsApp-based academic communication. Within this framework, participant relationship and academic action constitute the primary interactional conditions; verbal politeness markers, Indonesian and Batak Angkola language choices, and emojis function as communicative resources; while timing, directness, sequence, and recipient responses operate as contextual modifiers. Together, these elements shape pragmatic functions such as respect, mitigation, appreciation, solidarity, closeness, clarification, and humor. The framework therefore rejects the assumption that a particular word, emoji, or dialectal form possesses an inherently polite or impolite value. Instead, appropriateness emerges from the alignment among communicative resources, participant relationships, academic purposes, and interactional context.

This framework extends previous research in several ways. Studies of student–lecturer WhatsApp communication have demonstrated the importance of hierarchy, social distance, greetings, mitigation, and request formulation, while emoji studies have shown that visual symbols contribute to interpersonal meaning and tone. Research on multilingual and code-mixed communication has similarly established the role of local language in solidarity, identity, and social closeness. However, these lines of research have generally been developed separately. The present study integrates them within a single thread-based analysis and demonstrates that digital politeness is

simultaneously recipient-sensitive, action-sensitive, temporally situated, and multimodally negotiated. A student may use a formal Indonesian register and mitigation when addressing a lecturer, shift toward Batak Angkola and greater directness when responding to peers, and adjust emoji choice according to the academic action and conversational position. Such within-thread register movement indicates that politeness is not a stable personal style but a dynamic relational practice. The proposed framework therefore contributes not by introducing a new etiquette checklist, but by offering a conceptual model that explains how multiple linguistic, visual, relational, and contextual resources coordinate during naturally occurring academic interaction.

The framework also extends relational-work, digital-pragmatic, and sociolinguistic perspectives. From a relational-work perspective, the findings confirm that politeness is negotiated through social relations rather than encoded in isolated forms. From a digital-pragmatic perspective, meaning is generated through the interaction of text, emojis, sequence, timing, and participant response. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the selective use of Batak Angkola demonstrates that local language does not automatically signal informality or reduced respect; its social meaning depends on the interactional frame in which it occurs. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that digital academic politeness should be conceptualized as a layered process in which hierarchy, communicative purpose, linguistic choice, semiotic resources, and situational context operate interdependently. This integrated formulation is the study's principal conceptual contribution and distinguishes it from earlier research that examined these elements in isolation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study concludes that digital politeness in WhatsApp-based academic communication is a relational, contextual, and adaptive communicative practice rather than a fixed property of particular words, emojis, or language forms. The findings show that politeness shifts with the relationship between participants and the academic action being performed. Student–lecturer interactions more consistently employ greetings, academic forms of address, mitigation, clear statements of purpose, and appreciative closings, whereas student–student interactions allow greater directness, familiarity, and spontaneous use of local linguistic resources. These differences do not mean one interaction type is inherently more polite than another; instead, they show that communicative appropriateness is negotiated in relation to hierarchy, social distance, purpose, and interactional context. The four academic actions examined—asking for permission, asking about assignments, submitting assignments, and confirming class schedules—also create different pragmatic demands. Consequently, politeness cannot be adequately evaluated through the presence of a single marker such as a greeting, an apology, or a respectful form of address, but must be interpreted through the organization of the entire conversational thread. The study further concludes that emojis and the Batak Angkola dialect function as context-sensitive relational resources. Emojis do not possess stable pragmatic meanings across interactions: the same form may reinforce mitigation, respect, appreciation, affection, solidarity, humor, or emotional response depending on the recipient, message position, academic purpose, and subsequent response. Likewise, using Batak Angkola does not automatically signal informality or diminished academic respect. Indonesian remains the primary academic register, while Batak Angkola forms are selectively incorporated to express closeness, solidarity, clarification, emphasis, and group identity. In vertical student–lecturer relationships, local linguistic elements may coexist with greetings, academic forms of address, and mitigation, whereas horizontal peer interactions permit more extensive and spontaneous dialect use. Mixed-group interactions provide particularly important evidence of this adaptability because students may shift from a formal register when addressing lecturers to a more familiar register when addressing peers within the same conversational thread.

Another important conclusion concerns contextual appropriateness. The findings show that message timing, directness, conversational sequence, and recipient response shape how digital politeness is interpreted. A message sent at an inconvenient time, for example, may be pragmatically managed through an acknowledgment of timing and an apology, demonstrating that appropriateness extends beyond lexical choice. Interview evidence with students and lecturers strengthens these interpretations by showing that participants consciously differentiate language, emoji use, and levels of formality according to the interlocutor and academic situation. Thus, naturally occurring WhatsApp data and participants' own explanations jointly indicate that digital politeness is negotiated through the interaction between linguistic, visual, relational, temporal, and situational resources. The study's principal conceptual contribution is the Digital Academic Communication Politeness Framework. The framework proposes that digital academic politeness emerges from the interaction among participant relationship, academic action, verbal politeness markers, language choice, emoji use, message timing, conversational sequence, and interactional response. These components jointly shape pragmatic functions such as respect, mitigation, appreciation, solidarity, closeness, clarification, and humor, which must subsequently be interpreted in relation to contextual appropriateness. The framework differs from approaches that treat politeness as a numerical score or classify isolated forms as inherently polite or impolite. Instead, it conceptualizes digital academic politeness as a dynamic process in which communicative resources acquire meaning through their relationship with the recipient, academic purpose, and unfolding interaction.

Several recommendations arise from these findings. Lecturers and higher-education institutions should avoid formulating digital communication guidelines solely as rigid lists of permitted and prohibited expressions. Guidance for academic WhatsApp communication should instead address the relational and contextual dimensions identified in this study, including appropriate openings and forms of address, request mitigation, clarity of purpose, message timing, responsible emoji use, and sensitivity to differences between lecturer-directed and peer communication. Local linguistic resources should not automatically be treated as inappropriate in academic communication; their acceptability should be evaluated according to clarity, respect, interlocutor, and communicative purpose. Students may also benefit from explicit digital-pragmatic literacy activities that use authentic or appropriately anonymized examples to demonstrate how identical words, emojis, or dialectal forms can function differently across academic contexts.

Future research should test and refine the proposed framework across different study programs, universities, regional languages, and digital communication platforms. Comparative studies could examine whether similar patterns occur in other multilingual Indonesian communities or in platforms such as Telegram, Microsoft Teams, or institutional learning-management systems. Longitudinal research could investigate whether students' digital pragmatic practices change across semesters or following explicit instruction in academic digital communication. Future studies may also investigate lecturer–student perception gaps regarding particular emojis, message timing, response expectations, and local-language use. Such research should preserve the contextual and thread-based orientation of the present study rather than reducing politeness to isolated linguistic frequencies.

DECLARATIONS

Generative Artificial Intelligence Statement

Generative Artificial Intelligence Statement: Generative artificial intelligence tools were used solely for editorial assistance during manuscript preparation, particularly for language refinement, grammatical improvement, and organizing the written presentation. Generative AI was not used to generate, fabricate, modify, or replace the

research data, participant responses, WhatsApp conversations, research findings, or statistical results. The figures and research documentation presented in the study were derived from the original research materials, not generated by artificial intelligence. Any editorial modifications to visual materials were limited to anonymization, cropping, labeling, layout adjustments, and readability enhancements. The authors critically reviewed, verified, and revised all AI-assisted text and retain full responsibility for the accuracy, interpretation, originality, and integrity of the published work.

Conflict of Interest

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no financial, personal, professional, or other competing interests that could have influenced the design, conduct, analysis, interpretation, or reporting of this study.

Ethics and Participant Privacy

Ethics and Participant Privacy: The researchers maintained participant confidentiality throughout the research process. The authors removed, masked, or anonymized personally identifiable information in the WhatsApp data, including names, telephone numbers, profile photographs, and other identifying details, before analysis and publication. We presented conversation excerpts only for research purposes and interpreted them within their original interactional contexts. The authors are responsible for ensuring that the use and presentation of participant data comply with the applicable institutional and publication ethics requirements.

Author Contributions: All authors contributed to the conception and development of the study, the organization and interpretation of the research data, and the preparation of the manuscript. The authors jointly reviewed the analytical findings, contributed to the interpretation of digital politeness, emoji use, and Batak Angkola language practices, and participated in the critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for the integrity of the work.

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