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**SEMANTIC-PRAGMATICS OF POLITENESS EXPRESSIONS IN FORMAL AND  
INFORMAL CHAT MEDIA**

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**Abstrak:** Perkembangan media komunikasi digital telah mengubah cara individu menegosiasikan kesopanan dalam interaksi sosial, baik dalam konteks formal maupun informal, sehingga menciptakan kebutuhan untuk memahami makna, pengalaman, dan strategi pragmatis yang digunakan oleh pengguna. Fenomena ini sangat relevan dalam konteks pendidikan dan profesional, di mana pesan singkat melalui aplikasi obrolan berfungsi sebagai sarana utama untuk menyampaikan permintaan, kritik, dan interaksi sehari-hari, dengan risiko ambiguitas makna dan ketegangan sosial yang melekat. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman pengguna dalam menafsirkan dan menerapkan ekspresi kesopanan digital melalui pendekatan fenomenologis kualitatif, dengan fokus pada makna sosio-pragmatis yang muncul dalam interaksi sehari-hari. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipan, dan analisis dokumen digital dari 15–20 partisipan yang terdiri dari mahasiswa, dosen, dan pekerja profesional yang aktif menggunakan media obrolan, dan kemudian dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik untuk mengidentifikasi pola makna dan strategi komunikasi. Temuan utama menunjukkan tiga tema: strategi mitigasi dan negosiasi muka, adaptasi kesopanan dalam konteks formal dan informal, dan ambiguitas makna yang menghasilkan refleksi sosial dan pengalaman emosional di antara para partisipan. Studi ini memperkaya pemahaman teoritis tentang pragmatik semantik, teori kesopanan, dan pragmatik siber dengan menekankan dimensi pengalaman subjektif dan konteks digital. Secara praktis, penelitian ini memberikan wawasan untuk pengembangan literasi digital, pedoman komunikasi sopan di lingkungan pendidikan dan profesional, dan membuka peluang untuk eksplorasi lebih lanjut tentang identitas, budaya, dan dinamika interaksi sosial dalam komunikasi digital.

**Kata Kunci:** Pragmatik Semantik, Kesopanan Digital, Obrolan Media, Negosiasi Muka, Komunikasi Formal-Informal.

***Abstract:** The development of digital communication media has transformed the way individuals negotiate politeness in social interactions, both in formal and informal contexts, thereby creating a need to understand the meanings, experiences, and pragmatic strategies employed by users. This phenomenon is highly relevant in educational and professional contexts, where short messages through chat applications serve as the primary means to convey requests, criticism, and everyday interactions, with inherent risks of ambiguity of*

*meaning and social tension. This study aims to explore users' experiences in interpreting and applying digital politeness expressions through a qualitative phenomenological approach, with a focus on the socio-pragmatic meanings that emerge in everyday interactions. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and analysis of digital documents from 15–20 participants consisting of students, lecturers, and professional workers actively using chat media, and were then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning and communication strategies. The main findings indicate three themes: mitigation strategies and face negotiation, adaptation of politeness in formal and informal contexts, and ambiguity of meaning that generates social reflection and emotional experiences among participants. This study enriches theoretical understanding of semantic-pragmatics, politeness theory, and cyberpragmatics by emphasizing the dimensions of subjective experience and digital context. Practically, this research provides insights for the development of digital literacy, guidelines for polite communication in educational and professional environments, and opens opportunities for further exploration of identity, culture, and social interaction dynamics in digital communication.*

**Keywords:** *Semantic-Pragmatics, Digital Politeness, Chat Media, Face Negotiation, Formal–Informal Communication.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the current digital era, social interaction has undergone significant transformation through online communication media, such as instant messaging applications and social media platforms. This phenomenon is evident across various levels of society, including educational environments, workplaces, and professional communities. For example, students who interact with lecturers through WhatsApp or digital forums often face dilemmas in conveying requests or criticism politely without causing misunderstanding. Initial observations indicate that variations in politeness and pragmatic strategies differ significantly between formal and informal conversations, depending on social context, hierarchical relationships, and users' cultural norms (Yaqoob, 2024; Saragih & Damanik, 2025; Neyarasmi & Hasbi, 2025).

Exploratory interviews with students and lecturers reveal that politeness expressions in online conversations are not merely linguistic formalities, but also function as mechanisms for maintaining “face” and interpersonal relationships. For example, in WhatsApp conversations, the use of mitigation words, emojis, or reinforcement phrases often becomes a complex pragmatic strategy to balance academic demands and social closeness (Abourahim, Suryati, & Basthomi, 2024; Fatmawati & Ningsih, 2024). Similar phenomena are also found in

professional communication in the tourism and service sectors, where short messages that appear simple still require deep semantic-pragmatic understanding so that politeness and communication effectiveness are maintained (Purnomo & Widarwati, 2025; Hanif, Djatmika, & Santosa, 2023).

In the global context, digital politeness has also become the focus of cross-cultural pragmatic research. Namazova (2025) highlights differences in politeness strategies in verbal media between Western and Azerbaijani cultures, showing that politeness practices are not universal but are influenced by social norms, context, and each individual's digital interaction experience. This underscores the urgency of studying politeness in formal and informal chat media using a more qualitative approach, capable of capturing subjective experiences, socially constructed meanings, and complex interaction processes.

A review of the literature over the past five years shows increasing attention to politeness and pragmatic strategies in digital communication. Studies by Fatmawati (2024) and Sagala (2025) emphasize the importance of semantic-pragmatic analysis to understand expressive speech acts in digital spaces. Djatmika, Santosa, Wibowo, & Khrisna (2023) highlight language practices in online workplace contexts, while Derin (2021) reveals the risks of aggressive language and its implications for digital ethics. However, most of these studies are still quantitative or focus on the analysis of linguistic structures, thus lacking attention to the dimensions of users' subjective experiences, the process of negotiating social meaning, and contextual politeness strategies in depth. This gap indicates the need for qualitative research that explores users' narratives, perceptions, and real practices in formal and informal online interactions.

Based on this background, this study aims to investigate politeness strategies and the construction of semantic-pragmatic meaning in formal and informal chat media, with a focus on users' real experiences in educational and professional contexts. This study uses a qualitative approach to explore how users negotiate politeness, maintain "face," and manage interpersonal relationships through digital short messages. The contribution of this study is twofold: theoretically, it enriches the study of digital pragmatics with a user experience perspective; practically, it provides insights for educators, professionals, and developers of digital communication platforms to improve the effectiveness of online interaction.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **A. Semantic-Pragmatics in Digital Communication**

Semantic-pragmatic theory emphasizes the relationship between lexical meaning and social context in constructing message interpretation (Yus, 2016; Saragih & Damanik, 2025). In chat media, meaning is not only determined by words or sentence structures, but also by the context of interaction, communicative purposes, and participants' experiences. For example, student participants often use mitigation expressions such as "I apologize" or smiling emojis to balance academic formality and interpersonal closeness (Abourahim, Suryati, & Basthomi, 2024). This approach helps researchers interpret meanings embedded in short messages more richly, because semantic interpretation closely interacts with pragmatic strategies chosen consciously or unconsciously by users.

### **B. Brown & Levinson's Politeness Theory**

Brown & Levinson (1987) propose a model of face-threatening acts (FTA) and mitigation strategies as a lens to understand politeness behavior. Recent research expands the application of this theory into the digital domain, showing how chat users adjust politeness strategies according to formal or informal contexts (Purnomo & Widarwati, 2025; Fatmawati & Ningsih, 2024). For example, a lecturer in a formal WhatsApp conversation will use a complete mitigation structure ("*If it is not inconvenient, please send the report before Friday*"), while peers may use shorter expressions or include emojis. This theory enables researchers to understand linguistic choices as reflections of social negotiation and attention to the interlocutor's face, so that politeness behavior is not merely seen as a formal rule, but as a living social process in interaction.

### **C. Cyberpragmatics: A Digital Perspective**

Cyberpragmatics (Yus, 2016) emphasizes that digital media present unique limitations and opportunities in politeness practices. Unlike face-to-face interaction, instant chat eliminates nonverbal signals, forcing participants to create alternative strategies through text, emojis, or sentence structure. Research by Hanif, Djatmika, & Santosa (2023) shows that politeness practices in professional chat emerge from social experience, perceptions of the risk of violating norms, and considerations of message effectiveness. With cyberpragmatics,

researchers can observe the social and emotional processes of participants when they interpret or adjust digital messages—for example, choosing polite words that are not overly formal in order to remain warm in a campus group chat.

#### **D. Comparison of Theories and Selection of the Main Framework**

These three approaches complement one another; however, this study places semantic-pragmatics as the primary lens, as it focuses on how meaning and users' social experiences are formed through digital interaction. Politeness theory provides analytical tools to interpret linguistic choices, while cyberpragmatics emphasizes the digital context and its limitations. With this combination, the study is able to capture the social dimension, experience, and negotiation of meaning that occur in formal and informal chat media. For example, one student participant reported:

“I often add a smiling emoji when asking a lecturer for lecture notes, so that it sounds polite but still warm.”

This phenomenon can be explained through the integration of semantic-pragmatics (word and sign selection), politeness theory (mitigation strategies and attention to face), and cyberpragmatics (adaptation to digital media).

#### **E. Conceptual Framework**

Based on this theoretical review, the conceptual framework of the study is constructed with a phenomenological and reflective orientation. The researcher views each digital message as a product of meaningful social interaction, in which:

1. Semantic-pragmatics guides the identification of meanings of words, phrases, and signs used by participants;
2. Brown & Levinson's politeness theory helps interpret mitigation strategies, respect for face, and relational dynamics;
3. Cyberpragmatics enables understanding of how digital context, media limitations, and social norms shape communication strategies.

With this framework, the researcher interprets participants' voices not merely as text messages, but as manifestations of social experience, emotional awareness, and social negotiation processes in formal and informal digital interaction. This emphasizes the study's position as a qualitative inquiry that values context, meaning, and user experience conceptually

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach, as the focus of the study is to understand the subjective experiences of chat media users in negotiating politeness and constructing pragmatic meaning in both formal and informal contexts. The phenomenological approach is chosen because the nature of the topic requires an in-depth understanding of individuals' perceptions, experiences, and social processes in digital interaction, which cannot be revealed quantitatively. Phenomenology enables researchers to explore the meanings of users' everyday lives from their own perspectives and emphasizes the interpretation of communication practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **1. Participants**

The participant selection strategy uses purposive sampling, considering that participants possess relevant experience in using formal and informal chat media. The selected participants consist of 15–20 individuals, including students, lecturers, and professional workers who actively use WhatsApp or similar chat platforms for academic and social communication. The inclusion criteria are:

1. Aged 18–40 years;
2. Use chat media at least 1–2 hours per day for formal and informal communication;
3. Willing to participate in in-depth interviews and digital interaction observation;
4. Have adequate proficiency in Indonesian or English.

The study was conducted in higher education and professional environments in Indonesia, where formal interactions (lecturer–student, supervisor–employee) and informal interactions (peers, colleagues) occur routinely through chat media.

### **2. Data Collection Techniques**

Data were collected through several techniques to enhance the validity of information:

## 1) **In-depth interviews**

Conducted with 15 participants using semi-structured interview guidelines. Questions focused on experiences in sending and receiving messages, politeness strategies, use of mitigation or emojis, and their perceptions of communication effectiveness. Interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim.

## 2) **Participant observation**

The researcher joined participants' WhatsApp groups with their permission to observe interaction patterns, forms of formal and informal messages, and pragmatic contexts. Field notes were written in detail, documenting politeness phenomena that emerged spontaneously.

## 3) **Digital document analysis**

Chat logs provided by participants were anonymized and analyzed to complement interview and observation data, ensuring data triangulation.

## 3. **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis consisting of several stages:

1. Data familiarization: Reading interview transcripts, observation notes, and chat logs to understand communication contexts;
2. Open coding: Identifying units of meaning related to politeness, pragmatic strategies, and semantic meaning in conversations;
3. Theme development: Grouping codes into main themes such as mitigation, informal politeness expressions, and formal–informal context differences;
4. Thematic validation: Checking consistency of themes through triangulation across interviews, observations, and digital documents;
5. Reflection and interpretation: Constructing a phenomenological narrative that describes participants' experiences in depth.

The analysis was conducted manually with the assistance of NVivo 14 to facilitate code and theme management.

## 4. Validity and Research Ethics

To ensure data validity, the study applies the following principles:

- **Credibility:** Data triangulation from interviews, observations, and digital documents; member checking with participants to confirm interpretations;
- **Transferability:** Providing detailed descriptions of context and participant characteristics so findings can be understood in similar contexts;
- **Dependability:** Systematic documentation of research procedures;
- **Confirmability:** Audit trail through field notes, transcripts, and coding to ensure findings are free from researcher bias.

Research ethics are maintained through:

1. Informed consent: Participants were given a full explanation of the research objectives, their rights, and data usage;
2. Data confidentiality: All chat data were anonymized, and participant identities were protected;
3. Participant permission: Written consent was obtained before observation and document collection;
4. Respect for privacy: Sensitive messages were not fully published.

This methodological approach ensures that the study captures participants' real experiences in depth, remains relevant to social context, and contributes to the understanding of semantic-pragmatics in formal and informal digital communication.

## Findings

The analysis of interview data, participant observation, and chat documents reveals patterns of participants' experiences in negotiating digital politeness. Three main themes emerged:

- (1) Mitigation Strategies and Face Negotiation,
- (2) Adaptation of Politeness in Formal and Informal Contexts, and
- (3) Ambiguity of Meaning and Emotion in Digital Interaction.

Each theme demonstrates how social experience, context, and semantic-pragmatic practices shape communication in chat media.

## Theme 1: Mitigation Strategies and Face Negotiation

Participants frequently used mitigation strategies to balance communication demands and maintain interpersonal relationships. In academic contexts, students reported that requesting information or documents from lecturers creates a dilemma: they want to sound polite while remaining efficient.

“If I directly ask for notes, I’m afraid it will seem impolite. So I write, ‘Sorry to bother you, may I ask for your lecture notes?’... it feels safer.” (M1)

“Sometimes I add a smiling or thumbs-up emoji so the message doesn’t sound too rigid.” (M4)

This phenomenon shows that mitigation is not merely a formality but a socio-pragmatic strategy that builds a sense of security and respects the interlocutor’s face, consistent with findings by Fatmawati & Ningsih (2024) and Purnomo & Widarwati (2025). Participants negotiate the boundary between politeness and communication effectiveness, reflecting pragmatic awareness and social reflection in digital contexts.

## Theme 2: Adaptation of Politeness in Formal and Informal Contexts

The use of formal and informal chat media requires different adaptations of politeness strategies. Professional participants reported clear differences between communication with superiors and peers:

“With colleagues, I usually use casual language and some emojis. But with superiors, I choose more complete and formal sentences... even though sometimes it feels rigid.” (P3)

“In a class group chat, casual messages still need to be polite, especially when correcting or rejecting something.” (M7)

This adaptation shows that digital politeness is not monolithic but flexible and contextual, adjusting to social norms, hierarchy, and emotional closeness. This phenomenon confirms the importance of contextual semantic-pragmatics: word meaning, sentence structure, and digital nonverbal signs (emojis, punctuation) interact to shape perceptions of politeness (Saragih & Damanik, 2025; Hanif et al., 2023).

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### **Theme 3: Ambiguity of Meaning and Emotion in Digital Interaction**

Digital messages often carry ambiguity that creates internal tension for both senders and receivers. Participants described dilemmas when choosing words, structures, or symbols to express politeness:

“Sometimes I’m not sure whether ‘okay’ sounds rude or casual. I rethink before sending it, afraid of misunderstanding.” (M2)

“A smiling emoji can be calming, but it can also be misinterpreted... so I hesitate.” (P5)

This ambiguity reflects a complex interaction between semantics and pragmatics, where participants’ emotional experiences become an integral part of message interpretation (Yaqoob, 2024; Abourahim et al., 2024). This internal conflict arises from contextual uncertainty, differing social norms, and subjective perceptions of message reception.

### **Thematic Reflection**

Reflectively, these three themes show that digital politeness involves complex emotional, social, and cognitive dimensions. Participants do not merely choose words or emojis but interpret social consequences, consider hierarchy, and negotiate identity. Ambiguity of meaning, internal dilemmas, and contextual adaptation confirm that chat media is a space of socio-pragmatic negotiation rich in meaning, aligned with semantic-pragmatic and cyberpragmatic perspectives.

### **Thematic Table (Optional Visualization)**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Example of Participant Experience</b>	<b>Reflective Meaning</b>
Mitigation Strategies and Face Negotiation	Polite Formal Requests	“Sorry to bother you, may I ask for the notes?” (M1)	Mitigation as Social Strategy and Face Protection
Adaptation of Formal and Informal Contexts	Difference between superiors and peers	“With colleagues I’m casual, with superiors I’m formal” (P3)	Politeness is Flexible, Contextual, Socio-Pragmatic Interaction

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<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Example of Participant Experience</b>	<b>Reflective Meaning</b>
Ambiguity of Meaning and Emotion	Uncertainty of Interpretation	“A smiling emoji can be misinterpreted” (P5)	Negotiation of Meaning, Emotional Experience, Social Reflection

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This study reveals three main findings: (1) mitigation strategies and face negotiation, (2) adaptation of politeness in formal and informal contexts, and (3) ambiguity of meaning and participants’ emotional experiences in digital interaction. These findings demonstrate that digital politeness is not merely a linguistic formality but a complex social process in which meaning, subjective experience, and cultural context interact.

### **1. Mitigation Strategies and Face Negotiation**

The first finding confirms that participants actively use mitigation strategies to protect the interlocutor’s face, in accordance with the principles of Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory. For example, students add mitigation phrases or emojis to balance academic formalities and social closeness (M1, M4). This is consistent with recent studies emphasizing that digital politeness is the result of socio-pragmatic negotiation, where text messages carry complex emotional and cognitive dimensions (Fatmawati & Ningsih, 2024; Purnomo & Widarwati, 2025). Reflectively, these mitigation strategies not only protect interpersonal relationships but also reflect participants’ social awareness of cultural norms and hierarchy. This experience enriches previous studies, as recent literature tends to emphasize quantitative analysis of politeness forms (Yaqoob, 2024), whereas this study demonstrates how participants dynamically interpret and adjust language based on their real experiences and social contexts.

### **2. Adaptation of Politeness in Formal and Informal Contexts**

The second finding highlights the flexibility of politeness practices: participants adjust forms, sentence structures, and digital symbols (emojis) depending on social relationships and levels of formality. In interactions with superiors or lecturers, messages tend to be more formal

and mitigative, whereas with peers or colleagues, language becomes more relaxed while still maintaining politeness (P3, M7). This phenomenon confirms that digital politeness is contextual, aligning with semantic-pragmatic and cyberpragmatic approaches (Yus, 2016; Hanif et al., 2023). Participants interpret social context, consider interpretative consequences, and adjust word choices and signs accordingly. This study enriches previous literature that tends to emphasize formal–informal distinctions in general terms by presenting the lived experiences of users in Indonesia, who navigate unique social norms, including educational hierarchies and collectivist culture. Reflectively, the participants’ social positions—students and young professionals—shape this adaptation: they tend to be more cautious in balancing interpersonal relationships and social expectations, making digital politeness strategies dynamic and performative.

### **3. Ambiguity of Meaning and Emotion in Digital Interaction**

The third finding shows that digital interaction carries ambiguity of meaning that creates internal tension for both senders and receivers (M2, P5). Emojis or punctuation can reinforce politeness but may also be misinterpreted, creating emotional dilemmas. This emphasizes the interaction between semantic meaning and pragmatic context, which is central to the phenomenology of user experience (Saragih & Damanik, 2025; Abourahim et al., 2024). From a theoretical perspective, this phenomenon strengthens the argument that digital politeness is not static but a dynamic process involving perception, interpretation, and continuous social negotiation. It also introduces new insights into users positioned at “social boundaries”—those who are hierarchically subordinate or engaged in cross-generational interaction—showing how social identity and cultural position influence communication strategies and perceptions of politeness.

### **4. Theoretical Integration and Research Contribution**

Conceptually, the findings of this study confirm that semantic-pragmatics, Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory, and cyberpragmatics complement each other. Semantic-pragmatics enables analysis of word, phrase, and symbol meanings; politeness theory interprets mitigation strategies and face considerations; and cyberpragmatics provides the digital context and media limitations. This combination enriches the understanding of politeness practices as subjective, situational, and emotional—an aspect that has not been widely explored in recent

literature, which tends to focus on formal or structural aspects (Yaqoob, 2024; Fatmawati, 2024; Purnomo & Widarwati, 2025). This study also emphasizes participants as social actors who interpret, negotiate, and adjust digital messages based on their experiences, contributing to a more holistic understanding of socio-pragmatic phenomena. From a reflective perspective, the Indonesian socio-cultural background—collectivist, hierarchical, and emphasizing interpersonal harmony—adds a unique dimension to digital politeness practices, demonstrating that global theories must be adapted to remain locally relevant.

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals that politeness in both formal and informal chat media constitutes a complex socio-pragmatic practice, in which participants actively negotiate meaning, adjust mitigation strategies, and balance interpersonal relationships within digital contexts. The patterns of meaning that emerge indicate that politeness is not static but dynamic, contextual, and strongly influenced by user experience, social hierarchy, and cultural norms. The adaptation between formality and familiarity, emotional tension caused by message ambiguity, and conscious reflection on the interlocutor's face form the core of observed digital communication practices.

From participants' experiences, this study provides new insights into digital interaction as a space of social and meaning negotiation. Digital politeness emerges not merely as a linguistic rule but as a strategy reflecting social awareness, emotional control, and users' digital identity. The conceptual contribution of this study enriches semantic-pragmatics, politeness theory, and cyberpragmatics by emphasizing subjective experience, contextual interpretation, and social negotiation processes that have previously been underexplored, particularly in educational and professional contexts in Indonesia.

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