

Written Language Politeness (of Short Messages on Social Media) and Emotional Intelligence: A Study in Indonesia and Malaysia

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Introduction: The use of written communication through short messages in social media on smartphone platforms has recently become a habit in social relations and communication. Language politeness and emotional intelligence are required by individuals, groups, communities, or institutions in conveying the contents of the messages, ensuring them to be perceived appropriately by their targets.

Methods: Survey research was carried out on 173 respondents with Malay culture background in Indonesia and Malaysia using the *Self-Rated Malaysian Emotional Intelligence Scale* developed by with a reliability value of 0.922 for Malaysian respondents and 0.803 for Indonesian respondents as well as using a politeness scale developed based on Lakoff's linguistic politeness theory.

Results: The findings of the study demonstrated that culture may affect language politeness ($F(3, 169) = 5.759$ and $M2 = F(4, 168) = 4.300$, $P < 0.05$). However, language politeness did not correlate to emotional intelligence, age, gender, and educational background. Consequently, the use of communication in short messages should consider the cultural background of both the sender and receiver. Cultural similarities may facilitate the understanding of the message's content and diminish the occurrence of communication issues or conflicts.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, language politeness, communication, short messages in social media, Malay culture

Introduction

Every community has its culture; which deals with rules or principles governing the way of speaking or communicating.¹ One of the rules or principles of communication is politeness. Politeness is a behavior present in a community aimed to respect other members of the community and diminish conflicts or disputes between the members of the community.^{2,3} Politeness plays an important role in central issues of human lives, such as trust, team coordination, shared workloads, etc.⁴

The advancement of information technology has resulted in changes in chosen media in carrying out social relations and communication. Communication via smartphones, including written communication of short messages, has recently become very familiar. Short message services as one of the technological innovations and advancements potentially affect language use.⁵ Smartphone popularity enables multitasking and multi-communication functions, thus communication practice utilizing smartphones has become a habit in relational interactions between individuals.⁶ One of the elements needed in interpersonal relations and communication is politeness. Politeness has become an essential part of many cultures and technological advancements. Brown and Levinson⁷ stated that politeness is closely related to culture and language. Miller et al⁸ stated that one of the cultural and universal functions of politeness is to solve communication and relational issues.

The advancement of information technology has changed the media of social relations and communication for individuals, groups, communities, society, and other larger institutions. This advancement is followed by a set of regulations protecting communicants. Cyberlaw or telematics law has currently been implemented. Internationally, cyber law refers to regulations concerning the utilization of information and communication technology. Telematics law is the manifestation of the convergence of telecommunication, media, and informatics laws. Other terms commonly used are the law of information technology, the virtual world law, or the cyber law. In Indonesia, The Law of The Republic of Indonesia Number 11 of 2008 is the law regulating electronic information and transactions. Article 29 of the

Law states that “Any Person who knowingly and without authority sends Electronic Information and/or Electronic Records that contain violence threats or scares aimed personally”. It means any carelessness or impoliteness in social media communication can be deemed as a violation of the law when a party is harmed, and the violation can be proven. In Malaysia there is legislation which deals with the protection of cyberspace users is the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998. It provides a regulatory framework to cater for the convergence of the telecommunications, broadcasting and computer industries, with the aim of pushing Malaysia as a major global centre and hub for communications and multimedia information and content services.⁹ These provisions provide for communication.

Communication through media, especially smartphones, has developed the social, technical, and communicative functions of every individual in daily life.¹⁰ Social media communication provides a more convenient and easier way of communication.¹¹ Politeness has a role in communications, including online communications on social media platforms.¹² The observation of data and complaints recorded by Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network (SAFE-net) in 2020 resulted in 35 criminal cases which utilized the articles in The Law of Electronic Information and Transactions while Amnesty International Indonesia recorded 98 cases in 2021.^{13,14} In Malaysia, there are 1410 cases of intrusion cyber communication, 159 intrusion attempt cases, 417 cyber harassment cases, etc.⁹ Based on these records, language politeness, including the written language of short messages, becomes a problem that needs to be scientifically analyzed.

Among the previous studies discussing the politeness aspect of short messages is a study conducted by Brown and Levinson.⁷ They proposed four politeness strategies for delivering short messages, namely *bald on record*, *positive politeness*, *negative politeness*, and *off-record*. Researchers have conducted studies on social media communication phenomena through the perspective of politeness theories. Even, a special edition of the *Journal of Politeness Research* published in 2010 focused on politeness and impoliteness aspects in computer-mediated communication.⁶ A study conducted by Miller et al⁸ showed that the users of short messages applied several politeness strategies, such as hybrid strategies, off-cam records, and other strategies to avoid communication threats that might occur in face-to-face communication.

People in some cultures, especially the Eastern Culture, remain to consider that politeness is an important factor in building communication, including text message communications. Historically and geographically, Indonesia and Malaysia originate from the same culture, that is Malay culture. Even though Malaysia and Indonesia had experienced colonization from different countries, the cultures of these two countries tend to be similar, such as respecting elders. Malaysian and Indonesian people also call their elders with the prefix “Sir” or “Ma’am” both in formal and informal situations. Not only that, the culture of greeting, wearing clothes that are relatively polite and the culture of going home to older people in the family is also a common tradition between Malaysia and Indonesia. Therefore, a study on language politeness and emotional intelligence related to communication behaviors by using short messages on social media as one of the platforms which is widely used by individuals, groups, communities, and larger institutions will enrich the studies related to smartphone behaviors. This study aims to analyze the demographic factors of language politeness when creating communication through short messages on social media and to analyze emotional intelligence in the context of Indonesian and Malaysian culture.

Studies conducted by Eshghinejad and Moini,¹⁰ Faiz and Suhaila,¹⁵ and Holmes and Meyerhoff³ showed that the use of short messages via smartphones or other linguistic behaviors were affected by non-linguistic factors such as age, sex, education, personality, cultural background, and contexts where the language occurred. Another factor affecting communication is emotions. The emotion managing skills of each individual play a role in communicating and behaving. One of the factors affecting the ability of any individual in managing emotions is emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is categorized as a type of social intelligence involving the ability to observe the individual self’s emotions and other people’s emotions, and distinguish emotions by utilizing the information to guide thoughts and actions.¹⁶ Goleman¹⁷ perceives emotional intelligence as a constellation of abilities and attitudes embedded in four categories, namely self-consciousness (emotional management and self-confidence), social consciousness (empathy and social orientation), personal management (self-control, adaptability, internal motivation, and initiatives), and relational management (inspiring leadership, influence, and conflict management).

Based on the aforementioned explanation, emotional intelligence defines politeness in communications, including short message communication through social media in many cultures, including Indonesia and Malaysia, which are based on Malay culture.

Methods

This study was survey research of Indonesian and Malaysian participants using smartphones and short messages on communication media, including Whatsapp, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, etc. The number of participants was 173 respondents, consisting of 44 males and 129 females. The respondents in this study consisted of 87 Malaysian (50.3%) and 86 Indonesian (49.7%) people. The age of the respondents ranged between 17 and 28 years old. The respondents were chosen based on the accidental sampling method in two countries namely Indonesia and Malaysia. The data collection was conducted online. The participants declared their agreement in the form of informed consent before filling out the questionnaire. This study obtained ethical approval indicated by Ethical Approval Number 2624-KEPK Faculty of Nursing Universitas Airlangga.

Measures

The measurements were carried out using the *Demographic Questionnaire*, *Emotional Intelligence Scale*, and *Politeness Scale*.

Demographic Questionnaire

The Demographic Questionnaire was used to collect demographical data from the participants. The demographical data consist of age, sex, the highest grade of education, and citizenship.

Emotional Intelligence Scale

The emotional intelligence measurement in this study was carried out using the *Self-Rated Malaysian Emotional Intelligence Scale* developed by Tharbe and Mun.¹⁸ The scale was translated into the Indonesian language and tested on the Indonesian respondents. The scale contains 39 items representing Mayer and Salovey's four domains.¹⁶ The reliability of the questionnaire was 0.922 for Malaysian respondents and 0.803 for Indonesian respondents. The assessment method of the items was based on five categories of the Likert Scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) for positive items and vice versa for negative items.

Politeness

The politeness-measuring instrument was designed based on Lakoff's linguistic politeness theory.² Robin Lakoff's theory² mentioned the aspects of politeness, namely a) formality, were to achieve convenience in communication, the utterance should not impose or intimidate the interlocutors, and b) optionality, stating that both communicants communicating determine the agreed options to be mutually convenient, and c) an agreement stating that the one initiating a conversation must be friendly and maintain friendly bonds with his/her interlocutors so that the communicated messages can be conveyed properly. This instrument contains nine statement items related to language styles. Three out of the nine items are the items that according to Lakoff's theory² are the essential aspects of communication, namely being formal, equal, and non-coercive. The participants were asked to choose three statements describing language politeness. The correct statement would be scored 1 and the maximum score for this instrument was 3.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using ANOVA, regression analysis, and hierarchical regression analysis.^{19,20} ANOVA was used to examine the variations in average scores between the Indonesian and Malaysian groups. The regression analysis was used to examine the effects of emotional intelligence on language politeness of Indonesian and Malaysian participants while the hierarchical regression analysis was used to examine the contribution or the impact of demographical data on politeness behaviors in using language.

Result

Table 1 is information concerning ANOVA results with model 1 predictors, namely age, gender, and culture. Model 2 is the result of ANOVA predictors of language politeness, comprising age, gender, culture, and emotional intelligence. Based on the table, it can be seen that both regression models are significant to use. The formed regression models were $M1 = F(3.169) = 5.759$, $P < 0.05$ and $M2 = F(4.168) = 4.300$, $P < 0.05$. Each model demonstrated R^2 value of 0.93,

Table 1 Difference of Means Between the Indonesian and Malaysian Groups

Model	df1	df2	F	Sig
1	3	169	5.759	0.001
2	4	168	4.300	0.002

Table 2 Hierarchical Regression

Model	R ²	Variables	B	SE	B	Sig
1	0.93	(constant)	1.881	0.359		0.000
		Age	−0.178	0.128	−0.106	0.168
		Gender	0.091	0.142	0.047	0.523
		Culture	−0.411	0.128	−0.247	0.002*
2	0.93	(constant)	1.777			0.020
		Age	−0.181	−0.108	−0.108	0.167
		Gender	0.086	0.045	0.045	0.553
		Culture	−0.412	−0.247	−0.247	0.002*
		Emotional Intelligence	0.001	0.012	0.012	0.876

meaning that the predictors of age, gender, culture, and emotional intelligence simultaneously contribute 93% to politeness behavior in using language. Meanwhile, the rest is influenced by other non-examined variables.

Table 2 is provides information about the contribution of the variables of age, gender, culture, and emotional intelligence partially. From the table above, it can be seen that only the cultural variable significantly affects or predicts the language politeness variable (sig 0.002). Other variables, namely age, gender, and emotional intelligence do not significantly predict language politeness.

Discussion

The use of technology has become needs in facilitating communication. In many cultures, politeness in communication has become the key to determining success in building social relations or communication. The Law of Electronic Information and Transactions implicitly states that politeness in all forms of communication, including written short messages, must prioritize polite language rhetoric and can reach the message's recipients or the readers without causing any conflicts or problems which can lead to criminal cases due to Law violation.

Politeness always exists in every communication within society although the implementation of politeness strategies varies depending on cultural and linguistic differences.²¹ Local cultures and languages strongly affect the language politeness of Indonesians to form positive characters.²² Linguistic facts show that the use of polite Indonesian language is strongly influenced by local languages and cultural entities (Hendrayan, in Saputra et al).²²

Politeness is one key defining Malay cultural identity. Politeness or civility is an extremely good moral value in Malay culture. Polite behaviors can be noticed in both verbal and nonverbal forms. The establishment of politeness among the Malays is due to Islam as the official religion of the Malays which prioritizes *akhlaqul karimah* or noble characters. For most Malaysians, Islamic values and principles must become an indivisible part of their daily life and their cultural existence. In Malaysia, the Malays are mostly born Muslim. Malay people must not talk impolitely to others. This moral value has been deeply internalized in the daily life of most Malays living in Malaysia.²³

The findings of this study show that the demographic variables (i.e., age, gender, and culture) and emotional intelligence variables simultaneously affect the language politeness variable. The finding is in line with the findings of previous research conducted by Shirazi and Nadoushani²⁴ stating that emotional intelligence is strongly related to the ability to build relations in a social environment. Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize the emotions of oneself and the people around him/her and to express emotions properly based on the undergone social situations.²⁵

Emotional intelligence helps individuals to communicate effectively. Furthermore, Shirazi and Nadoushani²⁴ also found that the cultural aspects also affected politeness in using text messages. Every culture has its standards for assessing politeness in communication.

In her perspective, Lakoff²⁶ stated that politeness relates to conversations that functionally center on interpersonal relations rather than informational exchanges. Leech²⁷ also conceptualized politeness within pragmatic frameworks consisting of textual and interpersonal rhetoric. Leech's politeness theory belongs to interpersonal rhetoric, which prioritizes the principles of cooperativeness and irony. These politeness principles aim to build and maintain feelings developed in interactions happening in a social group. For Yule,²⁸ politeness signifies individual cognitive capability when interacting with his/her interlocutors. Politeness is closely related to interpersonal relations and only a small part of politeness is dedicated to informational exchanges.

The analysis result of each independent variable shows that only the variable of culture significantly affects the dependent variables. Variables of age, gender, and emotional intelligence do not significantly affect politeness in using text messages. This finding confirms the findings of a previous study conducted by Eshghinejaf and Moini¹⁰ indicating there is no difference between men and women in applying politeness as a communication strategy via text messages. Men and women apply politeness principles internalized in their respective cultures to do text messages. Culture is the only *independent* variable affecting language politeness. This finding is in line with the findings of previous studies stating that communication politeness is one of the aspects of a culture.^{29,30} Language politeness or civility is required in every social situation.^{9,31,32}

Language politeness or civility found in research respondents is a part of Indonesian and Malaysian people. Although historically Indonesian and Malaysian cultures originated from Malay culture, the development of these cultures has shown significant differences in terms of linguistic expressions and communication methods. In Indonesian people, language politeness covers the elements of communication politeness proposed by Lakoff,² namely being formal, equal, and non-coercive. In Indonesian society, language politeness includes elements of communication politeness proposed by Lakoff², namely formal, equal and not coercive. In this case, Indonesian people still respect politeness, call elders with the prefix "Sir/Ma'am", but remain equal in expressing (democratic) opinions and tend to respect personal decisions even though they have different views. For example, in responding to an opinion on Twitter, "I agree with your view about the dangers of using gadgets for children. However, the condition of both parents working in the public sphere often makes them provide more flexible screen time for children. This cannot be avoided, Ma'am/Sir. However, thanks for your perspective, I do respectX". This finding confirms the findings of a study by Wardoyo.³³ He states that the Indonesians use the principles of being formal, equal, and non-coercive (the interlocutors do not feel humiliated). Indonesians tend to be able to identify the gaps of power when communicating with others. Formal languages are commonly used when communicating with older people or people from higher ranks while informal languages are used in communications between participants of equal ages or positions.^{33,34}

Different from Indonesian concepts of language politeness, Malaysian politeness emphasizes *respect*, *patience*, and *gratitude* aspects of language politeness.²⁹ Respect is the ability to regard other people when communicating or expressing ideas. Respect refers to maintaining politeness through languages and actions in accordance with the norms of a community. Next, patience, which belongs to emotional aspects, is the aspect in which an individual is asked to control himself/herself from saying all of his/her thoughts out loud. Patience also means assessing the situation and the readiness of the interlocutors in carrying out communication. Gratitude aspect namely refers to civility or politeness in communicating or taking action. For example, the use of terms related to a religious perspective such as thanksgiving and salam (i.e., alhamdulillah, thank God and barakallah) are almost always written in conversations via WhatsApp private messages. The phrase "just relax, it's okay" also often appears when the writer interacts with Malaysians. These three aspects, namely respect, patience, and gratitude, are interrelated in generating the politeness of Malay culture, both in terms of language or actions deemed appropriate individually or socially.

Based on the aspect differences existing in language politeness in the culture of Indonesia and Malay in Malaysia, it can be concluded that the two cultures have different cultural aspects affecting language politeness, including the politeness of written language and communication through text messages on social media.

The limitations of this study are that the results of this study cannot be generalized to a population whose ages are outside the range of research participants, namely 18–28 years old. Besides, the similarities of cultural background (i.e., the Malay culture) are not controlled in this study. Moreover, the instrument of language politeness developed from Lakoff's theory² still needs further measurements on its reliability.

Conclusion

The use of written communications in the form of short messages on social media is a strategy for building social interactions and communication emphasizing on language politeness and emotional intelligence. Interpersonal conflicts originating from miscommunication can develop into more extensive conflicts between individuals, groups, communities, or institutions. Therefore, both the sender and the receiver of a message must consider cultural backgrounds in writing social media messages. Language politeness or civility and cultural similarities will facilitate understanding the contents of a message and diminish communication issues and conflicts. Indonesia and Malaysia demonstrate cultural differences in terms of language politeness or civility.

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