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Analysis of Persian WhatsApp Messages with Reference to Age, Politeness, and the Speech Act of Request

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Abstract

This study investigated WhatsApp messages exchanged between two generations of Iranian students and their respective lecturers in light of politeness, age, and the speech act of request. We utilised two sets of data: messages sent by current young students to two young lecturers, and those sent by former middle-aged students to two senior lecturers. Altogether, 100 WhatsApp messages were analysed (50 from each data set) focusing on salutations, body, and closing parts. The findings revealed that politeness is expressed differently across the two age groups: the younger students' messages featured short and informal expressions and frequent use of emojis while the older group utilised elaborate messages to express politeness through the frequent use of honorifics and other politeness markers. Moreover, the younger group used WhatsApp messages towards their academic goals, such as requesting the postponement of an exam, whereas the older group messages aimed at re-establishing solidarity with their lecturers.

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Keywords

WhatsApp exchanges – politeness – generational differences – requestive speech act

1 Introduction

During the last decade, the use of mobile social networking (MSN) technologies, such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp in language education has attracted the attention of researchers (Eisenlauer, 2014; Gillen and Merchant, 2013; Jurkovič, 2019; Naghdipour and Manca, 2022). Since the introduction of WhatsApp's client application in February 2014, research on WhatsApp and similar applications mainly focused on their use as informal and supplementary tools for language learning and communication (Andújar-Vaca and Cruz-Martínez, 2017; Lee and Dressman, 2018; Pimmer and Rambe, 2018; Toffoli and Sockett, 2015; Trinder, 2017). However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing global lockdowns paved the way for the incorporation of WhatsApp and other MSN technologies into formal education. As the new circumstances forced teachers and lecturers to conduct their courses online, they became more receptive and dependent on the use of mobile technologies to communicate with their students (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Carretero Gomez et al., 2021).

Thus far, many scholars have studied psycho-social traits and concepts such as self-praise, hostile interactions, emotional self-presentation, and solidarity through investigating WhatsApp exchanges (Dayter, 2018; García-Gómez, 2020; Maíz-Arévalo, 2018; Pérez-Sabater, 2021). Indeed, WhatsApp has been the world's most popular messaging application since 2015 (Metz, 2016; Rao, 2015) and it had more than two billion users across the world in 2020 (Ceci, 2020). WhatsApp provides this multitude of online users with affordances to exchange messages via texts, voices, and videos. Hence, studying pragmatic aspects of textual and/or extra-textual communication via this popular application may shed light on how users choose what to text or send from the range of possibilities that WhatsApp provides, and the effects their choices may have on the recipients of the messages. Although some studies have been conducted on the pragmatic aspects of WhatsApp messages (Dadzie et al., 2021; Flores-Salgado and Castineira-Benitez, 2018; Sánchez-Moya and Cruz-Moya, 2015) research on the effect of age on the expression of politeness through WhatsApp messages is scarce. Similarly, no study has been found on the use of the speech act of request in Iranian students' WhatsApp messages. Accordingly, this study strives to investigate the role of the users' generation in the

expression of politeness through Persian WhatsApp messages and the extent to which the speech act of request is used in these messages.

2 Literature Review

2.1 *WhatsApp and Textese*

One of the earliest attempts to explore the pragmatics of using WhatsApp was made by Sánchez-Moya and Cruz-Moya (2015). They compared discourse features and communicative practices adopted by two generations of WhatsApp users concerning their use of textese, an abridged variety of language used in online texting, instant messaging, and chatrooms, which is characterised by the omission of words and the use of symbols and abbreviations (Barton and Lee, 2013; Crystal, 2006; Vosloo, 2009). The findings of Sánchez-Moya and Cruz-Moya's (2015) study indicated that compared to adults, a higher density of textese features was found in teenagers' WhatsApp messages. Moreover, teenage WhatsApp users were more aware of the appropriateness of textese for some contexts than adults. While both corpora were characterised by atypical use of spelling and punctuation, textese produced by teenagers were more expressive, as they contained more instances of stylised spellings and emoticons.

Language variation in WhatsApp text messages was also investigated by Pérez-Sabater (2015). She used computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) via WordSmith software to analyse messages exchanged by two groups of young and adult WhatsApp users in Catalan, English, and Spanish. The findings revealed that Catalan WhatsApp users produced the shortest sentences and adult English participants the longest ones in contrast to previous findings which indicated that English users in non-WhatsApp CMC environments tended to use shorter sentences than users of Romance languages (Montero-Fleta et al., 2009). Pérez-Sabater (2015) stated that her findings could be due to the small number of participants and bias in the selection of the sample sentences. Another major finding of her study was that the lengths of sentences were considerably shorter in all the studied groups compared to normal written discourse. Furthermore, the younger users produced WhatsApp messages with more language variation than the adult ones because of their prevalent use of non-standard language in online communication.

Users employ 'laugh' particles to reproduce the oral characteristics of laughter in WhatsApp communication. While 'laugh' particles are closely related to textese and emojis, they belong to another category called 'discourse particles'

(DPs) which usually precede them. König (2019) examined stance-taking with 'laugh' particles, such as *haha*, *hehe* or *hihi,* and emojis in a corpus of German WhatsApp messages. She found that 'laugh' particles appear initially in postings as responsive resources. They are used for stance-taking to support a joking/funny modality. Her findings indicated that 'laughter' had a supporting function in WhatsApp exchanges which could be compared with face-to-face interactions.

2.2 *WhatsApp and Politeness*

A major theme in the present study is 'politeness', which seems to be underrepresented in the literature on WhatsApp messages. Politeness is an important aspect of our social life. As Kádár and Haugh (2013: 1) assert, it is "the key to all of our relationships and plays a fundamental part in the way we communicate with each other and the way we define ourselves". House (2005: 13) also considers politeness "a basic socio-psychological guideline that governs the relationship and behaviour of individuals in society".

A few models of politeness have been extensively discussed in the literature. According to Locher (2012: 38), "three approaches to politeness can be defined as the most influential early theories: Lakoff (1973), Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) and Leech (1983)". Lakoff's model was primarily concerned with pragmatic competence; however, she related it to politeness and proposed two simple rules for interpersonal pragmatics, i.e., 'Be clear' and 'Be polite' (Lakoff, 1973: 296). The first rule is related to Grice's (1975) maxim of manner (clarity), but the second rule, which is more directly related to our discussion, was further narrowed down by Lakoff (1973: 298) to: "1. Don't impose"; "2. Give options"; and "3. Make [alter] feel good – be friendly".

Brown and Levinson's (1978/1987) model, on the other hand, centred around the notion of face, i.e., one's public self-image that one expects others to acknowledge and respect. They introduced face-saving strategies to save and respect the public image of the addressee to minimise confrontation in everyday interaction (e.g., Brown and Levinson, 1978/1987. Spencer-Oatey (2008: 14) extended the definition of face to "self as a group member (group or collective identity) and self in relationship with others (relational identity)". Brown and Levinson's model has been criticised for being ethnocentric and having a Western bias (e.g. Ide, 1989; Mao, 1994; Matsumoto, 1988; Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998)". These authors emphasize the cultural specificity of face and facework as opposed to the notion of universality proposed by Brown and Levinson.

The third approach to politeness was put forth by Leech (1983). In his proposed 'politeness principles', Leech emphasized maintaining equilibrium in

interpersonal interactions as well as avoidance of offence and discord. However, it must be realized that we do not live in a philosopher's paradise; thus, adherence to such pragmatic principles in daily interactions would appear unrealistic. In other words, politeness only holds under normal circumstances, and not when people lose their temper and deliberately violate the rules of politeness. Arising from this, recent years have witnessed an increased interest in impoliteness research (see for example, Culpeper, 1996, 2005; Culpeper et al., 2003; Haugh, 2010; Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

Werkhofer (1992) argues that the principles of politeness do not reflect the dynamic aspects of social relationships with regard to the complex use of language in some societies, like Asian societies. In recent developments of politeness theory, some researchers have used the term *relational work* and *discursive approaches* to politeness instead of the traditional term '*facework*' (Locher and Watts, 2005). Relational work refers to "the entire gamut of interpersonal effects" (Locher, 2012: 45), as opposed to mitigating behaviour in the earlier models of politeness theory.

Despite a vast body of research on politeness, in general, politeness in WhatsApp messages has not been sufficiently explored, hence further justification for the present study. In the Iranian context, politeness can best be exemplified through the use of address forms and honorifics as they reflect the social relationship between dyads in a speech event (Keshavarz, 1988, 2021). Accordingly, the present study examines how the student participants address lecturers in the salutation of their WhatsApp messages.

In a related study, Dadzie et al. (2021) investigated sociopragmatic differences among WhatsApp users' exchanges in online classes in Ghana. They analysed 462 WhatsApp exchanges between 150 students and four English lecturers. The results indicated that while the lecturers' messages contained mostly instructions and directions, students normally addressed their teachers with respect, probably to observe power dynamics. Lecturers sent lengthier messages than students as they contained instructions. Compared to male students, female students used more emoticons and longer messages in their responses. Additionally, there were many abridged and atypical forms of texting in students' WhatsApp exchanges with their lecturers. Both students and teachers used convincing terms, such as *please*, and *kindly,* as a strategy to obtain the approval of the interlocutor and pragmatic markers were used to show surprise, agreement, or excitement.

2.3 *The Speech Act of Request*

Related to politeness is the speech act of request, whose purpose is to get the listener to perform an action. Félix-Brasdefer (2005) defines request as

"a directive act and a pre-event which initiates the negotiation of face during a conversational interaction" (p. 66). In making a request (e.g. requesting the teacher to postpone the date of an exam), the speaker believes that the hearer is capable of performing the action.

There are three different types of requests depending upon the strategies adopted by the requester, as follows (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

1. Direct strategies, such as commands, e.g., 'Clean the whiteboard', or 'You should clean the whiteboard'.
2. Conventionally indirect strategies, e.g., 'How about/would you mind cleaning the whiteboard?
3. Hints or non-conventionally indirect strategies, which partially refer to the object of the request, e.g., 'The whiteboard needs cleaning'.

In the majority of cases, requests are face-threatening speech acts as they involve some degree of imposition towards the addressee's negative face. However, they may be perceived as unimposing by the addressee depending on factors such as the relationship between the interlocutors, the formality of the context, tone, and phraseology of the request. In any case, the speaker tries to mitigate the face-threatening nature of the request and minimize the degree of imposition by employing polite strategies such as the use of downgraders. Languages may differ in the type of requests. For instance, while speakers of Arabic, Russian, and German tend to use direct and explicit requests, speakers of Japanese, Korean, and Chinese favour non-conventional indirect requests, e.g., 'The kitchen is a mess'. This suggests that direct/indirect requests are influenced by the cultural norms and communication styles of a given speech community. The degree of indirectness may also vary according to the situation. For instance, a couple may use direct requests in the privacy of their home, while they may use indirect strategies in front of others, especially in a formal situation. Therefore, as Economidou-Kogetsidis (2010: 2262) argues, "situational and cultural factors need to be taken into account when interpreting speakers' linguistic choices", in addition to other variables such as social status and power dynamics. In general, the degree of (in)directness in face-to-face communication and its impact on politeness varies from context to context and culture to culture (Ruytenbeek, 2020; Tannen, 1981; Ting-Toomey, 1999). Thus, care should be exercised not to establish a one-to-one correspondence between (in)directness and politeness. As an example, based on personal observation, in the Arabic culture, direct imperatives are quite common and they are not interpreted as being impolite or offensive. In fact, in some contexts, such as a dinner table, imperatives indicate generosity and

hospitality, e.g., *kol* 'eat', in offering food to a guest. However, the same utterance is interpreted as being rude in the Western culture, hence cross-cultural differences in politeness (Blum-Kulka, 1987; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Tannen, 1981; Ting-Toomey, 1999).

2.4 *The Speech Act of Request on WhatsApp*

Compared to the great number of studies that have been conducted on the speech act of request (e.g., Blum-Kulka, 1987; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Félix-Brasdefer, 2005; Flores-Salgado and Castineira-Benitez, 2018; García, 1993; Hassall, 1999), fewer studies have focused on the use of requests in WhatsApp messages, especially in the study context. A directly related research is Flores-Salgado and Castineira-Benitez's (2018) study on the use of politeness in WhatsApp discourse and move requests. The authors claim that "there are no linguistic guidelines for writing *WhatsApp* messages and people may often be unsure about which politeness strategies and forms of language are appropriate for a specific occasion" (p. 80). The results of their study indicated that the participants mostly used conventionally indirect strategies (82%) and many syntactic modifications to strike a balance between respecting the interactant and protecting the right to be unrestrained in actions. Almost all analysed exchanges contained formulaic utterances in opening and closing sequences. To display solidarity, the interactants preferred greetings over deferential address forms.

In an interesting longitudinal study, Malabarba (2022) focused on changes that occurred over time in the nature and tone of WhatsApp messages mainly due to changes in participants' relationship. The author stated that "over time, the teacher and the learner became more familiar with each other and requesting the answer key in the chat became a non-problematic activity for both interlocutors" (Malabarba 2022: 53). However, such changes appear to be specific to some Western cultures or individual participants of Malabarba's study. In other words, the results of this study may not be generalisable to other cultures, such as the present study's context. For instance, the first author of the current study has had a long history of relationship with his former students, ranging from two to four decades, yet they do not take the liberty of adopting an informal address style in their emails or WhatsApp messages.

2.5 *WhatsApp and Emojis*

One of the major functions of emojis is to compensate for the lack of nonverbal behavior, such as gestures and facial expressions, in text messages.

For example, smiling or laughter emojis can be used in informal WhatsApp exchanges to reduce tension or personal embarrassment. However, emojis can also be used independently to replace words in verbal messages. Such emojis are called 'naked or stand-alone emojis' (Sampietro, 2016).

In a study on the use of emoji in 3151 Spanish WhatsApp messages, comprising over 44,000 words as well as 1056 emojis belonging to around 120 users, Sampietro (2016), using a quantitative analysis, found that emojis were mostly located at the final part of the message (55%), such as a full stop, and hence may function as punctuation marks in CMC. One major difference between punctuation and emoji was that contrary to punctuation, emojis could be used without textual content (37% called naked or stand-alone emojis). However, based on a discursive analytical framework of the corpus, it was concluded that emoji and punctuation did not perform the same functions.

In another study, Sampietro (2019) explored the functions of emoji in a corpus of Spanish WhatsApp messages consisting of more than 270,000 words exchanged by 41 male and 74 female adult users whose ages ranged from 18 to 50. Her analysis indicated that emojis were used across different domains in the studied WhatsApp corpus. For example, they upgraded or downgraded different speech acts (illocutionary domain), and at the same time played a role in achieving a successful exchange by signalling closing sections or by contributing to negotiating openings (discourse domain). Additionally, emoji framed playful interactions (stylistic domain). She concluded that the Spanish culture had an influence on some practices adopted by Spanish emoji users.

Using Herring's (2004a) model, Al Rashdi (2018) also investigated the functions of emojis in WhatsApp messages exchanged by Arabic users in Oman. A qualitative content analysis of the messages revealed that emojis fulfilled eight communicative functions in the WhatsApp exchanges by Omani users. These functions included expressing emotions, contextualising cues, celebrating virtually, showing approval, reacting to thanks and compliments, opening and closing conversations, linking messages, and indicating the fulfilment of a request.

Having reviewed the literature related to the aims of the present study, we raise the following research questions to be addressed:

1. How is politeness expressed in WhatsApp messages across generations?
2. How is the speech act of request commonly used in WhatsApp messages sent by the two groups?
3. To what extent do the two age groups differ in their use of emojis and endearment terms?

3 Method

3.1 *Research Design*

Based on the nature of the WhatsApp data used in the present study, which included text and emoji (excluding voice and video), a mixed-method research design was used including quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data. We adopted the approach to original data collection in computer-mediated communication (CMC) research proposed by Androutsopoulos (2014). Accordingly, screen data were collected as described in 3.3.

3.2 *Participants*

The participants of the present study comprised two generations of Iranian students: young and middle-aged. In Group A (the younger group) students' average age was 19 years, and in Group B (the older group) students' average age was 50. The messages of Group A were sent to two younger lecturers (average age 46), and those of Group B to two older lecturers (average age 68). Therefore, both the students and lecturers belonged to two different generations. Table 1 displays the age of the lecturers and the group differences between both the lecturers and the students.

TABLE 1 Mean age of lecturers and students

Lecturer	**Age**	**SMA**
Group A	46	19
Group B	68	50
G_{diff}	22B	31B

Note. *SMA* = students' mean age; G_{diff} = differences between the two groups

Table 1 illustrates a 22-year age gap between the lecturers and a 31-year age difference between the students, indicating a generational gap between the two groups.

3.3 *Screen Data Collection*

Screen data is a source of data collection in digital media sociolinguistics. It is a digital written language that online users produce. The data for the current

study came from WhatsApp messages sent by two generations of students to the four lecturers belonging to two different age groups (young and old). In total, the data consisted of 100 messages, 50 from each of the two groups of students. The messages were sent mainly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.4 *Ethical Considerations*

To observe the ethics, the lecturers who participated in this study were assured that the messages they shared with the researchers would be used only for research purposes. In full acknowledgement of the moral responsibility of the researchers, we treated the data with extreme sensitivity. We took great care that the messages did not reveal the identities of the senders. To ensure confidentiality, the researchers anonymised the selected WhatsApp messages before using them in the analysis phase. All traces of senders in the WhatsApp messages were deleted including their names, references, institutions, classes, and specific locations. Wherever this was impossible, we used pseudonyms. Finally, we sent a draft of our analyses to participating lecturers for their approval.

3.5 *Sampling*

Herring (2004b) defines different types of sampling in CMC research. One type is *sampling by phenomenon*, which concentrates on certain aspects or patterns of language use. For example, emoji or non-conventional spellings can be automatically collected via a concordance or customised script. Discoursal features require qualitative analysis and should be detected manually. This type of sampling, which is appropriate for exploring rare or special characteristics in a sample, enables the researcher(s) to conduct an in-depth analysis of the studied phenomenon.

Accordingly, the present researchers collected samples of WhatsApp messages. The samples contained patterns of language use based on the form (e.g., frequency and mean of the words, emoji, endearment terms, and polite expressions per message sent to the lecturers; and frequency and percentage of pragmatic functions of the messages sent to the lecturers (e.g., request, ceremonial wishes, or inquiries). We then analysed the data qualitatively. The researchers selected samples from their own students' messages as well as from those anonymous messages sent to them via two other lecturers upon request, i.e., 25 from each of the four data sets. In total, 100 messages were chosen to be analysed as the sample of the current study. It should be mentioned that for the purposes of this research, the salutation, body, and closing parts of the messages were scrutinised.

3.6 *Data Analysis*

A sample of WhatsApp messages sent to the four lecturers by their students were analysed. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were carried out to triangulate the findings. The main aspects of messages that underwent scrutiny included the speech act of request, features of politeness, endearment terms, and emojis. The length of the messages was also examined concerning politeness. The analysis of each of the above aspects is presented below separately.

4 Results

The qualitative and quantitative analyses of the data yielded the subsequent results. In each section, for ease of presentation, first, quantitative findings are summarised in tables and qualitatively discussed afterwards. Next, the emerging themes from the qualitative content analysis are divided into different categories, furnished with examples from the data, as follows.

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics, i.e., the frequency and mean of total words per message sent to the lecturers in each group. Furthermore, it shows the frequencies and means of salutation, body, and closing words per message. The results show that the mean of total words per message for Group B (27.78) is 2.68 words more than the corresponding mean for Group A (25.10). A closer look at the means of salutation, body, and closing words in both groups indicates that these additional two words per message (G_{diff} = 2.04) belong to the salutation part in Group B messages. The means of the words per message in the body section are almost the same in both groups (G_{diff} = 0.04) and about half a word per message more in group B (G_{diff} = 0.60). Therefore, the two groups differ in the number of mean words per message in their salutation part. This difference in the number of words used in salutations is probably due to the differences in the themes of messages sent to the lecturers in each group, which was investigated in the qualitative analysis of the data explained below.

4.1 *The Speech Act of Request*

The qualitative analysis of the two data sets revealed that the main purpose of Group B WhatsApp messages was simply to interact with their former professors and maintain a long-established student-teacher relationship, i.e., they did not request a favour. Whereas, messages sent by Group A students served several requestive speech acts. These included requests for being exempt from attending classes, requests to postpone exams, requests for audio or video

TABLE 2 Frequency and mean of words per message sent to the lecturers

Lecturer	TF	MTW	SF	MS	BF	MB	CF	MC
1	678	27.12	103	4.12	557	22.28	18	0.72
2	577	23.08	104	4.16	405	16.20	68	2.72
Group A	1255	25.10	207	4.14	962	19.24	86	1.72
3	640	25.60	157	6.28	403	16.12	80	3.20
4	749	29.96	152	6.08	561	22.44	36	1.44
Group B	1389	27.78	309	6.18	964	19.28	116	2.32
G_{diff}	134B	2.68B	102B	2.04B	2B	0.04B	30B	0.60B

Note. *TF* = total frequency; *MTW* = mean of total words per message; *SF* = salutation frequency; *MS* = mean of salutation words per message; *BF* = body frequency; *MB* = mean of body words per message; *CF* = closing frequency; *MC* = mean of closing words per message; G_{diff} = differences between the two groups.

materials, and requests for holding some sessions online even after the classes transitioned to face-to-face after the pandemic. The participants employed mainly direct speech acts. However, a closer look at the data showed that they were consciously or unconsciously aware of the face-threatening nature of this speech act. Accordingly, they used minimizers (e.g., *agar emkāneš hast* 'if it's not too much trouble/if it's possible') and polite strategies (e.g., *baçehā darxāst kardan* 'children have requested', the colloquial version of *danesjuyān darxāst karde and* 'The students have requested') to mitigate the degree of imposition inherent in the requestive speech act. As another strategy, the participants sometimes used 'supportive moves' to modify the force of the request. The supportive moves variably occurred before the head act, as in 2A, or after the head act, as in 1A and 4A, below. In other words, the students initially provided a reason or justification, or a conditional clause for requesting something followed by their real intention (the request). However, only in Request 6A an alerter was used, namely the professional title *ostad* 'Master/Professor' in this case. It is worth mentioning that the participants observed the hierarchical teacher-student relationship in Persian culture by showing respect for their lecturers through polite expressions, as illustrated above. Excerpts 1A–6A below display the use of requestive speech act by Group A participants.

A sample of Group A messages comprising the speech act of request:

1A. baçehā darxāst kardan ke agar emkāneš hast in hafte ham kelāshā be surate maǰāzi edāme peidā koneh çunke āmār koronā so'udi šode.

The children [The students] request if it is possible, this week too, we continue the classes *in the form of virtual* [online] since *the statistics of Corona* [the number of infected cases] have gone up astronomically.

2A. az unǰā'i ke dānešgāh hozuri šode va mā bāyad fardā harekat konim samte dānešgāh xāstam beporsam emkāneš hast agar fardā tuye kelās šerkat nakardam qeybat nazanid.
As the university [classes] have become on-site and tomorrow we must move to the university, I wanted to ask if it is possible I won't attend the class tomorrow, and you wouldn't record [my] absence.

3A. xāstam azatun xāheš konam bebinam emkāneš hast emtehān miyānterm ro bendāzin do hafte ba'd?
I wanted to request you to see is it possible [I wanted to ask if it is possible] you postpone [to postpone] the midterm exam to two weeks from now?

4A. fāile zabt šodeh kelāse jalase qabl ro dar extiyāremān qarār midin? Çon man tāime dovom internetam qat' šod va natunestam dar kelās bāšam.
Can you provide us with the recorded file of the previous session? Because I lost my Internet connection during the second hour and couldn't attend the class.

5A. mixāstam bebinam āyā šomā ostādi ro mišnāsid ke betowre taxasosi tu howze migration studies tahqiq karde bāše?
I wanted *to see* [to know/to ask] if you know a professor *who has specifically worked* [whose expertise is] in the field of migration studies?

6A. Ostād, man mixāstam mozu'ie entexāb konam barāye payān nāme'am. Xāstam bebinam šomā ta'iedeš mikonid?
Master [Sir/Professor], I wanted to choose a topic for my thesis. I wanted to see if you approve it.

However, it is worth noting that not all messages sent by Group A students were requests for assistance or information. Rather, on special occasions like Teachers' Day and New Year holidays, they occasionally sent messages to connect with their lecturers. These messages simply meant to express their appreciation and let their lecturers know that they were remembered on such occasions. A comparison of the two data sets shows that the salutations in Group A messages were terse and informal compared to those in Group B messages. A few examples illustrate this point, as follows. For the sake of comparison, messages sent by the two groups are paired.

7A. Salām ostād.
Hello *master* [Professor].

1B. Dorud bar ostāde bozorg va farzāne.
Praise be to the great and wise master [Greetings to my esteemed and knowledgeable professor].

8A. Salām ostād vaqtetun bexeyr.
Hello *master* [Sir/Professor], have a good time.

2B. Ostāde arǰmand va farhixte, bā arze adab va ehterām.
The esteemed and sophisticated master [professor], *with submission of respect and regards* [with respect and regards].

9A. Salām ostād xub hastid?
Hello master, are you well? [Hello Sir/Professor, hope you're well].

3B. Salām āqāye Dr. …, hāletun çetore? Barātun ārezuye salāmati dāram ostāde aziz.
Hello Mr. Dr. … [Hello Dr. …], how are you? I wish you good health, dear master [Professor].

10A. Rouzetun mobārak.
Happy your day [Happy Teacher's Day].

4B. Ostāde gerāmi, ruzetān mobārak, deletān šād, tanetān sālem va omretān ǰāvdān.
Dear Professor, *happy your day* [Happy Teacher's Day], your heart be filled with joy, be healthy and live long.

11A. Eidetun mobārak.
Happy celebration to you [Happy New Year].

5B. Ba arze salāmo erādat, behtarinhā rā barāye hazrat āli va xanevāde mohtarametān dar sāle 1400 az xodāvand mota'āl ārezumandam, nowruzetān mobārak.
With offers of greetings and devotion, I pray to Almighty God best wishes for your excellency and your respectful family in the year 1400, Happy Nowruz.

4.2 *Politeness*

Another theme that emerged from the analysis of the data was the expression of politeness in WhatsApp messages. Politeness in Persian is marked by address forms, honorifics, and grammatical endings (Hadi, 2017; Keshavarz, 1988, 2001, 2021). Accordingly, using the word count, a list of the most frequent polite words and expressions as well as suffixes found in the messages was prepared. These included inflectional morphemes such as *-tun/-tān* (both of which mean a polite *you*/*your*) with 87 occurrences; *-id/-ed/-in* (all three suffixes indicate the polite *you*) with 76 instances; and words such as *šomā* (polite *you*) with 70 occurrences; *arz* (a polite *submission* or *offering*) with 32 instances; *xedmat* (a polite expression meaning *attendance/presence*) with 21 cases; *ǰenāb*

TABLE 3 Frequency of polite expressions in messages sent to the lecturers

Lecturer	TF	-tun/ -tān	-id/-ed/ -in	šomā	Arz	Xedmat	ǰenāb	erādat
1	65	29	27	6	1	2	0	0
2	56	22	22	7	2	3	0	0
Group A	121	51	49	13	3	5	0	0
3	99	14	5	36	17	12	7	8
4	90	22	22	21	12	4	6	3
Group B	189	36	27	57	29	16	13	11
G_{diff}	68B	15A	22A	44B	26B	11B	13B	11B

Note. TF = total frequency; G_{diff} = differences between the two groups.

(*excellency*) with 13 occurrences; and *erādat* (*regards/respect/sincerity*) with 11 instances. The frequencies of these polite expressions are presented in Table 3.

As Table 3 depicts, differences were observed in the frequency of politeness markers expressed in WhatsApp messages sent by the two groups of participants. That is, the messages sent by the older generation of students (Group B) contained more honorifics and polite expressions, hence more formal, compared to the younger students (G_{diff} = 68). The messages sent by the younger group were shorter, less formal, and contained fewer honorifics. For example, honorifics such as *arjmand*, and *grānqadr* were never used in Group A messages, instead, they frequently expressed politeness through inflectional morphemes thereby shortening the length of messages (G_{diff} = 37 totally). On the other hand, Group B participants used a wide range of honorifics to mark politeness, as the following examples illustrate. The honorifics included *arǰmand* 'esteemed', *grānqadr* 'precious', *ǰenāb-e ostad* 'Excellency Professor', *ostād-e farzāneh* 'knowledgeable Professor', *ostād-e bozorgvāram* 'My great Professor', *ǰenāb-e āqāye Dr*. ... 'Excellency Mr. Dr. ...', in addition to those mentioned in the previous examples (e.g., *farhixte* 'sophisticated'). Through the use of these honorifics, the older students demonstrated that they are familiar with the two main features of the politeness system in Persian, namely 'other-raising' and 'self-lowering' (Keshavarz, 1988, 2021) to the extent that they may use the expression *dastetuno mibusam* 'I kiss your hands', hence self-lowering.

6B. dorud bar šoma ostāde arǰmand.
Praise be to you, the esteemed master [Hello dear (honourable) professor].

7B. Ostād-e aziz va grānqadr, ǰenāb-e āqāye Dr. ..., bā salām va ehterām, vaqt bexeyr.

Dear and precious master [Professor], the revered Dr. ..., with [my] salute and respect [I salute and respect you], have a good time.

8B. Salām arz kardam ostād-e azizam. Sāle now rā xeyli tabrik arz mikonam xedmatetun.
Omidvāram sāli por az salāmati va šādi baše barāye šomā va xānevādeh mohtaram.
Dustdār hamišegi šomā, ... (student's name)
I submit a salute to my dear master [Greetings to my dear Professor]. *I firmly wish a happy new year to your presence*
[I wholeheartedly wish you a happy New Year]. I hope the [new] year will be full of health and happiness for you and your esteemed family. *The ever lover of you,* [Yours ever,] ... (student's name)

9B. ruze ostād rā xedmate šomā ostād farzāneh va arǰmand tabrik arz nemude ...
I congratulate you on the teachers' day, wise and respected master ... [Happy Teacher's Day to you, my knowledgeable and respected professor]

10B. ostāde bozorgvāram, ǰenābe āqāye doctor ... gerāmi, ruze ǰahāni mo'alem bar šomā mobārak.
My great master [My esteemed professor], dear Dr. ... honorable [dear Dr. ...], Happy International Teachers' Day.

11B. šādo salāmat bāšid. Hamiše dustetun dāram va dastetuno mibusam, ostād gerānqadr ǰenābe āqāye doctor. ... aziz.
Be happy and healthy. I always love you and kiss your hand, *precious master esteemed dear Dr.*, ... [Dear Dr. ...].

12B. bande hamiše do'ā guye šomā hastam va hamvāre xodam rā madyune šomā ostāde bozorgvār midānam. omidvāram hamiše salāmato tandorost bašid. Dānešǰuye hamišegi šomā, ... (student's name).
I always pray [the best] for you and always consider myself indebted to you forever, my great master [my dear professor]. I hope you are always healthy and well. Your ever student, ...

As evident, the above messages are sharply different from the explicit requests used in the younger group's messages, which lacked honorifics. Group A messages were much shorter, more direct, and less formal with fewer honorifics, e.g., 'xāstam beporsam', or 'mixāstam bebinam' (I wanted to ask) by Group A students, compared to the more formal and polite utterances by Group B students: 'mitunam az hozuretān xāheš konam' (may I ask from your presence = May I humbly ask you?). This, of course, does not imply that the younger generation was impolite. Rather, both groups utilised politeness markers in their

WhatsApp messages; they only differed in the degree of formality and length of utterances. As the above excerpts show, the younger generation started with the common greeting form *salam* 'hello' followed by the professional title *ostad* 'Master/Professor', which are markers of politeness. As mentioned in the previous section, although Group A students utilized direct speech acts in their requests they used minimisers, such as *agar emkāneş hast* 'if it's not too much trouble/if it's possible' and *baçehā darxāst kardan* 'children/students have requested' to mitigate the degree of imposition in this speech act.

4.3 *Use of Endearment Terms*

The two groups also sharply differed in their use of affectionate expressions. To investigate this feature, the researchers counted the frequency of endearment words and expressions, such as *aziz* (*dear*); *nāzanin* (*beloved*); *dustetun dāram* (*I love you*); *dustdār šomā* (*your lover*); and *dastetuno mibusam* (*I kiss your hand*), etc. and their combinations. Table 4 shows the frequencies and the means of endearment terms per message sent to the lecturers. The results indicate that while Group B students freely used endearment terms, Group A students were more reserved in expressing their feelings towards their teachers via these terms. This could probably be due to the students' age, the generational difference, and the duration of familiarity with their teachers. Another finding is that endearment terms were mostly used in the salutations and less frequently in the body sections of messages. However, they were not used in the closings.

TABLE 4 Frequency and mean of endearment terms per message sent to the lecturers

Lecturer	TF	MTW	SF	MS	BF	MB	CF	MC
1	3	0.12	3	0.12	0	0	0	0
2	1	0.04	1	0.04	0	0	0	0
Group A	4	0.08	4	0.08	0	0	0	0
3	14	0.56	11	0.44	3	0.12	0	0
4	22	0.88	14	0.56	8	0.32	0	0
Group B	36	0.72	25	0.50	11	0.22	0	0
G_{diff}	32B	0.64B	21B	0.42B	11B	0.22B	0	0

Note. *TF* = total frequency; *MTW* = mean of total words per message; *SF* = salutation frequency; *MS* = mean of salutation words per message; *BF* = body frequency; *MB* = mean of body words per message; *CF* = closing frequency; *MC* = mean of closing words per message; G_{diff} = differences between the two groups.

The qualitative content analysis of the messages revealed how endearment terms were used along with affectionate expressions in the salutation and body of the messages. For instance, the endearment term *aziz* was used frequently in the salutation and body sections of older students' messages, as the following examples show, while it was used only once in a message sent by a female student in Group A to a female lecturer, hence same gender interaction.

13B. dorud bar ostāde **aziz** va farzāne.
Praise be to [my] **dear** and knowledgeable master [professor].
14B. Ostād gerānqadr ǰenābe āqāye doctor … **aziz**
Precious master [Dear Professor], your excellency, **dear** Dr. …
15B. ǰenāb Dr. …, ostāde **azizam**, ruz ostād ra be šomā ostāde farhixte va dānešmand tabrik migam.
Your excellency, Dr. …, my **dear** master, I congratulate you, [my] sophisticated and knowledgeable master [professor], on [the occasion of] Teachers' Day.
16B. Hamiše **dustetān dāram** va **dastetuno mibusam** ostād gerānqadr ǰenābe āqāye Dr. … **aziz.**
I always **love you** and **kiss your hand**, [my] honourable master, your excellency **dear** Dr. …

As can be seen, in this extract (16B), in addition to the endearment term *aziz*, the student uses the affectionate expression *hamiše dustetān dāram*, 'I always love you', and *dastetuno mibusam* 'I kiss your hand'.

4.4 *Use of Emojis*

Emojis were occasionally used by Group B participants, while they were frequently found in Group A messages, especially at the end of requests, as shown below. Table 5 depicts the frequencies and means of emojis per message sent to lecturers in both groups.

Table 5 shows that emojis were used by both groups of students at the end of messages; however, Group A students used them twice as often as Group B participants. The results confirm previous studies, which indicate that the majority of WhatsApp users placed emojis in the final position (i.e., closing) of the messages (Sampietro, 2016, 2019). The following examples, taken from the closing parts of Group A messages, indicate that the younger students mostly used emojis after an expression of gratitude or wish, or simply a naked or stand-alone emoji to signal a closing indicating gratitude.

TABLE 5 Frequency and mean of emojis per message sent to the lecturers

Lecturer	TF	MTW	SF	MS	BF	MB	CF	MC
1	18	0.72	2	0.08	1	0.04	15	0.60
2	24	0.96	4	0.16	0	0	20	0.80
Group A	42	0.84	6	0.12	1	0.02	35	0.70
3	14	0.56	0	0	3	0.12	11	0.44
4	6	0.24	0	0	0	0	6	0.24
Group B	20	0.40	0	0	3	0.06	17	0.34
G_{diff}	22A	0.44A	6A	0.12A	2B	0.04B	18A	0.36A

Note. TF = total frequency; MTW = mean of total words per message; SF = salutation frequency; MS = mean of salutation words per message; BF = body frequency; MB = mean of body words per message; CF = closing frequency; MC = mean of closing words per message; G_{diff} = differences between the two groups.

12A. salāmat va pāyande bāšid 💐
May you be healthy and live long
13A. bā tašakor az zahamātetun 🌸🌸
With [many] thanks for your efforts 🌸🌸
14A. Motšakeram ostād 🌸🙏
Thanks master [professor] 🌸🙏
15A. 🙏
16A. 🙏🌹🌹

An interesting finding was that while Group B students never used emojis in their salutations, Group A students sometimes placed emojis in the salutations of their messages, e.g.,

17A. Salam ostad shabetun bekheyr omidvaram khub bashid 🌻
Hello master [professor], good evening, I hope you are well 🌻

5 Discussion

The results revealed that the speech act of request was abundant in Group A students' WhatsApp messages. Except for greetings on occasions such as New

Year's and Teachers' Day, they utilized this speech act to accomplish a goal. These included requests for being exempt from attending lessons, postponing exams, requesting audio or video materials, and requests for holding some sessions online even when the classes were face-to-face after the pandemic. Contrary to the findings of previous research (e.g., Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Félix-Brasdefer, 2005; Flores-Salgado and Castineira-Benitez, 2018; García, 1993) indicating that conventional indirect request is the most common strategy, the requests used by the participants in the present study were direct. However, they utilised Persian polite expressions to mitigate the imposition inherent in requests and show respect for their instructors. Therefore, it can be concluded that Iranian students show respect for their teachers regardless of their age or the age of the teachers. This is in line with previous research findings that "lecturers in Iran are addressed respectfully and politely irrespective of their age and academic rank. This is related to the conceptualisation of respect for teachers, which is firmly ingrained in Iranian culture" (Keshavarz, forthcoming, p. 19). The findings of this study regarding politeness, more noticeably in Group B's WhatsApp messages, are also in line with those of Dadzie et al. (2021) indicating that participants in their study normally addressed their teachers with esteem to observe power differences and unequal status.

The above finding supports Kádár and House's (2021) assertion that the relationship between forms, speech acts, and politeness differs significantly in various languages and cultures. In other words, context, cultural norms, and individual factors play a crucial role in shaping politeness behaviour. Their argument underscores the need for the study of politeness in various settings and linguacultures, such as the use of politeness in WhatsApp communications by the Persian-speaking participants of the present study. In line with Kádár and House's (2021) proposal, some of the 'politeness markers' in our datasets were context-dependent expressions associated with specific speech acts in WhatsApp communication.

Concerning the age factor, the major difference found in the expression of politeness in WhatsApp messages was that the older generation made more frequent use of honorifics. The reason for this seems to be further exposure and familiarity of the older generation with such time-honoured features of Persian politeness, in particular the cultural schema of respect for teachers. This is in line with the findings of previous research on Persian politeness concerning the importance and use of honorifics in this language (Hadi, 2017; Keshavarz, 1988, 2001, 2021; Koutlaki, 2002; Sharifian, 2008). As Ide (1989: 23) states, "people in a culture choose strategies of politeness according to the cultural expectations and requirements" of their society.

In contrast to Group A messages, whose purpose was mainly to achieve an objective (e.g., requesting to postpone an exam), Group B messages mostly aimed at maintaining old student-teacher relationships. This affected the content of the messages, which centred on four main themes: greetings on occasions such as Teachers' Day, enquiring about the lecturer's health (particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic), expressing loyalty and respect for their old teachers, and only occasionally seeking advice or asking for feedback on their research projects. Thus, as can be seen, only the last theme, which was rarely used, included a request.

Furthermore, Group A students (the younger generation) used convincing terms such as *agar emkāneš hast*, meaning "if it is possible" or *agar šomā taiedeš mikonid?* "If you approve it?" as a strategy to obtain approval from the teacher. However, with regard to the length of utterances and the use of atypical forms, our findings contradict the results of Dadzie et al. (2021), Melefa et al. (2017), and Sánchez-Moya and Cruz-Moya (2015) who found many textese and atypical forms in WhatsApp messages. The findings of the present study revealed that participants did not use atypical forms, and their use of textese was infrequent.

Yet another difference between the two data sets was the use of affectionate expressions by the older students. For instance, the endearment term *aziz* 'dear' was used frequently in the salutation and occasionally in the closing sections of older students' messages, as illustrated in the Results Section; however, this endearment term rarely occurred by Group A participants. This may be attributed to the sociolinguistic factors of 'age' and 'gender'. The fact that one of the young lecturers was male and most of his students were female might have affected the low frequency of the above endearment term. That is, in Iran, females try to maintain social distance with younger male addressees to avoid misinterpretation. This is in line with the previous research findings (Keshavarz, forthcoming). One of the participants in his study reported that once the head of his department had explicitly warned the staff members against addressing students, especially female students, by their FNs, which is a sign of intimacy. It is worth noting in passing that while the literal translation of 'aziz' in English is 'dear', the former has a far more emotional load in Persian and can be used for addressing a lover.

Another reason could be the history of the relationship, i.e., since Group B students had a long history of relationship with the oldest lecturer, they felt closer to him. Consequently, they found it easier to use affectionate terms in their WhatsApp messages. Generally speaking, the use of endearment terms is related to "the culturally-constructed *emotion schema*, which is influenced by the collective emotion and behaviour of a cultural group". That is, "Iranian

students seem to have developed this emotion schema to express their feelings towards their teachers" (Keshavarz, forthcoming, p. 22). It is worth noting that some other research studies have found that emotions are often conveyed through the use of semiotic systems, such as emojis and emoticons (Derks et al., 2007; Rezabeck and Cochenouor, 1994).

Another major difference between the two data sets concerned the length and number of words, which were longer and more elaborate in Group B messages. As can be seen, the messages in 7A and 9A are very short. Also, compare 11A to 15A with 11B to 15B. This could be due to the younger generation's preference for concise and less formal messages. This is in line with the results of Pérez-Sabater's (2015) study indicating that adult English participants produced the longest sentences. However, the finding is in stark contrast with Sánchez-Moya and Cruz-Moya's (2015) finding. In their study, it was the younger generation who used longer and more expressive messages.

Yet another difference was related to the use of emojis in WhatsApp messages by the two groups of participants. It must be mentioned that emojis are not considered textese; however, since they form part of the results of the present study, their inclusion in this section appears legitimate. In contrast to texts, emojis convey meaning through visuals, which belong to the realm of semiotics, a discipline concerned with the study of signs and symbols as well as their interpretants (Keshavarz and Noshadi, 2023). They are categorised as symbols since they are arbitrary representations that have been conventionally agreed upon to represent particular concepts or ideas, in particular emotion schemas. Analysis of the data showed that the younger generation participants made far more frequent use of emojis than the older generation in the closing section of their messages. This difference may indicate that Group A students, i.e., the younger generation, who were born digital, used social media more easily and conveyed information at a faster rate than the older generation. Similar to participants of Sampietro's (2016) study, Group A students mostly used emojis at the final position to express emotions, show approval, and especially to indicate the fulfilment of a request. This finding confirms the results of Al Rashdi's (2018) study which revealed that emojis were mostly employed by young Omani users to express emotions, show approval, react to thanks, close conversations, and indicate fulfilment of a request. However, this finding may be true in countries like Iran and Oman and should not be generalised to technologically advanced countries, such as Japan and the USA, where age cannot be considered equally important in the use of Internet communication. Moreover, due to social distance and formal relationships between students and lecturers in Iranian culture, no 'laugh' particles, such as *haha, hehe* or *hihi* were found in the data. This is in contradiction with the findings of König's (2019)

research findings due to cultural differences between participants of the two studies (German vs Persian).

6 Conclusion

The main conclusion drawn from the findings of the present study is that politeness is expressed differently across generations. That is, markers of politeness used by the two groups differed in length and quality, with the younger group using shorter and less formal politeness markers. Additionally, WhatsApp messages can be considered the linguistic manifestations of conceptualisations such as cultural schema, emotion schema, and symbolism. For example, elevated respect for teachers in Iranian culture, as expressed in the salutation of WhatsApp messages, is part of the time-honoured cultural schema of politeness amongst members of this cultural group. Similarly, the use of endearment terms in WhatsApp messages, such as *azizam* 'my dear', is related to emotion schema, which is "culturally constructed and influenced by the collective memory and cultural patterns of a cultural group" (Keshavarz, forthcoming). Iranian students use this endearment term to express their feelings towards their teachers. Furthermore, the frequent use of emojis by the younger generation seems to reflect the changing cultural behaviours and attitudes toward the expression of emotion and intimacy among students and lecturers. That is, compared to older students, the younger generation seems to have developed this emotion schema as they are more digital-friendly.

A key strength of the present research is the in-depth comparative analysis of WhatsApp exchanges produced by two generations of users. The generational differences can shed light on how parameters such as age, field, and tenor contribute to language variety and choice of register in online discursive situations. Another strength of this study is that it represents a comprehensive examination of the exchanges based on both quantitative and qualitative methods. This triangulation of methods has consolidated the results. Finally, this study is the first of its kind which concentrates on the analysis of WhatsApp messages in a Persian academic setting from the perspective of politeness and speech acts. However, the findings should be interpreted with caution owing to the following limitations:

First, the relatively small sample of data makes it difficult to generalise the findings. Second, this study is ex post facto, and hence, several extra-textual factors such as the academic setting, and the personality and gender of the participants, which could have impacted the findings, could not be controlled

or moderated. Moreover, the authors of this study investigated only screen data, i.e., digital written language.

While the results of the current study may contribute in several ways to our understanding of the features of politeness in WhatsApp messages, many questions remain unanswered. For example, what would happen to the frequency of endearment terms, and length of pragmatic features of politeness if all the lecturers or students were of the same gender or whether the same conclusions could be drawn in other cultures or settings? Furthermore, future researchers are encouraged to investigate oral communication through WhatsApp, such as analysing short voice messages. Furthermore, future studies with larger samples of data and more comprehensive comparisons across different generations, cultural backgrounds, or diverse settings can enhance our understanding of how various individuals and groups utilise WhatsApp.

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