



The Grammar of Guilt: A Communication Analysis of “Face-Saving” Strategies in Academic Refusals among Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the linguistic strategies used by undergraduates to manage the face-threatening act of boundary-setting during refusals. Participants include 25 transient Bruneian undergraduates studying at Universities across Malaysia. Data was systematically gathered via an online questionnaire featuring five Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) simulating extracurricular requests across varying social distances. To capture the intersection of emotional stress and linguistic choice, this study introduces the original term “Grammar of Guilt” to define the specific strategy deployed by speakers to manage the internal anxiety of setting personal boundaries. Evaluated through qualitative discourse, thematic, and cross-scenario frequency analysis, the findings revealed that the “Grammar of Guilt” operates as a fluid, context-dependent face management system that is driven by peer equity and vertical power asymmetries. Frequency Variation shows that Justification Buffers serve as the primary structural shield across all scenarios (64.0%-84.0% frequency) as students consistently externalize blame by leveraging institutional deadlines or cognitive exhaustion to avoid social blame. Additionally, politeness obligations plummet when peer equity is breached, as undergraduates enforce accountability by weaponizing the cultural concept of social shame. Furthermore, a gender split emerged where females operate on a binary of emotional overcompensation or rigid boundaries, while males build transactional negotiation bridges using casual peer slang and practical task compromises. Additionally, undergraduates exploit digital platform parameters to bypass real-time confrontation by executing temporal manipulation through strategic ghosting and technological offloading to ChatGPT. Overall, this study refines politeness theory by proving that collective harmony among undergraduates is highly conditional and based on mutual peer effort, while exposing an academic burnout crisis where modern undergraduates must weaponize mental health terminology to protect basic personal autonomy.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of Study

In a modern university setting, undergraduates are often caught in a conflict between escalating academic demands and interpersonal commitments. In this productivity-driven university setting, the act of refusing a request is considered a face-threatening act (FTA), which is often accompanied by layers of psychological guilt and the need to construct elaborate rhetorical defenses for their actions (Humaero, 2019). While politeness theory asserts that speakers tend to use specific strategies when responding to minimize threats to a listener's public "face" (Alabdali, 2019), recent discourse analysis suggests that the act of refusal is linked to the preservation of social harmony (Dong & Kong, 2021; Park, 2022). Investigating this paradigm is crucial in understanding how broader socio-cultural ideologies, such as academic hustle culture, reshape interpersonal discourse and their boundary-setting maneuvers.

Previous studies have shown how university students across different cultures, including Yemen and China, utilize specific pragmatic strategies in order to soften the impact of refusal (Alrefaee et al., 2019; Zhang, 2022). For example, research done on academic settings has shown that both teachers and students depend on indirect strategies to maintain classroom rapport as well as professional respect (Ali, 2019; Martínez-Flor, 2020). Moreover, looking into the Southeast Asian context, specifically on academic discourse in Malaysia, it has been identified as a subtle linguistic negotiation, emphasizing collective face-saving (Hamuddin & Noor, 2020; Nair, 2019).

However, despite broader studies on refusal strategies (Barron, 2020; Gass & Houck, 2020), a significant gap regarding the interplay between transient students' guilt affecting their grammar is under-examined. Hence, Bruneian students studying in Malaysia provide a unique lens for this study, as they are required to balance expectations from their home country while managing institutional pressures from their host country. Previous study by Mumin et. al. (2025) posits that Bruneian students often associate speaking in English language to the idea of success and modernisation. Use of slangs were also popular among Bruneian youths to help express their emotions better (Suhaini & Mumin, 2025) apart from their preference for English language than Malay (Mumin, 2023). Other existing literature tends to focus more on intercultural communication in the general sense (Chen, 2021), how this demographic linguistically constructs internal guilt alongside external productivity culture is underexamined. This study directly addresses this demographic by examining how students strategically utilize language to maintain politeness and lighten the social cost of establishing personal boundaries.

To adequately capture the intersection of emotional stress, institutional pressure, and linguistic choice among undergraduates, this study introduces an original conceptual term, "Grammar of Guilt." Coined within the scope of this study, the term is defined as the specific set of linguistic markers deployed by speakers to manage the internal anxiety of saying "no" within a highly productive academic environment. While traditional pragmatics frame refusal strategies as static formulas, the "Grammar of Guilt" is introduced as a holistic framework to document the physical, text-based evidence of emotional states such as guilt and exhaustion. By operationalizing this original term, this study moves beyond linguistic classification, as it offers a new conceptual tool to analyze the socio-psychological burdens embedded within modern student discourse.

1.2 Problem Statement and Research Purpose

While previous research has successfully identified and categorized refusal strategies (Allami & Naeimi, 2021; Bardovi-Harling, 2022), the exploration of how productivity-related guilt can alter the linguistic structures of undergraduates is underexamined. This research aims to introduce and determine the "Grammar of Guilt" in response to these underlying factors. The primary purpose of this research is to investigate how transient Bruneian undergraduates linguistically construct their refusals while undergoing academic hustle culture and peer expectations.

1.3 Research Objectives

RO1: To identify the linguistic strategies used by Bruneian undergraduates when refusing academic requests.

RO2: To examine how the pressures of productivity culture can influence the linguistic framing of refusals among Bruneian undergraduates.

RO3: To determine the extent to which internalized guilt correlates with specific linguistic strategies used by Bruneian undergraduates.

1.4 Research Questions

RQ1: What are the linguistic strategies used by Bruneian undergraduates when refusing an academic request?

RQ2: How does the ideology of productivity culture construct the framing of refusals among Bruneian Undergraduates?

RQ3: How do refusal strategies used by Bruneian undergraduates reflect external stressors and institutional pressures?

1.5 Significance of Study

1.5.1 Theoretical Contribution to Pragmatics

The primary theoretical contribution lies in the conceptualization and development of the “Grammar of Guilt” framework, as it demonstrates how modern societal expectations can alter traditional face-saving mechanisms. Additionally, while existing research on politeness theory has examined the mechanics of refusals (Barron, 2020; Fraser, 2020), this study further explores the discourse of refusals by looking into the “Grammar of Guilt” as it integrates the impact of productivity culture. Hence, refining Brown and Levinson’s (1987) framework and incorporating it within high-pressure academic environments. This can provide a deeper understanding of how the desire to appear productive can alter traditional linguistic formulas of politeness (Kitamura, 2022; Mao, 2021).

1.5.2 Practical Insights for well-being in Higher education

By looking into the “Grammar of Guilt”, this study can provide insight into factors influencing undergraduate burnout, such as the “productivity culture” in Malaysian universities, which can later be applied to wider ASEAN regions (Hamuddin & Noor, 2020). In the study, the majority of undergraduates utilize Internal Grounders (IG), which indicates mental exhaustion. The insights gained from this study can reinforce student support services to develop strategies to encourage healthy boundary-setting initiatives to mitigate stress among peers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Review of Key Studies

The primary theoretical framework of this study is Goffman's (1967) concept of Face-Threatening Acts (FTA). Goffman conceptualized “face” as the image or social identity an individual claims for themselves. Goffman asserts that during a social encounter, individuals are both linguistically and behaviourally invested in “face-work,” which is the actions taken by the individual to maintain their social identity. When an action inherently challenges this identity, it is categorized as a Face-Threatening Act (FTA). In this study, the FTA is the students' refusals to the requests.

Complementing this concept is Politeness Theory by Brown & Levinson (1987). This theory is essential for understanding how individuals maintain relationships through language. The theory is based on the idea that every individual has a public self-image known as their “Face,” which they actively try to protect. Additionally, an individual’s “face” can be categorized into two types: “Positive Face,” which reflects an individual’s desire to be liked, and “Negative Face,” which is an individual’s need for autonomy. When we refuse a request, we are performing a Face-Threatening Act (FTA) as it risks harming both the speaker’s positive face by appearing uncooperative and the negative face when there is pressure to complete unwanted commitments. To mitigate this threat, speakers utilize different “Politeness Strategies” such as an “Internal Grounder”. For instance, defending the speaker’s negative face can influence them to add an internal Grounder such as “I’m too tired to go”.

Furthermore, based on the Politeness Theory, the study by Sifianou and Tzanne (2021) on Sociopragmatic Fluidity and Facework in Context has evolved the theory to emphasize that facework is non-static and is more accurately defined as highly context-dependent, influenced by institutional setting. In this study, the institution refers to Malaysia’s higher education institutions. This high-pressure environment can dictate what constitutes as a valid justification for refusal. Utilizing this perspective can provide the study with a dynamic understanding of the shifts in discourse based on the social and academic pressures present in a university setting (Sifianou & Tzanne, 2021). Together, these theories provide a baseline for analysis on how Bruneian undergraduates linguistically mediate tension between academic pressure and social politeness.

Moreover, a significant advancement in understanding student-led communication is found within the work of Diridi (2021), who explored the pragmatics of refusals specifically in university settings. Diridi’s research highlights that university students have a unique “communicative burden” where they constantly attempt to balance social harmony while simultaneously protecting their academic autonomy. According to Diridi (2021), when students are faced with a request from a peer, direct refusals are rarely utilized. This is due to the unwillingness to appear uncooperative in a collaborative learning space. Instead, students rely heavily on “Grounders,” which are linguistic justifications that serve as a buffer to soften the impact of their refusal.

Diridi's research found that in close-peer relationships, there is a significant increase in the use of "Internal Grounders" among students as an attempt to maintain rapport while simultaneously protecting their personal boundary of time. Diridi's research correlates directly to this study of the "Grammar of Guilt" among undergraduates, as it provides a basis behind the reason students often over-explain their refusals when declining a request. Based on Diridi (2021), this is due to "institutional pressure" from the university; hence, the only socially validated responses are being "exhausted" or "busy." By utilizing Diridi's findings, this study will be able to further analyze the linguistic patterns used by the undergraduates.

Similarly, Nair (2019) highlights that within the ASEAN region, maintaining social harmony often takes precedence over direct communication as "saving face" is a critical sociological driver of face-to-face interactions. This validates the focus of the study on Bruneian students, as their cultural values of harmony will be constantly tested by the "productivity-first" culture of modern universities, where high performance is emphasized by strict deadlines, which in turn forces students into a corner (Park, 2022). According to Park (2022), this culture creates tension within students as they feel obligated to prioritize academic output over social obligations. While these research focuses on the social and cultural pressures, Aporbo (2022) investigates how these face-saving acts are performed within the constraints of digital platforms such as WhatsApp. Due to text-based discourse lacking non-verbal cues, linguistic are often utilized by students to ensure their refusals are not perceived as aggressive. This study can provide a deeper understanding into the reasons behind the use of linguistic intensifiers among students, as they often "type their guilt" to compensate for the lack of tone present in digital messages (Aporbo, 2022).

2.2 Definition of Key Terms

To ensure clarity throughout this study, the following terms are defined according to the specific context of Bruneian Undergraduate students:

"Grammar of Guilt" refers to a term coined and conceptualized in this study to denote specific set of linguistic markers, pragmatic formulas, and syntactical choices used to manage the interpersonal tension caused by refusing a request. This can include excessive hedging, repetitive apologies, and self-deprecation, which could indicate the speaker's emotional distress as well as an attempt to maintain harmony (Alfree et al., 2019; Park & Oh, 2019).

"Face-saving strategies" refer to the communicative strategies used to maintain or protect an individual's social identity. (Sapitri et al., 2019). This study will identify the strategies Bruneian undergraduates use to protect their reputation as an amenable individual while simultaneously protecting the "face" of the individual they are refusing (Humaero, 2019; Mao, 2021).

"Productivity culture (hustle culture)" refers to the sociolinguistic environment that prioritizes constant output and achievement. In this study, productivity culture is categorized as a factor that complicates the refusal process, as saying "no" will indicate a perceived notion of failure in self-competence rather than setting boundaries (Mao, 2021; Park 2022).

"Linguistic refusals" refer to a speech act where a speaker rejects a request. Since this is a "dispreferred second turn," which is a response that does not align with the expectations set by the first speaker, it could cause friction if the linguistic response is not strategically maneuvered (Barron, 2020). This study will focus on the specific sequence of words used during the refusal of requests (Zhang, 2022; Bardovi-Harling, 2022).

"Extracurricular requests" in this study refer to the task-based propositions and non-academic invitations that occur in university settings, such as attending a social gathering or needing help with an assignment.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Sampling

This study primarily adopts a qualitative research design, supplemented by a semi-quantitative approach, to document the elaborate linguistic strategies utilized by Bruneian undergraduates when refusing extracurricular requests (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). A qualitative approach is essential for exploring the "grammar of guilt," as it allows the analysis of complex meanings and social pressures that purely quantitative data may overlook (Mao, 2021). However, the integration of statistical frequency of frameworks will ensure observation of linguistic variations across different interpersonal scenarios.

Furthermore, the study adopts a non-probability sampling design, specifically combining convenience sampling and snowball sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Convenience sampling was utilized initially to access the Bruneian undergraduate population via student network groups and digital community platforms, specifically a WhatsApp group chat that consists of Bruneian higher education students currently studying in Malaysia. This group chat was created by members of the Persatuan Pelajar Brunei Di Malaysia, which is a verified community organisation under the Bruneian Embassy in Malaysia; hence, the WhatsApp

Channel would encompass the study's target sampling population. Additionally, snowball sampling was utilized, where initial participants were encouraged to share the survey with other eligible Bruneian peers across various Malaysian higher education institutions.

This dual-layered approach was selected to ensure the feasibility of the study within a condensed timeframe while maximizing the geographic and institutional reach of the sample. By expanding the sampling frame beyond specific universities, the study would be able to capture a more comprehensive and diverse range of linguistic responses. The final sample consisted of 25 Bruneian undergraduates from various public and private universities in Malaysia, comprising 15 females and 10 males. In addition, to ensure data quality, the criteria for participation of study remained strictly limited to Bruneian citizens currently enrolled in undergraduate programs in Malaysia, ensuring the grammar of guilt is analyzed within a specific, shared culture-transient context.

3.2 Data Collection Method

Data collection was conducted via an anonymous online Google Form questionnaire, which features Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) (Félix-Brasdefer, 2019; Bensfield & Szlemko, 2020). DCTs consist of a standard and effective tool in pragmatic research used to elicit specific speech acts, such as refusals, under controlled yet realistic conditions (Demirkol, 2019; Zhang, 2022). Additionally, data collection was conducted through an anonymous online Google Form questionnaire to ensure accessibility and consistency, as this allows participants to respond anonymously at their convenience, reducing social desirability bias, which may occur in face-to-face interviews (Joinson, 2020). The questionnaire consists of three sections:

- 1) Formal Informed Consent Section, where participants agree to the terms and conditions of the study before proceeding to respond to the following sections. By stating "I Agree," participants consent that they have fully read and understood the information provided above, are currently Bruneian undergraduates studying in Malaysia, and voluntarily agree to take part in the study.
- 2) Demographic Section, where basic details such as age, gender, and university affiliation are asked to contextualize the responses while still protecting the identity of participants.
- 3) Refusal Scenarios, where 5 DCT-based scenarios will be presented in the form of short, realistic prompts that stimulate extracurricular requests. These include:
 - Scenario 1: The Senior Student request
 - Scenario 2: The "Guilt-Trip" peer
 - Scenario 3: The "Borrowed Time" Conflict
 - Scenario 4: The Out-of-Scope Favor
 - Scenario 5: The "Career-Building" Opportunity

Participants were instructed to type their response in the form of a refusal to the request provided in a paragraph format, reflecting how they would naturally respond.

This approach combines the strengths of DCTs with open-ended responses, which ensures write responses reflect their natural communication style, specifically their use of grounders and justifications (Alrefaee et al. 2019; Bardovi-Harlig, 2022). The convenience of utilizing Google Forms also enables efficient data collection across institutions, particularly given the geographical spread of undergraduates in Malaysia.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedure

The 125 responses collected through the Google Form were analyzed using two qualitative discourse analyses (Gee, 2019), which is specifically useful in examining how "face" is incorporated in text (Fraser, 2020), and a semi-quantitative descriptive framework. The Three-stage process is as follows:

- 1) Iterative coding of linguistic strategies, where each refusal were coded manually according to established categories of face-saving strategies (Sapitri et al., 2019). Coding was iterative as it allows new categories to emerge from the data if participants employ strategies not captured by existing frameworks. The data was coded into three categories:
 - **Relational Softeners** – This category groups the linguistic strategies students use to show they place value in protecting the requester's positive face and their friendship, such as Alternatives and Redirection, and In-Group Softeners (Haugh & Terkourafi, 2019; Muslim Mohd Jalis et al., 2020; Hassan & Hashim, 2021).
 - **Accountability Markers** – This category groups the linguistic strategies students use that capture the direct and heavy emotional labour, such as Intensified Apologies, which is the core of "Grammar of Guilt" (Haugh & Terkourafi, 2019; Al-Shboul & Maros, 2020; Hassan & Hashim, 2021; Locher & Larina, 2022; Chen 2023).
 - **Justification Buffers** – This category groups the linguistic strategies students use to validate their refusal, which defends their negative face, specifically their time and desire for autonomy, such as

Internal Grounders, External Grounders, and Opting-out (Haugh & Terkourafi, 2019; Muslim Mohd Jalis et al., 2020; Hassan & Hashim, 2021).

- 2) Cross-Scenario Frequency Variation Analysis – To complement the qualitative insights, a semi-quantitative approach was applied by calculating the frequency distribution of pragmatic categories across the five scenarios. Frequency analysis is widely recognized in pragmatic discourse as a means of identifying the systemic variation in linguistic strategies used (Braun & Clarke, 2021).
- 3) Thematic Analysis – following the linguistic coding and quantitative mapping, thematic analysis was utilized to identify the narrative of productivity culture, academic stress, and internalized guilt embedded in the refusals (Barron, 2020). This ensures that the analysis addresses how external pressures shape the internal “Grammar of Guilt” (Barron, 2020; Park, 2022).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Overview of Dataset

The master data coding matrix maps out the dominant linguistic strategy(s) utilized by each participant across the five DCTs, as illustrated in Table 1. The dataset analyzed 125 responses in total, which provided a saturated qualitative foundation, offering an adequate amount of evidence to draw a clear conclusion on the speech act of refusal (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Saldaña, 2021).

Rather than relying on isolated text strings, these scenarios allowed a cross-examination on how undergraduates evaluate social risk when setting boundaries. By categorizing each response against an established pragmatic framework, this matrix is able to capture the behavioural patterns of the “Grammar of Guilt” across varying levels of social distance (Hassan & Hashim, 2021; Al-Shboul & Maros, 2023). To facilitate a clearer analysis of the findings, the 125 responses were manually categorized into the three frameworks: Justification Buffers (JB), Relational Softeners (RS), and Accountability Markers (AM). Additionally, participants occasionally combine multiple frameworks within a single response, such as pairing an apology with a deadline excuse; this overlap reflects the multi-layered nature of real-world digital communication, where human conversation is often fluid (Hohenstein et al., 2023).

Table 1: Master Data Coding Matrix (Scenarios 1-5)

Participant	Gender	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	Scenario 4	Scenario 5
P1	F	JB	JB	JB, RS	JB	JB
P2	M	JB, RS	RS, JB	RS, JB	RS	RS, JB
P3	F	JB	JB	AM, JB, RS	JB, RS	JB, RS
P4	F	AM, JB	JB	RS, JB	JB	JB
P5	F	JB	JB	JB, RS	JB	JB
P6	M	RS	RS, JB	RS, JB	JB	RS, JB
P7	F	JB	JB	JB	JB	JB
P8	F	JB	JB, RS	JB, RS	JB	JB, RS
P9	F	JB, RS	JB	AM, JB	JB	RS
P10	F	JB	JB	JB, RS	JB	JB
P11	F	JB	JB	JB, RS	JB, RS	JB, RS
P12	M	JB	RS	RS, JB	JB	JB, RS
P13	F	AM	JB	JB	RS	JB
P14	F	AM, JB	JB	JB	JB	JB, AM
P15	M	RS, JB	JB, RS	JB	RS, JB	JB
P16	F	JB, RS	RS	RS	JB	JB, RS
P17	F	JB	AM, JB	JB	AM, JB	RS, JB
P18	F	JB	JB	JB, RS	JB	JB
P19	F	JB	JB	JB	JB	JB

P20	M	JB, RS	JB, RS	RS	RS	JB
P21	M	JB	RS, JB	RS, JB	JB	JB
P22	M	JB	JB	JB, RS	JB	JB
P23	M	JB	JB, RS	JB, RS	JB	RS, JB
P24	M	JB, AM, RS	RS, JB	RS, JB	AM, RS, JB	RS, JB
P25	M	JB	JB	JB, RS	JB	JB

Table 1.1: Key

Key	Meaning
JB	Justification Buffers
RS	Relational Softeners
AM	Accountability Markers

4.2 Cross-Scenario Frequency Variation

The cross-scenario frequency variation provides insight into how undergraduates' boundary-setting drastically depends on who is asking (social distance) and how fair the request actually is (equity). The table below illustrates the fluctuations between the frequencies of the three frameworks, Justification Buffers (JB), Relational Softeners (RS), and Accountability Markers (AM), across the five DCT scenarios:

Table 2: Frequency Illustration

Scenario Type	Justification Buffers (JB)	Relational Softeners (RS)	Accountability Markers (AM)	Core Pragmatic Driver
S1: Senior Request	84.0%	20.0%	20.0%	Deference & Institutional Shields
S2: Guilt-Trip peer	64.0%	36.0%	4.0%	Moral Policing & Malu (Shame)
S3: Late-Night Favor	64.0%	52.0%	12.0%	Compromise & Technical Offloading
S4: Out-of-Scope Favor	80.0%	28.0%	8.0%	Workload Isolation & AI Redirection
S5: Career-building opportunity	80.0%	40.0%	4.0%	Mental Health & Biological Grounding

Based on Table 2, JB dominates across all five DCT scenarios, as it is the most frequently used framework, maintaining a 64% to 84% throughout. This shows that undergraduates heavily rely on externalizing their refusals, whether or not they are dealing with a superior or a peer. Excuses such as institutional deadlines and cognitive depletion are commonly used as justifications for the undergraduates' refusals (Hassan & Hashim, 2021; Mustafar et al., 2025). This is to prove that their rejection of the request was forced by their circumstance and not personal malice against the individual. Hence, this maintains their relationship with the individual as it shows that there was no personal vendetta against them while utilizing the productivity-first culture apparent in higher education institutions as a common excuse for refusals, such as institutional deadlines, which prevented them from joining extracurricular activities (Park, 2022).

However, as the discourse shifts from a vertical social distance in S1 to an equal social distance in S2, AM plummets from 20% in S1 to 4% in S2. This can be seen as remorse peaking with seniors but collapsing with peers (Al-Shboul & Maros, 2023). Politeness strategies drastically drop as undergraduates switch to defensive boundary setting and direct peer policing. For instance, undergraduates often weaponize shame (malu) when peers violate fairness, hence abandoning harmony between them (Nair 2019; Locher & Larina, 2022). Additionally, looking into S3, RS peaks at 52% as the requests happen late at night. Undergraduates often overcompensate by using casual peer slang such as "bro," which is used frequently by undergraduate males who often rely on colloquial humour and softeners, while offering future rainchecks or practical task compromises to preserve harmony with their peers without giving up their rest time (Yaakob & Latiff, 2025; Mohd Kamal & Ariffin, 2023). Due to the high-burden scenarios in S4 and S5, JB dominates once again as the most frequently utilized strategy. This can be seen as undergraduates valuing their mental and physical well-being as non-negotiable boundaries against peers. Similar to S1, in S4 and S5, undergraduates employ

cognitive depletion as their go-to excuse, such as (“out of headspace”), or they would entirely redirect their peers to utilize automated tools such as (“ask ChatGPT”) (Hohenstein et al., 2023; Hancock et al., 2020). Thus, undergraduates display linguistic resistance against the institutional “hustle culture” present (Chen, 2023).

4.3 Thematic Analysis of the “Grammar of Guilt”

The findings of this study show that the “Grammar of Guilt” functions as a context-dependent face-management system. This can be seen as undergraduates do not possess a static method for saying “no”, instead, they perform an analysis of the situation, which consists of the perceived fairness of the task, the social distance between them and the requester, and an assessment of their own capabilities or limits. Throughout the five scenarios, a pattern is established in which politeness strategies decrease as the unreasonable nature of the request increases.

4.3.1 Justification Buffers (JB)

Justification Buffers are utilized when participants intend to leverage their external demands or internal capacity to mitigate the social friction caused by their refusal. By providing a valid reason for their refusal, the participant establishes that their inability to agree is due to their circumstance rather than a disregard for their relationship (Yaakob & Lattif, 2025; De Vera & Jajalla, 2025). The findings show that undergraduates commonly deploy the university’s own rigid timeline as a bulletproof excuse for their refusals (Nair, 2019; Mustafar et al., 2025). In this sense, the institution is externalized as the controlling factor for the undergraduate’s behavioural output (Park, 2022). For example, in S1, P1 stated, “*since I have an urgent assignment due on Monday...*”, which shows that undergraduates frequently resort to the use of the “Monday deadline” as an institutional alibi, reflecting Nair’s (2019) emphasis on ASEAN face-preservation and Mustafar et al.’s (2025) findings that institutional deadlines are the most common refusal justification among Malaysian undergraduates. Additionally, due to the high-productivity culture of higher institutions, this excuse is completely valid, thus exempting the refuser from any social blame.

Moreover, as S4 and S5 become more intrusive, there is a shift from leveraging external deadlines to internal mental states as undergraduates claim mental exhaustion to end further negotiations which reflects resistance towards the productivity culture in higher institutions (Ulaş & Seçer, 2024; Forrester, 2023). For example, in S4, P21 states that “*...overloaded with work at the moment and not in the headspace to take on anything extra,*” which indicates that their psychological burnout and mental preservation are treated as definitive boundaries. (Chen, 2023).

4.3.2 Relational Softeners (RS)

Relational Softeners are the linguistic efforts undertaken by undergraduates to minimize the threat to the requester’s positive face. These strategies reinforce existing rapport between peers as it cushions the blow of the refusals (Yaakob & Latiff, 2025). For example, in S5, P15 states “*sorry wei im so tired...*” and in S2, P2 states “*Haiyaaa bro should’ve done it earlier hahahahah*”. The integration of regional linguistic markers such as “*wei*” and casual male-bonding terms like “*bro*” serves to deliberately de-escalate the gravity of the rejection, echoing Mohd Kamal & Ariffin’s (2023) observation that male undergraduates often rely on humor and informality to preserve harmony in peer interactions. Additionally, undergraduates often utilize redirections, alternative digital options, and the promise of future presence to prove their ongoing attempt to become cooperative peers. For example, in S4, P13 states “*Girl asl cgpt*” as their refusal response. This highlights the emergence of generative artificial intelligence, which allows undergraduates to execute a “responsibility shift” by redirecting their peers to an AI tool. This unburdens their conscience while offering a functional solution to the problem their peers are facing. (Hohenstein et al., 2023).

4.3.3 Accountability Markers (AM)

Accountability Markers capture the direct execution of apologies and remorse throughout undergraduates’ refusals (Chen, 2023). Thematic analysis of findings shows that the performance of regret is volatile as it depends heavily on equity, power dynamics, and social distance (Locher & Larina, 2022). In terms of intensified apologies, undergraduates often overcompensate by exaggerating their typography, such as elongating their words to ensure their remorse is highly visible. For example, in S1, P4 states, “*omgg i’m sorry, i don’t think im freeeee*” which shows lengthening of words “*freeeee*”. These typographic elongations mirror Aporbo’s (2022) analysis of digital pragmatics, where students “type their guilt” to compensate for missing non-verbal cues in online platforms. On the other hand, in S2, where a peer violates group equity, Accountability Markers are completely disregarded as remorse is replaced by an assertive linguistic style of refusal. For example, S2, P11 states, “*No, I saw you hanging out with your friends so that means you had time... that should be your responsibility.*” This indicates that when a peer crosses boundaries of fairness, the “Grammar of Guilt” completely shifts. In addition, rather than expressing internal guilt for refusing, the

undergraduate shifts their tone to an attack designed to project and enforce social shame and responsibility towards the requester (Nair, 2019).

4.4 Sociolinguistic and Pragmatic Discussion

4.4.1 The cultural vs. Institutional Crossfire: Nair (2019) vs. Park (2022)

According to Nair (2019), interactions that occur within the ASEAN region are dictated by the socio-cultural need for face-preservation to maintain harmony, which takes precedence over blunt, direct communication. However, the findings from this study show that the traditional value of harmony is contradicted by what Park (2022) refers to as the “productivity-first” culture of modern higher education. For instance, undergraduates negotiate between these competing demands in S1, where the “Monday assignment deadline” is commonly used as an excuse, and in S4, where “cognitive exhaustion” is often the main reason for refusals. The “Grammar of Guilt” is the linguistic byproduct caused by this friction. While Nair (2019) emphasizes harmony as a cultural imperative in ASEAN discourse, Park (2022) highlights the competing “productivity-first” ethos of higher education, which underpins the Grammar of Guilt.

Furthermore, undergraduates are unable to simply reply with a “No” as it violates the ASEAN collective codes outlined by Nair. However, total compliance is seemingly difficult to achieve, as highlighted by Park’s framework, which demands an absolute dedication to their individual workloads. Hence, the utilization of Justification Buffers to mitigate the refusals. JB leverages the presence of institutional pressures as a socially acceptable excuse to protect the individual’s time without appearing uncooperative and hostile.

4.4.2 “Typing the Guilt”, Digital Pragmatics and Asynchronous Manipulation

Expanding on the work of Aprobo (2022), which states that text-based platforms lack the contextual non-verbal communication present during face-to-face interactions, such as vocal tone and facial expressions, which demand individuals to overcompensate linguistically to mitigate the possibility of being viewed as rude. Due to student communication primarily occurring across digital platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram, the “Grammar of Guilt” is structurally conditioned by the limitations of digital platforms. The findings from this study expanded Aprobo’s theory in terms of the typographic over-compensation and temporal manipulation strategies utilized by undergraduates in their refusals. For instance, undergraduates replaced an apologetic tone of voice with digital visual proxies such as emotional emojis to show remorse as well as structural lengthening of words (“freeee”).

Additionally, undergraduates are also adopting advanced tactical strategies to refuse a request, such as “ghosting,” which is the act of cutting off communication with an individual without explanation or justification. For example, in S3, P17 states “*I will not respond to this, not gonna open the text... im going to reply to them the next day: ‘im so sorry, i was so tired last night and fell asleep as soon as i got home’*”. This demonstrates that within modern digital pragmatics, undergraduates are not limited to using language to save face; they can also actively manipulate delivery lags to manufacture an internal justification that bypasses real-time confrontation.

4.4.3 The Breakdown of Face-Saving: Boundary Violation and Moral Policing

A theoretically significant finding from this study is the disregard of politeness strategies utilized within refusals in scenarios where there is a severe boundary violation or deflection of obligations in S2 and S4, respectively. This provides a counter-narrative perspective towards the traditional model of the ASEAN collectivism framework. According to Goffman (1967), individuals are innately driven to maintain face-work to preserve social relationships. Similarly, Brown and Levinson (1987) outline face-work, the tactical strategies a speaker takes to counteract the damage done by FTAs. However, in S2, Responses from P10, P14, and P18 (“*No, we’re going down together*”) exhibit no face-redress.

Furthermore, in scenarios where a peer is slacking off to socialize while attempting to guilt-trip a classmate into completing their work, the request shifts from a standard academic favour to a blatant violation of group equity. Hence, in this case, the refuser would feel entirely validated in executing a face-attack towards the requester. In addition, the cultural code of shame (*Malu*) is actively exploited to police the peer’s lack of accountability. This shows that the traditional obligation to preserve social harmony is highly conditional based on the situation an individual encounters, such that if a requester breaks the moral codes of academic fairness for their own personal gain, the right they have to face-protection is entirely revoked.

4.5 Gender Differences in Linguistic Boundary Settings

A comparative analysis of the dataset revealed disparities present in how the Grammar of Guilt is implemented between the male and female genders of undergraduates. Based on the findings, female undergraduates consistently operate between two extreme poles of the politeness spectrum, which either

include intensified apologies or rigid boundaries. Female undergraduates dedicate a substantial amount of cognitive and emotional labour into utilizing Accountability Markers in their refusals, such as the highly visible typography in S3, P3 stated, “omggg i’m so sorryy”. In contrast, when there is a boundary violation, females are significantly blunter compared to males when structuring refusals. Moral accountability lines are blatantly invoked, such as in S2, P21 stated, “Your work is not my responsibility.” This blunt invocation of moral accountability aligns with Locher and Larina’s (2022) findings that politeness strategies collapse under boundary violations. In comparison, Mohd Kamal and Ariffin (2023) note that male peers utilize humor and redirection to soften refusals. Based on the findings, male undergraduates rarely engage in emotional performances of regret or explicit moral lectures in their refusals. Instead, males often defend their negative face by structuring refusals which include In-Group Softeners, which is a Relational softener, and provide practical alternatives instead. For Example, males utilize casual, gender-coded peer markers such as “bro,” or “bruv,” and internet gaming humor such as “skill issue 101,” or “noob” to deliver their refusals. Additionally, rather than producing a clear rejection to the request, males prefer to soften the blow by deflecting or providing a tactical solution such as redirecting them to use ChatGPT.

4.6 Theoretical and Methodological Contributions

ASEAN communication styles are often characterized as monolithically collectivistic, prioritizing shame-avoidance (*Malu*), indirectness, and the absolute preservation of group harmony (Nair, 2019). However, this study contradicts this narrative, as the findings show that collectivist harmony is conditional, echoing Barron’s (2020) observation that refusal strategies shift under institutional stress. When undergraduates are faced with unfair workloads or intrusive boundary oversteps, positive-face redresses are discarded, and assertive moral policing or blunt rejections are used instead. This introduces a localized evolution of literature as modern Brunei undergraduates are strategically manipulating traditional collectivist face-saving values with individualistic boundaries of self-preservation.

This study advances existing theories on digital pragmatics, particularly on how users manage to interpret text-based platforms that lack non-verbal buffers, by analyzing asynchronous text interactions (Aporbo, 2022). While previous literature primarily focuses on typographic overcompensation such as emojis or text elongation to replace facial features, this study unveils the tactical utilization of temporal manipulation in the form of strategic ghosting and technological offloading. The findings showed that occasionally, students intentionally weaponize message delivery lags, a tactic that extends Aporbo’s (2022) theory of digital pragmatics by showing how asynchronous refusal strategies create manufactured justifications. For instance, the use of generative AI to offload the moral burden of being a helpful peer. This represents a novel contribution to how politeness theory and negative-face protection operated in the digital era.

This study makes a theoretical contribution to the field of sociolinguistics by introducing and operationalizing a new pragmatic concept, “Grammar of Guilt.” While existing politeness models focus on generalized strategies for face-redress, this new construct specifically captures the unique linguistic frameworks that undergraduates use when attempting to balance the hustle culture in university settings. The “Grammar of Guilt” maps out how undergraduates experience intense internal moral conflict when attempting to protect their negative face. Rather than treating a refusal as an objective speech act, this concept views the act of saying “no” as a site of heavy emotional labour. For instance, by proving that undergraduates systematically use Justification Buffers to justify their basic personal boundaries, this study establishes the “Grammar of Guilt” as a replicable pragmatic tool. This construct allows future researchers to measure and evaluate how systemic institutional stress changes interpersonal communication in the digital age.

The findings of this study provide a localized linguistic mapping of how the hustle culture in higher education institutions can alter the communicative patterns of undergraduates balancing an overwhelming workload (Park, 2022). This study documents the justification buffers used by undergraduates to push back against academic burnout. By reframing “rest” as a physiological necessity instead of a lack of motivation, this study can provide a linguistic baseline on how the modern undergraduate demographic negotiates mental health boundaries through the use of language.

4.7 Practical Applications

4.7.1 Pedagogical Restructuring of Group Assessment Frameworks

The distress and sudden abandonment of politeness strategies observed in this study when a peer slacks off highlight how politeness is a deferential tactic that unravels under pressure. Hence, higher education instructors should not assume that students will harmoniously resolve internal workload imbalances by themselves, as this subjects them to severe emotional discomfort or social fallout. Instead, universities should implement formalized, mandatory peer evaluation throughout the semester. By institutionalizing

accountability mechanisms within the curriculum, the burden of moral policing shifts away from the individual student, thereby reducing the interpersonal stress identified within this study.

4.7.2 Academic Communication Training

The gender differences observed when boundaries were violated within the study reveal that undergraduates frequently lack the tools for professional and assertive refusal strategies. There is a practical need for communication departments to implement targeted workshops focusing on assertive pragmatics. Thus, training students on how to construct professional boundaries without defaulting to either emotional overcompensation or hostile attacks can help with their preparation for when they enter the corporate industry post-graduation.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Synthesis of Major Findings

The cross-scenario frequency variation showed that the “Grammar of Guilt” is highly conditional based on the vertical power asymmetries and peer equity. The findings also established that JB served as a central pillar of the politeness frameworks utilized by undergraduates, as it consistently appeared as the most frequently used, with 64% to 84% across the scenarios. Whether the interaction was with a superior or a peer, undergraduates overwhelmingly rely on externalizing their reasons for refusal. Moreover, this study shows the contrast between hierarchical compliance and peer policing. A politeness depletion was seen when peer equity was violated. This study exposed a distinctive gender difference in how undergraduates establish text-based boundaries, as Females tend to operate on a clear binary, while males often utilize a transactional negotiation bridge in refusals. Lastly, the findings showed that undergraduates are able to bypass the friction of face-to-face confrontation entirely due to the modern digital parameters.

5.2 Limitations of Study

A structural limitation of this study is its reliance on a relatively small sample size (N=25). While the sample size was adequate for generating a saturated result, it lacked the statistical power required for a broader demographic representation of the results.

5.3 Recommendations for Future Research

5.3.1 Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA)

Future studies should look beyond plain text and explore how digital paralinguistic tokens such as voice note intonations, screenshot sharing, and meme culture templates can alter the execution of the “Grammar of Guilt.”

5.3.2 Comparative Geographic Studies

A comparative pragmatic analysis should be conducted between Bruneian undergraduates studying domestically within Brunei, for example, in UTB or UBD, in comparison to those studying abroad in Western academic environments. This would reveal the influence of geographical displacement, which is who is watching them against the local cultural shifts, which is based on the behavioural rules of their new environment.

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