

## The Organization of Negative Business Messages Preferred by Students in Higher Education

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### KEYWORDS

negative message, bad news, high education, buffer, business communication

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to reveal the organization of negative business messages preferred by higher education students while receiving messages from university parties. The participants are the vice-chancellors for finance and academic affairs or the representatives (heads of divisions) at three private universities within the Association of Catholic Higher Learning Institutions as the senders and 170 active students in several universities as the receivers. This study uses quantitative and qualitative descriptive approaches. I collected data through online questionnaires, semistructured interviews, and observation of written documents in email and WhatsApp. I proposed four essential dimensions of negative message, namely, organization/approach, language, medium, and response, with the Likert scale questionnaire. I also inserted two cases of negative messages at the end of the questionnaire to find students' tendency to select one they liked. The questionnaire results are used to discover the participants' preference for the approach of relaying negative messages, corroborated by the interviews. The study found that students preferred direct approach to negative business messages. Buffers, prevalent in negative business with indirect order, are found in the email. A positive tone was not found at the end of the message. The study concluded that negative messages should be conveyed in writing with direct organizations and positive language and addressed to students before being forwarded to their parents

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### Introduction

Communication is essential in an organization. The primary purpose of communication is to forward the correct information to the right people at the right time and in the proper manner (Othmane, 2021). Communication is exchanging information, ideas, or decisions to achieve specific goals. The essential elements of communication include communicators, communicants, messages, media, and channels (Bové, 2008), which are related to the aspects of constituency, message content, context, and

communication networks (Dedmon, 1970). Managers need to develop effective communication skills (Othmane, 2021). Success in managerial and corporate communication depends on mastering the manager's core abilities, such as writing effectively and structurally, corresponding from emails and memos to proposals and reports, making confident and persuasive presentations, and speaking and writing in the target language concisely and correctly (Barrett, 2006). For effective leadership in higher education, competencies besides academic records also include communicating and negotiating with others (Spendlove, 2007).

Higher education institutions, as organizations in the service sector, regularly communicate with stakeholders such as students, parents, employees, and vendors. In an educational sector competition, the institutions offer their products, namely, programs of education, and prioritize service quality and customer satisfaction. Service and retail quality are measured using the dimensions of reliability, assurance, tangibility, empathy, and responsiveness (Parasuraman et al., 1988). The achieved consumer satisfaction allows consumer interest (referring to students in this study) to communicate the advantages of their educational institutions compared with others (Mwiya et al., 2019).

The findings of a study on communication in the educational and industrial sectors are interesting to be noted (Dedmon, 1970) stated that informal communication in the education and industrial sectors plays an important role. The industrial sector emphasizes written communication more than educational institutions (universities). The content of communication, both oral and written, varies more in the educational sector (university) than in the industrial sector. Managers in the industrial sector are more concerned than university leaders with the message's recipients. Other studies stressed that email is the most widely used channel for written communication in organizations (Kiddie, 2014) (Roach & Anderson, 2007); (Wijayanti, 2017). However, in higher education, face-to-face communication is preferred by the faculty in interacting with students to convey complex messages; in contrast, the faculty prefers to use email channels (Fong & Sulaiman, 2011).

The process of producing a message to the internal and external parties of the organization cannot be disregarded. The senders must construct the message as carefully as possible because the primary purpose of delivering messages is to maintain goodwill with the receivers. An effectively and efficiently delivered message makes the receivers clearly understand the essence of the message and respond according to the wishes of the senders. By contrast, an unclear message will produce a disappointing response for the senders. Therefore, effective communication is the goal of the senders. Effective communication involves precise, clear, and concise messages to help the receivers easily understand the messages (Othmane, 2021). (Othmane, 2021) further explains that the senders of the message serve as the source of information, and the message can positively or negatively impact the receivers. At that point, the senders' professionalism is demonstrated through their ability to write receiver-oriented messages and choose the right approach to convey the message.

Business messages generally observed in a professional context have attracted the attention of researchers as they involve good relations with various parties and support the credibility of the senders and the organization. Frequently, cases arise in business owing to conflict or dissatisfaction with the receivers. They are common in workers engaged in the service sector, including universities. Customers or receivers of the messages complain of not obtaining services as expected. Reports from customers need to be adequately addressed. Senders must be open and respond to customer complaints

by clarifying or resolving problems to prevent prolonged disappointment that negatively impacts the organization. Meanwhile, the senders comprehend that there has been a miscommunication since the delivered message is ineffective or wrongly perceived by the receivers.

One type of business message is a negative message or bad news message. A negative message contains displeased information for the receiver; however, it is necessary for the sender to deliver such message. Bovée and Thill (2018) stressed a distinction between a direct organization and an indirect organization for delivering the negative message. Many communicators agreed that the indirect strategy would soften negative news (Guffey & Loewy, 2019). The indirect structure is preferable when the bad news is unexpected (Jansen & Janssen, 2011) the message is personally upsetting and provokes a hostile reaction (Guffey & Loewy, 2019).

Researchers have explored studies on negative messages in the last three decades (Creelman, 2012). The negative message contains a sandwich approach with a prefatory buffer, the bad news, the reasons, and a closing buffer, sandwiching the bad news with additional communication (DuFrene & Lehman, 2011). Previous researchers have observed negative messages from various points of view: the impact of negative and positive message sequences in campaigns (Nai & Seeberg, 2018), a cross-cultural study on organization and communication styles on corporate websites in China and the US (Ngai & Singh, 2017), and negative messages in data breach notifications (Veltsos, 2012). Other researchers focused on the language of negative messages, politeness strategies, speech acts, and effectiveness of legal letters (DeKay, 2012) (Schryer, 2000) negative terminology in negative business messages (Mascolini, 1994) negative messages in argumentative texts (Limaye, 1988) the preferred message model affecting productivity and job satisfaction of subordinates (LaPlante & Ambady, 2002) and negative messages in job refusal letters received by students (Thominet, 2020).

Previous researchers have not exposed studies on negative messages issued by university leaders to students, even though universities are engaged in the service sector and have intense communication with internal and external parties, both formally and informally. Students will respond to academic and financial services from universities with either satisfaction or dissatisfaction. This gap in previous studies raises the question of this study: What are the characteristics of negative messages preferred by students in higher education? This study contributes to validating the theory of professional communication in higher education. In addition, because of a different way of conveying messages in other cultures (French & Holden, 2012), this study complements intercultural communication, particularly related to strategies for delivering information in negative messages in a high-context culture and education setting. This study also has practical implications for academic professionals in designing receiver-oriented negative messages. The scope of negative messages is limited to emails and WhatsApp data sent by university parties to students.

## Research Methods

This study was initiated by the interest of the authors in a situation in a professional higher education setting, namely, the written communication between the university parties and students. Therefore, this study employed primary data from data sources in the even semester of 2021–2022. This study used quantitative and qualitative descriptive

methods. Data were collected through questionnaires (Google-forms), semistructured interviews, and observations. Both techniques are explained in more detail as follows.

The participants of this study are the vice-chancellors/heads for finance and the vice-chancellors/heads for academic affairs from private universities that are members of the Association of Catholic Higher Learning Institutions (Asosiasi Perguruan Tinggi Katolik/APTIK). Of the 21 universities under APTIK, the authors selected three universities as the objects of the study according to their regions, namely, Jakarta (western Indonesia), Manado (central Indonesia), and Kupang (East Nusa Tenggara, central Indonesia). Since there are no APTIK members in eastern Indonesia, this study involved two universities in central Indonesia. The consideration for selecting these three universities is the ease of access for the participants. Two to three vice-chancellors/heads for finance and vice-chancellors/heads for academic affairs from these three universities became participants. Thus, the total number of participants is eight. Semistructured in-depth online interviews were conducted according to the university and the division (accountings and academics).

Besides the university parties, the participants of this study are also students. Data were collected quantitatively from 170 students at various private universities and public universities through an online questionnaire (g-form). The questionnaire consists of statements using a four-point Likert scale [strongly agree (4), agree (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1)]. The questionnaire referred to the 17 indicators of the four dimensions of negative message, which were proposed by the authors. First, writing negative messages uses a specific strategy to avoid negatively affecting the recipient. Second, the language used to write the negative message affects the recipient psychologically. Third, the choice of media or channel needs to be considered by paying attention to the urgency and impact on the message recipient. Fourth, the message's sender needs to pay attention to the response caused by the negative message. The statements in the questionnaire led to all four essential elements in negative written business communication. The four dimensions are divided into 17 statements in the questionnaire: the organization dimension contains six statements, the language contains four statements, the media contains two statements, and the response contains five statements.

Testing the validity and reliability of the instrument was carried out after data collection from the 170 respondents. Therefore, this study does not involve invalid indicators and unreliable constructs in subsequent discussions. Validity testing uses the corrected item–total correlation technique. Based on this technique, to determine whether the indicator is valid or invalid, the r-count value is compared with the r-table of 0.151 for  $df = 170 - 2 = 168$ ,  $\alpha = 0.05$ . If the r-count is greater than the r-table, the indicator is inferred to be valid; conversely, if the r-count is smaller than the r-table, the indicator is inferred to be invalid (Ghozali, 2017). Meanwhile, to determine whether the negative message construct is reliable or not, this study uses the Cronbach's alpha formula. A construct is reliable if the coefficient of Cronbach's alpha value is greater than 0.70 and unreliable if Cronbach's alpha value is smaller than 0.70 (Ghozali, 2017). The test results show that all indicators are valid because r-count 0.240–0.248 is greater than r-table 0.151. The negative message construct has a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.857, which is greater than 0.70. This indicates that the construct of the message recipient is reliable.

At the end of the questionnaire, participants chose one of two preferred and more desirable negative messages as receivers and gave their reasons. The message comes from the documentation, and the other wrote based that message by changing the organization.

Thus, the two messages have different approaches, namely, the direct and indirect approaches. In addition, the authors conducted semistructured interviews with six students filling out the questionnaire to complete the data collection. The participants of the interviews were selected randomly based on the criterion of having experienced receiving negative messages from the university. Their identities, such as students' and heads/vice-chancellors' names, were initialed to maintain the codes of ethics.

Data were also collected by observing negative messages documented on WhatsApp and emails of the vice-chancellors/heads as participants. The authors requested them to provide evidence of real negative messages sent and received. The authors also requested them to sign an ethical clearance letter stating that the data provided are correct and only used for research purposes. In alignment with these, the identity of the universities and the names listed in the negative messages were blurred.

In this study, there are two types of data collected, namely, quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative data were analyzed using, first, a frequency distribution table to describe the distribution of demographic variables. Second, the mean score technique categorizes participants' answers according to four Likert scales for statements. Third, the corrected item-total correlation and Cronbach alpha techniques were used to test the validity and reliability of research instruments. All statistical calculations used SPSS 25. Meanwhile, qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed by describing, classifying, and connecting the data and then drawing a conclusion (Dey, 2003). Negative messages collected from email and WhatsApp were analyzed using content analysis, focused on topics, language used, and message organization..

## Results and Discussions

This section is divided into three parts: the participants demographics, the students' experience sending and receiving negative messages, and the view of the students of the preferred negative messages.

### Participants demographics

The participants of this study were academic and financial vice-chancellor or the heads of the academic and financial divisions, amounting to eight people, two of whom were female. In addition, the participants who filled out the questionnaire were 170 students from various private and public universities in Indonesia, including the three universities that participated in this study. Of these 170 respondents, 71% were female (Table 1).

**Table 1: Sex Of Respondents**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	49	28.8	28.8	28.8
	Female	121	71.2	71.2	100.0
	Total	170	100.0	100.0	

Most respondents were students from various study programs who enrolled as students in 2020 (38%), followed by 2018 (24%) and 2019 (21%) (Table 2).

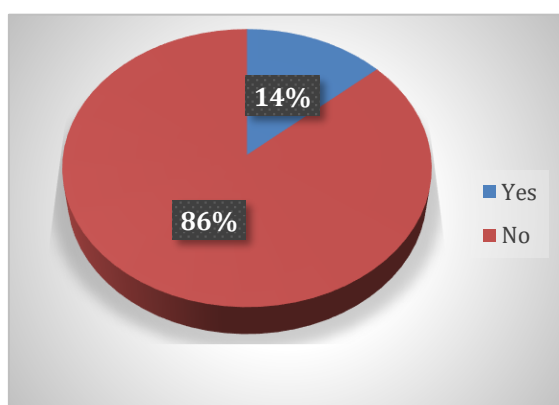
**Table 2: Study Enrollment Year**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<b>Valid</b>	2016	2	1.2	1.2	1.2
	2017	21	12.4	12.9	14.1
	2018	40	23.5	24.5	38.7
	2019	36	21.2	22.1	60.7
	2020	64	37.6	39.3	100.0
	Total	163	95.9	100.0	
<b>Missing</b>	System	7	4.1		
<b>Total</b>		170	100.0		

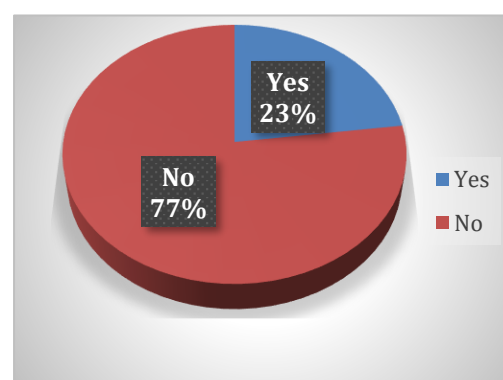
This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically in the even semester of 2021–2022, when the government enforced social distancing, resulting in minimal direct interaction on campus. Educational activities were thoroughly carried out in an online system. Without real interaction, communication transpired in writing through either email or WhatsApp, intensely at the beginning of each semester and before final exams. Nonetheless, students came directly to the campus for urgent needs.

#### **The Experience Of Receiving and Sending Negative Messages**

Regarding the questionnaire results, 86% of the respondents have never sent negative messages to university parties (Figure 1), and 77% have never received negative messages (Figure 2). These percentages are understandable since the respondents generally enrolled in 2020 (Table 2) and had only been studying for two semesters when the data were collected, hence their lack of experiencing any academic or financial problems.



**Figure 1: The experience of sending negative message**



**Figure 2: The experience of receiving negative message**

Despite the small number of respondents having experienced sending and receiving negative messages, the data indicate that written communication with negative messages is unavoidable in the educational sector. One vice-rector verified this finding: “It is not frequent, but it is existent” (K, male). Negative messages express the dissatisfaction, violation, or fault related to the finance or academics of the students while

studying. The authors collected data during the COVID-19 pandemic when all learning was carried out at home (study from home). Thus, WhatsApp and email have become the preferred communication media for conveying messages from university to students and vice versa.

In this study, negative messages are related to academic affairs, such as issuance of diplomas, lecture attendance, refusal to take certifications, grade point average scores, complaints about lecture schedules, negligence of lecturers, and lecture facilities or services. Negative messages concerning finances are related to problems with receivables, requests for tuition waivers, and unreasonable real-thematic work lecture (kuliah kerja nyata tematik/KKN) refunds. These affairs resemble the bad news that (Dibble & Sharkey, 2017) found about disapproval or disappointment.

#### **Characteristics of negative messages preferred by students**

In exploring negative messages that students prefer, the authors classified the characteristics based on four dimensions: organization, media, language, and response. Each dimension was broken down into several indicators in the questionnaire. The questionnaire results were categorized based on the mean score (Table 3).

**Table 3 The Mean Score**

<b>Mean</b>	<b>Categorization</b>
1.00–1.74	Strongly disagree
1.75–2.49	Disagree
2.50–3.24	Agree
3.25–4.00	Strongly agree

Source: Authors (2022)

#### a. Message organization

As the receiver of negative messages (Table 4), the students strongly agree to pay attention to the organization of the messages written by the senders ( $M = 3.26$ ;  $SD = 0.639$ ) and choose a deductive approach ( $M = 2.79$ ;  $SD = 0.878$ ). Students acknowledge that messages with either a deductive or negative approach affect them ( $M = 2.37$ ;  $SD = 0.806$ ). They strongly agree that negative messages should end with optimistic sentences, ask for actions, or provide a problem solution for the receivers ( $M = 3.44$ ;  $SD = 0.704$ ). Likewise, negative messages should start with arguments to support the negative/bad news ( $M = 3.07$ ;  $SD = 0.758$ ). They feel that strong arguments before negative messages prepare them mentally ( $M = 3.21$ ;  $SD = 0.768$ ).

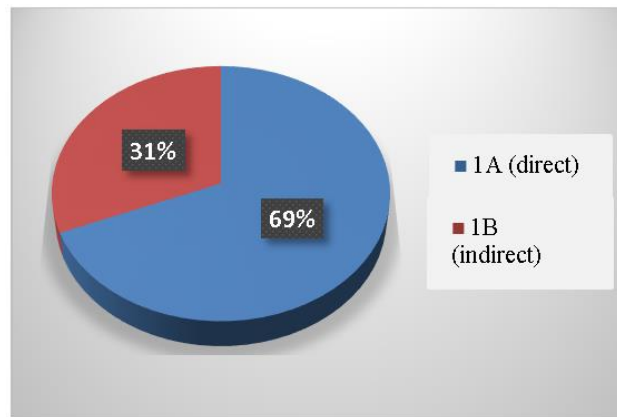
**Table 4 The Dimensions Of Organization**

	N	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)	Description
I pay attention to the organization of the senders' messages to me.	170	3.26	0.639	Strongly agree
I prefer negative letters with a deductive disposition that directly reveal the essence of the negative/bad news, followed by an explanation/argument as to why the negative/bad news was delivered.	170	2.79	0.878	Agree
In my opinion, either deductive or inductive negative letters have no effect on me as the receivers.	170	2.37	0.806	Disagree
Negative messages should end with sentences that show an optimistic attitude, ask for actions, or provide a problem solution for the receivers.	170	3.44	0.704	Strongly agree
In my opinion, negative messages should contain an introduction to support the negative/bad news delivery.	170	3.07	0.758	Agree
In my opinion, messages that start with strong arguments before conveying negative can prepare the receivers mentally.	170	3.21	0.768	Agree

Source: Data processed (2021)

Table 4 explains that students choose a deductive organization, starting with a negative message, followed by an explanation or argument that clarifies the negative message, and closing with a solution or an optimistic and encouraging tone. This organization is reinforced when the respondents choose one of the forms of the message they like: 69% of the participants preferred message 1A (Figure 3). Message 1A has a direct (deductive) approach (Figure 7). The respondents chose message 1A for certain reasons: "Message 1A is more subtle and not too disagreeable" (Y, female); "It contains pleasantries" (M, female); and "The words are easier to read and conveyed gently thus they do not surprise me" (W, female).





**Figure 3 Preferred Organization Of Negative Message**

Factually, in the sample of negative message, the sequence of direct approach opening with a buffer before the negative message. The sequence of a direct approach is shown in Figure 4.



**Figure 4 The sequence of a direct approach**

The senders open with a buffer containing an acknowledgment and effort to build agreement between the senders and the receivers. The buffer becomes the basis for mentally preparing the receivers for the negative message (Bovée, 2008). Buffers provide background information, good news, acknowledgments, compliments, or accepted truths or express empathy to the receivers or neutral idea that leads to the negative message (DuFrene & Lehman, 2011). This buffer causes the respondents to deem message 1A to be more polite, besides supported by an expression of gratitude as shown in the opening, continued to the body of the message, and closing with a thank-you (Table 5):

**Table 5 The steps of negative message**

Organization	Steps	Data
<b>Opening</b>	Appreciation	Thank you for communicating with us regarding your daughter // Education in universities is adult education in which the responsibility for its success lies with the student concerned
	Buffer	
<b>Body</b>	Bad news	Therefore, according to the results of the study program evaluation, the study program cannot accept the student concerned to be re-active in college // because the student concerned has exceeded the leave of absence as stipulated in the academic guidelines
	Reason	
<b>Closing</b>	Formal ending	Thank you for your attention

As seen in Table 5, a buffer is used by the sender to build the common ground. However, in contrast to previous studies, this study has no encouraging closing, which should provide solutions, helpful statements, or positive and friendly statements to rebuild the psychology of the receivers (Bordyuk, 2007) (Kim & Johnson, 2016).

The direct approach is usually applied when the problem is not urgent. The receivers are assumed to find important information in the opening message quickly. The receivers are assured not to be angry or disappointed. Refer to the cases; the decision not to continue the study harms the receiver since it involves the receiver's future. In addition, the relationship between the receiver and the sender is not equally close as the relationship between superiors and subordinates in numerous organizations. Therefore, a direct approach is preferable.

Meanwhile, 31% of the respondents chose message 1B as an indirect message (inductive) approach. Concerning the results of interviews with students, only one student chose message 1B. She stated that the message is "easier to understand, clearer in defining cause-and-effect relationships, more polite and concise, less confusing, and less verbose" (Y, female).



**Figure 5 The sequence of an indirect approach**

Message 1B has an indirect (inductive) approach. The senders start the message by conveying the reasons or evidence of decision making, followed by the core of the message (bad news), then a buffer in the form of a common perspective that "the responsibility for education lies with the students concerned," and end with a thank-you (Figure 5). Like message 1A, message 1B has no friendly, positive, solution-based ending to reduce the unpleasant impact on the receivers. This formula is in contrast to those of the previous studies, which used buffer, reasons, negative messages (counterproposal or silver lining statement), and positive tone.

Regarding the option to choose between negative messages 1A and 1B, the results of this study indicate that the students prefer the deductive approach (message 1A) as it directly informs the content of the negative message even though it begins with a buffer to mentally prepare the receivers (referred to as "pleasantries"). The finding was confirmed by the results of the interviews with six students. Of the six students, only one chose message 1B.

Observed from the sender's point of view, the content of the negative message in this study is not considered offensive. It is common for students to be involved in such violations in education. Therefore, the authors assume that the sender is less concerned about offending the receiver in using a direct message. The sender starts with a buffer to precede the bad news instead of prioritizing acceptable reasons to mentally prepare the receiver before the buffer, as is generally found in an indirect approach.

This study differs from numerous discussions in business communication theory concerning the organization of negative messages that suggest using an indirect approach rather than a direct approach. Nevertheless, in this study, students prefer a direct approach that exposes the buffer in the beginning of the message. This study is similar to that by Lin (2020), who found the schematic structure of the four rhetorical movements in CSR

reports, which are (a) preparing the reader, (b) conveying the bad news, (c) mitigating the bad news, and (d) reassuring the reader. As shown in Figure 5, this study found the negative message sequence: (a) buffer, (b) negative message, (c) reasons, and (d) thank you note. Section “preparing the reading” similar with “buffer” in this study; “mitigating the bad news” replaced with “the reasons”; “reassuring the reader” not found in this study. A buffer, similar to that in the study by (Lin et al., 2020), prepares readers mentally by reminding them about their commitment to college studies. Unlike Lin (2020), who did not give a reason after stating the negative message, mitigated it so as not to affect the recipient adversely. This study does not end with a statement that convinces the reader that everything will be fine, as done by (Bovée, 2008).

I did not find any counterproposal after the negative message to reduce the negative impact on the recipient in the inductive organization, such as considering a position if there is a suitable vacancy for the job applicant (DuFrene & Lehman, 2011). No counterproposal or “silver lining statement” was provided in the case of this study (Lehman & Dufrene, 2011). Table 6 compares the sequences of negative deductive messages of the present study and previous studies.

**Table 6 The Sequences Of Negative Deductive Messages**

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Bovée and Thill (2018)</b>	<b>Lin (2020)</b>	<b>Wijayanti et al. (2022)</b>
<b>Opening</b>	Bad news	Preparation	Buffer
<b>Body</b>	Reasons of decision	Bad news	Bad news
		Mitigating bad news	Reasons /facts/data
<b>Closing</b>	Offer additional information	Reassuring	Thanking note

The important purpose of written communication in CSR reports for companies is to reduce the impact of negative messages and show positive impressions (Lin, 2019). This goal is the same in the academic setting in this study. The university conveys a negative message or bad news accompanied by a logical reason for the recipient to notice, realize, accept, and correct their deeds or mistakes and then do something according to the solutions given. However, in the email, there were no positive expressions to reduce the impact of negative messages.

This study and previous studies show that the organization of negative messages in writing varies. Higher education institutions and industrial companies deliver negative messages for specific purposes. It shows a writing style that is not much different because the point will be to convey the negative message and show the evidence and reasons. The difference is that the evidence and reasons are written either before or after the negative message is delivered.

Referring to WhatsApp’s data, negative messages are generally brief and on point owing to the limited total characters of one message on WhatsApp. The following data show the correspondence between a student and a finance division head.

Sender (student, VN, female)

I (self-introduction) hereby inquire about the tuition fee for the 2020/2021 Even Semester. According to the decree of the rector that has been distributed, students are entitled to a fee waiver of IDR 500,000. However, I have not received the waiver.

Thank you for your attention.

Receiver (the head of an accounting bureau, V, female)

Dear (name of the student),

Since you have obtained academic achievement discount (*reason*), you are no longer entitled to a fee waiver of IDR 500,000. (*bad-news*)

Regards

As shown above, the receiver (the university party) answers the email with a brief message, only one sentence containing the reason and bad news.

That message briefly uses an inductive pattern: starting with a reason and ending with bad news without a buffer and positive closing. It implies that different media causes different approaches to organizing the negative message. However, it needs to be backed by evidenced with a significant amount of data, which this study has not fulfilled. Messages in WhatsApp are written more briefly and concisely than those in email. The receivers (students) prefer deductive messages in emails, but the sender (university) conveys negative messages using an inductive sequence on WhatsApp. However, this assumption needs to be investigated further and proved with facts and data in higher education settings.

b. Language features

Students state that the senders must pay attention to language features when delivering negative messages (Table 7). The questionnaire results strongly agree that the respondents prefer negative messages to be conveyed in a manner that does not debase them as the receivers (M = 3.59; SD = 0.676). The students also strongly agree to pay attention to language features the senders use when sending messages (M = 3.42; SD = 0.659). However, they agree that message information is more essential than language features (M = 2.82; SD = 0.845). They strongly agree that negative messages are delivered well to maintain the goodwill between the receivers and the senders (M = 3.58; SD = 0.685). Negative messages containing information less preferred by the receivers should be delivered in a specific and structured manner because they involve the sustainability of student education at the relevant university.

**Table 7 Language features of negative messages**

	N	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)	Description
I prefer negative messages to be conveyed in a manner that does not debase the receivers.	170	3.59	0.676	Strongly agree
I always pay attention to language features used by the senders.	170	3.42	0.659	Strongly agree
I prioritize message information over language features used by the senders.	170	2.82	0.845	Agree

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In my opinion, negative messages need to be delivered well to maintain the relationship between the receivers and the senders.	170	3.58	0.685	Strongly agree
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Language features deemed necessary by receivers also become the concern of the senders, in this regard the university party. They strive for a positive impression from the receivers through language features used and prioritize good relationships in the future, which confirms the following interview excerpt:

The message must be accepted with pleasure and heeded by the receiver. Therefore, we need to consider the words and sentences used. Bad sentences will damage the working relationship since students are partners as well. They will partner to help develop the area when they graduate, thus becoming our fellow missionaries. Supposing they are offended because our goodwill message is not conveyed in good words, we will close the relationship as good friends. (KF, male)

Other participants confirm that language features extensively affect the response of the receiver to the message, as stated in the following excerpts:

Supposing we act offensively or use language features poorly, the student concerned will not accept it... we will consider and compose the letter so that it will not offend the student concerned. (RK, male)

It is not instructing the student to pay but instead reminding that the student has fallen into arrears. We significantly consider the right words to convey the message. Students who obtain good facilities and services will speak well about us. They will encourage their relatives and acquaintances to be part of us. (F, male)

From the excerpts of the interview above, the university responded to negative messages written by parents of students or students via email with polite and lexical language that is simple and easy to understand. The language used is formal Indonesian. The communication in an email, such as traditional correspondence, shows clear writing conventions, from the salutation, the content of the message, and greeting to the sender's name at the bottom. The format shows a formal relationship between the recipient and the sender and the politeness of language and etiquette in emails. Similar to the results of Lewin-Jones and Mason (2014) about communication in email between lecturers and students, this study supports the importance of style, language, and ethics in communicating. The senders of the messages in this study were not only students but also their parents. Differences in topics in emails also affect the style of the message. Negative messages in this study are considered serious student problems; therefore, the context of formality is higher. The following excerpt shows the university replying to the email in a concise and straightforward language but still carefully conveying it.

Dear Mr. X

In response to your email regarding tuition fees and fees per credit, we hereby inform you that fees can be paid in installments four times, and there are no late payment penalties. Regarding tuition waivers, we are sorry that there is no waiver for this semester.

Regards,  
VS

From the excerpt above, although the message contains negative information for the receiver, the sender writes it down using a straightforward language. The sender did not give tuition waivers but was informed to pay in installments four times. This unequivocal and direct strategy indicates that the recipient complies with the applicable school rules.

c. Message delivery media

As shown in Table 8, the students prefer that negative messages be conveyed in writing rather than verbally ( $M = 2.85$ ;  $SD = 0.868$ ). They perceive that the negative messages they receive both verbally and in writing have similar effects ( $M = 2.46$ ;  $SD = 0.916$ ).

**Table 8 Message delivery media**

	N	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)	Description
I prefer negative messages that are conveyed in writing rather than verbally.	170	2.85	0.868	Agree
The negative messages I received, either verbally or in writing, have no effect on me.	170	2.43	0.916	Disagree

Within an organization, including in higher education, the delivery of negative messages is a process of communication that cannot be ignored, even though this is a frequent occurrence (Bies, 2013). When studying in higher education, sometimes students or university parties face many problems related to the continuity of learning or tuition. Meanwhile, the time of messaging is an important variable in managing negative message or bad news (Bies, 2013) In this study, the sender could not delay sending negative messages to students or universities or vice versa. Negative messages contain information that is unpleasant and important to know immediately. As in the example in this study in the previous section, parents sent an email asking for a tuition reduction, but the university responded by offering installments.

The media used to send negative messages in the present study were email and WhatsApp. Email is widely used in professional settings. As Bies (2013) found, email is more often used than face-to-face or telephone communication to convey negative messages, and it minimizes the possibility of communication misunderstandings. In addition to reducing geographic barriers, email also reduces the inconvenience for senders in delivering negative messages (Lehman & Dufrene, 2011). However, this study revealed that in a higher education context, face-to-face communication is more effective owing to the distance between the residence and the campus, as the following participant observed:

It is difficult to rely on the address since we are in Nusa Tenggara Timur, and the students are from villages. Most of our students are from Sumba Island. We cannot send the messages by plane; thus, the student concerned comes to the university, and we convey the messages directly (Y, male).

This study reveals the importance of choosing the correct medium for delivering a negative message. This finding is consistent with that of (Dibble & Sharkey, 2017) that before sending a message, the sender should assume the recipient's reaction, the impact of the message on the recipient, the delivery of messages, and the collateral damage/consequence, if any. However, this study also reveals that the emerging problems between students or parents and the university are frequently resolved directly through face-to-face meetings. It just so happens that sometimes a university has difficulty reaching students through home addresses. Thus, the students come to campus. One participant explains this:

Students never write messages on WhatsApp, but rather call or come to protest with an indignant expression. I inform them to write the complaint letters, but they prefer to meet or call, presumably because the parents have difficulty in writing complaint letters. (KF, male)

The following respondent also mentions a verbal response:

...when students apply to us, we answer verbally instead of in correspondence. Whether students come with a letter or use it verbally, we will answer that the university is not authorized to provide tuition waivers. It is the authority of the foundation instead. We will advise them to go directly to the foundation office.... (F, male)

In terms of business messages, the university will reply to the messages sent to them by either email or WhatsApp. They also explain that their campuses provide suggestion boxes to accommodate criticism and suggestions as a means of evaluation. The quality assurance team forwards the messages to the relevant faculty members or units. The messages obtained include complaints regarding the facilities and infrastructure (toilet, air-conditioning systems, and Wi-Fi connection), delay in registering for courses, total lecture attendance, uncoordinated class substitutions, lecturer attendance, and others. The messages obtained are shortened and sent using forms by the quality assurance team. Therefore, the authors cannot use the messages as data for this study.

d. Response to messages

Negative messages do not have a significant impact on students or parents, as stated by students involved in the following issue of dissatisfaction:

The message addressed to me was negative or did not meet my expectations. Rather than feeling disappointed, it motivated me to improve myself as I was aware of my mistakes. (W, female)

I accepted the evaluation decision as my motivation to study harder for better grades. (Y, female)

As presented in Table 9, the students agree that they must respond to any negative messages from the university heads ( $M = 3.21$ ;  $SD = 0.698$ ). Likewise, they strongly agree that the university also must respond to any negative messages conveyed by students ( $M = 3.26$ ;  $SD = 0.732$ ). The students agree to forward the negative messages to their parents ( $M = 2.98$ ;  $SD = 0.792$ ) and respond to negative messages addressed to them ( $M = 2.46$ ;  $SD = 0.968$ ). They expect negative messages be sent to them in person instead of to their parents ( $M = 2.40$ ;  $SD = 0.913$ ).

**Table 9 Response to messages**

	N	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)	Description
Any negative messages sent by the head of the faculty/university/bureau to students have to be responded to.	170	3.21	0.698	Agree
Any negative messages conveyed from students to the head of the faculty/university/bureau have to be responded to.	170	3.26	0.732	Strongly agree
I will forward the negative messages I received to my parents.	170	2.98	0.792	Agree
I choose not to respond to negative messages addressed to me to not interfere with my studies.	170	2.46	0.968	Disagree
Any negative messages from the university/faculty/bureau head should be delivered to my parents instead of to me.	170	2.40	0.913	Disagree

Students and their parents will respond to negative messages addressed by university parties. This suggests that although the messages are negative, the family should know the problem. Negative messages do not look a severe impact on students depending on the problem or situation experienced. As shown in the example cases in this study, when it comes to financial conditions, parents will try to be able to pay even if they are in installments. When it comes to poor learning achievement notices, the student become motivated to study hard. Locker said that situations and contexts influence responses to negative messages rather than direct and indirect organizational patterns (p. 25).

## Conclusion

This study confirms that delivering messages, especially in writing, is significantly pivotal because students, as receivers, are stakeholders whose relationship needs to be well maintained to retain the institution's good name in public. The results of this study reveal that the students prefer negative messages with a deductive approach. They felt the negative message had no serious impact, but it made them responsible and motivated in their study. Opening buffers, which are commonly used in relaying negative messages, appear in a direct approach in this study. Buffers build a common ground between the sender and the receiver, before the negative messages, followed by reasons, are stated. This study did not find that a positive tone encourages the receivers at the end of the messages.

The limitation of this study mainly lies in the considerably minimal amount of written data. Email or WhatsApp messages are usually not stored for an extended period, resulting in a lack of data from the participants. It also leads to less enriching findings. Further studies need to use more varied negative messages to compare the findings of this study. In addition, as this study discovers different approaches to relaying negative messages in WhatsApp and email, future studies can explore these differences. Rich data will allow further corroboration for these differences. Furthermore, this study only



observes messages written by university parties to students. Future studies can highlight negative messages written by students.

This study has practical implications in formal written business communication, particularly organizing messages by paying attention to the positive impact on the receivers. This study also has implications for writing business messages in a business communication learning and cultural study.

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