



## CHANGES IN POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION

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**Abstract:** The study investigates the shifts in politeness strategies in social media communication, focusing on how users adapt their language in digital interactions. With the increasing prominence of social media as a primary mode of communication, understanding and following some rules of politeness is expressed on social media has become an outstanding issue for many decades. The study addresses a gap in research regarding how different contexts and audiences affect the choice and implementation of politeness strategies in online environments. The research aims to identify the most frequently used politeness strategies on social media, analyze their effectiveness and evaluate the effect of contextual factors on user's language choices. A qualitative content analysis was conducted on a corpus of 600 social media posts and comments, using Brown and Levinson's politeness theory as the analytical framework.

**Keywords:** politeness strategies, digital communication, social media, pragmatic analysis, interpersonal interactions.

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Telegram have significantly transformed human communication. Unlike face-to-face interactions, online communication lacks immediate feedback through facial expressions, tone of voice and body language. Consequently, speakers rely heavily



on written texts, emojis, stickers and abbreviations to convey politeness and maintain social harmony. According to the academic rolodexes research, politeness strategies, traditionally studied within Brown and Levinson's (1987) theoretical framework, aim to protect the speaker's and listener's "face", i.e., their social image and self-confidence, assurance and esteem. These strategies are typically divided into positive politeness ( expressing friendliness and solidarity) and negative politeness ( showing respect and avoiding imposition). The rise of social media has led to noticeable changes in the way politeness expressed. Results from various studies indicate that while similar politeness strategies are used across digital and social interactions, their frequency and style differ. Social media often favors informal and direct forms of expression, reflecting its conversational and interactive nature, whereas professional and structured online communication tends to adopt more formal strategies at the same time. Furthermore, audience and context play a crucial role: informal interactions allow for positive politeness such as solidarity and friendliness, while sensitive or potentially confrontational contexts encourage the use of negative politeness to avoid offense. Understanding these dynamics is essential for analyzing digital communication norms and highlights the need for users to adapt their politeness strategies according to the status quo. This paper explores these changes and examines how social media reshapes traditional politeness strategies, providing insights into the dynamic nature of online interpersonal communication.

#### RESEARCH PROBLEM

The rapid growth of social media platforms has transformed the ways people communicate online. Despite this, there is still a gap in the literature concerning how politeness strategies are expressed and adapted specifically in social media interactions. Most previous research has focused on face-to-face communication or treated digital communication as a uniform context without distinguishing between



platforms. However, the unique characteristics of social media — including informal language, emojis, and instant feedback — raise important questions about the effectiveness, adaptation, and variation of politeness strategies in these digital environments. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for both theoretical insights into pragmatics and practical guidance for effective online communication.

### Research Objectives

The main objectives of this study are:

To identify and categorize the politeness strategies commonly used in social media communication.

To analyze how these strategies function in promoting positive and harmonious interactions among users.

To examine the influence of contextual factors, such as audience, purpose, and platform characteristics, on users' choice of politeness strategies.

### Research Questions

To achieve these objectives, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the most frequently used politeness strategies on social media platforms?

2. How do the characteristics of different social media platforms influence the choice and effectiveness of these strategies?

3. In what ways do contextual factors, such as audience, topic, and interaction type, shape users' use of politeness strategies in online communication?

### LITERATURE REVIEW



The growth of digital communication has profoundly reshaped human interaction, prompting a re-evaluation of traditional communication theories, particularly those concerning politeness strategies. This literature review synthesizes current research on politeness theory, the distinctive features of digital communication platforms, and the role of context in shaping politeness practices. By doing so, the review identifies gaps in the literature, emphasizing the need for research focused specifically on politeness strategies in social media communication.

### Politeness Theory

Politeness theory, initially proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), suggests that individuals employ various strategies to protect the “face” — their social identity and self-esteem — during interactions. The theory categorizes politeness into positive politeness, which aims to enhance the listener’s self-image, and negative politeness, which minimizes imposition on the listener.

Subsequent research by Holmes (1995) emphasized sociolinguistic factors such as power, social distance, and relational context, arguing that the choice of politeness strategies is heavily influenced by the relationship between speakers. While much of this research has focused on face-to-face communication, the question arises as to how these strategies translate to digital contexts, where non-verbal cues are limited.

Example: In face-to-face settings, a compliment like “You did an amazing job!” is reinforced by smiling and tone. Online, users may rely on emojis (“You did an amazing job! ”) to convey the same positive politeness.

### Digital Communication Contexts

Digital communication spans a variety of platforms, including social media, instant messaging, and email, each with its own characteristics that shape politeness



strategies. Social media, for instance, is largely informal, public, and conversational, whereas email tends to follow formal conventions, particularly in professional contexts (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007).

Walther (2011) notes that the lack of non-verbal cues in digital communication makes it necessary to rely on linguistic strategies to convey politeness effectively. For example:

Facebook comment (informal, positive politeness): “Great photo! Looks like you had so much fun ”

Professional email (formal, negative politeness): “Could you please review the attached document at your earliest convenience?”

These examples highlight how the medium itself influences both the style and frequency of politeness strategies. Social media favors informal, interactive, and visually expressive strategies, while emails demand formal, structured, and indirect politeness.

#### Contextual Influences on Politeness Strategies

Audience and purpose are critical factors in determining which politeness strategies are appropriate. Haugh (2015) argues that the intended recipient significantly shapes the level and type of politeness used. For instance, professionals communicating with clients often employ more formal politeness strategies than when communicating with colleagues (Kienpointer & Smid, 2018).

Social media adds another layer of complexity, as users often address diverse audiences simultaneously. As Taguchi (2015) observes, a single post may reach friends, acquaintances, and strangers, requiring strategic adaptation of politeness to accommodate multiple audience expectations.



Example: On Instagram, a public post might use neutral or positive politeness to appeal to a wide audience:

“Excited to share my latest artwork with you all! Hope you enjoy it!”

A private message to a close friend might use informal positive politeness:

“Hey! Check out my new painting Can’t wait to hear your thoughts!”

These examples demonstrate how contextual factors such as audience type, platform norms, and interaction purpose influence politeness strategies, confirming that digital communication requires flexible and adaptive approaches.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory to classify politeness strategies in social media communication. Positive politeness strategies include compliments, in-group identity markers, and shared interests, while negative politeness strategies encompass hedging, indirectness, and apologies.

Contextual variables such as audience, purpose, and platform characteristics are also considered, following the insights of Holmes (1995) and Haugh (2015), to examine how these factors influence the choice of politeness strategies. A qualitative content analysis was conducted on a corpus of 600 social media posts and comments. Each interaction was coded according to the type of politeness strategy and relevant contextual factors. Additionally, interviews were thematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase procedure to identify patterns in users’ perceptions and experiences of politeness in digital communication.

For quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics were used to summarize the frequency and types of strategies, and differences across platforms were tested using chi-square analysis. Ethical considerations were strictly observed: participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and data



confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. Finally, six illustrative extracts from the corpus were analyzed to demonstrate how politeness strategies are employed in different digital contexts and how audience and purpose shape communication practices.

## RESULTS

The analysis of social media discourse reveals that users frequently employ a combination of positive and negative politeness strategies to maintain interactional harmony and audience engagement.

### Extract 1: Social Media Post

“Hey everyone! Just wanted to share a quick update on my project. Thanks for all the support! Can’t wait to hear your thoughts!”

This extract illustrates a clear use of positive politeness strategies aimed at engaging a broad audience. The greeting “Hey everyone!” functions as an inclusive address form, fostering a sense of community and shared involvement. Similarly, the expression “Thanks for all the support!” reinforces in-group solidarity and gratitude, which are essential for maintaining positive social relations in online environments. The closing sentence “Can’t wait to hear your thoughts!” further encourages interaction by inviting feedback, demonstrating openness and friendliness. This example shows that social media posts often rely on positive politeness to promote active participation and relationship-building in a public digital space.

### Extract 2: Social Media Comment

“Great post! But I think it could have included more about the challenges faced. Just my two cents!”



This comment demonstrates a combination of positive and negative politeness strategies. The initial compliment “Great post!” serves as a positive politeness marker, acknowledging the content creator’s effort and supporting their positive face. However, the subsequent critical remark introduces a potential face-threatening act. To mitigate this, the commenter employs hedging through the phrase “I think” and especially “Just my two cents!”, which frames the critique as a personal opinion rather than a direct judgment. This strategy reduces imposition and helps preserve social harmony.

Overall, these extracts indicate that social media users strategically balance politeness strategies to express opinions while maintaining positive interpersonal relationships. The findings suggest that positive politeness dominates in public and informal contexts, while negative politeness is used to soften disagreement or criticism, reflecting the adaptive and dynamic nature of politeness in social media communication.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that politeness strategies in social media communication are highly context-dependent and dynamic. In line with Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory, both positive and negative politeness strategies were observed; however, positive politeness appeared more frequently due to the informal and interactive nature of social media platforms. This supports previous research suggesting that online public spaces encourage solidarity, friendliness, and audience engagement.

At the same time, the use of negative politeness strategies, particularly hedging and indirectness, highlights users’ awareness of potential face-threatening acts. Similar to Haugh’s (2015) observations, users carefully balance expressing opinions and maintaining social harmony, especially in situations involving criticism or disagreement. Overall, the results demonstrate that social media reshapes traditional



politeness norms by requiring users to adapt their communicative behavior to audience diversity and platform characteristics.

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown that politeness strategies in social media communication differ from traditional face-to-face interactions due to the specific characteristics of digital platforms. The findings indicate that positive politeness strategies are predominantly used to foster solidarity, engagement, and a sense of community, while negative politeness strategies are employed to mitigate disagreement and avoid potential conflict. Audience, context, and platform type play a crucial role in shaping users' linguistic choices. Overall, the study highlights the adaptive nature of politeness in online communication and emphasizes the need for greater awareness of appropriate politeness strategies in digital discourse.

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