# Politeness and Impoliteness in Digital Communication: A Pragmatic Study in English

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## Abstrak

Strategi kesantunan dan ketidaksantunan dalam komunikasi digital dianalisis melalui pendekatan pragmatik, dengan fokus pada pola linguistik dalam bahasa Inggris di berbagai platform. Pendekatan kualitatif digunakan untuk mengumpulkan data dari media sosial, email, dan aplikasi pesan yang dianalisis menggunakan teori kesantunan dan ketidaksantunan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan pentingnya penanda linguistik, seperti emoji dan indikator nada, serta pengaruh variasi budaya, dinamika kekuasaan, dan norma platform terhadap praktik komunikasi. Kesantunan mendukung kerja sama, sementara ketidaksantunan sering digunakan untuk konflik atau dominasi, tergantung pada konteks dan anonimitas. Temuan ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman perilaku pragmatik di ruang virtual dan menawarkan wawasan untuk mendorong interaksi digital yang efektif dan hormat.

**Kata kunci:** *Kesantunan, Ketidaksantunan, Pragmatik, Komunikasi Digital*

## Abstract

Politeness and impoliteness strategies in digital communication are analyzed through a pragmatic lens, focusing on linguistic patterns in English across diverse platforms. Using a qualitative approach, data from social media, emails, and messaging apps were collected and analyzed with frameworks from politeness and impoliteness theories. Results reveal the critical role of linguistic markers, such as emojis and tone indicators, and highlight the influence of cultural variations, power dynamics, and platform norms on communication practices. While politeness fosters cooperation, impoliteness is often employed for conflict or dominance, shaped by context and anonymity. Findings contribute to understanding pragmatic behavior in virtual spaces and offer insights for fostering effective and respectful digital interactions.

**Keywords:** *Politeness, Impoliteness, Pragmatics, Digital Communication*

## INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, communication has transcended physical boundaries, making the study of language use in virtual contexts increasingly relevant. Digital communication has become more prevalent and essential in our everyday lives (Andini et al., 2024). This research examines politeness and impoliteness strategies in digital communication, focusing on pragmatic phenomena in English language contexts. The rise of online platforms such as social media, emails, and instant messaging has transformed how individuals interact, often challenging traditional norms of politeness. Exploring these interactions provides a deeper understanding of how individuals maintain or disrupt social harmony in virtual spaces (Herring, 2019).

The focus of this study lies in analyzing how linguistic strategies reflect politeness and impoliteness in digital communication. Specifically, it aims to identify and categorize the pragmatic markers used to express respect, solidarity, sarcasm, or conflict in online interactions. The choice of English as the medium is due to its status as a global lingua franca, facilitating diverse cross-cultural interactions that bring unique challenges to politeness theories (Crystal, 2012). This research seeks to uncover how users adapt or deviate from conventional norms in their attempts to navigate these challenges in digital communication.

According to Pasaribu et al., (2022) politeness is an essential aspect of communication that ensures smooth social interaction by considering the relationship between speakers and listeners. Factors such as age, social status, and position significantly influence how individuals communicate, leading to different approaches when addressing teachers, friends, or younger people. This awareness of context and relationship dynamics reflects the principle of politeness, while the effort to maintain respectful communication and avoid embarrassing the interlocutor is known as a politeness strategy.

Then, Bustam, Syihabuddin, and Saifullah (2024) argued politeness in digital communication is crucial for maintaining positive interactions, especially in educational settings like WhatsApp groups. Their study highlights that participants, including students and lecturers, employ various politeness strategies such as indirect speech acts, politeness markers, and expressions of gratitude to foster respectful communication. These strategies not only promote harmonious interactions but also reflect power dynamics, where lecturers maintain authoritative discourse and students adopt respectful language, contributing to an inclusive virtual learning environment

Furthemore, Soehendro and Jumanto (2022) describe how impoliteness strategies are often employed to create discomfort or pose a threat to the "face" of the listener, as evident in the Grammar Nazi phenomenon on Twitter. In this context, perpetrators use harsh words, sarcasm, or mockery to criticize grammatical errors, sometimes resulting in verbal bullying. Most data indicate that such actions are more frequently intended to demean rather than provide constructive benefits, highlighting the negative impact of impoliteness in digital communication.

The purpose of this study is multifaceted. Firstly, it seeks to contribute to the growing field of pragmatics by extending its focus to digital communication. Secondly, it aims to provide insights into the linguistic behaviors that foster either cooperation or conflict in online settings. Lastly, the research intends to inform digital communication strategies by identifying patterns that promote constructive engagement and mitigate misunderstandings. Such findings can have practical implications, particularly for educators, policymakers, and digital platform developers aiming to foster healthier online environments (Locher & Watts, 2005).

The rationale for conducting this study stems from the increasing reliance on digital communication in both personal and professional contexts. Unlike face-to-face communication, where tone and non-verbal cues often clarify intent, digital interactions rely heavily on written text, which is more prone to misinterpretation. Furthermore, the asynchronous nature of many online platforms can exacerbate misunderstandings, as participants may interpret messages out of context or with emotional detachment (Walther, 1996). Exploring politeness and impoliteness in this context is crucial to understanding how individuals negotiate meaning and manage relationships in virtual spaces.

The significance of politeness theories, particularly Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, cannot be overstated in this context. Their concepts of face-saving acts and face-threatening acts provide a foundational lens through which to analyze digital interactions. However, the unique features of online communication, such as anonymity and rapid dissemination, challenge these traditional theories, necessitating further investigation. This study aims to bridge the gap by adapting and applying these theories to the digital realm, providing a nuanced understanding of politeness in virtual interactions.

Additionally, the study examines the phenomenon of impoliteness, which has gained prominence in digital communication due to the prevalence of online trolling, cyberbullying, and aggressive discourse. Culpeper's (2011) impoliteness framework serves as a critical tool for identifying and analyzing the linguistic strategies that contribute to such behaviors. By understanding the pragmatic underpinnings of impoliteness, this research hopes to shed light on the factors that escalate conflicts in digital spaces and explore potential interventions.

The study's emphasis on pragmatic markers aligns with the growing body of research focusing on linguistic features in digital communication. Markers such as emojis, punctuation, capitalization, and discourse markers play a pivotal role in conveying politeness or impoliteness. These elements are particularly significant in English, where the lack of grammatical gender and other linguistic features necessitates reliance on contextual cues to convey social meanings (Tagg, 2015).

This research also considers the role of cultural factors in shaping digital politeness and impoliteness. As English serves as a global medium, interactions often involve participants from diverse cultural backgrounds with varying expectations of politeness. Hofstede's (1984) dimensions of culture provide a valuable framework for understanding how cultural differences influence communication styles, particularly in the digital context. This study aims to explore these dimensions to better comprehend cross-cultural variations in digital politeness strategies.

Furthermore, the study addresses the impact of platform-specific norms on politeness and impoliteness. Each digital platform fosters unique conventions and expectations, shaping how users express themselves. For instance, professional platforms like LinkedIn may encourage more formal politeness strategies, whereas platforms like Twitter may tolerate or even celebrate impoliteness in the form of humor or sarcasm (Page, 2014). By examining these platform-specific dynamics, this research seeks to offer a comprehensive view of politeness in digital communication.

Another key area of focus is the role of power dynamics in shaping politeness and impoliteness strategies. Online interactions often blur traditional power structures, allowing users to challenge authority figures or assert dominance in ways that might not be possible in face-to-face contexts. This research explores how these dynamics influence the choice of pragmatic strategies and the resulting social outcomes. Such analysis is particularly relevant in understanding conflicts and cooperation in digital communities (Baym, 2010).

The study also aims to explore the evolution of politeness norms in digital communication over time. As digital platforms evolve and users become more accustomed to online interactions, the norms governing politeness and impoliteness are likely to shift. By examining contemporary digital interactions, this research hopes to capture these changes and contribute to the ongoing discourse on language use in the digital age.

**METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to investigate politeness and impoliteness strategies in digital communication. The qualitative approach is chosen because it allows for an in-depth analysis of language use and contextual factors, which are central to understanding pragmatic phenomena. Data collection focuses on naturally occurring interactions in various digital platforms, such as social media comments, email exchanges, and instant messaging conversations. These platforms were selected to ensure diversity in communication contexts, ranging from formal to informal interactions. The goal is to identify linguistic markers and strategies used to convey politeness and impoliteness across different scenarios.

The data collection process involves purposive sampling to gather relevant and meaningful examples of digital communication in English. Publicly available posts, comments, and threads on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit serve as primary sources. Additionally, email correspondence and excerpts from messaging applications, with appropriate consent from participants, are included to explore formal and informal communication. Ethical considerations are paramount; all collected data are anonymized to protect user identities and ensure compliance with research ethics guidelines. These measures guarantee the authenticity of the data while respecting the privacy of the individuals involved.

Once collected, the data are analyzed using a pragmatic framework rooted in politeness theory and impoliteness studies. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies and Culpeper's (2011) impoliteness framework provide the theoretical foundation for identifying and categorizing linguistic patterns. These frameworks are adapted to account for the unique features of digital communication, such as the use of emojis, abbreviations, and other multimodal elements. Each interaction is examined to identify explicit and implicit markers of politeness or impoliteness, focusing on their contextual use and pragmatic function.

The analysis process employs coding techniques to organize and interpret the data systematically. Initially, open coding is used to identify recurring themes, such as mitigation strategies, face-threatening acts, and conflict escalation. This is followed by axial coding to establish relationships between these themes, considering factors like platform norms, cultural influences, and power dynamics. Software tools for qualitative data analysis, such as NVivo, are

utilized to facilitate the organization and visualization of patterns within the dataset. These tools enhance the rigor of the analysis by enabling the researcher to track coding consistency and identify nuanced insights.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, triangulation is employed by comparing data from multiple platforms and contexts. This approach minimizes bias and enhances the credibility of the results by corroborating findings across diverse sources. Additionally, peer review is incorporated into the analysis process, with fellow researchers examining the coding and interpretation to provide constructive feedback. This collaborative effort ensures that the analysis is robust and reflective of the complex dynamics of politeness and impoliteness in digital communication.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The results of this study reveal a diverse range of politeness and impoliteness strategies employed by individuals in digital communication across various platforms. Politeness strategies frequently manifest in the use of mitigation tools, such as softening expressions with hedges ("I think," "maybe") and including emojis to convey friendliness or lessen the impact of potentially face-threatening acts. For example, in professional email exchanges, phrases like "I would appreciate it if you could..." accompanied by polite closings ("Best regards") indicate deliberate efforts to maintain formality and respect. On the other hand, impoliteness strategies, such as direct insults or dismissive tones, are prevalent in anonymous or semi-anonymous platforms like Reddit, often contributing to conflict escalation. These findings highlight the significant role of platform-specific norms in shaping linguistic behaviors.

One notable result is the role of multimodal elements, such as emojis, GIFs, and capitalization, in expressing politeness or impoliteness. Emojis frequently serve to soften messages and clarify tone, particularly in informal settings like messaging apps. For instance, the use of a smiley face (□) can transform a potentially curt statement into a more amicable one. Conversely, excessive use of capitalization or punctuation (e.g., "WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?!") is often perceived as aggressive or impolite, especially on platforms where tone is difficult to discern from text alone. These findings underscore the adaptive nature of communication strategies in the absence of non-verbal cues.

The study also reveals that cultural variations significantly influence politeness norms in digital communication. Participants from collectivist cultures, for example, often prioritize maintaining group harmony, as evidenced by their frequent use of indirectness and avoidance of confrontational language. In contrast, participants from individualist cultures may employ more direct and assertive strategies, valuing clarity over social harmony. This cultural divergence is particularly evident in cross-cultural interactions, where misinterpretations of politeness can lead to unintended conflicts. These results emphasize the importance of cultural sensitivity in global digital communication.

Power dynamics emerge as another critical factor shaping politeness and impoliteness strategies. In professional settings, individuals often use deferential language when addressing superiors, such as expressions of gratitude or acknowledgment of authority ("Thank you for considering my request"). On the other hand, in peer-to-peer interactions, power asymmetries can sometimes lead to impoliteness, such as condescending remarks or sarcasm used to assert dominance. For instance, on social media, users with a larger following may employ impoliteness strategically to reinforce their authority or influence within a community.

The study also highlights the evolving norms of politeness in digital communication over time. On platforms like Twitter, where brevity is paramount, users often employ concise politeness strategies, such as emojis or shorthand phrases ("TY" for "thank you"). However, this economy of expression can sometimes lead to misinterpretations, particularly among users unfamiliar with platform conventions. Similarly, younger users tend to adopt more casual politeness norms, often blending informal language with polite intent, reflecting the dynamic and generational shifts in digital communication practices.

An interesting finding is the dual role of anonymity in shaping politeness and impoliteness. While anonymity can encourage honest and uninhibited communication, it also facilitates

impoliteness, as seen in trolling or aggressive discourse. For example, on platforms like Reddit, anonymous users may openly criticize others without fear of personal repercussions, often resulting in escalated conflicts. At the same time, anonymity can enable marginalized individuals to express their views freely, using politeness strategies to navigate sensitive discussions. These contrasting effects highlight the complexity of anonymity in digital communication.

The study also identifies the impact of context and purpose on the choice of politeness strategies. In collaborative contexts, such as online forums dedicated to problem-solving, participants often employ positive politeness strategies to build rapport and foster cooperation. Statements like "That's a great idea, but maybe we could try..." demonstrate a balance between expressing agreement and suggesting alternatives. In contrast, in competitive contexts, such as debates on social media, impoliteness strategies like sarcasm and mocking often dominate, reflecting the adversarial nature of such interactions.

Another key finding is the role of perceived intent in interpreting politeness and impoliteness. Users often rely on contextual clues to infer whether a message is intended to be polite, neutral, or rude. For instance, a sarcastic remark may be perceived as humorous by one participant but offensive by another, depending on their familiarity with the speaker or the context. This subjectivity highlights the challenges of achieving shared understanding in digital communication, where tone and intent are often ambiguous.

Platform-specific norms significantly influence the manifestation of politeness and impoliteness. On LinkedIn, for example, users tend to adopt highly formal and polite language to maintain a professional image, whereas platforms like Instagram often feature more casual and playful expressions of politeness. The study also notes that certain platforms, such as YouTube comment sections, are more prone to impoliteness due to minimal moderation and the relative ease of posting inflammatory remarks. These findings demonstrate the interplay between platform design and communication practices.

The results of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of politeness and impoliteness strategies in digital communication. By examining linguistic markers, cultural influences, platform norms, and power dynamics, the research reveals the complex and context-dependent nature of these strategies. The findings highlight the adaptive capabilities of users in navigating the challenges of virtual interactions and underscore the need for continued research to address emerging trends and issues in digital communication. These insights not only advance the theoretical understanding of pragmatics but also offer practical implications for fostering effective and respectful communication in digital spaces.

**CONCLUSION**

This study highlights the complex and dynamic nature of politeness and impoliteness strategies in digital communication. The findings reveal how linguistic markers, cultural differences, platform norms, and power dynamics shape user interactions in virtual spaces. Politeness often serves to foster cooperation and maintain harmony, while impoliteness is frequently used to assert dominance or express conflict, influenced by contextual and platform-specific factors. The study underscores the adaptive strategies employed by users to navigate the challenges of digital communication, offering valuable insights into the evolving norms of language use in online environments. These results contribute to the field of pragmatics and provide practical guidance for promoting respectful and effective digital interactions.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of understanding the role of multimodal elements, such as emojis and punctuation, in conveying tone and intent in digital communication. These elements often compensate for the lack of non-verbal cues in virtual interactions, helping users clarify politeness or impoliteness. Additionally, the findings highlight the need for cultural and contextual sensitivity, as varying norms and expectations can influence how messages are interpreted. By addressing these factors, the research not only enriches theoretical discussions on pragmatics but also offers practical implications for improving communication practices across diverse digital platforms.

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