

Original Research Article

Politeness Strategies in Online Communication: A Pragmatic Analysis of Selected Social Media Interactions in Nigeria

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Abstract: This study investigates how people use politeness strategies in online communication, especially on social media. It focuses on three main goals: identifying the politeness strategies that users apply on selected social media platforms, examining how these strategies help manage face, keep harmony, and build social relationships, and assessing the impact of these strategies on online conversations and communication across cultures. To achieve these goals, the study used a qualitative research method, analyzing online conversations chosen from Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter (X) platforms. The analysis was guided by Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory and offer a clearer picture of how people handle politeness in digital interactions and provide insights into how social values, norms, and virtues are maintained in the increasingly digital communication landscape. The study concludes that in the Nigerian context, online politeness includes cultural markers like greetings, terms for family members, and religious comments. It goes beyond mere etiquette; it is an essential tool for promoting cooperation, reducing conflict, and upholding social values in digital spaces.

Keywords: Politeness Strategies, Online Communication, Pragmatics, Social Media.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter (now X), and Instagram have greatly changed how people communicate. Unlike traditional face-to-face interactions, online communication often relies on written or multimodal texts, including emoji's, images, and GIFs. This shift creates distinct challenges for individuals in expressing themselves, managing relationships, and maintaining social harmony. In these digital spaces, politeness is key. It helps reduce conflict and protects the social image of those involved.

Pragmatics focuses on meaning in context and serves as a good framework for understanding how individuals use politeness strategies in online communication. Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987), which highlights positive and negative face needs, provides important insights into how social actors negotiate respect, solidarity, and power dynamics in conversations that occur online. Given that social media can often feel impersonal and leads to misinterpretations, politeness strategies are essential for minimizing face-threatening actions and maintaining personal connections.

Researchers like Herring (2010), Locher & Graham (2010), and Crystal (2011) have observed that online discourse retains many traditional politeness norms while also introducing new strategies suited to the features of digital technology. For example, emojis and abbreviations can take the place of vocal cues and make potentially rude comments seem softer. The study of politeness in online settings is not only academically important but also socially relevant, particularly as digital communication becomes more prevalent in personal, professional, and political contexts.

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While there is extensive research on politeness in face-to-face interactions, fewer studies explore how politeness appears in online social media, especially within Nigeria. Online communication often comes with anonymity, immediacy, and less physical presence, which can lead to rudeness, bullying, and misunderstandings. Still, many users strategically use politeness markers to address face concerns, nurture relationships, and uphold social norms.

The issue is that despite the prevalence of online interactions and the relatively limited research on the strategies that underlie them. How do social media users manage politeness in their everyday conversations? What types of politeness strategies do they use, and how do they help maintain harmony or lessen conflict? Answering these questions is essential for understanding the language and social implications of digital communication.

This research focuses on online conversations from selected social media platforms—specifically Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter (X). The study examines how Nigerian social media users apply politeness strategies in their daily interactions. While the analysis references broader pragmatic theories, it primarily follows Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. This study is significant in three main ways. First, it adds to the growing research on pragmatics by extending politeness analysis to the digital space, where unique communication challenges exist. Second, it offers useful insights for social media users, policymakers, and educators on utilizing politeness strategies to encourage positive interactions and reduce conflict online. Third, the study holds intercultural relevance, helping us understand how people negotiate cultural expectations, social values, and language norms in a technology-driven environment.

Ultimately, this research connects language, technology, and society by highlighting how politeness strategies influence the quality of online communication.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Conceptual Clarifications

2.1.1 Politeness

Politeness is a key concept in pragmatics. It describes the set of strategies speakers use to keep interpersonal relationships smooth (Leech, 2014). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness is based on the idea of "face," which refers to the public image people want to create and protect in conversations. Positive politeness strategies focus on solidarity, approval, and friendliness, while negative politeness strategies respect autonomy and avoid imposing on others. Politeness serves as a practical tool for managing communication and preventing conflict.

2.1.2 Online Communication

Online communication includes interactions happening through digital platforms like social media, messaging apps, blogs, and forums. Unlike traditional face-to-face conversations, online discourse relies on technology and is often brief, informal, and multimodal, incorporating texts, emojis, images, and GIFs. These features affect how politeness is shown, understood, and negotiated. For instance, users may use emojis to soften commands or abbreviations like "pls" and "lol" to convey friendliness and lessen face threats.

2.1.3 Pragmatics

Pragmatics studies meaning in context. It looks at how language is used to accomplish actions, express intentions, and maintain relationships (Mey, 2001). Within pragmatics, politeness is seen as a communication strategy that reflects language choices and social values. Online communication is a dynamic and globalized field that provides fertile ground for examining politeness strategies and their intercultural aspects.

2.2 Politeness in Face-to-Face Communication

Studies of politeness in traditional spoken interactions reveal much about cross-cultural norms. For example, Lakoff (1973) viewed politeness as rules aimed at reducing conflict during conversations. Leech (1983, 2014) introduced a Politeness Principle to maximize benefits to others while minimizing costs to oneself. Blum-Kulka *et al.*, (1989) showed through the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) that requests and apologies differ across cultures but generally serve to maintain face.

These studies underscore the universality of politeness and emphasize that its expression varies by culture. What is polite in one culture may seem rude in another. This brings up questions about how these norms apply in the more fluid, multicultural world of online communication.

2.3 Politeness in Online Communication

The shift to digital platforms has opened new avenues for polite communication research. Herring (2010) noted that online discourse often reflects spoken interactions while creating new conventions, like emojis, hashtags, and memes as politeness markers. Locher and Graham (2010) proposed the idea of relational work, examining how people build identities and relationships online through both polite and impolite actions.

In Nigeria, Adegoju and Oyebode (2015) explored online political talk. They noted that politeness is often overlooked in favor of rudeness and aggression, although it can be softened with humor and proverbs. Chiluwa (2012) studied Nigerian Facebook exchanges, finding that politeness strategies combine local language norms (like honorifics and greetings) with global digital habits (like abbreviations and emojis).

These findings suggest that online politeness is a mix of cultural traditions and technological influences.

2.4 Research Gap

Although there is valuable research on politeness in both online and offline settings, some gaps remain. Much of the scholarship on online politeness comes from Western contexts, with limited attention to African or specifically Nigerian digital environments. Additionally, studies often focus on rudeness and cyber aggression, leaving politeness strategies largely unexplored. Finally, there are few analyses applying Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory to compare various social media platforms.

This study aims to fill these gaps by analyzing politeness strategies in Nigerian online communication on Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter (X). It highlights how users manage face, maintain harmony, and navigate relationships in increasingly important digital spaces.

Theoretical Framework: Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory is the main model for studying politeness. The theory centers on the idea of face, which Goffman (1967) describes as an individual's public self-image. According to the theory, people want to protect both their positive face (the desire to be liked and accepted) and negative face (the desire for independence and freedom from imposition).

Conversations often involve face-threatening acts (FTAs), like requests or disagreements. To soften these FTAs, speakers use four main types of politeness strategies:

1. Bald-on-record (direct speech acts, e.g., "Give me your book.")
2. Positive politeness (strategies emphasizing connection, e.g., "Could you please share your book with me, friend?")
3. Negative politeness (strategies minimizing imposition, e.g., "I'm sorry to bother you, but may I borrow your book?")
4. Off-record (indirect) politeness (implying rather than stating, e.g., "It would be nice to have that book right now.")

In digital communication, these strategies often show through creative use of emojis, abbreviations, humor, and indirectness. Critics of Brown and Levinson (e.g., Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003) argue that the model can be too focused on individuals and culturally biased toward Western norms. Still, it remains a valuable tool for studying politeness in various contexts, including social media

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research design, focusing on discourse analysis to explore politeness strategies in online communication. Qualitative methods are chosen because the study aims to interpret meanings, strategies, and contextual details in social media interactions, rather than just counting numbers (Creswell, 2014). This approach allows the researcher to look at language in its natural social setting and see how politeness is negotiated, expressed, or ignored in mediated discussions.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The population for this study includes online conversations from Nigerian users on selected social media platforms: Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter (X). These platforms were specifically chosen for their popularity, accessibility, and representation of different styles of online interaction. A purposive sampling technique was used to select data that clearly show politeness strategies. Conversations that included requests, apologies, greetings, disagreements, and responses were targeted, as these speech acts often involve face-threatening situations that require politeness strategies. Five conversation excerpts were sampled across the three platforms: Facebook comment threads, WhatsApp group chats, and Twitter (X) replies.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected using two methods:

1. Observation and Screenshot Capture – Naturally occurring conversations on the selected platforms were observed, and relevant excerpts were captured as screenshots.

2. Archival Retrieval – For WhatsApp data, the researcher accessed archived chat histories from participants who agreed to share their data.

The collected data were anonymized by removing identifiable information such as names, profile pictures, and phone numbers. Only the linguistic content, including texts, were used for analysis.

3.4 Method of Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using discourse analysis, based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. The analysis occurred in the following stages:

1. Identification of Politeness Strategies – Each conversational excerpt was examined for bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies.
2. Functional Analysis – The communicative function of each strategy was examined to see how it managed face, maintained harmony, or negotiated relationships.
3. Comparative Platform Analysis – Patterns were compared across Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter (X) to note similarities and differences in politeness strategies among platforms.

The qualitative analysis was supported with frequency counts to show which strategies appeared most often, while the main focus remained on interpretation instead of statistical generalization.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

As this study involves human communication in digital spaces, ethical guidelines were strictly observed. Participants whose WhatsApp data were used provided informed consent. Public conversations from Facebook and Twitter (X) were treated as open data but were anonymized to protect users' identities. Care was taken to ensure that no sensitive or private information was revealed. Additionally, the analysis was conducted without manipulation or misrepresentation of participants' comments.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the analysis which focuses on identifying the politeness strategies used by users. It analyzes how these strategies work in digital interactions and discusses their impact on face management and social harmony. The analysis is based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, which categorizes politeness strategies into bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record (indirect) strategies.

4.2 Data from Facebook

Excerpt 1: Facebook Comment Thread

User A: "Please, can you help me share this post? I really need it to reach more people."

User B: "Of course, brother. I will share it right away. Don't worry, God will bless your efforts."

Analysis:

User A's request shows negative politeness by using "Please" and the soft phrasing "can you help me," which reduces the impact on User B's freedom.

User B replies with positive politeness, highlighting connection ("brother") and comfort ("Don't worry, God will bless your efforts"). This exchange demonstrates how Facebook users soften requests and strengthen community bonds, mixing practical strategies with cultural expressions of empathy and religiosity.

Excerpt 2: Facebook Comment on a Political Post

User C: "You are wrong, sir. But I respect your opinion."

User D: "Thanks. We can agree to disagree. At least the conversation is healthy."

Analysis:

User C's statement contains a direct disagreement ("You are wrong") followed by positive politeness ("But I respect your opinion"). User D responds with a face-saving reply that accepts the disagreement but maintains harmony ("agree to disagree"). This pattern shows that even during heated political discussions, Facebook users use politeness strategies to ease potential conflict and keep the conversation civil.

Data from WhatsApp

Excerpt 3: WhatsApp Group Chat

Member A: "Guys, sorry to disturb, but could anyone please send me yesterday's lecture notes?"

Member B: "No problem, bro. I'll forward them to you now."

Member C: "Same here, check your inbox."

Analysis:

Member A's request uses negative politeness with apologetic phrases ("sorry to disturb"), modal verbs ("could"), and politeness markers ("please"). Members B and C reply with positive politeness, using friendly terms ("bro") and helpful offers ("I'll forward them"). This shows the cooperative spirit often found in WhatsApp group chats, where relationships are strengthened along with information sharing.

Excerpt 4: WhatsApp Family Group

Mother: "David, remember to call your uncle today. He asked after you."

David: "Yes, Mum. I'll do that. Thanks for reminding me 🙏."

Analysis:

The mother's utterance is a bald-on-record directive ("remember to call your uncle"). David responds with positive politeness, acknowledging the instruction respectfully and using gratitude plus emoji 🙏 to soften any sense of imposition. The emoji functions as a digital politeness marker, visually reinforcing respect and appreciation.

Data from Twitter (X)

Excerpt 5: Twitter Reply

User X: "Could someone kindly share the link to the webinar?"

User Y: "Here you go 👉. Hope it helps."

Analysis:

User X uses negative politeness with "Could someone kindly" to mitigate the request. User Y responds with positive politeness, showing helpfulness and support. The emoji 👉 strengthens friendliness and reduces social distance. Twitter interactions, despite their brevity, still accommodate politeness strategies through lexical choices and symbols.

Excerpt 6: Political Disagreement on Twitter

User M: "That's the dumbest idea I've ever heard ☹️."

User N: "You may not agree, but name-calling isn't necessary. Let's argue the point, not the person."

Analysis:

User M's comment breaks politeness rules by being rude ("dumbest idea"). User N tries to mend the situation by using negative politeness ("You may not agree") and a meta-pragmatic approach ("Let's argue the point, not the person"). This shows how users often respond to rudeness with polite methods to repair face-threatening situations.

Comparative Platforms Analysis

The analysis shows different trends on each platform:

Facebook: Users mix politeness strategies with cultural and religious expressions (e.g., "God bless you"). They pair disagreement with respect markers to keep discussions civil.

WhatsApp: This platform promotes closeness and togetherness. Positive politeness is common, with emoji's and terms of endearment ("bro," "Mum") being important markers.

Twitter (X): Politeness often faces challenges due to the platform's short format and confrontational tone. Still, negative politeness and the use of emoji's serve as tools for softening remarks and reducing conflict.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The data indicate that politeness strategies are common and important in online communication. Across platforms, negative politeness is used to lessen the impact of requests, while positive politeness strengthens group bonds and personal relationships. Direct strategies appear in family or hierarchical scenarios where straightforwardness is accepted. Indirect strategies are less common but show up in humorous or vague comments.

In the Nigerian context, online politeness includes cultural markers like greetings, terms for family members, and religious comments. This shows a blend of digital communication styles. Emoji's act as replacements for vocal cues, boosting positive politeness and softening face-threatening acts. These findings highlight that politeness is vital for maintaining interactions, even in digital spaces often linked to conflict and rudeness. The main findings are:

1. Prevalence of Politeness Strategies:

- All four types of politeness strategies—direct, positive, negative, and indirect—were noted across the platforms.
- Positive politeness (solidarity, in-group identity markers, and supportive responses) and negative politeness (use of hedges, apologies, modal verbs, and politeness phrases like "please" and "sorry") were the most common.

2. Platform-Specific Tendencies:

- **Facebook:** Users frequently blend politeness with cultural and religious expressions, such as “God bless you” or family terms like “brother,” to soften requests and disagreements.
- **WhatsApp:** Positive politeness strategies are prevalent because of the close nature of group chats. Emoji’s, terms for family members (e.g., “Mum,” “bro”), and expressions of gratitude are commonly used to reinforce closeness.
- **Twitter (X):** While rudeness and confrontational exchanges were common, users also used negative politeness and conciliatory gestures to handle conflicts. Emoji’s worked as quick polite indicators in a character-limited space.

Role of Emoji’s and Digital Affordances:

- Emoji’s such as 🙏, 👉, and 🗑 were found to function pragmatically as politeness markers, compensating for the absence of prosodic and non-verbal cues in digital interaction.
- They often enhanced positive politeness by expressing friendliness, gratitude, or empathy.

Cultural Hybridization of Politeness:

- Nigerian social media users blended globalized digital conventions (abbreviations, emoji’s) with local cultural norms (greetings, honorifics, and religious references).
- This created a hybrid politeness style, reflecting both indigenous values and global digital trends.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that politeness strategies are still crucial for communication in online settings, despite the anonymity and chances for rudeness that come with digital platforms. Nigerian users of Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter (X) display practical awareness by using various politeness strategies to manage face-threatening acts, maintain harmony, and keep social relationships intact. In the end, politeness in online communication goes beyond mere etiquette; it is an essential tool for promoting cooperation, reducing conflict, and upholding social values in digital spaces. Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory helped categorize these strategies, but online interactions revealed new ways of expressing politeness, such as through emoji’s, which the original model doesn’t fully cover. The findings emphasize that politeness is a universal need in communication, while also showing how it can adapt to technology and cultural differences. In the end, politeness in online communication goes beyond mere etiquette; it is an essential tool for promoting cooperation, reducing conflict, and upholding social values in digital spaces. This study posits that online platforms are naturally intercultural, hence there is a need for Nigerian users and others to consider the cultural differences in politeness. What is polite in one culture might be misunderstood in another; therefore, clarity and cultural sensitivity should guide online communication.

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