

Analysing politeness strategies within WhatsApp interactions: Can you be polite?

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Abstract This study is concerned with the politeness strategies used in digital communication. Focusing on WhatsApp, this study deals with how speakers maintain face and foster harmonious interactions. Grounded in Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, this study identified the types and frequencies of politeness strategies as well as examined their impact on communication and language teaching. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected from natural conversations in a WhatsApp group and analysed through coding and frequency counts to obtain the dominant patterns. The findings indicate that positive politeness was the most dominant strategy employed by participants (20 occurrences), followed by bald on-record (13), negative politeness (8), and off-record (5). The appearance of the strategies in question indicates that the participants tended to maintain solidarity and directness, while still using other strategies that mitigate imposition. The study provides empirical evidence by applying and testing the relevance of politeness theory in WhatsApp group communication, rather than claiming a theoretical extension. The research provides new perspectives for pragmatic competence and language pedagogy, suggesting that teachers should be able to guide students in using politeness strategies for effective communication.

Keywords: implication; politeness strategies; teaching; WhatsApp

INTRODUCTION

Language is fundamental to human communication, serving as the primary medium through which individuals construct meaning, maintain relationships, and negotiate social realities. Through communicative language, individuals remain connected with one another, as communication encompasses both content and context. Content refers to the message itself, whereas context denotes the circumstances in which communication occurs and is shaped by social norms (Marta & Setyaningsih, 2023). Importantly, these social norms are not neutral but are embedded within broader structures of power and inequality that influence how communication is produced and interpreted. In the Indonesian context, such norms are often shaped by hierarchical cultural values, including respect for authority, seniority, and institutional status, which play a significant role in regulating communicative behaviour (Avelino, 2021; Herman, 2024; Murphy, 2025; Shamim et al., 2025). Understanding these two dimensions remains a central challenge in communication. In face-to-face interaction, meaning is reinforced by gestures, facial expressions, intonation, and mimicry, all of which may strengthen or weaken the intended message.

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However, in digital contexts, such cues are largely absent due to the lack of physical co-presence. Consequently, communicators must carefully select words, symbols, emoticons, and other semiotic resources to ensure clarity and minimise misunderstanding. At the same time, this shift to digital communication does not eliminate power relations but rather reconfigures them, requiring users to negotiate politeness within technologically mediated environments. In this respect, politeness becomes a crucial mechanism for maintaining clarity, interpersonal balance, and social harmony (Halil et al., 2021).

Politeness, although commonly understood in everyday terms, is more rigorously conceptualised in academic discourse as a socially and culturally situated communicative strategy rather than a universal construct. Interpretations of politeness vary across cultural groups, reflecting not only stylistic preferences but also underlying social norms and values. These variations are deeply intertwined with cultural power dynamics, where politeness functions as a means of reproducing or negotiating hierarchical relations within specific social structures. In Indonesia, for example, politeness is often linked to the maintenance of social harmony and respect, particularly within institutional settings such as education, where asymmetrical relationships between lecturers and students or senior and junior peers are strongly maintained (Revalina & Aslan, 2025). It functions as a strategy for maintaining harmony and managing social interaction, particularly in multicultural and multilingual contexts where misinterpretation is more likely to occur. As such, the selection of appropriate linguistic forms, words, phrases, clauses, and sentences, becomes essential. Politeness also operates as an indicator of cultural and social domains, reflecting identity and interpersonal dynamics (Alazzawie, 2022; Hutahaean & Girsang, 2021). Accordingly, politeness can be regarded as a key analytical lens for understanding how individuals manage interpersonal relations across communicative contexts, while simultaneously revealing how such relations are structured by broader socio-cultural hierarchies and expectations.

Theoretical perspectives on politeness further underscore its role in regulating social interaction and preventing conflict. Politeness may be understood as a mechanism for restraining emotions while simultaneously enabling their expression, thereby sustaining favourable interpersonal relations and negotiating power dynamics. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness is closely associated with the concept of “face”, or an individual’s self-esteem in interaction. Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) occur when this social image is challenged (Denisenko et al., 2023). However, the notion of ‘face’ itself must be understood as culturally and structurally embedded, particularly in contexts where social hierarchy strongly shapes expectations of deference and authority, such as in Indonesian educational environments. In such contexts, the management of face is not merely an individual concern but is closely tied to institutional norms and power relations. To mitigate such threats, speakers employ a range of politeness strategies. Positive politeness emphasises friendliness, solidarity, and shared interests, whereas negative politeness prioritises respect for autonomy and the minimisation of imposition. Supporting this view, Yule (as cited in Putra & Sedeng, 2022) highlights the importance of protecting an individual’s face. Similarly, Darong (2021) argue that linguistic politeness facilitates favourable communicative environments by reducing emotional and pragmatic burdens. In this sense, politeness reflects both ethical and contextual dimensions of communication, as well as underlying relations of power and social positioning.

Brown and Levinson’s framework identify four principal strategies: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. Bald on-record strategies involve direct communication without mitigating face threats, whereas positive politeness seeks to enhance the interlocutor’s self-image and establish rapport. Negative politeness functions as a redressive strategy that respects autonomy and reduces imposition, while off-record strategies enable speakers to convey meaning indirectly (Rahman and Isroyana, 2021). Furthermore, politeness may be realised through various linguistic devices, including indirectness, euphemisms, modal expressions, and affective markers. These strategies are shaped by sociocultural norms and are employed in both spoken and written communication to maintain harmonious interaction (Rahman and Isroyana, 2021; Denisenko, Yergazy, and Rybakov, 2023). Importantly, such strategies are not only communicative choices but also reflections of broader social structures, including class, institutional hierarchy, and cultural expectations that shape how individuals position themselves and others in interaction. As noted by Baravati & Rangriz (2019) and Tanduk (2023), politeness strategies not only facilitate communication but also reflect social

attitudes and cultural identities. Thus, politeness emerges as a socially regulated practice essential for sustaining cooperative and respectful discourse (Darong, 2022; Hutahaeen et al., 2021; Chintawidy and Sartini, 2022; Subyantoro et al., 2023).

Empirical studies have examined politeness across various contexts, particularly in relation to cultural and situational factors. For instance, Oyadiji (2020), and Sari et al. (2019) demonstrate that linguistic features such as forms of address and honorifics play a significant role in the realisation of politeness. However, these studies predominantly focus on conventional or face-to-face communication. With the advancement of technology, communication has increasingly shifted to digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, email, and Instagram, where interactional norms differ substantially. These platforms are not neutral communication channels but are embedded within what scholars describe as global platform capitalism, where digital infrastructures shape, standardise, and sometimes constrain user interaction. As a widely used messaging application, WhatsApp provides specific communicative affordances, such as read receipts, typing indicators, and group chat structures, that influence how politeness, responsiveness, and interpersonal expectations are negotiated. In digital communication, the absence of physical co-presence creates both constraints and affordances, necessitating more flexible politeness strategies that adapt to the mode of discourse and communicative context (Maulidya et al., 2021; Alazzawie, 2022; Algiovan, 2022). Thus, expressions of intimacy and politeness in digital environments are not only culturally shaped but also technologically mediated (Suparno et al., 2023). Although multimodal elements such as emojis and multimedia are relevant, the present study focuses specifically on textual interaction to ensure analytical clarity.

Politeness also plays a strategic role in educational settings, influencing classroom discourse, interactional patterns, and student engagement (Darong et al., 2020; Darong, 2020). In Indonesian educational contexts, these interactions are often governed by hierarchical norms that prioritise respect for authority (Simon & Mishra, 2025) which in turn shapes how students formulate requests, responses, and disagreements, particularly in mediated environments such as WhatsApp groups. In digital contexts, however, politeness may emphasise different dimensions, such as impersonality and collaboration (Kadirov, 2020). As digital communication becomes increasingly embedded in everyday life, politeness remains essential for maintaining interpersonal relationships, particularly in the absence of physical interaction. The deliberate selection of linguistic forms may even enhance a sense of intimacy in digital exchanges (Marta & Setyaningsih, 2023). Among various platforms, WhatsApp is particularly prominent due to its widespread use, informal interactional style, and its dual role in supporting both academic and social communication (Algiovan, 2022). This makes it a highly relevant context for examining how politeness strategies operate in naturally occurring digital discourse. In addition, politeness is inherently context-dependent, shaped by factors such as communicative purpose, social norms, the degree of familiarity between interlocutors, and the topic of discussion. Levels of formality and directness vary across contexts, ranging from formal academic discourse to informal peer interaction. Sensitivity to potentially controversial or taboo topics further influences how politeness is realised. These factors collectively create a complex and dynamic framework of politeness that cannot be treated as a uniform phenomenon; rather, it must be examined within specific communicative environments, including the intersection of cultural norms, institutional hierarchies, and digital infrastructures.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative descriptive design was employed, and the study endeavoured to document authentic instances of language usage by focusing on naturally occurring conversations in WhatsApp groups, thereby avoiding the artificiality that may arise from controlled or experimental settings. The focus of the study ensured that the analysis emphasised providing a thorough account of the politeness strategies employed, rather than assessing preconceived notions. In this regard, a qualitative approach was employed to enable an in-depth understanding of how linguistic choices and interactional dynamics convey politeness and respect among participants. More specifically, this study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach with limited quantitative support in the form of frequency counts to identify dominant patterns of politeness strategies.

The data for this study were derived from student group chats on WhatsApp. WhatsApp was chosen as the primary medium because it is widely used for communication in both academic and social contexts. The data were drawn from a single WhatsApp group consisting of approximately 27 student participants, thereby maintaining the focus on one interactional setting. The group was selected based on purposive sampling criteria, namely: (1) active student participation, (2) relevance to academic communication, and (3) accessibility of naturally occurring conversations. Participants' detail is highlighted in the Table 1).

Table 1. Participants' detail

Category	Description	Total
Age	19 years old	22
	20 years old	3
	21 years old	2
Educational background	Senior High School (SMA)	20
	Vocational School (SMK)	7
Current status	Third-year undergraduate students	
Field of study	English Language Education Programme	
Institution	Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng	

Source: Author (2026)

In this study, the researchers focused on identifying the presence of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies, positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on-record, and off-record, through the analysis of instances in which participants made requests, offered responses, or expressed opinions. Subsequently, the utterances were categorised based on the strategies employed, considering the linguistic and contextual cues that influenced their interpretation. The unit of analysis in this study was individual utterances within the chat, particularly those containing interactional moves such as requests, responses, and evaluative statements. Furthermore, the researchers examined each conversational extract repeatedly, employing a coding process based on established theoretical definitions of politeness strategies to ensure validity and minimise researcher bias. The coding framework was derived from Brown and Levinson's (1987) taxonomy, which guided the classification of utterances into four main strategies. Triangulation was achieved by comparing outcomes from different group discussions, allowing patterns and inconsistencies to emerge. To maintain consistency with the single-group design, triangulation in this study refers to the comparison of multiple interactional instances and conversational threads within the same group rather than across different groups. Additionally, reflexivity was emphasised throughout the research process; the investigator consistently examined their own assumptions and interpretations to reduce the likelihood of introducing personal biases into the data. To ensure ethical integrity, all participants' identities were anonymised, and the data were used solely for research purposes with prior consent obtained from group members. Furthermore, reliability was enhanced through repeated coding and careful cross-checking of categorisation decisions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Results

This finding highlights the types of politeness strategies employed in WhatsApp group conversations, detailing the frequency of each strategy utilised by participants. The classification is derived from the framework of Brown and Levinson and encompasses positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on-record, and off-record strategies. The presentation of the data facilitates comparison of the relative frequency of each strategy and provides insight into the predominant forms of politeness employed in digital interactions.

The data on Table 2 and Figure 1 indicate that all four types of politeness strategies were employed; however, their frequency varied considerably. Positive politeness emerged as the most frequently used strategy, occurring twenty times out of a total of forty six instances. This suggests that group members prioritised friendliness, cooperation, and mutual support in their interactions. The predominance of positive politeness reflects the inherently cooperative and relational nature of WhatsApp group communication, where maintaining harmony and strengthening social ties are of primary importance. However, this tendency must also be

understood within the broader cultural and structural context of Indonesian society, where the maintenance of harmony and the avoidance of conflict are closely tied to hierarchical social expectations. In educational settings, such norms are further reinforced by asymmetrical relations between participants which subtly encourage individuals to perform solidarity and alignment as a way of negotiating their social position. Thus, positive politeness may function not only as an interpersonal strategy but also as a means of reproducing culturally embedded power relations. The second most frequently used strategy was bald on-record, with thirteen occurrences. This indicates that participants also valued clarity and efficiency. In this context, direct communication was likely facilitated by the informal and familiar nature of the group, allowing participants to express their needs or opinions without excessive mitigation. At the same time, the relatively high occurrence of bald on-record strategies suggests a shift from conventional expectations of indirectness in Indonesian communication. This shift may be shaped by the affordances of digital platforms such as WhatsApp, which prioritise immediacy, brevity, and responsiveness, thereby encouraging more direct forms of expression even within hierarchical contexts.

Table 2. Politeness strategy

No	Types of politeness strategies	Frequency
1	Positive politeness	20
2	Negative politeness	8
3	Bald on-record	13
4	Off-record	5
	Total	46

Source: Researcher's analysis of WhatsApp group conversations (2026)

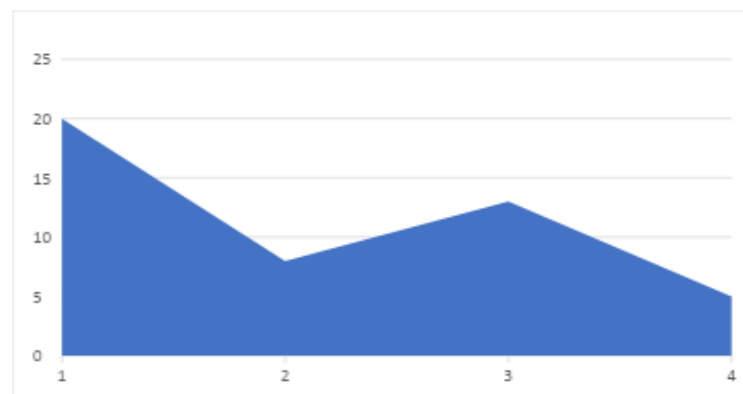


Figure 1. Frequencies of politeness strategies in WhatsApp group conversations
 Source: Author (2026)

Negative politeness and off-record strategies were less frequently employed, with eight and five occurrences, respectively. This suggests that although participants acknowledged the importance of respecting others' autonomy and minimising imposition, these strategies were not as central as positive politeness or direct communication. The relatively limited use of off-record strategies further indicates a preference for clarity and explicitness over indirectness. From a critical perspective, this pattern can also be linked to the technological structuring of interaction within WhatsApp as a global communication platform. Features such as read receipts, message visibility, and group chat dynamics create implicit pressures for clarity and timely response, which may constrain the use of highly indirect (off-record) strategies (Alazzawie, 2022; Denisenko et al., 2023). In this sense, expressions of politeness are not only culturally shaped but also mediated and standardised by the digital architecture of the platform itself, reflecting broader dynamics of global platform capitalism. Taken together, these findings suggest that communication within the WhatsApp group was characterised by intimacy, directness, and reciprocal support, while still allowing for expressions of deference and respect when necessary. Importantly, these interactional patterns emerge from the intersection of local cultural norms, institutional hierarchies, and the communicative affordances of digital media, highlighting that politeness in this context is both socially situated and technologically mediated.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that participants employed all four of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies, positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on-record, and off-record, within WhatsApp group conversations. With respect to the data, positive politeness strategies were employed most frequently (20 instances), followed by bald on-record strategies (13 instances), negative politeness strategies (8 instances), and off-record strategies, which were the least frequent (5 instances). This distribution indicates that individuals maintain their social standing and navigate interpersonal relations in digital communication, particularly in semi-formal or informal online group settings such as WhatsApp. Importantly, these patterns should also be understood as embedded within broader socio-cultural and institutional power relations. In Indonesian educational contexts, communicative practices are shaped by hierarchical norms that privilege respect, seniority, and collective harmony, which in turn influence how individuals strategically employ politeness in mediated interaction.

To strengthen the empirical grounding of these findings, several representative excerpts from the dataset are presented. For instance, a positive politeness strategy can be observed in the following utterance produced by a student "Guys, let's help each other finish this assignment". (Riska's utterance). This excerpt was coded as positive politeness because it includes in-group markers ('guys') and emphasises solidarity through inclusive language ('let's'). Such linguistic choices may also be interpreted as strategies for constructing group alignment and negotiating social belonging within a context where peer relationships coexist with implicit institutional hierarchies. In contrast, a bald on-record strategy appears where the speaker delivers a direct command without mitigation, as illustrated in the following example; Ratih uttered: "Send the file now" or "Check the document." These examples illustrate how the strategies were operationalised in actual interaction rather than merely quantified. The coexistence of these contrasting strategies reflects the dynamic negotiation between solidarity and authority within digitally mediated communication.

Regarding the most frequently occurring strategy (positive politeness), the findings highlight the importance of solidarity, friendliness, and a sense of belonging. In the context of WhatsApp, where group communication often involves collaboration, shared responsibilities, and relational connectivity, it is unsurprising that positive politeness emerges as the dominant strategy. The use of language that emphasises rapport enables group members to communicate within a supportive environment, thereby facilitating smooth interaction and strengthening group cohesion. These findings support previous studies indicating that politeness often reflects concern for the interlocutor's "positive face", or the desire to be appreciated and included in social interaction (Yetty, 2018; Hutahaeen et al., 2021). However, beyond interpersonal rapport, this dominance may also reflect culturally embedded expectations of maintaining harmony and avoiding confrontation, which are central to Indonesian communicative norms (Aditia, 2021; Hutahaeen et al., 2021). In this sense, positive politeness can function as a mechanism through which individuals reproduce socially expected behaviours while simultaneously negotiating their position within group and institutional hierarchies.

By contrast, bald on-record strategies are typically employed in situations where the risk of offence is minimal, such as among close peers, or where clarity and efficiency are prioritised over politeness. The informal and familiar nature of the WhatsApp setting appears to have allowed participants to communicate directly without concern for potential face threats. The relatively high frequency of this strategy (13 instances) indicates participants' preference for directness in specific communicative contexts. Bald on-record strategies often place the hearer's face at risk due to the absence of mitigating devices (Algiovan, 2022; Brown and Levinson, 1987). This reliance on directness may be attributed to the pragmatic and task-oriented nature of many group discussions, where information must be conveyed quickly and clearly. At the same time, this tendency suggests a reconfiguration of traditional norms of indirectness, as digital environments such as WhatsApp encourage immediacy and efficiency. These communicative patterns are shaped not only by interpersonal familiarity but also by the technological affordances of the platform, which prioritise rapid exchange and responsiveness (Norwanto & Risdiant, 2022). Furthermore, a closer examination of the data further reveals that the use of positive politeness is frequently associated with collaborative tasks, such as group assignments or shared responsibilities. For example, Fredy said; "Let's divide the tasks so it's easier for all of us." This excerpt reflects both task orientation and relational concern. Meanwhile, bald on-record

strategies tend to occur in time-sensitive situations, such as approaching deadlines, where efficiency takes precedence over politeness considerations. This suggests that the selection of politeness strategies is influenced not only by interpersonal relationships but also by communicative purpose and urgency, as well as by the structural conditions of digital communication that favour speed and clarity (Krishnendu & Bhati, 2022).

Negative politeness strategies occurred in only 8 instances and were primarily oriented towards respecting the interlocutor's autonomy and minimising imposition. Their relatively limited use suggests that, although participants occasionally acknowledged deference and social distance, these factors were not central to the group's communication (Denisenko, Yergazy, and Rybakov, 2023). This is unsurprising in a WhatsApp context, where participants are typically peers and thus less constrained by hierarchical norms. However, this apparent reduction of hierarchy should not be interpreted as its absence; rather, hierarchy may operate in more subtle and implicit ways, shaping expectations of appropriateness and influencing when deference is strategically enacted (Michael & Woodyatt, 2025). Similarly, off-record strategies were the least frequent (5 instances), indicating a preference for explicit and unambiguous communication. In digital contexts, where non-verbal cues are absent, indirectness may increase the likelihood of misinterpretation. Additionally, the technological architecture of WhatsApp, including features such as read receipts and message visibility, may discourage ambiguity and favour clarity, thereby constraining the use of highly indirect strategies.

An example of negative politeness includes "Sorry to bother you, could you please check this file?" (Ratih's utterance) This utterance minimises imposition through apology and indirect request forms. In contrast, an off-record strategy may be observed in Randi's utterance "It would be great if this could be finished soon." This example conveys a request indirectly without addressing a specific individual. Although less frequent, these strategies are employed in contexts involving potential imposition or sensitivity. Their selective use suggests that participants remain aware of relational risks and strategically adjust their language, when necessary, particularly in situations involving potential power asymmetry or social sensitivity.

The predominance of positive politeness in this study supports previous research demonstrating that speakers frequently employ strategies that enhance solidarity and interpersonal relations. The findings are consistent with studies indicating that linguistic politeness fosters favourable communicative environments characterised by mutual respect and harmony (Chintawidy & Sartini, 2022; Oyadiji, 2020). However, the relatively frequent use of bald on-record strategies contrasts with studies that emphasise the predominance of indirectness in maintaining politeness, particularly in online contexts (Rahman and Isroyana, 2021). The present findings suggest that in WhatsApp group communication, directness may be equally or even more prominent, especially where familiarity reduces the need for mitigation. This divergence highlights the importance of considering how digital platforms reshape communicative norms, producing hybrid forms of politeness that combine relational warmth with communicative efficiency.

Positive politeness strategies respond to the interlocutor's need for approval (positive face), whereas negative politeness protects their desire for autonomy (negative face) (Brown and Levinson, 1987). The dominance of positive politeness reflects strong social cohesion among participants, while the relatively limited use of negative and off-record strategies suggests a reduced perception of face threat within the group. Cultural factors may also contribute to this pattern, as politeness in many collectivist societies is closely associated with maintaining group harmony and cohesion (Leech, 1983; Allan, 2023). Additionally, contextual factors such as familiarity, shared academic goals, and the informal digital setting play a significant role in shaping these patterns. Crucially, these factors intersect with broader structural conditions, including institutional hierarchies and the standardising effects of global communication platforms, which together shape how politeness is realised in practice.

CONCLUSION

The results indicate that positive politeness and bald on-record strategies are the most frequently employed strategies in WhatsApp group interactions. Based on the analysis of the conversations, the predominance of these strategies reflects participants' tendency to maintain solidarity and intimacy. Their use signifies in-group membership, mutual respect, and the

mitigation of potential face-threatening acts. However, these interactional tendencies should also be understood within broader socio-cultural and structural contexts, particularly the influence of hierarchical norms in Indonesian educational settings, where maintaining harmony and demonstrating alignment are closely tied to expectations of appropriate social conduct. In this sense, the use of positive politeness may not only reflect interpersonal closeness but also function as a strategy for negotiating social positioning within implicitly structured power relations. The findings further demonstrate that, although traditional politeness theory remains relevant, its application in digital communication is shaped by context-specific factors, including participant relationships and the nature of discussion topics. Moreover, these context-specific factors extend beyond interpersonal dynamics to include the technological affordances and constraints of WhatsApp as a digital platform. Features such as instant messaging, read receipts, and group visibility contribute to shaping communicative expectations, encouraging clarity, responsiveness, and efficiency in interaction. More importantly, the results suggest that student WhatsApp group interaction is characterised by a combination of solidarity-oriented politeness and efficient directness, indicating an adaptive use of politeness strategies in digital contexts. This combination reflects a hybrid communicative practice emerging from the intersection of local cultural norms, institutional hierarchies, and the structuring effects of globally standardised digital platforms.

This study is subject to several limitations. First, it focuses exclusively on textual data, thereby overlooking paralinguistic elements such as emoticons, GIFs, and voice messages, which carry pragmatic significance in online communication. These multimodal elements may also play a role in negotiating affect, power, and relational meaning, particularly in contexts where textual communication alone may not fully capture the complexity of interaction. Second, the study examines only a single WhatsApp group, which limits the generalisability of the findings to other contexts, cultures, or digital platforms. Consequently, the results should be interpreted with caution, particularly when extended to broader participants or different communicative environments. Different institutional settings, cultural backgrounds, and levels of hierarchy may produce distinct configurations of politeness strategies, especially when mediated through different digital infrastructures. Future research is therefore recommended to expand the scope by including multiple communication platforms and incorporating multimodal interactional elements to provide a more comprehensive understanding of politeness strategies in digital communication. Additionally, further studies are encouraged to utilise larger and more diverse datasets to enhance the robustness and representativeness of findings on digital politeness practices. Future research may also benefit from critically examining how digital platforms, as products of global socio-economic systems, shape communicative norms and influence the ways in which politeness, intimacy, and power are expressed across different contexts.

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