

Politeness Strategies in Social Media Communication: A Systematic Literature Review Study

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of social media has transformed communication practices and heightened the importance of politeness in digital interaction. Despite increasing research on politeness strategies, findings remain fragmented across platforms, cultures, and methodological approaches, limiting a comprehensive understanding of the field. This study systematically reviews research on politeness strategies in social media communication by examining research trends, theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, key findings, and research gaps. Using a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) guided by PRISMA, peer-reviewed articles published between 2021 and 2025 were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings show that positive politeness is the most frequently employed strategy for maintaining interpersonal harmony, strengthening social solidarity, and constructing online identities. The review also reveals the growing relevance of impoliteness, cyber ethics, and multimodal communication, including emojis, memes, and visual cues as pragmatic resources. Furthermore, cultural background and platform characteristics significantly influence politeness practices. This review contributes to digital pragmatics by identifying emerging research directions, including multimodal communication, cross-platform comparative studies, and the integration of cyber ethics and impoliteness into politeness research, while highlighting the need for more diverse methodologies and broader cross-cultural investigations.

Keywords : *Politeness Strategies, Social Media Communication, Digital Pragmatics, Systematic Literature Review, Multimodal Communication*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology and social media has transformed the way individuals build, maintain, and negotiate social relationships in everyday communication. Social media platforms no longer function solely as channels for information sharing; they have evolved into important communication spaces where

users express identities, opinions, emotions, and interpersonal attitudes across both public and semi-public interactions. These platforms facilitate diverse forms of social engagement and emotional expression while providing environments in which individuals negotiate relationships, social norms, and personal experiences within interconnected digital publics (Bruns, 2023; Zhao et al., 2025). In this context, language use plays a crucial role because online interactions often occur without the presence of nonverbal cues that typically support mutual understanding in face-to-face communication. Consequently, politeness strategies have become increasingly important in digital communication to minimize potential conflict, maintain interpersonal harmony, protect face, and support positive social interaction in virtual environments. This phenomenon can be observed across various social media platforms such as Instagram, X, TikTok, and Facebook, where users from diverse cultural and social backgrounds interact rapidly and intensively.

Within the fields of pragmatics and digital communication studies, politeness strategies have become one of the most widely discussed topics in recent years. Many previous studies have adopted the politeness theory proposed by Brown & Levinson (1987), particularly the concepts of face-threatening acts and the strategies of positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on-record, and off-record communication (Nensilanti et al., 2026; Yanti, 2021). Previous studies also indicate that the use of politeness strategies is influenced by various factors, including cultural background, interpersonal relationships, communication goals, and social dynamics related to power and status (Saefudin et al., 2025; Saefudin, Santosa, et al., 2026; Saefudin, Sentosa, et al., 2026; Suparno et al., 2023). In digital communication contexts, recent studies have increasingly connected politeness with online interaction patterns, identity construction, relational work, and multimodal forms of communication in social media environments (Virtanen & Lee, 2022). Methodologically, earlier studies predominantly employed qualitative approaches using pragmatic or discourse analysis to examine language use in online and offline interactions. However, these studies generally focused on specific platforms, communities, or interactional settings separately, resulting in limited comprehensive understanding regarding broader research trends, theoretical developments, methodological tendencies, and dominant themes in politeness strategies across social media communication contexts.

Although studies on politeness strategies in social media communication have increased significantly, important gaps remain in the existing literature. Methodologically, previous research has been largely dominated by qualitative approaches, particularly pragmatic, discourse, and cyberpragmatic analyses of naturally occurring language data from social media interactions (Daulay et al., 2025; Kusmanto & Widodo, 2022; Sahib et al., 2023). While these studies have provided

valuable insights into the forms and functions of politeness strategies, they have primarily focused on specific datasets and communication contexts. Furthermore, much of the research has been conducted within single-platform environments, limiting broader understanding of how politeness strategies vary across different social media ecosystems. Given that platform affordances, interaction patterns, and user behavior differ considerably across digital environments, a more comprehensive synthesis is needed to identify overarching trends and research patterns in online politeness studies (Lukito et al., 2026; Marolla et al., 2026).

In addition, much of the literature continues to rely on traditional politeness frameworks, while comparatively less attention has been paid to integrating emerging perspectives from digital pragmatics and online interaction studies. Recent research highlights the importance of examining politeness within evolving digital communication environments; however, a comprehensive understanding of how these developments reshape politeness practices across social media platforms remains limited (Triyono et al., 2025). Empirical evidence suggests that the functions and realization of politeness strategies vary across digital communication contexts. Such variations are shaped by cultural backgrounds, platform affordances, social dynamics, and communicative goals, indicating that politeness practices are closely tied to the sociocultural and technological environments in which online interactions occur (Noor, 2026; Rai, 2026; Yao, 2025). Therefore, a systematic literature review is needed to synthesize and critically evaluate previous studies in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of research trends, theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and dominant themes related to politeness strategies in social media communication.

Based on the gaps identified in previous studies, this study aims to systematically review research on politeness strategies in social media communication. The study focuses on examining the development of research trends, dominant theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and major themes discussed in previous studies. In addition, this study seeks to provide a broader understanding of how politeness strategies are applied and interpreted across various social media platforms and digital communication contexts.

This study is expected to contribute theoretically, methodologically, and practically. Theoretically, it contributes to the growing discussion of politeness in digital communication by synthesizing findings from previous studies related to online interaction and pragmatic communication. Methodologically, this study applies a systematic literature review approach to organize and critically synthesize previous research from various digital communication contexts. Practically, the findings may provide useful insights for digital communication practices, language education, and

the promotion of respectful interaction in online environments. The remainder of this paper is organized into the research method, results and discussion, and conclusion sections.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) design to examine the development of research on politeness strategies in social media communication. The study followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure a systematic, transparent, and structured review process, including identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of relevant studies. To formulate the research focus and eligibility criteria, this study adopted the SPIDER framework (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, and Research Type), which is commonly used in qualitative evidence synthesis. In this study, the sample referred to social media users and online communication participants discussed in previous studies, while the phenomenon of interest focused on politeness strategies in social media communication. The design included qualitative, discourse analysis, pragmatic analysis, and mixed-method studies, whereas the evaluation emphasized communication patterns, politeness functions, interactional meanings, and digital communication practices. The research type primarily consisted of qualitative and mixed-method studies related to politeness strategies in online interaction contexts. The data collection process was conducted from January to March 2026 through searches in academic databases such as Semantic Scholar, Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), and ERIC. The reviewed studies consisted of journal articles published between 2021 and 2025 that discussed politeness strategies in social media communication contexts. The articles were selected based on several inclusion criteria, including relevance to the topic, publication in peer-reviewed journals, availability in English, and accessibility of the full text, while studies unrelated to politeness strategies in digital communication contexts were excluded. Data were collected through documentation techniques using keywords such as “politeness strategies,” “social media communication,” “digital pragmatics,” “online interaction,” and “social media discourse.” The selection process began with identifying potentially relevant studies, followed by title and abstract screening and full-text evaluation based on predetermined criteria. The main instrument used in this study was a data extraction form containing information related to publication year, theoretical framework, methodology, social media platform, research focus, and major findings. The collected data were analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis to identify publication trends, dominant theories, methodological approaches, and major themes in previous studies on politeness strategies in social media communication. To

ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, repeated cross-checking and careful comparison among selected studies were conducted throughout the analysis process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The reviewed studies show a substantial increase in research on politeness strategies in social media communication between 2021 and 2025, with publication activity peaking in 2025. This trend reflects the growing scholarly interest in digital pragmatics and online interaction as social media increasingly shapes everyday communication practices. Geographically, most studies originated from Asian countries, particularly Indonesia, Pakistan, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Japan. This distribution suggests that issues of politeness remain highly relevant in societies where cultural norms, collectivist values, and hierarchical relationships strongly influence communication behavior.

Regarding communication platforms, WhatsApp, Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube were the most frequently examined. WhatsApp was commonly associated with educational and interpersonal communication, while Twitter/X and Facebook were often investigated in political and public discourse contexts. TikTok and YouTube mainly appeared in studies of influencer communication, fandom interaction, and multimodal discourse..

Several dominant themes emerged from the reviewed studies. First, politeness strategies based on Brown and Levinson's framework were the most frequently investigated topic. Many studies analyzed positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record strategies in maintaining harmonious online interaction. Positive politeness appeared particularly dominant in friendship-oriented and community-based interactions.

Second, impoliteness and toxic communication became increasingly prominent themes after 2024. Studies identified sarcasm, mock politeness, cyberbullying, verbal aggression, and face-threatening acts as common characteristics of controversial online discussions, particularly in political and identity-sensitive discourse.

Third, cyber ethics and digital communication ethics also appeared as important themes. Several studies highlighted ethical communication practices, respectful interaction, and the role of politeness in preventing online conflict and maintaining social cohesion.

Fourth, speech acts and pragmatic strategies were widely discussed. Directive speech acts, disagreement strategies, compliment expressions, requests, apologies, and congratulatory messages were analyzed to understand how social media users negotiate relationships and identities in digital interaction.

Most studies employed qualitative approaches, particularly descriptive qualitative research, discourse analysis, pragmatic analysis, and cyberpragmatic analysis. Researchers commonly examined comment sections, WhatsApp conversations, Twitter threads, and social media posts to identify politeness patterns in naturally occurring digital interaction. Thematic analysis and content analysis were also frequently used to categorize communication patterns and interpret interactional meanings. In addition, several studies applied corpus-based analysis and mixed-method approaches to investigate large-scale digital communication data and cross-cultural interaction. However, quantitative and computational approaches remained relatively limited compared to qualitative studies. Most research relied on small datasets and platform-specific interactions rather than large-scale multimodal digital corpora.

Across the reviewed studies, positive politeness emerged as the most dominant strategy in social media communication, with users frequently employing greetings, compliments, humor, expressions of solidarity, gratitude, and indirectness to maintain harmonious relationships and reduce social distance in online interactions. These strategies functioned not only as mechanisms for preserving interpersonal harmony but also as important resources for identity construction, group belonging, and conflict mitigation within online communities. However, the findings also revealed that impoliteness strategies were common in controversial discussions involving politics, religion, nationalism, fandoms, and cyberbullying, where sarcasm, mock politeness, insults, and aggressive criticism were often used to challenge opposing viewpoints and reinforce ideological positions. Alongside these patterns, the studies highlighted the growing emergence of multimodal politeness, as emojis, memes, visual cues, and code-switching increasingly served as pragmatic devices that softened criticism, clarified emotional tone, and strengthened interpersonal rapport in digital communication.

Several important research gaps were identified across the reviewed studies. First, most studies focused on single platforms, such as Twitter/X, WhatsApp, Instagram, or TikTok, while comparative studies examining politeness strategies across multiple platforms remain limited. Second, multicultural and cross-cultural analyses are still relatively underexplored. Although several studies discussed cultural differences, most datasets were region-specific and lacked broader intercultural comparisons involving multilingual digital communities. Third, multimodal analysis remains limited, as existing studies primarily focused on textual interaction, whereas aspects such as GIFs, reaction features, voice notes, live-stream interaction, and video-based communication have received little scholarly attention. Finally, most studies continued to rely heavily on Brown and Levinson's traditional politeness framework, while contemporary approaches such as relational work, discursive politeness,

multimodal pragmatics, and AI-mediated communication remain insufficiently explored.

Most studies indicate that politeness strategies in social media communication are primarily employed to maintain relational harmony, social solidarity, and group identity. Positive politeness appears more dominant across interactive platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter/X, where users attempt to reduce interpersonal distance and strengthen online relationships through compliments, humor, greetings, and indirect communication. The findings further reveal that politeness functions as an important mechanism for identity construction and conflict mitigation within online communities. However, impoliteness strategies frequently emerge in politically sensitive, controversial, and identity-related discussions. Sarcasm, mock politeness, verbal aggression, and face-threatening acts become more visible in conflict-oriented discourse, particularly within political debates, fandom conflicts, and cyberbullying contexts. This suggests that social media simultaneously functions as a space for relational bonding and ideological confrontation.

The findings also demonstrate that digital politeness is increasingly multimodal. Emojis, memes, visual cues, and code-switching are no longer supplementary communication features but function as central pragmatic resources for expressing stance, reducing tension, and negotiating interpersonal meaning in online interaction. In addition, cultural background significantly influences the selection of politeness strategies. Studies involving Indonesian, Japanese, Pakistani, Moroccan, Saudi, and Malaysian users reveal that local norms, collectivism, hierarchy, and religious values shape online politeness behavior differently across communities.

The reviewed studies indicate that politeness in digital communication is strongly influenced by social relationships, cultural background, platform characteristics, and communicative purposes. Users strategically employ politeness not only to maintain harmonious interaction but also to negotiate identity, authority, and social positioning in online spaces.

Cultural factors play a crucial role in shaping online politeness behavior. Studies involving Asian communities consistently demonstrate the influence of collectivist values, respect for hierarchy, and indirect communication patterns. For example, WhatsApp communication among students and lecturers frequently relies on greetings, apologies, and honorific expressions to maintain respect and social harmony.

Platform affordances also influence the forms of politeness strategies used by users. Twitter/X tends to encourage direct disagreement, criticism, and sarcasm due to its fast-paced public discussion format. In contrast, WhatsApp communication is generally more relational and cooperative because interactions often occur within smaller and more familiar social groups. TikTok and YouTube demonstrate more

multimodal forms of politeness involving emojis, visual performances, and influencer-audience engagement strategies.

These findings also highlight several important research gaps that can inform future scholarship. First, the growing use of emojis, memes, and other visual resources suggests the need for multimodal analytical frameworks capable of capturing the interaction between verbal and non-verbal elements in online communication. Second, the predominance of platform-specific studies indicates the importance of comparative cross-platform research to examine how different technological affordances shape politeness and impoliteness practices. Third, although cultural factors frequently influence online interaction, cross-cultural comparative investigations remain limited, restricting a broader understanding of how politeness norms are negotiated across diverse digital communities. Finally, the continued dominance of qualitative approaches points to opportunities for integrating quantitative, mixed-methods, and computational techniques to provide more comprehensive insights into emerging patterns of digital communication. Addressing these gaps would contribute to a more nuanced and theoretically robust understanding of politeness in evolving social media environments.

The findings also have important implications for education and the social humanities. From an educational perspective, understanding politeness strategies in social media communication can support the development of digital literacy, online etiquette, and digital citizenship programs. As social media increasingly becomes part of students' daily communication, educators can use insights from digital politeness research to foster respectful, responsible, and culturally sensitive online interactions. From a social humanities perspective, the findings highlight how language practices in digital spaces reflect broader social values, cultural norms, identity construction, and power relations. The coexistence of politeness and impoliteness in online communication demonstrates the dynamic nature of social interaction in contemporary society and provides valuable insights into how individuals negotiate relationships, express ideological positions, and maintain social cohesion in increasingly mediated communication environments.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review demonstrates that politeness strategies remain central to social media communication, serving to maintain interpersonal harmony, strengthen social solidarity, manage conflict, and construct online identities. Positive politeness emerged as the most dominant strategy across platforms, although impoliteness has become increasingly prominent in political and controversial interactions where users negotiate ideological positions and social identities. The

review also highlights the growing importance of cyberpragmatics and multimodal communication, with emojis, memes, visual cues, and code-switching functioning as key pragmatic resources in digital discourse. Furthermore, the findings indicate that cultural background and platform-specific affordances significantly influence the use and interpretation of politeness strategies. By synthesizing recent evidence across diverse social media contexts, this study contributes to the advancement of digital pragmatics and offers practical insights for digital literacy, online etiquette, and digital citizenship education. The review also identifies several gaps in the existing literature, including the predominance of platform-specific studies, the continued reliance on qualitative text-based analyses, and the limited number of cross-cultural comparative investigations. Addressing these gaps, future research should undertake cross-platform and cross-cultural studies, incorporate multimodal and computational approaches, and explore emerging contexts such as AI-mediated politeness, livestream interactions, and algorithm-driven communication to develop a more comprehensive understanding of politeness in evolving digital environments.

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