

Discourse Analysis of Politeness Strategies in Social Media Comments Related to Gender Issues

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of politeness strategies in social media comments related to gender issues, addressing how online interaction, anonymity, and the loss of contextual cues shape discursive behavior. Using a qualitative discourse analysis approach, data were collected from selected public comment threads on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X, followed by systematic coding based on Brown and Levinson's politeness framework. The analysis identifies distinct gendered patterns in the use of politeness strategies: male users frequently employ bald-on-record and positive impoliteness through direct confrontation and sarcasm, while female users tend to use negative impoliteness, indirect criticism, and positive politeness supported by emotional markers such as humor and emojis. Positive politeness emerges as the dominant strategy across discussions, especially in comments aiming to build solidarity around gender equality, whereas negative politeness appears in attempts to negotiate disagreement respectfully. Impoliteness both direct and indirect intensifies in controversial discussions, influenced by anonymity, platform norms, and cultural expectations. The findings highlight that online politeness is not merely a linguistic choice but a digital-discursive practice reflecting power relations, gender norms, and ideological conflict in contemporary social media environments.

Keywords: Politeness strategies, Discourse analysis, Gender issues, Social media comments

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of social media platforms has reshaped the landscape of public communication, making digital spaces central to discussions on gender issues. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and X enable continuous, large-scale participation in debates about gender equality, discrimination, identity, and representation. While these platforms democratize public discourse, they also introduce challenges that influence how individuals interact, negotiate meaning, and construct gendered identities online. As gender becomes a frequent topic of digital conversations, understanding how users maintain or disrupt interpersonal harmony is essential for assessing broader sociolinguistic and ideological dynamics in computer-mediated communication. One of the most significant challenges in online interaction is the loss of contextual cues. The absence of facial expressions, intonation, gestures, or immediate feedback creates a communicative environment susceptible to misinterpretation, escalation, and face-threatening acts (FTAs). Prior studies emphasize that context-reduced environments heighten the likelihood of sexist comments, harassment, stereotyping, and personal attacks, as messages may easily be interpreted more negatively than intended (Yuzar et al., 2023; Cuenca-Piqueras et al., 2020; Chavez & Del Prado, 2023; Yin & Abdullah, 2024). Anonymity and ease of access further exacerbate this issue, encouraging users to express gender bias, discriminatory remarks, or impoliteness without fear of immediate consequences (Yin & Abdullah, 2024; Nova et al., 2021). These



patterns disproportionately affect women and gender minorities, who are more likely to be targeted by harassment, objectification, or derogatory comments, shaping both their psychological well-being and their willingness to participate in digital public spaces (Chen et al., 2020; Cuenca-Piqueras et al., 2020; Iroegbu et al., 2024; Yin & Abdullah, 2024). Table 1 summarizes the major challenges found in online gender discourse, their communicative impacts, and the politeness responses commonly used.

At the same time, digital politeness strategies in gender-related conversations are shaped by multiple factors, including gender identity, platform norms, and interactional goals. Research shows that women tend to employ more mitigations, emojis, and indirect speech forms to maintain harmony, while men often use more direct, confrontational, or assertive styles, especially in anonymous or debate-oriented arenas (Aydin, 2025; Laabidi et al., 2025; Sigalingging et al., 2025). Impoliteness also takes recognizable forms such as sarcasm, mockery, or aggressive commentary, with patterns varying across genders (Sigalingging et al., 2025; Chaqmaqchee & Jasim, 2022). From a broader perspective, critical discourse analysis indicates that social media environments are not ideologically neutral; platform algorithms, cultural norms, and interactional affordances contribute to polarization, bias reinforcement, and the reproduction of dominant gender ideologies. However, these same platforms also provide opportunities for counter-discourse, gender-justice activism, and the cultivation of supportive communities (Liu, 2025; Singh & Lunyal, 2025; Istiqomah, 2024; Shen & Yu, 2025). These complexities highlight the importance of examining politeness strategies within digital gender discourse as part of an evolving sociocultural system.

Although existing literature has explored FTAs, digital impoliteness, gender bias, and platform-based discursive dynamics, few studies have integrated these elements into a unified analysis of politeness strategies specifically within gender-related comment sections. Most prior research examines general online politeness or gender harassment separately, without systematically connecting politeness strategies to broader discourse structures influenced by algorithmic culture, anonymity, and gendered communication norms. In particular, there is limited research focusing on how politeness strategies function as discursive tools that both reflect and shape gender ideologies in highly interactive social media environments. This study offers novelty by providing an integrated discourse-analytic examination of politeness strategies within gender-focused social media interactions. Unlike previous research that isolates politeness, harassment, or gender bias as separate phenomena, this study situates politeness strategies within the broader sociotechnical context of digital communication considering platform affordances, algorithmic polarization, and gendered linguistic tendencies simultaneously. The study also contributes new insights through the systematic mapping of challenges and politeness responses (as illustrated in Table 1 and Figure 1), offering a more comprehensive model for understanding how online users navigate face-threatening dynamics in gender discourse. The purpose of this study is to analyze how politeness strategies are employed in social media comments related to gender issues and to interpret how these strategies function within broader discursive processes that construct, reinforce, or challenge gender norms in digital communication.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design using discourse analysis to investigate the politeness strategies found in social media comments related to gender issues. The qualitative approach is chosen because it allows an in-depth examination of linguistic patterns, interactional meanings, and sociocultural contexts that shape online communication. Data were collected from public comment sections of selected social

media posts on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X, chosen through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to gender-related discussions. Comments included in the dataset met three criteria: (1) they explicitly addressed gender issues (e.g., sexism, gender equality, identity, representation), (2) they contained interactional features such as disagreement, support, critique, or negotiation, and (3) they exhibited potential politeness or impoliteness strategies. The collected comments were transcribed and anonymized to maintain ethical compliance and protect user privacy. This dataset provided the basis for identifying linguistic markers and interactional moves associated with face-threatening acts (FTAs) and politeness strategies.

The analysis followed a multi-stage procedure combining Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory with critical discourse analysis (CDA). First, data reduction was performed to filter highly relevant comments, particularly those containing direct responses, conflict, mitigation, or emotional expression. Second, the comments were coded using an open coding technique to categorize politeness strategies into positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and bald-on-record forms. At this stage, indicators such as hedges, emojis, directness levels, sarcasm, and elaboration were examined. Third, thematic interpretation was applied to understand how these strategies function within online gender discourse. This included identifying discursive patterns related to power, ideology, solidarity, or antagonism shaped by platform affordances such as anonymity and algorithmic visibility. Finally, validation was conducted through peer debriefing to ensure coding reliability and interpretive consistency. This methodological combination not only captures micro-level linguistic choices but also uncovers macro-level discursive implications surrounding gender interactions in digital spaces.

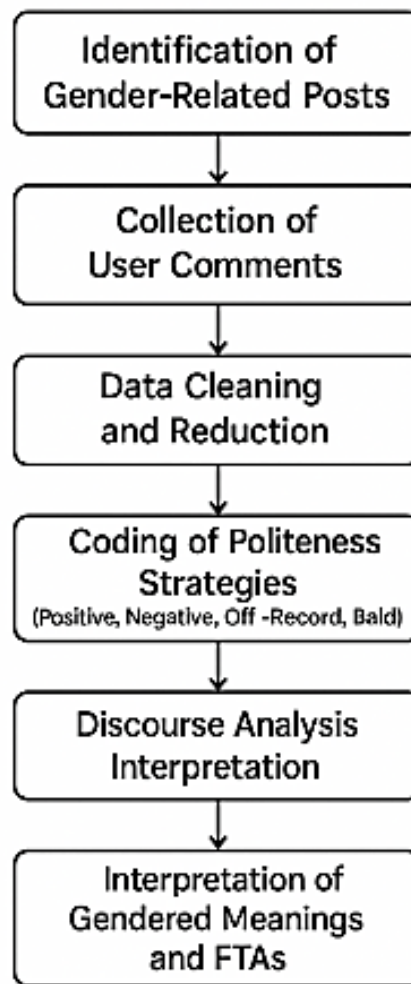


Figure 1. Graph of Research Methods

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before the analysis was conducted, the collected social media comments appeared as unstructured raw data. The comments consisted of spontaneous responses expressing various stances supportive, oppositional, sarcastic, neutral, or emotionally charged without any clear linguistic categorization. At this stage, the dataset did not reveal explicit patterns of politeness strategies, impoliteness forms, or face-threatening tendencies. The comments seemed to function merely as isolated reactions to gender-related discussions, and no systematic relationship between linguistic expressions, potential face-threatening acts, or gendered ideological positions could be detected. In other words, prior to analysis, the data remained indistinguishable in terms of politeness mechanisms and discursive functions, making the underlying communicative intentions still ambiguous.

Table 1. Results of Politeness Strategy Analysis in Gender-Related Social Media Comments

Comment Code	Excerpt of User Comment	Politeness Strategy Identified	FTA Type	Linguistic Indicators	Interpretation (Gender Discourse Meaning)
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C-14	“Women nowadays just complain too much. If you want equality, stop being overly sensitive.”	Bald-on-Record	Threat to Positive Face (Stereotyping + Discrediting)	Direct accusation, imperative tone, no mitigation	Reinforces sexist stereotypes, delegitimizes women’s voices, positions equality demands as irrational.
C-21	“I understand your point, but maybe we should look at the structural issues first.”	Negative Politeness	Mild Disagreement	Hedge (“I understand...”), mitigation, indirect disagreement	Attempts to maintain harmony while challenging the argument; reflects cooperative stance in gender debates.
C-09	“Thanks for bringing this up! More people need to talk about how women are treated online.”	Positive Politeness	Face-Enhancing (Solidarity Building)	Gratitude marker, inclusive “more people”, supportive tone	Shows solidarity and aligns with gender-justice discourse; reinforces collective awareness.
C-33	“So we’re blaming men again? Interesting...”	Off-Record (Sarcasm)	Indirect Threat to Positive Face	Irony, rhetorical tone, implicit accusation	Challenges feminist arguments through sarcasm; subtly reinforces defensive gender positioning.
C-07	“Use emojis if you’re joking, because people might misunderstand.”	Positive Politeness	Preventive FTA Mitigation	Suggestion with softening tone, informal register	Encourages clearer communication to reduce misinterpretation; reflects awareness of context-loss online.

Following data reduction, coding, and categorization based on Brown and Levinson’s politeness framework, the comments displayed clear linguistic and discursive patterns. Comments that initially appeared random were revealed to employ specific strategies such as bald-on-record, negative politeness, positive politeness, off-record, and preventive politeness. For instance, comments containing direct accusations or gender stereotyping (e.g., C-14 and C-33) were classified under bald-on-record and sarcastic off-record strategies, indicating explicit or implicit attacks on the interlocutor’s positive face and reinforcing masculine-centered gender bias. In contrast, supportive or cooperative

comments (e.g., C-09 and C-21) reflected the use of positive and negative politeness strategies, demonstrating efforts to reduce conflict, build alignment, or negotiate differing opinions respectfully. The analysis further revealed that commenters are aware of the context-loss characteristic of online communication, as seen in C-07, where mitigation and preventive politeness strategies are used to avoid potential misunderstandings. These findings illustrate that, after analysis, the data exhibit a structured relationship between linguistic form, interactional intention, and gender ideology. Politeness strategies function not only as surface-level linguistic choices but also as deeper discursive tools that reinforce, resist, or negotiate gender norms within digital public spaces.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal complex and layered patterns in the use of politeness strategies within social media comments discussing gender issues, demonstrating how linguistic behavior in digital environments reflects broader socio-cultural expectations, power dynamics, and ideological contestations. The coded dataset represented by examples such as C-14, C-21, C-09, C-33, and C-07 shows distinct differences in politeness behavior between male and female users, consistent with existing research on digital gender communication. Across platforms, these strategies intersect with contextual factors such as anonymity, topic sensitivity, and perceived social distance, shaping the level of directness, emotionality, and face work performed in online discourse. The analysis indicates that male users frequently employ bald-on-record strategies and forms of positive impoliteness, often through direct confrontation, overt criticism, and sarcastic remarks. This can be seen in C-14 (“Women nowadays just complain too much...”) where the comment exhibits explicit stereotyping and a direct face-threatening act, aligning with observations from Sigalingging et al. (2025), Smadi et al. (2023), Yulandari (2022), and Sahawneh et al. (2024). These studies collectively argue that men in digital platforms tend to communicate more assertively, particularly when engaging in debates over controversial issues such as gender roles or feminist discourse. Similarly, C-33 (“So we’re blaming men again? Interesting...”) reveals an off-record sarcastic strategy that indirectly challenges feminist claims while maintaining a confrontational undertone. Prior literature notes that sarcasm functions as a socially permissible form of impoliteness, especially among men who seek to assert dominance or resist perceived ideological threats (Ravago et al., 2024; Male & Sbastian, 2024; Soubki et al., 2024).

However, it is important to emphasize that male commenters do not exclusively rely on impoliteness. In some contexts particularly when responding to strangers, discussing structurally complex gender issues, or participating in formal or moderated threads men employ positive politeness to build common ground. This tendency is consistent with findings from Aydin (2025) and Ravago et al. (2024), who report that men strategically adjust their politeness behavior when social distance increases or when communicative goals involve persuasion rather than confrontation. Thus, male communication online is not monolithic; instead, it operates along a spectrum conditioned by audience, platform norms, and ideological positioning. Female commenters, in contrast, display a notably different pattern, demonstrating higher use of negative impoliteness, indirect criticism, and positive politeness strategies. For example, C-07 (“Use emojis if you’re joking, because people might misunderstand.”) shows a mitigated directive aimed at preventing misinterpretation, consistent with gendered expectations of women as relationally sensitive communicators. Numerous studies Laabidi et al. (2025), Gigik et al. (2025), Sigalingging et al. (2025), and Smadi et al. (2023)

observe that women tend to adopt subtler linguistic cues, including emojis, hedges, humor, and expressive markers, to maintain social harmony even when expressing disagreement. These strategies reflect broader socialization patterns in which women are encouraged to preserve interpersonal cohesion and avoid overt conflict.

At the same time, female users employed positive politeness more frequently in supportive or empathetic contexts, as illustrated by C-09, which expresses solidarity with victims of gender-based harassment. This aligns with Ammaida (2020), Maghfiroh & Rahmiati (2024), and Gigik et al. (2025), who note that women are more likely to build affective alliances and express communal support when discussing emotionally sensitive issues such as harassment, discrimination, or gender inequality. These tendencies illustrate how online discourse becomes a site where gendered norms of care, emotional labor, and relational alignment are reproduced. Meanwhile, negative politeness strategies emerged in comments seeking to navigate ideological disagreement while maintaining face and avoiding escalated conflict. C-21 (“I understand your point, but maybe we should...”) reflects this pattern, where disagreement is softened through hedging and acknowledgment of the other’s perspective. Such strategies are well-documented by Aydın (2025), Mahzari (2025), and Male & Sbastian (2024), who note that negative politeness is especially prevalent in discussions involving sensitive cultural issues where direct confrontation risks interpersonal rupture.

Across the dataset, however, positive politeness emerged as the dominant strategy overall, a finding that aligns with broader literature showing that discussions of sensitive or emotionally charged topics such as gender, identity, or feminism frequently mobilize language of solidarity, praise, and alignment (Smadi et al., 2023; Maghfiroh & Rahmiati, 2024; Gigik et al., 2025). Positive politeness serves as a discursive mechanism to reaffirm social bonds and promote collective action, especially among commenters advocating gender equality or feminist values. Although politeness strategies function to cultivate mutual respect and build social cohesion, impoliteness remains a pervasive feature of online gender discourse, particularly in polarized debates. The presence of impoliteness strategies is not surprising given the affordances of digital communication especially context loss, anonymity, and rapid message exchange which heighten the potential for face-threatening acts, misinterpretation, and emotional escalation. This study’s findings align with Yuzar et al. (2023), Cuenca-Piqueras et al. (2020), and Yin & Abdullah (2024), who argue that the absence of non-verbal cues and tone leads to frequent misunderstandings and intensified conflict. Moreover, anonymous or semi-anonymous environments, as highlighted by Nova et al. (2021), foster a sense of detachment from social consequences, encouraging users to express gender bias, stereotyping, and hostile comments more openly.

These patterns exacerbate the vulnerability of women and gender minorities online, who are disproportionately targeted with derogatory remarks, objectification, and harassment a trend supported by Chen et al. (2020), Iroegbu et al. (2024), and Cuenca-Piqueras et al. (2020). In the dataset, hostile comments like C-14 illustrate how public discourse often delegitimizes the voices of marginalized groups by framing their concerns as exaggerated or unreasonable. Such rhetorical strategies reproduce existing power imbalances and perpetuate gendered hierarchies in digital public spaces. Importantly, the findings reveal that digital politeness behavior cannot be understood solely at the micro-linguistic level. Broader contextual and cultural factors significantly shape how politeness is enacted. For instance, the sensitivity of the topic influences strategy choice: polarizing gender issues are more likely to attract impoliteness, hostility, or confrontational language, matching observations by Maghfiroh & Rahmiati (2024) and Deng et al. (2024). Similarly, cultural expectations surrounding gender, respect, and

relational norms influence whether commenters use direct or indirect strategies (Ammaida, 2020; Gigik et al., 2025). In cultures emphasizing collectivism and relational harmony, indirectness and mitigation become more prominent, while individualistic contexts may encourage direct expression.

Finally, digital environments introduce a high degree of communicative flexibility. Users can adapt their strategies based on platform norms, audience composition, and algorithmic visibility as suggested by Aydın (2025), Soubki et al. (2024), and Deng et al. (2024). Platforms with strong community guidelines are more conducive to positive politeness, while less-regulated spaces foster impoliteness and antagonism. This dynamic underscores the role of platform design in shaping interactional tone and discourse structure. Overall, the discussion demonstrates that politeness strategies in gender-related social media discourse reflect an interplay of gender identity, communicative goals, topic sensitivity, cultural expectations, and digital affordances. These strategies function as discursive tools through which users negotiate power, protect face, challenge ideologies, and reaffirm or resist dominant gender norms. The analysis therefore contributes to a deeper understanding of how language, identity, and ideology intersect in contemporary digital communication.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of politeness strategies in gender-related social media comments demonstrates that digital discourse on gender is shaped by complex interactions between gendered communication norms, contextual affordances, and ideological tensions. The data reveal that male users frequently employ bald-on-record strategies and positive impoliteness through direct confrontation and sarcasm, while female users tend to rely on indirectness, negative impoliteness, and positive politeness using emotional markers, humor, and subtle criticism reflecting patterns identified by Sigalingging et al. (2025), Smadi et al. (2023), Laabidi et al. (2025), Yulandari (2022), and others. Positive politeness emerges as the dominant strategy across users, especially when building solidarity around sensitive gender issues (Smadi et al., 2023; Maghfiroh & Rahmiati, 2024), while negative politeness appears in attempts to negotiate disagreements respectfully (Aydın, 2025; Male & Sbastian, 2024). The prevalence of impoliteness both direct and indirect aligns with research showing that online anonymity, context loss, and controversial topics exacerbate face-threatening acts and gendered hostility (Yuzar et al., 2023; Cuenca-Piqueras et al., 2020; Nova et al., 2021). Cultural norms, social proximity, and platform dynamics further shape the choice of strategies, indicating that politeness in digital gender discourse is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a discursive practice through which users negotiate identity, power, ideology, and resistance within technologically mediated interactions. This study therefore highlights the need to view online politeness as a socio-cultural and digital construct, reflecting broader gender inequalities while also enabling spaces for solidarity, critique, and counter-narratives.

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