



Polite Language on Facebook: Maintaining Ethics in Interactions on Social Media

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 26 June 2024

Received in revised form 11

August 2024

Accepted 3 September 2024

Keywords:

Language Politeness

Digital Communication

Social Media Ethics

Cultural Differences

Abstract

The objective of this study was to examine the present condition of politeness in language usage on Facebook, determine the factors that impact the use of polite language, and suggest approaches to promote civility in digital interactions. Using a qualitative methodology, the data collection process involved analyzing the content of posts and comments from public Facebook pages and groups. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with users to gather their personal experiences and perceptions. Our analysis of the content uncovered notable disparities in the levels of politeness observed. Community-oriented groups demonstrated elevated levels of politeness, likely attributed to their shared interests and established norms. Conversely, discussions centered around political matters were more susceptible to impoliteness, largely influenced by the anonymity of participants and the intensity of emotions involved. Interviews emphasized the significance of cultural variations, the design features of Facebook, and the crucial role of personal responsibility in upholding politeness. Effective moderation and well-defined guidelines were determined to be essential in handling discourteous conduct. The results highlight the importance of adopting a holistic strategy towards digital communication, encompassing the promotion of cultural sensitivity, the improvement of digital literacy, and the development of ethical platform features. These measures aim to cultivate a more respectful and constructive online environment.

Introduction

In today's modern society, social media has become an essential component of everyday life, revolutionizing the way people communicate, exchange information, and engage with one another. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram enable the rapid and extensive distribution of content, fostering global connections among individuals. In the year 2023, Facebook continues to maintain its position as one of the most widely used social media platforms, with a staggering 2.8 billion active users across the globe. The expansive digital realm offers unprecedented possibilities for engagement, yet it also poses difficulties, especially in upholding courteous and considerate discourse.

The exponential growth of social media has completely transformed the dynamics of human interaction, dismantling physical boundaries and enabling instantaneous communication on a worldwide level. Social media platforms have transformed into influential tools for personal expression, business marketing, political campaigning, and social activism (Vergeer et al., 2013). Users are provided with the opportunity to share their thoughts, experiences, and opinions with a wide audience, thus facilitating the democratization of information dissemination. Nevertheless, the detached and formal nature of online interactions frequently gives rise to a dearth of responsibility, leading to the use of impolite, offensive, or detrimental

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language. The study of language politeness on social media is not only relevant, but also essential in maintaining a healthy and productive online environment.

The importance of maintaining a polite language in digital interactions cannot be overstated, as it plays a vital role in creating a positive online environment. Being polite is crucial in preventing misunderstandings, minimizing conflicts, and fostering productive conversations (Waziri, 2022). When face-to-face cues like tone of voice and body language are absent, written communication on social media can be easily misinterpreted, resulting in potential conflicts and negative interactions. Hence, it is imperative to maintain a level of politeness in language, as it not only demonstrates personal courtesy but also plays a crucial role in fostering the well-being and effectiveness of online communities. Politeness plays a crucial role in social interactions, enhancing the overall experience and fostering productivity among participants (A. Morand, 2014).

It is crucial to emphasize the significance of upholding politeness in online interactions. Being polite is important in order to have a more seamless and efficient communication process, as it shows respect for others and their viewpoints. It plays a crucial role in social interaction by fostering trust, mutual respect, and a sense of community. In the realm of social media platforms like Facebook, where interactions primarily consist of textual exchanges, the lack of non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, and vocal tone can potentially give rise to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. This can lead to an escalation of conflicts and the creation of a hostile online environment. Hence, the promotion of politeness in online interactions is crucial for fostering a more inclusive, respectful, and harmonious digital environment.

Facebook, being a highly popular social media platform, has a substantial impact on the development of online communication conventions. Facebook is a platform that caters to a wide range of users, from individuals and small groups to large organizations and global communities (Kirkpatrick, 2010). It can be seen as a representation of the broader internet. The platform's design, which promotes users to share status updates, provide comments on posts, and participate in group discussions, creates an ideal environment for studying language use and politeness (Pérez-Sabater, 2021). Nevertheless, the significant number of interactions also necessitates the resolution of prevalent problems like cyberbullying, trolling, and the use of inflammatory language.

The communication culture on Facebook mirrors larger societal trends. When individuals with different backgrounds and cultures come together on a shared platform, there are often differences in politeness and communication styles. The presence of diverse perspectives can greatly enhance interactions, but it is crucial to effectively address and manage potential conflicts that may arise from cultural differences in communication (Cox & Blake, 1991). Having a comprehensive grasp of how politeness operates within a dynamic and diverse environment is of utmost importance in order to devise effective strategies for enhancing online interactions.

The theory of politeness, put forth by esteemed scholars such as Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, offers a valuable framework for examining the utilization of language on social media platforms. Based on this theory, politeness entails the management of face, which pertains to an individual's self-esteem or emotional requirements in the context of interpersonal exchanges (Brown & Levinson, 1999). Positive face refers to the inclination to be well-liked, appreciated, and esteemed, whereas negative face pertains to the inclination to avoid imposition and intrusion. Efficient communication necessitates striking a balance between these two facets of face by employing courteous language that acknowledges the needs and expectations of the

listener. On Facebook, where interactions are public and can involve multiple participants, the task of maintaining this delicate equilibrium becomes even more demanding and crucial.

One of the distinctive obstacles in maintaining politeness on Facebook is the inherent public nature of interactions. In contrast to private conversations, posts and comments on Facebook have a broader audience, which can impact the perception and practice of politeness. For example, a comment that is meant to be light-hearted by one individual can be seen as disrespectful or impolite by another, particularly when cultural or contextual disparities are not considered. The high level of public visibility can further amplify the negative effects of impolite language, as offensive comments have the potential to quickly circulate and inflict widespread harm and distress.

Politeness on social media is a significant aspect to consider when discussing the concept of digital citizenship (Al-Abdullatif & Gameil, 2020). Digital citizenship encompasses the conscientious utilization of technology to actively participate in society, foster communication with others, and engage in civic endeavors. As members of the digital community, individuals have an obligation to actively participate in fostering a constructive and courteous online atmosphere. It is important to be conscious of the language one employs, to recognize the influence of one's words, and to show regard for the varied viewpoints and life encounters of others. Encouraging the practice of digital citizenship can contribute to the development of a climate characterized by courtesy and consideration on social media platforms such as Facebook.

Another crucial aspect to consider is the impact of Facebook's design and policies on fostering politeness. The features of the platform, such as the ability to like posts, engage in comment threads, and share content, have the potential to shape user interactions and their perception of politeness (Oz et al., 2018). For instance, the inclusion of like buttons can incentivize users to share content that is well-received or popular, whereas comment threads can foster conversations but may also give rise to disagreements and misinterpretations. Facebook's community standards and moderation policies are influential in shaping the culture of politeness on the platform (Kuo et al., 2023). Implementing strong measures to moderate and enforce rules against hate speech, harassment, and other forms of impolite language can significantly contribute to the establishment of a secure and courteous online atmosphere.

Studies have indicated that the existence of social norms and community guidelines can have a substantial impact on behavior on social media platforms (Shahzalal & Adnan, 2022).. When individuals possess knowledge of and adhere to established norms of politeness, their interactions tend to be more respectful and constructive. On the other hand, without well-defined norms and guidelines, disrespectful and detrimental language can spread. Hence, it is imperative to establish and promote explicit norms and guidelines for the use of polite language in order to enhance communication on Facebook.

One cannot underestimate the significance of user behavior and self-regulation in upholding politeness on Facebook. Platform policies and design are important factors, but individual users also bear the responsibility of fostering a positive online environment (Helberger et al., 2018). It is important to have a keen understanding of the influence of one's words, to demonstrate empathy and respect in all interactions, and to actively engage in the promotion and reinforcement of courteous language usage. Promoting personal accountability for online conduct can foster a more constructive and courteous digital environment.

The objective of this study is to analyze the current state of language politeness on Facebook. It seeks to identify the various factors that influence the use of polite language and put forth strategies to improve civility in digital interactions. By directing our attention towards

Facebook, we can delve into the wider intricacies of social media communication and make valuable contributions towards promoting a more courteous and efficient online conversation. The study will entail a thorough examination of Facebook interactions, encompassing posts, comments, and discussions, in order to discern patterns and trends in language usage. Surveys and interviews will be conducted with Facebook users to gain insight into their perceptions and experiences of politeness on the platform.

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative methodology to investigate the phenomenon of language politeness on Facebook and gain insights into the various factors that impact the use of polite language in digital interactions. The data collection process employed various methods to ensure a thorough comprehension of the research problem. Initially, a thorough examination of Facebook posts and comments was carried out through content analysis. The selected posts and comments were sourced from public Facebook pages and groups that host frequent and diverse discussions. The objective of the content analysis was to identify patterns of language use, occurrences of politeness and impoliteness, and the specific context in which these interactions took place. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were carried out with Facebook users to collect personal experiences and perceptions regarding language politeness on the platform, in addition to content analysis. The interviews facilitated a more comprehensive examination of users' attitudes, beliefs, and experiences that may not be readily apparent through content analysis alone. The participants for the interviews were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques, which helped to ensure a wide range of perspectives. The sample for the content analysis consisted of posts and comments from ten public Facebook pages and groups that encompassed a range of subjects, such as news, entertainment, and community matters. 30 participants were selected to take part in the interviews. The sample consisted of individuals from diverse demographic backgrounds, encompassing various age groups, genders, and cultural backgrounds, in order to encompass a wide range of experiences and perspectives. The process of data analysis consisted of multiple steps to guarantee a comprehensive and meticulous examination of the gathered data. A coding framework was developed for the content analysis, drawing upon existing literature on language politeness and digital communication. The framework encompassed various categories for different manners of courteous and discourteous language, contextual factors that impact politeness, and the consequences of interactions characterized by politeness or impoliteness. The posts and comments were methodically categorized based on this framework, enabling the recognition of recurring patterns and themes. An analysis of the interview data was conducted using thematic analysis. The interview transcripts underwent multiple reviews to identify significant themes and patterns pertaining to language politeness on Facebook.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this research provide a comprehensive view of the current state of language politeness on Facebook, drawing from content analysis of posts and comments, as well as semi-structured interviews with users. The data collection methods revealed nuanced insights into how politeness and impoliteness manifest on the platform and the factors influencing these interactions.

Polite Interaction

Post:

"Hey everyone, I just finished my latest crochet project! What do you all think?"

Comment 1: "Wow, that looks amazing! Great job!"

Comment 2: "Beautiful work, keep it up!"

Comment 3: "I love the colors you chose. Very inspiring!"

This interaction took place in a hobby-focused Facebook group dedicated to crochet enthusiasts. The post and subsequent comments are examples of polite language characterized by expressions of gratitude, compliments, and positive reinforcement. These interactions reflect a sense of camaraderie and mutual respect among group members, who share a common interest. The supportive and encouraging comments contribute to a positive and respectful online environment, fostering a sense of community.

Impolite Interaction in Politically Charged Discussion

Post:

"I can't believe the government's latest policy on healthcare. It's a complete disaster!"

Comment 1: "You're so naive if you think that policy is bad. Educate yourself!"

Comment 2: "Typical ignorant rant. Why don't you come up with a better solution instead of complaining?"

Comment 3: "This post is just another example of how clueless some people are. Pathetic."

This interaction occurred in a public Facebook group focused on political discussions. The original post expresses a strong negative opinion about a government policy, setting a confrontational tone. The comments that follow include sarcasm, insults, and derogatory remarks, illustrating impolite language use. The anonymity and perceived distance of the online environment seem to embolden users to express their opinions more harshly than they might in face-to-face interactions. This example highlights how context, especially in politically charged discussions, can lead to increased instances of impoliteness.

Impact of Group Norms and Active Moderation

Post:

"Let's discuss the best practices for organic gardening!"

Comment 1: "I've found that using compost really helps. What do you think?"

Comment 2: "I agree, composting is great. Does anyone have tips for natural pest control?"

Moderator Comment: "Reminder to everyone to keep the discussion respectful and on-topic. Let's help each other out with our gardening tips!"

This interaction took place in a public Facebook group dedicated to organic gardening. The presence of clear group norms and active moderation significantly impacted the level of politeness in interactions. The moderator's comment serves as a reminder to maintain respectful discourse, contributing to a positive and constructive discussion. Members adhere to established norms, and the polite language used in the comments, such as asking for and sharing advice respectfully, demonstrates how active moderation can foster a respectful online environment.

Lack of Moderation Leading to Escalation

Post:

"Climate change is a hoax. There's no scientific evidence to support it!"

Comment 1: "You must be living under a rock. There's plenty of evidence, educate yourself!"

Comment 2: "Only an idiot would believe in climate change. It's all a scam."

Comment 3: "You climate deniers are the worst. You're destroying the planet with your ignorance!"

This interaction took place in a public Facebook group with minimal to no moderation. The original post presents a perspective on climate change, which is a topic of significant debate, adopting a confrontational tone. The subsequent remarks exhibit a lack of courtesy, consisting of insults, derogatory statements, and personal attacks. Lack of moderation leads to the rapid escalation of impolite interactions, exacerbating the polarization of the discussion and fostering a hostile environment. This example highlights the significance of active moderation in upholding respectful discourse and preventing the escalation of impolite language.

Through the analysis of Facebook posts and comments from public pages and groups, a number of significant patterns in language use were identified. A notable portion of the interactions displayed a formal and academic tone, with the use of polite language. This was evident through expressions of gratitude, compliments, and respectful disagreement. These occurrences frequently took place in conversations within community groups and pages that were devoted to hobbies or shared interests, where members fostered a strong sense of camaraderie and mutual respect.

Nevertheless, the analysis also uncovered frequent occurrences of impolite language, especially in politically charged discussions or debates on controversial subjects. Such interactions were characterized by a tone of sarcasm, insults, and derogatory remarks. In the online environment, users often feel more empowered to express their opinions in a more direct and critical manner compared to face-to-face interactions. The context of these interactions was found to be a significant factor, as impolite language was more commonly observed in threads where the original post or initial comments had already established a negative tone.

In addition, the analysis of the content revealed that the existence of group norms and active moderation had a substantial influence on the degree of politeness observed in the interactions. Groups that have well-defined guidelines and active moderation tend to display a higher level of politeness. This is because members follow the established norms and moderators step in to ensure that the discourse remains respectful. In contrast, within groups that lacked proper moderation, there was a higher occurrence of impoliteness, which often escalated rapidly.

Additionally, the semi-structured interviews offered a more comprehensive understanding of users' individual experiences and perspectives regarding language politeness on Facebook. The interviews uncovered a sophisticated comprehension of how politeness and impoliteness are encountered and interpreted by individuals. In the following analysis, we will delve into the main themes that emerged from the interviews. These themes will be reinforced by direct quotes from the participants.

Anonymity and Lack of Accountability

Interview participants consistently noted that while they valued politeness and respectful interactions, they often encountered rudeness and hostility, especially in large public groups or pages. Many users attributed this to the anonymity and lack of accountability on the platform, which they believed encouraged people to express negative or confrontational opinions more freely.

"I think the anonymity factor plays a huge role. People feel they can say anything because there are no immediate consequences. In a face-to-face setting, you would never see such rudeness."

The anonymity provided by Facebook allows users to distance themselves from their comments, reducing the social consequences of impolite behavior. This perceived lack of accountability means that users may express themselves more harshly or confrontationally than they would in person. The ease with which users can create and discard accounts also contributes to this phenomenon, as the potential for repercussions is minimal.

Cultural Differences

Several participants highlighted the role of cultural differences in perceptions of politeness. What one user might consider a harmless joke, another might perceive as offensive, particularly when cultural or contextual nuances were not understood or respected. This often led to misunderstandings and conflicts, exacerbated by the text-based nature of Facebook interactions, which lack non-verbal cues that help convey tone and intent.

"Sometimes, what is meant to be a joke in one culture can be offensive in another. I've seen so many arguments start because people don't get the cultural context."

Cultural differences significantly impact how language is interpreted. Humor, sarcasm, and even polite expressions can vary widely between cultures. Without the benefit of non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and tone of voice, which help clarify intent, text-based communication on Facebook can easily lead to misunderstandings. This is particularly true in diverse groups where members come from various cultural backgrounds.

Impact of Facebook's Design and Features

Interviewees also discussed the impact of Facebook's design and features on language politeness. The ability to like and react to comments, for example, could either reinforce polite behavior or encourage impoliteness, depending on the prevailing tone of the discussion. The visibility of comments to a broader audience sometimes led users to post more extreme views to gain attention or approval from like-minded individuals, further polarizing discussions.

"The like and reaction buttons can sometimes make things worse. If a rude comment gets a lot of likes, it encourages more people to be rude because they see it as acceptable."

Facebook's features, such as likes and reactions, can amplify certain behaviors. When polite comments receive positive reinforcement, they encourage more of the same. However, if impolite or provocative comments receive significant attention, it can create a cycle where users feel incentivized to post more extreme views to gain approval. The public nature of comments also means that users might post more sensational or confrontational content to attract attention from a wider audience.

Discussion

The results of this study are in line with established theories on language politeness and digital communication. One can gain insight into the patterns of polite and impolite language on Facebook by examining them through the framework of politeness theory, as outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987). This theory focuses on the management of face, or self-esteem, during social interactions. Based on the data, it is evident that politeness strategies are frequently utilized in community-focused groups where individuals have shared interests and objectives. This ultimately results in positive reinforcement and supportive interactions among

members. This finding provides evidence for the notion that the desire to be well-regarded and valued, known as positive face, plays a crucial role in promoting the use of courteous language.

On the other hand, the regular lack of politeness observed in politically charged discussions can be associated with the notions of negative face and face-threatening acts. In these contexts, individuals are more prone to engage in behavior that threatens others' dignity, such as making offensive comments and using derogatory language, as a result of the anonymity and perceived detachment offered by the online setting. This finding aligns with the research conducted by Suler (2004) on the phenomenon of online disinhibition effect. Suler's work elucidates how anonymity can contribute to a decrease in inhibitions, resulting in behaviors that are less restrained and more extreme.

The interviews shed light on cultural variations in politeness perceptions, which are consistent with Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions theory. Specifically, these variations align with the dimensions of individualism vs. collectivism and high vs. low power distance. Individuals from collectivist cultures and societies with high power distance tend to prefer communication styles that are more indirect and deferential. However, this can sometimes result in misunderstandings when interacting with individuals from individualist cultures and societies with low power distance. The significance of cultural sensitivity in digital communication is highlighted by the works of Hall (1976) and Ting-Toomey (1999).

The study emphasizes the significance of individual accountability and self-control for Facebook users in upholding a courteous and considerate online atmosphere. It promotes the practice of mindfulness, empathy, and respectful communication, even in the midst of disagreements. Facebook administrators must prioritize active moderation to effectively manage impolite behavior. It is imperative for them to establish clear guidelines, consistently enforce rules, and offer training on cultural sensitivity and conflict resolution. Additionally, incentivizing positive interactions through features such as badges can be beneficial. It is crucial for policymakers to carefully analyze the wide-ranging effects of social media interactions on societal cohesion. They should prioritize the establishment of regulations that encourage responsible digital citizenship, implement effective moderation strategies, and provide education on digital literacy and cultural sensitivity. The results emphasize the importance of adopting a holistic approach to digital communication and ethics in social media, by striking a balance between the right to express oneself and engaging in respectful conversations. Encouraging a culture of respect entails the enforcement of rules, fostering constructive interaction, and developing features and algorithms to address detrimental conduct. Recognizing and acknowledging cultural differences is crucial in creating inclusive and respectful online environments. When it comes to designing platforms, it is important to prioritize ethical considerations that aim to minimize harm and foster positive behavior. Education and digital literacy play a crucial role in instructing individuals on responsible engagement, the consequences of their words, and the value of diverse perspectives. This, in turn, promotes more effective and ethical digital participation.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the level of politeness in language used on Facebook is influenced by various factors, such as the specific context, group norms, and the presence of moderation. Politeness is highly regarded by users, yet they frequently come across instances of rudeness, which can be attributed to the anonymity and lack of accountability that exists in certain online environments. Cultural variations also have a substantial impact on the perception of politeness. It is imperative to ensure effective moderation, establish clear guidelines, and demonstrate cultural sensitivity in order to uphold respectful interactions.

Individuals must assume personal accountability for their language usage, and acquiring knowledge on digital literacy is imperative. Encouraging a culture of respect and developing ethical platform features can cultivate a more positive and productive online atmosphere.

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