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Positive Versus Negative Politeness Strategies: Predicting User Engagement in Reddit-Based Academic Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Politeness research in academic discourse has focused mostly on regulated teacher-student interactions, leaving open, institutionally unregulated forums understudied. This study explored the extent to which positive and negative politeness strategies differentially predict user engagement in discussions of university experience on Reddit among Kenyan university students, using Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory framework. A convergent mixed-methods design combined content analysis and discourse analysis on a corpus of 200 posts and comments collected from discussion threads of five academic-related subreddit forums. Content analysis relied on a coding scheme with high internal consistency (Cohen's $\kappa = .84$) to identify politeness strategies. Descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation were used to compare engagement (upvotes, replies, thread depth) with the occurrence of positive and negative politeness strategies. Positive politeness was more prevalent than negative politeness (in-group markers constituted 42.1% of positive politeness) and showed a significantly stronger positive correlation with all engagement measures (upvotes $r = .412$; replies $r = .385$) than negative politeness ($r = .336$; $r = .351$). Positive politeness yielded a higher mean engagement than negative politeness. Discourse analysis showed that strategy choice was topic-dependent: positive politeness strategies dominated supportive posts, while negative politeness occurred in face-threatening topics such as unemployment and academic failure. These results indicate that positive politeness strategies are the most important predictors of engagement in Reddit-based discussions due to their face-saving nature, as opposed to face-debasing negative politeness strategies. The findings extend politeness theory to open peer-based community settings and offer guidelines for discussion facilitators.

INTRODUCTION

Digital media has changed the way students interact online when seeking academic advice, exchanging knowledge, and discussing differences beyond institutional channels. CMC has stripped the process of academic discourse of prosodic and non-verbal features that play a central role in face work and has left linguistic politeness strategies as the main tool for managing face and interaction. However, Reddit, along with other open peer-to-peer forums, differs from institutional platforms in terms of several features that may restructure face-work – participation is voluntary, not mandatory; identity is pseudonymous, not accountable; and there is no authority whose face should be respected (Kádár & Haugh, 2021). According to the face-threat model developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), the severity of the face-threat is determined by the power differential and social distance between the participants; the latter two factors are minimized in case of Reddit as opposed to an institution or lecturer-moderated forum. Therefore, one cannot apply conclusions about face-work made within the framework of institutional computer-mediated communication (CMC) studies, since in this context negative politeness strategies play a considerable role due to power asymmetry between interlocutors.

The recent literature on social media politeness supports the dominance of positive politeness strategies in digital

discourse, however, only in those cases when the power asymmetry between the commenter and the addressee is clearly pronounced, for example, when people address heads of states, celebrities, or technology entrepreneurs (Situmorang *et al.*, 2025). One can wonder then whether positive politeness dominance is associated with deference to the high status or, on the contrary, is a general characteristic of the digital face-work regardless of the power relations. The current study examines the latter possibility in a setting in which the power asymmetry is structurally absent – peer-to-peer anonymous academic discussion among students in Kenya.

While a bulk of research dedicated to politeness strategies in online academic discourse focuses on structured, institutionally moderated platforms (learning management systems, lecturer-moderated forums, etc.), where negative politeness strategies have interactional weight due to preserved power asymmetry and social distance between the interlocutors, there are only few examples where positive and negative politeness strategies have been examined in parallel in order to compare their effectiveness. Moreover, there are practically no studies that deal with anonymous and voluntarily used peer-to-peer platforms like Reddit. It is especially dangerous to assume that polite strategies typical for the institutional settings would have the same impact in an anonymous setting without power asymmetry. In particular, there is

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no evidence of which category of politeness strategies, positive or negative, better predicts measurable user engagement (replies, upvotes, thread continuity) in such an environment. This study aims at addressing this question by examining Reddit discussions of university experience among Kenyan students. The research objective of this study is to identify which category of politeness strategies, positive or negative, better predicts user engagement in Reddit-based academic discussions among Kenyan students.

The current study is based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, according to which politeness strategies operate in order to maintain face – individual public self-image, which consists of desire for approval (positive face) and independence from interference (negative face). Positive politeness strategies protect the positive face through showing solidarity, appreciating and using inclusive language; negative politeness strategies protect the negative face through hedging, using indirect requestives and mitigating disagreement. Both positive and negative politeness strategies are defined through three social variables: the power differential between the interlocutors, the social distance between them and the level of imposition of the given act. Because virtually every act of communication carries some potential to threaten either the speaker's or the hearer's face, speakers routinely draw on this repertoire of strategies to preserve social harmony (Watts, 2003), which is precisely why the distribution and relative effectiveness of positive versus negative politeness in a given setting becomes an empirical question worth testing rather than assuming. Previous research into politeness in digital scholarly communication has shown that positive politeness strategies are conducive to collaboration and continued participation in institutionally moderated platforms, such as Learning Management Systems and ResearchGate-type communities (Baiocco *et al.*, 2023; Taguchi, 2021). Additionally, research has demonstrated that negative politeness strategies reduce face threat and are conducive to continued interaction in regulated environments (Lee & DeLiema, 2024; Wang & Chen, 2023). In the African region, research into online learning environments confirms both findings: positive politeness is positively correlated with peer responsiveness and thread continuation (Moyo & Van der Merwe, 2021), while negative politeness correlates with culturally informed deference in student-lecturer interactions (Adebayo & Oladipo, 2022). In Kenya, the positive effect of politeness on collaborative learning and respect for peers has been observed in institutional communication channels, such as WhatsApp groups and Moodle discussion forums (Mutua & Kihara, 2022; Njoroge & Wambui, 2023). In summary, all this literature proves the significance of politeness strategies for engagement but focuses on accountable and institutionally-bounded communication, where users' identities, roles, and relations are regulated. Current research into politeness on Reddit-like platforms has tended to describe strategy types and provide

descriptive accounts of usage without systematic testing of their differential predictive power for measurable engagement outcomes. Furthermore, another methodological problem is that when positive and negative politeness were considered together, the two strategy types were seen as complementary, not competitive (Moyo & Van der Merwe, 2021; Mutua & Kihara, 2022). This results in a theoretical issue of great significance: in communication with minimized power asymmetry and social distance, does face-work based on solidarity surpass face-work mitigating imposition as a predictor of engagement, or does the institutional pattern remain valid irrespective of communication environment? The answer to this question determines whether the basic assumptions of Politeness Theory can be applied in anonymous digital settings or not. The study relies on the hypothesis that in communication with minimized power asymmetry and social distance, solidarity-based face-work should have priority over deference-based mitigation. Hence, the current study hypothesizes that positive politeness strategies would demonstrate a stronger correlation with measures of engagement (replies, upvotes, thread depth) than negative politeness strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Politeness strategies have increasingly been recognized as a key pragmatic resource for managing relationships and sustaining participation in online academic discourse, where the absence of prosody and non-verbal cues places the interactional burden on language choice alone. Taguchi (2021) observes that in multilingual online classrooms, learners frequently rely on positive politeness devices such as encouragement, compliments, and inclusive language to build collaborative, friendly learning environments, while Kádár and Haugh (2021) note that participants in online discussion forums draw on both positive and negative politeness to sustain harmonious interaction. Much of this literature, however, concerns formal, institutionally moderated settings and offers little insight into open social platforms such as Reddit, where interaction is voluntary and unregulated.

Positive Politeness and Engagement

Positive politeness strategies have been consistently linked to increased participation in digital academic settings. Baiocco *et al.* (2023) found that pragmatic markers of solidarity and appreciation were associated with higher engagement in online academic communication, while Lee and DeLiema (2024) showed that peer-directed encouragement and inclusive language helped students build rapport and sustain active participation in asynchronous learning forums. Within Africa, Moyo and Van der Merwe (2021) reported that frequent use of greetings, encouragement, and inclusive language in South African online learning environments increased peer responses and thread continuation, while in Kenya, Mutua and Kihara (2022) found that expressions of respect, appreciation, and solidarity in WhatsApp

learning groups and Moodle forums were associated with higher peer engagement and collaborative learning. Similarly, Makokha and Mutisya (2016) and Njeru and Mwangi (2022) found that supportive, positively toned communication increased participation and collaborative learning among Kenyan university students online. Taken together, these studies establish a consistent relationship between positive politeness and engagement, but almost exclusively within institutionally regulated platforms where participation is shaped by academic roles and expectations rather than by voluntary, anonymous choice, as is the case on Reddit.

Negative Politeness and Engagement

Negative politeness strategies, which minimize imposition and protect the hearer's autonomy (Brown & Levinson, 1987), have similarly been linked to constructive engagement, particularly where communication involves requesting help or expressing disagreement. Taguchi (2021) found that hedging and indirect requests increased the likelihood of replies in online learning environments by reducing the perceived imposition on other participants, and Wang and Chen (2023) reported that apology markers and mitigating expressions supported positive interaction by allowing users to voice requests and opinions respectfully. Regionally, negative politeness use has been shown to be shaped by culturally grounded norms of respect and hierarchy: Adebayo and Oladipo (2022) found that Nigerian university students relied on indirect requests and respectful address forms when communicating with lecturers online, while Moyo and Van der Merwe (2021) observed South African students using mitigation strategies when requesting academic assistance. In the Kenyan context, Njoroge and Wambui (2023) found that hedging, apologies, and indirect forms of request were associated with more favourable peer responses in online academic communication. As with the positive politeness literature, these studies are concentrated in lecturer-student and other power-asymmetric relationships, leaving the role of negative politeness in anonymous, peer-to-peer forums largely unexamined.

Comparative Effectiveness of Positive and Negative Politeness

A smaller body of work has directly compared the relative contribution of positive and negative politeness to engagement. Kádár and Haugh (2021) suggest that positive politeness is particularly effective at building a sense of community and sustaining continuous interaction in online discussion forums, while negative politeness is more closely tied to smooth information exchange and conflict-free disagreement. In East and Southern Africa, Moyo and Van der Merwe (2021) found that positive politeness dominated peer-to-peer communication aimed at building solidarity, while negative politeness featured more in student-instructor interactions and formal requests; Mutua and Kihara (2022) reported a

similar pattern in Kenyan digital learning platforms, with positive politeness driving peer collaboration and negative politeness supporting respectful communication within hierarchical exchanges. None of these comparative studies, however, tests which strategy type more strongly predicts measurable engagement outcomes such as replies, upvotes, or thread continuity, and none examines a setting in which power asymmetry and social distance are structurally minimized, as on Reddit.

Research Gap

Across this literature, three gaps are evident. First, existing research on politeness and engagement in digital academic communication is concentrated in institutionally regulated platforms — learning management systems, moderated classrooms, and supervised discussion boards — where participants' roles, identities, and power relations are fixed by the institution. Second, where positive and negative politeness have been examined together, they have generally been treated as complementary rather than competing predictors of engagement, leaving open the question of which strategy type carries greater predictive weight. Third, very little attention has been paid to anonymous, voluntary peer-to-peer platforms such as Reddit, where the absence of institutional authority and accountable identity may fundamentally alter the relationship between politeness and engagement. The present study addresses these gaps by directly comparing the predictive strength of positive and negative politeness strategies for user engagement in Reddit-based academic discussions among Kenyan university students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A convergent mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative content analysis and qualitative discourse analysis, has been used to investigate politeness strategies and their relationship with user engagement in Reddit academic communication. Quantitative design addressed the issues of frequency and correlation, while the qualitative component put those patterns in interactional and pragmatic perspective. Data have been collected from publicly accessible discussions on academically-oriented subreddits (such as *r/AskAcademia*, *r/college*, *r/HomeworkHelp*, and *r/GradSchool*) focusing on university experience of Kenyan students in the six-month period preceding data collection. Purposive sampling has been used to select subreddits with high level of English activity and meaningful academic content, followed by identification of discussion threads with student-related academic interaction (help requests, giving advice, peer feedback, academic discussion, problem-solving). Out of the identified pool, 200 posts and comments have been selected as a corpus for content analysis, whereas 30 discussion threads have been reserved for discourse analysis in order to retain interactional and pragmatic context. Sample size has been determined by data saturation and representativeness, not by a pre-set statistical power goal. The unit of analysis has been each

individual post or comment demonstrating the usage of politeness strategy along with engagement outcome.

The collection of data was done by extracting the content of documentary data, recording the textual content, the subreddit source, the date of posting, the discussion topic, and three measures of engagement including number of replies, number of upvotes and thread depth. Participant interaction did not happen; anonymity was ensured by anonymization of usernames and other identifiers, while direct quotations were paraphrased, in accordance with Reddit terms of service and institutional ethical approval (NACOSTI). Identification and classification of politeness strategies were based on the coding instrument, designed according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. Specifically, identification was carried out through the differentiation between positive politeness strategies (e.g., identity markers for inclusion in a group, expressions of empathy and solidarity, offers of cooperation, and expressions of appreciation) and negative politeness strategies (e.g., hedging, indirect requestives, disclaimers, apology/deference markers). Each unit of analysis was coded for the presence and the frequency of particular sub-strategies under each one of these categories, along with three engagement indicators. This coding instrument was improved through supervisory and pragmatics expert reviews, which allowed for sharpening category definitions and decreasing definitional overlaps before coding. Reliability of the instrument was established through double-coding of a portion of the data independently by two coders, resulting in substantial inter-rater reliability (Cohen's $\kappa = .84$); almost perfect agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Validity of the instrument was supported through direct rooting of coding categories into the framework provided by Brown and Levinson (1987), pragmatics expert review of the coding instrument and the alignment of the measures of engagement with similar prior research (Baiocco *et al.*, 2023; Lee & DeLiema, 2024). A pilot round of coding (30 posts/comments, not included in the final dataset) was conducted in order to test and adjust the coding categories and the extraction method.

The analysis is divided into three phases: computation of frequencies and percentages of each positive and negative politeness sub-strategy; Pearson correlation analysis between politeness strategy category and engagement measures in SPSS; comparison of predictive power of positive versus negative politeness, when the correlation is statistically significant. In addition to this quantitative analysis, qualitative thematic analysis of data using NVivo and manual coding was performed in order to identify patterns of use of politeness strategies in building rapport, peer support, disagreement management and cooperative problem solving. Integration of qualitative and quantitative findings took place in the phase of interpretation of results in order to provide context for statistical associations. No private messages, deleted content or restricted material was accessed. Institutional ethical approval and NACOSTI research authorization were received before collecting data, and all data that was

extracted was anonymized and paraphrased in accordance with Reddit terms of service.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Corpus Composition

Consistent with the sampling procedure described above, the analytic corpus consisted of 200 Reddit posts and comments (50 original posts and 150 comments/replies) drawn from five discussion threads addressing major phases of the Kenyan university experience: transition to university life and campus adjustment, choice between public and private universities, academic stress and burnout, challenges of postgraduate study, and graduate unemployment and labour-market experience. Comments and replies accounted for 75% of the corpus ($n = 150$) against 25% original posts ($n = 50$), a ratio of roughly three responses for every original post, indicating that the sampled discussions were highly conversational and interaction-driven. Because these five themes span both informational and emotionally charged exchanges, they offered varied opportunities for users to agree, disagree, express empathy, advise, and criticise — and so a suitable corpus for examining how positive and negative politeness strategies relate to engagement.

Distribution of Politeness Strategies

Positive politeness strategies ($N = 195$) were used more frequently than negative politeness strategies ($N = 172$), with the most common being in-group identification (42.1%, $n = 82$), solidarity/empathy expressions (34.9%, $n = 68$), and offers of cooperation and assistance (23.0%, $n = 45$). Negative politeness strategies included most frequently hedging expressions (43.0%, $n = 74$), disclaimers (27.9%, $n = 48$), minimizing impositions (18.0%, $n = 31$), and apologies/deference (11.1%, $n = 19$).

Positive Politeness and User Engagement

Positive politeness proved to be associated with user engagement most strongly and consistently across the three types of engagement metrics measured. Comments containing positive politeness strategies were upvoted an average of 34.2 times, got an average of 4.8 replies, and achieved a mean thread depth of 4.5, with solidarity/empathy expressions giving rise to the highest returns of all types ($M = 38.5$ upvotes, 5.7 replies, thread depth of 5.1). Correlations confirmed this trend statistically: positive politeness was correlated moderately and significantly with upvotes ($r = .412$, $p < .05$), replies ($r = .385$, $p < .05$), and thread depth ($r = .401$, $p < .05$). Upvotes – the most objective measure of community appreciation – correlated more strongly than replies with positive politeness strategies, implying that users did not just reciprocate with replies but also genuinely appreciated the language of building solidarity.

Negative Politeness and User Engagement

Negative politeness strategies also correlated positively with user engagement, although less strongly on all

measures. Comments using negative politeness strategies got an average of 24.2 upvotes, 3.8 replies, and achieved a thread depth of 3.7. Correlations with engagement were moderate but significant ($r = .336$ with upvotes, $p < .05$; $r = .351$ with replies, $p < .05$; $r = .328$ with thread depth, $p < .05$). Of negative politeness strategies, hedging expressions resulted in the greatest engagement ($M = 28.6$ upvotes, 4.5 replies), and apologies/deference in the weakest engagement ($M = 19.7$ upvotes, 2.8 replies) of all strategies measured in the study.

Illustrative Discourse Examples

Discourse analysis of the coded threads illustrated how these strategies operated in context. In-group identity markers were used to open requests for advice and to address the community as peers, for example: “Kenyaans on Reddit, what are your campus experiences and what advice would you give to someone about to join Uni?” and “What about guys in the tech space... some advice to a young comrade please.” Encouragement and empathy expressions accompanied difficult disclosures, as in “Don’t give up stranger and don’t be discouraged” and “Iza bro one day tutapata jobs” (“we will get jobs one day”). Inclusive pronouns performed a similar solidarity

function, for instance in “We don’t have tables here, support your woman.”

Negative politeness strategies were most visible where users offered opinions on contested topics. Hedges such as “I think it’s the university freedom that somehow makes it difficult for many to complete studies” and “I think he means most academically gifted people tend to become employees...” allowed users to advance a view while signalling that it was not categorical. Disclaimers performed a comparable mitigating function, prefacing potentially face-threatening opinions with markers such as “IMO, if I’m to study Engineering, my best bet would be...” and “This is just my opinion...” before discussing the shortcomings of specific university programmes. Across the corpus, positive politeness strategies clustered in threads offering advice, emotional support, and shared experience, while negative politeness strategies clustered in threads on contested or face-threatening topics such as university quality, unemployment, and academic failure — a topic-dependent pattern consistent with Brown and Levinson’s (1987) claim that speakers select politeness forms strategically according to relationship and communicative intent.

Solidarity and empathy expressions generated the highest

Table 1: Engagement statistics by positive politeness sub-strategy.

Positive Politeness Strategy	Mean Upvotes	Mean Replies	Mean Thread Depth
In-group identity markers	36.8	5.3	4.6
Solidarity and empathy	38.5	5.7	5.1
Offers of cooperation/help	27.4	3.6	3.8
Overall mean	34.2	4.8	4.5

engagement of any positive politeness sub-strategy, followed closely by in-group identity markers, while offers of cooperation and assistance — though least frequent — still outperformed every negative politeness sub-strategy

on upvotes and replies. This pattern suggests that Reddit users reward emotionally attuned, relationship-building language over purely informational or task-oriented contributions.

Table 2: Engagement statistics by negative politeness sub-strategy.

Negative Politeness Strategy	Mean Upvotes	Mean Replies	Mean Thread Depth
Hedging expressions	28.6	4.5	4.3
Disclaimers and self-effacement	25.4	4.1	3.9
Minimizing imposition	23.1	3.6	3.5
Apologies and deference markers	19.7	2.8	2.9
Overall mean	24.2	3.8	3.7

Hedging expressions produced the strongest engagement among the negative politeness sub-strategies, consistent with their function of softening an opinion just enough to invite response without provoking disagreement. Apologies and deference markers, by contrast, generated the weakest engagement of any sub-strategy in the study — positive or negative — suggesting that overt self-effacement may dampen rather than encourage further interaction.

Comparative Predictive Strength

Positive politeness was greater than negative politeness across every engagement measurement and every correlation coefficient used, as summarized in Table 1.

Thread depth showed a similar pattern to upvotes and replies: positive politeness was associated with a mean thread depth of 4.5 compared with 3.7 for negative politeness, and the correlation between positive politeness and thread depth ($r = .358$, $p < .05$) was likewise stronger

Table 3: Comparative predictive strength of positive versus negative politeness.

Engagement Indicator	Positive Politeness	Negative Politeness
Mean Upvotes	34.2	24.2
Mean Replies	4.8	3.8
Mean Thread Depth	4.5	3.7
Correlation with Upvotes (r)	.412*	.336*
Correlation with Replies (r)	.385*	.351*

Note. *Correlation significant at $p < .05$ (two-tailed).

than that for negative politeness ($r = .328$, $p < .05$).

The greatest difference was observed in upvotes ($\Delta M = 10.0$; $\Delta r = .076$), whereas the lowest was seen in replies ($\Delta r = .034$). That is, while both politeness strategies were equally good at provoking reaction, positive politeness was significantly better at gaining endorsement by the community.

Discussion

The findings provide clear evidence for Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory that positive politeness strategies fulfill people's need for positive face — the desire to be appreciated, accepted, and considered part of an admired social group. In-group identity markers (msee, bro, guyz, chuo) worked by emphasizing commonality and shared identity, confirming that positive politeness reduces interpersonal distance and creates familiarity. This is consistent with Baiocco *et al.* (2023) and Lee & DeLiema's (2024) findings that expressions of shared identity and affiliation play an important role in community building and interaction in digital space — the current study shows the same phenomenon occurring through Sheng and other local expressions in Kenyan Reddit communities. Solidarity and empathy expressions (e.g., “you are not alone,” “it gets better”) were similarly interpreted through Makokha and Mutisya (2016) and Njeru & Mwangi's (2022) finding that supportive communication increases participation and collaborative learning, and align with Kádár and Haugh's (2021) relational view of politeness that its main function is managing interpersonal relations rather than following linguistic rules.

Qualitatively, inclusive pronouns (“we,” “our”) and comments such as “The hidden pain in the comments is sponsored by the government” and “Shida ni walituchocha enmasse...” (“The problem is that we were all misled together...”) illustrate how positive politeness reduces

social distance and satisfies the need to be positively regarded — consistent with Brown and Levinson's (1987) account of positive face. Comments disclosing burnout and academic struggle (e.g., “Burn out will definitely catch up with you if you push yourself this much”) generated substantial engagement, supporting the idea that empathy and encouragement satisfy positive-face needs through fostering unity, approval, and belonging. This finding also aligns with Baym (2015), who argues that emotional satisfaction and a sense of belonging sustain online communication, and with Kipruto *et al.* (2021) and Mmbwanga & Etakwa (2024), who describe digital platforms as sources of peer support for students the current data confirm that positive politeness, through inclusive language, encouragement, and solidarity markers, plays an important role in facilitating engagement by increasing replies and discussion continuity.

The comparatively weaker performance of negative politeness may partly reflect a ceiling effect of mitigation itself: excessive hedging or self-effacement can make a contribution read as less confident or less relevant, even as it successfully avoids imposing on the reader. At the same time, every negative politeness sub-strategy still attracted meaningful engagement, which suggests that respectful, cautious phrasing remains valuable for discussing sensitive topics such as academic failure, institutional quality, and unemployment — arenas in which users appear to prefer voicing disagreement carefully rather than bluntly. This is consistent with Lee and DeLiema's (2024) finding that respectful disagreement sustains engagement over time, and with Makokha and Mutisya's (2016) and Njeru and Mwangi's (2022) observation that non-threatening communication fosters collaboration in online educational communities.

Negative politeness strategies were interpreted through the same theoretical lens: hedging (e.g., “I think it's the

university freedom that somehow makes it difficult...” and disclaimers (e.g., “IMO, if I’m to study Engineering...”, “This is just my opinion...”) allowed users to present opinions without imposing them on others, consistent with Brown and Levinson’s (1987) account of negative face respecting the interlocutor’s freedom of opinion and reducing imposition. This is in line with Lee & DeLiema (2024), whose work shows that negative politeness and respectful disagreement facilitate participation in online discussion environments, and with Baiocco *et al.* (2023), who found that users are more interested in comments that acknowledge alternatives. The comparatively weaker correlations for negative politeness ($r = .336-.351$, versus $r = .412-.385$ for positive politeness) indicate that while respectful, mitigated language contributes to engagement, solidarity and empathy make a stronger contribution — supporting Kádár and Haugh’s (2021) view of politeness as relational and context-dependent, especially online.

Bringing the two strands together, the discourse-level pattern was topic-dependent: positive politeness strategies dominated conversations involving advice, emotional support, and shared experience, whereas negative politeness strategies occurred more often in controversial or face-threatening discussions (university quality, unemployment, academic failure). This confirms Brown and Levinson’s (1987) hypothesis that speakers strategically select politeness forms depending on relationships and communicative intent, and suggests that Kenyan Reddit users constantly negotiate solidarity and disagreement to balance personal opinion with social harmony — a pattern that mirrors broader societal concerns around academic stress, graduate unemployment, and uncertainty about the future. Taken together, the results indicate that participation in these discussions is driven not only by information exchange but by emotional support and community-building, and that positive politeness strategies are the stronger predictor of engagement because users’ need for belonging, validation, and emotional support outweighs the value of cautious, face-mitigating language in this low-power-asymmetry, anonymous setting.

These findings carry practical weight for those who design and moderate online academic spaces. University counselling and mentorship programmes should recognise the importance of online peer-support communities and explore ways of integrating digital discussion platforms into student support initiatives. Online community moderators should encourage supportive and empathetic communication practices, because such interactions promote sustained participation and constructive engagement. Higher education institutions should leverage social media platforms to facilitate peer mentorship and information sharing among students and graduates, and users participating in online educational communities should be encouraged to employ positive politeness strategies that foster inclusivity, empathy, and constructive dialogue.

Read together, the sub-strategy findings point to a

psychosocial function underlying the raw correlations. In a context marked by academic pressure, delayed graduation, and scarce graduate employment, expressions of empathy and shared identity appear to do more than exchange information — they offer recognition, validation, and a sense of not facing these pressures alone. This may explain why solidarity and empathy expressions outperformed every other sub-strategy, including the more information-oriented offers of cooperation and help: users engaging with academically and emotionally difficult material seem to reward comments that acknowledge shared struggle at least as much as, if not more than, those that simply offer a solution. This reading is consistent with Kádár and Haugh’s (2021) broader observation that positive politeness serves a community-building function in online discussion forums: on Reddit, where no institutional authority moderates the exchange, that community-building function appears to become the primary engine of engagement, with negative politeness playing a smaller, complementary role in keeping disagreement civil.

CONCLUSION

This study is subject to certain limitations that should be noted when interpreting its findings. The analysis was delimited to asynchronous, text-based interaction on Reddit and did not extend to synchronous chats, video conferencing, instant messaging, email, or institutional learning-management platforms; only English-language posts and comments were analysed, which excludes discussions conducted in Kiswahili or in mixed-code Sheng. The corpus was also drawn from a purposively selected set of academically oriented subreddits over a six-month window, and the correlational design means that the reported associations between politeness strategies and engagement should be read as predictive rather than causal relationships.

From the results of this research, several conclusions can be drawn. Politeness plays an important role in online discussions by Kenyan Reddit users regarding their university life, with users employing various politeness techniques depending on the subject being discussed. Positive politeness strategies proved even more significant for establishing interactions and maintaining participation: they help bridge the gap of social distance between people and create a feeling of belongingness that leads to active user participation. Negative politeness strategies also help create engagement, through fostering respectful communication and avoiding conflicts, though their contribution is relatively lesser when compared with positive politeness strategies. Taken together, these findings validate Politeness Theory by Brown and Levinson through the observation of the continuous negotiation of positive and negative face requirements, even in the case of anonymous online interactions, and confirm that politeness in computer-mediated communication is not only concerned with linguistic matters but with societal concerns as well.

The present study was limited to Reddit discussions concerning university experiences among Kenyans, and this scope points to clear directions for future research. Future studies may examine politeness strategies across other social media platforms such as X (Twitter), Facebook, TikTok, and LinkedIn; investigate the relationship between impoliteness and user engagement in online communities; conduct comparative studies between Kenyan and non-Kenyan online communities to establish possible cultural differences in politeness behaviour; explore the influence of demographic variables such as age, gender, and educational background on the use of politeness strategies in computer-mediated communication; and investigate how politeness strategies influence mental well-being and social support among university students in digital communities.

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