

THE POLITENESS STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY ASIAN AND WESTERN SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

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ABSTRACT

Politeness strategies play a vital role in communication in order to avoid any conflicts or offending other people's feelings. Showing good manners and uttering good words are extremely important in Islam. This is in line with the Prophet Muhammad's teaching for his followers to be kind and speak compassionately. In communication, conflicts may occur due to misunderstanding and misinterpreting especially when communicating inter-culturally. The Prophet Muhammad advised us to speak beneficently or keep silent (Muslim & Bukhari). Therefore, the use of politeness in communication is important to bridge good social communication between speakers. However, different cultures may have different strategies and different interpretations of the concepts of politeness strategy in communication. Hence, this study aimed to identify the types of politeness strategies as well as the most dominant strategies employed by ten selected Asian and Western social media influencers. This study also highlighted the differences and similarities of politeness strategies between two different cultures in social media. The data - the influencers' Instagram captions were analysed using qualitative method and classified according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. The results indicated that positive politeness strategies are the most dominant strategies employed by Asian and Western social media influencers compared to negative politeness strategies, off-record strategies and bald on-record strategies. Hence, this study showed that the influencers practised good manners and kind words in their online communication with the public as preached by the Prophet Muhammad. This research hopes to highlight the importance of politeness strategies and the effects of the strategies on communication.

Keywords: Communication, Influencers, Instagram, Politeness strategies, Social media

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Politeness is an important aspect in communication, as it helps the interlocutor to retain interpersonal relationship during the interaction (Kadar, 2017). With politeness, issues like misunderstanding, misinterpretation and ambiguous language can be avoided (Najeeb, 2012). It shows that being aware and respectful of other people's feelings will minimize the conflicts. Therefore, politeness should be applied in both verbal and non-verbal communication to create a harmonious situation.

Social media is a platform that helps people to communicate with one another in different languages (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). By applying politeness in language, it helps influencers to build respect and rapport from their followers. Besides, the right choice of language also helps to understand the messages that are being conveyed precisely. At this point, social media influencers play an important role as their content may impact the followers' decision and character (Veirman et al., 2019). Next, languages used on social media also vary based on different cultures which have different ways to interpret and understand the meaning when communicating with cross-cultural interlocutors.

1.1 Background of The Study

1.1.1 Politeness

The rationale of politeness is not just about maintaining a good relationship, but also minimizing the degree of rudeness and conflicts (Hammood, 2016). As stated by Lakoff (1973), one of the linguists that invented politeness theory defined politeness as a form of behaviour that drives speakers to have a good interaction in order to avoid threatening other people's feelings. Politeness may be viewed differently based on different cultural influences. What is considered polite in one culture may not be the same for other culture (Huang, 2008). Therefore, understanding other cultures will bridge the gap between the interlocutors from different cultural background (Marsih, 2010).

1.1.2 Online Communication

Nowadays, online communication has become a part of people's lives. It helps people to communicate with friends and families around the world via various types of online communication features like emails, instant messaging, and social media applications. The absence of facial expression and body language in online communication allow the users to use words to express their messages (Markus, 2011). Therefore, it is very important to choose the right choice of words before sending or posting the messages on communication platforms to avoid any conflicts or miscommunications.

1.1.3 Social Media

The rapid development of technology has totally changed the way people interact, communicate, and engage with one another (Arora et al., 2019). In the past, people communicated through phone calls, letters, and faxes. However, the revolution of social media has changed everything as it plays a vital role in the purpose of communication and influence (Baruah, 2012).

1.1.4 Social Media Influencers (SMIs)

In this era, social media influencers (SMIs) give a huge impact on online activities. Due to their popularity, they have a huge role in influencing the public through social media. The content that they create can affect their followers' behaviours, beliefs, and opinions. According to Nouri (2018) the influence from people who have a great reputation in this industry give a tremendous impact on the society. Chatzigeorgiou (2017) supported that the followers trusted the influencers based on their reputation, predictability and competence.

Lim et al. (2017) added that SMIs build better rapport with the audience on social media compared to television celebrities. Television celebrities appear more on traditional platform like television, magazines and newspaper.

1.2 Definition of Terms

1.2.1 Politeness

Lakoff (1973) defined politeness as a form of behaviour that drives people to have a good interaction with people. Politeness is not just about having a good manner but also involves the right word choice in a language. Lakoff (1973) also highlighted on the importance of language since it acts as a medium to transmit the information. Therefore, the use of politeness strategies lessen the potential threat in communication.

1.2.2 Social Media Influencer

Social media influencer is defined as third-party endorser who has the power and knowledge on a certain topic which helps to shape the audience attitudes and influence their decisions through social media platform for instance, Instagram, Twitter and Blog (Freberg et al., 2010). As an online celebrity, it is a good platform for them to share about their lifestyle and branded themselves.

1.2.3 Culture

Hofstede (2011) defines culture as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others. It is about a custom and social behaviour that a person has based on how they were raised and grew up. Every culture has their own uniqueness and cultural practices.

1.2.4 Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication refers to communications that take place between people of different cultures or backgrounds (Denomme, 2023). It is inclusive of both verbal and nonverbal forms of communication. Communication is the related process which messages are produced and interpreted in order to obtain a response (Griffin, 2011).

1.3 Problem Statement

It has become a norm for the social media influencers (SMIs) to share their thoughts and ideas on the social media platform. Their postings on social media can generate conversation and drive engagement with many people out there. They play an important role in guiding and shaping the follower's attitude. The purpose of politeness strategies in social media is to avoid face-threatening acts (FTA) as it may lead to consequences such as misunderstanding (Maros & Rosli, 2017).

However, some cultures may perceive politeness differently because different cultures may have different interpretations on the concept of politeness in communications (Tawalbeh & Al-Oqaily, 2012). What is considered polite in one culture can be rude in another culture. In Chinese culture, it is considered rude to stare at people over a long period but the Westerners believe that maintaining eye contact with the speaker's eyes during the interaction is to show respect for the speakers (Akeshi et al., 2013).

Therefore, this research investigates and compares politeness strategies between Asian and Western social media influencers. It will also investigate the types of politeness strategies that are frequently used by the influencers from two different cultures.

1.4 Research Objectives

1. To identify the types of politeness strategies employed by Asian and Western social media influencers.
2. To identify the differences and similarities of politeness strategies employed by Asian and Western social media influencers.

1.5 Significance of Study

This research would be beneficial for the influencers in applying the politeness strategies in their social media updates. By knowing the different types of politeness strategies, it helps the influencers to prevent miscommunication and face-threatening acts in social media. Next, it benefits them to become more aware of courtesy used in social media to avoid offending other people's feelings.

This study is hoped to raise the consciousness among social media influencers themselves on how different types of politeness strategies convey different meaning based on their social media content. With better understanding on the concepts of politeness strategies, both the influencers as well as the followers can avoid from threatening other people's face.

1.6 Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted to identify the types of politeness strategy used by Asian and Western social media influencers. It focused on the 4 types of politeness strategies by Brown and Levinson (1987), which consists of positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on record and off record strategy. The study identified the differences and similarities of politeness strategies used by the influencers from different cultural background. The influencers' Instagram captions were selected as samples of the study.

There were also limitations to consider when conducting this study. The first one was due to the limited number of reknown influencers. In this study, only five Asian influencers and five Western influencers were selected. The least number of influencers may not represent all aspects of politeness from each culture. These limitations may affect the reliability of the results of the study.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Concept of Face

Goffman (1967) described face as a self-image that people wanted to be seen. The degree level of face is also different from one country to another. For example, the Chinese are more sensitive towards face issues compared to Westerners. In their culture, it is very important to save other people's face (Wang & Walker, 2011). Brown and Levinson (1987) defined "face" as something that is emotionally invested and can be lost, preserved and has to be constantly looked after in interaction. There are two types of face that were introduced by Brown and Levinson which are positive face and negative face. Positive face involves the desire to be esteemed, admired, looked up to and respected. Meanwhile, negative face occurs when people want to be free from imposing on their freedom, on ability to make choices and on their decisions.

2.2 Face Threatening Acts

Face-threatening act (FTA) is an act that can damage the speaker's or hearer's face by doing something that opposite to their desire or wants. Apart from threatening the face from both side, Brown and Levinson (1987) also highlighted that FTA may threaten either positive face or negative face. For instance, the acts of criticising, disagreeing and bumping into can threaten the faces from both sides. Normally, the consequences of face threat cause feelings on shame, embarrassment, confusion, and defensiveness.

2.3 Politeness Strategies

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness strategies is used to prevent violation and save the hearer's face during the interaction. Brown and Levinson described four types of politeness strategies in their theory:

- a. Negative politeness strategy
- b. Positive politeness strategy
- c. Off-record strategy
- d. Bald on-record strategy

2.4 Effects of Culture on Politeness

The application of politeness is different from one culture to another as every culture has different views on politeness based on their norms and values. What the Asian people considered to be polite may not be true according to Western culture. These two cultures have their own perspectives on viewing the concept of politeness. In order to be polite, Leech (1983) highlights that politeness helps to lessen the degree of rudeness.

2.5 Politeness in Social Media

The concept of politeness is considered as fundamental for human in order to avoid conflicts and misunderstanding during the interaction on social media. With politeness, the speakers can maintain a comfortable communication (Markus, 2011). In online conversation, Markus (2011) stated that the omission of gestures and facial expression force the speakers to use other strategies in order to avoid misinformation that can lead to misunderstanding. Online conversation is different from offline because speakers rely on what is being said and what is written in order to deliver the messages. Therefore, the language used by the speaker plays a major role in online conversation. The theory of politeness by Brown and Levinson (1987) emphasizes on face theory that any language or expression that breaks the laws of politeness in communication can be a face threat.

2.6 Previous Studies

Researchers have conducted various studies on politeness from different perspectives. Maros and Rosli (2017) conducted a research on female Malaysian undergraduates doing English language studies to identify the politeness strategies used in Twitter updates. The researchers employed Brown and Levinson (1987) theory to analyse the findings. The results showed that all participants applied all four Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies in their twitter updates. The researchers revealed that positive politeness is the most frequently used strategy as it lessens the gap between the speakers and the hearer by displaying a good relationship.

Another study done by Nurfarida (2016) focused on the politeness strategy used by the netizen's comment on Instagram. The researcher chose to analyse the comments on

Instagram post from one a politician's comments from Indonesia, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama. The findings revealed that most of the comments from netizen depicts positive politeness. Based on the previous studies above, Asian culture applies positive politeness the most in communication.

In the Western culture context, Ammaida (2018) has conducted a research on politeness strategies of the comments toward International Women's day. This study analyzed Donald Trump's Instagram post on social media. The researcher also used Brown and Levinson politeness theory in order to identify the types of politeness used by the user's comments. The findings showed that positive politeness was being used the most by most people who commented on Trump's Instagram post.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative content analysis method as a research design. According to Hsieh and Shanon (2005), qualitative content analysis is one of the various research methods used to analyse text- based data. Hence, this method is an appropriate choice to answer the research questions about the differences and similarities of politeness strategies used in different culture and types of politeness strategies used by social media influencers in their social media updates.

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative content analysis method as a research design. According to Hsieh and Shanon (2005), qualitative content analysis is one of the various research methods used to analyse text- based data. Hence, this method is an appropriate choice to answer the research questions about the differences and similarities of politeness strategies used in different culture and types of politeness strategies used by social media influencers in their social media updates.

3.2 Participants

For this study, a purposive sampling technique was applied to select 10 social media influencers from two different cultures. Palinkas (2015) stated that this method is able to compare and contrast, to identify similarities and differences in the phenomenon of interest. The participants of this study were selected from two different cultures who 5 influencers are Asians and the other 5 influencers are Americans. The influencers were selected from different backgrounds which are beauty influencer, parenting influencer, fitness and health influencer, cooking influencer and lifestyle influencer. This research also focused on the influencers' English language postings as a medium to interact with their followers on Instagram.

The reason why Instagram was chosen because Instagram has a younger audience compared to Twitter and Facebook. Famemass website stated that 71% of Instagram users are under the age of 35 and the percentage of social media influencers on Instagram are around 78% (Savla, 2019). To ensure the homogeneity among the influencers, the postings were selected from January 2021 to May 2021.

3.3 Instrument

The coding method applied for this study was adapted from Bryman (2011) coding method to analyse the types of politeness strategies employed by the influencers in their Instagrams. Coding is a systematic process of classifying the research data into the relevant

categories for data analysis and interpretation purposes. The influencers' Instagram posts were analysed using content analysis based on four types of politeness strategies by Brown and Levinson (1987) which are positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on record and off record.

3.4 Data Collection

The data collection for this study focused on the Asian and Western social media influencers' postings on Instagram. First, 10 social media influencers from two different cultures were selected as research samples. The influencers were divided into two groups which consists of five influencers from Asian countries; Malaysia, the Phillipines and India, and five western influencers from the United States of America. The influencers were chosen based on five criteria which are the number of followers, frequency of postings, engagement with the followers, produce a good content and gives an inspiration. The data were taken from the influencers' captions which consist of text, phrases, words and clauses. The analysis began with selecting the captions from the influencers' Instagram posts starting from January 2021 to May 2021.

3.5 Data Analysis

The captions from the influencers' postings were analysed according to Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. Firstly, the influencer's captions on Instagram was gathered and observed on how each influencer used politeness in their social media using the Bryman and Bell (2011) coding schemes in order to determine the types of politeness strategies used by the influencers. Each of the strategies found in the caption will be highlighted with four different colours to differentiate the types of politeness strategy used by the influencers, which then tabulated into table forms based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies. The utterances from both groups were compared and contrasted to identify the effects of culture on the use of politeness in communication.

4.0 FINDINGS

Based on Brown and Levinson (1987) politeness theory, there are four types of politeness strategies which are positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on record and off record strategies. Alan Bryman and Emma Bell's coding schemes (2011) were used to identify the types of politeness strategies used by the influencers in their Instagram captions.

The tables below show the categorization of politeness strategies employed by Asian and Western social media influencers.

Table 1. Positive Politeness Strategies Employed by Asian and Western Social Media Influencers on Instagram

Types	Strategies	Asian Influencers	Western Influencers
Positive politeness	Include both S and H in the activity	1	0
	Notice, attend to hearer's needs and wants	1	0
	Exaggerate	7	5
	Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation)	4	6
	Use in-group identity markers	3	3
	Assert or pre-suppose the S's knowledge of and concern for H's wants	2	4
	Joke	1	1
	Presuppose/ raise/ assert common ground	2	

Offer/promise	2	1
Intensify interest to H	3	1
Be optimistic	1	0
TOTAL	27	21

Table 2. Negative Politeness Strategies Employed by Asian and Western Social Media Influencers on Instagram

Types	Strategies	Asian Influencers	Western Influencers
Negative politeness	Apologize	1	1
	Be pessimistic	3	0
	Being conventionally indirect	0	2
	Question/ hedges	0	1
	TOTAL	4	4

Table 3. Bald on Record Strategies Employed by Asian and Western Social Media Influencers in Instagram

Types	Strategies	Asian Influencers	Western Influencers
Bald on record	The act of urgency	4	0
	Being rude without risk of offending	0	1
	Sympathetic advice/ warning	0	3
	Overcoming channel noise	0	1
	Complaint/ criticism	0	2
	TOTAL	4	7

Table 4. Off Record Strategies Employed by Asian and Western Social Media Influencers in Instagram

Types	Strategies	Asian Influencers	Western Influencers
Off Record	Metaphor	2	0
	Overstatement	2	1
	Be vague	2	0
	Tautologies	1	0
	Use rhetorical question	0	2
	TOTAL	7	3

Based on the data in Table 1, positive politeness was employed the most by Asian social media influencers. "Exaggerate" has the highest frequency which consists of 7 total counts then followed by "Give gifts to H" with 4 total counts. Meanwhile, "Use in group-identity markers" and "Intensify interest to H" strategies were categorized as the third highest positive politeness strategies used by Asian social media influencers.

Similar to Asian influencers data, positive politeness strategies were also frequently used by Western social media influencers in Instagram. However, the western influencers employed "Give gift to H" as the highest frequency, followed by "Exaggerate". Only 7 strategies from positive politeness strategies were used by 5 selected Western social media influencers in their Instagram caption compared to the Asian influencers using 11 positive politeness strategies.

In Table 2, only two negative politeness strategies were found in Asian social media influencer's Instagram captions which "Apologizing" and "be pessimistic" are the most frequently used by Asian influencers, which in contrast to the Western influencers who employed three negative politeness strategies which are "being conventionally indirect", "question/ hedges" and "apologize".

Besides, the result in Table 3 indicates that bald on record strategy is rarely used by Asian influencers in their Instagram's caption. There is only one subtype found in the data which is "The act of urgency". However, surprisingly, there are 4 bald on record strategies used by Western social media influencers which are "being rude without risk of offending", "sympathetic advice/ warning", "overcoming channel noise" and "complaint/criticism".

As for off record strategy is the second highest politeness strategy found in Asian influencer's Instagram captions. There are four subtypes of off record strategies used by the influencers which are "metaphor", "overstatement", "be vague" and "tautologies" as depicted in Table 4. In contrast, off record strategies were the least strategy used by Western social media influencers.

5.0 DISCUSSION

5.1 Types of Politeness Strategy Employed by Asian and Western Social Media Influencers

It was found that all the influencers used positive politeness in many situational cases such as to deliver exaggerated expressions, give promises, give gifts to H, notice/ attend to H wants and others. By using this strategy, it helps the influencers to avoid giving any offence towards their followers. At the same time, the influencers can create friendliness with their followers.

From the analysis, "Exaggerate" is the highest subtypes of positive politeness used by Asian influencers in their Instagram's captions to deliver their feelings by showing interest, compliment, approval and sympathy towards people. The exaggerated expressions can be shown by using exaggerated intonation, stress and empathic words or particles (Pratiknyo, 2016). The Western social media influencers, in contrast, used "Give gifts to H" strategy to satisfy their followers' positive face by giving appreciation, showing some sympathy and any action of gift-giving human relation. The word "gift" in this strategy does not refer to an object that is given willingly for someone, instead it is one of the forms of gratitude, sharing, wanting to be liked and also understanding which can enhance friendliness (Maros & Rosli, 2017).

5.2 The Differences and Similarities of Politeness Strategies used by Asian and Western Social Media Influencers

The findings of the study revealed that Asian and Western social media influencers similarly employed positive politeness strategies the most in their Instagram captions. It is identified that positive politeness strategies were used 27 times by Asian influencers, while Western influencers employed this strategy as many as 21 times. This indicates that the influencers preferred to use positive politeness strategy in their captions to give compliments and demonstrate the friendliness and rapport relationship with their followers.

The results are similar to Maros and Rosli (2017) research whereby they agree that positive politeness strategies are the most frequently used strategies used by the participants because this strategy provides various communicative purposes and most importantly to highlight friendliness. They also emphasize that it is common to find positive politeness in twitter updates. People tend to use jokes, seeking for agreement, shared common ground and use in-group identity in their social media.

The differences between Asian and Western social media influencers is that off-record strategies were less used by Western influencers compared to Asian influencers. From the findings, off-record is the second highest strategy used by Asian influencers while it is the least strategy used by Western influencers in their Instagram caption. In Western, there are only two subtypes of off-record strategy used by the influencers which are "use rhetorical questions" and "overstate". Conversely, there are four subtypes with seven utterances of off-record strategies found in Asian social media influencer's captions. It is identified that off-record strategy is the most indirect strategy used by the influencers in order to minimize the pressure on the followers.

5.3 Recommendations

It is recommended that future researchers can analyse newspaper articles, blogs, advertisements and script interviews as samples of the study. These materials are reachable and contain a variety of comments can be analysed for politeness which will make the research more attractive. Furthermore, future researchers can conduct a study on other specific country and region. This will help them to study in-depth about the culture and gain a new knowledge about other cultures from different perspectives. Last but not least, future researchers can consider conducting a study on politeness strategies used in gender differences. It helps people to understand how women and men use politeness strategies on social media.

6.0 CONCLUSION

As presented, the similarities of Asian and Western social media influencers are that all the influencers recorded the highest frequency for positive politeness. Meanwhile the differences found from the analysis is that off-record strategy is the least used by Western influencers, however bald on record strategy is less used by Asian influencers. This shows that Asian influencers are more comfortable using specific strategies in delivering their messages in social media compared to Western influencers. The use of politeness strategy in communication is vital to show concerns for other people and at the same time to save the face of the followers in order to save their face as well as the face of the influencers.

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