The Role of Emoji in Politeness Strategies in the Comments of Influencer TikTok

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Abstract. Social media has transformed communication patterns, with TikTok emerging as a platform where interactions are highly expressive and multimodal. This study examines the role of emojis as politeness strategies in the comments section of TikTok influencers, focusing on how these visual symbols help maintain harmonious digital communication. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the researchers analyzed 20 emoji-containing comments from a high-engagement influencer video. The data were interpreted through Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, supplemented by the concept of multimodality. The findings indicate that emojis significantly support both positive and negative politeness strategies. Positive politeness was dominant (around 70%), often realized through empathy, humor, and solidarity-building emojis, while negative politeness was achieved through hedging, apologies, and respectful cues. Emojis also frequently softened bald-on-record statements and enabled off-record indirectness. The study concludes that emojis are crucial in enhancing politeness, enriching emotional expression, and fostering a sense of community in TikTok interactions, highlighting their importance in the evolving landscape of digital sociolinguistics.

Keywords: Digital Communication; Emoji; Politeness Strategies; Sociolinguistics; TikTok Comments.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a communication space that not only records but also influences how people interact on a daily basis. TikTok, as one of the most popular platforms, presents a new communication pattern that is ephemeral, diverse, and highly expressive. Through the comments section, users not only share their opinions but also display their identities, demonstrate closeness, and negotiate social positions. Moreover, social media norms encourage positive self-presentation, creating a bias where positive content is more prevalent and attracts greater engagement than negative expressions (Barta & Andalibi, 2021). Arshad, Shabir, Aslam, and Farid (2025) explain the development of social media (TikTok, Instagram, etc.) as a global communication space and a sociolinguistic phenomenon. This dynamic is even more interesting when it occurs on influencer accounts, because interactions between fans and public figures occur on a large scale and in full diversity.

The principle of politeness in communication can be understood in two forms: absolute politeness and relative politeness. Geoffrey Leech explains that absolute politeness is related to a scale with two poles: negative and positive. On the negative side, politeness is demonstrated by efforts to reduce potentially offensive or coercive speech acts, such as commands. Meanwhile, on the positive side, politeness is demonstrated by efforts to strengthen polite and pleasant speech acts for the interlocutor. Relative politeness can vary in various aspects, depending on certain standards (Leech, 1996, p. 84). The principle of politeness in communication is seen in expressive speech acts, such as condolences, which show empathy

for grief or tragedy, with a level of politeness that is appropriate to the situation (Ryabova, 2015).

Sholehah and Nafa (2023) explain that influencers are individuals capable of influencing others, including the general public. Currently, more and more people are acting as influencers, in line with the growing appeal and influence they wield over the wider community. Social media influencers are a type of digital content creator who is known for their large number of followers online, and who has a unique personal brand image or identity (duffy, 2020). In the context of comments on influencer accounts, one particularly prominent element is the use of emojis, which are no longer simply a message complement or visual decoration, but rather an integral part of communication strategies and also serve as markers of emotion, attitude, and even politeness. For example, the use of a smiley or heart emoji can soften criticism, while a laughing emoji can signal closeness, solidarity, or irony. This phenomenon demonstrates that emojis have become a strategic tool in managing politeness and maintaining harmonious communication in the digital space. For many users, emojis serve as a way to maintain social connections, reduce potential conflict, or reinforce positive nuances in the highly open communication of online public spaces.

The uniqueness of this phenomenon lies in the complexity of emojis' meanings, which are not always singular. In the context of communication in TikTok celebrity comment sections, emoji meanings can change according to social relationships, user identities, and conversational situations. An emoji considered friendly by some may be interpreted as sarcastic by others. This uncertainty of meaning is what makes emoji-based communication ambiguous, unique, and complex. This ambiguity demands a deeper understanding of how emojis function within politeness strategies and how users interpret them in everyday communication practices.

However, studies on emojis and politeness strategies on social media still face a significant research gap. Although conducted from various perspectives, none have specifically linked the role of emojis to politeness strategies in celebrity TikTok comments. Kurniawan's (2024) study on TikTok comments on Prabowo Subianto used Yus's (2014) framework to identify emoji functions, but did not place them within a politeness framework. Densu's (2025) study, "Comment Column," highlighted politeness forms and gender factors in TikTok comments, but did not examine the dimensions of emojis as pragmatic markers. Xie's (2025) cross-cultural study focused on the function of emojis in compliments on TikTok and Douyin, making it relevant but emphasizing linguistic differences and functional categories rather than politeness strategies.

Studies of netizen comments on Indonesian public figures, such as the case of Fuji An (2025), found a predominance of positive politeness strategies along with the presence of verbal attacks, but did not highlight the role of emojis in these dynamics. A similar finding was seen in Sholehah's (2023) study of Instagram influencer comments, which found a predominance of positive politeness but did not address multimodal aspects like emojis. Meanwhile, Micle & Mudure-Iacob (2024) emphasized that emojis can create a polite context in online academic interactions, but the academic context is certainly different from in-person interactions on TikTok. Other studies, such as the analysis of politeness in the film Tinkerbell by IEFLJ (2022), confirmed the dominance of positive politeness using the Brown & Levinson framework, but limited it to the film's subtitles, not the digital comment space.

A clear gap emerges from these studies: there is still a lack of research that examines in depth how emojis are used as part of politeness strategies, particularly in the comments of Indonesian-language TikTok celebrities. The originality of this study lies in its focus on connecting two previously separately studied domains: emoji functions and politeness strategies. While previous research has primarily examined the function of emojis without connecting them to politeness theory, or discussed politeness strategies without considering multimodal dimensions like emojis, this study seeks to combine the two in the context of TikTok celebrity comments. Using Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory framework, this study will analyze how emojis support both positive and negative politeness strategies, as well as how users interpret their role as non-verbal complements in digital interactions. Furthermore, this study adds a rarely explored Indonesian local context, thus contributing to the study of digital sociolinguistics, particularly in understanding how language choices and emoji use reflect the dynamics of netizens' communication with public figures on social media.

Unlike quantitative research, which emphasizes the number and frequency of emoji appearances, a qualitative approach allows researchers to explore the deeper and more subjective meanings behind each communication practice. Through a qualitative lens, emoji use is understood not simply as a recurring visual symbol, but as a social experience fraught with intention, interpretation, and a process of negotiation of meaning between users. From this perspective, emojis are not treated as standalone linguistic elements, but rather as part of a social practice closely related to identity formation, emotional expression, and the management of interpersonal relationships in digital spaces. The complexity of this phenomenon opens up opportunities for a richer study of how emojis function as politeness strategies in celebrity TikTok comment sections, where diverse user backgrounds and interaction dynamics create a communicative realm rich in interaction and meaning.

2. THEORETICAL STUDY

This study employs Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987) as the primary analytical lens. The theory centers on the concept of face, referring to an individual's public self-image that must be maintained during interactions.

Brown and Levinson propose two main strategies: 1) Positive Politeness, which aims to create a sense of closeness, solidarity, and approval between speakers and hearers. 2) Negative Politeness, which seeks to respect personal autonomy and minimize potential threats to the hearer's face.

In addition, this study draws on the concept of multimodality (Kress, 2010) to account for the nonverbal nature of emojis as semiotic resources. Multimodality highlights that meaning-making in digital spaces is not limited to text but also involves images, symbols, and other visual cues.

By integrating these frameworks, this research analyzes how emojis function not only as linguistic elements but also as multimodal tools that reinforce or modify politeness strategies in TikTok comment sections.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative design to explore politeness strategies and the role of emojis in TikTok comments, focusing on textual and visual meaning rather than numerical measurement. The data comprise 20 comments from an influencer's video with high engagement, selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: containing at least one emoji, expressing politeness or potential face-threatening acts, and written in English. Collected in September 2025, the comments were manually copied and documented with supporting screenshots to maintain authenticity. The analysis involved identifying emojis and politeness elements, categorizing them using Brown and Levinson's (1987) strategies, interpreting each emoji's function in reinforcing or softening politeness, and validating the coding through re-examination to ensure reliability.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

In the context of digital communication, especially on fast-paced and casual platforms like TikTok, emojis are not only complements to words but also tools for setting the tone of conversations, making them sound friendlier and more polite.

Emojis help users convey their feelings or intentions in a more subtle and expressive way (Waziri, 2022). For example, when offering praise or criticism, emojis can make the message feel more personal and less harsh or offensive. Furthermore, the use of emojis can facilitate the formation of positive relationships between followers and influencers, as emojis lend a warm and approachable feel to comments.

The importance of emojis in these comments also demonstrates how digital language continues to evolve with its own creativity. Politeness strategies through emojis reflect social adaptations in the ephemeral and visual nature of online communication.

The theory of politeness developed by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson in their book Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage (1987) explains how people use language to maintain "face" (a sense of self-respect or dignity) in social interactions. They divide politeness strategies into four main categories:

Positive Politeness (Positive Politeness)

This strategy focuses on building solidarity and making the recipient feel valued, recognized, or part of a group. It initiates positive face pressure (the desire to be liked and approved). It uses compliments, similarity, or inclusive language to create a sense of closeness and warmth.

Negative Politeness (Negative Politeness)

In contrast to positive politeness, this strategy respects negative face (the desire for autonomy and freedom from intrusion). This strategy is more formal and cautious, with elements such as apology, hedging (softening words like "maybe" or "if I may"), or distance to avoid appearing pushy. It acknowledges the recipient's right to refuse.

Bald on the Record (Direct and Straightforward)

This is the most direct strategy, where the speaker delivers the message without any special effort to convince or avoid face threats. It is used when the situation is not sensitive, the relationship is very close, or there is urgency (e.g., an emergency). It carries a high risk of being rude if misconstrued, but it is efficient for quick communication.

Off-Record (Indirect or Ambiguous)

This is the most subtle and indirect strategy, where the message is delivered ambiguously so the speaker can "escape" responsibility if rejected. This avoids FTA by leaving interpretation open, often using metaphors, implicit suggestions, or humor. There is no clear commitment, so the recipient can choose the meaning that is comfortable.

Table 1. The interpretation of comments.

No	Comment Text	Interpretation	Politeness Strategy
1	He looks so innocent 😭	Total empathy play—that crying emoji amps up the "aww" factor, showing you're on the same emotional page. It's hyping the cuteness to connect without judging the vid harshly.	Positive Politeness (empathy and rapport-building via exaggeration)
2	Sorry to bug u, but can u tell me more bout this? 🤔	Classic negative politeness: Apology up front, casual "u" and thinking emoji keep the info request chill and collaborative, not pushy.	Negative Politeness (apology and hedge to minimize imposition)
3	number 2 guy was fighting for his mentality 🥀 🥀	Poetic sympathy with those wilted roses (🥀) nodding to mental battles. It's a subtle shoutout to resilience, politely framing the struggle as badass to lift everyone's spirits.	Positive Politeness (sympathy and indirect compliment)
4	u win, I bet my rent for you 🤑	Over-the-top hype with the money emoji—direct win-concession that's pure positive energy, making the poster feel like a champ.	Positive Politeness (exaggerated admiration and support)
5	bro is lonely, just look at his expression 🤡	"Bro" keeps it buddy-buddy, and the clown emoji turns loneliness into a self-roast	Positive Politeness (humor and

		meme. Positive vibes soften any pity, making it a relatable chuckle instead of awkward.	informal address for camaraderie)
6	this is lit !Keep shinin ✦	Straight fire compliments: "Lit" and sparkles scream support, all positive politeness to motivate and connect.	Positive Politeness (direct compliments and encouragement)
7	Kinda confused bout the deets, can u explain pls? 😳	Soft hedge ("kinda") and "pls" with the side-eye emoji— negative politeness for a polite nudge, showing you're engaged but not bossy.	Negative Politeness (hedge and polite request)
8	when you buy a cat from china 🤣 🤣	Meme gold—off-record jab at cheap buys, but rolling laughs (🤣) keep it fun and non-judgy, like viral shade without the sting.	Off-Record (indirect humor to avoid direct criticism)
9	Am I beautiful? 😔 🥺	A sneaky off-record ask for reassurance—those sad/teary emojis pull at heartstrings without demanding a reply. It's TikTok's classic "fish for compliments" move, all vulnerable and inviting positivity.	Off-Record (rhetorical question seeking validation)
10	So what did y'all search? ☐	Inclusive "y'all" plus peeking emoji makes curiosity cute and low-pressure. Off-record nosiness that's playfully inviting.	Positive Politeness with Off-Record (inclusive query softened by playfulness)
11	how i imagine my dad as a kid 🥴 😫	Sharing a personal throwback with those groan emojis builds instant rapport. Positive	Positive Politeness (self-disclosure and relatable humor)

		politeness through humor makes it feel like an inside joke, no face-threat in sight.	
12	She has been sleeping for the past few weeks 💀	Dark humor on blast with the skull (💀 implying "dead tired"). It's direct but buffered by exaggeration, politely poking fun at laziness without real shade.	Bald On-Record (direct with humorous exaggeration)
13	back to strangers ☑	Quick, ironic wrap-up with the checkmark—direct but emoji-softened acceptance of whatever drama, no emotional baggage.	Bald On-Record (ironic closure with emoji mitigation)
14	Born to repost, forced to like and keep scrolling 🥀 🙏	Relatable rant on app burnout, wilted rose and prayers add humorous resignation. Off-record gripe that bonds over common struggles.	Off-Record (indirect complaint via relatable exaggeration)
15	maybe my love wasn't enough for her..n her new man loves her more than me ☺ ☺	Ironic smiles hide the heartbreak—off-record self-drag that shows maturity. It invites empathy replies while keeping things light and non-imposing.	Off-Record (self-deprecating irony)
16	forever in the shadows,where I belong...Batman 🦇	Cool self-portrait as the brooding hero—off-record humility with bat vibes, drawing empathetic nods without bragging.	Positive Politeness with Off-Record (self-identification for solidarity)
17	and i didn't like the ending 🥴 🫠 😪	Straight talk on the bad vibes, but emojis layer anger into sadness for that shared "ugh"	Bald On-Record softened by Positive Politeness

		moment. Positive politeness turns gripe into group therapy.	(emojis for shared emotion)
18	I guess this is what Sleeper build means 😹😹	Slang nod to hidden strength, cat laughs make it a fun compliment. Positive politeness celebrating the surprise factor.	Positive Politeness (humorous indirect compliment)
19	people: 🤣😂🤣 me: 😑😑🥴	Emoji contrast for "not impressed" humor—off-record mild diss that's personal, not attacking the vid directly	Off-Record (contrastive humor for mild criticism)
20	hahah 🦟🦟🦟🦟 haha 🐎🐎🐎🐎	Punny laughs (mosquitoes and horses? Horsefly vibes?)—direct joy-spreading, positive and infectious without overthinking	Bald On-Record (direct laughter with playful emojis)

Discussion

By breaking down 20 comments loaded with slang, memes, and those fun little icons, we discovered that emojis do way more than just look cute—they're the key ingredient for keeping things smooth and face-saving in our endless scroll sessions. Positive politeness showed up big time (about 70% of the time).

The comments on social media are full of clever ways to be polite and keep things friendly, mixing empathy, jokes, and emojis to build connections. Take positive politeness—it's all about showing you get someone's vibe and making them feel included. Stuff like "He looks so innocent 🥹" hits hard with that crying emoji, sharing the feels and keeping any shade super light. Or hyping someone up with "u win, I bet my rent for you 🎲"—it's playful support that screams "I'm on your team!" Then there's the bro humor in "bro is lonely, just look at his expression 😳," roasting without being mean, or relatable shares like "how I imagine my dad as a kid 😊😊" that make everyone nod and laugh together. All this creates a chill, welcoming vibe that pulls people in and sparks real chats.

On the flip side, negative politeness is about not coming on too strong—it's like giving space while still asking for what you need. You'll see apologies upfront, like "Sorry to bug u, but can u tell me more bout this? 🫠," which keeps it low-key and collaborative. Or hedging with "Kinda confused bout the deets, can u explain pls? 😊"—that "kinda" and "pls" plus the eye-roll emoji make it feel casual, not pushy, respecting the other person's time.

Off-record stuff is sneakier, dodging direct hits on touchy topics by being indirect or funny. For example, "when you buy a cat from china 🤭" throws subtle shade but the laugh emoji turns it into a meme-worthy roast. Questions like "Am I beautiful? 😄 😄" are low-stakes ways to fish for compliments without begging. And those ironic self-pity posts, like "maybe my love wasnt enough for her..n her new man loves her more than me 🥲," or venting with "Born to repost, forced to like and keep scrolling 😔 🌷 🙏," share the emotional load without starting drama, building quiet solidarity.

Bald on-record is straight-up direct, but emojis and humor keep it from feeling harsh. "She has been sleeping for the past few weeks 💀" calls it out with skull vibes for that dark humor twist. Or "back to strangers ☑" wraps things up ironically with a checkmark, like "cool, moving on." Even laughs like "hahah haha 🎏 🐉" are just pure, unfiltered fun. And when it's negative, like "and I didn't like the ending 😵 🥲," the emojis soften it, turning gripes into shared "ugh, same" moments.

In the end, this whole mix shows how social media comments nail politeness in a text-only world—emojis amp up the nuance, blending laughs, bonds, and careful wording to handle drama, spread joy, and keep convos flowing without anyone feeling attacked. If you want me to dive deeper into any part or add more examples, just say the word!

5. CONCLUSION

This research highlight how emojis play important role in making communication more polite in Tiktok influencer content or comment section. Emojis add emotional depth and help users express their feelings like happy, emphaty, and sadness. By using positive politeness, emoji create a inclusive atmosphere. At the same time, they soften requests or criticism through subtle hints, apology, and direct or indirect language, respecting others calmness and reduce any sense of pressure. By combining Brown and Levinson theory with modern multimodal approaches the study shows how emoji work as powerful tools that clarify meaning in online chats or comments, they help people manage sensitive conversations creatively with a mix

direct, indirect and humorous signals. This research reveals how culture shapes the way emojis express politeness. Overall, it demonstrates that emojis are key in shaping friendly and meaningful interactions, helping build online community and social bonds on fast moving platforms like TikTok.

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