



A Pragmatic Analysis of Politeness Strategies Employed by English-Speaking Influencers in Responding to Public Conflicts on Instagram and X

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Abstract

This study investigates the politeness strategies employed by English-speaking influencers when responding to public conflicts on Instagram and X. Using a qualitative digital discourse analysis, the study examined 180 public posts and related responses produced by 12 influencers between January 2022 and December 2024. The data were classified according to Brown and Levinson's framework into positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and bald-on-record strategies, while the analysis also considered platform affordances and sociopragmatic factors. The findings show that positive politeness was the most frequently used strategy, accounting for 42.3% of the data, followed by off-record strategies at 28.9%, negative politeness at 18.6%, and bald-on-record strategies at 10.2%. Instagram tended to support more elaborated, emotionally framed, and community-oriented responses, whereas X encouraged more concise, direct, and publicly contested communication. Strategy selection was influenced by social distance, relative power, the seriousness of the conflict, audience expectations, and reputational risk. The study concludes that politeness in influencer conflict responses functions not merely as linguistic courtesy but as a strategic resource for face management, identity negotiation, trust restoration, and digital reputation repair.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, social media has significantly transformed the nature of public communication. Platforms such as Instagram and X, formerly known as Twitter, no longer function merely as channels for sharing information but also as public arenas in which identities are constructed, opinions are negotiated, and interpersonal conflicts are openly managed. Communication in these environments is persistent, searchable, and visible to multiple audiences, allowing a single statement to be rapidly circulated, criticised, and reinterpreted. Consequently, linguistic choices on social media have important interpersonal and reputational consequences, particularly for public figures whose statements are continuously evaluated by followers and wider online communities. Digital discourse must therefore be understood in relation to the technological,

social, and algorithmic characteristics of the platforms through which it is produced (Ab Rashid, 2026).

Social media influencers occupy a distinctive position within this communication environment because their credibility and visibility depend heavily on their relationships with followers. Through repeated interaction and carefully constructed self-presentation, influencers may shape consumer behaviour, cultural preferences, and public perceptions. However, such visibility also exposes them to criticism, controversy, and reputational threats. When involved in public conflict, influencers may issue apologies, provide clarification, reject accusations, defend their actions, or respond to criticism from followers, brands, media institutions, and other public figures. These responses constitute strategic acts through which influencers attempt to protect their social identity, preserve relationships with audiences, and control the public interpretation of a controversy. Research on influencers' post-cancellation communication shows that rebuilding a personal brand commonly involves strategic self-presentation, narrative reconstruction, and renewed engagement with audiences (Djafarova & Jobling, 2026; Trisakti & Putri, 2025).

Pragmatics provides an appropriate framework for examining such responses because it focuses on how meaning is produced and interpreted in relation to context, communicative intention, and social relationships. Within this field, politeness theory explains how speakers manage potentially threatening interactions by protecting their own face and that of others. Brown and Levinson's framework distinguishes four broad strategies: positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record strategies, and bald-on-record strategies. Positive politeness attends to the addressee's desire for approval and social acceptance, whereas negative politeness respects autonomy and reduces imposition. Off-record strategies communicate meanings indirectly, while bald-on-record strategies express intentions directly with minimal mitigation. Recent studies indicate that these categories remain widely applied in social media research, although their manifestations are shaped by digital interactional conditions (Afriyanti et al., 2026).

In public conflicts, positive politeness may be realised through expressions of solidarity, appreciation, empathy, shared identity, and emotional closeness. Influencers may address followers as a community, acknowledge their concerns, or express gratitude for criticism. Negative politeness may occur through apologies, hedging, restrained disagreement, or recognition of the audience's right to hold a different opinion. Off-record strategies allow influencers to imply criticism or self-defence through rhetorical questions, humour, irony, or ambiguity, whereas bald-on-record responses communicate rejection or correction explicitly. Studies of Instagram interactions have found that positive politeness is often employed to maintain harmony, while critics may use direct and unmitigated expressions that threaten the addressee's face (Rahmani, 2025). Other research has shown that social media users may alternate between indirect criticism and highly explicit, sarcastic, or aggressive comments depending on the issue and interactional context (Yusuf & Resha, 2025).

The analysis of politeness in digital communication requires attention to the concept of facework. Facework in online discourse is not limited to maintaining interpersonal harmony between two individuals; it may also involve identity performance before multiple audiences, avoidance of further conflict, and management of public exposure (Virtanen & Lee, 2022). Walsh & Baker (2022), for example, demonstrate that users on Twitter may employ particular facework practices to minimise exposure and avoid escalating conflict. For influencers, these concerns are especially significant because a response addressed to one critic may simultaneously be interpreted

by followers, sponsors, journalists, and other stakeholders. Politeness strategies therefore become resources for both interpersonal management and public reputation protection.

The need to protect reputation becomes particularly evident in public apologies and post-scandal communication. Influencers' apologies do not merely express regret; they may also seek to reduce negative audience engagement, restore trust, and reposition the influencer's identity. Dolan et al. (2026) show that apology strategies may help mitigate negative brand engagement following an influencer scandal. Other studies of celebrity and creator apologies indicate that sincerity, acceptance of responsibility, explanation, and image-repair strategies influence whether audiences are willing to forgive the speaker (Choi & Mitchell, 2022; Yang, 2024). These findings suggest that politeness should be examined not only as a matter of linguistic form but also as part of a broader strategy of face protection, trust restoration, and reputation management.

Platform characteristics may also shape the forms and functions of politeness. Instagram is strongly visual and encourages curated self-presentation through images, videos, captions, stories, and reels. These affordances may support extended explanations, emotionally framed apologies, and positive politeness strategies that emphasise intimacy and community. X, in contrast, facilitates rapid public replies, reposting, quotation, and participation in contested conversations. Its interactional structure may encourage more explicit disagreement, defensive language, or indirect criticism. Research comparing social media platforms confirms that communicative norms vary according to their affordances and audience practices. Harmer & Southern (2026) identify different response tendencies across Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, while Van Raemdonck et al. (2025) demonstrate that social norms are shaped differently through the affordances of Instagram and Twitter.

Previous studies have examined politeness in Instagram comments, netizen responses to political and public issues, online disagreement, digital apologies, and influencer reputation repair. These studies demonstrate the relevance of positive politeness, negative politeness, indirectness, directness, facework, and image restoration in social media interaction (Asadanie et al., 2023; Rahmani, 2025; Yusuf & Resha, 2025). However, research specifically comparing the politeness strategies used by English-speaking influencers when responding to public conflict on Instagram and X remains limited. Existing studies commonly focus on a single platform, general user comments, one type of speech act, or reputation management without systematically connecting linguistic strategies to differences in platform affordances.

Accordingly, this study analyses the politeness strategies employed by English-speaking influencers in responding to public conflicts on Instagram and X. It addresses three questions: (1) which positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and bald-on-record strategies are predominantly employed; (2) how their use differs between Instagram and X in relation to platform characteristics and interactional contexts; and (3) which sociopragmatic factors, particularly social distance, relative power, and the degree of imposition, influence strategy selection. By integrating politeness theory, digital facework, and platform-based analysis, this study contributes to digital pragmatics and provides a more specific explanation of how influencers use language to manage conflict, protect identity, maintain audience relationships, and repair public reputation.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using digital discourse analysis to examine politeness strategies in English-speaking influencers' responses to public conflicts on Instagram and

X. The approach was selected because it enables the analysis of language use in relation to interactional context, platform characteristics, audience structure, and communicative purpose. Brown and Levinson's politeness framework was used to classify the data into positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and bald-on-record strategies.

The data consisted of 180 public posts and related responses produced between January 2022 and December 2024 by 12 English-speaking influencers from lifestyle, beauty, technology, and entertainment sectors. Purposive sampling was applied using the following criteria: the influencer had more than one million followers, was involved in a publicly documented conflict, and had posted a direct response, clarification, apology, or defence on Instagram, X, or both platforms. The unit of analysis was each verbal expression containing a response to criticism, accusation, disagreement, or controversy. Publicly accessible data were collected through documentation, while influencer identities were anonymised where necessary to minimise potential harm.

Data analysis was conducted in several stages. First, all posts were read repeatedly to identify conflict context, intended audience, and communicative function. Second, relevant expressions were coded according to the four politeness categories and then compared across Instagram and X. Third, the analysis examined the influence of social distance, relative power, degree of imposition, and platform affordances on strategy selection. To strengthen analytical credibility, the coding process involved repeated checking of category consistency and comparison between linguistic form, contextual meaning, and interactional function. The results were then presented descriptively through frequencies, percentages, platform comparison, and qualitative interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Politeness Strategies in Influencers' Responses to Public Conflict

The analysis of 180 posts and related responses shows that English-speaking influencers employed all four politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson, although their distribution was uneven. Positive politeness was the most frequently identified strategy, accounting for 42.3% of the data. It was followed by off-record strategies at 28.9%, negative politeness at 18.6%, and bald-on-record strategies at 10.2%. This distribution indicates that influencers generally preferred responses that preserved social closeness, reduced interpersonal tension, and protected their public image rather than responses that directly intensified conflict. The dominance of positive politeness is consistent with previous social media studies showing that users frequently employ expressions of solidarity, appreciation, shared identity, and emotional alignment when attempting to maintain favourable relationships with online audiences (Afriyanti et al., 2026; Rahmani, 2025).

Positive politeness appeared most clearly in responses that acknowledged followers' feelings, expressed gratitude for criticism, emphasised shared values, or positioned the audience as part of a common community. Influencers often used inclusive pronouns and collective expressions such as "we," "our community," "you all," or "everyone who has supported me." These forms reduced the apparent distance between the influencer and the audience and framed the response as a cooperative interaction rather than a unilateral defence. Expressions of appreciation, such as thanking followers for raising concerns or for allowing the influencer to explain, also functioned as positive-face support. Such expressions implied that audience members were valued participants whose opinions deserved recognition.

This strategy was especially visible in apology and clarification posts. Rather than beginning with a direct denial, many influencers first acknowledged the audience's disappointment or concern. The sequence commonly moved from recognition of public reaction to explanation, apology, and a promise of future improvement. This pattern reflects an effort to restore relational harmony and repair the speaker's positive face. Studies of online apologies similarly show that expressions of solidarity, responsibility, and appreciation may increase perceptions of sincerity and help rebuild audience trust (Choi & Mitchell, 2022; Yang, 2024). In influencer communication, this process is particularly important because the influencer's public value depends not only on visibility but also on the perception of authenticity and accessibility.

The use of positive politeness also demonstrates that public conflict on social media is not simply an exchange between an influencer and a single critic. The response is performed before multiple audiences, including followers, brands, journalists, and other influencers. As a result, a statement such as "I understand why many of you are upset" simultaneously addresses criticism, confirms awareness of audience expectations, and presents the influencer as empathetic and accountable. This broader function supports the argument that online facework involves public identity management as well as interpersonal politeness (Virtanen & Lee, 2022).

Off-record strategies were the second most frequent category. These strategies allowed influencers to communicate criticism, disagreement, or self-defence indirectly. They appeared in rhetorical questions, implied contrasts, vague references, humour, irony, selective omission, and statements that invited the audience to infer the intended meaning. Rather than explicitly accusing another party of dishonesty, for example, an influencer might state that "there are always two sides to a story" or that "the full context has not yet been shared." Such formulations enabled the speaker to challenge an accusation while avoiding full responsibility for a direct counterattack.

The relatively high occurrence of off-record responses reflects the risks associated with direct confrontation in highly visible digital environments. Public statements can be screenshotted, redistributed, quoted without context, and incorporated into later criticism. Indirectness therefore provides strategic flexibility. Influencers can signal disagreement while preserving the possibility of denying an aggressive intention. Walsh & Baker (2022) similarly demonstrate that facework on Twitter may involve avoiding excessive exposure and reducing the likelihood of conflict escalation. In the present study, off-record strategies functioned as a means of protecting both the influencer's face and the future manageability of the controversy.

However, indirectness did not always reduce conflict. In some cases, rhetorical questions, irony, or vague references invited further speculation. Audiences could interpret ambiguity as evasiveness, manipulation, or unwillingness to accept responsibility. This finding shows that off-record communication has a double function in digital conflict. It can soften an accusation, but it can also create uncertainty that encourages users to construct competing interpretations (Harmer & Southern, 2026; Hendar et al., 2026; Rynarzewska et al., 2026). The effectiveness of indirectness therefore depended on the existing level of trust, the seriousness of the controversy, and the audience's perception of the influencer's sincerity.

Negative politeness accounted for 18.6% of the data. It was expressed through apologies, hedges, conditional statements, expressions of reluctance, and recognition of the audience's freedom to disagree. Phrases such as "*I may not have communicated this clearly,*" "*I understand that some of you may see this differently,*" or "*I do not expect everyone to accept my explanation*" reduced the force

of the response and respected the audience's negative face. Rather than demanding acceptance, these expressions presented the explanation as one perspective among several possible interpretations.

Negative politeness was frequently used when influencers responded to parties with greater institutional or symbolic power, including brands, media organisations, or other well-established public figures. It was also common when the issue involved legal, professional, or contractual sensitivity. In such situations, the influencer often avoided categorical accusations and used carefully qualified statements. This pattern supports the sociopragmatic prediction that greater relative power and higher communicative risk increase the need for mitigation.

Apologies constituted an important form of negative politeness because they acknowledged the burden that the influencer's actions or statements had placed on others. Nevertheless, not all apologies operated in the same way. Some directly accepted responsibility, whereas others were conditional or focused on audience reaction, as in expressions resembling "*I am sorry if anyone felt offended.*" The latter type reduced the degree of admission and protected the speaker from full responsibility. Research on public apologies indicates that audiences distinguish between clear responsibility-taking and apologies that appear defensive or strategically incomplete (Choi & Mitchell, 2022; Dolan et al., 2026). Thus, negative politeness may soften a response, but it does not automatically create perceptions of sincerity.

Bald-on-record strategies were the least frequent, at 10.2%. These responses conveyed disagreement, denial, correction, or boundary-setting directly and with minimal mitigation. Examples included categorical statements that an allegation was false, explicit instructions to stop spreading misinformation, and direct rejection of criticism. Such responses were more likely when influencers believed that the accusation threatened their legal position, professional credibility, personal safety, or close relationships. Directness was also used when the influencer perceived the critic as having less power or when the audience was already supportive of the influencer's position.

Although bald-on-record responses may appear impolite, they were not necessarily irrational or ineffective. In some conflict situations, ambiguity can be interpreted as weakness or admission. Direct statements may therefore be used to establish authority, correct misinformation rapidly, or define the limits of acceptable audience behaviour. Studies of online conflict and impoliteness show that directness may serve functions such as identity defence, resistance, and the assertion of power (Rahardi & Rahmat, 2026; Rahma et al., 2025). The present findings similarly suggest that influencers selected direct strategies when clarity and self-protection were prioritised over relational harmony.

The overall pattern indicates that politeness strategies in influencer conflict responses performed several overlapping functions. They reduced social distance, softened criticism, limited personal responsibility, restored trust, defended identity, and protected commercial reputation. The same utterance could also combine more than one function (Escouflaire, 2021; Nwegbo, 2026). An apology might contain positive politeness through solidarity, negative politeness through deference, and off-record elements through partial explanation. Consequently, politeness categories should not be treated as mechanically isolated forms. Their interpretation depends on the broader sequence, conflict context, and audience relationship.

These findings also reinforce the continued usefulness of Brown and Levinson's framework in digital pragmatics. The four strategic categories remained identifiable in social media discourse, but their functions extended beyond dyadic interpersonal interaction. In influencer communication, politeness became part of public facework, identity performance, and reputation repair. This

extension does not invalidate the framework; rather, it shows that digital contexts require its categories to be interpreted in relation to multiple audiences, platform visibility, and commercialised self-presentation.

Cross-Platform Differences between Instagram and X

The analysis also revealed meaningful differences between Instagram and X. Although the same four politeness strategies appeared on both platforms, their frequency, form, and communicative function were influenced by platform affordances. Instagram encouraged more elaborated, visually supported, and emotionally framed responses, whereas X was associated with shorter, more immediate, and more openly contested exchanges. This difference supports research showing that social norms and communicative practices emerge through the interaction between platform features and user behaviour (Hase et al., 2023; Van Raemdonck et al., 2025).

On Instagram, positive politeness was particularly prominent. Influencers frequently used long captions, carousel posts, stories, or video statements to construct a detailed narrative around the controversy. These formats allowed them to express gratitude, acknowledge audience emotions, provide background information, and present evidence in a carefully organised sequence. Visual elements such as facial expression, setting, typography, and image selection also contributed to the interpretation of sincerity and emotional openness. Even when the primary data were analysed linguistically, the surrounding visual environment strengthened the interpersonal meaning of the text.

The visual and curated nature of Instagram supports a communication style centred on identity continuity. Influencers generally maintain recognisable personal brands through recurring aesthetic styles, emotional narratives, and community-oriented language. When conflict occurs, the response must therefore be integrated into this existing identity. An abrupt and aggressive statement may appear inconsistent with an influencer whose brand depends on intimacy or positivity. For this reason, Instagram responses often framed the controversy as a moment of learning, reflection, or reconnection with followers.

The use of collective address was also more noticeable on Instagram. Influencers frequently spoke to followers as a unified community rather than replying to individual critics. This allowed them to reposition the conflict from an interpersonal dispute into a broader relationship-management process. Statements that addressed “everyone who has been following this” or “the community that has supported me” transformed the response into a public performance of accountability. Such practices align with the observation that Instagram is often used to demonstrate support and maintain affective connection (Harmer & Southern, 2026; Muid et al., 2026).

Instagram also facilitated narrative control. Through captions and videos, influencers could organise events chronologically, select screenshots, explain intention, and combine apology with self-defence. This extended format favoured positive and negative politeness because speakers had space to acknowledge concerns, hedge claims, and express regret. However, the ability to curate a detailed response could also produce scepticism. Audiences sometimes interpreted highly polished statements as professionally managed rather than personally sincere. Thus, the affordances that support positive face repair may also increase suspicion of strategic image management.

X presented a different interactional environment. Its public reply structure, rapid circulation, quoting practices, and culture of immediate commentary created stronger pressure for concise responses. Influencers were more likely to produce short clarifications, direct corrections, or

statements that could be easily reposted. In this setting, bald-on-record and off-record strategies became more salient. Direct denials could respond quickly to misinformation, while irony, implication, or rhetorical questions could communicate resistance without producing a lengthy statement.

The structure of X also increased the visibility of disagreement. A response could be quoted and accompanied by critical commentary, allowing new users to join the dispute without having followed its original development. Consequently, influencers on X faced a less controllable audience and a higher risk of decontextualisation. Off-record strategies offered some protection because they allowed speakers to avoid explicit accusations, but they also created opportunities for alternative interpretations. Walsh and Baker's (2022) discussion of facework on Twitter is relevant here: users may attempt to minimise exposure, yet the platform's public architecture can continually reopen the conflict.

Bald-on-record responses on X often functioned as rapid boundary-setting. Influencers used them to deny allegations, correct factual claims, or tell users to stop spreading particular content. These responses were more compatible with the platform's compressed and confrontational interactional norms than with Instagram's curated visual culture. This does not mean that X is inherently impolite. Rather, directness is more normalised because the platform rewards speed, visibility, and quotable statements.

Negative politeness on X was often realised in compact forms such as hedges, disclaimers, or statements that acknowledged disagreement. Because of space and interactional constraints, these forms tended to be less elaborated than those found in Instagram captions or videos. A phrase such as "with respect, that is not what happened" simultaneously acknowledged the other party and issued a correction. The strategy combined deference with directness, illustrating how platform constraints may produce hybrid pragmatic forms.

The difference between the two platforms also involved the role of audience participation. Instagram comments often followed an influencer's principal post, while X enabled a more decentralised and recursive conversation through replies, quotations, and reposts. On Instagram, the influencer could more clearly establish the initial frame of the response. On X, the response was more likely to become one contribution within a broader argumentative network. This reduced the influencer's ability to control the narrative and increased the importance of concise facework (Bhat, 2026; Yusuf & Resha, 2025).

Platform-specific audiences also influenced strategy choice. Followers on Instagram often encounter influencers through lifestyle content, personal narratives, visual branding, and parasocial intimacy. They may therefore expect emotional disclosure, reassurance, and relational repair. Audiences on X may be more issue-oriented, politically engaged, or focused on real-time commentary. These different expectations shape what counts as an appropriate response. A long emotional apology may be positively received on Instagram but criticised as excessive or evasive on X. Conversely, a short factual denial may appear efficient on X but emotionally inadequate on Instagram.

The findings therefore support an affordance-based interpretation of politeness. Influencers did not simply transfer identical statements between platforms. They adapted tone, length, directness, and interpersonal framing to the communicative environment. Van Raemdonck et al. (2025) argue that norms are shaped through the practical use of platform affordances rather than by

technology alone. The present study confirms this position. Instagram and X did not mechanically determine politeness strategies, but they made some forms more available, visible, and socially expected than others.

The comparison also has implications for interpreting statistical distribution. The overall predominance of positive politeness does not mean that both platforms displayed the same interactional style. Positive politeness was more compatible with Instagram's visual intimacy and community orientation, while off-record and direct strategies were more prominent in the faster and more contested environment of X. Therefore, the meaning of a strategy should be interpreted in relation to the platform on which it appears.

Another important implication concerns multimodality. On Instagram, words were frequently accompanied by photographs, videos, facial expressions, music, colour, and layout. On X, meaning could be influenced by hashtags, memes, quoted posts, screenshots, punctuation, and emojis. Although the present study focused primarily on verbal expressions, these semiotic resources formed part of the pragmatic context. Research on digital discourse shows that visual and textual modes often work together in constructing stance and politeness (Hase et al., 2023; Sampietro & Pérez-Sabater, 2025). Future analyses should therefore examine whether the same verbal statement acquires different meanings when paired with particular visual or interactive features.

Overall, the cross-platform findings show that politeness in influencer communication is adaptive. Instagram encouraged relational repair through elaborated positive politeness and emotional framing, whereas X encouraged concise, indirect, or direct responses shaped by open public contestation. The differences confirm that digital politeness cannot be analysed solely as a property of linguistic form. It is also a product of platform affordances, interactional norms, audience composition, and reputational risk.

Sociopragmatic Factors and Digital Reputation Management

The selection of politeness strategies was influenced by three principal sociopragmatic factors: social distance, relative power, and the degree of imposition or seriousness of the conflict. These variables were not static. In digital environments, they were shaped by follower relationships, institutional status, audience scale, commercial partnerships, and the perceived consequences of the controversy. The findings support Brown and Levinson's general model while showing that digital interaction requires a broader interpretation of social relationships.

Social distance influenced whether influencers emphasised solidarity or formality. When addressing established follower communities, especially in lifestyle, gaming, beauty, or technology niches, influencers frequently used positive politeness. They referred to shared experiences, expressed appreciation, and adopted familiar forms of address. The lower perceived distance between the influencer and followers encouraged communication that resembled interpersonal closeness, even though the actual relationship was mediated and unequal.

This closeness is partly constructed through parasocial interaction. Influencers regularly present personal experiences, routines, opinions, and emotions, encouraging followers to feel that they know them personally. During conflict, positive politeness helps preserve this perceived intimacy. An influencer who addresses the audience as "my community" reinforces the idea of a continuing relationship that should survive the controversy. However, such language may also be strategic because audience loyalty has reputational and economic value.

When the audience was more distant or heterogeneous, influencers tended to use greater formality and negative politeness. Responses directed at journalists, institutions, brands, or unfamiliar public audiences contained more hedging, careful qualification, and limited emotional disclosure. This indicates that social distance shaped not only the degree of politeness but also the type of public persona presented.

Relative power was another major factor. Power in social media conflict could derive from follower numbers, institutional authority, media visibility, legal resources, commercial influence, or collective audience pressure. When influencers responded to powerful organisations or prominent public figures, they generally avoided strong accusations and preferred negative politeness or off-record strategies. Qualified statements reduced the risk of legal, contractual, or reputational consequences.

In contrast, influencers were more likely to use bald-on-record responses when addressing anonymous users or critics perceived as having less influence. Direct correction and boundary-setting became more acceptable because the perceived consequences were lower. Nevertheless, digital power is unstable. A user with few followers can produce content that becomes widely circulated, while a large group of ordinary users can collectively exert substantial pressure. Therefore, influencers could not evaluate power solely through formal status.

Audience collectivity created a distinctive form of digital power. Even when individual critics had little influence, coordinated criticism could threaten sponsorships, search visibility, and public reputation. The influencer's response was thus often addressed to an imagined collective audience rather than to the original critic. This helps explain the frequent use of positive politeness: the primary objective was not necessarily to persuade the accuser but to reassure the broader follower community.

The seriousness of the conflict also affected strategy selection. Minor misunderstandings were often handled through humour, light clarification, or positive politeness. Serious accusations involving discrimination, dishonesty, professional misconduct, or harm required more careful responses. In such cases, influencers frequently combined apology, explanation, evidence, and explicit commitment to corrective action. The greater the reputational threat, the more strategically organised the response became.

High-risk conflicts also encouraged institutionalised communication. Statements appeared more polished, legalistic, or professionally edited. This could reduce linguistic spontaneity and increase negative politeness, but it might also undermine perceived authenticity. Influencers therefore faced a tension between precision and sincerity. A carefully worded statement could minimise legal exposure while appearing emotionally distant. A highly personal response could seem authentic while creating additional risks.

The choice of strategy was closely connected to reputation management. Influencers' public identities function as personal brands, and conflict threatens not only social approval but also commercial viability. Djafarova & Jobling (2026) show that influencers rebuilding a personal brand after cancellation may use strategic self-presentation and identity reconstruction. Trisakti & Putri (2025) similarly emphasise narrative reframing in influencer public relations. The present findings indicate that politeness strategies are central linguistic resources within these processes.

Positive politeness helped rebuild affiliation. By acknowledging followers, expressing gratitude, and emphasising shared values, influencers attempted to restore a sense of community.

Negative politeness reduced perceptions of arrogance or coercion by recognising the audience's right to criticise. Off-record strategies provided room for self-defence without an explicit attack. Bald-on-record responses protected credibility when immediate correction was considered essential. Thus, each strategy could support reputation management under different conditions.

Apology was one of the clearest connections between politeness and image repair. Effective apologies generally included acknowledgement of harm, acceptance of responsibility, expression of regret, explanation without excessive self-justification, and commitment to change. Responses that omitted these elements were more likely to be perceived as insincere. Choi and Mitchell (2022) found that perceptions of sincerity affect audience forgiveness, while Dolan et al. (2026) demonstrate that apologies can mitigate negative engagement after influencer scandals.

However, apology did not always require complete self-condemnation. Influencers often attempted to balance responsibility with identity protection. They might apologise for impact while disputing intention, or accept communication failure while rejecting more serious accusations. This balancing act illustrates the complexity of facework. The speaker protects the audience's positive face by recognising offence but also protects personal face by limiting the scope of responsibility.

Clarification performed a related function. It allowed influencers to provide context, correct claims, and present an alternative narrative. Clarification was often framed through positive politeness to avoid appearing dismissive. Expressions such as *"I want to explain this honestly to everyone who has supported me"* combined self-defence with audience appreciation. Sudding et al. (2025) show that apology and clarification videos frequently rely on implicature, meaning that speakers communicate more than is explicitly stated. The present study similarly found that clarification often included off-record meanings through selective detail, implication, or contrast.

Narrative control was another aspect of reputation management. Influencers attempted to define the beginning, cause, and moral meaning of the conflict. They could position themselves as mistaken but learning, misunderstood, unfairly attacked, or committed to improvement. These narratives shaped how politeness strategies were interpreted. An apology embedded in a redemption narrative functioned differently from an apology embedded in a denial narrative.

Audience trust was central to the success of these strategies. Yang (2024) emphasises that trust reconstruction depends on the quality and perceived authenticity of apology. In the present data, politeness was most persuasive when linguistic form, evidence, tone, and subsequent action appeared consistent. A highly polite statement could fail if audiences perceived it as formulaic or contradicted by earlier behaviour. Conversely, a direct response could be accepted when it provided clear evidence and aligned with the influencer's established communication style.

The analysis also revealed that politeness and impoliteness were not strict opposites. Some direct or sarcastic responses were used to strengthen solidarity with supportive followers. Criticising an opposing party could enhance the influencer's positive face within an in-group while threatening the other party's face. Rahardi & Rahmat (2026) show that anger in online discourse may be used to negotiate identity and power. The present study confirms that conflict communication can simultaneously damage one relationship and strengthen another.

This observation suggests a limitation in treating politeness only as conflict avoidance. Influencers sometimes used confrontation strategically to demonstrate authenticity, courage, or loyalty to a community. A strongly worded response could mobilise supporters and reframe the

controversy as an unfair attack. Therefore, the effectiveness of politeness depended on the audience whose approval mattered most.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support the dimensions of distance, power, and imposition but show that each is digitally mediated. Social distance can be reduced through parasocial language despite the absence of personal acquaintance. Power may be distributed among institutions, platforms, audiences, and algorithms. Imposition includes not only interpersonal burden but also reputational, commercial, and legal risk. The Brown and Levinson model remains useful, but these expanded conditions should be incorporated into digital pragmatic analysis.

The findings also strengthen the connection between politeness theory and facework. Virtanen & Lee (2022) emphasise that online face is multiple and context-dependent. Influencers manage personal face, professional face, brand identity, community membership, and moral credibility simultaneously. A single response may therefore be polite toward followers, defensive toward critics, and strategically neutral toward sponsors.

In practical terms, the study suggests that effective conflict management requires platform-sensitive and audience-sensitive communication. Influencers and digital communication professionals should consider not only what information must be conveyed but also whose face is threatened, which relationships require repair, and how the platform shapes interpretation. Positive politeness may be effective for maintaining community, but it should not replace clear responsibility. Negative politeness can reduce pressure, but excessive hedging may appear evasive. Off-record strategies can limit confrontation, but ambiguity can intensify speculation. Bald-on-record responses can establish clarity, but they may escalate conflict when the audience expects empathy.

Overall, the results demonstrate that influencer politeness strategies are embedded in a broader system of digital reputation management. Their selection is shaped by social distance, power, conflict severity, platform norms, audience expectations, and commercial risk. Politeness in this context is not merely a matter of courtesy. It is a strategic resource through which influencers negotiate identity, defend credibility, maintain relationships, and attempt to control the public meaning of conflict.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that English-speaking influencers employ positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and bald-on-record strategies when responding to public conflicts on Instagram and X. Positive politeness was the most frequently used strategy, indicating that influencers generally prioritised solidarity, audience recognition, and the maintenance of favourable public relationships. Off-record strategies were also prominent because they enabled influencers to defend themselves, imply criticism, and reduce direct accountability, while negative politeness and bald-on-record responses were used more selectively according to the seriousness of the conflict, the relative power of the parties involved, and the need for either mitigation or clarity.

The findings also confirm that platform affordances shape the form and function of politeness strategies. Instagram tended to support elaborated, emotionally framed, and community-oriented responses through captions, stories, and visual narratives, whereas X encouraged more concise, direct, and publicly contested communication. Strategy selection was further influenced by social distance, relative power, degree of imposition, audience expectations, and reputational risk. In this

context, politeness functioned not merely as linguistic courtesy but as a strategic resource for face management, conflict negotiation, trust restoration, identity protection, and digital reputation repair.

This study is limited by its focus on 12 influencers, 180 posts, two social media platforms, and predominantly verbal data from the 2022–2024 period. The analysis did not fully examine multimodal elements such as images, videos, facial expressions, sound, typography, hashtags, and emojis, nor did it systematically measure audience reception or changes in public sentiment after each response. Future research should therefore involve larger and more culturally diverse datasets, compare additional platforms and language communities, and integrate multimodal, corpus-based, and audience-response analyses. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable for examining how politeness strategies affect reputation recovery, follower trust, and conflict development over time.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the revision of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT, developed by OpenAI, to assist with English-language editing, improvement of academic clarity, structural refinement, and consistency of terminology. The tool was not used to generate or alter the research data, analytical results, or substantive conclusions of the study. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed, verified, and revised by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the final manuscript.

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