

Politeness Vs. Impoliteness Strategies by Malaysian Influencers on Tiktok

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ABSTRACT

In today's digital era, TikTok is seen as one of the fastest-growing social media platforms (Ai & Liao, 2023). Apart from regular users, influencers and celebrities are among the most active, using it to communicate with millions of followers, promote content, and shape public discourse. Through these online encounters, these individuals shape how they are seen, frequently incorporating politeness or impoliteness into their communication (Ribino, 2023). Hence, this study investigates the strategic use of politeness and impoliteness strategies by two Malaysian influencers, Khairul Aming and Kak KM, in shaping their online personas on TikTok. Guided by Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory and Culpeper's (1996, 2011) Impoliteness Framework, a qualitative approach, specifically content analysis, was applied to two selected TikTok videos to identify these linguistic strategies. The findings reveal that various types of politeness strategies, such as positive politeness, negative politeness, and bald-on-record, along with impoliteness strategies including bald-on-record, sarcasm, mock impoliteness, dismissal, and repetition, were used by the influencers in their videos, and brought considerable impact on their online personas. These include Khairul Aming's portrayal as a responsible and caring figure who maintains closeness with his audience through considerate language and direct warnings, as well as Kak KM's portrayal as a bold, unfiltered, and provocative figure who uses humour, and confrontational tones to maintain attention and assert dominance. However, future research should consider incorporating TikTok Live for richer data analysis, expanding the scope across multiple platforms, and employing a mixed-methods approach to enhance analytical depth.

Keywords: Politeness Strategies, Impoliteness Strategies, Social Media Influencers, Online Persona, TikTok

INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

In this modern age, social media is becoming increasingly popular as a medium of communication. According to statistics, there are approximately 28.68 million active social media users in Malaysia as of 2024, which reflects the country's strong digital presence (Howe, 2024). These platforms enable users to communicate with people, exchange ideas and strengthen relationships, regardless of their gender, status or location, demonstrating how powerful they are in shaping social connection and interaction globally. Out of the many platforms in use today, TikTok is seen as the most used social media platform with millions of active users spending time each day watching short-form videos. It is also one of the fastest-growing platforms and is especially popular among the younger generation (Ai & Liao, 2023). According to Barta et al., (2023), TikTok has become the fastest-growing social network in the post-pandemic era as it was the most downloaded app worldwide in both 2020 and 2021, with a total of 1.506 billion downloads, surpassing Instagram during the same period. Not just that,

in Malaysia, a total of 21.9% of users engage on TikTok, ranking as the second most used social media platform after Whatsapp (Howe, 2024).

Additionally, among the most active users of TikTok are influencers and celebrities. As mentioned by Duffy (2020), influencers are a group of digital content creators characterised by their large online audiences, unique personal brands, and consistent partnerships with commercial sponsors. Unlike in the past when public figures like politicians and celebrities communicated through arranged interviews and press releases, influencers and celebrities nowadays utilise social media and interact directly with their followers via postings, comments, and live updates. Through these online encounters, these individuals shape how they are seen, frequently incorporating politeness or impoliteness into their communication. Research shows that people obey politeness strategies to maintain their "face," or social image. Hence, this concept of face encompasses both social and emotional dimensions, such as upholding one's dignity, reputation, and the positive worth or respect they want others to see in them (Ribino, 2023).

Soria and Frenandez (2024) mentioned that personal branding is the idea of shaping a person's image and reputation to achieve its goals, especially for celebrities and influencers who use it to showcase their uniqueness and connect emotionally with their followers. This is closely related to their communication styles, specifically by the usage of politeness strategies. However, while many influencers utilise politeness strategies to appear approachable and maintain a positive image, others intentionally employ impoliteness—such as sarcasm, rude comments, or sharp "clapbacks", which refers to quick, assertive, and often witty verbal response intended to counter or criticise a prior statement or insult (Oxford English Dictionary, 3rd ed., 2020) to gain attention, assert authority, or build their personal brand. The term "clapback" serves as a linguistic tool for reclaiming authority and defending one's stance with sharp retort (Oxford English Dictionary, 3rd ed., 2020). Additionally, as cited in Wong and Wei (2023), due to the inappropriateness of the influencers' content or as part of their planned social media communications strategy to evoke strong feelings in their followers, some may draw dislikes, negative comments, or hate speech from their viewers. This proves that some influencers may intentionally employ rudeness or contentious behaviour to increase their visibility, encourage interaction, or develop a daring and eye-catching public image.

These language choices are not random as they reflect deeper sociolinguistic processes concerning power, identity, and the expectations of their audience (Abidin, 2021). As Bucholtz and Hall (2005, pp. 593–594) explain, this process is known as indexicality, the process by which language constructs identity, essential to how individuals present themselves. Thus, studying how politeness and impoliteness are performed by influencers and celebrities on social media is important because it sheds light on how language shapes the way people behave online, what they see as respectful, and who they see as having the power on social media. The language of these public figures often sets trends for what is acceptable or taboo in online interactions. This is because their words are seen to either reinforce or challenge societal norms, particularly around controversial issues like gender and power. As the boundary between public and private communication becomes more blurred in digital spaces, especially in this era, looking at how politeness is used or deliberately ignored, can help us better understand how the norms of online interaction are changing.

Problem Statement

In today's digital realm, we can see that many influencers and celebrities in Malaysia are often involved in arguments, rude comments or respond with sarcasm on their social media platforms, especially on TikTok. These actions, like clapbacks or calling someone out are watched by millions of people and can make impolite or aggressive behaviour seem normal or even entertaining. Ana Afrina et al. (2024) mentioned that in the entertainment world, violence has become a popular phenomenon among adolescents around the world. As digital technologies like social media platforms become a bigger part of our daily lives (Lagerkvist, 2018), they also play a key role in how violence happens and how people experience it (Morales, 2023). As a result, this can create a toxic online environment, where disrespect becomes acceptable or even encouraged. This was proven and supported in the study by Ana Afrina et al. (2024), where aggressive behaviour that emerged among adolescents in Malaysia had a significant relationship with the social media influence.

According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA, 2013), the term “youth” or “young people” are often used interchangeably to describe individuals between the ages of 15 and 24, although definitions may vary across countries and organizations. This group of people are among the top users of social media, specifically TikTok. As recorded by Peiro and Permuy (2024), 53.19% of youths, which was more than half of the people surveyed, spend more than an hour a day on TikTok, 35.28% spend more than an hour and a half, and 20.22% spend more than two hours. Apart from that, according to data cited by McCashin and Murphy (2023), in the United States, 32.5% of TikTok users are those aged 10–19, while 29.5% are between 20–29 years old. Globally, the platform is assumed to be predominantly used by pre-teen and adolescent users. Thus, attention must be drawn as these kinds of contents can shape their understanding of communication and conflict resolution, leading them to copy similar impolite or confrontational behaviour in their own online interactions. These problems show that the way influencers speak affects how young people learn to talk to others, how they handle their emotions, and how they build relationships. As cited in Cook and Bird (2011), besides changes in how adolescents think and behave, they also go through important changes in their brains as during these years, parts of the brain that help with making decisions, controlling emotions, and understanding others are still developing.

However, not much research has been done in Malaysia to see how influencers use polite or impolite language on TikTok, or how this phenomena happens. Thus, this study aims to fill that gap by comparing two Malaysian influencers from different backgrounds to see how they use politeness and impoliteness in their videos and how these strategies contribute to the construction and maintenance of their online personas.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the types of politeness and impoliteness strategies employed by Malaysian influencers on TikTok.
2. To examine how these strategies contribute to the construction and maintenance of their online public personas.

Research Questions

1. What types of politeness and impoliteness strategies do Malaysian influencers employ on their TikTok?
2. How does the use of politeness and impoliteness strategies shape the online public personas of influencers?.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Proposed by Penelope Brown and Steven Levinson in 1987, the politeness theory is widely recognised for inspiring a large amount of research, both within linguistics and in other related fields (Putri et al., 2019). The highlight of this theory is that politeness is a strategy used to protect a person’s face or self-image in interactions, whether online or face-to-face. Nevertheless, the reasoning of it is not just about maintaining a good relationship, but also minimizing the level of rudeness and conflicts (Hammood, 2016, as cited in Noor Qamarina, 2024). The politeness theory consists of two parts which are positive face and negative face. The positive face represents a person’s need for approval, respect, and appreciation from others; whereas the negative face reflects the desire to be free from impositions or limits (Muhammad Ari, 2019). Additionally, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), there are four types of politeness strategies which are positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record and off-record. These strategies are often used to maintain harmony, reduce threats to face, and build rapport or connection. As mentioned by Putri et al. (2019), politeness strategies are aimed to protect a person’s face during interactions to avoid causing embarrassment or discomfort to the listener. Furthermore, in this theory, Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that politeness strategies are chosen based on three social factors, namely power, social distance, and the degree of imposition. This highlights that politeness is context-dependent, as speakers consider both the relationship and the situation before selecting how to express

themselves. Putri et al. (2019) also supported this claim by stating that politeness is deeply tied to socio-cultural settings, and that expressions considered polite in one culture or context may be interpreted differently in another. Not just that, they emphasized that politeness strategies are not universal in form, but adapted to the specific norms and expectations of the interaction setting, which is another key component highlighted in this theory. Empirical evidence also reinforces this perspective. For example, Ishmah et al. (2025), observed that differences in power and social distance influence the selection of politeness strategies, which supports Brown and Levinson's theory that politeness is contextually driven rather than universally applied.

The impoliteness framework by Culpeper (1996) provides a foundational structure for understanding impoliteness as a deliberate strategy to assert dominance or to provoke a reaction. He categorizes impoliteness strategies such as bald-on-record, sarcasm, and mock politeness as face-threatening acts, directly targeting the interlocutor's positive or negative face (pp. 350-352). In addition, Culpeper (2010, 2011) argues that impoliteness is about breaking social rules and can also be expressed through commonly used standard phrases. He provides evidence that certain expressions, tone patterns, or repetitions could be recognised as the impoliteness markers. This view is relevant in online platforms like TikTok, the platform where audiences familiarise themselves and expect certain styles of aggressiveness from certain influencers. Further expanding on this, Culpeper (2011) elaborates on how repetition can function as a rhetorical device to reinforce insults, amplify hostility, or assert dominance in online spaces, particularly in contexts in which visibility and virality are the key factors in shaping online persona of an influencer. Additionally, face-threatening acts are at the heart of impoliteness, and shows how sarcasm can work, which is by letting someone appear humorous on the surface, while still mocking the person they are talking about (Bousfield, 2008). This supports the claim by Dynel (2015), who examines how sarcasm and mock politeness intersect in digital discourse, allowing speakers to mask direct aggression as playful banter, thus undermining the target's face while maintaining a seemingly humorous stance. Haugh (2010) also discusses sarcasm as a covert form of impoliteness, primarily in face-to-face interactions, but notes its applicability to digital contexts where sarcasm serves to belittle without overt aggression. Not just that, Culpeper et al. (2003) highlight that repetition can intensify impoliteness by reinforcing the speaker's negative stance and putting pressure on the one who hears it. When face-threatening acts are repeated, they become more prominent and harder to ignore, which will further escalate the imposition and sharpen the interpersonal conflict. They also added that repetition in this context does not merely echo the message but strengthens its impact and strategic force in interaction. Baym (2015) explores the strategic construction of online personas. He emphasizes how language is curated to project specific traits or maintain a public identity, aligning with the use of impoliteness to assert dominance and control perception.

Numerous studies have discovered the realm of politeness and impoliteness strategies especially on digital spaces. For example, Jaafar and Syahirah (2022) examined Justin Bieber's Instagram comments and found that fans predominantly used positive and negative politeness to engage with the celebrity. Similarly, Zulkarnain (2020) analysed YouTube comments and identified both politeness and impoliteness strategies used in response to controversial issues. Not just that, Ryabova (2015) also conducted a study on the politeness strategies in everyday communication where several models of English speech etiquette, specifically the use of politeness forms were analysed. She revealed that etiquette norms in English speech behaviour are a key part of their communicative culture, which influences the choice of expressions and communication styles used in daily interactions, often reflecting a person's social group and status. While many empirical studies focus on digital communication, there are some scholars who investigate how politeness and impoliteness strategies function in direct, face-to-face interactions. For instance, Ishmah et al. (2025) note that Indonesian elementary students tend to use more polite language with their teachers in formal classroom interactions but shift to casual or even impolite expressions with peers, illustrating how variations in power and social distance guide the choice of politeness strategies. Similarly, in another study by Beschieru (2021), the researcher concluded that negative politeness strategies in classroom discourse often involve indirect speech, hedging, and minimizing imposition. While teachers primarily use politeness to maintain authority and harmony, the students sometimes adopt impoliteness as a way to claim power. This is reflected in behaviours such as interrupting, challenging the teacher, showing disinterest, or being rude to peers in order to assert dominance. Apart from that, Liu (2022) conducted a study regarding mock impoliteness strategies in a Chinese online talk show called Roast!, where it focuses on how impoliteness is constructed and evaluated by the third-party participants. The study demonstrated that mock impoliteness is constructed using specific patterns such as teasing, sarcasm, and indirect dismissal by

employing a multimodal pragmatics approach and modified frameworks from Culpeper (2011) and Spencer-Oatey (2002). It was later revealed from the study that funniness and impoliteness were the two most significant factors in how audiences judged mock impoliteness. Liu's findings suggest that mock impoliteness functions both as entertainment and as a strategic tool for persona construction, a concept that is aligned with how influencers like Kak KM engage with her audiences through provocative language on TikTok.

In the Malaysian context, recent studies have provided valuable insights into digital impoliteness. For instance, Pung and Mohd Faizal (2023) investigated 440 Twitter replies and found that Malaysian users frequently employed sarcasm, positive impoliteness, and direct criticism. Meanwhile, Kadri et al. (2021) studied public tweets directed at the Malaysian royal family and revealed a preference for off-record and indirect impoliteness strategies, reflecting socio-cultural sensitivities. These studies emphasize that language on social media is deeply influenced by cultural norms and power dynamics. In addition, Ismail et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative content analysis of apology statements made by 19 local public figures across multiple social media platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter (X). Their findings show that Malaysian celebrities tend to employ an explicit apology strategy, which signals a request for forgiveness and an admission of responsibility. They also tend to use additional strategies such as flattery, changing the topic, or openly accepting criticism. The study also notably observed frequent code-mixing between Malay and English, both formal and informal, which reflects a culturally specific approach to repair their public image. Although focused on apology discourse, this research mentions the strategic use of politeness to manage face and restore online reputation, which makes it highly relevant to the current study's focus on persona construction through politeness strategies in digital spaces. However, while there is evidence that much research has been done on the politeness and impoliteness strategies implemented online, little research has been conducted on social media influencers, specifically Malaysian influencers and how it contributes to their online personas.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative research design, specifically using qualitative content analysis, to explore the types of politeness and impoliteness strategies used by two Malaysian influencers, and how these strategies help construct their online persona. Qualitative research is suitable for this study as it provides in-depth insights into how language is used in real-life digital interactions to shape online personas (Tenny et al., 2022). According to Bengtsson (2016), it gives details into human experiences across various contexts and how individuals perceive specific situations. Moreover, he also mentioned that in 1952, Berelson defined content analysis as a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication (Bengtsson, 2016). In short, it is applicable for this study as it is a research method commonly used to study communication including texts, media or speech. Hence, this method is an appropriate choice to answer the research questions on the types of politeness and impoliteness strategies used, as well as how they construct online persona.

The study's setting is the online social media platform, TikTok where many influencers post short videos and interact with their followers. TikTok offers a strategic context to analyse the types of politeness and impoliteness strategies used by influencers, as well as how these strategies contribute to shaping their online personas since both influencers are active on this social media platform. Additionally, the study focuses on two famous Malaysian influencers, namely Khairul Aming and Kak KM. Khairul Aming, who is a social media influencer, content creator and entrepreneur, best known for his food content, especially the recipes he shares online has a total of 6.2M followers on TikTok. His food content, particularly during the month of Ramadan, has gained immense popularity, with many viewers recreating his recipes for buka puasa (breaking fast). Every day during the holy month of Ramadan, he would upload simple recipes for his viewers to try. Meanwhile, Liana Rosli, or famously known as Kak KM, is an influencer and entrepreneur with a number of 65.4K followers, is known for her bold and unfiltered communication style in promoting health and beauty products, particularly those related to women's wellness. This bold and often provocative communication style has drawn both praise and backlash from the public.



Fig. 1 Khairul Aming's TikTok video

Moreover, a total of two videos, one from each influencer were purposely selected based on how the influencers address certain issues, the relevance of the video, the use of words and presence of clear verbal communication with their audience. The first video used for analysis, as shown in FIGURE 1 above, is a TikTok video by Khairul Aming, a 1 minute 22 seconds long video, posted on the 14th of August 2024. In the video, he addresses the issue of defamation involving the misuse of his identity, specifically his face and voice. He clarifies that online scammers have been using Artificial Intelligence (AI), to imitate his identity to trick viewers into buying products such as pots and pans, Apple watches and other electronic gadgets. He states that he has no involvement in selling the products and that he only sells food like sambal nyet and dendeng nyet. Khairul Aming also expresses his concern about the rise of online scams these days and alerted his followers to never trust things too easily. The video was created to clarify the situation and protect his reputation; hence, the reasoning behind the selection of this video is due to the positive values reflected through his communication style and public reputation. This is closely related to the politeness strategies as it is shown in his use of in-group identity markers, softened warnings and clarification, which are often used to build trust and maintain a respectful relationship with the audience. As mentioned by Sinjabat and Ambalegin (2020), when politeness strategies are incorporated between a speaker and a listener, the speaker expresses their feelings in a respectful way, making the listener feel at ease. This phenomenon helps to create a positive and comfortable relationship between them through the use of attending to the hearer's needs, exaggerating interest, and in-group identity markers (Sinjabat & Ambalegin, 2020).



Fig. 2 Kak KM's TikTok video

On the other hand, the second TikTok video, as shown in FIGURE 2, used for the analysis is a 1 minute 50 seconds video posted by Kak KM on 23 August 2023, following public backlash she received after sharing her views on a highly publicised polygamy-related controversy of a Malaysian influencer, Abang Tesla. In her previous post, she had openly criticised the perceived double standard in how men exercise financial and emotional power in relationships, stating, “Lelaki memang tak boleh ada duit”, which roughly means “Men really can’t have money”. Her opinion, however, sparked criticism from some viewers, who argued that her own financial privilege disqualified her from commenting on such matters. The video selected for analysis was Kak KM’s direct response to this backlash. The video was taken from her business TikTok account (@sweetdara_kmbeauty), as her business account is where she frequently uses impoliteness strategies as part of her marketing rhetoric to promote traditional health products. Another reason behind the selection of her video is her emotionally charged tone, laced with sarcasm, that illustrates her use of impoliteness strategies. According to Kienpointner (2008), although arguments driven by negative emotions can be conveyed politely, certain subtypes of emotional arguments are frequently accompanied by impoliteness strategies. These influencers were chosen to represent contrasting backgrounds and styles of communication.

Furthermore, as for the data analysis, it starts with transcribing the two selected TikTok videos by Khairul Aming and Kak KM, since both influencers primarily spoke Malay and used code-mixing with English. After the transcribing phase, the data was then carefully analysed and categorised according to the types of politeness and impoliteness strategies, guided by the Brown and Levinson’s (1987) Politeness Theory and Culpeper’s (1996, 2011) Impoliteness Framework. In order to answer the second objective, the way politeness and impoliteness strategies construct the influencers’ online personas was analysed based on content analysis, specifically using deductive coding. As defined by Elo and Kyngäs (2008), deductive content analysis is appropriate when the structure of analysis is operationalized based on existing theories or models, which enhances its relevance for testing known frameworks in the new contexts. In our study, the categorizations were derived from Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory and Culpeper’s (1996) impoliteness framework. This theory-driven coding method enabled the identification of the strategies, such as bald-on-record expressions, sarcasm, repetition, and in-group markers. The coding process followed Schreier’s (2012) guidelines to ensure the consistency in the deductive category application.

In order to comply with the ethical regulations, only publicly available TikTok videos that required no login, permission, or private access were selected. No identifiable personal data was extracted, and only content posted by these public figures was analyzed. This approach aligns with ethical standards emphasizing critical evaluation of what counts as public data and the need to respect user privacy expectations, even when the content could be accessed by the public (Townsend & Wallace, 2016). Moreover, a purposive sampling strategy was applied to select one representative video per influencer. The selected videos were chosen based on high engagement such as likes, shares, and comments. The clear presence of either politeness or impoliteness strategies were also considered in the selection. Moreover, the chosen videos were also sourced directly from Khairul Aming’s official account and Kak KM’s verified business account to ensure the authenticity of post engagement and audience interaction. This approach ensured that the sample reflected each influencer’s typical communicative style and public persona, which is essential for discourse-based persona analysis (Palinkas et al., 2015). Not to forget, the interpretations and analysis presented in this study reflect the researchers’ own perspectives and do not claim to represent general public opinion.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

This section of the study showcases the findings from the qualitative content analysis of two TikTok videos posted by two Malaysian influencers, Khairul Aming and Kak KM. The analysis focuses on identifying the types of politeness and impoliteness strategies employed by the influencers in each video as well as analysing the possible contributions of the strategies to the construction and maintenance of their online personas. Results show that the types of politeness strategies, like positive politeness, negative politeness and bald-on-record, as well as impolite strategies, like bald-on-record, sarcasm, mock impoliteness, dismissal and repetition are evident in the two influencers’ videos. Aside from that, the strategies employed have had a considerable impact on the influencers’ online personas. For example, Khairul Aming’s use of negative politeness and softened directions indicates a thoughtful, caring, and socially responsible figure, which contributes to his reputation as a trustworthy and responsible content creator. In contrast, Kak KM’s frequent use of impoliteness strategies such

as mock impoliteness and sarcasm contributes to her strong, unapologetic, and provocative attitude, which is consistent with her reputation for being outspoken and controversial. Therefore, the following analysis provides further elaboration on the findings presented.

Types Of Politeness and Impoliteness Strategies Used

In order to answer the first research question on the types of politeness and impoliteness strategies used by the two Malaysian influencers, the following analysis examines two TikTok videos uploaded by Khairul Aming and Kak KM, and categorises the strategies observed according to the Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and Culpeper's (1996, 2011) impoliteness framework.

Firstly, in a TikTok video addressing the misuse of artificial intelligence (AI), the influencer, Khairul Aming, warns his followers about scams using AI-generated versions of his voice and video. Throughout the video, he employs a variety of politeness strategies including positive politeness, negative politeness and bald-on-record to convey his message effectively while maintaining a respectful tone to his audiences.

Table I. Types of Politeness Strategies Used by Khairul Aming

Types of Politeness Strategies	Examples
Positive Politeness	<p>Use of in-group identity markers</p> <p>Original: “...korang...” “So, especially akak-akak, makcik-makcik yang tengok, abang-abang kat luar sana, please be careful”.</p> <p>Translated: “...you guys...” “So, especially girls, aunties and uncles out there who are watching, please be careful.”</p> <p>Show concern for the listener's well-being</p> <p>Original: “I just want to remind you guys untuk berhati-hati, sebab fitnah dah makin berleluasa sekarang.” “please be careful”.</p> <p>Translated: “I just want to remind you guys to be careful because slander is spreading widely these days.” “please be careful”.</p>
Negative Politeness	<p>Softened warnings with polite language</p> <p>Original: “I just want to remind you guys untuk berhati-hati...”</p> <p>Translated: “I just want to remind you guys...”</p>
Bald-On-Record	<p>Direct warnings and clarifications</p> <p>Original: “Jangan mudah percaya.” “Saya tiada menjual apa-apa barang selain daripada sambal nyet dengan dendeng nyet. Itu sahaja”.</p> <p>Translated: “Don't trust things easily.” “I don't sell anything other than sambal nyet and dendeng nyet. That's all.”</p>

Based on TABLE 1 above, one of the politeness strategies shown in Khairul Aming's video is positive politeness. According to Servitia (2017), positive politeness refers to how speakers show friendliness, solidarity, and respect for the listener's desire to be liked or accepted. It is the most commonly used strategy among social media users (Nur Afiqah, 2022). Such utterances are not limited to interactions between acquaintances as they can also signal an intention to build rapport or establish a sense of familiarity between individuals who do not yet know each other (Servitia, 2017). Thus, they are often used by influencers to create

a sense of closeness with their followers, despite the lack of a personal relationship. Additionally, Ryabova (2015) stated that speakers applying positive politeness show the listener that they understand, support, and share their interests, needs, and goals.

This can be seen in Khairul Aming's video through the use of in-group identity markers, specifically in the use of slang and address forms. Brown and Levinson (1987, as cited in Fathi, 2024) claimed that the use of address forms, language or dialect, jargon or slang, and ellipsis are known to be in-group identity markers. In the TikTok video, Khairul Aming used the slang "*korang*" which is a colloquial version of "*kamu orang*" or "*kau orang*". It is informal, and commonly used in spoken and written Malay, which means "you all". Its informal nature helps break down social distance between him and his viewers, making the interaction feel more personal and accessible. As mentioned by Fathi (2024), all these in-group usages and markers stipulate some background knowledge that enhances the bonds of in-group membership. Not just that, it reflects local linguistic identity, showing a sense of belonging and cultural familiarity when speaking with his followers or audience.

Another instance of the usage of in-group identity markers, closely related to positive politeness is in the 1:06 minute in the video, where Khairul Aming mentioned "*So, especially akak-akak, makcik-makcik yang tengok, abang-abang kat luar sana, please be careful*". This sentence is translated as "So, especially girls, aunties and uncles out there who are watching, please be careful." In this sentence, Khairul Aming is giving a warning or reminder to be cautious, particularly to certain groups of people in the audience like girls, older women and men who may be more vulnerable or likely to fall for scams or misleading content. This is an instance of in-group identity marker as he used terms like "*akak-akak*", "*makcik-makcik*", and "*abang-abang*", which are relational and culturally familiar in the Malaysian context. It signals how he sees the audience as part of the same social or cultural group, which is a key feature of positive politeness. As mentioned by Suswanto (2015), in-group identity markers fosters solidarity among speakers; thus, by personally addressing different members of the audience, instead of just generalising everyone, Khairul Aming is showing that he is thinking about them directly, which further creates a feeling of recognition and inclusion.

Apart from that, he also showed concern about the viewer's well-being, which is categorised as one of the positive politeness strategies: Notice, attend to the hearer's interest, wants, needs and goods (Servitia, 2017). For instance, in the video, he mentioned "*I just want to remind you guys untuk berhati-hati, sebab fitnah dah makin berleluasa sekarang*", which is translated as "I just want to remind you to be careful because slander is spreading widely these days". This phrase specifically shows how he is genuinely concerned for the audience's safety in relation to scams since it is a famous topic among Malaysians nowadays. The reference to "*fitnah*", which means "slander", and scams also taps into a shared concern among Malaysians, making his message feel even more relatable to his viewers. By acknowledging a real issue his followers might face and offering a gentle warning, he strengthens in-group identity and builds rapport with viewers. This kind of communication not only protects his audience, but also helps him maintain a warm, approachable online persona that audiences are more likely to trust and engage with.

Furthermore, another politeness strategy reflected in Khairul Aming's TikTok video is negative politeness. Aisyatul (2019) stated that negative politeness is oriented towards the hearer's negative face and emphasizes negative face imposition on the hearer. This was also supported by Njuki (2021), when she mentioned that negative politeness strategies involve actions such as being indirect, using cautious or vague language, reducing the sense of imposition, expressing apologies, showing respect, avoiding personal references, and appealing to general principles or norms. In short, negative politeness is respecting others' personal space and avoiding imposition. This can be seen in the video where Khairul Aming softened his tone in the 0:38 minute, when he said "I just want to remind you," to reduce imposition and avoid sounding forceful to his audience, even if he thinks that it is the right thing to do. Using a soft or indirect tone is one of the key ways speakers reduce the impact of what might otherwise be a face-threatening act (FTA). Thus, this shows that Khairul Aming respects the audience's autonomy, which demonstrates the use of negative politeness.

Lastly, bald-on-record was also used by Khairul Aming in his video. Bald-on-record strategies are used in urgent situations to communicate clearly and efficiently (Pipit et al., 2019). The authors also add that it may be used when the speaker expects little cooperation from the listener, wants to show concern for the listener, gives permission, or uses direct commands. This is shown in the video where Khairul Aming mentioned directly

“*Jangan mudah percaya.*”, which means “Don’t trust things easily.” He then adds “*Saya tiada menjual apa-apa barang selain daripada sambal nyet dengan dendeng nyet. Itu sahaja.*” which means “I don’t sell anything other than sambal nyet and dendeng nyet. That’s all.” These direct remarks highlight the seriousness and urgency of his message, clarifying that he was not the one behind the video. There was no attempt by him to sugarcoat or lessen the force of the message, as he set the record straight, so his followers would know exactly which products are officially sold by him, aiming to clearly guide the audience’s behaviour in response to the growing threat of AI-related scams that has been happening online.

In a TikTok video promoting her health supplement product Sweet Dara, influencer Kak KM responds to individuals who have mocked and criticised her. Rather than addressing the criticism through conventional means, she adopts an unapologetically confrontational stance. Throughout the video, she employs various impoliteness strategies including bald-on-record statements, mock impoliteness, and sarcasm to retaliate against perceived slander, but also to assert her dominance and defend her brand identity in a provocative and theatrical manner.

Table II. Types Of Impoliteness Strategies Used by Kak Km

Types of Impoliteness Strategies	Examples
Bald-On-Record	Original: "Engkau lagi teruk! Perangai macam musibat!" Translated: "You're the worst! You act like a loser!"
Sarcasm	Original: "Oh, jangan cemburukan Kak KM ya." Translated: "Oh, don't be jealous of me (Kak KM)."
Mock Impoliteness	Original: "Engkau bolehlah cakap, engkau banyak duit" Translated: "Easy for you to say. You've got money."
Dismissal	Original: "Bapak tak relaks." Translated: "You're really not chill, are you?"
Repetition as Rhetorical Strategy	Original: "Sekali makan..., sekali makan..." Translated: "Once eaten..., once eaten..."

Based on TABLE 2 above, the analysis of impoliteness strategies employed by Kak KM in her TikTok video reveals a deliberate and calculated application of Culpeper’s impoliteness framework (1996, 2011). These include bald-on-record insults, sarcasm, mock politeness, dismissal, and repetition. Rather than being spontaneous or erratic, these strategies operate as intentional face-threatening acts, used to assert control, discredit criticism, and intensify the confrontational tone of her speech.

Culpeper (1996) defines bald-on-record impoliteness as a form of communication that is direct, unambiguous, and without mitigation. It is often used when the speaker seeks to dominate or undermine the target. This is demonstrated when Kak KM uses the word *musibat* at [00:35], a term that refers to someone who is worthless or disgraceful. The insult is delivered plainly, without any softening, and functions as a direct attack on the character of her target. Her tone is aggressive, and the lack of filtering in her delivery suggests a calculated effort to assert moral authority, positioning herself as the upright figure in contrast to her critics.

Sarcasm, described by Culpeper (1996) as a form of off-record impoliteness, involves making an indirect attack disguised as humour or exaggerated politeness. At [00:57], Kak KM uses a seemingly sweet tone in the

line “*Oh, jangan cemburu dengan Kak KM ya*”. This can be translated as “Don’t be jealous of Kak KM.” While it appears friendly, the intent is to ridicule, portraying her critics as petty and envious. Her delivery masks the insult with charm, allowing her to undermine others while keeping her tone light-hearted. This tactic maintains her persona as playful and humorous, even when issuing subtle put-downs.

Mock impoliteness also appears in her video, where she uses sarcastic imitation to ridicule her critics. Culpeper (1996) describes this strategy as using polite or neutral language in an insincere or mocking way. At [1:41], she says “*Engkau bolehlah cakap, engkau banyak duit*”, which can be interpreted as “Easy for you to say. You’ve got money.” She delivers this line with laughter, mimicking the phrasing of her critics. The exaggerated intonation and mimicry transform what might seem like a neutral observation into a scornful dismissal. Her tone creates the illusion of modesty while actually undermining the legitimacy of the other person’s perspective.

At [1:47], the line “*Bapak tak relax*” illustrates her use of dismissal. This is interpreted as “You’re really not chill, are you?” The word “*bapak*”, functioning as an intensifier, heightens the sense of ridicule. Here, she trivialises the target’s reaction, suggesting that they are overreacting or being overly emotional. This rhetorical move allows her to present herself as calm and composed, further reinforcing her dominant position in the exchange.

Repetition serves as another important rhetorical device in her video. Starting at [1:17], Kak KM repeats the phrase “*sekali makan*”, which translates to “one intake,” in six different product claims. These include “*Sekali makan je dah ketat*” (One intake and it tightens), “*Sekali makan je dah tak keluar keputihan*” (One intake and discharge stops), “*Sekali makan je tak payah pakai pantyliner dah*” (One intake and pantyliners are no longer needed), “*Sekali makan je sakit tumit hilang*” (One intake and heel pain disappears), “*Sekali makan je dah tak payah solat duduk*” (One intake and there is no more need to pray sitting down), and “*Sekali makan je, suami takkan fikir kahwin lain*” (One intake and your husband will no longer consider marrying another). While the repetition may appear casual, it functions as a calculated rhetorical technique that emphasises the product’s impact in a bold and memorable way. As Miles (2018) notes, even a plain and factual tone, when delivered strategically, can serve as a powerful rhetorical tool in performance-based communication.

This repeated phrase does more than promote a product. It also subtly mocks commonly held female insecurities by listing exaggerated benefits that align with societal pressures related to physical appearance, health, and relationship stability. Through rhythm and repetition, Kak KM amplifies her claims and mocks skepticism toward her products. Her delivery turns the message into a chant that reinforces her authority while teasing her audience, enhancing both memorability and dominance in the conversation.

Overall, the impoliteness strategies employed by Kak KM reflect a purposeful and consistent application of Culpeper’s (2011) framework. Her use of bald-on-record insults, sarcasm, and mock politeness is not random but reveals a clear rhetorical pattern. Each linguistic choice serves a distinct function within the context of her performance, whether to provoke, confront, or assert control. Through impoliteness, she pushes against conventional expectations of influencer behaviour and demonstrates how provocative speech can be used not only to shock but also to command attention, shape discourse, and maintain influence in digital spaces like TikTok.

Politeness And Impoliteness in Shaping Online Public Personas

Online persona is strategically constructed through language, and for many digital influencers, this includes the intentional use of politeness and impoliteness strategies. In order to answer the second research question on how the strategies employed by Khairul Aming and Kak KM shape their online persona on social media, a qualitative content analysis, specifically using the deductive coding was employed, guided by the Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory and Culpeper’s (1996, 2011) impoliteness theory. This method is appropriate for uncovering patterns in language and behaviour, particularly when analysing rhetorical and interpersonal strategies in social media discourse (Schreier, 2012). The following analysis provides a detailed explanation.

Through the application of content analysis, with a focus on the politeness strategies established by Brown and Levinson (1987), this analysis shows that Khairul Aming employs a mix of positive politeness, negative

politeness, and bald-on-record strategies to shape an online persona that is pleasant and approachable, thoughtful and considerate as well as responsible and trustworthy.

Firstly, in Khairul Aming's use of positive politeness like the usage of in-group identity markers, specifically in slang and address forms, he demonstrates an online persona that is both approachable and pleasant. This is evident in TABLE 1 where he used the slang "...*korang*..." which is a Malay colloquial term that means "you guys". The usage of the slang shows familiarity with his viewers, as it is common for Malays to use the term instead of saying "*kau orang*" or "*kalian*", which is more formal. When doing this, he also identifies himself as a member of the same social group and instills a sense of community and proximity with his viewers. As mentioned by Maros and Rosli (2017, as cited in Noor Qamarina et al., 2024), the use of positive politeness was frequently used to lessen the gap between speakers and hearers to portray a good relationship among them. Similarly, Abidin (2021) also explains that influencers often adjust their content and language to match local values and ways of speaking. Not just that, he also addresses girls, and older women as "*akak-akak*" and "*makcik-makcik*" while highlighting the topics on scams. The use of these in-group identity markers conveys familiarity with the listener, showing that the use of positive politeness helps create a sense of closeness and connection with the listener, which can be achieved through the use of humor and informal or familiar terms of address. Khairul Aming's choice of these words helps him connect with a Malaysian audience, showing that his politeness is not just about being respectful, but also reflects the culture and community he is part of. This also aligns with a study by Travnikova (2012), that generic names are used to soften face-threatening acts. Hence, Khairul Aming's consistent use of this strategy in the video as well as in other TikTok videos, helps shape an online persona that is warm, approachable and pleasant, strengthening his connection with his followers.

Furthermore, the use of negative politeness by Khairul Aming, as seen in the phrase "*I just want to remind you guys untuk berhati-hati...*", which is translated to "I just want you guys to be careful", reflects himself as a thoughtful and considerate influencer since he is addressing a serious issue that has been happening during that time. In the video, Khairul Aming softens his tone, reducing imposition and avoiding sounding forceful to his audience even when he thinks it's the right thing to do. This aligns with the Brown and Levinson's (1987, as cited in Fathi, 2024), view that negative politeness is a politeness method that respects the listener's need for privacy, independence, and autonomy, where the speaker avoids pressuring the audience. Not just that, by addressing the issue and employing negative politeness, he also represents his social media self-branding strategy. McRae (2017) defines self-branding as the building of an extraordinary persona, someone who is both relatable and extraordinary. Hence, by softening his tone and warning his audience without being authoritarian, he displays himself as a regular person who sincerely cares about his followers. This communication approach contributes to his reputation without looking overwhelming or domineering.

Lastly, he employs bald-on-record strategies, such as in the phrase "*First korang kena tengok video ni.*" which is translated to as "First, you guys need to watch this video" and "*jangan mudah percaya*", which means "Don't trust things easily," to deliver direct instructions and warnings. These statements emphasize urgency and reflect his assertiveness and proactive stance toward his followers. This directness in his video establishes Khairul Aming's public reputation as a public figure who is transparent, responsible, and someone who does not sugarcoat important matters, particularly when dealing with AI-related frauds. This is also seen in his sentence, "*Saya tiada menjual apa-apa barang selain daripada sambal nyet dengan dendeng nyet. Itu sahaja*", which means "I don't sell anything other than sambal nyet and dendeng nyet. That's all." This sentence shows that he did not only clear his reputation, but also frames himself as a responsible public person, taking the initiative to solve the situation and prevent others from getting tricked by the scammers, resulting in an online identity that combines professionalism and responsibility.

Overall, it is evident that the use of politeness strategies by Khairul Aming in his video contribute significantly to the construction and maintenance of his online persona as a responsible, trustworthy, and community-oriented public figure. This strategic use of politeness strengthens Abidin's (2021) idea of 'refracted publics', where influencers like Khairul Aming himself, shape their audience by portraying themselves in a consistent and trustworthy way. Using a mixture of positive, negative, and bald-on-record strategies enables him to portray a public image that is both relatable and responsible, which helps him connect with his followers on a personal level and build a strong, loyal community. Consequently, it allows him to stay visible and trusted in the fast-growing and competitive world of social media. This is evident as throughout his years as an influencer, Khairul

Aming has consistently demonstrated positive values, such as honesty and humbleness. Since he is well-known not only for promoting his products but also for setting a good example whether through responsible business practices, clear communication, or community engagement, this long-standing consistency enhances the effectiveness of the politeness strategies he uses in the video. Not just that, because his audience already views him as someone who is trustworthy and sincere, his use of direct warnings (bald-on-record), respectful reminders (negative politeness), and friendly, inclusive language (positive politeness) further strengthens his image as a dependable and socially responsible public figure. In this way, his communication style is not just a one-off, but aligns with the persona he has carefully built over time.

This section of the analysis examines how Kak KM constructs her online persona through the use of impoliteness strategies. In one of the most rhetorically charged moments of her video, Kak KM exclaims, “*acah-acah tasbih, perangai macam musibat,*” a line that layers multiple impoliteness strategies into a single, provocative outburst. This expression refers to individuals who pretend to display religious devotion such as using prayer beads while behaving in morally reprehensible ways. That is to say, the statement targets performative religiosity and implies deep moral hypocrisy. It illustrates mock impoliteness, where a moral reference is used sarcastically to delegitimize the character of others (Culpeper, 2011). The phrase “*acah-acah tasbih*” can be rendered in English as pretending to use a tasbih (prayer beads), which implies a façade of piety. This is compounded by the bald-on-record insult “*perangai macam musibat,*” which is interpreted as likening someone’s behaviour to that of a demon. Rather than diffusing tension, this rhetorical move intensifies social conflict and asserts Kak KM’s moral authority, reinforcing a persona that is unapologetically bold, emotionally raw, and socially transgressive.

Other instances in her speech further consolidate this image. For example, the line “*Apa kecoh-kecoh ni?*” can be translated as “What’s the commotion about?”, while “*Kau rasa orang suka kau?*” is understood to mean “You think people like you?” Both are examples of bald-on-record impoliteness, delivered without any attempt to soften or mitigate their face-threatening impact. According to Culpeper (2011), such strategies are not inherently offensive but become impolite when used in contexts where politeness is expected. Here, the speaker suggests that direct verbal aggression can be an intentional disruption of social norms—signalling dominance and defiance. For Kak KM, these utterances are not just stylistic choices; they function as essential tools in constructing a persona of emotional fearlessness and unfiltered honesty.

Her rhetorical dexterity becomes even more apparent in moments of tone-shifting, where she pivots from verbal aggression to cheerful brand promotion. A notable example is her shift from confrontation to sales language in the line “*Baik kau pergi makan Sweet Dara... jangan cemburukan Kak KM.*” This can be translated as a direct urge to viewers to try her product, followed by a playful remark warning them not to be jealous of her. The phrase reflects her ability to effortlessly toggle between communicative frames—what Goffman (1981) refers to as footing. In this case, she simultaneously adopts the roles of provocateur and brand ambassador, demonstrating how persona management involves both emotional expressiveness and calculated self-promotion.

Repetition also plays a key role in her rhetorical arsenal. One of the most iconic features of the video is the repeated phrase “*sekali makan je...*”, which can be interpreted as “just one intake is enough.” This line conveys exaggerated promises such as “*...dah ketat*” (which roughly means “it’ll tighten”), “*...tak keluar keputihan*” (which is understood to mean “no more discharge”), and “*...suami takkan fikir kahwin lain*” (which is equivalent to saying “your husband won’t think of marrying another”). The use of repetition here serves both persuasive and performative purposes. According to McQuarrie and Mick (1996), repetition is a rhetorical figure that enhances memorability and persuasive impact. In Kak KM’s speech, it operates not only to sell a product but also to reinforce her theatrical, attention-grabbing style.

Through these mockery, bald-on-record attacks, sarcasm, tone-shifting, and repetition strategies, Kak KM crafts a deliberate and highly distinctive digital persona. This persona is not intended for universal appeal but for visibility, recognisability, and controversy. As Marshall and Barbour (2015) argue, digital self-presentation is rarely spontaneous; instead, it is a strategic performance calibrated to resonate with specific audiences. Marshall et al. (2020) further suggest that personas are constructed in direct response to platform affordances and audience expectations. In Kak KM’s case, her TikTok persona thrives on disruption and theatricality, blending confrontation with commerce in a way that is uniquely her own. Her linguistic style, while often offensive, serves broader rhetorical goals: it provokes, entertains, and brands simultaneously.

This aligns with Archer and Robb's (2024) view that influencer personas are not reflections of inner character but curated performances designed to capture and maintain audience engagement. It also resonates with Abidin's (2021) concept of refracted publics, in which influencers craft content to appeal to specific audience segments while maintaining a sense of intimacy and connection. Abidin's insights into influencer visibility and engagement strategies also strengthen this analysis by contextualizing Kak KM's provocative style within broader influencer culture. Her work also addresses the gap in platform-specific studies by highlighting how personas are shaped not only by personality, but also by how influencers use the features and expectations of platforms like TikTok (Abidin, 2021). Through her bold and provocative language, Kak KM attracts a niche, emotionally engaged audience that connects with her unapologetic persona—an audience that is shaped as much by her content as by how she presents herself. In a way, Kak KM's rhetorical strategies enable her to stand out in a crowded digital environment, using calculated impoliteness as a branding tool and an identity anchor.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

In a nutshell, this study investigates how Malaysian influencers, specifically Khairul Aming and Kak KM, strategically employ politeness and impoliteness strategies in their TikTok videos to construct and maintain their unique online personas. The content analysis revealed contrasting linguistic approaches guided by Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory and Culpeper's (1996, 2011) Impoliteness Framework. Based on the findings, Khairul Aming utilised more politeness strategies like positive and negative politeness, alongside direct warnings to convey an approachable, trustworthy, and community-oriented image. Kak KM, on the other hand, employed more impoliteness strategies such as bald-on-record insults, sarcasm, and dismissal to project a bold, unapologetic character that was characterised by assertiveness and provocation. These findings affirm how the selected influencers use language not just to communicate, but to navigate power dynamics and reinforce their public image in digital spaces.

Building upon this, recommendations for future research could include expanding the research scope, utilising other social media platforms, and adopting a mixed-method approach. Firstly, future research could expand the scope by analysing TikTok Live sessions, instead of just investigating videos posted by the users. The reason behind this is because unlike pre-recorded contents, live interactions allow real-time discourse, which often reveals more spontaneous and emotionally driven language. For instance, Zhao (2022) highlighted how comment-based TikTok interactions evolve dynamically in response to audience engagement. Thus, by applying this approach, researchers can capture how influencers shift their politeness or impoliteness strategies in reaction to real-time feedback. This approach would enrich the understanding of strategic persona-building, especially under public scrutiny.

Besides that, the study could be improved by extending the analysis to other digital platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter (X). This is because each of these platforms has its own way of communication and built-in features that may influence how influencers portray their online persona. For example, Peng et al. (2022) highlight that platform-specific features such as video duration, algorithmic visibility, and audience engagement tools all play a role in shaping the style of interactions. The researchers can identify whether certain strategies are platform-dependent or reflect broader patterns of digital self-presentation by comparing behaviours across these platforms.

In addition, future researchers could also consider adopting a mixed-methods approach instead. Salimi and Mortazavi (2023) emphasized the need for more studies that combine qualitative and quantitative methods in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of impoliteness and the moral order in online communication. Their study highlights how mixed-methods can enrich the findings by combining both contextual interpretations with measurable trends. Additionally, in a study by Gomez and Alcosero (2022), although they primarily used qualitative methods in their study, they successfully portrayed the value of methodological variety by employing content analysis and viewer interviews to illustrate how politeness strategies were enacted and perceived. This shows that while qualitative content analysis allows researchers to discover nuanced linguistic strategies and contextual meanings, integrating it with quantitative methods such as frequency counts or engagement metrics can improve the reliability of findings. Thus, embracing a mixed-methods approach can help future research to better capture the dynamic interplay between the linguistic strategy

and audience response, especially in fast-evolving digital platforms. In conclusion, these recommendations can offer a more holistic insight into the use of strategic language in the digital culture.

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