

## Politeness Strategies in Twitter Updates of Female English Language Studies Malaysian Undergraduates

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### ABSTRACT

*Twitter is now developing as a rich research site for scholars who studied online interaction, information dissemination and other plethora of subjects. Taking on this new development, this paper aims to contribute to the field of politeness and English language studies in computer-mediated communication (CMC) by showcasing the politeness strategies in Twitter updates and by predicting how the tweets could potentially misfire. A total of 776 tweet updates produced by 9 female undergraduates, active users of Twitter within two months, were documented and open-ended questionnaire responses were collected for in-depth findings. The data were analysed using Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Strategies. The findings show that the participants employed four politeness strategies with positive politeness employed the most, followed by bald-on record, off-record with the least employed being negative politeness. Positive politeness is believed to be used the most because of the nature of CMC which promotes interpersonal communication and expression among its users. Although the participants employed all four politeness strategies, it is important to be aware that misunderstanding could still easily occur due to the absence of other communication cues in virtual 'faceless' communication. Hence, this study showed that the overuse of profanity, ambiguous indirect strategy and failure to comply with the 140-character limits in Twitter are some of the reasons that might cause misfire to happen.*

*Keywords: politeness strategies; computer-mediated communication (CMC); Twitter status updates; communication misfire, Malaysian Public University*

### INTRODUCTION

The interest for this study emerged from the discussion of politeness issues in popular social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Dans (2016) listed online offences and urged the community to be 'kind' in social media communication. VitalSmarts survey reported that 88 percent agreed that people are less polite when using social media; 75 percent of the users witness online conflicts and arguments, while one in five users have decreased in-person contact with somebody altogether due to something that they said online (Bennet 2013). It has become the norm for users of this new medium of communication to adopt brevity in writing and directness, which could potentially lead to misfire in the communication process via the social media (Bedard 2014)

This study focusses on the use of politeness strategies in status updates in Twitter, a popular social media service which allows people to share updates, news, and information. In this medium, the update which is referred to as 'tweet' has a limitation of 140 characters only per tweet (Humphreys, Gill, Newbury & Krishnamurthy 2013); hence the challenge of brevity while maintaining politeness in communication. However, despite this limitation, Twitter has 500 million tweets posted daily with 80 percent active users on mobile and an active global user base of over 320 million in 2015 alone (Twitter.com 2015). This means that word limit does not discourage the users as they have found ways to adapt to the need by using short

forms and brevity in messaging. Humpreys et al. (2013) report that 95% of tweets are accounting and commentary tweet-style, while the three most frequent topics are social activities, media-related and historically informed topic (family, friends, food and beverage, health, religion). Twitter's popularity as the new medium of online communication with its apparent imposition on the word limit per update raised language issues hence necessitating this study.

The limitation has also caused another problem with communication via Twitter, that is, the messages tend to be ambiguous. According to Gebremeskel (2011), Twitter demonstrates many omissions, abbreviations and slang language in observing the 140-character limit. While analyses of microblogging suggests that the brevity and broadcastability of messages are important affordances of microblogging (Boyd, Golder & Lotan 2010, Java, et al. 2007 in Humpreys et al 2013), Murthy (2013) argues whether meaning can be found in messages limited to 140 characters or if it can result in misunderstanding. Grenny (2013) also argued it is difficult to speak through a virtual forum as people still struggle to speak candidly and respectfully even in face-to-face interactions. Fathimath et al (2016) added there are various features in face-to-face communication like non-verbal cues and gestures that are not present in online written communication. Thus, these leave the users to rely primarily on textual messages to construct and interpret meaning online. However, because text delivers meaning similar to spoken conversation (Herring 2010), it is important to understand how language through politeness is constructed in order to minimise the risk of being rude and at the same time delivering the message correctly using Twitter.

There are many past studies related to computer-mediated communication (CMC) focusing on the area of language and linguistics, however, most of the research was on Facebook because of the richer data gathered. Therefore, this research aims to provide more information on politeness strategies in Twitter as this area still needs documentation to understand the concept of politeness in new social media. According to Marvick (2013), research on Twitter is now fast developing as a rich area of study especially on online interaction, information dissemination and other subjects. This research is significant to understand the sociopragmatic norms that guide the users' behaviour with respect to one medium of CMC, because although Twitter has evolved rapidly, an established set of social norms guiding the users' behaviour has yet to be established (McCaughlin & Vitak 2012). Statistics show that one in five users (19 percent) have lost contact with somebody because of something that they said online, hence, if the issue is not taken seriously, it will result in a gradual if not accelerated degradation of politeness in online communication. Thus, this study will shed light on the understanding of the new mode of online communication focusing on the issue of politeness.

## FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The theory of politeness was first introduced by Goffman in 1963 who also coined the term Face Threatening Acts (FTA) based on the notion of 'face' in his *On Face-Work*. This was later developed by Brown and Levinson (1978) as The Face Theory, by suggesting three basic notions of face which are face, face threatening acts (FTAs) and politeness strategies. According to Brown and Levinson (1978, p. 66), "face" is "something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction". Meanwhile, Face-Threatening Act (FTA) is an act that inherently damages the face of the addressee or the speaker by acting in opposition to the wants and desires of the

others (Brown and Levinson 1987). They argued that everyone has positive face and negative face.

Politeness focuses on the effect a speaker intends to have on a listener's self-image or face (Katz 2015). Grice's Cooperative Principles (1957, 1975) were one of the first theories on politeness strategies based on pragmatics and became greatly influential. Grice introduced four conversational maxims: Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner. Leech (1983) also reacted to Grice's proposal and suggested his own politeness principle consists of six maxims, each with two rules related to minimizing the cost and maximizing the benefit to a speaker or an addressee (Stodulkova 2013). These maxims are tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement and sympathy. Both the work of Leech (1983) and Brown and Levinson (1987) are essential in linguistics politeness. Other contemporary approaches tend to develop the theories further, usually in the form of criticism such as Culpeper (2009) Impoliteness theory.

Speakers make many choices when speaking and delivering intention including the politeness level of their utterances (Coulmas 2006). Leech (1983) defined politeness as forms of behaviour to create and maintain harmonious interaction while Lakoff (1990) supported by stating politeness facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interactions. Consequently, interlocutors have to use specific strategies to minimise the threat according to a rational assessment of the face risk as an attempt to avoid FTAs. In this research, the researcher employed Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Strategies because despite the criticism, it is universally valid (Zena Moayad Najeeb et al 2012) and is relevant for analysing findings for the present research. Brown and Levinson (1987) suggested four politeness strategies which are bald-on record, positive politeness, negative politeness and off-record politeness strategy.

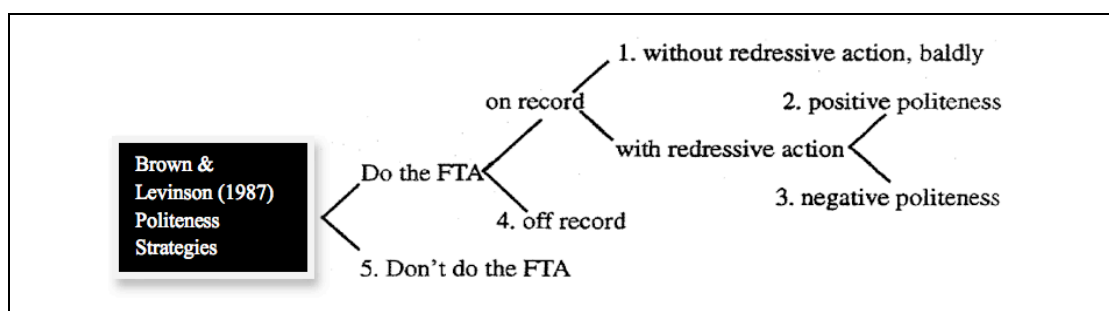


FIGURE 1: Brown and Levinson Politeness Strategies (1987)

Bald-on record without redressive action is when the speaker expressed an intention unambiguously, directly and baldly for example, 'Watch out!' and 'Go away'. For bald-on record without redressive action, the strategy will only be used in the following situations:

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**Bald-on record without redressive action**

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1. In cases of great urgency or desperation.
  2. Cases of channel noise, or where communication difficulties exploit pressure to speak with maximum efficiency such as in calling across a distance.
  3. Task-oriented, in this kind of interaction face redress will be irrelevant.
  4. S's want to satisfy H's face is small, either because S is powerful and does not fear retribution or non-cooperation from H.
  5. S wants to be rude without risk of offending, so S does not care about maintaining face.
  6. Sympathetic advice or warnings.
  7. Granting permission for something that H has requested.
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Meanwhile, bald-on record with redressive action includes positive politeness and negative politeness. Positive politeness is performed to save the hearer's positive face by treating the hearer as a member of an in-group which assures that the FTA is not understood

as a negative evaluation of hearer's face (Bensch 2010). It saved positive face by demonstrating closeness, appealing friendship and establishing common ground. Examples are, 'We're not feeling well, are we?' (inclusive form 'we') and 'Hey Bud, have you gotta minute?' (first name or family name to insinuate familiarity). Below are sub-strategies of positive politeness strategy:

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**Positive Politeness Strategy**

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1. Notice, attend to H (his interests, wants, needs, goods).
  2. Exaggerate (interest approval, sympathy with H)
  3. Intensify interest to H
  4. Use in-group identity markers
  5. Seek agreement
  6. Avoid disagreement
  7. Presuppose/raise/assert common ground
  8. Jokes
  9. Assert or presuppose S's knowledge of and concern for H's wants.
  10. Offer, promise.
  11. Be optimistic
  12. Include both S and H in the activity
  13. Give (or ask for) reasons
  14. Assume or assert reciprocity
  15. Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation)
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Next, negative politeness is oriented toward the hearer's negative face by demonstrating distance and circumspection. Negative politeness also often adds the feeling that the speaker is imposing on the other person. For example, 'I am sorry to bother you, but...' and 'I need just a little of your time.' This strategy is used to avoid intruding on each other's territory and apologizing, hedging and questions are used to avoid imposing on the other hearers. Below are the sub-strategies of negative politeness strategy:

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**Negative Politeness Strategy**

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1. Be conventionally indirect.
  2. Question, hedge.
  3. Be pessimistic.
  4. Minimise imposition
  5. Give difference
  6. Apologise
  7. Impersonalise S and H
  8. State the FTA as general rule
  9. Nominalise
  10. Go on record as incurring debt, or as not indebting H.
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The last strategy is the indirect strategy known as off-record. Off record is giving hints, clues and the utterances are ambiguous as opposed to bald-on record without redressive action. For example, the utterances 'it's getting late' (wrap up and intended to go home right away) and 'it's hot in here' (sending indirect message for someone to speed up the fans). Off record strategy is being so ambiguous that the hearer "cannot know with certainty that a hint has been broached and the sender can credibly claim an alternate interpretation" (NurNajla 2012, p. 32). Below are sub-categories of off-record strategies:

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**Off Record Strategy**

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1. Give hints
  2. Give association clues
  3. Presuppose
  4. Understate
  5. Overstate
  6. Tautologies
  7. Contradictions
  8. Be ironic
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9. Use metaphors
  10. Use rhetorical questions
  11. Be ambiguous
  12. Be vague
  13. Over-generalise
  14. Displace H
  15. Be incomplete, use ellipsis
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## STUDIES ON POLITENESS

Several studies on politeness have been conducted from various aspects. For example, Oktaviani and Laturrakhmi (2013) interviewed two different generations (young adults and lecturers) to explore how using social media has changed their language use and perception on politeness by using Goffman's face concept (1967) and Brown and Levinson Face-threatening acts (FTA). The study claimed that utilisation of media, including social network sites should be carefully monitored as it may impact the new generation's language habit thus changing their cultural perception of politeness. Another study by Oliveira (2010) focussed on pragmatic perspectives of Twitter and claimed that Twittersphere is a (non) place for politeness. The disembodiment of messages in the virtual world caused the political instances of politeness to lessen and known as a form of control of "indiscipline and resistance" (Oliveira 2010, p. 9). As a result, the users have to accept the rules and avoid sending messages that might cause 'problems' to themselves or others. Rentel (2014) took a step further by conducting a study on Twitter and its role as private communication by investigating 50 Italian private tweets. The findings reveal a high frequency of hedging strategies used to weaken claims, metacommunication aims at relation building, asking questions aims at being polite, while the expression of gratitude towards the community and apologizing show general esteem for addressee.

In the Malaysian context, Thayalan et al (2012) and Nur Aqsa Nabila (2014) are two examples of research on language and politeness in social media networking among the locals. Thayalan et al (2012) found that Malaysian news bloggers were generally polite with the use of positive politeness and negative politeness strategies. Nine prominent tactics to save face were identified with the use of jokes and in-group markers among the highest. In order to preserve the harmony in virtual communication, some bloggers were found to have served as gatekeepers. Nur Aqsa Nabilla (2014) who conducted a study of language and politeness strategies among Malaysian chatters revealed positive politeness is the most used politeness strategy. Positive politeness sub-strategies include giving gifts to the hearer, offering sympathetic advice and impersonalizing the speaker or hearer. This study also confirmed two stereotypes which prove Malaysian females are more polite than Malaysian males and the younger age group tends to use more positive politeness strategy as compared to the older age group.

As mentioned previously, multiple studies have been done in the area of politeness that used new media as the platform of investigation. Although some of the past studies shown were related to this present study, there have been few attempts in exploring politeness practice through the platform of social network Twitter. Regardless of the limited literature of politeness on Twitter, this study aims to investigate the most frequently used politeness strategies and to predict how a tweet can potentially misfire. This study hopes to present significant findings to the understanding of the modern online communication trend through the concepts of politeness. Thus, the objective of this paper is to identify the most frequently used politeness strategy among female ELS undergraduates and examine how their tweets could potentially misfire.



## METHODOLOGY

### PARTICIPANTS AND INSTRUMENTS

This is a qualitative research study employing observation of tweet updates and an open-ended questionnaire. This study incorporated a purposive sampling technique targeting undergraduate students aged from 20 to 23 years old. A total of 9 female English Language Studies (ELS) undergraduates of a public university in Malaysia were selected as research participants. According to Malaysia Social Media Statistic 2014, youths from 18 to 24 years old are the most active online users (blog.malaysia-asia.my 2015). ELS undergraduates were chosen as they were predicted to tweet mostly in English and these students are familiar with studies of politeness. Only female participants were selected for the purpose of the current study.

776 tweets were collected from Twitter.com over a two month period based on few restrictions. Only ‘solo’ tweets were collected, which means typically messages of 140 maximum characters of either status updates, detailing feelings and experiences, personal comments on recent news or presence updates from the participants (Jenders 2012). Other twitter features such as ‘retweets’, ‘mentions’, ‘hyperlinks’, or ‘polls’ were discarded from analysis. All the tweets were written in English to avoid the errors in translating tweets written in other languages. The second research instrument used in this research is an open-ended questionnaire (Appendix A) adapted from Mishaud (2007) who studied Twitter users’ appropriation of a web-based communication platform. The first section collected data on participants’ background information while the second section had eight open –ended questions on the participants’ experiences with politeness in Twitter. The researcher provides the participants with all the relevant information related to the study prior the survey and all answers were treated confidentially.

### DATA ANALYSIS

For data analysis, the twitter updates gathered were examined and analysed based on Brown and Levinson Politeness Strategies (1987) framework. For example, where respondent A tweeted ‘Go away traitor!’, the researchers would first refer to the 4 strategies and then classified the speaker as using the Bald-on Record strategy. This is because the tweet employed is direct and sounded aggressive as ‘go away’ is a directive and written with an apostrophe as if it was shouted. Another reason is the fact that the word ‘traitor’ is not a positive word synonym to ‘betrayer’ (Oxford University Press 2016). It is important to analyse each and every tweet to find out how the politeness strategies are usually used. The findings were then presented in the form of a table to assist in the discussion of the results.

The findings from the open-ended questionnaire were used to answer the potential misfire of Twitter messages and to support the findings on politeness from the main data. Analysis of data showed which messages had the potential to misfire. For example, the answers of open-ended question number eight on ‘How do you accept swearing or using vulgar word in Twitter? Explain’ was compared and related to the evidence of politeness strategies reflected in the main data twitter updates.

## RESULTS

The table below shows the summary of politeness strategies employed by female Twitter users.



than that, positive politeness of ‘asserting or establishing common ground’ is also one of the most popular strategies among the female twitter users. For example in sentence 5 ‘That feeling when you wanna reload rm10 into your tng but your mum shows up and gives rm50 instead.’ The sentence is classified as asserting common ground because of the phrase ‘That feeling ...’ which assumed the hearer knows ‘the feeling’ and could immediately relate to the sentence. In twitter sphere there are occurrences of the sentences that start with ‘that moment when you...’, ‘that feeling when you...’, ‘that awkward moment when you...’. People who are involved with twitter are usually able to acknowledge that all of the sentences which begin with these phrases talk about shared experiences, which in politeness is used to establish common background.

#### BALD-ON RECORD POLITENESS STRATEGY

Bald on record politeness strategy is a direct strategy and often sounds impolite. Brown and Levinson (1987, p, 69) state that the strategy is without redressive action, baldly means “doing it in the most direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way possible”. Twitter with its 140 character limit might have influence on the users’ behavior as the character limit might have persuaded the users to use direct and concise language. Examples are:

- (8) *Damnit jam.*
- (9) *F\*ck it. F\*ck the rest of today's class. I'm just gonna pass myself out*
- (10) *"You can't finish 2 Drama series in 2 days" WATCH. ME.*
- (11) *Sick of your immature act*
- (12) *When someone post a photo with "Breakouts" as the caption while looking flawless..bijwhereeee?????!!*

From the findings, the most popular bald on-record strategy is a simple utterance that uses a negative word which is connoted as a ‘rude’ expression. The utterances are usually very short and precise. It is a bald-on record because the utterance is direct and has negative words such as ‘d\*mn’, ‘sh\*t’, ‘s\*tan’, ‘b\*stard’, ‘f\*ck’ and many others. It is observed that the direct utterances include the words as expression of ‘frustration’ or the speaker really wanting to be rude as shown in sentences 8 and 9. Moreover, it is a norm for people to rant in cyber world about their feelings and frustrations. The high employment of swear and vulgar words in Twitter is proven and considered as common by the participants. This is evident when answering the question on the acceptance of swear words and vulgar speech in Twitter where all of the participants thought it was perfectly fine and common. Some participants also pointed out that using vulgar words leaves bigger impact and stronger impressions.

Sentence 11 is a direct bald on-record of desperation. The word ‘sick’ showed that the speaker is desperate and therefore produced the direct utterances. There was no attempt on saving the face of ‘your’ in the sentences. Meanwhile sentence 10 shows direct bald on-record of task-orientation where the speaker gives a task in a direct manner ‘WATCH. ME’. The speaker also used capital letters for emphasis and this leaves a greater impact on the hearer. As for utterance 12, it is considered as bald on-record because the statement is rude and the word ‘bij’ here is a local spelling for the swear word ‘b\*tch’ which carries a negative connotation.

#### OFF-RECORD POLITENESS STRATEGY

Off-record politeness strategy is also known as an indirect strategy. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), off-record happens when a speaker decides to leave it up to the addressee to decide how to meaning while doing the FTAs. Hence, it is possible that the hearer may not



discover the tidings and the meaning can be interpreted differently. In Twitter, some of the users had the tendency to use off-record in their tweet updates such as:

(13) *I knew it was too good to be true!*

(14) *ATTENTION SPAN OF A GOLD FISH GODDAMMIT*

(15) *If someone told me to wake them up, its an easy ask. But if im the one asking for the help goodluck waking me up*

(16) *Is it me or Malaysians are getting less smarter day by day? This is all Najib's fault*

(17) *Damn... i'm so deprived now..i need to puff.*

(18) *Could be all calm on the outside when I'm actually planning to keep your mouth shut*

(19) *"Thanks to pakcik who cut the grass super noisy this morning coz he successfully woke me up from sleep. The sound is super killing".*

(20) *"replies text at 7am\* 'So you actually woke up for subuh? Im proud of you"*

Being metaphoric as shown in sentences 13 and 14 are indirect politeness strategy. 'I knew it was too good to be true!' is a metaphor for 'not worth it' and 'ATTENTION SPAN OF A GOLD FISH' is a metaphor for saying someone is very forgetful because of the fact that a goldfish's memory does not last long (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/>). Another interesting finding is that there is a tweet that sounds 'Whenever I buy and eat nasi ayam kukus dara..i feel like satan. Because it's like a virgin offering to me...erm..'. From the sentences, it is noted that the speaker is relating the meaning of 'nasi ayam kukus dara' because 'dara' in Bahasa Melayu, means a virgin or a state of still being a virgin. The speaker was relating the rice with a 'dark' concept because of the words 'dara' and 'satan' when in actual both words do not have any connection at all. Other indirect strategies found are 'give hints' and 'overgeneralization'. Sentences 15 and 17 are examples of how speakers use indirect strategy by giving hints. For example, sentence 15 is the indirect hint of saying the speaker loves to sleep and is difficult to awaken, while another example for number 17 is an indirect hint that the speaker wants to smoke. Next, example of generalization is in sentence 16 where the speaker is overgeneralizing 'Malaysians' and the Prime Minister Najib in the utterance.

Off-record 'contradiction' is also found among the tweets such as 'Mr. Right but Wrong'. The real meaning of the sentence can be interpreted as a negative statement. Another example is in sentence 18 where the speaker used contradiction to minimise the FTA although it sounded harsh. Another interesting tweet is sentence 19, 'Thanks to pakcik who cut the grass super noisy this morning coz he successfully woke me up from sleep. The sound is super killing'. From the sentence it shows that the speaker ironically used the word 'thanks' to convey her frustration. Besides, the sentence also contains the element of 'sarcasm'. Culpeper (1996, p. 357) defines sarcasm as mock-politeness where "FTA is performed with the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere, and thus remain surface realizations". The speaker was expressing gratitude and used the deference 'pakcik' or 'uncle'. Both of the elements are parts of politeness strategies. However, it is not expressed sincerely but rather ironically. Another example of tweet with element of sarcasm is sentence 20, 'replies text at 7am\* 'So you actually woke up for subuh? Im proud of you'. From the researchers' point of view, it is possible that the hearer rarely replied text as early as 7am and thus, the act of the hearer performing Subuh which is the morning prayer for Muslims, was questioned. However, it becomes clearer that the sentence has the influence of sarcasm because of the latter sentence 'Im proud of you'. Culpeper (1996) who criticised politeness strategies produced impoliteness theories based on Brown and Levinson's and sarcasm is one meta-strategy of impoliteness.

#### NEGATIVE POLITENESS STRATEGY

Negative politeness may appear quite formal and restrained (Stodulkova 2013). Negative politeness strategy is used the least (7 percent) in the Twitter updates as this strategy is often used with hearers of a higher status like teachers, employers or lecturers. However, in Twitter, most of the audience are of equal power status and social difference, thus explaining why the strategy is the least employed. Examples of tweets using negative politeness strategy are:

- (21) *If only u know how much i don't wanna lose you*
- (22) *When you know that you are unable to do something anymore*
- (23) *I wish to keep you close and never to stray but are you willing to sacrifice and stay?*
- (24) *i am so easily irritated nowadays it's getting annoying. Sorry for those who need to entertain me in whatsapp everyday.*
- (25) *I remember during Writing class, I couldn't pronounce 'perpetrator' correctly so Miss Siti just kept teasing me*
- (26) *I mean, i know you're trying to help. But i'm sorry. I just really hate myself at times. Like theres no issue but i just feel like stabbing.....*

'Apologizing' and 'hedges' are part of negative politeness strategy. In sentence 24, the speaker tried to minimise the FTA by apologizing and was trying to save the negative face of 'those who need to entertain' the speaker. Another example of apologizing is sentence 26. Next, hedges such as 'sort of', 'rather' 'if only', 'what have you' and 'when you know' are also part of negative politeness and an important politeness marker when identifying politeness utterances. The usage of hedges soften the FTA and the examples are found in sentences 21 and 22; 'if only...' and 'when you....'.

Next, 'giving deference' is also found among negative politeness utterances. Take the case of sentence 25 with the mentioning of *Miss Siti*. The mentioning of 'Miss', 'Prof', 'Dr' are examples of deference such as 'Achievement for today: *Dr. Roy* complimented on our group's thesis statement and intro' and 'The only reason to love *Dr Affendi*'. Another example is 'I don't want.... *Is it permissible for a student to call their professors?*', in the utterance, the speaker is employing negative politeness because of the deference mentioned (student, professors) and using such question to minimise the FTAs and to address the negative face need. Other example of negative politeness strategy by using question is sentence 23.

#### FINDINGS OF POLITENESS ON TWITTER FROM OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONNAIRES

Participants started tweeting from 2009-2010 to escape from Facebook as Twitter was found to be less intimidating and user-friendly in nature. It is efficient because people can just share and deliver random thoughts in a tweet, in any second and news is always updated. Twitter is known as a platform to express emotions and feelings. One participant (Fatin: Q1) said "Twitter was designed for people to freely said what they want which is freedom of speech" and "I can share my thoughts without worrying of anything" (Dhia: Q1). Other than that, the brevity on Twitter urges the users to get addicted. Therefore, the characters limit of 140 on Twitter user suggests pros and cons. Oktaviani et al. (2013) suggested the exertion of media including social network should be monitored as it could negatively impact the new generation's language habit and politeness. From the questionnaire, majority agree that Twitter users use Twitter impolitely. Mills (2003) mentioned that communication is not always cooperative and studies of conversation often defeat the contract of communication which promotes harmonious and balance between the speakers.

Profanity, the use of taboo words and abusive words are listed in Culpeper's impoliteness study under positive impoliteness (the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's positive face want). The findings show that the majority of the participants claimed cursing is common on Twitter. One of the participants stated 'Most response to other Twitter user with minority-agreed views are scorned and condemned in a very hard manner using vulgar speech and even threats' (Anna: Q4). Swear words on Twitter are considered as normal where all the participants accepted and regarded it as 'perfectly fine and common' (Anna: Q8). (Fatin: Q8) however stated 'I am fine when Twitter users use vulgar word because I believe that he/she have his/her own rights in doing that...I am fine as long as the swearing words are not for me', while, (Dhia:Q8) mentioned 'I don't mind as long as it doesn't cross any lines'. These show that the female twitter users are being open about the use of profanity, however, they set some restrictions such as 'as long as it doesn't cross any lines' and 'as long as the swearing words are not for me'. Two participants disagreed by arguing that 'a lot of twitter accounts tweet everyday quotes and in other way, they tweet words that are inspiring to other people' (Fatin: Q4) and 'I am a firm believer that Twitter is a platform to share information quickly. So I don't agree so' (Grace: Q4). Meanwhile, another two participants felt it was up to the individual to decide on the use of these words.

It is argued whether meaning can be found in messages limited to 140 characters or it actually can result in misunderstanding (Murthy 2013). Five participants were of the opinion that the 140-character limit does cause problems with only one saying it did not matter. The 140-character limit can be problematic because the meaning cannot be delivered completely and some of them prefer to write in full sentences. The participants wrote 'Sometimes, I have to make a thread of certain issues I feel the need to emphasise on which requires more than 140 words' (Anna: Q7), and 'I'm the kind of person who likes to express a lot of things in one sentence. I always find it hard because my sentences are dangling' (Intan: Q7). Meanwhile, some of the participants claimed that the 140 limit characters have pros as the limit keep tweets short and precise.

Majority of the participants agreed that misunderstanding on Twitter can easily happen and therefore they took some precautions to avoid FTAs. Being ambiguous with 'unmentioned' tweet is one of the reasons why tweet misfired. (Emily: Q6) said 'I post what I want to post and sometimes, the tweets fit perfectly to someone despite of not even talking about them. This is probably due to a trend called 'unmentioned tweets'. This is really a bothersome trend because people keep on butthurting over some tweets that are not even focusing on them'. 'Unmentioned' tweet is an indirect and open tweet. It does not target any specific person. However, any reader of the tweet might relate to the situation and this might cause a misunderstanding or conflict. Another example is from (Bibah: Q6) 'Seldom. When it happens, it's always because of my indirect tweets'. The participants agree that appropriate politeness strategies help reduce FTAs; 'the way I reduce the risk of FTAs between me and my follower is by tweeting nice words or sometimes I do not reply to his/her disagreement' (Fatin: Q5); 'I insert hahaha where necessary so that it'll sound like a joke.....and I try to add emojis where necessary' (Hana: Q5). Another strategy suggested is always aware and tries to not employ profanity as 'it may sound too rude' (Intan: Q5). Other examples are, 'I simply just be careful with my tweets and not to pick a fight with my followers' (Cammy: Q5) and 'I would always try very hard not to use any profanity despite how upset I am' (Intan: Q5). The participant (Intan: Q5) also added that she used indirect strategy when 'I would not mention directly to them even if I'm tweeting something bad about them'. However, being ambiguous might be a remedy or vice versa. Two participants (Anna: Q5, Emily: Q5) said that blocking any potential threat hinder misunderstanding. This is also supported by (Bibah: Q5) where she claimed her followers are her friends who know her well so she does not need any strategy.

## DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that the participants employed all four Brown & Levinson's politeness strategies on their tweet updates which are bald-on record, positive politeness, negative politeness and off record.

Positive politeness is the most frequently used strategy, followed by bald-on record, off record and lastly negative politeness. Positive politeness usually tries to minimise the distance between the speakers and hearer by expressing friendliness and solid interest in the hearer's need to be respected (NurNajla 2012) and this can be seen clearly in the world of Twitter. Both NurNajla (2012) and Thayalan et al (2012), found that positive politeness strategy was also the most frequently used strategy like the results of the present study. It is not surprising that the strategy is used most often because positive politeness serves various communicative purposes, most importantly to emphasise friendliness. From the findings, it is observed that the participants employed several sub-strategies of positive politeness on Twitter updates including creating a joke or humour in conversation, attending to the hearer interest, giving gift to hearer, avoiding disagreement, seeking for agreement, in-group identity markers and establishing common ground. One of the important findings in the research is the use of the expression 'HAHAHA' or 'LOL' to indicate the speaker is telling a joke. Abbreviations such as LOL and expression of laughing HAHAHA are seen as a habit in social media and reveal they are being overused. It is also noted that HAHAHA and LOL are not only used in computer-mediated communication but also in mobile short-messaging.

Next, the findings showed that bald on record appeared to be the second top strategy and it is not surprising as Twitter with its 140-character limit might have an influence on the strategy used. The character-limit might persuade the users to use Twitter directly and concisely. The participants used a sub-strategy of direct negative words, sympathetic warning and advice and direct bald on record of desperation. As mentioned, the use of profanities occurred in this strategy. It is observed that direct utterances include the word as expression of 'frustration' or the speaker really wanted to be rude and made no effort to minimise threats to the other person's 'face'. In the virtual 'faceless' community, the speaker also used capital letters to emphasise and leave a greater impact to the hearer. Other than that, in extreme bald-on record instances, the speaker ignored the face of a much older person regardless of the social difference but at the same time still retained the status and honorifics such as 'uncle', 'Dr', 'Miss' and 'Prof'. For example, 'Dearest uncle, please just stop with your pathetic scheme to downgrade the path I'm taking now. It makes you look...well..foolish :)'.

The third most frequent used politeness strategy is off-record. It was observed that the number of people who favoured direct strategies and indirect strategies is almost similar and it is proven that some people prefer one way or another. The majority of the participants employed sub-strategies involving metaphors, hints, over generalisations and contradictions. Indirect strategy is used to minimise the FTA in a most subtle and almost ambiguous way. From the findings, instances of 'sarcasm' were also found in the data. It is interesting to discuss indirect strategies because it can be an advantage where the speakers can try to impose FTAs without taking responsibility for it. At the same time, on record can be a disadvantage where the hearer might not discover the tidings and lose the meaning of the speaker's intention.

Last but not least is negative politeness strategy. The participants employed the strategy by apologizing, hedges, minimizing imposition and deference. This strategy is used the least because on Twitter, there is often no deference and most would rather employ positive politeness to maintain friendliness without exaggerating or imposing. However, this negative politeness strategy is best used when communicating with new people to minimise the FTA and when the speaker is trying to save the negative face of the hearers. This strategy

is also popular in interactions that involve two difference statuses. Hence, all of Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies are found in the tweet updates data and there are several ways how the strategies are manifested. Thus, this answered the first objective of the study.

For the second objective of the research, i.e., on potential misfire, it was found that there are many instances of tweets that could potentially cause harm in terms of politeness. The findings showed that the overuse of profanity, ambiguous indirect strategies and the failure to comply with Twitter's 140 character limits are the main reasons that cause misfire to happen. Profane words are used universally by the users not only as nouns or adjectives, but also as verbs and interjections. Although all the participants take profanity as normal in twitter sphere, it is still rude because not all hearers could accept the use of profanity especially in the 'unmentioned' or indirect tweet. It is found that in Twitter, being indirect is more risky and could cause conflicts as compared to being direct, opposing the traditional theory of politeness where indirectness is often opted to avoid confrontations. The 140-character limit can also be problematic when the meaning failed to be delivered completely.

In the analysis of tweet status, profanities are commonly overused to express frustration and admiration. Few of the participants mentioned and did agree that it is always important to be aware and refrain from employing profanity online. However, all of the participants used profanity in their tweets. In fact, some of the participants mentioned that it is fine to use swear words as long as the words are not for them, which proves that profanity is still not socially approved despite their casual occurrences among twitter users. Hence, it is concluded that the participants might not realise or be aware that all of them had employed profanity in Twitter. It stands true that profanity is considered as taboo, and its use is still considered as rude (NurNajla 2012).

Next, indirect strategy can either be a savior or damage. A participant said that she will use indirect strategy when she wanted to tweet something bad about a person without mentioning the name. However, the other participants share her experience on being indirect too and it did misfire when she actually directed a tweet to her friend but it was misinterpreted by another friend. Sometimes, a tweet is not directed to anyone yet it can be misunderstood because of its ambiguity. This is probably because an indirect tweet is usually produced as an open tweet or unmentioned; therefore, any reader of the tweet might identify with the situation, thus causing potential misfire as mentioned above. Below are examples of an open tweet:

*Why talk shit when you cant work your own shit, girl?(13)*

*You're so full of yourself. Narcissist!( 11)*

*I swear don't annoy me. So close to losing my shit.(20)*

Murthy (2013) argued whether meaning can be found in messages limited to 140 characters or it actually can result in misunderstanding. In the findings, it is agreed that meaning can be found in messages limited to 140 character limit as long as it is kept simple and precise. However, for virtual 'faceless' communication with the absence of many other cues, it is important for the users to comply with the 140-character limit so that the risks of misunderstanding are lessened to avoid any possible unfavourable issues.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to identify the most frequently used politeness strategy among the female undergraduates ELS Twitter and to investigate the potential misfire of tweets in Twittersphere. The present research investigated specifically on politeness in new media Twitter.



The findings reveal that all of the participants employed all four politeness strategies by Brown and Levinson (1987) in their tweet updates. Positive politeness is found to be the most frequently used politeness strategy by female Twitter users due to the nature of CMC which promotes interpersonal communication and expression among users. It is then followed by bald-on record, off record and lastly negative politeness strategy. Bald on record is the second top due to the 140-character limit of Twitter that persuades the users to be direct and profanities are found the most under this strategy. Off-record strategies are also found and prone to potential misfire due to ambiguousness. Negative strategy is the least used because in Twitter there is often no deference. It is also concluded that based on the findings, the use of profanity and the indirect mention in the tweets could potentially cause a misfire. Apart from that, the 140-character limit forced the participants to write more than one tweet and run the risk of being misunderstood if the following tweets are not read in sequence resulting in a potential misfire. Findings suggest that the female Twitter users were aware of the risk of getting misunderstood by others in the virtual site and they did use few strategies to reduce the face-threatening acts to others.

Future studies on politeness strategies in twitter should look into gender differences. This study further supports the teaching of politeness theory in class for more exposure to the application of politeness strategies which the students can benefit from and apply in both social network communication and face-to-face interaction. Society should take the issue of politeness seriously in order to maintain harmonious relationship and camaraderie. Last but not least, it is hoped that the findings from this study would enrich understanding on language use and communication and help future endeavors expand the discourse further.

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## APPENDIX A

### SAMPLE OF OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONNAIRE

#### Politeness Strategies in Twitter Status Updates among Female ELS Undergraduates of a Malaysian Public University

The purpose of this study is to identify the most frequently used politeness strategy among the female undergraduates ELS Twitter users, to explore the politeness strategies employed by the ELS female Twitter users and to investigate the potential misfire of tweets in Twittersphere. The questionnaire given aimed to understand the awareness of Twitter users on politeness which are employed in the twitter sphere. Please answer the questions honestly as the data will be collected. All the participant information and answers will be kept confidential. Thank you for your cooperation.

**Section A : Demographic Background.**  
Please tick (✓) the appropriate alphabet.

1. Gender : ( A ) Male  
( B ) Female
2. Race : ( A ) Malay  
( B ) Chinese  
( C ) Indian  
( D ) Others : \_\_\_\_\_
3. Age : \_\_\_\_\_
4. Level of enrollment : ( A ) First year ELS  
( B ) Second year ELS  
( C ) Third year ELS
5. Mother tongue : ( A ) Bahasa Melayu  
( B ) English  
( C ) Chinese ( Mandarin/Hokkien/Cantonese/Hakka etc.)  
( D ) Tamil  
( E ) Others : \_\_\_\_\_

**Section B: Open-ended Questions**  
Please answer the questions below.

1. How did you come to join Twitter and what attracted you?

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2. How do you use Twitter – do you reply to the set question, “What are you doing? Or submit entries along your own thinking?

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3. Do you agree that Tweets can persuade people to do the action suggested? Explain.

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4. Do you agree majority of Twitter users use Twitter impolitely? Explain.

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5. How did you reduce the risk of FTA between you and your follower? Explain.

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6. Have you experience any misunderstanding on Twitter between your followers? Explain

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7. Do you have problems delivering your message within 140 tweet limits? Explain.

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8. How do you accept swearing or using vulgar word in Twitter? Explain.

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## APPENDIX B

### SAMPLE OF TWEETS

1	Go back to where you belong and just goddamn rot there.
2	*about to turn off wifi* 'oh look 50% sale on zalora'
3	This is the reason why i wanted to stay longer at ptsl. FREAKING HOT IN HERE
4	My hamster just gave me the 'whayudoin' look
5	'And it will be just like you were never gone'
6	Everyone's just good at hiding their problems. They could be laughing, smiling and shit, but deep down you dont know
7	The cold shower you take after a jog. Ya Allah BLESSSSSS
8	Such a productive day.
9	The only reason to love draffendi
10	A very short haha followed by a question. Imin deep shit.
11	<i>Why talk shit when you cant work your own shit, girl?</i>
12	Last minute plan to watch mock trial again and i end up wearing jersey with sweater and sweatpants
13	<i>You're so full of yourself. Narcissist!</i>
14	I did not regret ditching my plans for today.
15	The struggle is real. I really need to take off my lens
16	That 'thanks a lot and sorry for everything tho.
17	Andthat is what i call degree student but stupid!
18	Contemplating whether should i go out or not.
19	Fabsquadis always the answer to when im stressed out.
20	I swear dont annoy me. So close to losing my shit.
22	So close to losing it. But nvm. Hold on first.
23	So...i almost got killed by a freaking nadiputra bus just now. This is why i hate ukm bus drivers.
24	And people are banging doors at this hour. I wannakill them so bad.
25	Having to watch muted videos cause this headache is killing me
26	Shit its fucking hot
27	80% of the students are not paying attention. That shows how done we are with this class.
28	My bed is the reason for my bad posture doh
29	Praying hard for Mama to let me apply for Japan
30	It doesn't hurt for the few days. But after a week, imdying inside.
31	I dont get why lecturers like to give us few simple assignments now and give tonnes that are difficult a week before finals
32	Please pleaseplease let me bump into him tomorrow. So i can show him what he's missing
33	Im so good at being mean
34	God bless this uncle for giving his sit to me cause my feet are freaking sore
35	I can feel my sweat dripping on my back
36	Can someone explain why is it so hard to be loyal?
37	I can never look at her the same again.
38	If someone told me to wake them up, its an easy ask. But if im the one asking for the help, goodluck waking me up
39	Too start over after 6 months? Nope. I would rather fight for it than waste my 6 months.
40	Too many inside jokes man. Damn you
41	What happens if me and Hawari does a face swap? NOTHING. HAHAHAHAHHAHAHA
42	Perks of being a few blocks away: he'll come to your block just to say sorry
43	Gonna drown myself in all these books i bought tonight
45	Waiting for bae to finish class at 7 is torturing
46	Its been awhile since my heartbeat went crazy all of a sudden and suddenly BOOM its back.
47	*replies text at 7am* 'So you actually woke up for subuh? Improud of you'
48	The only reason i take the bus is because its free and my parents paid for it dah. SO WHERE THE HELL IS ZON 6
49	This is why idont like having friends around me in class.
50	I noticed. Butlets not make it worse.