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(Im)politeness in the face of digital rejection: an analysis of whether gender affects the response to an impolite refusal of a Facebook friend request

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Abstract: This paper analyzes whether gender affects how people respond to a refused friend request combined with an impolite private message that expresses condescension and criticism. The private message was designed to elicit a response to the face-threatening acts of request, refusal and negative impoliteness. The study adopted an explanatory mixed methods approach to analyze 120 participant responses. Firstly, Culpeper et al.'s (Culpeper, Jonathan, Derek Bousfield & Anne Wichmann. 2003. Impoliteness revisited: With special reference to dynamic and prosodic aspects. *Journal of Pragmatics* 35(10–11). 1545–1579.) model of *response to the refusal options was applied to* identify counter-offensive and counter-defensive responses. After that, replies were categorized according to Culpeper's (Culpeper, Jonathan. 1996. Towards an anatomy of impoliteness. *Journal of Pragmatics* 25(3). 349–367., Culpeper, Jonathan. 2005. Impoliteness and entertainment in the television quiz show: The weakest link. *Journal of Politeness Research* 1(1). 35–72.) (im)politeness super-strategies and Bousfield's (Bousfield, Derek. 2007. Beginnings, middles and ends: A biopsy of the dynamics of impolite exchanges. *Journal of Pragmatics* 39(12). 2185–2216) defensive counterstrategies. The results show that men predominantly utilize defensive and aggressive counterstrategies, particularly mock politeness. Women, in contrast, heavily use counter defensive strategies, specifically abrogation, to deny responsibility for the triggering act. Social media is an increasingly crucial communicative tool in contemporary society, and this study provides evidence that gender-based differences can be observed in etiquette and norms on social media, which may be influenced by face-to-face dynamics. In addition, the study investigates how culture-specific expressions are discursively employed on social media to denote sarcasm or impoliteness, giving further insight into how language usage patterns may be impacted by social media.

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1 Introduction

Social media is ubiquitous, and textual interaction online makes for a rich source of politeness and impoliteness discourse. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has produced unique social interactions with distinctive language and rules of engagement. For example, individuals respond when asked to unfollow another (Matley 2018) or retweet an inflammatory question (Al Zidjaly 2019). The proper way to comment on the wall post (Placencia et al. 2016) or respond to a stranger's friend request (Rashtian et al. 2014) is shaped by the "basic moral perspective" individuals bring to online interactions, as highlighted by Parvaresh (2019). These moral prejudgments, which transcend cultural differences, can make it even harder to deal with impoliteness and rejection when trying to stick to the basics of etiquette in such situations.

Several previous studies have explored the relationship between gender and impoliteness, arguing that gender is performative and shaped, negotiated, and "achieved" during specific social interactions (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003; Mills 2003), challenging the stereotype that men are direct and women are indirect. The relationship between gender and impoliteness is impacted by how individuals construct their own gender identities, as this dictates how they feel they will be viewed by others. Thus, they may oscillate between more masculine or feminine forms on this basis (Mills 2005). Therefore, responses to impoliteness can be impacted by individual gender identity, norms, and expected roles.

Communicative norms and computer-mediated communication on social networking sites have opened a different world of etiquette and impoliteness articulated beyond the textual level (e.g., hiding identity by using pseudonym, blocking friends and followers, deleting posts and photos, being unfollowed). Friend requests are an essential part of social media, and a larger number of friends, connections, and followers reflect greater social prestige and clout.

This is in line with Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital. For example, a larger number of friends makes a user more appealing as a Facebook friend. When a friend request is refused or ignored, it constitutes the face-threatening act (FTA) of social rejection and often evokes negative emotions (Chen and Abedin 2014; Johnson et al. 2004). The act of sending a friend request is not inherently impolite. Rather, this article focuses on instances where a friend request is met with an impolite rejection or response. Thus, the impoliteness in question stems not from the act of sending a friend request, but from the way the recipient of that request reacts to such rejection. Moreover, this study aims to examine if gender and context play a role in how

respondents react to the refusal of a friend request, specifically when combined with a private message that expresses additional FTAs: criticism and impoliteness.

This study employs a mixed methods research approach, first applying the (im) politeness response options model proposed by Culpeper et al. (2003) to the data as a broader form of analysis, then analyzing the results using Bousfield's (2007) defensive counterstrategies, Culpeper's (1996, 2005) impoliteness super-strategies, and conventionalized impoliteness formulae (Culpeper 2011). Moreover, Culpeper and Hardaker (2017) redirect the emphasis from overarching strategies to the precise linguistic signals and contextual factors that contribute to impoliteness, providing a more nuanced comprehension of how impoliteness functions in interaction.

The study categorizes offensive responses using Culpeper's (1996) taxonomy of impoliteness super-strategies. However, it primarily employs a more integrated analysis that follows later developments in impoliteness theory, specifically regarding elements like impoliteness formulae and context sensitivity in interpretation. The application of these broader super-strategies is more suitable for achieving the goals of this research since they constitute a well-developed framework for the analysis of impoliteness within the contexts investigated in the study. Even though the newer constructs add further depth to the analysis, the defined area of research is more encompassed and lends further breadth by the super-strategies framework.

The study intends to explore whether gender and culture are factors in how participants respond to an act of impoliteness and rejection, and what counter-response options, (im)politeness super-strategies, and formulae they employ to save face. This paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Does gender impact how individuals respond to face-threatening acts of request refusal and negative impoliteness?
2. How do cultural norms impact (im)politeness strategies in the online environment?

2 Literature review

2.1 (Im)politeness theory

Brown and Levinson's (1978) politeness theory defined politeness as employing language in conversation to minimize conflict with others, while considering the interlocutors' feelings and desires. They based their model of politeness on Goffman's (1967) concept of "face", a term derived from the Chinese notion of self-esteem or self-image. Building on this model, they developed the concepts of positive face and negative face. Brown and Levinson (1987: 62) describe positive face as "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others" – in other words,

the desire to be accepted and appreciated by others. Negative face is "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 62). FTAs are actions that inherently damage an interlocutor's positive or negative face and are essential tools for understanding (im)politeness (Brown and Levinson 1978).

Culpeper and Hardaker (2017) categorize the existing studies on impoliteness into three waves of research. The first wave of the framework includes categories such as bald on record, positive, negative, off record, and withholding of politeness, whereas sarcasm and mock politeness were added later (Culpeper et al. 2003). The second wave moved to the discursive orientation of (im)politeness, focusing on the construction of the phenomenon and the constant battle over its definition. The last wave, associated with Bousfield (2008) and Bousfield and Culpeper (2008), focuses on speaker-hearer turns, context of use, and fixed meanings of particular linguistic forms according to Culpeper and Hardaker's (2017) review of (im)politeness research.

2.2 Cultural context and norms

Context is essential to understanding (im)politeness. Actions or utterances that might be considered impolite when viewed in isolation might appear otherwise, depending on their context (Culpeper 2010; Kádár et al. 2021; Kecskes 2015; Spencer-Oatey and Kádár 2016). When said between friends, an apparent insult like "You are such a moron" is more likely to be an example of mock impoliteness or banter than an utterance intended to offend (Culpeper 2005; Haugh and Bousfield 2012; Taylor 2015). In addition to the relationship between interlocutors or the specific social environment (see Culpeper 1996 on army training camps), context must also account for gender, communication medium, and culture.

Thus, cultural context and norms become an essential component in the construction of (im)politeness in digital communication, as illustrated by the case of rejecting a Facebook friend request. There is a significant cultural impact on how politeness is both conveyed and received between people of different genders. In terms of some cultures, it is considered rude and/or improper to say no directly, while in others, such directness is appropriate and acceptable (Spencer-Oatey 2008).

Moreover, culture has a strong influence on disparities between genders in communication through elements like authority, religion, self-perception, identity, pride, honor, and the law. Research also highlights the importance of cultural norms in influencing the cognition, language, and behavior of individuals. It reflects that gender constructs are crucial in determining attitudes, emotions, and social roles (Enaifoghe 2023).

Cassell and Blake (2012) and Alkahtani et al. (2013) have examined Saudi Arabian communication, including a dislike of stress/pressure, conflict, and a negative attitude toward technology use and the importance of dignity and respect. For Arabs, particularly Saudis, politeness is about being tactful and self-restraint, influenced by religious values that emphasize humility, hospitality, and respect (Bouchara 2015; Hariri 2017). Daily speech contains religious words in greetings and casual conversations, such as Masha Allah (As God has willed), InshaAllah (God Willing), Barak Allahu feek (May God bless you), Alhamdollillah (praise to be God). The phrases are used to acknowledge God and to bless longevity. These expressions are polite according to religious and cultural traditions, rather than typical European politeness norms, which serve to avoid conflict (Bouchara 2015; Shum and Lee 2013). This study will also contribute to the understanding of (im)politeness in various cultural settings.

2.3 Gender and (im)politeness

In this article, gender is considered a crucial social attribute that generally influences language usage and influences individuals' inclination to employ impolite tactics in communication during interactions. Studies further indicate that language use reflects and reinforces gender roles as well as different communication styles (Salsabila et al. 2024). The development of different approaches was influenced by evolving perceptions of how gender is defined. First-wave scholars (e.g., Brown and Levinson 1978; Holmes 1995; Lakoff 1975; Leech 1983) viewed gender as binary and assigned social and linguistic practices to a specific gender. In her book, *Language and Woman's Place*, Lakoff (1975) offered a theory describing unique features of women's speech. She argued that "women's speech" is inherently politer than "men's speech".

However, other scholars criticized Lakoff's observations for using "men's speech" as the basis against which she measured "women's speech". Holmes (1995) rejected Lakoff's (1975) assertion of a deficiency in female language dynamics, proposing that where evidence suggests that women are more inclined to respond with sensitivity, this is likely due to environmental influence rather than biological disposition. Holmes (1995) further suggested that these behaviors were more likely emulations of successful communicative efforts observed in people working in positions of power (Chalupnik et al. 2017).

Later research into language and gender was highly influenced by Butler's (1990) performativity theory, which redefined gender as a verb (the way people act and speak), rather than a fixed biological trait. Gender as performance draws on social and linguistic resources to construct an identity that has "profound effects on their production of social reality" (Chalupnik et al. 2017: 518–519; see Butler 2011). Mills's

(2003) social constructionist theory of gender and politeness posits that it is essential to assess both the gender identity of the speaker and how they believe their language use may be judged by others in a specific community of practice. Mills (2003) therefore argues that (im)politeness is shaped by sociological identity factors that arise in specific contexts. This study adopts Mills's (2003) social constructionist notion of gender. Gender will be treated as an independent variable in this study to enable quantitative analysis, specifically to analyze trends in responses to (im)politeness and to determine whether gender affects how participants respond.[1] However, it is explicitly recognized that differences in (im)politeness are not inherent traits; instead, they are shaped by societal expectations and reflect how individuals perform and express their gender in social interactions.

2.4 Reactions to acts of refusal and impoliteness

Culpeper et al. (2003) developed an (im)politeness choices model to investigate how people respond to acts of (im)politeness (see Figure 1 below). The model has four stages following the "triggering" act of impoliteness. The first stage is whether or not to reply. The second one is to respond to the impoliteness or reject it; accepting an impolite speech implicates taking responsibility (Bousfield 2007). Culpeper et al. (2003) suggests two counter strategies: the offensive approach aimed at attacking the speaker and the defensive strategy designed to protect the recipient. Bousfield (2007) developed defensive counter strategies (see Appendix B), which are more concerned with defending the face of the receiver than attacking the original speaker.

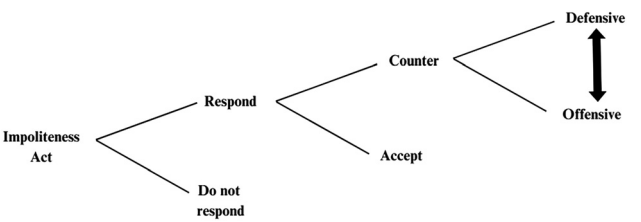

Figure 1: Culpeper et al.'s (2003) impoliteness response options model.

1 We gathered demographic information from the participants' Facebook profiles; as Facebook has 58 gender options, we felt it appropriate to use their self-identified genders as variables in this study. Female and male were the only two gender identities listed by participants.

A vital feature of impoliteness theory is examining the speech event in context. As Bousfield (2007: 2190) states, "[i]mpoliteness does not exist in a vacuum." Instead, there is often a "triggering event" or confrontation that the speaker perceives as a face attack or face threat preceding impoliteness.

Apart from this, there is considerable literature on gender as a variable in (im) politeness research. Chen and Abedin (2014) studied the extent to which men and women retaliate in response to rejection and criticism. Their findings support prior research (Bushman and Huesmann 2010; Fischer 2011; Herring 2000; Wood and Eagly 2010), which suggest that while men are more overt in aggressive behavior, women are more likely to withdraw. However, they found that men responded differently to rejection than to criticism, whereas women responded to both as aversive speech. Other studies (Anderson et al. 2014; Papacharissi 2004; Wolak et al. 2007) have observed that rejection and criticism of others have increased in recent years in online communities. In a study of gender differences in impoliteness on Tumblr, Hairetdin (2018) found that while women were just as impolite as men, the strategies they used were different. Whereas men were more likely to use taboo words and insults, women were more likely to scorn or disassociate from the impolite offender. According to Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012), individuals are more likely to act impolitely and aggressively in online settings because they often interact anonymously. They found that lack of eye contact is a significant factor contributing to this behavior.

The literature has revealed differences in overall reactions to face threats such as rejection and criticism (Blackhart et al. 2009; Chen and Abedin 2014; Downey et al. 2004), but not many researchers have analyzed responses to face threats in terms of gender. Existing studies suggest that both male and female participants employ impoliteness strategies in Internet communication, but do so in quite dissimilar ways.

The findings from studies such as Chen and Abedin (2014) and Hairetdin (2018) support studies conducted on face-to-face communication (Mills 2003) and suggest that online (im)politeness and gender are contextual and dependent on the specific online environment. However, a persistent gap in the literature is the lack of research exploring gendered aggressive responses to social media threats. This study intends to address the gap in the literature by investigating the politeness of elicited participant responses rather than studying a standard intuitive communicative narrative. Thus, rather than assessing responses in a typical setting where norms and regulations may prevent spontaneous responses, this study explores provoked responses.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research design

The study collected data from the responses of a group of Muslim men and women to the rejection of a friend request and a message of criticism from the requestee's profile. The participants had all sent unsolicited friend requests to the profile of an Islamic academic researcher known for controversial opinions on politics and religion. The profile had reached the maximum number of 5,000 Facebook friends, leading to subsequent friend requests being rejected. Initially, all participants sent a friend request to the researcher's active Facebook page. They received a private message in reply that was designed to damage their negative face wants. Out of the many responses, only those that showed signs of annoyance were taken for deeper consideration and analysis. It is important to note that not every respondent who employs defensive techniques is perceived to be losing "face". However, the study suggests the possibility of "losing face" when respondents use offensive strategies.

Moreover, negative impoliteness strategies are also known to elicit more responses (Culpeper 1996; Culpeper et al. 2003), a strategy intended to constrain the recipient's desire for autonomy and individuality. The message read:

(1) *For certain private reasons, I cannot accept your friend request. I hope you understand! Moreover, I advise you to send requests only to the people you know. That is part of self-discipline and respect.*

This study investigates how the gender variable affects how participants respond to the affront they received, whether the counter-response is offensive or defensive, and further, which (im)politeness strategies and formulae they use to save face.

Despite a small sample size, an explanatory research design was adopted to identify a causal link between gender and responses to an act of rejection and impoliteness. This study utilizes a deductive explanatory research method with a mixed methods approach to analyze participant responses to a message of refusal/rejection. It identifies (im)politeness strategies employed by the participants.

3.2 Data

This paper aims to analyze the responses elicited by a private Facebook message that commits face-threatening acts in both refusing the request and expressing criticism of the requester. Among the 120 responses, 61 were from self-identified men and 59 from self-identified women. The data was analyzed using an explanatory mixed methods approach.

3.3 Participants

Demographic data was gathered from participants' Facebook pages. Most participants were second-language English speakers with Arabic as a first language. Of the 120 Facebook friend requests received, men sent 61 and women 59. All the participants were of the Islamic faith; however, their geographical locations and ages were too varied to be used as reliable variables. Once the participants provided the initial response, a follow-up message, explaining the study's purpose, a promise of anonymity, and a request to use their responses was sent. Those who did not react to the follow-up message were also counted for the overall effective response rate but were not considered for further analysis.

3.4 Data analysis

As previously mentioned, a mixed methods approach was employed to analyze the data, involving a three-step process. First, a qualitative analysis of the responses was conducted using a truncated version of the model of impoliteness response options by Culpeper et al. (2003) (see Figure 1). Next, for the quantitative analysis, Bousfield's (2007) defensive counterstrategies (Appendix B) were applied to the data identified as defensive (im)politeness, while Culpeper's (1996, 2005) impoliteness superstrategies model (Appendix A) was applied to the data identified as offensive (im)politeness. Finally, Culpeper's (2010) impoliteness formulae assisted in further categorization of the offensive responses. In the qualitative analysis, we used the insights gained from Bousfield's model, Culpeper's impoliteness super strategies, and his impoliteness formulae to identify possible data patterns and how they relate to gender and culture as variables.

As for the theoretical framework of this investigation, it is crucial to note that context and co-text are the cornerstones of (im)politeness theory. In constructing the theoretical framework for this study, it is essential to underline that context and co-text are the foundations of (im)politeness theory. However, in computer-mediated communication (CMC), the concept of context collapse (Marwick and boyd 2011) is particularly relevant. Context collapse is the integration of formerly distinct social contexts in online environments, resulting in the convergence of numerous users and standards. This challenges the implementation of cultural norms because people are often not aware of the full reach of their audience.

Based on this theoretical framework, the present investigation explored participants' responses to an FTA in the form of scorn and rudeness delivered privately in the context of rejecting a friend request. The negative words that were used seemed abusive and the second-person pronoun "you" were directed to the recipient.

This behavior is regarded as intentional offending and is categorized as an act of impoliteness aimed at lowering the recipient's dignity. The type of impoliteness known as reactive rudeness, described by Kienpointner (1997), occurs when individuals respond to a perceived provocation with reciprocal impoliteness as an act of self-defense or retaliation.

4 Results

This section presents the results of the study. It begins with an analysis of the quantitative results before moving on to an analysis of the qualitative results.

4.1 Quantitative results

The quantitative analysis followed Culpeper et al.'s (2003) impoliteness response options model, which has four stages. Each stage leading from the initial "triggering" event offers further analysis of the data set. From this initial triggering event, the recipient has the choice of whether to respond. Choosing to respond opens other branches, and choosing not to respond involves not engaging, staying silent, or simply ignoring the event. Seventy-four responses to the FTA were received, with 4 participants choosing not to respond. The gender split reflected the results of previous studies (Mercadal 2021; Mills 2003; Stone and Can 2021) which indicate that women are generally less likely to engage in face-threatening acts. In this study, 44 % of female participants chose not to participate, compared to 33 % of men. This means that 56 % of the female participants responded, compared to 67 % of the male participants.

The results show that 52.63 % of male participants responded with acceptance, compared to 47.37 % of female participants (see Table 1). The level of male acceptance responses is slightly higher than those of female participants. Overall, there was a

Table 1: Counter or accept the FTA.

Categories	Total participants	% of Total participants	Male participants	% of male participants	Female participants	% of female participants
Counters	36	48.648	20	55.555	16	44.444
Accepts	38	51.351	20	52.631	18	47.368

near-equal split between responses that expressed acceptance (51.35 %) and those that countered with impoliteness (48.65 %).

Examples of acceptance can be seen below:

(1)

a. *I am sorry Akhi. I was not aware of that. I apologize. Jazak Allahu Khairan ['May God reward you'].*
b. *OK, thanks you. Insya Allah ['God Willing'] Yes no problem.*
c. *Alright, sir…. Shukuran WA Jazak Allahu khair ['Thank you and May God reward you']*
d. *Waaleikum salaam ['Peace be on you'] no problem brother it is fine*

In the next stage of Culpeper's response model, two choices branch out from the "counter" option: defensive or offensive counter strategies. Table 1 shows that there are countering responses from 36 of the total participants. Applying Bousfield's (2007) and Culpeper's (2005, 2011) classifications for defensive and offensive counterstrategies, 17 participants chose to employ offensive counterstrategies, and 19 used defensive strategies. A third category – "query" – emerged from the data. This involved the use of interrogatives, question marks, or short questions to counter the FTA by querying the message. While these responses counter the triggering message, they are not classified as either offensive or defensive.

As shown in Table 2, 64.705 % of responses from female participants could be classed as "offensive", compared to 35.294 % of male responses.

Additionally, Table 2 above indicates more defensive responses (46.34 %) than offensive responses (41.46 %). In both cases, a higher percentage of male participants (35.29 % for offensive and 73.68 % for defensive) than female participants (64.71 % for offensive and 26.32 % for defensive) used counterstrategies. Almost double the percentage of female participants used offensive counterstrategies (64.71 %) compared

Table 2: Breakdown of response options collectively for male (*N* = 20) and female (*N* = 16) participants.

Categories	Responses	Response %	Male	Male %	Female	Female %
Offensive	17	41.463	6	35.294	11	64.705
Defensive	19	46.341	14	73.684	5	26.315
Query	5	12.195	3	60	2	40

to defensive ones (26.32 %). The number of query responses was higher for male participants (60.0 %) than for female participants (40.0 %).

4.2 Qualitative results

As previously discussed, in (im)politeness theory, understanding co-text and context is an essential analysis factor. In this instance, we have a context: the private message that initiated the FTA. In addition to rejecting an offer of friendship, an already fraught act, the message further expresses criticism and condescension. Within the super-strategies frameworks of Culpeper (1996) and Culpeper et al. (2003), these are both elements of negative impoliteness, as they are designed to damage the recipient's negative face. Further, the private message sent to participants uses the second-person singular pronoun "you" to establish a clear association between the recipient and the negative aspect. Responses that express a similar intention are referred to as reactive rudeness (Kienpointner 1997). This highlights both the cause of and the intention behind the act of impoliteness.

4.2.1 Offensive super-strategies

Applying Culpeper's (1996, 2005) framework identifies both strategies as negative impoliteness, designed to damage the recipient's negative face. Across both genders, only two offensive super-strategies were employed: negative impoliteness and sarcasm/mock politeness. With only two strategies identified, it was necessary to explore the exact nature of these strategies and identify the underlying (im)politeness formulae (Culpeper 2011). The initial FTA included elements of condescension, scorn, contempt, and belittling, as well as the use of the second-person singular pronoun "you" to further provoke a response. Table 3 illustrates seven examples of negative impoliteness:

While almost all responses include condescension, only responses A, B, and E include insults. Response E does so with the question "Are you normal?", the implication being that the aggressor does not conform to the rules of politeness and is therefore aberrant in some way. In comparison, B is an example of a personalized negative insult, again, the use of "you" followed by an assertion of the researcher's unimportance. Finally, E is an example of personalized third-person negative references. The insult is indirect ("I consider them sick"): it offers a certain amount of face-saving as the insult is an association rather than a direct comment. Responses A and E show denial and insist they did not initiate a friend request. This strategy redirects the blame by framing the "impolite act" as inappropriate, breaking the rules of politeness for no reason. The universal use of condescension across almost

Table 3: Responses that make use of (im)politeness super-strategy negative impoliteness.

#	Negative impoliteness example	Formula
A	When I send You a request? I don't know you. Sorry and bye. By the way, I don't want to talk with people who have the attitude I consider them sick	Condescension Insult
B	You can remove the 'Add as a friend button' from your timeline page You aren't that important to act that way though.	Condescension Insult
C	This Facebook is for networking purposes not solitary alone, but if try to find your comrade, seek a friend who is the greatest Taqwa or tremendous God fearing to add more and more reward in hereafter. Not to connect a girl who is a stranger because Satan is between you and him.	Condescension Implicature
D	Excuse me You don't need to explain or message me if you do not accept my friend request.	Condescension
E	Are you normal? I never send you a friendship request try to check instead you talk without proof sorry bro I'm not like you think I preserve myself too I do not provoke men	Insult Condescension
F	Sorry, I don't follow you seem angry? if you don't want to know new people that is up to you but you don't have to say that to people.	Condescension

Spelling mistakes have been corrected for ease of legibility, and all words in square brackets are English translations of non-English languages.

all offensive responses could be an example of equal impoliteness reciprocity, returning like for like and meeting condescension with condescension. (Im)politeness is disguised as helpfulness.

The examples of "mock politeness" in Table 4 were identified using the following definition: "mock politeness occurs when there is an im/politeness mismatch leading to an implicature of impoliteness" (Haugh 2014: 278, as cited in Taylor 2015: 130). Moreover, Haugh's (2015) idea of impoliteness implicature strengthens this analysis as it also captures how an impolite meaning can be inferred from a context even where politeness is performed. This supports the assertion that mock politeness works through actual indirectness whereby the intent is core rude despite surface-level politeness.

Table 4: Responses that make use of meta-strategy sarcasm/mock politeness.

#	Sarcasm/mock politeness sample
A.	Jazak Allah! [May God Reward you] You are too much to be a public figure.
B.	SALAM ALAIKOM. I am sorry for the inconvenience I might have caused for you. Your posts look intriguing and great. But you need more etiquette in giving advice. Jazak Allah [May God Reward you]
C.	jazakallahu khair [May God Reward you]. I am not looking for a bf but looking for a friend on fb. LOL
D.	(ALHAMDULELLAH) [Thank God]. OK, I know now. I seek your PARDON "SIR" 🙇‍♀
E.	(JazakALLAH Khairan) [May God Reward you] now i know why we should NOT be rude
F.	Bro Jazak ALLAH KHAIR! This is fb and not real life. Are you aware of that? LOL

In each instance of mock politeness, the expression of thankfulness, especially the phrase "Jazak Allahu", appears genuine but conceals ridicule, particularly if it is followed by either sarcasm or mockery. While it appears courteous, the use of (Jazak ALLAH) in condescending settings implies mock politeness, in which the gratitude is not sincere but aims to covertly critique or disrespect the recipient.

This phenomenon is particularly notable in some Muslim cultures, where JazakAllah is very polite but is not always used genuinely. It could also be used as a mock politeness technique. This typically occurs when the speaker does not absolutely wish to express goodwill but instead uses the phrase to convey annoyance or to mock someone. In this study, some responses initially showed annoyance and ended up saying "Kazakh Allah" as a strategy to minimize the negative face. It can sometimes be interpreted as "Shut up! I do not want to continue arguing". However, not all "Kazakh Allah" in the responses were interpreted as "mock politeness". Only those responses that showed initial annoyance were viewed in this way. The phrase translates as "May Allah/God reward you". This phrase traditionally ends with the word *khayr* ('good'), which specifies that God should reward you (with) goodness (*Meaning of Jazakallah Khair or Jazakallah Khairan*). While *Jazak Allahu* is often used as an abbreviation of the entire phrase, it does leave the nature of the blessing open to interpretation. Respondents have used this phrase to express both politeness and mock politeness in reaction to the FTA.

4.2.2 Defensive counterstrategies

The use of defensive counterstrategies was far more prominent across both genders than the use of offensive counterstrategies. Most respondents, regardless of gender (63 %), employed Bousfield's (2007) "offer an account/explanation" strategy. We only begin to see gender-specific strategies when we look at the next most common response category, abrogation. Of the seven respondents who used this defensive strategy, only one was male, and the rest were female. Three male respondents used "ignore the Face Attack and offer insincere agreement", with "plead", "direct contradiction", and "dismiss/make a light joke" as the outliers (see Table 5 for details).

Table 5: Counter-defensive strategies.

Defensive strategy	Responses	%	Male (*N* = 19)	%	Female (*N* = 5)	%
Direct contradiction	1	5 %	1	5 %	0	N/A
Abrogation	7	36 %	1	5 %	6	31 %
Dismiss	2	10 %	2	10 %	0	N/A
Ignore	3	15 %	3	15 %	0	N/A
Offer an account/explanation	12	63 %	7	36 %	5	26 %
Plead	1	5 %	0	N/A	1	5 %

As can be seen from Table 5, offering an account/explanation was the most common strategy for both genders (63 %), with male participants (36 %) using this strategy more than female participants (26 %). Abrogation was the second most common strategy (36 %) but was used overwhelmingly by female participants (31 %) than by male participants (5 %). "Ignore" made up 15 % of the total responses but was only used by (15 %) of men. Next, "dismiss" was again only used by (10 %) of men. "Plead" and "direct contradiction" were each only used once, by a female participant and a male participant, respectively. As offering an explanation was used by most participants (63 %), this strategy will be discussed in greater detail. Offering an explanation also included negotiation to save face. Several of these responses appealed to the researcher's identity as a Muslim, either in apology or to renegotiate the refusal of their friend request. Responses categorized as offering an account/explanation are presented in Table 6.

In many of the responses, an apology is offered. Other participants used cultural or geographical references to explain their actions: "Masha Allah (As God has willed) brother from Saudi", "I sent you a friend request because you are living in Saudi Arabia", and "I need to know my Muslim brother". Other responses mentioned sharing knowledge/information: "I just add people to share knowledge", "your posts inspiring used to do some nice posting and interesting stories", "I want to follow your account only for sound knowledge". Finally, some of the responses referred to their relationship with the researcher: "We have over 100 friends in common", "You are friend with my brother", "We used to sit together in Memphis Tennessee", "We used to be friends here". Thus, participants used various strategies when offering an account/explanation.

The following section will explore abrogation, which was the second most used defensive counterstrategy in the dataset. Abrogation is a strategy that shifts the blame for provoking the initial act of impoliteness. Each respondent denies sending the initial friend request, again calling out the author of the impoliteness act as behaving unreasonably, as there was no provocation. Although this could also be recognized as a form of denial, it was the initial act that was denied, not the criticism (see Table 7). As was shown in Table 5, there was a gender imbalance in the use of abrogation, which was used by 31 % of female participants and just 5 % of male participants.

As a strategy, abrogation was similar to "offering an account/explanation", as it also featured the common use of apology. Most of the examples denied having sent the request: "You had to have sent me one because I don't send requests", "I never sent you one", "I didn't send any request to you", "What request are you referring to?", or

Table 6: Offering an account/explanation.

#	Response	Strategy
P	I am sorry I should have asked permission and I want to follow your account only for sound knowledge	Offer an account/ explanation
Q	I AM sorry many times MY grandson USED MY iPad SO I guess they SEND you friends request BY mistake. Sorry.	Offer an account/ explanation
R	I'm following your post. Will that be fine right?	Offer an account/ explanation
S	I'm sorry for the inconvenience. I actually don't know you but with your picture as a good man that's why I sent you the friend request. Thanks	Offer an account/ explanation
T	It's ok. I sent you friend request because you are living in Saudi Arab. I thought that you would be helpful for me in the fact of job there. So, I sent you request. I hope you will able to consider my problem.	Offer an account/ explanation
U	Masha Allah (As God has willed) brother from Saudi it's alright I understand We actually use to be friends here before I had some issues with my account which I had to reset it you actually use to do some nice posting and interesting stories of which is always read and learn something which are really beneficial for me but Alhamdulillah (Praise be to God) my brother if can't be friends on Facebook again	Offer an account/ explanation
V	Not a problem…I'm woman and I understand brother. Just interested in my Deen [religion]. Learning as I'm revert. Your posts inspiring…my apologies indeed.	Offer an account/ explanation
W	Ok thank for that advise but us a Muslim i need to know my Muslim brother even if I don't know him or I know him or her so my brother by the names	Offer an account/ explanation
X	Thanks for advise dear. By the way, we used to sit together in Memphis Tennessee, I am [redacted] I am so sorry and may God bless you. You may remember me when you were in studying in the States.	Offer an account/ explanation
Y	we have over 100 friends in common so that is why the friend request. In'Sha Allah Khair Asalam (God willing, May God come and peace be with you) Brother	Offer an account/ explanation
Z	why is that…you are friend with my brother	Offer an account/ explanation
AA	You welcome, and I respect your privacy… I just add people to share knowledge…. I'm sorry if I bother you. ☺	Offer an account/ explanation

indicate lack of understanding: "I don't understand the purpose of your message", "I am not understanding what you are talking about", "I cannot remember adding you, to be honest". One example characterized the incident as an accident: "might have accidentally pressed the add friend button". Thus, in the case of abrogation, most of the participants who employed the strategy denied having sent the request in the first place.

Table 7: Abrogation examples.

#	Response	Strategy
G	I didn't send you a request. You had to have sent me one because I don't send requests but thanks for letting me know	Abrogation
H	I never sent you one. I think there is a mistake somewhere, maybe.	Abrogation
I	I'm sorry I didn't send any request to you	Abrogation
J	I'm sorry, I don't understand the purpose of your message. Which request are you referring to?	Abrogation
K	I am not understanding what you are talking about	Abrogation
L	lol, I wanted to press the follow button on your page. Might have accidentally pressed the add friend button.	Abrogation
M	Waalakemasalaam no problem I cannot remember adding you, to be honest.	Abrogation

5 Discussion

The findings of the study reveal the presence of gender differences in the response patterns of male and female participants to an FTA. As shown in Table 1, the choice to either counter or accept the FTA also differs between male and female participants. The results showed that 56 % of the male participants decided to retaliate against the FTA, while only 44 % of the female participants did so. This finding supports studies conducted since Brown and Levinson's (1987) research, which have argued that men are more likely to use face-threating acts. On the other hand, the percentage of female participants who accepted the FTA was slightly lower than that of the male participants (47.37 % and 52.63 %, respectively), which also corroborates Mills's (2003) studies indicating that men are inclined to dominate conversations by non-acceptance of FTAs.

In Table 2, the data presented offer a further breakdown of the kinds of responses according to gender. However, the percentage of female participants who chose the offense strategy was considerably greater than that of male participants (64.71 % vs. 35.29 %), thus contradicting previous assertions (see Arriaga and Aguiar 2019; Fahlgren et al. 2022) that male participants engage in more aggressive strategies. This contrast with previous research may indicate that the setting of the conversation or the women's perception of what is at stake in the conversation may cause them to behave more assertively. This could be because women, in particular, have become increasingly assertive in their communicative behavior in certain contexts, as pointed out by (McLean 2020).

When it comes to defensive strategies, male participants demonstrated a higher probability of engaging in this type of behavior: 73.68 % responded defensively as

opposed to only 26 % of female participants. This result lends credence to Goffman's (1967) view that men are more likely to manage the social dangers of FTAs through poses that protect face while avoiding conflict. It also has implications related to Brown and Levinson's (1978) politeness theory, which posits that people employ face-keeping strategies to avoid confrontation, especially when initiated by male participants.

Lastly, in the query response, men formed the larger percentage of participants using this strategy at 60 %, while women comprised 40 % of the sample. As claimed by other researchers (e.g., Tannen 1996), men are more likely to try to clear up issues that may be unclear to them as this will help them avoid any social complications. This result may also draw attention to a gender-communication effect, whereby men are more inclined to focus on the conclusiveness of the conversation (Coates 2015).

Generally, the responses from each gender made use of cultural norms and dynamics to provide responses to the friend request. In the case of male participants, solidarity was enhanced using the word "bro" or "brother", although this kind of language was most often encountered among male participants using the defensive counterstrategy of offering an account/explanation. Islam places a strong emphasis on brotherhood, and the use of the term "bro" could be a strategy of saving face and negotiating rejection by drawing upon religious solidarity. Female participants also made explicit mention of their gender in certain circumstances, especially as a means of avoiding misunderstanding: "not to connect a girl which is stranger", "I'm a woman and I understand brother", and "I preserve myself too I do not provoke men". These responses indicate that regardless of the varied geographical spread of the participants, Islamic values and communicative strategies were expressed collectively, supporting previous research by Zamakhshari (2018). Additionally, this corresponds with Edward Hall (1976) categorizing Arabic as high-context and collectivistic lingua-culture; hence, the role of general values, invisible messages, and common identity in setting up the interaction and communication practices.

Bouchara (2015) noted that politeness in speech can be associated with religious expression, which is also true for this study. The phrase "Jazak Allahu" (meaning "May Allah/God reward you") has a polite undertone, where one feels grateful, thankful, or appreciative. However, in some situations, it can also mean mock politeness, where the speaker may seem to be polite but is being sarcastic. This duality shows that politeness can sometimes serve as a veil and may have hidden meanings depending on the way the phrase is said.

It was also found to be sarcastic, which people used with other elements of irony, as in "Jazak Allahu khair 4 ur advice", to show their intention. Ordinarily used in polite conversation in face-to-face communication, these phrases are

utilized differently in cyberspace because the anonymous nature of the communication facilitates sarcasm. Culpeper (1996: 356) defines mock politeness, or sarcastic politeness, as a type of impoliteness meta-strategy. It includes performing a face-threatening act using politeness strategies that are overtly insincere, thereby functioning only at the surface level. Therefore, it serves to insult or condemn rather than show sincere politeness. In this regard, *Jazak Allahu* as a form of mock politeness, conveys politeness in its literal sense while also indicating sarcasm. Culture was another influential factor in (im)polite responses – Islamic culture encourages polite responses even when facing impoliteness (Hariri 2017). Therefore, the use of *Jazak Allahu* as mock politeness served as a technique for portraying dislike while conforming to cultural standards of politeness, an example of a way in which sacred phrases can be used to express (im)politeness without offending the recipient.

Moreover, there has been a growing interest in the interactional nature of (im)politeness in digital media from a cultural perspective. According to Culpeper's (1996) theory of impoliteness, certain communicative activities purposefully threaten a person's positive face (their desire to be liked and accepted). In this context, rejecting a friendship request causes negative emotions in the recipients since it threatens the positive face. Comments like "I suggest you send messages only to people you know" heighten the face threat and generate reactive responses (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010; Culpeper et al. 2017).

To this line of work, the present research contributes by establishing that cultural and religious factors can affect impoliteness responses. Such use of Jazak Allahu in sarcastic form is a perfect example of how traditional politeness enters in conflict with the modernity of the social media platform. Yus (2018) call it "cyber-pragmatics", which involves conducting cultural practices in cyberspace and frequently employs irony. In addition to religious and cultural expression, gender norms also appear prominently in the digital discourse, as seen in comparable tensions between traditional ideals and communicative standards of online spaces.

Gendered norms are often manifest in online communication, such as when male participants call others brothers or when the female participant makes her gender identity clear. These examples illustrate how online interactions not only reflect but also negotiate traditional gender expectations. Language plays a crucial role in defining gender identity and boundaries (Holmes 1997). Furthermore, studies indicate that online gender norms tend to be similar to those offline and at the same time, offer an opportunity to challenge and redefine them (Wilhelm 2021). These results show that the use of digital communication is not entirely new or simply an extension of traditional practices. Instead, it serves as a multifunctional space where established social norms are modified, questioned, and, in some cases, heightened.

6 Conclusions

The results of this study demonstrate that gender and culture significantly affect responses to an impolite FTA consisting of a rejected friend request and a condescending and critical private message. Some of the results supported findings from the existing literature, and others were unexpected. In the study, male participants were found to be more likely than female participants to respond to and counter the rejection. Female participants were more likely to choose not to respond, with both results represented in the existing literature. Although previous studies had found that men were more likely to use insults, the results of this study showed that female participants did not shy away from responding with insults. While some results showed an almost even split between the genders, female participants used offensive counterstrategies more often than defensive responses and were much more likely to use abrogation. These results found that women may feel more at ease engaging in such behaviors online due to the lack of physical threat.

Cultural norms also played an important impact in establishing online (im) politeness practices. Both genders used only two offensive counterstrategies: negative impoliteness and mock politeness. Mock-polite responses were undoubtedly affected by the participants' culture, as many responses offered a traditional Islamic phrase of gratitude followed by a sarcastic remark. Data patterns clearly showed the effect of gender and culture on how participants chose to respond to the rejection and the additional FTAs of condescension and criticism.

As the study relies on online demographic data, which could be falsified, one limitation of the study was the lack of reliability for qualitative data. The qualitative data was further limited by the number of participants who replied. Further exploration into participants who did not reply could offer a different avenue of research.

Additionally, a similar study that explored one specific region could offer a more robust set of results for both gendered and cultural impacts by linking the results of the dataset to sociological realities. Future studies should be conducted focusing on the cultural aspect of (im)politeness separately from face theory. Additional research could also provide a better understanding of how different cultures build the concept and perception of politeness and (im)politeness, thus expanding on the current knowledge base.

For the purpose of this study, Culpeper's impoliteness super-strategies (1996) have been employed in this analysis. However, the scope for future research could consider Culpeper's more recent "impoliteness triggers/formulae". This approach may provide more understanding of how certain lexical features and situations lead to impoliteness in computer-mediated communication.

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Appendix A: Culpeper's impoliteness super-strategies (1996: 356–357; 2005)

Strategy	Description
Bald on-record impoliteness:	The Face Threatening Act (FTA) is performed in a clear, direct, and concise way in circumstances where *face* is not minimized or irrelevant
Positive impoliteness	The use of certain strategies to damage the addressee's positive-face wants, e.g. ignore the other, exclude the other from an activity, be disinterested, unconcerned, unsympathetic, use inappropriate identity markers, use obscure or secretive language, seek disagreement, use taboo words, call the other names.
Negative impoliteness:	The use of strategies to damage the addressee's negative-face wants, e.g. frighten, condescend, scorn or ridicule, be contemptuous, do not treat the other seriously, belittle the other, invade the other's space (literally or metaphorically), explicitly associate others with negative aspects (personalize, use the pronouns 'you' and 'I', put the other's indebtedness on record.
Off-record impoliteness	The FTA is performed by means of an implicature but in such a way that one attributable intention clearly outweighs any others.
Withhold politeness	The absence of politeness works where it would be expected. For example, failing to thank somebody for a present may be taken as deliberate impoliteness.
Impoliteness Meta-strategy *Sarcasm or mock politeness*	The FTA is performed with the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere, and thus remain surface realizations.

Appendix B: Bousfield's (2007) defensive counter-strategy

Defense strategy	Definition/explanation
Direct contradiction a.k.a. inversion	The receiver of the FTA denies the FTA.
Abrogation (social and/or discoursal role-switching)	The receiver denies personal responsibility for the triggering event.
Dismiss: make light of face damage, joke	Make light of damage, joke the receiver acts as if the FTA is unimportant or as if it is not face-threatening.

(continued)

Defense strategy	Definition/explanation
Ignore the face attack (whether explicit or implied), offer an insincere agreement	Sometimes this strategy is used to allow the speaker who makes the impolite utterance(s) to vent. Other times, the receiver ignores an implied FTA.
Offer an account/explanation	The receiver of the FTA attempts to explain facts that led to the triggering event so the speaker of the FTA may have to retract it or appear to have made a mistake by using the FTA in the first place.
Plead	Bousfield acknowledges this to be a theoretical move as he did not find instances in his data. In pleading, the receiver of the initial FTA uses positive politeness and deference to enhance the speaker who committed the FTA's face while simultaneously damaging his or her own positive face. Like 'offer an explanation' the goal is for the speaker to retract the FTA or look bad for having committed it.
Opt-out on record	The receiver chooses not to respond, but does so on record.
Treat the situation as a different 'activity type'	The receiver treats the situation as a different activity type, one in which the utterance would not be considered impolite

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Bionote

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