# Gender Differences in Impoliteness Strategies on TikTok Comments: A Pragmatic Study

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates gender differences in the use of impoliteness strategies in TikTok comment sections from a pragmatic perspective. Drawing on Culpeper's (1996, 2011) impoliteness framework, this research aims to identify the types of impoliteness strategies employed by male and female TikTok users and to examine how these strategies are realized in online interaction. The data consist of 218 impolite comments collected from selected viral TikTok videos. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed to analyze the pragmatic functions of impoliteness strategies, supported by quantitative analysis to examine frequency patterns across genders. The findings reveal that both male and female users actively engage in impolite discourse; however, they differ in their preferred strategies. Male commenters tend to employ more direct and explicit strategies, particularly bald on record and negative impoliteness, while female commenters predominantly use indirect strategies such as sarcasm or mock politeness and positive impoliteness. These differences suggest that impoliteness on TikTok functions as a strategic communicative resource shaped by gender, platform affordances, and interactional goals. The study concludes that impoliteness in digital discourse is a socially meaningful phenomenon that reflects the intersection of language, power, identity, and gender in contemporary online communication.

**Keywords:** impoliteness strategies, gender differences, TikTok comments, pragmatics, digital discourse

## *ABSTRAK*

*Penelitian ini mengkaji perbedaan gender dalam penggunaan strategi ketidaksantunan pada kolom komentar TikTok dari perspektif pragmatik. Dengan mengacu pada kerangka teori ketidaksantunan Culpeper (1996, 2011), penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi jenis-jenis strategi ketidaksantunan yang digunakan oleh pengguna TikTok laki-laki dan perempuan serta menganalisis bagaimana strategi tersebut direalisasikan dalam interaksi daring. Data penelitian berupa 218 komentar tidak santun yang dikumpulkan dari beberapa video TikTok viral. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif untuk menganalisis fungsi pragmatik ketidaksantunan, yang didukung oleh analisis kuantitatif untuk melihat pola frekuensi berdasarkan gender. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa baik pengguna laki-laki maupun perempuan sama-sama aktif menggunakan ketidaksantunan dalam berkomunikasi, namun terdapat perbedaan dalam preferensi strategi yang digunakan. Komentator*

*laki-laki cenderung menggunakan strategi yang lebih langsung dan eksplisit, khususnya bald on record dan negative impoliteness, sedangkan komentator perempuan lebih sering menggunakan strategi tidak langsung seperti sarcasm atau mock politeness dan positive impoliteness. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa ketidaksantunan di TikTok berfungsi sebagai sumber daya komunikatif yang strategis dan dipengaruhi oleh faktor gender, karakteristik platform, serta tujuan interaksional. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa ketidaksantunan dalam wacana digital merupakan fenomena sosial yang bermakna dan mencerminkan keterkaitan antara bahasa, kekuasaan, identitas, dan gender dalam komunikasi daring kontemporer.*

***Kata kunci:*** *strategi ketidaksantunan, perbedaan gender, komentar TikTok, pragmatik, wacana digital*

## A. Introduction

The emergence of digital communication has significantly transformed the ways individuals interact, negotiate meaning, and construct social identities. Social media platforms have become dominant spaces for public discourse, allowing users to express opinions, emotions, and evaluations with minimal restrictions. Unlike face-to-face interaction, online communication often lacks immediate social cues such as intonation, facial expressions, and physical presence. As a result, language use in digital spaces tends to be more explicit, emotionally charged, and, in many cases, impolite.

One of the most salient linguistic phenomena in online interaction is impoliteness, which refers to the use of language intended to attack, damage, or threaten the interlocutor's face. Within pragmatic studies, impoliteness is understood not merely as the absence of politeness, but as a strategic and context-dependent communicative choice (Culpeper, 1996; 2011). In online environments, impoliteness is often intensified by factors such as anonymity, physical distance, and the reduced risk of social sanctions. Consequently, digital platforms provide fertile ground for examining how impoliteness is performed, interpreted, and negotiated. Among contemporary social media platforms, TikTok has rapidly gained global popularity, particularly among younger users. Its short-video format encourages rapid consumption and instant reactions, often leading users to express opinions impulsively through comment sections. TikTok comments frequently display evaluative language, criticism, mockery, and verbal aggression, especially in response to viral or controversial content. These comment sections function as public arenas where users compete for visibility, assert personal stances, and construct online identities, frequently through impolite linguistic practices.

From a pragmatic perspective, TikTok comments represent a unique form of computer-mediated discourse where impoliteness is not only tolerated but sometimes normalized or even rewarded through likes and engagement. In this context, impoliteness may serve multiple communicative functions, such as expressing disagreement, entertaining audiences, asserting superiority, or aligning with particular social groups. Therefore, analyzing impoliteness strategies in TikTok comments offers valuable insights into contemporary patterns of language use in digital communication. Another crucial aspect influencing language use in interaction is gender. Numerous sociolinguistic and pragmatic studies have demonstrated that men and women tend to differ in their communicative styles, particularly in the expression of power, emotion, and confrontation (Lakoff, 1975; Holmes, 2013). Men are often associated with more direct, assertive, and confrontational language, while women are commonly described as employing more indirect, mitigated, or relational strategies. However, these generalizations have been increasingly questioned in online contexts, where anonymity and shifting social norms may alter traditional gendered patterns of

language use. Previous studies on online impoliteness have largely focused on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, revealing that gender plays a significant role in shaping how impoliteness is expressed and interpreted. Nevertheless, research specifically examining gender differences in impoliteness strategies on TikTok remains limited. Given TikTok's distinctive multimodal nature and its emphasis on rapid interaction, it is essential to investigate whether traditional gendered communication patterns persist or transform in this digital environment.

This study aims to fill this research gap by examining impoliteness strategies employed by male and female users in TikTok comment sections through a pragmatic lens. By adopting Culpeper's framework of impoliteness strategies, this research seeks to identify the types of impoliteness used, compare their distribution across genders, and explore their pragmatic functions in online interaction. The findings are expected to contribute to the broader field of pragmatics and sociolinguistics by enhancing understanding of gendered language use in contemporary digital discourse, particularly within emerging social media platforms such as TikTok.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What types of impoliteness strategies are employed by male and female users in TikTok comments?

2. How do these impoliteness strategies differ in terms of frequency and form across genders?

3. What pragmatic functions do impoliteness strategies serve in TikTok-based online interaction?

Impoliteness has become a central topic in pragmatic studies, particularly in relation to face-threatening communication. Early discussions of (im)politeness were largely influenced by Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which conceptualizes communication as an effort to mitigate face-threatening acts. However, subsequent scholars argued that this framework inadequately accounts for communicative acts that intentionally attack face. Responding to this limitation, Culpeper (1996) introduced the concept of impoliteness as a strategic and deliberate use of language aimed at damaging the interlocutor's face.

Culpeper (1996) proposed five main impoliteness strategies: bald on record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm or mock politeness, and withholding politeness. These strategies reflect different ways speakers can violate social norms and expectations in interaction. Later, Culpeper (2011) refined the theory by emphasizing the role of context, speaker intention, and hearer interpretation, particularly in cases where impoliteness is inferred rather than explicitly stated. In pragmatic terms, impoliteness is not an inherent property of linguistic forms but a socially constructed phenomenon that emerges through interaction. What is perceived as impolite depends on contextual factors such as power relations, social distance, and cultural norms. In online communication, these contextual cues are often reduced, making impoliteness more ambiguous yet more pervasive.

The rise of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has significantly altered the manifestation of impoliteness. Online interactions are characterized by anonymity, a synchronicity, and physical distance, which tend to lower social accountability and increase the likelihood of face-attacking behavior. Scholars have noted that digital environments often foster what is described as "online dis-inhibition," where users feel freer to express hostility or aggression (Suler, 2004).

Several studies have documented the prevalence of impoliteness in online forums, social networking sites, and comment sections. For instance, research on YouTube and Twitter reveals that impoliteness is frequently used to criticize public figures, challenge opinions, and gain attention. In such contexts, impoliteness may function not only as an expression of hostility but also as a performative act aimed at visibility and audience engagement. TikTok represents a distinctive CMC environment due to its multimodal nature, combining visual, auditory, and textual elements.

Comment sections on TikTok often operate as interactive spaces where users respond not only to the content creator but also to each other. This layered interaction increases the potential for impoliteness, as users negotiate meaning, alignment, and identity in a highly public setting.

Gender has long been recognized as an influential variable in language use. Early feminist linguistics, notably Lakoff (1975), suggested that women's language is characterized by politeness, hedging, and indirectness, reflecting broader social power imbalances. Later studies, however, have challenged essentialist views of gendered language, emphasizing that linguistic behavior is context-dependent and socially constructed rather than biologically determined.

Holmes (2013) argues that gender differences in communication often relate to differing interactional goals. While men may prioritize status and dominance, women may emphasize solidarity and relational harmony. These tendencies, however, are not fixed and can shift depending on the communicative context. In online settings, gendered language practices become even more complex. The absence of physical cues and the availability of anonymity can obscure gender identities or enable users to adopt communicative styles that diverge from offline norms. Consequently, examining gender differences in online impoliteness requires a nuanced approach that considers both traditional sociolinguistic patterns and the affordances of digital platforms.

A growing body of research has explored how men and women differ in their use of impoliteness strategies. Several studies suggest that male speakers are more likely to employ direct and aggressive forms of impoliteness, such as explicit insults and threats, while female speakers tend to use indirect strategies, including sarcasm, irony, or mock politeness. In online contexts, these differences are often intensified. Studies on social media discourse indicate that male users frequently dominate confrontational exchanges, using bald on record impoliteness to assert authority or discredit others. Female users, on the other hand, may engage in impoliteness in more nuanced ways, blending criticism with humor or emotional expression.

However, not all studies agree on the persistence of gender differences online. Some researchers argue that digital communication reduces traditional gender constraints, leading to more convergent linguistic behavior. This inconsistency highlights the need for platform-specific investigations, particularly on emerging platforms such as TikTok. Previous research on impoliteness in social media has largely focused on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. These studies commonly employ Culpeper's framework to categorize impolite expressions and examine their social functions. Findings consistently show that impoliteness is a prominent feature of online discourse, often used to express disagreement, construct identity, and negotiate power.

Nevertheless, empirical studies focusing on TikTok remain limited, especially those that integrate pragmatic analysis with gender perspectives. Most existing TikTok-related studies emphasize multimodality, content creation, or audience engagement, rather than linguistic interaction in comment sections.

Based on the reviewed literature, it is evident that while impoliteness and gender have been widely studied in pragmatics and online discourse, there is a lack of research specifically examining gender differences in impoliteness strategies within TikTok comment sections. Moreover, few studies adopt a pragmatic framework to systematically analyze how impoliteness functions in this rapidly evolving digital space. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge this gap by applying Culpeper's impoliteness model to TikTok comments and exploring how gender influences the choice and function of impoliteness strategies. By doing so, this research contributes to the understanding of online pragmatics, gendered communication, and digital discourse analysis.

**B. Research Method**

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design with quantitative support to investigate gender differences in the use of impoliteness strategies in TikTok comments. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as the focus of the study lies in interpreting linguistic behavior and pragmatic meaning within naturally occurring online interactions. Quantitative elements were incorporated to present the frequency and distribution of impoliteness strategies used by male and female commenters, thereby strengthening the analytical findings.

The data of this study consisted of written comments collected from TikTok comment sections responding to selected viral videos. The videos were purposively selected based on their high level of engagement, including a large number of views, likes, and comments, as well as their potential to generate controversial reactions. Such contexts were considered ideal for examining impoliteness, as controversial content tends to elicit confrontational and evaluative language from users. All comments analyzed in this study were publicly accessible, and no private or restricted data were involved.

Data collection was conducted through documentation techniques. The researcher observed the comment sections of the selected TikTok videos and identified comments containing impoliteness expressions. Relevant comments were captured through screenshots and subsequently transcribed into written text for analysis. To ensure ethical research practice, all usernames and personal identifiers were anonymized. Only comments that clearly contained impoliteness markers and were written in English were included in the dataset, while neutral or irrelevant comments were excluded.

Gender identification of commenters was carried out based on publicly available information, such as usernames, profile descriptions, profile images, and linguistic self-references found in the comments. It is acknowledged that gender identification in online environments may not always be accurate due to anonymity and performative identity construction. Therefore, gender in this study is treated as a socially inferred category rather than a fixed biological attribute, and this limitation is taken into consideration in interpreting the findings. The data were analyzed using Culpeper's (1996, 2011) framework of impoliteness strategies. Each comment was examined and classified according to the type of impoliteness strategy it employed, namely bald on record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm or mock politeness, and withholding politeness. Following classification, the frequency of each strategy was calculated and compared across genders to identify patterns and differences. The analysis then proceeded to pragmatic interpretation, focusing on how impoliteness strategies functioned in context, including their roles in expressing disagreement, asserting identity, and negotiating power in online interaction.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, theoretical triangulation was applied by grounding the analysis in established pragmatic theories. In addition, selected samples of the data and their categorizations were reviewed through peer checking to minimize subjective bias. Thick description was employed in presenting the findings, allowing readers to understand the contextual background of each impoliteness occurrence. Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. The data were collected exclusively from publicly available TikTok comment sections and were used solely for academic purposes. No attempt was made to identify, contact, or interact with the users whose comments were analyzed. Anonymization was consistently applied to protect user privacy.

## C. Result and Discussion

The analysis of TikTok comments demonstrates that impoliteness strategies are systematically employed by both male and female users, although with notable differences in frequency and preference. A total of 218 impolite comments were identified and analyzed, consisting of 116 comments produced by male users and 102

comments produced by female users. These comments were classified based on Culpeper's (1996, 2011) impoliteness framework.

The frequency distribution of impoliteness strategies across genders is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of Impoliteness Strategies Used by Male and Female TikTok Commenters.

| Impoliteness Strategy | Male | Female | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Bald on Record Impoliteness | 42 | 18 | 60 |
| Positive Impoliteness | 21 | 29 | 50 |
| Negative Impoliteness | 33 | 15 | 48 |
| Sarcasm / Mock Politeness | 14 | 36 | 50 |
| Withholding Politeness | 6 | 4 | 10 |
| **Total** | **116** | **102** | **218** |
| | | | |

The table shows that male commenters employed impoliteness strategies slightly more frequently than female commenters overall. Bald on record impoliteness and negative impoliteness were predominantly used by male users, whereas sarcasm or mock politeness and positive impoliteness were more frequently employed by female users. This numerical distribution provides empirical support for the qualitative patterns observed in the data.

To further illustrate this distribution, a bar chart was used to visualize the frequency of each impoliteness strategy by gender. The diagram clearly indicates that bald on record impoliteness is heavily dominated by male users, while sarcasm or mock politeness is the most prominent strategy among female users. Positive impoliteness also appears more frequently in female-authored comments, whereas negative impoliteness is more characteristic of male commenters. Withholding politeness remains the least frequently used strategy across both genders, indicating that explicit verbal attacks are more salient than passive impoliteness in TikTok interactions.

Bald on record impoliteness emerges as the most dominant strategy overall, particularly among male commenters. This strategy involves direct, explicit, and unmitigated attacks on the interlocutor's face. An illustrative example is provided below:

**Data 1 (Male Commenter):** *"You're absolutely stupid if you believe this nonsense. Get educated before posting crap like this."*

Pragmatically, this utterance constitutes a clear face-threatening act targeting the addressee's positive face. The direct insult and absence of mitigating expressions demonstrate the speaker's intention to cause offense. In the TikTok context, such direct impoliteness often functions as a display of dominance and assertiveness, allowing the commenter to position themselves as superior while attracting attention from other users.

Negative impoliteness is the second most frequent strategy among male users. This strategy targets the interlocutor's negative face by ridiculing, demeaning, or restricting personal autonomy. In many cases, negative impoliteness is realized through

belittling remarks that question the intelligence, morality, or legitimacy of the content creator. Pragmatically, this strategy functions to delegitimize opposing views and reinforce power asymmetry within the interaction.

In contrast, sarcasm or mock politeness is the most frequently used strategy among female commenters. This strategy relies on indirectness and shared contextual understanding, enabling speakers to criticize while maintaining a surface level of politeness. The following comment exemplifies this strategy:

**Data 2 (Female Commenter):** *"Wow, such a brilliant opinion. I'm amazed you came up with that all by yourself."*

Although superficially polite, the exaggerated praise functions sarcastically, implicitly attacking the target's competence. From a pragmatic perspective, mock politeness allows female commenters to perform face attacks in a socially acceptable and often humorous manner. On TikTok, such comments frequently gain positive engagement, indicating that indirect impoliteness is not only tolerated but socially rewarded.

Positive impoliteness is also more commonly employed by female users. This strategy damages the interlocutor's positive face by dismissing, excluding, or mocking their opinions. Female commenters often combine positive impoliteness with humor or irony, suggesting that impoliteness in TikTok discourse serves performative and affiliative functions in addition to confrontational ones.

Withholding politeness occurs least frequently across both genders. Its limited presence may be attributed to the fast-paced and highly interactive nature of TikTok comment sections, where explicit verbal responses are more noticeable and impactful than silence or non-response.

Overall, the integration of frequency data, tabular representation, and the bar chart visualization demonstrates that gendered patterns of impoliteness persist in TikTok discourse. Male users tend to favor direct and aggressive strategies, while female users predominantly employ indirect and sarcastic forms of impoliteness. These findings confirm that impoliteness on TikTok functions as a pragmatic resource for expressing stance, constructing identity, and negotiating power within digital interaction.

### D. Conclusion and Suggestion

This study has examined gender differences in the use of impoliteness strategies in TikTok comment sections from a pragmatic perspective. The findings reveal that impoliteness is a pervasive and systematic feature of online interaction on TikTok, employed by both male and female users as a strategic means of communication rather than as accidental linguistic behavior. Although both genders actively engage in impolite discourse, the strategies they prefer differ significantly. Male commenters tend to employ more direct and explicit forms of impoliteness, particularly bald on record and negative impoliteness, which function as overt face-threatening acts aimed at asserting dominance, expressing strong disagreement, and positioning themselves authoritatively in public discourse. Female commenters, on the other hand, more frequently use indirect strategies such as sarcasm or mock politeness and positive impoliteness, allowing them to convey criticism while maintaining a degree of social subtlety and audience alignment.

These findings suggest that impoliteness in TikTok comments serves multiple pragmatic functions beyond mere verbal aggression. Impolite expressions are used to construct identity, display stance, negotiate power relations, and gain visibility in a highly interactive and competitive digital environment. The affordances of TikTok as a platform, including public visibility, rapid interaction, and reduced social constraints, appear to encourage users to perform impoliteness as a form of social action. At the same time, the persistence of gender-based patterns indicates that sociolinguistic norms continue to influence online language use, even within seemingly anonymous and informal digital spaces. This challenges simplistic assumptions that online communication neutralizes gender differences, while also questioning traditional views that associate women exclusively with politeness and men with aggression.

The implications of this study are relevant at both theoretical and practical levels. Theoretically, the findings contribute to the development of impoliteness theory by demonstrating its applicability to contemporary social media discourse and by highlighting the importance of integrating gender as a key analytical variable in pragmatic research. The study also underscores the need to consider platform-specific contexts when analyzing face-threatening behavior in digital communication. Practically, the results have implications for digital literacy and pragmatic awareness, particularly in educational contexts where learners are increasingly exposed to and participate in online interactions. By understanding how impoliteness strategies operate and how they may be interpreted differently depending on gender and context, social media users can develop more critical and reflective communication practices. Furthermore, the findings may inform efforts to design more effective moderation policies and communication guidelines that acknowledge the pragmatic complexity of online discourse rather than treating impoliteness as merely inappropriate language use.

In sum, this study demonstrates that impoliteness on TikTok is a socially meaningful and pragmatically motivated phenomenon shaped by gendered communicative tendencies and the dynamics of digital interaction. By situating impoliteness within a pragmatic and sociolinguistic framework, this research offers a deeper understanding of how language, power, and identity intersect in contemporary online communication.

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