Impoliteness on Twitter by Malaysians

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates impoliteness on Twitter in the context of Malaysian users. The objectives of the study are to examine the impoliteness strategies and triggers of impoliteness found in tweet replies on tweets on issues related to COVID-19. The data consist of 440 tweet replies on COVID-19, posted from May 2020 to May 2021 which contain elements of impoliteness. The study uses Culpeper's (2005) impoliteness model and Culpeper's (2011) framework for examining impoliteness triggers. The findings show that four types of impoliteness strategies are used in the tweet replies: bald-on record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, and sarcasm or mock impoliteness. The most dominant type of impoliteness strategy is positive impoliteness, while bald-on record impoliteness is the least employed impoliteness strategy. Pointed criticism is found to be the most often occurring impoliteness trigger in the study, followed by insult, negative expressive, and challenging or unpalatable question and/or presupposition. The findings suggest culture and the communication platform may play a role in the use of impoliteness strategies and impoliteness triggers in the tweets.

Keywords: impoliteness, Malaysian, Twitter

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INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of technology, the social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram has become an increasingly popular interaction mode (Alias & Yahaya, 2019). Moreover, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic at the end of 2019, these communication platforms are even more important with restricted people movement as a measure to curb the infection rates. In these platforms, interactants can exchange and discuss information and opinions on any topic, anywhere, and at anytime (Alias & Yahaya, 2019). Nonetheless, owing to the high cases of deaths and infection rates, as well as the disruption to the people's normal routine due to COVID-19, this has caused much anxiety, fear, confusion and anger among people. This results in frequent heated remarks, including impolite comments in social media, consequently leading to possible social tension and disharmony (Colaco et al., 2021).

Impoliteness has been defined in a variety of ways. Culpeper (1996) defined impoliteness as the use of strategies that attack face and cause "social disruption" (p. 350). Culpeper (2010) later revised this to emphasise that impoliteness is culturally-specific, while Bousfield (2008) stated that impoliteness has be intentionally performed and that the hearer must also be able understand that the speaker is being offensive. However, Culpeper (2011) pointed out that impoliteness is not always conventionalised, and hence, the hearer may perceive an utterance or behaviour as impolite although it is not intended as such. This study adopts Culpeper's (2011) definition of impoliteness in which it "is a negative attitude towards specific behaviors occurring in specific contexts" (p. 23), and hence, perception of impoliteness is contextual and hearer-focused.

Although there have been past studies on impoliteness, these are still relatively scant compared to research on politeness (Culpeper, 2010; Rabab'ah & Alali, 2020). With regards to research on impoliteness strategies in the southeast Asian context, the findings from such studies revealed that some modification to Culpeper's (1996, 2005) impoliteness strategies may be necessary due to contextual differences. For example, Erza and Hamzah (2018) investigated impoliteness among haters on Instagram comments of Indonesian male-female entertainers and found that the positive impoliteness was the most used impoliteness strategy. This finding differs from Krishnan's (2018) findings in his study on impoliteness in the Malaysian news website, Malaysiakini, comments section. His study looked at impoliteness only in the Malay language, and discovered that indirect impoliteness and sarcasm were most often used in the comments, and that users in this platform were more uninhibited in expressing their feelings although these were targeted at the government and the Prime Minister.

In relation to impoliteness triggers, review of studies on impoliteness triggers also suggests impoliteness triggers differ based on communication settings. For instance, Halim (2015) examined impoliteness in the comments section of the Facebook account of a prominent Malaysian politician and revealed that insults were the most dominant impoliteness trigger. However, the study also disclosed that three of his comments could not be classified according to Culpeper's (2011) framework and these were non-verbal cues of one spitting, sticking the tongue out, and rolling the eyes. Akmal (2018) also investigated impoliteness on Facebook, but in a Bruneian setting, and discovered not all of Culpeper's (2011) impoliteness triggers were in his data, pointing to possible differences between impoliteness manifestations in face-to-face situations and those in online settings. Thayalan (2017), in contrast, researched on impoliteness on a different social media, i.e. comments on Youtube using the Low Yat Plaza incident as the setting. Like Halim (2015), he also found that insults, particularly the use of profanities, were rampant in his data. However, he also discovered a need to do some revisions to Culpeper's (2011) framework to include three more categories of insults: accusation and baseless claims, show superiority and mock and ridicule.

Despite the various past online impoliteness studies, most of these studies focused on impoliteness on Facebook, Instagram and comments in online news websites and YouTube. Nevertheless, literature review of past impoliteness studies have also shown that there was a need to modify analysis frameworks in some of these studies due to variations in contexts and communication platforms. Therefore, this indicates there is a need for more online impoliteness studies, particularly when communicating on different issues in a variety of communication platforms so as to better understand the manifestations of impoliteness. This study aims to fill in this research gap by analysing impoliteness strategies on Twitter employed by Malaysian users when tweeting replies to trending topics related to COVID-19. The objectives are to :
1.   examine the impoliteness strategies found in tweet replies to trending topics related to COVID-19
2.   analyse triggers of impoliteness found in tweet replies to trending topics related to COVID-19

METHOD OF STUDY

A qualitative approach with a descriptive design was employed to examine the impoliteness strategies used on Twitter. The data consisted of 2,331 tweet replies on trending COVID-19 topics from May 2020 to May 2021. This time period was chosen for data collection due to the many events during that time which could trigger dissatisfaction among Malaysians: Movement Control Order, Conditional Movement Control Order, emergency declaration, and the national Covid-19 vaccination programme.

During the one-year data collection period, a total of 2,331 Tweet replies were collected. However, only 440 (18.87%) tweets were identified as impolite and were used for analysis. These Tweet replies were in either the Malay or English language, the two most dominant languages used by Malaysians when posting online comments. As Twitter allows users to create pseudonymous accounts, the users could be of any demographic background.

For the data analysis in this study, impoliteness strategies were identified based on Culpeper's (2005) impoliteness strategies (Table 1), while types of impoliteness triggers were identified following Culpeper's (2011) model of impoliteness triggers (Table 2). These two frameworks were commonly used to investigate impoliteness in past studies.

Table 1. Culpeper's (2005) impoliteness strategies.

No.	Impoliteness Strategy	Description
1	Bald-on Record Impoliteness	the face threatening act (FTA) is performed in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way without any attempt to minimise face damage
2	Positive Impoliteness	strategies that damage the addressee's positive face wants
3	Negative Impoliteness	strategies that threaten the addressee's negative face wants
4	Sarcasm or Mock Politeness	politeness strategies which are insincere and remain as surface realisations
5	Withhold Politeness	absence of politeness work where it is expected

Table 2. Culpeper's (2011) model of impoliteness triggers.

No.	Impoliteness Trigger	Examples
1	Insults:	
	a) Personalised negative vocatives	You stupid
	b) Personalised negative assertions	You are pathetic
	c) Personalised negative references	Your stinking breath
	d) Personalised negative third-person negative references (in the hearing of the target)	He's a nut
2	Pointed criticisms or complaints	That is rubbish
3	Challenging or Unpalatable Questions	Why are you making my life miserable?
4	Condescension (belittling the addressee)	This is childish
5	Threats (intimidation)	We're going to smash your face if you don't…
6	Negative Expressives (Curse & Ill-Wishers)	Go to hell, Damn you
7	Message Enforcers	listen here, do you understand me?
8	Dismissals	get lost, go away
9	Silencers	shut up, enough talking

RESULTS

This section reports on the impoliteness strategies and triggers of impoliteness found in tweet replies on trending COVID-19 topics from May 2020 to May 2021.

Impoliteness strategies on Twitter
The findings showed that the impoliteness strategies used in the tweet replies were positive impoliteness (224 or 35.44%), negative impoliteness (210 or 33.23%), sarcasm or mock politeness (136 or 21.52%), and bald-on record impoliteness (62 or 9.81%).

Table 1. Impoliteness strategies in tweet replies on trending COVID-19 topics from May 2020 to May 2021.

No.	Impoliteness Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Positive Impoliteness	224	35.44%
2.	Negative Impoliteness	210	33.23%
3.	Sarcasm or Mock Politeness	136	21.52%
4.	Bald-on Record Impoliteness	62	9.81%
	Total	632	100%

Positive impoliteness
The positive impoliteness strategy was the most used strategy in the Tweet replies. This strategy is intended to threaten or damage the addressee's positive face wants. Examples of utterances that employ positive impoliteness strategy include utterances that: (1) ignore, exclude, or disassociate from the other, (2) show disinterest or lack of concern in the other, (3) use inappropriate identity markers, obscure or secretive language, taboo words, or derogatory remarks, and (4) seek disagreement (Culpeper, 1996).

In the data collected, it was found that positive impoliteness strategies were most prevalent in tweets that expressed animosity towards the authorities. These tweets mainly functioned to show disassociation from the authorities, as well as to show a lack of interest in the authorities. For instance, in Tweet 1, the animosity was conveyed through disaffiliating himself or herself from the government. The tweet author showed disapproval of the government at that time by blatantly denying the government ("Not the government we wanted") and wanting the previous government ("we missed you").

Tweet 1
Not the government we wanted... we missed you @NajibRazak

In Tweet 2, the tweet author disregarded the authority's response to the increasing COVID-19 cases by showing disinterest in what the authority wanted to say ("move on lah weh"). This disinterest and dismissal of the

authority's statement is further intensified by the use of the discourse particle "lah", a feature of Malaysian English that is used to indicate a variety of pragmatic functions including exasperation (The International School of Kuala Lumpur, 2001), disapproval (Kuang, 2002), and anger (Kuang, 2002). There was also the author's justification for disagreeing with the authority's response about the success of the Movement Control Order (PKP) in the second sentence of the tweet.

Tweet 2
move on lah weh. kalau PKP 2.0 tak gagal, takde nya kes nak melambung mcm sekarang sampai kena buat PKP 3.0 ni.
Translation: Move on. If the Movement Control Order 2.0 is not a failure, then there wouldn't be such an increase of cases until the need for the Movement Control Order 3.0.

Negative impoliteness
Negative impoliteness, the second most used impoliteness strategy, is aimed at threatening the addressee's negative face wants. Examples include to frighten, condescend, scorn and ridicule the addressee by emphasising the addressor's relative power (Culpeper, 1996).

In this study, negative impoliteness was primarily shown through rebukes of those in authority in their response to COVID-19. These tweets ridiculed the government's incompetency to govern the country. In Tweet 3, the authority was criticised as unscientific, unprofessional, and irresponsible, while in Tweet 4, the author was blaming the elections called by the government as the cause for the rising COVID-19 cases. Malaysia underwent an economic downturn during the pandemic, and thus, the tweet seemed to deride the government as ridiculous to hold the election, thereby sidelining the health, safety and economic well-being of the nation.

Tweet 3
Very unscientific, unprofessional and irresponsible statement by the Authority !

Tweet 4
ni semua punca pilihan raya di Sabah . sop tk jaga . padan lah semua sama2 kena
Translation: This is all caused by the election in Sabah. No observation of the Standard Operation Procedures. Serves you right, everyone is affected.

Sarcasm or mock politeness
Sarcasm or mock politeness is insincere politeness, and thus politeness remains at surface realisations (Culpeper, 1996). The findings showed this strategy was mainly used to voice the tweet authors' frustration with the government, but done so in an indirect manner. For instance in Tweet 5, the author was lamenting about the difficulties faced by the people ("*buat rakyat susah*"), but yet, the author was congratulating ("*Tahniah*") and thanking the government ministers ("*Terima kasih banyak2 ye para menteri*"). This tweet was in response to the election in Sabah whereby the government went ahead with the election despite having the COVID-19 infection under control after months of the Movement Control Order. The result of the government's decision to go ahead with the election resulted in a drastic increase of COVID-19 cases again, and hence, the possibility of another Movement Control Order, which angered many citizens. However, the author in Tweet 5 expressed his anger in the form of a sarcasm rather than be direct about it.

Tweet 6 focused on a different aspect of people's dissatisfaction, specifically the denial to be with one's family during the Raya festival, a festival which holds special significance for the Muslims. This loss of opportunity to be with loved ones during Raya understandably brought about vexation in the people, but in Tweet 6, the author was thanking the authorities ("Thank you @MuhyiddinYassin @MKNJPM@IsmailSabri60") for the Raya "gift" ("*untuk hadiah hari raya aidilfitri* ").

Tweet 5
Tahniah dah buat rakyat susah. Terima kasih banyak2 ye para menteri
Translation: Congratulations for causing troubles for the people. Thank you very much to the ministers.

Tweet 6
Thank you @MuhyiddinYassin @MKNJPM@IsmailSabri60 untuk hadiah hari raya aidilfitri tahun ini.
Translation: Thank you @MuhyiddinYassin @MKNJPM@IsmailSabri60 for the Hari Raya Aidilfitri gift this year.

Bald-on record impoliteness
The bald-on record impoliteness is the most explicit and direct impoliteness strategy (Culpeper, 1996). In this study, this impoliteness strategy usually made use of hostile language and frequently contained insults using offensive terms (e.g. the curse "*sial*" in Tweet 7 and the vulgar word "*pukimak*" in Tweet 8). The bald-on record impoliteness was the least used impoliteness strategy in the tweet replies in the present study most probably because this impoliteness strategy is the most explicit and aggressive impoliteness strategy.

Tweet 7
Sial lah korg dua ni
Translation: These two people bring bad luck

Tweet 8
Bapak pukimak anak pun mcm pantat dafi lancau
Translation: Really, the cunt of the child is also like the buttocks that fit the penis snugly

To sum up, although all four of Culpeper's (2005) impoliteness strategies were found in the tweet replies, the most commonly used ones were positive impoliteness and negative impoliteness, followed by sarcasm of mock politeness and bald-on-record impoliteness. Most of these impolite tweets were directed to the authorities, expressing their animosity and dissatisfaction with the way the authorities handled the COVID-19 situation in the country. This shows that for the Malaysians, it is paramount for the authorities to show that they deserve the respect of the people by being consistent, fair, and responsible in carrying out their duties.

Triggers of impoliteness on Twitter
Of the triggers of impoliteness, the most frequently occurring impoliteness trigger was pointed criticism or complaint (213 or 48.41%), followed by negative expressive (108 or 24.55%), insult (65 or 14.77%), challenging or unpalatable question (48 or 10.91%), gesture-verbal (3 or 0.07%), dismissal (2 or 0.05%) and silencer (1 or 0.02%) (Table 3).

Table 2. Triggers of impoliteness in tweet replies on trending COVID-19 topics from May 2020 to May 2021.

No.	Impoliteness Triggers	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Pointed criticism or complaint	213	48.41%
2.	Negative expressive	108	24.55%
3.	Insult	65	14.77%
4.	Challenging or unpalatable question	48	10.91%
5.	Gesture-verbal	3	0.07%
6.	Dismissal	2	0.05%
7.	Silencer	1	0.02%
	Total	440	100%

Pointed criticism or complaint
Pointed criticism or complaint was the most frequently occurring impoliteness trigger found in the study. Many of these criticisms or complaints were on the failure of the government and the Ministry of Health, the increased cases of COVID-19, and the different standard operating procedures for people of different status, especially between the politicians and the normal citizenry (Table 4).

Table 4. Examples of pointed criticisms or complaints.

No.	Tweets in Malay	Translation in English
a)	*Memang dah gagal. Terima kenyataan. Kerajaan gagal.*	Definitely a failure. Face the facts. The government has failed.
b)	*Ni semua punca pilihan raya di Sabah. Sop tk jaga.*	This is all caused by the election in Sabah. No observation of the SOP.
c)	*org dah fed up ngn double standard*	People are fed up with the double standards.

Insults
The insults in the study can be divided into personalised negative vocatives and personalised negative third-person negative references (Table 5).

Table 5. Examples of insults.

No.	Types of Insults	Tweets in Malay or English	Translation in English
a)	Personalised negative vocatives	*Oi bodoh abadi!*	Oi eternal dumb!
b)	Personalised negative third-person negative references	*YAB = Yang Amat Bangang* *Defensive bodoh KKM ni*	The Most Stupid The Ministry of Health is stupidly defensive

As shown in Table 5, the personalised negative vocatives in the data were predominantly about calling the government with disrespectful terms such as stupid ("*bodoh*", "*bangang*"). In example (a), there is also the use of the interjection "oi" which is considered a rude way to get someone's attention. The word "*abadi*" meaning indefinitely or endlessly also enhances the emotional context of the tweet indicating the high degree of stupidity of the government. In example (b), the tweet is also insulting the government as being stupid ("*bangang*"). The author uses the irony of designating the acronym YAB to mean "The Most Stupid" while in Malaysia, YAB is in fact, a honorific title "*Yang Amat Berhormat*" meaning "The Most Honourable".

Unpalatable or challenging questions
Unpalatable or challenging questions are questions intended to ridicule the authority in their announcements and decisions.

Table 6. Examples of unpalatable or challenging questions.

No.	Tweets in Malay	Translation in English
a)	*Tidak gagal? Kat mana beli confidence level mcm ni? Sy nak satu. Shopee ada jual tak?*	Not a failure? Where can we buy confidence of this level? I would like one too. Is this sold on Shopee?
b)	*Kenapa Tak malam raya umum pkp?*	Why not announce the Movement Control Order on the night of Raya?

The two questions in Table 6 were not requests for information, but rhetorical questions with obvious answers and the pragmatic function was to mock the incredulous decisions made by the authority on the COVID-19 situation of the nation. To the author in example (a) in Table 6, the government failed to manage the pandemic successfully and was thus, mocking how the government could still confidently perceive that they were successful. The derision was also enhanced by the sarcasm that if confidence could be bought, the author would also want to get it from the online shopping platform, Shopee. The second question, (b), challenged the government's logic in announcing the Movement Control Order at an unsuitable time just before the festive season which angered many for having to spend the festival away from their family and loved ones.

Dismissals
The focal point of dismissals in this study carried the themes of purging, cleansing, removing and casting aside the authorities of that time. For instance, in Tweet 9, the author was explicit about his distrust towards the governing authorities at that time by requesting their resignations - Muhyiddin bin Muhammad Yassin (the Prime Minister), Ismail Sabri (the Minister of Defense) and Adham Baba (the Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation).

Tweet 9
@MuhyiddinYassin @IsmailSabri60 @DrAdhamBaba Sila letak jawatan.
Translation: @MuhyiddinYassin @IsmailSabri60 @DrAdhamBaba Please resign.

Silencers
Silencers in this study centred on wanting the authorities to stop justifying their decisions. Justifications or explanations were deemed as excuses, as exemplified by Tweet 10. The structure or expression "U better" (You'd better) implies a threat or warning to the authorities, giving a sense of the author's exasperation and vexation for the authorities to stop making excuses.

Tweet 10
U better keep quiet n not try to make excuses

Negative expressives
There were also negative expressives used, particularly profanities to curse the authorities. These were crude comments, showing extreme anger of the tweet users, and thus, were highly offensive and impolite (Tweet 11).

Tweet 11
Bapak pukimak anak pun mcm pantat dafi lancau.
Translation: Really, the cunt of the child is also like the buttocks that fit the penis snugly

Gesture-verbal
Because non-verbal impoliteness cannot be observed in the written form, tweet users took to using alternatives, i.e. onomatopoeia or words to indicate gestural movements in their posts. These were labelled as gesture-verbal. The underlined words in Table 7 ("puih", "cui", "phui") mimicked the sound of one spitting and also bring to mind the gestures or actions involved when one spits.

Table 7. Examples of gesture-verbal.

No.	Tweets in Malay	Translation in English
a)	*eleh buat PKP sebab nak darurat je.* <u>*puih*</u>	Eleh, the Movement Control Order is in place just to proclaim the state of emergency. <u>Puih</u>
b)	*Mengundi lagi penting <u>cui</u>*	Voting is more important. <u>Cui</u>
c)	*Enforcement cam celako. <u>Phui</u>*	The enforcement is fuck. <u>Phui</u>

In summary, seven types of impoliteness triggers were found in the tweets used by the Malaysian users: pointed criticism or complaint, negative expressive, insult, challenging or unpalatable question, gesture-verbal, dismissal, and silencer. Of them, pointed criticism or complaint was the most frequently occurring impoliteness trigger. Most of the pointed criticisms or complaints were accusations that the government and the Ministry of Health were a failure due to their selfish politically-motivated interests and were prejudiced in their implementation of standard operating procedures for COVID-19. The findings also indicated that there was an additional impoliteness trigger not found in Culpeper's (2010) model of impoliteness triggers, namely the gesture-verbal impoliteness trigger. These findings on impoliteness triggers suggest that although the Malaysian culture is categorised as high power distance based on Hofstede's (2003) cultural dimensions, an anonymous public communication such as Twitter could provide users an avenue to freely albeit impolitely vent their frustrations, hence ignoring social hierarchies. In addition, the findings also indicate how users could creatively employ alternatives to express non-verbal impoliteness through the gesture-verbal impoliteness trigger.

DISCUSSION

While the Malaysian culture may be known to be generally polite, in this study, there were a variety of impoliteness strategies and triggers. The communication platform may be a contributing factor due to the affordances of Twitter in maintaining the anonymity of its users. Impolite comments or tweets cannot be traced back to the users, and thus, users may be more bold and uninhibited in expressing their dissatisfaction and discontent. As stated by Hay (2007), an anonymous public communication can be a channel for people to communicate their frustrations with heated remarks. This finding about anonymity as a significant factor for manifestation of impoliteness is congruent with the findings of Rahab'ah and Alali's (2020) study on impoliteness in reader comments on the Al-Jazeera channel news website whereby they also found a variety of impolite acts which commenters engaged online.

Another possible reason for the findings could also simply be that the Malaysian culture has undergone some kind of change over time, especially in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. From a culture which is generally reserved, polite and places emphasis on protecting face, the Malaysian culture may have shifted to one which is more direct and explicit about expressing dissatisfaction, although impolite. The confusion and anxiety caused by the COVID-19 pandemic could have been triggers for the people to be explicit, even if they were impolite, in their communication of resentment and fear.

Culpeper (1996) argued that a powerful party has more liberty to be impolite, but in this study, we can see that it is the ones with less power (the commoners) who adopted this aggressive stance to attack those of higher authority. Therefore, the findings of this study have shown that this social structural power in society is juxtaposed in Twitter. This suggests the power and importance of Twitter as a communication channel for people with less power such as people at the grassroots level to be honest with their actual sentiments to freely vent their frustrations

and anger. This aspect of the findings also resonates with the findings in Krishnan's (2018) study, whereby he revealed how the anonymity in the online communication platform allowed the readers in the Malaysian news website, Malaysiakini, to be more daring in attacking the government and the Prime Minister due to the fuel price increase issue.

Another implication of the study is that Culpeper's (2011) model of impoliteness triggers may not be adequate enough to examine impoliteness in all contexts, especially when non-verbal strategies are used. The identification of a new form of impoliteness trigger, which is gesture-verbal, indicates that tweet users have to resort to alternatives with the use of onomatopoeia to show their gestural movements in their posts. Hence, a recommendation for future studies is to perhaps add gesture-verbal to Culpeper's (2011) list of impoliteness triggers.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the study has shown the types of impoliteness strategies and triggers Malaysians use when tweeting replies to trending topics on issues related to COVID-19. The findings revealed that these strategies and triggers are context-dependent and have highlighted the important role of Twitter as a platform for those at the grassroots to express their discontent and frustration with the authority. This allows one to have access into the actual sentiments and thoughts of the people.

Nevertheless, the study has its limitations. The study is that the findings only apply to tweet replies to trending topics during the period of data collection. Another limitation of the study is that it examined impoliteness on issues related to COVID-19, and therefore, the findings here may not apply to other issues or topics. As such, future studies could study impoliteness in other contexts such as in different settings, and in communication involving other types of issues. Other aspects of impoliteness such as non-verbal impoliteness (e.g. prosody, gestures, emojis, emoticons) can also be studied.

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