

Face-Saving and Face-Threatening Strategies in Sundanese Teenagers' Interactions through TikTok Content

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Abstract: In today's digital landscape, traditional norms of politeness are increasingly challenged by the fluid and often informal nature of online communication, particularly among teenagers. This research focuses on how Sundanese teenagers apply *undak-usuk basa*, a cultural system of linguistic politeness in their content interactions on TikTok, a platform characterized by spontaneous and casual exchanges. The aim of this research is to analyze how face-saving and face-threatening strategies are utilized by Sundanese-speaking adolescents in digital peer communication. Employing a qualitative approach, the research collects data through observation and discourse analysis of selected TikTok videos. Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory serves as the primary framework to examine how traditional politeness strategies are adapted within modern teenage interactions. The findings reveal that Sundanese teenagers apply *undak-usuk basa* selectively, influenced by social context, peer dynamics, and platform-specific norms. These results suggest that while digital media shapes communication behavior, the cultural norms embedded in *undak-usuk basa* remain relevant in the practice of both face-saving and face-threatening acts.

Keywords: *politeness strategies, undak-usuk, Sundanese teenagers, face-saving & face-threatening*

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital age, social media platforms like TikTok are highly popular among teenagers for interacting. This platform is chosen by users to create engaging conversation content using spontaneous, equal, and often informal language. For Sundanese teenagers, this presents a unique challenge, as Sundanese cultural values emphasize politeness through a hierarchical language system known as *undak-usuk basa*.

In Sundanese society, *undak-usuk basa* represents a deeply rooted form of politeness embedded in language, reflecting values such as respect, humility, and social harmony. According to Almustari (2024), understanding and correctly applying *undak-usuk basa* is a vital part of social interaction in Sundanese culture. Similarly, Adejuve (2011) describes this system as a distinctive mark of Sundanese identity that upholds etiquette and decency in everyday life.

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However, in practice, many TikTok videos show Sundanese teenagers mixing language levels or using blunt, even harsh expressions in casual conversation with peers. Teasing, interrupting, and mocking are often presented humorously and normalized within the platform's culture. This suggests a shift in how traditional norms of politeness are expressed or even challenged.

While *undak-usuk basa* is widely recognized as a core aspect of Sundanese identity, there remains little public understanding of how it is actually used or gradually lost by younger generations in digital spaces. It is still unclear whether Sundanese teenagers consistently apply politeness strategies in online peer communication or whether they adjust these norms in response to the informal nature of the platform. As Handriani et al. (2025) emphasize, politeness strategies play a crucial role in fostering social harmony, and Usman et al. (2020) argue that language is a mirror of cultural values and social order.

To analyze this phenomenon, this research applies Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, which explains how individuals use strategies to manage face-saving and face-threatening acts in communication, based on the concepts of positive face (the desire to be liked) and negative face (the desire for autonomy). The theory outlines politeness strategies, such as bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record, used depending on social factors like power, distance, and the level of imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987). According to the theory, individuals aim to protect their own and others' "face" — the public self-image — during interaction. Positive face relates to the desire to be liked and accepted, while negative face refers to the desire to act freely without imposition. This framework is suitable to understand how Sundanese teenagers express politeness and navigate peer relationships in online interactions, particularly through TikTok.

This research also adopts a pragmatic-sociolinguistic approach to explore how traditional politeness norms are adapted in peer-to-peer digital interactions. Through this lens, the research investigates how these adaptations affect both face-saving and face-threatening acts in their daily communication, especially in peer contexts within online platforms.

Some previous studies use Brown and Levinson's politeness theory in investigating how TikTok affects language politeness (e.g., Anggraeni et al., 2023; Islami et al., 2024; Guo, 2022). This research reveals the complex interactions between exposure to disrespectful content and the maintenance of polite language in daily interactions. Compared to Anggraeni's research that focuses on children, this research emphasizes Sundanese teenagers. Similarly, Islami et al. (2024) analyzed politeness in YouTube podcasts, while this research focuses on TikTok interactions.

However, limited research has specifically analyzed how *undak-usuk basa* is practiced, adapted, or potentially diminished among Sundanese teenagers in online communication, especially in informal peer interactions. This is concerning, as *undak-usuk basa* is a vital element of Sundanese cultural identity that should be preserved across generations.

Therefore, this research is essential to investigate how cultural politeness is expressed through face-saving and face-threatening acts among Sundanese teenagers. The research aims to highlight whether these traditional politeness strategies continue to shape their digital conversations and contribute not only to pragmatic and sociolinguistic scholarship but also to cultural preservation efforts.

METHOD

In the process, this research uses a descriptive qualitative approach which is most suitable for capturing and presenting detailed, context-rich insights into naturally occurring communication phenomena. According to Sandelowski (2000), descriptive qualitative research aims to provide a straightforward

description of experiences or events, making it ideal for analyzing discourse without heavy theoretical abstraction.. This method is chosen because the research analyzes data collected from several TikTok videos that become the main objects of research. The conversations in these videos, especially among Sundanese-speaking teenagers, are observed to identify the use of face-saving and face-threatening strategies. To support this, the theory of politeness strategy by Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson is applied through a pragmatic-sociolinguistic approach (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This theory helps to explain more deeply the meaning and implications of both strategies as they appear in the selected video content.

The primary data of this research consist of recorded statements, interactions, and dialogues among Sundanese teenagers that reflect real-life politeness practices. These data were collected through observation of natural communication found in public TikTok content. Meanwhile, the secondary data include academic references such as books, journal articles, and other relevant sources discussing politeness theory, linguistic pragmatics, and the cultural values embedded in the use of the Sundanese language.

In the analysis stage, the researcher first observed how Sundanese teenagers communicate in peer-to-peer situations to recognize patterns related to politeness. Then, several relevant theories were reviewed to support the analysis, especially those related to politeness and language use in digital spaces. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, where instances of communication were coded and grouped based on emerging themes based on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, specifically face-saving and face-threatening strategies. Finally, the results of the research were interpreted in relation to existing literature to understand how Sundanese adolescents negotiate traditional norms in everyday communication, especially in digital environments.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This research explores how Sundanese teenagers use face-saving and face-threatening strategies in their TikTok interactions, based on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. The results show that they often switch between polite and casual language depending on the context and who they are talking to. In some cases, they maintain traditional politeness, while in others they use direct or humorous expressions with peers. Below are several findings taken from selected TikTok content that show how these strategies appear in real conversations.

Face Saving

Extract 1: (source: @budaksunda.merch)

Boy 1: "Hey... bade kamana? Kadieu tuang... sareng...". [*Hi... where are you going? let's eat here... together...*].

Boy 2: "Muhun... manga... lanjengkeun...". [*yes... please... continue...*].

Boy 1: "Eh... ngariung meh resepe... kadieu...". [*Eh... let's get together to have more fun... come here...*].

Boy 2: "Eh... muhun manga... ngiring raos na we...". [*Eh... yes please... I'll enjoy it through you*].

The first extract illustrates how Sundanese adolescents use polite and inclusive language to negotiate social relationships in ways that reflect cultural values and strategic communication. The exchange, which begins with "bade kamana?" and is followed by phrases such as "kadieu tuang... sareng...", demonstrates the use of positive politeness strategies, as outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987), which aim to foster solidarity, engagement, and mutual respect. The second speaker's gentle refusal—"muhun... manga... lanjengkeun..."—further emphasizes the face-saving orientation, typical in Sundanese norms of interaction, which prioritizes avoiding direct conflict and maintaining social harmony.

This finding resonates with Anggraeni et al. (2023), who found that TikTok influenced children's politeness by encouraging

conformity and experimentation with forms of politeness. Although their research focused on younger children, this research shows that adolescents also actively maintain forms of politeness, especially in peer interactions, reflecting the continuing influence of traditional values in digital discourse. Moreover, these findings differ from those of Islami et al. (2024), who observed mixed politeness and impoliteness strategies (e.g., sarcasm and directness) in Sundanese YouTube podcast interactions. In contrast, the teen dialogues analyzed here lacked overt impoliteness, which suggests that peer-based TikTok interactions may encourage more harmonious and collaborative language use compared to entertainment-based discourse settings.

In addition, the use of *basa undak-usuk* - as seen in the expressions “*muhun*” and “*manga*” - illustrates how Sundanese adolescents use hierarchical language even in casual peer contexts. This supports Guo's (2022) argument that platforms like TikTok shape adolescents' communication styles and social behaviors. However, while Guo highlights shifting interactional norms, this research shows that digital environments do not necessarily diminish traditional norms of politeness, but rather provide a space where such values are renegotiated and reinforced among peers.

Extract 2: (source: @budaksunda.merch)

Boy 1: "*Kang... tukang ojek didieu?*". [*Sir... is there an ojek here?*].

Boy 2: "*Enya...*". [*Yes...*].

Boy 1: "*Nyalira wae atuh...*". [*You're alone here, right...*].

Boy 2: "*Muhun a, bade kamana?*". [*Yes, sir. Where would you like to go?*].

Boy 1: "*Ari ka Parongpong, sabaraha?*". [*How much is the cost to Parongpong?*].

Boy 2: "*Oh... sapuluh rebu we...*". [*Oh... just ten thousand*].

Boy 1: "*Ari ka Pasar Lemang?*". [*How about Lemang Market?*].

Boy 2: "*Kadinya mah paling dua puluh lima rebu*". [*That would be around twenty-five thousand*].

Boy 1: "*Ari ka Cimahi?*". [*To Cimahi?*].

Boy 2: "*Tilu puluh rebu we a, teu nanaon...*". [*Thirty thousand only, sir. That's fine...*].

Based on this extract, the interaction begins with a respectful and culturally appropriate greeting. Boy 1 uses the polite term “*Kang*,” (sir), which signals deference to the other person, even though they appear to be peers. The follow-up question “*tukang ojek didieu?*” (is there an ojek here), is neutral but still carries a sense of formality. Boy 2 responds briefly with “*Enya*,” and as the conversation continues, he replies with “*Muhun a, bade kamana?*” (Yes, sir. Where would you like to go?), an expression rooted in *undak-usuk basa* that softens the interaction and maintains mutual respect. These early turns reflect Sundanese politeness norms, where showing humility and avoiding imposition are prioritized, even in casual settings like ojek negotiation.

The tone of the dialogue is consistently cooperative. Boy 1 continues asking about different destinations, but his inquiries remain polite and exploratory rather than demanding. Boy 2's answers are calm and accommodating. Phrases like “*sapuluh rebu we*” (just ten thousand), and “*teu nanaon*” (that's fine), are not just factual price responses they function as subtle strategies to maintain harmony, show generosity, and reduce the weight of the transactional setting. This reflects Brown and Levinson's positive politeness strategies, particularly giving goods and services, showing camaraderie, and avoiding conflict. There's no sign of annoyance or distance even after multiple questions, highlighting the speaker's desire to maintain a comfortable interactional atmosphere.

The consistent use of soft tone and *lemes* language level illustrates how *undak-usuk basa* is still actively used by Sundanese teenagers even in digital media recreations of daily life like those on TikTok. This supports the notion that traditional politeness systems are not lost,

but they are recontextualized in newer communication platforms. The interaction in this extract serves as a good example of how young people uphold cultural values through respectful language choices, showing that face-saving acts remain relevant and meaningful in peer conversations.

Face Threatening

Extract 1: (source: @budaksunda.merch)

Boy 1: *"Hey... bade kamana? Kadieu tuang... sareng...". [Hi... where are you going? let's eat here... together...].*

Boy 2: *"Muhun... manga... lanjengkeun...". [yes... please... continue...].*

Boy 1: *"Eh... ngariung meh resep... kadieu...". [Eh... let's get together to have more fun... come here...].*

Boy 2: *"Eh... muhun manga... ngiring raos na we...". [Eh... yes please... I'll enjoy it through you].*

Boy 1: *"Eh... rek naon maneh kadieu?". [Eh... what are you doing here?].*

Boy 2: *"Hehe... mana atuh piringna?". [Hehe... where is the plate?].*

Based on the first extract, the initial part of the conversation still reflects politeness and friendliness, as seen in the earlier turns of offering and soft refusals. However, the tone changes in the fifth utterance when Boy 1 says *"rek naon maneh kadieu?"*, which directly challenges or mocks Boy 2's presence in a confrontational tone. The informal address *"maneh"* and the direct questioning signal a shift from positive politeness to face-threatening interaction. Instead of maintaining harmony, the speaker begins to undermine the other's face through sarcasm or mild confrontation.

The choice of vocabulary plays a key role in shifting the tone of the exchange. The word *"maneh,"* (you), while commonly used among close peers in Sundanese, carries a lower politeness level compared to alternatives like *"anjeun"* (you) or *"akang."* (sir). When used in certain contexts, especially alongside direct or critical questions, it can trigger a sense of

informality that borders on disrespect. In this case, the sudden switch from soft language to blunt questioning introduces a social distance or tension that may threaten the hearer's positive face, as the speaker no longer frames his remarks in a cooperative or affiliative manner.

This change disrupts the earlier harmony and shifts the conversation from respectful to slightly mocking. It reflects a face-threatening strategy, where the speaker no longer tries to maintain the listener's need to be appreciated or included. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), this type of utterance threatens the hearer's positive face, especially when spoken without any softening or politeness markers.

Extract 2: (source: @budaksunda.merch)

Boy 1: *"Ari ka Cibaruga?". [How about the cost to Cibaruga?].*

Boy 2: *"Lima belas rebu!... Keheula... Aa teh rek naon ojek moal sih? Titadi tunya-tanya wae!". [Fifteen thousand! ... Hold on... Are you going to ride or not, bro? You've been asking so many questions!].*

Boy 1: *"Ah... henteu, naros we a, abdi mah... ari kitu mah, abdi ngojek didieu wios? hehe". [Ah... no, I was just asking... may I be the one taking ojek here then? hehe].*

Boy 2: *"Euh... kasus!". [Uh... what a mess!]*

Based on this extract, the tone of the conversation shifts significantly. While the earlier part showed politeness and patience, the speaker in this segment Boy 2 expresses irritation and frustration. The use of *"Keheula... Aa teh rek naon ojek moal sih?"* (Hold on... are you taking the ride or not?) clearly reflects a face-threatening act. The statement is blunt, emotionally charged, and lacks softening expressions, which indicates a breakdown of politeness strategies.

The escalation in tone is not only evident in the wording but also in the shift of relational footing. Initially, the interaction is transactional and relatively neutral, but once the speaker uses expressions like *"tunya-tanya wae,"* (you've been asking so many questions!), it conveys annoyance and implies that the listener is

wasting time. The informal particle “*teh*” combined with the rhetorical question style reinforces the speaker’s rising irritation. This signals a breakdown in cooperative communication, where the speaker’s face-threatening act is not mitigated with humor, deference, or indirectness, resulting in a more confrontational tone that disrupts the earlier balance.

This kind of response signals a loss of patience and challenges the hearer’s face by questioning their intent in a confrontational manner. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), such utterances threaten the hearer’s positive face, as they imply criticism, sarcasm, and social discomfort. Boy 1 tries to neutralize the situation with a humorous tone, but the final response from Boy 2 (“*Kasus!*”) affirms the conversational breakdown and serves as an example of impoliteness within digital-age peer interaction.

CONCLUSION

This research analyzes how Sundanese teenagers express politeness through face-saving and face-threatening strategies in their TikTok interactions, using Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory. The findings show that Sundanese teenagers are able to apply traditional politeness through the use of *undak-usuk basa*, especially when expressing respect, inviting others, or maintaining group harmony. This is evident in the use of soft language, inclusive phrases, and subtle refusals which are clearly reflected in the face-saving excerpts.

However, the data also show a shift in certain contexts, particularly among close friends, where speakers tend to use more direct, humorous, or even teasing expressions that threaten the positive face of the listener. These moments reflect face-threatening strategies that mark a more relaxed and expressive communication style, characteristic of teenage interactions on digital platforms.

Overall, this research illustrates that Sundanese adolescents actively negotiate between traditional cultural norms and the communicative dynamics of digital platforms

such as TikTok. Instead of abandoning politeness, they adapt key elements of *undak-usuk basa*, such as respectful expression and indirectness, to maintain social harmony in online peer interactions. This suggests that cultural values are not lost in the digital space, but are reshaped to fit the new context. The findings imply that local linguistic norms remain resilient and adaptable, even in a rapidly changing media environment. The findings also point to the importance of integrating cultural awareness into digital literacy, so that young users can engage online while maintaining their cultural identity. More broadly, this research contributes to sociolinguistic research by showing that politeness strategies evolve in response to technological and social changes, which highlights the dynamic nature of language and culture in young people’s communication.

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