

Religious Expressions and Discursive Politeness in Synchronous Communication

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Abstract

In Islamic Arabic culture, religious words and phrases play a significant role and serve various pragmatic functions, mainly related to politeness strategies. However, religious expressions have not been accounted for in politeness theories because of the theories' secular nature. Although several studies have analyzed the functions of specific religious expressions in face-to-face verbal interactions, no study has yet investigated the role of these expressions in non-face-to-face written discourses. Therefore, in this paper, it is asserted that religious expressions in the Muslim discourse can be salient aspects of polite and politic behavior in non-face-to-face interactions, such as Telegram chats. The study adopted an eclectic discursive approach to data analysis, entailing the use of Brown and Levinson's (1987) modern model and Terkourafi's (2008) and Watts' (2009) post-modern models. The findings showed that Saudi interactants on Telegram value expressing their religious identities with other interactants despite anonymity of participants and constraints of time and space. The findings also provided implications about the applicability of relational work of Terkourafi (2008) and Watts (2009) to synchronous communication. Interactants on Telegram used religious expressions to express polite and politic behavior.

Keywords: discourse analysis, religious expressions, post-modern politeness, pragmatics, telegram discourse

1. Introduction

In the past 50 years, politeness theory has developed substantially since 1978, when Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) introduced the first politeness model. Since then, approaches to politeness have developed from traditional models predominantly reliant on speech act theory and quantitative analyses of linguistic forms of isolated polite speech acts to discursive theories that focus on analyzing politeness and impoliteness within discourse. Despite the wide criticism leveled at Brown and Levinson's (1987) seminal politeness model, it influenced post-modern theories (Mills, 2011), many of which led to the development of additional models or adaptations of Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework to address the previous models' limitations (Locher & Watts, 2005; Mills, 2011; Terkourafi, 2008; Watts, 2009)

In Watts' (2009) and Terkourafi's (2008) post-modern account of politeness, they employed the notions of face and face-threatening acts (FTAs) in their analysis of (im) politeness. Relational work has proposed a wider perspective of politeness by distinguishing between polite and political behavior with its relational possibilities. However, non-Western cultural distinctions remain a challenge to all models and theories of politeness. No politeness model has accounted for all discursive phenomena of politeness, such as the role of religious expressions in political behavior. This unique discursive phenomenon in particular has not been explained in research from the perspective of politeness.

The current study highlights the difficulty of using one politeness model when analyzing a culture-specific phenomenon, such as discursive religious expressions. Brown and Levinson (1987) analyzed politeness in isolated decontextualized utterances (see Almusallam, 2018; Mills, 2011) whereas Ahmadi and Weisi (2023) have contended that politeness may not be understood in "a vacuum; [rather] it may be understood in face-to-face interaction (...) Encoding politeness meaning depends [on] the prosodic, facial, body cues..." (p. 416)

Regarding the virtual world, Ahmadi and Weisi (2023) have argued that people express and interpret politeness

differently; notably, people show more impoliteness as they can hide their identities behind nicknames and pseudonyms. Recent studies have examined various types of virtual discourses, such as Facebook, Instagram, etc. However, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, Ahmadi and Weisi's (2023) is the only study that investigated virtual discourse from the perspective of politeness. Therefore, the present study aims to contribute to the growing research on social media discourses.

1.1 Research Objective

The study used an eclectic approach, aiming to account for the role of discursive religious expressions in polite behavior. This eclectic approach is similar to Watts' (2009) analytical approach. It integrated Brown and Levinson's (1987) notions of FTAs, as well as post-modern concepts of face constitution, marked and unmarked politeness, and political behavior. It is also argued for the relevance of the notion of positive politeness to the pragmatic meaning of several religious expressions.

1.2 Research Questions

The study aimed to answer the following questions:

- To what extent does the use of religious expressions in Saudi spoken Arabic increase the politeness of utterances/Telegram textual messages?
- How do Saudi Telegram user's express discursive politeness through religious expressions in their exchanges?
- How do religious expressions in discourse express polite/political behavior?

1.3 Research Significance

Real-time written discourse has become dominant in everyday interactions. Different applications have provided varied channels for users to communicate for social, academic, political, and entertainment purposes. However, there is a paucity of research exploring the discursive features of this type of communication, particularly in terms of polite and political behavior. Ahmadi and Weisi (2023) conducted one of only a few studies that investigated textual messages from a pragmalinguistic perspective. Specifically, they investigated how Iranian English as a foreign language students employed Leech's (2007) politeness constraints in their Telegram messages. Although those scholars used Leech's recent discursive maxims, they admitted the shortcomings of their cultural applicability. They concluded that it remains challenging for researchers to "state what exactly constitutes politeness" and also acknowledged the difficulty of relying on a specific model "due to the intervening (...) factors including sociocultural dynamics, political issues, religious ideologies, etc." (Ahmadi & Weisi, 2023, p. 438). Furthermore, Ahmadi and Weisi (2023) used terms that are better suited to spoken discourse rather than written discourse, such as "utterance" and "speakers," to refer to textual messages and users, demonstrating the current difficulty of employing certain terms when analyzing written discourse. Hence, the present study aimed to contribute to expanding the research on written real-time discourse from the politeness perspective.

2. Literature Review

Despite the plethora of research explicating the shortcomings of Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, this instrumental model was chosen as part of the current study's methodological framework for two reasons. First, applying this model to pragmatic aspects of religious language is still very rare, if not entirely lacking, and the notions of positive and negative politeness using religious terms remain unexplored. Second, post-modern theories may not, on their own, be adequate to account for religious discourse, particularly in terms of the type of effect these expressions have on the addressee.

2.1 Brown and Levinson's Influence

Although Brown and Levinson's (1987) model has been criticized for cultural inadequacy in non-Western speech communities, its notions of face and types of politeness remain popular in non-Western studies. This could be explained by the fact that the model's applicability to various contexts may outweigh its shortcomings in other cultural contexts. In this study, for example, the notion of positive politeness seems to explain the pragmatic meaning of religious expressions in many contexts. Relational work explains the difference between marked and unmarked behavior and how speakers struggle to express politeness in discourse when negotiating relationships (Watts, 2005). Although this view contributes to explaining aspects of the discursive phenomenon of religious expressions, it may not be solely adequate to explain the complex culture-specific phenomenon, which may require dimensional analysis.

Brown & Levinson (1987) defined “face” as “something that can be lost, maintained or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61). They proposed two types of face: Positive face is related to one’s desire to be liked, appreciated, or approved of by other members of society, and negative face is related to the desire to act with freedom from imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Furthermore, Brown and Levinson (1987) argued that people recognize face-related vulnerabilities and cooperate during interactions to maintain each other’s face through a set of politeness strategies that speakers tend to use when they decide to perform an FTA that can potentially cause their interlocutor to lose face. They argued that all speech acts are FTAs and that it is the speaker’s job to redress this threat. They proposed three main mitigation strategies. First, to do the act baldly on record means to perform the FTA directly without any regressive action, for instance when giving a command. Second, to go on record involves conducting an FTA accompanied by a regressive action, that is, either by attending to the hearer’s positive face by addressing their needs and interests, such as by giving compliments and using words of endearment, or by performing the FTA with a regressive action that satisfies the addressee’s negative face by not interfering with their freedom of action (i.e., negative politeness), such as using titles, apologies, or questions. Finally, the speaker can use off-record strategies when performing an FTA, which can entail irony, tautologies, understatements, rhetorical questions, and various hints. However, the speaker may refrain from doing an FTA entirely.

Post-modern theorists have rejected the distinction between the face and the principle of strategies. Many have argued that not all performed acts are FTAs (e.g., Mills, 2011). Locher (2006) ascribed the problematic nature of politeness to the fact that politeness resides in judgments on norms that are constantly changing over time; therefore, she asserted that proposing a fixed model that claims to account for all languages is deficient. Post-modernists believe that to account for politeness, a more comprehensive model applicable to various cultural contexts is needed. As such, relational work has been proposed to provide a nuanced explanation of (im)polite behavior.

However, despite criticism, Brown and Levinson’s (1987) notion of face is still predominant even among proponents of relational work. Many post-modern theorists have employed the concept of face (e.g., Locher, 2006; Terkourafi, 2008; Watts, 2005, 2009). Locher (2006) re-proposed that “face can be equated with a ‘mask,’ an image a person gives him- or herself during a particular interaction, and that this face is not fixed but negotiated in emergent networks” (p. 514). The term “emergent networks” was first used by Watts (1991), who defined these as social interactions that have not been previously established. Moreover, Locher (2004, 2006) postulated that relations between interlocutors are constructed as “the discourse unfolds,” that is, at “the actual moment in time when interlocutors engage in a social practice and activate and renegotiate these links” (Locher 2004, p. 27).

Moreover, although many post-modern linguists have criticized and rejected the concept of mitigation, many still find it relevant to specific contexts. Watts (2009), for example, has argued that FTAs are expected in confrontational discourses, such as in disputes and debates, and he has applied this concept in his analysis of political interviews. Terkourafi (2008) also supported the relevance of face to any communication, as Brown and Levinson (1987) suggested, by emphasizing that in any interaction, interlocutors engaged in exchanges may have their face either constituted or threatened.

Relational work not only refers to polite linguistic behavior but also “covers the entire spectrum of interpersonal linguistic behavior” (Locher, 2006, p. 10). The theory focuses on the interpersonal relationships that interlocutors maintain “by adapting their language to different speech events and to the different goals that they might be pursuing” (p.10) In relational theory, polite as well as impolite and aggressive linguistic behavior contributes significantly to the construction of discursive identities (see Mills, 2011). Terkourafi (2008) divided (im)polite behavior into five categories: marked politeness, marked rudeness, unmarked politeness, unmarked rudeness, and impoliteness.

Terkourafi (2008) postulated that unmarked politeness occurs when a conventionalized expression is used in a context where face constituting is expected. Conversely, unmarked rudeness is when an FTA is expected. Marked rudeness occurs when the speaker performs an FTA, and the hearer recognizes the speaker’s intention. Impoliteness, on the other hand, occurs when there is an FTA, but the addressee does not perceive the speaker’s intention to threaten his/her face (see Terkourafi, 2008; Mills, 2011). As noted above, to investigate the role of religious expressions in polite behavior, this study adopted Brown and Levinson’s (1987) perspective of FTAs and positive politeness and Terkourafi’s (2008) model of discursive politeness.

2.2 Religion and Discourse

Although several studies have discussed the role of religion in discourse, to the best of my knowledge, no study has meticulously investigated this sociolinguistic phenomenon from the perspective of politeness strategies, particularly

by classifying it within the framework of the theory of politeness. This study proposes a classification system that encompasses all discursive Islamic religious expressions used in performing various speech acts under positive politeness.

Alqahtani (2009) proposed positive politeness as a salient function of some religious expressions; however, the study lacked intensive exploration of these tools. The research focused exclusively on invoking God's name when making offers, as invocation of God's name is the most frequently used religious expression in Saudi spoken Arabic discourse. The current paper, however, provides a comprehensive and detailed account of the politeness function of the most frequently occurring religious expressions and explains how propositions containing religious expressions can be face-enhancing or constitute different speech acts. The study also used a discursive approach to investigate politeness in these expressions.

Additionally, Al-Rojaie (2021) discussed the pragmatic functions of religious expressions in one Saudi dialect. However, his investigation of politeness was incidental and not the focal point of his study. Contrarily, the current study focused exclusively on the politeness function of religious expressions in discourse, and this paper proposes arguments to support the view that religious expressions are oriented toward the addressee's positive face. Furthermore, this study focused on one variety of Arabic: The Saudi dialect.

The study aimed to focus particularly on the linguistic aspects of social media platforms as channels for daily face-to-face interaction. The research delved into how users employ strategies in their interactions on these platforms that are similar to the strategies they use in real-life face-to-face interactions, with an emphasis on how religious expressions are employed to express polite and political behavior. However, before delving into the relationship between religious expressions and politeness, this paper will provide a brief account of politeness theory and the relevance of religious expressions.

Religious expressions have been labeled differently in research as "Allah expressions," "the Allah lexicon," "Arabic God phrases," "religious invocations," and "religious formulas" (see Al-Rojaie, 2021). In this study, these terms will be used interchangeably with the term "religious expression."

Nuredeen (2008) asserted that religious expressions express several illocutionary forces, such as fillers or hedges, to redress FTAs. Religious expressions in Muslim discourse have various forms, but the most frequent ones are invoking God's name (Allah) as *Walla:h* ("in the name of God" or "I swear to/by God") to intensify a speech act's illocutionary force. Another frequent religious expression is using prayers or religious invocations to pray for the addressee, for example, "May Allah keep you healthy," "May Allah bless you," "May Allah keep you alive," or "May Allah make you happy" (see Al-Rojaie, 2021; Bouchara, 2015; Nuredeen, 2008). Religious expressions can also take the form of intertextuality as a quotation from the Holy Quran or a reference to a holy topic. They can also be conventional, formulaic religious expressions such as *Masha?lla:h* ("What God wills"), which is used in compliments to assure the addressee of the speaker's good intention. This study aimed to unravel the most frequently used expressions in Saudi written discourse.

Notably, some of these religious expressions have drifted from their literal and lexical meanings to adopt completely different pragmatic meanings (Al-Rojaie, 2021) and have thus become formulaic expressions used as politeness markers. Expressions such as *Masha?lla:h* ("What God wills") have, in everyday discourse, lost their literal meanings and acquired idiomatic ones (Al-Rojaie, 2021). In the speech act of complimenting, the expression is used to mean "May God protect you from the evil eye." Another expression that has acquired new pragmatic meaning when complimenting is praise of the Prophet ("Peace be upon him"), which politely means invoking prayers to the Prophet to seek protection from the evil eye, as in *S'alli Sala annabi* (i.e., "Say your prayers to the Prophet") (Migdadi & Badraneh, 2013), which pragmatically means "I admire this so much that I invoke prayers to the Prophet to protect you from the evil eye (envy)."

2.3 Religious Expressions and Propositional Content

Al-Rojaie (2021) has posited that religious expressions boost utterances' illocutionary force but do not contribute to their propositional content. This view aligns with Rambaud's (2012) definition of "expressive meaning" as expressing an emotion, judgment, or attitude that is only valid for the speaker at the moment of utterance. Rambaud (2012) also used the term "expletives" to refer to expressions that express specific attitudes but do not contribute to the propositional content of the utterance and therefore do not affect its truth value, as in:

"Turn off this bloody machine!"

However, Rambaud (2012) only examined expletives as expressing negative emotions. Nonetheless, considering the functions of expletives and their contribution to propositional content, religious expressions can be classified as

semantic expletives. As expletives, religious expressions only express feelings; the proposition is complete without them. Expletives can also be considered expressions of linguistic politeness. Watts (2009) suggested that politeness expressions are procedural rather than propositional. He argued that politeness is concerned with the social interpersonal meaning rather than the ideational meaning, which is more closely related to the utterance's linguistic form; therefore, "ideational meaning is concerned with propositions and propositions are assigned truth values" (p. 174). In a similar vein, Jary (1998) has argued that, in many cases, linguistic politeness does not belong to the intended message; thus, the politeness assumption does not contribute to the conveyed propositional content. In this view, religious expressions of any type employed in FTAs aim to alleviate the act's imposition on the addressee's face and can therefore be called polite expletives. In requests, for example, in Muslims' discourse, it is highly common to use God-phrases such as *Alla:h yazza:k yair* ("May Allah [God] reward you with the best/goodness"), as in the utterance *aʕʔini alkita:b Alla:h yazza:k yair* ("Give me the book; may Allah [God] reward you with goodness"). The proposition "Give me the book" remains intact as a directive, despite the use of the God-phrase, which only ameliorates the force of the utterance and mitigates the FTA. Therefore, in line with Rambaud's (2012) view of expletives, religious expressions can be classified as polite expletives that intensify the emotional effect of an utterance without contributing to its propositional content.

2.4 Religious Expressions and Politeness: Research Limitations

The relationship between religious expressions and type of politeness has not received sufficient scholarly interest. Bouchara's (2015) study might be considered the most meticulous investigation of the role of religion in politeness. However, as in previous studies, Bouchara (2015) only investigated the speech act of greeting, which did not sufficiently show the effect of religious lexicons on FTAs, as the speech act of greeting is inherently polite.

Despite the notably growing research on social media discourse, to the best of my knowledge, "real-time writing" (Carter & Goddard, 2016) or synchronous communication has not been explored in terms of the pragmatic aspects of religious expressions. Existing studies have emphasized the ideological aspects of language non-discursively, particularly socio-political issues such as racism, power, and terrorism, which have been investigated through critical discourse analysis. Extant studies have also explored social media platforms but have mainly selected platforms that are popular among individuals for personal use, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. The focus has mainly been on the social and industrial (technological) aspects of discourse (Kopytowska, 2023). Therefore, the interactively discursive aspects of social media and how users utilize language to interact collectively and personally on these platforms remain unexplored. Hence, these were the focus of the current study.

2.5 Religious Expressions as Positive-Politeness Markers

In this paper, it is argued that various forms of religious expressions used in FTAs are discursive strategies that can be oriented toward the addressee's positive face. These premises are based on the functions of positive politeness strategies, as Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed, along with the cultural, social, and linguistic meanings of these expressions.

Religious expressions are only perceived as an appropriate strategy if used in an appropriate context; otherwise, the use of religious expressions may change the utterance into a face-threatening or impolite one. However, appropriateness does not necessarily entail politeness, as Almusallam (2018) has pointed out. Rather, appropriateness can be determined by the speech act in which religious expressions are used, the type of expression, and the exchange during which the speech act is performed. For example, invoking God's name when making offers, that is, *Walla:h*, which means "I swear [this offer] to God," is expected to occur more frequently when the offeror is negotiating the offer rather than initiating it (Alqahtani, 2009), specifically when the offeror senses hesitance on the part of the offeree. Initiating an offer by swearing to God to persuade the offeree to accept the offer may sound highly face-threatening because it does not give the offeree the option to reject the offer and instead forces the offeree to accept it because rejecting it after God's name has been invoked has serious consequences for the offeror in Islam (see Section 6.1). However, despite the apparent FTA that the expression *Walla:h* may become, such an offer is still quite appropriate in Saudi culture (Alqahtani, 2009). Other religious invocations, such as prayers and quoted verses or references to holy topics, on the other hand, may be used both when initiating an offer and when negotiating one.

However, with compliments, specific religious expressions are appropriate only for the first exchange. Failing to initiate compliments with religious expressions may cause a communication breakdown (see Al-Rojaie, 2021) (as will be explained in Section 6.2). Similarly, praying for the addressee is appropriate when initiating a request in which the addressee is directed to do something for the speaker, as the prayer functions as an advance expression of the speaker's verbal thank you. Religious expressions can also be used to satisfy addressees' need to feel secure and

protected. In Arabic discourse, compliments, for example, may sound inappropriate and highly face-threatening if not coupled with the formulaic expression *Masha?lla:h* (and sometimes coupled with expressions such as *Taba:rk Alla:h!* meaning "God's blessings" or *La qu:wata illa billa:h*, which means "No power but that of Allah/God") as a verbal reward for the addressee in advance of the addressee's response to the request.

The salient function of religious expressions is to show interest in the addressee's needs. This function is strategically realized by religious expressions in different speech acts, most noticeably in offers and requests. In these two speech acts, using religious expressions—whether in the form of swearing to God (using the expression *Walla:h* (By God (Allah), you accept my offer) or other religious invocations—shows the extent to which the speaker cares sincerely about the hearer. Invoking God's name by swearing to God that the offeree accepts the offer 'e.g., *Walla:h*, meaning 'By God (or I swear to God that) you would have a cup of tea with me' is an insistence strategy, which is mainly used in making offers and invitations. This culture-specific strategy enables the offeror and the offeree to cast away any doubt about the speaker's sincerity in making the offer, the speaker's use of this religious expression is considered, culturally, the sincerest manifestation of care for and interest in the addressee's wants, because the speaker subjects themselves to serious consequential expiation if the offeree turns the offer down. The cultural uniqueness of invoking God's name in negotiating offers resides in the fact that, although it may turn the offer into an FTA, this FTA does not make the offer less appropriate. This religious expression exerts a desirable pressure that allows the offeree to accept the offer without impinging on the speaker.

In religious societies, exchanging prayers through speech is a salient way to express care and intimacy. In diverse cultures, expressions such as 'God bless you!' manifest solidarity among interlocutors (Ryabova, 2015). In the Islamic culture, the Islamic teachings encourage speakers to use discursive prayers in which they wish their addressees God's graciousness and mercy to strengthen social bonding and brotherly/sisterly love, such as '*Alla:h yit'awwil fi Sumrak*' (May Allah extend your life/grant you long life), and '*Allah yiyali:k*' (May Allah save you (your life)!).

Religious expressions can also be used to satisfy addressees' needs to feel secure and protected. Compliments, for example, in Arabic discourse may sound inappropriate and highly face-threatening if not coupled with the formulaic expression '*Masha?lla:h!*' This expression pragmatically functions in two dimensions: expressing genuine admiration on the one hand and showing care to keep the evil eye away from the complimentee on the other. The use of these expressions in compliments generally intensifies the pragmatic force of the compliment (Al-Rojaie, 2021), but simultaneously mitigates its imposition. Al-Rojaie posits that using such acts without these expressions may cause embarrassment to both the addresser and the addressee, leading to a communicative breakdown.

Another important religious expression that clearly expresses optimism, especially with offers, is the religious formulaic expression *Inasha?lla:h*, which means 'if God wills/God willing'. This expression has also lost its literal meaning and acquired a new pragmatic meaning, *Iasha?lla:h* in this context expresses the speaker's optimism of the addressee's cooperation and acceptance, similar in function to the meaning of the expression I hope that Brown and Levinson (1987) provide as a salient presumptuous, optimistic expression that lessens the FTA.

Almusallam and Ismail (2022) analyzed the conversations held in Saudi female friendship groups and conducted a quantitative analysis. The analysis showed that in friendly interaction, religious expressions were present in many offer formulas. Many studies have been published to examine politeness in speech in the context of different languages. The present study makes a novel attempt where politeness has been assessed in terms of the usage of religious expressions through a discursive analysis. Additionally, religious expressions have not received appropriate attention concerning their role in politeness in religious speech communities. More importantly, there is a paucity of research on these discursive tools regarding non-face-to-face, non-verbal interactions, such as Telegram chats. On such platforms, interlocutors engage in interactions with no previous knowledge of their addressees. Hence, relations are constructed as the discourse unfolds. The current study focused on how users of emergent networks exploit religious expressions to express polite and politic behavior.

2.6 Politeness in Synchronous Communication

Real-time written discourse has become dominant in everyday interactions. Different applications have provided varied channels for users to communicate for social, academic, political, and entertainment purposes. However, there is a paucity of research exploring the discursive features of this type of communication, particularly in terms of polite and politic behavior. Ahmadi and Weisi (2023) conducted one of only a few studies that investigated textual messages from a pragmalinguistic perspective. Specifically, they investigated how Iranian English as a foreign language students employed Leech's (2007) politeness constraints in their Telegram messages. Although those scholars used Leech's recent discursive maxims, they admitted the shortcomings of their cultural applicability. They

concluded that it remains challenging for researchers to “state what exactly constitutes politeness” and also acknowledged the difficulty of relying on a specific model “due to the intervening (...) factors including sociocultural dynamics, political issues, religious ideologies, etc.” (Ahmadi & Weisi, 2023, p. 438). Furthermore, Ahmadi and Weisi (2023) used terms that are better suited to spoken discourse rather than written discourse, such as “utterance” and “speakers,” to refer to textual messages and users, demonstrating the current difficulty of employing certain terms when analyzing written discourse. Hence, the present study aimed to contribute to expanding the research on written real-time discourse from the politeness perspective. In contrast to the findings of the current study, Rabab’ah and Alali (2020) found out that anonymity on virtual platforms was “a factor in the production of impoliteness.” (p. 36). They investigated the language of commenters on a news platform and found out that impoliteness was prevalent in most comments. They concluded that virtual communication-platforms might contribute to impolite linguistic behaviour as users hide their identities behind nicknames and pseudonyms.

3. Methodology

A qualitative approach was used to support the argument that religious expressions in discourse are expressions of politeness. A complementary quantitative method was used to generate basic statistics showing the usage frequencies of religious expressions. The study investigated the linguistic context in which religious expressions are used to provide an in-depth analysis of the politeness strategy entailing the use of religious expressions. The analysis eclectically drew upon Brown and Levinson's (1987) notions of face and FTAs and positive politeness (see Section 2.2) as well as discursive methods of politeness. The approach adopted a post-modern discursive analysis of politeness when speakers negotiate meaning using religious expressions.

3.1 Data Collection

The data comprised 474 textual messages collected from a chat group on a university's Telegram channel. The channel's subscribers are mainly students attending the university. The name of the university has been anonymized in this paper to ensure confidentiality regarding the students' message content. The selected textual messages were all related to the university's then-upcoming announcement of final admission decisions. The only way to save users' messages was to capture a screenshot in the same discursive sequence. Some captured texts were unclear, and some were not fully captured. In those cases, I had to research the site to recapture clearer texts. In the final stage of collection, the texts were screen-shot to ensure that no texts had been deleted by the users. In one instance, such texts were excluded from the final collection of the texts to protect users' privacy.

3.2 Ethical Considerations

Telegram's anonymization of the research subjects' identities did not pose a difficulty as subscribers usually use nicknames, pseudonyms, or their initials. In this study, participants are not identified to the researcher nor to the readers. According to the committee of ethics in various universities “low-risk research involving no direct contact with participants or personal details may not require informed consent.” (Townsend & Wallace, n.d.). In this study, the chat is extracted from a telegram public channel for a university. As such, the data is available to the public and, the participants' contributions are expected to be made with these considerations in mind.

Great attention has been given to ensure that the analysis of the extracted texts did not reveal any hints about students' real names, departments, colleges, or any other sensitive personal information. In messages that included clues about students' identities, the symbol (.) was used to replace such information. This deleted information did not affect the meaning of the subjects' messages. Additionally, text containing vulgar or disrespectful comments was disregarded.

3.3 Problems with Terminology

The prevalence of textual communication has posed a new challenge to discourse analysts regarding choosing the correct terms for analysis. Basic terms from linguistic analysis, such as "speakers," "listeners," "interlocutors," and "utterances," may be inappropriate to discuss written discourse. Analysts have traditionally used the terms "sender" and "receiver" when discussing emails. However, Telegram's interactive conversational aspects require adopting the terms conventionally used in discourse analysis studies, following Ahmadi and Weisi's (2023) similar usage of the terms "speakers," "interlocutors," and "utterances."

3.5 Data Analysis

As noted above, this study's analytical methodology entailed a socio-pragmatic discursive approach to politeness that incorporated principles, terms, and notions from Brown and Levinson's (1987) and Watts' (2009) and Terkourafi's

(2008) models. The analysis considered the discursive context in which religious expressions were used within several discursive turns. Religious expressions' pragmatic meanings were analyzed based on their linguistic meaning in the context and the type of politeness indicated, according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) classification of politeness strategies. Additionally, the analysis drew upon the researcher's intuitive judgment and background knowledge regarding the use of such expressions. A complementary quantitative method was employed to generate basic statistics about the usage frequencies of the religious expressions observed in the collected corpus. Table 1.1 shows the usage frequencies of Saudi Telegram users' religious expressions. The frequencies may provide answers to the research questions. The data were transliterated using the conventional system many linguists employ (e.g., Almusallam, 2018; Al-Rojaie, 2021), with a few modifications. Transliteration was conducted in the Saudi standard colloquial dialect, particularly that used in the region where the discourse occurred.

4. Analysis and Findings

Table 1 displays that the Saudi Telegram users employed various religious expressions very frequently in their interactions. In every 100 textual messages, almost 29 messages included religious expressions. Overall, the notable usage frequency of religious expressions in Saudi conversation indicates the influence of religion on Saudi speakers' language choices. It also provides a salient indication of Saudi pragmalinguistic norms as a religious society. Using religious expressions to serve different pragmatic functions is a discursive norm in Saudi interaction.

Table 1. Frequencies and Forms of Religious Expressions in Telegram Messages

Religious expression	Usage frequency	Percentage within 100 words (%)
Invocations, blessings, and prayers for the addressee	53	11.2
Inshaʔalla:h (God willing)	22	4.6
Assalamu ʔalaikum (Peace be upon you)	17	3.6
Ami:n (Ya rab) (Amen Oh Lord!)	12	2.5
Walla:h (Uqsim billa:h) (By God)	11	2.3
Billa:h (In God's name)	8	1.7
Mashaʔlla:h (God Protect!)	6	1.3
Alhamdulillah (Thank God)	4	0.8
Biʔiḏenilla:h (in God's permission)	1	0.21
Total	134	28.21

Table 1 shows variations in the usage frequencies of these expressions in the collected data. Religious invocations (God-wishes) in which the speaker invokes God's name to wish the addressee goodness constitute the most frequently occurring type of religious expression among the Saudi Telegram users, whereas *Biʔiḏenilla:h* is the least frequently used in the data. The reason for the latter's rare occurrence may be that *Biʔiḏenilla:h* is usually used interchangeably with the expression *Inshaʔalla:h*. However, *Inshaʔalla:h* seems to be more frequently used in daily conversation (Farghal, 1995), whereas the conventional Islamic greeting *Asslamu ʔalaikum* seems to be equally prominent in both written and spoken discourse.

Interestingly, the research subjects used the Islamic greeting *Asslamu ʔalaikum* although they were not engaged in face-to-face interaction. Saudi Telegram users seem to value this Islamic practice despite the practical considerations of synchronous communication, which imposes a semi-telegraphic writing style. Most of the research subjects who used the Islamic greeting used the form *Asslamu ʔalaikum* when initiating an inquiry. The shortest form of the greeting, Salam! ("Peace!") only appears once in these data. The longest form of the greeting, *Asslamu ʔalaikum wa Rahmatu Alla:h wa Baraka:tuh*, is also rarely used. The low usage frequency of the shortest and longest forms of the Islamic greeting can be explained from two perspectives. The shortest form, Salam, is an elliptical form of greeting, which, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), is a positive politeness strategy that aims to establish intimacy in close relationships. In the social media interaction context, users address distant and unfamiliar people; thus, this type of greeting is rarely used in the data. Using the longest form, on the other hand, may be problematic in real-time

written discourse due to time and space constraints. Therefore, *Aslamu Salaikum* is the most frequently used, possibly due to its practicality and formality; that is, it is more practical than the longest form and more formal than the shortest one.

However, interestingly, in the dataset, when the longest form of the greeting appears in a query, all the interactants responding to the query responded to the Islamic greeting either by using the full form or the short one. Contrarily, when the short form, *Aslamu Salaikum*, is used in a query, many respondents do not reciprocate the greeting and skip to answering the query directly. This may indicate that the longest form of the greeting may be stronger at provoking Islamic emotions among recipients; that is, it might be face-threatening for users not to reciprocate this strong Islamic greeting as that might show disrespect for its meaning. Although using the long form of the Islamic greeting may not accord with the norms of social media synchronic communication, which calls for short and brief language, it can be also concluded that the research subjects used the long Islamic greeting to build solidarity, to attract attention to their messages. Saudi Telegram users seem to abide by Islamic teachings when greeting or responding to another's greeting even when their interlocutor's identity is concealed and face-to-face interaction is not possible.

Another religious expression that occurs very frequently in Muslims' discourse and also in Telegram chats is *Walla:h* ("By God"). In the students' discussion about the upcoming admissions decisions, the expression is used eight times in the form of *Walla:h* and once as *Uqsim Billa:h* ("I swear to God"). However, in the dataset, *Wall:ah* is only used as a formulaic expression to intensify the perlocutionary force of declarative and disagreements (see Section 2.2 for the pragmatic functions of *Walla:h*). The analysis commenced with expressions that have varied pragmatic functions. P1-P3 are salient examples of how religion plays an essential role in the Saudi Islamic discursive identity as in Table 2.

Table 2. Pragmatic Functions of Expression *Walla:h*

Extract transliteration	Original extract
P1: <i>Walla:h</i> ma:ʔadri aqu:l ya rab angibel walla la ha:ði <i>Walla:h</i> ilbalshah. I swear to God I don't know whether to pray for acceptance or not. By God, this is a dilemma.	والله ما ادري أقول يا رب انقبل و الا لا. هذي والله البليشة
P2a: bana:m idʕu li aqu:m ahasʕil risalt alqubo:l. I'll go to sleep. Pray for me to wake up and find the message of acceptance	بأنام ادعو لي أقوم احصل رسالة القبول.
P2b: ya rab nihasʕilha kullana. Oh God let all of us receive this message.	يا رب نحصلها كلنا
P2c: <i>Walla:h</i> ma yiʕi ino:m. By God sleep will not come to you.	والله ما يجي النوم
P2d: bilʕaks <i>Walla:h</i> maɔugt inno:m thalathah aya:m lain ʕa qub:li. To the contrary, By God I couldn't sleep for three days until I received acceptance.	بالعكس والله ما نقت النوم ثلاثة أيام لين جا قبولي.
P3a: Termain ʔahwan <u>min thala:thah. ðʕyʕfʕ nafsi wa ʕasadi wkullah rakiðʕ</u> . Two terms is better than three; (in three) emotional and physical pressure and it is all just running.	ترمين اهون من ثلاثة. ضغط نفسي وجسدي و كله ركض
P3b: La <i>Walla:h</i> ʔana zarrabt thala:thah ʔatra:am Wallah innah ahwan ilmuða:karah tiyif (...). No by God I tried the three-term plan last year; By God it's easier, and the pressure of studying is less (...)	لا والله انا جربت ثلاثة اترام والله انها اهون المذاكرة تخف (...)

In P1, the speaker begins her (When gender is known, the specific pronoun is used) message with the intensifier *Walla:h* ("By God") to describe her confusion and reluctance to join the university. She is confused about whether to pray to Allah to help her be accepted to the program or not. This intensification of the state of confusion is reinforced by another use of the intensifier *Walla:h* to emphasize the dilemma. The expression intensifies the message's perlocutionary force. Although the subject communicated her confusion to the audience, there seemed to be no direct involvement of the "other" in the utterance; therefore, the religious expression is formulaic here, with no politeness content.

In P2c and P2d, *Walla:h* is used in response to several turns of negotiation related to the subject's insomnia due to the stress of waiting for the admission decision. The speaker in P2a requests that readers pray for her to receive an acceptance message from the university as soon as she wakes up. The speaker in P2c initiates the discussion by

joking that even after receiving the acceptance message, students will still be unable to sleep due to overexcitement. During negotiation, the expression *Walla:h* is used to intensify the idea's illocutionary force. In P2d, *Walla:h* is used to politically boost disagreement with the addressee, without sounding rude.

Similarly, in P3b, the speaker mitigates disagreement with P3a by invoking God's name to verify the proposition's truthfulness. This user does so in response to an exchange in which another student has praised the two-term plan. P3b disagrees, using the article *la* ("no") and intensifying the disagreement with the religious expression *Walla:h*. Here, the intensifier politically emphasizes disagreement because it urges the addressee to respect God's name and end the argument. This may show that users view swearing to God as a powerful persuasion strategy, and recipients show respect for God's name by refraining from further discussion. The uniqueness of this expression in the disagreement context is that it intensifies the illocutionary force without making the response sound coarse. Consider an alternative without the religious expression; it would sound like blunt disagreement, such as:

*No, I tried the two-term plan, and it's much easier.

Therefore, the use of the religious expression *Walla:h* in these contexts can be considered to be politic behavior. Despite such expressions' strong effect in cases of disagreement, they are accepted as appropriate due to their religious content.

Another noteworthy use of *Walla:h* is to redress the negative response to the inquiry made in P4a.

Table 3. *Walla:h* as a Negative-Politeness Marker

Extract transliteration	Original extract
P4a: ma tanzil bi itadri:3 issa:ʃah 10? Don't they appear gradually at 10:00?	مانتزل بالتدريج الصباح؟ و الله ما اعرف يمكن قبلها الظاهر
P4b: <i>Walla:h</i> ma aʃarif bus yimkin gablaha iyʃahir. By God, I don't know. Maybe before.	

The speaker in P4b responds to P4a and uses an intensifier to express sincerity that he/she lacks the required knowledge. This is done to convince the addressee that he/she is being truthful rather than simply evading helping the addressee. The expression *Walla:h* is also used to ameliorate the imposition. This formula *Walla:h ma ʔadri* ("By God, I don't know") is frequently used in Saudi conversations because it not only intensifies the proposition's veracity but also increases its politeness. The expression aims to show the speaker's sincerity in declaring his/her lack of knowledge rather than evading providing a helpful answer. After asserting his/her lack of knowledge, the speaker in P4b mitigates this assertion by hedging using "but," "maybe," and "apparently." This mitigation distances the subject from taking responsibility for the proposition after strongly affirming his/her lack of knowledge. *Walla:h* is also used to mean "really" or "seriously," which are, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), expressions of performative hedges that "present the illocutionary force of the sentence" (p. 146), as evidenced in P5a₂.

Table 4. *Walla:h* as a Hedge

Extract transliteration	Original text
P5a ₁ : fih ihtima:l yinazzulu:n alnita:yi3 qabel 12? Is there any chance they would post the results before 12:00.	فيه احتمال ينزلون النتائج قبل ١٢؟
P5b: yimken. Possibly.	يمكن
P5a ₂ : yalait <i>Walla:h</i> lʔan tʃifishna	ياليت والله لأن طفشنا
I wish by God (seriously) because we got fed up.	

Another religious expression used as an alerter to intensify requests is *Billa:h* ("in God's name"). Examine the following text in Table 5.

Table 5. Pragmatic Functions of *Billa:h*

Extract transliteration	Original text
P6: illi ma nazal ?ithbat il'amal yinlaghi qubu:lah? <i>Billa:h</i> Ruddu d'aru:ri/ For those who don't provide evidence for work, will their acceptance be cancelled? In God's name answer me. It is urgent.	اللي ما نزل اثبات العمل ينلغي قبوله؟ بالله ردوا ضروري.

Table 6. Pragmatic Functions of *Masha?lla:h*

Extract transliteration	Original text
P7a: ana 65 wangibalt I am 65 and have been accepted.	انا ٦٥ و اتقبلت
P7b: <i>Masha?lla:h</i> ana 94 wmangibalt. God Protect you from the evil eye! Mine is 94 and I wasn't accepted.	ما شاء الله عليك انا ٩٤ وأنا ما تقبلت
P8a ₁ : lao simahtu illi yaʕrif wi ʕindah jawab aki:d yigu:l li hul ilinsiḥab yuathir ʕala almudah iniḏʕamiyah li addirasah? If you please, who knows and is sure (of the answer) can tell me: does withdrawal affect the required duration for study?	لو سمحتوا اللي يعرف وعنده جواب اكيد يقول لي الانسحاب يؤثر على المدة النظاميه للدراسة؟

Table 6 Continued

Extract transliteration	Original text
P8b ₁ : taʕrifeen aish yaʕni insiḥab? alinsiḥab mu bas yuathir ʕala almudahalniḏʕamiyah yaʕni bye bye li ilja:mʕah. wana bi jamiʕati matigdari:n tigadimi:n ʕala alja:mʕah illa baʕad muru:r sanatain wa aʕtaqid ḏa niḏa:m jami:ʕ iljamiʕa:t wiwagtaha biyku:n malik awlawyah abad ilawlawyah li ilʕari:j:in fa nasʕiḥah lik ?ʕili iʕtaḏri ayi shay bas la tinsaḥbi:n Do you know what withdrawal means? It not only affects the legal duration but it means Bye Bye to the university. At my university, you can't reapply to the university until after two years. So, my advice is just to drop a semester.	تعرفين ايش يعني انسحاب؟ انسحاب مو بس يؤثر على المدة النظاميه يعني باي باي للجامعة. وانا بجامعتي ما تقدرين تقديم على الجامعات الا بعد مرور سنتين واعتقد ذا نظام جميع الجامعات ووقتها بيكون مالك الاولويه ابد الاولويه للخريجين فنصيحة لك اجلى اعتذري اي شي بس لا تتسحبين
P8a ₂ : ana ʕiri:ʕah ya ruḥi ana gabel 5 sanawat sawwait insiḥa:b wi riʕiʕet isanah illi baʕdaha ʕla tʕu:l, bas abyʕa aʕrif iḏa hu yiʕthir ʕala almudahalniḏʕamiyah laʕn a:ʕer tirm ma nazzalu li muka:faʕh? I'm an expected graduate darling. Five years ago, I withdrew and returned the next year immediately. I just want to know does that affect the required duration to complete my study because the last term I didn't get a stipend [...]	انا خريجة يا روحي انا قبل ٥ سنوات سويت انسحاب و رجعت السنة اللي بعدها على طول بس ابغي اعرف اذا هو يؤثر على المدة النظامية لأن اخر ترم ما نزلوا لي مكافأة اخر ترم(..)
P8b ₂ : ?aha fihimt <i>Masha?lla:h</i> kwayis iḏa innaha ja:t ʕala almuka:faʕah <i>Alla:h</i> yuwafigik. Aha Got it. God Protect you from the eye. Good it only affected your stipend. May God grant you luck!	أها فهمت ما شاء الله كويس إذا انها جات على المكافأة الله يوفقك.

In non-face-to-face interactions in virtual environments, users commonly ignore others' messages because no imposition to respond to requests has been exerted given that the speakers' identities are unknown. Therefore, the speaker in P6 uses God's name to impose on the users who ignored her first query. The proposition is appropriate and cannot be categorized as impolite. However, this imposition may explain the expression's low usage frequency in the

corpus compared to other more frequently used expressions. This may fall under politic behavior in the category of unmarked politeness. Users resort to this type of strategy to avoid being neglected and to persuade others to cooperate.

Saudi Telegram users frequently use the expression *Masha?lla:h*, which means "What God wills." However, the expression has developed new pragmatic functions that deviate from its literal meaning (Al-Rojaie, 2021). In compliments, this expression has been conventionalized to channel the meaning "I invoke God's name to protect you from evil eye!" In the dataset, in real-time written discourse, the research subjects use the expression *Masha?lla:h* in a way similar to its use in spoken discourse (see Section 2). As with the previously discussed expressions, *Masha?lla:h* is an important aspect of politic behavior in Muslim societies when showing admiration. However, unlike the previous expressions, which might exert pressure if used, this expression is essential when giving compliments to constitute the addressee's face, and its absence may cause face damage. Therefore, regardless of whether the interaction is face-to-face or not, using such expressions is integral to complimenting Muslim discourse, as shown in P7a–P8a₂.

The expression *Masha?lla:h* in P8a₂ is used after extensive negotiation of meaning. Despite a long argument resulting from a misunderstanding caused by a user's misuse of terminology in P8a, which may have created a negative attitude between the interacting users, the speaker in P8b₂ still invokes God to protect the addressee from evil eye. In so doing, she expresses implied admiration using *Masha?lla:h* to an addressee who exceeded the permitted study duration but whose enrolment status was not affected. It is worth noting that despite the conflict between the two users and the nature of the non-face-to-face interaction, the research subject clings to her Islamic values by showing care for the addressee and attending to the addressee's needs even though the users' identities were concealed.

Another instance of *Masha?lla:h* occurs with another prominent Islamic discursive expression *Insha:?lla:h*. In P9b, the two expressions have two different pragmatic meanings.

Table 7. Multiple Functions of Religious Expressions

Extract transliteration	Original text
P9a: idʕu li angibel ana maozu:nati 93.	ادعولي انقبل. موزونتي
Pray for me to be accepted. My percentage is 93.	93
P9b: <i>Masha:?lla:h</i> tingabli:n bi ira:hah <i>Insha:?lla:h</i> God protect you! You will be accepted easily.	ما شاء الله تتقبلين بالراحة ان شاء الله

The speaker in P9b expresses admiration of the addressee for her good parentage by using the formulaic expression *Masha:?lla:h*, followed by a direct affirmation that the addressee will be accepted. However, to alleviate responsibility for this affirmation, the speaker in P9b also uses the religious expression *Insha:?lla:h*, which means "if God wills." Culturally, the expression *Insha:?lla:h* implies a conditional state in which any expectation of a future event is contingent on God's will. However, as previously discussed (see Section 2), the expression has developed other pragmatic meanings related to optimism and has become a positive politeness strategy akin to "I hope" or "hopefully." In many contexts, the expression can, along with optimism, also imply that the speaker is not taking full responsibility for assuring the addressee about the imminence of a positive future event.

An interesting use of the expression *Insha:?lla:h* can be seen in P10b, where the speaker constitutes the face of an addressee who is ironically celebrating the university's rejection of her application.

The subject expresses irony through the paradoxical use of *Alhamudlialla:h* ("Thank God") in combination with "Congratulate me on being rejected." Conventionally, combining the expression *Alhamudlialla:h* with congratulations is a pragmatic use that is appropriate in response to positive attributes and events. However, in P10a, the research subject asks other users to congratulate her on her failure. Therefore, the speaker in P10b responds with the expression *Insha:?lla:h*, which aims to alleviate the addressee's stressful expression of insincere happiness and give the addressee hope instead. The use of the expression also saves the speaker's face regarding definitively asserting that the addressee will eventually be accepted as the speaker knows that it may be impossible for the addressee to ever be accepted after having been rejected. The expression, therefore, ameliorates the proposition's force and truth value.

Table 8. Face-Constituting Uses of Religious Expressions

Extract transliteration	Original text
P10a: barku li inrafað't <i>Alhamudlialla:h</i> . Congratulate me! I have been rejected Thank God!	باركو لي انرفضت الحمد لله
P10b: itku:n maʕna <i>Insha:ʔlla:h</i> . You will be with us God willing.	تكون معنا ان شاء الله

Religious invocations or prayers are the most frequently used expressions in the data. They occur in a wide range of speech acts, particularly requests. Invocations are used when redressing requests, thanking someone for carrying out a request and expressing solidarity and rapport. In identity-concealed interactions, these exchanges are indexical of societal speech norms. *Allah yisʕidk(kumi)* (*um* is a plural suffix) (“May Allah make you happy”) and *Alla:h Yiʕtʕik(kum) ilʕafyah* (“May Allah bestow good health on you”) are the most frequently used prayers when making requests or when thanking someone for answering a query. This accords with Bajri’s (2005) conclusions about face-to-face interactions, where Saudi speakers use blessings as alerts to express politeness when making requests. However, this necessitates future research on why participants use politeness to construct intimate relations when socializing virtually.

Interestingly, many research subjects can be seen asking other users to pray for them, specifically to pray for them to be accepted to the university. This shows the importance of religious expressions in constructing social relations. Examine how the interlocutors in P11a₁–P11a₂ exchange prayers to support each other.

Table 9. Religious Invocations as Politeness Strategies

Extract transliteration	Original text
P11a ₁ : adʕu li angibel. Pray for me that I get accepted (.)	ادعو لي انقبل (.)
P11b: ya rab tengabli:n wi yihagig lik mubtaʕa:ki. I pray to God that you will be accepted and He makes you achieve what you aspire to.	يا رب تنقبلين ويحقق لك مبتغاك.
P11a ₂ : <i>Alla:h yisʕidk ya rab!</i> May Allah make you happy!	الله يسعدك يا رب

However, the research subjects not only invoke prayers but also use them when making requests to redress the imposition of the request by attending to the addressee's positive face, which is possible because the invocation always involves the speaker's prayer for the addressee's well-being. The strategy may be considered the most salient example of positive politeness due to its religious significance to holy topics related to the Prophet.

Table 10. Religious Invocations as Mitigating Strategies in Requests

Extract transliteration	Original text
P12a ₁ : kaif ayʕiyyer ilʕa:lah munsaʕib? How do I change my status to "Dropout"?	كيف أغير الحالة منسحب؟
P12b: sawwi iʕa:dat qaid. Do re-enrolment.	سوي إعادة قيد.
P12a ₂ : kaif asswi:h <i>Alla:h yisʕidk</i> ? How do I do that May Allah make you happy?	كيف أسويه الله يسعدك؟
P13: lao samaʕtu <i>Alla:h yisʕdkumii</i> lao anqabalt mathalan bi (.) wi isanah al za:yah yemdi:ni ayʕayer wella la . Arzu arrad. If please may Allah make you happy, If I were accepted for (.), can I change my major next year? Or not? I beg for an answer.	لو سمحتوا الله يسعدكم لو انقبلت مثلاً ب... و السنه الجايه اغير... يمديني؟ و الا لا ارجو الرد

The need for prayers/blessings or religious invocations increases as the request's degree of face threat increases. In this case, the religious expression functions as an in-advance verbal reward for the addressee that enhances his/her positive face and lessens the directive's imposition on both interlocutors' faces. In P12a₂, the speaker mitigates the imposition of asking the addressee another question by using a religious prayer. As previously mentioned, in identity-concealed interactions, these exchanges are indexical of the societal speech norms.

The inclusion of a religious prayer addresses the addressee's negative face given that the addressee may feel unconformable because of the detailed information they have to provide in writing to answer the speaker's question. Because Saudi interactants value the themes of health and happiness in their prayers to establish solidarity and rapport among community members, the speaker in P12a₂ responds by praying for the addressee, using the expression *Alla:h yisfidik* ("May Allah make you happy"). The prayer may be perceived as a strong version of 'shukran', meaning "thank you."

In P13, the speaker uses the conventional expressions "if you please" and "I beg for a response," whereas the use of the prayer *Alla:h yisfdikum* can be analyzed as polite behavior since its usage is unconventional. Using prayers in combination with a conventional formulaic expression is a salient marker of politeness. The speaker aims to exert the strongest effect on the recipients to ensure their cooperation. Arguably, this heightened positive effect makes the religious expression a form of polite behavior.

Interestingly, religious invocations and blessings are also employed to mitigate disagreement and negative attitudes. In P14, two users have engaged in a long argument about the average percentage required for admission.

Table 11. Invocations in Disagreements

Extract transliteration	Original text
P14a: tuwagafo:n yagbulu:ni? nisbiti 74. Do you think they will accept me? My percentage is 74.	توقعون يقبولوني؟ نسبتي ٧٤.
P14b ₁ : ilbana:t fo:g 89 wi ?awla:d aggal shay 87. For Girls' (percentages) above 89 and for boys the lowest is 87.	البنات فوق ٨٩ و الأولاد اقل شي ٨٧
P14c ₁ : la ʕa:di sahbati maʕa ittarqiyah ingabalat wi hi aqal min 89 ihtima:l ði issanah aʕala s'ara:hah nisabhum hilwa ziddan/No. It's fine. My friend with the upgrade was accepted although she scored less than 89. Maybe this year percentages will be higher. The required average this year is very good indeed.	لا عادي صاحبتي مع الترقية انقبلت و هي اقل من ٨٩ احتمال ذي السنه اعلى. صراحة نسبهم حلوه جدا.
P14b ₂ : irziʕi taʕakkadi min alnisab/ Go back and check the percentages well.	ارجعي تأكدي من النسب
P14c ₂ : mitaʕkidah wi waʕid minhum mingibel wu hu 87 baʕad. I'm sure one boy was not accepted and he also scored 87.	متأكدة و واحد منهم انقبل و هو ٨٧ بعد.
P14b ₃ : irziʕi taʕkkadi <i>Alla:h yisʕlihik</i> tawini ashu:f isʕuwar . Go back and check May Allah make you a good person.	ارجعي تأكدي الله يصلحك.

After many exchanges concerned with negotiating the required average percentage, the speaker in P14b₃ invokes religious prayers, not as an expression of solidarity and intimacy but rather as mitigation of criticism, disagreement, and a negative attitude toward the addressee. Although it is a religious invocation, *Alla:h yisʕlihik* (May Allah make you a good person) has a negative connotation that implies criticism of someone as having been misled and thus needing guidance; hence, it may be interpreted as an FTA. Although it mitigates harsh criticism, it still, to some extent, poses a threat to the addressee's image, albeit in an appropriate way. In terms of the relational theory principles (Terkourafi, 2008; Watts, 2009), this type of strategy saliently functions as politic behavior. This function aligns with Al-Rojaie's view (2021) that classifies them as negative-politeness markers used for persuasion.

Religious invocations are also used to replace direct expressions of thanks. In the following proposition, a user responds to the addressee's provision of help with a religious invocation combined with the agreement marker *tama:m*.

Table 12. Religious Invocations in Expressing Thanks

Extract transliteration	Original text
P15: <i>tama:m Yiʕti:k ilʕa:fyah</i> Perfect!	تمام يعطيك العافية
May Allah bestow health on you!	

In P15, the speaker uses the agreement discourse maker *tama:m* (good/perfect) with an invocation for the addressee's wellbeing. The speaker does not need to express thanks on record using the conventional expression *shukran* (*lak*) (Thank(s) (you)). The invocation *Yiʕti:k ilʕa:fyah* "May (God) give (bless) you with good health" may have a stronger perlocutionary effect on the addressee than the typical "thank you." The speaker not only expresses appreciation but, more importantly, offers verbal prayers that constitute the addressee's face.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper has provided theoretical and empirical accounts of the pragmatic interpretation of the different forms of religious expressions that Muslim speakers use in everyday conversation. It has demonstrated how religious expressions in many texts are expressions of polite and politic behavior. In line with the findings of research on face-to-face interactions, Saudi interactants on Telegram have been found to emphasize their religious identities through the usage of religious expressions that communicate politeness and rapport. The analysis also provided ample examples of the various contexts in which speakers use religious expressions to redress FTAs by attending to the addressee's positive face, such as by fulfilling others' need for recognition, intimacy, care, and affiliation.

The analysis has also shown the importance of using an eclectic method to rigorously explain this complex culture-specific phenomenon. Moreover, the analysis showed the applicability of Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept of positive politeness as well as the post-modern concepts of politic behavior and face constitution. The analysis also showed that Brown and Levinson's (1987) notion of face and their types of politeness are still applicable to various religious expressions. In many instances, the research subjects used polite formulas comprising religious expressions in discourses where their faces and identities were not visible. Users responded to the interactants by employing these expressions to strategically attend to addressees' face wants in a virtual environment. If politeness is only intended to satisfy the speaker's interest and self-image, it may be logical to assume that in "unseen" interactions, these formulas would not be expected to occur. In cases of disagreement and opposition, for example, Telegram users still avoided using impolite language and instead employed religious expressions to mitigate negative emotions although they could have opted out and chosen rudeness without fearing the consequences. Interestingly, many users used God-wishes and invocations to express solidarity and rapport with members without even being engaged in a discussion with any particular addressee. This has demonstrated how members of religious societies seem to maintain the rules of politic behavior even in non-face-to-face interactions.

The results align with previous research in one perspective. They emphasize Almusallams' (2018) and Bouchara's (2015) findings that Muslim speakers overuse religious expressions in their discourse to reflect their attachment to the Islamic teachings and express good manners. However, Bouchara claims that Muslims' overuse of religious expressions does not necessarily indicate they are more religious than other non-Muslim societies, but because they have the habit to use these expressions in their daily activities and due to cultural and religious aspects of Arabic as the language of Quran. However, in the light of the current findings, the speakers' insistence on using religious expressions in virtual environments where participants' identities are anonymized indicates firmness of religious belief rather than habitual behavior in daily activities. Some speakers sent prayers to all the members even without engaging in any discussion. Implementing religious expressions actively as persuasive strategies to accomplish discursive goals shows deep awareness of the role of these expressions and their effect in discourse. Initiating texts by the Islamic greeting in social media applications, for example, is not expected in terms of the norms of media talk. Therefore, such discursive practices show how users tend to foreground their religious identities. However, more research is needed to investigate whether users of these modes of communication in other cultures also maintain similar polite or politic formulas while interacting with others on such platforms even though impoliteness has been conventionally associated with social media discourses.

The study also showed the effectiveness of combining modern and post-modern models to analyze politeness in Muslim discourse. Alqahtani (2009), Al-Rojaie (2021) and Bouchara (2015) analyzed the functions of religious expressions from the perspective of Brown and Levinson's modern theory. This may have led to dichotomous

analysis of positive-negative functions. Aspects of politic behavior that function in the realm of marked and unmarked politeness have not been accounted for in such studies. The current study showed functions of religious expressions that may have impolite implications but are still considered appropriate such as the expression *Alla:h yis'lihik* "May Allah make you a good person".

Importantly, the emergence and prevalence of these new social media discourses have posed new challenges in terms of the appropriate usage of discursive terminology and notions. For instance, can we use the notion of "face" when there is no visible face involved in the interaction? Does the concept of "self-image" apply when no one can see the individual's image? Which terms should be used in place of "speakers," "interlocutors," and "utterances?" The term "participant" is inadequate in some contexts and misleading in others because it does not indicate whether it refers to the speaker or the addressee.

5.1 Implications for Discourse Analysis

This study aimed to test the applicability of politeness theory to the use of religious expressions in synchronous non-face-to-face, non-verbal communication. The recent revolution in real-time discursive writing has demanded new perspectives on analyzing politic behavior. The data for this study were obtained from Telegram. Users' identities were concealed, and students in these discourses engaged in face-threatening arguments with other members who may have been unidentified interlocutors, students, administrators, and other principals. However, the analysis showed that face is always relevant to interactions even in discourses where speakers' identities are concealed. Nevertheless, why interlocutors are keen to express politic behavior in interactions where users' identities are unknown to any of the interactants remains an unexplored question. Given the absence of face-to-face interaction and users' anonymity, the presence of these strategies in such communication reveals aspects of discursive behavior that require further investigation. Regarding Saudi discourse, the analysis showed that the interactants seemed to be aware of face needs and that people need rules to constitute their faces and the faces of others. Despite the practical time and space considerations that apply to digital communication, Saudi users were keen to express their religious identity in various situations. These expressions, as noted above, do not contribute to speakers' utterances' propositional content but rather express emotive meaning. In digital discourses, language is expected to focus on the main words that convey the message. The expressions were largely used to find common ground with addressees through conveyances of solidarity and group membership. The practice of evoking Islamic emotions was observed as prevalent throughout the discourse.

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