




## Sarcasm as a Digital Indirectness Strategy: A Pragmatic Analysis of Gen Z’s Face Work on Instagram Posts/Stories

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article History:</b>            Received: April 15, 2026            Revised: May 08, 2026            Accepted: May 20, 2026            Available Online: June 02, 2026</p>	<p><i>This research investigates sarcasm as an indirect linguistic strategy used to avoid face work in dynamic social interactions. Instagram has transformed contemporary communication by supporting creative and purposeful language practices among Gen Z. The study examines how Gen Z users employ sarcasm on Instagram posts through the lens of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) Politeness Theory. It employs a qualitative textual analysis of Instagram posts to identify and interpret Goffman’s idea of facework that includes positive, negative and off record Face Threatening Acts. The findings indicate that positive politeness strategies are more frequently used to reinforce solidarity among peers. Negative politeness strategies appear less frequently but emerge in contexts involving authority or sensitive topics. Off-Record strategies enable Gen Z to convey implicit meanings to maintain plausible deniability. The research aims to uncover how language constructs different strategies to manage face-needs and avoid face-threats. The choice of strategy depends on social variables such as power relations, social distance, and degree of imposition. The analysis demonstrates that people use sarcasm as a linguistic strategy to show anger and frustrations in their social, political, relational and cultural lives. For Gen Z, sarcasm not only functions as a key expressive resource for humour, identity construction and social critique but also as a tool that has the potential to threaten both positive and negative faces. The findings also reveal that people use language to create their appealing self-image while conveying unexpected meanings by stating them indirectly. It further suggests that sarcasm is not merely a stylistic device, but a socially negotiated practice shaped by politeness strategies and communicative norms of Instagram.</i></p>
<p><b>Keywords:</b>            Politeness, Face threatening Acts, Sarcasm, Generation Z, Self-Representation, Instagram Discourse, Self-deprecation</p>	
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## **1. Introduction**

In contemporary digital communication, sarcasm has emerged as a prominent and multifunctional pragmatic strategy, especially among Generation Z. As young users increasingly rely on social media platforms to navigate identity, relationships, and social expectations, Instagram posts and stories have become key spaces where communicative norms are negotiated and reshaped. Unlike face-to-face interaction, online communication lacks prosodic cues such as tone, facial expressions, and gesture, making indirectness strategies such as sarcasm more complex but also more creatively deployed. Gen Z often uses sarcasm not merely for humour, but as a nuanced tool for managing face needs, softening criticism, expressing resistance, and building in-group solidarity.

Sarcasm functions as a form of digital indirectness that allows users to convey meanings that are contextually layered, ambiguous, or intentionally contradictory. This strategic ambiguity can protect the speaker's positive or negative face while enabling them to address sensitive topics such as self-presentation, social pressure, or emotional vulnerability without overt confrontation.

Although previous research has examined sarcasm in computer-mediated communication, few studies have focused specifically on how Gen Z uses sarcasm as a face-work strategy within the Instagram environment. Understanding this phenomenon is important because it illuminates how digital natives negotiate politeness, self-saving, and social norms in highly public yet personalized online spaces. This study therefore explores how sarcasm functions as an indirectness strategy and what role it plays in Gen Z's face-work on Instagram posts and stories. This research is grounded in Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, which conceptualizes communication as a continuous negotiation of face needs: positive face (the desire to be liked and approved of) and negative face (the desire for freedom from imposition) and Off-Record face acts. From this perspective, sarcasm can be interpreted as a strategic response to potentially face-threatening acts. By saying the opposite of what is meant, speakers create intentional ambiguity, enabling them to mask criticism, soften disapproval, or express vulnerability without overtly challenging the hearer's face. The study examines how speakers use three main linguistic strategies to manage FTAs, each varying in directness and the degree of redress provided to the hearer's face.

### **1.1 Research Objectives:**

This research has the following objectives:

1. To identify and categorise the forms of sarcasm used by Gen Z as a strategy of digital indirectness on Instagram Stories.
2. To examine how sarcasm reflects Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies and functions as a face-saving or face-threatening mechanism in Gen Z's online interactions.

### **1.2 Research Questions**

This research focuses on the following research questions:

1. What forms of sarcasm do Gen Z users employ as strategies of digital indirectness in Instagram Stories?
2. How does sarcasm function as a face-saving or face-threatening mechanism in Gen Z's online interactions?

### **1.3 Significance of Research**

This research presents a vivid example of how Gen Z employs sarcasm on Instagram Stories/posts to perform communicative actions such as expressing criticism, signaling emotional stance, and

managing social distance quite implicitly, thus suggesting dynamic patterns of digital indirectness and evolving norms of online face work. It further serves to illuminate how changing language practices and interactional styles in social media contexts are shaped by politeness concerns, as explained by Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, and how these are negotiated through the linguistic features of Instagram Stories.

#### **1.4 Research Gap**

The pattern observed in previous research raises an important question: does Gen Z use sarcasm on Instagram primarily as a protective device to save face and avoid confrontation or has sarcasm become a normalized way of communicating real social tension and stereotypes under the guise of humour? The previous research examined sarcasm as an emotional or attitudinal signal. The present study addresses this gap by examining how sarcasm can function in place of traditional politeness strategies such as off-record hints, positive politeness, negative politeness, and even bald-on-record acts. It investigates how Gen Z strategically uses sarcastic remarks to navigate face-threatening situations, negotiate social closeness, and perform face-work in digital interactions. Unlike studies that highlight emojis, visuals, or multimodality, this research focuses primarily on linguistic choices, presenting sarcasm as a calculated and meaningful form of indirectness rather than an accidental or spontaneous reaction.

## **2. Literature Review**

Despite growing interest in digital discourse, the interplay between sarcasm, politeness strategies, and face management among Gen Z remains underexplored, prompting a closer review of existing scholarships. A considerable number of researchers have examined these aspects in the context of different interpretations. Virtanen (2022) mixed-methods study extends Goffmanian face-work into social media, arguing that platform-specific affordances produce new "*virtual performatives*" through which users manage impressions and negotiate face. The study shows that indirect strategies (including irony and sarcasm) operate as deliberate face-protecting and face-attacking moves: sarcastic posts may soften an attack by wrapping it in humor while simultaneously marking in-group membership. Virtanen's findings are methodologically useful for Instagram research because they link multimodal signals (text, images, likes, and reply threads) to face outcomes and emphasize how audience scope (public vs. close followers) conditions whether sarcasm will be repairable or escalatory. For a study of Gen Z on Instagram, Virtanen's theoretical framing supplies dramaturgical tools to analyse how sarcasm functions pragmatically as both a hedging device and a social boundary marker.

According to Rackley (2023) and Tufail (2024), qualitative work *Gen Z's Digital Habits and Language Practices on Instagram* cited that Gen Z utilizes sarcasm to perform two opposing social functions: bonding and mocking. Gen Z employs slang, rapid stylistic shifts, and inventive emoji use to perform identity and manage relationships online. These studies highlight that Gen Z's communicative repertoire intentionally blurs sincerity and creates a context in which sarcastic utterances become a routine strategy for face-work: to bond, mock, and to deflect direct confrontation. Most importantly they report that younger users expect followers to be literate in these shared codes (memes, reaction GIFs, ironic captions), so sarcasm is often comprehensible within peer networks but risky across heterogeneous audiences. Methodologically, these works advocate combining discourse analysis with participant interviews to capture both producers' intent and recipients' interpretations, a model directly applicable to research on Instagram posts and stories.

Moreover, foundational computational and pragmatic reviews (e.g., “Construct of Sarcasm on Social Media,” 2019) show multimodal and contextual complexity of sarcasm; this includes literal-positive surface forms with negative intended meanings, signaled through lexical cues, punctuation, timing, and paratext (hashtags, emojis). These reviews emphasize that sarcasm detection requires pragmatic inference: the same textual surface may be sarcastic in one conversational frame but sincere in another. For a Gen Z Instagram focus, this body of work underscores that automatic classification is error-prone unless the models incorporate user networks and interaction histories reinforcing the need for qualitative pragmatics to interpret face work functions that automatic tools miss. The review literature foregrounds the trade-off between sarcasm’s indirectness (which mitigates direct face threat) and its potential to cause misinterpretation across audiences. Recent empirical studies suggest that for Generation Z, sarcasm is no longer a purely linguistic phenomenon but a multimodal semiotic assemblage. Central to this shift is the role of emojis as “pragmatic scaffolding.”

Research by Garcia et al. (2022) and Daniel and Camp (2020) highlights that sarcasm on platforms like Instagram is often cued through semantic incongruity. By pairing a literal-positive emoji with a negative or critical statement, users provide a visual “anchor” that signals ironic intent. This allows the speaker to navigate “face-work”, as the emoji acts as a buffer that “softens” the threat of a direct insult, transforming a potential confrontation into a “playful abrasion.”

A critical trend identified in the work of Brinson et al. (2023) is the active “recoding” of emoji meanings within Gen Z peer groups. Unlike previous generations, who used emojis as direct mirrors of emotion, Gen Z repurposes them to signal solidarity through irony. For instance, using the “Smiling Face” to express frustration or the “Thumbs Up” as a sarcastic dismissal, “crying face” or “skull” to show laughter. This internal “literacy” creates a divide: while these markers effectively manage relationships within a peer group, they remain “risky” and prone to misinterpretation by “heterogeneous audiences” (older users or those outside the subculture) who may read the emoji literally.

Sarcasm on Instagram coexists with ephemeral content like Stories and Stickers, the literature (e.g., Amalia & Budiwati, 2025) increasingly advocates for Multimodal Discourse Analysis. These studies argue that automatic classification tools are insufficient because they miss the “interaction histories” and “user networks” that define Gen Z’s digital language practices. Instead, researchers are encouraged to combine textual analysis with participant interviews to bridge the gap between the producer’s intended “face-saving” and the recipient’s actual perception of the irony.

A closely related study by Abbasi, Jamshed, and Bilal (2025) entitled “Discourse Analysis of Emoji Use in Digital Communication by the Millennials & Gen Z”, highlights comparative discourse analysis and applies Searle’s Speech Act Theory to explore the pragmatic evolution of emojis across generations. The findings of the study indicate a significant shift in communicative intent: where Millennials often utilize emojis as literal, expressive illocutionary acts to clarify tone, Gen Z employs them as indirect and assertive acts rooted in irony and shared cultural knowledge. Rather than providing direct feedback, Gen Z users employ ironic emoji markers to perform “passive-aggressive” or “dismissive” functions. This allows them to maintain a sense of “cool” or “sass” while navigating digital social hierarchies. The research concludes that, for younger digital natives, emojis have transcended decorative purpose to become sophisticated semiotic tools that manage social distance and identity through layered, often sarcastic, meanings. Similar to emoji-based irony, sarcasm allows Gen Z users to express criticism, humour, or disagreement indirectly while maintaining social harmony. Therefore, this study supports the argument that Gen Z’s digital

communication favours indirect and context-driven strategies, such as sarcasm to manage face and politeness in Instagram interactions.

Previous Studies have rarely examined sarcasm as a purposeful indirectness strategy used to protect or threaten face, especially within Brown & Levinson's politeness framework. The digital pragmatics research at hand shows that online communication amplifies face-threats by focusing exclusively on how Gen Z uses sarcasm to manage social "face". Previous studies on Gen Z communication have commonly highlighted irony, playful sarcasm, and indirect critique. However, these research works have mainly focused on text-based platforms rather than multimodal perspectives. Moreover, they have examined sarcasm through Pragmatic (Interactional) lens instead of Sociolinguistic (Generational) perspective. Therefore, this study fills this gap by analyzing how sarcasm substitutes for off-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, or bald-on-record strategies and how Gen Z uses sarcasm to manage face threats in social interactions. The study also shows how face-work is constructed through language. Unlike previous research, it has excluded the role of multimodality and presents sarcasm as a strategic rather than accidental indirect choice.

### **3. Research Methodology**

A qualitative pragmatic approach will be applied to analyze Gen-Z interactions on Instagram. It is centered on understanding how users manage face-needs, avoid face-threats, and employ politeness strategies in digital communication. Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory serves as the analytical framework underpinning the data analysis conducted to examine the use of sarcasm as a digital indirectness strategy in Instagram Stories. Politeness Theory considers how communication is shaped not only by what is said explicitly but also by how speakers strategically manage to face the desire to be approved of (positive face) and the desire to be unimpeded (negative face). According to Brown and Levinson, face-threatening acts (FTAs) can be performed through four major strategies, three of which are analysed in this study.

1. Positive politeness strategy: The speaker attends to the hearer's desire for approval and social closeness
2. Negative politeness strategy: The speaker minimizes imposition and respects the hearer's autonomy
3. Off-record strategy: The speaker communicates indirectly by relying on implications, hints, or ambiguity

This framework is particularly relevant to the study of sarcasm, which often functions as an off-record strategy by saying one thing and implying another meaning. Sarcasm can conceal criticism, soften disapproval, or maintain social distance while still performing an underlying communicative act. It can also appear as a positive politeness tool (in-group humour), a negative politeness tool (softened critique), or even a bald-on-record act when used in an intentionally harsh or direct manner.

The acknowledgment of sarcasm as a strategic tool of politeness broadens the applicability of Politeness Theory to contemporary digital spaces and recognizes that communicative norms evolve within online environments. In the digital age, meanings increasingly depend on indirectness and platform-specific stylistic conventions. Building an interdisciplinary approach that draws from linguistic pragmatics and digital communication studies is therefore fundamental for understanding how sarcastic practices are employed to achieve communicative and relational goals in Instagram-based interaction.

### **3.1 Research Design**

The research design is qualitative which involves an in-depth interpretation of textual sarcasm in Instagram Stories. A Descriptive Research Design is utilized in this research, which describes the types of sarcastic expressions used by Gen Z on Instagram Stories and identifies common linguistic features used in sarcastic posts.

### **3.2 Mode of data collection**

The data was collected from the social media platform, Instagram, specifically focusing on naturally occurring interactions in the stories. Only Instagram stories produced by Gen Z users were selected as data, based on the presence of identifiable sarcastic expressions and contextual indicators of generational identity. For this reason, data was collected from Instagram by observing posts and Stories from selected public accounts, including ecards (02 posts), UET's Einsteins (uetseinsteins) 03 posts and khatti\_meethi\_batein\_2\_04. These accounts were chosen because they frequently use humorous, ironic, and sarcastic content that reflects Gen Z communication styles.

### **3.3 Sample Size**

This study draws on a purposive sample of approximately 5 public Instagram posts. The data includes captions on posts. Only public posts will be used for analysis. The samples are attached as screenshots.

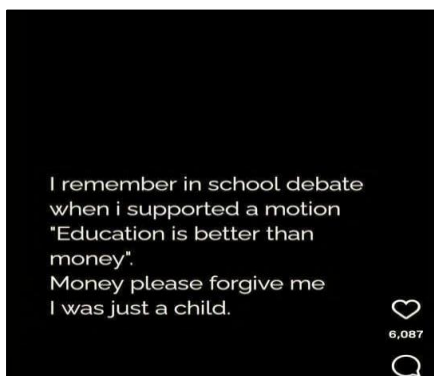
### **3.4 Theoretical and Analytical Framework**

This study is anchored in Goffman's (1967) concept of face-work, which is further expanded by Brown and Levinson (1987) in their Politeness Theory. These frameworks allow for a nuanced understanding of sarcasm not merely as humour or irony, but as a strategic linguistic tool used to manage interpersonal relationships in digital communication. The samples are analysed through the framework of four broad strategies that speakers use to navigate face-threatening acts (FTAs). In addition, the data is examined to identify the types of sarcasm used within these interactions. Considering sarcasm as an intentional politeness strategy reveals how users manage face concerns while navigating social visibility, impressions, and peer dynamics on social media.

## **4. Data Analysis**

The analysis presented in this section examines the types of sarcasm used and interprets the Face threatening Acts and strategies involved in each sample. Coding will be conducted in accordance with Brown and Levinson's politeness framework, with particular attention to the identification of sarcastic expressions and forms of indirectness.

### **4.1 Analysis of Sample 01:**



*"I remember in school debate when I supported a motion 'Education is better than money.' Money please forgive me. I was just a child."*

**Analysis of the Data:**

This post exemplifies lexical-verbal sarcasm through strategic use of anthropomorphism and self-deprecating humour. The utterance constructs sarcasm by attributing human characteristics to an abstract entity, thereby enabling indirect critique and playful evaluation. It exhibits Lexical-Verbal Sarcasm; for instance, the phrase "Money please forgive me" anthropomorphizes money and humorously blames it, which signals irony. This technique of associating human traits, emotions, or intentions to money (a non-human entity) is used to make ideas more relatable, humorous, or vivid. The speaker attributes human-like ability of forgiveness to money, which makes the statement playful and ironic. Furthermore, the utterance, "I was just a child" contradicts the previous idea of regret, by reversing the speaker's meaning from guilt to lack of responsibility.

The speaker employs an off-record politeness strategy by conveying indirect criticism through sarcasm and self-deprecation. Self-deprecation means that a speaker makes fun of himself and highlights his own flaws and mistakes in a humorous or humble way. By framing it as a "childish mistake," the user indirectly admits their past narrative without criticizing himself harshly. According to Brown and Levinson, this is an off-record strategy because the sarcasm allows multiple interpretations such as humorous regret, mild self-blame, or playful exaggeration.

Despite the presence of irony, the post also makes proper use of positive politeness strategy. The humour in the post invites the audience to share belief and agreement, which functions as positive politeness. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), positive politeness strategies aim to reduce social distance and create a sense of solidarity, friendliness, and shared identity between interlocutors. In this post, the self-deprecating remark 'I was just a child' allows the speaker to share experiences of youthful idealism that appeal to their common ground and mutual understanding. It also builds solidarity with peers who can relate to prioritizing ideals over money during youth. The post depicts how youth are struggling financially without saying it explicitly; instead, it utilizes sugar coated language to hide their struggle to earn money. Moreover, it employs indirect critique and sarcasm about education, which shows how the education system and education itself is worthless in making money nowadays.

The post performs the Face-Threatening Act by implicitly challenging dominant social values associated with money and success. The above analysis shows sarcasm as a Face-Threatening Act. Simultaneously, Face-saving elements are also used in the post, such as the self-deprecating tone ("I was just a child") softens the potential embarrassment of admitting a "wrong" viewpoint, which enables Gen Z to think more about shortcuts. The humorous way of interaction protects the positive face (desire to be liked and accepted) by presenting the speaker as humble and relatable. It also enables the audience not to take the past claim seriously, thereby reducing further social risks. By recalling support for the motion "Education is better than money" and expressing mock regret, the speaker risks threatening their positive face, as the utterance invites judgement for their idealism. Similarly, the post also threatens the positive face of others who strongly prioritize wealth, as it indirectly questions materialistic ideologies. However, the speaker mitigates this threat through humour and self-deprecation, which reduces the risk of social disapproval.

Therefore, the post sarcastically reflects tension that young people, especially Gen Z, experience between the old Idealistic view of education and the practical importance of money in this hybrid world where money is thought to be everything indeed. Indirect sarcasm is potentially presented through word choice (childish, apologize) protecting one's own face while playfully

acknowledging economic realities. This post is a reflection of broader Gen Z online behaviour where humour and irony are used to raise the conflict between personal ideals and pressures related to wealth, career and financial independence, while saving their face. This aligns with how Gen Z often manages emotions online, using sarcasm to navigate minor social or personal “failures” in a way that maintains social cohesion and relatability.

**Sample 02:**



*"Honestly, I don't even get disappointed anymore.*

*I'm just like, 'ah, again? Ok'"*

**Analysis of the Data:**

In this post the speaker employs sarcasm as an indirect strategy to express repeated disappointment in a humorous way. The forms of sarcasm used as digital indirectness is reflected through the choice of Lexical-Verbal Markers, such as the phrase “*ah*” conveys an exaggerated reaction and signals irony in tone. The other word “again?” acts as rhetorical question, which implies frustration or disbelief without explicitly stating a complaint. Meanwhile, the lexical marker “Ok” has minimal expressive power which shows flat acceptance that emphasizes detachment and subtle mockery of the situation.

The speaker has utilized an Off-record Strategy by opting for sarcasm rather than a direct declaration in order to limit complaining. This off-record strategy allows for layered interpretations of the text, such as humour, mild irritation, and self-reflection. The phrasing is notably understated, which is a hallmark of Gen Z’s digital discourse that favors short, casual, yet socially meaningful interaction. The sarcastic tone and specific modality are reinforced in the post through nonverbal clues, punctuation marks like “?” and comma, lexical choices and informal markers, such as spacing between sentences, thus enhancing relatability. This approach reflects common Gen Z communicative practices which they use to report their feelings and emotions e.g. expressing wishes, resolving conflicts and making themselves a calm or detached social exterior through irony. The post reflects Off-record politeness strategy as the speaker claims ‘no disappointment’, and this denial violates the maxim of quality. Similarly, it shows vagueness in ‘ah, again?’, which hints at a person or a problem but avoids bald-on-record attack on other person’s face. The casual word ‘ok’ further minimizes emotional display. This allows the speaker to complain while maintaining a “chill” or “unbothered” persona, which is a key social strategy for Gen Z.

Sarcasm in the post functions as a face-saving act, leading to positive effects. The speaker begins the post with the adverb “honestly”, suggestive of the speaker’s claim to be truthful, while the upcoming statement is presented as unfiltered and real. This strengthens the intended sincerity behind the sarcastic tone. Therefore, this indirectness serves to mitigate the risk of being perceived as hyperbolic or performative — labels often stigmatized within Gen Z digital spaces. This lexical choice shows his interest in saving positive face by demonstrating maturity and emotional stability, implying that the speaker is going to make an honest comment. The speaker reduces emotional vulnerability by using a sarcastic tone rather than overtly complaining, thereby protecting a positive face by appearing calm and composed. Words like “even” and “anymore” show his

positive face that after continuous loss and failure he is no more disappointed. This depicts that for Gen Z disappointment is the least thing to be felt. The post also illustrates how society is disappointing younger individuals to such an extent that they have got used to it and have learned coping strategies to maintain face. The speaker performs an indirect face threatening act towards himself by acknowledging repeated disappointment but harmonizing it with soft tone “ok”. The use of Pronoun “I” in both statements signals that the statement is not generalized or hypothetical but personalized, lived and authentic, placing the speaker at the center of the situation, showing Gen Z as having more self-awareness, and self-evaluation power. This choice of words and phrases shows that Gen Z expresses mild criticism in a playful and indirect manner which protects their identity as calm, unbothered, emotionally resilient, sarcastic yet maintaining a socially desirable self-image.

From a broader perspective, the post illustrates how Gen Z often uses indirect sarcasm and irony online to manage emotions, normalize minor setbacks, and maintain social cohesion. It demonstrates strong personality and self-regulation in digital spaces. It manages their negative emotions and provides the speaker with a proper means to reframe frustration. The post also shows how Gen Z normalizes repeated failure with minor disappointment in online spaces while saving face and presenting a socially “cool” way of handling repeated letdowns.

### Sample 03:



*“My sister ordered food for me without asking what I wanted. When it arrived, I said: JazakaAllah but you should've asked my choice before ordering.*

*She replied: Happy Independence Day. In Pakistan you're Azad but don't have freedom. Wow, that hit deeper than the taste of the food.”*

### Analysis of the Data:

The post uses layered sarcasm by combining humour, cultural references, and ironic exaggeration. Multiple types of sarcasm are used in this post by the speaker. Situational sarcasm is present, as a common everyday situation is narrated, i.e. ordering food without asking others' preference, but it is presented as a dramatic event that is exaggerated by the second member when she

relates it to the serious issue of “personal freedom”. This exaggeration serves as an ironic narrative device, turning a trivial inconvenience into a humorous life lesson. Cultural-political sarcasm in the sister's response “*Happy Independence Day. In Pakistan you're Azad but don't have freedom,*” functions as a sarcastic cultural analogy. The metaphorical comparison between *national independence vs. personal freedom* highlights the contradiction that the speaker is considered “free,” yet not free to choose food.

According to Brown and Levinson's Politeness theory, this is a classic off-record sarcastic strategy, because the deeper meaning is implied rather than stated directly. Sarcasm through contrast and exaggeration is also present in the final line of the post: “*Wow, that hit deeper than the taste of the food*”. This statement adds hyperbolic sarcasm, implying that the sister's quick comment affected the speaker more deeply than the meal itself. Politeness is combined with irony in the phrase “*JazakaAllah... but...*”, which enables the speaker to use a religious expression of

gratitude, “*JazakaAllah*” (*may Allah reward you*)” followed by indirect complaint, thus, creating an overall blend of sarcasm and politeness.

The post shows how sarcasm helps in saving both self-face and other-face within a close relationship. With respect to Brown and Levinson’s FTAs, the post shows Face-Saving Functions through the acknowledgement of hospitality and the offering of food, which shows gratitude alongside gentle criticism as a negative politeness. This helps the sibling who is offering food to save face and hold a positive face. The entire interaction is framed humorously. Sarcasm creates emotional distance, preventing the situation from escalating into a genuine argument. The speaker’s self-face is protected through humour and indirectness in narrating the whole story, which enables them to maintain a positive face in front of the online audience. Through this sarcastic tone, Face threatening elements are minimized. The utterance “You should’ve asked my choice” is a mild FTA, but the modal verb “*should have*” softens the criticism. The sister’s response sister is a mocking attitude, yet affectionate FTA directed at the listener: “*You’re Azad but you don’t have freedom*”. This statement challenges the speaker's expectation to be free to speak their opinion and makes them realize the truth about the perceived and actual freedom. Moreover, the Statement: “*Happy Independence Day*” Serves as a Positive Politeness strategy, appealing to a common ground or shared identity to minimize a possible conflict. By showing a national greeting in response to a personal complaint, the sister is attempting to claim an “In-group Identity.” She is sarcastically treating the situation as a shared celebration rather than a conflict. It is an attempt to preserve “Positive Face” — the desire to be liked and to belong to the same group (in this case, being Pakistani).

Negative Politeness is also utilized by the speaker through resigned acceptance in the statement, “*Wow, that hit deeper than the taste of the food.*” This strategy acknowledges the hearer's right to be unimpeded, often through self-effacement or formal distancing. By shifting the focus to how the comment “hit deeper”, the speaker effectively withdraws his complaint and respects her “Negative Face” (her desire not to be scolded) by conceding the argument to her superior wit. The speaker is using ironic self-deprecation to end the conflict without further “stressing” her for an apology.

From a broader perspective, this style of sarcastic storytelling reflects Gen Z’s relational humour, showing mutual understanding of some aspects that are perceived as unachievable, but the dramatic exaggeration leads to a deeper understanding of life lessons. For Gen Z, *Independence Day* has ironic connotations, since independence means to have freedom of choice and the right to make decisions in everyday life events, such as ordering food.

#### Sample 04:



~Female patients are tough man. I tell them to try to work while sitting if their feet ache but they say, "Beth kar konga kam hota?". I tell them to rest but they say, "Ghar ka kam kaun karega". I tell them to eat multivitamins but they say, "Unse pait mein dard hota hai"

#### Analysis of Data:

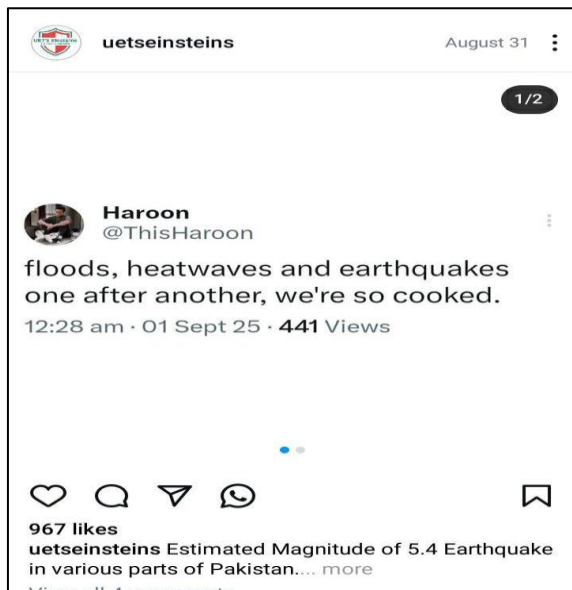
The interaction highlights a specific type of socio-cultural sarcasm characterized by resigned irony and defensive skepticism. In a clinical or caregiving

context, this form of sarcasm serves as a pragmatic barrier between the professional's medical advice and the patient's lived reality. In the post, the first line is ironic which expresses frustration in a light and indirect way. When they say, "*Female patients are tough man,*" it appears to be praise but actually shows how difficult the situation becomes when someone deals with a female patient. The repeated rhythm in the patient's reply to the advice is interrogative in tone, which is also an indirect excuse for rejecting every suggestion: "*What work can be done while sitting?*", "*Who will do the housework?*", and "*Multivitamins hurt my stomach*". These exchanges in dialogue convey Gen Z's storytelling style in Instagram posts, where serious issues are raised without sounding rude or angry. Sarcasm plays an important role in both exaggerating others' attitudes and protecting self-image. Instead of complaining directly about the behaviour of female patients, the speaker uses generalized terms to imply that "all females exhibit such an attitude." Similarly, hyperbolic skepticism or medical defiance is used strategically as a generalized sarcasm in the statement: "*Unse pait mein dard hota hai.*" (They cause stomach pain.). Even if only one pill once caused slight discomfort, the patient uses a sweeping, sarcastic dismissal to reject the entire category of multivitamins, just as the doctor generalises his perception of one woman to the rest of the women.

In the light of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, especially the notion of Face threatening Acts, the sarcasm works both as a way to save the speaker's face and as a subtle face-threatening act toward the patients, showing how Gen Z communicates problems through humour rather than direct confrontation as an off-record FTA. Through these narrative styles, the speaker uses sarcasm and off-record politeness strategies to frame a generalized gender stereotype. By saying "*Female patients are tough man,*" and listing a series of complaints or excuses, the speaker presents women as difficult, unreasonable, and emotional without ever stating it directly. The speaker employs a face-saving technique by using ambiguous word "*tough*" having both negative and positive connotations depending on how the listener perceives it. It can be interpreted as strong, resilient, and capable (positive) or difficult, stubborn, and unmanageable (negative). On the surface, it appears as a compliment, suggesting that the patients are strong women who tolerate pain. Through pragmatic analysis of the context, the speaker actually suggests that these patients are hard to deal with, stubborn, or uncooperative. This duality of meaning in Gen Z interactions on Instagram reveals how they use language to criticize serious issues in a humorous way.

The patient's retort, "*Ghar ka kam kaun karega?*", functions as a sophisticated application of cultural irony, wherein the speaker utilizes a rhetorical question to highlight the absence of a domestic support system. Within the framework of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, this utterance serves as a form of Negative Politeness used as a protective shield; the patient sarcastically emphasizes her lack of "freedom" or Negative Face to comply with the medical advice provided. By directing sarcasm at the perceived unfairness and rigidity of her socio-cultural role, she effectively subverts the doctor's professional authority. This sarcastic move ends the conversation immediately. By using sarcasm, the patient makes the doctor feel that his medical advice is "out of touch" with her personal life and responsibilities. This allows her to ignore his instructions while keeping her pride as the hard-working person upon whom the entire household depends. So, his clinical directives are detached from the patient's lived experience, which is implied in the responses given by the patient.

**Sample 05**



“Floods, heatwaves and earthquakes one after another, we’re so cooked.”

**Analysis of Data:**

The statement “*floods, heat waves and earthquakes one after another, we’re so cooked*” demonstrates ironic sarcasm — a type where the speaker expresses a meaning opposite to the literal words. The phrase “*we’re so cooked*” exaggerates the speaker’s frustration with ongoing natural disasters, using humour to mitigate the emotional weight of the situation. This hyperbolic and playful exaggeration is characteristic of Gen Z communication, where irony and relatable expressions are employed to convey shared experiences or collective exasperation. The sarcasm is subtle and relies on shared understanding with the audience, making it effective in online social interactions.

From the perspective of Brown and Levinson’s politeness framework, this post aligns most closely with an off-record strategy. The phrase “we’re so cooked” is off-record as it uses metaphorical language to describe a global crisis. By employing sarcasm and exaggeration, the speaker indirectly comments on the severity and overwhelming nature of environmental crises without directly blaming anyone or confronting the audience. This indirectness allows the user to express frustration while minimizing potential face-threatening impacts on themselves or others.

Moreover, the post carries elements of positive politeness, as it fosters a sense of solidarity with followers who are possibly experiencing similar feelings, creating a shared understanding through indirect sarcasm. Despite the grim topic, this post is a clear instance of Positive Politeness. By using the collective pronoun “we” and the generational slang “cooked,” the speaker appeals to a shared struggle and builds solidarity. The speaker assumes that the audience shares the same context and feelings about the environment. It satisfies the “Positive Face” needs of the listeners by making them feel part of a group that “gets it,” thereby turning a global tragedy into a shared bonding moment.

The speaker employs sarcasm like “we’re so cooked” in a polite way rather than in a “trauma-dumping” manner on others. If they were intending to express the crises in a completely serious and emotional manner about the world ending, it could function as a Face-Threatening Act, as it would force the listener to deal with a lot of heavy feelings. By keeping the comment short and sarcastic, the speaker respects the listener’s Negative Face, which is perceived as their desire to go about their day without being stressed out by someone else’s panic. Here, sarcasm acts as a buffer, making a terrifying reality feel like a “light” joke that is much easier for everyone to handle. Negative politeness strategy allows speakers to distance themselves emotionally from global physical issues.

The combination of ironic sarcasm and politeness strategies illustrates how Gen Z navigates complex social realities via online platforms. Through sarcasm, users can comment on serious issues like climate disasters in a relatable, emotionally resonant way while avoiding direct

confrontation. Politeness strategies help maintain social harmony, manage face, and reinforce peer connections. These linguistic choices reflect a digital coping mechanism where humour and subtle indirectness allow users to acknowledge societal challenges while simultaneously negotiating their social presence and solidarity within online communities.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

Overall, in all the posts it is shown that Gen Z uses indirect sarcasm as a strategy to overcome their frustration to shield themselves while critiquing others. These posts include different types of sarcasms e.g. lexical, ironic, cultural, situational, and relational. This sarcasm helps individuals:

- maintain their social face,
- indirectly threaten other's face,
- reinforce subtle biases related to gender, relationship, and economic factors etc.
- and shape Gen Z's behaviour toward emotional distance, humour-based coping, and indirect communication.

Across all five Instagram posts, the sarcastic narratives clearly demonstrate Goffman's idea of face-work, where individuals try to protect their own social image while managing the impressions of others. According to Brown and Levinson's politeness framework, these posts repeatedly use off-record politeness strategies, where the speaker hints at criticism instead of stating it openly. Hence, the analysis shows that Instagram posts by Gen Z are not random humour; they operate through structured, theory-backed politeness strategies to acknowledge societal hard realities and challenges — whether economic, social, relational, political or public — in a calm way.

Therefore, sarcasm is a strategic linguistic choice that enables speakers to hide their inferiority complex, vulnerabilities and fulfill their desire to critique others without losing self-image. Sarcasm plays a purposeful strategy to indirectly hide self-image and expose others' face by using different lexical choices. Ultimately, the generational shift in digital pragmatics reveals that Gen Z has weaponized sarcasm as a sophisticated facework tool. By consistently opting for Off-Record, Positive and Negative Politeness strategies, Gen Z creates a digital environment where sarcasm serves as a necessary and purposeful buffer, which allows expression of grievances, cultural critiques, and existential anxieties without violating the generational mandate of 'Dispassionate Stoicism, Ironic Detachment and Affective Neutrality.'

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