



Speech Acts of Suggestion in Social Media Communication: A Pragmatic Analysis of Instagram Comments

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Article History:

Received: 22-02-2026
Revision: 26-04-2026
Accepted: 01-05-2026
Publication: 22-05-2026

Cite this article as:

Alghamdi, S. S., Alzahrani, D., Khan, M. A., & Ali, A. (2026). Speech Acts of Suggestion in Social Media Communication: A Pragmatic Analysis of Instagram Comments. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 26(2), 96-106. doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v26i2.1451

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Abstract: This study examines the use of suggestion speech acts in Instagram comments, with particular attention to how Saudi EFL users demonstrate pragmatic competence in digital communication. Drawing on Martínez Flor's taxonomy of suggestion strategies, the study analyzes 103 suggestion-oriented comments selected from an initial dataset of 150 Instagram comments. A mixed-methods design was adopted: qualitative analysis was used to classify suggestion strategies into direct, conventionalized, and indirect forms, while quantitative frequency analysis was applied to identify their distribution across the dataset. The findings show that indirect strategies were the most frequently used, accounting for 40 instances, followed by conventionalized forms (33) and direct strategies (30). At the sub-strategy level, impersonal constructions were the most dominant form, indicating users' preference for mitigating imposition and reducing face-threatening effects in online interaction. The qualitative analysis further reveals that Instagram users employ suggestions not only to advise or recommend actions but also to express critique, negotiate social distance, and maintain politeness in public digital discourse. The study contributes to research on interlanguage pragmatics and computer-mediated communication by showing how suggestion speech acts are shaped by platform-based interaction, sociocultural norms, and digital politeness practices. However, the findings should be interpreted within the limits of the selected dataset and the specific Instagram context examined.

Keywords: Suggestion strategies, Instagram comments, Pragmatics, Computer-mediated communication, Interlanguage pragmatics, Politeness strategies.

1. Introduction

Speech acts are performative linguistic actions through which speakers prompt hearers to “commit” to future actions (Mulyono, Laksono, Wuryaningrum, & Cahyo, 2025; Searle, 1969). These acts are traditionally categorized into directives, commissives, expressives, declaratives, and representatives, each serving distinct interactional purposes within society (Lewiński et al., 2023; Searle, 1975). Trosborg (1995, p. 20) emphasized that “only in the case of directives is the hearer’s subsequent act (getting things done) part of the speaker’s intention.” Within directive speech acts, the interlocutors’ participation and their responses to the speaker’s propositions are essential, as the intended outcome can only be realized when the hearer recognizes or accepts the speaker’s intention (Alcón & Safont, 2001). As Thomas (1983) noted, both speakers and hearers must actively engage in the directive. In this regard, Rintell (1979, p. 99) defined a suggestion speech act as one in which the “speaker asks the hearer to take some action which the speaker believes will be beneficial for the hearer, even one that the speaker should desire.”

Suggestions are, therefore, a crucial type of speech act, requiring speakers to enter the hearer’s domain of action. Brown and Levinson (1987), in their politeness theory, identify suggestions as face-threatening acts (FTAs) because they impose on the hearer’s autonomy by urging them to perform an act the speaker desires, but the hearer may not intend to perform (Saleem & Yasmin, 2024). Suggestions thus represent impositive behaviors that may challenge the hearer’s negative face. Having established that suggestions are directive and face-threatening, and distinguished them from other speech acts such as requests and apologies (Saleem & Yasmin, 2024), it becomes evident that suggestions constitute a significant subcategory of speech acts closely related to advice-giving (Martínez Flor, 2005).

Recent studies on speech acts have increasingly examined subcategories such as congratulatory, apology, and celebratory strategies, particularly among Saudi social media users (Al-Seghayer, 2024; Alhaythami & Shoaib, 2026; Barbulet, 2013; Saleem & Yasmin, 2024). These studies often highlight the influence of social variables such as power relations, educational background, and gender dynamics. Despite the growing body of research on speech act strategies, studies specifically focusing on suggestion strategies remain limited. In particular, little attention has been given to how Saudi social media users employ suggestions, and even less to how pragmatic competence is demonstrated in social media contexts, where communication is often expressed through user comments, reels, and posts on platforms such as Instagram (Mahzari, 2025; Rahmani, 2025; Ali, 2025). This research gap underscores the need to explore suggestion speech acts in digital discourse, where linguistic behavior is shaped by socio-cultural and technological factors.

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Understanding speech acts is essential for analyzing how speakers use language across diverse contexts to achieve specific communicative goals, such as offering suggestions and advice (Levinson, 1983; Yule, 2022). As Austin (1975) distinguished, speech acts can be categorized into locutionary acts, which refer to the utterance itself; illocutionary acts, which refer to the speaker's intended meaning; and perlocutionary acts, which refer to the effect on the listener. Building on this, Searle (1975) classified speech acts into representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives. Suggestions, as a form of directive speech act, involve the speaker's attempt to influence the hearer's actions. They are often framed as advice and shaped by cultural and interpersonal variables (Leech, 2014). Martínez Flor (2005) further refined this area by proposing a taxonomy of suggestions, direct, conventionalized, and indirect, based on explicitness and politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). These categories provide a framework for understanding how suggestions are expressed in social contexts, including on computer-mediated communication (CMC) platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. In these digital media platforms, users articulate suggestions not only through verbal text but also through multimodal resources such as symbols, emojis, and emoticons (Al-Seghayer, 2024; Alhaythami & Shoab, 2026; Barbulet, 2013).

Against this backdrop, the present study addresses the research gap by examining suggestion strategies in Instagram comments, particularly among Saudi EFL learners, a domain that has received far less scholarly attention than other speech acts, such as congratulating, apologizing, and complimenting. By conducting this analysis, the study seeks to clarify how digital platforms shape the use of directive and face-threatening acts (FTAs). In doing so, it contributes to interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) by extending speech-act theory to the socio-cultural dimensions of online interaction and highlighting the role of social media in fostering pragmatic competence and expressive linguistic behavior in digital communities. The study formulates the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Saudi EFL Instagram users employ suggestion speech acts in their online comments to demonstrate pragmatic competence?

RQ2: Which types of suggestion strategies occur most frequently in Saudi EFL Instagram comments?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Pragmatic Competence and Speech Acts

Pragmatic competence is defined as the capacity to adopt, use, and manipulate language efficiently in communication and social interactions. It is closely associated with speech act theory, as Kasper and Schmidt (1996) describe pragmatic competence as “the knowledge of how to use language in socially appropriate ways,” emphasizing that communicative comprehension hinges not only on grammatical accuracy but also on the effective performance and choice of speech acts. Building on Austin (1975), a foundational framework, speech acts are considered utterances that perform dual tasks: conveying meaning and performing actions, such as directives, commissives, congratulations, apologies, and suggestions. Consider the example (1), when a speaker utters as follows:

(1) I promise to send you the letter.

In (1), the utterance shows the function of a commissive act, performing a commitment rather than merely stating or conveying information. This instance shows how pragmatic competence merges in recognizing and enacting utterances that successfully achieve communicative goals at three dimensions: the locutionary act (literal meaning), the illocutionary act (intended meaning, such as directions, requests, propositions, and suggestions), and the perlocutionary act (the influence on the listener) (Schmidt & Richards, 1980; Saleem & Yasmin, 2024). Trosborg (1995) and Martínez Flor (2005) further demonstrate that speech acts serve several purposes, including apologizing, requesting, suggesting, and congratulating, and that speakers must choose forms that align with cultural norms and contextual factors. Therefore, pragmatic competence is inseparable from speech act theory, as it involves the ability to explore meaning, intention, motivation, and influence in communication, ensuring that language functions effectively as both a social and performative device.

2.2. Digital Pragmatics

Building on pragmatic competence, digital pragmatics has emerged in the era of advanced technologies as a significant extension of traditional pragmatic theory. It focuses on how meaning is explored and negotiated in technology-mediated communication (TMC). According to Herring (2013), “computer-mediated discourse requires new pragmatic frameworks because it blends features of spoken and written language.” It highlights the hybrid nature of online interaction. This domain is reinforced by Seargeant and Tagg (2014), who claim that digital social media platforms foster “novel forms of pragmatic meaning-making through multimodal resources such as emojis, memes, and hyperlinks.” However, in the domains of second language acquisition (SLA) and interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), digital contexts offer authentic opportunities for pragmatic development, as González-Lloret (2019) emphasizes that “technology-mediated tasks (TMTs) permit learners to develop speech acts and politeness strategies in semi-authentic settings.” At the same time, scholars (Sampietro, 2020; Lewińskiet al., 2023) caution that multimodal cues and signals are culturally variable and may complicate interpretation. Overall, digital pragmatics situates itself at the intersection of linguistics, communication studies, and digital culture, offering a framework for understanding how online discourse constructs pragmatic competence, multimodal meaning-making, and sociocultural norms.

2.3. Computer-Mediated Discourse

Within linguistics, communication, and pragmatics, computer-mediated discourse (CMD) has become a pivotal focus in applied linguistics and communication studies. It examines how language usage is being adapted to digital situations, environments, and platforms. Herring (2007) simply defines CMD as “the communication produced when human beings interact with one another by transmitting messages via networked computers,” articulating its hybrid nature between spoken and written modes. This hybridity is further examined by Crystal (2011), who noted that “online discourse blurs the boundaries of traditional linguistic categories, constructing new registers and styles of interaction.” Scholars (Saleem & Yasmin, 2024) have shown the pragmatic dimensions of CMD, examining how online platforms foster novel strategies not only for politeness and turn-taking but also for identity construction. Moreover, Seargeant and Tagg (2014) state that the CMD is inherently multimodal, as meaning is co-constructed using text, emojis, hyperlinks, and other semiotic cues. In the domain of second

language acquisition (SLA), González-Lloret(2019) argues that “computer-mediated communication provides learners with authentic opportunities to practice speech acts and pragmatic routines in real-time interaction.” Likewise, challenges emerge from the interpretive complexity of multimodal cues and the influence of social media platform design on discourse practices. Collectively, the CMD provides a framework for a comprehensive understanding of how digital technologies on social media platforms reshape linguistic interaction, pragmatic competence, and sociocultural norms in digital communication.

2.4. Previous Studies on Suggestion Speech Acts

Suggestion speech acts are basically a subcategory of directive speech acts. In a suggestion speech act, the speaker proposes a particular course of action for the hearer’s benefit, typically framed with politeness and indirectness to avoid imposing obligation. According to Searle (1975), “suggestions differ from *commands* in that they are oriented toward the hearer’s interests rather than the speaker’s authority.” Within the framework of pragmatic competence, Kasper and Schmidt (1996) stated that the ability to produce and interpret suggestions appropriately demonstrates “the knowledge of how to use language in socially appropriate ways.” Previous studies of pragmatic competence in digital discourse have typically evolved to demonstrate both pedagogical challenges and sociocultural dynamics, particularly in Saudi contexts. Al-Seghayer (2024) argued that Saudi EFL learners face systemic barriers in mastering pragmatic appropriateness. He further emphasized that pragmatic competence is not limited to grammatical accuracy but prioritizes sociocultural sensitivity and the strategic use of speech acts. His study also highlighted the consequences of pragmatic failure, miscommunication, and diminished intercultural effectiveness- and calls for pedagogical reforms that embed pragmatic awareness into language instruction. Shifting the context, Barbulet (2013) extended their study focusing on Instagram. They showed that social media platforms function as authentic contexts for pragmatic negotiation. Their analysis furthermore highlights how multimodal cues, including emojis, hashtags, and stickers, serve as pragmatic resources. These cues construct the performance of speech acts, including suggestions, requests, and compliments. On the other hand, their study is not confined to the Saudi context; it establishes Instagram as a fertile ground for pragmatic practice and demonstrates the global relevance of digital discourse.

In their work on Saudi discourse, Alhaythami and Shoaib (2026) analyzed Instagram posts and found that suggestion speech acts are strategically embedded in promotional discourse. They function as indirect invitations to participate in different cultural identities. In addition, their study demonstrates how visual symbols, captions, and cues reinforce politeness strategies that align with Saudi sociocultural norms. They also show the ideological aspects of pragmatic acts. Rahmani (2025) made a significant contribution to research on Instagram comments in the Indonesian context. He analyzed various posts of Medy Renaldy, illustrating how politeness strategies such as indirectness, mitigation, and face-saving devices are significant for pragmatic competence in digital contexts. This study provided a richer comparison of the Saudi case by highlighting that pragmatic negotiation in Instagram discourse is culturally diverse yet universally associated with community harmony. Unlike Rahmani (2025) and Mahzari (2025), who investigated requests from Saudi Facebook users. He found that indirectness and politeness markers dominate. He also affirmed that pragmatic strategies in Saudi discourse are consistent across platforms, underscoring cultural expectations of respect and solidarity. Significantly, he revealed that pragmatic competence on Saudi digital media platforms is largely embedded in sociocultural norms, with requests serving as a lens into broader cultural values.

Collectively, the studies discussed above reveal that suggestion speech acts in Saudi Instagram comments serve as polite, indirect invitations that demonstrate cultural identity and community solidarity. However, the research remains restricted in its pragmatic intention. Most studies have emphasized marketing effectiveness and cultural engagement, despite the detailed linguistic mechanisms underlying suggestion acts in Instagram comments. This research gap necessitates a systematic, pragmatic analysis of suggestion speech acts among Saudi Instagram users, particularly their multimodal interaction, mutual negotiation, and role in digital pragmatic development, employing the taxonomy of Martinez Flor (2005).

2.5. Martinez-Flor Taxonomy of Suggestion

The taxonomy of Mart’inez Flor (2005) for suggestion speech acts closely aligns with speech act theory (Austin, 1975) and politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Levinson, 1983; Leech, 2014). Within speech act theory, suggestions are categorized as directives, since they primarily aim to affect the hearer’s future actions. However, unlike compliments, commands, requests, or suggestions are oriented toward the hearer’s benefit, which shapes them less face-threateningly. Furthermore, politeness theory (Levinson, 1983) explicates how speakers mitigate the imperative force of suggestions through indirectness and conventionalized forms. This taxonomy organized suggestions into three major categories (see Table 1).

Table 1: Martinez-Flor Suggestions’ Taxonomy 2005

Level	Strategy Type	Example
Direct	Performative Verb	I suggest/advise/recommend you that...
	Noun of suggestion	My suggestion would be...
	Imperative	Try using ...
	Negative Imperative	Don’t try to ...
Conventionalized	Specific formulae	Why don’t you ...? How about ...?
	Possibility/probability	“If I were you, I’d revise it.”
	Should	You should...
	Need	You need to ...
	Conditional	If I were you, I would ...
Indirect	Hint	I have heard that...”
	Impersonal Form	It might be better to...A good idea would be...

Source: Calculated by the author

This taxonomy demonstrates how suggestion speech acts operate along a continuum of explicitness and politeness, aligning with the theoretical foundations of speech act and politeness theory. Direct strategies emphasize illocutionary force, conventional indirect strategies illustrate indirect speech acts, and indirect strategies highlight pragmatic inference and face-saving mechanisms. In collectivist cultures such as Saudi Arabia, indirect and conventional indirect strategies are often preferred, reflecting cultural norms of respect, solidarity, and pragmatic competence in digital communication.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative procedures to examine suggestion speech acts in Instagram comments. A mixed-methods design was appropriate because the study required both interpretive analysis of pragmatic meanings and numerical analysis of the distribution of suggestion strategies. As Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) explain, mixed-methods research combines multiple methods, techniques, instruments, and analytical tools within a single study to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. In the present study, the qualitative component was used to identify and classify suggestion speech acts according to Martínez Flor's (2005) taxonomy. This allowed the researcher to examine how suggestion strategies were pragmatically constructed in digital interaction. The quantitative component was then used to calculate the frequency, proportion, and distribution of the identified suggestion strategies across the dataset. This integration enabled the study to examine both the linguistic realization of suggestions and their measurable patterns of occurrence. Qualitative analysis was particularly relevant because the study focuses on meaning, intention, politeness, and pragmatic force in naturally occurring online comments. As Creswell et al. (2003, p. 4) define it, qualitative research is "an approach for exploring and understanding the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem." Furthermore, the study employed quantizing, which refers to the process of converting qualitative categories into numerical codes for statistical analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This procedure made it possible to interpret the pragmatic features of suggestion speech acts and to identify statistically observable patterns in their use.

3.2. Procedure

The data for this study were collected from Instagram comments. Instagram was selected because it is a widely used social media platform where users engage in public interaction through comments, reactions, advice, evaluations, and suggestions. The study focused on English-language comments from Saudi EFL Instagram users, as these comments provide a relevant context for examining pragmatic competence in digital communication. A total of 150 Instagram comments were initially collected. The comments were selected from publicly accessible Instagram posts between October 5, 2023, and November 11, 2023. This time frame was adopted to keep the dataset manageable while ensuring that the comments reflected active user engagement within a specific period. Only comments from active accounts were considered, and activity was determined by visible public engagement, such as recent posts, comments, or interactions during the selected period. To enhance the dataset's relevance, the selection process adhered to specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were as follows: the comment had to be publicly available, written in English, produced by a user identifiable as a Saudi EFL user through public profile information or contextual indicators, and contain a suggestion-oriented speech act. Comments were excluded if they consisted only of greetings, compliments, emojis without verbal content, general reactions, unrelated remarks, or speech acts other than suggestions. Comments from private accounts, inaccessible profiles, or accounts with insufficient contextual information were also excluded. After applying these criteria, 103 comments were retained for final analysis. These comments contained suggestion-oriented speech acts and were therefore suitable for examining the pragmatic realization of suggestions in Instagram-based communication. The filtering process ensured that the final dataset was directly aligned with the study's purpose.

Because the study specifically examines Saudi EFL Instagram users, user identification was based on publicly available and ethically accessible information. Users were considered relevant to the study when their public profile information, language use, location indicators, national or cultural references, or contextual engagement suggested a Saudi background and English-as-a-foreign-language use. No private information, private messages, or restricted account data were accessed. The term "verified" in this study refers to accounts whose relevance was assessed by the researcher using publicly available information and activity, rather than necessarily to Instagram blue-check verification. This clarification is important because the study focuses on ordinary digital users and their pragmatic performance, not only on officially verified public figures. The purpose of this screening was to ensure that the selected comments reflected authentic user participation and were relevant to the Saudi EFL context.

3.3. Coding Procedure

The selected comments were coded according to Martínez Flor's (2005) taxonomy of suggestion strategies. The coding process was conducted in several stages. First, all collected comments were screened to identify whether they contained suggestion-oriented speech acts. Second, comments that met this criterion were classified into one of the three main categories of suggestion strategies: direct, conventionalized, and indirect. Third, each comment was further coded into its relevant subcategory. Direct suggestions included performative verbs, nouns of suggestion, imperatives, and negative imperatives. Conventionalized forms included specific formulae, possibility/probability markers, should constructions, need constructions, and conditional forms. Indirect suggestions included hints and impersonal forms. For example, a comment such as "You should try a different strategy" was coded as a conventionalized form using a should construction, while a comment such as "It would be better to change the plan" was coded as an indirect strategy using an impersonal form. Similarly, a comment such as "Don't use this method" was coded as a direct strategy using a negative imperative. This coding procedure allowed the study to classify the comments systematically while preserving their pragmatic meaning. It also enabled the researcher to examine how Instagram users employed different degrees of directness, politeness, mitigation, and face-saving strategies in online communication.

3.4. Data analysis

After data collection and coding, the data were analyzed using Jeffreys's Amazing Statistics Program (JASP). The analysis combined qualitative categorization with quantitative statistical procedures. First, each Instagram comment was coded according to Martínez Flor's (2005) taxonomy of suggestion strategies. The comments were classified into three main categories: direct, conventionalized, and indirect suggestions, and then further coded into their relevant sub-strategies. To make the data suitable for inferential statistical analysis, a continuous dependent variable was created as a pragmatic mitigation score. This score represented the degree to which each suggestion reduced direct imposition on the hearer. The score was based on the presence of linguistic features such as modal verbs, hedging devices, conditional structures, impersonal constructions,

indirect phrasing, and other face-saving strategies. Higher scores indicated greater pragmatic mitigation and indirectness, whereas lower scores indicated more direct and less mitigated suggestions. To address Research Question 2, frequency and proportion analyses were conducted to identify the distribution of direct, conventionalized, and indirect suggestion strategies. To support the interpretation of Research Question 1, a pragmatic mitigation score was used to examine how the three suggestion types differed in their degree of indirectness, politeness, and face-saving force. A one-way ANOVA was then conducted to examine whether the mean pragmatic mitigation scores differed significantly across the three suggestion types. The independent variable was suggestion type, with three levels: direct, conventionalized, and indirect. The dependent variable was the pragmatic mitigation score. When the ANOVA result was significant, Tukey's HSD post hoc test was used to identify which groups differed from one another. In addition, inter-rater reliability was assessed to ensure coding consistency. Two independent raters coded the suggestion strategies according to Martínez Flor's (2005) taxonomy. Krippendorff's alpha was used to measure agreement because it accounts for chance agreement and is suitable for categorical coding. The reliability analysis yielded $\alpha = 0.782$ (SE = 0.009, 95% CI [0.740, 0.820], $p < 0.001$), indicating substantial agreement between the raters.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative Analysis

The present study investigated the distribution and pragmatic strength of suggestion strategies used by Saudi EFL Instagram users. A total of 103 suggestion-oriented comments were analyzed and categorized into three main types: direct, conventionalized, and indirect suggestions. In addition to frequency analysis, each comment was assigned a pragmatic mitigation score to measure the degree of indirectness, politeness, and face-saving force embedded in the suggestion. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the pragmatic mitigation scores across the three suggestion types. Direct suggestions recorded the lowest mean mitigation score ($M = 2.067$, $SD = 1.112$), indicating that they were generally more explicit and less mitigated. Conventionalized forms recorded a higher mean score ($M = 7.121$, $SD = 1.516$), suggesting a moderate level of mitigation through formulaic and modalized structures. Indirect suggestions recorded the highest mean score ($M = 10.250$, $SD = 0.439$), indicating that these strategies involved the greatest degree of pragmatic mitigation and face-saving force. The frequency distribution showed that indirect strategies were the most frequently used suggestion type, appearing in 40 cases, which represented 38.8% of the dataset. Conventionalized forms appeared in 33 cases (32.0%), while direct strategies appeared in 30 cases (29.1%). Therefore, indirect strategies were both the most frequent category and the category with the highest pragmatic mitigation score.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Suggestion

Suggestions Types	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
Direct	30	2.067	1.112	0.203	0.538
Conventionalized forms	33	7.121	1.516	0.264	0.213
Indirect	40	10.250	0.439	0.069	0.043

Source: Calculated by the author

Following the descriptive statistics, Table 3 presents the distribution of suggestion strategies used by Saudi Instagram users in comments. Direct strategies were noted in 30 of 103 instances, accounting for 29% of the total, as shown in Table 3. Conventionalized forms appeared slightly more frequently, with 33 occurrences (32%). Indirect strategies were the most common, accounting for 40 instances (38%). The statistical distribution is depicted.

Table 3: Suggestions Strategies

N	Strategies	Counts	Total	Proportion	p
Suggestions	Direct	30	103	0.291	< .001
	Conventionalized forms	33	103	0.320	< .001
	Indirect	40	103	0.388	0.030

Source: Calculated by the author

Table 3 presents the proportional distribution of the three main suggestion strategies identified in the dataset. Direct strategies occurred in 30 out of 103 instances, representing 29.1% of the dataset. Conventionalized forms occurred in 33 instances (32.0%), while indirect strategies occurred in 40 instances (38.8%). These results show that indirect strategies were the most frequently used category, followed by conventionalized forms and direct strategies. Although p-values are reported in Table 3, the present analysis primarily focuses on the descriptive distribution of the strategies, as the main purpose of this section is to identify which types of suggestions occurred most frequently in the Instagram comments. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted primarily in terms of frequency and proportion, rather than as strong evidence of statistically distinct preferences, unless the specific statistical test and comparison baseline are further clarified.

Table 4 provides a more detailed distribution of the sub-strategies within each main category of suggestion. Among direct strategies, performative verbs were the most frequent sub-strategy, accounting for 12 cases (40% of direct suggestions); however, the reported p-value ($p = 0.362$) indicates that, while common, they do not constitute a statistically distinctive feature of the dataset. Nouns of suggestion occurred 9 times, representing 30% of direct suggestions, and were statistically significant ($p = 0.043$), suggesting that nominalized forms of advice, such as "my suggestion is..." were used more frequently than expected. Imperatives, both positive and negative, were relatively rare, with 4 cases (13.3%) and 5 cases (16.7%), respectively; however, both were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), underscoring their salience when they occurred despite their overall infrequency. Within conventionalized forms, conditional constructions were the most frequent sub-strategy, with 9 cases (27.3%; $p = 0.014$). Specific formulae, should constructions, and need constructions each occurred 7 times, representing 21.2% of conventionalized forms, and each was statistically significant ($p = 0.001$). Possibility/probability markers occurred less frequently, with 3 cases (9.1%), but were also statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating the role of modal hedging in suggestion-making. Among indirect strategies, impersonal constructions were clearly dominant, accounting for 29 of 40 indirect suggestions (72.5%; $p = 0.006$), while hints occurred 11 times (27.5%; $p = 0.006$). Overall, impersonal constructions were the most prominent individual sub-strategy in the full dataset.

Table 4: Sub-Types of Suggestions

Variable	Level	Counts	Total	Proportion	p
Direct	Performative verb	12	30	0.400	0.362
	Noun of suggestion	9		0.300	0.043
	Imperative	4		0.133	< .001
Conventionalized forms	Negative imperative	5	33	0.167	< .001
	Specific formulae	7		0.212	0.001
	Possibility/probability	3		0.091	< .001
	Should	7		0.212	0.001
	Need	7		0.212	0.001
Indirect	Conditional	9	40	0.273	0.014
	Impersonal	29		0.725	0.006
	Hint	11		0.275	0.006

Source: Calculated by the author

Taken together, the data in Table 4 reveal that suggestion-making is characterized primarily by indirectness, mitigation, and conventionalized linguistic forms. Direct imperatives, though rare, were marked when employed, while performative verbs, despite their frequency, lacked statistical distinctiveness. The findings align with speech act theory, which emphasizes the role of indirectness in maintaining politeness and minimizing imposition, suggesting that speakers strategically deploy impersonal and modalized forms to balance clarity with social appropriateness in social media communication.

Table 5: ANOVA - Suggestions

Cases	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	η^2
Suggestions Types	1151.215	2	575.608	492.470	< .001	0.908
Residuals	116.882	100	1.169			

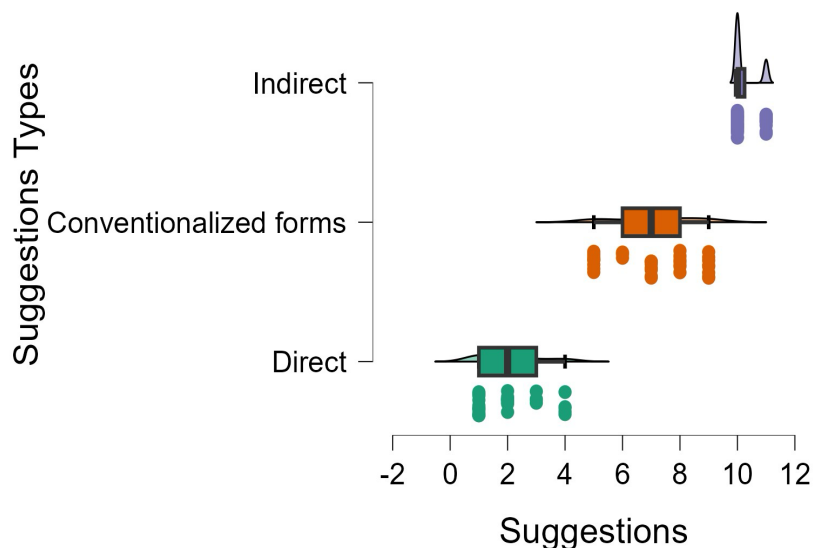
Source: Calculated by the author

After calculating descriptive statistics and frequencies for the suggestion strategies, Table 5 presents a one-way ANOVA examining whether the mean pragmatic mitigation scores differed across the three main suggestion types. The between-groups sum of squares was 1151.215, with 2 degrees of freedom, producing a mean square of 575.608. The residual sum of squares was 116.882, with 100 degrees of freedom, producing a mean square of 1.169. The ANOVA result was statistically significant, $F(2, 100) = 492.470$, $p < .001$, with a large effect size, $\eta^2 = 0.908$. This indicates that the three suggestion types differed substantially in their mean pragmatic mitigation scores. However, the ANOVA should be interpreted as a test of differences in mitigation scores, not as a test of the frequency distribution of suggestion types. Since ANOVA is an omnibus test, it only indicates that at least one group mean differs from at least one other. Therefore, Tukey's HSD post hoc comparisons were conducted to identify the specific differences between the three suggestion types. The results in Table 5 indicate that suggestion types differed significantly in their distribution, with the effect size suggesting a strong influence of suggestion type on the dependent measure. The large F-value and extremely low p-value confirm that the observed differences are unlikely to be due to chance. Thus, the choice of suggestion type is a critical factor in shaping the overall pattern of responses. However, ANOVA is an omnibus test: it only indicates that at least one group mean differs, but it does not specify which groups differ. To examine group differences, a post hoc test (Tukey's) was performed for each suggestion type. For this, consider Table 6 given below:

Table 6: Post Hoc Comparisons - Suggestions Types

		Mean	df	SE	df	t	ptukey
Direct	Conventionalized forms	-5.055	100	0.273	100	-18.533	< .001
	Indirect	-8.183	100	0.261	100	-31.340	< .001
Conventionalized forms	Indirect	-3.129	100	0.254	100	-12.306	< .001

Source: Calculated by the author

**Figure 1:** Suggestion Types

Following the significant omnibus ANOVA, Tukey's HSD post hoc comparisons were conducted to examine pairwise differences in pragmatic mitigation scores across the three suggestion types. The results in Table 6 show that direct suggestions differed significantly from conventionalized forms, with direct suggestions receiving lower mitigation scores than conventionalized forms (mean difference = -5.055, SE = 0.273, $t(100) = -18.533$, $p < .001$). Direct suggestions also differed significantly from indirect suggestions, with direct suggestions receiving substantially lower mitigation scores (mean difference = -8.183, SE = 0.261, $t(100) = -31.340$, $p < .001$). In addition, conventionalized forms differed significantly from indirect suggestions (mean difference = -3.129, SE = 0.254, $t(100) = -12.306$, $p < .001$). These results indicate that indirect suggestions had the highest pragmatic mitigation scores, followed by conventionalized forms and then direct suggestions. This pattern supports the interpretation that indirect strategies carried the strongest face-saving and mitigation force, whereas direct strategies were comparatively less mitigated.

4.2. Qualitative Analysis

4.2.1. Direct Forms of Suggestions in Instagram comments

Following the quantitative analysis, this section presents the qualitative analysis, which shows the pragmatic diversity of suggestion-making in Instagram comments. Each example represents how Instagram users strategically select linguistic forms to convey suggestion, critique, or directive force, illustrating varying degrees of directness and politeness (Leech, 2014).

Performative verbs (e.g., "*The team should attack more in the final third*"; "*The striker needs to be more aggressive in front of goal like Mitrovic*") explicitly mark the act of suggesting within the direct suggestion strategies. These constructions represent the speaker's stance in the comments, presenting a suggestion as a performative act rather than a neutral observation. The use of modal verbs (*should*, *needs to*) basically softens the directive force, shaping the suggestion as guidance rather than a command (Levinson, 1983). Such forms balance authority with politeness, permitting Instagram users to maintain suggestive credibility while mitigating face threats.

Nouns of suggestion (e.g., "*My suggestion is that the captain should focus more on his performance rather than leadership responsibilities*") nominalize the act of suggesting, thereby distancing the speaker from direct imposition. This suggestion strategy formalizes the suggestion speech act, exhibiting it as a considered proposal in the Instagram context. In this way, this nominal form enhances objectivity and deliberation, positioning the advice as reflective rather than personal.

Imperatives (e.g., "*The team should have played more offensively and increased the tempo earlier.*") represent urgency and prescriptiveness. The imperative mood leaves little room for negotiation, positioning the Instagram user as authoritative. While effective in contexts that require decisive action, imperatives risk being perceived as face-threatening, particularly when directed at high-status individuals, such as team captains.

Negative imperatives (e.g., "*Don't start this player in the next match. Bring in a faster winger instead.*") merge with prohibition with directive force. These different forms are specifically strong, as they not only prescribe directive action but also explicitly reject alternatives. The evaluative language ("waste player") intensifies the directive, highlighting dissatisfaction and illustrating the authority of suggestion. Such constructions show Instagram users' critical stance and their attempt to reshape team composition through categorical rejection.

Hybrid strategies (e.g., "*Give the captaincy to a player with better game awareness, not just individual performance.*") mix performative verbs with evaluative commentary. These constructions basically merge advice with critique, simultaneously offering a solution and justifying it. By appealing to broader principles of leadership and performance, the Instagram user legitimizes the suggestion, embedding it within a normative framework.

The above-discussed examples demonstrate that suggestion-making is not a neutral act but a strategic selection of Instagram users shaped by the virtual context and interpersonal dynamics (Al-Seghayer, 2024). Performative verbs and nouns of suggestion soften imposition by framing advice as guidance or proposal; conversely, imperatives and negative imperatives heighten directive force, often at the expense of politeness. The prevalence of evaluative language suggests that suggestions in this domain are closely tied to judgments of competence and authority.

4.2.2. Conventionalized Forms of Suggestions in Instagram comments

The dataset demonstrates several conventionalized forms of suggestion strategies in Instagram comments, each making distinctive pragmatic orientations towards politeness, mitigation, power, distance, and users' authority.

Specific formulae (e.g., "*Have recent losses prompted a review of team tactics and strategies for future matches?*") use interrogative framing to present a suggestion indirectly. Rather than highlighting a directive, the Instagram users couch the suggestion as a question, thereby reducing imposition and inviting collaborative reflection (Alhaythami & Shoaib, 2026). This strategy thus exemplifies a face-saving device, aligning with Brown and Levinson's notion of negative politeness by allowing the addressee to retain autonomy in responding.

Possibility markers (e.g., "*The team may score two or three goals if they maintain this level of performance.*") show uncertainty. By using modal verbs—*may* and *might*—Instagram users frame the suggestion as a probabilistic scenario rather than a categorical directive. This hedging strategy softens the force of advice, illustrating it as an evaluative forecast rather than prescriptive instruction.

Need constructions (e.g., "*The captain needs to lead from the front by making the required sacrifices for his team.*") address obligation and necessity. Unlike probabilistic suggestion strategies, *need-based strategies emphasize* compulsion, positioning the suggestion as an essential requirement rather than an option. This strategy, however, increases directive force while sustaining a degree of politeness by constructing the obligation as inherent to the captain's role.

Should constructions (e.g., "*Players should carefully evaluate the pitch conditions before a game to modify their plans properly.*") balance prescriptiveness with mitigation? The modal *should* convey normative expectation without the categorical force of imperatives. This suggestion form is particularly effective in advisory contexts, as it signals a strong recommendation while preserving the hearer's agency.

Conditional forms (e.g., “*The team can win if they maintain possession and control the midfield.*”) embed suggestions within hypothetical scenarios. By linking success to a condition, the Instagram users frame the suggestion as contingent upon external factors. This strategy reduces imposition by presenting the advice as a logical inference rather than a directive, thereby aligning with indirectness and politeness norms.

Collectively, the examples discussed in this section demonstrate that conventionalized forms of suggestion strategies rely heavily on modalization, conditionality, and interrogative framing to mitigate directive force (Martínez Flor, 2005; Mulyono et al., 2025). Unlike imperatives, which impose direct obligations, these strategies foreground uncertainty, necessity, or hypothetical reasoning, thereby balancing clarity with relational sensitivity. The prevalence of such forms reflects a pragmatic orientation toward indirectness in suggestive discourse, particularly in contexts where authority and face management are salient, such as on social media platforms. These findings complement the quantitative results, exhibiting that Instagram users strategically deploy conventionalized forms to maintain politeness while still conveying strong evaluative stances.

4.2.3. Indirect Forms of Suggestion in Instagram comments

The dataset also shows the use of impersonal constructions and hints, both of which represent highly indirect forms of suggestion strategies. These strategies are observable for their reliance on inference and depersonalization, which mitigate directive force and reduce potential face-threats.

Impersonal constructions (e.g., “*It was a mistake not to substitute the tired players earlier in the match.*”) frame the suggestion in terms of an evaluative observation rather than a direct directive. By attributing the issue to a “*mistake*” and embedding the advice within a hypothetical scenario (“*if I were the coach, I would have made the substitution earlier.*”), the speaker avoids overtly instructing the addressee. This depersonalization shifts responsibility away from the speaker, presenting the suggestion as a logical inference rather than a command. The closing phrase (“*But it’s okay, hope’s alive Inshallah*”) further softens the critique, embedding the advice within a discourse of optimism and faith. Such constructions exemplify negative politeness strategies, as they minimize imposition while still conveying evaluative guidance.

Hints (e.g., “*This looks like a strong lineup... maybe include another defender.*”) rely on implication rather than explicit directive force. The suggestion is embedded within an evaluative statement about team composition, with the parenthetical remark (“*Maybe somewhere include Martinez*”) functioning as a subtle prompt. This strategy requires the hearer to infer the intended action, thereby reducing the speaker’s accountability for imposing advice. Hints are particularly effective in contexts where authority relations are sensitive, as they allow the speaker to contribute evaluative input without overtly challenging decision-makers.

Together, these examples demonstrate that indirect strategies, such as impersonal constructions and hints, are central to suggestion-making in contexts where authority and face management are salient. Impersonal forms depersonalize advice, presenting it as observation or inference, while hints rely on implication, leaving the hearer to interpret the intended action. Both strategies exemplify mitigation, allowing speakers to balance the need for guidance with the preservation of relational harmony. These findings reinforce the broader quantitative pattern in which indirect strategies dominate, underscoring the pragmatic orientation toward politeness and non-imposition in advisory discourse. In sports-related communication, such strategies enable speakers to critique or advise without overtly threatening the face of high-status individuals, thereby maintaining social equilibrium.

5. Discussion

The primary aim of the present study was to examine suggestion speech acts employed by Saudi EFL Instagram users in the comments section, to provide a pragmatic analysis of the strategies used, and to investigate differences in their use when commenting on Instagram. Based on the Saudi Instagram comments dataset, it was revealed that users employ three types of suggestions: direct, indirect, and conventionalized forms, each dominating with varying proportions. Within these three strategies, Martínez Flor (2005) subdivided the categories of suggestion into performative verb, noun of suggestion, imperative, negative imperative for direct strategies; specific formula, possibility markers, modal verbs such as *should* and *need*, and conditional constructions for conventionalized forms; and impersonal forms and hints for indirect strategies. However, the present study revises the classification of direct strategies by introducing *hybrid* strategies. In this form, suggestions are combined with critique, the offering of solutions, and justification.

This study also identified subtypes of suggestion strategies in Instagram comments. These include performative verbs, nouns of suggestion, imperatives, negative imperatives, and hybrid forms within the category of direct suggestion strategies, each occurring at different rates according to quantitative data. Conventionalized forms of suggestion speech acts were realized through specific formulas, possibility markers, constructions with *need* and *should*, and conditional forms. Instagram users employed these strategies to achieve depersonalization and to mitigate face-threatening acts (Saleem & Yasmin, 2024). Indirect strategies, particularly impersonal forms and hints, were observed most frequently in Saudi Instagram comments.

Addressing the first research question (RQ1), the present study’s findings reveal that Saudi EFL Instagram users employ suggestion speech acts to negotiate and maintain impersonal relations and to demonstrate pragmatic awareness in digital communication on social media platforms. Suggestions were not merely directive in nature but were often accompanied by depersonalization techniques, such as impersonal constructions, hedging, and conventionalized formulae, thereby reducing imposition on the addressee. The presence of hybrid strategies, in which suggestions were coupled with critique, justification, or proposed solutions, further illustrates users’ ability to balance directness with politeness. This pragmatic competence demonstrates awareness of both linguistic resources and sociocultural norms that govern online interaction in Saudi digital contexts.

Addressing the second research question (RQ2), the analysis shows that indirect suggestion strategies were the most frequently used, followed by conventionalized forms and direct strategies. This pattern indicates that Saudi EFL Instagram users preferred strategies that reduced direct imposition and allowed suggestions to be expressed in a socially mitigated manner. Within the indirect category, impersonal constructions were particularly dominant, suggesting that users frequently framed advice as general observation or evaluative inference rather than as direct instruction. Conventionalized forms, including

possibility markers, modal verbs such as should and need, and conditional constructions, also played an important role in balancing clarity with politeness. Direct strategies, including imperatives and performative forms, were less frequent but remained useful when users intended to express urgency, authority, or a strong evaluative stance. Overall, this distribution demonstrates that Saudi EFL Instagram users tend to prioritize politeness, face-saving, and relational harmony in their online suggestion-making practices.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings of the present study align closely with politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), who posit that speakers employ indirectness and mitigation to preserve face and minimize imposition. Following this perspective, social media users, particularly Instagram users, employed impersonal constructions and hint forms in comments to suggest on social media. In this way, the prevalence of impersonal constructions, hints, and conditional forms represents negative politeness strategies, whereby advice is framed as optional, contingent, or depersonalized. Conversely, the occasional use of imperatives and negative imperatives conveys a stronger directive force, in which urgency, criticism, or evaluative authority may override a preference for mitigation. Thus, suggestion-making emerges as a dynamic negotiation between clarity and relational sensitivity. The findings are broadly consistent with Al-Seghayer (2024), who highlights the role of pragmatic markers and mitigation strategies in softening the directive force in digital communication, a pattern that corresponds to the dominance of indirectness observed in the present study. Alhaythami and Shoaib (2026) emphasize multimodal strategies in suggestion-making, noting that visual and textual cues often combine to mitigate imposition, paralleling the evaluative and hedging devices found in this dataset. In addition, Barbulet (2013) and Saleem and Yasmin (2024) similarly highlight the celebratory and relational dimensions of pragmatic acts, extending that indirectness serves not only to preserve face but also to foster solidarity and optimism, as evidenced in the use of religious invocations (“Inshallah”) and evaluative comments in the present qualitative data analysis.

6. Conclusion

The current study examined the pragmatic use of suggestion speech acts in Saudi EFL Instagram comments, with particular attention to the strategies employed and their relative frequency in digital interaction. The analysis showed that Saudi Instagram users employed a range of suggestion types, including direct, conventionalized, and indirect strategies. Among these, indirect strategies were the most frequently used, followed by conventionalized forms and direct strategies. This finding indicates that users generally preferred mitigated, face-saving forms of suggestion over highly direct expressions. At the sub-strategy level, impersonal constructions were the most dominant form, suggesting that users often framed suggestions as general observations, evaluations, or indirect advice rather than direct instructions. Conventionalized forms, including modal verbs such as should and need, possibility markers, and conditional constructions, also played an important role in balancing clarity with politeness. Direct strategies, such as imperatives and performative forms, appeared less frequently but were used when users intended to express urgency, authority, or a strong evaluative stance.

These findings contribute to interlanguage pragmatics and digital pragmatics by showing how Saudi EFL Instagram users negotiate meaning, politeness, and social relationships through suggestion speech acts. The study also highlights Instagram as a space for pragmatic performance, in which users employ linguistic strategies to mitigate face-threatening effects while still expressing advice, critique, and recommendations. Furthermore, the identification of hybrid forms, in which suggestions are combined with critique, justification, or proposed solutions, indicates that digital suggestion-making is dynamic and shaped by both linguistic choices and sociocultural norms. However, the findings should be interpreted within the limits of the selected dataset, the Instagram context, and the criteria used to identify Saudi EFL users. Future studies may expand the dataset, compare across social media platforms, and examine the role of multimodal resources, such as emojis, images, hashtags, and other visual cues, in shaping suggestion speech acts. Overall, the study demonstrates that suggestion-making in digital communication is not only a linguistic act but also a socially embedded practice through which users manage politeness, indirectness, and interpersonal relations.

Acknowledgment Statement: The authors would like to thank the Deanship of Research and Graduate Studies at King Khalid University for the financial support.

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Authors' contribution statements: Author 1 contributed to the Methodology, Data Curation, Investigation, Resources, Writing –Review & Editing; Author 2 contributed to Methodology, Validation, and Data Curation; Author 3 contributed to Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation, and Visualization; Author 4 contributed to Conceptualization, Writing Original Draft, Writing Review & Editing, and Supervision.

Funding statements: This work is funded by the Deanship of Research and Graduate Studies at King Khalid University under the Large Research Project. The grant number is RGP2/363/45.

Data availability statement: Data is available upon request. Please contact the corresponding author for any additional information on data access or usage.

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Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process: During the revision of this work, the author(s) used Copilot for copy-editing. After using this tool, the author(s) carefully reviewed and edited the content as required and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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