

Perceived Helpfulness of Phatic Expressions in Online Help-Giving Interactions

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Abstract: In this survey study, we assessed how students rated the helpfulness of replies to online requests for help with and without *phatic expressions*, or comments serving a purely social purpose. We found that students perceived help-giving replies with neutral and self-oriented phatic comments to be less helpful than those discussing course content alone. In contrast, students perceived help-giving replies with greetings, salutations, and other-oriented comments to be equally helpful to those discussing course content alone.

Introduction

When struggling students seek academic help in online learning environments, it is important that they perceive the help they receive from others to be effective. In the online context, these perceptions of support have been found to be related to academic resilience (Permatasari et al., 2021), and students who have negative experiences with help-seeking are less likely to seek further help in the future (Mare & Sohbat, 2002).

In the present study, we contribute to literature on online collaborative learning by examining whether *phatic expressions*—comments that serve a social rather than informative purpose (Maíz-Arévalo, 2017)—contribute to or detract from the perceived helpfulness of replies to requests for help posted to an online college course discussion forum. Although existing work has shed light on behaviors that yield effective academic helping interactions in online courses (Nandi et al., 2012), little is known about the helpfulness of comments that serve a purely social function in these settings. On one hand, phatic expressions do not convey information about course content and thus do not directly address a help-seeker’s academic problem. On the other hand, these expressions may help learners connect with others and thus increase their willingness to accept others’ support.

Maíz-Arévalo (2017) previously identified four different types of phatic expressions that are used in online communicative settings: greeting/parting tokens, self-oriented comments, other-oriented comments, and neutral comments (see Table 1). Our investigation explores how the inclusion of each of these types of expressions predicts the perceived helpfulness of help-giving replies posted to an online discussion forum. Our research question is: *How do phatic expressions contribute to or detract from the perceived helpfulness of replies to requests for help posted to a college course discussion forum?*

Table 1
Types of Online Phatic Expressions (Maíz-Arévalo, 2017)

Type of phatic expression	Definition	Example
Greeting/parting token	Greetings and farewells to open/close messages	“Hi there”
Self-oriented comment	Comments that refer to the speaker	“I’ve had a busy week”
Other-oriented comment	Comments that refer to the addressee	“Thanks for your question”
Neutral comment	Comments on the “context shared by interlocutors” (Maíz-Arévalo, 2017, p. 440)	“Lots of posts on the forum today”

Methods

Participants and procedure

This study utilized a repeated measures survey design and was completed online during the Spring 2022 semester. Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in a large introductory statistics course at a public university in the midwestern United States. During the survey, participants rated the helpfulness of 16 replies to requests for help posted to an online statistics course discussion forum, on a scale from 1 = *Not helpful* to 5 = *Very helpful*. For each of the 16 replies, participants were randomly shown one of two possible versions of the same reply: (a) a version that only discussed course content (e.g., “For any z-score that is huge, to the point where it’s off the chart, you can assume the p-value is going to be pretty much 0”) or (b) an edited version that discussed the same course content and also included a phatic expression (e.g., “This is a very good question. Basically, for any z-score that is huge and off the chart, you can assume the p-value is pretty much 0”). The order in which the 16 replies were presented was randomized for each participant.

Of our 16 help-giving replies, 5 included greeting/parting tokens in the version of the reply with a phatic expression, 4 included self-oriented comments, 4 included other-oriented comments, and 3 included neutral comments. We dummy coded phatic expression type (i.e., the type of phatic expression associated with the version of each reply shown to each participant) into 4 variables (“greeting/parting token,” “self-oriented comment,” “other-oriented comment,” and “neutral comment”) at the individual rating level, with “no phatic expression” as the baseline group for comparison.

Originally, 345 participants completed the survey. We excluded 6 participants who demonstrated response bias by providing the same helpfulness rating for all 16 replies. Our final sample consisted of the remaining 339 participants. All participants were compensated with extra credit.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the data with linear mixed model analysis because we could not consider multiple ratings from the same participant or for the same help-giving reply to be independent of one another. We included helpfulness rating as our dependent variable, participant ID and help-giving reply (post ID) as random effects, and the different types of phatic expressions as fixed effects. We centered and standardized helpfulness rating prior to analysis.

Results and Discussion

Participants perceived help-giving replies with neutral ($\beta = -0.16$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .002$) and self-oriented ($\beta = -0.18$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$) comments to be significantly less helpful than replies discussing course content alone. In contrast, participants perceived replies with greetings/parting tokens ($\beta = 0.03$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .49$) and other-oriented comments ($\beta = 0.02$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .96$) to be equally helpful to replies discussing course content alone. Figure 1 is a density plot displaying the distribution of helpfulness ratings by the type of phatic expression used.

Figure 1

Distribution of Helpfulness Ratings by Type of Phatic Expression



Overall, our findings suggest that the ratings associated with help-giving replies were not improved by the inclusion of phatic expressions. In fact, self-oriented and neutral comments appeared to have a negative impact on perceived helpfulness. Participants may have perceived such expressions as adding little to the content of the help-giving reply and thus a potential waste of the help-seeker’s time. However, our findings suggest that students can include other-oriented comments and greeting/parting tokens in their online help-giving replies without detracting from the message’s overall perceived helpfulness. These expressions have the common characteristic of acknowledging the addressee’s presence; it is possible participants saw them as worth including in help-giving posts because while they are not helpful in terms of conveying course material, they can provide social support by making students feel encouraged, appreciated, or seen by others. That being said, a limitation of our survey design is that it is possible our participants may have felt differently about the use of phatic expressions in more authentic contexts. Thus, future work should examine how online help-giving replies that include different phatic expressions are perceived by the students who receive them after seeking academic help.

References

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