

## Facing Falsehoods: Strategies for Polite Misinformation Correction

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Misinformation is a serious problem. One gap in misinformation correction research is understanding the role of relational concerns, particularly adherence to politeness norms within relationships. Combining insights from the politeness literature with the misinformation correction strategies scholarship, through an interview study (N = 26) of Indian young adults, we examined how they make sense of their correction experiences with older relatives who share misinformation on WhatsApp. We found that localized relational norms associated with politeness are underscored in these accounts as participants discussed employing strategies that decreased the sense of direct interaction to avoid being viewed as disrespectful and questioning the competency of higher status elders. These included using a credible alternative explanation, broad spectrum immunizing, and an emergent strategy of addressing the broader topic, without mentioning the misinformation incident. Participants' accounts reflected that these more indirect approaches were aimed toward achieving goals of both correction and adherence to politeness norms.

*Keywords: misinformation, correction, debunking, politeness, face, goals, India*

Misinformation is an immense problem facing societies worldwide. Effective correction of misinformation is one aspect of deterrence explored by scholars. The correction of misinformation is a proposed means of decreasing the impact of that misinformation, usually with a goal of persuading someone to not believe it (Wang & Song, 2015). In this study, we focus on interpersonal ties correcting each other for sharing falsehoods. We know that this type of correction is both important and difficult. Further, most misinformation correction research is conducted in North America and Western Europe and is rooted in cultural norms in those societies (Seo & Faris, 2021). Moreover, much of this research does not attend to how the nature of interpersonal relationships may impact the correction process (Li, 2020). To address these issues, this interview study examines how Indian young adults make sense of their experiences correcting older family members for sharing misinformation on the mobile instant messaging service (MIM) WhatsApp, particularly how these accounts are imbued with an emphasis on politeness concerns in a culture wherein elder deference is a salient value. We find that participants were concerned about showing respect to elders and avoiding insinuating that they were questioning elders' competency. These concerns informed their accounts of the correction strategies they used, especially their use of more indirect strategies, which

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included providing an alternative explanation backed by a credible source, engaging in broad spectrum immunizing against common misinformation tactics, and an emergent strategy of addressing the broader topic without explicitly mentioning the misinformation incident. In making sense of these strategies, participants pointed toward how these more indirect approaches allowed them to achieve multiple interactional goals of both correcting misinformation and adhering to politeness norms.

To be sure, we are not measuring the comparable effectiveness of different strategies; rather, we focus on how individuals make sense of their day-to-day experiences of correcting misinformation within a relational and cultural context wherein politeness concerns are salient. This is important because research on misinformation correction typically focuses on the effectiveness of different strategies through conducting experiments wherein an individual is exposed to a correction from an abstract stranger (Vraga & Bode, 2017). While this is valuable, it does not capture the role of relational characteristics or the broader cultural context in shaping correction strategies when interpersonal ties correct each other. Thus, we put extant research on misinformation correction in conversation with insights from the politeness literature to understand young Indians' accounts of the correction strategies they use when older relatives share misinformation on WhatsApp, adding an interpersonal perspective to the misinformation correction literature. Further, although much attention has been paid to misinformation on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, we answer calls from scholars like Rossini, Stromer-Galley, Baptista, and Veiga de Oliveira (2021) to also focus on MIMs like WhatsApp, which are prominent vectors for misinformation in the global south. We also respond to calls for more communication research situated in India, a country that remains underrepresented in research despite being the second most populous global nation (Dutta, 2021).

## **Literature Review**

### ***Misinformation***

Misinformation is typically defined as information that is considered incorrect based on "the best available evidence from relevant experts at the time" (Vraga & Bode, 2020, p. 138). While the information may initially be considered valid or true, it is later recognized to be incorrect (Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz, & Cook, 2012). Social media have amplified misinformation (Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Rossini et al., 2021; Wittenberg & Berinsky, 2020) including in India, particularly on the MIM WhatsApp (Akbar, Panda, Kukreti, Meena, & Pal, 2020; Badrinathan, 2021; Neyazi, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2021).

This study considers young Indians' accounts of correcting misinformation shared by older relatives within WhatsApp family group chats. WhatsApp allows individuals and groups to exchange text and multimedia messages (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2018). The spread of misinformation on MIMs is a known issue (Badrinathan, 2021; Rossini et al., 2021). MIMs are particularly vulnerable to misinformation because of the greater sense of privacy they afford (Rossini et al., 2021), the lack of content moderation, and that they are often encrypted. Further, as they enable users to connect with family and friends through one-to-one and group chats, MIMs are perceived as private and intimate (Matassi, Boczkowski, & Mitchelstein, 2019), making them a relevant context to understand how relational aspects may influence the correction of misinformation among interpersonal ties.

### *Misinformation Correction*

With the substantial concern about the effects of misinformation, there is much empirical work on misinformation correction and its associated strategies and best practices.

### *Correction Strategies*

Much work is concerned with evaluating the effectiveness of misinformation correction strategies. This is particularly important because misinformation correction is generally shown to be only somewhat effective (Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021; Thorson & Li, 2021; Walter, Brooks, Saucier, & Suresh, 2021; Walter & Murphy, 2018; Walter & Tukachinsky, 2020). There is some evidence, however, that some correction, especially in response to health misinformation, can be effective (Vraga & Bode, 2017, 2018).

A number of scholarly reviews detail best practices and misinformation correction strategies. The most often cited work on misinformation correction is Lewandowsky et al. (2012), with a psychological focus. Swire-Thompson and Ecker (2018) extend the aforementioned review. More recently, Wittenberg and Berinsky (2020) provide additional summaries of empirical work.

Within the misinformation correction literature, nearly all discuss *inoculation*, which involves warning individuals before they are exposed to misinformation (Compton, 2020; Ivanov, 2017; Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021; Swire-Thompson & Ecker, 2018; van der Meer & Jin, 2019; Vraga & Bode, 2021; Vraga, Kim, Cook, & Bode, 2020), and is effective (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021). Inoculation is a two-step process that requires both a warning to help activate threats and a weakened form of the misinformation accompanied by a refutation (also known as *prebunking*; Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021). However, Lewandowsky and van der Linden (2021) note that inoculation may be difficult in practice because of the lack of a controlled environment and the difficulty in formulating weakened forms for some topics. *Broad spectrum immunity* is a more recent addition to misinformation correction strategies, tied to inoculation (Cook, Lewandowsky, & Ecker, 2017). "Rather than focusing on specific content, the public should be inoculated against the broader manipulation techniques that underlie the production of most misinformation," Lewandowsky and van der Linden (2021) argue (p. 19).

But if inoculation isn't possible and the misinformation has already been shared, there may need to be *responsive correction* (Bode & Vraga, 2021a) or *debunking*, "presenting a corrective message that establishes that the prior message was misinformation" (Chan, Jones, Hall Jamieson, & Albarracín, 2017, p. 1531). This often includes providing alternative explanations (Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021; Swire-Thompson & Ecker, 2018). Providing any factual details has been found to be more effective than simply labeling misinformation as false (Chan et al., 2017; Lewandowsky et al., 2012; van der Meer & Jin, 2019). In mediated spaces, this additional information may include links to a corroborating source (Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Rossini et al., 2021; Vraga & Bode, 2018), but that source needs to be credible (Swire-Thompson & Ecker, 2018). Indeed, information from expert sources like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is particularly effective (Vraga & Bode, 2017). However, Lewandowsky and van der Linden (2021) outline three challenges associated with debunking. First, there may not be a clear alternative

explanation for every piece of misinformation. Second, if an alternative does exist, people may be hesitant to accept one tied to ideological beliefs. Third, as debunking requires a repetition of the original misinformation, this can reinforce or reactivate the false belief (Swire-Thompson & Ecker, 2018; Wittenberg & Berinsky, 2020).

#### *Correction Source*

The source of a correction influences effectiveness, and a trustworthy source is the most important attribute in an effective correction, even more than expertise (Guillory & Geraci, 2013). Within the misinformation correction literature, there is scant mention of correction source and, if human, their relationship to the misinformation sharer. There is some work on the effectiveness of external fact-checking organizations and social media platforms' efforts (Oeldorf-Hirsch, Schmierbach, Appelman, & Boyle, 2020), but for person-based corrections, most studies experimentally test the effectiveness of observing abstract social media users correct each other (Bode & Vraga, 2018; Vraga & Bode, 2017). Other work does consider correction from known others, like "a friend," some showing that they are effective in drawing attention (Garrett & Poulsen, 2019; Hannak, Margolin, Keegan, & Weber, 2014; Huang & Wang, 2020; Koo, Su, Lee, Ahn, & Rojas, 2021; Margolin, Hannak, & Weber, 2018; van der Meer & Jin, 2019). However, such research does not take into account relational characteristics or cultural norms. We know that the type of relationship matters in correction, as people are more likely to correct close ties (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2020) and are more likely to express political disagreement with them as well (Morey, Eveland, & Hutchens, 2012). Further, decades of research demonstrates that context matters for interpersonal interactions. Thus, because misinformation correction strategy frameworks do not consider relational characteristics or broader contextual norms, we propose combining insights from the correction strategy literature with work on politeness norms to better understand the broader misinformation correction context.

#### *Corrections and Politeness*

A correction is a communication act where an individual knows that another individual has made a factual error and acts on it (Takahashi & Beebe, 1993). Corrections are often believed to be embarrassing (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990), and can imply that the corrected person is misguided or incompetent (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Because of this, correctors typically consider politeness (Goldsmith, 2000; Takahashi & Beebe, 1993).

#### ***Politeness***

Politeness is broadly understood to be an evaluation of behavior that is a form of social practice whereby people work out and maintain interpersonal relationships (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). Politeness is also linked to the notion of being considerate to others, according to expected norms (Mills, 2011). We, like Tracy (2020), use politeness as a sensitizing tool. As communication scholars tend to use older conceptualizations of politeness (Haugh, Kádár, & Mills, 2013), we provide a review of more recent relevant theorizing.

Research on politeness has undergone a shift away from second-order politeness, closely linked to the work of Brown and Levinson (1987), to a second wave of politeness research where scholars focus on lay understandings of politeness (first-order politeness) or situated politeness and its evaluation by those

engaged in the interaction (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). Importantly, the second wave focuses on relational aspects of politeness (Haugh, 2013; Haugh et al., 2013; Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Spencer-Oatey, 2011; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2020). While interpersonal communication scholars have been late to embrace this shift (Haugh et al., 2013), explorations of interpersonal interactions that consider politeness would benefit from understanding politeness in this way (Locher, 2015). As such, we draw from concepts that are consistently applied across second-wave politeness theorizing.

### *Politeness and Face*

Face is one of the most important concepts within politeness. Face is viewed as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (Goffman, 1967, p. 213). Within communication, most use Tracy’s (1990) definition of face as “the socially situated identities people claim or attribute to others” (p. 210) and facework as the communicative strategies that enact, support, and challenge those identities. Face and politeness are related concepts, as face is an interpretation of relational work, while politeness is the evaluation of the interaction (Haugh, 2013). Indeed, much politeness research draws on notions of face to explain interpersonal acts (Haugh, 2012). The Indian understanding of one’s face, *izzat*, is an integral part of Indian culture (Manian & Naidu, 2009). *Izzat* encompasses honor, respect, and reputation as a scaffolding for social relationships. It includes personal conduct norms that are tied to both individual and family honor (Baig, Ting-Toomey, & Dorjee, 2014; Pearce & Vitak, 2016). Individuals consider their own as well as others’ *izzat* while interacting. One particular instance of this is that *izzat* is threatened if a younger person engages in a face-threatening act with an elder, especially in front of others (Baig et al., 2014).

### *Politeness Norms*

Norms are a frame of reference for politeness judgments and evaluations (Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2020). Politeness norms are multilayered and nested sets of norms that create shared expectancies for behavior and include localized norms for the particular relationship, community or group norms, and societal or cultural norms (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). The nested nature of these norms means that localized norms are embedded and interpreted relative to community and societal norms.

### *Localized Relational Norms*

Relationships have considerable history, which impacts interpersonal interactions (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). Presumably, with this history, there are expectations for politeness and a shared normative evaluation of it (Kádár & Haugh, 2013).

Another aspect of localized relational norms is the role of the interactors’ status (including age, gender, social class) and acknowledged social relationship (parent/child, teacher/student, etc.; Kádár & Haugh, 2013). The relative power attributed based on status and relationship is commonly discussed in terms of the impact on politeness strategies and expectations (Spencer-Oatey, 2008; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2020; Spencer-Oatey & Žegarac, 2017). Localized relational politeness norms are also tied to relational closeness (Brown & Levinson,

1987; Spencer-Oatey & Žegarac, 2017). It is generally assumed that with greater relational closeness, the need for politeness decreases (Ambady, Koo, Lee, & Rosenthal, 1996).

Within the current study, younger and older family members' relationships are the focus and unit of analysis. Thus, we presume that there are power differences between these two groups as in Indian culture, deference toward elders is normative (Saavala, 2010). However, since they are family, we also presume some level of relational closeness and history and a mutual expectation that the relationship will continue.

#### *Community or Group Norms*

Community or group norms are at the level of relational networks, which are intersecting social links between people who form an identifiable group (Kádár & Haugh, 2013), such as a family. In such a group, there is usually a shared normative understanding of how politeness is evaluated, especially when there are ongoing interactions over time (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). Members hold themselves and others accountable to the norms of the group (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). This is not the unit of analysis of the current study, but community or group norms do influence localized relational norms.

#### *Societal and Cultural Norms*

More diffuse societal and cultural politeness norms also play a role in influencing localized relational norms (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). While this is not the unit of analysis for this study, it is important to consider how the broader cultural context influences individual behavior. Indeed, there are supralocal societal norms for understanding and evaluating politeness (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). Moreover, all levels of politeness are deeply tied to culture and cultural norms (Mills & Kádár, 2011; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2020). The current study is situated in India, and aspects of Indian culture relate to these politeness concepts. While there is not a great deal of work directly addressing politeness in India, there is some evidence that there are harmony-driven goals tied to polite communication (Hample & Anagondahalli, 2015). As noted earlier, *izzat* and showing respect and deference to older people is a salient cultural value, and such behaviors manifest in communication acts (Harwood, McKee, & Lin, 2000).

#### *Message Considerations*

Although we are not explicitly analyzing linguistic politeness strategies à la Brown and Levinson (1987) and are instead drawing from the broader second-wave politeness theorizing, the latter does provide some insights on message construction, particularly regarding directness and indirectness. These are important concepts in considerations of politeness (Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2020), tied to intention (Mills & Grainger, 2016). Mills and Grainger (2016) define indirectness as "a face-management strategy involving the avoidance of putting one's meaning on record" (p. 46), which is typically considered a way to enhance politeness because it avoids conflict and minimizes imposition (Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Mills & Grainger, 2016). Moreover, ambiguous meaning is less threatening (Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000). Directness is the conveyance of "the illocutionary force of request" (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p. 23). Directness encompasses explicitness, "the extent to which a message is coded unambiguously" (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p. 30) and bluntness, the extent to which the message is softened or mitigated (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). However,

directness is not necessarily impolite. For example, directness can signal intimacy in a close relationship (Dillard, Wilson, Tusing, & Kinney, 1997).

### **Multiple Goals**

Bringing the two strands of research discussed above together, we posit that when individuals make sense of correcting interpersonal ties for sharing misinformation on WhatsApp, they will underscore being driven by multiple goals. Scholars who adopt a multiple goals perspective recognize that when an individual attempts to influence an interpersonal relation, they are often driven by more than one goal, including influence, identity, instrumental, and relational goals (Wilson & Caughlin, 2017). For example, one could have a goal to change someone else's behavior while also holding concerns for the relationship (Pennington & Winfrey, 2021). Within a specific context, individuals form and attempt to achieve these goals through communication that is considered culturally appropriate, including attending to culturally specific politeness and face-related concerns (Goldsmith, 2001). In this study, we expect that our participants will describe being driven by the goal to correct the misperceptions harbored by their older family members who share misinformation as well as the goal to adhere to localized politeness norms, influenced by group and cultural politeness norms.

### **Research Questions**

Thus, we focus on how these norms and general politeness considerations inform Indian young adults' accounts of correcting their older family members for sharing misinformation on WhatsApp, including the different correction strategies they use. While misinformation correction strategies are logical and come from empirical evidence, few authors acknowledge the role of politeness within the correction. Thus, we pose the following research questions:

*RQ1: How does politeness (face, norms, considerations) inform misinformation correction?*

*RQ2: What strategies do Indian young adults self-report using to correct misinformation?*

### **Method**

Studies of politeness frequently analyze interactions and discourse, but answering calls for more interpretive work to enrich theoretical understandings of politeness (Jucker & Staley, 2017; Reiter, 2020), this study uses interviews, which allow for greater insight into how individuals evaluate the politeness of the interaction and how they reconstruct salient norms. The first author conducted semistructured interviews with 26 adults (ages 18–26) residing in Delhi from June to August 2020 via Zoom. All study materials and procedures were approved by the University of Washington Human Subjects Division. We adopted a snowball sampling approach as the first author reached out to personal contacts in Delhi, who referred participants. The participants' descriptors and demographics are available in Table 1. The interviews averaged 51 minutes and were conducted primarily in English. However, participants sometimes spoke in a mix of Hindi and English to the first author, who is fluent in both languages. The interview protocol, which can be accessed here ([https://osf.io/tq4r5/?view\\_only=07abbd2454534d319e259878d12b93c0](https://osf.io/tq4r5/?view_only=07abbd2454534d319e259878d12b93c0)), focused on themes such as family communication, participants' engagement in family group chats, and their encounters with

misinformation within such chats. For example, participants were asked questions like "Once you saw the misinformation shared by your relative, what went through your mind?" They were also asked to recount specific incidents of older relatives sharing misinformation on WhatsApp. Participants received a rupees 500 (\$7 USD) e-gift card as compensation.

**Table 1. Participant Demographics.**

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Status
Abhishek	20	M	Student
Aditi	24	F	Student
Jane	23	F	Student
Dina	18	F	Student
Karan	25	M	Marketer
Mahima	25	F	Teacher
Nalin	21	M	Student
Neha	24	F	Student
Nidhi	20	F	Student
Pradhyuman	26	M	Lawyer
Rahat	21	M	Student
Raj	25	M	Accountant
Rushil	24	M	Finance
Shubham	22	M	Student
Sidhant	21	M	Student
Simi	26	F	Lawyer
Sonam	18	F	Student
Surya	19	M	Student
Udant	22	M	Student
Udita	23	F	Student
Vandana	25	F	Lawyer
Vani	24	F	Student
Vidhi	21	F	Student
Virat	24	M	Engineer
Vivek	23	M	Engineer
Zoya	25	F	Media professional

### **Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed and translated by the first author. Following this, transcripts were analyzed using the technique of thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). Although participants also discussed times when they chose to not correct, this is outside of the scope of the current study, which focuses on the corrective acts. Thus, instances where participants mentioned correcting older relatives for sharing misinformation on WhatsApp were first identified. These excerpts were exported into



spreadsheets, and metamatrices were created to find patterns across participants, determine patterns in findings, and detect negative cases. These metamatrices can be accessed here ([https://osf.io/tq4r5/?view\\_only=07abbd2454534d319e259878d12b93c0](https://osf.io/tq4r5/?view_only=07abbd2454534d319e259878d12b93c0)). For RQ1, excerpts where participants emphasized the need to adhere to politeness norms and face concerns were identified. Based on second-wave politeness literature, three themes emerged within these excerpts: General discussions of politeness and face concerns, relational politeness norms, and message-construction-related considerations. For RQ2, based on the misinformation correction literature, every excerpt where participants mentioned how they corrected older relatives was assigned a correction strategy. This included identifying strategies like alternative explanations, inoculation, and the emergent strategy of addressing the broader topic. For each excerpt, notes were made regarding how politeness informed participants' strategy choices. Finally, to ensure trustworthiness, we engaged in peer debriefing and exemplar identification (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## Results

### *Research Question 1*

To address the first research question, we provide examples of participants' concerns for face, localized relational politeness norms, and message construction.

#### *Politeness and Face (Izzat)*

Participants were concerned about how elders would perceive their corrections. For example, participants explained that a misinformation correction was fraught with the chance to "come off as rude" or "offensive" and could "spoil the entire relationship." Participants made it clear that they thought about politeness as a way to counter being evaluated negatively.

Many participants also talked about concerns about their behavior reflecting poorly on their family or their parents. As noted earlier, *izzat* is not only individual but also reflects on the entire family. For example, when Udita's aunt and uncle shared misinformation, she asked her cousin, their daughter, to correct them out of concern that her relatives would tell her parents that Udita was engaging in "unacceptable behavior" and being "disrespectful." Rahat spoke of his worry about correcting his more distant relatives—"If they think I'm disrespecting them, it will all come down to my parents' upbringing"—meaning that it will reflect poorly on his parents, not raising him with awareness of respect norms.

Participants showed great concern for the *izzat* of the elders whom they were correcting. This was exemplified by Virat: "There is definitely a decent way of correcting anybody, and when it comes to our elders, there should always be that respect." This is especially tied to anything that may be viewed as questioning an elder's competence. "Avoid being disrespectful or condescending" to elders, said Vivek.

*Politeness and Localized Relational Norms*

Both the corrector and the corrected had relational history and futures, and participants openly shared how this mattered for the politeness in their corrections. It was clear that with greater relational closeness, there was less consideration for politeness, as was expected. For example, Nidhi's description of correcting her grandmother reflected this: "It's not something I really have to think out in my head before actually speaking out." But for family members who were more relationally distant, there had to be greater considerations. Vandana explained that she is "very mindful of what I'm writing" and "extremely careful of the words" she uses with her extended family.

*Politeness Considerations in Messages: Linguistic Forms and Directness/Indirectness*

While this study does not aim to conduct a linguistic analysis, we note that many participants discussed the strategic use of polite linguistic forms. These forms are meaningful units of language that conventionally accomplish politeness (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). For example, Vandana explained that she chose words "which are very respectful." Some tied these to their goal of having the recipient be more open to listening to them. For example, as Vani explained, not only would polite linguistic forms increase listening, but she also believed that the likelihood of the correction being accepted would be higher:

You can't use harsh words with them. . . .If you're aggressive about your points, they'll never listen to you. And if you're gentle with what you're trying to say and if you're patient with them, then maybe the conversation leads somewhere.

Directness and its dimensions of force, unambiguousness, and bluntness (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) also mattered. This was reflected by Vidhi, who explained that because of her "comfort level" with her immediate family, "I can talk to them openly and in a blunt way about things." Neha suggested that she would even directly tell her mother to engage in some evaluation herself, saying, "You have to Google it at least!" Participants stated that such directness was possible mainly with their parents, echoing research suggesting that relational closeness allows for lower politeness concern.

However, most participants emphasized indirectness, especially for corrections in relationships with low relational closeness or high status differences. Indeed, most participants who wanted to correct an older relative, especially a distant one, said they opted for strategies that allowed them to achieve multiple goals: first, to reduce the impact of the misinformation either through the sharer no longer believing it or not further sharing it *and* to adhere to politeness and respect norms by not directly mentioning the misinformation sharing incident. For RQ2, where we look at correction strategies, many participants stated that they opted for strategies that allowed them to be more indirect to meet their politeness goals. For example, Sonam said she used a broad spectrum immunity strategy and explained that if she had questioned her parents more directly about the specific misinformation sharing incident, they would "feel worse" and "won't like it."

### **Research Question 2**

To address RQ2, we present how participants made sense of their correction strategies. We note that none of these strategies are mutually exclusive and participants described engaging in many simultaneously. From the literature, we identified strategies of inoculation, including broad spectrum immunity, and responsive correction (debunking). Within responsive correction, participants discussed direct debunks, alternative explanations, and the inclusion of credible sources. We also identified a new strategy, addressing the broader topic.

#### *Inoculation*

Inoculation is an important aspect of misinformation correction. But as Lewandowsky and van der Linden (2021) express, it is challenging to find inoculation examples outside of experimental settings as preempting misinformation in the real world is difficult. Thus, it is unsurprising that participants did not describe engaging in behaviors that met the definition of inoculation. While the current study focuses on individual behavior, we do point to work by Badrinathan (2021) that found that media literacy interventions informed by inoculation literature did not enhance people's ability to identify misinformation in India.

#### *Broad Spectrum Immunity*

However, participants provided several examples of broad spectrum immunity behaviors. This is a strategy that helps individuals understand the mechanisms of misinformation creation and spread. Participants stated that they engaged in this strategy through broadly informing the misinformation sharer about common signs of manipulated information. For example, Vivek reflected on how it was important to educate older relatives when they started using digital platforms because "they might not be aware of the simple fact that all the information that goes and comes their way are not true." He added, "You can always make them more aware about the risks of false information being spread and how they can be more aware of it." Vivek specified that this was a preferable way for him to deter misinformation versus a direct correction, saying that such efforts can be used "if you don't want to argue with them about a particular issue." Engagement in broad spectrum immunizing may be evaluated as more polite because it is more indirect and there is not a specific misinformation incident pointed to.

Participants also described pointing out different aspects related to the specific misinformation environment in India and best practices to navigate it. For example, Sonam addressed the issue of forwarded messages on WhatsApp indirectly, versus a direct correction. She explained to her parents "in a very sweet tone. . .all of these are just like 'forwards' and they're not authentic messages." Another common refrain was instructing family members to not forward messages before reading and checking them. As Nalin told his father, "Give them a good read-through before you're forwarding such information." This is also indirect because Nalin was speaking about *all* forwarded messages, versus correcting his father about a specific one. Another broad spectrum immunity focus was encouraging family members to check sources. Sidhant stated he did this with his mother, notably impolitely and more directly, asking her, "I'm sorry, where's this source? Where's this coming from? WhatsApp university?" Other topics included warning family about the possibility that *all* images could have been manipulated or that misinformation more broadly may be agenda-driven.

For example, Shubham told his family “about how videos and images and articles, they can all be edited and people have their own agendas for spreading things.”

### *Responsive Corrections*

Corrections that occur after the misinformation sharing incident are examples of *responsive corrections* (Bode & Vraga, 2021a) or *debunking* (Chan et al., 2017). Such corrections will almost always be direct if they refer to a specific piece of misinformation. A few participants described how they engaged in responsive corrections by succinctly telling the misinformation sharer that the information was false in an unambiguous and direct way, without adding any other information. For instance, Udant described his correction strategy by stating that “I say it’s not correct. I’ll just be straightforward.” Similarly, Simi said, “I’ll directly say to her face that *mumma* (mom) this is a wrong thing which you have circulated.” As noted above, such directness was viewed as being possible only with those who were relationally close, like parents. Even though we are not examining the effectiveness of different strategies, it is important to note that according to the literature, this is unlikely to be an effective strategy because it does not provide any additional information like an alternative explanation (Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021; van der Meer & Jin, 2019).

Others did provide alternative explanations while engaging in correction. An example comes from Virat, whose mother had shared misinformation about a brand of hand sanitizer in combating the spread of COVID-19. COVID-19 treatment is a common form of misinformation in India (Akbar et al., 2020). He approached his mother face-to-face and explained to her that what she had shared was likely a scam, but he did not emphasize the scam to avoid implying that his mother was stupid. He politely explained the scam by offering the alternative explanation that it was likely a “market strategy to just promote the sanitizer.”

Another strategy mentioned in the correction literature involves also including information from a credible source. In the earlier example, Virat also showed his mother a World Health Organization report. He stated that the combination of an alternative explanation with the appeal to an authoritative source convinced her that the content was incorrect. Pointing toward a credible source also allows for greater politeness because the correction source is a credible institution rather than the corrector themselves. This allows lower status correctors to avoid giving the impression that they are imposing their knowledge on the higher status misinformation sharer. Thus, rather than questioning elders for sending or believing misinformation, the participants focused on gently providing them with correct information, usually from an online source. To illustrate how appealing to an authority is more polite, we present the example of Simi. Simi, a lawyer, stated that she commonly used the strategy of sharing a “more informative link” in her efforts to correct misinformation with her extended family. She believed her family’s opinions would “probably” change after reading it. Importantly, Simi felt that the link was more polite than a direct accusation of misinformation sharing. She said that if she told them directly that they were wrong, “they will react in a very weird fashion.” She did not want to say the words “you’re wrong” and felt that sharing a link would be a “better way to put it.” According to her, “In this way, you have communicated also that they are wrong and, simultaneously, you have shared a new piece of information which is actually correct—with a substantial piece of evidence.” Thus, Simi eloquently explained how a link does the correction task for her without requiring her to directly correct the misinformation herself.

*Addressing the Broader Topic*

An emergent finding, not discussed in the misinformation correction literature, was bringing up the broader misinformation topic in a casual way rather than directly correcting the misinformation. This was another way to be polite through indirectness and not threaten the misinformation sharer. Thus, discussing the broader topic is a way that correctors can achieve their goal of correcting the misinformation while attending to relational considerations. Participants reported starting broader conversations on a topic like the treatment of minority groups or mental health and then vaguely, indirectly, and broadly slipping in a correction to misinformation. This often happened in face-to-face rather than mediated contexts. Uditā said she did this with a “causal conversation” on a related topic “to correct my parents so that they don't think that I am coming at them directly.”

Participants described using this strategy to correct misinformation tied to ideological issues, which included the spread of controversial and hate-filled opinions about marginalized groups. Ideologically driven misinformation is of great concern in India (Al-Zaman, 2020). This may be because individuals tend to seek out and assess evidence that reinforces their ideological beliefs, especially when it affirms their identities (Kahan, 2013). Pradyuman experienced this, saying that it was difficult to correct opinions “especially around issues like religion, our politics, or morality,” comparing them to nonideological misinformation that “you counter through either correct information, through facts and figures, or through a compelling rational argument.” Rather than correcting a specific piece of misinformation, participants shared that they would address the ideological issues that underpinned the spread of certain falsehoods and that this required effort and thoughtfulness. This is similar to the broad spectrum immunity strategy, but instead of illuminating misinformation mechanisms, the corrector tackles the content. To illustrate, Uditā shared an example of the spread of misinformation regarding a celebrity death that was based in misogynist views. Uditā said she corrected “the root ideology, not the immediate conspiracy that’s going on.” Similarly, Vani described how it was important to “explain to them where it comes from. If there’s a certain belief, we can dissect that belief.”

The most commonly mentioned example of this was misinformation associated with communal tensions—strained relations among religious, ethnic, caste, or other groups in India. Indeed, this is not only a key political issue in India but is also a common theme in the Indian misinformation environment, including falsehoods associated with the protests and riots surrounding the introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Act and misinformation linking the spread of COVID-19 to the Muslim community (Akbar et al., 2020; Al-Zaman, 2020). Referring to his parents’ belief in misinformation on this topic, Virat revealed that in his corrections he would “try to neutralize their thought process” tied to their “biases.” However, scholarly work suggests that refuting ideological views is challenging (Kahan, 2013; Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021; Walter & Salovich, 2021), especially those tied to intergroup conflict (Nyhan & Zeitzoff, 2018).

**Discussion and Conclusion**

In this study, we find that young Indians emphasize the need to attend to localized and relational politeness norms, influenced by broader cultural norms tied to *izzat*, in their accounts of correcting older family members who share misinformation on WhatsApp. These considerations are viewed as less salient when correcting parents and others who are relationally close; however, while correcting more distant

relatives, not adhering to them can have a negative impact on *izzat* at both an individual and familial level. These considerations are also underscored in how participants make sense of their correction strategies as they state that they prefer less direct strategies, avoiding direct reference to the misinformation that is shared. From the literature, this aligns with the broad spectrum immunity strategy associated with inoculation, wherein the emphasis is on educating others about the mechanisms that contribute to the creation and spread of misinformation. They also discuss responsive corrections or debunking strategies, including direct corrections without any factual elaboration, providing alternative explanations, and sharing links and screenshots of credible sources.

An emergent strategy of addressing the broader topic without explicitly mentioning the misinformation incident was also discussed. This strategy was especially tied to correcting misinformation associated with ideological issues. Here, it is important to note that, according to the participants, misinformation constitutes not just verifiably false claims but also opinions and beliefs related to ideological differences. Such opinions and beliefs require broader conversations that address underlying ideological issues. Thus, our work demonstrates that people may conceptualize misinformation in broader terms than typical scholarly definitions of this phenomenon. Much of the literature assumes a fixed definition of misinformation, but our results indicate that rather than assuming an a priori definition, future research may examine how the conceptualization of misinformation is situated and contested among different groups.

In our participants' accounts, we find that strategy choice is closely tied to politeness concerns, with some strategies seemingly allowing for greater politeness. For example, pointing to a credible alternative source allows an individual to avoid giving the impression that they are imposing their knowledge on an elder, which is a possibility if they directly correct them. Similarly, efforts at broadly educating family about misinformation or addressing the broader topic are viewed as more polite than directly telling them that they shared a piece of false information. Although we do not make any claims regarding the possible effectiveness of these strategies, by presenting accounts of people's correction experiences, we illustrate the important role that politeness and relational concerns play in how people view their misinformation correction experiences with interpersonal ties. Scholars who do focus on the effectiveness of different correction strategies can draw on our insights and examine the extent to which more polite corrections may reduce misperceptions.

Moreover, a greater emphasis on relational factors is needed within the scholarship on misinformation and its correction. As our study demonstrates, this involves drawing on interpersonal communication literature. Misinformation is typically studied by political communication scholars; however, misinformation is ubiquitous and pervades various aspects of our lives, including our relationships. We believe that insights from interpersonal communication scholarship can help scholars develop a more complete understanding of important issues like how belief in misinformation is negotiated within families and other close relationships. Further, in focusing on intergenerational relationships in urban India, we also demonstrate how people's understanding of misinformation and its correction is influenced by cultural and contextual aspects. More work that is similarly relationally, culturally, and contextually situated will add to our understanding of misinformation. In drawing on second-wave politeness theorizing, we also respond to calls by scholars who focus on politeness to highlight lay understandings of politeness norms, including localized relational norms.

It is important to address the limitations of this study. As with any study on misinformation correction that relies on self-reports, there is a risk that the extent to which individuals engage in correction is overstated because of impression management concerns (Bode & Vraga, 2021b). Here, it is important to note that we do not make any claims regarding the frequency or effectiveness of corrections; rather, our focus is on how people make sense of their correction experiences. This focus also necessitates contextually grounded qualitative interviews with a limited sample; therefore, we do not make any claims of representativeness. Further, it is vital to recognize that this narrow sample of urban middle- and upper-middle-class young Indians are financially comfortable and actively use technology. Future research could aim for a broader and representative sample to better understand how variance within India regarding technology access, class position, and localized relational norms associated with politeness influences misinformation correction.

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