

Exploring Linguistic Hedges and Gender Equity in Academic Discourse of Commerce and Management Studies

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Devendra Kumar, Assistant Professor, Dharmanand Uniyal Government
Degree College Narendranagar (T.G.) Uttarakhand, India

Sapna Kashyap, Associate Professor, Atar Singh Negi
Government Degree College, Brahmkhal, Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand, India

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Abstract

Purpose: Stylistics is the study of styles in spoken and written languages. It is used to explore how language is used and how the author affects the meaning of the text. Hedges are important features of stylistics because they create a literary impact and convey deeper meaning to the reader. These are words or phrases used by writers to add ambiguity or uncertainty to literature or conversations, thereby representing probable fact, indecision, or caution. Hedges are used to reduce the effect of bragging and soften the impact of utterance with politeness, making them markers of uncertainty or etiquette in language usage. The use of linguistic hedges, like other linguistic constructions by male and female authors, may reflect certain traits or behaviors that mark their identity. Therefore, their usage may reflect gender-based disparities, cultural biases, and communicative inequalities in written academic discourse. This study examines how linguistic hedges are utilized by male and female authors in academic writing, particularly in management studies in India, and focuses on their potential impact on inclusivity, accessibility, and gender equity.

Methodology: A mixed approach employing quantitative and qualitative is used for the analysis of a corpus text of 40 research articles (20 authored by males and 20 by females) of management studies in Indian context. The frequencies and patterns of hedging words used by male and female authors were examined using the AntConc tool and compared qualitatively.

Significance of the study: Through this study the author contributes to ongoing efforts to address gender biases, promote inclusivity, and advocate for diversity and gender equity in language usage for academic writing. In addition, this study provides valuable insights into the diverse ways language is used, offering a better understanding of the nuances of gendered language use.

Keywords: linguistic sexism, gender equity, inclusivity, gendered language. Sociolinguistics, AntConc.

1. Introduction

Language plays a pivotal role in facilitating effective and meaningful communication among the audience. Communication is not merely the transmission of text; it is also the conveyance of the underlying meaning of text. Crafting impactful and compelling messages to convey implicit and explicit meanings involves the strategic use of textual and lexical devices. One such device is hedges, which are utilized by the authors to introduce uncertainty into their utterances or literature. Lakoff (1973) introduced the concept of hedges. According to him, hedges are words that make things fuzzier. Additionally, Hyland (1996) points out that hedges are used in academic writing to express tentativeness or the possibility of representing unproven prepositions. Hedges perform various functions, acting not only as representations of probable facts, indecisiveness, or caution but also as markers of politeness and etiquette in language use. Various authors have contributed to the knowledge of linguistic hedges by identifying and classifying them into different categories. Some of the notable classifications include: -

1. Salager-Meyer (1994) : - She in her study "Hedges and Textual Communicative Function in Medical English Written Discourse" classified the hedges on the basis of their formal and functional use. The main types are: -

- Sheilds (modal verbs), plausibility shields and epistemic verbs.
- Approximators



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- c) Expressions
- d) Intensifiers
- e) Compound hedges.

2. Ken Hyland (1996) : - classified hedges into content-oriented and reader-oriented hedges. Content-oriented hedges are classified as accuracy-oriented and writer-oriented hedges. He classified accuracy-oriented hedges into attribute markers (agree, prefer, unfortunately, hopefully, appropriate, logical, remarkable, etc.) and reliability (modal auxiliaries, full verbs, modal adverbs, adjectives, and nouns as possible, might, perhaps).

3. Hinkel (1997): - A comprehensive taxonomy of hedges was given by Hinkel in 1997. Her taxonomy highlights the following types of hedges:

- (a) Epistemic Lexical Verbs such as believe, think, and assume.
- (b) Adjectives and Adverbs of Probability and Frequency: e.g., probable, likely, often, sometimes.
- (c) Introductory Phrases: statements of caution, for example it is possible that there is a chance that.
- (d) Questions: Used to introduce uncertainty (e.g., Could this be due to...?).
- (e) Quantifiers: Used for uncertainty in quantity (e.g., several, some, and many).

4. Varttala (2001)- Another taxonomy was given by T. Varttala. He provided the following categories of hedging:

- a) Nouns: probability, possibility, likelihood, potential, trend prediction, implication, proposal, argument hypothesis, assessment, assumption, belief, and estimates.
- b) Adjectives: - probable, likely, often.
- c) Full Verb - argue, predict, imply, suggest, propose, assume, speculate, think, believe, estimate, evaluate, tend, appear, seem, and look.
- d) Modal verbs - may, might, can, could, would, will, should.

Hedges are emerging components of linguistics and are classified differently by different authors.

Some common types of hedges identified in English language are

- 1) Modal Verbs
Examples: might, may, could, would
- 2) Adverbs of Probability
Examples: possibly, probably, likely
- 3) Adjectives of Probability
Examples: possible, probable, likely
- 4) Quantifiers
Examples: some, many, few
- 5) Expressions of Frequency
Examples: often, sometimes, usually
- 6) Cautious Phrases
Examples: it seems that, it appears that, it is possible that
- 7) Approximators
Examples: about, approximately, around
- 8) Clauses of Limitation
Examples: to some extent, in some cases, under certain conditions
- 9) Tentative Verbs
Examples: suggest, indicate, imply

Many authors around the world are writing and publishing their research articles or papers; each has the autonomy to select words or phrases that make the texts written differently. Lakoff (1973) states that the language used by women reflects their powerlessness, as their speech lacks confidence and shows uncertainty. Holmes (1986), found that men used hedges to convey uncertainty, while women used them to convey confidence, which is contradictory to what Lakoff stated in her article. The use of linguistic hedges, like other linguistic constructions by male and female authors, may reflect certain traits or behaviors to mark their identity. Therefore, it is interesting to investigate how male and female authors utilize

textual devices, such as hedges, to craft their content impactfully and engagingly. Understanding the language patterns and communication styles used by male and female authors can help shed light on gender disparities in this realm

2. Review of the Literature

Previous studies of many authors have highlighted the linguistic differences between male and female authors in using linguistic devices such as hedges. The articles of Applied Linguistics written by female authors were found to be more hedged than those written by male authors. Thus, hedging primarily denotes femininity (Bathaie and Ansarin 2011). In addition, Serholt (2012) investigated gender differences in the usage of hedges and boosters in the academic writing of advanced Swedish learners of English. The study revealed that male learners used more hedges than female learners in their academic writing, whereas female learners used more boosters than male learners. This suggests that female learners are more inclined to make commitments with more confidence than are male learners. However, the author also concluded that, there was no significant gender difference found in the study. Similarly, Mohamad and Sahib (2014), revealed that male speakers used more hedges than female speakers in TV debates titled Doha debates aired on BBC, implying that males are more flexible in their speeches than females. Furthermore, Mohajer and Jan (2015) revealed that men prefer to speak in a forceful manner and do not want to look foolish when they provide personal information or express uncertainty about something, for which they prefer to use hedges. Contrastingly, Rosanti and Jaelani (2016) in their study highlighted the differences in choosing lexical hedges by male and female students in English debates. This study showed that female students used more hedging words than did male students in the debate. Female students used hedges to give longer opinions, whereas male students gave brief opinions on the topic of the debate. Similarly, Rahadiyanti (2017) analysed the women language features in Tennessee William's paly called A Streetcar Named Desire and found that the dialogue of the main female characters used lexical hedges more frequently, reflecting lack of confidence. Also. Namaziandost and Shafiee (2018) contrasted how men and women utilize lexical hedges in academic spoken language and found that female respondents use more lexical hedges and provide longer opinions on debate themes, whereas men tend to give concise opinions on the same. These findings are also in line with those of Du (2021) who analyzed the frequency and distribution of hedges In BNC spoken texts and investigated how their usage varies with the gender of the speaker. The study revealed that females use hedges more frequently than male speakers. Ashcroft (2020) concluded that there were no differences in hedging frequencies based on the gender of participants. In the study by 66 applied linguistics, articles were analyzed to evaluate the assertions made by Lakoff in her article "Language and Women's Place." Contrary to the Lakoff assertions, the author found that hedges were more frequently used in articles written by males than in articles written by women. The study investigated significant gender differences in the use of hedges by consulting five different studies based on the hypothesis given by Lakoff in her article. The results of this study shows that there is no significant difference in hedge use between men and women. In some situations, women may use hedging words more frequently than men do, but not in others. However, Ajmal (2023) found that female native English writers utilized hedges more frequently than their male counterparts.

Many authors have studied the use of hedging in a variety of discourses, disciplines, and contexts, in which hedging is most common in linguistic and social texts. However, their utilization in texts from other disciplines such as engineering, medicine, and management has also been studied by several authors. Ignacio (2010) and Mur-Dueñas (2017) studied the use of modal verbs in a corpus of business management research articles. Elheky (2018) compared the frequency of hedging in social and business texts and found that the use of hedging words is more frequent in social articles than in business articles. It has been pointed out that despite being a scientific genre where authors are less doubtful about their findings, hedges are also used in the management discipline. While Several studies by many researchers have examined gender disparities in this realm, it seems that studies on using hedges by males and females in the context of management studies remain untouched. By

addressing this gap, our study seeks to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of gender equity by exploring the use of hedges by male and female authors in academia, particularly in management discourse. Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate how linguistic hedges are utilized by male and female authors in the academic publications of management studies in India.

3. Research Questions

- RQ1. What are the differences in the hedging frequencies used by male and female authors in management studies?
- RQ2. What percentage of male and female management studies authors use hedges?
- RQ3. What types of hedging words are preferred by male and female authors of the management discourse?
- RQ4. How do social factors influence the use of hedges by male and female management studies authors?

4. Methodology

This study uses a comprehensive corpus of text extracted from research papers written by Indian authors in the field of management studies. Total 40 papers were selected for this study from renowned Indian journals of management studies. 20 articles were written by female authors and 20 were written by male authors. The frequencies and patterns of hedging words used by male and female authors were examined and compared using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative approach involved the collection of statistical data for frequencies of hedging words, while a qualitative approach was used to explain the similarities and differences observed in the usage of hedging words by male and female authors of management studies. AntConc corpus analysis tool was used to determine the frequencies and concordance of hedging words used by male and female authors. Dominance theory by Spender (1980) served as the theoretical framework for this study.

Data Collection: - No data collection tool was used in this study. Forty academic papers were randomly selected by searching online for renowned Indian journals in management studies. A list of the selected papers is provided in Appendix I.

The research papers were segregated into two sets: one set of papers authored by men and another set of papers authored by women. The papers in each group were then converted into text format and combined section-wise (e.g., introduction of all papers combined into a single file). The text files were uploaded to the AntConc corpus tool for further analysis. All sections, except the methodology, were selected for the scanning of hedges. Since the methodology section is technical, it is assumed by the author that it may contain a negligible number of hedges or no hedges. Therefore, this section of each paper has been omitted from inclusion in the text corpus. Abstract, Introduction, Literature Review, Results and Discussion, and Conclusion sections were considered for scanning hedges. Although a software application was used for the analysis of the data, manual scanning and evaluation were sometimes performed when needed.

Hedges under consideration in this study are as follows: -

- 1) Modal verbs: - may, might, could, should, shall, can, and tend.
- 2) Adverbs: - probably, perhaps, possibly, likely, maybe, and rarely, obviously.
- 3) Adjectives: - probable, possible, likely.
- 4) Tentative Verbs: - suggest, indicate, imply, seem(s), appear(s), think, conclude/concluded, inferred.
- 5) Cautious Phrases: - it seems that, it appears that, it is possible that, I believe that.

5. Data Analysis and Discussion: -

The following hedging devices were examined using the AntConc. AntConc screenshots are presented below. It is not possible to include all the screenshots here, so few of them are included below. However, for detailed results, the tables given in Annexure-II can be accessed.

Modal verbs: - may, might, could, should, shall, can, tend.

This group consist of 'may', 'might', 'could', 'should', 'shall', 'can', and 'tend.' Each of these words was searched separately for both male and female authors. In the case of female authors, 255 concordance hits were found for selected modal verbs, of which 51 instances

were found to be out of context (non-hedged) by carefully checking the text manually. In the case of male authors, 431 concordance hits were found and 71 occurrences were found out of context. The modal verb 'can' was identified as being out of context in these instances. It was found that male authors in the field of management studies prefer to utilize more modal verbs for hedging purposes in their academic writing. Among them, 'may', 'should' and 'can' were preferred by both male and female authors. However, these modal verbs were used significantly more by male authors. These findings are consistent with those of Ajmal (2023) He suggested that males used the modal verb 'might' more than women, and hence showed doubtful and uncertain attitudes. Hassan (2019) found that the number of epistemic modals used by male politicians was greater than that of female politicians. These findings contradict the study of Namaziandost and Shafiee (2018), which indicated that females used more modal verbs than their male counterparts in discussions. Similarly, Ali and Shakir (2022) revealed that females used more modal verbs than male column writers.

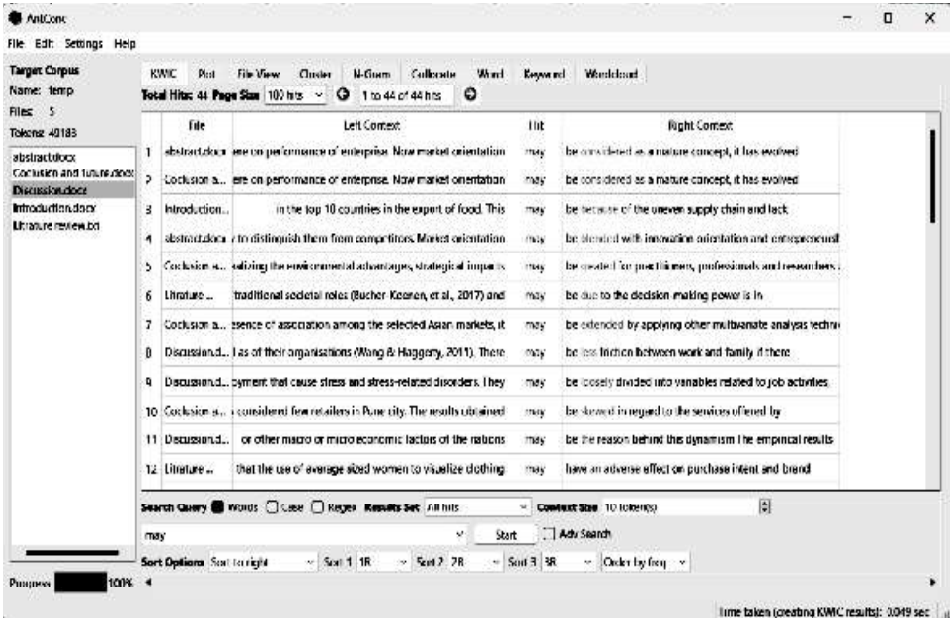


Figure 1. (a)
may' used by female
authors

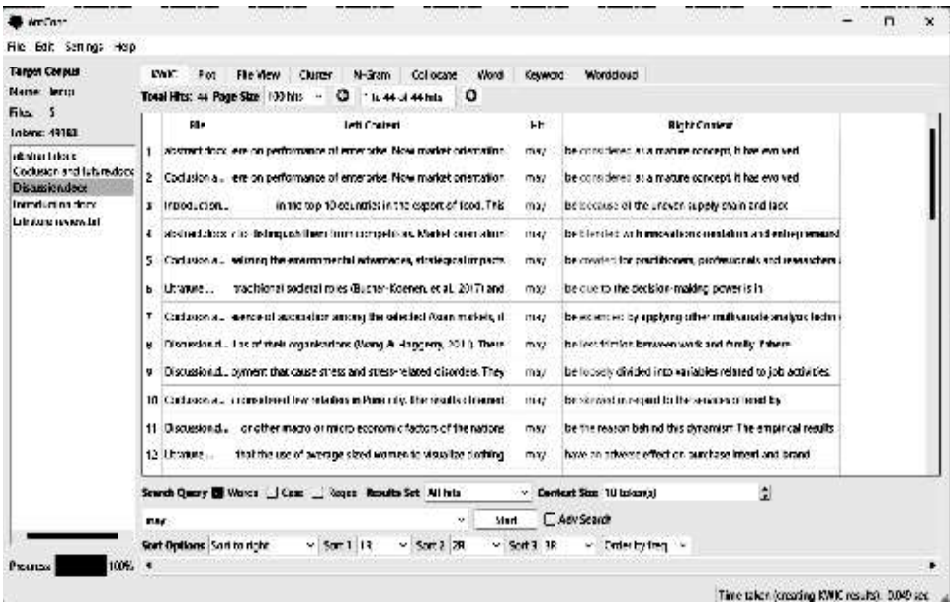
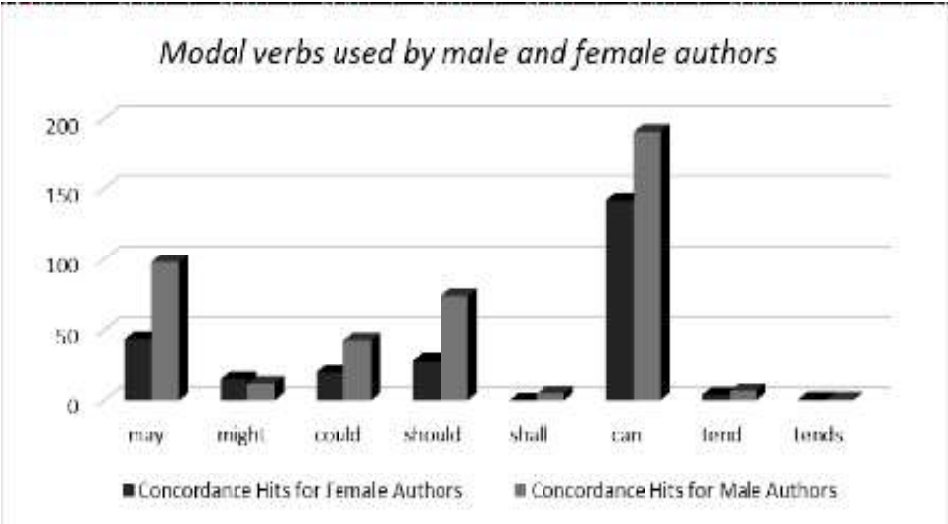


Figure 1. (b)
may' used by male authors

Figure 2.
Modal verbs used by the
authors



Adverbs: - probably, perhaps, possibly, likely, maybe, rarely, obviously

The second group of hedging words consists of adverbs. Each word of this group was searched in the corpus and found that most of the time adverb 'likely' was used by both male and female writers. However, male writers preceded female writers in utilizing 'likely' in their academic text. Also, the finding shows that male writers have used the word 'perhaps' which was not found in the text of female authors. The word perhaps represents possibility or uncertainty. Sometimes it may be used to prevent hesitation. This result shows that the male authors might used 'perhaps' to soften their statements and to avoid being more assertive. The study of Ali and Shakir (2022) is contradictory to these findings, as they suggested that female writers utilized more adverbs as hedges in their writings. Similarly, this study contradicts the findings of Ajmal (2023), suggesting that females used comparatively more adverbs like 'certainly' and 'perhaps' than males.

Figure 3. (a)
'likely' used by female
authors.



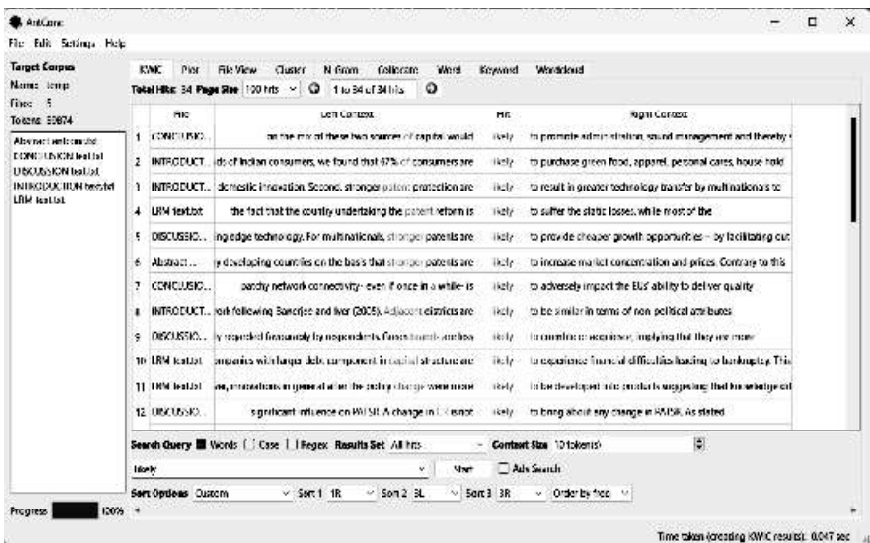


Figure 3. (b)
likely' used by male
authors.

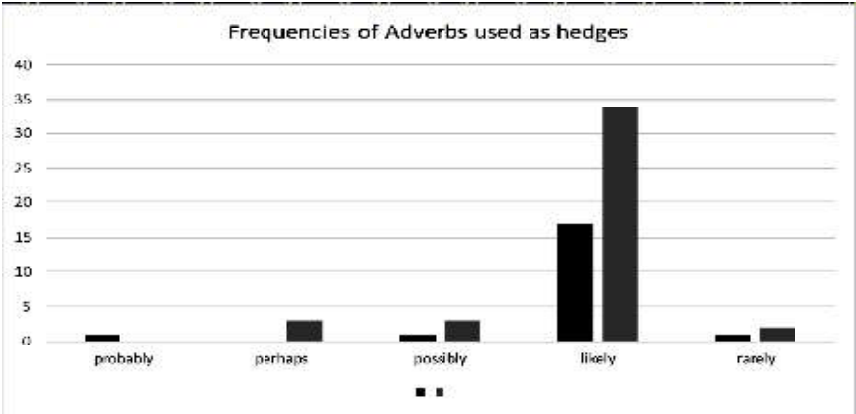


Figure 4.
Adverbs used by authors.

Adjectives: - probable, possible.

The third group of hedging words consisted of adjectives. Two adjectives that were under consideration for this study were 'probable', 'possible'. The analysis revealed no significant difference in the usage of adverbs by male and female authors. However, a notable distinction was shown by the result in the usage of the word 'probable'. Female authors used 'probable' in their writings, while no such inclination was observed in the selected text of the male authors.



Figure 5. (a)
'probable' and 'possible'
used by female authors.

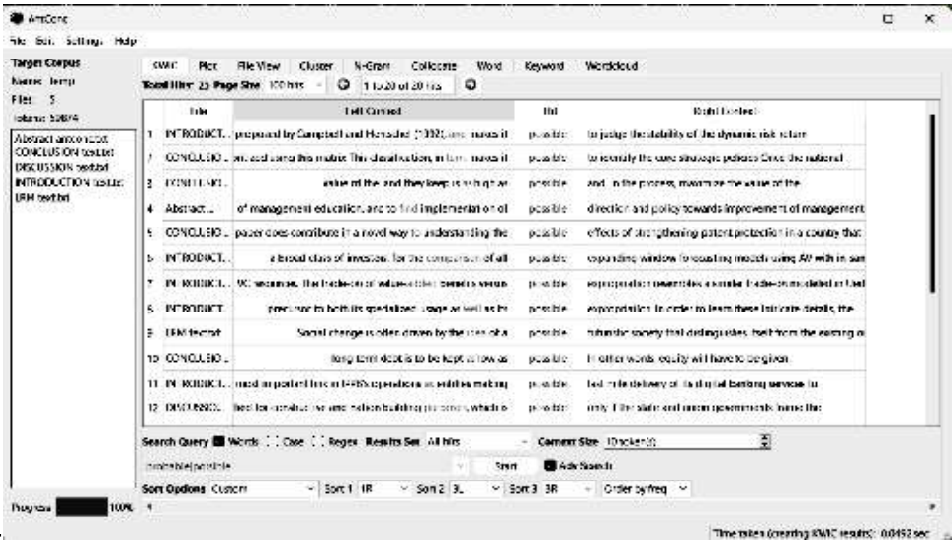


Figure 5. (b)
'probable' and 'possible'
used by male authors.

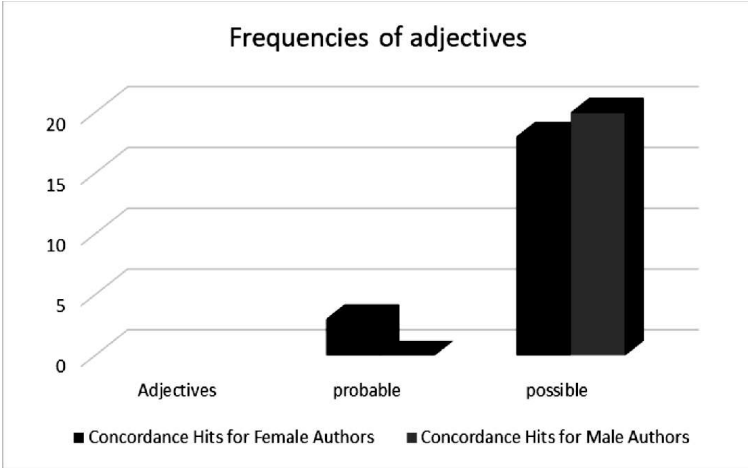


Figure 6.
'probable' and 'possible'
used by male and female
authors

Tentative Verbs: - suggest, indicate, imply, seem, appear, think, conclude/concluded, inferred. Analysis of this group of hedging words revealed that the female authors used more tentative verbs in their academic writings than male authors. The most frequent words in the female author's text were 'conclude' and 'concluded' (21 occurrences). However, male authors seem more inclined than female authors towards using 'appear' and 'seems' in their academic writings. This indicates that women prefer to keep their claims tentative and open to alternative explanations. They might use these words to be preventive in making an outright claim while keeping a tone of seriousness. These findings are different from the findings of Bathaie and Ansarin (2011), who suggested that female authors used significantly more tentative verbs than their male counterparts.

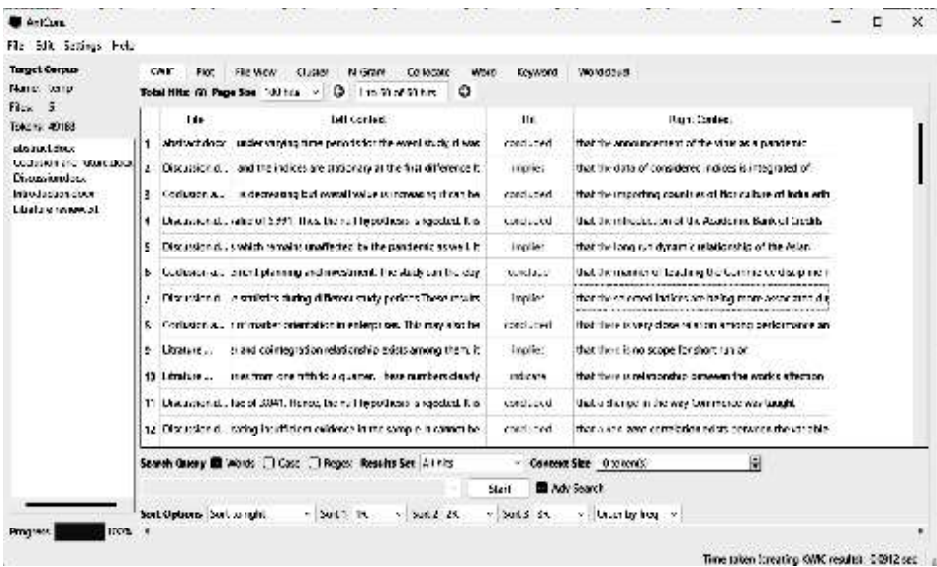


Figure 7. (a)
Tentative verbs used by
used by female authors.

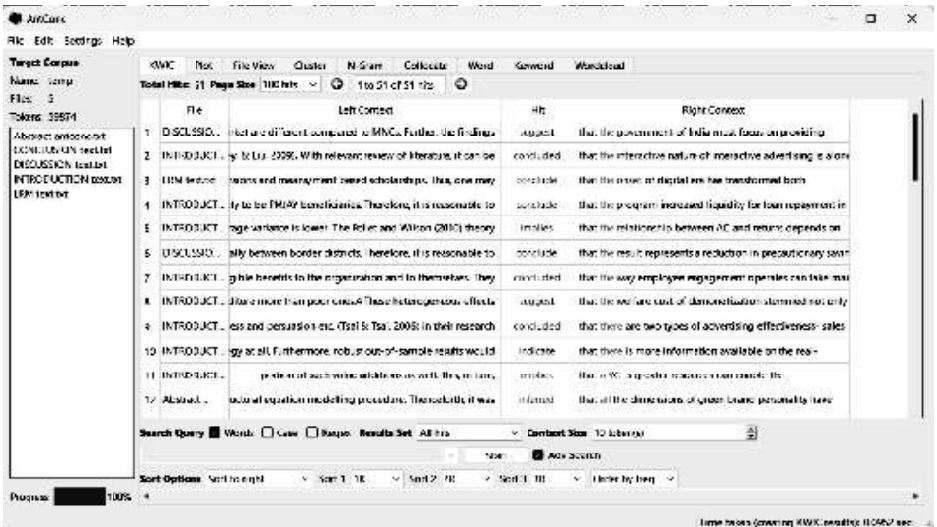


Figure 7. (b)
Tentative verbs used by
used by male authors.

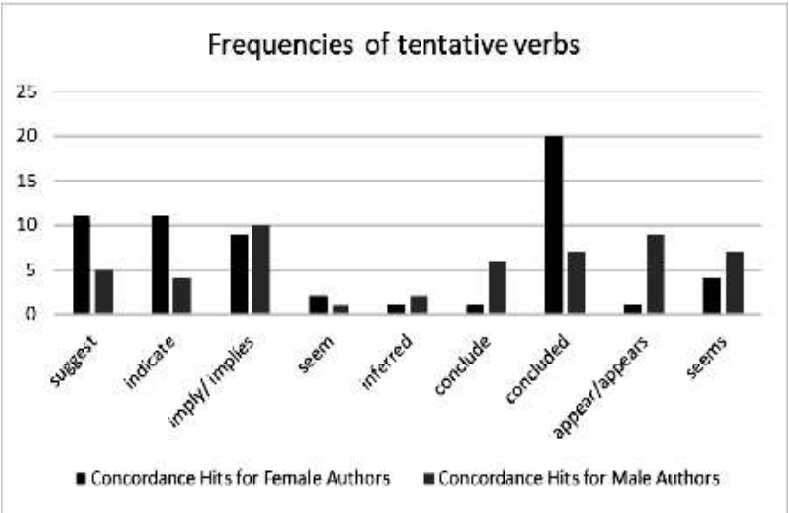


Figure 8.
Tentative verbs used by
used by male and female
authors.

Cautious Phrases: - it seems that, it appears that, it is possible that, I believe that.
The analysis of cautious phrases revealed that male authors used more cautious phrases (6 occurrences) than female authors (2 occurrences). The results also revealed an important difference: the phrases 'it is possible that' (2 instances) and 'it seems that' (1 instance) were used only by male authors.

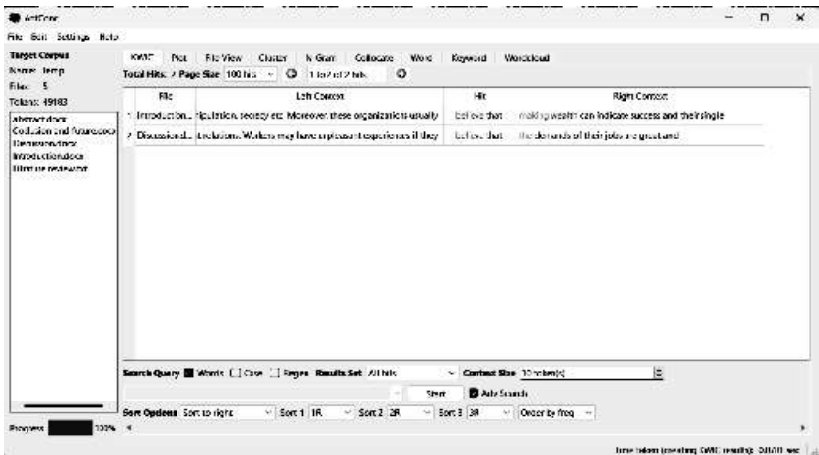


Figure 9. (a)
Cautious phrases used by
used by female authors

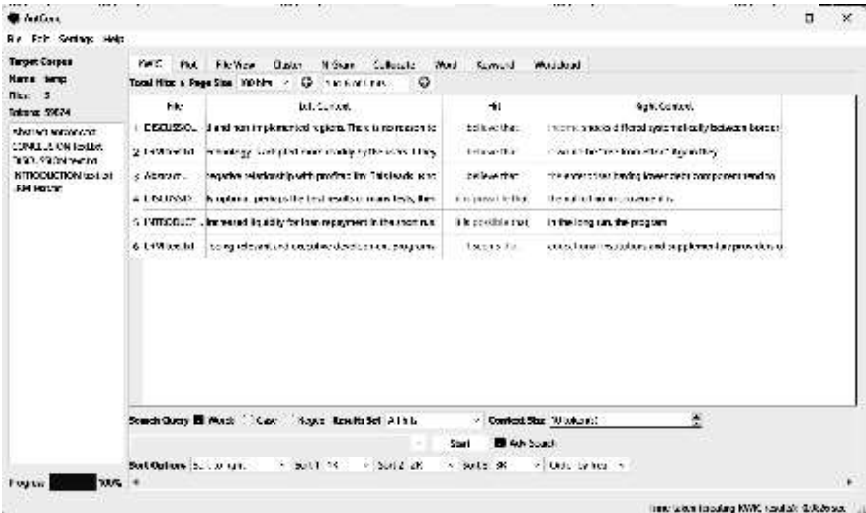
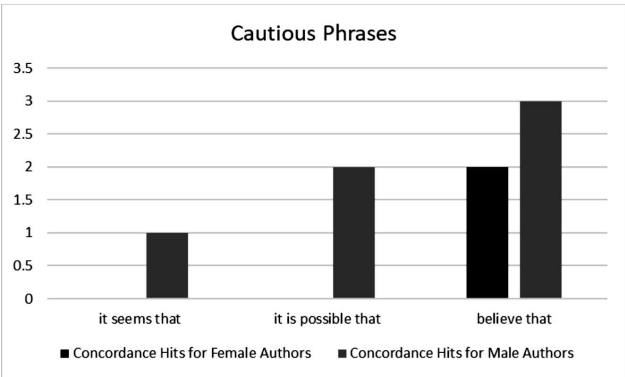


Figure 9. (b)
Cautious phrases used by
used by male authors.



Male authors use a total of 550 hedging devices, while female authors use 358, suggesting that male authors of management studies tend to use more hedges than women. Also, male authors used modal verbs significantly more than female authors. While the female authors showed moderate use of adjectives and tentative verbs. The analysis of cautious phrases showed distinct choices between male and female authors. The male authors used more cautious phrases than the female authors, indicating a more cautious approach to stating their claims. All these findings contradict Lakoff (1973) claim that women prefer to use hedging and other similar components like intensifiers, polite words, etc. because of their unequal status and powerlessness as compared to men. Serholt (2012) also supports our findings, as they suggested that male students were more inclined towards utilising hedges than their female counterparts. Although a study Mirzapour (2016) found no significant difference regarding the use of hedging devices among male and female authors of applied linguistics, Namaziandost and Shafiee (2018) found that female respondents used more hedging than male respondents, which contradicts the findings of this study. Similarly, the findings of Hassan (2019), suggesting females were more inclined to use frequent hedging strategies as compared to their male counterparts, are not in line with our study. However, Daryae Motlagh (2021) corroborates our findings by suggesting that men's articles were found to be more hedged than female writers.

6. Conclusion

The study aims to investigate how male and female authors utilise hedging strategies in academic writing in the field of management studies in India. The findings of this study revealed that male authors of management studies are more inclined towards utilising hedges in their writings as compared to female authors. The variations in the utilisation of hedging devices could reveal more complex inequalities in the writings of males and females. In management, decision-making is often uncertain. Male authors might have used modal verbs like 'may' and 'can' to unearth various outcomes. The evidence that female authors used more tentative verbs to express politeness and indirectness may be an indication of an inclination towards cultural implication generally expected from a female in an Indian setting. Also, a balanced use of adjectives like 'possible' and 'probable' by female authors may be an indication of a careful approach to risk dilution, which may be affected by social and cultural aspects. Therefore, we can conclude from the findings of the study that social aspects like politeness, assertiveness, and cautiousness may affect hedging strategies in the context of management studies in India. Female authors tend to use more cautious and tentative language, which reflects the cultural expectation of politeness and risk mitigation. Male authors used more modal verbs and balanced adjectives, indicating assertiveness and handling uncertainty and complexity in academic writing. The understanding of these differences and the nuance of hedging by male and female authors of Indian management studies can help in making academic writing in this field more inclusive and easier to understand by everyone.

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