# Politeness to ChatGPT costs millions but remains key to our humanity



As a child, I vividly recall my mother stressing the importance of manners, imparting simple yet profound lessons on the value of "please" and "thank you." These expressions were not merely social niceties; they formed the bedrock of respectful interaction. My routine was ingrained: upon leaving a friend's house, I would dutifully thank their parents for their hospitality. Yet, I was caught off guard once when a friend's mother, rather sharply, countered with, "I’m not your mother, I never had you." That moment was my first encounter with the nuances of the English language and the delicate balance of politeness, leaving me momentarily speechless.

Such exchanges highlight the critical role of language, not just in communication but in maintaining human connection. This habitual politeness, however, faces new scrutiny in an age increasingly dominated by artificial intelligence. Recent comments from OpenAI's CEO, Sam Altman, revealed a surprising twist: expressing politeness to AI systems, such as ChatGPT, incurs significant operational costs. Altman stated that responses to polite queries can lead to expenses amounting to "tens of millions of dollars," prompting discussions around sustainability and the ethical implications of using such technology.

Research supports this assertion, indicating that a single interaction with ChatGPT, particularly when courteous language is used, can burn as much energy as a light bulb consumes over a 20-minute period. This has broad implications, with the Electric Power Research Institute predicting that AI queries could consume ten times more electricity than traditional internet searches. Such figures raise critical questions about the environmental footprint of our digital interactions.

In an ironic twist, this cost of politeness could lead to ethical dilemmas. How do we reconcile our upbringing—steeped in civility and respect—with the harsh realities of energy consumption and environmental sustainability? Many users now grapple with the internal conflict of wanting to maintain kindness in their interactions while being aware of the potential costs associated with such behaviour. A survey from a British publishing company found that while a majority of users were less polite due to brevity, a surprising 12% modified their language because of concerns about AI's future implications.

However, not all is lost in the discourse surrounding this issue. When queried, ChatGPT reaffirmed the importance of politeness, clarifying that while longer, more courteous messages do increase energy usage, the difference is negligible. The AI emphasised the humanising aspect of kindness, suggesting that fostering politeness might ultimately prove beneficial, even in digital realms. Scott Z. Burns, a screenwriter noted for his reflections on human interaction with AI, echoed this sentiment by warning against "nastiness" in our dealings, asserting that kindness should serve as our "default setting," whether we are conversing with humans or machines.

It is essential to realise that this debate extends beyond mere etiquette; it touches upon our broader humanity. In an era where technology is designed to expedite communication and transactions, there remains a vital need for expressing appreciation and recognising our interdependence. The cheerful admonitions of our parents to be gracious hold deeper significance today. The environmental stakes may be higher now, but so too is the necessity of maintaining our humane qualities—qualities that machines cannot replicate.

As the world navigates the complexities of AI, we must reflect on the type of interactions we wish to cultivate. If the quest for efficiency leads us to abandon common decency, we risk losing a fundamental aspect of our humanity. Perhaps the effort it takes to say "please" and "thank you" is a small price to pay—not for the benefit of a chatbot, but for our own well-being and the essence of what makes us human. In this balance lies the true cost of our interactions, extending far beyond mere energy consumption.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://witness.co.za/opinion/2025/05/31/opinion-say-thank-you-please/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://www.tomshardware.com/tech-industry/artificial-intelligence/openai-spends-millions-to-process-polite-phrases-such-as-thank-you-and-please-with-chatgpt), [[5]](https://www.business-standard.com/technology/tech-news/saying-please-thank-you-adds-millions-in-openai-s-costs-sam-altman-125042000313_1.html), [[6]](https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/saying-thankyou-and-please-to-chatgpt-costing-openai-millions-of-dollars-says-sam-altman-8210245)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.laptopmag.com/ai/being-nice-to-chatgpt-environmental-cost), [[4]](https://www.axios.com/newsletters/axios-generate-c1c56aa0-1dc8-11ef-8757-c3a3f7a9ccc2)
* Paragraph 4 – [[7]](https://www.livemint.com/technology/tech-news/saying-thank-you-please-to-chatgpt-it-s-costing-openai-millions-of-dollars-says-sam-altman-11745084899074.html)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://witness.co.za/opinion/2025/05/31/opinion-say-thank-you-please/), [[2]](https://www.tomshardware.com/tech-industry/artificial-intelligence/openai-spends-millions-to-process-polite-phrases-such-as-thank-you-and-please-with-chatgpt), [[6]](https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/saying-thankyou-and-please-to-chatgpt-costing-openai-millions-of-dollars-says-sam-altman-8210245)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://witness.co.za/opinion/2025/05/31/opinion-say-thank-you-please/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.tomshardware.com/tech-industry/artificial-intelligence/openai-spends-millions-to-process-polite-phrases-such-as-thank-you-and-please-with-chatgpt> - This article discusses how OpenAI incurs significant costs due to users' polite interactions with ChatGPT. Each 'please' and 'thank you' adds to the computational load, leading to increased electricity usage. OpenAI CEO Sam Altman acknowledges these expenses, stating they amount to 'tens of millions of dollars well spent.' The piece highlights the balance between user experience and operational costs in AI development.
3. <https://www.laptopmag.com/ai/being-nice-to-chatgpt-environmental-cost> - The article examines the unintended environmental and financial consequences of using polite language with ChatGPT. Phrases like 'please' and 'thank you' increase the computational resources and energy required for AI responses. OpenAI CEO Sam Altman estimates these pleasantries could cost the company 'tens of millions of dollars,' raising questions about the environmental footprint of AI interactions. Experts suggest that while politeness may improve response quality, it also leads to higher energy consumption.
4. <https://www.axios.com/newsletters/axios-generate-c1c56aa0-1dc8-11ef-8757-c3a3f7a9ccc2> - This newsletter highlights the significant energy demands of data centers, particularly due to AI integration. Predictions by the Electric Power Research Institute (EPRI) indicate that AI queries like ChatGPT's consume ten times more electricity than traditional Google searches. The piece underscores the challenges of balancing energy consumption with the growing use of AI technologies, emphasizing the need for sustainable practices in data center operations.
5. <https://www.business-standard.com/technology/tech-news/saying-please-thank-you-adds-millions-in-openai-s-costs-sam-altman-125042000313_1.html> - OpenAI CEO Sam Altman reveals that user politeness, such as saying 'please' and 'thank you' to ChatGPT, contributes to millions of dollars in operational expenses. These polite phrases require ChatGPT to interpret and generate full responses, increasing computational load and energy consumption. The article discusses the balance between enhancing user experience and managing operational costs in AI systems.
6. <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/saying-thankyou-and-please-to-chatgpt-costing-openai-millions-of-dollars-says-sam-altman-8210245> - OpenAI CEO Sam Altman acknowledges that users' polite interactions with ChatGPT, such as saying 'please' and 'thank you,' are costing the company millions of dollars. These additional words increase the computational strain on the AI system, leading to higher operational expenses. The article explores the implications of politeness in AI interactions and the associated costs.
7. <https://www.livemint.com/technology/tech-news/saying-thank-you-please-to-chatgpt-it-s-costing-openai-millions-of-dollars-says-sam-altman-11745084899074.html> - The article discusses how OpenAI CEO Sam Altman revealed that users' polite language, such as 'please' and 'thank you,' is contributing to significant energy costs for the company. Each additional word increases processing power and electricity usage, leading to tens of millions of dollars in expenses. The piece delves into the balance between user experience and operational costs in AI development.