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A CULTURAL COMPARISON OF IMPOLITENESS STRATEGIES IN CHINESE AND ENGLISH ON TAOBAO AND AMAZON

This study investigates the underexplored influence of cultural differences on impoliteness strategies within negative online consumer reviews (OCRs). Conducting a comparative analysis of 300 low-rated reviews from Taobao (Chinese) and Amazon (English), the research examines how Chinese and English consumers strategically use language to express dissatisfaction. The findings reveal that while both groups exhibit a strong preference for direct, on-record impoliteness, qualitative differences in rhetorical style persist, reflecting deeper cultural-communicative norms. The study contributes to cross-cultural pragmatics and offers practical insights for managing global e-commerce communication by highlighting the interplay between genre conventions and cultural specificity in online discourse.

Keywords: pragmatics, impoliteness strategies, online consumer reviews, intercultural communication, e-commerce

1. Introduction

Impoliteness has become an increasingly common phenomenon in digital communication, particularly in the context of e-commerce. When consumers encounter unsatisfactory online shopping experiences, they often use impolite language in negative reviews, which can significantly impact brand reputation

and purchasing decisions (Culpeper et al. 2010). While substantial research exists on impoliteness strategies in OCRs, few studies have systematically examined how cultural differences specifically shape their manifestation across linguistic boundaries. The rapid development of e-commerce platforms has changed the way that consumers and businesses interact, as well as the way that consumers interact with each other. Consumers from different backgrounds adopt different expressions when leaving comments. Platforms like Taobao and Amazon allow customers to express their dissatisfaction through negative reviews, which often contain impoliteness strategies. There is growing evidence that cultural differences between Chinese and English-speaking consumers can significantly affect the way they use impoliteness strategies (Culpeper et al. 2010).

However, while there is a large literature on the use of impoliteness strategies embodied in negative OCRs, there is a lack of focused research on how cultural differences specifically influence the use of impoliteness strategies in OCRs. If this issue is not addressed, it could lead to multiple consequences. First, users from different cultural backgrounds may experience conflicts due to misunderstandings of impolite behavior, which could reduce their satisfaction and trust in the platform. Second, businesses may be unsuccessful to effectively address customer issues because they cannot correctly interpret the cultural perspectives in negative reviews, impacting their business decisions and sales performance. Research shows that if impolite behavior is not properly managed, it may also lead to user attrition and affect the long-term development of the platform.

Although existing research has focused on the impact of cultural differences on language communication, there are still many unknowns regarding the strategies of impoliteness. The impolite phenomenon in network communication has gradually become the new focus of scholars. Lorenzo-Dus et al. (2011) studied the impoliteness strategies used in YouTube comments. However, the study on impoliteness behavior in languages other than English and in bilingual contexts is still relatively lacking. Therefore, this paper chooses the negative consumer reviews of Amazon (American Edition) and Taobao (China Edition) as the research and analysis object, because Amazon and Taobao are the world's largest e-commerce platforms. Understanding these differences is essential for businesses to effectively manage customer feedback and strengthen cross-cultural communication strategies. Moreover, when comparing the use of impoliteness strategies to express dissatisfaction between Chinese consumers on Taobao and English-speaking consumers on Amazon, this gap is also quite evident.

To address this gap, the present study sought to answer the following research questions:

- 1) To what extent do Chinese and English consumers differ in the frequency of impoliteness strategies used in negative OCRs?

2) How do Chinese and English consumers differ in the pragmatic realization of these impoliteness strategies specifically and how is impoliteness linguistically and rhetorically framed across the two cultural contexts?

3) What role do genre conventions of OCRs play in shaping the use of impoliteness strategies, and how do these genre conventions interact with cultural norms?

By analyzing 300 reviews across parallel product categories and addressing these research questions, this study investigates how cultural communication patterns influence the realization of impoliteness, contributing to both cross-cultural pragmatics and e-commerce communication strategies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Impoliteness strategies

Impoliteness is defined as "a negative attitude toward specific behavior occurring in a specific context" (Culpeper 2011: 23) and involves deliberate face-threatening acts (Bousfield 2008). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), Negative consumer reviews can harm a supplier's positive reputation because the customer's need for acknowledgment is unmet. In certain cases, these reviews may also pose a threat to the supplier's reputation if the complainant demands compensation, thus restricting the supplier's ability to act freely. The impoliteness strategy involves attacking someone's face, which can result in social conflict and discord (Culpeper 2005).

The development of linguistic impoliteness strategy was intermittent and accelerated in the mid-1990s, and reached its climax in 2008 (Culpeper and Hardaker 2017). Researchers believe that all concepts of impoliteness involve at least one participant perceiving the behavior as emotionally negative. In addition to physical actions, verbal behaviors are also involved. The study of linguistic impoliteness covers a broader range of social situations and relationships. It primarily focuses on communicative behaviors, especially those where language is used entirely or primarily to achieve impoliteness. Examples include text messages, blogs, emails, Twitter, and other forms of digital media.

A number of scholars examined impoliteness in various contexts, such as daily communication, workplace, CMC communication, etc. Among them, many scholars have provided their own insights into the framework of the impoliteness model. Culpeper's model of impoliteness includes five super-strategies as follows: 1) Bald on-record Impoliteness, 2) Positive Impoliteness, 3) Negative Impoliteness, 4) Sarcasm or Mock Politeness, and 5) Withhold Politeness. Impoliteness strategy is the research focus of impoliteness theory. Bousfield (2006) proposed an impoliteness model consisting of five strategies: open impolite,

positive impolite, negative impolite, informal impolite and concealed impolite. Later, Kienpointner (2008) improved Bousfield's theory and divided impoliteness strategies into On-record impoliteness and Off-record impoliteness.

2.2. Impoliteness research in OCRs in CMC (Computer-mediated communication) contexts

OCR is a common research topic, especially in cross-cultural studies. For example, Chen (2023) concluded through a survey of online store representatives on Taobao, one of China's largest e-commerce platforms, that on this particular platform, the use of impoliteness strategies provides e-store representatives with an opportunity to renegotiate their image and reconstruct customer perceptions in response to critical comments. Lai's (2019) study, by analyzing the expression of impoliteness in English and Chinese of negative online reviews in the catering industry, found that English reviewers tended to use mixed forms of approval and criticism, as well as "staff oriented" sharp complaints, while Chinese reviewers used more indignant exclamations and "staff oriented" sharp complaints.

Although some studies have analyzed impolite strategies for OCR comparability, the number is still insufficient (Feng and Ren 2020). Existing research on OCRs primarily focuses on English. Many researchers have called for more studies on a wider variety of languages in order to better understand the linguistic features and the localization of social practices within this genre. In addition, Taobao and Amazon are the e-commerce platforms chosen by more consumers for online shopping.

2.3. Cultural differences in communication

Culture has multiple definitions. Culture includes patterned ways of thinking, feeling, and reacting, primarily acquired and transmitted through symbols, and constitutes the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts. Culture for a human group is like personality for an individual. Personality is defined by Guilford (1959) as "the total interaction of the personal characteristics that influence an individual's response to the environment." Culture can be defined as the total interaction of shared characteristics that influence a human group's response to the environment. Culture determines the identity of a human group, just as personality determines the identity of an individual. Previous research has shown that politeness and impoliteness are influenced by multiple factors, such as culture and gender (Mills and Kadar 2011).

The work of Spencer-Oatey (2008) introduces the importance of relationship management and the variability of facial sensitivity across cultures. Studies

focusing on the comparison between East and West, such as Gu's (1990) study on Chinese politeness, emphasize that politeness plays a normative role in restricting the order of conversation and communication of individual speech behaviors in the Chinese context. Politeness is a phenomenon belonging to the social level, which supports the normative constraints of each of its individuals.

Cross-cultural studies of language often focus on differences in how politeness and incivility are perceived and enforced in different societies. Edward Hall (1976, 2000) proposed a popular cultural framework in which he suggested that all cultures can be positioned relative to one another based on their communication styles. In some cultures, such as those of Scandinavians, Germans, and Swiss, communication primarily occurs through explicit statements in texts and speech, and thus these cultures are categorized as low-context cultures. In other cultures, such as Japan and China, communication includes additional cues like body language and the use of silence. These dimensions are crucial to understanding why different impoliteness strategies may be employed in Chinese and English OCRs.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection procedure

This study adopted a stratified random sampling method to construct a comparable and representative corpus of negative OCRs. Data were collected from two analogous platforms which were Taobao (for Chinese) and Amazon.com (for English) for ensuring cross-cultural comparability. The corpus was categorized to three key volume, standardized product categories to regulate for variability in consumer expectations namely electronics, clothing, and personal care. For sampling procedure, all reviews were acquired within a defined period of time frame of the comments which was from 1st January 2023 until 30th June 2023. While for product identification on each platform, the search function was employed with neutral keywords namely 'USB-C cable', 'cotton t-shirt', and 'facial moisturizer'. The results were then sorted by 'Best Sellers' or 'Bestselling' in identifying the most popular items, allowing the reviews to illustrate common consumer experiences. The reviews which were ten most recent 1-star and 2-star reviews were selected from the product page of the top five best-selling items in each category which resulted in a total of 150 reviews per language were collected (5 products x 3 categories x 10 reviews). All the data were then filtered and omitted in the sense of the relevancy like irrelevant to the product namely commenting (only on shipping speed), insufficient linguistic data (less than five words long), and written by verified users who received the product through a free promotion (can be biased sentiment). The final balanced corpus eventually

consisted of 300 reviews, which 150 in Chinese and 150 in English. Those data were then fairly distributed across the three product categories. All Chinese data was analysed in its original language; examples were translated post-analysis solely for presentation with careful attention to preserving pragmatic force.

3.2. Data analysis

The data analysis proceeded in two phases: (1) a quantitative coding phase to identify and classify impoliteness strategies, and (2) a qualitative discourse analysis phase to interpret the pragmatic functions and cultural resonances of these strategies. A critical methodological decision regarding the unit of analysis was made prior to both phases.

3.2.1. Unit of analysis and coding protocol

A fundamental consideration in (im)politeness research is the specification of the unit of analysis, as this directly affects frequency counts and the interpretability of quantitative findings (Bousfield 2008; Culpeper 2011). OCRs vary considerably in length and complexity, ranging from single-sentence expressions of dissatisfaction to multi-paragraph narratives containing multiple distinct impoliteness acts. Therefore, a consistent and transparent unit of analysis is essential for reliable coding and meaningful cross-cultural comparison. This study adopted the **speech act** as the primary unit of analysis. Following the framework of Culpeper (2011), a speech act was operationalized as a unit of communicative meaning that performs a specific pragmatic function namely accusing, threatening, warning, insulting, or ridiculing toward a target (the seller, product, or service). Practically, a single speech act could span from a single clause to multiple sentences, provided that the utterance collectively realizes a single coherent pragmatic intention. The identification of speech act boundaries was guided by shifts in pragmatic function which is a transition from product criticism to a threat, for example, was treated as marking a new speech act unit. The coding protocol for handling reviews of varying lengths and complexity was operationalized as follows:

- a) **Single-strategy reviews**: Reviews containing only one identifiable impoliteness speech act contributed **one count** to the total frequency column for that strategy type.
- b) **Multi-strategy reviews**: Reviews containing two or more distinct impoliteness speech acts contributed **multiple counts** which was one count for each identifiable speech act to the respective strategy categories.
- c) **Co-occurring strategies**: In cases where strategies overlapped or were embedded within one another namely sarcasm used within a threat, the

dominant pragmatic function determined the primary classification, with secondary strategies noted in the coding commentary for qualitative reference but not double-counted.

Illustrative example of multi-strategy coding:

"This product is absolute garbage. The seller clearly doesn't care about customers. I will never buy from this store again unless I get a refund"

This review contains three distinct impoliteness speech acts namely product insult, accusation of seller negligence and conditional threat. The phrases "this product is absolute garbage" and "the seller clearly doesn't care about customers" were coded as positive impoliteness, while "I will never buy from this store again unless I get a refund" was coded as negative impoliteness.

Therefore, this single review would contribute two counts to positive impoliteness and one count to negative impoliteness, reflecting the multi-functional nature of the complaint. Because individual reviews may contain multiple impoliteness speech acts, the total frequency of strategies (summed across all categories) will naturally exceed the number of reviews in the corpus. This discrepancy is not an error but a meaningful empirical observation: it indicates the degree of *impoliteness density* within the corpus and reflects the prevalence of multi-strategy reviews wherein reviewers employ multiple impoliteness strategies to intensify dissatisfaction or achieve multiple pragmatic goals. To ensure coding consistency, both coders underwent training in identifying speech act boundaries using pragmatic criteria. A coding guide was developed with explicit decision rules, including illustrative examples of single-strategy, multi-strategy, and borderline cases. Coders were instructed to err toward splitting rather than lumping when pragmatic boundaries were ambiguous, as this approach yields more granular data and reduces the risk of conflating distinct pragmatic functions.

3.2.2 Establishing coding reliability

In Phase I, two trained coders with high fluency in pragmatics and near-native proficiency in the respective languages independently coded the entire dataset. For inter-coder reliability reinforcement, a double-blind coding of a 20% randomized subset (60 reviews) was conducted. Agreement was measured adopting Cohen's Kappa (κ), which yielded a score of $\kappa = 0.85$, demonstrating high agreement beyond chance (Landis and Koch 1977). All differences were resolved through discussion, leading to a revised coding guide that was then applied to the full corpus.

Subsequently, shifting beyond frequency accounts, in Phase II, this study adopted a qualitative discourse analysis (Androutsopoulos 2008) to interpret the pragmatic function and cultural resonance of the strategies. This comprised examining how impoliteness was linguistically realized, its interactional goals, and how it reflected or contested broader cultural communication norms.

Impoliteness in OCRs	Working Definitions
On-record impoliteness <i>Positive impoliteness</i>	Reviews that conducted impoliteness straightforwardly, threatening the online retailers' positive or negative face directly. a. Reviews that questioned the authenticity and quality of the purchased products; b. Reviews that blamed the products, services, after-sales or logistics directly; c. Reviews that used taboo words.
<i>Negative impoliteness</i>	a. Reviews that threatened or expressed feelings such as disappointment, anger, annoyance b. Reviews that requested for further services, questioned the business, or made orders.
Off-record impoliteness <i>Implicated impoliteness</i>	Reviews that conducted impoliteness implicitly, through the implicature of the negative OCR. a. Reviews that advised for cautious purchase of potential customers; b. Reviews that showed doubts and unsolved problems; c. Reviews that blamed the products, services, after-sales or logistics indirectly; d. Reviews that compared the purchased product or service with those sold elsewhere.
<i>Sarcasm</i>	a. Reviews that made unfriendly or unkind joke about the purchased products in form of remarks or rhetorical questions; b. Reviews that appeared to be appropriate on the surface, but were meant to be taken as face-attack and critical in terms of face-management.

Ethical consideration

This study adhered to established ethical guidelines for research involving publicly available online data (Markham and Buchanan 2012; Franzke et al. 2020). All data collected were derived from publicly accessible consumer reviews on Taobao and Amazon. Because the reviews are publicly available and do not involve interaction with human subjects, formal institutional review board approval was not required. Nevertheless, the following ethical safeguards were implemented to protect user privacy and ensure responsible data use.

Data source and accessibility. All reviews included in this study were publicly available on the Taobao and Amazon platforms at the time of data collection (January 1, 2023, to June 30, 2023). No login credentials or special access privileges were required to view these reviews. The study did not involve any direct interaction with reviewers or platform users.

Anonymization and privacy protection. To safeguard user privacy, no personally identifiable information was collected or stored. Username, profile names, and any other direct identifiers were excluded from the dataset. There were no attempts made to contact reviewers or trace their identities, unless the textual content of reviews was retained for analysis. While in the presentation of findings, reviews are cited without any identifying information, ensuring that individual reviewers cannot be identified.

Data usage and purpose limitation. The collected data were used exclusively for academic research purposes related to cross-cultural pragmatics and impoliteness strategies in online consumer reviews. The data were not used for commercial purposes, nor were they shared with third parties. All data were stored securely and accessible only to the research team.

Compliance with platform policies. The data collection procedures were designed to comply with the respective platforms' terms of service and data usage

policies. Only publicly accessible content was collected, and no automated scraping tools or methods that violated platform restrictions were employed. The study's data collection involved manual retrieval of reviews in accordance with standard academic practices for publicly available online data.

Data integrity and transparency. In addition to privacy safeguards, the study ensured data integrity by excluding irrelevant or invalid comments (e.g. reviews commenting only on shipping speed, reviews with insufficient linguistic data). The content of the reviews was not modified except for necessary translations of Chinese comments into English for presentation purposes; translations were conducted with careful attention to preserving pragmatic force.

By implementing these measures, the study sought to balance the objectives of empirical research with the ethical responsibilities of respecting user privacy and adhering to platform norms.

4. Results and Finding

4.1. Impoliteness in Chinese vs. English OCRs

Because individual reviews may employ more than one impoliteness strategy, the total frequency of strategies (172 for Chinese, 161 for English) exceeds the number of reviews. Percentages in Table 2 are calculated based on the total strategy count per language, ensuring that subcategory percentages sum to 100% within each column.

The most significant finding of this study is not a difference, but a striking similarity. As depicted in Table 2, the distribution of impoliteness strategies between Chinese and English reviews is nearly identical, with a strong preference for **on-record impoliteness** in both corpora (Chinese: 62.21%; English: 62.11%). This quantitative parallel depicts a theoretical challenge to determinis-

Table 2: Impoliteness strategies across Chinese vs. English

Language	Chinese(n =150)		English (n = 150)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Impoliteness Strategies				
On-record impoliteness	107	62.21%	100	62.11%
Positive impoliteness	88	51.16%	79	49.07%
Negative impoliteness	19	11.05%	21	13.04%
Off-record impoliteness	65	37.79%	61	37.89%
Implicated impoliteness	60	34.88%	54	33.54%
Sarcasm	5	2.91%	7	4.35%
Total	172		161	

tic models of cross-cultural communication. It suggests that the context of the online review genre itself imposes a powerful, homogenizing effect. The main *pragmatic functions* of a negative OCR were to issue a firm warning, require for refinement, and perform dissatisfaction for a public audience which basically privilege directness and clarity. In the form of anonymous followed by non-relationship-based setting, the efficiency of bald-on-record impoliteness outweighs the normative cultural preference for indirectness that might govern face-to-face interactions. This finding is parallel to the concept of context collapse (Kini et al. 2022) and online disinhibition (Meriläinen and Ruotsalainen 2024), where the specific affordances of the digital platform including anonymity, asynchronicity, and the public nature of reviews can temporarily suspend or reshape default communicative norms. These platform-specific factors complicate any straightforward application of cultural frameworks derived from face-to-face interaction.

While the strategic choice is quantitatively similar, a qualitative analysis reveals that the linguistic realization and pragmatic framing of these strategies are shaped by culturally influenced communicative preferences though importantly, these preferences function as tendencies instead of deterministic patterns. The cultural divergence, hence, lies not in whether to be impolite, but in how to be effectively and meaningfully impolite within one's cultural framework, as mediated by the specific context of the OCR genre. Both groups frequently adopt positive impoliteness, but the nature of the attack differs in ways that reflect broader communicative tendencies.

In the Chinese OCRs, this strategy often functions as a communal sanction. This can be seen when the reviewer acts as a guardian of the collective, leveraging shared values to amplify the face-attack. This pattern aligns with tendencies toward collectivist orientation, though it is not a universal or invariant feature of all Chinese reviewers. *Example 2*: "大家不要买 · 超级不好用 · 谁买谁后悔" ("Everyone, don't buy this; it's super unusable, whoever buys it will regret it"). By analyzing pragmatically, the adoption of "大家" (everyone) and the generic warning "谁买谁后悔" frames the serious complaint of public service announcement instead of solely on personal grievance. The impoliteness is amplified by invoking collective solidarity against the seller.

Example 2A: "兄弟姐妹们听我一句劝，这家店的东西千万别买！我买了三件，一件都没法穿，料子差得要命，洗一次就缩水变形。这不是坑人吗？大家擦亮眼睛，别像我一样上当受骗！" ("Brothers and sisters, listen to my advice. Don't ever buy from this store! I bought three items, not one of them is wearable. The fabric is terrible; it shrank and deformed after just one wash. Isn't this a scam? Everyone, keep your eyes open, don't be fooled like I was!"). Here, the address "兄弟姐妹们" (brothers and sisters) invokes familial solidarity, framing the reviewer as a protective elder warning kin against harm. The rhetorical question "这不是坑人吗？" (Isn't this a scam?) invites shared moral judgment

rather than simply reporting individual grievance. The impoliteness is not directed at the seller in isolation but is amplified through the construction of an imagined community of consumers whose welfare the reviewer champions.

Example 2B: "各位买家注意了！这家店卖假货还不承认，客服态度极其恶劣。我已经投诉到平台了，希望大家一起抵制这种无良商家！不能让这种人继续坑害消费者！" ("Attention all buyers! This store sells fake products and won't admit it. The customer service attitude is extremely poor. I've already reported them to the platform. I hope everyone will join together to boycott these unscrupulous merchants! We cannot let such people continue to harm consumers!").

This example demonstrates collective warning through explicit calls to collective action. The phrase "无良商家" (unscrupulous merchants) invokes a moral category that positions the seller as violating communal ethical standards. The call to "一起抵制" (join together to boycott) transforms individual dissatisfaction into a collective movement, weaponizing collective identity to amplify the face-attack.

In English OCRs, forensic and individualistic accusation more prevalently reflects positive impoliteness. The reviewer builds a case based on personal observation and evidence. It can be seen in Example 4 where the utterance "the first sign was the misplaced label.... The product did not have a seal, only a sticker illustrating the product was new. By analyzing pragmatically, through a meticulous approach and evidence-based destruction of the seller's credibility can attain impoliteness. The strong influence of the complaint derives from its logical coherence and the presentation of factual and observable details. This aligns with low-context, individualistic norms that value personal autonomy and persuade through reasoned argument and objective proof.

The finding of directness in Chinese reviews may appear counter-intuitive given the frequent characterization of Chinese communication as high-context (Hall 1976) and oriented toward indirectness (Gu 1990). However, rather than viewing this as a contradiction, it can be understood through the concept of contextual salience. In the context of OCRs, the primary objective is not to maintain interpersonal harmony (*rapport-management*) but to publicize a breach of trust and warn other consumers. The cultural script shifts from 'maintaining face' to 'rectifying a wrong' and 'asserting consumer rights.' The directness observed is therefore not a rejection of cultural norms but an adaptation of them to a specific genre context. The reviewer employs culturally potent, collective-oriented directness to achieve a contextually appropriate goal. This illustrates that culture does not prescribe fixed communicative behaviors but rather provides a repertoire of resources that individuals strategically deploy according to context.

4.2. Analysis of individual impoliteness strategies

Positive impoliteness targets the addressee's positive face namely the desire to be liked, respected, and socially validated. When taboo language or insults are directed at the product, quality, or identity of the seller such as calling a product "garbage" or questioning the seller's honesty, these are classified as positive impoliteness because they attack the seller's reputation and social standing. In contrast, negative impoliteness targets the addressee's negative face namely the desire for autonomy, freedom from imposition, and freedom of action. When taboo language or insults are used to express anger that demands action, threatens consequences, or restricts the seller's operational freedom such as *"I will never buy from this company again unless they change"*, these are classified as negative impoliteness. The presence of taboo words may intensify the emotional force, but the classification hinges on whether the primary pragmatic function is to attack the seller's reputation (positive impoliteness) or to impose upon the seller's autonomy (negative impoliteness).

This distinction is summarized in Table 3 below.

4.2.1. Positive impoliteness

As one of the most common impoliteness strategies in negative OCRs, positive impoliteness strategy mainly involves questioning the authenticity and quality of the purchased product, such as concerns about the product's genuine-

Table 3: The difference between positive and negative impoliteness

Impoliteness Type	Pragmatic Target	Definition	Linguistic Indicators	Example
Positive Impoliteness	Positive face (reputation, social standing, identity)	Attacks the seller's credibility, product quality, or social image	– Direct product insults (e.g. "garbage," "trash") – Accusations of dishonesty (e.g. "fake," "scam") – Ridicule of seller competence	"这纸谁买谁后悔 · 假的假的" (<i>"Anyone who buys this paper will regret it; it's fake, it's fake"</i>) attacks product authenticity and seller credibility
Negative Impoliteness	Negative face (autonomy, freedom from imposition)	Threatens the seller's operational freedom; demands action; imposes restrictions	– Purchase withdrawal threats (e.g. "never buy again") – Conditional ultimatums (e.g. "unless you...") – Expressions of anger that demand redress	<i>"I am never ever buying from this company again unless they decide to start caring more about living creatures"</i> restricts seller's future autonomy through conditional threat

ness. Additionally, consumers directly accuse the product, service, logistics, or after-sales service, which also falls under the use of positive impoliteness strategies. The use of taboo words such as 'garbage' or 'trash' can appear in both positive and negative impoliteness, depending on the pragmatic target. When such terms attack the product quality or seller credibility, they function as positive impoliteness; when they intensify demands or threats that restrict seller autonomy, they function as negative impoliteness (see Table 3 above for the classification framework). Examples 1 to 4 illustrate how positive impoliteness works in the Chinese and English OCRs.

Example 1: 使用效果非常差, 遇水都化成纸屑了, 没办法擦手, 第一次买到感觉像假冒伪劣的产品。非常不好用。

Translation: The use effect is very poor. It disintegrates into paper scraps when it gets wet, making it impossible to wipe hands. First time buying, and it feels like a fake, counterfeit product. Very unusable.

Example 2: 这纸抽都抽不出来, 说三层的跟人家一层的差不多厚, 这纸谁买谁后悔, 假的假的。大家不要买, 超级不好用, 谁买谁后悔...□纸超薄, 还抽不出来, 都粘在袋子上 很不好用, 假清风

Translation: You can't even pull the tissues out. They claim it's 3-ply, but it's about as thick as 1-ply. Anyone who buys this will regret it. It's fake, it's fake. Don't buy; it's super unusable, and anyone who buys it will regret it. Super thin, and you can't pull it out; it sticks to the bag. Very bad to use. Fake Qingfeng.

Example 3: I never write reviews but this needs to be said. This is fake Keihl's. The instant I put this on my face my face burned and stung horribly. My eyes watered and stung until I washed it off. This is a dangerous product so be cautious.

Example 4: Do not buy this product! It is fake! The first sign was the misplaced label, which was placed so low that it curled at the bottom. The product did not have a seal, only a sticker indicating the product was "new". I opened the product to compare it to my original Kiehls and the seal was broken. DO NOT BUY!

In Example 1, the consumer repeatedly mentions poor performance and difficulty of use, which reflects positive impoliteness. In addition, the example also highlights specific details, such as pointing out that the product is a counterfeit, as the paper turned into scraps when it came into contact with water. This directly calls attention to the poor quality of the product.

In Example 2, the consumer questions the authenticity of the product, stating twice that the product is fake. Additionally, the author directly criticizes the product by stating that the tissue cannot be pulled out, it's inconvenient to use, and that anyone who buys it will regret it. This is a direct accusation of the product.

In Example 3, the consumer claims that using the product caused a painful burning sensation on their face, but after washing it off, everything was fine. This leads them to directly state that the product is fake. By accusing the product of being fake, the consumer is directly attacking the product's credibility, which

also threatens the reputation of the seller. Therefore, Example 3 also falls under positive impoliteness.

In Example 4, the consumer directly points out that the product is fake and provides specific details. They note that the product lacks a seal and the label is placed incorrectly, further supporting the claim of it being counterfeit.

As demonstrated in Examples 1-4, in the anonymous CMC (Computer-Mediated Communication) environment of OCRs, reviewers use a variety of expressions to convey their dissatisfaction. By highlighting the poor quality of the purchased products and questioning their authenticity, they attack the quality and reputation of retailers on platforms like Taobao and Amazon. Moreover, when looking at the frequency of strategies, positive impoliteness strategies account for the largest proportion among all impoliteness strategies, making them the most common in OCRs. Browsing through unpleasant real user experiences and explicit recommendations not to buy can have a significant impact on potential customers, influencing their purchasing decisions.

It should be noted that while taboo words such as 'garbage' or 'disgusting' may appear in these examples, their classification as positive impoliteness is determined by their pragmatic target: they attack the product's quality and, by extension, the seller's reputation. The same taboo words, if used to intensify a threat or demand that restricts the seller's autonomy, would be classified as negative impoliteness (see Section 4.2.3.).

4.2.2. *Implicated impoliteness*

Implicated impoliteness refers to face-threatening acts that are conveyed indirectly, rather than through direct attacks on someone's face. Implicated impoliteness often involves indirect criticism of the product, after-sales service, or logistics. It is the second most common type of impoliteness strategy among all impoliteness strategies. Examples 5-8 demonstrate how implicated impoliteness is reflected in both Chinese and English negative OCRs.

Example 5: 看上成分才买的, 但有股油漆味, 假滑

Translation: Purchased for ingredients, but smells like paint and feels greasy.

Example 6: 买过很多次了, 这次的新包装味道跟之前一点也不一样, 想一股发霉的味道, 打出的泡沫也没有之前的多, 很水

Translation: Bought multiple times, but the new packaging smells not the same as before, like a musty taste and has less foam than before.

Example 7: Package was thrown and damaged. The product leaked through the box it's leaked all over the concrete

Example 8: I've never had acne issues before. Just stubborn chin blackheads so I figured it was time to switch it up. This review is long overdue and late so I have scars now rather than pimples. I saw this brand had great reviews and it worked for a lot of people so I was thinking I'd try it. This made my face

breakout so much. It's 5 months later and my scars are still very prominent. Hoping they heal soon with my new skin care brand that has been working so far. In the pictures are both my cheeks.

In Example 5, the reviewer points out that the product has a paint-like smell and feels slippery, which clearly indicates dissatisfaction with the product. However, the reviewer does not directly say that the product is bad or that they dislike it. By highlighting certain quality issues, the reviewer indirectly criticizes the product, which is an implicit form of impoliteness.

In Example 6, the consumer mentions that the packaging of the product is different from the previous ones. In addition, the consumer points out that the product has a moldy smell and that the foam produced is less than before. Clearly, the consumer is implying doubts about the product's authenticity. However, the consumer does not explicitly state that the product is counterfeit; instead, they use phrases like "different from before" and "less foam" along with the mention of a moldy smell. These clues suggest that the consumer is indirectly criticizing the product's quality and expressing doubts about its authenticity.

In Example 7, the review mentions that the packaging was damaged and the product leaked, which indirectly suggests a quality issue with the product. However, the reviewer does not directly attack the seller's reputation or claim that the product is of poor quality, making this an example of implicated impoliteness. Similarly, in Example 8, the consumer states that her face has scars and was severely damaged after using the product. However, the reviewer does not directly assert that the product is bad or has quality problems. They only express their personal experience after using the product without directly attacking the seller's face.

In conclusion, as demonstrated by these examples, implicated impoliteness strategies in negative OCRs can be realized in various ways. For example, they can be expressed through indirect criticism of the product, after-sales service, logistics, or customer service. Implicit reminders not to buy the product can also serve as a form of impoliteness. Additionally, comparing the purchased product to other products can also be an implicated form of impoliteness.

4.2.3. Negative impoliteness

Negative impoliteness strategies attack the addressee's negative face which is the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. While taboo language or emotionally charged expressions may accompany such strategies, the defining feature is not the presence of taboo words but the pragmatic function of restricting the seller's operational freedom, issuing threats, or imposing demands. In the following examples, note that the classification as negative impoliteness stems from these functional criteria instead of the use of taboo language alone.

Among all impoliteness strategies, negative impoliteness is the third most common type of impolite behavior. Negative impoliteness strategies account for

11.05% of all impoliteness strategies in Chinese, and 13.04% in English. Examples 9-12 demonstrate how negative impoliteness strategies are expressed in negative OCRs.

Example 9: 恶心 美白效果扯淡 什么破玩意□这么贵价格还没用, 不买了以后 保湿控油没效果 吸收效果无用

Translation: Disgusting. whitening effect bullshit. what shit, so expensive. It's useless. Won't buy again. The moisturizing oil control has no effect. Absorption effect is useless

Example10: 整体评价 差 质地手感 差假货 吸收效果差 一塌糊涂 产品质量差得不行 用了起痘烂脸, 退了货, 卖家收到货, 赖着不退款, 说没收到货, 倒了十八辈子 血霉买他家东西找气受

Translation: Overall evaluation: Poor. Texture and feel: Poor, fake product. Absorption effect: Poor, a complete mess. Product quality: Terrible. Caused breakouts and ruined my face, returned the product, but the seller refused to refund, claiming they didn't receive the item back. It was a terrible experience buying from them, nothing but frustration.

Example 11: I've used this over the last couple of days for the first time, this morning my finger has popped an air bubble which now shows the true amount of contents in the tub!!! That is the bottom of the tub you can see in the middle!!! I am absolutely disgusted I have spent £20 on an item with half of product! Not that I can afford to waste this kind of money on skin care in this climate! I am absolutely fuming

Example 12: I just found out that this company tests on animals!!! I will be using the Inkey List SA cleanser from now on because they are cruelty free!! Not to mention this cleanser is literally cheaper AND better. I will be finishing the bottle I have now then I am never EVER buying from this company again unless they decide to start caring more about living, breathing, creatures, instead of adding more money to the billions of dollars they already have!!

In Example 9, the reviewer says "disgusting" mentions the lack of whitening effect, and refers to the product as "garbage" which clearly indicates the reviewer is extremely angry. Additionally, the statement "I will never buy again" is a direct threat to the seller's reputation, which is a form of negative impoliteness.

In Example 10, the consumer states that buying the product was a way of "seeking trouble" showing that they are very upset. The phrase "this is bad luck for generations" further emphasizes the consumer's frustration and anger. This is an expression of negative impoliteness.

In Example 11, the consumer uses numerous exclamation marks to stress their dissatisfaction. The use of words like "fuming" and "disgusted" further illustrates the consumer's anger and disappointment toward the seller, again reflecting negative impoliteness.

In Example 12, the consumer says they will "never buy from them again unless they do something about it" This is a threat to the seller, demanding

a change in their actions. The statement "I am never ever buying... again, unless.." restricts the seller's freedom to act, which is an example of negative impoliteness. This represents a challenge to the retailer's autonomy and threatens their reputation.

In summary, unlike positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness attacks the operational freedom of Taobao and Amazon. Consumers express threats, disappointment, and anger, and sometimes demand further services or actions before making another purchase. These behaviors affect the rights and interests of online retailers on platforms like Taobao and Amazon (Spencer-Oatey 2008).

4.2.4. *Sarcasm*

This study found that sarcasm is the least frequently used impoliteness strategy, both in Chinese and English OCRs. Examples 13-16 demonstrate how sarcasm is expressed in reviews.

Example 13: 实物与宣传不符 谁买谁是大冤种**商家虚假宣传 还在看评价的赶紧退出去别拍！！自己看图 量了尺寸不够 客服竟然让我用20cm的尺子 自己家产品质量心里不清楚吗 刁难我？我带着外包装说小客服不承认让我打开量里面的纸 我打开了又不给我退款说影响二次销售 恶心至极 清风一生黑

Translation: The product does not match the advertisement. Whoever buys this is a sucker. The seller is false advertising. If you're still looking at reviews, quickly exit and don't buy! Look at the pictures. I measured, and it's too small. Customer service told me to use a 20cm ruler. Don't they know the product's quality? I showed them the packaging, and they told me to open it to measure the inside. After opening it, they refused to refund, claiming it affects resale. It's absolutely disgusting. Qingfeng is blacklisted forever.

Example 14: 刚买还没用就空一大块, 缺斤少两, 想用常规版的包装, 结果发个花里胡哨的, 那么个大品牌做这样的事, 也是绝绝子了。干皮擦了还是一样干, 一点用都没有, 不再回购系列。

Translation: I just bought it but haven't used it yet, and there's a huge empty space inside – it's missing product. I wanted the regular packaging, but they sent me some flashy one instead. For such a big brand to do this is really wonderful. I have dry skin, and it still feels dry after using it – no effect at all. I won't be repurchasing from this line.

Example 15: I've always had great skin and I haven't had a pimple in over 20 years. Since I started using this product, I look like a 15 years old kid going thru puberty. Even when I was 15, I never struggled with acne and always had clear skin. I do not have sensitive skin at all. Bottom line is my pores aren't any smaller and my face looks like a slice of pepperoni pizza.

Example 16: If you're like me and deal with oily skin around your T-zone, DO. NOT. BUY. THIS. PRODUCT. It has corn oil listed as an ingredient, which

is a complete joke in and of itself. The amount of oil my face produced after using this product was scary. You would've thought I ran a 5k in the amazon rainforest by the looks of my face when I woke up in the morning. If you're going to use a CeraVe cleanser, use the Foaming Facial Cleanser for normal to dry skin and save yourself from nightmare-ish oily skin.

In Example 13, the reviewer says that the actual product does not match the advertisement, accusing the seller of false advertising, which implies that the product's quality is poor. The reviewer then sarcastically asks the seller if they are unaware of the quality of their own product. In most cases, if the product were of good quality, the seller would be well aware of it. This rhetorical question is clearly a form of sarcasm, mocking the seller's lack of honesty or awareness about their product's poor quality.

In Example 14, the reviewer uses the phrase "绝绝子" (which generally means "fantastic" or "awesome") in a sarcastic way. Normally, "绝绝子" would be a compliment, but from the context of the review, it's clear that the product is subpar, with issues such as it being sold with a shortage of product. The consumer sarcastically uses this phrase to express disappointment in the brand's actions, not to praise it. This is a form of sarcasm, mocking the brand's poor performance.

In Example 15, the reviewer mentions that they have had clear skin for over 20 years without ever suffering from acne, but after using the product, their skin became like that of a teenager going through puberty. This sarcastic remark suggests that the product caused the reviewer to break out in acne. Furthermore, the reviewer compares their face to an "Italian sausage pizza" implying that their skin became unhealthy after using the product. This sarcastic comparison not only criticizes the product but also attacks the seller's reputation by suggesting the product had a negative effect on their appearance.

In Example 16, the reviewer calls the product a "joke" sarcastically implying that it is of poor quality. In addition, the reviewer humorously describes how the oil on their face in the morning was like running 5 kilometers in the Amazon rainforest, exaggerating the excessive oil production caused by the product. This humorous exaggeration is a sarcastic way of highlighting how ineffective the product is, thus indirectly mocking its performance.

In conclusion, reviewers often use unfriendly jokes or metaphors to attack the face of Taobao and Amazon, and these jokes are typically disguised as rhetorical questions. In negative OCRs, using sarcasm as an impoliteness strategy is more persuasive and makes the reviewer's expression more humorous. Although sarcasm is the least frequently used impoliteness strategy, it is a unique form of impoliteness and serves as a distinctive rhetorical strategy. By incorporating sarcasm, consumers can deliver their criticisms in a way that both undermines the product or seller and entertains or engages the audience, making it a particularly effective but less common approach.

5. Discussion

5.1. Frequency of Impoliteness Strategies (RQ1)

The quantitative findings presented in Table 2 reveal a striking similarity instead of a significant difference. Both corpora demonstrated a strong preference for on-record impoliteness (Chinese: 62.21%; English: 62.11%), with positive impoliteness emerging as the most frequently adopted subcategory in both languages (Chinese: 51.16%; English: 49.07%). Similarly, off-record impoliteness accounted for comparable proportions (Chinese: 37.79%; English: 37.89%), with implicated impoliteness far outnumbering sarcasm in both datasets. This quantitative parallel challenges overly deterministic interpretations of cultural frameworks such as Hall's (1976) high-context/low-context distinction or Hofstede's (1984) individualism/collectivism dimension. While these frameworks offer valuable insights into broad cultural tendencies, they risk essentializing cultural differences if applied without attention to contextual factors. The findings suggest that the context of the online review genre itself exerts a powerful, homogenizing effect that can override or reshape culturally patterned preferences. This does not mean that culture is irrelevant; in contrast, it indicates that cultural influence is *contextually mediated* and *non-deterministic*. In this specific genre characterized by anonymity, public accountability, and the pragmatic goal of warning others, the preference for directness becomes functionally salient across both cultural groups.

The main pragmatic functions of a negative OCR are to issue a firm warning, demand remediation, and perform dissatisfaction for a public audience privilege directness and clarity. In the form of anonymous, non-relationship-based setting, the efficiency of bald-on-record impoliteness outweighs the normative cultural preferences for indirectness that might govern face-to-face interactions. This finding aligns with the concepts of context collapse (Kini et al. 2022) and online disinhibition (Meriläinen and Ruotsalainen 2024), where the specific affordances of digital platforms can temporarily suspend or reshape default communicative norms. Therefore, in response to RQ1, **no substantial cross-cultural difference was observed in the frequency distribution of impoliteness strategies**, suggesting that genre conventions exert a strong homogenizing force across cultural contexts.

5.2. Pragmatic realization of impoliteness (RQ2)

While the strategic choice was quantitatively similar, the qualitative analysis revealed that the linguistic realization and pragmatic framing of these strategies are profoundly shaped by culture. The cultural divergence, therefore, lies not in whether to be impolite, but in how to be effectively and meaningfully impolite within one's cultural framework. Positive impoliteness, the most frequent strategy

in both corpora, manifested differently across cultures. In Chinese OCRs, this strategy often functioned as a communal sanction. As illustrated in Example 2, the reviewer acts as a guardian of the collective, leveraging shared values to amplify the face-attack: "大家不要买 · 超级不好用 · 谁买谁后悔" ("Everyone, don't buy this; whoever buys it will regret it"). The adoption of "大家" (everyone) and the generic warning frame the complaint as a public service announcement instead of a personal grievance. This reflects a collectivist orientation where social validation serves as a powerful rhetorical tool. In contrast, English OCRs manifested positive impoliteness through forensic and individualistic accusation. As shown in Example 4, the reviewer builds a case based on personal observation and evidence: "The first sign was the misplaced label... The product did not have a seal, only a sticker" Impoliteness is achieved through meticulous, evidence-based destruction of the seller's credibility. This aligns with *tendencies* associated with low-context, particularly individualistic orientations, a preference for explicit reasoning, evidence-based argumentation, and appeals to personal autonomy. It is important to emphasize that these are tendencies, instead of fixed characteristics; individual reviewers may diverge from these patterns, and the online context itself may amplify or suppress certain communicative preferences.

Implicated impoliteness, the second most frequent strategy, also revealed cultural divergence. Chinese reviewers tended to use subtle cues namely comparisons to previous purchases or allusions to unfamiliar smells to imply inauthenticity without direct accusation (Examples 5 and 6). English reviewers, while also employing indirectness, however, often framed implicated impoliteness within detailed personal narratives that documented consequences over time (Example 8), reinforcing the cultural preference for evidence-based argumentation. Sarcasm, though the least frequent strategy, served distinct cultural functions. Chinese sarcasm often involved rhetorical questions that mocked seller incompetence (Example 13) or ironic praise (Example 14), while English sarcasm frequently employed exaggerated metaphors and humorous analogies (Examples 15 and 16) to underscore product failure. Thus, in response to RQ2, the pragmatic realization of impoliteness exhibits meaningful cross-cultural *tendencies* that align with broader cultural orientations identified in the work of Hall (1976) and Hofstede (1984). Chinese reviewers in this corpus demonstrated a greater tendency toward communal, collectivist-oriented framing, while English reviewers showed a greater tendency toward individualistic, evidence-based narratives. However, these findings should not be interpreted as evidence of culturally deterministic patterns. The observed differences are best understood as *probabilistic tendencies* that emerge within the specific context of OCRs as a context that itself shapes how cultural resources are deployed. Moreover, the considerable overlap between the two corpora (e.g. both groups used on-record impoliteness at comparable rates) underscores that culture interacts with, instead of determines and communicative behavior.

5.3. The role of genre conventions (RQ3)

The findings suggest that OCRs have evolved into a distinct genre with its own pragmatic conventions that transcend cultural boundaries. The strong preference for on-record impoliteness in both corpora indicates that the genre prioritizes directness, clarity, and impact features that serve the primary functions of warning potential buyers and compelling seller response. However, genre conventions do not omit cultural specificity; in contrast, they interact with cultural norms in complex ways. The concept of contextual salience helps explain this interaction. In the context of OCRs, the objective is not to maintain harmony (*rappport-management*) but to rectify a perceived wrong and warn others. The cultural script shifts from "maintaining face" to "asserting consumer rights"

For Chinese reviewers, directness is not a rejection of culturally patterned preferences but an adaptation of them to the OCR genre. They draw upon culturally available resources namely collective-oriented rhetoric and appeals to shared values to achieve the genre's functional goals. For English reviewers, the genre's demand for directness aligns more seamlessly with tendencies associated with low-context, individualistic communication norms, potentially resulting in a more straightforward alignment between genre expectations and culturally preferred styles. However, this observation should not be taken to imply that English reviewers are uniformly 'direct' or that Chinese reviewers are uniformly 'indirect'; however, it points to differing *resources* that reviewers draw upon when navigating the generic demands of OCRs. Importantly, the online environment introduces additional mediating factors. Anonymity, asynchronicity, and the public, transactional nature of reviews can alter how cultural norms are enacted (Meriläinen and Ruotsalainen 2024). What might be considered excessively confrontational in face-to-face interaction may be perceived as acceptable even expected in the context of online consumer feedback. Therefore, the interplay between culture, genre, and digital context is dynamic and non-linear; cultural influences are not simply 'reflected' in language but are actively negotiated and sometimes transformed through the affordances of the medium.

This study thus shifts beyond a mechanical application of Culpeper's model by emphasizing the pragmatic function of the strategies. The choice of a specific linguistic realization which was a collective warning *vs.* an evidentiary account constitutes a performance of cultural identity. For the Chinese reviewer, the bald-on-record insult is not solely an emotional outburst; but it is a tool for enacting communal judgment. For the English reviewer, the detailed narrative is not solely a complaint; however, it is a performance of rational individualism. Therefore, genre conventions provide the structural framework within which impoliteness occurs, but culture fundamentally shapes how impoliteness is pragmatically weaponized to be most meaningful and effective within a specific cultural world-view.

6. Conclusion

In response to **RQ2 (pragmatic realization)**, the study revealed that despite quantitative similarities, qualitative differences in linguistic framing persist. Chinese reviewers demonstrated a *tendency* toward collectivist-oriented strategies, framing complaints as communal warnings and leveraging shared values to amplify face-attacks. However, English reviewers, demonstrated a *tendency* toward individualistic, evidence-based narratives that construct impoliteness through logical argumentation and personal accountability. These patterns align with broader cultural-communicative tendencies associated with collectivism vs. individualism and high-context vs. low-context communication styles (Hall 1976; Hofstede 1984). However, it is crucial to interpret these findings as *probabilistic tendencies* instead of deterministic cultural prescriptions. The considerable overlap between the two corpora and the near-identical rates of on-record impoliteness underscores that culture does not rigidly determine communicative behavior. Instead, cultural orientations provide repertoires of resources that individuals strategically deploy in response to genre conventions, platform affordances, and the specific interactional goals of the OCR context.

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