Language Impoliteness Strategy as the Tool in Zhai Tianlin's Cancel Culture Phenomenon

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates impoliteness strategies used by Chinese netizens in the cancel culture surrounding the Zhai Tianlin CNKI incident. Through the analysis of 30 Weibo comments, it is found that strategies such as sarcasm and direct insults not only express anger, but also show group identity and moral judgment. The study reveals how language constructs public opinion and maintains social norms in cyberspace.

Keywords: Cancel Culture, Impoliteness, Social Media, Group Identity, Linguistics

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, cancel culture has become more and more common on social media. In China, similar things also happen. The term "cancelling" is a metaphor that has the meaning of "an attempt to unfollow the social media accounts of the person or organization concerned, refusing to participate in activities that can provide income to that person or organization" (Putri Febrianti et al., 2023, p. 3).In this process, language becomes the main tool. Many internet users use impolite language strategies, such as sarcasm, insults, or humiliation, to express their anger and dissatisfaction.
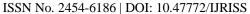
This issue is important because cancel culture is not only about one person. It also shows the emotions of a group and reflects some values that many people share. When people use impolite words online, they are not only expressing feelings, but also telling others what they think is "right" or "wrong." Studying this language use can help us understand people's behavior and attitudes in the online world.

In 2019, the Zhai Tianlin CNKI incident became a typical example of cancel culture in China. Zhai Tianlin was a famous actor with a PhD degree. But during a live-streaming session, he said he did not know what CNKI was. This made many people question his academic ability.

CNKI means China National Knowledge Infrastructure. It is the most important academic database in China. Almost every university student and graduate student in China uses CNKI to find academic papers and write their own essays. In Chinese universities, if a person with a PhD degree does not know CNKI, people usually think this is a serious problem. It can be a sign of "lack of basic academic knowledge" or even "faking a degree."

After Zhai's comment, many internet users got very angry. They began to search his past papers and found problems. Later, his university canceled his PhD degree. His public image was also badly damaged. He had to stop acting and disappeared from the public eye. This incident led to a large amount of online criticism and sarcasm, and became a hot topic on Chinese social media.

The goal of this paper is to analyze what impolite language strategies were used by internet users in the Zhai Tianlin incident. This paper also tries to understand how these language strategies helped shape cancel culture, and how they helped users express their group identity and social values. Through this case, we can

better understand how language works on Chinese social media and how public opinion affects the fate of public figures.

Research Questions

What impolite language strategies did netizens employ in the cancel culture surrounding the Zhai Tianlin CNKI incident?

How did the use of impoliteness reinforce cancel culture during the Zhai Tianlin case?

How did impolite language construct group identity and reflect shared public values in this incident?

Research Objectives

To identify the impolite language strategies used by netizens in the Zhai Tianlin CNKI incident.

To understand the role of impoliteness in forming and promoting cancel culture in the Chinese online context.

To explore how impolite language functions as a tool for expressing group identity and public values among Chinese netizens.
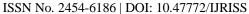
LITERATURE REVIEW

Relevant Theories

To understand the impoliteness strategies used by Chinese netizens during the Zhai Tianlin CNKI incident, this study uses several key theories. First is the Face Theory by Brown and Levinson (1987). It says that in communication, people want to protect their "face," including positive face (the wish to be liked) and negative face (the wish to be left alone). When netizens use strong language like sarcasm or insults, they attack the face of the target. Building on this, Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory (1996) helps to understand how language can cause offense on purpose. He gave five types of impoliteness: bald-on-record (direct attacks), positive impoliteness (ignoring, mocking), negative impoliteness (threats, disrespect), sarcasm/mock impoliteness, and indirect politeness. The followings are detailed explanation:

1. Bald-on-record impoliteness: directly, clearly, and unambiguously perform face-threatening behaviors.
2. Positive impoliteness: damage the other party's positive face and undermine the other party's desire to be liked and recognized.
3. Negative impoliteness: damage the other party's negative face and infringe on the other party's desire not to be disturbed and to maintain autonomy.
4. Indirect impoliteness: perform face-threatening behaviors in an implicit way.
5. Sarcasm or mock impoliteness: use sarcasm and belittlement to perform face-threatening behaviors.

These types can be clearly seen in many Weibo comments during the Zhai Tianlin case. In particular, sarcasm and mocking are common when netizens want to express moral anger or disappointment. Previous studies confirm that sarcasm is widely used in social media, and users often rely on specific linguistic markers, such as profanity, capital letters, and excessive punctuation, to indicate sarcasm explicitly (Irawati et al., 2023). Another theory used is Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory explains that people use language to show they belong to a group. In the cancel culture against Zhai Tianlin, many netizens used impolite words not only to attack him but also to show that they are part of a group that supports academic honesty and moral justice, to show they worked hard to write their own academic papers. In this way, impoliteness becomes a kind of moral badge or identity signal. This study also refers to work in discourse analysis. The book "Social Media Discourse, (Dis)identifications and Diversities" (Leppänen et al., 2017) suggests that social media is a key space where people do "identity work" through language and semiotic choices. This is important for the current study, because it helps to explain why netizens used

certain impolite strategies—not only to criticize Zhai Tianlin, but also to build their own group identities and moral positions. The book also shows that digital discourse often mixes playfulness (like memes or jokes) with serious social judgment, which matches the sarcastic tone seen in Weibo comments.

Different Scholars and Schools of Thought

This study also refers to different views about impoliteness. Early researchers used a fixed model to judge politeness. But more recent scholars like Culpeper (2011) say that politeness and impoliteness depend on the context. What is polite in one situation can be rude in another. This is very important in the Chinese online space, where sarcasm or mocking may look playful but often carries serious social meaning. Additionally, impoliteness can reflect not only personal emotions but also serve political or ideological purposes. For example, political leaders' speeches sometimes intentionally include direct insults or negative impoliteness to assert authority or express political dominance (Hassan et al., 2023). In the Zhai Tianlin case, many netizens judged his comments as not only wrong but as a symbol of fake academic values. Their strong language reflected this judgment.

Previous Studies

Many studies have used Culpeper's theory to understand online comments. Zhong (2018) studied Weibo posts and found that Chinese netizens often use positive impoliteness (mocking, ignoring), negative impoliteness (disrespect), and sarcasm. These match what we see in the comments attacking Zhai Tianlin after the CNKI event. Nilsson & Lopes (2024) looked at Gen Z and found that young people cancel others not only by direct insults but also by silent actions, like unfollowing. Still, they are often driven by group emotion and social pressure. This matches Social Identity Theory and also helps us understand why so many netizens joined the attack in the Zhai Tianlin case—it was not just personal anger, but group feeling. Previous research also highlights negative impoliteness strategies in social media, specifically how netizens tend to directly insult and disrespect targets, significantly influencing public perception and intensifying negative sentiments (Santosa, 2020; Supa'at et al., 2021). A study by Febrianti et al. (2023) on K-pop fans showed a similar result: people may see cancel culture as negative, but still think it can bring justice. This shows that cancel culture is not only about language but also about public feelings and moral values.

Relevant Perspectives

Cancel culture, especially in Chinese social media, is more than just online fighting. It is a way for netizens to express anger, group values, and even fight for fairness. Platforms like Weibo give people the power to act like moral judges. In the Zhai Tianlin CNKI case, netizens used sarcasm, mockery, and direct criticism not only to shame him, but also to speak for a public value, that is respect for academic honesty. Similar online behavior has been observed in other social media contexts, such as the Grammar Nazi phenomenon on Twitter, where impoliteness strategies are used explicitly for face-threatening acts, either to criticize or publicly embarrass users (Soehendro & Jumanto, 2022). This shows that impoliteness in cancel culture is not just about being rude. It is a complex act that connects language, identity, emotion, and power. Studying these strategies in the Zhai Tianlin case can help us understand how language builds cancel culture in today's Chinese online environment.
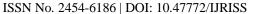
METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research method, using Impoliteness Theory and Social Identity Theory as the main analytical framework to study how netizens use impoliteness strategies in the Zhai Tianlin incident. This study investigates how discourse practices on the Chinese social media platform Weibo construct cancel culture dynamics through impoliteness.

Data Collection

A total of 30 Weibo comments were selected, which needed to be sent after the Zhai Tianlin CNKI incident (February 8, 2019). Data will be collected from the following sources on the Weibo platform:

Comments on Zhai Tianlin's personal Weibo account

Media posts on Weibo (including official media and self-media accounts)

User comments in relevant Weibo hashtags and super topics, including but not limited to: #翟天临# (Zhai Tianlin) #翟天临你睡了吗# (Zhai Tianlin, are you sleeping?)

Ethical Considerations

This study follows ethical standards and focuses only on language content, without analyzing or judging user personal information and attitudes.

The comments selected in the study are all publicly accessible. In order to protect user privacy, usernames are not disclosed in the text.

DATA ANALYSIS

Impoliteness strategies

Firstly, the 30 comments collected were classified according to the type of impoliteness strategy:

Table I. Classification table of impoliteness strategies in comments

	Number of comments	Serial number
Bald-on-record impoliteness	11	6, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23, 25, 27, 29
Positive impoliteness	3	2,4,8
Negative impoliteness	7	7, 10, 11, 17, 19, 26, 30
Off-record impoliteness	6	3, 9, 13, 14, 24, 28
Sarcasm or mock impoliteness	8	1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 12, 22, 30

Secondly, several representative comments were selected as examples to show the analysis process of impolite strategies:

Comment 2: "**你受到的流言蜚**语污蔑诽谤实在太多了！不能让那些人再猖狂下去了，赶快拿出核心期刊论文来打烂他们的脸吧！"

Comment 2: "You've been subjected to too much gossip, slander, and defamation! You can't let those people get away with it anymore, hurry up and produce a core journal paper to slap their faces!"

This comment uses sarcasm or mock politeness. The comment begins by pretending to sympathize with Zhai Tianlin for encountering "too much gossip" , and then offers suggestions like giving advice (produce a core journal paper to slap their faces). This ironically challenges Zhai Tianlin's academic legitimacy because the commentator knows that Zhai cannot produce evidence to exonerate himself.

Then, "hurry up and produce a core journal paper" puts forward a request to Zhai that he cannot meet now, which is a damage to Zhai's positive face such as star halo, academic background, and character, and is a practice of positive impoliteness.

Comment 3: "兄弟，听说你论文查重53%"

Comment 3: "Bro, I heard that your paper was found to have 53% plagiarism."

This comment uses the strategy of off-record impoliteness. On the surface, there is no angry attack or personal attack, but only the actual situation of Zhai Tianlin's graduation thesis. But the subtext is to question Zhai's academic integrity, which actually carries an implicit offense to him.

Comment 19: "你还敢发微博？我就是你2019届第一批受害者！"

Comment 19: "You still dare to post on Weibo? I am your first batch of victims in 2019!"

Bald-on-record impoliteness can be found in this comment, where the commenter directly accuses ("You still dare to post on Weibo?") and confronts Zhai Tianlin without any easing, attacking him for continuing to be active on social media after the scandal.

This comment is also negative impoliteness, where the commenter claims to be a "victim" of Zhai's behavior (probably referring to the fact that due to his misconduct, the education system requires a lower rate of plagiarism in graduation thesis), implying that Zhai has caused harm to others.

The Role of Impoliteness in Forming and Promoting Cancel Culture

Before exploring the perspective of social identity theory, it is important to explain how impolite behavior actively contributes to "cancel culture" in China's digital sphere. In Chinese social media, impolite or offensive language is not only a tool for emotional catharsis or personal attack, but can also become a mechanism to mobilize online groups and shape public judgment. For example, in the case of Zhai Tianlin, the language of comments became a weapon to challenge his legitimacy and deprive him of his social capital. The use of impolite language is at the core of the implementation and strengthening of "cancel culture" in China's cyberspace. It transforms scattered anger into collective action until the target is completely excluded or erased from public life.
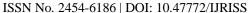
Social Identity

Because of the booming development of the Internet, the entire process of events like the Zhai Tianlin incident has been amplified and fermented in the media in a new and complex way. Compared with traditional media, the Internet provides a large amount of content that supports social identity and promotes collective action of groups. However, the Internet is relatively loosely regulated, so it is easier to spread hate speech and encourage group violence (Harwood, 2020).

According to Trepte and Loy (2017), when individuals are exposed to some media content, they will evaluate the in-group and out-group related to themselves, hoping to gain positive uniqueness from it. Next, based on social identity theory, the in-group solidarity and out-group exclusion of these comments are analyzed:

Comment 15: "你连知网都不知道你读个屁博士，显着你了挺大个脸，舔个大脸读博士，好几宿没睡觉，神经衰弱整个人老了十岁！我睡不着就来骂你！"

Comment 15: "You don't even know what CNKI is, what a shitty PhD you are studying for? Showing off with that big face, shamelessly pursuing a doctorate, I haven't slept for nights, I'm mentally exhausted and aged ten years! I can't sleep, so I'm here to curse you!"

1) *In-group solidarity:* The commenter claimed to be a victim of Zhai Tianlin's behavior ("mentally exhausted and aged ten years"), and stood in solidarity with other students who were under pressure from plagiarism checks due to Zhai Tianlin's scandal. This promoted solidarity among netizens, especially those who had experienced academic pressure.

2) *Out-group exclusion:* Zhai Tianlin was explicitly insulted in this comment (Showing off with that big face, shamelessly pursuing a doctorate) and accused of causing physical harm to others, which reflected out-group exclusion of Zhai. Zhai was positioned by netizens as a person who was not worthy of respect and acceptance, and was nailed to the pillar of shame for academic misconduct.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the 30 Weibo comments reveals that netizens employed a variety of impoliteness strategies to voice collective anger, but clear patterns emerge when grouping these strategies into themes. Many comments combined direct insults with moralistic language or humor, showing that these are not random acts of aggression. Three overarching themes stand out: moral outrage and identity assertion, language as symbolic punishment, and humor and sarcasm as public resistance. Together they demonstrate how impolite language functions as a tool for expressing shared values and social judgement in cancel culture, rather than mere personal attack.

A dominant theme is that netizens frame their comments as moral judgements, aligning themselves with an in-group of righteous critics. Many comments explicitly invoke academic values or collective victimhood. For example, Comment 19 ("You still dare to post on Weibo? I am your first batch of victims in 2019!") portrays the commenter as a wronged party and casts Zhai as an offender. Similarly, Comment 15 ("You don't even know what CNKI is… I'm mentally exhausted and aged ten years! I can't sleep, so I'm here to curse you!") depicts the writer as a diligent student harmed by Zhai's behavior. In these cases the language does double duty: it attacks Zhai's face (calling him an unworthy PhD) and also signals group identity. According to Social Identity Theory, such comments mark an in-group ("hardworking students" who value academic integrity) versus an out-group (the "deceitful scholar"). By insisting on shared moral standards and framing themselves as victims or defenders of those standards, netizens build solidarity and express moral outrage. In short, the impolite comments serve as a moral badge – they publicly declare "we defend honest scholarship" and exclude those perceived to violate it.

Another theme is that netizens use harsh language to symbolically punish the target. The comments include vivid metaphors and demands that imply retribution. For instance, Comment 1 urges "Please accept the hammer of Thor from the academic circle," and Comment 13 asks, "Shouldn't he be banned entirely?" (封杀). Other comments demand compensation or consequences (e.g. Comment 26: "Doctor Zhai, how about you pay me some money?"). These are not realistic threats of violence but rather symbolic sanctions enacted through words. Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory classifies many of these moves as negative impoliteness, involving overt disrespect or threats to the target's autonomy. In our data, netizens explicitly threaten to revoke Zhai's status or shame him in public ("ban him", "slap his face with evidence"), which damages his social image and asserts communal norms. In effect, language becomes a tool to enforce consequences: by insulting, cursing, or demanding punitive actions, commenters convey that Zhai deserves shame for breaking academic trust. This demonstrates how impolite language can act as a form of social control – a way for the community to collectively "punish" wrongdoing without physical force.

The third theme highlights how netizens often soften their outrage with humor, using sarcasm and mockery as a form of collective resistance. Many comments employ off-record or pseudo-polite strategies. For example, Comment 24 jokingly suggests hacking CNKI so that the paid fees automatically transfer to Zhai's bank account, mixing with criticism. This kind of ridicule allows users to vent anger in a playful tone. Such language is still impolite, but the humor helps engage a larger audience and diffuse tension. As Leppänen et al. observe, social media discourse frequently "mixes playfulness (like memes or jokes) with serious social judgment". In this case, sarcasm and irony reinforce shared disapproval while also entertaining readers. The frequent use of sarcasm (analyzed as mock impoliteness) turns the criticism into a participatory act of public resistance. It emphasizes the communal nature of the outrage: by laughing together at Zhai's expense, netizens reinforce their group identity and sustain the pressure for accountability. In summary, the impolite strategies found in the Zhai Tianlin cancel campaign are carefully tuned to social purposes. They articulate moral outrage (justifying insults as enforcing academic values), group identity (defining a righteous "we" against a deviant "other"), and symbolic punishment (meting out accountability through words). At the same time, humor and sarcasm pervade the discourse, aligning with discourse-analytic insights that social media criticism often blends levity with moral condemnation. These findings show that netizens' impoliteness is not mere flame-throwing: it is a collective language practice that builds cancel culture by asserting norms and cohesion. The patterns observed are consistent with Culpeper's and Brown & Levinson's frameworks on face and impoliteness, with Social Identity Theory, and with discourse studies – all of which suggest that language online conflicts is purposive, symbolic, and identity-based.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study finds that impolite language played a central role in the collective discourse that formed around the Zhai Tianlin CNKI incident. Netizens employed a variety of impoliteness strategies, including direct insults, sarcasm, mock politeness, and indirect attacks. Among these, bald-on-record expressions and sarcasm were particularly prevalent. Rather than isolated expressions of anger, these strategies reflected deliberate rhetorical choices used to articulate public discontent and moral condemnation.

Through repeated use of such language, netizens actively constructed a shared sense of moral order. Impoliteness served not only to discredit the individual being criticized, but also to uphold communal values such as academic integrity, fairness, and merit-based achievement. These verbal strategies acted as symbolic punishments—calls to action, condemnation, and public shaming—conveying the collective belief that certain behaviors were unacceptable in the academic and public sphere.

Moreover, impolite comments often contained elements of group identification. Commenters positioned themselves as responsible, hardworking students or ethical members of society, drawing a clear line between themselves and the accused figure. These distinctions helped form and reinforce a digital in-group that rallied around shared norms and values. In this context, impoliteness became a language of solidarity—a way for netizens to assert identity, moral alignment, and emotional resonance with others who shared their concerns.

Overall, impolite language in this case functioned as a powerful tool for mobilizing public opinion and sustaining cancel culture discourse. It enabled large groups of users to express collective anger, demand accountability, and symbolically restore perceived social balance through linguistic means. These findings support the view that impoliteness in online contexts is not merely hostile or emotional, but often strategic, value-driven, and community-oriented.
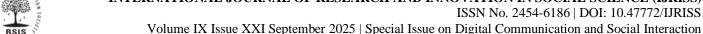
Recommendations

1) Enhance awareness of linguistic consequences: Users should be encouraged to recognize the influence of language in shaping online opinion. Although criticism is a right, excessive verbal aggression can cause real emotional harm and escalate digital violence. Social platforms and educators should guide users to reflect on their tone and choose more constructive expressions when participating in public discourse.

2) Promote digital literacy and ethic communication: Introducing digital literacy and online ethics education into schools and community programs can equip individuals with tools to distinguish between rational critique and emotional manipulation. This can reduce impulsive participation in cancel culture and encourage evidence-based, respectful communication online.

3) Encourage responsible platform governance: Social media platforms should implement content moderation tools that address inflammatory or abusive language, while also promoting diverse and balanced viewpoints. Features such as comment delay prompts, tone-checking suggestions, or "pause and reflect" mechanisms may help users reconsider their language before posting.

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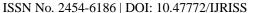
APPENDIX

A. Selected 30 Weibo Comments Used for Analysis

[1] Please accept the Thor's Hammer from the academic community.

[2] You've been subjected to too much gossip, slander, and defamation! You can't let those people get away with it anymore, hurry up and produce a core journal paper to slap their faces!

[3] Bro, I heard that your paper was found to have 53% plagiarism.

[4] An "entertainment industry doctor"? What a joke. The entire entertainment industry is a joke.

[5] Big brother, can I read your core journal paper?

[6] Your paper was bought with money, wasn't it? Fake doctor!

[7] Thank you for reappearing and reminding me I hadn't unfollowed you yet! Because of you, my paper, written word by word, cost me nearly 1,000 yuan extra for plagiarism checks. That might be pocket change to you, but for every master's and doctoral graduate, you'll always be a pillar of shame!!!

[8] I worked so hard writing my paper word by word, exhausted from reducing the plagiarism rate. But you, Dr. Zhai, make a comeback during graduation season—how impressive.

[9] It's graduation season again, and all undergraduates, master's, and doctoral students will come back to "greet" you.

[10] Dr. Zhai, I passed my thesis defense, but reducing the plagiarism rate was exhausting, and the CNKI checks cost a fortune. Many students will never forget you, and your legacy will live on forever.

[11] Pay for my plagiarism check fees and compensate me for my hair loss. Can you even sleep in April and May???

[12] Have you published a paper today?

[13] Speechless… Shouldn't you be banned?

[14] Can't write my paper anymore, so I came to check on you.

[15] You don't even know what CNKI is, what a shitty PhD you are studying for? Showing off with that big face, shamelessly pursuing a doctorate, I haven't slept for nights, I'm mentally exhausted and aged ten years! I can't sleep, so I'm here to curse you!

[16] You piece of trash, why do you need such a high degree to be an actor? Plenty of actors graduated from junior high and still made it. You went for the highest degree, got exposed, and ruined your reputation, didn't you?

[17] Are you happy? Oh, you must be thrilled. Do you know how strong the wind is at midnight? No, you don't—you don't even know what CNKI is. Do you know what a thesis is? No, you still don't. I've never hated someone so much in my life. Why are you showing off? If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be suffering like this.

[18] I really want to slap you. I'm going to transfer all my bad luck onto you.

[19] You still dare to post on Weibo? I am your first batch of victims in 2019!

[20] Can't you just quietly find a place to bury yourself?

[21] Daily curse: You filthy person.

[22] Thanks to you, all the computers in my dorm are running full blast.

[23] Zhai Tianlin, can you sleep at night? I can't sleep writing my paper. My thesis is about to be randomly inspected, and I still have to pay for CNKI checks out of my own pocket. What are you? You think you're qualified to talk about CNKI?

[24] Can a hacker redirect CNKI and Wanfang's payment pages to Zhai Tianlin's bank account?

[25] Zhai Tianlin, why were you even born? Graduation thesis materials are killing us. I swear, every year, students' resentment will make you suffer forever.

[26] Dr. Zhai, how about you compensate me with some money?

[27] Zhai Tianlin, I'm clueless about reducing my plagiarism rate right now, but I feel like I could write a 1,000-word essay cursing you without repeating a single insult.

[28] No one will hate Zhai Tianlin forever, but there will always be someone hating Zhai Tianlin.

[29] I pray you never have smooth sailing, your family never enjoys health or happiness, you're filled with despair, and every day is filled with unkindness, unhappiness, and lovelessness.

[30] Don't you get the "academic stars" of the entertainment industry? Solving a linear equation makes you a genius, and speaking broken English makes you a scholar. This guy at least "studied" for a doctorate for years. The public's expectations are really something these days.