An Impoliteness Study on the Use of Swear Words among Chinese College Students in the TikTok Comment Section

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Chinese college students use swear words in TikTok comment sections, focusing on impolite language. Using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and recent impoliteness research, it analyzes 30 comments through critical discourse analysis (CDA). The study identifies common swear words, their types, and their functions in context. Findings show that sexual and family-related insults—especially targeting one's mother—are most frequent, reflecting the rise of "Zu'an culture." Swearing is used to insult, express emotion, show group identity, and add humor or emphasis. These results reveal how online impoliteness both challenges and reshapes traditional politeness norms. The paper also offers suggestions for improving online communication and ideas for future research.

Keywords: Impoliteness, Swear Words, Chinese College Students, Tiktok, Politeness Theory, Discourse Analysis Introduction

INTRODUCTION

Swearing plays an ubiquitous role in everyday conversations among humans, both in oral and textual communication, and occurs fre-quently in social media texts, typically featured by informal language and spontaneous writing (Pamungkas et al., 2020). TikTok, a popular video-sharing platform, is no exception. Despite TikTok's generally playful content, its comment sections Swear words are often used in communication In particular, Chinese college students on TikTok (including the domestic app Douyin as well as the international version) have been observed using a variety of swear words. Understanding this phenomenon is important because online discourse can influence broader communication norms. A recent study in Indonesia found that 84% of young TikTok users had encountered impolite content, though the majority did not emulate this behavior in their own comments. (Anggraeni &Robandi, 2023) This raises concerns that frequent exposure to insults and swearing might gradually normalize such impoliteness. The issue is especially pertinent in China, where an emerging "Zu'an culture" celebrates creative profanity and aggressive insults. Zu'an culture (originating from a notoriously toxic online gaming community) has popularized crude sexual and ancestral slurs among youth, contributing to the widespread use of swear words. (Yi Yan gang. 2020). Within this cultural backdrop, Chinese college students may come to view swearing as a routine aspect of online interaction, even as it violates traditional norms of respect. This situation highlights a core challenge in impoliteness research: distinguishing genuine insults from casual or even humorous uses of the same profanity. As Jarquín-Vásquez et al. (2020) point out, the interpretation of a swear word is highly context dependent, making simple keyword-based analysis inadequate.

Swearing is the use of taboo language (also referred to as bad language, swear words, offensive language, curse words, or vulgar words) to express the speaker's emotional state to their listeners (Jay, 1992; Jay, 1999). In Chinese digital spaces, the use of such foul language has become increasingly prevalent and is closely linked to incivility in communication. Swearing is often deemed "bad language," carrying labels like impolite, vulgar, or uncivil. However, researchers note that swearing can serve important social and emotional functions. It can act as a form of linguistic creativity to express intense feelings or attitudes that non-taboo words might not convey as forcefully. For example, using a curse word is like "using the horn on your car" – a blunt tool to signal anger, frustration, humor, or solidarity when other words fail. Positive social outcomes can even arise from swearing

in certain contexts, such as jokes, storytelling, in-group slang, or self-deprecating humor. At the same time, the negative functions of swearing are well documented: people swear to draw attention, to show contempt or hostility, to provoke others, or to defy and mock authority. (Jay, T. 2009) All of these uses can be observed in online forums, where the relative anonymity and informality lower the barriers to impolite speech. Indeed, the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) suggests that individuals communicate with fewer restraints on the internet, behaving in ways they might avoid in face-to-face settings. The lack of immediate social consequences and the distance afforded by screen-mediated interaction allow college students to flout polite norms.

On TikTok, users operate through pseudonymous accounts in a peer-group environment. Within these online "digital publics," a norm of bluntness or even rudeness can emerge, whereby swear words pepper interactions without speakers feeling they have done anything extraordinary. Over time, if many participants frequently use profanity, impolite speech can become contagious – a collective linguistic norm. Song et al. (2022) demonstrated that on a popular Hong Kong forum, once a few users introduced political swears into the discussion, others quickly adopted similar offensive language through mimicry and reciprocity, reinforcing a cycle of incivility. This "contagion of offensive speech" can spiral into a hostile communicative environment and make aggressive swearing appear acceptable or even expected in the community. A similar spiral may be taking place in Chinese TikTok circles, especially given the influence of Zu'an culture.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, Chinese profanity is notable for its semantic focus. In contrast to English swearing (which often draws on religious blasphemy or scatological terms), Mandarin Chinese swear words most commonly involve sexual references or insults against someone's ancestors – particularly one's mother. Such expressions carry a heavy emotional charge in Chinese culture because they attack deeply face-sensitive domains (sexual morality and family honor). For example, calling someone a "傻逼" (shǎbī, literally "stupid ct," a highly vulgar term for "idiot") or telling them "去死" (qù sǐ, "go die") directly challenges their dignity and social worth. The prominence of maternal insults – for instance, the notorious "操你妈" (cào nǐ mā, "fk your mother") or the euphemistic acronym "NMSL" (nǐ mā sǐ le, "your mom is dead") – reflects how Chinese swearing leverages the family as a taboo target. These extreme phrases are severe face-threatening acts because they overtly impugn the target's social value and violate interpersonal respect. The popularity of such vulgar insults among some Chinese college-age netizens signals a subversive rejection of polite speech norms in certain online subcultures.

Against this background, the present study aims to analyze how and why Chinese college students deploy swear words in TikTok comment sections, through the dual lens of politeness and impoliteness theories. By examining real instances of swearing on TikTok, this study extends classic politeness frameworks with recent impoliteness models to understand the strategies and social functions of these face-attacking acts in an online Chinese context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Politeness Theory and Face

Politeness theory, as articulated by Brown and Levinson (1987), remains a foundational framework for analyzing courteous versus discourteous language. Brown and Levinson's model centers on the concept of face, inspired by Goffman's definition of face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself… during a particular contact" (Goffman, 1967). In other words, face is an individual's public self-image or sense of social worth. The theory distinguishes between positive face – the desire to be liked, appreciated, and approved by others – and negative face – the desire not to be imposed upon, to have freedom of action and autonomy. Communicative acts that threaten either of these desires are termed face-threatening acts (FTAs). For example, directly insulting someone attacks their positive face (they are not being respected), while making a demand or order can threaten their negative face (restricting their freedom). Politeness, in Brown and Levinson's formulation, is fundamentally about mitigating FTAs to preserve face. Speakers use politeness strategies – such as indirect language, honorifics, hedges, or apologetic phrasing – to reduce the impact of FTAs, based on social variables like distance, power, and the imposition rank between speaker and hearer. The higher the risk of face damage in a situation (for instance, talking to a high-status person about a sensitive issue), the more politeness is expected. Brown and Levinson outline a hierarchy of strategies ranging from bald-on-record (performing the

FTA directly with no politeness) to off-record (hinting or using ambiguity to avoid a direct FTA), as well as positive-politeness and negative-politeness strategies in between.

Although Brown and Levinson did not extensively theorize impoliteness, their concepts of face and FTAs implicitly provide a template for understanding it: if politeness strategies are ways to avoid offense, then impoliteness can be seen as deliberately choosing strategies (or non-strategies) that cause offense. In Brown and Levinson's terms, going bald-on-record with an FTA in a context where politeness is expected is one way to be impolite. For instance, politely saying, "Could you please be quiet?" mitigates a request, whereas shouting "Shut up!" is a bald command that ignores the addressee's face needs. Similarly, referring to someone as "that idiot" instead of using a neutral term constitutes an intentional face-attack on their positive face. Thus, impoliteness occurs when speakers either fail to avoid FTAs or choose an overt, unmitigated way of performing them, thereby actively damaging the target's face.

An important aspect of Brown and Levinson's framework is the cultural variability of politeness. They argued that face and some politeness strategies are universal, but what is considered face-threatening or face-saving can vary across cultures. In Chinese culture (influenced by Confucian values), respect for elders, humility, and "saving face" are highly emphasized in formal contexts. Historically, insulting someone's family or using obscene language carries strong social stigma, as it causes the target to lose face in the eyes of others. From a Brown & Levinson perspective, Chinese communicators might be expected to employ negative-politeness strategies (e.g. honorifics, indirectness) when addressing superiors, and positive-politeness or solidarity strategies among close friends to maintain harmony. However, the rise of online communication has created new contexts where traditional face norms are altered. The relatively egalitarian and anonymous environment on platforms like TikTok means social distance and power differences between interlocutors are often minimized – everyone is essentially just a username on a screen. According to Brown & Levinson's formula for the weight of an FTA $W = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + R$, a low perceived Distance (D) and low Power differential (P) can significantly reduce the weight (W) of many acts. In such scenarios, speakers may feel less need for formal politeness. In other words, college-aged TikTok users often treat each other as peers (minimal power difference) and as part of the same online community (reducing social distance), which partially explains the lack of formality or deference in their interactions. Of course, this casual atmosphere does not automatically entail rudeness – one can be informal yet still courteous – but it creates a setting where the normative pressure to be polite is weak. In such an environment, other factors (like emotional expression, humor, or urgency) can take precedence over face concerns, leading to more frequent use of impolite language, including swearing.

Impoliteness and Online Discourse

In response to classical politeness theory, later scholars developed theories of impoliteness to explicitly address how and why speakers use language to attack face. Culpeper (1996) was among the first to propose a systematic impoliteness framework, essentially mirroring Brown & Levinson's strategies in the opposite direction. Culpeper identified several impoliteness superstrategies, including:

Bald-on-record impoliteness: Performing the FTA in a direct, unmitigated way when offense is clearly intended.

Positive impoliteness: Using tactics that damage the target's positive face wants (e.g. insults, snubs, rude nicknames, dismissive comments).

Negative impoliteness: Using strategies that target the target's negative face wants (e.g. threats, condescension, blunt commands that invade the other's autonomy).

Off-record impoliteness: Using indirect or ambiguous language with a hostile or insincere undertone (so one offensive interpretation is inferable). Sarcasm often falls in this category – a sneering remark like "Oh, great job " is ostensibly polite or mild but clearly meant to taunt.

Withholding politeness: Pointedly failing to show politeness where it is expected (for instance, not thanking someone for a favor or gift, which pointedly signals disrespect).

Additionally, Culpeper noted a mock politeness or sarcasm strategy, where a speaker uses overly polite or friendly language in an obviously insincere way to ridicule or belittle the target. These impoliteness strategies correspond to recognizable behaviors online. For instance, a blunt obscene insult in a comment is a clear case of bald-on-record impoliteness, while a sarcastic reply like "Oh, so smart of you " constitutes off-record impoliteness via sarcasm. Culpeper's framework highlights that impoliteness is not merely the absence of politeness, but rather a set of deliberate communicative moves aimed at causing offense.

In the context of TikTok comments, this study would expect positive impoliteness to be very common – users often employ taboo words, name-calling, and direct disrespect to damage someone's social standing or feelings. For example, telling another user "**你就是个傻逼**" ("You're nothing but a shǎbī [idiot]") uses a vulgar epithet and openly dismisses the person, undermining their positive face. Negative impoliteness appears when, say, someone comments "滚！" ("Get lost!") or "谁管你？" ("Who cares about you?"), which bluntly impose the speaker's will or diminish the other's importance. Such remarks attack the hearer's desire for autonomy and respect. Notably, TikTok's threaded reply system can lead to heated back-and-forth exchanges where one user's impoliteness provokes retaliation in kind. This tit-for-tat escalation often results in flame wars: if one participant's face is attacked, they may respond by attacking back, creating an impoliteness spiral.

Beyond individual strategies, researchers have also proposed broader categorizations of impoliteness. Bousfield (2008), for example, simplified the typology to essentially on-record vs. off-record impoliteness – i.e. whether the offensive intent is explicit or implicit. In most TikTok comments, the use of swear words and slurs would qualify as on-record impoliteness, since the hostility or ridicule is usually clear and direct. For instance, a comment like "这种人真他妈恶心" ("This kind of person is really f**king disgusting") unambiguously conveys contempt toward the subject – a straightforward, explicit offense. In contrast, an off-record impolite comment might be something like "**看来某人智商感人**" ("It seems someone's IQ is so touching [i.e. so low]"), a sarcastic euphemism implying "so stupid" without saying it outright. Though witty, such subtle barbs are far less common in blunt TikTok discourse; more often this study see plainly stated profanity and name-calling in heated threads rather than clever, indirect jabs.

Another relevant concept is incivility in online discourse. Researchers distinguish between vigorous disagreement (which can still remain civil) and true incivility, which involves personal attacks or vulgar, degrading language. A discussion can be heated and critical yet remain civil, but when participants resort to name-calling, hate speech, or profanity, the discourse turns clearly uncivil and less constructive. Recent studies confirm this pattern across platforms: for example, Teneketzi (2021) showed that YouTube comment threads exhibit significantly more incivility than those on Reddit, mainly due to factors like weaker moderation and fewer content restrictions on YouTube. In our context, a TikTok user could certainly express a critical opinion without swearing, but adding an epithet like "you idiot" or an acronym like "WTF" immediately shifts the tone from a pointed critique to a personal attack. In this study, we treat the use of swear words as a marker of impoliteness (and incivility) unless it is clearly being used in a playful, non-serious manner among friends.

It is important to note that what one user perceives as a harsh insult, another user—especially within an in-group—might perceive as jest or banter. The interpretation of impoliteness depends heavily on context and the relationship between participants. For example, close friends might jovially call each other "**瓜皮**" (lit. "melon rind," slang for "silly fool") or even casually say "**傻逼**" to one another in a teasing way that actually reinforces their bond; an outsider reading the exchange might see only the offensive language without the friendly context. This ambiguity underscores the need for critical discourse analysis to interpret not just the words used, but the social meaning and intent behind them.

Notably, recent research suggests that impolite language can even fulfill positive social functions in certain settings. For instance, Shulguinov (2023) observed that impolite communication in sports fan comment sections sometimes serves as a community-building tool, strengthening in-group solidarity through shared aggressive banter. In other words, a flurry of taunts and swear words among members of the same fan community may actually promote camaraderie – those who "get the joke" feel included, while outsiders may misinterpret the

tone as purely hostile. This perspective cautions against labeling a discourse "toxic" or "impolite" based solely on the presence of taboo vocabulary, without considering participants' relationships and intentions.

In the Chinese online context, researchers have begun to document the prevalence of and attitudes toward taboo language among youth. Wei and Chen (2021), for example, developed a scale to measure Chinese college students' attitudes toward sexual swear words, motivated by the spread of the "Zu'an" subculture and rampant use of vulgar insults among students. Their work indicates that many Chinese students are familiar with and do use sexual profanity (e.g. terms for genitalia, the "f**k your mother" insult, etc.), but attitudes vary: some view it as normal slang or dark humor, while others still find it offensive or unacceptable. The rise of the "祖安" (Zu'an) style of online speech suggests that a segment of Chinese netizens pride themselves on outrageous, highly creative swearing as a form of competitive insult humor. This parallels the Western concept of "trash talking" or flame wars, but with distinct Chinese characteristics – such as elaborate genealogical curses and the inventing of harmless-sounding phrases that phonetically resemble curses (to evade censorship). Our study leverages insights from Wei and Chen (2021) by observing which sexual swear words actually appear in a TikTok setting and in what contexts they are used. Additionally, Song et al. (2022) (mentioned earlier) found that social mechanisms like peer mimicry and reciprocity significantly contribute to the contagious spread of offensive speech online, reinforcing the idea that impoliteness can be socially amplified in digital communities.

Overall, the literature provides a theoretical and contextual foundation for this study: politeness and face theory explain what makes certain language offensive, impoliteness frameworks explain how offense is enacted, and prior studies on Chinese digital communication highlight the prevalence and normalization of swearing in youth culture. This background informs our analysis of Chinese college students' swear word usage on TikTok.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

This research employed a qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA) methodology, supplemented by basic quantitative counts. The primary data consisted of 30 comments collected from TikTok (Douyin) videos that were popular among Chinese college students. To obtain a relevant sample, this study first identified TikTok content likely to attract Chinese college student viewers and commenters. Specifically, this study focused on videos related to campus life, student humor, and youth-oriented topics or controversies trending in China (for example, short skits about exams, dormitory life vlogs, or debates on social issues). From several such videos, this study selected specific examples whose comment sections contained active discussions. Using purposive sampling, this study then captured comments – including their threaded replies – that featured clear instances of swearing or profanity. Comments were gathered over a period of two weeks in late 2024, ensuring a mix of contexts and topics. This time frame was chosen to capture contemporary usage; all sampled comments were relatively recent (no older than late 2024) to reflect current slang and trends. Ultimately, the dataset included 30 impolite comments (and their associated sub-comments) drawn from 15 distinct TikTok video threads.

All selected comments were publicly visible (posted in public comment sections) and were anonymized for analysis. To protect user privacy and adhere to ethical research practices, this study replaced any usernames with pseudonyms (e.g., "User A", "User B") and removed any identifying information. Although TikTok comments are public by nature, this study treated the data with care: our goal was to analyze patterns of language use, not to expose or judge individual users. this study did not seek individual consent from the commenters (given that the data consist of naturally occurring public text), but this study followed established ethical guidelines for internet research by anonymizing sources and focusing our analysis on linguistic content rather than personal identities.

Analytical Framework

Our analysis proceeded in two stages: (1) swear word identification and categorization, and (2) discourse function analysis. In stage 1, this study systematically examined the Chinese text of each comment to identify any swear words or phrases. this study defined "swear words" broadly as instances of profanity, taboo language, or vulgar insults in Chinese. This included common Chinese curse words and slurs – for example, 操 (cào, "fk"),

妈的 (māde, “damn it” or a general curse), **傻逼** (shǎbī, a vulgar term for “idiot”), **屁** (pì, “crap/fart”), 滚 (gǔn, “roll,” i.e. “get lost”), and abusive phrases like **去死** (qù sǐ, “go die”). this study also counted derogatory epithets (e.g. **笨蛋** “moron,” 婊子 “bitch”) and insults involving family (e.g. starting with **你妈** “your mom...” as in the curse “your mother is dead”). In addition, this study noted creative or obfuscated swearing common in online language, such as use of homophones or variants to evade censorship (for instance, using “**草**” for cào or acronyms like “NMSL” for nǐ mā sǐ le). Each occurrence of a swear word in the dataset was logged. this study then categorized the swear words based on their semantic type. Following categorizations of swearing in the literature (e.g., Ljung, 2011), this study grouped them into categories such as: sexual/obscene terms (e.g. references to genitalia or sexual acts, including extreme insults like threats of raping one’s ancestors), insults to intelligence or character (e.g. calling someone stupid, trash, etc.), ancestral or family-related insults (“your mother...”, “bastard” implying illegitimacy), commands or wishes of harm (“get lost,” “go to hell”), and general expletives used as emphatic interjections (akin to saying “sh*t!” or “fk!” as a reaction). Some words could arguably fit multiple categories, but this study assigned each occurrence to the category that best fit its primary connotation in context.

In stage 2, a qualitative discourse analysis was conducted to examine the communicative function and context of each swearing instance. This entailed a close reading of each comment in its conversational context (looking at any preceding comments that might have triggered the response, and any replies that followed) to interpret why that swear word was used and how it functioned in the interaction. This study inductively coded the pragmatic function of each swear word occurrence — in other words, what the speaker was trying to accomplish by swearing. Informed by prior research on why people swear, this study looked for functions such as:

Table I. Classification table of impolite strategies

type	Insulting/attacking	Expressing emotion	Emphasis/intensification	Humor /sarcasm	Group solidarity or identity marking
Behavior	Using swear words to directly derogate or attack another person	Swearing to express strong emotion	Using swear words to amplify the force of a message or emphasize a point	Using swearing as part of a joke, meme, or sarcastic remark meant to amuse	Using profanity to bond or to signal one’s identity as a plain-spoken

Afterwards, the 30 collected reviews were classified according to the above classification.Next, this study will select several representative comments as examples to show the analysis process of impoliteness strategies:

1.You have no talent in your life, and your parents will shake their heads when they see you. "King of Glory" is your eternal glory. (King of Glory is the name of a game)

一辈子没啥本事，父母看了摇头，王者就是你永远的荣耀

This passage uses Off-record impoliteness. On the surface, it says "King of Glory is your eternal glory", which seems to be affirming the other party's achievements. In fact, "King of Glory" here does not refer to the real glory in real life, but the virtual achievements in the game. Treating "glory in the game" as "the only glory in life" is actually belittling the other party's "no achievements in reality".

2.You must be stupid, otherwise how could you come up with such a comment?

你要不是傻x才怪，要不然怎么会想出这种评论?

Bald-on-record impoliteness is used here. The "idiot" (a euphemism for "idiot") in the sentence is an obvious insulting term, which directly denies and belittles the other party's personality and intelligence. A typical face-attack faux pas

3.I just want to call you SB

我只想骂你 SB

This passage uses Withholding politeness. In normal communication, no matter what kind of disagreement you face, expressing politeness and respect is a basic social norm. Knowing this, but directly saying "I just want to call you SB" shows that the speaker consciously rejected the requirements of social etiquette.

4.Hey, you are really a talent

哎，你她娘的还真是个人才

On the one hand, this sentence uses swear words to emphasize and strengthen, making the emotional color stronger and the expression more extreme; on the other hand, this kind of vulgar "praise" is actually a damage to the listener's positive face, with obvious positive impoliteness. It can express extreme admiration, or it can be sarcastic and offensive. It is a typical "praise with swear words" phenomenon in the online context.

5.The stinky outsiders are here to beg for food again

臭外地的又来讨饭吃了

On the one hand, this sentence uses insulting language to exclude "outsiders" from "us", strengthening the internal identity of the local group (group identity theory); on the other hand, through insulting, derogatory, and humiliating expressions, it seriously infringes on the other party's negative face, putting the other party in a social position of being attacked and excluded (negative impoliteness theory). This type of language is easy to intensify opposition and cause group conflicts on the Internet or in real life, and is a typical expression of exclusion and aggression.

This study applied concepts from politeness/impoliteness theory to each instance. We identified cases of Culpeper's impoliteness strategies in the data when relevant. For example, if a comment involved calling someone a derogatory name, we marked it as a clear case of positive impoliteness (attacking positive face by using taboo epithets). If a comment included a threat or a condescending command, we labeled that as negative impoliteness. We kept an eye out for off-record impoliteness as well (such as clearly sarcastic or insincere "polite" phrasing used to mock someone), though as expected, such indirect impoliteness was rare in the largely blunt TikTok comments. By mapping the comments to these theoretical categories, we sought to evaluate how well Western-developed impoliteness models fit Chinese online behavior, and whether any culture-specific or platform-specific patterns emerged that might extend our understanding of impoliteness.

This study also considered multimodal cues in the comments, particularly the presence of emojis, which can modify the tone of a message. For example, a harsh remark followed by a laughing face emoji might indicate that the commenter intends their words in a humorous or sarcastic spirit rather than as a serious attack. Whenever emojis were present around the swear words, this study noted their potential effect on interpretation (drawing on insights like those of Nguyen (2023), who highlighted how emojis can imbue or mitigate impoliteness in online interactions).

In summary, our methodology combined quantitative content analysis (to quantify which swear words appear and how frequently) with qualitative discourse analysis (to interpret meaning and function in context), underpinned by the theoretical frameworks of politeness/impoliteness and critical discourse analysis. This mixed approach allowed us to capture both the broad patterns of impolite language usage and the pragmatic nuances behind each usage. The goal was to ensure that this study not only list which "bad words" are used, but also understand the interpersonal work those words are doing in Chinese TikTok conversations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study classified and statistically analyzed the impolite strategies in the comments (as shown in Table 2), and combined them with the induction of the text content.

Table II. Classification table of impoliteness strategies in comments

	Number of comments	Serial number
Insulting/attacking	8	1.4.5.7.9.16.27.28
Expressing emotion (venting)	3	8.13.26
Emphasis/intensification	4	10.11.17.19
Humor or sarcasm	9	2.3.6.12.21.22.23.25.29
Group solidarity or identity marking	6	14.15.18.20.24.30

found that swearing among Chinese college commenters is dominated by sexual and family-related vulgarities (terms like 傻逼, 操/草, 你妈 insults, etc.), which is consistent with the broader literature noting that Chinese swear words tend to revolve around those themes. Words like 傻逼 and 操/草 have, for many young people, become part of everyday slang despite their crudeness – they often function almost like filler intensifiers or casual put-downs, akin to how English words like "idiot" or intensifiers like "freaking" might be used in colloquial speech (though 傻逼 is much more taboo than "idiot," carrying a stronger sting). The frequent appearance of 他妈的 as an intensifier or expletive, for instance, suggests a degree of linguistic normalization of swearing: many users likely do not even contemplate its literal meaning ("[someone's] mother") when using it, much as English speakers utter "damn it" without any religious intent.

However, the presence of extremely incendiary phrases like "操你妈" and NMSL indicates that TikTok comment sections can also become very hostile and hurtful. Notably, this study observed that these strongest insults often appeared in reply threads where arguments were escalating. For instance, in one thread from our sample, a mild disagreement about a video's content quickly snowballed: one user replied to another with "你懂个屁" ("What do you know, you understand fart [i.e., you don't know sh*t]"), and the retort to that was "有本事当面骂？怂逼" ("If you've got guts, curse me to my face, cowardly b**ch"). In the span of a short exchange, the language intensified from initially no swearing, to a moderate vulgarity ("屁"), to a very personal attack ("怂逼", sǒngbī, literally "cowardly c**t"). This rapid escalation exemplifies the contagion effect described by Song et al (2022). – one act of impoliteness provokes another, and participants seem to engage in one-upmanship to outdo each other's profanity. In such online flame wars, using swear words serves almost as a weapon or shield: each side tries to assert dominance or save face by showing they can insult more aggressively. This unfortunately often derails any substantive discussion. What begins as a disagreement about content can devolve into an exchange of vulgarities, as seen in that thread.

Communicative Functions of Swearing in Context

Our CDA of the comments revealed several key communicative functions for which these Chinese college students employed swear words. These functions align with many identified in prior swearing research, but some are shaped by the specific online context and Chinese cultural nuances. Below this study discuss each major function, providing examples from the data and linking them to theoretical concepts:

Insulting others / Face attack: By far the most common function of swearing in our sample was to directly insult or put down another person. In terms of politeness theory, this corresponds to a positive impoliteness strategy –

it aims to damage the target's positive face (their basic need to be liked or respected). Approximately half of all the swear word instances this study recorded (nearly all uses of words like **傻逼**, 脑残 "brain-dead," **垃圾** "trash," etc.) were directed squarely at a specific individual – whether it was the video creator or another commenter in a discussion. For example, one user wrote: "发表这种言论的都是傻逼。" ("Anyone who voices this kind of opinion is a shabi.") In this comment, the speaker uses **傻逼** as a broad brush insult, effectively saying that anyone holding the opposing view is stupid. This not only vents the commenter's anger or disagreement, but also strategically works to undermine the credibility and social worth of those on the other side of the argument. The function here is not just emotional release; it's an attempt to discredit and demean the target (or even a whole group of people) in front of an audience. In Brown & Levinson's terms, the commenter performed a bald-on-record FTA (calling someone a derogatory name) with no politeness redress whatsoever, indicating they had little interest in preserving the other's face. From an impoliteness perspective, this is a clear on-record face attack: it explicitly uses taboo or abusive language to make the target feel bad or appear inferior. The intended perlocutionary effect is to hurt the target's feelings and/or to lower their standing in the eyes of others. In some cases, the insulter even compounded the affront by adopting a contemptuous or mocking tone – for instance, adding "**哈哈**" ("haha") or "LOL" after the insult, or using a laughing-face emoji. Such additions emphasize the speaker's scorn and ridicule of the target, combining the face-attack with a hint of sarcasm or mock impoliteness (laughing at the target's expense). These insulting uses of swearing fulfill what Jay (2009) described as the functions of showing contempt and provoking the target. Not surprisingly, they most often appeared in heated debates or in response to content/behavior that the commenter strongly disapproved of. The power dynamic inherent in these instances is telling: by insulting someone, the speaker is attempting to claim a one-up position ("I am better or smarter than you") – in essence, a dominance move within the interaction.

Expressing frustration or anger (venting): The next significant function this study observed was swearing as a way to express strong negative emotion about a situation, rather than to attack a person. In these cases, the profanity was not aimed at someone but was more self-directed or impersonal, serving as an emotional outlet. For example, under a video about difficult university professors, one frustrated student commented: "**我草，我的**毕业论文导师也是这么变态！" ("Wocao, my thesis advisor is like this too – so perverse!"). Here **我草** (a variant of **卧槽**, essentially "f**k" used as an exclamation) is used as an emotive interjection. The commenter is not insulting the advisor directly with a swear word – they do call the advisor 变态 ("perverse," a negative adjective but not a profanity) – yet they prefaced their statement with a vulgar exclamation **我草** to convey the depth of their frustration. In other words, the swear word is serving a cathartic purpose: it helps the speaker vent intense annoyance and bond with others who might feel the same exasperation. This use of profanity corresponds to what some researchers identify as the cathartic function of swearing – it can relieve anger, pain, or stress. Neurolinguistic studies (as noted by Jay, 2009) have even suggested that swearing can activate emotional brain pathways that help diminish the sensation of pain or frustration. In our data, such venting swears were common when commenters reacted to something frustrating or upsetting depicted in the video or discussed in the thread. The profanity underscored how strongly they felt, essentially intensifying their expression of displeasure or outrage about the situation. Importantly, unlike the insulting function, the venting function did not target another user's face; it was about the speaker's own emotional state.

Humor and sarcasm: A noteworthy subset of comments used swear words in a deliberately humorous or ironic way. In these cases, the swearing was intended to amuse others who share a certain understanding, rather than to genuinely attack or offend. For instance, under a prank video of a student scaring his roommate, one comment read: "**室友吓得直接懵：'卧槽'都喊不出来哈哈**" ("The roommate was so scared he was dumbfounded – he couldn't even shout 'wocao,' haha"). In this comment, the person imagines the scared roommate being at a loss for words – too frightened to even utter the common expletive **卧槽**, and then adds a "**哈哈**" (laughing) to indicate it's a joke. Here the swear word is part of a punchline. This study saw many instances where humorous uses of swearing were accompanied by laughter indicators (textual "haha" or emojis like) or other internet catchphrases, clearly signaling that the intent was playful. This kind of usage reflects what Culpeper later termed "off-record impoliteness" or mock impoliteness – the form of an impolite expression is there, but without sincere hostile intent. The audience, if attuned to the context, recognizes it as banter or sarcasm rather than aggression. In our data, swearing-as-humor often relied on shared cultural references or absurdity for its effect. It sometimes

overlapped with in-group slang, where the shock value of a swear word is mined for comedic effect. Socially, these humorous profanity uses can actually be face-building within the group: everyone "in on the joke" shares a laugh, which can build positive face collectively (a sense of camaraderie and shared norm of not being too uptight). This study observed that TikTok users often appreciate witty or funny comments, even if they contain swear words, as long as the target is not an actual person present or the tone is clearly tongue-in-cheek.

Group solidarity and identity: Some instances of swearing served as a marker of solidarity or group identity among the commenters. In these cases, using a swear word signaled a kind of cultural intimacy or solidarity – an understanding that "we're all straightforward speakers here." For example, under a video discussing the stresses of job hunting, one user lamented: "**他**妈的工作怎么这么难找" ("Why the hell is it so hard to find a job?"). Several other users replied in agreement (some upvoting the comment, others echoing the sentiment in their own words). The initial commenter's use of **他**妈的 ("the hell") in complaining about the job market likely resonated with others' frustrations. By swearing, the speaker set a tone of candid, unfiltered emotion ("I'm not going to sugarcoat it, this really sucks"), which invited others to commiserate. In responding with their own informal language or simply indicating support, those others were effectively saying "I feel you" — thereby a small community of shared feeling was formed in that thread. In such contexts, swearing actually helped build solidarity: it was a linguistic signal that the speaker is being genuine and letting off steam, and it can encourage a sense of we're all in this together among similarly affected peers. Another aspect of solidarity-building is the use of playful insults or vulgar slang among friends. Much as in Western youth culture, Chinese young people sometimes address close friends with mock-insulting nicknames or phrases that, taken literally, are impolite. For instance, calling a friend "**沙雕**" (shādiāo, lit. "sand sculpture," which is internet slang homophonous with "stupid dickhead") as a joke, or saying "滚啦" ("oh, shoo/go away~") to a friend in a teasing manner. Such language, far from causing offense between friends, can actually reinforce closeness – it implies the relationship is strong enough to withstand taboo language, and that both parties understand it's affectionate in intent. This study saw hints of this in comments where peers who appeared to know each other used insults that outsiders might misinterpret. This phenomenon ties into what some scholars call the "impoliteness as solidarity" paradox: within an in-group, impolite language can become a bonding mechanism.This is not confined to Chinese digital spaces. A remarkably similar pattern was observed in a study of Indonesian students by Setyaningtias et al. (2023), who identified "characteriz[ing] intimacy" as a key function of swearing. They argue that when used among peers in a close relationship, such language is spoken "for fun and have no intention of insulting or hurting other people's feelings," thereby reinforcing social bonds.In our data, this was evident when commenters used profanity not to attack an outsider, but to show shared humor or tough love with someone they presumably knew. It creates an egalitarian solidarity ("we're all blunt friends here") among those who participate. Of course, this same behavior simultaneously creates an unwelcoming climate for those who are not part of the in-group or who prefer more civil interactions. Newcomers or more sensitive individuals might find such pervasive swearing off-putting, not realizing it's "just how this group talks."

Intensification and emphasis: Many commenters inserted swear words simply to intensify their statements or convey a higher degree of whatever sentiment they were expressing. This function overlaps with the expressive (venting) one, but it is worth distinguishing: here the focus is on amplifying content rather than just releasing emotion. For example, consider the comment: "这个宿舍也太他妈干净了吧" ("This dorm room is just too f*ing clean**!"). The comment was actually a compliment marveling at how clean a showcased dorm was; the swear **他**妈的 is used to underscore how clean – in essence meaning "extremely." Similarly, a user wrote: "**笑死，我靠**，这也可以？！" ("Dead from laughing. Wkao, this actually works?!"). **我靠** (wǒ kào, a toned-down variant of **卧槽**) in that sentence is akin to a shocked "damn" used as an exclamatory filler. In both instances, the swear word doesn't introduce new propositional content – it doesn't add a new idea, but it modulates the force of the statement, making the reaction seem much stronger. In positive reactions (like praising the clean dorm or expressing astonishment at something funny), the swear word paradoxically coexists with a positive sentiment. Under a traditional politeness lens, this is puzzling because swearing is "impolite," yet here it's used in the context of praise or excitement. However, within the peer group norm on TikTok, using a bit of profanity to say "this is really awesome" can actually make the praise feel more genuine, informal, and enthusiastic. A

very polite or formal compliment might come off as sarcastic or out-of-place in this casual space, whereas throwing in a **他**妈的 or **我靠** signals that the speaker is emotionally invested and "speaking from the heart" without filter. This aligns with observations that taboo words can effectively intensify emotional communication. In negative reactions, similarly, an intensifier like "**真的**烦死我了" ("it really f**king annoyed me to death") makes the complaint more forceful than "I'm very annoyed." Either way—positive or negative—the swear doesn't fundamentally change the meaning of the sentence; it boosts the intensity. This study found this intensification function was common in comments that were not directly replying to someone else, but rather remarking on the video or topic itself. It shows that for these students, peppering a statement with a "**他**妈的" or blurting out a "**卧槽**" is simply part of a colloquial register they find appropriate for the TikTok context – it's a way to show strong feeling quickly and casually. In some sense, it may even be perceived as more sincere or unfiltered than a clean, polished statement. "This shows that online youth culture values being 'real' and straightforward, not overly formal." and not overly sanitized in one's expression. An overly polite or academic tone could be seen as stiff or disingenuous on TikTok, whereas a bit of swearing marks the speaker as a "regular person" who is emotionally engaged. Thus, the intensification function of swearing ties into identity performance – it signals membership in the blunt, free-speaking TikTok youth community and shows that the commenter is not putting on airs.

Group dynamics and mimicry: While not a separate "function" of swearing per se, this study observed patterns suggesting that the use of swear words was influenced by group interaction dynamics in comment threads. In discussions with multiple participants, if one user introduced a strong swear word into the thread, subsequent replies often also contained swears – either echoing the same term or escalating to an even stronger one. In other words, impolite language tended to trigger more impolite language, creating a feedback loop. For instance, in a thread about an online cheating scandal, the top comment expressed outrage with a swear: "这种人渣，封号算便宜他，操" ("This kind of scum — banning his account is letting him off easy, fk."). A reply to this comment voiced agreement and added its own profanity: "**就是，一点教**训都没有，他妈的气死我了" ("Exactly, he hasn't learned a lesson at all — damn it, I'm so angry I could die"). A further reply then upped the ante by insulting the cheater: "这种骗子脑子有坑，傻逼玩意" ("This kind of swindler has a hole in his brain, f*ing idiot thing"). Here this study see a progression: the first comment used **操** to emphasize anger, the second comment mirrored the outrage with **他**妈的, and the third went full-on with **傻逼**. This kind of piling on suggests a peer mimicry effect, where once an uncivil tone is set, others follow suit, perhaps feeling it's acceptable or even expected to use similar language. It also reflects a sort of one-upmanship – each participant may feel pressure to match or exceed the previous level of profanity to assert their stance or emotions just as strongly. This dynamic is reminiscent of the "contagion" of offensive speech: swearing begets more swearing. In group psychology terms, it may serve a bonding function among those on the same side of an argument (we're all passionately hurling invective at a common enemy), but it certainly heightens the hostility of the exchange. The net result is that a thread can quickly become saturated with profanity, making the overall tone quite aggressive and potentially deterring any more measured voices from chiming in. Essentially, group dynamics can amplify impoliteness once it starts, as users influence each other's linguistic choices in the heat of the moment.

Toward the end of our analysis, this study also considered some broader social observations that emerged from these patterns. The online space perhaps offers a venting arena for these students – a place where they feel free from the conversational restraints they might have offline, and thus they speak in an "unsanitized" manner. It might also reflect a generational shift: younger Chinese netizens, having grown up immersed in the internet's candid culture, may be less invested in traditional polite speech norms than older generations. They inhabit a global-ish meme culture where being sarcastic, blunt, or sprinkling in swearing is seen as more genuine, relatable, or even humorous. Some scholars have noted that Chinese internet language (网络语言) is often subversive and irreverent, filled with puns, creative curses, and satire, as a way for youth to carve out an identity distinct from the formally regulated, face-conscious discourse expected in more official contexts. Our study's micro-level look at TikTok comments aligns with that macro-level observation. In a sense, every casual "**傻逼**" hurled in a TikTok thread is a tiny challenge to the Confucian norm of measured, deferential speech. While this

study wouldn't exaggerate it as any kind of grand political rebellion, it does represent a cultural development in how communication is done among a segment of Chinese youth.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to examine impoliteness in the form of swear word usage among Chinese college students on TikTok, using Brown and Levinson's politeness theory as a lens alongside modern impoliteness scholarship. Through an analysis of 30 TikTok comments, this study found that swearing is a pervasive feature of these students' online interactions, serving multiple discourse functions ranging from attacking others to bonding with peers. The most frequently used swear words in our sample include highly vulgar terms (e.g. 傻逼, 操你妈) that specifically target intelligence and family – underscoring that Chinese impoliteness often strikes at core face concerns like personal respect and family honor. This study observed that many of the impolite comments were direct face-threatening acts performed with minimal or no politeness mitigation (for instance, blunt insults and commands), illustrating a predominance of bald, on-record impoliteness strategies in this TikTok context. Moreover, impoliteness in the threads tended to become collectively reinforced: one user's offensive remark frequently triggered a cascade of similarly impolite responses. This dynamic reflects what Song et al. (2022) described as a contagion effect – a single instance of offensive speech can prompt mimicry and escalation, rapidly creating a hostile communicative environment. While such hostile exchanges may be exhilarating or cathartic for participants in the heat of the moment, they can also alienate or intimidate more neutral or polite users who might otherwise engage.

From a theoretical standpoint, our findings affirm the relevance of Brown & Levinson's concept of face in understanding why certain swear words are so incendiary: these words often explicitly challenge or deny someone's face. Calling someone "trash," for example, denies them positive face (the desire for approval), while telling someone to "get lost" flouts considerations of negative face (the desire not to be imposed upon). At the same time, our results highlight the need to extend beyond classical politeness theory to fully account for intentional face-attacks and the social functions they serve. Impoliteness theories (as developed by Culpeper, Bousfield, and others) provided a useful framework for categorizing much of what this study saw – this study found clear instances in our data of positive impoliteness (direct insults, name-calling, profanity), negative impoliteness (threats, blunt dismissals), and occasional mock politeness or sarcasm. Moreover, the data emphasize that not all impoliteness is purely antagonistic or malicious. Context is crucial in determining meaning. A string of profanities exchanged among friends might actually reinforce their bond (illustrating the impoliteness-as-solidarity paradox this study discussed), whereas the same words between strangers would be fighting words. This suggests that researchers and observers should be cautious in labeling a discourse "toxic" or "impolite" based solely on the presence of swear words; understanding the participants' relationship, intent, and shared norms is essential. The exact same utterance can be either playfully bonding or aggressively face-attacking, depending on context.

In terms of practical implications, this study sheds light on the communication norms of Chinese youth in online spaces – insights that could be valuable for educators, community moderators, and even language instructors. It appears that Chinese college students may compartmentalize their linguistic behavior: being quite polite and formal in offline, face-to-face settings (e.g., with professors or strangers), while adopting a much rougher, more straightforward persona in online peer environments like TikTok. Educators and parents concerned about students' use of foul language online should recognize that, for many young people, swearing can function as a form of social expression or stress relief among peers. That said, the prevalence of derogatory and aggressive language is not without issues. It can contribute to cyberbullying, miscommunications, and an overall decline in the civility of discourse. Therefore, one recommendation is to incorporate digital literacy and civility training for young adults. Such training can acknowledge the realities of online speech (i.e., it's normal to express oneself informally and passionately online) but also encourage reflection on language choices. For example, making students aware of how constant negativity and personal attacks can affect the community's well-being, and teaching strategies for disagreeing without resorting to ad hominem insults.

Social media platforms like TikTok might also consider subtle design interventions to encourage more positive interactions. This study do not advocate heavy-handed censorship of swear words – users are adept at inventing

new coded language to evade filters (as seen with homophones and acronyms like "NMSL"). However, gentle reminders or nudges could be explored. For instance, if a thread is detected to have a high level of profanity or heated exchanges, the app could display a small reminder about respectful communication or pause before posting a particularly offensive comment, asking "Are you sure you want to say this?" Some Chinese platforms already automatically replace certain swear words with asterisks or playful symbols; while users find ways around this, it at least signals an attempt to moderate the tone and can make users momentarily aware of their language. Even minor friction in the interface (like requiring an extra tap to confirm a rude comment) might reduce impulsive insults.

Another recommendation stems from our observation about humor and creativity in swearing: communities might harness that linguistic creativity in positive ways. The energy that goes into crafting elaborate insults or witty vulgar wordplay could be channeled into humor that doesn't target individuals maliciously. For example, community challenges or trends could be promoted that celebrate clever wit without nastiness – similar to "roasting" content in a good-natured way. Given that many students clearly enjoy banter and joking around with outrageous language, providing outlets for venting or roasting that have explicit rules (e.g., no personal attacks on non-consenting targets) might help. Some online forums, for instance, have dedicated threads where users can just rant or curse about their day in a "no judgment" zone – a kind of cathartic space separate from interactions with others. TikTok or related platforms could experiment with something similar, such as a feature where you can post something that only you and close friends see (essentially to blow off steam privately), thereby reducing the impulse to unleash those feelings in public at a random stranger.

For future research, it is important to note that this study was limited in scope – this study analyzed 30 comments from one platform and a specific demographic group. A logical next step would be a larger-scale corpus analysis of impoliteness on Chinese social media, which could quantify trends over time and across different communities. For example, it would be revealing to compare profanity use in platforms or forums heavily used by college students versus those with a more general user base, or to see how impoliteness manifests on TikTok versus text-centric platforms like Weibo or Baidu Tieba. Additionally, surveys or interviews with Chinese college students about their own perceptions of swearing could provide valuable insight: Do they view their frequent swearing online as impolite or just normal peer language? How do they feel when they receive such comments – do they shrug it off as banter, or do they take offense? Understanding the user perspective could tell us whether the impact of these words is as harsh as an outside observer might assume, or if it's mitigated by a shared subcultural understanding (much as some Western studies have found that frequent swearing among friends doesn't cause offense within that group). Comparative studies would also be beneficial – for instance, comparing Chinese and English-speaking college students on TikTok or other social media to highlight any cultural differences in impoliteness strategies. Are English-speaking students more likely to use sarcasm or less likely to use family-based insults than Chinese students? Preliminary intuition and cultural norms would suggest yes (English profanity leans more toward sexual and scatological references, with fewer family honor insults), but solid data would help confirm such differences and test the universality of certain impoliteness patterns.

In conclusion, impoliteness in the form of swearing among Chinese college students on TikTok is a multifaceted phenomenon. It functions as both a scalpel and a glue – cutting at people's face in moments of conflict, yet at times bonding peers together in laughter or mutual catharsis. It challenges classical notions of politeness, especially in an online world where traditional social constraints are loosened. Understanding this behavior requires a holistic approach that considers the linguistic content, the context of the interaction, the intent of the speaker, and the effect on the audience. While such language may be jarring to some, it is clearly part of the communicative repertoire of a new generation negotiating identity, emotion, and power in digital spaces. As sociolinguists, this study recognize it as a legitimate object of study – one that can reveal much about changing norms and values in communication. As members of society, this study might strive for a balance where freedom of expression does not devolve into wanton incivility. Encouraging reflection on language use,empathy for interlocutors (even those hiding behind avatars), and awareness of alternative ways to express disagreement are all steps toward healthier online discourse. Ultimately, swear words will never disappear – they are too ingrained in how humans express strong feelings – but perhaps their sting can be lessened and their misuse curbed by continuing to understand the why and how of their usage, as this study have attempted in this paper.

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APPENDIX

[1] Look at your childish figure that makes people have no desire

[2] You have no talent in your life, your parents will shake their heads when they see you, and the king is your eternal glory

[3] You must be an ugly and inferior trash, like to argue and have a fragile heart, and you are the only one who can curse people?

[4] Have I replied to you? You are talking about me here. Is it because you are too ugly offline that no one cares about you, and you like to show your presence online

[5] It would be strange if you are not stupid, otherwise how could you come up with such a comment?

[6] This is fake, illiterate

[7] Don’t you know how to respond when others greet you? If you are uneducated, it will be useless no matter how fast you swim, not to mention that you don’t swim very fast

[8] I just want to scold you SB

[9] Fatty, are you sick?! Did your whole family die?? You are commenting for nothing, you idiot, if you can't comment, don't come, you troll

[10] Password, I don't care

[11] Damn, you are so handsome

[12] Dong Zhuo is ashamed of himself

[13] None of them are human

[14] Damn, this move of Junior Brother Wa is too cruel

[15] Damn, it's not dead water, it's still dark!

[16] It takes so long to reply to a message, are you dead?

[17] Damn, is this true?

[18] Our little Tangren is like this

[19] Hey, you are really a talent

[20] If there is really a player with a dog protection card, it is hard to doubt that he is a human

[21] No hands and no feet? Don't adults know how to work?

[22] If you were born like this, what will happen to your family?

[23] Byd, what you said is even more ridiculous than a novel. You are really amazing.

[24] You are a human being. I can't stand it.

[25] Did you take this photo with your door lock?

[26] This is so funny. I laughed like a retard in the middle of the night.

[27] Fuck your dad. Do you plan to play the game you made yourself?

[28] Why do you like to grin so much? Do you think you are authoritative when you curse?

[29] Are you a jerk for doing this?

[30] The stinky outsider is begging for food again.