

Impoliteness as a Social Strategy in Online Communication among China Chinese Youths: Resistance, Solidarity, and Power on BILIBILI

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Chinese youths employ impolite language as a strategy to resist authority on the video-sharing platform Bilibili. It further investigates how such language use contributes to the emergence of China's "cancel culture" and reshapes power dynamics in digital spaces. Drawing on Culpeper's impoliteness taxonomy and Goffman's theory of face, the analysis reveals that users frequently adopt positive impoliteness tactics to challenge public figures, undermine their moral legitimacy, and mobilize collective disapproval. The findings suggest that online impoliteness functions not merely as personal expression but as a powerful discursive tool for grassroots resistance and the reconfiguration of sociopolitical hierarchies.

Keywords: Impoliteness; China Chinese Youths; Resistance; Cancel Culture; Power Dynamics; Impoliteness Theory; Face Theory

INTRODUCTION

Background of the research

In recent years, impoliteness has become increasingly pervasive in online discourse, especially among young users on interactive platforms. On international platforms such as TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), and Discord, overtly offensive language—including explicit profanity—is often visible and, in many cases, unmoderated. However, the situation in China differs due to stricter censorship policies. Rather than using direct expletives, Chinese youths frequently employ homophonic substitutions, emojis, or culturally embedded memes to convey insults and aggression without triggering moderation filters.

Bilibili, a popular video-sharing platform among Chinese youth, has become a prominent site for such expression. Users often engage in linguistic conflicts in the comment sections or produce satirical and confrontational videos targeting public figures or institutions. These interactions are not always purely emotional outbursts. Instead, many users strategically employ impoliteness to challenge authority, build peer solidarity, or mobilize collective sentiment. This behavior signals a broader shift in communication norms, where traditional values of deference and indirectness are increasingly supplanted by face-threatening language strategies.

To better understand this shift, it is important to consider the cultural and theoretical underpinnings of interpersonal communication in China. The concept of "face" (面子 *mianzi*), which Goffman (1967) defines as the social image a person claims during interactions, is deeply embedded in Chinese society. As Qi (2011) notes, maintaining face is a core component of both personal and institutional relationships in Chinese culture. Yet, on digital platforms like Bilibili, this value appears to be actively contested or redefined, especially by younger generations. The deliberate use of impoliteness can thus be seen not merely as social deviance but as a discursive strategy to negotiate identity, authority, and moral legitimacy in online public spaces.

This research investigates how impoliteness is employed by Chinese youths on Bilibili to express resistance, shape group identity, and reconfigure power relations. By analyzing one high-profile case, the study aims to explore the motivations behind impolite discourse and its role in the formation of China's emerging cancel culture.

Description of Bilibili

Bilibili, nicknamed B Site, is a Chinese online video sharing website based in Shanghai where users can submit, view, and add overlaid commentary on videos (Lyu, 2024; Chew, 2023). The platform started as a community for anime fans, but has since grown into a mainstream Chinese video platform with a predominantly young user base. By the end of 2024, the main users are concentrated under the age of 30, with users born in the 1990s and 2000s accounting for as much as 78.67%. Specifically, users aged 18-24 account for 60.28%, and users aged 25 to 30 account for 16.71%. The average age of users is 22.8 years old, with a high proportion of college students (Xun Bei Technology, 2025). On Bilibili, users can actively participate in content creation and discussion with the help of features such as video overlaid comments. And Chinese youths from China are very keen to express their opinions in video comment section and "dan mu" (overlaid comments). In other words, the content of the platform's comment section or "dan mu" reflects the overall trend of online language use among contemporary China Chinese youths.

Research Objectives

Based on the research background, this research aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine that impoliteness is used as a form of resistance in Bilibili.
2. To explore the role of impoliteness in shaping China "cancel culture" and online discourse.
3. To explore the relationship between impoliteness and power dynamics in China Chinese youths' social media interactions.

By answering these questions, this paper aims to explain the role of impoliteness language among China Chinese youths, its impact on the shaping of China's "cancel culture", and the relationship between impoliteness and power dynamics through Culpeper's impoliteness theory and Goffman's face theory. In the following sections, we will review previous research, introduce relevant theoretical frameworks, explain the research methods, and introduce how to collect data.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous Studies

In the previous studies, Wang (2020) analyzed 22 Bilibili and AcFun videos that together yielded 1,564 impolite danmu utterances. Seven strategy types emerged, with overt, conventionalized formulae (especially insults and negative expressive) accounting for 84 percent of all cases. Motivational interviews revealed that users deploy impoliteness for entertainment, emotional release, opinion expression, and coalition-building. Lyu (2024) focused on 10 food videos from Bilibili and identified four super-strategies—bald-on-record, positive, negative, and sarcasm/mock politeness—with positive impoliteness used most frequently and subdividing into ten specific output moves. The author attributes this preference to emotional contagion among viewers and to asymmetrical power relations created by anonymity and platform affordances. Zhong (2018) extracted 5,873 impolite comments from a single, highly viral Sina Weibo post about celebrity tax fraud. Quantitative coding again showed four Culpeper strategies, led by positive impoliteness and followed closely by negative and bald-on-record attacks; no instances of "withhold politeness" were found. The study confirms the scalability of Culpeper's framework to large Chinese datasets, but also notes coder reliability difficulties with fine-grained distinctions.

Across danmu, bullet chats, and micro-blog comments, positive impoliteness consistently dominates, while sarcasm/mock politeness and withhold politeness appear least or not at all. Prior work converges on two enabling

factors: the low social cost of anonymous participation and the affordance of synchronous audience pooling, which together invite emotionally charged, face-threatening acts. However, three lacunae remain:

1. Resistance and cancel culture. Existing studies catalogue strategy frequencies but stop short of linking impoliteness to collective action such as boycotts or “cancelling,” leaving unanswered how face-attacks translate into reputational or material consequences for targets.
2. Power re-negotiation. Although Lyu (2024) highlights “power factors,” no study systematically models how impoliteness reshapes hierarchical relations between ordinary users, influencers, and state actors.
3. Comparative flashpoint analysis. Prior corpora draw either on routine entertainment content or a single scandal. A focused, case-centered approach that tracks one policy-related flashpoint over time could illuminate the dynamic sequencing of impoliteness tactics and their reception.

This research addresses these gaps by examining the most popular comments under the original Bilibili video “No Way—How Bai Yansong Views the Phenomenon of Split-Like Problems among Contemporary Young People”, combining Culpeper’s impoliteness taxonomy with Goffman’s face framework to show how Chinese young people use impoliteness as a weapon of resistance, solidarity, and power realignment in the formation of contemporary “cancel culture”.

Cancel culture” in China

“Cancel culture” as a phenomenon is gaining momentum in the United States. The term “Cancel” was first used by Neil Rogers of the band Chic in 1981, in a song called “Your Love Is Cancelled” that compared a breakup to the cancellation of a television show. (McGrady, 2021). It is seen as a social boycott movement, that is, someone is publicly boycotted and humiliated by the public on social media or other places for violating certain social norms, such as “making controversial remarks” (Tan, 2025). Ng (2022) pointed out that, cancelling has contributed to the identification of various kinds of misconduct around gender, race, and related concerns.

In the UK, Rowling was “cancelled” from Harry Potter commercial activities because of her remarks that were considered “transgender discrimination”, which caused protests and boycotts from the LGBT community. In the United States, Johnny Depp was boycotted by the media and netizens because of fabricated domestic violence, which caused him to lose his role in the upcoming film. Kanye West was boycotted by the media and the public for making racist and anti-Semitic remarks, which caused him to lose cooperation with a number of commercial brands, such as Adidas, Balenciaga, etc. These cases reflect the impact of “cancel culture” on Western social media platforms. Although “cancel culture” is very popular on Western social media, Western cancel culture usually has a high tolerance and comeback mechanism, and public figures are often able to rebuild their social image after a certain period of time (Ng, 2020).

Compared with the West, China’s “cancel culture” is more thorough. If a public figure triggers strong public opinion, government agencies and video platforms will intervene in public opinion, such as issuing official statements and banning accounts. Many “cancelled” stars or other public figures cannot rebuild their social image through social media after the public opinion disappears. For example, Zhai Tianlin, a Chinese actor, is popular for his “Doctor of Arts” identity. He was boycotted by China Chinese youths for academic fraud, and he lost his degree and was banned from the entertainment industry. Among the boycotts launched on Chinese social media, many are based on criticism of public figures’ morality, power, and boycotts of inappropriate political speech. Chew (2023) mentioned in his research that young Internet users, especially the so-called “xiao fen hong”, actively participate in the dissemination and implementation of nationalist discourse on social media. Therefore, China Chinese youths can be said to be the main force in shaping China’s “cancel culture”.

Theoretical Framework: Impoliteness, Face, and Power in Chinese Online Discourse

This research draws upon Culpeper’s impoliteness theory and Goffman’s face theory, integrating them into a unified analytical framework to investigate how Chinese youths use online impoliteness as a strategy of resistance, solidarity, and power negotiation on Bilibili.

Culpeper (2011) conceptualizes impoliteness not simply as the absence of politeness, but as linguistic behavior—either intentional or perceived—that causes offense, asserts dominance, or challenges social norms. His five-

part taxonomy includes: bald-on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm/mock politeness, and withhold politeness. This framework provides a structured lens to identify how impolite expressions function within interaction.

In the context of Bilibili, Culpeper's model is adapted to capture the creative, semi-coded, and affective nature of impoliteness on Chinese digital platforms. For example, users often substitute profanity with homophones, emojis, or cultural memes to bypass censorship while maintaining aggressive tone. Positive impoliteness is frequently observed through moral condemnation or the questioning of authority figures' legitimacy, while sarcasm/mock politeness mimics official speech or slogans in a parodic tone. The platform's algorithmic affordances—such as likes elevating impolite comments—further amplify these expressions, turning individual sentiment into visible, collective action.

To understand the social consequences of these acts, the study incorporates Goffman's (1967) face theory, which defines "face" as the public self-image individuals seek to uphold during interaction. In collectivist cultures like China, face is not solely personal but closely tied to group identity, moral alignment, and institutional legitimacy. Losing face in public—especially on highly visible platforms like Bilibili—can lead to social ostracism, reputational collapse, and even official sanctions. This is central to how "cancel culture" operates in the Chinese context: when a public figure violates perceived group norms, impolite comments often snowball into collective boycotts or moral denunciations.

Together, these two theories allow this study to analyze impoliteness not just as linguistic form, but as a socio-political act. Impoliteness becomes a discursive resource by which less powerful individuals—especially young people—contest hierarchies, disrupt elite narratives, and reclaim discourse power. Simultaneously, the concept of face explains why these attacks carry such moral and social weight, especially in an environment where online expression is public, performative, and politically charged.

By combining Culpeper's typology with Goffman's socio-cultural insights, this research establishes a comprehensive lens through which to understand how Chinese youths strategically deploy impoliteness to navigate power, express resistance, and shape digital social norms.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative research design, analyzing data through Culpeper's impoliteness theory and Goffman's face theory to explain how Chinese youths use impoliteness as a tool of resistance, the role of impoliteness in shaping China's "cancel culture", and the relationship between impoliteness and power dynamics in Bilibili's interactions to play a role of resistance, solidarity, and power. This part outlines the research methods, data collection methods, sampling methods and types, data analysis process, and ethical considerations about the research.

Research approach

This research adopts a qualitative content analysis approach, focusing on the impoliteness language used in the video comment section of Bilibili. The purpose is to classify and interpret these instances using Culpeper's (2011) five impoliteness strategies: (1) bald-on-record impoliteness, (2) negative impoliteness, (3) positive impoliteness, (4) sarcasm/mock politeness, and (5) withhold politeness.

The analysis follows a deductive coding approach, as the researchers applied an existing theoretical framework (Culpeper's taxonomy) to guide the classification of comments. All comments were manually coded by two independent coders without the use of coding software like NVivo. Manual coding was selected due to the manageable sample size (N=50) and the need for close linguistic and contextual interpretation of each comment.

To ensure the reliability of the categorization, the study conducted an inter-rater reliability check. Two coders independently coded all 50 comments, and any discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus. The level of agreement was measured using Cohen's Kappa, and a coefficient above 0.80 was considered

acceptable to demonstrate coding consistency. This process helped to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the data interpretation.

Sampling Method

This study adopts a purposive sampling strategy. The data was drawn from the comment section of a Bilibili video titled “No Way—How Bai Yansong Views the Phenomenon of Split-Like Problems among Contemporary Young People.” This video was selected based on its high public attention, its controversial subject matter (a well-known news commentator discussing youth mental health in a perceived patronizing tone), and the presence of polarized viewer reactions, as reflected in thousands of emotionally charged comments and widespread sharing. These features collectively meet the criteria for a “controversial” video, making it suitable for exploring impoliteness as resistance.

To select relevant comments, the “Sort by popularity” function was used to sort comments based on the number of likes, ensuring that only the most visible and impactful responses were included. The researchers aimed to collect 50 comments for in-depth analysis.

Prior to formal coding using Culpeper’s taxonomy, the researchers conducted a preliminary screening based on recognizable markers of impoliteness. Comments were flagged if they exhibited aggressive tone, sarcasm, direct insults, or moral criticism. These were identified through key linguistic cues such as imperative verbs, rhetorical questions, irony, and evaluative adjectives. Only those comments that clearly demonstrated impolite or face-threatening content were included for final analysis. This pre-screening ensured the corpus was relevant while allowing Culpeper’s framework to be systematically applied in the subsequent coding phase.

Ethical Considerations

All data comes from public comments on Bilibili. Due to the small number of users’ fans, the video platform will not publicly display users’ personal information, such as their names. Therefore, no private information that needs to be protected was obtained in this study. However, out of respect for the commenters and possible misunderstandings or troubles caused by the language content. The researchers anonymized the nicknames of all commenters who used impolite language collected, and only used numbers to organize, sort and analyze the collected comments. Therefore, this research does not involve intervention on the participants, and all content has been made public, so the risk to the commenters is minimal.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Data Analysis

The full corpus consists of the 50 most liked comments containing impolite language, selected from the comment section of the Bilibili video titled “No way—How Bai Yansong Views the Phenomenon of Split-Like Problems among Contemporary Young People.” These comments were exported to an Excel spreadsheet and manually coded using Culpeper’s (2011) five-part impoliteness taxonomy: (1) bald-on-record impoliteness, (2) negative impoliteness, (3) positive impoliteness, (4) sarcasm/mock politeness, and (5) withhold politeness.

The coding process followed these stages:

Initial reading and segment marking: Two coders independently read the comments, identified face-threatening elements, and assigned strategy types.

Translation and annotation: To aid interpretation and cross-validation, the original Chinese comments were translated into English with contextual annotations (e.g., “站着说话不腰疼 / Standing and talking without back pain” → bald-on-record; “真的感觉这是现在的何不食肉糜 / I really feel like this is the current ‘why not eat meat’” → sarcasm/mock politeness).

Quantification: The frequencies and percentages of each strategy were calculated in Excel based on the total corpus size (N = 50).

To ensure inter-coder reliability, Cohen's Kappa was calculated on the independently coded data. The resulting value was 0.83, indicating a strong level of agreement between coders and reinforcing the consistency of the analysis.

Although the sample size is limited to 50 comments, this number was deemed sufficient for qualitative depth and data saturation. Saturation was reached when no new impoliteness patterns or strategy types emerged during preliminary screening and coding. Additionally, the high visibility of these 50 top-liked comments ensures their representativeness in reflecting dominant user sentiments and linguistic strategies within the platform's discourse environment.

Results

The analysis identified the frequency distribution of impoliteness strategies used in the 50 selected comments, coded according to Culpeper's (2011) five-part taxonomy. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table1 Frequency of impoliteness strategies in the sampled comments (N = 50)

Impoliteness Strategy	n	% of corpus
Positive impoliteness	20	40 %
Sarcasm / mock politeness	16	32 %
Bald-on-record impoliteness	13	26 %
Negative impoliteness	1	2 %
Withhold politeness	0	0 %

Positive impoliteness was the most frequently observed strategy, followed by sarcasm/mock politeness and bald-on-record impoliteness. Negative impoliteness occurred only once, and no instances of withhold politeness were found in the sample.

Discussion

Positive impoliteness emerged as the most frequently used strategy, typically involving moral criticism and explicit disapproval (e.g., “最他吗讨厌白岩松这种居高临下的姿态 / I hate Bai Yansong's condescending attitude the most”). Sarcasm/mock politeness was also common, parodying official rhetoric to express discontent (“新时代的何不食肉糜 / Why not eat meat in the new era?”). These contrast with bald-on-record impoliteness, which appeared in shorter, imperative challenges to legitimacy (e.g., “能说人话吗 / Can you speak human language?”).

Rather than simply venting emotion, users predominantly employ positive and sarcastic impoliteness strategies to delegitimize Bai Yansong's discourse authority. These comments often target his perceived moral failings and social detachment, reframing his public persona from respected journalist to out-of-touch figure. Through this linguistic resistance, Chinese youths contest top-down narratives and reposition themselves as active participants in the construction of public discourse.

The vast majority of the 50 comments exhibit themes of resistance, satire, or devaluation directed at Bai Yansong. This is consistent with the Western model that cumulative face attacks lead to reputational damage, but here the process unfolds faster and more thoroughly: once the host's moral stance is exposed, users move seamlessly toward collective ostracism. The data thus confirms the claim that impoliteness is a catalyst for China's “cancel culture”. In this culture, the intensity of public shaming is amplified by the virality of video platforms, and these emotional, inflammatory impolite language may resonate and respond to more people as the video spreads.

Although public figures enjoy discourse power due to the attention they receive, these comments in the comment section reverse and reposition the relationship between public figures and the public's discourse power. Likes push these comments using impoliteness language to the top, challenging the discourse power, that is, giving

priority to the audience's discourse over the public figures. These comments using impoliteness language portray Bai Yansong as someone out of touch with reality, depriving him of his moral authority, and the same comments ("何不食肉糜"/Why don't you eat meat?) together with the number of likes together highlight group cohesion. In this case, Bai Yansong, as a news authority, and the commentator, as an audience, should have more power in this relationship, but the China Chinese youths' use of impoliteness to attack his moral and social image successfully repositioned power, allowing the audience with less actual power in this relationship to resist the more powerful authority.

Limitations

This research has certain limitations. First, the research only selected 50 comments containing impolite language in a video comment section as a sample. The sample size is small and may not fully reflect the overall use and diversity of impoliteness language on the Bilibili platform. Since the content of the comments is affected by factors such as the specific video theme, the influence of the publisher, and the composition of the audience, the research results may also be biased and lack representativeness. Secondly, the research used purposive sampling, which helps to focus on typical impolite language but may also introduce subjective bias, making the sample selection lack randomness and representativeness. In addition, since the video platform does not specifically represent the age of users, some of the comments collected in this research may not be posted by young people, which will affect the conclusions of the research.

CONCLUSION

This research aims to explain how Chinese young people use impoliteness on the Bilibili platform as a resistance strategy, a driving force of "resistance culture", and a lever to renegotiate power. By coding the 50 most liked comments under the video "No way - How does Bai Yansong view the phenomenon of contemporary young people's split personality" using Culpepper's five-part classification method and interpreting them using Goffman's "face" framework.

When China Chinese youths used impoliteness, positive impoliteness (40 %) and sarcasm/mock politeness (32 %) dominated, while bald-on-record attacks (26 %) served as sharp punctuations; negative impoliteness was rare and withhold politeness absent. Therefore, China Chinese youths viewed impoliteness strategies as a means of directly resisting authority. More than two-thirds of the comments are discrediting Bai Yansong's public image and morality. Impoliteness acts as a catalyst, emotional and inflammatory remarks, attracting more audiences, while accelerating the collapse of his reputation, forming a Chinese "cancel culture" characterized by rapid crowd gathering and limited ways to make a comeback. It is this group boycott activity caused by impoliteness that has caused the inversion of power. As the less powerful party in the relationship, the audience gains the right to speak, allowing them to resist the authority with more powerful discourse.

Although the research has its shortcomings, such as the small size of the corpus and the focus on specific policies; even so, the evidence shows that impoliteness is a social strategy that helps young netizens in contemporary China challenge authority, shape common identities, and regulate public morality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Future Research, Expand the data horizon. Examine multiple flashpoints across time and platforms (e.g., Weibo, Douyin) and incorporate multimodal cues (emoji, GIFs, voiceovers) to test whether the dominance of positive impoliteness generalizes. Combine methods. Pair qualitative coding with network analytics (likes, repost paths) or sentiment tracking to measure how linguistic tactics translate into reputational or policy outcomes. Probe audience reception. Survey lurkers as well as commenters to explore silent approval, moral disengagement, and the psychological costs of participating in cancel culture.

For Platform Designers and Moderators, Context-sensitive moderation. Rather than blanket bans on taboo words, use adaptive filters that weigh intent, satire, and conversational norms, reducing over-censorship while curbing targeted harassment. Visibility nudges. Experiment with "cool-down" timers or staggered comment displays

during flashpoints to discourage impulsive face-threats and foster reflective dialogue.

For Educators and Media-Literacy Programmed, Critical digital citizenship. Integrate modules on impoliteness tactics, face theory, and cancel-culture dynamics into high-school and university curricula so that students recognize both the expressive power and potential harms of online shaming. Emotion-regulation skills. Teach youths practical strategies (reframing, timed response delays) to balance righteous anger with constructive engagement.

For Policymakers, Nuanced governance. Support transparent, proportionate content-regulation frameworks that distinguish between legitimate dissent and coordinated abuse, safeguarding space for civic critique while protecting individual dignity. By pursuing these lines of action, stakeholders can better understand—and possibly reshape—the volatile but influential role that impoliteness now plays in China’s rapidly evolving digital public sphere.

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