

# Impoliteness Responses to Immorality in Online Comments: A Case from *Sina Weibo*

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## Abstract

This study investigates impoliteness responses to immorality in online comments through a case involving a man repeatedly verbally abusing two construction workers because their work clothes were stained with dust on Line 5 of the Beijing subway on April 17, 2025, posted by *Hong Xing News*, a news agency in China, on *Sina Weibo*, a popular social media platform in China. The analysis examines how *Sina Weibo* users make impoliteness responses in this context, and the real reason behind these comments, in terms of morality. The findings reveal that these *Sina Weibo* users employ 13 impoliteness response strategies in total, including three broad strategies and 12 subcategories. In addition, the real reason behind these comments is the man's violation of moral principles of equality, and laborers should be held in high esteem, highlighting the *Sina Weibo* users' strong determination to condemn immorality.

## Keywords

Impoliteness Responses, Online Comments, Strategies, Morality, *Sina Weibo*

## 1. Introduction

Computer-mediated communication (CMC), defined as “human interactions occurring through the use of devices such as computers, tablets, and smartphones” (Hardaker & McGlashan, 2016: p. 81), is usually operated through social media which “provides a platform for sharing content with an unprecedented freedom and ease” (Tähtinen, 2024: p. 1), compared to face-to-face communication. Also, due to “the equality and openness of online communication, people are no longer subject to the politeness norms in face-to-face communication, they can thus express their opinions, and even make malicious attacks such as abuse and slander at will” (Chen & Ran, 2019: p. 48), free from the barriers of time and space. That is to say, the comments of online users can be either polite or impolite. The present

study focused on the latter. According to Culpeper (2011: p. 23), impoliteness is “a negative attitude towards specific behaviours occurring in specific contexts”, and the “judgements of impoliteness stem from deviations to expected behaviour” (McNab & Mavrou, 2025: p. 3) that is viewed as “part of the moral order” (Parvaresh & Tayebi, 2018: p. 91), or morality. As pointed out by Watts (2003: p. 253), “most of us are far more likely to recognise and comment on impolite than on polite behaviour”, in other words, the violation of morality will probably result in impoliteness responses.

Although “impoliteness has been a topic of great interest in the field of language and communication” (Gao & Liu, 2023: p. 32), comparatively little work has been focusing on impoliteness strategies to impolite behaviors, especially those in online comments. The present study, based on Culpeper’s (1996) and Bousfield’s (2008) impoliteness frameworks, aims to fill this research gap by analyzing the impoliteness comments under a news post of *Hong Xing News*, a news agency in China. The event involved a man, called Zhao Moufeng, and two construction workers seated beside him on Line 5 of the Beijing subway on April 17, 2025. The man verbally abused the two workers due to their dust-stained clothing, which led to extensive public comments under this post on *Sina Weibo*, a popular social media platform in China.

## 2. Impoliteness

Just as Culpeper (2011: p. 22) notes, “defining impoliteness is a real challenge”, one of its common definitions can be “behaviour that is face-aggravating in a particular context” (Locher & Bousfield, 2008: p. 3). Likewise, Culpeper et al. (2003: p. 1546) consider impoliteness as “communicative strategies designed to attack face, and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony”. Similarly, Bousfield (2008: p. 72) puts forward that “impoliteness constitutes the communication of intentionally gratuitous and conflictive verbal face-threatening acts (FTAs) which are purposefully delivered”.

Unlike the above definitions, which view impoliteness as being closely related to face threat, the following studies adopt a different orientation. “Although studies of morality have their roots in philosophy and psychology” (McNab & Mavrou, 2025: p. 2), “this notion has only recently received careful attention” (Bou-Franch, 2022: p. 34), and “it is only in the past decade that more systematic attention has been devoted to morality from a linguistic pragmatic perspective” (Haugh et al., 2022: p. 118). According to Haidt (2008: p. 70), “moral systems are interlocking sets of values, practices, institutions, and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate selfishness and make social life possible”. Put simply, Morality can be perceived as “those principles which govern the way we tend to distinguish between what we consider as right and wrong or good and bad conduct” (Parvaresh & Tayebi, 2018: p. 93). Watts (2003: p. 18) believes that “impoliteness is clearly a salient form of social behaviour in the sense that it appears to go against the canons of acceptable, appropriate behaviour operative for

the ongoing social interaction” or, in other words, it “infringing the norms of appropriate behaviour that prevail in particular contexts and among particular interlocutors, whether intentionally or not” (Holmes et al., 2008: p. 196). These canons and norms can be conveniently regarded as morality. In short, the violation of morality will bring about an impoliteness evaluation from social participants. That is to say, “an improper flow of interactional moves may emerge as ‘immoral’ from a participant’s point of view” (Kádár, 2017: p. 178).

In a nutshell, impoliteness studies have experienced an expansion from face threat to the violation of morality. The present study aims to investigate the impoliteness comments on immorality in online comments based on Culpeper’s (1996) and Bousfield’s (2008) impoliteness frameworks. Specially, the study intends to answer the following two research questions:

- 1) What impoliteness response strategies do *Sina Weibo* users employ in their comments on Zhao Moufeng and his immoral behaviour?
- 2) What is the real reason behind these impoliteness comments?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Data Collection

In the current study, the data were collected from *Sina Weibo*, one of the largest Chinese social media platforms, which attracts more than 500 million users. The post that published Zhao Moufeng’s immoral event in this study was based on the following two considerations: 1) the completeness of the event; 2) the amount of comments on the post. Following the above two standards, a post from *Hong Xing News* was selected. All comments below this post were collected, including a few indirect comments (i.e., although they may be secondary or other-level comments, they might also contain impolite remarks). That is, all comments on the event and the man were collected. 858 comments have been obtained in total. In the second stage of the study, a thorough screening process was conducted, ensuring irrelevant comments or comments that did not exhibit impoliteness were eliminated from the dataset. By this step, a corpus consisting of 219 felicitous impoliteness comments (i.e., comments that could be very suitably identified as impoliteness) was yielded.

#### 3.2. Data Analysis

The impoliteness comments in the dataset were analyzed based on Culpeper’s (1996) and Bousfield’s (2008) impoliteness frameworks, with Culpeper’s (1996) impoliteness framework comprises five impoliteness super strategies (i.e., “bald on record impoliteness”, “positive impoliteness”, “negative impoliteness”, “sarcasm or mock politeness”, and “withhold politeness”) and a range of open-ended impoliteness output strategies (pp. 356-358), and Bousfield’s (2008) impoliteness framework consisting of two major categories (i.e., “on record impoliteness” and “off record impoliteness”), two subcategories (i.e., “sarcasm” and “withhold politeness”) and four additional impoliteness output strategies (i.e., “criticize”, “hin-

der/block”, “enforce role shift” and “challenge”) (pp. 125-134). As Culpeper (1996: p. 357) argues, his positive and negative impoliteness output strategies are “not exhaustive and that the strategies depend upon an appropriate context to be impolite”; that is, different contexts would result in several different output strategies of positive and negative impoliteness.

Based on the two frameworks, the study meticulously coded these impoliteness response strategies according to their categories. Table 1 presents the impoliteness strategies categorized in the dataset, with definitions and examples for each. Among them, the strategies of “praise victims”, “take pleasure in the other’s misfortune”, “take a part for the whole”, “give an example”, and “make an assumption” were newly identified impoliteness output strategies that could cover some utterances that the two frameworks could not. Accordingly, their definitions were provided by this study, and the other definitions of the strategies were from the two frameworks. It should be noted that several impoliteness comments were difficult to categorize because their boundaries are not clear-cut; in other words, they may fulfill different impoliteness strategies at the same time. For these occasions, the two researchers would debate until a consensus was reached. Also, the translations of each example were provided by the two researchers of the study.

**Table 1.** Definitions and examples of each impoliteness response strategy based on Culpeper’s (1996: pp. 356-358) and Bousfield’s (2008: pp. 125-134) impoliteness frameworks.

Impoliteness response strategies	Definitions	Examples	Examples translated into English
<b>Positive impoliteness output strategies</b>	The uses of strategies designed to damage the addressee’s positive face wants.		
Disassociate from the other	Deny association or common ground with the other.	不是所有人都叫人	Not everyone can be recognized as a human being.
Criticise	Dispraise h, some action or inaction by h.	大家都是人，众生皆平等，没有谁比谁矮一截。	We are all human beings, and every being is equal. No one is superior to others.
Use taboo words	Swear, or use abusive or profane language.	这他妈的	It’s fucking.
Call the other names	Use derogatory nominations.	内心狭隘，一颗老鼠屎！	Being a rat shit, he is narrow-minded!
Praise victims	Show approval of or sympathy with victims.	没有建筑工人就没有那些挡风遮雨的家	Without construction workers, there would be no shelter from the wind and rain.
Take pleasure in the other’s misfortune	Be happy about the other’s failure.	拘留了哈哈哈哈好啊！	Detained. Hahahaha, it’s great!
<b>Negative impoliteness output strategies</b>	The uses of strategies designed to damage the addressee’s negative face wants.		
Frighten	Instill a belief that action detrimental to the other will occur.	已经在给他准备三周年的后事了。	Preparations for his third-anniversary memorial have already been made.

**Continued**

Explicitly associate the other with a negative aspect	Personalize, personalize, use the pronouns “I” and “you”.	心脏了	Your inner self has become dirty.
Challenge	Ask h a challenging question, question h’s position, stance, beliefs, assumed power, rights, obligations, ethics, etc.	你厉害做什么地铁啊?	Since you were so outstanding, why did you take the subway then?
Take a part for the whole	Accuse anyone or anything that is associated with the other.	真给北京人丢人	What a disgraceful behaviour to the people of Beijing.
Give an example	Think back to a similar negative event.	啊我曾经也在地铁上一个男的带着他的大肚子老婆车上都满了他就用眼神挑中了我呵斥我起来“诶起来”我当时就懵老老实站起来其实给孕妇让座是可以的但是起码的礼貌我现在回想就很气🤔	Once upon a time, I was encountered a man with his pregnant wife one the subway. The subway was packed, and he fixed his eyes on me, shouting at me loudly, “Hey, get up!” I was stunned and stood up obediently. Giving up a seat to a pregnant woman is fine, but basic politeness is needed. I still get angry when I think back to it now. 🤔
Make an assumption	Assume the self or someone else was in the circumstance.	我看到这样的叔叔阿姨, 只会觉得生活不易, 每个人都在努力生活着, 应该被尊重	Whenever encountering older individuals in such contexts, I feel only the arduousness of life. Everyone is struggling to live, and each deserves respect.
<b>Sarcasm or mock politeness</b>	The FTA is performed with the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere, and thus remain surface realisations.	他出名了, 上央视了都🤔	He became so famous that he appeared on CCTV. 🤔

a. As these examples were online comments, there were some errors, such as a lack of punctuation and misused characters, in some examples.

## 4. Results

The results of the study were presented into two components: the structure of these impoliteness response strategies and a meticulous analysis of each strategy. **Table 2** shows the frequency and percentage of impoliteness response strategies in comments under the post.

As shown in **Table 2**, among the three broad categories, “positive impoliteness response strategies” (42.92%), “negative impoliteness response strategies” (48.86%), and “sarcasm or mock politeness” (8.22%), the *Sina Weibo* users towards this post preferred “negative impoliteness response strategies”. Under the first main category, “negative impoliteness response strategies”, the strategy of “challenge” takes the largest proportion (14.61%). The strategy of “criticise” is the largest part (20.55%) of the second main category, “positive impoliteness response strategies”.

A systematic and rigorous analysis of the three primary impoliteness strategies, as well as each of the negative and positive impoliteness output strategies—the

**Table 2.** Frequency and percentage of impoliteness response strategies in comments under the *Sina Weibo* post.

Impoliteness response strategies	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Positive impoliteness output strategies</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>42.92%</b>
Disassociate from the other	3	1.37%
Criticise	45	20.55%
Use taboo words	7	3.20%
Call the other names	13	5.94%
Praise victims	21	9.59%
Take pleasure in the other's misfortune	5	2.28%
<b>Negative impoliteness output strategies</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>48.86%</b>
Frighten	24	10.96%
Explicitly associate the other with a negative aspect	20	9.13%
Challenge	32	14.61%
Take a part for the whole	18	8.22%
Give an example	5	2.28%
Make an assumption	8	3.65%
<b>Sarcasm or mock politeness</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>8.22%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>219</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

first two major impoliteness response strategies in the study—was presented in this section. As mentioned in section 3.2, the translations of each example in this section were also provided by the two researchers of the study. It is also worthwhile noting that since the emojis in these examples were used to enhance the users' opinions, there were no additional explanations for them in the study.

#### 4.1. Positive Impoliteness Output Strategies

Positive impoliteness output strategies consisted of six secondary categories, with “praise victims” and “take pleasure in the other's misfortune” as the newly identified positive impoliteness output strategies in the context. The following sections deal with the nuances of each positive impoliteness out strategy.

##### 4.1.1. Disassociate from the Other

(1) 不是所有人都叫人。Not everyone can be recognized as a human being.

“Disassociate from the other” stood out as the least frequently employed impoliteness response strategy (1.37%). The example implicitly shows the *Sina Weibo* user's intention to exclude Zhao Moufeng from the realm of human beings because human beings never do such immoral events, in this user's view. Thus, by this response, even in terms of human beings, the *Sina Weibo* user refused to establish any association with the man.

#### 4.1.2. Criticise

(2) 不喜欢起来离开就好了，说出来就很没素质。If you did not like these two construction workers, you could have just gotten up and left. It was rude of you to say these abusive words.

This strategy was the most frequently used impoliteness response strategy (20.55%) by *Sina Weibo* users in the post. Example (2) explicitly presented the reproach upon Zhao Moufeng's immoral behaviour of the *Sina Weibo* user. This example demonstrated that this strategy is used to criticize others' inappropriate actions (Culpeper, 1996).

#### 4.1.3. Use Taboo Words

(3) 这他妈的，Its fucking.

“The taboo language expresses anger targeted at the hearer” (Culpeper et al., 2003: p. 1557). As Jay (1992: p. 63) states, taboo words “intensify description”. In example (3), the use of taboo words intensifies the *Sina Weibo* user's attack on Zhao Moufeng's positive face.

#### 4.1.4. Call the Other Names

(4) 老畜牲，一把岁数还不积德，可以采访曝光一下这个老畜牲的家属嚟。Old beast, you still lack virtue at your age. This old beast's family members should be interviewed and exposed to the public.

According to Culpeper (1996: p. 358), this strategy means the use of “derogatory nominations” to refer to the hearer. In example (4), the *Sina Weibo* user employed “old beast” to signify Zhao Moufeng, which explicitly classified the man and beasts into the same category, expressing the belief that the man is as morally lacking as a beast. By this strategy, the user's impoliteness response to the man's immoral behaviour was evidently presented.

#### 4.1.5. Praise Victims

(5) 是为淳朴善良的劳动者！勤勤恳恳任劳任怨，受委屈了也不去攻击别人！会幸福安康的🙏🙏🙏 These two construction workers are laborers embodying the qualities of integrity and benevolence. They are diligent, and always bear hardship without complaint. Even when endured injustices, they chose not to retaliate against others. They will surely lead a life of happiness in the future. 🙏🙏🙏

In example (5), the *Sina Weibo* user praised the victims (i.e., the two construction workers) for their loft virtues and good performance in the context. Therefore, the user implicitly hit the goal of attacking Zhao Moufeng's positive face by highlighting the two victims' distinct moral superiority over the man.

#### 4.1.6. Take Pleasure in the Other's Misfortune

(6) 不过进去了真让人开心😁😁😁 Anyway, his detention brings me a lot of pleasure. 😁😁😁

According to the post, Zhao Moufeng was finally detained by police for repeatedly abusing passengers and disrupting public transport order. In example (6), the *Sina Weibo* user was happy with Zhao Moufeng's failure, thus highlighting the

user's violent face attack on him.

## 4.2. Negative Impoliteness Output Strategies

Negative impoliteness output strategies contained six subcategories in the context, with “take a part for the whole”, “give an example”, and “make an assumption” as the newly identified impoliteness response strategies. The subsequent sections are designed as a meticulous examination of them.

### 4.2.1. Frighten

(7) 把他老保停了。His pension benefits will be suspended immediately.

The strategy of “frighten” is used to attack negative face by firmly holding the opinion that the other's immoral behaviour will certainly result in some serious consequences for themselves (Culpeper, 1996). In example (7), the *Sina Weibo* user believed that Zhao Moufeng's immoral behaviour was so egregious that his pension benefits must be suspended, and the user was certain that this would be a just and common punishment for the man.

### 4.2.2. Explicitly Associate the Other with a Negative Aspect

(8) 衣服弄脏了，可以洗。但心灵脏了，就难了。If your clothes get dirty, you can wash them clean. However, if your soul becomes stained, it is extremely hard to clean.

This strategy is employed to yield impoliteness effects by the belief that other aspects of the other are also negative (Culpeper, 1996). In this example, after knowing Zhao Moufeng's immoral behaviour, the *Sina Weibo* user steadily believed that the man's other aspects, like his inner self, were also negative.

### 4.2.3. Challenge

(9) 谁不是打工的？凭什么辱骂别人？Who is not merely a wage laborer? On what basis did you verbally abuse the two construction workers back then?

The strategy of “challenge” emerged as the second most frequently employed negative impoliteness strategy in the context. According to Bousfield (2008: p. 132), the strategy is “always issued in the form of a question”, and it is adopted to directly doubt the hearer's intention in doing actions. It would “force the intended recipient to respond in a highly restricted and self-damaging way” (Bousfield, 2008: p. 132), and thus attack the other's negative face. In this instance, the *Sina Weibo* user directly questioned the man why he did such an immoral behaviour at that time. In the user's opinion, everyone is just, and no one is superior to others, so we should respect each other.

### 4.2.4. Take a Part for the Whole

(10) 一家子也就那样了。His family members, like him, all lack morality.

This strategy means that while attacking the recipients' negative face, the speaker will also attack anyone or anything that has associations with them. In other words, anyone or anything will be attacked for being associated with the recipient who did immoral behaviour. In example (10), the *Sina Weibo* user be-

lieved that Zhao Moufeng's family members, like him, were all bad people, although this user may know nothing about his family members.

#### 4.2.5. Give an Example

(11) 去年上海乘地铁一对情侣先上, 后面跟着一位阿姨, 小情侣坐下, 阿姨就开骂, 男方让位给她, 说你在我后面没看见, 但还是被一直骂, 最过分的是当着人家女朋友面说, 谁找你倒八辈子血霉, 我说骂两句就行了他已经让位了, 他在前面没看见你, 然后就开始骂我, 我真的是见她年纪大怕把她气出问题, 否则绝不饶她。Last year in Shanghai subway, a couple boarded first followed by an aunt. After the couple sat down, the aunt started verbally abusing them. The man gave up his seat and said, "You were behind me, so I did not see you", but the man kept being insulted. Most outrageously, she told him in front of his girlfriend, "Whoever becomes your partner will have much bad luck". I interrupted: "Stop, he has already given you his seat, and he truly did not see you behind." Then she began to verbally abuse me. I did not respond to her only because she was elderly, and worried I might make her angry enough to fall ill; otherwise, I would not have tolerated her.

"Give an example" is used to demonstrate that the recipient's behaviour is immoral and disgusting by recalling a similar immoral event. Consequently, the degree of the attack on the recipient's negative face is intensified. In example (11), the *Sina Weibo* user recalled a similar context (i.e., passenger disputes) to demonstrate that Zhao Moufeng's behaviour was certainly immoral, and it should be hard reproached.

#### 4.2.6. Make an Assumption

(12) 我爸也是农民工, 但是他脾气没这么好, 可能我爸会跟他打一架。My father is also a migrant worker, but he does not have the same good temper as the two construction workers. He probably would have gotten into a fight with that Zhao Moufeng.

The strategy involves assuming that either the self or someone else was present in the context, thereby altering the outcome of the event. In this instance, the *Sina Weibo* user assumed that one of the victims was the father of the user, and the outcome is largely different. Hence, the user implicitly expressed the belief that Zhao Moufeng's behaviour was so immoral and egregious that it needed severe punishment, even physical attack, to be justified.

### 4.3. Sarcasm or Mock Politeness

(13) 这位爱干净的老厮终于体验了一把胜利。This tidy elderly man has finally experienced victory.

According to Culpeper (1996), the strategy of "sarcasm or mock politeness" is used to counter the hearer in a way that seems polite on the surface, but is inherently impolite. In the context, Zhao Moufeng was detained by police for repeatedly verbally abusing the two construction workers whose work clothes were stained with dust, in the subway. For this reason, it is less difficult to understand that in

example (13), “tidy” and “victory” are a praise to Zhao Moufeng on the surface, that is, they were mock politeness. However, the user’s real intention was to satirize Zhao Moufeng for provoking the event.

#### 4.4. The Morality

Apart from a few comments that expressed the *Sina Weibo* users’ approval of Zhao Moufeng’s behaviour in the subway, an overwhelming majority of comments countered his behaviour. The impoliteness response strategies employed by these *Sina Weibo* users in the context not only contained their reproach to the man or the event, but also conveyed their moral emotions that “are the emotions that respond to moral violations or that motivate moral behavior” such as “contempt, anger, and disgust” (Haidt, 2003: pp. 853-855). In the context, Zhao Moufeng repeatedly verbally abused the two construction workers whose work clothes were stained with dust, which violated the morality summarized in the *Sina Weibo* comments. Firstly, everyone should be treated equally. Secondly, laborers, for example, construction workers, should be held in high esteem because they have made great, indispensable contributions to society.

### 5. Discussion

This study probed into impoliteness responses to Zhao Moufeng and his immoral behaviour in online comments from a *Sina Weibo* post of *Hong Xing News*. The first research question dealt with how these impoliteness responses were made in the comments, which was answered by analyzing comments based on Culpeper’s (1996) and Bousfield’s (2008) impoliteness frameworks. The findings shown that these strategies included 3 broad impoliteness strategies (i.e., “positive impoliteness strategies”, “negative impoliteness strategies”, and “sarcasm or mock politeness”), and 12 impoliteness output strategies in total, with “praise victims”, “take pleasure in the other’s misfortune”, “take a part for the whole”, “give an example”, and “make an assumption” as the newly identified impoliteness output strategies in the context. The strategy of negative impoliteness constituted the largest proportion, and among all the output strategies, “criticise” was the most frequently used one, indicating that these *Sina Weibo* users favored the way of directly reproaching Zhao Moufeng and his immoral behaviour. The second research question examines the real reason behind these comments, which was addressed by analyzing the comments from the perspective of morality. The findings revealed that the impoliteness responses were motivated by the condemnation of Zhao Moufeng’s immoral conduct rather than stemming from an intentional attack, indicating that, instead of online disharmony, impoliteness comments might be employed to maintain online harmony in some specific contexts.

### 6. Conclusion

The current study examined online comments about Zhao Moufeng and his immoral behavior in response to a post on *Sina Weibo*, a popular social media plat-

form in China. A total of 13 impoliteness response strategies were identified in the comments. The study identified and categorized new, context-specific strategies that complement the existing frameworks, demonstrating that impoliteness strategies are contextually dependent (Culpeper, 1996; Bousfield, 2008). Additionally, the reason behind these impolite comments was Zhao Moufeng's breach of morality. Hence, these *Sina Weibo* users felt justified in countering him and his immoral behavior, which represented their strong stance to uphold politeness and equity (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Spencer-Oatey, 2008) in social interactions. Nonetheless, the study was limited by its sample size. Future research could include a large dataset from various posts related to this event on *Sina Weibo* or across multiple popular social media platforms to identify additional strategies within existing impoliteness frameworks, such as Culpeper's (1996) and Bousfield's (2008) frameworks, or to create new frameworks of impoliteness. Also, it is promising to investigate other contexts focusing on the intentions reflected by those impolite comments from various social media platforms.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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