



## Article

# Face Attack Online: Unpacking Conflicts in Multimodal Group Chats

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**Abstract:** This study focuses on analyzing face attacks in the conflict discourse of cross-linguistic online chats on the instant message application *WeChat* among a group of international students at a prestigious university in China. Drawing on the previous impoliteness theory of Leech and Culpeper, this article selectively combines these two theories and proposes that in face-attack studies, especially with respect to online discourses, impolite multimodal discourse should be considered and subsumed in the theoretical framework. It is found that a wide array of face attacks in conflict discourse manifest themselves both in verbal discourse as well as in multimodal counterparts. The present study might shed light on online impoliteness research that is beyond monolingual and single-mode contexts.

**Keywords:** impoliteness; face attack; Internet communication; conflict discourse; multimodality



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## 1. Introduction

Goffman (1967) first proposes the definition of “face” in sociology, which later has been one of the main themes studied in pragmatics. Built on this notion, Brown and Levinson (1987) demarcate positive face and negative face, the former being the need for solidarity and the latter being the need for independence, as summarized by Yule (1996). The delineation of the face is closely bound up with politeness and impoliteness, the latter of which will spawn face attacks. Culpeper et al. (2003) define impoliteness as “the use of communicative strategies designed to attack face and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony”. Culpeper (2005) further offers an understanding of impoliteness as in the situation when the speaker conducts face attack behavior and/or the hearer feels the face attack. Therefore, following this thread of understanding, impoliteness will lead to face attacks and then conflict between the speaker and the hearer.

Conflict related to face attacks and face has been studied by a multitude of researchers (see Ran and Yang 2011; Ran 2010a, 2010b; Ran and Zhao 2018; Zhao and Ran 2019). For example, Zhao and Ran (2019) suggest the role of *qingmian* threats in the interpersonal conflict in the culture-specific context of China and stress the understanding of moral order as the mediator between social practice and the evaluation of impoliteness. Also, their paper reveals the influence of face not only on the targeting person but also on the relationship of the two involved, or in the Chinese context, *qingmian* (literal meaning: affection-based face). This constructive exploration also confirms the cultural factor in the feeling of offense on the side of the recipients and the relationship between the interlocutors. Just as Brown (2017) summarizes, there is a wide range of work on politeness and impoliteness from different academic disciplines, methods, and theories. Still, she also poses the concern that naturally occurring languages “are hard to capture on video and have scarcely been studied” (p. 397). In the meantime, multimodality has long been incorporated and recognized within pragmatic studies (see, for example, Benson 2017; Yus 2019). Nevertheless, the impoliteness of online multimodal languages is underexplored. Therefore, the

main purpose of the present study is to discover the impoliteness and face attacks that international students in this prestigious Chinese university deploy during the negotiation process of conflict in their cross-linguistic online group chats, thereby contributing to studies of both conflict and impoliteness in naturally occurring interactions online instead of acted-out ones. This research pays specific attention to the group face attacks, that is, a constantly construed and situated process of impoliteness by their multimodal resources and verbal resources.

This online group is comprised of international students who live in the same residential hall, including both males and females. By investigating the impoliteness and face attacks by the multi-party group chat, this study aims to contribute insights to the field of impoliteness studies in contemporary communication, especially involving the advent of digital media and phone applications that enable messages encompassing not only texts but also emojis as well as other multimodal forms of communications.

The overall structure of this study takes the form of six parts. Section 1 gives a brief review of the main topic and the contextualization of the data. Section 2 identifies the main theory of impoliteness and face attack/conflict, which is followed by Section 3 the methodology part. Subsequently, Section 4 presents the data analysis and results. The last two sections deal with the discussion and conclusion, where major findings and limitations will be offered.

## 2. Face Attack and Impoliteness

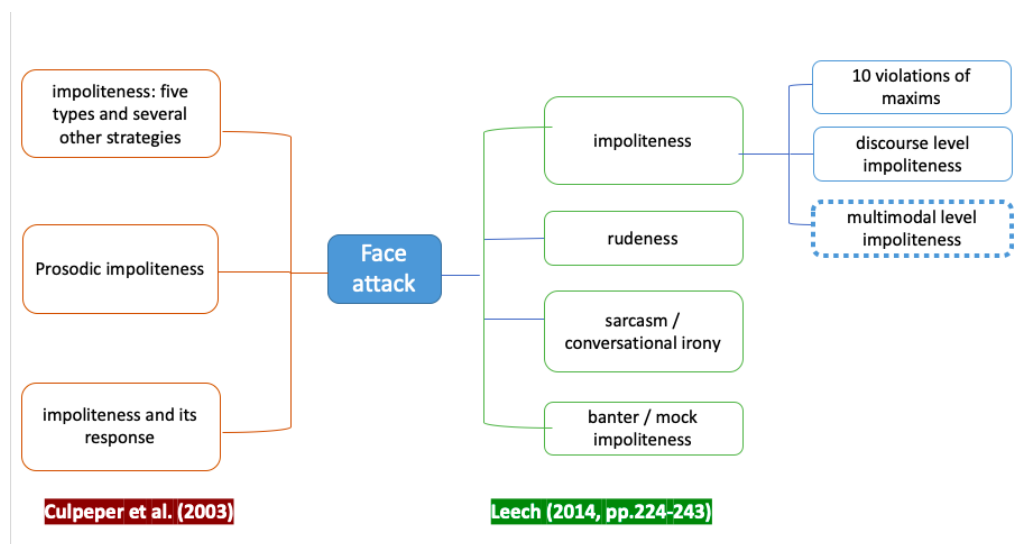
As early as 1967, Goffman demarcates facework and aggressive facework. In his distinction, facework is unmarked and involves people's actions to prompt the smooth flow of the interaction, whereas aggressive facework is realized at the expense of others' face loss. Face attacks, regarded as marked and unusual, receive insufficient attention in [Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#). [Tracy and Tracy \(1998\)](#) argue that face attacks are not the equivalent of a lack of politeness. Further, they propose that face attacks, both spontaneous and strategic, should be seen as social judgments that are predicated on layered yet loosely connected contexts. This stance aligns with an array of other studies (cf. [Locher 2011](#); [Han 2021](#)) under the umbrella of situated impoliteness.

Face attacks and impoliteness are happening among conscious and socialized people, including the speaker, the addressee, and the co-presents. [Leech \(2014\)](#) deploys a notion, *other* (O), as a more inclusive concept that encompasses the addressees as well as the co-presents. In this study, the object will also be the other (O), as information/message is viewed by all members in the same group chat. In other words, it is not confined to the direct interlocutor but also the rest of the group members.

There is a body of literature oriented towards impoliteness. Drawing on [Brown and Levinson's \(1987\)](#) super-strategies for dealing with face-threatening acts (FTA), [Culpeper \(1996\)](#) proposes five strategies of impoliteness, which are as follows: (1) bald-on-record impoliteness; (2) positive impoliteness; (3) negative impoliteness; (4) sarcasm or mock politeness, and (5) withhold politeness (p. 356). Built on these five strategies, [Leech \(2014\)](#) subscribes to the general idea of this anatomy, but he maintains that sarcasm should be excluded, and the fifth point, *withhold politeness*, can be understood as under-politeness instead of impoliteness. He further puts forward the general strategy of impoliteness as opposed to that of politeness: "In pursuing the goal of impoliteness, S will express/ imply evaluative meanings that are favorable to S and unfavorable to O" (p. 221). Based on this general strategy, he points out ten situations of violation of maxims corresponding to those of politeness; they are, respectively: (1) violation of the generosity maxim, (2) violation of the tact maxim, (3) violation of the approbation maxim, (4) violation of the modesty maxim, (5) violation of the obligation to O, (6) violation of the obligation to S, (7) violation of the agreement, (8) violation of opinion reticence, (9) violation of sympathy, and (10) violation of feeling reticence.

Moreover, [Culpeper \(2011\)](#) notes the scalar characteristics of impoliteness (p. 111) while [Leech \(2014\)](#) notices that less attention has been paid to impoliteness in compari-

son with that to politeness due to the characteristics of markedness of the former (p. 219). However, by noticing that the opposite of politeness is not necessarily impoliteness, Leech (2014) proposes that it can be non-politeness and others. He holds that impoliteness is only part of face attacks; the latter also includes rudeness, sarcasm/conversational irony, etc. According to Leech, sarcasm is “superficially interpretable as polite but is more indirectly or deeply interpreted as face attack as impolite” (ibid., p. 232). The summary of the theoretical framework can be seen in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Summary of frameworks in Culpeper et al. (2003) and Leech (2014).

In their seminal paper *Impoliteness revisited: With special reference to dynamic and prosodic aspects*, Culpeper et al. (2003) notice that there are also offensive and defensive responses to the impoliteness and the prosodic features of offense. However, in the context of online communication, where instant messages in written forms are dominant, the prosodic analysis will be ignored in this study due to its infeasibility.

Brown (2017) notes that extant studies have paid attention to cross-cultural (im)politeness studies. Nevertheless, few studies notice the cross-linguistic parameters. This article explores strategies of impoliteness and response that are deployed in a multimodal and cross-linguistic online conflict situation. This study attempts to address face attacks by means of impoliteness strategies and the necessity of the role of multimodal impoliteness.

Based on the previous research gap, this study sets out to answer the following two research questions:

1. What are the strategies group members employ to engage in face attack during conflictual situations online?
2. What are the features of multimodal and cross-linguistic face attacks in a group chat online?

### 3. Methodology

In their foundational work on thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) differentiate between three concepts: data corpus, dataset, and data extract. The term “data corpus” refers to the entirety of available data that can be gathered, while “dataset” pertains to the subset of data currently under analysis. In contrast, “data extract” signifies the specific portions of data utilized for theme analysis. WeChat<sup>1</sup> is the most frequently used mobile application in China, from which the data corpus of the present study is formed. The dataset consists of messages from the online WeChat group that took place in April 2023, involving more than 25 students from more than 10 countries with the inclusion of both females and males. All of them have the capability of speaking and understanding Chinese and English,

though differing in aptitude and competence (therefore, there are Chinese vocabulary errors in some utterances). Students at that university live in the students' residential halls, which are normally single-gendered for male students or female students. The one for this group of students is different in that cross-gendered students live on different floors in the same building. There are dryers and washing machines on every floor and a fridge and kitchen in the building. Due to ethical concerns, all the students' names and aliases on *WeChat* will be anonymized and represented alphabetically (from A to Z, AA to ZZ). As it is a cross-linguistic dispute, the whole utterance will be translated into English by the author, but the language variety will be kept in the transcription. One author of this paper, as an international student, is a member of this chatting group and friends with several other hall residents, which enables the collection of this online data and the contextual information for the sake of the situatedness of the analysis. The focus of the conflict centers on whether students of one gender can go and use the washing and drying facilities on the floors of another gender. At the outset, A, a female student, set out to complain about an unusual event happening to her in English with abbreviations and slang. She lost half of her socks, and her laundry was wet even after the drying process, so she suspected that someone, notably one of the male students, had touched her laundry. B, as a male leader student of the floor<sup>2</sup>, tries to comfort her and justify the reason for the wet clothes. A kept complaining and it attracted other group chat members to join the conflict talk. Later, the conflict topic extended to access to other public areas, such as the kitchen and study rooms, and even led to separate online chat groups within this community.

The reason why these key examples are selected from over 120 turns of online messages<sup>3</sup> to examine impoliteness and face attacks is that these extracts are chunks of messages that reflect the semantic flow of the conflict revolving around the usage of the facilities in the university residential hall. It is within these critical and intricate details that the conflict unfolds and develops.

Thematic analysis, defined as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke 2006), will be employed for data analysis. This approach can immensely contribute to the themed analysis of the current dataset. Meanwhile, the study will also take into account both co-textual and contextual factors to ensure a thorough understanding of the recurrence of the themes, specifically face attack and conflict. Just as noted in the previous section, it embraces the general assumption in impoliteness studies as "situated impoliteness" (Locher 2011; Han 2021) so as to sensitize readers to the particular contexts of face-attack events, facilitating a deeper understanding of such occurrences.

#### 4. Findings

Students employ various strategies in conducting and responding to face attacks in online group chats, which encompasses impoliteness by the violation of maxims and their response, discourse-level impoliteness, sarcasm, banter, and multimodal impoliteness. Additionally, it is found that these categories are not used exclusively; instead, speakers employ them in a flexible manner.

##### (1) Face attack by the violation of maxims

Various strategies have been identified, including violations of the obligation to O, violations of the maxim of approbation, violations of the maxim of generosity, and violations of the maxim of agreement. The following examples illustrate these points. In *Example 1*, A started the dialogue in the group chat in a very offensive way.

##### Example 1

1. <sup>4</sup>A: Can we just all agree to like send a text to the gc if the laundry is done (*because waiting two mins for the other person to take out their laundry is so hard*) bc like pls don't just throw other ppl's shit into anywhere you please because i'm missing half my socks and id totally appreciate it if y'all started being the tiniest considerate ☺
2. B: 是还没烘干完毕还是烘干完毕之后还是湿的? [Is it still wet before or after drying?]<sup>5</sup>

3. A: idk man but my clothes were sopping wet which is def unusual!
4. B: 你离开的时候确保你启动了吗? [Are you sure you have turned it on when you leave?]
5. 因为烘干的过程中 门是打不开的 [Because the door cannot be opened during the drying process.]
6. 还有一种可能就是衣服太多了 也会出现 烘不干的情况 [Another possibility is that if there are too many clothes, it will not dry properly.]
7. A: 可以打开的呢 [It can be opened.]
8. 但是衣服量跟以前是一样的哦 [But the amount of clothes is the same as before.]

In this part of the dispute, the main interlocutors are A and B. The topic of discussion changed from the suspect of others moving the clothes to the possibility of opening the door of the dryer while it was working. In line 1, A was requesting other students not to move her laundry after it was done and instead, they should send a message to the group chat so as to get her notified. This utterance led to the face attack by violating the obligation to O (Other). The demand made by A would cause extra responsibility to the other members of the group chat. At the same time, she also violated the maxim of approbation by asking for O's being the tiniest considerate. In lines 4–8, students A and B both violated the maxims of approbation and agreement. First, they didn't reach an agreed conclusion on whether the dryer could be opened or not while it was working. While A insisted that she had successfully opened the dryer door, B held that it was impossible to open it. And A defied the statement that the laundry was wet as there were too many clothes inside, which is also an act of violating the agreement maxim.

#### Example 2

15. B: 过程中是打不开的 [It cannot be opened during the drying process]
16. A: 不试怎么能知道啊 [How will you know if you don't try?]
17. B: 所以你开过吗? [So did you open the dryer door during the drying process?]
18. 如果是的话 那很危险 [If yes, it is dangerous]
19. 得要通知前台来维修 [You have to notify the front desk for maintenance]

In the second example, A and B continued the dispute of whether the dryer could be opened during its operation. In line 15, a confirmative overtone was delivered as B used an assertive statement in telling A that it is a fact that the dryer cannot be opened at that specific time. As a response, A forcefully questioned this "fact" proposed by B, which violates the maxim of agreement. In line 18, there was a violation of the maxims of generosity and tact as B was warning of a possible threat to A, that it might be dangerous for her if she had opened the dryer while it was working. Since keeping it shut is normal for the working dryer, B was implying that A did something inappropriate in interrupting the operation of the machine. Line 19 further violates the maxim of obligation to O as A might not be cognizant that she had to get someone else noticed. And now she was obligated to do that.

#### Example 3

39. D: 一般就是机器实际上没启动成功, 但是后台系统以为启动成功了 [Generally, the machine does not start successfully, but the background system thinks that the start is successful.]
40. A: 确实哦! 难道这个就是个乱扔别人的衣服的理由么? [Indeed! Is this an excuse to throw other people's clothes?]
41. D: 还有人乱扔别人衣服的吗 [Is there anyone who throws other people's clothes?]
42. 我一般都是放旁边篮子 [I usually put it in the basket nearby.]

The violations of maxims can be sequential and continual. In this example, D first tried to claim that it was the system error that caused the wet laundry but A didn't buy it. Here, A first agreed with B with the succinct adverb "indeed" in line 40; however, she then used a much longer rhetorical question that presupposed that even if the machine didn't work, *Others* could not throw away clothes that didn't belong to them, thereby violating

the maxim of approbation. In the same manner, D counter-questioned A and doubted the possibility of *Others'* discarding clothes haphazardly. Being an apparent violation of the maxim of agreement, the doubt and the disclaimer in lines 41 and 42 tried to persuade others that he could not be blamed. These two lines attacked A's face in challenging the veracity of her question. Involving several rounds of maxim violation, this extract creates sequential face attacks.

## (2) Discourse-level impoliteness

Leech (2014) further elaborates on impoliteness on a higher level of structure, that is, impoliteness in turn-talking, floor-holding, and other aspects of discourse management.

### Example 4

25. B: 我刚刚和前台问了问 [I just asked the front desk]  
 26. 过程中是打不开的 [The door of the dryer cannot be opened during the process.]  
 27. 只有结束和还没开启之前 [ It can be opened only before it is working or finishes its working]  
 28. A: 6 [bravo]  
 29. B: 如果你的烘干机是可以打开的 [If the door of the dryer can be opened,]  
 30. A: 那我怎么打开的呢 [How did I open it?]  
 31. B: 那你可以问看看 [Then you should ask someone]  
 32. 洗衣机应该是大家都是通用的 只能让大家尽可能不要混着用 [The washing machine should be communal. All we need to do is try not to use the machines on other floors.]

From lines 29 to 31 in Example 4, B tried to persuade A that it was impossible to open the dryer when it was working, and then A interrupted B by saying line 30 before B finished his remark. Here, the interruption of A was impolite on the discourse level and at the same time challenged the statement of B, therefore also violating the maxim of agreement.

### Example 5

9. B: 你试过吗? [Have you tried (opening it)?]  
 10. 我们是弄不开的 [We are unable to do that.]

B tried to challenge A's assumption that someone opened the dryer in Example 5. In line 10, by deploying the indexical "我们 (we)", B formed a virtual/imagined community excluding A in endorsing that the door of the dryer will be automatically locked. In so doing, he challenged A indirectly by indicating that all of the rest of the students were unable to open the dryer while it was in operation. This indexical also reinforces the violation of the agreement maxim. This sequential and reciprocal impoliteness caused face attacks on both parties. The exclusion brought about by the indexical expression "we" has to be understood from the discourse level, automatically implicating other group members.

### Example 6

104. Z: 3 different groupchats for one building?  
 105. :#  
 106. Ope  
 107. B: 这个群主要是让同学们上报设备问题 [This group is mainly for students to report facility issues.  
 108. 如果我们在这里吹太多水 领班们会看不到消息 [If we chat too much here, the leaders won't see the messages.]  
 109. V:Omg guys...like seriously?  
 110. T:guys this isn't a war thing🙄

As the conflict intensified, the focus of this dispute shifted from the separate use of facilities to creating new online chat groups. In the previous messages before Example 6, students proposed the creation of three separate WeChat groups so they could have privacy among their peers of the same gender. Z sent three consecutive messages, which included a question, an emoticon, and an internet slang term expressing embarrassment.



These messages expressed Z's resentment of the situation and conflictual development and violated the maxim of agreement and approbation. B took the floor to explain why students shouldn't communicate too much in this group, stating, "The leaders won't see the messages" regarding the facility issue. He began by using the upscaled phrase "同学们" (fellow students) and then referred to "我们" (we) in contrast to "领班们" (leaders) to clarify the purpose of this group chat and allow for the formation of the new groups. B's ostensibly objective explanation was also a violation of the maxim of approbation, as students who engaged in excessive talk (including this one) would feel ashamed to have interrupted "the leaders" in reading messages. Then, V and T attempted to defuse the situation in lines 109 and 110 by reminding the students this should not have been a war-like conflict. These two phrases, as violations of the maxim of agreement, both attacked the faces of B and the students who sent the QR code with the intention of creating "this war thing" and taking it "seriously". This example involved discourse-level impoliteness both in terms of floor-taking and also the interpretation of messages based on the previous discourse.

### (3) Impoliteness and its response

According to Culpeper et al. (2003), in response to an offensive utterance, there are two possibilities of reply, offensive and defensive ones. In response to A's offense in line 1, B first defended himself as the student leader of the floor who had the responsibility of attending to and even working out problems regarding the facilities proposed by students. In Example 4, B started to take offensive stances instead of mere defensive ones. For instance, B used line 31 to be offensive before using line 32 to be defensive. B used the directive to advise A to ask for the reason why she could open the door of the dryer under conditions that were normally impossible with the implicature that A was either lying or irrational. B apparently knew "someone" didn't exist, and as a student leader of the floor, he seemed to try to end the whole argument by orienting towards the sharedness of the machines.

#### Example 7

69. H: Men shouldn't be around these areas  
 70. B: So, what's the point of sending that pic  
 71. H: The sign is clear  
 72. B: Yeah  
 73. so, it's clear  
 ...  
 87. H: I should be able to walk freely to the shower room knowing that I won't bump into a man in the corridor  
 88. If other girls don't care about this issue, I care  
 89. The sign is clear  
 90. Z: What about study rooms and kitchens then?  
 91. B: Same

In Example 7, students H, B, and Z were negotiating whether male students could be present in the public areas of the floors of females. H expressed that men should not be around the shower room, in line 69. After B checked the purpose of sending a sign pertaining to the denial of entry of males, H's response had the implicature that no further confirmation was expected as people can read from the sign unless the person was silly or illiterate. This response violates the maxim of sympathy in that H refused to answer directly H's query but implied that the sign was clear enough to convey the message. Then, after Z asked about the demarcation of the study room and kitchen, B resentfully said these two areas should also be divided, which had the implicature that girls would suffer more than men if they insisted on their thoughts, which can be seen as a violation of approbation and also of generosity, as B and Z were threatening the female students implicitly. As such, H attacked B's face with line 71, while B offended back with the last line of the extract.

What is interesting in these responses is the repetition of the information "the sign is clear" in lines 71, 73, and 89. To H, this phrase suggests that no additional information

is necessary, as the sign conveys everything explicitly. As an objective and regulatory statement concerning the use of floor space, “the sign is clear” serves to prohibit male students from entering the female floor and should be regarded as the sole response to any inquiries about male access to that area.

#### (4) Sarcasm and banter

Sarcasm, conversational irony, banter, or mock impoliteness are also traceable in these online dialogues.

#### Example 8

60. B: 以后只要是男访客也不建议上楼了 [In the future, any male visitor is not recommended to go upstairs.]
61. K: 男师傅也不可以去修理你们的房间了 [The male mechanic is no longer able to fix the stuff in your room.]
62. B: 哈哈哈哈哈 [hahaha hahaha]
63. L: Points have been made.
64. A: At least they won't have gone through my laundry!

In the early stages of the focal conflict, A asked the favor of all her hall mates to “be the tiniest considerate” in line 1. This phrase was an understatement that can trigger conversational irony. Obviously, she implicated and charged that Os aren't even considerate to the least extent. Additionally, A also employed conversational irony in the italicized part, as this is a ostensible politeness expression, as she is being considerate to realize that waiting for two minutes is so hard; however, delving deeper, it is not hard to find that she was being very ironic to imply that other students were too impatient to notify the owner of the done laundry and take them out without the permission of the latter.

As the conflict intensified, the center of the group chat shifted from the automatic lock of the dryer to the issue of whether the opposite gender could be present on the floor. A proposed that this cannot be the case (in line 33) to ensure that laundry facilities on the female floor can only be used by themselves, whereby she received both proponents as well as opponents. In *Example 8*, male students B and K were mocking those female students who defied men's sharing machines with them by violating the maxim of generosity as they threatened their female counterparts by reminding them that there would be no mechanics able to help fix and that there would be no registered male visitors anymore. In the context of this university, mechanics are mostly male. After B's mention of male visitors, K specified a subgroup of this group of people, namely “男师傅 (male mechanics)”. B and K were collaboratively making fun of the female students by pointing out that the broken facilities in their room would be left unattended if male visitors were banned on the female floor. These two turns of talk are sarcasm to the female students involved in this group chat string. Ensuing, the interjective “hahaha hahaha” of B is indicative of the ridicule. It is banter or mock impoliteness. L, as a male who opposed A's proposal, plainly presented his opinion on the whole conflict in line 63, violating the maxim of agreement. Faced with three face attackers, student A chose the banter impoliteness by indicating it was one of the male students here in this group who touched and moved her laundry and the male mechanics “at least” would only perform their duties and would not have something to do with her laundry.

#### (5) Multimodal impoliteness

This group chat dataset also features multimodal aspects of online impoliteness. These forms of face attacks are typical of online chat, including visual images, voices, emojis, and written forms. These developments of multimodal communication enable a faster speed and fuller range of information exchange and, at the same time, enrich forms of impoliteness. The following two examples will illustrate the face attack delivered by visual images.

#### Example 9



55. H:



56. H:



(...)

With the argument going further, more students in the group got involved in the discussion/dispute and expressed their opinions. Here in this extract, student H first sent a picture message to the group and then the exact same one but edited with a highlighted mark in red by scribbling a rectangular shape surrounding “男士止步 No males on this floor”. This multimodal configuration, encompassing the picture, the scribbling, and the vibrant color used in the editing of the picture, showcased the emphasized violation of the obligation to O. In other words, the female student who highlighted the sign attempted to police their male counterparts by means of official resources in an exaggerated and aggravated way. In the meantime, the content of the second picture was the same as the first one, both indicating females only on that floor. However, with the scribble, H breaches the maxim of tact by suggesting that only someone inattentive would disregard the sign. Her action was “beneficial” in that she annotated the important information to ensure that those who overlooked it might take notice. All the male students who had ignored this sign would feel embarrassed and be notified that it was regulated that they were not allowed on the female students’ floor, let alone use dryers and washing machines. The first picture showing “no males on this floor”, mentioned in example 9, is a visual face attack on those male students who entered that floor, whereas the edited one with the red mark is an even more aggravated face attack on the same target group.

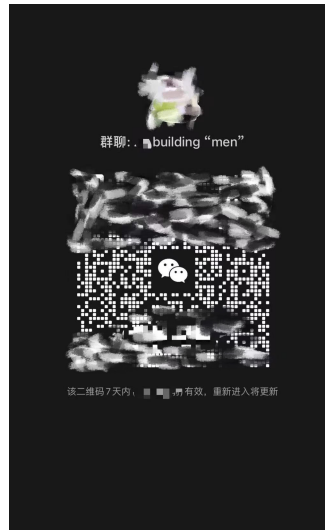
Example 10

96. AA:



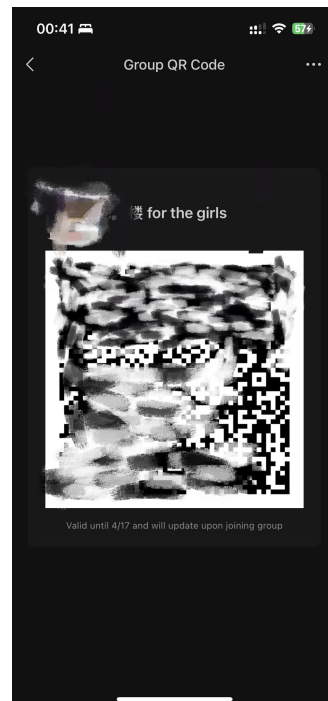
[WeChat QR code 1 with the group name “\* floor kings”]

- 97. B: Should build another group just for men?
- 98. Z: this is floor-ist. I demand entry as well.
- 99. B:



[WeChat group QR code 2 with the group name群聊 \* building “men”(group chat \* building “men”)]

- 100. Feel free to join
- 101. BB: Good
- 102. Now I can leave this one
- 103. CC:



[WeChat group QR code 3 with group name \*婁 for the girls, which means \* building for the girls]

In this example, the conflict among students had escalated, illustrating the underlying tensions as they strived to establish their own exclusive online communities instead of maintaining a unified group (as indicated by line 102). Initially, AA initiated the fragmentation by sending a QR code to invite male students from his floor to join a group. Subsequently, B expanded this initiative by distributing a similar QR code to invite all male students in the building. In response to these, CC created a separate group for female students by sharing a dedicated QR code. These actions, accomplished through the pictures that were sent in the group chat, not only facilitate the formation of distinct groups but also represent a multimodal face attack, clearly delineating the division between male and female students. The establishment of separate groups signifies that if male students have their own space, then female students are entitled to their own as well. The move of CC is a sharp confrontation, serving to assert strength and “territorial claims” of female students within the social dynamics of this online community of the whole building.

In addition to pictures, there are also face-attacking emojis used in this conflictual discourse. In lines 1, 20, 33, and 46, different emojis were used, but they all carried a message that the speaker was impatient and unhappy about the existing request. These emojis often support and even reinforce the co-texts. For instance, at the end of line 1, student A employed the emoji “🤔” to show speechlessness in a playful way to resonate with and thus aggravate the impoliteness of her text message before this emoji.

## 5. Discussion

This whole stretch of dispute is replete with face-attacking utterances, violating divergent maxims of politeness, demonstrating mock and sarcasm, and exhibiting impoliteness both in response and at the discourse level. The data showcases the general characteristics of the online language features, both in grammar and vocabulary, as well as errors and typos. This can be seen, for example, in the phrase “让后 (ranghou), in line 12, which doesn’t make any sense in Chinese. It was a sign either showing a lack of proficiency or imprudence in typing the message of student C when she attempted to explain that the working condition of the dryer might influence its lock and unlock. Presumably, she intended to say “然后 (ranhou)” which means “then”.

Despite the above-mentioned common features of Internet language, the impoliteness of Internet verbal language manifests itself in the following aspects, according to the data. On the one hand, for example, in line 1, there is a wide range of abbreviations and acronyms that presuppose the literacy of these phrases and the English variety in the group. Nevertheless, for people who happen to lack English Internet language fluency, this might be offensive in that the speaker was not intending to, or at least aspiring to, make himself/herself understood. On the other hand, there is an array of means of the internet language in carrying impoliteness and leading to face attack. This can be elucidated in the following three aspects:

First, cultural-specific internet language. In line 28, A said “6”, which indicated “bravo” in Chinese, to manifest her sarcasm as B had asked the front desk about the working of the dryer, which was far beyond A’s expectation.

Second, more than two interlocutors engage in the group face attack. Each group member has the opportunity to articulate their viewpoints both during and after each face attack. What is noteworthy is the fluidity of their ascribed identity (Blommaert 2005, pp. 205, 208). At times, they are the targets of face attacks, implicitly labeled as individuals who transgress certain norms. However, at other times, they also assert their opinions, thereby mitigating this ascribed impolite identity.

Third, face attacks in online group chats can be checkered, sporadic, and unordered. In face-to-face communication, and even in literary texts, face attacks often happen in relatively strict sequential order (for example, texts from a play analyzed in (Leech 2014). The online group chat shows a rather different picture due to the different times individuals get exposed to the message. For example, in line 70 of the data, student B violates the maxim of tact by bluntly questioning H of the meaning of sending the picture in lines 55 and 56. In line 76, O’s violation of the maxim of the obligation of Others is shown in his proposal of an opposite sign needed for the male’s floor in response to the message way before his utterance.

What is also noteworthy is that, in some lines, there are offenses in English to attack the faces of the recipients and responses in Chinese to fight back, or vice versa, which demonstrates the potential of cross-linguistic face attacks. In the confrontational exchange in lines 45 and 46, after student D contended that female and male students should use separate machines on their respective floors in reaction to the conflict in the group chat in Chinese, student E replied in English, stating that “all the other buildings share washing machines and it’s alright”. As mentioned earlier, in the Section 1 all the students are international students with varying degrees of proficiency in Chinese and English. The situation here demonstrates how multilingual individuals can engage in cross-linguistic face attacks, where they may violate maxims in one language and receive responses in another language. This phenomenon remains underexplored in impoliteness studies but intersects with language attitudes, identity, and second language acquisition research.

## 6. Conclusions

In this study, we examined how a group of international students at a university in China deploy divergent linguistic and multimodal resources to navigate conflicts revolving around the facilities of the same residential hall in their online chat group. By dint of analysis of these very detailed and intricate online dialogues, this article intends to reveal new aspects of face attacks in this globalized and digitalized world.

It is found that students employ a wide variety of strategies in engaging in these multi-party-involved conflictual situations; these include the violation of multiple maxims, such as the violation of approbation and agreement. Discourse-level impoliteness becomes apparent when students engage in either defensive or offensive responses to face-threatening acts. Both male and female students exhibit impoliteness through sarcasm and banter as a means of articulating their attitudes in group conflicts. Furthermore, multimodal impoliteness is discovered through the incorporation of images and emojis in the messages by the

students in the group chat. Meanwhile, at least three characteristics have been identified regarding face attacks in online group chats.

This research contributes new insights to impoliteness studies by highlighting multi-modal and cross-linguistic ways of face attacks. Nevertheless, due to the complex nature of impoliteness studies in terms of diverse manifestations and situatedness in the analysis, this article sheds light on new perspectives in online face attacks, particularly within group chat settings. These perspectives warrant more scholarly investigation. Further research could also delve deeper into analyzing power dynamics in negotiation among group members and conducting sociolinguistic ethnographic studies on code-switching to gain richer insights.

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**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Appendix A <sup>6</sup>

4. A: can we just all agree to like send a text to the gc if the laundry is done (because waiting two mins for the other person to take out their laundry is so hard) bc like pls don't just throw other ppl's shit into anywhere you please because i'm missing half my socks and id totally appreciate it if y'all started being the tiniest considerate ☺
5. B: 是还没烘干完毕还是烘干完毕之后还是湿的? [Is it still wet before or after drying?]<sup>7</sup>
6. A: idk man but my clothes were sopping wet which is def unusual!
7. B: 你离开的时候确保你启动了吗? [Are you sure you have turned it on when you leave?]
8. 因为烘干的过程中 门是打不开的 [Because the door cannot be opened during the drying process]
9. 还有一种可能就是衣服太多了 也会出现 烘不干的情况 [Another possibility is that if there are too many clothes, it also will not dry properly.]
10. A: 可以打开的呢 [It can be opened.]
11. 但是衣服量跟以前是一样的哦 [But the amount of clothes is the same as before.]
12. B: 你试过吗? [Have you tried (opening it)?]
13. 我们是弄不开的 [We are unable to do that.]
14. C: 可以试试把插头拔下来, 然后再插上去 [Try unplugging it and plugging it in again.]
15. 我经常这样, 让后<sup>8</sup>再插上去就能用了 [I often do this, let it be plugged in and then we can use it.]
16. B: 她的情况是她自己不知道启动没启动 [In her case, she didn't know whether the dryer was turned on or not.]
17. 如果还能打开 不是完毕就是还没有开启 [If it can still be opened, it is either completed or not turned on yet]
18. 过程中是打不开的 [It cannot be opened during the drying process]
19. A: 不试怎么能知道啊 [How will you know if you don't try?]
20. B: 所以你开过吗? [So did you open the dryer door during the drying process?]
21. 如果是的话 那很危险 [If yes, it is dangerous]
22. 得要通知前台来维修 [You have to notify the front desk for maintenance.]
23. A: 自己的衣服肯定开过啊 [I definitely have opened it if the dried are my clothes.]

24. B: 不是 [Nope]
25. 我是指 过程中 [I mean during the drying process]
26. A: (reply to line 18)im the one in danger ur good!
27. (reply to line 22)我也是啊 [I mean the process too]
28. B: 我刚刚和前台问了问 [I just asked the front desk]
29. 过程中是打不开的 [The door of the dryer cannot be opened during the process.]
30. 只有结束和还没开启之前 [It can be opened only before it is working or finishes its working]
31. A: 6 [bravo]
32. B: 如果你的烘干机是可以打开的 [If the door of the dryer can be opened]
33. A: 那我怎么打开的呢 [How did I open it?]
34. B: 那你可以问看看 [Then you should ask someone.]
35. 洗衣机应该是大家都是通用的 只能让大家尽可能不要混着用 [The washing machine should be available to everyone, all we need to do is try not to use the machines on other floors]
36. A男生本应该不能上楼的，况且哪个住六楼以下的来十楼烘衣服啊 然后搁着碰别人的衣服你觉得合理吗 [Male students should not go upstairs to the female students' floor. And whoever lives below the sixth floor would come to the tenth floor to dry clothes? Do you think it is reasonable to touch other people's clothes?]
37. B说实话 女生也经常来我们的楼层洗衣服 [To be honest, girls often come to our floor to do laundry too.]
38. A那也是不对的哦！ 也没说她们是对的哦！ [That is also wrong! Didn't say they were right!]
39. B好的 那这个情况我们先记下来 之后我们试着去解决 [Okay, let's note down this first, and then we will try to solve it.]
40. D有时候确实提示烘干完成，过去发现根本没有烘干成功 [Sometimes when it indicates that the drying is complete, then you go and find the laundry is still wet.]
41. A主要是异性碰你的衣服你不觉得膈应吗？ [The main thing is that when the opposite gender touches your clothes (in the dryer), don't you feel disgusted?]
42. D一般就是机器实际上没启动成功，但是后台系统以为启动成功了 [Generally, the machine does not start successfully, but the background system thinks that the start is successful.]
43. A确实哦！ 难道这个就是个乱扔别人的衣服的理由么？ [Indeed! Is this an excuse to throw other people's clothes?]
44. D还有人乱扔别人衣服的吗 [Anyone else throw other people's clothes?]
45. 我一般都是放旁边篮子 [I usually put it in the side basket.]
46. E: lmao idt it's reasonable separating washing machines by gender now <sup>[08]</sup> sometimes the men's floors will be all filled, or the women's will be all filled just when u need to wash clothes and the other is free
47. F: 10th floor dryer done, I've put in in the public basket
48. D:不过我同意男女各自使用自己楼层的洗衣/烘干机 [But I agree that men and women can use the washer/dryer on their own floor]
49. E: all the other buildings share washing machines and it's alr 🤖
50. B:+1
51. D: 因为上次在六楼烘干，打开烘干机发现一堆女性衣物还是非常震惊 [Because I was drying on the sixth floor last time, I was shocked to find a pile of women's clothes when I opened the dryer]
52. B:只能尽可能 但不能做到绝对 [We can all only do as much as possible but not absolutely]
53. 毕竟也是属于公共设备 [After all, it is also a public device]
54. 个人想法\* [Personal Thoughts\*]
55. G: 偶尔男女混也可以理解吧，别的楼也不分男女 [Occasionally, it is understandable that men and women are mixed, and other buildings do not distinguish between men and women.]



56. D: 我倒无所谓, 就是被惊到了 [I don't care, I'm just surprised]

57. H: +1



58.



59.

60. I: 这样我不建议女生晚上出现在男生楼层 [In this way, I don't recommend girls to appear on the boys' floor at night]

61. B: 我也这么认为 [I think so]

62. J: 别的楼因为是单人间 所以本身就无法避免这个问题 我们楼的男女楼层的分界很明晰 所以很好避免吧 不能因为别的楼层混用混洗所以我们楼层也可以吧 怎么变成了我们楼向下兼容无法避免的“低标准”了 [Because other floors are single rooms, this problem cannot be avoided. In our building, the division between male and female floors is very clear, so it is easy to avoid it. It can't be mixed with other floors, so our floor can also be used. How could it become our floor down? Compatible with unavoidable "low standards"]

63. B: 以后只要是男访客也不建议上楼了 [In the future, as long as it is a male visitor, it is not recommended to go upstairs.]

64. K: 男师傅也不可以去修理你们的房间了 [The male mechanic is no longer able to fix the stuffs in your room.]

65. B: 哈哈哈哈哈 [hahahahahaha]

66. L: points have been made

67. A: at least they won't have gone through my laundry!

68. J: 这不对吧 那阿姨也可以不用打扫我们房间了 是这意思 [Isn't that right? Then the female cleaner doesn't have to clean our room. Right?]

69. B: 对 [yes]

70. K: 我并没有阻止阿姨来我的房间 当然我也没有支持男孩子去女生楼层洗衣 [I didn't stop the female cleaner from coming to my room, and of course I didn't support boys doing laundry on the girls' floor]

71. M: +1 no one goes to other floors to wash clothes if the washing machines in theirs is available 🧠 limiting common resources like that will only make it harder for everyone to get their shi washed on time. Next thing you know you can only use kitchens on the girl floors Men should be doing laundry on their floor. Laundry rooms are close to female shower rooms.

72. H: Men shouldn't be around these areas

73. B: So what's the point of sending that pic

74. H: The sign is clear

75. B: Yeah
76. so it's clear
77. H: There are enough washing machines on each floor to accommodate requirements. If washing machines on a certain floor are all occupied find another one that is in a floor that matches your gender. /Men shouldn't be around our shower rooms under the pretext of using washing machines
78. N: hhh funny
79. O: 建议男生楼层也搞一个女士止步 [It is suggested that the male students' floor should also have a sign saying males only.]
80. P: I'm sorry, but there aren't. Most of the times they are all occupied, specially on weekends
81. B: 认同 [I agree]
82. I: +1
83. R: +2
84. S: Well, NGL there always a time that you won't have a dryer to use, they are all occupied, I have experienced that be4
85. A: then don't save ur clothes all for the weekend!
86. H: +1
87. A: be patient and wait for one!
88. H: I never went on a men's floor so I don't want men around on my floor either
89. A: +1!
90. H: I should be able to walk freely to the shower room knowing that I won't bump into a man in the corridor/
91. If other girls don't care about this issue, I care /
92. The sign is clear
93. Z: What about study rooms and kitchens then?
94. B: Same
95. Y: There's other things that we use on each others floors: kitchens and study rooms are also included. So now we are going to stop using them?!
96. M: 异性s arent aliens, there'll be times when people have to go to the other genders floors for one reason or the other [the other gender]
97. H: Study rooms aren't in the corridor leading to the shower room.
98. I: 所以既然这样 公共厨房的冰箱是不是也该分一分? 为了不要向下兼容1-2层的食材放在2层 3和4 5和6 7和8 9和10以此兴推, 那就请你们自觉拿走吧 [So if this is the case, should the refrigerators in public kitchens also be given a point? In order not to be backward compatible with the ingredients on the 1st-2nd floor, put them on the 2nd floor, 3 and 4, 5 and 6, 7 and 8, 9 and 10, so please take it away consciously.] (some time later)
99. AA:<sup>9</sup>



[WeChat QR code 1 with the group name “\* floor kings”]<sup>10</sup>

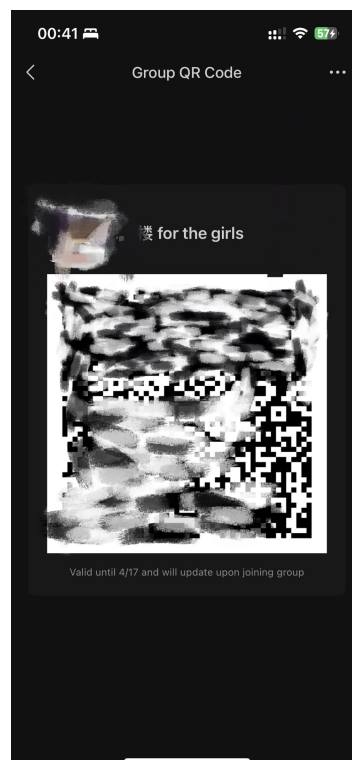
...

100. B: Should build another group just for men?  
 101. Z: this is floor-ist. I demand entry as well.  
 102. B:



[WeChat group QR code 2 with the group name 群聊 \* building "men" (groupchat \* building "men")]

103. Feel free to join  
 104. BB: Good  
 105. Now I can leave this one  
 106. CC:



[WeChat group QR code 3 with group name \*楼 for the girls, which means \* building for the girls]

- ...  
 107. Z: 3 different groupchats for one building?  
 108. :#  
 109. Ope

110. B: 这个群主要是让同学们上报设备问题 [This group is mainly for students to report equipment issues.]
111. 如果我们在这里吹太多水 领班们会看不到消息 [If we chat too much here, the leaders won't see the messages.]
112. V: Omg guys..like seriously?
113. T: guys this isnt a war thing
114. T: its like
115. X: A battle resulting in division of territory
116. T: having a peaceful girl group where we can talk about more female oriented things
117. W: 我有个不成熟的想法 其实可以开个通知群和交流群, 如果搞分化会有点点怪 [I have an immature idea: we could actually create a notification group and a discussion group. It might feel a bit strange to separate according to gender].
118. T: 可不可以不要 add oil to fire its not like that [can we not]
119. X: Bruv 加油 is literally a good thing in Chinese [add oil/come on]
120. T: NO
121. A: bruv it's english ?
122. T: its like
123. whats the proverb
124. 火上浇油 [adding fuel to the fire]
125. yee that one
126. i forgot it for a hot sec
127. heh
128. L: Isn't tomorrow Monday?

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See survey by Statista released in 2024 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/250546/leading-social-network-sites-in-china/> (accessed on 20 May 2024).
- <sup>2</sup> There is one leader student on each floor who is responsible for networking between the hall leader and students.
- <sup>3</sup> Full chat messages can be seen in the Appendix 6.
- <sup>4</sup> The utterance number corresponds to the timing of each message, as outlined in the Appendix 6.
- <sup>5</sup> All bracketed parts [...] are translated by the author.
- <sup>6</sup> All the format such as errors conform to the original messages.
- <sup>7</sup> All bracketed parts [...] are translated by the author.
- <sup>8</sup> Here “让后 (ranghou)” is an error. The correct form in Chinese is “然后 (ranhou)”.
- <sup>9</sup> All these three QR codes have been edited for ethical reasons.
- <sup>10</sup> People have to scan this QR code to join the group chat. See the *WeChat* website for more background information. [https://help.wechat.com/cgi-bin/micromsg-bin/oshelpcenter?opcode=2&id=1508193qqjiv150819e7zjbm&lang=en&plat=ios&Channel=helpcenter#:~:text=\(1\)%20Select%20and%20enter%20a,QR%20Code%20to%20other%20users](https://help.wechat.com/cgi-bin/micromsg-bin/oshelpcenter?opcode=2&id=1508193qqjiv150819e7zjbm&lang=en&plat=ios&Channel=helpcenter#:~:text=(1)%20Select%20and%20enter%20a,QR%20Code%20to%20other%20users) (accessed on 20 May 2024).

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