

Impoliteness Strategies in Negative Online Consumer Reviews in China: A Cross-Platform and Cross-Product Comparison of JD.com and Douyin Mall

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Abstract

Online consumer reviews influence purchasing decisions, but impolite expressions in negative reviews may damage brand reputation and intensify disputes between consumers and merchants. Drawing on Feng and Ren's framework, this study examines 800 one-star reviews from JD.com and Douyin Mall in the beauty and skincare and 3C digital product sectors. Through manual coding, inter-coder reliability testing, and chi-square analysis, it compares positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, implicated impoliteness, and sarcasm. On-record impoliteness was the dominant category, while positive impoliteness was the most frequent individual strategy and sarcasm was the least frequent. Douyin Mall contained significantly more positive impoliteness, whereas JD.com contained significantly more negative impoliteness. 3C reviews contained significantly more on-record impoliteness, while beauty and skincare reviews contained more implicated impoliteness. These differences may result from platform transaction logic and product characteristics. The findings offer implications for differentiated review governance and customer relationship management.

Keywords

Impoliteness strategies; negative online consumer reviews; shelf-based e-commerce; content-based e-commerce; review management.

1. Introduction

Electronic word-of-mouth has become an important source of information in digital commerce. Online consumer reviews (OCRs) provide consumers with free information before purchase and influence shopping decisions [1]. In China, JD.com mainly represents shelf-based e-commerce, where consumers search for products through specifications, prices, ratings, and after-sales information. Douyin Mall is more closely associated with content-based e-commerce, where short videos, livestreaming, recommendations, and emotional presentation shape consumer expectations.

Negative reviews can damage brand reputation, especially when they contain strong emotional or impolite expressions. Online anonymity and physical distance may weaken ordinary politeness constraints and encourage direct criticism [2], [3]. Reviews also address potential consumers rather than only merchants. An impolite review may therefore perform two functions: expressing dissatisfaction and discouraging others from purchasing.

Previous studies have often focused on one platform, one language, or one product sector. Comparisons between shelf-based and content-based e-commerce remain limited. In addition, functional products such as digital devices may generate different complaint patterns from experiential products such as beauty and skincare items. This study addresses these gaps by comparing one-star reviews from JD.com and Douyin Mall across the two product sectors. It examines the following questions:

How do impoliteness strategies differ between JD.com and Douyin Mall?

How do they differ between beauty and skincare reviews and 3C digital product reviews?
What do these differences imply for review governance and customer relationship management?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Impoliteness Theory and Chinese Online Discourse

Culpeper defines impoliteness as a negative attitude toward behavior in a particular context, while Bousfield emphasizes the intentional communication of face-threatening acts [4], [5]. An expression cannot therefore be classified as impolite only according to its linguistic form. Interpretation depends on the relationship between participants, the communicative situation, and contextual expectations.

Spencer-Oatey distinguishes quality face and social identity face and also discusses equity rights and association rights [6]. Research on cross-cultural perceptions suggests that Chinese participants attach particular importance to fairness, appropriate treatment, and the fulfilment of obligations [7]. These concerns are relevant to online complaints involving refunds, customer service, product authenticity, and merchants' responsibilities.

Online communication may reduce the pressure to maintain harmonious relationships. Chinese online reviews may combine mitigation devices, such as hedges and disclaimers, with intensifiers, repetition, taboo expressions, and emphatic punctuation [3], [8]. This combination allows reviewers to express strong dissatisfaction while adapting their criticism to the communicative context.

2.2. Impoliteness in Online Consumer Reviews

Vásquez found that online complaints are frequently accompanied by advice and recommendations and are not always expressed directly [9]. Feng and Ren classified impoliteness in negative online consumer reviews into positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, implicated impoliteness, and sarcasm [10]. Positive impoliteness directly attacks the target's positive face by criticizing quality, authenticity, service, or performance. Negative impoliteness threatens the target's freedom of action through complaints, demands, anger, or threats. Implicated impoliteness conveys criticism indirectly through doubts, comparisons, warnings, or advice. Sarcasm uses apparently positive or humorous language to express a negative intended meaning.

Previous studies indicate that positive impoliteness is generally the most frequent strategy, while sarcasm is relatively uncommon [10], [11]. Product type also affects online evaluation. Consumers may emphasize trustworthiness, functionality, price, and quality, but the linguistic realization of dissatisfaction may vary according to the object of evaluation [12]. Functional defects are often easier to identify, whereas beauty and skincare experiences may depend on skin type, personal preference, and usage conditions.

2.3. Platform Differences and Research Gap

JD.com is a relatively search-oriented platform where consumers rely on product specifications, prices, ratings, and after-sales policies. Douyin Mall relies more on short videos, livestreaming, recommendations, and emotional product presentation. These differences may shape consumer expectations and the expression of dissatisfaction.

Existing studies have not sufficiently compared these two platform types or examined their relationship with product attributes. The present study therefore investigates one-star reviews from JD.com and Douyin Mall in the beauty and skincare and 3C digital product sectors. It extends previous research by introducing platform ecology and product characteristics into the analysis of impoliteness in Chinese OCRs.

3. Analytical Framework

Following Feng and Ren [10], this study divides impoliteness into on-record and off-record impoliteness. On-record impoliteness directly threatens the merchant's positive or negative face. It includes positive impoliteness and negative impoliteness. Positive impoliteness directly criticizes product quality, authenticity, service, after-sales procedures, or logistics, and may also employ taboo words. Negative impoliteness restricts the merchant's freedom of action through threats, complaints, demands, or angry emotional expressions.

Off-record impoliteness conveys dissatisfaction indirectly. It includes implicated impoliteness and sarcasm. Implicated impoliteness is realized through doubts, comparisons, purchase warnings, indirect criticism, or advisory remarks to potential buyers. Sarcasm occurs when utterances sound appropriate literally, while the underlying intention is critical and constitutes face attack against retailers.

4. Methodology

4.1. Data Sources and Sampling

The dataset comprises 800 one-star reviews collected from JD.com, a typical shelf-based e-commerce platform, and Douyin Mall, a representative content-based shopping platform. The sample covers two categories: beauty and skincare (facial masks, sunscreen, essences, and facial cleansers) and 3C digital products (mobile phones, power banks, and earphones). These sectors were selected due to divergent evaluation certainty. Common defects of 3C products, such as overheating, lagging, charging issues and short battery life, tend to be objectively observable. In contrast, the effects of beauty and skincare goods are contingent on skin sensitivity, usage conditions, fragrance and personal preference.

Where feasible, consistent product pools were adopted across the two platforms. Customized goods, gift sets, co-branded products and other special SKUs were excluded. Reviews were obtained via targeted random sampling between May 1, 2025 and May 1, 2026 and classified into four subgroups: JD.com beauty and skincare, JD.com 3C, Douyin Mall beauty and skincare, and Douyin Mall 3C, with 200 valid reviews for each group.

4.2. Data Cleaning and Coding

Blank ratings, automated reviews, advertisements, irrelevant promotional content, and invalid comments were removed. The unit of analysis was the occurrence of an impoliteness strategy rather than the number of reviews, because one review could contain more than one strategy. For example, a reviewer might directly criticize a product and then advise others not to purchase it.

Two trained coders independently coded the reviews according to the four-category framework. The inter-coder reliability coefficient was 0.86. Disagreements were resolved through discussion. Frequencies, percentages, and chi-square tests were used, with statistical significance set at $p < 0.05$.

5. Results

5.1. Differences between JD.com and Douyin Mall

On-record impoliteness dominated both platforms, accounting for 73.02% of coded occurrences on JD.com and 77.72% on Douyin Mall, while off-record impoliteness made up 26.98% and 22.28% respectively; the overall gap between platforms was insignificant $p = 0.1936$. This distribution aligns with Feng and Ren's (2020) view that consumers tend to voice dissatisfaction directly in negative online reviews.

Significant gaps existed in explicit criticism types: positive impoliteness hit 62.36% on JD.com versus 70.65% on Douyin Mall $p = 0.0027$, and negative impoliteness reached 10.66% on JD.com versus only 7.07% on Douyin Mall $p = 0.0314$. Douyin Mall users criticize promotional exaggeration more, while JD.com users focus on after-sales and refund disputes.

Indirect impoliteness showed no notable cross-platform divergence. Implicated impoliteness stood at 24.39% (JD.com) and 21.20% (Douyin Mall) $p = 0.1936$, and sarcasm only occupied 2.58% and 1.09% respectively $p = 0.0595$, with both p -values above the 0.05 significance threshold.

5.2. Differences between Product Sectors

On-record impoliteness accounted for 69.54% of coded occurrences in beauty and skincare reviews and 81.51% in 3C reviews ($p < 0.0001$). Off-record impoliteness was more frequent among beauty and skincare reviews, accounting for 30.46% versus 18.49% of 3C reviews ($p < 0.0001$).

Positive impoliteness was more frequent in 3C reviews, at 70.38% compared with 62.54% for beauty products $p = 0.0046$. Negative impoliteness also registered a higher proportion in 3C reviews: 11.13% versus 7.00% $p = 0.0135$. These results suggest that consumers of 3C products tend to point out objective functional defects and demand remedies directly.

Implicated impoliteness reached 28.18% in beauty reviews but only 17.06% in 3C samples ($p < 0.0001$). Beauty buyers are more likely to express doubts, draw cross-product comparisons and warn other potential purchasers. Sarcasm remained rare in both categories $p = 0.2892$, with no statistically significant difference.

5.3. Examples of the Four Strategies

Following Feng and Ren (2020), this section presents the four strategies in descending order of frequency. The relevant expressions are underlined in the Chinese examples and their translations.

Positive Impoliteness

Positive impoliteness was mainly used to criticize product quality or authenticity, blame products and services, and express strong negative emotions.

Example 1: 轻易不写评论，写评论就是太烂了，第一次买到这种烂商品，里面的包装看看撕成什么样子了，恶心！

The expressions “太烂了” (“terrible”), “烂商品” (“terrible product”), and “恶心” (“disgusting”) directly reject both the product and its packaging. The reviewer does not mitigate the criticism and openly attacks the merchant’s positive face.

Example 2: 这家的面膜一点都不好，没有直播上说的那么好，都是骗人的。

This review directly contrasts the actual product with the livestream presentation. The accusation “都是骗人的” (“it was all a lie”) transforms dissatisfaction with product performance into an explicit attack on the credibility of the merchant’s promotion.

Implicated Impoliteness

Implicated impoliteness was realized through doubts about authenticity, comparisons, unresolved problems, and warnings to potential consumers.

Example 3: 很像假的，包装一股塑料味还褪色。和之前买的不一样。

The reviewer does not state categorically that the product is counterfeit. Instead, the suspicion is implied through the plastic smell, faded packaging, and comparison with a previous purchase. Readers are invited to infer a possible authenticity problem.

Example 4: 建议别入手，系统兼容性真的很差，很多软件都是以前的版本，系统的流畅度也很差。

The review describes several technical problems and ends with direct advice to potential consumers. The warning “建议别入手” (“I suggest that people not buy it”) indirectly damages the merchant’s reputation by discouraging future purchases.

Negative Impoliteness

Negative impoliteness was realized through threats, complaints, strong emotions, and demands for responsibility.

Example 5: 第一次在京东上面写这种投诉评价.....客服完全不管解决问题，只管机械回复，一百多块钱的东西，还要我去验货，要搞得这么麻烦的话，我坚决投诉到底！

The reviewer criticizes the customer-service process and threatens to continue complaining. The threat places pressure on the merchant and challenges its ability to control the dispute.

Example 6: 充不进去电，退还不给退，什么破玩意呀？商品问题，换了四五条充电线都充不进去！差评！

This review combines a functional failure with dissatisfaction about the refusal to accept a return. The rhetorical question and the expressions “什么破玩意” (“what a terrible product”) and “差评” (“one-star review”) express strong anger and protest.

Sarcasm

Sarcasm was realized through apparently positive evaluations with negative intended meanings.

Example 7: 洗完特别干！用一次就冒痘！见效可真快！！！想长痘的就来！

“见效可真快” (“it worked so quickly”) appears to be praise, but the surrounding complaints show that the intended meaning is negative. The final sentence reverses the normal recommendation format and sarcastically warns consumers against purchasing the product.

Example 8: 商家很会节省成本，本来应该配有充电头的，操作指南视频里都有，发给我们的只有一根线，搞笑。

The phrase “很会节省成本” (“very good at saving costs”) superficially sounds complimentary. In context, however, it criticizes the merchant for omitting a charger. “搞笑” (“how hilarious”) reinforces the sarcastic and contemptuous tone.

6. Discussion

6.1. Platform Differences

The higher frequency of positive impoliteness on Douyin Mall may be related to the platform’s promotional environment. Livestreams and short videos rely on visual demonstrations, recommendations, and immediate purchase decisions. These features can create strong expectations. When actual product performance differs from promotional claims, consumers may respond with direct accusations about quality, authenticity, or misleading advertising.

JD.com reviews contained more negative impoliteness. This may reflect the platform’s emphasis on search, transactions, prices, logistics, and after-sales procedures. Consumers often evaluate whether merchants have fulfilled their obligations concerning refunds, returns, price protection, and customer service. When these procedures fail, complaints may take the form of demands, anger, and threats of further action.

6.2. Product Differences

3C reviews contained significantly more on-record impoliteness. Technical problems such as charging failure, overheating, lagging, and poor compatibility are relatively observable and can be described directly. Consumers can identify a specific defect and demand repair, replacement, or refund.

Beauty and skincare reviews contained more off-record and implicated impoliteness. Product effects may depend on skin type, sensitivity, personal preference, and usage conditions. Reviewers may therefore be less certain about the exact cause of dissatisfaction. They may express doubts about authenticity, compare the product with previous purchases, describe possible adverse reactions, or advise others to be cautious.

6.3. Practical Implications

The findings suggest that platform governance should be differentiated. Douyin Mall merchants should ensure that livestream demonstrations and promotional claims accurately represent the products delivered. Reducing the gap between promotion and actual experience may decrease direct accusations. JD.com merchants should improve refund, return, price-protection, and customer-service procedures. Mechanical replies may intensify anger, whereas specific and substantive responses may help repair the relationship.

For 3C products, merchants should provide rapid technical support and clear procedures for inspection, repair, replacement, and refund. For beauty and skincare products, merchants should strengthen authenticity verification, batch information, ingredient disclosure, and usage guidance. Platforms should also monitor reviews containing severe derogatory expressions, threats of formal complaints, or explicit warnings to potential buyers, because unresolved dissatisfaction may develop into broader reputational damage [13], [14].

7. Conclusion

This study compared impoliteness strategies in 800 one-star reviews from JD.com and Douyin Mall across beauty and skincare and 3C digital products. On-record impoliteness was dominant, positive impoliteness was the most frequent individual strategy, and sarcasm was the least frequent. Douyin Mall contained significantly more positive impoliteness, whereas JD.com contained significantly more negative impoliteness. 3C reviews contained more direct impoliteness, while beauty and skincare reviews contained more implicated impoliteness.

The differences can be related to platform transaction logic and product characteristics. Content-based e-commerce may produce direct accusations when promotional expectations are not met. Shelf-based e-commerce may generate more complaints about after-sales procedures and consumer rights. Functional 3C products encourage direct criticism because their defects are relatively easy to identify. The more subjective nature of beauty and skincare products encourages doubts, comparisons, and indirect warnings.

The study is limited to two platforms and two product sectors. It also relies mainly on manual interpretation and does not include interviews with reviewers or merchants. Future research may include additional platforms, product categories, and consumer groups, and may examine how merchant responses repair damaged customer relationships.

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