JOURNAL OF
PRAGMATICS
RESEARCH

Dear Leader! A Look at (In)directness in Online Complaints in China

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Abstract

The rise of e-government services has led to an increase in citizens interacting with the government online. However, not much is known about the nature of citizen complaints on such administrative platforms. A few previous studies have shown that due to politeness considerations, Chinese communication is often indirect in power-asymmetrical settings. This study examines citizen complaint posts on an online e-service platform in China, exploring the linguistic (in)directness and politeness of those posts. Using a qualitative method, 300 citizen complaint posts were analyzed, with the findings revealing that: a) traditional markers of politeness were not extensively used in the opening and closing of complaint posts despite their inherently face-threatening nature; b) citizens communicated directly with the government, expressing a high level of directness in complaint posts; c) despite finding (b), complaint components were not in general perceived as impolite. The paper argues that Chinese communication is not always indirect, particularly in online situations with a power imbalance. In such cases, citizens sporadically use traditional politeness elements; instead, they focused more on avoiding Component B (i.e. dissatisfaction/disapproval) in complaints and formalizing complaint components. Direct citizen-to-government (C2G) communication is transaction-oriented and instrumental in this online administrative context. This paper provides some insight into Chinese pragmatics and practical guidelines for citizens to make successful and efficient complaints in an online administrative context.

Keywords: politeness; (in)directness; complaints; China; e-government service platform

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of the Internet and social media has brought about significant change in social interaction (Mason & Carr, 2021; Ren & Fukushima, 2022), including e-government communication between citizens and their respective government representatives. Through information and communication technology (ICT), e-government provides citizens and businesses with up-to-date information and services, facilitating problem-solving and enhancing communication with government authorities (Basu, 2004; Meng, 2019). This communication platform encompasses two types of communication: Government-to-Citizen (G2C) and Citizen-to-Government (C2G), the latter being the focus of this research. The communication functions are primarily categorized into transactional and interpersonal (Yule & Brown, 1983). Theoretically, e-government interactions, particularly C2G petitions, present an exciting opportunity for language and communication research as they are a relatively new phenomenon with evolving social norms, leading to unknown communication strategies and variations.

Messages on the e-government platform must be clear, authentic, and accurate, providing substantive descriptions. Emotional catharsis is encouraged to be avoided (https://liuyan.people.com.cn/forum/list). Successfully posting citizen complaints on an e-government platform is not necessarily straightforward. Although many complaints are submitted to Chinese e-government service platforms daily, many of such messages fail to be posted because of inappropriate linguistic expressions. It appears that some citizens are not aware of the right communication skills to create successful posts. In addition, not all posted complaints will be responded to (Su & Meng, 2016) and the selective responsiveness of governments is found to be closely related to citizens' discursive strategy (Li et al., 2019). To complicate matters further, the Chinese government now employs strategic online censorship in handling certain content types such as any language that can lead to collective action (Han & Shao, 2022). Only appropriate discursive techniques seem to circumvent censorship (Wu & Fitzgerald, 2021). "Information about how best to submit complaints is eagerly sought but difficult to obtain" (Tsai & Xu, 2017, p. 5) despite e-platforms possibly being the only channel for laypeople, as opposed to party

members and political elites, to engage in political/administrative activities (Xu et al., 2022). All these factors highlight the importance of pertinent communication skills for successful negotiation in an online administrative context. These skills or strategies should be used to assist citizens in getting their complaints posted and responded to by government representatives, as these complaint posts are "informative about what powerholders are willing to tolerate" (Distelhorst & Fu, 2019, p. 108). Unfortunately, this is currently non-existent.

The focus on complaints in the present study is to fill in the literature gap, as little research has been conducted to probe into complaining behaviour in online administrative environments in China. Previous studies on complaints are mainly confined to alphabetic languages such as French and German, and in business contexts such as email and online shopping platforms (e.g., Decock & Depraetere, 2018; Decock & Spiessens, 2017; Depraetere et al., 2021). Therefore, the present paper provides one of the first explorations of linguistic strategies used in complaints posted on an e-government service platform in Chinese. To the researchers' knowledge, only two research studies have been conducted on the linguistic features found on this specific e-government service platform. Distelhorst and Fu (2019) and Li et al. (2019) mainly focused on discourse types drawing on limited linguistic features of all types of posts (including speech acts such as complaining, advising, and consulting) without paying particular attention to complaints. The paucity of research in such a context warrants this study.

Given the above, this study asks the following questions: 1) How direct or indirect are the complaints made on Message Board for Leaders (MBL)? 2) How is politeness expressed in online complaints on MBL?

The speech act of complaint

Decock and Depraetere (2018) define a complaint situation as having four components. The complainer can express disapproval (component B) of an offensive act that occurred in the past or is occurring at present (component A). The complainee is assumed to be (at least partly) accountable for the complained-of action or event

(component C) and is expected to take a remedial action for the complainable (component D). They further argue that in a complaint situation a complainer can either opt out or use a complaint strategy based on linguistic (in)directness, that is, being explicit and implicit. It is important to note that the notion of (in)directness here is different from previous research (House & Kasper, 2011; Trosborg, 1995) where not only explicitness and implicitness but perceived face threat were also factored in (in)directness. More scholars argue that face threat can only be experienced by the interactants themselves as opposed to something that analysts can observe (Locher & Watts, 2005). Therefore, the linguistic (in)directness in this research refers to implicitness and explicitness "(of the proposition and illocutionary force communicated)" (Decock & Depraetere, 2018, p.37) only as the analysis is based solely on the researcher's assessment.

Making complaints against government authorities through e-government service platforms can be "strategic" (Distelhorst & Fu, 2019, p. 108). The statement of complainable, i.e. Decock and Depraetere's component A, is needed for complainers to "project oneself as doing it reluctantly, or only through necessity" as opposed to a "dispositional moaner" (Edwards, 2005, p. 24). Moreover, refraining from negative emotional expressions such as disapproval, anger, and dissatisfaction (Decock and Depraetere's component B) can contribute to the effectiveness of complaints and make it possible for the public (observers) to make evaluative assessments (Dayter & Rüdiger, 2014). In addition, avoiding explicit reference to an assumed responsible agent(s), i.e. Decock and Depraetere's component C, is expected to make a complaint less face-threatening (House & Kasper, 2011). When it comes to component D, its form varies based on the context. For example, in a business context, it can vary from advice, suggestions, and recommendations (Jin & Yuan, 2020; Vásquez, 2011) to more severe warnings, insults (Meinl, 2013), and requests. In an online administrative context like People Voice Online, a Chinese local e-government service platform, the most common speech act that co-occurs with complaints is requesting remedial actions (Zhou, 2016). In this institutional context, the recipients "will probably welcome explicit requests as they are usually clearer and easier to process" (Migdadi et al., 2012).

Chinese is noted for its linguistic indirectness in expression (e.g., Ding, 2006; Zhang, 1995), especially when expressing face-threatening act complaints (Brown & Levinson, 1987) in power asymmetrical settings (Chen et al., 2011; Yuan, 2009; Yuan & Zhu, 2007) as "social power is an overriding factor in Chinese society" (Chen et al., 2011, p. 269). The indirectness employed by Chinese people in making complaints is attributed to the performance of deference and politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). However, previous study data were mainly elicited by Discourse Completion Tasks (DCT), role plays, or interviews, and the powerholders in designed scenarios were usually parents and professors to make them as close to real life as possible. Therefore, online authentic complaints are good examples for explaining how linguistic and cultural factors inform the performance of this speech act. Although indirectness in communication is preferred in China, the context where a complaint is lodged is important. To be more specific, the public platform is run to focus more on problem-solving than nurturing personal relationships; complaints are thus expected to be pragmatic, direct, and transaction oriented.

Politeness in China

According to Chinese linguists Zhou and Zhang (2018), politeness means acting appropriately and in accordance with social norms. Politeness can be demonstrated in various ways, such as through salutations and greetings, which can help build rapport between individuals (Van Herck et al., 2022). Self-disclosure is another way to establish a close relationship by proactively sharing personal information with others. In addition, the use of refined language is also considered polite (Zhou & Zhang, 2018). For instance, the Chinese request performative "请" (please) can be substituted with synonymous refined requestive verbs like "关注" (pay attention to) to invite government authorities to provide favourable intervention. This approach acknowledges the power gap between officials and citizens and gives officials the discretion to assist without feeling obligated to do so (Distelhorst & Fu, 2019). By using refined language, interactants can minimize the imposition of requests by suggesting that the responsible party handle complaints at their discretion, rather than following social obligations. Thanking is also seen as an inherently

polite speech act (Leech, 2014) and is typically used at the end of a discourse. These traditional markers of politeness strategies are commonly used in research on politeness.

Communication in China can be "inscrutable" (Scollon & Wong-Scollon, 1991, p. 113), especially concerning politeness. Politeness in China is represented in two different ways – "traditionally polite" such as using honorific addressing terms and small talk in interaction to reinforce social interaction or "direct and pragmatic" (Kádár & Pan, 2011), for example, in certain businesses interactions, politeness strategies are seldom used and the only purpose for which is to complete the task (Pan, 2000). While covert use of traditional politeness has decreased over time, some forms of politeness still exist, particularly in written genres like "official petitions" (Kádár & Pan, 2011, p. 137). This is because hierarchical relationships are still important in Chinese culture. In conversations, terms of address such as job titles, are often used to show power differentiation and deference (Wood & Kroger, 1991). To summarize, even though the "lack of politeness" (Pan & Kádár, 2011, p. 127) is often seen as the norm, the hierarchical relations between those in power and those without power persist and should be acknowledged. It would be interesting to see if there is a change in politeness practices when it comes to online communication in China, especially in online administrative contexts.

RESEARCH METHOD

Data and data collection

To analyze and describe politeness and linguistic (in)directness in citizen complaints in the chosen context, the Message Board for Leaders (MBL) was selected because it is the largest online political interactive platform in China at present (Li et al., 2019). As there are over 10,000 messages posted by citizens daily, it is necessary to narrow down the dataset. Three levels of governments which are province, prefecture and county are represented on this platform. One hundred messages posted to each level of government were selected to take into account citizens' sensitivity to power differences. To ensure recency, data from February 2022 was taken as a reference. Twenty most active government administrators, as ranked by the platform for that month, were selected, and every first five

complaints posted to them in February were collected. In total, 300 complaints were obtained. It should be noted that complaints posted by the same ID with identical content were not included. The dataset thus comprises 300 citizen complaint posts, with a total of 46,778 words. Each post averages 156 words, with the shortest consisting of only 22 words, and the longest post, 589 words. All posts are in Chinese.

Data analysis

The analysis involved coding using NVivo. The coding scheme used in identifying complaint strategies and formal realization of complaint components was based on those by Decock and Depraetere (2018) and Depraetere et al. (2021). Not all codes appeared in the data set; only those that were attested are demonstrated. Because this analytical framework was proposed based on alphabetic languages such as German and Dutch, modification was made based on Chinese linguistics by addition and integration. A new type of formal realization of B was added, i.e., an interrogative starts with "why not/why don't". Gao (1999) argued that interrogatives start with "why don't …" in Chinese is often expressed as "a combination of a question and a criticism" (p. 9). The interrogative starts with "why don't …" in Chinese is "sarcastic, used in anger of impatience." (Gao, 1999, p. 10). It is found that this kind of sentence in the MBL corpus expresses dissatisfaction. Therefore, interrogatives starting with "why don't/not …" can also be considered as a formal realization of component B in this corpus. When it comes to the realization of component B, the negative evaluative adjective/adverb/verb/noun can be a broad category as negative evaluative expression as the difference between them is too small to be mentioned in Chinese. Regarding the formal realization of component D, two additions and one integration were made. The requestive noun and suggestion were added, and performative was included as a subtype of imperative based on Liu et al. (2021).

The data used in this research is from a public platform that any user can access. The platform's privacy policy allows institutions, such as universities, to use content for research purposes, provided anonymity is maintained. In this case, the messages are anonymized using generic words like "NAME." In addition, no sensitive information is contained in citizen posts on MBL. The study utilized two coders, one was the first author of the paper, and the other was a trained linguistics lecturer. The inter-rater reliability was 86%. In cases of disagreement, a third linguistic expert was invited to resolve the differences.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Level of Linguistic (in)directness in complaints

Table 1 summarizes the occurrence rates of constitutive components within citizen complaints in an online institutional setting. It shows that Component A appears in all complaint posts, indicating its indispensability. Component C ranked second (87.7%) followed by Component D (78.7). Notably, Component B exhibited a realization rate which is lower (31%) than that of Components C and D, and one-third of that of Component A. Depraetere et al. (2021) discovers that customers express significantly more of component B (more than 70%) when complaining to a national railway company on Twitter. Similarly, a study by Ruytenbeek et al. (2021) uncovers that customers on Booking.com platform and TripAdvisor express a lot of negative component B (more than 80%). The difference in the amount of component B found in online administrative and online business contexts due to the former complainers' awareness of 'power difference' (Fukushima, 2000, p. 85) in dealing with the government since component B, which expresses disapproval, can lower the level of politeness in complaints (Ruytenbeek et al., 2022).

Table 1 Frequency of constitutive components of citizen complaints on MBL

Constitutive component	Freq. (/300)	%
A	300	100%
B	92	31%
C	263	87.7%
D	236	78.7%

(Note: A= complainable, B= disapproval/ dissatisfaction, C=person/institution take responsibility for the complainable, D= wish the offensive acts to be remedied)

Table 2 summarised the occurrence frequencies of constituent components and their combinations within complaint posts on MBL. The data revealed that the most common combination, involving three constitutive components, comprised over 50% of the sample, which was approximately double the percentage of combinations involving four constitutive components (20.7%). Combinations of two constitutive components accounted for 15.3%, representing an increase of around 5% compared to complain posts containing only one constitutive component. This indicates that citizen complaints have been expressed with high directness to ensure effective communication.

Table 2 Frequency of one/ two/ three/ four constitutive component(s) combinations of citizen complaints on MBL

Combination of complaint component	Freq. (/300)	%
One constitutive component	32	10.67%
Two constitutive components	46	15.33%
Three constitutive components	160	53.33%
Four constitutive components	62	20.67%

(Within the present dataset, two-constitutive-component combinations can involve any two constituent components. The two-component complaint posts in the dataset include combinations such as AB, AC, and AD. On the other hand, three-constitutive-component combinations can consist of any three constituent components. As a result, the combinations observed for three-component complaints are ABC, ABD, and ACD (refer to Table 4.4 for further information).

Table 3 presented a summary of the frequencies of the complaint strategies employed by Chinese citizens when addressing government authorities within an online administrative climate. It showed that the most frequently utilized complaint strategy was ACD, accounting for 48.7% of the total, which was more than twice the usage of the second most employed complaint strategy ABCD (20.7%). Complaint strategies consisting solely of component A (10.7%) and those combining components A and C (10.3%) exhibited similar percentages. Complaint strategies AD and ABC had nearly identical usage rates, both representing approximately 4% of the total. The least employed complaint strategies AB and ABD, occurred only three times respectively, constituting approximately 1% of the sample set. The high level of directness in citizen complaints could increase clarity and thus ensure effective handling.

Table 3 Frequency of component/component combination (complaint strategy) of citizen complaint posts on MBL

Complaint strategy	Freq. (/300)	%
ACD	146	48.7%
ABCD	62	20.7%
A	32	10.7%
AC	31	10.3%
AD	12	4%
ABC	11	3.7%
AB	3	1%
ABD	3	1%

(Note: A= complainable, B= disapproval/ dissatisfaction, C=person/institution take responsibility for the complainable, D= wish the offensive acts to be compensated)

Formal realization of complaint components A, B, C, D

Table 4 presented the results of various types of formal realizations of component A in citizen complaints within the MBL dataset. The most frequently employed form of formal realisation for component A was in the form of the declarative sentence, accounting for approximately 86%. Although declarative sentences can make assertions, they do not express strong personal emotions like exclamative sentences, the second most employed formal realization of component A (Zhan & Bai, 2016). This is important to avoid any

impression of impoliteness (Ruytenbeek et al., 2023). Therefore, the preference for expressing component A in declarative sentences is to display citizens' politeness sensibilities.

Table 4 Formal realization of component A (the complainable) in citizen complaint posts on MBL

	Freq. (/348)	%
Assertion-declarative (content and/or consequences)	299	85.91%
Expressive-exclamative (content and/or consequences)	21	6.03%
Request-interrogative (why)	18	5.17%
Assertion-picture/videos	6	1.72%
Request-interrogative (other)	3	0.86%
Rhetorical question-interrogative	1	0.31%

Table 5 showed various formal realizations of Component B in the citizen complaints corpus. It was evident that a majority (51%) of the formal realization of Component B consisted of negative evaluative expressions, surpassing the second most utilised expression type: rhetorical questions (19%), by more than double the percentage. Politeness concerns can explain this preference. It is been argued that explicit expressions of disapproval or dissatisfaction are more polite than rhetorical questions in Chinese (Zhou & Zhang, 2022). It explains the complainers' preference for this form.

Table 5 Formal realization of component B (dissatisfaction/disapproval) in citizen complaint posts on MBL

	Freq. (/101)	%
Negative evaluative expression	65	64.35%
Rhetorical question	19	18.81%
Punctuation!	9	8.91%
Punctuation?!/???/!!!/…	5	4.95%
Irony and sarcasm	2	1.98%
Interrogative starts with "why not"	1	1%

It is important to note that a single complaint may have multiple formal realizations. It is why the frequency of formal realizations of component C is higher than the frequency

of the component itself (see Table 2). Table 6 presented the different ways component C was formally expressed in the dataset of citizen complaint posts. Around 83% of this component was expressed through noun phrases that typically denote job title, such as '领导' (the leader) and involved institution, such as '有关部门' (pertinent department). These nouns are used to maintain a hierarchy and indicate power differentiation (Pan & Kádár, 2011), thus indicating deference and politeness. The most frequently used form to express Component C is also related to politeness.

Table 6 Formal realizations of component C in citizen complaint posts on MBL

	Freq. (/298)	%
NP (Noun Phrase) Identifying the referent held to be responsible got the complainable	250	83.89%
Imperative	43	14.43%
Pronoun	5	1.68%

It is important to highlight that the frequency of formal realizations of component D was 236 (see Table 1), while the total number of different types of formal realizations of D was 257. This disparity arises because various types of component D are often expressed multiple times within a single complaint post. The repetition of requests serves two significant pragmatic functions: firstly, it enhances the importance and urgency of the requested actions, thereby persuading leaders to comply with the appeals; and secondly, it enhances the clarity of citizens' intentions, aiming to prevent any misunderstandings (Migdadi et al., 2012). Interestingly, in the majority of cases, component D appears at the end of a complaint, serving the function of closing the post.

Table 7 presented different types of formal realizations for component D in citizen complaints on MBL, as observed in the present corpus. It showed that component D's most prevalent type of formal realization were want statements and imperatives, comprising approximately 40% of the cases. These two formal ways to express component D are based on politeness. In languages like Hebrew, a request that may be modified by politeness markers like "please" and realized in imperative form is considered the most direct and the least polite of all request strategies (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984); however, it is

considered formal and polite in written Chinese (Ide, 1989) since almost all imperatives are modified by politeness markers (Gao, 1999). As for want statements, a request in this form may express citizens' hope, desire and wish to seek help and information. This type of request reduces the requestive illocutionary force by turning officials' obligations into own volition or freedom (Distelhorst & Fu, 2019). This is clearly a consideration of politeness of politeness.

Table 7 Formal realization of component D in citizen complaint posts on MBL

	Freq. (/270)	%
Request for action (imperative)	110	40.74%
Request for action (want statement)	108	40%
Request for information related to the solution (interrogative Wh, Y/N)	19	7.04%
Request for action (suggestion)	13	4.81%
Request for action (preparatory conditions, willingness, propositional content)	9	3.33%
Request for action (requestive noun)	8	2.97%
Request for action (strong hint)	3	1.11%

Overall, the findings support the claim that the type of formal realization of complaints is associated with perceived politeness (Ruytenbeek et al., 2022).

Politeness elements in online complaint posts

Table 8 displayed the infrequent use of politeness elements in citizen complaints. Politeness markers were the most commonly used element for showing politeness (33%). The second most common element was the refined requestive verb (25%). Salutations and self-disclosure were also used frequently, accounting for 18% and 17.3% respectively. Interestingly, 12.3% of citizen complaint posts contained thanking, with 37 out of 300 total complaint posts containing this speech act. Additionally, it is worth noting that some citizen complaint posts contained multiple instances of politeness elements, resulting in a higher frequency of these elements than the actual number of complaint posts. It is clear that traditional politeness elements were not being used as expected in this context of power asymmetry

Table 8 Politeness elements employed in citizen complaint posts on MBL

Politeness elements	Freq. (/300)	% (/300)	Subtypes	Freq. (/300)	% (/300)
Politeness markers	99	33%	请 Please	67	67%
			Words indicating a sincere plea (Kádár & House, 2021)	32	32%
Refined requestive verbs	75	25%	(给予)关注 guan zhu (attend/pay attention)	28	9%
			(给予)帮助 bang zhu (help/offer)	23	8%
			(给予)重视 Zhong shi (prioritize/place a premium on)	16	5%
			Other requestive verbs	9	3%
Salutation	54	18%	Greeting + political title	23	7.7%
			Greeting + political title with honorific expression	15	5%
			Greeting	10	3.3
			Political title	3	1%
			Political title + honorific expression	2	0.6%
			Greeting + political title with surname	1	0.3%
Self-disclosure	52	17.3%	Self-identity	42	14%
			Self-location	10	3.3%
Thanking	37	12.3%	Formulaic expression	26	8.7%
			An expression indicating sincere gratitude	11	3.7%

This study aimed to evaluate the politeness and complaint strategies in citizen complaint posts from the MBL. Prior research has suggested that the more complaint components are realized explicitly, the more direct a complaint is likely to be (Depraetere et al., 2021). These findings suggest that the communication between citizens and government authorities on the e-government platform is direct and explicit, with citizens

demonstrating a preference for a high level of directness when interacting with powerholders in their complaint posts. The most commonly employed complaint strategy by citizens includes the ACD combination, which contrasts with the findings of previous studies that suggest Chinese people tend to use indirect strategies when complaining to high-status addressees (Chen et al., 2011; Yuan, 2009; Yuan & Zhu, 2007), as "politeness is the chief motivation for indirectness" (Searle, 1979, p. 36).

There are several possible reasons for this difference. One is the effect of the online administrative context, in which complaints "are quite different from face-to-face complaints" (Vásquez, 2011, p. 1715). In an online context, citizens and public administrators have limited knowledge of each other and are less likely to meet in person. Consequently, they focus more on resolving the complaint rather than face-concerns. In this respect, the "power difference" (Fukushima, 2000, p. 85) between citizens and leaders may be minimized or even ignored. It is essentially the reverse of how it is in daily, face-to-face communication. Another possible explanation is that complaints in an online institutional context are indirect regarding the participation framework (Boxer, 1993), as the parties responsible for the offenses are not usually present on the online platform. Furthermore, although citizens express their concerns explicitly to government authorities, "the explicitness of the complaints does not necessarily communicate face-threat…, and even if it does, it is directed toward… 'professional' face rather than… 'personal' face (Migdadi et al., 2012, p. 338)".

In addition, the primary function of the MBL platform is complaint handling. By participating in this institutional online activity, the public expects that public administrators can "intervene on their behalf to solve problems or provide useful information" (Distelhorst & Fu, 2019, p. 108). In this case, more information such as the problems, assumed agents, and explicit requests for remedial actions is needed to clarify complaint handling. A high level of the directness of complaint is likely to contribute to the clarity of what is said (Migdadi et al., 2012) and may even increase proximity between interactants (Beamer, 2003) when complainers are cautious of expressing negative emotions. Another reason for the high level of directness is the analytical framework used. Previous research utilized directness, which draws on both explicitness and implicitness,

and perceived face threat at the same time, while the present study separates the researcher's assessment from the interactant's assessment by focusing on explicitness and implicitness only.

The analysis findings also highlight that citizens express their politeness awareness by refraining from using component B and specific types of formal realization of complaint components, as well as traditional markers of politeness in the opening and closing sections of their complaints. However, it was observed that only a small portion of complaint posts demonstrate signs of traditional politeness. This result is not in line with Gu's expectation that politeness in China is normative, particularly in the context of power asymmetry (Kádár, 2007). The diminished display of politeness in both sections in the present research may again be attributed to the influence of the online context. This context provides insight into new "norms of appropriateness", and "it is often the 'lack of politeness' that we could define as the norm", as argued by Pan and Kádár (2011). Politeness may be realized through other means such as avoiding mention of negative emotions such as dissatisfaction and disapproval and using a relatively polite formal realization for complaint components. From a pragmatician's perspective, the absence of traditional politeness in these two parts appears acceptable, normative, and politic (Watts, 2003), as it should be in the interaction between citizens and government authorities in the online administrative context.

CONCLUSION

This research analyzes citizen complaints posted to government authorities on an e-government service platform in terms of linguistic directness and politeness. The analysis shows that communication between citizens and government authorities is direct and explicit in citizen complaints in this context, which is unexpected in formal communication in Chinese. The expected display of politeness is expressed through opening and closing, taking up only a small portion of the complaint. Meanwhile, the lower frequency of disapproval expression or component B and preference for particular formal realizations of complaint components simultaneously suggests that the citizens' verbal behaviour is nonetheless politic. It can be concluded that a new norm has emerged in the

performance of citizen complaints in an online institutional context where citizens do not necessarily observe traditional politeness conventions. On the contrary, they pay attention to complaint components and their formal realizations to adhere to a new politeness norm. The study raises the question of how government authorities react when they read such direct complaint posts in power-asymmetrical situations. Drawing from our research findings, it is apparent that Chinese communication within the computer-mediated Communication (CMC) realm remains direct, irrespective of power differentials. These outcomes carry substantial implications for citizens, offering a comprehensive understanding of online interactions between citizens and government authorities. Additionally, our study paves the way for future inquiries, particularly in conducting a comparative analysis of online and offline citizen complaints.

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