Affective-discursive practices in online medical consultations in China: emotional and empathic acts, identity positions, and power relations
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Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that patients’ emotional expressions and doctors’ empathic responses play a key role in providing satisfactory healthcare services and improving doctor-patient relationships. While such affective aspect of medical consultation discourse has been studied in different fields of research with the focus of examining medical consultations that occur in face-to-face settings, this area is extremely under-researched in the field of linguistics, particularly in the non-western context and the online space. While online medical consultation (OMC) has ushered in the new era of e-communication around the beginning of this century, discourse-related research on OMC is still in its infancy and studies on the affective dimension of the OMC discourse in non-western sites are, to my best knowledge, apparently absent in the literature. As China has seen a significant increase in the use of OMC platforms, studying OMC discourse in the China context is not only important but vital. With the support of the Chinese government’s “Internet Plus Healthcare” policy issued in 2018, the reliance on the online mode of medical consultation will be further strengthened and the future of OMC service in China will remain promising. In order to have a better understanding of the affective aspect of OMC discourse, this thesis explores the online interaction between doctors and e-patients (including patients’ caregivers) from a poststructuralist discourse analysis perspective.

The data for this study consists of 300 text-based one-to-one instant messaging OMC cases collected from three popular OMC websites used in China. Each OMC case contains e-patients’ emotional expression and doctors’ empathic response. The data are analysed by the approach of computer-mediated discourse analysis in terms of two dimensions: the textual dimension and the social practice dimension. At the textual level, the study identifies indirect negative emotional acts by e-patients and empathic acts by doctors (which constitute the affective practice); it also examines the interactional discursive features involved in the affective practice. At the social practice level, it explores the discursive positions of e-patients and doctors within the affective practice context and the power relations that are reflected in the identity positionings.

This study finds that the text-based OMC affective practice is rich in various types of emotional expressions and different ways of manifesting empathy, some of which are not mentioned in studies on medial consultation discourse. The study also identifies positions that disrupt the traditional or stereotypical roles of doctor and patient. Besides, it presents dynamic power relations, which problematizes the idea that doctors are always the more powerful party and patients are always powerless in medical encounters. This study sheds light on the importance of examining the affective facet of medical consultation from a discourse analytic perspective, when it comes to identifying non-traditional positions and power relations in clinical communication. The study also provides the implication that e-healthcare platforms, especially those with an e-commercialised model for healthcare services, have potential to produce a type of neo-liberal discourse – the e-commercialised medical consultation discourse – in which patients and caregivers, who are acknowledged as the less powerful group in the traditional healthcare activities, are empowered and privileged.
# Table of Contents

DECLARATION ..................................................................................................... i

Abstract ........................................................................................................ ii

Acknowledgments ............................................................................................ iii

List of Tables ................................................................................................... viii

List of Figures .................................................................................................. viii

Chapter 1 Introduction ...................................................................................... 1

1.1 Research Background ............................................................................... 5
   1.1.1 Online space for illness/health .................................................... 5
   1.1.2 The Internet use for illness/health in China ............................... 7
   1.1.3 OMC in China ........................................................................... 9

1.2 Problem Statement and Research Significance ........................................ 11

1.3 Definition of Affective Practice ............................................................... 15

1.4 Scope of the Study .................................................................................... 18
   1.4.1 A poststructuralist discourse analysis perspective .................... 18
   1.4.2 Research aims ............................................................................ 20

1.5 Overview of Chapters ............................................................................... 21

Chapter 2 Discourse Practice in Health Communication .............................. 23

2.1 Studies on Face-to-Face Medical Encounters ......................................... 24
   2.1.1 Linguistic attributes .................................................................. 24
   2.1.2 Knowledge territory ................................................................. 26
   2.1.3 Power asymmetry ................................................................... 26
   2.1.4 The “sick role” of patients ....................................................... 28

2.2 Computer-Mediated Health Communication ........................................ 29
   2.2.1 Peer-to-peer interactions .......................................................... 30
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.2.2 Ask-the-experts online</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Affective Communications in the Clinical Context</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1 Emotional expression by patients</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.2 Empathic communication by doctors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3 Data and Methodology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Research Sites</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Data Collection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4 Emotional and Empathic Discursive Acts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 E-Patients’ Indirect Emotional Acts (Indirect PEAs)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.1 Presenting uncertainty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.2 Narrating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.3 Self-Repetition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.4 Disagreeing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Doctors’ Empathic Acts (DEAs)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1 Understanding act</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.2 Reassuring acts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.3 Agreeing act</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.4 Praising act</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.5 Self-disclosing act</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.6 Implications of DEAs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 The Distribution of Empathic Acts in Response to Emotional Acts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Summary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5 From Affective Discursive Acts to Affective Interaction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Sequences of Empathic Communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.1 Emotional act ( \rightarrow ) immediate empathic act</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.1.2 Emotional act → non-empathic act → re-emotional act → empathic act ................................................................................................. 97

5.1.3 Emotional act → delayed empathic act .................................................. 103

5.1.4 Emotional act → empathic act → re-emotional act → empathic act ................................................................................................. 104

5.1.5 Discussion of empathic communication sequences ............................ 107

5.2 Features of the Ineffective Empathic Response ...................................... 108

5.2.1 Not addressing all the presented questions ......................................... 109

5.2.2 Providing premature generalization ..................................................... 111

5.2.3 Giving no specific explanation .............................................................. 112

5.2.4 Using self-disclosure to delegitimize e-patients’ concerns ............... 114

5.2.5 Discussion of ineffective empathic response features ....................... 116

5.3 Sequential positions of DEA within Empathic Response ...................... 119

5.3.1 Positioning empathic act after medical agendas .............................. 120

5.3.2 Positioning empathic act before medical agenda ............................. 123

5.4 Summary .................................................................................................. 125

Chapter 6 Discursive Positionings: Bucking the Traditional Roles ........... 126

6.1 Poststructuralist Approach to Identity .................................................. 130

6.1.1 A poststructuralist view on identity .................................................... 130

6.1.2 Positioning theory .................................................................................. 131

6.2 The Co-Construction of Positions – Emotional Support Seeker (ESS)/Giver (ESG) ...................................................................................... 132

6.3 The Negotiation of Positions ................................................................. 135

6.3.1 From accuser/defender to ESS/ESG .................................................... 135

6.3.2 From dissenter/justifier to ESS/compromiser ..................................... 139

6.4 Doctor Initiated Construction of Positions .......................................... 142

6.4.1 Online seller .......................................................................................... 143

6.4.2 Peer ........................................................................................................ 146
6.4.3 Family member ................................................................. 148
6.5 Discussion and Summary ......................................................... 150

Chapter 7 Dynamic Power Relations Informed by Discursive Positionings 153

7.1 A Poststructuralist View on Power ........................................... 154
7.2 The Dynamic Power Relations ................................................... 155
  7.2.1 Highlighting e-patients’ reward/coercive power ....................... 155
  7.2.2 Softening doctors’ expert power ............................................ 158
  7.2.3 Negotiating expert power ....................................................... 162
  7.2.4 Giving up legitimate power .................................................... 165
7.3 Discussion and Summary .......................................................... 169

Chapter 8 Conclusion .................................................................... 172
8.1 Summary of Thesis ................................................................. 172
8.2 Implications of Study ............................................................. 176
  8.2.1 Theoretical and empirical implications ..................................... 176
  8.2.2 Social Implications ............................................................... 180
8.3 Limitations and Future Research .............................................. 181

References ................................................................................ 186

Appendix I PRISMA Flowchart ..................................................... 215