Non-Advising Responses to Advice-Seeking on Xiaohongshu

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Abstract— *As for research on advice pragmatics, tingquan (taking advice) is an unexplored trend, where beauty is a novel topic that abounds with intercultural responses. Although much good work has been done on sequential organization in online interactions, current studies seldom focus on sequential incoherence in advice-seeking posts, especially those in newer platforms, and lack in-depth analysis on to what extent the second pair part does not align with the first one. Drawing upon the Conversation Analytic notions of affiliation and alignment (Stivers, 2008; Stivers et al., 2011), this study chose hot tingquan-related posts from Xiaohongshu, a new leading social media and lifestyle platform in China, and aimed to examine responses to advice-seeking that do not give advice. The findings show that, while direct advice accounted for roughly a half, non-advising responses occupied a large proportion, providing encouragement, assessment, referral and related experience. Besides, while many non-advising responses aligned with the overall activity with an affiliative/neutral stance, a large number of non-aligning ones denied the validity of advice-seeking for supportive compliment and humor. Compared with replies to foreign users, replies to Chinese users were more direct and less polite, and contain more assessment, referral, and memes from the context of Chinese digital culture. To some extent, this study can shed light on tingquan as an ongoing trend.*

Keywords— *Advice-seeking, Affiliation, Alignment, Xiaohongshu*

I. INTRODUCTION

Tingquan, literally meaning "taking advice," represents an emerging mode of learning and social interaction that spans multiple aspects of daily life, including makeup, weight management, travel, interior design, and career choices. Data from Xiaohongshu, China's Instagram-like platform, indicate that tingquan has become one of the top three lifestyle trends in 2023. Topics related to tingquan have accumulated over 900 million views, while search volume for the term has increased fifty-onefold year on year, and users have generated approximately three million posts referencing tingquan. More recently, the trend has attracted the attention of international youth, who are downloading Xiaohongshu to participate in this beauty trend. Clutching a sign with the Chinese characters "tingquan", they invite Chinese users to weigh in on how to improve their appearance. The origin of this trend can be traced to a widely circulated TikTok video, in which a blogger highlighted how Chinese netizens are actively helping others to improve their self-image.

Many researchers have begun to see advice as a

negotiated interaction that is highly context-sensitive, and focus on the process of seeking and providing advice online. As for research on advice pragmatics, tingquan is an unexplored trend, where beauty is a novel topic that abounds with intercultural responses. Drawing upon the Conversation Analytic notions of affiliation and alignment (Stivers, 2008; Stivers et al., 2011), this study chose hot tingquan-related posts from Xiaohongshu, a new leading social media and lifestyle platform in China, and aims to explore the asymmetry between advice-seeking and the responses, in the hope of shedding light on tingquan as an ongoing trend.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Seeking and Giving Advice

Research on advice pragmatics is extensive, and many scholars regard advice as a negotiated interaction that is highly context-sensitive (Locher, 2013; Stommel, 2016; Lu, 2024). For instance, Hudson (1990) defined an advice interaction as a situation where individuals act as advice-giver and/or advice-seeker, and the subsequent interactions between these two parties. Generally, advice-seeking is described as indirect (indicated by the telling of a problem) or direct (such as questions, statements of uncertainty, and appeals for help) (Locher, 2013), and can be distinguished from information-seeking by a typical problem description (Plnick, 2001). Accordingly, indirect advice can be expressed as interrogatives, declaratives, and non-agentive statements, while direct advice as imperatives, modal verbs of necessity or overt recommendations, which leads to future action (Locher, 2013).

Most studies have limited their investigation to specific contexts, such as health institutions (Bloch & Antaki, 2022) and education institutions (Badem-Korkmaz et al., 2022; Park, 2012). Except for offline settings, recent work has explored advice interactions in digital contexts, such as in forums (Morrow, 2012; Placencia, 2012), columns (Locher, 2013), counseling sessions (Stommel, 2016) and even commercial platforms (Yuan & Jin, 2023).

To sum up, former research can shed light on the framework of this study. As technology improves, multi-sided platforms and interactions have the potential to generate innovations. Therefore, more work can be done

on exploring the relationship between user interaction and language choices, and the influence of online environment on advice interactions.

2.2 Sequential (In)coherence in Online Interaction

Researchers have applied Conversational Analysis (CA) to understand how sequences of messages are organized in online interactions. This approach, sometimes referred to as Digital Conversation Analysis, emphasizes the use of CA tools in different online channels, with the understanding of the given platform or medium, instead of equating them directly with spoken conversation (Giles et al., 2017; Pauluset al., 2016; Meredith, 2017). The particularities of online forums include asynchronous tempo, the prevalence of long turns (posts and comments), and writers' intentional choices of dominant or response-worthy actions (Stommel & Koole, 2010).

In sequential organization, the connection between the first and the second part of an adjacency pair is typically tight, which is demonstrated in dyadic spoken interaction, and may become somewhat looser in written multi-party interactions (Meredith, 2019). After a digression, one is expected to return to the main line and provide the missing second pair part (Schegloff, 2007). The asymmetrical relationship has been examined in various institutional settings, including medical interaction (Leppänen, 1998), counseling sessions (Park, 2012; Pudlinski, 2002), etc. Since sequential incoherence may cause misunderstandings, many studies have focused on how coherence can be maintained, such as through quoting (Gibson, 2009) and addressing (Licoppe & Morel, 2012). Meanwhile, several scholars have noticed that loosened coherence can be reasonable, and have its advantages. For instance, Herring (1999) revealed that the main sources of structural incoherence in online interaction is caused by a high level of disrupted adjacency, overlapping exchanges and asynchronous feedback, while user adaption, heightened interactivity and playfulness make computer-mediated communication popular. Stommel and Koole (2010) suggested that the lack of a second part is unproblematic in asynchronous written interactions, such as emails and forums, since the post can be understood as telling, having no need of responses.

To sum up, from a conversation analytical perspective, the connection between the first and second pair parts in

asynchronous online interaction is different from that in synchronous face-to-face communication. However, current studies seldom focus on sequential incoherence in advice-seeking posts, and lack in-depth analysis on to what extent the second pair part does not align with the first one.

2.3 Affiliation and Alignment

Affiliation and alignment are two important analytical notions in CA. Influenced by preference, lexico-grammatical features, prosody, timing, turn-design, visual conduct and some other factors, responses are specific to the initiating or prior actions (Lee &Tanaka, 2016; Stivers & Rossano, 2010). Responding actions are shown to be closely fitted with the initiating ones, or somewhat mobilized, along the dimensions of (dis)affiliation and (dis)alignment.

Affiliation pertains to the affective or action level of cooperation (Stivers, 2008; Stivers et al., 2011). More specifically, affiliative responses are said to be "maximally pro-social when they match the prior speaker's evaluative stance, display empathy and/or cooperate with the preference of the prior action" (Stivers et al., 2011). Therefore, affiliative responses can involve two interrelated but slightly different facets: the degrees of support for the prior speaker's affective stance, as in the context of storytelling (Couper-Kuhlen, 2012; Stivers, 2008); and whether the response accords with the action preference, as in preferred responses to initiating actions of requests, offers, invitations, etc. (Lee & Tanaka, 2016).

Alignment refers to the structural symmetry of cooperation (Stivers, 2008; Stivers et al., 2011). More specifically, aligning responses cooperate by "facilitating the proposed activity or sequence, accepting the presuppositions and terms of the proposed action or activity, and matching the formal design preference of the turn" (Stivers et al., 2011). For instance, type-conforming responses are constructed with a lexical item projected by the question, such as yes or no in English (Raymond, 2003). Furthermore, research has found that responding actions can align or disalign with the initiating action, apart from whether they affiliate with the question (Raymond, 2003), and disaligning responses can be used to achieve cooperation at the level of affective or evaluative stance (Lee & Tanaka, 2016).

Although the concepts of affiliation and alignment are distinct from each another, the design and conduct of responses may involve interplay of the two. For instance, focusing on Reddit as a unique online discussion forum that is still understudied, Lu (2024) explored the types of moves used in several subreddits' advice-giving, investigated the association between moves and upvotes, and suggested that advice-givers', auditors' and overhearers' perceptions of the interactional goals seem to be misaligned. However, based on affiliative stance and action alignment, Vepsäläinen (2022) revealed that although without producing the requested action, most responses that did not align with the action did align with the overall activity, or another action made relevant by the preceding message.

To summarize, much good work has been done on advice pragmatics, and sequential organization in online interactions. However, current studies seldom focus on sequential incoherence in advice-seeking posts, especially those in newer online platforms, and lack in-depth analysis on to what extent the second pair part does not align with the first one. Drawing upon the Conversation Analytic notions of affiliation and alignment (Stivers, 2008; Stivers et al., 2011), this study chose hot tingquan-related posts from Xiaohongshu, a new leading social media and lifestyle platform in China, and aims to examine responses to advice-seeking that do not give advice, in the hope of shedding light on tingquan as an ongoing trend. The three specific research questions are as follows:

(1) What are the functions of responses that do not give advice?

(2) What types of stance do these responses display towards the advice-seeking?

(3) What are the differences between responses to foreign users and responses to Chinese users?

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data Collection

The data consisted of comments under 10 tingquan-related posts from Xiaohongshu. Also known as RED or Little Red Book, Xiaohongshu is a social media and e-commerce platform focusing on user-generated content in fashion, beauty, and lifestyle, and has 300 million active users nowadays. The post and the comments

create a threaded tree-like structure, in which each response can begin a new branch, and have an unlimited number of responses (Vepsäläinen, 2022). In order to detect the asymmetry between the initiating action and the responding action, this study just focused on the responses to the original post. Using "听劝 (tingquan)" as the search term, 5 posts of foreign users and 5 posts of Chinese users were selected based on the comprehensive sorting, each of which contains more than 500 comments, thus can achieve maximum variation to a great extent. These posts are the advice-seekers' first posts for appearance improvement, thus the comments contain no assessment of the follow-up. In consideration of ethical issues, usernames and images were excluded.

Table 1: Sources of Data

Posts	Number of Posts	Number of Comments
By Chinese users	5	2,880
By Foreign users	5	3,725

3.2 Data Analysis

This study qualitatively classified the comments by using NVivo 14.

To answer question 1, this study first explored the types of moves used in the selected comments, and identified the proportion of non-advising responses. As seen in Table 2, adapted from Lu (2024)'s research on advice interactions on Reddit, the coding scheme involves five main moves. Direct advice refers to explicit suggestions provided by the commenters. Encouragement includes compliments. Referral provides another source of information or frame of reference. Assessment provides evaluations of the information given in the original post. Experience sharing refers to the commenters' own experience or the experience of someone else. Comments of less relevance are excluded, such as tagging others by type the @ symbol followed by their usernames.

Table 2: Types of Moves

Moves	Example from the data
Direct advice	头发蓬松一点，卷个大波浪，可以弄个法式八字刘海 You could add more volume to your hair, make big waves, and try French curtain bangs.
Encouragement	小姐姐好美，不用改造都迷死我了 You're already so beautiful; you don't need any changes to impress me.
Referral	在小红书上搜索一下"梨型身材"，会看到很多适合需要的建议 You can search "pear-shaped body" on Xiaohongshu and find lots of helpful suggestions.
Assessment	你的身材看上去很健康，这种圆润壮实的体型虽然不太符合当下亚洲大多数人的审美，但其实一点儿问题都没有 Your body looks very healthy. This fuller, solid body type may not match current Asian beauty standards, but there's absolutely nothing wrong with it.
Experience sharing	和我理工男老公好像，我学设计的，我自己穿着打扮特别注重，我朋友都觉得我和他在一起很神奇，他经常穿的像个渔夫 You look like my engineer husband. I studied design and care a lot about fashion, so my friends think it's funny that we're together. He often dresses like a fisherman.

To answer question 2, each case of non-advice was then analyzed in terms of alignment and affiliation. As seen in Table 3, two types were mainly identified based on Vepsäläinen (2022)'s classification: accepting and denying the validity of the advice-seeking. Validity here refers to being "solvable" or "advice-worthy".

Table 3: Types of Stance

Alignment	Affiliation	
	Affiliative/Neutral	Disaffiliative
Aligning with the overall activity	Accepting	Denying
Non-aligning	Accepting	Denying

To answer question 3, comments to foreign users and comments to Chinese users were finally contrasted based on above procedures.

IV.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 The Functions of Non-Advising Responses

Table 4: Quantification of Move Analysis Results

Moves	Responses to Foreign Users	Responses to Chinese Users
Direct advice	53.28%	47.72%
Encouragement	32.90%	29.41%
Assessment	4.52%	6.21%
Referral	2.67%	5.13%
Experience sharing	0.81%	0.61%

As seen in Table 4, direct advice accounts for roughly a half in both types, which can reflect Chinese netizens' helpfulness and kindness. Meanwhile, non-advising responses occupy a large proportion, and can provide encouragement, assessment, referral and related experience based on the move analysis.

First, encouragement ranks the second, and appears slightly more in responses to foreign users. As a relationally-oriented move, it can help fulfill the supportive aspect of advice (Locher, 2013). Comparatively, the assessment move can be face-threatening, since the advice-giver may point out the problems brutally, or reject the advice-seekers' self-evaluation. In responses to Chinese users, the commenters provide more assessment rather than fake politeness, especially negative evaluations on slovenly males. Moreover, referral provides another source of information or frame of reference, and appears more in replies to Chinese users, probably because the commenters are more likely to associate them with domestic influencers or celebrities, and believe that they are better at using domestic platforms for retrieval. Lastly, sharing experiences is noticed in several comments, which may facilitate rapport building between the advice-giver and advice-seeker by reinforcing similar or core values (Lu, 2024).

4.2 The Stance of Non-Advising Response

4.2.1 Accepting the Validity of the Advice-Seeking

Non-advising responses may nonetheless accept the validity of the advice-seeking. The users accept the post's ground for seeking advice, and their stance may be affiliative or neutral. In other words, the users may align with the overall activity or be non-aligning in a topically coherent manner.

First, aligning with the overall activity means that although responses that do not provide advice are not aligned with the request for advice, they still take part or display interest in solving the problem. Except for requesting and providing advice, the process of problem-solving involves other parts, such as noting the problem and assessing the problem. Inconsistent with Vepsäläinen (2022)'s case, the original posts are usually concise and straightforward, not involving lengthy stories. Therefore, this study did not differentiate troubles-telling from advice-seeking, and the commenters' attitudes were thought to be relevant to the overall process. As seen in Example 1 and 2, keen netizens will specify the problems while suggesting improvement to both foreign and domestic users.

Example 1

本人骨相皮相底子都很好，皮相还带点东方感，皮肤又白，所以金色头发只会显得整个人更苍白。眉毛太高且有种用力睁大眼睛的感觉，让人感觉眉头太用力了。把眉头用力这个肌肉习惯改掉，放松眼部。

Your facial structure and skin are already very good, with a bit of an Eastern look, and your skin is quite fair. Blonde hair would only make you look paler. Your eyebrows sit a bit too high, and it looks like you're forcing your eyes open. Try to relax that muscle habit and keep your eye area more relaxed.

Example 2

乍一看，你最大的问题就是仪态，弯腰驼背，缩头塌肩，就算你是满分，也能扣成零蛋。可以练练站桩功，基础剑法招式。坚持个一年，脱胎换骨。

At first glance, your biggest issue is posture -- slouching, hunching forward, and rounded shoulders. Even with great looks, poor posture can ruin the overall impression. You could practice stance training and basic sword movements. If you stick with it for a year, you will completely transform your posture and presence.

Second, non-aligning comments can be on-topic but off-action in this case. Even though the commenters occasionally display an orientation to the normative structure of adjacency pairs, these responding actions are neither treated as disruptive nor reacted to in any particular manner. They are rare, but still an essential part of online discussion. One possible reason for this might be that

previous responses have already given the necessary advice, which allows others to have a more "unstructured" discussion on the topic (Vepsäläinen, 2022). As seen in Example 3, since the American girl replies many comments politely, the commenter accepts her ground for seeking advice, and expresses the willingness to help her, but no advice was provided.

Example 3

从你的回复中能感觉到你是一个礼貌的人，不像其他外国人问完压根不理人，我们更于对友善的朋友提供建议。

From your replies, I can tell you are very polite. We really appreciate friendly people like you who will respond after asking questions, and we are happy to give more advice.

To sum up, in this section, non-advising responses can nevertheless align with the overall activity, or they can be non-aligning in rare cases. They are not fitted second pair parts to advice-seeking as the main action, but can be a step towards advice-giving, and display either neutral or affiliative stance towards the original post.

4.2.2 Denying the Validity of the Advice-Seeking

In this section, the advice-seeker is not regarded as a sincere person with a genuine problem to be solved, thus the validity of the advice-seeking is somehow problematic. The comments display a disaffiliative stance towards the original post, and can be further divided into two types: In basic cases, the non-advising responses may align with the overall activity or be non-aligning in a topically coherent manner, similar to previous cases in which advice-givers regard the posts as advice-worthy; in special cases, the comments appear to provide advice, whereas the advice is not genuine.

In basic cases, the original posts are explicitly judged as fictitious or unnecessary. While disagreeing with the original posts, the comments usually take the form of compliment and encouragement. As seen in Example 4, in order to reply the American girl, the commenter uses a translator, making the reply soft and polite. Since the girl seems to be good enough, the advice for her is she does not have to change her fashion style. Similarly, as shown in Example 5, while replying a Chinese beauty, the commenter seems to be a watching judge for the advice-seekers, and proposes that she does not have to

change her appearance. The linguistic style seems to be less polite and more direct.

Example 4

You're perfect and there's no need to change. You look very, very good.

Example 5

美人胚子，不用改造，下一个

You're naturally beautiful, no makeover needed. Next one.

Besides, non-aligning responses occupy a large proportion. They are not second pair parts or other fitted responses to the post, nor do they display an affiliative stance towards it. Instead, they use the topic of the post as a springboard to initiate a new action. As reflected by Example 6, some commenters are not kind to the foreigners. They may think it strange that a large number of foreigners have flooded in the platform within a short time, clutching a sign with the Chinese characters for changing their appearance, or suppose that the post is pretending to seek advice, but is actually attracting attention.

Example 6

涌入一大批莫名其妙举牌子说要改造的外国 ip，莫名其妙。

A bunch of foreign accounts suddenly showed up asking for makeovers. It's kind of weird.

你讲话和标点符号真像中国人装德国人。

The way you write and use punctuation really feels like a Chinese person pretending to be German.

Despite of several negative comments, many responses try to use memes or confession for humor, implying their disaffiliative stance towards the advice-seeking. As seen in Example 7, "Li Hua", the name of a student who frequently appears in the annual national college entrance exam, always makes students joke about why they are always asked to write a letter on behalf of Li. As seen in Example 8, if the foreigners are pretty or handsome, there is no lack of admirers in the comments.

Example 7

假如你是李华，收到外国朋友 Intraveil 想你询问如何改变自己的外在形象，希望你给出一些建议。请写一封回信，提出你的建议。

Suppose you are Li Hua. Your foreign friend Intraveil wrote to ask how to improve their appearance and

hopes you can give some advice. Please write a reply letter and provide your suggestions.

Example 8

Honey, do you have wechat? Can I add you if I can? I really think you're beautiful. If you don't have it that's fine. We can be friends!!

When replying to Chinese users, the memes are more easily understood by Chinese netizens, and the confession of love is exaggerated, which are hard to be translated. As seen in Example 9, the comment is taken from *Empresses in the Palace* (*Zhen Huan Zhuan*), a famous Chinese TV series. In response to a good-looking youth, the commenter visualizes herself as the emperor, who can always appreciate new faces. As seen in Example 10, the statement seems to be rambling and ridiculous due to the use of rhyme.

Example 9

新来的吗, 朕怎么从未见过你?

Are you new here? How have you escaped my notice until now?

Example 10

我的妈我的姥, 我的褂子我的袄, 我的大脑变大枣, 我的老公你别跑。

Oh my mom, oh my granny, my coat and my jacket, my brain turned to a date, my hubby, don't panic!

In special cases, the second pair parts to advice-seeking are mock advice, which also have a humor effect. As seen in Example 11, the foreign poster expects to look better when being photographed with Beckham. The commenter does not actually suggest him wear a bra of the brand, but makes a pun to suggest Beckham's wife.

Example 11

-- 太激动了后天要和贝克汉姆同框, 我该怎么变帅大家帮帮我! 有贝克汉姆十分之一帅就行!

I'm so excited! The day after tomorrow I'll be in the same frame as Beckham. How can I look my best? Even being one-tenth as handsome as him would be enough!

-- 穿维多利亚的 secret。

Wearing Victoria's Secret.

As shown by Example 12, in responses to Chinese users, the tone of mother tongue seems to more animated. When replying to the handsome man, the commenter pretends to show an affiliative stance towards his problems,

but actually jokes about meeting him as a new friend, rather than as an advice-seeker.

Example 12

你这, 唉我说你这问题也太多了, 三言两语说不明白, 这样吧你来我这我给你看看, 不要钱, 交个朋友好吧, 一般来我这的人都得交, 我真心想救你就算了, 你赶紧过来吧。

Wow, that's a lot to fix. I can't explain it all here. Just come to me and I'll help you in person. No fee -- let's call it making a friend. Usually people have to pay, but I truly want to save you, so I'll let it slide. Come over quickly.

To sum up, similar to non-advising responses that accept the validity of advice-seeking, those denying the validity may align with the overall activity, or be non-aligning in a topically coherent manner. The greatest difference lies in that the denying replies display a disaffiliative stance towards the original post. While many non-advising responses align with the overall activity with an affiliative/neutral stance, a large number of non-aligning ones deny the validity of the advice-seeking for supportive compliment and humor. Compared with replies to foreign users, replies to Chinese users are more direct and less polite, and contain more memes from the context of Chinese digital culture.

V.   CONCLUSION

Drawing upon the Conversation Analytic concepts of affiliation and alignment (Stivers, 2008; Stivers et al., 2011), this study investigated replies to advice-seeking that do not give advice, and focused on tingquan as an unexplored trend on Xiaohongshu, where beauty is a novel topic that abounds with intercultural responses. The findings show that, while direct advice accounted for roughly a half, non-advising responses occupied a large proportion, and could provide encouragement, assessment, referral and related experience. Besides, while many non-advising responses aligned with the overall activity with an affiliative/neutral stance, a large number of non-aligning ones denied the validity of advice-seeking for supportive compliment and humor. Compared with replies to foreign users, replies to Chinese users were more direct and less polite, and contain more assessment, referral, and memes from the context of Chinese digital culture. To some extent, this study can shed light on tingquan as an

ongoing trend.

This study still has limitations. In data collection, the textual comments were merely selected from 10 tingquan-related posts for beauty advice, which were posted by users of different ages, genders and looks. In move analysis, the moves were classified with assumptions, based on the coding scheme of former research. In stance analysis, some cases were unmarked: some comments did not directly accept or deny the validity of advice-seeking, and might be affiliative or disaffiliative. In the future, further studies should also consider the influence of topicality, the interactivity of a given platform, the context of digital culture and other influential factors, and can incorporate images from a multimodal perspective.

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