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## Impoliteness in Online News Discourse: Evidence from BBC News Facebook<sup>1</sup> Comments

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**Abstract:** This study investigates impoliteness in the comment section of the BBC English News website, focusing on the types of conventionalized impolite triggers used by commenters. It also examines the influence of computer-mediated factors, including anonymity and synchronicity, on impolite behavior. J. Culpeper's bottom-up model of impoliteness triggers (2011, 2016) was applied to classify impolite acts. Using a mixed-method approach, we analyzed 115 comments containing 170 impolite strategies. Our findings reveal that commenters frequently targeted writers, politicians, and the BBC itself. Insults and pointed criticisms were their most common strategies, while silencers and threats were used least often. Among threats, personalized negative vocatives were most frequent, while personalized negative assertions and references were least common. Our analysis further shows that anonymity, synchronicity, and emotional expression significantly shape the manifestation of impoliteness in online comments.

**Keywords:** impoliteness, computer-mediated communication, online comments, J. Culpeper's model, Facebook discourse, conflict strategies

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оригинальная статья

## Невежливость в новостном дискурсе в Интернете: данные из комментариев BBC News на Facebook<sup>2</sup>

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**Аннотация:** В данном исследовании изучается невежливость в разделе комментариев новостного сайта BBC English с акцентом на типы условных триггеров невежливости, используемых комментаторами. Также рассматривается влияние компьютерных факторов, включая анонимность и синхронность, на невежливое поведение. Для классификации невежливых действий применялась модель «снизу вверх» триггеров невежливости Дж. Калпепера. С использованием смешанного метода было проанализировано 115 комментариев, содержащих 170 стратегий невежливости. Результаты показали, что комментаторы чаще всего выбирали в качестве мишени писателей, политиков и сам BBC, при этом наиболее распространенными

<sup>1</sup> *Meta Platforms*, the parent company of *Facebook*, *Instagram* and *WhatsApp* Messenger, is banned in the Russian Federation as an extremist organization.

<sup>2</sup> Компания *Meta Platforms*, владеющая социальными сетями *Facebook* и *Instagram* и онлайн-мессенджером *WhatsApp*, признана экстремистской организацией, ее деятельность запрещена на территории РФ.

стратегиями были оскорбления и острая критика, а наименее распространенными – замалчивание и угрозы. Среди угроз наиболее часто встречались персонифицированные отрицательные обращения (категория 1), в то время как персонифицированные отрицательные утверждения (категория 2) и персонифицированные отрицательные упоминания (категория 3) использовались реже всего. Анализ также показал, что анонимность, синхронность и эмоциональное выражение существенно влияют на проявление невежливости в онлайн-комментариях.

**Ключевые слова:** невежливость, компьютерное общение, онлайн-комментарии, модель Дж. Калпепера, дискурс в Facebook, стратегии разрешения конфликтов

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## Introduction

Politeness has long been a central topic in linguistic research. Traditional politeness theories, such as those by R. Lakoff, G. N. Leech, and P. Brown and S. C. Levinson [Brown, Levinson 1987; Lakoff 1973; Leech 1983], focused on creating harmonious interactions that preserve self-respect. However, as M. A. Locher and D. Bousfield note, recent studies have shifted toward exploring impoliteness in a variety of discourse contexts [Locher, Bousfield 2008], including legal [Harris 2011], classroom [Cashman 2006], political [García-Pastor 2008], interpersonal [Hardaker, McGlashan 2016; Sampietro 2019], and media [Larina, Ponton 2022; Lorenzo-Dus 2009] discourse. Other research has examined computer-mediated communication, such as YouTube interactions [Bou-Franch, Blitvich 2014] and student emails [Economidou-Kogetsidis 2016].

Scholars have also explored the reasons behind the use of impoliteness, highlighting its role in achieving specific interactional goals [Bousfield 2007; 2008; Culpeper 1996; Culpeper et al. 2003; Watts 2003]. J. Culpeper et al. define impoliteness as "communicative strategies designed to attack the face, and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony" [Culpeper et al. 2003: 1564]. In this sense, impoliteness is the opposite of politeness, producing social disruption instead of harmony. Unlike politeness, impoliteness may serve purposes such as asserting power or reinforcing social distance. The interpretation of such strategies depends heavily on context and participants: what is acceptable in one setting may be considered impolite in another.

P. Brown and S. C. Levinson's politeness theory introduced the concept of *face*, defined as the public self-image that individuals seek to protect [Brown,

Levinson 1987]. The authors distinguish between a positive face – the desire to be appreciated by others – and a negative face – the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition [Ibid.: 61–62]. Positive politeness strategies aim to meet the hearer's wants and show approval, while negative politeness strategies emphasize respect for personal freedom.

Building on this, J. Culpeper developed a bottom-up model of impoliteness triggers [Culpeper 2011; 2016], revising his earlier framework [Culpeper 1996]. This model, influenced by M. Terkourafi's work on politeness, introduced the term *triggers* in place of *strategies* and distinguished between conventionalized and non-conventionalized impoliteness formulae [Terkourafi 2002; 2003; 2005]. The conventionalized set includes nine categories, three linked to positive impoliteness and six to negative impoliteness.

As a widespread phenomenon, impoliteness deserves greater attention in pragmatic research, especially in digital contexts. Online comments, blogs, and user-generated content on news websites reflect real-life opinions and interactional dynamics. Z. Reich notes that comments are the most common form of participatory journalism [Reich 2011]. Studies show that readers are often more influenced by comments than the articles themselves, sometimes even changing their opinions based on others' reactions [Lee, Jang 2010; Yang 2008]. M. Neurauter-Kessels also found that impolite comments on news sites often targeted writers rather than the article content [Neurauter-Kessels 2011].

Given the limited linguistic research on impoliteness in online comments, we aimed to examine how readers use impoliteness in the BBC English News

website's comment sections. By exploring this modern platform, we sought to provide insights that contribute to the broader understanding of impoliteness in computer-mediated communication. More specifically, we attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the main types of impoliteness found in the comment section on the BBC English online news website?

2. What are the possible factors that contribute to impoliteness in Facebook comments?

Finally, our study aimed to contribute to this underexplored area by providing findings that can be compared with emerging parallel research (e.g., [Suhaila et al. 2022]), thereby helping to build a more robust understanding of impoliteness in global online news communities.

## Review of related literature

### Impoliteness

The concept of impoliteness has gone through several revisions over the years. J. Culpeper defined it as "the use of strategies that are designed to have the opposite effect – that of social disruption. The purpose of such strategies is to attack the face, which is an emotionally sensitive concept of the self" [Culpeper 1996: 350]. However, this definition has limitations. Firstly, it focuses only on individual lexical or grammatical utterances [Culpeper et al. 2003]. Secondly, this definition assumes that impoliteness always leads to social conflict and disharmony, which does not account for contexts where impoliteness can express solidarity or strengthen group identity [Culpeper 1996; 2005].

To address these gaps, J. Culpeper revised his definition, noting that impoliteness does not always produce disharmony and that the hearer's role must also be considered [Culpeper 2005]. He proposed that impoliteness involves either: (1) the speaker intentionally communicating a face-attack, or (2) the hearer perceiving or constructing behavior as intentionally face-attacking, or a combination of both [Culpeper 2005: 38]. However, this definition conflicts with J. Culpeper's own claim that impoliteness cannot be unintentional [Ibid.: 37]. In later work, J. Culpeper offered a more detailed definition [Culpeper 2010], but each version faced its own challenges.

D. Bousfield emphasizes that impoliteness must be intentional and that the hearer must understand the speaker's aim as to *offend*. He argues that impoliteness

occurs when it is: (1) unmitigated in contexts where mitigation is equated with politeness, and / or (2) performed with deliberate aggression to maximize face damage [Bousfield 2007: 2186; 2008: 132]. This definition addresses both the speaker's and hearer's roles and highlights intentionality. For this reason, we adopted D. Bousfield's [Bousfield 2007] definition for this study, as capturing the key elements of impoliteness.

Overall, no utterance is universally impolite, and communicative acts cannot be analyzed without considering context. Both the speaker's intention and discourse factors are crucial. M. A. Locher and R. J. Watts note that even within a single interaction, the same message may be interpreted differently by speaker and hearer. Thus, whether an utterance is polite or impolite depends on the judgments made during a specific interaction [Locher, Watts 2008: 78]. This aligns with M. A. Locher and D. Bousfield's view that there is no absolute consensus on what constitutes impoliteness or how to define it consistently [Locher, Bousfield 2008: 3].

### Impoliteness framework

Researchers have developed several models to explain impoliteness. P. Austin, for example, proposed strategies of face attack based on the power relationship between speaker and hearer [Austin 1990]. J. Culpeper advanced the field by introducing a bottom-up approach to impoliteness triggers [Culpeper 2011; 2016], paralleling M. Terkourafi's politeness model [Terkourafi 2002; 2003; 2005]. M. Terkourafi's framework distinguishes between two types of impoliteness formulae: conventionalized and non-conventionalized.

The conventionalized impoliteness formulae include nine core categories (Tab. 1). The first three align with positive impoliteness strategies, while the remaining six correspond to negative impoliteness. Non-conventionalized impoliteness formulae are categorized as form-driven, convention-driven, or context-driven. In his 2016 model, J. Culpeper used square brackets to mark structural features of formulae and slashes to indicate alternative options [Culpeper 2016: 437].

In this study, we applied J. Culpeper's (2016) bottom-up approach to analyze impoliteness triggers in the comment section of the BBC English News Facebook page, focusing on how these formulae appear in user-generated online discourse.

Tab. 1. Conventionalized impoliteness triggers (adopted from J. Culpeper [Culpeper 2011; 2016])

Табл. 1. Традиционные триггеры невежливости [Culpeper 2011; 2016]

|    | Impoliteness triggers                                                        | Examples in English                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. | Insults                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|    | Personalized negative vocatives                                              | [you] [f*****g / rotten / dirty / fat / little/ etc.]<br>[moron / f**k / plonker / dickhead / berk / pig / shit / bastard / loser / liar / minx / brat / slut / squirt / sod / bugger / etc.] [you]                                                                                                                          |
|    | Personalized negative assertions                                             | [you] [are] [so / such a] [shit / stink / thick / stupid / bitchy / bitch / hypocrite / disappointment / gay / nuts / nuttier than a fruit cake / hopeless / pathetic / fussy / terrible / fat / ugly / etc.]<br>[you] [can't do] [anything right / basic arithmetic / etc.]<br>[you] [disgust me] / [make me] [sick / etc.] |
|    | Personalized negative references                                             | [your] [stinking / little] [mouth / act / arse / body / corpse / hands / guts / trap / breath / etc.]                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|    | Personalized third-person negative references (in the hearing of the target) | [the] [daft] [bimbo]<br>[she] ['s] [nutzo]                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 2. | Pointed criticisms / complaints                                              | [that / this / it] [is / was] [absolutely / extraordinarily / unspeakably / etc.]<br>[bad / rubbish / crap / horrible / terrible / etc.]                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 3. | Unpalatable questions and / or presuppositions                               | why do you make my life impossible?<br>which lie are you telling me?<br>what's gone wrong now?<br>you want to argue with me or you want to go to jail?                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 4. | Condescensions (see also the use of "little" in Insults)                     | [that] ['s / is being] [babyish / childish / etc.]                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| 5. | Message enforcers                                                            | listen here (preface)<br>you got [it / that]? (tag)<br>do you understand [me]? (tag)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 6. | Dismissals                                                                   | [go] [away]<br>[get] [lost / out]<br>[f**k / piss / shove] [off]                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 7. | Silencers                                                                    | [shut] [it] / [your] [stinking / f*****g / etc.] [mouth / face / trap / etc.]<br>shut [the f**k] up                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 8. | Threats                                                                      | [I'll / I'm / we're] [gonna] [smash your face in / beat the shit out of you / box your ears / bust your f*****g head off / straighten you out/ etc.] [if you don't] [X]<br>[you'd better be ready Friday the 20th to meet with me / do it] [or] [else] [I'll] [X]<br>[X] [before I] [hit you / strangle you]                 |
| 9. | Negative expressives (e.g. curses, ill-wishes)                               | [go] [to hell / hang yourself / f**k yourself]<br>[damn / f**k] [you]                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

### Computer-mediated communication discourse

The rapid growth of the Internet and its widespread use have created new platforms for studying public discourse. Herring defines computer-mediated communication (CMC) as "communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers" [Herring 1996: 1]. One of the most common CMC spaces is the comment sections on websites,

including online news platforms. However, research on these areas remains limited. M. Trice points out that "the comment field as a unit of discussion and potentially deliberation has been largely ignored" [Trice 2011: 237]. R. Zamith and S. C. Lewis similarly note that comment sections on online news sites have received little scholarly attention [Zamith, Lewis 2014].

This gap highlights the need for more linguistic studies of comment discourse. In response, we investigated impoliteness in the comment sections of the BBC English news website.

CMC can be broadly divided into synchronous and asynchronous communication. Synchronous communication occurs in real time, such as face-to-face conversations or live chats. In contrast, asynchronous communication does not require participants to be online at the same time, allowing them to revise their messages and produce more carefully constructed texts. This characteristic is especially relevant for blogs and online news comment sections, where commenters have the opportunity to shape their messages intentionally.

CMC also varies by channel, including text, audio, video, or multimodal formats. Comment sections on news websites are primarily text-based, making them suitable for linguistic analysis. In this study, particular attention is given to how the asynchronous nature of CMC influences the language choices and impoliteness strategies used by online commenters.

### Empirical studies

Several empirical studies have examined impoliteness in different contexts, including face-to-face and online communication. Some focused on gender differences, while others explored impoliteness in various forms of digital media.

One strand of research has analyzed impoliteness as a tool for strengthening social bonds. H. Kotthoff, for instance, investigated politeness and impoliteness in humorous communication during 20 informal gatherings among students and friends in Austria, Switzerland, and Germany [Kotthoff 1996]. The findings showed that many humorous utterances were impolite, particularly jokes, but they did not damage the listener's face. Instead, those utterances reinforced companionship between the participants. H. Kotthoff also observed that such impolite acts were often initiated by the individuals with higher social status and varied depending on the social relationship dynamics.

In contrast, other studies have focused on impoliteness in online discourse. M. Neurauter-Kessels examined aggressive behavior in anonymous comments targeting authors of online newspaper articles [Neurauter-Kessels 2011]. Analyzing 81 comments, the study identified nine types of impolite attacks, including

lack of fairness, lack of judgment, lack of accuracy, lack of expertise, and lack of persuasiveness. The most frequent strategies were accusations of lacking fairness, judgment, and persuasiveness, while the least common were claims of inconsistency and being out of touch with the audience. The study concluded that the users often crossed etiquette boundaries in comment sections by attacking journalists personally and undermining their professional credibility.

B. C. N. Mak and H. L. Chui studied impoliteness among colleagues of an Italian restaurant in Hong Kong through their Facebook status updates outside the workplace [Mak, Chui 2014]. Using E. Wenger's Communities of Practice framework [Wenger 1998] and J. Culpeper's impoliteness model [Culpeper 1996], they analyzed 200 updates. The results showed that the colleagues used impolite strategies such as disassociating from others, being unsympathetic, and not taking others seriously. These behaviors reflected the dynamics of power and authority within their social group.

V. Shinta et al. explored impoliteness strategies used by supporters and detractors of Ahok on Facebook and Instagram [Shinta et al. 2018]. Applying J. Culpeper's taxonomy [Culpeper 1996], they analyzed 584 impolite expressions in 300 comments. The analysis revealed four strategies out of five, namely bald on record, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, and sarcasm / mock politeness, with positive impoliteness being the most frequent, especially among male commenters.

Similarly, A. H. Ibrahim analyzed impolite expressions on Twitter in response to political content, focusing on age and gender [Ibrahim 2020]. Using J. Culpeper's framework [Culpeper 1996], she found that the male users employed impoliteness strategies more frequently than the females, with negative and bald on record strategies dominating. The younger users (15–25) rarely engaged with political posts, whereas the users aged 25–35 produced the highest proportion of impolite tweets.

More recently, researchers have continued to apply impoliteness frameworks to online news comments. For instance, M. Rizana et al. analyzed impolite reader responses on Indonesian news sites, identifying a prevalence of direct, on-record impoliteness strategies [Rizana et al. 2018]. Most notably, I. Suhaila et al. applied J. Culpeper's model of impoliteness triggers [Culpeper 2016] to analyze reader comments on the BBC News Facebook page, identifying insults

and criticisms as the most frequent strategies [Suhaila et al. 2022]. The convergence of their study with our research in the subject matter and methodology underscores the relevance of this area of study. However, it also highlights the necessity for further replication and nuanced analysis to identify contextual and cultural specificities in impoliteness realization.

Our study builds on this body of research by providing a detailed analysis of impoliteness in comments on the BBC News Facebook page using J. Culpeper's bottom-up model [Culpeper 2016]. While I. Suhaila et al. also applied this model to the BBC Facebook comments, our study offers a distinct contribution by focusing on a different, specific time period (e.g., during the COVID-19 crisis and the political events of 2020), capturing impoliteness in a unique socio-political context [Suhaila et al. 2022]. Furthermore, our study seeks to provide a more granular analysis of the *insults* category, breaking down the sub-categories and their frequencies.

## Methods and materials

We selected a total of 115 comments on various posts on the BBC News Facebook page<sup>3</sup>. Most posts addressed political and economic topics, including the COVID-19 crisis, UK investments, and speeches by Prime Minister Boris Johnson, while a smaller number focused on religious and intellectual issues.

A mixed-method approach was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques. Using J. Culpeper's framework of impoliteness triggers [Culpeper 2011; 2016], impolite strategies were identified in each comment. For the quantitative analysis, each instance of an impoliteness strategy was coded individually. Therefore, a single comment could be counted multiple times if it contained, for example, both an insult and a pointed criticism. As a result, we identified a total of 170 strategy instances across the 115-comment dataset. Contributing factors to impolite behavior were also identified and discussed. Demographic details such as gender were not considered due to the unavailability of commenters' profiles.

The selection of comments followed N. Henrich and B. Holmes' inclusion criteria, which suggest three options: including all comments, selecting a single comment per user, or choosing comments relevant

to the research focus [Henrich, Holmes 2013]. For this study, we adopted the last approach, including only those comments which contained impolite acts related to the topic under investigation.

It is important to note that we did not know whether any comments were removed due to the BBC moderation policies or if some remained offline. Therefore, our dataset comprises only those comments which were publicly visible at the time of data collection under each article, video, or blog post.

## Results and discussion

### Impoliteness triggers in the BBC Facebook database

This section discusses the findings of data analysis for the present study. The impolite comments were exposed to statistical analysis to either confirm or invalidate the findings of previous research about impoliteness on social media. Our analysis revealed eight of nine triggers established in J. Culpeper's thematic categorization of face attacks [Culpeper 2011; 2016] (Tab. 2).

Table 2 shows that a total of 170 instances of impolite acts were identified across the comments on various BBC News posts covering different topics. The most frequent impolite act was **insults**, with 58 instances (34.11%), followed by **pointed criticisms**

Tab. 2. Impoliteness triggers in Facebook database  
Табл. 2. Факторы, указывающие на невежливость, в Facebook

| Impoliteness triggers                          | Frequency | %     |
|------------------------------------------------|-----------|-------|
| Insults                                        | 58        | 34.11 |
| Pointed criticisms / complaints                | 49        | 28.8  |
| Unpalatable questions and / or presuppositions | 22        | 12.94 |
| Condescensions                                 | 17        | 10    |
| Message enforcers                              | 13        | 7.64  |
| Negative expressives (e.g. curses, ill-wishes) | 5         | 2.94  |
| Dismissals                                     | 4         | 2.35  |
| Silencers                                      | 2         | 1.17  |
| Threats                                        | –         | –     |
| Total                                          | 170       | 100%  |

<sup>3</sup> BBC News Facebook. URL: <https://www.facebook.com/bbcnews/> (accessed 10 Jul 2025).

**and complaints** (49 instances) and **unpalatable questions and / or presuppositions** (22 instances). The least frequent strategy was **silencers** (2 instances), while **threats** did not occur at all.

Our findings indicate that many comments contained more than one type of face-threatening acts (FTAs), reflecting the intensity of the commenters' dissatisfaction and anger toward particular issues. Several categories overlapped, and in some cases, boundaries between the strategies were not easily distinguishable. Overall, 170 instances of impoliteness were identified in 115 comments and analyzed using J. Culpeper's model of impoliteness triggers [Ibid.].

Our analysis uncovered numerous examples of online impoliteness employed to attack the face of the writers and provoke offence. The sections below present a detailed description of these FTAs, supported by examples from the dataset and aligned with J. Culpeper's framework [Ibid.].

### Strategy 1: Insults

The insult strategy is closely linked to face as a social concept and is used to perform a direct face-threatening attack. Within J. Culpeper's model, insults are divided into four categories:

1. Personalized negative vocatives.
2. Personalized negative assertions.
3. Personalized negative references.

Personalized third-person negative references (in the hearing of the target).

Table 3 presents the distribution of these categories as used by the commenters on the BBC News Facebook page to express anger and dissatisfaction.

**Tab. 3. Categories of the Insult impolite trigger used by commenters in Facebook database**

**Табл. 3. Категории триггера невежливое оскорбление, используемые комментаторами в Facebook**

| Category                                                   | Frequency | %     |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|-------|
| Category 1 (personalized negative vocatives)               | 25        | 43.10 |
| Category 2 (personalized negative assertions)              | 9         | 15.51 |
| Category 3 (personalized negative references)              | 9         | 15.51 |
| Category 4 (personalized third-person negative references) | 15        | 25.86 |
| Total                                                      | 58        | 100%  |

As shown in Table 3, the commenters most frequently employed **Category 1: personalized negative vocatives**, which accounted for 25 instances. The second most common was **Category 4: personalized third-person negative references in the hearing of the target**, with 15 instances. The least used were **Category 2: personalized negative assertions** and **Category 3: personalized negative references**, both appearing 9 times each.

The analysis indicates that many Facebook users resorted to short, direct terms such as clown, wuss, or stupid, often without further elaboration. These instances were classified as name-calling and included in Category 1. A possible explanation is that some commenters aimed to express anger or frustration quickly without engaging in detailed argumentation. This aligns with M. A. Locher and D. Bousfield's view of impoliteness as a behavior that aggravates face within a specific context [Locher, Bousfield 2008].

The examples below, drawn from the BBC News Facebook posts, demonstrate how this strategy was applied. These comments appeared under posts on different topics, including UK political speeches about economic policy (e.g., the post titled *Budget 2020: What is Johnson-omics?*), as well as numerous updates on COVID-19 precautions, which were frequently covered by BBC News. These examples illustrate the use of impolite triggers across the four insult categories identified in the dataset.

#### Category 1 – Personalized negative vocatives

This rude strategy was used most frequently by the online commenters. For example, the insult *stupid* appeared three times. Other insults included words such as *gross*, *rubbish*, *shit*, and *idiot*. Most comments targeted the politician Boris Johnson with words such as *arrogant*, *wuss*, *a joke*, *clown*, *crazy*, *buffoon*, *awful prime minister*, *a clone of Trump*, *can't believe anything he says*, *you're a disgrace*, and *poor leadership*.

Some insults also appeared in the posts about Coronavirus precautions, attacking the BBC's credibility. These included phrases such as *mankind's stupidity*, *liars*, *full of BS as usual*, *pathetic biased broadcasting co-*, *the biggest bullshitter of all*, *the BBC*, *so much fake news*, and *changes day to day*. Overall, personalized negative names were the most common type of insult used among the four categories.

#### Category 2 – Personalized negative assertions

Some comments included strong insults aimed at Michael Gove, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, such as *You are priceless*, *Michael*; *You can't do anything*

*right, Michael; You are worthless; and You are sick.* Online users also attacked the credibility of BBC News with remarks such as *It's all lies; BBC is one of the biggest culprits with negative half-truth reports; BBC news brings you fake news and views daily; The BBC are biased far-left clowns; BBC are crap; and I'm sick of seeing fake crap spread as if we don't have enough to worry about.* These comments express strong negative opinions toward both BBC News and several politicians.

### Category 3 – Personalized negative references

Many insulting comments were found on the posts about the coronavirus pandemic, e.g., *There are too many germbags like that around and it will be from people like that spreading it.* The commenter explained, *She was standing in the queue at the bank today, and a man in front of me was coughing and spluttering everywhere, not even using a tissue.* This shows how the commenter used negative language to criticize the people who ignore important safety measures. Other comments targeted politicians with phrases such as *our politicians are pied pipers, not leaders; this is not the behavior of a real leader; this is stupid; words that don't mean anything; and him and his followers are a lost cause.* Some comments also made fun of other topics, such as *that press conference today was a laugh.*

### Category 4 – Personalized third-person negative references (in the hearing of the target)

Personalized third-person negative insults were also used to offend the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson. Examples include insults such as *he is a bumbling fool; he is stupid and lacks clarity; he sounds ridiculously stupid babbling tremendously; he makes things worse with his quips; Boris will follow suit as he's already under fire; his ineptitude and selfishness has already cost many lives; he's so camp; he doesn't think we need all those ventilators but wants to quarantine the city; and he is a disgrace and embarrassment to our country.* Other rude comments targeted the US President, Donald Trump, with remarks such as *he has half a brain; the language he uses is so dramatic; and he sounds like an idiot.* Some comments even attacked Bill Gates, saying, *Bill Gates is the one who destroyed this world; he killed Congolese people.* Negative comments were also directed at BBC News, such as *they are all lying; there is no real pandemic; it isn't called the British Bullshitting Corporation for nothing; and do not believe anything they say; they are liars.* Overall, insults were the most common strategy used to damage the reputations of the writers on the BBC News website.

### Strategy 2. Pointed criticisms / complaints

Online commenters used criticism and complaint strategies to attack the reputation of the writers. Many impolite comments expressed complaints and criticisms about the government actions and the Coronavirus crisis. Examples include *poor leadership; fake news; what a fatal leadership; austerity ruins the lives of millions... the government does nothing; I would like to think Brits washed their hands and used tissues when coughing or sneezing, but I guess not; they can't keep blaming us for their failures; delays in taking action, lack of testing, lack of professional equipment, and refusal of help for ventilators; why were international flights still running until recently; if the government had stopped flights from affected areas months ago instead of letting them continue, we wouldn't be in this position now; and this is not the behavior of a real leader.* This criticism and complaint strategy was the second most common impolite tactic used by the commenters on the BBC News website.

### Strategy 3. Unpalatable questions and / or presuppositions

Impoliteness was also shown through sharp questions and presuppositions. Some comments using this strategy included *Did someone clone Trump? Poor Great Britain; PM Boris Johnson! How about following basic logic?; Strict measures? Where? Definitely not in England; Is he playing Trump? Poor leadership; Can anyone tell me why the borders, ports, and airports aren't shut?; This man lacks the skill to speak coherently; Why on earth would anyone think he could lead a country through a crisis?; BBC News – care to give us this level of reporting on diseases with similar infection and death rates?; It makes me laugh that everyone is out buying soap; didn't they wash their hands before?; What is the government doing to protect workers when frontline staff are short of PPE?; and There is a virus outbreak, but you still go to the gym? Can't you exercise outside or at home? Gyms should be one of the first places to close.* These comments mostly focused on the Coronavirus and people's dissatisfaction with the leadership of the prime ministers during this time.

### Strategy 4. Condescensions (the use of little in Insults)

Commenters were also offensive by using strategies that belittled the writer, various politicians, and BBC News. Many comments portrayed politicians as weak and poor leaders. For example, people said things such as *You leaders are an embarrassment to our country!; Our leaders are pied pipers, not leaders; Michael Gove is clueless; Trump is finally having a light bulb moment! I wonder who changed*

*the battery – probably Cuomo; He doesn't know any figures; it's like asking a dog to do your taxes with an abacus; Just use logic!; It's an absolute farce to call him president; It's not rocket science, but you're not a leader; Our leaders lack the skill to speak coherently; Stupid prime minister; and In the Oxford English Dictionary, there should be a picture of Trump under 'buffoon'.* In conclusion, most impolite comments focused on attacking politicians and their leadership.

#### **Strategy 5. Message enforcers**

Some comments used impolite strategies called message enforcers. These included commands and urgent calls such as *Enforce strict measures now; Follow logic!; Wake up, people, this is a political hoax; Get creative!; Take action and be decisive! I'm amazed politicians don't get that!; Don't believe anything he says!; Level up, Trump!; This must be stopped!; and Must adhere fully; there will be exceptions!* Although this strategy was used often, it was less common than insults and criticisms.

#### **Strategy 6. Dismissals**

The dismissal strategy was one of the least used by the online commenters on the BBC News website. Examples include comments such as *go hide in a fridge, you wuss; go wash your hands, you idiot; politicians should resign; and get real.* Overall, the commenters preferred using other strategies rather than dismissals to attack the writer's reputation.

#### **Strategy 7. Silencers**

The silencer strategy is similar to dismissals, but is used specifically to make someone stop speaking. This rude tactic was rarely used by the online commenters. In fact, only two comments showed this, namely *Shut up, why don't you! You're talking nonsense;* and *Shut your word hole.* This shows that online users prefer to attack others in other ways rather than telling them to be silent.

#### **Strategy 8. Negative expressives (e.g. curses, ill-wishes)**

Impolite comments containing curses or ill-wishes appeared several times on various posts on the BBC News website. For example, commenters wrote *For goodness' sake, some idiots are commenting here; This should have been done weeks ago, for Christ's sake; For Christ's sake! This man lacks the skill to speak properly. Why would anyone think he can lead a country through a crisis?; and I swear to God you're delusional.* However, no examples of threats were found in the dataset.

### **Factors that trigger impoliteness in Facebook comments**

Having analyzed the data referred to in the previous section, we identified three main factors that trigger impoliteness. Since our data come from Facebook, which is a form of computer-mediated communication (CMC), anonymity stands out as a central cause of impolite comments, followed by asynchronicity and emotion. Similar factors have been discussed in earlier studies [Kienpointner 2008; Postmes et al. 1998].

The large number of face-threatening comments can be linked to online disinhibition factors such as anonymity. Z. Reich explains that hiding behind the screen names increases offensive and rude behavior online [Reich 2011]. This suggests that the usual social rules do not apply in social media spaces, and the usual respect for status and authority is reduced. Because social cues are missing, commenters often see themselves as equals to public figures, such as politicians, and feel free to attack them.

Furthermore, anonymity in CMC allows people to express their opinions more freely than in face-to-face communication. In our data, hidden identities clearly contributed to the high level of impolite comments, especially those aimed at high-ranking people such as the prime minister. Internet users often do not feel responsible for their behavior or worry about embarrassment, since they remain anonymous and can delete their comments without being tracked or judged.

Another important factor is asynchronicity – the time delay in online interactions – and the text-based nature of comment sections. This allows commenters to write longer and more complex messages because they have time to think before posting. This idea supports S. C. Herring's view that asynchronous communication lets users create more complex structures [Herring 2002]. A. D. Santana also pointed out that asynchronicity affects commenters' behavior and increases impoliteness, especially when combined with anonymity [Santana 2014].

The third factor is emotion. R. J. Watts noted that besides power, distance, and rank, the emotional relationship between people influences whether interactions are cooperative or competitive [Watts 2003]. Emotions such as fear, compassion, and anger play important roles. Compassion motivates people to support what they believe is right, fear makes them cautious, and anger drives them to fight against injustice. However, these emotions can also lead

to impoliteness if expressed negatively. In this study, the commenters used rude language to show anger and dissatisfaction with issues such as slow government action on the Coronavirus and poor political leadership. This matches Kienpointner's finding that negative emotions such as fear, contempt, or hatred often lead to impolite communication [Kienpointner 2008].

In conclusion, online comment sections, such as those on the BBC News website, are spaces where readers interact with writers and express their opinions and emotions. The topics discussed and the asynchronous nature of comments influence both the number of comments and the amount of impoliteness. Our study shows that impoliteness in the BBC News posts is triggered by the related factors of anonymity, asynchronicity, and emotion.

## Discussion and conclusion

The main aim of our study was to investigate how impoliteness appears in a relatively new online context – the comment section on the BBC News website. As noted by M. Trice and R. Zamith and S. C. Lewis, this area of research is still underexplored [Trice 2011; Zamith, Lewis 2014]. Our data revealed eight of J. Culpeper's nine impoliteness triggers in the comments [Culpeper 2011; 2016]. However, some strategies were used more often than others. The most common face-threatening acts were insults and sharp criticisms, while silencers and threats were the least common. Among insults, the most frequent were personalized negative vocatives (Category 1), and the least used were personalized negative assertions (Category 2) and personalized negative references (Category 3).

The results also reveal that many commenters engage in impolite behavior online. This may be because commenters are not held accountable

due to anonymity, asynchronicity, and the text-based nature of the comment section. This finding contrasts with N. M. Hammod and A. Abdul-Rassul's study, which found anonymity was not a factor in impoliteness [Hammod, Rassul 2017]. Another important factor in this study was emotion, especially anger and dissatisfaction, which led the commenters to express themselves impolitely.

Our study focused on impoliteness in the BBC News website's comment section. For future research, it would be useful to explore impoliteness on other social networks such as Instagram or Snapchat, since our findings cannot be generalized because of the limited data. Researchers could also compare comments in different languages or study other user-generated content formats, such as blogs and forums. Additionally, it would be valuable to examine how J. Culpeper's bottom-up model of impoliteness triggers [Culpeper 2011; 2016] applies to these formats in languages other than English.

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