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# E-mpoliteness – creative impoliteness as an expression of digital social capital

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the formal, conceptual, and functional characteristics of impoliteness in social media interactions, arguing that face-threatening acts can be viewed as an effective manifestation of social capital if delivered in a way that has potential to grant the user distinction in cyberspace – the process contingent on recognition by some groups and elimination of others. As argued in the following, social capital manifests itself through a distinct habitus that exploits relevant cultural resources specific to social media interactions for the purpose of successful differentiation between spaces and participants in this context. In order to account for the complex, richly intertextual nature of creative impoliteness on social media, the study introduces the concept of “e-mpoliteness,” which refers not only to the surface form of the examined instances but also to the plethora of other resources and references that instantiate the habitus of meaning-making in online discourse.

**Keywords:** creative impoliteness; creativity; digital social capital; group membership; social media interactions

## 1 Introduction

While the migration of the contemporary public discourse into cyberspace is one of the major technological and cultural advances of the 21st century society, it is also one of the underlying causes of its increasing divisiveness. The degree of polarity and conflict on the internet is perplexing, particularly in social media (henceforth SM) interactions, which are a frequent site of violations of social standards (or even civility), aggression, and attacks on participants’ self-image and/or social identity. While these types of practices, commonly referred to as “impoliteness” (Culpeper 2011), have been viewed as an uncooperative behaviour detrimental to the process of forming social bonds (Kienpointner 2018; Locher and Watts 2008), existing research consistently points to their vital role as a vehicle of the internet user’s desired

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identity and (group) affiliation in cyberspace (Andersson 2021; Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014; Graham and Hardaker 2017; Kleinke and Bös 2015). These claims may appear counterintuitive from the standpoint of the core function of SM, which is connecting people with existing links and forming new networks (Burke et al. 2011; Huang et al. 2021). SM usage, however, should not be viewed as a monolithic activity, but rather as a range of pursuits undertaken for a variety of reasons, each with its own underlying motivations (Burke et al. 2011). Furthermore, as the spread of human online activities becomes more dynamic and unpredictable due to the increasingly powerful capabilities of technological networks, internet users increasingly operate at the intersection of various communicative contexts with different yet intertwined functions, which they must (re)define and (re)construct as spaces of a distinct yet identifiable culture (Durante 2011; Evans 2015; Julien 2015; Xie et al. 2021).

Following these perspectives on SM, the current paper contends that interactions on SM, as a public domain that incorporates people's mutual relationships, involve a system of practices, principles, criteria, and structures that are voluntarily created and exchanged by participants as an expression of a distinct and malleable habitus. Habitus refers to norms and expectations acquired and internalized through experience and socialization to allow individuals to act improvisationally within the constraints of specific social settings (Bourdieu [1986] 2016). Since expressions of the habitus are both structured by and structuring the communicative settings, some individuals will be able to fully participate and gain status while others will be excluded as a result (Julien 2015; Qi et al. 2018). The element of exclusion, along with that of distinction, has been argued to be related to the individual's capacity to establish, maintain, and aggregate a "network of relationships of mutual recognition" with those who function in the same society, that is, to their social capital (Bourdieu 1986; Julien 2015; Qi et al. 2018). Thus, in terms of traditionally understood social capital, the ability to exclude others may be viewed as a positive attribute, a manifestation of the individual's aptitude to function effectively, behave in particular ways, and achieve distinction in the identifiable culture (Julien 2015; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993). In online interactions, different forms of exclusion, such as group demarcation and (dis)alignment, group recognition and identification, and (un)favourable group presentation, have been evidenced to be commonly realized through impoliteness (Andersson 2021, 2022; Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al. 2013; Graham and Hardaker 2017; Kleinke and Bös 2015; Lorenzo-Dus et al. 2011). Based on its recognized role as a strategy to mark group membership by including some participants while excluding others, the current paper argues that impoliteness in SM interactions can be reinvented as an effective expression of a new type of social capital, that is "digital social capital" (Julien 2015: 10), an

embodiment of the unique habitus: languages, structures, behaviours, and the specific principles of successful differentiation between digital spaces and participants (cf. Helsper 2012; Julien 2015). The prerequisite in this process, however, is an expression of impoliteness that is distinctive enough to allow the individual to gain recognition and approval by participants in a relevant culture.

The structural and stylistic aspects of thus conveyed impoliteness have been previously discussed by Culpeper (2011), based on the established categorizations of creativity in the language (Carter 2004); however, the current study will approach creative impoliteness from the perspective of creativity viewed as a deliberate act that yields products of not only aesthetic but also psychological and/or social value (cf. Jones 2016). This approach is consistent with, firstly, the conceptualization of impoliteness as face-threatening behaviour intended to demean the target's identity (Culpeper 2005; Knoblock 2020). According to this view, interpretation of behaviour as impoliteness requires a contextualised judgement that is dependent not only on linguistic structures but also on contextual attributes such as “the pragmatic and socio-cultural context within which they are produced and interpreted” (Mateo and Yus 2013: 89). Secondly, while impoliteness on SM covers a spectrum between utterances that specifically instantiate online cultural references (such as the negative exclamation *derp*<sup>1</sup>) and those that can be found also in other contexts (e.g., mimicry), the current objective is to examine impoliteness as a phenomenon specifically calibrated toward the manifestation of SM users' distinct abilities to navigate cyberspace; an act of recontextualization<sup>2</sup> and ingenious transformation of relevant cultural resources (Carter 2004; Jones 2016; Vásquez and Creel 2017). Therefore, the data will be analysed as activities with a specific social purpose rather than unmediated instances of rudeness and/or incivility.

In this sense, the paper alludes to the question of when impoliteness is deliberate (see Haugh 2008 on the addressee's subjective attribution of impolite intention and Parvaresh and Tayebi 2021 as well as Terkourafi 2008 on inadvertent impoliteness), arguing that the formal aspects of its expression serve as a proxy for the speaker's goal to offend. Further, while it should be underscored that a deliberately creative choice of offensive surface form signals this specific goal more clearly than “conventional” strategies (Knoblock 2020), the structural and conceptual determination of how impoliteness is communicated, that is, “not what was said but how it was said” (Culpeper 2005: 36), is known to serve the purpose of not only offending the target but also of gaining approval (e.g., “likes” and “shares”) from “ratified

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1 While *derp* stems from the name of a character in the *South Park* TV show (Mr. Derp), it has evolved into an expression of disapproval online.

2 Recontextualization is understood as transformation of meanings and meaning potentials (Linell 1998).

interactants” online (Dynel 2021b: 30; Knoblock 2020). Expressions of approval in SM interactions, it has been argued, play an important role of “identity statements” marking group membership (Varis and Blommaert 2018: 43). Consequently, assuming that creative impoliteness on SM is a type of social competence contingent on the user’s ability to reproduce relevant social structures, the current study aims to demonstrate how such acts can be used to achieve distinction among the reference group the user intends to affiliate with, while leading to exclusion of others. Crucially, exclusion is viewed as both the plane of “capabilities required to perceive specific knowledge” (Julien 2015: 7) expressed through innovative implementation of relevant cultural references and that of ideological and social disaffiliation from the targeted individuals and groups (cf. Dynel 2021b).

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the model and extensions of the idea of creative impoliteness after dealing with the concept of digital social capital. A description of the methods is provided in Section 3, followed by a detailed textual and functional analysis of several instances of creative impoliteness in Section 4. Section 5 brings the paper to a close with a discussion and conclusions.

## 2 Creative impoliteness and digital social capital

### 2.1 Digital social capital

The concept of social capital accumulation through SM activities has previously been discussed in the literature; most recently, Xie et al. (2021: 3) define the cyber world as an “extremely crucial ‘social field’ in the sense of Bourdieu”. Julien (2015) contends that, due to the current pervasiveness of the internet, online interactions *per se* contain and extend the user’s social capital and may have an impact on their network of relationships. How and whether SM networks contribute to an individual’s social capital in real life has yet to be established (Burke et al. 2011; Qi et al. 2018); however, social capital has been argued to be pliable to growth through a distinct habitus manifesting as successful interactions in cyberspace (Julien 2015). In a similar vein, Qi et al. (2018; see also Evans 2015) define SM activities as a form of reproduction of relevant social structures that are instrumental to the user’s goal of social capital accumulation, emphasizing the role of strategical evaluation of “success of a given action in a specific context” in interactions with others (Bourdieu 1986, mentioned in Qi et al. 2018: 97). This perspective has implications for discursive settings in which participants oscillate between private and public spaces, resulting in a merger of their personal and social (i.e., group-related) identities into a single image malleable in response to specific goals, contexts, and assessments of potential consequences of undertaken communicative acts (Durante 2011; Xie et al. 2021). This could certainly be

argued of the SM environment in the “post-digital” era, where the mainstay of communication is an effective manifestation of group membership (Andersson 2021, 2022; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al. 2013; Xie et al. 2021). Consequently, SM participants are likely to employ strategies potentially successful in terms of “subjective hopes and objective chances” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007; cited in Qi et al. 2018: 99) to increase their “digital social capital”, viewed as an extension of social capital in the traditional sense (Evans 2015; Julien 2015; Qi et al. 2018).

The current paper, therefore, contends that the unique socio-cultural context of SM interactions not only facilitates acts that enhance the likelihood of successful communication and attainment of a privileged position in the online world but also engenders new forms of such behaviours that mark the user’s group affiliation, leading to exclusion of outgroup(s). Viewing creatively conveyed impoliteness through the lens of Bourdieu’s (1998) concept of a “distinctive property” as an important facet of successful functioning within a social space, the study argues that such forms of impoliteness contribute to the recontextualization of the online world’s structures. By (re)producing the conditions of the digital environment, creative impoliteness becomes an integral facet of the digital habitus, effectively marking group membership both pragmatically and metapragmatically (cf. Julien 2015, based on Bourdieu 1998; Qi et al. 2018). According to Julien (2015), interactions that involve tokens of group recognition reinforce relationships and reproduce groups. This phenomenon extends to entirely impromptu actions contingent on the immediate situational context and intended to resonate with a spontaneously formed reference group, presumed to share the same understanding of online culture.

## 2.2 Creativity and e-mpoliteness

The traditional view of creativity associates the phenomenon with positive incentives; for instance, Goddard (2015) argues that in online communication, creativity fosters interpersonal connections, expression of individual identity, and group cohesion. However, creative acts can serve diverse social goals, including “disruptive purposes in which existing orders can be inverted” (Carter 2004: 69). One pertinent example is the development of SM *per se* – created to promote social interaction and long-distance bonds, SM are often utilized for the purpose of (cyber) bullying and conflict (Whittaker and Kowalski 2015; Xie and Yus 2018). In this regard impoliteness has become perhaps not a sanctioned (cf. army training examined by Culpeper 2011; Bousfield and McIntyre 2018) but an expected phenomenon on SM platforms (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010). As will be demonstrated in the following, it frequently employs creative forms of expression in this specific environment.

Nonetheless, investigating how impoliteness can serve as a manifestation of one's digital social capital necessitates focussing on the creative use of language, discussed in the literature as one of the "pleasures of impoliteness" (Culpeper 2011: 234f); the aesthetic gratification, where creativity figures as a desirable skill that not everyone possesses,<sup>3</sup> and which can gain the participant a distinctive superior position in the exchange (likely resulting in emotional pleasure in some observers). The same principle extends to the humorous potential of creatively expressed impoliteness, which Dynel (2021b) notes is particularly conspicuous in multi-party communication on SM, where acts of "genuine insult" frequently earn rewards for producing humorous effects intended to exclude the target while entertaining the user's cohort group. Impoliteness has a (dis)affiliative function in this context and is linked to group membership as the speaker and non-targeted audiences affiliate against the target (Dynel 2021b; Knoblock 2020).

The concept of creative impoliteness has been previously discussed in dramatic and literary texts, where it has been argued to foreground and typify linguistic behaviour in specific contexts (Bousfield and McIntyre 2018) and aggravate the strength of the intended malice (Rudanko 2006). Studies dealing with creative impoliteness specifically in SM discourse are scarce (cf. Dynel 2021a for internet memes; Vásquez and Creel 2017 for creativity in chat forums), which is a neglect this paper seeks to rectify through combining several theoretical perspectives. It is also worth noting that the current focus is on the written mode of creativity; while some posts may be considered modally composite by virtue of involving graphic material other than words (e.g., hashtags), the study investigates the modal affordances of the written language rather than different modalities (e.g., image and text; Stöckl 2019). However, due to the inherently dynamic and multifunctional nature of the internet, as well as the existence of different types of richly intertextual instantiations of how "language is used in situated social contexts to create new kinds of social identities and social practices" (Jones 2016: 62), the creativity component will be interpreted in accordance with Leech's ([1967] 1971) concept of both original use of already established language resources and going beyond them, that is, devising new ways of expression not yet available in the language.

Despite the fact that the concept of creativity is central to linguistics and has long been regarded as a universal quality shared by all languages in both generative and cognitivist linguistic traditions (Chomsky 1970; Goldberg 2005), modelling of possibilities for going beyond established language resources is still a rare enterprise (see Hoffmann 2019). Thus, drawing upon the adopted perspective on creativity

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3 It should be noted that dealing with creativity from the perspective of inter-individual differences with respect to intellectual and personality traits, which have been accounted for in psychological research (Kandler et al. 2016), is beyond the scope of this paper.

in cyberspace, the current paper proposes to extend the concept of creative impoliteness to account for its manifestations in online discourse. This extension is based on Hoffmann’s (2019: 3) argument that novel instances of communicative potential that extend beyond established language resources (e.g., “Thing-um-a-jig” from Lewis Carroll’s *The Hunting of the Snark*) should be regarded, in accordance with Sampson (2016), as “E-creativity” (where the *E* signifies enlarging/extending). Importantly, this conceptual extension, referred to as “e-mpoliteness” (where the *e* signifies both extending and digital environment) in the following, is concerned with both the surface/linguistic structure of creative impoliteness as well as with other forms of implementation of digital habitus through distinct strategies that incorporate, blend, and synthesize various resources of and references to relevant culture. As the discussion will show, creative impoliteness in the SM discursive environment may elude the existing categories and models of creativity (Carter 2004; Culpeper 2011). It is therefore hoped that the concept of e-mpoliteness will help capture the complex nature of creative face-threatening acts that specifically instantiate the richly intertextual habitus of meaning-making in cyberspace and aid in the comprehensive interpretation of such acts.

The starting point to the process of identification and analysis of the data will be Culpeper’s impoliteness formula (2011: 240–242) reinterpreted in terms of Carter’s (2004) categories of creativity:

**Table 1:** Four categories of creativity (summary based on Culpeper 2011).

Creativity category	Example of formula/expression
Pattern re-forming (Carter 2004)	puns; metaphors; idiom modification
Pattern forming (Carter 2004)	parallelism; echoing; mimicry
Situational deviation (Culpeper 2011)	context-driven impoliteness (e.g., not thanking for a gift)
Unusual implicitness (Culpeper 2011)	implicational impoliteness (sarcasm; innuendo)

The “situational deviation” category is irrelevant to the current analysis because situation-driven expectations are difficult to establish in the asynchronous environment of SM, where verbal exchanges between participants entail no obligation to respond<sup>4</sup> (see e.g., Knoblock 2020). The top two categories instantiate what Carter (2004: 109) refers to as two types of creativity: overt “presentational” uses of language that deviate from expected formulations and reshape language conventions (“pattern re-forming”) and less explicit subliminal parallelisms (“pattern forming”).

4 The category would be relevant in the context of instant messaging.

The category of “unusual implicitness” is Culpeper’s (2011) addition to account for impoliteness that requires a particularized implicature derived from the specific context for disambiguation (e.g., sarcasm) – as opposed to explicit forms such as insults (e.g., *you idiot!*). However, regardless of the level of explicitness, it appears that creative impoliteness will always necessitate an unusual amount of inferential work due to its inherent ingenuity. Consider an example borrowed from Culpeper (2011: 242):

- (1) [you] [bitter yorkshire pie munching ale drinking sheep fucking] [poof]

While (1) contains an insult (*you poof*), it also deviates from what could be considered a typical structure of an explicit insult in English due to the unusual length of the premodifying component (cf. Culpeper 2011), triggering further inference as to the function of the utterance (the speaker is potentially jocular, which could be explained with Levinson’s M-heuristics).

Having said that, given both the idiosyncrasies and multiple affordances of online communication, the question is whether all cyberspace phenomena will fit into the categories of creativity presented in Table 1. A case in point is Greta Thunberg’s well-known “How dare you!” utterance, delivered during her appearance at the United Nations Climate Action Summit in New York in 2019. The phrase has since gone viral, evolving into a socially recognized token of the user’s ideological stance, and being ingeniously employed to attack outgroups in different SM contexts and for different purposes (Andersson 2021). However, the categorization challenge in this case is intricately linked to the fact that while it could be argued that viral impoliteness instantiates the category of pattern forming owing to its repetition/echoing properties (see Table 1; Vladimirov and House 2018), the mainstay of virality is an intertextual process of recontextualization of an expression by a variety of contextual factors. This process leads to the emergence of a complex heteroglossic phenomenon (cf. Vásquez and Creel 2017), which is why, despite the intrinsically echoing nature of virality, viral impoliteness may have to be described differently. For comparison, consider the following *ad hoc* case of pattern forming, in which the repetition of the expletive contributes to the creative expression of User2’s impoliteness (from YouTube comment threads discussing climate activism; Andersson 2021):<sup>5</sup>

- (2) User1: I shit on you.  
User2: I shit on you and your shit.

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<sup>5</sup> Note that unlike some of Culpeper’s (2011) examples of pattern forming, which he describes as a tit-for-tat ritual conflict, User2’s utterance can be interpreted as genuine impoliteness due to the presence of the overt expletive (i.e., *shit*) (infrequent in ritual insults; Dynel 2021b) in the context of social conflict.



Unlike (2), where User2's statement forms a pattern based on the previous context (cf. Culpeper's example of repetitive expressions like "get lost!" in 2011: 243), Thunberg's "How dare you!" becoming a viral impoliteness expression exemplifies the intertextuality process, which involves modifying the original sense and imbuing it with new meanings. This process gives rise to adapted standalone units, wherein the echoing aspect may be suppressed, as they begin to serve a purpose that extends beyond their source domain. Furthermore, while virality may elicit "(...) more innovative reshaping of our ways of seeing" (Carter 2004: 102), its instantiations are not necessarily contingent on the form that is novel and/or reshapes language conventions (i.e., "pattern re-forming" Carter [2004]).<sup>6</sup> Rather, the mainstay of virality is creative exploitation of different types of references, whether formal, conceptual, or intertextual, for a variety of discursive and social purposes, resulting in a hybridity of implicated (i.e., inferential) and explicit (i.e., based on prior experience) meanings. What this discussion implies is that the process of interpreting creative impoliteness in the SM discursive environment requires accounting for the plethora of resources and references that instantiate the richly intertextual habitus of meaning-making in cyberspace (cf. Wu and Fitzgerald 2021), rather than focussing on the sole formal properties of the data, which may not adequately capture the phenomenon.

### 3 Data and methods

Different online platforms have different underlying functions, which relate to different incentives and means of achieving distinction and enacting the relevant habitus. Users on business networking sites such as LinkedIn, for example, will employ different strategies than those on social networking sites (e.g., Facebook) or social navigation platforms (e.g., YouTube; cf. Yus 2011). Having recognized these differences, the current study seeks to describe creative strategies that are broadly specific to SM environment, in which the digital social capital of the participants is contingent not only on their personal networks of relationships, but also on the appeal to anonymous audiences and *ad hoc* alliances outside those networks (cf. Andersson 2021; Knoblock 2020; Varis and Blommaert 2018).

The instances of creative impoliteness discussed below were obtained from various publicly accessible domains on YouTube (Andersson 2021), Facebook (the sites of BBC News; The Independent; The Guardian), and Twitter, and are confined to the written mode of the user commentary. The data were collected and anonymized

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<sup>6</sup> It could be argued that the structural core of viral expressions must be preserved to adhere to the established cultural canon. Too much modification may cause the phrase to be misinterpreted.

in accordance with the ethical principles of Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke et al. 2020) (no user identities are disclosed; the username in example (4) below is the name of a public Twitter account). Commenting as an aspect of users' participatory engagement is a feature shared by all the platforms considered. In this sense, the platforms can be regarded as comparable, despite their different technological affordances (e.g., the GIF-format of comments is enabled on Facebook but not on YouTube). All the examples examined come from asynchronous discussions involving clashes between different worldviews, values, and group affiliations – a common site of impoliteness on SM (Andersson 2021, 2022; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al. 2013; Tsoumou 2023). The postings were sent to the platforms between 2020 and 2021, and they cover three themes and topics that have been trending on SM in recent years: Covid-19 vaccinations, social (justice) movements, and environmental activism. As indicated elsewhere, these topics commonly spark ideologically charged discussions and social conflict, giving rise to impoliteness (Andersson 2021, 2022; Novotná et al. 2023). The data are therefore discussed against the backdrop of their respective socio-cultural contexts. Finally, the theoretical underpinning of the collection process has been Culpeper's (2011) model of creativity types (recall Table 1) and the related conceptualization of impoliteness as deliberate face-threatening acts delivered to cause harm (Culpeper 2005, 2011), which all instances examined below exemplify (see Section 4 for details). It is also worth mentioning that, while the paper generally adopts a second-order approach (i.e., observer's perspective), one selection criterion was at least 100 reactions to the analyzed post at the time of retrieval, in accordance with Jones' (2016) contention that to consider certain practices creative, some measure of their value should be discerned (for example, [4] below had over 2,600 "likes" in November 2021).<sup>7</sup>

## 4 E-mpoliteness as an aspect of digital social capital

As previously stated, digital social capital can be accumulated not only through the participants' personal networks of relationships, but also through "undirected communication" (inherent to public domains on SM), that is, producing content for the consumption of others without knowing their identity (Burke et al. 2011; Knoblock 2020). Perhaps despite appearances, communication that is not directed

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<sup>7</sup> It is necessary to acknowledge, however, that establishing an objective quantitative measure of approval in the SM context is difficult for reasons such as participants' perceptions of the social function of the platform, which determine the type and number of responses and reactions (Andersson 2021).

at any particular other may have the potential to increase the user's social capital by felicitously employing the relevant reference (Burke et al. 2011; Varis and Blommaert 2018). This principle is assumed to be true also for SM platforms where users are commonly tied to their true identities and real-world contacts, such as Facebook; however, the content they post is unlikely to remain within their "intimate circle of friends" (Goddard 2015: 368). Whether or not such communicative practices result in an expanded circle of personal contacts is determined by a number of social and contextual factors that are beyond the scope of this article. The current aim is to examine the structural and conceptual elements of online user comments perceived as instances of creative impoliteness. This interpretation is grounded in the potential of these comments to evoke offence and harm, an attribute originating from the analysis of their astute surface structure (cf. Carter 2004; Culpeper 2011). Since the user's ability to inventively transform relevant cultural resources has been argued to be one of the principles of differentiation between digital spaces and participants by including some groups and excluding others, the data will be considered from the standpoint of their (dis)affiliative function.

A case in point is the structure commonly employed in SM interactions, that is pattern re-forming. Given its potential to shift attention away from ideas and toward the intrinsic emphasis on form (particularly in the written medium of online communication, where typographic elements are at play), as well as the aptitude to elicit "pleasure and laughter" (Carter 2004: 102), the strategy proves effective for the purpose of offending/excluding some while appealing to others (Dynel 2021b; Knoblock 2020). Example (3) below is an instance of pattern re-forming that involves "Karen", a derogatory label of identity for a middle-aged white woman, a rude and entitled racist and, most recently, an anti-vaxxer. This identity has been demonstrated to be well-established and commonly used in the SM environment to cause offence (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2022). Example comes from a Facebook discussion of the Covid-19 vaccine, in which the target of impoliteness claims the vaccine is harmful:

(3) You're so ignorant it's sKaren me.

This utterance is ingenious not only because its surface form is a near pun (Partington 2009) exploiting the phonological and orthographic similarity of the expression "sKaren me" to the phrase "scaring". Rather, the core of creativity in this case is the transformation of the stigmatised SM identity into an emotional stimulus that adversely impacts the poster's internal state, which is communicated through their unique perspective. By employing this popular online trope, the poster undoubtedly tries to appeal to the audience's ability to recognize the reference and appreciate the inherent twist, contingent on the assumed level of their intellectual dexterity (shared by those who appreciate the wit; Dynel 2021b). The target of

impoliteness, in contrast, is excluded both in the immediate social context by labelling her as an epitome of unfavourable mental/intellectual faculties from which the user wishes to distance themselves (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010) and in the broader sense of comparison between those invested in online culture and those less initiated.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the act of implementation and recontextualization of relevant cultural references in this context leads to social comparison and group (dis)alignment (Andersson 2021). Thus, (3) should be interpreted holistically as a strategy that not only reflects but also shapes the principles of differentiation between digital participants. The end result of this process is referred to as e-mpoliteness here.

Another example of e-mpoliteness realized through pattern re-forming involves deliberate misspellings. Deliberate misspellings are a strategy deeply ingrained in online culture and may be deployed for a variety of reasons, including avoiding comment moderation or/and as a mitigation strategy (e.g., misspellings of profanities: *fcuk*, *ffuck*, *fukc*, etc.). However, misspellings in online communication felicitously serve the purpose of ingeniously attacking another user's identity (e.g., nickname mocking; Perelmutter 2021), frequently highlighting their lack of knowledge, or, as noted elsewhere (Andersson 2022), functioning as a general strategy of meaning-making calculated to reinforce ideological and political conflict and group (dis)affiliation. An illustrative case is a post from the Twitter account "Woman-AgainstFeminism", a parody of the anti-feminist "WomenAgainstFeminism" movement. In this example of impoliteness that involves a refreshed schema and departs from expected forms (cf. Culpeper 2011), the deliberate misspellings of the word "feminism" serve as a vehicle for sarcasm and mockery directed at women who are assumed to be so ill-informed about the purpose of feminism as to be unable to correctly spell the term:

- (4) I don't need *finimsm* the *femists* are trying to get rid of men & make them obsolete. (...)

Deliberate misspellings can thus be deployed for the purpose of attacking the interlocutor's intellectual/societal competences. This appears to be the case in (5), where the misspelling in the first post underlies the mockery (and thus exclusion) of an anti-vaxxer in a Facebook discussion about the Covid-19 vaccine:

- (5) User1: I won't advice anyone to inject anything into their body because the media is paid to push this agenda.  
User2: You won't "advice" anything because you don't know anything.

At first blush, (5) could be interpreted as a case of pattern forming, that is, echoing/mimicking the previous utterance, and, in fact, a case of User2 repeating her own

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, the target of (3) appeared perplexed by the form of the utterance.

words (“anything”), thus reinforcing the intended effect. However, as Carter (2004) contends, quoting involves a recontextualization of the original utterance to the point that the mechanism of pattern forming may also entail pattern re-forming (i.e., reshaping language conventions), provided that the author’s stance is conveyed creatively enough. The creative component in (5) resides in the quotation marks, which are a token of the underlying evaluation (in this case based on the workings of language ideologies; Andersson 2022; Haugh and Culpeper 2018), aiming at the interlocutor’s intellectual disposition and serving a dissociative function. This function is inherent in social conflict and allows the users to (re)affirm their own group membership through an indirect comparison on a dimension that benefits their own group (i.e., those who can spell; cf. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al. 2013). The intrinsic addressivity (Bakhtin 1984) of quotation marks towards a specific target is particularly apt for the purpose of guiding the interpretation of impoliteness in SM context, as a means of creatively appropriating another user’s voice (Vásquez and Creel 2017). As a result, the strategy can be effectively viewed as an expression of the relevant cultural resource.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of the user’s goal described in terms of distinction and group identification, e-mpoliteness appears to be an effective way of reinforcing one’s digital social capital through suppression of potential dialogue and exclusion of unwanted views. The sarcastic utterance in (6) below is a pertinent example (from a Facebook discussion about the Covid-19 vaccination; commentary on some users’ claims that the vaccine is a form of governmental control over society):

- (6) We are grateful to the experts from YouTube University for their contribution.

This is a fairly complex instantiation of the category “unusual implicitness” (Culpeper 2011; Table 1), which demonstrates how internet users can derive their stake of social capital by means of a distinct parlance. “YouTube University,” “Facebook University,” and “Google University” are examples of derogatory sarcastic expressions used on SM to refer to people who indiscriminately rely on questionable sources of information (usually online). Thus, the particularized implicature necessary for interpretation is contingent on one’s familiarity with the relevant cultural context. However, once this condition is met, the utterance may no longer be regarded as an instance of mere sarcasm (i.e., an utterance with a sense opposite to its surface form; Culpeper 2011). Rather, (6) appears to be an ingenious expression of the user’s value orientation toward different groups realized through a relevant cultural habitus, described here as e-mpoliteness. It can therefore be argued that this specific example, and perhaps e-mpoliteness in general, represents a “socially creative” exclusion strategy which relies on social comparison between groups rather than engaging in explicit confrontation or conflict with the outgroup (cf. Douglas

et al. 2005). In consequence, opposing viewpoints can be effectively suppressed while the established identity of the ingroup is maintained.

Nonetheless, all the instances discussed so far exemplify an intriguing change in online social practices described by Vásquez and Creel (2017) as a shift from collaborative activities to creative solo performances viewed as individual accomplishments in SM contexts. This account is consistent with the current concept of e-mpoliteness as a manifestation of the poster's distinctive abilities calibrated to gain distinction. Having said that, e-mpoliteness is not a solitary effort but rather a metapragmatically interactive endeavour through which the user seeks engagement from others through sharing, liking, or even through cross-platform practices collectively adopted by groups of users (Wu and Fitzgerald 2021). E-impoliteness may therefore emerge as a result of co-creation and discursive negotiation among several participants, which are regarded as vital components of both creativity (Carter 2004; Culpeper 2011) and impoliteness (e.g., Vladimirou and House 2018). The following is an example of a structurally and functionally complex co-creation in which two users collaborate to attain distinction among their cohort group(s) and dissociate themselves from the targeted group (from a Facebook discussion of the news article about an adult female teacher engaging in sexual relations with an under-age male student):

- (7) User1: Poor kid! I wish I'd had such a teacher when I was in school!  
User2: #metoo

While User1 is sarcastic towards the victim referring to him as a “poor kid” before expressing a desire to share the same experience, the creative twist must be attributed to User2, who contributes by turning the well-established online token of solidarity with victims of sexual harassment into a punchline. The conveyed mockery thus becomes quite complex and must be attributed to the interplay between the two posts, as a result of which the utterance targets both the object of the abuse and the entire social justice movement, from which the poster disassociates himself. Interestingly, #MeToo movement's inception in the context of SM, and the subsequent loss of its social influence caused by dismissive attitudes towards social justice movements within that very environment, is as an excellent instantiation of the relevant habitus enabled by the participants' shared cultural knowledge and common ground. Nonetheless, in asynchronous online communication, co-creation may facilitate rapport between members of the same group(s) as they bond around the same values, while their individual contributions amplify the overall expression of impoliteness, as in (7) (Vladimirou et al. 2021).

However, the important formal feature of e-mpoliteness in (7) is the use of a hashtag for the purpose of creative exploitation of semiotic resources beyond language. Although primarily serving as metadata tags, hashtags possess inherent

potential for creative expression as a type of user-generated content with specific functions. In fact, their utilization for conveying interpersonal evaluative or attitudinal positions, which surpasses their mere indexing role, has been documented in the literature (e.g., Zappavigna 2015). One illustrative example is the hashtag “#facepalm”, frequently deployed across online platforms as an enactment of mockery. Based on this example, it could be argued that when hashtags are deployed to express an attitude, their primary indexical/denotational metafunction is obscured, yielding a sense of “spotlighting” the stance of the adjacent utterance (or even encapsulating an attitude in their own right). The particularly interesting aspect of (7) is that it combines this extra-linguistic component with a bleached formula of echoing (i.e., the viral phrase “mee too”; see Culpeper 2011) to express a disaffiliative stance. As a result, (7) defies existing models of linguistic creativity.

A final case considered here is the assemblage of textual and linguistic resources in (8) (the post is a user’s commentary on the YouTube video critical towards Greta Thunberg’s environmental activism):

- (8) Literally no one:  
Environmental activists: we’re severely gretarded.

The utterance employs a phrasal template<sup>9</sup> that has grown in popularity on SM platforms, where it is frequently used for observational humour and mockery of certain patterns of behaviour, juxtaposing them with those of society at large. Specifically, the crux of the (unfavourable) social comparison between groups is the juxtaposition of “literally no one” and the blank space in the first line with an utterance mimicking the target in the second line. This juxtaposition also makes a fairly stable component of the creative exploitation of both the resources available through the written medium and those reflecting the poster’s unique habitus (here: deploying the template that uninitiated participants are unlikely to utilize/understand).

However, the surface structure of (8) is particularly ingenious (and thus difficult to analyse in accordance with the current models of creativity), because the second line of the utilized template usually mimics contents attributable to either an identifiable source or to imaginary/potential expressions regarded as typical of a member of the targeted group (Popa-Wyatt 2014). A pertinent example is (9) below (mockery beneath a YouTube video by a vegan activist):

- (9) Literally nobody:  
Typical vegan: I’m vegan.

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9 Sometimes used as a meme caption.

In contrast to (8), (9) imitates what (some) vegans have said or may have said, which is the mainstay of mimicry/echoing (Culpeper 2011; Popa-Wyatt 2014). It is, however, quite unlikely that an environmental activist would make the self-derogatory assertion in (8). Rather, the second segment in (8), represents the poster's own dissociative attitude toward environmentalists expressed through (a) the jabberwocky phrase *gretarded* (pattern re-forming and a reference to Greta Thunberg's neurodiversity – frequently targeted online; Andersson 2021) and (b) the assertion of intellectual deficiencies misleadingly attributed to the environmentalists' own utterances. As a result, the complex case of (extra)linguistic creativity in (8) (intended to index an implied “you”) is perhaps better described as “pseudo-echoing”, as it does not involve a replication of behaviour but rather projects an alternate world in which such an expression could have been made by the target. Example (8) is thus an ingenious culturally situated act of implementation and recontextualization of relevant conceptual and structural resources, which constitute an expression of a unique digital habitus calibrated to appeal to the user's cohort group while leading to their disaffiliation from the targeted group, that is, e-mpoliteness.

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

This paper has explored the phenomenon of impoliteness as a vehicle and underlying force of creativity in SM interactions. The analysis was based on the assumption that the user's desire for distinction and marking group membership is at the heart of impoliteness expression realized through a combination of ingenious surface forms and relevant cultural references. Thus conveyed impoliteness is particularly well-suited for the said purpose, owing to its role in both reproducing and defining the socio-cultural standards and structures of the online environment, as well as manifesting the user's (and their group's) intellectual superiority and cultural investment (Culpeper 2011; Dynel 2021b). For this reason, creative impoliteness in the SM environment can be considered a very effective expression of the user's (digital) social capital, intrinsically linked to group (dis)affiliation. Section 4 demonstrates how this aspect underpins the selection of forms and concepts that, through social comparison, are meant to appeal to the intended reference group while excluding others.

While the current paper is therefore not agnostic about the aim of the offensive postings, the major contribution of the study is the description of the *je ne sais quoi* of creative practices deployed for impoliteness expression. Culpeper's (2011) adaptation of Carter's (2004) creativity model has proven useful in describing the formal layer of the discussed examples, which frequently forms identifiable structures that orient interpretation. The detection of similar creative strategies in various contexts lends



credence to previous evidence that the SM environment facilitates the transfer of meanings and resources across contexts and spaces (Wu and Fitzgerald 2021). The current study adds to these findings by demonstrating that the meanings and formal/cultural resources examined are all common to the written mode of SM communication as instantiations of the relevant cultural norm identified across the three platforms.

However, the analysis also demonstrates that the structural properties of creativity in cyberspace are just one aspect of the relevant habitus. The misspellings in (4) and the utilization of extra-linguistic resources such as hashtags (e.g., [7]) are two semiotic innovations illustrative of the workings of this phenomenon. The distinguishing surface features of these examples reflect the palette of cultural resources available in the meaning-making process ensconced in references to the unique discursive environment of SM. As this process necessitates an understanding and interpretation of the data through the prism of their cultural boundness, creative impoliteness online may be difficult to account for unequivocally using only the existing categories of creativity. For this reason, the notion of e-mpoliteness has been introduced as a conceptual extension to the type of impoliteness that reinvents and recontextualizes both formal and cultural resources available on SM.

The idea turned out to be useful despite the fact that creative impoliteness on SM exists on a spectrum; some patterns, such as the use of quotation marks in (5), are undoubtedly present in other modes of communication as well (e.g., parody through “air quoting” in speech). The same is true for the concept of “YouTube university” (recall [6]), which, due to the nexus between online and offline words, operates at the intersection of both (cf. Blommaert 2019). Consequently, the dividing line between what has been referred to as e-mpoliteness in the present discussion and ingenious face-threatening behaviour encountered elsewhere may not always be sharp; however, as indicated above, the investigated cases reflect the interconnections between on/offline spaces in terms of what is considered offensive (or not). A pertinent example is the aforementioned identity of “Karen”, which serves as a prototype of impolite behaviour in both worlds (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2022). It can therefore be argued that all of the examined cases exemplify e-mpoliteness because they all (re)instantiate the relevant online habitus and are all unique to internet-mediated communication. The pattern-forming exchange of profanities in (2) is an example characteristic of the latter. The escalatory aggression displayed may have been enabled/inspired by the asynchronous and socially detached nature of YouTube comment sections (Vladimirou et al. 2021), which lacks the expectation that the posts will be responded to or even noticed by the target (Andersson 2021). The user’s desire to attract people’s attention and reap rewards as a member of a relevant group may thus be the primary goal of impoliteness in this context.

Nevertheless, one limitation of the study is that it focuses on only one mode of expression, whereas the obvious spin-off effect of the user's aim to extend their social capital in the online world involves the utilization of resources other than the affordances of the written language. A pertinent example are memes, whose polyvocal and entertaining nature specific to the online culture is an effective manifestation of unique social capital (Julien 2015) and a conduit for the expression of impoliteness (Dynel 2021a). Another example is communicative events that rely on the interplay of various semiotic resources (common on Instagram; Zappavigna and Ross 2021), such as the offensive "Caption: gross pig" beneath a bikini picture of Ariella Nyssa, a body positive Instagrammer. The correct disambiguation of impoliteness in this case relies on establishing links between the multimedia contents enabled by technological affordances of the internet. It remains to be seen to what extent and in what ways the technological and cultural resources on different platforms inspire and contribute to creative impoliteness; however, as Vásquez and Creel's (2017) analysis of Tumblr chats suggests, different online environments create unique opportunities to connect with and appeal to other users (see also Wu and Fitzgerald 2021). Given the intermodal nature of online communication, further research into the potential of other semiotic resources as carriers of e-mpoliteness is certainly warranted.

To summarize, the current study has investigated several patterns of creative impoliteness in the written mode of SM interactions treating them as formally, conceptually, and culturally specific to the context on hand. The acts of impoliteness have been viewed through the prism of the user's goal to gain distinction in the environment of SM by means of ingenious social comparison leading to their (dis)affiliation with relevant groups. In order to account for all aspects of the phenomenon, a conceptual extension to creative impoliteness, dubbed e-mpoliteness, has been proposed. As indicated above, e-mpoliteness serves as a notably effective means of impoliteness expression in terms of accumulating digital social capital. This observation is supported by claims about the growing significance of creativity as a constituent of social capital (Jones 2012). Consequently, creative impoliteness can be reasonably expected to receive greater acknowledgement and be reproduced in various forms in SM discursive contexts.

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