"QUIT YOUR ♥♥♥♥♥ING AND PLAY THE GAME": Impoliteness in a gaming-oriented online discussion forum

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Tiivistelmä

Tässä tutkimuksessa selvitettiin, millaisia strategioita Counter-Strike: Global Offensive -videopeliin keskittyvällä keskustelufoorumilla käytetään epäkohteliaisuuden ilmaisemiseksi. Tutkimus toteutettiin ankkuroidun teorian periaatteita mukaillen. Tutkimuksen tarkoitus oli luoda aineistoa uskollisesti kuvaava luokittelu, kiinnittäen samalla huomiota multimodaalisiin ilmiöihin. Osaltaan pohdittiin myös sitä, tulisiko tutkimuskohteena ollutta foorumia tarkastella yhteisönä (Community of Practice) vai tilana (Affinity Space). Keskeisenä lähteenä epäkohteliaisuuden analyysissä toimi Bousfield (2008), jonka luokitteluun tuloksia verrattiin.

Analyysin lopputuloksena oli kymmenen epäkohteliaisuusstrategian luokittelu. Foorumin käyttäjät pyrkivät strategioita käyttäen hyökkäämään muita henkilöitä sekä heidän mielipiteitään vastaan. Samalla strategioiden käytöllä on kuitenkin keskeinen rooli käyttäjien yrityksissä muokata, luoda ja määritellä foorumin käytänteitä, ryhmiä, voimasuhteita sekä yleisesti hyväksyttyjä mielipiteitä sekä sallittuja puheenaiheita. Multimodaaliset välineet olivat hieman yllättäen sivuosassa, viitaten niiden mahdollisesti olevan positiivisen ja/tai rakentavan keskustelun piirre. Käyttäjien keskittyessä toisen vääräksi osoittamiseen sekä leimaamiseen varsinaista keskustelua asiasta ei pääse syntymään, ja osanottajat jakautuvat jyrkästi leireihin, joiden väliin keskustelijat eivät mahdu tai tahdo mahtua.

Asiasanat

Impoliteness, Computer-mediated communication, Grounded Theory, Affinity Space, Community of Practice, Multimodality, CMC cues

Säilytyspaikka

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1. INTRODUCTION

Online communication in its myriad forms is more and more prevalent in modern society. Most facets of human communication have some type of online form. On the other hand, impoliteness is a phenomenon that seems to appear wherever people go. Furthermore, it is not uncommon to find the conception that internet communication in specific is riddled with impoliteness actions. It is, then, somewhat of a surprise that impoliteness on the web has only fairly recently begun to properly grow as a research topic; if the internet really is ruled by trolls, flaming and hate-speech, and if we spend more and more time online, should not the combination be studied more extensively? Fortunately, in recent years field has taken steps ahead, and online conflicts are the topic of an increasing number of studies. For example, Angouri and Tseliga (2010) looked at impoliteness on several bulletin boards, while Bou-Franch and Blitvich (2014) analyzed on conflict management in Youtube comment sections. Still, the majority of studies on the topic focuses on conflict management, and the preceding examples notwithstanding, relatively few researchers have taken linguistic impoliteness as the starting point for their research.

There are several reasons for studying impoliteness online. Firstly, as was stated above, the internet has reached practical ubiquity in the daily life a large part of the world. Any phenomenon so pervasive merits analyses from different perspectives; without extensive knowledge on online communication, we risk ignoring vital elements of our lives in our decision-making. Furthermore, "online communication is as real as offline interaction" (Locher, 2010: 1), and hostile interaction online can be psychologically just as taxing as face-to-face communication for the participants. Considering that internet users can be very young, it is necessary to gain knowledge of how impoliteness actions play out online. Using such knowledge, internet users can better develop methods for responding to impoliteness so as to reduce the mental stress involved, and to simply get more out of their experiences online.

More relevantly to linguistics, the development and refinement of theories of impoliteness helps in understanding perceptions on the limits of appropriate and

inappropriate behavior. In addition, we can learn how impoliteness is used and for what purposes. With regard to politeness in the context of computer-mediated communication (CMC), Graham (2006: 757) writes that "as this type of mediated interaction becomes more prevalent, it stands to reason that we must be more aware of the impact of the mediated environment, since it seems to play its own (pivotal) role in determining expectations of politeness within mediated settings". The same can no doubt be said of impoliteness. Furthermore, in written CMC, we have as researchers a permanent record of the entire exchanges, which is provides a unique window into real interaction and its evolution over time.

To study impoliteness in computer-mediated contexts, a gaming-oriented discussion forum was chosen for data collection. More specifically, the data was collected from the subforum that centered on the team-based first-person shooter game Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO). Players gather to the forum discuss the game, new features, and problems related to it. The users are from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds, which has an impact on language use. A vast majority of discussions takes place in English, though. As the forum is a moderated environment, studying impoliteness can reveal details about what is considered appropriate behavior in the forum; of course, this measure of appropriateness is that of the moderators, not the average user.

The focus of this paper is impoliteness in a computer-mediated communicative environment. To get to the heart of the problem, the following question was formulated: how are impoliteness acts realized in the Steam discussion forum? With increasing knowledge of the field as well as the data, I formulated the question more in a manner more suitable for the starting point of the present study: what strategies do forum members use to attack each other's face? By answering this key question, it was hoped that the research could not only categorize impoliteness acts, but also provide some deeper insights as to how impoliteness plays out in computer-mediated environments, and why such strategies are used in the first place.

I suspected that opting to use an existing categorization of impoliteness strategies

could be a source of bias for two reasons. Firstly, the data for most research on (im)politeness is from non-CMC sources, and therefore the categorizations derived from them may not be entirely applicable to my data. Secondly, I feared that by following a pre-existing categorization I might simply become blind to elements that do not fit the model. In order to respond to these potential problems I chose to set aside existing classifications of (im)politeness, instead using the concepts behind them to conduct a grounded theory analysis of the data and create my own categorization. After analyzing the data and reviewing the results, I contextualized the findings by comparing the strategies to those used in Bousfield (2008) which, in turn, were derived from Culpeper (1996).

In order to study the realizations of impoliteness in an online forum, an effective framework needs to be constructed. In Chapter 2, I lay down the context in which this study will operate: The forum that constituted the data for this study will be discussed from the viewpoints of communities of practice, affinity spaces, as well as computer-mediated communication. In Chapter 3, I will present the relevant theories of (im)politeness and form a framework for analyzing the data. Chapter four focuses on grounded theory and its application in the present study. In Chapter 5, I will explain my categorization in detail with examples illustrating each category, as well as comment shortly on some key observations that do not directly relate to the categorization. In Chapter 6 I will discuss the results as well as other observations from a broader point of view. Finally, I will present my concluding remarks in Chapter 7.

2. BACKGROUND

In order to systematically study a social phenomenon such as impoliteness, it is necessary to understand the context in which the interaction takes place. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the environment and the people who populate it. In the first section (2.1) I will discuss communities of practice and affinity spaces, and try to locate the forum through the two lenses. In section 2.2, the key features of computer-mediated communication will be presented alongside a brief elaboration on the ethical aspects of internet research. Section 2.3 will present the Steam forum more closely, and finally in section 2.4 I will briefly discuss issues related to demography.

2.1 Conceptualizing interactional environments

2.2.1 Wenger's communities of practice

Community of Practice is a term coined by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger to explore communal and group learning. In this view, the term practice is taken to be "about meaning as an experience of everyday life" (Wenger, 1998: 52). In a community of practice, participants negotiate these meanings in social interaction. On the other hand, Wenger (Wenger, 1998: 102) writes that "Practice is a shared history of learning that requires some catching up for joining". There are specific ways of behaving in any given community of practice: for example, to successfully participate in a community of practice, a prospective member might have to internalize the expectations pertaining to clothing or manner of address, or observe and understand what arguments and manners of speech are accepted, as well as recognize the conditions under which these behaviors are allowed or required. Included here are both explicit and tacit elements. For example, in the case of the forum of the present paper a participant needs to know the meanings of certain abbreviations and acronyms (explicit practice), but also has to develop a sense of what topics are appropriate for a new thread (partially tacit knowledge). Failure to comply often exposes the tacit and turns it into explicit expressions of disapproval. In sum, practice is a way in which communication happens and is expected to happen, and these

expectations are often not explicitly stated, although sometimes they can be.

In the above explanation we can already see what Wenger sees as the "three dimensions of practice as a property of a community": mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998: 72-73). Firstly, the prerequisite to the existence of any community is the existence of a *social activity*, whatever that may be, which brings individuals together and facilitates social interaction and the formation of a social practice. Continued communication towards some goal, whether stated or unstated, results in (as well as requires) the adoption of specific types of behavior; *mutual engagement*, i.e. the focusing of efforts to reach the goal, creates a venue for the emergence and evolution of a community and its practices. Secondly, there needs to exist a set of objectives, stated or unstated, which serves as the purpose of communication. This is what we call the *joint enterprise*. It is a complex, multifaceted and evolving set of objectives which individuals in a community of practice can be seen to share; not only do the participants in the Steam forums have such specific goals such as posting an opinion, but they also have larger, more general goals, such as being informed or elaborating on how the game could be improved and thus contributing to the evolution of the game (regardless of whether the community in reality has any influence upon Valve, the owner of the franchise). The joint enterprise is "a shared understanding of what binds them together" (Wenger, 1998: 72), effectively referring to the very reason for which the community exists. Thirdly, and finally, a community of practice will have a number of behaviors that are typical or stereotypical to the community. Over time certain words, phrases and other communicative signs take meanings that only a member of the community can fully understand as a result of their history within that community. A *shared repertoire*, then, is the set of shared resources that the members can use and interpret based on past interactions (Wenger 1998: 83). However, it is not stable: the very fact that the repertoire exists in use means that it will inevitably change over time, as its parts are utilized in new contexts and attached to new meanings.

Wenger's model is useful in accounting for the ways in which communities develop practices and become what they are. Interactions between individuals with personal

histories are at the core of the model, and negotiation and renegotiation are a key aspect – change is continuous and inevitable. Wenger (1998: 85) reminds the reader that the notion of community of practice should not be seen to make judgments on whether a community of practice is a good or a bad thing. Rather, communities exist in and of themselves, and their (perceived) practices are viewed as good or bad by the members and outsiders. Communities of practice may afford their members tools to resist imposition by those higher in an institutional hierarchy, but they can also limit an individual member's freedom. Furthermore, Wenger notes that "shared practice does not itself imply harmony or collaboration" (Wenger, 1998: 85). This is a key insight: Culpeper (2013: 25) writes that behaviors judged negatively by some might be judged positively by others, as the example of ritualized banter in some youth cultures. In accordance with these observations, it is rather easy to imagine a community of practice where the joint enterprise includes not only objectives such as exchange of opinions and dissemination of knowledge, but also exercise of power over others by the use of any and all rhetoric tools available – including linguistic impoliteness.

There are some points which need to be discussed on the topic of communities of practice. A community of practice must not be seen as a monolithic entity existing somewhere "out there". To the contrary, there is no reason to assume that they exist outside the minds of the individuals who interact in that community – but even between individuals in the same community of practice there will necessarily be disagreements as to the three dimensions mentioned above. The limits of appropriate behavior, degree of commitment and views on how rigid and significant the assumed limits of the community practice are all examples of possibly contested aspects of the community. Graham (2006) and Aakhus and Rumney (2010), both studied conflicts in email-based online communities. In these cases, the trigger for the conflicts was a series of posts which were perceived by others members as inappropriate behavior; as Graham writes, the conflict flowed from the initiator's "disregard for, lack of awareness of, and/or competence in the demands and limitations of the computer medium" (Graham, 2006: 756-757).

Another key point to remember is that the borders of communities of practice are not clear-cut, and the positions of individual participants will differ in terms of how invested and central the person will be in that community. Individuals are also members of several communities of practice, which means that communities of practice are not closed systems evolving in isolation. Practices flow from one community to another through interactions, although this of course says nothing of how the members of the "receiving" community of practice will perceive new influences, if indeed they notice the influence at all. For example, in the case of the CS:GO community, members may bring in practices from their home countries, homes, other online communities as well as the game and its communication itself. On the other hand, the community rules, set by moderators, attempt to steer community practices in another way, exerting what Watts calls "symbolic violence" (2003: 132). It is in the intersection of these two forces, the users and their personal histories on the one hand, and the moderators and their institutional power on the other, that community practices arise (or, if the community formation never really takes place, don't). A very clear example of this is the use of curse words: a filter removes curse words from posts since they are not permitted by institutional practice, yet many members continue to use them, or invent ways of circumventing the filter, in an attempt to communicate according to how what they see that the practices of the community should be.

Many aspects of the concept of communities of practice suit our purposes of analyzing impolite interaction in the Steam Users' forums. However, in order to have a more accurate view, in the following section I will present an alternative standpoint, and try to combine the best applicable elements of the two.

2.1.2 Gee's affinity spaces

James Paul Gee presents an "alternative to the notion of a community of practice" (2009: 1). Gee asserts that while community practice is a useful term in many cases, it suffers from a number of crucial shortcomings. Firstly, he argues that the use of the word "community" evokes specific associations, namely those of a rather warm,

tightly knit community (Gee, 2009: 2). There is, he writes, a discrepancy between this terminology and the everyday life of schools, where the ties between the students can well be less than friendly. Second, Gee (2009: 3) points out that communities of practice assume a notion of membership in the community; the issue, then, is that membership can take many forms and mean very different things to different people, bringing into question whether the term actually describes anything at all. The idea of a shared enterprise may thus lose value in such situations, leading to false conclusions. Thirdly, and finally, researchers have used the theory of communities of practice in contexts where more some other model of social learning might have been more appropriate.

In response to these issues, Gee (2009: 5) suggests that instead of looking at groups and people, researchers should be paying attention to spaces in which the people interact, and on the basis of these interactions make judgments about whether we can say that the interactions constitute a community of practice. In this way, fewer pre-determined assumptions are made. Spaces, in Gee's terms, are made of two elements: content and interaction. Content is simply what the space is about, be it a video game, a type of anime, or any other form of culture (Gee, 2009: 10). The source of the content is called a generator. There can be one or more generators in any given space; in other words, the space can be about more than just one “thing”. Interaction refers to the interactions that people have with and over the content (Gee, 2009: 11). Every space has, then, a content organization and an interactional organization. As Gee summarizes:

> "The content organization of a game emerges from the work of designers. The interactional organization emerges from people's actions and interactions with and over the space --- as these begin to take on some (however loose) regularity or patterning." (Gee, 2009: 12).

The content organization of an affinity space influences (but does not necessarily determine) the interactional organization of the affinity space. This is a fairly straightforward assertion: the content and its structure is, after all, what the

interaction and possibly even the space are built around. Similarly, the interactions that take place in the affinity space can reflect upon the generator: a developer can get feedback, participate in discussions, fix bugs and try to make the content more pleasing to the people who play the game (Gee, 2009: 13).

But for any space to exist there must be something that enables a person to enter that space. These are called portals. There can be many portals to the same content, and portals can, in addition to making content available, be or become generators themselves.

The following is a summary of Gee's (2009: 20-25) list of features of affinity spaces:

1. Common endeavor, not race, class, gender, or disability, is primary
2. Newbies and masters and everyone else share common space
3. Some portals are strong generators
4. Content organization is transformed by interactional transformation
5. Encourages extensive and intensive knowledge
6. Encourages individual and distributed knowledge
7. Encourages dispersed knowledge
8. Uses and honors tacit knowledge
9. Many different forms and routes to participation
10. Lots of different routes to status
11. Leadership is porous and leaders are resources.

Since the model of affinity spaces is primarily concerned with social learning, many of the features above are not as relevant to this paper as others, although, of course, the less relevant points still hold true in many cases. Points 1-4 and 9-11 will be discussed further here, owing to their potential value to the research at hand.

Beginning with the first point, Gee (2009: 20) writes that ”in an affinity space, people relate to each other primarily in terms of common interests, endeavors, goals, or practices, not primarily in terms of race, gender, age, disability, or social class”. The

common endeavor centers on a topic and/or a set of content instead of people and relationships with them, although the relationships in an affinity space can be important motivators for some of the interactants. Anonymity on internet-based affinity spaces serves to further push this point.

Secondly, the lack of segregation by skill levels is an important aspect in online game discussion forums. Skilled players will encounter and communicate with unskilled players. This is, naturally, a possible source of conflict: some will no doubt want to be separated from "the rest".

The third point is the idea that some portals are also generators. In the case of the forum in question, I would like to identify two major generators of content. The primary generator is the game itself, Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, and the tournaments, video streams, and personal experiences associated with the game. The forum that is the target of this study could also be called a primary generator, although in the chosen data set it does not appear as one (players mainly do not discuss the forum itself). The forum certainly constitutes a secondary generator: the interactional space creates threads, historical records of interactions, which participants read and comment on. Sometimes, these comments lead to changes in the practices of the forum.

As to point 4, the actions and opinions of players on the Steam forum are often expressed with the purpose of discussing, and possibly in the hopes of changing, some aspect of gameplay. Whether or not the parent company and game developers actually read the forum and use them as feedback is not known, but what is important here is that forum users act and discuss matters as if the discussions could influence the designers' decisions.

Users have no requirement to participate actively in the space: in any affinity space, users can be *lurkers*, who only read the forum but choose not to participate in the discussions (e.g. Merriam-Webster, 201623), while they may be important contributors in other spaces. There can also be other portals where the members

discuss the CS:GO content, e.g. Reddit's CS:GO subreddit[1].

Status can be achieved in different ways: skill in the game, good argumentation, commonly accepted opinions, and witticisms are examples of possible sources of status. Members naturally differ in how they value a person, and status is thus not to be seen as a static or forum-wide phenomenon.

Finally, hierarchies are not rigid, and there can be significant changes in leader-follower relations in short periods of time. Typically, in the case of the forum in this paper, moderators hold considerable power and thus could be expected to also wield status, but their actions can easily come under fire from users, and they can lose their status if their behavior is displeasing to the participants. Even so, I would argue that the moderators' power is not of the greatest significance in this point. Relationships between individual members affect this more, as between threads users can, with little consequence, decide to oppose a person's argumentation, while in another thread fully support them. This is in line with Zafeiriou (2003: 102), whose paper showed that the lack of paralinguistic cues in CMC environments encourages users to express their own opinions rather than follow those of others.

A shortcoming in the discussion of affinity spaces is that Gee pays little attention to the fact that participants in an affinity space have models of how one should behave in each space. It is my argument that the concept of a shared repertoire, as explained in section 2.2.1, is useful in illustrating that participants in a space assume other participants know certain things and to act in certain ways. Inability to adhere to the tacit and explicit norms of a space can result in negative reactions just as in communities of practice. The focus that affinity spaces have for the common endeavor may, however, override the will to care about some parts of the shared repertoire (as, incidentally, happens in the data). In communities of practice, members are interested in restoring balance: Graham (2006) and Aakhus and Rumney (2010) both report that the conflicts ended in a constructive discussion and

[1] Reddit is an online social news site where users may submit links to other sites, and/or discuss current events, as well as start their own subreddit dedicated to a singular point of interest, such as CS:GO.

renegotiation of the community's role. In affinity spaces, the interactants have the option to simply leave conflicts unresolved; such results are reported by, for example, Bou-Franch and Blitvich (2014), who studied discussions in Youtube comment sections. This is, in my opinion, the emblematic difference between the two. As such, I suggest here (I will argue this further in a later chapter) that the CS:GO forum of this study should be regarded as primarily an affinity space. Nevertheless, the potential of some of Wenger's concepts is too great to pass, and I have used them where necessary.

2.2 Aspects of computer-mediated communication

Herring (1996: 1) defines computer-mediated communication as "communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers". While this definition makes no reference to the primacy of text, at the time of publication – and indeed to this day – written language was the prevalent medium in CMC. Twenty years later, text is still an important aspect of CMC, even though streaming services and social media sites allow for a high degree of multimodality. Despite the limitations to expressive freedom in the early web, internet language has for long been molded by the desire to more accurately express the full range of human emotions. This conflict between media and aspiration is the focus of this section. Section 2.2.1 presents the basic features associated with CMC that are relevant to the study of (im)politeness, while section 2.2.2 discusses multimodality and CMC cues. In 2.2.3, the ethical issues present in doing internet research will be discussed.

2.2.1 Basic features of Computer-mediated communication

Graham (2007: 745) identifies three factors that affect perceptions of politeness in a mediated setting: the lack of paralinguistic markers, participation structure, and netiquette. I will discuss the first two aspects here, while the question of netiquette will be discussed in section 3.4 in conjunction with impoliteness theory.

Lack of paralinguistic markers

Paralinguistic markers such as prosody, facial expressions and body language have a remarkable impact on interpersonal communication. For example, when discussing implicational impoliteness Culpeper (2011: 157) states that "prosody and other intensifying techniques are used to ensure that we are guided to the 'impolite' interpretation". These tools of face-to-face communication are not readily available in text-based discussion forums. To counter this, means of livening up communication have arisen in online communication. Users often have at their disposal a variety of multimodal tools and CMC cues with which the effect of the lack of paralinguistic markers can be alleviated; a common example of such cues is emoticons. (A full explanation of multimodality and CMC cues will be presented in section 2.2.2).

The lack of paralinguistic markers is, in fact, a well-known source of confusion and discord, a fact perhaps best encapsulated by what is known as Poe's Law: "Without a smiley or other blatant display of humour, it is impossible to create a parody of fundamentalism that someone won't mistake for the real thing" (Chivers, 2009). Although originally intended as humorous, Poe's Law is nevertheless an adept formulation of the basic dilemma of text-based communication: one can rarely be entirely sure whether a post is sarcastic in intent or not. Given that perceptions of what constitutes fundamentalist thinking are subjective, as well as the variation which we can assume to exist between the multitudes of internet users, it is likely that this element will play a large part in motivating impolite behavior. Supporting this view, a study by Zafeiriou (2003) found that misunderstandings of this kind are important factors in computer-mediated conflict. Dark humor, for example, can easily be interpreted as an expression of genuine opinion.

One phenomenon closely related to Poe's law and deriving from the lack of paralinguistic markers is trolling. Trolls try to create discord and conflict in online communities by attempting to display themselves as legitimate members of the group; their tools is the expression of views that are likely to incite unrest, and the use of communicative strategies that evoke strong responses (Hardaker, 2010: 237). Trolling is often viewed in an extremely negative light: for example, the Indiana

University lists the motivations for trolling as getting attention, disrupting discussion and making trouble (Indiana University, 2013). The tricky part is, again, that due to the lack or paralinguistic markers, trolls are often very difficult to recognize. The presence of trolls may have had an influence on the data of the present study, as their presence cannot be reliably verified or ruled out. On the other hand, while trolls can have an effect on the results, their presence is not entirely a threat. Firstly, their activities are found everywhere in online communities, and thus they can be argued to form integral elements of their communication; second, since they attempt to aggravate the face of others, they ideally help to reveal the boundaries of acceptable behavior as well as to elicit impolite responses that then yield more data for the paper at hand. Recall at this point that the purpose of the present study is to describe impoliteness on the forum – regardless of who uses it and for what motivation. Thus, impoliteness for self-gratification and trolling, as described by Bousfield (2008: 108) and Hardaker (2010: 238), are simply a part of these communicative worlds, and are not a cause for concern.

In addition to difficulties in understanding the true purposes of interactants, the lack of paralinguistic cues can significantly lower the threshold for, on the one hand, expressing one's honest opinion, and on the other, being impolite. Zafeiriou reports that the students who participated in the study found it easier to disagree in online-text-based circumstances (2003: 101). The lack of social cues and extralinguistic tools of communicating was seen as an equalizing factor between dominant group members. In addition, the students expressed that online conflicts in general are not as serious as face-to-face arguments, since the "heat is taken out" (Zafeiriou, 2003: 102). This would suggest that online communication encourages participants to voice their opinions, possibly (but not necessarily) increasing the likelihood of impolite interaction. Upadhay similarly reports that in online reader responses to news articles, a link exists between anonymity and impoliteness (2010: 124).

Participation structure

The way in which a discussion forum is built can have a significant effect on communicative practices; as Gee (2009: 11) noted, the content organization of an

affinity space affects its interactive organization. This section is dedicated to exploring possible implications of participation structure, and to examining the structure of the Steam forum in the light of those findings.

Supporting the hypothesis that participation structure affects communication, Hagman (2012) conducted a comparative analysis of conflict talk in two online communities, *4chan* and *Something Awful*. Significant differences were found between the two media, despite the fact that their target audience is roughly the same. In the *Something Awful* community, users preferred longer and more detailed posts, while *4chan* attracted shorter and more multimodal posts (2012: 96-97). Probable reasons cited were differences in the way threads are structured and anonymity. For example, *4chan* is completely anonymous and its commenting system is simplistic; all posts appear in a simple, chronological order. Thus, technological aspects of the user interface probably have an effect on the practices of the environment. Interestingly, Wanner (2008: 133) writes that discussion forums are, in relation to chatrooms, conceptually written media; they tend to adhere to the rules of standard language (Koch and Oesterreicher, 1994; cited in Wanner, 2003: 132). The fact that posts are visible to a great number of people and for a prolonged period of time seems to motivate this behavior. At the same time, Wanner found that topic-oriented areas in discussion forums are more conceptually written than free-for-all discussions without a particular point of discussion.

Montero-Fleta et al (2009), on the other hand, reported different results. In the paper, they conducted a comparison of communication styles between three discussion forums, one Spanish, one English, and the third Catalan. All the forums were centered on the topic of football. The results revealed that the English forum leaned heavily towards an oral mode of communication, and the users utilized the forum as if it were a synchronous chatroom rather than an asynchronous bulletin board. The average length of posts, as well as sentence length, was significantly higher on the Spanish and Catalan forums. As the two forums were structurally very similar (and quite similar to the forum in the present study), the differences in communicative practices were attributed to cultural differences.

Angouri and Tseliga (2010) studied two online bulletin board -type forums, one of which was used by students and another by teachers. They compared two discussion forums, one used by students and one used by academic professionals. The student forum was more tolerant of non-standard language and, in Koch and Oesterreicher's (1994) terms, leaned towards conceptually oral communication; the professors' forum, on the other hand, was more conceptually written in style. The choice of style in each forum was seen to reflect the identity that posters would like to claim for themselves (Angouri and Tseliga, 2010: 63-64).

Participation structure therefore can be an important factor in the formation of established practices in a discussion forum, but at least two other factors can be identified: culture and personal face-claims. Thus, while some structural aspects may attract specific types of users and communities, the users in the end define in practical interaction what they want to do with that medium.

Having considered some examples of the influence of participation structure on a discussion forum, we now turn our attention to the target forum of the present study. The Steam users' forum is a bulletin board-type interaction space. The forum is provided by bulletins, which offers discussion forums services based on templates that can be customized by the buyer. As such, the forum does not differ greatly from other such forums, besides its coloring scheme. Posters begin conversations, called threads, to which other users can respond. A poster who starts the thread is generally referred to as OP (an abbreviation of *original poster*), a term which I will use in this paper. A thread will always have a heading, such as ”Need help with graphics settings”. Once a user clicks the heading, they will see the complete post with the OP’s elaboration, after which all other users' comments appear. The forum is an asynchronous environment, meaning that the time at which a comment is made is not as important than in a chat room, where user: while messages in a chatroom generally disappear after a set amount of time, in discussion forums the whole thread is visible from the beginning until the end until a moderator, an automated system removes it, or the server is shut down.

Messages in a thread will appear from the top to the bottom starting with the oldest to the newest, beginning with the original post. In the main view of the domain, threads are arranged by the time of the last post made in them. This means that some threads can be several years old, accumulating responses very slowly, and occasionally a user might ”bump” a thread, that is, post in a thread only to ”bring it up from the dead” and to the front page of the domain. This is forbidden by the rules of the forum, but of course there is potential for different interpretations as to where the line between bumping and legitimate continuation of conversation goes.

As messages can be separated both chronologically (e.g. a reply is made three days after the post to which the reply is directed) and spatially (several messages, or pages of messages, can have appeared between a post and a reply to it), the forum utilizes a quote system, which is essential in addressing replies to specific posts. A user will quote parts of a post or an entire post to make sure readers understand who, and what point, the target of the reply is. Another way to reply to posts is to explicitly state the username of the person being replied to. In such a way, conversations can form several branches or strains within the more general framework of the thread. As a result, there is an option to see a comment tree, where posts are arranged according to the branch of conversation they belong to.

2.2.2 Multimodality and CMC cues

Van Leeuwen and Kress define multimodality as “[t]he phenomenon in texts and communicative events whereby a variety of ‘semiotic modes’ (means of expression) are integrated into a unified whole” (Van Leeuwen & Kress: 2011: 107). Text and image can be combined for illustrative purposes: for example, the work of Arendholz (2013: 260) shows that discussion boards use a broad array of multimodal devices to be “co-present”, that is, to make and negotiate face-claims just as one would in face-to-face interaction.

Interactive online environments allow easy access to multimodal resources, such as

meme libraries and video hosting services. Some environments allow users to embed images and videos directly in their posts, while on other services, such as the Steam forum in this paper, direct embedding is disallowed. In these cases, the reader has to click on the poster's link to access the external content. The reader, in addition, has a choice over whether they will view the content or not.

Multimodal tools may be used from time to time for purposes such as clarifying a point, bringing in new knowledge to the discussion, or intensifying impolite intent. It is my view that when such tools are used, they can be analyzed similarly to written texts; that is, an interpretation of what they are aimed at can be made in similar terms to those used to analyze the text content for a message. Of course, not all multimodality will be relevant to this paper, and thus only those instances that can be interpreted as a driving force for impoliteness will be included in the analysis.

As said above, the Steam forum does not allow the users to embed pictures or videos in their posts. As a result, I expected that the use of these elements is would not be very high in the data. However, links to external content are not the only form of multimodality in online communication. Another significant category consists in those tools of multimodal communication that can be seen on the forum page itself, called CMC cues by Vandergriff (2013). What makes CMC cues special is that they appear right within the text, and cannot be avoided by the reader; a start contrast to content hosted on other websites. These include strategies such as smileys (emoticons), modifying the typeface, and using capital letters (for purposes other than adhering to the rules of “standard” language).

Emoticons can be used to reflect emotions, point towards a non-emotional sentiment associated with the facial expression, or to enhance illocutionary force (Dresner and Herring, 2010). In Angouri and Tseliga (2010), the researchers found that nonstandard spellings, capitalization and punctuation served as tools to express and intensify impolite face-attacks in both the student and the professional academic forum. Vandergriff, on the other hand, reports that emotive CMC cues such as smileys tended to appear more frequently in constructive interaction, while

conflictual and impoliteness interaction features accentuating cues, such as capitalization of individual words (2013: 9). These two observations seem to fit the data of this paper. As the data of this study was high in impoliteness content, I expected to find multimodal tools and CMC cues used in moderate amounts throughout the data.

2.2.3 Ethical considerations of internet research

The ethics of internet research have been and still are the subject of some debate. In the case of the present paper, the discussion hinges upon the privacy of the individual on the one hand and on the other hand the researcher's freedom to study authentic communication. This section attempts to clear the path through the complicated considerations involved by taking a look at suggested solutions to the issues, as well as the official stance of the service provider.

To begin the discussion, on the Valve Privacy Policy Page (Valve, 2015a), in a section titled "Chat Forums, Etc." it is stated that "any information that is disclosed in chat, forums or bulletin boards should be considered public information---". Similarly, the forum rules, which I will present in section 2.3, make no reference to the possible use of the posts in outside contexts. Thus, we can make a tentative assumption that members in the forum are aware of the visibility of the posts to anyone on the internet. From this we can infer that using the data does not infringe on any officially set rules, as the notion of *public information* implies *not confidential*, and possibly, *free to use*. Legal disburdenment alone, however, is not enough, as such delineations are often not in harmony or up-to-date with the complex reality of human interaction (Eynon at al., 2008: 37).

The crucial points of discussion are privacy and the rights that a person has to their communicative acts. More specifically, while the risk of identification of an individual from the data is a serious consideration, attention must also be given to the potential harm deriving from that identification (Buchanan and Zimmer, 2012; The Association of Internet Researchers, 2012). Among the variety of possible

consequences are, for example social or public shame, financial losses, as well as personal anxiety.

The potential for harm depends on several factors. Take, for example, the nature of the forum: it is an open environment, viewable to anyone with an internet access. Contrast this fact to the topic of the study, impoliteness. The intuition of the researcher here is that impoliteness interactions are, to an extent, sensitive, and could have a harmful effect on a person if the interactions were to be scrutinized publicly. On the other hand, the data is not exceptional in terms of what types of interaction are available for viewing online, and the content of the posts neither disseminates personal information nor breaches any laws that could be applicable in this context. Clearly, the issue is a complicated one. However, it is necessary to point out here that a separate private message function exists in the forum for interactions deemed too private for public discussion. In this light, I see it as a reasonable assumption to make that forum members are in sufficient understanding of the fact that anyone can read the posts, and that as such their public postings are made in with consciousness of this notion.

In the AOIR guidelines (2012: 7) it is stated that “even 'anonymised' datasets that contain enough personal information can result in individuals being identifiable”. This is a serious issue. Any direct quote could, often quite easily, traced back to the original post, using, for example, information such as timestamps and the citation in question. So it is in the present study as well. I will note here, though, that Steam accounts are relatively anonymous, since users are behind nicknames as well as profiles which are not required to include or show real personal information. There are, thus, at least two layers of anonymity between the post and the person. Furthermore, users can change their nicknames at any point in time, and it is also within their power to modify and delete any of their posts. Thus the distance between post and person becomes quite long.

For the most part, citations from the data will be presented verbatim, in plain text, without usernames. Direct citations are necessary so as to present and explain

linguistic and pragmatic phenomena, at least if the reader is to understand the researcher's point. On the other hand, usernames are a potential identity risk: forum accounts are linked to real, functional Steam accounts, which may or may not include personal details, depending on what information the user has decided to make public (the information need not be truthful). Excluding usernames does not harm the presentation of the data in any way; showing usernames is simply not necessary. In cases where a user mentions another by name, I have simply indicated that such a reference has been made. With these points in mind, there is simply no reason to not give the forum members the extra layer of security.

Finally, very little research could be made in natural environments if full consent was required. For example, how should forum members be contacted? Should permission be gained from all participants? The same questions apply not only to discussion forums, but also to research on reality TV (Bousfield, 2008) and radio shows (Watts, 2003). Furthermore, as I stated above the data is relatively distanced from the individuals involved, and does not contain e.g. trade secrets, medical histories or other personal information (see Eynon at al., 2008: 36-37 for an example of a harmful, publicly available corpus.). In other words, the present study is not an intrusion on any person's intimate life. Considering that a wide body of research on online communication already exists, I see it as suitable to conclude that should I err, I shall err in good company.

2.3 The Steam forum: Defining the context for communication

In order to study the forum in detail, some general knowledge of the forum and how it relates to the points already explained will be laid out in this section. Most of the following is based on the researcher's personal experience in the forum.

The forum whose content will serve as the data for this study is the Counter-Strike-Global Offensive domain of the Steam Users' Forums[2]. Steam is an online gaming

[2]http://forums.steampowered.com/forums/index.php

platform, through which gamers buy licenses to games and download them to their personal computers. Steam is owned by Valve Corporation, which offers several gaming-related services. As a part of their attempts to foster a gaming community and culture, Valve also hosts the Steam Users' Forums under the Steam name. The CS:GO portal in the Steam Users' Forums is one of the more frequently visited forums in the community, mostly owing to the game's popularity. For example, on 9th December 2014, the game was the second-most played game on Steam, with a peak of 297178 players playing simultaneously that day (Valve Corporation, 2015b).

The user base is, in basic terms, anyone on Steam. A CS:GO domain will naturally attract CS:GO players, but that is about as exact as we can be of who the users are. The language of the domain is English, which is used in nearly all situations, although occasional non-English interactions do occur. All discussion in the data of this study was in English, not because non-English were not wanted, but simply because the threads that were seen to contain the best data had no such events. As implied in section (TBD), the ethnic make-up of the domain is mixed, with participants coming from practically anywhere with an internet connection. The users' English is therefore varied, reflecting their personal levels of proficiency. I expected this to have some effect on interpersonal communication on the forum, although the exact implications remain unclear. To exemplify, ambiguous and sarcastic comments often confuse even first-language speakers. The linguistic as well as cultural differences can easily function as another layer of insecurity as to the delivery and interpretation of the intended message.

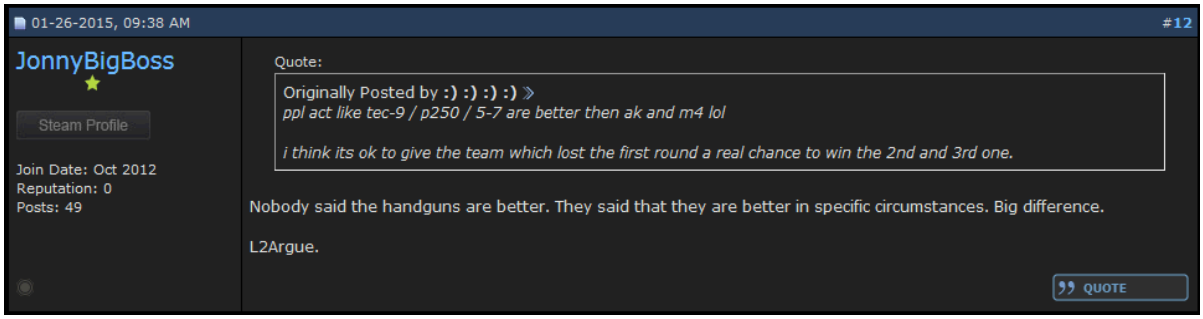

Figure 1: A typical, short post on the forum.

Figure 1 is an example of what a visitor to the forum will see. At the top left, the time the post was submitted is visible; at the top right, the post's chronological order number is given. Clicking on the name of the poster will lead the reader to the forum profile of the poster; however, this link cannot be followed without signing in. Below the username, the stars illustrate the number of posts that the user has made in the whole of the Steam Users' forums. The user's join date and exact number of posts are also given, as well as a ”reputation” score, which is a measure of the number of times someone has given the post a positive score (somewhat similar to Facebook's *Like* feature). The poster is responding to an earlier post, and as a result the earlier post (usually only parts of it) is visible. The posts that involve direct quotations are of specific interest to us: it is there that we may best observe how the users conceptualize and reveal their perceptions of what types of behavior are acceptable in the forum.

The threads in the forum have two different categories. By default, normal threads appear in the flowing list of threads according to the time of the last post made in them (arranged according to other criteria, as well). *Sticky* posts, on the other hand, remain at the top of the forum main view. These are threads that deal with general topics that are frequently discussed, and have been given sticky status to allow users easy access to commonly faced topics and problems. For example, out of seven sticky posts in the domain currently, three handle technical problems associated with the game, while the rest deal with reporting bugs and giving feedback on the game. The data of this study was taken from normal, non-stickied threads; sticky threads simply are did not provide interesting data for this study.

2.4 Demography and Gender

The topic of gender needs to be addressed here for two reasons. Firstly, we need to have a rough idea of who we are studying, and secondly, gender can and does affect communication in many ways. For example, Baker (2008: 46–47) gives a quick look in the British National Corpus, revealing that men were more likely to use curse words than women, and that women were more likely to use words such as *fabulous*. While

such simple corpus analyses are not of much value in and of themselves (Baker is very much aware of this), they do nevertheless show that differences exist in some way and need to be accounted for.

My personal experience with Counter-Strike: Global Offensive is that the player base is overwhelmingly male. As a result, it would be easy to infer that this applies to the discussion forum, as well. However, the issue is not as straightforward. The Internet Advertising Bureau UK (2014) reports that women account for up to 47% of gamers in the United Kingdom. Although there is a strong connection between the number of female gamers and the marked rise in the popularity of mobile gaming, it is reasonable to assume that women have also taken to other forms of video games, such as online first-person shooters.

An online questionnaire by Matthew (2012) revealed that gamers generally agree that sexism is prevalent in online gaming communities. Women were reported to be four times more likely to experience taunting or harassment than men, and that 19.5% percent of female respondents had experienced harassment that continued outside the game; the equivalent figure for male respondents is 3%. The study was executed as an open questionnaire, which could have caused a bias in the composition of the sample. Nonetheless, the results still serve as a strong indication that there exists an incentive for women to hide their gender when playing online – and, in fact, 67.5% of female respondents admitted to having done so.

In short, while there is little way of knowing who the people behind the profiles are, there nonetheless appears to exist a male norm, which can be seen, for example, in the pronouns forum members use of each other: *he* is used in practically every instance where the person being referred to has not been explicitly designated as female (this occurred once in the entire dataset for the study.) It appears as a natural solution, then, to make no assumptions about the gender of individual users. Thus, the language of the present paper will reflect this. I will use gender-neutral terms unless gendered pronouns are warranted by the data. It should be nonetheless remembered that even when gender is stated explicitly, it might not reflect reality.

This chapter has been an exploration and explanation of the context from which the data for this study was extracted. A starting point for studying social interaction, combining elements from communities of practice and affinity spaces, was presented, and the forum was discussed in this context. I also covered the basic elements of computer-mediated communication. Finally, I touched upon the ethics of internet research and the topic of gender in CMC environments. With this background, we are well prepared for the following chapter, where I will present and discuss theories of (im)politeness.

3. THEORIZING IMPOLITENESS

The question of how a researcher can recognize and classify impoliteness is a very relevant one. As several authors (e.g. Upadhay, 2010) have noted, there is no consensus among researchers as to what constitutes politeness – or, for that matter, impoliteness. Researchers use similar terms to describe very different and at times opposite phenomena. The purpose of this section is to provide a framework for working with impoliteness. The framework that I shall present here will address topics such as face, face-threats, social norms, intentions, emotions, and offence. The focus will be on, firstly, the creation of a functional foundation, and secondly, on the question of how impoliteness can be located, recognized and interpreted in an environment where we have neither access to the interlocutors nor have the benefit of working with interpersonal conversation cues. To this end, I will first present an overview of face and face-threats and their position in the analysis of impoliteness. The succeeding sections will discuss the role of social practices in analyzing impoliteness; the role of emotions, intentions, and offence; and netiquette. In the final section, impoliteness models will be presented, together with means of adoption into practice.

3.1 Face and face-threats

Modern theories of politeness and (im)politeness have from their inception worked with and revolved around the concept of *face*. Researchers disagree as to the exact nature of face, but at the core of the concept is a sense of self that can be attacked, damaged, supported and maintained in social interaction. The idea was brought to the forefront of pragmatics by Erving Goffman (1967), but it has its origins in China. Goffman's original definition of face was "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (1967: 5). A crucial element of this definition is the social aspect: participants in an interaction claim a face based on their interpretation of how others in a given communicational situation perceive them. In addition, Goffman's notion of

face as *lines* both implies social constraints (one is expected to continue to behave in accordance with the line) as well as allows for changes in behavior between contexts (in different situations, a line will be taken to suit the situation) (1967: 6–7).

Brown and Levinson, whose work continues to underlie much of modern politeness research, describe their concept of face as "derived from Goffman (1967) and from the English folk term" (1978[1987]: 61). The definition of face is "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (ibid.). Face, in their view, is composed of positive face and negative face. Negative face is the bare minimum politeness associated with interaction that happens between strangers: defined through *wants* by Brown and Levinson (1987: 62), negative face is "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded with others". Positive face, on the other hand, is "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some other" (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 62). The desire to be accepted and understood by others is highly linked with positive face. For example, compliments (e.g. "I like your hair!") give positive face to people by implying that the complimented person and/or feature of that person is good (desirable, admirable, stylish etc.).

Watts (2003) discusses Brown and Levinson's face at quite some length. Firstly, Watts points out that Asian scholars, and scholars from "collectivist" societies in general, have expressed the view that the concept is too focused on the individual, and fails to account for situations where face might be intertwined with social constraints (Watts, 2003: 102). Negative face, in such situations, is not necessarily a useful term, as the needs of the group face might override individual face wants. This criticism thus implies that Brown and Levinson's face is ideologically charged. Furthermore, the focus on the individual also downplays the fact that even in societies that are traditionally deemed individualistic there will exist situations or subcultures where the individual's face wants will be subordinate to those of the community. Watts also explains that the Brown and Levinsonian face assumes a stable personality which is constructed before the communication and which "consists of a stable core of values lodged somewhere in the individual" (Watts, 2003: 105). This individualistic

definition is in stark contrast with Goffman's considerably more socially oriented notion.

To remedy the issue of Western ideological influence, Bousfield writes that an interactant brings with them into an interaction a set of "expectations as to how we would like our face(s) to be constituted", but that the reality of the interaction then bestows some modified face upon the individual in question (Bousfield 2008: 39–40) . "Face expectations not matching reality may well result, amongst other things, in the communication, manipulation or management of impoliteness or aggression, linguistic or otherwise" (Bousfield, 2008: 40). Watts offers a similar idea in advocating a return to a more Goffmanian conception of face as "the positive social value that a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Watts, 2003: 124). These formulations (1) allow for a concept of face that has both socially and individually attributed elements; (2) imply the possibility that interactants have the ability to exercise power by not acting in accordance with an individual's expected face; and (3) acknowledge the fact that an individual's face can be very different in different contexts, and is negotiated and renegotiated in every interaction.

Bousfield (2008: 36) pays attention to the issue of dualistic dichotomy of Brown and Levinson's face, noting that impoliteness often incorporates aspects of both positive and negative face. A scalar relationship is proposed instead; no impoliteness strategy can be said to address either positive or negative face, since individual impoliteness acts may differ so much from the prototype as to render the categorization useless as a model for real interaction. This point of view was kept in mind at all stages of the present study, so as to remain grounded in the data and represent the phenomena faithfully.

Finally, in the context of computer-mediated communication, the effect of anonymity on face and communication has to be considered. As noted in section 2.2.1, anonymous environments appear to foster shorter, more multimodal posts. Hagman (2012: 98) even goes on to describe *4chan* communication as a "shouting match

between two representatives of two different political parties". Neurater-Kessels (2011), while analyzing have-your-say comment sections of online news services, similarly remarked that anonymous commenters have much less face-risk then the journalists whom they were criticizing. Thus, low face-risk to self appears to be connected with higher face-attacks towards others. Steam users in general have relatively little personal face-risk, since they act under an alias of their choosing and can make most of their profile information invisible to others. However, having an online nickname and profile, the users still have a distinct type of online face that builds on the history they have on the forum: the conversations, posts, style of writing and argumentation all play into the perception and ideas that communicators have about any single person or profile. Whether or not users attribute any importance to the maintenance of this online face is, of course, up to them. The online identity could, in addition, work as a mask behind which the users feel safer in engaging in certain types of communication; the findings of e.g. Upadhay (2010) and Zafeiriou (2003) support this suggestion.

In conclusion, face, although fundamentally social, resides neither in the individual nor in interaction, and in fact does not "reside" at all; rather, it is constituted and negotiated in interaction based on individual thoughts as well as expectations based on previous interactions – in other words, the current interaction is a precursor to future expectations and face claims. Face-threatening acts, then, call into question the face that another person claims for themselves: denying, challenging or imposing face claims and roles. But we have not yet defined impoliteness; this relationship between face-attack and impoliteness will be discussed in chapter 3.3. Before that, it is necessary to discuss the relationship between social practices and impoliteness.

3.2 Politic behavior: social practices and expectations as the foundation of (im)politeness

Watts (2003) uses the term *politic behaviour* to describe behavior that adheres to the expected norms of a situation. In interaction, participants have in their mind a set of examples and dispositions with which they construct an idea of appropriate behavior

in that interaction (Watts, 2003: 145), referring back to Bourdieu's term *habitus* in explaining how individuals can have any idea of appropriate behavior at all. *Linguistic politeness*, then, is behavior which "goes beyond the bounds of politic behaviour" and thus is open to interpretation as polite, although this says nothing about how the politeness will actually be interpreted (Watts, 2003: 161). In a similar vein, impoliteness is behavior that falls short of the expected norm of the situation, which can, just as with politeness, be interpreted positively or negatively.

Politic behavior as a term is related to, for example, Mills' (2003) idea that hypothesized norms, or the set of norms which each individual considers appropriate for the community of practice in question, form the basis of appropriate behavior; breaks from these hypothesized norms are seen to constitute impoliteness. Importantly, the ideas of communities of practice, as explained in chapter 2, and especially the related concept of shared repertoire, bear significant overlap with politic behavior. Both involve a sense of acting in an appropriate manner in terms of the expected norms of the context. Shared repertoire denotes the tools that are available to members of a specific community to negotiate meaning, and they are, in this sense, unique to the community of practice in question. Community-specific behaviors, however, constitute only a small subset of all behaviors that exist in that community: as was said, earlier, the borders of communities of practice are not clear-cut, and the contexts in which the community exists always (e.g. country, company, culture) carry with them a set of assumed practices. Therefore, I interpret politic behavior as roughly the way in which the these tools are and should (in the opinion of individual participants) be used in interaction within that community. The term politic behavior, then, holds a stronger sense of social obligation to act in a certain way. This idea of social obligation is held by individual members in forms which may, of course, differ radically but can be a significant source of conflict and thus impoliteness nonetheless.

Culpeper (2011: 25) explains that impoliteness can be a socially acceptable phenomenon, citing some youth cultures as examples of situations where preserving face requires the use of impoliteness. The politic behavior of any given community of

practice can involve the use of what researchers (e.g. Bousfield, Culpeper) have termed “impoliteness strategies”; they have become part for the community's shared repertoire. In other words, the linguistic structure used is not impolite or polite in and of itself, but rather by the interpretation that members of the community attribute to it (cf. Watts, 2003). As a result, any study on what constitutes impoliteness can only ever describe the phenomena that are impolite to the participants of the study in the specific context of communication. The issue that arises here is that expressions whose content seems impolite or face-threatening on the outside can mislead a researcher. Thus, it becomes increasingly difficult for a researcher to distinguish between impolite and neutral behavior. Shum and Lee's (2013: 71) findings shed some light on online communication: the messages of the members of two Hong Kong discussion forums “tended to be unmitigated but politic” (i.e. interviewed forum members judged them as politic).This roughly corresponds with my experience of communication on the Steam forum. As a further exploration of the issue of perceptions of impoliteness, the following section will handle the role of intentions, emotions and, in particular, offense, in constructing impoliteness.

3.3 Intentions, emotions, and offense

The relationship between face-threats and intentions is one that merits some elaboration. Culpeper (2011: 48-49) adopts the view that intention is a post-facto construct, meaning that a hearer will attribute, in accordance with the message he/she receives and the contextual factors of the situations, a specific set of intentions to the speaker committing to the utterance. Similarly, Mills (2003: 136) writes that “impoliteness cannot be said to be simply a question of the content or surface message of the utterance, but it is an assessment made on the basis of hypothesised intention.” This is in sharp contrast with Brown and Levinson (1987), whose production model of politeness assumes that a speaker's intentions can be known. Mills and Culpeper certainly have the upper hand in this discussion, for there is no way for a researcher to know for certain what the intentions and goals of an interactant are. Even if asked, the subjects might have reasons not to be honest, and I would argue that in the case of impoliteness most interviewees would, consciously or

unconsciously, attempt to frame themselves in the most positive light possible. Others might simply be unaware of or incapable to express their "true" intentions in the first place. It thus makes sense to consider the interpretations of the listener.

Culpeper (2011: 48-49) notes that hearer attributions of impoliteness can be observed in the hearer's immediate reaction to the utterance. Thus, the recognition of impoliteness relies heavily on observing the hearer. Indeed, Bousfield (2008: 72) writes that in situations where a hearer does not recognize the impolite intent, impoliteness "fails". However, as Culpeper (2011: 51) points out, serious offense can be taken even in the absence of speaker intention and hearer interpretation of impoliteness. Culpeper refers to Goffman (1967: 14) for the terms "incidental offence" and "accidental offence". The former is used to denote offense which has not been intended but which has also been necessary in order to achieve some goal, while the latter refers to situations where there is no impolite intent and offense is taken as a result of some misinterpretation of an utterance or its context (for example, interpreting a serious utterance as a joke and laughing as a response).

All of the above makes it clear that the aims and goals of this study need readjustment. The ways in which I as a researcher could recognize impoliteness had to be spelled out. Occasionally, the reactions of forum members to others gave enough context so as to locate and recognize impoliteness. However, on many occasions, such evidence was not readily available. Upadhay (2010), studying identity and impoliteness in reader responses to online news articles, discusses the issue, and resolves that "face-attacking linguistic behavior directed against an individual will be labeled as impolite behavior in this study on the assumption that the severity and bluntness of the attack would generally be regarded as negatively marked and inappropriate by American readers of online newspapers" (2010: 108–109). In other words, the analysis necessarily leans upon the researcher's personal experience firstly as a member of the cultural sphere, and secondly upon knowledge of the practices of the forum as well as online communication in general. The data is then reflected upon this background knowledge.

In order to reliably work in this manner, a more accurate and detailed description of impoliteness became necessary. I therefore took impoliteness to be roughly equivalent to face-attacks, i.e. face-threatening acts that are committed because of or in spite of the face-threatening aspect of the utterance. Accidental offense was not considered impoliteness. There are inherent problems involved in making these decisions and definitions. Even so, my choice allows for working with impoliteness flexibly. In order to better understand what impoliteness is and how it can be recognized, I have devoted the following chapter to the question of netiquette.

3.4 Netiquette: the official code of conduct as a pointer of impoliteness

As said above, interactions in online environments are directed in their part by the rules and guidelines, explicit and implicit, which have been set on the forum by, for example, the moderators. In the Steam users' forums, a post by a moderator (Steam Forums, 2008) explains, in a regular thread with disabled comments, general guidelines which extend to the domain that serves as the data for the present study. While the rules are certainly of great significance in the context of this study, it is not practical to examine the entirety of the rules in detail here. Instead, I will summarize the main points that are relevant to this study, and refer to the points left unmentioned explicitly when needed.

The first heading consists of a list of behaviors that are deemed improper. Clearly relevant to impoliteness acts are the prohibitions on flaming and insults, swearing, and on the practice of bypassing swear filters by substituting numbers or other symbols in place of some letter of a word. Posting personal information is forbidden as well. The second heading concerns disallowed topics of discussion: cheating, piracy, threats, racism, and topics "prone to huge arguments" are defined as off-limits, with piracy indicated as a topic whose discussion will result in a permanent ban. The third and fourth headings deal with moderating and reporting posts and users that break the rules. "Backseat moderating", which refers to non-moderators trying to enforce the forum rules, is prohibited, while using the "report post" button is promoted as the only legal means for regular users to participate in moderating

activities. The fifth and final heading concerns the satirically named “Lifetime Achievement Awards”: repeat offenders will receive bans to the forums. No numerical requirement for the Lifetime Achievement Award is given, so moderators seem to have significant power in this matter.

While on the surface the rules may seem to imply that linguistic impoliteness is assessed negatively in the forum, such ideas should not be accepted at face value. Sarcasm – or as Bousfield (2008: 118) describes it, mock politeness – usually involves no direct impoliteness acts, but rather has to be inferred from the style of the text – or, as often is the case, is misinterpreted. As paralinguistic markers are absent, it becomes even more difficult to unambiguously determine a speaker's intent as impolite, polite, or neutral. For example, Brown and Levinson (1978: 69) define off-record strategies of redressing face-threatening acts as having “more than one unambiguously attributable intention so that the actor cannot be held to have committed himself to one particular intent”. The same can no doubt be said of impoliteness.

Another implication of the guidelines is that moderators hold considerable power in the forum: for example, no directives as to what constitutes a topic which is ”prone to huge arguments” is given, implying that the decision is, in the end, up to the moderator. This obviously has an impact on the practices of the forum, but can also affect the data: as Neurater-Kessels (2011: 194) points out, moderator intervention by way of deleting comments can cause a situation whereby an impoliteness researcher cannot access the (potentially) most interesting data. Furthermore, most of the time it is impossible to know when and where moderators have exerted their power. However, this need not be a problem: the impoliteness acts that remain in the forum despite moderation become the focal point in the present paper. As a result of these observations, a slight readjustment and refinement of the original research question is in order: with blatant offences removed, how and with what methods do forum members attack each other’s face? It is at this point that we need to have a look at how researchers working with (im)politeness have typified and categorized impoliteness. The following section is devoted to their models.

3.5 Theorizing (im)politeness

The purpose of this section is to give insight as to the complexities involved in analyzing impoliteness, and to ultimately find and adopt a framework that will suit the needs of the present study. In order to reach this goal, I will present here models that were central to the development to my view of what impoliteness is, and how I can think of it in the very specific context of this study. The main works referred to here are Brown and Levinson (1987), Culpeper (2005 and 2011), and Bousfield (2008).

The work of Brown and Levinson was seminal in the field of politeness studies. While a study on politeness rather than impoliteness, it is nonetheless of vital importance for anyone wanting to understand the modern field. The model made extensive use of the concept of face, arguing that giving and preserving a communicative partner's face is central to both the success of the communication process and the preservation of one's own face (1987: 61). Brown and Levinson (1987:65-68) claim that some communicative acts have an intrinsic face-threatening aspect, and group examples of these according to (1) the kinds of face threatened by the act and (2) by difference in seriousness between the threat to the speaker's face versus the hearer's face. Drawing on samples from three languages, the end result of the model is a classification of redressive strategies that aim to mitigate face-threats that occur in interaction. The superstrategies are as follows, going from the least face-preserving to the most polite:

1. Do the FTA on record, baldly
2. Go on record with positive politeness strategies
3. Go on record with negative politeness strategies
4. Go off record
5. Don't do the FTA (Brown and Levinson, 1987; 69).

The individual is assumed to be capable of weighing the face-threat, and choosing an appropriate redressive strategy. The most face-threatening strategy is to go bald on-record, that is, to utter an FTA without using any redressive strategies. Commands and demands are examples of the bald on-record supersrategy (e.g. “Give me that!”). In options 2 and 3, the FTA is pronounced, but with measures to address either the positive (“You're so good with computers – could you help me with a problem I

have?") or negative ("I wouldn't want to bother you, but...") face of the hearer; of these, using negative politeness strategies is more formally "polite", while positive politeness is something that happens between people who know each other to some degree. Going off record, then, involves flouting a Gricean maxim, hoping that the hearer will make the correct inferral of what has been said. This strategy is, again, more polite than the previous strategies. Finally, not committing the FTA at all is said to cause the least face-damage, and is thus the safest option. (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 60). In this view, making implications and using indirect forms of language are always more polite than more direct ways of saying the same thing. In this view, impoliteness comprises (1) failure to choose an adequately redressive politeness strategy or (2) going intentionally bald on record.

Brown and Levinson has been criticized, reviewed and revised on several occasions. The ideological bias in the concept of face as an individual rather than social phenomenon is perhaps the most prevalent of these (Watts, 2003: 102). In addition, the concept of a Model Person, a rational communicator always who always considers the face interests of others from an objective point of view, and which serves as a starting point for the analysis, has been said to assume too much rationality of the average communicator. In fact, being a production model, it seems to involve a very large amount of thinking that must be done before each utterance (watts. 2003: 88), a slightly paranoid view of human interaction. Of course, in focusing on politeness, the researchers leave the question of impoliteness relatively unexplored.

Culpeper (2005) takes the Brown-Levinsonian politeness model, and creates a mirror image categorization for impoliteness. Impoliteness, thus, can take the form of:

1. Bald on record impoliteness: direct, unambiguously impolite utterances
2. Positive impoliteness: attacks on an interactant's positive face, the want to be approved of.
3. Negative impoliteness: attacking an interactant's negative face, freedom of action.
4. Off-record impoliteness: indirect attacks which can (in theory) be cancelled, but where one intention dominates others, given the context.
5. Withholding politeness: failing to or choosing not to utilize politeness strategies where such behavior is expected.

The end result is closer to a framework that allows for effective analysis of impoliteness. However, a number of key criticisms force us to delve slightly further. Firstly, as to the distinction between positive and negative face, Bousfield argues that

> "Most utterances will, even only secondarily, implicate both aspects of face on, or at, some level. Indeed, given that (a) face is always an issue in interaction, and (b) the systematic way in which 'positive' and 'negative' face strategies have already been found to regularly *combine* in interaction (see Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann 2003: 1560–1562; Harris 2001) then it would appear that the positive/negative face distinction becomes simply superfluous---." (Bousfield, 2008:94)

Thus the positive/negative face aspect appears to be an inaccurate criterion for classifying impoliteness. In addition, the use of only positive and negative face in the framework potentially implies that other types of face do not exist and may limit the researcher's view.

As a further criticism, Bousfield (2008: 154–155) points out that impoliteness strategies very rarely occur in isolation, that is, in a way that a single utterance or turn-at-talk could be unambiguously labeled as a representation of a single category of impoliteness. He coins a simple-complex dichotomy of impoliteness, arguing that earlier researchers have focused (mostly intentionally and consciously) on simple impoliteness in their models (ibid.). Impoliteness that occurs in real interactional situations is termed complex impoliteness; it comprises acts that habitually combine "simple" elements to create a desired effect in a given communicative space. The present paper is a study on complex impoliteness. The same dangers of presenting too simplistic a view of the phenomenon of course persist in any attempt of categorization. The use of grounded theory, however, allowed for accounting for the combinations, as the focus of the categories was not so much on the individual expressions themselves, but on what function they serve in the particular context. Furthermore, from the very start I allowed for each entry to fall in several categories, and tried to point out connections between the categories.

Bousfield's solution to the problem with positive/negative face distinction is to simplify the model down to two general categories: on record and off-record impoliteness. On record impoliteness involves

> "The use of strategies designed to *explicitly* (a) attack the face of an interactant, (b) construct the face of an interactant in a non-harmonious or outright conflictive way, (c) deny the expected face wants, needs, or rights of the interactant, or some combination thereof. The attack is made in an unambiguous way given the context in which it occurs." (Bousfield, 2008: 95).

The off record category, on the other hand, includes strategies which threaten an interactant's face indirectly and in a way which allows for denying the face-attack; the face-threatening intention is, however, often clear to the participants. This category subsumes (a) sarcasm, or the use of politeness strategies to message impolite intent, and (b) withholding politeness, or the absence of politeness strategies where the context is perceived (by the participants) as requiring such redressive action. (Bousfield, 2008: 95).

The major advantage of Bousfield's model for impoliteness is that it allows us to ignore problems related to aspects of face, which, while interesting, are not at the core of the present paper. On the other hand, it still leaves room for face distinctions if they seem necessary. The model thus allows the researcher free to make and record observations on the terms of the data rather than the model. The issue of having to force entries in strictly defined categories is greatly alleviated as well.

Of course, simplicity is no guarantee of functionality, and indeed one should remember that even with a simple two-way categorization ambiguities can occur. Bousfield explicitly states that the model should not be seen as guaranteeing exclusivity of the categories, although he does argue that "they are *de facto* mutually exclusive as with each FTA, on- and off-record utterances are *contextually dictated*" (2008: 96). To word it differently, certain categories of impoliteness will have fuzzy edges: and two entries that on the surface look similar can fall in separate categories, if the context is sufficiently different.

To give some insight as to what we may expect, Culpeper (2011) makes a useful division of impoliteness into formulaic and non-formulaic impoliteness. Culpeper describes formulaic impoliteness as well-known expressions whose impoliteness

value is seen to span several contexts (2011: 135–139), and lists insults, pointed criticisms and complaints, unpalatable questions/presuppositions, condescensions, message enforcers, dismissals, silencers, threats, and negative expressives (such as curses and ill-wishes). He also notes that the impoliteness effect of an utterance can be exacerbated by certain means, such as prosody, modifiers, and so on. The significance of this is that while internet communication is mainly textual, many elements of spoken communication can be expressed with multimodal tools or by using CMC cues. An overview of multimodality and CMC cues was given in section 2.2.2.

Non-formulaic, or implicational impoliteness comprises expressions that are interpreted as impolite in a given context, and where no impoliteness formulae are used (Culpeper 2011: 155). Implicational impoliteness can be form-driven, convention-driven or context-driven. Form-driven impoliteness refers too phenomena such as innuendoes and snide remarks, and these rely on prosody to deliver the correct interpretation. Convention-driven impoliteness functions on the basis of mismatches between the utterance and its surrounding utterances or the environment. These cases utilize a conventional politeness formula to mark the mismatch and therefore the impoliteness event. Context-driven impoliteness relies on the context to deliver the impoliteness, and uses no conventionalized politeness formulae to mark the impoliteness. The relationship between formulaic and non-formulaic impoliteness is scalar, with some elements being classified as semi-formulaic.

At this point we have a fairly good idea of what we will be facing in the data. Bousfield's model is the anchor from which this study probes into the communicative practices. The significance of Culpeper (2011) is relatively invisible to the reader: I used his terminology as a fallback when my own capacity to process the entries was not enough. Furthermore, the formulaic-non-formulaic divide touches quite closely on Bousfield's on and off-record categories which helped in the analysis. Even so, I strived to not rely too heavily on Culpeper's rather fine-tuned and

elaborate system, so as to ensure that the results of the present paper be as true to life as possible.

To sum up this section and to connect it to the previous sections, impoliteness in this study refers to face-attacks that are committed intentionally or in spite of a known impolite interpretation that accompanies a certain message. Impolite acts come in two main flavors: those committed in ways that are directly associated with impoliteness by convention, and those that require making inferences and interpreting the message in terms of its context. Impoliteness in real life is complex, and many impolite utterances cannot be unilaterally said to be of any single type of impoliteness; but often they can, and in any case the many elements which make up the utterance can be named and labelled. These points established, it is time to turn our attention towards research methodology.

4. METHODOLOGY AND SETUP OF THE STUDY

Grounded theory is a research method which aims to create theory that has as its base a set of empirical data. The origins of the grounded theory method lie in the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967). A qualitative method of research, it proceeds from the particular to the general, from single objects to concepts, with the goal of creating functional theory for the phenomenon under study. As Strauss and Corbin put it:

> "A researcher does not begin a project with a preconceived theory in mind - - -. Rather, the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data" (1998: 12).

Grounded theory research is an iterative process in which new findings are compared to earlier findings, and the data is constantly evaluated and re-evaluated. In this chapter, I will present the basics of grounded theory. In addition, I will demonstrate its relevance to the present paper, as well as explain how the method will be used with the current data.

4.1. Basic elements of the Grounded Theory Method

Oktay (2012: 15–17) defines four key components of grounded theory, those being theoretical sensitivity, constant comparison, theoretical sampling, and theoretical saturation. We will now examine these four components with respect to their application in this study, after which some attention will be given to how the data will be coded in the analysis.

Firstly, theoretical sensitivity refers to the ability of the researcher to see past the object under study, and to recognize its features in ways which allow for grouping it together with other objects which display similar characteristics. Although the grounded theory approach of this study necessitates that we not grasp onto some well-defined previous results, it is nonetheless necessary to study earlier findings in order to "stimulate out thinking about properties and dimensions that we can then

use to examine the data in front of us" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 44). There is certainly a risk of bias here; a researcher who is unaware of the ramifications of reading earlier works too closely could risk being led astray by them, possibly obscuring any original findings. Explicitly recognizing this possibility is the only way to try to balance the need to, on the one hand, have enough expertise in the area, and on the other, to have an open mind. Another point to consider here is that as the aim of the study is interpretation, and the process of interpreting is carried out by a human, the results of the study will necessarily be to at least some extent influenced by the thoughts, ideas, and knowledge of the researcher (e.g. Corbin and Strauss, 1998: 43). Again, awareness of this is crucial to minimizing this influence, and with a rigid, systematic approach, the results will be such that a similar study conducted under the same conditions will yield similar (but not necessarily identical) observations.

Secondly, the term "constant comparison" is used to denote a process by which each object or case is compared to other objects or cases, to determine the ways in which the case in question differs from or resembles other cases. With enough samples to compare, the researcher begins to see and develop concepts (Oktay, 2012: 16), which are again compared against further samples and concepts. Strauss and Corbin (1998: 43) write that comparing incidents to others is vital in order to make objective observations that are grounded in the data. Holton (2007: 278) describes constant comparison as having three types: the objects are first compared each other; then, emerging concepts are compared against additional objects, to validate, disprove, and elaborate on the findings thus far and see what types of data should be selected for further analysis; and finally, concepts are compared to each other to determine their relationships. Using constant comparison at every stage of the research, a conceptual framework begins to emerge.

The third component in grounded theory is theoretical sampling. The ways in which the data is sampled change according to the changes that happen in the theory, with the objective of producing theory that can be applied to other similar situations; "the aim --- is a sample that allows thorough exploration of the relevant concepts" (Oktay,

2012: 17). In other words, the sampling process must not be predetermined; the details and representativeness of the target population are secondary to the objective of exploring and formulating concepts, and data gathering is directed primarily by the need to gather data that is as ”rich” as possible. Morse (2007: 230) points out that researcher experience is vital in locating good data. As this paper is the first of its kind by the researcher, it is clear that the lack of experience can be an issue. As a result I made sure to take the time to seriously consider possible datasets, tapping into my personal experience as a user on internet forums, and reflecting upon the results of previous studies.

As Oktay (2012: 38-39) notes, constant comparison and theoretical sampling are highly interrelated. Constant comparison can and should be used to determine which data could be useful to the study, as the ideal data has as much variation as possible. Again, theoretical sensitivity is of importance, as it will allow the researcher to make a better informed judgment on the type of data that they should look for. With regard to the present paper, the threads that were picked for analysis were specifically chosen due to their high impoliteness content; they were what at the time seemed to be the most fruitful target. In addition, the data collection process was two-staged: during the initial stage, only one long thread was chosen for analysis, and the two shorter threads were selected later on as it became clear that more data was needed. The extra data was selected for analysis on the basis that they contained impoliteness acts that would provide useful for the analysis. In the end, prolonged exchanges of impolite interaction are not the primary mode of communication in the forum; as such, selecting the data was also directed by the frequency at which such outbreaks occurred.

Finally, theoretical saturation refers to the point in the study at which the data offers no further objects of interest. Holton (2007: 265) also uses the term *interchangeability of indicators*, which, as far as I can observe, has little semantic difference from theoretical saturation. What is implied by the definitions is that the amount of data needed to complete the study cannot be known beforehand. Instead, new data is gathered and analyzed for as long as necessary to achieve a point where the theory is saturated,

and the law of diminishing returns takes over. Of course, in the very real context of this paper, time limitations exist which have the potential to pull the analysis to a halt before theoretical saturation is reached. On the other hand, there is a possibility that theoretical saturation is reached in a very early stage, and the question of what to do in that case is still open. One final issue is that it might not be possible to know when theoretical saturation has been reached. Holton (2007: 281) simply states that ”one stops when one no longer needs to continue”. Thus in the end it is the researcher's responsibility to decide according to their best judgment whether the analysis should be ended or not. There is certainly room for error here, but using a systematic approach and rigidly planned theoretical sampling the threat will be small.

4.2 Coding

Coding the data is a key part of grounded theory. As the aim of grounded theory is to create new theory based on data, the way in which the data is coded evolves with the study. The first, tentative steps are made with open coding: objects are given labels according to what the objects express (Oktay, 2012: 55). In the first stages of coding, it is important to be meticulously obedient to the data itself, and use labels which directly reflect the message of the object. It must be kept in mind that the researcher cannot know how and where the theory will evolve, and thus using as detailed and numerous labels as possible is recommended (Oktay, 2012: 56). Open coding is a fairly laborious process, as every bit of information in an object should be recorded. Holton (2007: 275) writes that line-by-line open coding forces the researcher to account for every piece of information in the object of analysis, thereby minimizing the chance that a central category be lost. Open coding, then, is an especially important part of the analysis. The decisions made at this stage will resonate throughout the whole study, and thus careful attention must be paid to the process. As an important counterpoint, Kelle (2007: 196-167) warns that line-by-line coding can essentially lead to paralysis by analysis if the researcher refuses to conceptualize the codes and to use the findings to help with future cases. Thus, one must be conscious of the balance between the analysis and the resources available for it.

Coding evolves from the particular to the general. At first, a post might be given what are called substantive codes (Oktay, 2012: 54), referring to labels that have a direct basis in the studied object. The label can be a word in the object, called an ”in vivo” code, or it can be a word that best describes the immediate action or expression. Theoretical codes, on the other hand, are labels that are given to objects that give put the object in a more general category. Here, Oktay (2012: 55) warns that a researcher's previous theoretical knowledge can interfere with the labelling process. The concept of clinical incapacity (Oktay, 2012: 57) is evoked to refer to this phenomenon. The suggested solution is to try to create theoretical labels that are as close to the data as possible, and do not veer towards general categorization too early.

Once the amount of coded data is growing, the codes used will begin to display some kind of patterns. Some codes will have properties according to which they can be grouped together. From these groupings, concepts and categories will begin to arise. Oktay (2011: 60) notes that it is not always clear whether something constitutes a code, concept or category, but that the centralness of that concept to the theory will, in the end, determine its position in the hierarchy. The general pattern is that codes are labels given to individual objects and their content, while concepts are higher terms that express the basic function or meaning of the codes which are attributed to it. Concepts, then, will be grouped into even more general categories, whose number should be relatively low.

Axial coding is a term that refers to a process that takes place somewhat later in the data analysis process, and involves three components. These components, according to Oktay (2012:74), are ”(1) identifying the variety of conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences associated with a category; (2) relating a category to its subcategories; and (3) looking for clues in the data about how major categories might relate to each other”. In other words, the focus of the analysis shifts from the properties of individual objects to the emerging concepts and categories. Analyzing individual objects does not end at this point, of course, as the aim of grounded theory is to reach theoretical saturation through a cyclical process. Axial coding has great value in organizing the still somewhat raw open-coded data into more readily

processable packages, and is thus an important middle-step on the way to building theory.

The research will next enter the selective coding phase. At this point, the theory is developed even further by establishing a small set of core categories which grow to cover the observed phenomena. The core then becomes the center of the study, and the coding of other categories begins to reflect the way they are (or are not) connected to the core categories. Theoretical sampling is needed as the decision on what new data to include in the study is increasingly directed by the need to fill the gaps of the core categories. (Oktay, 2012: 81–82). Open and axial coding is at this point done mostly only to data which belongs to categories and concepts not covered by the core category. Once this process is drawing to a close, Oktay (2012: 84) suggests that the researcher do one final round of data gathering and analysis, with the goal of finding cases that do not fit so neatly in the framework that has been formed. That is to say, the researcher aims to disprove parts of the theory so as to find out what its limitations are. This, in turn, helps in setting clear-cut limits to the theory's applicability, as well as to possibly find ways to develop the theory to accommodate the seemingly divergent cases. This process is known as negative case analysis (Oktay, 2012: 84-85).

4.3 Memos

Throughout the analysis, the researcher must keep memos so that more general observations can be recorded and retained for later confirmation or refutation (Holton, 2007: 281). Memoing is a process that complements coding and evolves along with the emerging theory. This is one part of the study that the reader will not likely see, but it is necessary to stress that coding alone is not sufficient to write up a paper. Memoing acts as a bridge between the data and coding on the one hand and the final paper on the other, forcing the researcher to consider what the codes and patterns actually mean, and how they might contribute to the overall picture that the researcher sees at the specific moment. They also serve as a sort of historical record of the evolution of the theory, allowing for a more detailed post-analysis description of

the process; when sorted, they “become the outline for presentation of the theory's publication” (Holton, 2007: 284). Memos go through a process of sorting that is rather similar to that of coding, and as the data begins to yield results in the form of theory, so the memos evolve to condense the theory on the one hand and to avoid making premature conclusions on the other.

In conclusion, Grounded Theory is a method that relies upon constant re-evaluation of the results, and aims at producing a realistic image of the phenomena that are being sought in the data. A few crucial points need restatement a this point. Firstly, the dataset being studied is not randomized, but instead selected so as to gain as much data as possible that reflects the phenomena. Second, the size of the dataset will be somewhat limited, since the analysis requires re-evaluation of earlier analysis and data samples and the time and resources of the research are limited. Finally, the method requires that the researcher be able to balance the need for knowledge of the field and phenomena with the need to retain an unbiased and “fresh” look when analyzing the data.

5. DATA AND ANALYSIS

This chapter is dedicated to the presentation of the data and results. In the first section, I will present some general points about the analysis, as well as an overview of how the analysis proceeded. Section 5.2 is the core of this chapter, where the impoliteness strategies will be presented in detail. Finally, section 5.3 concerns phenomena that could not be handled within the framework of the categorization, but nonetheless require detailed inspection: sarcasm, taboo words, and multimodality.

5.1 Overview of the process

The data was gathered in spring 2015, and the analysis was conducted during summer and fall 2015. As presented above, the analysis drew heavily from Bousfield's work. I attempted to identify (potential) impoliteness events as either on- or off record, and label each entry with a very literal code. In retrospect, this was the most difficult part of the analysis, and highlighted the idea that impoliteness acts on many levels.

The open coding process took a relatively long time; there was difficulty in deciding upon exactly what elements were the predominant in a given impoliteness instance. With time and experience, the process became easier and quicker, and the labels given to each instance began to exhibit discernible patterns.

After open coding, I established preliminary classifications using the labels I had given to identified instances of (possible) impoliteness. At this point, the main goal was to get all of the instances in a single place, with relatively little regard for the categories themselves. Even at this early stage, the categories clearly exhibited behaviors that differed – although not radically – from Bousfield's realizations of impoliteness.

I will make use of examples to illustrate each category. The purpose of the examples

is to express in the most clear manner possible the idea behind the categorization; therefore, the examples were chosen so as to (1) provide the most illustrative representation of the category; and to (2) draw attention to significant deviations from or subgroups of that ideal. Naturally there are limitations: most entries fell into a handful of categories, leaving others relatively small and possibly unexplored. In addition, the borders between the categories are fuzzy and unclear, and most entries so complex that "purity" is an obviously unattainable state. Even so, the best examples are usually enough.

As was the case with Bousfield's data, the categories presented below are subject to some considerations. Firstly, not all categories are equal; some of them are broad, fuzzy or focus on the content of the message, while others are more narrowly defined, and act on a level that is closer to grammatical aspects of language. This heterogeneity of categories is purely a practical matter: impoliteness appears to function on different levels of discourse. Secondly, partially as a result of the first point, there is overlap in the categorization. Real-life impoliteness acts are almost always combinations and blends of different tactics, rather than different tactics used in separation. Owing to this, some entries have found a place several categories.

5.2 Realizations of impoliteness

In this section, I will present the categories that formed during my analysis, and provide examples of each category to illustrate them. There are ten categories, many of which have internal groupings. These subcategories, as they are referred to in this study, are formed by entries that share similar traits, but whose traits are not salient enough to warrant a category of their own. The ten categories are as follows:

1. Express disinterest
2. Disagree
3. Exclude
4. Question
5. Minimize the issue
6. Blame
7. Judge

8. Insult
9. Threaten
10. Interrupt

When necessary, I have italicized relevant sections of examples to highlight those details that have led to their classification in that specific category. (---) is used to indicate that a post does not begin or end where the extract begins or ends. --- means that the sentence continues, and is used where a part of a sentence has been cut due to irrelevancy to the topic at hand. In addition, when I make references to categories in the text, I have chosen to capitalize the name of the category so as to be clear of my intention to refer to the category instead of the general phenomenon. Thus the words Judge and Disagree refer to the categories, while judge and disagree do not.

Self and *writer* are used exclusively to refer to the forum member who has posted the text that has warranted the categorization. In reference to the person being addressed or responded to, I use the words *other, reader* and *addressee*, as well as their plural forms. There is no special meaning as to which word is used; I use then interchangeably.

5.2.1 Express disinterest

The first category in this listing focuses on entries that express a very singular idea: "I do not care". At the ideal level, expressing a lack of interest can cause face-damage as such expressions fail to attend to the other's face wants or face expectations. In Bousfield's terms, they are therefore on-record face-attacks. In reality, entries in this category of course carry or accompany other face-attacks.

(1) It's not my responsibility to make sure no one uses insults, and *I frankly don't give a damn*.

In (1), the writer does three things: summarizes their view of what the discussion is about; denies responsibility for fixing it; and finally states that the matter is in fact of no interest to them. While the first clause potentially also carries a face-attack, the last half of the statement is, of course, of the greatest interest to us. The writer uses what

appears to be a formulaic expression, as well as a reference to the film *Gone With the Wind*. It is impossible to know whether this half-citation was made in full consciousness of its origins, and similarly the effects of whether or not the reader will recognize it and how it will be interpreted in terms of impoliteness value is difficult to assess. Even so, the use of the intensifying taboo word *damn* is likely to exacerbate the impoliteness effect.

This category appears to have some overlap with the category 6.2.2 Disagree, as well as 6.2.5 Minimize the issue. For example:

> (2) (W1, quoted) moral of history: Guns with same/similar caliber should not be too distant in damage.
>
> (W2) its cs and not a simulation
> no one cares about real gun calibers or prices. (---)

Here, W2 quotes a piece of W1's post and snubs W1 in suggesting that CS:GO, being mainly an entertainment platform, has other goals than realism, and that therefore the relationship between real-world caliber and in-game damage is not an issue that players worry, our should worry about. By opting for the use of "no one cares", W2 appears to be framing W1 as worried about an issue which nobody, at least not anyone held to be of significance by W2, is interested in. Among all this, W2 of course implies that they themselves do not care.

As said at the start of this section, the category is centered on a very finely defined idea, and as such the entries did not form any subcategorizations. Eight entries in total qualified for this category. The small number came as somewhat of a surprise. However, it is possible that since the aim is to communicate opinions and debate subjects, forum members by default are interested – otherwise they would be unlikely to post at all. Simply put, disinterest is not often a very meaningful contribution in conversation. This fact further supports the idea that expressing disinterest will be interpreted as impolite.

5.2.2 Disagree

Disagreement is a difficult topic to analyze reliably. Any act of expressing a differing opinion can potentially be interpreted as disagreement, and possibly also as impolite. This category, however, comprises those acts of disagreement that clearly aim to express their disagreement as strongly and forcefully as possible, with little to no intent to redress. Generally speaking, "active disagreement" is a direct on-record face-attack, potentially infused with the off-record element of withholding politeness. The data presents three main types of disagreement, which can roughly be summarized as exclamations, contradictions and exaggerations.

Exclamative disagreement is the expression of a negative emotive reaction to the earlier proposal. In these cases, the writer expresses their disagreement through displays of strong emotions and/or attitudes such as disbelief, disgust, sadness, anger or tiredness; as such, intensifiers and taboo words appear from time to time. A very common tactic is to frame the proposal as dumb, illogical or ridiculous.

(3) What nonsense! (---).

(4) (W1, quoted) It's sad that you enjoy watching eco rounds consisting of light buying OP pistols combined with playing like overly aggressive mongoloids rather than the well thought out and finessed eco's of the past. It was a lot prettier to watch.

(W2) *We must be talking about different games*. Pretty eco rounds happened once in a blue moon. (---)

Extract (3) is a fairly straightforward expression of incredulity towards a proposition, attacking the other's face directly with a relatively formulaic expression. As such a simple element, it serves as a stereotype for this category.

Extract (4) demonstrates a sarcastic, semi-formulaic expression as a method of attack. The sarcasm flows from the fact that the forum is dedicated to discussion about a specific video game, and therefore there is no confusion about this. In addition to the sarcasm, the face damage potentially lies in the tension between W1's aggression on the one hand, and W2's cool response on the other. Although *We must be talking about different games* certainly qualifies as an exclamation and perhaps an emotional response, the coolness nonetheless works as an effective counter-strategy. Thus, there

is potential for additional face-damage in this counterstrategy; I will deliberate counterstrategies LATER). Returning to the matter at hand, the "attack" of the extract is derived from the implication that the writer's view is the correct view, and differences in point of view appear to imply error or otherwise bad judgment. On the other hand, (3) is a relatively formulaic expression, and these considerations may thus be completely irrelevant – participants simply know from experience that this formula is impolite, and need not make additional inferencing.

Simpler, formulaic expressions achieve the same effect very succinctly:

(5) Oh please. (---).

Exclamations are usually at the head of a post or a substructure of a post, as they express the (assumed, but also possibly fake) first reactions of the writer; they are almost always followed by an explication of why they disagree with the previous statement.

The second type, contradictions, is formed by entries that assert the opposite or of what an earlier writer has expressed, or otherwise contradicts the factuality of a proposition. Thus in contrast to exclamations, which are mainly emotive, this subcategory revolves around claims that negotiate, dispute and assert views on how reality should be interpreted.

(6) (---) *There is no "hate speech"*, there is either free speech, or no free speech. (---)

(7) *This is not how this works*.
You lie. Enjoy your ban.

(8) *But yes, it can,* that was my point all along. You can mute that person, and then, magic (snort snort), their voice ceases to exist for your ears' pleasure.

Note how the words "yes" and "no" appear in the examples; this is a key feature in these entries. In (6), the writer bluntly says "this is not a real phenomenon", and continues to lay out the options that correspond to their view of how the reality of the situation is constructed. By using simplistic terms, the writer attempts to force the other to choose between the two states, an obvious attack on the other's face

expectations. (7) is very similar in style, essentially saying *what you say is not true*. This short post expresses a strong Disagreement and follows up with an Accusation (*You lie.*), combined with a Threat (*Enjoy your ban.*). Together with the official-sounding and minimalist mode of expression – period-only punctuation, Standard English capitalization, minimal use of words – the writer appears to be making use of the withholding of politeness so as to create a strong face-attack. In (8), the writer disagrees to the positive, making use of a discourse marker – *but* – to begin their turn-at-talk and mark the disagreement, and perhaps to hint that the other really should have seen the writer's point themselves. Note the use of sarcasm in the explanation that follows; the writer appears to have no intention to behave in what could be called a "civil" manner, opting to ridicule the other instead.

At times, discussions entered a series of yes-no arguments, possibly signifying a stalemate. Interestingly, these entries did not contain taboo words, which is in stark contrast with the exclamative forms of disagreement above. In addition, their grammar and punctuation closely resemble Standard English.

The third and final way to express disagreement is to take the other person's assumed opinion and express it in a way that attempts to bring forth the presumed absurdities of the idea; hence the summarizing title *exaggeration*. These entries differ somewhat from the two subcategories presented above, but the core concept appears to be the same: The writer does not accept the proposal set forth by other forum members.

(9) "human empathy blahblah" It's the Internet, get that in your thick skull.

In (9), the writer begins by summarizing their view of what the earlier commenter has said. The exact meaning of the part within quotation marks is not clear – for example, they could be saying that the they have heard the same arguments before and are tired of hearing them – but it is clear, especially when contrasted with the explanation and insult that finish the statement, that the writer is in direct disagreement. Looking at Bousfield (2008), I see this substrategy as a tool whose primary purpose is non-harmonious representation of the other. Consider (10):

(10) Freedom of speech, blahblahblah, you're free to do whatever you want as long as we allow it am I right?

Here, the writer takes this tactic slightly further. The basic pattern is the same, but the writer prolongs the face-attack into a complete sentence. Noteworthy differences from (9) are the lack of quotation marks, and the use of a marker (*am I right?*) to indicate and/or stress the fact that the statement should be interpreted as sarcasm. In fact, the use of *am I right?* and its derivatives appears to be a hallmark of this subcategory. The reason for this is, perhaps, that forum members are aware of Poe's Law (See section 2.2.1) and thus take precautionary measures to ensure that the intended meaning is captured by the reader. Alternatively, and possibly in conjunction with the previous point, the writers simply wish to underline their intent so as to be as impolite as possible. Finally, the prevalence of the marker could also indicate towards an established practice in online communication – it is simply something that one does in such a situation, and as such does not necessarily constitute a (fully) conscious choice.

Of the three subtypes, Exclamations and Rejections made large but equal parts, with Exaggerations making up a fourth. All in all, this category was very large. This is not very surprising, given the conflict oriented nature of the environment. Structurally, these entries tended to act as the "head" of the post; that is, they often appeared as the first element in that post. Again, this is not an unexpected result, considering how reactionary these expressions are. The writer first expresses their disagreement, and then proceeds to explain the reasons behind their thinking.

5.2.3 Exclude

A key element in impoliteness is the creation and propagation of ideas related to in-group membership. Such ideas are strongly related to face wants and expectations. The data revealed three main types of elements that are used to mold and represent group memberships: speaking past a person, imposing group memberships on others, and disassociating the self from the other. I will now present these three subtypes, which can roughly be summarized as *they, you* and *I*.

Firstly, it is common practice in the forum to communicate in a manner that does not directly address any single person. There is nothing inherently impolite in this; rather, it is a natural consequence of a situation where many people gather to communicate. When a specific person is addressed, their username will be used, or their previous post(s) cited. A writer can, however, speak of another forum member in the third person (hence *they*), while the addressee remains the indefinite "forum". This can be used to implicitly or explicitly deliver face-attacks at some groups or individuals. Naturally, every post in a way "addresses the forum" in that the whole forum can read that post, and forum members are very much aware of this.

> (11) He says he was Gold Nova, now he says he is stuck in silver, not because of his own inability to perform, but because he only plays with trolls. (the enemy team should have an equal amount of trolls as well, but I dunno...)

In the above example, the writer attempts to discredit another person's account about having fallen in a lower skill group due to trolls (in this context, players who do not play seriously and/or disable the team with useless communication) and griefers (players who intentionally hamper their team's performance). The writer presents their interpretation of the other's story to the forum, addressing the other in the third person. This resembles the prosecution of a public court case, or a political speech, or even gossip; by summarizing the other person's narrative, the writer attracts attention to perceived weaknesses, without being overly explicit about them. The final hesitation (*but I dunno...*) is an insincere expression of insecurity; in other words, mock politeness that, on the surface, allows the reader come to their own conclusions, while in reality it steers the reader to infer the writer's conclusion on the matter. Other writers express this more directly:

> (12) I think the MG2 to DMG ranks have even more fun. *I* have more fun playing at those ranks, even though most of my best CS friends are novas. We all used to be MGs but now we are all novas.
>
> *According to* [nickname], *this should not be possible. But he knows nothing, obviously.*

In (12), the writer is expressing their experience as someone who plays the game and has noticed a drop in their skill group. Responding to the post of another forum member, the writer singles out a third forum member, and presents their interpretation of this member's opinion. The writer then proceeds to dismiss the

forum member's opinion by saying that the member has no knowledge on the issue. The dismissal is underlined by the use of the word *obviously*, which seems to be used here to state that the falsity of the statement can be seen in the evidence that the writer has provided here. The writer presents their narrative as a tangible, real-life piece of counter-evidence.

Several types of face-damage can occur. Initially, the most obvious impoliteness value lies in the insults that these turns-at-talk, just as the examples, above, carry. The third person can rarely – and did not do so in the data – serve as an impoliteness act in itself. The use of the third person gains its offensive value from the microenvironment, that is, the very near context. (Such is the case with all impoliteness, of course, but this point appears especially relevant here). The second layer is formed by the process whereby the writer, in addressing the forum, positions the self as part the in-group, excluding the person being referred to – a severe step on the face wants and/or needs of the individual. In addition, the rhythmic arrangement of the sentences is a possible intensifying factor as well: the first sentence, framed in a relatively mild and neutral manner, is followed by an abrupt "slap". This is a formula that appeared in most of the cases in this category.

The core idea of the second subcategory is the imposition of a particular group membership or role on another interactant, in most cases using the second person (*you*):

> (13) (---) You're just part of the group of people who try and fix things when it's clearly impossible. You're the only ones worried about the effect of the language on people.

Example (13) exhibits many key elements of this subcategory. Firstly, the writer uses the second person to directly point at the person, and gives a loose group definition to the other person. Note the negative assessment given to this newly created grouping: its members are stubbornly and blindly fighting against what the writer perceives as hard, unchangeable facts. The second part of the entry exacerbates this grouping, underlining the writer's apparent perception that (1) the issue is only interesting to one group in the larger community, (2) that the one group is small and

insignificant ("You are the *only ones*"), and that (3) as a result of the two earlier points, the issue is not really worth talking about in the first place.

The third and final subcategory, summarized as *I*, concerns disassociating the self with the other. The disassociation can be with the group to which the other is seen to belong, but can also point towards a feature or quality of the other person which the person expressing the disassociation sees as undesirable.

(14) You guys are the only ones who are "stuck" *I can goto silver and go back to AK easily solo*.

In extract (14), the writer first commits the act of grouping the other, a face-attack of the second type, and proceeds to imply a difference between themselves and the group that has been asserted. (14) is a particularly useful example as it displays in a simple succession the fact that disassociation can only take place if there is something to disassociate the self with. In other words, while the second subcategory creates and/or forces a grouping on another person and therefore only indirectly refers to earlier discussion, the third type needs a direct referent to pre-exist the disassociation. I hypothesize that similar to extract (14), expressions that would fall in this third subtype frequently appear in combination with the second subtype. Alternatively, the third subtype could be considered an extension of the second, or its "flip side": any grouping of the other can be seen also a way of placing oneself outside of the other's group. The data as it stands is not large enough to draw far-reaching conclusions on this, however.

Group memberships and identities are a vital part of human life and worldview. Thus it is no surprise that manipulating memberships can be a powerful tool in impoliteness. In a large part, the categories *Judge* and, in especial, *Insult*, seem to have some overlap with this category. Judgments, and insults in specific, make use of group memberships. Example (10) exhibits an entry in which potential Judgment co-occurs with an Exclusion. (15), below, displays a borderline insult that found its place in the *you* category:

(15) u r one of those noobs who think they are better than everyone else. (---)

5.2.4 Question

The category *Question* comprises entries that attempt to undermine the reliability or credibility of the other by posing witty or aggressive questions. Purely rhetorical questions populate this class side by side with genuine but in some manner disruptive questions. To clarify, this category is not about questions in the noun definition, but about questioning as a verb; naturally, most entries in this category are questions in the grammatical sense as well. Questions fall into roughly three types, whose relationships are, again, scalar.

Questions that imply face-attacks appear to have two roughly defined types. Entries of the first type appear, at least on the surface, to be interested in the topic. They question the implications of a proposal set forth in an earlier post.

(16) So because I was a nova 4 / AK last year, I should be SEM now?

(17) Are you implying that the difference between LEM+ ranks (or so) and lower is all tactics and very little about reflexes?

Or simply:

(18) So? (---)

Both (16) and (17) seek to question the logic of a previous proposition through interpreting the proposal and exploring the implications of that interpretation. This has obvious face-damaging potential: it is an on-record attack on the earlier person. (17) is very similar to (16), but with an added layer of complexity. The primary element is the same, but the use of the words "all" and "very little" seems to serve to intensify the impoliteness: using them is an attempt to purposefully exaggerate the other's view (remember Bousfield: on-record, type 2: construct the face in non-harmonious/conflictive manner). In addition, the decision to use "Are you implying" has a potentially accusative tone, at least in comparison to alternative expressions (e.g. "Do you mean that…"). As a result, (17) appears to be more readily identifiable as impoliteness even when removed from its context, while one could more easily imagine non-conflictive purposes for (16).

The second type consists of entries that have a tendency to ask for a reason for some line of thinking and behavior, often combined with a strong emotional response. Again, the questions carry or imply other forms of face-attack, but in these cases, the face-attacks appear to be directed towards a person's behavior, rather than an argument, as was the case with inquisitive questions. The question often begins with the word "why".

> (19) These are REAL PEOPLE! So why are you acting like they're not? Why are you role playing that on the internet people don't have feelings you can hurt?

(19) exemplifies this subcategory quite well. Of particular note here is the overlap with category *Accuse* (section 5.2.6): with the line of questioning, the writer simultaneously accuses the other for the behavior mentioned in the post. As such, it might be that these entries are not acts committed for the sake of actually receiving answers, but instead exist for more rhetorical purposes. Certainty, however, is far away on this matter.

As with many other categories, questions can be put one after another to produce a cumulative impoliteness effect; the entry below is one example.

> (20) They could instead fix 2nd and 3rd round by "re-evaluating a lot of different things"?
> What exactly do you mean by "re-evaluate a lot of different things"?
> How precisely should they go about "re-evaluating a lot of different things", and what difference will it make to the game?

In (20) the writer uses repetition to their benefit in several levels: four successive questions, three of which cite the words of an earlier writer, two of which include an intensifying adverb ("exactly", "precisely"). The addressee is being pummeled with a series of questions akin to an interrogation, and the impact is likely that of increased aggression as well as continuous pressure.

5.2.5 Minimize the issue

The category *Minimize the issue* covers a range of entries that all attempt to assert the opinion that the topic of discussion is not in reality an issue at all. This category has two types of entries. The first consists of straightforward downplaying of the issue,

while the second type is formed around Some of these entries are difficult to tell apart from entries in the Disagree and Question categories; samples of these are found in relevant sections.

An important feature shared by almost all of the entries is the use of absolute terms to describe the topic of conversation. Consider the following example:

(21) Words in a video game are absolutely nothing and do not cause any harm to anyone. (---)

(21) is a blatant refusal to consider the implications of the behavior that the discussion is centered around. Firstly, the interactant denies that the arguments and considerations of the other interactant should have any validity, to the point of the issue not really being worth talking about (a blatant denial of face wants, needs, or rights). Secondly, by expressing this, the interactant possibly implies that those concerned by the issue and speaking out about it are in some way overreacting (construct face in a non-harmonious way); this, in fact, is later confirmed as the person explicitly states:

(22) Quit your ♥♥♥♥♥ing and play the game.

In situation such as this one, the element of withholding politeness (as described by Bousfield) could be invoked. However, I suggest that at this point in the conversation – the conflict has already erupted – the lack of expressions of politeness has little impoliteness effect beyond that already put in place by everything else. In other words, the lack of politeness is expected, and formal politeness could easily be interpreted as sarcasm.

Minimization can be very powerful when combined with a question:

(23) We're talking about crying on the internet. Who really gets offended by this?

This example is essentially a double minimization. The second type has already partially been covered in the above examples. Rather than directly state that the topic, whatever it might be, is unimportant, writers often choose to use imperatives to urge

the other to *move on*.

(24) (---) Quit your ♥♥♥♥♥ing and play the game. Be thankful you even have a roof and Internet and stop worrying about pointless things.

In (24), the writer attacks a forum member by implying that the forum member's communications qualify as *bitching*, or complaining about irrelevancies. To a large degree, this entry is an Accusation – see chapter 5.2.6 – of whining and/or focusing on the wrong things about the game. A more thorough elaboration on this overlap will be given in the following chapter. Importantly to the categorization, the writer expresses first as an implication, then in explicit terms, their negative attitude towards debating the issue: the choice of the words *pointless things* highlights this.

Present in entries of this category is a strong element of attempting to silence the other. In nullifying the other's experience, these face-attacks also have a wider impact: the speaker expresses the wish that the other not express their feelings and opinions, at least when they are of a certain type. As such, the entries in this category can be seen as attempting to thwart certain opinions and behavior in the forum, thus exerting power over the forum's practices.

5.2.6 Accuse

There are cases where an interactant chooses to blame the other or assign responsibility on them for some (imaginary, projected or real) consequence. Within this category there are both direct accusations as well as cases where responsibility is implied using various linguistic tactics. For example:

(25) (---) And if your entire team takes part in it? Hell, the whole server? Then leave, unless you care so much about your rank you'd rather fight through all that garbage. *Your call I guess*.

The context is this: the writer has, earlier in the same post, given the options that a player in the game has to avoid racist language and other abusive behavior. The post is quite long, spanning several short paragraphs, and is written in what I would describe as a very opinionated and aggressive manner. The impoliteness in this example arises from several factors. The fact that the writer mentions rank is a

potential face-attack, as attaching too much value to membership of a skill group is generally regarded as unwise[3]. The formulaic hedge "I guess" is very likely to be interpreted as sarcasm, given the aggressive context; it seems to falsely soften the effect of the preceding face-attacks. The overall effect of the hedge is, of course, impossible to define. Finally, in saying that the decision is up to the reader (who, as I interpret it, is not defined at this point), the writer appears to imply that any person who does not follow the instruction the writer has laid out for them is simply responsible for the consequences that take place. The writer thus blames those concerned with the issue of hate speech of causing their own problems.

> (26) (---) (W1)You really seem to think you're in the real world when you're playing.
> (W2) We are in the real world. It's not like I only play when I'm sleeping. This is the real world. I'm a real person. So are you. *Stop acting like we're not.*
>
> (W1) This isn't some roleplay bull♥♥♥♥,
> (W2) FINALLY some sense! It's not roleplaying. These are REAL PEOPLE! *So why are you acting like they're not? Why are you role playing that on the internet people don't have feelings you can hurt?*
>
> (W1) play the game and that's it.
> (W2) Amen! *Stop harassing people because they're girls or because they sound gay or black, stop ridiculing people for getting upset, just play the game!*
>
> (W1) And as the poster above pointed out, you actually removed him from your friend list, did you type a paragraph to explain why to him?
> (W2) I'm talking to the whole forums. If I had just wanted to speak to him, I would have simply PMd him.

(26) is an extremely interesting entry from several points of view. It demonstrates several instances of the category *Accuse* in context, but importantly, we also see how part-by-part argumentation works, and have definite proof that face-attacks that address the forum instead of an individual can still be considered face-attacks. Note that this excerpt is less than half of the length of the original post, and forms its final parts.

The Accusations in (26) stem from the charged relationship between W1's writings and W2's view of what their implications are. In the first part, W2 contradicts W1 directly, and derives the accusation from that contradiction. The second and third part, however, derive their face-attacks from the opposite: W2 expresses agreement,

[3] This is only my own impression, but at the very least, the writer here appears to think so.

however partial or insincere it might be – and it indeed might be just that – and simply elaborates on that agreement to point out that the discussed behavior – trash talking – does not comply with the views that W1 has put in writing.

Looking at the category more generally, imperative forms and questions appear frequently. In addition, as (26) demonstrates, simple sentences and repetition are used in conjunction to drive home the point that precedes the accusation. This simplicity of expression can possibly be an impoliteness act in itself, possibly expressing condescension or some similar attitude.

There is potentially a large amount of overlap between this category and the category *Judge*. Furthermore, the examples (25) and (26) in this category are so different in many ways that the reason for placing them in the same category might not appear obvious. (This certainly needs some more elaboration.) In addition, the second subcategory of the category *Minimize the issue* has entries that are very similar to (26) in that they often urge the other to stop from engaging in some behavior. Consider the following:

> (27) (---) Quit your ♥♥♥♥♥ing and play the game. Be thankful you even have a roof and Internet and stop worrying about pointless things.

The above is clearly an accusation, with the point of accusing being "bitching", and being ungrateful for what the person has in their life. But the entry also has other characteristics: it can be seen as an indirect insult, implying qualities such as ungratefulness; furthermore, the entry carries elements that obviously point towards the category *Minimize the issue*. I maintain that when analyzing complex impoliteness, a single entry may be given place in several categories: a simple one-entry-one-category -system is dishonest to the phenomena as they occur. As a result, this entry found its place in both *Minimize the issue* and *Accuse*. Further exploration revealed that the entries in the categories were not interchangeable, that is, the categories expressed different ideas and were not thus considered superfluous.

5.2.7 Judge

If judgment is taken in a broad sense of the word, it could be certainly argued that most forms of impoliteness imply at least some degree of judgment of the other. At times, however, the judgment is expressed in more explicit terms. In the cases that ended up forming the present category, an interactant presents some piece of evidence, or a condition which the person being judged potentially fills, and proceeds to express a judging opinion of said behavior.

(28) That you posted saying racism is part of the game and therefore OK says a lot about you.

Note how in (28), the writer refers to an action that the other has committed earlier in the discussion. This referent is, of course, partially the result of the writer's interpretation; the person being addressed here has been discussing "trash talk", or the practice of trying to get under another player's skin with impolite commentary; no explicit expression of condoning racism has been made. The writer then presents this discussion in their own terms, and finally expresses the opinion that acceptance of the unacceptable is a sufficient description of this other person themselves. The implied nature of the face-attacks is a crucial element in this category: the face-attack is set up as flowing from the reader's own actions and words, and the writer merely highlights the fault.

(29) If you're offended by words and not by a game in which the goal is to murder people, then something is wrong with you. (---)

In (29), the writer uses a conditional clause to pass on a judgment similarly to (28). The context clarifies the implications: several forum members have expressed their worry about the possible effects the toxic communication that some players commit during gameplay. While certainly some people have taken offense, the writer in (29) goes further and appears to equate worry with offense, and killing in the game with murder. The goal of this appears to be firstly to frame the context as supporting the writer's position, and secondly to accuse others of hypocrisy or moral panic of some sort. Finally, the writer presents a similar indirect judgment as in (28) – not saying "you are X", but instead presenting a vague but negative assessment of the other. This indirectness is probably the result of having to function in a moderated

environment.

Especially if-statements such as (29) seem relatively frequent throughout the data. They appear to offer a handy vessel for harsh criticism that still heeds the law in letter, if not always in spirit. In principle, users of such strategies retain the option to claim to have made a general statement instead of passing any judgment themselves. Portraying the face-attack as a matter of logical reasoning, they steer the "heat", or responsibility, away from themselves. "The facts speak for themselves" appears to be the idea at the core of this category. Of course, as (28) demonstrates, the predicates for this reasoning process are the result of active interpretation and representation of the other's words and actions, and may not represent any "factual" state.

5.2.8 Insult

At times, forum users resort to describing each other in undesirable terms. As was put forth earlier, direct insults and curse words are prohibited in the forum. This fact has a remarkable influence on how forum users insult each other: taboo words and name-calling in the traditional sense is near-absent in the data. I have divided insults in two general types: improper nominations of the other, and other negatively assessed descriptions of the other.

Improper nominations refer to the practice of referring to or addressing another person by a noun or noun phrase that expresses a negative attitude towards the other. For example:

> (30) (---) Nowhere in this thread is anyone saying "No one should be legally permitted by the US gov't to use the n-word, therefore a person in Valve MM should be arrested for doing so".
>
> Get in now *you wannabe freedom fighters*?

In (30), the writer directly addresses the other(s). The use of the second person pronoun marks the intention to call them a derogatory name. *Wannabe freedom fighters* refers to the statements that the addressees have made in defense of free speech, implying that the addressees are deluded in their aims and do not understand the

heart of the issue. Additionally, the writer possibly means to say that the addressees see themselves as freedom fighters. Therefore this title is not only a direct attack on face, but also attempts to construct the addressees' face negatively through by exaggerating or otherwise interpreting the level to which the addressees find the matter important.

The second subtype, negative descriptions, comprises insults that are slightly more indirect in their expression, They often make use of adjectival expressions and comparisons. Extract (31) serves as a stereotype of this category:

(31) Oh please. *You sound like a teenager*. (---)

Example (31) is interesting in how the two sentences seem to serve as a multi-part emotive Disagreement: both sentences could be seen to signal disagreement, albeit in different ways, and their combined effect may be interpreted as an even stronger disagreement. More relevantly to the category at hand, the writer in (31) likens the other to a teenager. Associating the other with youth – in the sense of childishness – is a common tactic in the forum, and is apparently used owing to the negative aspects seen in it: inexperience, immaturity, and lack of perspective. The twofold aim is to insult the other on the one hand, and discredit their arguments on the other. In extract (32) some of these negative associations are spelled out, supporting my interpretation:

(32) Since you said so, I guess you don't mind me calling you an immature schoolboy who haven't seen life yet.

As with (31), (32) is not just about attempting the hurt the other's emotions, but also implies that the addressee's arguments should not be taken seriously. (32) is also a possible sample of mixing insults with the strategy *Judge*, as the writer uses the other's previous statement to "draw a conclusion". In addition, we see here that the line between insults and other negative descriptions is sometimes unclear – some "insults" have no other purpose than attacking the other's face, but use terms which are not traditionally considered very insulting.

As can be seen in the examples provided above, insults carry multi-faceted face-attacks. They are not simply intended to hurt the other person, but also to associate them with negative qualities. With this negative association, insults aim at calling into question the reliability of the person being insulted, and as a result to make the arguments that the person has presented look bad. The shadow of moderation looms here, too. I would expect insults to be much more "dirtier" if not for the presence of active moderators and the reporting procedure. Despite this, forum members manage to direct highly face-attacking insults at each other.

5.2.9 Threaten

Threatening someone with repercussions can be a very strong impoliteness act. It is therefore no surprise that it should appear in this paper as well. However, this category, in the end, turned out very small.

(33) Enjoy it while you can. The entire community of pro's and competitive players has been screaming for a movement/accel/tagging improvement for half of forever. Volvo takes forever to address anything but odds are it's coming. Your beloved ADADADADADADAD + m1 eco rounds will be gone eventually.

Here, the speaker does not express the threat as a consequence of some action or behavior of the (relatively indefinite) other; rather, the consequence will arrive whatever happens. As such, it could be better be described as a "prophecy" of sorts. The writer expresses their wish that the feature (or, from their point of view, "exploit") be removed from the game. In terms of tone, the post begins fairly neutrally; it is difficult to be certain as to whether "enjoy it while you can" should be interpreted threateningly or in some other way; it is only towards the beginning of the post, where the writer chooses to use the second person, that the post finally takes shape as a threat. This use of the second person is further exacerbated by the use of "ADADADADADADAD + m1": the first part refers to quick strafing movements, often called "spamming" the A and D keys, while m1 is the name of a weapon in the game that appears to have "noob" status; in other words, it is seen as very easy to use, and is seen as a sign of inexperience. Therefore the writer implies that the other person plays with the simplest possible tactics and has neither understanding of nor interest in how the game "should be played".

Since the number of entries in this category is so small (only two), nothing can be said about possibly subtypes. It is noteworthy, however, that as (33) exemplified, threats in the data were not very direct. In fact, the decision of whether to include this category at all was difficult to make, since the examples were so mild. The presence of moderators probably plays a large part here. Despite these facts, the entries do not really fit anywhere else, and therefore deserve to have their own category.

5.2.10 Interrupt

The unifying element of the entries in this category is that they, at least on the surface, break communicative patterns by saying thing at times when they really are not (traditionally) expected to do so. From the extremely small number of entries in this category, I found two distinct types.

The first type consists of a rhetorical device of answering one's own questions. In these entries, the writer presents a question that is sarcastic, aggressive or otherwise rhetorical and proceeds to respond to that question themselves. The question and the answer combine to point out a flaw or element of hypocrisy in another forum member's thinking or behavior.

> (34) (---) And as the poster above pointed out, you actually removed him from your friend list, did you type a paragraph to explain why to him? I don't think so.

Whether answering one's own questions is more impolite than the question alone is debatable. As (34) shows, the question can imply a face-attack, but this cannot be said to occur in every instance of this category. In consequence, the answering statement could be seen to serve as a clarification of intent: it renders the impoliteness value more explicit, but not necessarily any more intensive. Then again, the formula breaks a pattern in conversation – an interactant might expect to be given an opportunity to answer to the question, and in breaking this expectation, the writer potentially violates the addressee's face expectations.

In the second type, an interactant makes presuppositions about the other, and rushes

in to express that presupposition before the other had had the opportunity to express any opinion on the matter. This strategy is a face-attack for two reasons. Firstly, in making (and expressing) that assumption, the offender steps on the freedom of the other to define and express themselves as they want to – an obvious violation of the addressee's face rights. Secondly, the person expressing the assumption makes clear through the context that the line of thinking is unacceptable; a disharmonious construction of the addressee's face. Two entries found their place as representations of this strategy:

(35) inb4 that [abbreviated nickname] kid comes in to tell you that pistols are perfect

(36) (---) not a single person is saying anything about outlawing free speech in case you're thinking about bringing that up (---)

Extract (35), in specific, demonstrates the central idea of this category: the forum member is being referred to with a demeaning distortion of their username, a face-attack of its own that was discussed in the category *Insult*. What is more is that (35) is the first post in response to the original post, which is a lengthy discussion on the topic of weapon strength in the game. (35) in no way comments on the original post, and thus the comment really has no apparent purpose other than inflicting face-damage to a person who has not even had the time to comment on the OP. Note also the use of the third person, an impoliteness tactic that covered by the strategy *Exclude*.

(36), then, is a slightly less explicit example, but the purpose appears the same: the writer highlights a point that they expect the addressee to make. While this constitutes a similar face-attack as (35), in (36) the writer has a clear context in which this issue is raised up. In other words, the fact that (36) has apparent goals besides inflicting face-damage (although this is probably still among them) would appear to play down the impoliteness value. (B) also uses gives some explanation and/or justification for their behavior (*in case you're thinking about bringing that up*); whether this strategy is successful or even a genuine attempt at redressing the other remains unclear.

To sum up this category, the strategy *Interrupt* relies on violating an expected order or

pattern of communication. Looking at Bousfield, it appears that the primary component of this category is an on-record denial of the other person's face rights, wants or expectations. The major differences between the two examples seem to lie in the amount of perceived intentionality. Extract (35) seems to be easily interpretable as impoliteness owing to the fact that the expression does not have readily available alternative explanations. On the other hand, in (36) there exists more leeway as to how the expression should be interpreted. Even so, the redress strategy seems superficial and thus the expression will probably be interpreted as a face-attack.

5.3 Other observations

During the analysis it became clear that certain phenomena and observations required elaboration outside the actual impoliteness classification. To do justice to these observations, the topics of sarcasm, taboo words, and multimodality and CMC cues will be elaborated upon in this section.

5.3.1 Sarcasm

As the reader may have noticed, sarcastic entries were not given a separate category of their own. Instead, they found places within the other categories based on their content. The reason for this is that the categorization in this study turned out to be rather topical, that is, describing the intended content or the core concept(s) of each entry. In contrast, sarcasm is a tool for presenting the concept or the content, but cannot be said to be part of it. Even so, sarcasm merits some study of its own, given the important part it plays in impoliteness. General observations on sarcasm will be presented first, while the latter part of this section will explain when and where sarcasm was used.

A key finding in the analysis of sarcastic elements is that the intended meaning of a message is in many cases much clearer than what one might expect on the basis of impoliteness literature. Users utilize what I have called sarcasm markers to underline the intent of their message:

(37) W1: (---) But of course we can't do that, we have to teach these wrong doers a lesson am I right? These people can't go unpunished for trash talking in a video game. Nah, better send them to jail for that. (---)

W1 uses at least two clear cases of sarcasm marking: *am I right?* and *Nah*. Of the two, *am I right?* is more common, appearing also in the forms *right, amirite*, as well as others. One possible interpretation for this marker is that it portrays supporters of the opinion being ridiculed as thinking as a group rather than as individuals, seeking affirmation from others. *Nah*, on the other hand, reflects the style of writing more generally, responding to the expressions *But of course we can't do that* and *These people can't go unpunished*. Given the context in which the extract occurred (a fairly long post very critical of limitations on communication in-game), there is no doubt of the writer's sarcastic intent. As such, it is questionable as to whether sarcasm actually *needs* to be marked to be understood by readers; but in almost all cases, forum members choose to mark the sarcasm anyway. Forum users probably want to simply drive their point home in the most effective way possible, with as little possibility for misinterpretation as possible. Alternatively, users may simply enjoy using sarcasm, or otherwise see it as a socially desirable behavior.

Sarcasm did not appear uniformly throughout the data, but was used for specific purposes; the uneven distribution manifested itself in the categorization. In category 5.2.2 Disagree, the third subcategory consisted of entries that expressed disagreement mostly by exaggerating the other person's view. The bulk of sarcastic entries fell in this category, as disagreeing through exaggeration was so common in the data. The use of sarcasm markers, in the sense explained above, occurred in all but one of the entries in this subcategory.

I interpreted sarcastic exaggeration as a way to express disagreement with the said opinion. The category *Interrupt* had some entries that were sarcastic as well. Consider the following example:

(38) (---) The best solution would be to remove the chat entirely, you know, just to make sure children can't be exposed to the harsh reality of the human species behavior. *Oh but wait,* they're already playing a game in which you kill other fellow humans with firearms. But that's far less important, right? (---)

Here, the writer uses a sarcastic expression (*Oh but wait*) as an expression of insincere will to discuss the matter from the other's point of view.

Sarcasm also took place in the form of insincere hedges:

> (Abbreviated from extract 25) Your call *I guess.*
>
> (From 11) (the enemy team should have an equal amount of trolls as well, *but I dunno*…)

Insincere hedges were infrequent in the data, possibly because they are a relatively mild and indirect type of impoliteness, at least when contrasted with the highly conflictual and explicitly marked impoliteness that happens around them.

In three cases, sarcasm was used in the form of expressions of amusement:

> (39) (---) Think: If committing suicide was the standard thing to do in case of insults, how many people would be left? I would have killed myself when I was 10. Probably even before but, *funny*, I can't even remember. That probably wasn't such a big deal.

By using the word *funny*, the writer sets the stage for the two following clauses. The word begins a part in the post where the writer acts as if they were having a sudden realization. This is a prime example of sarcasm: the writer pretends to be living the same experience as the person they are writing to, while in truth their purpose is to smite the other.

In conclusion, sarcasm was used extensively in the data, and found various forms. Most prominently, sarcastic language was used to exaggerate the opinions and behaviors of the perceived opposition. Other forms, such as the example use of *funny*, were only occasional.

5.3.2 Taboo words

Taboo words, i.e. swearwords and profane insults, were not given their own category. This was because the use of taboo words was limited mostly to intensifying and/or implicational roles. As such, their treatment on the analysis resembled that of

sarcasm: a tool for impoliteness, but not a strategy in and of itself. I noted that the use of taboo words did not appear to be primary in any message. The following extract will clarify this reasoning:

(40) W1: Well that's a disgusting-as-♥♥♥♥ attitude. (---)

In (40), the writer's use of a taboo word (censored by the forum's swearword filter, most likely *fuck*) intensifies their disapproval of the other's (perceived) attitude. The swearword is part of a semi-formulaic expression, and while the censored word could certainly have been replaced with a milder alternative, the expression as well as the context would suggest the most extreme option. It is difficult to estimate the importance of a single word within a formulaic expression. How, then, should taboo words in such a context be analyzed, given that they occur so rarely?

There were very few of using taboo words to insult another person in the formulaic, perhaps traditionally conceived manner. The most blatant example of this in the data was the use of the abbreviation *stfu (*abbreviated from *shut the fuck up*). Thus, the swearword filter and moderation clearly influence the forum members' behavior in different ways. Similarly, direct insults are forbidden and either disappear thanks to the moderators, or simply never take place; even so, forum members insult each other extensively using less-than-blatant expressions.

Excluding taboo words from the categorization was probably the least reliable outcome in my analysis. I expect that had there been more cases in the data, a separate category would have arisen. As it stands though, there simply is not enough data to support such an outcome. Naturally, this is an element of the forum: since curse words are censored and not allowed, communication begins to adhere to these limitations.

5.3.3 Multimodality and CMC cues

In section 2.2.2 it was stated that multimodality was expected to be found throughout the data. However, the reality of the data was in stark contrast with these

expectations. The most striking discovery was possible the near non-existence of smileys: only one appeared in the threads, and the case occurred in a post which did not contain anything that I could define as impoliteness.

Only two posts in the entire dataset made use of hyperlinks. The first of these linked to an gif (a type of short animated content) named crying waterfalls, displaying a young, crying Asian boy with flowing waterfalls edited below his eyes.

(41) W1: wahhhhhhhhh someone was mean to me on the internet

wahhhhhhhhhhhh

http://mashable.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/crying-waterfalls.gif

The writer mimics the sound of crying, repeating the letter h to mark a long sound, and expresses their disagreement with sarcastic agreement. It is an obvious attempt at constructing the other's face in a negative light, and belongs to the category *Disagree*. Multimodality is used here to strengthen the message: the main content is in the text of the post, and the gif merely illustrates the comment in an attempt to ridicule the other.

The second case uses a link to an image of a Twitter post to express their opinion, while the text content of the post only states that the poster agree with the opinion.

(42) As crass as it sounds I totally agree with Tyler the Creator. (http://25.media.tumblr.com/7c4c9c07f72c47d0a3dc7ec97742bb19/tumblr_mju0v4WVeZ1rekpvzo1_500.jpg)[4]

The link leads to a Tweet by Tyler the Creator, a US rap artist, whose Twitter account as well as public persona in general are notorious for controversial statements. The content of the tweet is as follows:

(43) Hahahahahahahaha How The Fuck Is Cyber Bullying Real Hahahaha Nigga Just Walk Away From The Screen Like Nigga Close Your Eyes Haha

[4] Accessed on 22nd January, 2015. The image was hosted by Tumblr, but is a screenshot from Twitter. The image has since been removed from the hosting service.

The text in the tweet contains several impoliteness strategies: taboo words (*fuck, nigga*), written laughter to mark a non-sympathetic attitude, a question (*How The Fuck Is Cyber Bullying Real)*, a minimization of the issue and a shifting of the responsibility on the other (*Just Walk Away; Close Your Eyes*). The contents of the tweet clearly violate the forum's rules at least on swearing. It appears thus that linked content may not be monitored as strictly as content on the forum. An alternative explanation is that outside content is not seen as the responsibility of the moderators. Whatever the explanation, multimodality potentially affords users the tools to circumvent the forum's limitations. One possible reason for the lack of multimodality is that images cannot be embedded in the posts; they have to be linked to, and the added value of multimodality may simply not be worth the extra cost involved. All in all, multimodality was scarce, and as a result, not much can be said about its role, other than that it appears infrequently in the conflict at hand.

CMC cues, in the sense used by Vandergriff (2013), were slightly more frequent in the data (with the exception of smileys), although they occurred unexpectedly rarely as well. They were used for two main purposes: accentuation and marking sarcasm. For example:

(44) W1: (---) it's their own fault for exposing themselves to such a "harsh" environment, called "human nature".

W1 uses quotation marks to stress that the words they use as description do not match with the view that the writer holds. Quotation marks are not strictly a feature of online communication, but rather written communication in general. It is nonetheless a non-verbal tool that attempts to bring something from face-to-face communication to the table, and as such I classified it as a CMC cue for the purposes of this study.

Capitalization for accentuating purposes happened occasionally, but was by no means as common as expected. Most cases involved stressing a single word in a post, as in (the following:)

(45) W1: (---) Realise people are different and NEED to be treated with respect. (---)

In one case, an entire sentence was capitalized:

(46) W1: WHY DO YOU THINK PEOPLE COMMIT SUICIDE DUE TO BULLYING INCLUDING ON THE INTERNET?

At this point, the debate has continued for a prolonged period of time, and the writer appears frustrated by the lack of progress – no-one has made admissions in any direction.

Perhaps the reason for the lack of multimodality, and especially the lack of smileys, is the fact that one of the most important functions of multimodality is to express and accentuate emotions and their nuances. Using them requires that there exist some nuances to express, while in conflict situations there range of (stereotypically) possible emotional displays may be significantly reduced. In other words, it is possible that multimodality is primarily a feature of polite, politic or supportive interaction; their use would simply be out of place in impolite contexts, and cause face damage to a person using them. Clearly the relationship between multimodality and (im)politeness needs to be more thoroughly researched.

In summary, the data suggests that multimodal tools are used to illustrate a point, and possibly to circumvent certain restrictions in the forum. CMC cues, on the other hand, are used for stressing important points, and to mark sarcasm. In conflict situations it appears that users want to make sure that sarcasm is interpreted correctly – to ensure the delivery of impolite intent. Multimodal tools appear rare in conflict situations, while the use of CMC cues appears to be focused on a small number of key purposes.

6. DISCUSSION

The analysis came through with results that were insightful on the one hand and unsurprising on the other. The level of the categories was fairly general, and despite attempts to stay as close to the data, quite distanced from the actual expressions themselves – the aim, after all, was to not make categorizations based on grammatical features, but the most salient intent and/or outcome of the message instead depending on what information was available in each case.

In this chapter the results will be reviewed in three ways. Firstly, I will discuss the forum in general terms, comparing it to earlier findings in the field. After this, the categorization will be reviewed in more detail, drawing conclusions about the forum based on them. Thirdly, and finally, the categorization will be briefly compared to Bousfield (2008, based on Culpeper, 1996), so as to give some perspective on the nature of the categorization.

6.1 General observations

During the analysis, observations arose that were insightful as to the data as a whole, but which did not quite fit in within the strict borders of the analytic process itself. These observations set the stage for reviewing the categorization in more depth, and thus merit discussion on their own. The purpose of this section is to describe those observations. The topics covered here are the roles of the forum's rules and moderation, and the usefulness of the concepts of communities of practice and affinity spaces to describe the data.

A fundamental aspect of the data and the discussion forum is that communication happens around a relatively clear-cut topic. The categorization that the analysis resulted in reflects this heavily: as communication has a definite goal (i.e. discussing and debating a specified topic), so the types of impoliteness serve to strengthen one's arguments and undermine the other. The communication on the forum did not

appear to have among its goal the formation or development of one's own opinions. Instead, participants were taking every possible measure to stick to their opinion. *Discussion* is hardly the right word to refer to the communication: *debate* is much closer, although the level of aggression essentially amounts to an *argument* (in the sense of a fight or row). At the core lies the struggle for power in which the forum members participate in the threads. Extreme opinions and extreme expressions dominated, as the interlocutors rushed to prove that the other side was wrong: a strong offense seems to be the best defense.

With regard to the rules of the forum, it seems that they acted more as guidelines than as strict rules to be followed. For example, the rules prohibited insults and swearing; in reality, insults and swearwords both appeared in the discussions. It is possible, and indeed probable, that on many occasions the users resorted to implicational methods so as to get their message through as offensively as possible and at the same time keep within the bounds of the official instructions. At times, the discussion became so heated that they only nominally fell short of flaming, also banned by the forum rules. Similarly, the issues and points raised touched upon racism and other volatile topics, but again with a very tight margin fell outside of what could with certainty said to constitute a violation. In other words, a large part of the discussion was made up of comments that would best be described as borderline cases, from the moderator point of view.

We cannot see what actions the moderators have made in the threads. Given the presence of the moderators, as well as the report button, it is a fair assumption that the moderators have intervened to remove the most blatant offenses. The forum members appear highly adapted to these conditions: they manage to be extremely impolite at times without explicitly breaching the forum's rules. Furthermore, forums members rarely react to linguistic impoliteness by pointing out the perceived impoliteness. The fact that backseat moderation, i.e. writing posts that point out suspected violations of the forum's rules, did not occur in the data. I suspect the main reason for the unwillingness to react is that users who express indignation at impoliteness are viewed negatively. At least one post seems to support this view:

(47) W1(quoted): What you DO have control over is how you react to it. The less reaction you have, the less rewarded your tormentors will be.

W2: You're talking to people who probably write "Stop it now or I will be forced to report you for verbal abuse!" in chat.

It's like sticking scissors in an outlet, you couldn't possibly give them a worse reaction. (or better, in their case)

W2 describes their view of people who react to impoliteness (in this case, by trolls) by expressing their negative emotional reaction, which W2 perceives as further fueling the impoliteness and trolling. At the same time, W2 seems to imply that such people are simply out of touch with (internet) reality, since the trolls are only encouraged by displays of hurt feelings. In another post, in more simple words:

(48) W1 (---) It's the Internet, get that in your thick skull. (---)

To address the threads more generally, the debates that took place in the threads have no real resolution. Similar results were reported by Bou-Franch and Blitvich (2014). In their study on Youtube comments and massive polylogues, they found that the discussions quickly form oppositions and entrenched parties. As new users joined the discussion, they adopted a social identity as "supporters or detractors of homosexuality" (2014: 33). Furthermore, the arguments and points of new participants to the discussions rarely brought anything new to the debate: participants enter and leave as they will, apparently do not read each other's commentaries, and finally repeat the points that have already been raised numerous times in the debate. The same applies to the dataset of the present study. In the largest thread, each commenter was either an opponent or a supporter of *free speech*, *censorship*, or *banning abuse*, depending on who was writing. No real middle ground existed between the two opinions. This is a stark contrast to Graham (2006) and Aakhus and Rumney (2010): in both of these cases, once conflict situations receded, the member of the communities entered a discussion about the rules and norms of the community. There appears to be little incentive for the members of the forum to settle their differences in any meaningful manner, and nobody certainly admitted to having been wrong. It is possible, and in fact likely, that the argument is a clash of two vocal minorities, while the majority of users remain indifferent otherwise

inactive during the debate[5].

With regards to the discussion as to whether we should regard the forum as a community practice or an affinity space, the lack of willingness to head towards resolution could signal weak communal ties, possibly pointing towards an affinity space interpretation. Similarly, behavior on the forum corresponds highly to the findings of studies on affinity spaces (e.g. Vandergriff, 2013; Bou-Franch and Blitvitch, 2014). On the other hand, the forum does have a relatively stable set of core members who actively and regularly participate in the discussions; for example, as of January 2016, most of the participants that appeared in the data were still active on the forum; some continuity therefore exists in demography and, as a result, practices.

One perspective on the eruption of impolite exchanges is that a game so competitive and emotionally intensive as Counter-Strike could (1) attract certain personality types that are conducive to such behavior; and/or (2) cause emotional or behavioral "spillover" to the forums: the forum becomes an extension of the game, and the discussions are seen as competitions. Of course, as Hardaker concludes:

> "- - - it seems clear that part of the human condition is to find a degree of entertainment in conflict, whether in the form of high-risk sports, action films, violent computer games, or linguistic aggression in television programs. However, unlike these situations where the individual typically only watches or simulates conflict, online, with the protection of anonymity and distance, CMC users can exercise aggression against other real humans, with little risk of being identified or held accountable for their actions." (2010: 238)

In the end, little can be said for sure about the social practices of the forum on the basis on the data. Many forum members, when engaging in threads such as the ones that made up the data, resort to any and all measures that at least marginally fall under acceptable bounds in the forum. On the other hand, the forum has plenty of threads that are filled with mostly calm and civil discussion, with the occasional provocation here and there. The data thus hardly describes the forum in general to any significant degree. Instead, the results are more descriptive of impoliteness online generally, and of moderated anonymous discussion boards more specifically.

[5] It is not difficult to draw parallels between political discussions over e.g. immigration, where extreme opinions appear to control the flow of discussion.

6.2 A struggle for power: reviewing the impoliteness strategies

In the table below, the each category is presented together with the number of occurrences in it. Subcategories are included in the numbering.

Table 1: Number of entries in each category

Express Disinterest	9
Disagree	A: 14; B: 15; C: 7
Exclude	A: 6; B: 5; C: 5
Question	13
Minimize the issue	A: 8; B: 6
Accuse, Blame:	8
Judge	5
Insult	A: 8; B: 6
Threaten	2
Interrupt	2
Total	**119**

Looking at the results of the present study, and the categorization that represents them, it appears that the core concept – in the grounded theory sense – is, ultimately, the exertion of power over others. More specifically, impoliteness acts were used to, for example, assert control over the topics and opinions that were allowed in the forum, and to affect the general perception of status that individual users are seen to hold within the community. This section will explain the ways in which the core concept manifested itself in practice, with special attention as to what each category could be seen to express.

Firstly, forum members clearly wanted to restrict and define the purpose of the forum in their own terms, as well as to delineate acceptable topics and opinions in the forum. In specific, the categories *Express disinterest* and *Minimize the issue* appealed to either personal disinterest or the perceived overall insignificance of the subject matter to argue that the worries and discussions are unfounded in reality. In terms of the positive-negative face dichotomy, the strategies both attack the other's

will to be approved of and taken seriously (positive face), as well as their freedom to interact and express their opinions (negative face). They thus serve as tools for attempting to thwart discussion on certain topics, and control the forum's practices and views. At 9 and 14 entries respectively, the set's 23 entries make up 20% of the total number of cases.

Second, the category *Exclude* showed that forum members actively create, define and redefine in-groups and out-groups. The aim is to affect the opinions of forum members by treating or framing another interactant as not belonging to the central group of users, or simply as an outsider from the writer's point of view. The strategy is thus an attack on the person rather than the topic. The 16 entries in this category represent 13.4% of the entire set, a number which shows that group memberships are a significant element in impoliteness on the forum.

The categories *Accuse, Judge* and *Insult* were primarily concerned with attacking the other by framing the person or their behavior in a negative light; the attacks vary from direct insults to implications made by presenting a forum member's actions in a certain light. What makes these categories fall together so well is that to some extent, there are similarities and overlap between them, especially in the case of *Insult* and *Judge*. These three categories have in common the orientation towards the other person. The occurrences for *Accuse, Judge* and *Insult* were 8, 5 and 15, respectively, coming to 28 entries in total.

Thirdly, the categories *Disagree* and *Question* go together in the sense that both are mostly topic-oriented strategies. These two categories are the only strategies that seek to discuss the ideas themselves and their implications, although some individual entries were so aggressive as to largely overshadow this aspect. At 36 and 13 entries, respectively, these categories were some of the largest in the data. The frequency of the category *Disagree* is in large part explained by the fact that expressing disagreement is so central to the activity of posting. A post simply has very little meaning or purpose in a conflict situation unless it in some way disagrees with an earlier post.

Fourthly, and finally, the total number of what were identified as structural impoliteness and threats was a mere four in the whole data. With regards to threats, it is hardly a surprise that they would not be common in a moderated environment. What is more, users generally have very little to threaten each other with; as the cases showed, the threats that did occur were very vague and un-threatening overall. As to the small number of occurrences in the structural group, the emergence of the *Interrupt* category was somewhat unexpected, and the tools in used in the present paper were not sufficient for analyzing structural aspects of impoliteness. Obviously, more attention should be given to studying how impoliteness is structured and constructed on a longer timescale and over several posts and sentences.

Table 2 summarizes the above elaboration:

Table 2: Number of occurrences in each group of categories

Person-oriented attacks	*Insult, Accuse, Judge; Exclude*	43
Topic-oriented attacks	*Disagree*, *Question*	49
Control-oriented FTA	*Express disinterest, Minimize the issue*	23
Structural	*Interrupt*	2
Other	Threaten	2
Total		**119**

What this simple analysis reveals is that impoliteness strategies whose main target is another person are used nearly as often as those that attack the opinion or topic currently being discussed. Attempts to control the topic of discussion occurred at half the rate of person-oriented attacks. One possible reason for the high level of personal attacks is that the person and the argument become closely intertwined in conflict situations. While this is to some extent true to all communication, the mediated environment exacerbates the effect as interactants (1) often have very little or no previous knowledge of each other and (2) have little to no discernible features besides the online face and persona that is built upon their history of written communication in the forum (See section 3.1). This extends to the groups that each

interactant is seen to represent, thus making attacks on group identities a viable strategy. Clearly, group identities and group face in computer-mediated environments warrants more research, especially with regards to its role and importance in impolite exchanges.

Yet again, it is important to remember that impoliteness in reality is complex. All abstracted classifications such as the one I have presented in this section ignore some details, such as overlaps and spillover between categories. Similarities in entries appeared especially between the categories *Minimize the issue* and *Accuse*. Similarly, the categories *Insult* and *Judge* often seemed to overlap. As such, not too much weight should be given to the exact number of elements in each group. The groupings do, however, provide a useful glance into the relative frequencies of each type of impoliteness, and on their part illustrate the impoliteness practices of the forum.

The inaccurate nature of quantitative displays was one of the expectations for the present study, and an important reason for choosing the Grounded Theory method. More generally, a phenomenon such as impoliteness requires careful consideration, and due to the high level of complexity involved in processing phenomena such as sarcasm, each instance needs to be studied individually. With Big Data and computer-driven statistical analyses gaining ground, (im)politeness appears to elude the reach of large-scale quantitative research. After all, (im)politeness does not reside in language or linguistic expressions, but is a subjective experience or attitude evoked by those linguistic expressions in certain contexts. Such phenomena can only with great difficulty be reduced to numbers.

6.3 The categories in perspective: a comparison with Bousfield/Culpeper

In order to understand the categories thoroughly, it is necessary to reflect on their relationship to earlier findings. Importantly, since the present paper is largely based on Bousfield (2008), it makes sense to compare the results in detail with his findings in specific. What similarities and differences can be found in two categorizations that

use the same underlying principles, but differ in their datasets and methods of analysis?

In table 1, the categorization of the present study has been put side by side with Bousfield's categories (built on Culpeper, 1996), as a way of illustrating the similarities and dissimilarities between the two systems. On the left-hand side, the categories from Bousfield (2008) are presented in the order of appearance, while the categories of the present study are on the right, matched against each corresponding category.

Table 3: A comparison of categories with Bousfield (2008)

Bousfield, 2008 (adapted from Culpeper, 1996)	**Viljakainen, 2016**
Snub	Express disinterest
Disassociate from the other – for example, deny association or common ground with the other; avoid sitting together	Exclude
Be uninterested, unconcerned, unsympathetic	Minimize the issue; Express disinterest
Use inappropriate identity markers	Insult
Seek disagreement/avoid agreement	Disagree
Use taboo words – swear, or use abusive or profane language	-
Threaten/Frighten – instil a belief that action detrimental to the other will occur	Threaten
Condescend, scorn or ridicule – emphasize your relative power. Be contemptuous	Disagree;
Explicitly associate the other with a negative aspect – personalise, use the pronouns 'I' and 'you'	Insult; Accuse; Judge
Criticise – dispraise h[earer], some action or inaction by h, or some entity in which h has invested face	-
Hinder/block – physically (block passage), communicatively (deny turn, interrupt)	Interrupt
Enforce Role Shift	-
Challenges	Question

Looking at the comparative listing, it is clear that the two categorizations have major similarities. This is especially true in the following pairs:

1. Snub – Express disinterest
2. Seek disagreement/avoid agreement – Disagree
3. Threaten/Frighten – Threaten
4. Challenges – Question

Most of these categories are similar enough to warrant calling them equivalent; this is, in part, demonstrated by the similarity in naming. The pairs *Snub – Express disinterest* and *Challenges – Question* have potentially misleading names, but a closer look reveals that the entries and interpretations correspond with a high degree. Both strategies seek to undermine the other's expressed opinion by means of a pointed question, seeking to draw out the hidden motivations or implications of a given person or opinion (Bousfield, 2008: 133).

As these four pairs of categories go together so neatly, it is not necessary to discuss them further at this point. The rest of the categories, however, need to be contextualized in more detail. The two sections that follow will focus on the differences between the categorizations, moving from close relatives to distant cousins.

6.3.1 Categories which mostly overlap

There were three pairs of categories that corresponded with each other, but where the data that resulted in the creation of the category differed qualitatively:

1. Disassociate from the other – Exclude
2. Use inappropriate identity markers – Insult
3. Hinder/block –Interrupt

The first pair of these, *Disassociation – Exclusion*, follows the same principles in both cases, but the focus of the entries differs greatly. In the examples provided by Bousfield (2008: 103 – 104), disassociation is achieved by means of "I", that is, by saying:

> S1: I'm hoping the OC recommends you to be discharged from the army . I don't want you . because you are a pathetic individual do you understand (Bousfield 2008: 104)

In my data, the strategy of exclusion took varying forms, and was, in general, more aggressive, at least insofar as choice of words is considered. For example, a key element that reappears is an overlap with inappropriate identity markers; they explicitly group and attack the other, while less frequently purely disassociate with the self. When this disassociation with the self does occur, it is with methods that rely more heavily on implications, as exemplified in section (5.2.?)

The second pair is *Use inappropriate identity markers – Insult*. In Bousfield (2008: 107–108), the data appears to present sarcastic cases, such as *my friend*, as well as intentional use of identity markers that are improper in the context but would not be considered impolite outside that context. Conversely, in my data, the identity markers used are usually more explicitly insulting, and amount to name-calling. In addition, I included several negative descriptions in the data that are not necessarily as strong as insults themselves; the reason I gave for this was that the line between insults and negative descriptions is often unclear, and the latter can be the former even without the presence of direct insults. It seems that the categories of this latter pair at least partially describe the same phenomenon, but simply on different levels. There were no instances in the data which were directly comparable to those given by Bousfield.

The category *Hinder/Block* was one that Bousfield identified in his data, but was not named by Culpeper (Bousfield, 2008: 127-128). Similarly, in the present dataset a small but distinct category named *Interrupt* emerged in the present study. These two categories overlap and essentially describe the same phenomenon, with minor differences in orientation. The elements in this category worked as determined by the CMC environment, where interruptions and blocking are impossible. Forum members built up situations where they could answer their own questions, simulating an interruption or a denial of turn. Thus one could hypothesize the forum members participate in a form of active or proactive interruption, since typical reactive strategies i.e. pure interruptions are not a viable strategy.

Finally, the category *Interrupt* raises questions as to how impoliteness can be conveyed, expressed or strengthened by structural means. These means, which provoke questions that could not be answered within the framework of the present paper, involve the evolution and structuring of impoliteness over multiple sentences and, possibly, turns-at-talk.

6.3.2 Categories with major differences or no correspondence

Major differences in categorization and no-match cases were the following:

1. Be uninterested, unconcerned, unsympathetic – Minimize the issue; Express disinterest
2. Explicitly associate the other with a negative aspect – Insult, Accuse, Judge
3. Taboo words – none
4. Criticise – dispraise h, some action or inaction by h, or some entity in which h has invested face – *Accuse*, *Judge*; none?
5. Condescend, scorn or ridicule – Disagree
6. Enforce Role Shift – none

The category *Be uninterested, unconcerned, unsympathetic* had no direct equivalent in the present study. Elements that best suit this category dispersed between the categories *Minimize the issue* and *Express disinterest*. It appears that the Bousfield/Culpeper category could act as a supercategory of sorts for the two describing a more general phenomenon, while the closest counterparts in the present analysis describe the strategies in more detail.

Similarly to *Be uninterested*, the category *Explicitly associate the other with a negative aspect* subsumes strategies that fell in several different categories, namely *Insult, Accuse* and *Judge*. In the case of *Insult*, an important detail to remember is that entries in that category ranged from direct, obscene insults to negative descriptions, as the line between the two ends was found impossible to draw. While the negative descriptions fit the Bousfield/Culpeper category better, more direct attacks also fall under the same umbrella. *Accuse* and *Judge*, on the other hand, both have entries where the association is made explicitly as well as implicitly. Therefore, these two

categories are partially equivalent with *Explicitly associate*. The differences in interpretation are at their most visible.

The lack of a distinct category of this name in the categorization of this study is the result of a number of reasons. Firstly, the category *Criticise* in Culpeper's terms is rather broad and vague. Secondly, and relatedly, a good case can be made that most, if not all, of the categories created in this analysis are criticisms of some kind. Therefore, to call an entry a criticism does not really tell us much about its content. This is not to say that the category is entirely useless or irrelevant, however. The core of the category *Criticise* is to express disapproval of a behavior or person; but such behaviors are to a large extent covered by other categories. *Criticise* thus appears to be a leftover category for whatever has not been fit in other categories. In the case of the present data, the implicit associations – as opposed to *Explicitly associate* – seem to be homeless. In practice, the discussion possibly touches upon the categories *Judge* and *Accuse,* but the question remains unresolved, since the data of these categories only marginally resembles Bousfield's example (2008: 127).

In section 5.3.2, the findings regarding taboo words were spelled out. In light of the findings, it was concluded that taboo words are not, in this dataset, an element that appears in a such a manner as to constitute their own category of impoliteness; this is, of course, in stark opposition to Bousfield and Culpeper, for whom taboo words were an important form of conveying impolite intent. Again, it needs to be restated that these results are almost certainly the result of the forum's rules and moderation; indeed, given the level of aggression present in these discussions, it is very likely that any forum with slightly looser rules would have produced significant amounts of data pertaining to the use of swearwords as an impoliteness strategy in and of themselves.

The case of the third pair, *Condescend, scorn or ridicule – Disagree*, is somewhat complicated. Most of the elements in the category *Disagree* do not qualify as members Bousfield's category. On the other hand, when condescension, scorn or ridicule was found in the data, it was most eminently in this category, as shown by (10):

(10) Freedom of speech, blahblahblah, you're free to do whatever you want as long as we allow it am I right?

A sarcastic way of exaggerating the other's view, the entry exhibits several types of face-aggravation, and the element of ridicule is hard to miss. While I maintain that the elements I classified as Exaggerations in the category *Disagree* are there for the right reasons, the case of *Condescend, scorn or ridicule* raises important questions as to the nature of the two categories. What is meant by the categories? Is a category carrying three distinct names too vague in definition? Or is the division of *Disagree* into three subcategories a sign of the category subsuming elements that would be better examined in separate categories? The qualitative researcher's response, of course, is that the issue is less serious than it might seem on the basis of this discussion: we are simply looking at a difference in conceptualization. Nonetheless, in this case it seems Bousfield has described a phenomenon that the present paper could have highlighted in more detail.

Enforce role shift, a category created by Bousfield, was the only impoliteness strategy that could not be identified at all in the data. The category describes situations where a speaker changes or attempts to change the hearer's role, that is, the face-claim. Such entries were not found in the data, presumably because to detect such an event, explicit mentions of these roles need to be found. An alternative and complementary explanation could be the fact that the number of roles available the forum users is limited. For example, the divide into two opposing groups in the threads really only allows roles such as *proponent* and *opponent*, and the only conceivable role shift is that of assigning an interactant to one of the groups. Clearly, this strategy needs to be studied more.

In summary, the differences between Bousfield's model the findings of the present paper resemble each other quite closely. Four categories found near-identical matches. Three other categories found single matching pairs, but with the difference that the entries of the present study were somewhat aggressive in nature; in addition, the data was more detailed and subcategories with distinct nuances were identified.

Finally, six of Bousfield's categories had not direct correspondence. Four of these consisted in elements that were covered by the categories of the present research; one *(Taboo words*) was not treated as a separate category in the present study; and one (*Enforce role shift*) could not be identified in the data. The differences in classification stem partially from the fact that the CMC environment appears to encourage certain strategies, while discouraging others; but as demonstrated by the pair *Condesend, scorn or ridicule – Disagree,* similar elements may simply lead to dissimilar interpretations.

7. CONCLUSION

This study was an exploration and categorization of impoliteness strategies and their uses on a gaming-oriented asynchronous discussion forum. The attempted to answer the following questions: What types of impoliteness do forum members use in the forum? To facilitate the present study, the main research question was reformulated thus: How do forum members attack each other's face? The study was conducted using an adaptation of the grounded theory method, as using pre-existing frameworks too closely could have caused some observations to slip away from the researcher's view. For a functional framework for analyzing facework, the research drew heavily on the work of Bousfield (2008).

The study succeeded in creating a thematic categorization for impoliteness phenomena on the forum. The list of impoliteness strategies was slightly shorter than those of other similar papers, which was seen to reflect the fact that the data comprised, firstly, discussions with a clear goal rather than general together-being, and secondly, highly conflictual material in a computer-mediated environment. In comparison to the impoliteness strategies outlined by Culpeper (1996) and amended by Bousfield (2008), the data was found to be more aggressive and other-oriented overall. The study also seemed to confirm the findings of Vandergriff (2013) that in conflict situations, multimodal tools are used sparingly and as accentuating elements rather than emotive expressions.

Impoliteness in the forum was used to highlight, create and redefine lines between forum members and the opinions they represent. The aim of the threads was found to be the assertion of a dominant opinion, as well as the presentation of that opinion as the eminent point of view. Furthermore, forum members used impoliteness for the purposes of hindering discussion around certain topics. Little in the way of constructive dialogue happened, as the participants focused on stigmatizing, discrediting and disproving their opponent.

There are two main limitations to the applicability of the results. Firstly, and most obviously, the dataset was drawn from a very finely-defined environment. Even though I have little reason to assume that communication in e.g. other subforums of the Steam users' forums is radically different from the CS:GO subforum, the fact remains that the results only describe impoliteness in three conflictual threads on this specific discussion board. Secondly, given incredible the complexity of impoliteness, it may be that not all impoliteness in the data has been analyzed. In particular, the effect of features such as the structure of the posts, counterstrategies, and co-occurrences, which were not given much attention in this paper, needs to be researched in more depth in the future. Despite these limitations, I maintain that the study achieved its goals.

Finally, the analysis raised questions as to the structural aspects of impoliteness in both on- and offline communication. As the category *Interrupt* demonstrated, impoliteness can be conveyed through the use of linguistic patterns that are neither grammatical nor topical. While the number of these entries was low, their appearance in a dataset of this size and type suggests that such elements should appear regularly in other datasets as well. It remains to be answered whether the phenomenon is related to, e.g., the double imperative or other such half-idiomatic expressions. Even so, the present paper has shown that impoliteness needs to be studied on several levels and from different angles.

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