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Research Paper

"Calling a Spade, a Spade": Impoliteness and Shame on Twitter

Ana Larissa Adorno Marciotto Oliveira¹ & Monique Vieira Miranda²

¹Corresponding author, Graduate Program in Linguistic Studies, Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil; Visiting Scholar Program, University of Lancaster, Lancaster, United Kingdom; adornomarciotto@gmail.com

²Graduate Program in Linguistic Studies, Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil; nkmiranda@gmail.com

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Abstract

In this paper, we focus on the impoliteness metadiscourse (Culpeper, 2011) on Twitter about what was said by US President Joe Biden at a press conference where he cursed journalist Peter Doocy after he asked if inflation was a liability in the midterm elections. To do that, we searched for #sonofabitch, and found 610 original tweets with the tag in the days following the episode. After analyzing them, we discovered that the hashtag was employed to vilify both Joe Biden and Peter Doocy. The tag also prompted a discussion about impoliteness and shameful language in the political sphere. Moreover, the data also showed that the posts containing hashtags employed impolite formulae and negative assertions that characterized the process of online public shaming (Blitvich, 2022, p. 62).

Keywords: Impoliteness; Public Shaming; Political Domain; Hashtags; Twitter.

1. Introduction

Insults frequently gain instantaneous repercussions on Twitter. When uttered by celebrities or influential politicians, they also commonly become the target of moral judgment through impoliteness metadiscourse (Culpeper, 2011). Impoliteness metadiscourse is defined as a type of discourse "built against the background of specific contexts that evoke certain conventionalized expression used to judge an impoliteness behavior" (Culpeper, 2011, p. 24). It discloses a perception that the valid norms of conduct were violated and need to be restored. Impoliteness metadiscourse also shows the community members' "orientation to a group" by judging perceived breaches of their respective social norms (Terkourafi, 2001, p. 27).

As a consequence of this judgment, a process termed "cancellation" is often at play on social media. According to Blitvich (2022, p. 62), "cancellation" or "cancellation culture" refers to online forms of public humiliation (OPS) that aim to "hold individuals and groups accountable for behaviors perceived to be offensive". The phenomenon is pervasive on social media and is considered "imbued in morality" (Blitvich, 2022, p. 62). For this reason, public shaming is also strongly associated with the desire to punish the offenders for something wrong that they did or are perceived to have done. Morality is also contingent on social practice and it is often seen as a phenomenon that revolves around metacommunicative behaviors. Hence, impoliteness metadiscourse describes the moral norms behind the interveners' actions (Kadar & Márquez-Reiter, 2015).

In this paper, the impoliteness metadiscourse about an episode involving impolite and shameful language in the political scenario will be explored under the light of OPS. The episode on focus took place in January of 2022 when US President Joe Biden cursed journalist Peter Doocy as a "stupid son of a bitch" at a press conference. This happened after the journalist asked if inflation was a liability in the midterm elections¹. Drawing from this background, this paper focuses on the analysis of the formulae employed in the impoliteness metadiscourse on Twitter following the episode in an attempt to investigate to what extent it triggered processes of online cancellation (Blitvich, 2022, p. 62). To do that, the following questions guide the study: (a) "What impolite formulae were used on Twitter to judge the phrase "stupid s.o.b" in the



passage involving Joe Biden and Peter Doocy”?; (b) To what extent did these formulae trigger processes of online cancellation?

In the following section, we will explore the notions of impoliteness formulae (Terkourafi, 2002, Culpeper, 2010; 2011), interaction on Twitter (Starbird & Palen 2011, Han et al., 2014), and moral shame (Hansberg, 2000; Blitvich, 2022) that underly this study. After that, in Section 3, we will present the methods of data-gathering, which encompassed a quantitative search from which we departed to proceed with the qualitative analysis. This section is followed by Section 4, which contains a discussion of the quantitative results. In section 5, we present a qualitative analysis of selected posts before we put forward the concluding remarks of the study.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. *Impoliteness Formulae*

Research has shown that impolite formulae are not always seen as the marked, exceptional counterpart of polite language use. For example, in some contexts, they can even be the norm (Culpeper, Haugh, & Kádár, 2017). As Culpeper (2010, p. 3237) argues “(...) conventionalized meaning – as opposed to conventional meaning – sits midway between semantics and pragmatics, between fully conventionalized and non-conventionalized meanings”. The author reinforces his claim by reaffirming that “a conventionalized impoliteness formula is a form of language in which context-specific impoliteness effects are conventionalized” (Culpeper, 2010: 3243). Likewise, the use of conventionalized formulae may also be a “demonstration of knowledge of community social norms” (Terkourafi, 2002, p. 97), which is typically founded on the shared ideology of the community and joint cognition.

From this view, appropriateness judgments involve “the casting of persons and relationships into particular valenced (i.e., positive-neutral-negative) categories, according to some kind of perceived normative scale or frame” (Haugh, 2014, p. 159). Because impoliteness is often seen as a negative attitude toward specific behaviors taking place in particular contexts, situated behaviors are judged negatively when they defy valid social norms of conduct and cause “emotional consequences for at least one participant, that is, they cause or are presumed to cause offense” (Culpeper, 2005, p. 38). Hence, when certain behaviors are perceived by community members as offensive, this perception typically invites retaliation.

Public violations of norms can also call forth sanctions when speakers who transgress them are seen as uncooperative (Barrett et al., 2002). Barret et al. (2002, p. 773) argue that “moral obligations provide a means of addressing, and of sanctioning those who are not cooperative”. Moreover, negative judgment, represented in the acts such as criticizing, disapproving, mocking, and ridiculing, among others encompasses potential face threats (Brown & Levinson, 1987). When these threats are unmitigated, they are usually taken as offensive. At the same time, people can also take offense even when a speech act is mitigated. Furthermore, social class, gender, age, and political orientation typically affect the judgment of impoliteness while also encouraging the desire to retaliate in kind. This is one of the reasons why, according to Ekström and Johansson (2008, p. 385), “those in the public eye quickly learn to behave in the media in a way that does not create offense or public indignation”.

In Culpeper (2010), ideology is associated with evaluative beliefs through which a community assesses certain verbal behaviors as acceptable or unacceptable in a given context. According to this view, ideology involves *schemata*, which, as Eysenck and Keane (2010, p. 401) argue, are defined as “well-integrated packets of knowledge about the world, events, people, and actions”. This definition of schemata also indicates that conventionalized impolite formulae are associated with packets of language wrapped with ideology and constrained by norms of conduct. Hence, the interest in associating impoliteness with ideological issues can welcome the study of online public shaming (Blitvich, 2022), particularly on Twitter. For this reason, in the next section, we will explore the characteristics of communication on this platform.

2.2. *Interactions on Twitter*

Twitter allows users to share information and opinions in real-time and, according to Han et al. (2014), post messages that are a response to the question “What is happening now?”. This response, initially limited to 140 characters, can currently reach 280 characters. The microblog was also described by Purohit et al. (2013) as an online platform that

“acts as a medium for the flow of information where users can post from other users” (Purohit et al., 2013, p. 73). Hence, the short messages on Twitter (the “tweets”) reflect the relevance of current events from the community’s perspective. As new tweets appear on the feed of those who follow a certain account or can be found through Twitter’s search interface, the platform encourages a permanent need for connectivity among users (Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018). In this process, hashtags prompt the negotiation of relative social positions in digitally mediated communication (Dreyfus & Li, 2021), and thus became a popular element that has emerged on Twitter. They involve assembling postings using a common tagged word or expression. Although Twitter initially introduced hashtags to classify the tweets into common themes or topics, operating as bookmark content, they are also used for different purposes, stressing the affordance potential that digital technology often displays (Zappavigna, 2017). As the concept of affordance lies at the heart of the interaction between users and the technological apparatus, in the case of hashtags they also allow the creation of innovative services and uses. From this angle, Starbird and Palen (2011, p. 3) claim that hashtags work as a means to “form bonds and to create a feeling of community”, surpassing the initial bookmark content. Likewise, Oliveira and Carneiro (2020) argue that hashtags are used on Twitter to help frame interactions as impolite or sarcastic. In this sense, the study of Oliveira and Carneiro (2020) asserted that hashtags play a dual role. While they contribute to the calculation of meaning, offering contextual or referential clues to the interlocutor, they also operate as an injunctive element, linked to calls for political mobilization. By the same token, Scott (2015) asserts that hashtags express a stance on Twitter, and connect one post with the previous ones, while also adding an extra layer of meaning to the message communicated.

Hashtags also play a major role in the impolite discourse on Twitter. As Vásquez (2011) notes, the relation between discussion topics and the level of aggression is significant on the platform. The author notes that topical contexts, such as politics and religion, are susceptible to antagonistic behavior online Vásquez (2021, p. 41). In terms of the semiotic choices expressing aggressiveness, playful impoliteness, and sarcastic assertions are considered key elements, as Vladimirou and House (2018) point out. According to the authors, playful language encompasses elements of parody and playfulness particularly strong and manifested through the creative mix of visual and linguistic resources (Vladimirou & House, 2018, p. 157) and is a key element of impoliteness on Twitter. This happens because, by collectively engaging in the effort to trend certain tags, users encourage their followers to put perceived offenders to shame (Blitvich, 2022).

Taking the phenomenon OPS into view, in the next section, we will discuss the implications of the notion of moral shame to impoliteness metadiscourse on Twitter.

2.3. Moral Shame in Impoliteness Metadiscourse

Hansberg (2000, p. 161) argues that moral shame is felt when moral values or demands regarding ideals about how to behave and how to live come into play, such as when verbal conduct is seen as rude, cruel, or unjust. As shaming is always more intense when it happens publicly, the audience is considered a key component (Hansberg, 2000, p. 160) in the process since “one sees oneself through the eyes of others and only thus recognizes the nature of one’s acts, failing, fault or circumstance”. While public shaming seeks “to degrade and ostracize the individual” (Blitvich, 2022, p. 64), it reaffirms social cohesion and power legitimization. For this reason, OPS is defined as “a form of peer surveillance manifested via user posting of photos, videos and text on websites, blogs, forums and portals capturing inconsiderate, uncivil and illegal behaviors of citizens to expose and shame such behaviors” (Skoric et al., 2010, p. 187).

As impoliteness metadiscourse is a means to judge impoliteness, it may also be the vehicle in the process of OPS, particularly when it is seen through the lenses of the impolite semiotic resources connected to what Culpeper (2011) termed “coercive impoliteness”. Coercive impoliteness is related to “the attempt to force others to succumb to one’s will” (Culpeper, 2011, p. 226). Furthermore, the phenomenon is associated with “the display of heightened emotion, mostly anger, implying that the target is to blame for producing such emotional state” (Culpeper, 2011, p. 252).

Among the choices that speakers have to judge a behavior perceived as aggressive, impolite, or inappropriate is the strategy of reacting to impoliteness by producing more impoliteness, for example, by deploying conventionalized impolite formulae, such as negative assertions, insults, and sarcastic assertions to reinforce criticism and disapproval (Culpeper, 2011, p. 250). From this view, as Blitvich (2022, p. 64) asserts, research on impoliteness and shameful language may be placed in the realm of (im)politeness research since it helps describe how impolite or offensive behaviors can become the target of strong moral criticism.

Similarly, according to Parr and Parr (2020, p. 1001), moral criticism involves “a practice of public accountability, in which individuals publicly hold one another responsible for norm violations in a way that serves several morally valuable purposes”. For the authors, public criticism is a “double-edged sword that can be a force for both good and bad”. Hence, it can serve to fuel the debate on moral conduct as well as can give rise to OPS and unjustified offense.

Taking the concepts of impoliteness and moral shame discussed so far, in the next section we will describe the methods of data collection, involving both qualitative and quantitative approaches to the analysis of the case of “stupid s.o.b”, as uttered by John Biden when addressing Peter Doocy.

3. Methodology

The methodology of data collection followed four main steps. First, with the help of Twitter’s Application Programming Interface (API), we searched for “#StupidSonOfABitch”, which figured as a trending topic on January 24th, 2022, following the press conference in which Joe Biden cursed Peter Doocy². In this preliminary search, we gathered data within 30 days after the episode, which resulted in a total of 1.725 tweets displaying #StupidSonOfABitch. As 95.7% of these tweets originated in the first week following the event, we were able to confirm that the topic was trendy on the platform and also that it was oriented to the episode on focus in the study. Next, in Step 2, we removed all repeated posts (known as *retweets*) from our corpus. As the retweets amounted to 64% of the corpus, after refining the dataset, we were able to compile a corpus containing 610 unique tweets that employed #StupidSonOfABitch”. These findings are presented in the quantitative section of this paper.

Next, in Step 3, we generated a list of the most frequent impolite formulae identified in the corpus, which was done with the help of Sketch Engine online software. This step was essential to find out to what extent these formulae were deployed in impoliteness metadiscourse, and if they prompted the process of online public shaming. Following the generation of this list, in Step 4 we set off to proceed with a manual analysis of the tweets with hashtags, which aimed to identify how the process of online public shaming was constructed. A selected sample of this analysis is presented in the section dedicated to the qualitative analysis of this study.

As for the ethical issues involving the study, given the non-invasive nature of the data collected, we may cautiously assume that no one will be harmed by this research. The tweets analyzed were published in open accounts, with open access. Nonetheless, all marks of authorship were removed from the posts in the interest of anonymity.

4. Quantitative Results

In analyzing the quantitative data, we were able to observe that most Twitter users reacted to what was said by Biden through insults. While doing these, they either retaliated against Joe Biden or targeted Peter Doocy. A small portion of the tweets (4.2%) solely urged the topic to trend and did not overtly insult any of the parties in particular. More importantly, regarding the insults employed, they were mostly attached to hashtags, as Table 1 illustrates:

Table 1. *Hashtags with insults*

Offenses to Peter Doocy		Offenses to Joe Biden	
Hashtags	Frequency ¹ in percentage	Hashtags	Frequency in percentage
#stupidsonofabitch	55.1	#stupidsonofabitch	49.4
#stupiddoocy	1.4	#letsgobrandon	6.7
#stupidsoobdoocy	1.0	#fjb	2.8
#peterdoocystupidsoob	0.5	#bidenworstpresidentever	1.1
#moron	0.3	#stupidsoob	0.9
#doucheypoocy	0.3	#dementiajoe	0.7
#magaretards	0.3	#angryjoe	0.6
		#sob	0.6
		#liberalmentalillness	0.4
		#worstpresidentever	0.4
		#bidenisafailure	0.4
		#incompetent	0.4
		#enemyofthepeople	0.4
		#sleepyjoe	0.4

¹ The cutting point in the table was of least two occurrences in the whole corpus.

In Table 1, Twitter users employed hashtags containing insults to vilify both Joe Biden and Peter Doocy. They did this by mainly reproducing the input from Biden, as can be seen in Table 1. The Table also shows that #stupidsonofabitch was by far the most frequent hashtag employed in the data. Moreover, the hashtag #letsgo Brandon was the second most employed in our corpus. The tag is frequently used on Twitter to replace #fjb (“fuck Joe Biden”). Since it originated on Twitter to escape the penalties for violating Twitter norms, it became widespread on the platform as a strategy to disparage Joe Biden. Moreover, in an attempt to cancel Biden, Twitter users also employed hashtags implying a correlation between seniority and mental incapacity, as can be seen in #dementiajoe and #liberalmentalillness. As for Doocy, his intelligence and professional skills were targeted, as can be seen in #moron, #doucheidoocy, and #magaretards.

In sum, as it is possible to see from the quantitative results shown in this section, while judging what was said by Biden, Twitter users produced a type of impoliteness metadiscourse that vilified both the President (“the offender”) and Doocy (“the target of the insult”). In other words, users assessed impoliteness by producing more impoliteness, particularly through the reproduction of the input from Biden (stupid s.o.b). Taking this into view, in the next section we will analyze some selected tweets containing hashtags to explore the language employed to trigger the process of online public shaming.

5. Qualitative Analysis of Selected Examples

5.1. Vilifying Joe Biden

When vilifying Joe Biden for having cursed Peter Doocy as “stupid s.o.b”, Twitter users constructed their messages mostly using insults and negative assertions that targeted their honor, as well as the deontic state of their public positions, as can be seen in Figure 1:

@POTUS When you stand in front of the podium and call a journalist a #stupidSonOfABitch, you look like an imbecile. You were the guy that was supposed to unify us and instead we get this #idiocy. That’s at least twice this wk you called a journalist names in anger under a hot mic

8:15 PM · Jan 24, 2022 · Tweetbot for iOS

Figure 1. Example of Vilifying Joe Biden

In the post, the insult “imbecile” is deployed in Figure 1 to disparage Biden. According to Culpeper (2011), insults are conventionalized formulae that are “activated by in-context-behaviors which are associated, along with the person who gave rise to them, with impoliteness metalanguage” (Culpeper, 2011, p. 135). The insult is justified on the grounds that shame is felt because moral values regarding ideals were not observed, as Parr and Parr (2020, p. 1001) point out. This feeling is suggested in “You were the guy that was supposed to unify us instead we get this #idiocy”. Alongside the same lines, the use of #idiocy is also significant in the post since it suggests the effort to trend the hashtag and thus to put Biden to OPS. Moreover, by reaffirming that the breach of verbal conduct was recurrent (“That’s at least twice this wk you called a journalist names in anger under a hot mic”), the post also underscores that the President is to be morally punished since his verbal behavior is constantly unacceptable.

In Figure 2, insults are also prominent and, together with the utterance initiated by the expression ‘exactly’ (“Exactly what we would expect), they convey strong criticism, which is constructed through a sarcastic assertion. As Vásquez (2021) noted, sarcastic readings typically stem from contradictions leading to implicated conclusions that preclude the primary interpretation of the message. In this case, the expression “exactly what we would expect”, in the initial part of the post, contradicts its final portion, as well as the context of the whole publication, in which Biden is insulted (“incompetent, mentally incapacitated, poor excuse of leader”) and put to shame. This is evidence that sarcasm commonly plays a major role in impoliteness metadiscourse, particularly because it helps impart bitter criticism “ranging from the positive to the negative emotional poles” (Claridge, 2011, p. 145). Similar findings regarding the role of criticism have also been identified in other interactional fields, for example, in the academic domain (Izadi, 2017).

Exactly what we would expect from an incompetent, mentally incapacitated, poor excuse of a leader.

#StupidSonofABitch
 #LetsGoBrandon
 #FJB

Figure 2. Example of Vilifying Joe Biden

It is also interesting to note that the insults deployed in the post (“incompetent”, “mentally incapacitated” and “poor excuse of a leader”) are maximized by the use of two tags: “#LetsGoBrandon” and “#fjb”. The former is a euphemism for the latter (“fuck you Joe Biden”) and is a reference to Brandon Straka, a pro-Trump digital influencer. Used to avoid potential sanctions imposed on users who deploy aggressive language on Twitter, the tag has become recurrent among Trump supporters when attacking Biden. As it is possible to see, the hashtag is creatively used in an attempt to encourage OPS.

In Figure 3, Joe Biden is described as an “old fool” who “can’t control himself anymore”, which resonates with the insults in Figure 2 (“incompetent, mentally incapacitated, poor excuse of leader”).

That decrepit old fool Joe Biden can’t control himself anymore. #StupidSOB #StupidSonOfaBitch #DementiaJoe #dementia #AngryJoe #BidenWorstPresidentEver #BidenAnger #bidenpressconference #BidenBS #BidenBlowUp #JoeBiden #Biden



Figure 3. Example of Vilifying Joe Biden

Furthermore, several other hashtags are used in the post in an attempt to ridicule Biden. Of particular interest is “#dementia”, which also resonates with “old fool” and “mentally incapable” (Fig. 2), and was possibly deployed to trend the insult on Twitter. As a result, impoliteness is associated with issues of ideology and prejudice that underlie the classification of Biden as “old” and “demented”. Hence, the insults serve to challenge his deontic state of commander in chief.

Figure 4 also displays an attempt to put shame on Biden by ridiculing him through sarcasm (“that’s pure class for a #commanderinchief”). Because the apparent polite remark (a compliment) is contradicted by the context (Culpeper, 2011, p. 154), the sarcastic reading is considered a more plausible interpretation for the post. To reinforce this view, the closing of the message deploys the blunt offense “be classy u old fart”, which also represents an attempt to associate old age with negative identity markers framed as incompatible with the presidency. The negative assertion is also reinforced by “#biden #aging”, used in an attempt to trend the tag.

so @POTUS calls @pdoocy a #stupidsonofabitch".
that's pure class for a #commanderinchief. be classy u
old fart #biden #aging

7:48 PM · Jan 24, 2022 · Twitter for iPhone

Figure 4. Example of Vilifying Joe Biden

In Figure 5, Biden is pictured as not being “a real man” (“a real man would not call another person’s mother a bitch from distance”). The tag #LetsGoBrandon is also deployed, followed by “You!”, in which Biden’s words (“stupid s.o.b”) are employed to insult him. According to Culpeper, Haugh and Kádar (2017, p. 123) responding in kind is a characteristic of counter-impoliteness, which is seen as provocative, since it generates negative feelings of retaliation. Moreover, it is also interesting to note the use of “Blood would be shed!” suggesting that Biden’s words were very offensive and deserve punishment.

A real man would not call another person's mother a
bitch from a distance. Blood would be shed!
#LetsGoBrandon
You!
#StupidsonofaBitch

2:31 PM · Jan 25, 2022 · Twitter for Android

Figure 5. Example of Vilifying Joe Biden

In the next section, some selected posts vilifying Doocy are analyzed. Interestingly, they focus on moral standards that challenge the journalist's professional status, as was also observed in the posts that vilified Biden. This phenomenon may well be an indication that polarized views of morality and shame are formed on similar grounds, allowing for counter-impoliteness to be extensively employed as a legitimate strategy to respond to a perceived provocation (Culpeper, 2011).

5.2. Vilifying Peter Doocy

Figure 6 is foregrounded by the pragmatic marker “well”, followed by #ThatsADoocy and #StupidSonOfABitch:

Well... #ThatsADoocy. #StupidSonOfABitch.

@pdoocy is to joirnalism, what @IvankaTrump (&
@jaredkushner) were to WH senior advising. Just a
bunch of good ol' shameless white privilege, nepotistic,
immensely uderqualified charlatans.

That's what's destroying a great nation.

8:48 PM · Jan 24, 2022 · Twitter Web App

Figure 6. Example of Vilifying Peter Doocy

In an attempt to bring to the fore a strong criticism towards Peter Doocy, the journalist is portrayed as emulating Trump’s daughter and son-in-law in what is evaluated as transgressive behavior, a reference to the alleged nepotism in Trump’s administration. To expose and shame such behaviors, the message is constructed with mentions of the public accounts of the targets (@IvankaTrump and @jaredkrushner), a strategy commonly associated with unmitigated confrontation and interpersonal provocation (Bushman & Huesmann, 2010, p. 352). Moreover, the choice of deploying a negative assertion followed by several insults (“just a bunch of good ol’ shameless white privilege, nepotistic, immensely underqualified charlatans”) was used to close the post and reinforce the process of OPS.

It is also interesting to note that the debate about “stupid s.o.b” is built on the grounds of a divisive and polarized stance, as can be seen in Figures 6-7, where “that nepotistic” constitutes a negative identifying marker used to defame

and exclude Peter Doocy, as well as Trump supporters and family members. It also operates as a strategy to gain the attention of Twitter users to the cause of vilifying the journalist, pictured as a nemesis of “everyone else” and, hence, as a member of a group that is “destroying a great nation”:

My president says what everyone else who has ever
seen that nepotistic lunkhead has thought.
[#PeterDoocy](#) [#StupidSonofaBitch](#)

Figure 7. Example of Vilifying Peter Doocy

The post in Figure 7 pictures Doocy as a “lunkhead”, who is perceived as such by “everyone else”. The tweet is also constructed to defame Doocy and express support for Biden since the President is described as someone who “calls a spade a spade” and “says what everyone who has seen that nepotistic lunkhead has thought”. From this view, cursing Doocy as “stupid s.o.b” is evaluated as the due course of actions, or a strategy to call forth sanctions to a perceived offender.

The post in Figure 8 disparages Doocy while licensing the insult lobbed by Biden, which should, according to this angle, also be lobbed to other media professionals as well (“I hope he says it again next time and idiot faux reporter asks him a stupid question”). From this perspective, Doocy is to be blamed as much as most mainstream media professionals do ([#StupidSonOfABitch](#) describes most of you”). In reinforcing this view, the author of the post offers their extensive support to Biden (“I am here for it”) should a similar occasion happen again.

Of course he remembers! And I hope he says it again the next time an idiot faux reporter asks him a stupid question! [#StupidSonOfABitch](#) describes most of you entertainment hosts and I am here for it!!



Figure 8. Example of Vilifying Peter Doocy

Described as “an idiot faux reporter”, Doocy’s inquisitive behavior at the press conference is evaluated as provocative and unprofessional in Figure 8, echoing the post in Figure 6 (“underqualified charlatans”). Taking that a relevant situational cause of verbal offense is interpersonal aggression, as Bushman and Huesmann (2010, p. 352) note. As a result, impoliteness metadiscourse may bring into play the possibility of more aggression towards the perceived offender.

The post also highlights that public shaming involves polarization and the creation of a nemesis, as can be seen in (“[#sonofabitch](#) describes most of you entertainment hosts and I am here for it”), where mainstream media is perceived as liable to be punished. It is also interesting to note that, as Ingraham and Reeves (2016) point out, “by publicly shaming others, we are both distracted from a larger crisis we seem to have little agency to affect and we perform a semblance of that agency on a smaller digital scale” (Ingraham & Reeves, 2016, p. 463). In the episode described here, the impoliteness metadiscourse is populated with the notion that shameful language is a legitimate way to retaliate against a perceived provocation in the face of the whole community that seems to be at risk of losing its reputation. Departing from the analysis of the selected examples carried out in this section, we set off to the concluding remarks of the paper, in which we attempt to shed light on the field of impoliteness and online public shaming on Twitter, taking the case of “stupid s.o.b” into view.

6. Conclusion

In analyzing the case of “stupid s.o.b”, as employed by Joe Biden to curse Peter Doocy, two questions guided the study. As for the first question “What impolite formulae were used on Twitter to judge ‘stupid s.o.b’ in the passage involving Joe Biden and Peter Doocy”?, we found that #StupidSonOfABitch” was employed in 610 tweets of the data set. As the hashtag contained an insult, we were able to attest that these were the most frequent formulae employed in the dataset. Moreover, considering that #StupidSonOfABitch stemmed from Biden’s input, the findings also suggest that the impoliteness metadiscourse on Twitter displays several instances of counter impoliteness, as Culpeper (2011) also noted in different interactional scenarios. More importantly, the high frequency of #StupidSonOfABitch revealed that the tags with insults were key components in constructing the impoliteness metadiscourse on the platform.

As for the second question “To what extent do these formulae trigger processes of online cancellation?”, our data showed that impolite formulae like insults (“stupid, lunkhead, idiot”) and negative assertions (“incompetent, mentally incapacitated, unqualified charlatan”) framed online cancellation and were used in the posts containing hashtags to put either Doocy or Biden to public shame. Moreover, while vilifying Doocy, Twitter users targeted his professional expertise and inquisitive verbal behavior. When Biden was the focus of public shaming, users mostly retaliated against him by targeting his physical and mental conditions, associating incapacity with seniority.

Our data also show that the process of online cancellation may be triggered by different elements affecting social life, for example, political inclinations. These findings serve as an indication that a new trend in the political debate may be underway, which, in our view, licenses impolite shameful language to be uttered (Wodak et al., 2021). The data also show how impolite formulae can be versatile and deployed in different contexts, particularly on social media. This tendency is also consistent with the transient and opinionated characteristics of verbal aggression on Twitter, as Oliveira and Carneiro (2018) and Oliveira (forthcoming) also point out.

Finally, an important implication of this study is that it helps expand the knowledge about impoliteness in the digital sphere, with a special focus on how the indirect experience of impoliteness, expressed via metadiscourse, can shape what counts as impolite (Culpeper, 2010). We understand that more research is needed to further scrutinize our results, particularly concerning other social media platforms.

Notes

¹<<https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/24/biden-calls-fox-news-reporter-peter-doocy-a-stupid-son-of-a-bitch.html>>

² This first step originated within the scope of a bigger project, entitled “A multi-dimensional analysis of impoliteness in Twitter”, in which the authors aim to shed light on impoliteness in the political domain.

Author Contributions

Author 1 gathered the data on Twitter while author 2 examined them from the perspective of impoliteness and online shaming. Author 1 also carried out the qualitative analysis while author 2 analyzed the quantitative data. Finally, Authors 1 and 2 systematized the data and provided the paper with its final version.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to the work presented in this manuscript.

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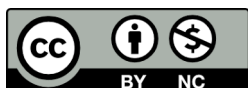
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