



“Let's see how many of you mother fuckers unfollow me for this”: The pragmatic function of the hashtag #sorrynotsorry in non-apologetic Instagram posts

David Matley

English Department, University of Zurich, Plattenstrasse 47, 8032 Zurich, Switzerland



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ABSTRACT

Social media play a key role in presentation of the self and management of social relationships. Although self-presentation online has been seen to exhibit a positivity bias, making positive forms of self-presentation more likely than negative ones, there is evidence that linguistic “behaviour” in digitally-mediated communication (DMC) often transgresses norms of appropriateness. This study adds to research on impoliteness in social media by examining the ways in which users of Instagram strategically employ hashtags and engage in face work with potentially inappropriate posts. It presents the results of a quantitative study (512 posts from a random sample) of the content of Instagram posts labelled #sorrynotsorry, as well as a qualitative analysis of politeness strategies accompanying images using the hashtag. It demonstrates how the hashtag is used as a non-apology marker in a balancing act of (im-)politeness and self-presentation strategies that allows for a level of sanctioned face attack. Overall, it suggests that posters on Instagram use #sorrynotsorry in a trans-ideological manner, allowing them to take both oppositional and complicitous stances on evolving norms of appropriateness online. The results add to an understanding of the pragmatics of hashtags in DMC and highlight the strategic nature of self-presentation on social networking sites.

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1. Introduction

Social media can be seen as “stance-rich” environments (Barton and Lee, 2013, p. 31) whose affordances enable users to construct online identities. While psychological research suggests that presentation of the self on social networking sites (SNSs) tends to be positive (Bryant and Marmo, 2012; Burke and Develin, 2016; Chou and Edge, 2012; Reinecke and Trepte, 2014), there is broad pragmatic evidence that linguistic “behaviour” in digitally-mediated communication (DMC) often transgresses norms of appropriateness (Dynel, 2015; Graham and Hardaker, 2017; Locher et al., 2015). Thus, intriguingly, users of SNSs are involved in a delicate balancing act of promotion of the self while posting potentially offensive content.

From a pragmatic perspective, norms of appropriate self-presentation are closely connected with notions of (im-) politeness and face work. Research has shown that impoliteness and face threat are not marginal phenomena (cf. Leech, 1983, p. 105) but key elements of online communication in digital communities (Arendholz, 2013; Bedijs et al., 2014; Dayter, 2014, 2018; Graham and Hardaker, 2017). Thus far, attention has mainly been focused on archetypally face-threatening behaviour in

E-mail address: david.matley@es.uzh.ch.

DMC such as trolling, flaming, threats, insults and disagreements (Angouri and Tseliga, 2010; Hardaker, 2013; Hardaker and McGlashan, 2016; Kleinke and Bös, 2015; Shum and Lee, 2013). These and other studies suggest that impoliteness, rather than simply being a manifestation of online disinhibition (Suler, 2004), may also have community- and identity-forming functions (Bolander and Locher, 2015; Dayter, 2014; Graham, 2015), and that online ‘rudeness’ can form part of both in-group and out-group identities (Kleinke and Bös, 2015).

Yet, as Dynel (2015), Graham (2015), Graham and Hardaker (2017) and Locher et al. (2015) make clear, impoliteness as a central element of online relational work is still an under-researched area. In particular, there have been very few studies of how key affordances of social media such as hashtagging form part of (im-)politeness online (cf. Matley, 2018). Equally, the function of other speech acts such as apologies in online environments has received relatively little research attention (cf. Lutzky and Kehoe, 2017; Page, 2014). Furthermore, while Instagram as an SNS has been discussed extensively in the psychological literature (e.g. Halpern et al., 2017; Hendrickse et al., 2017; Moon et al., 2016; Slater et al., 2017), it remains neglected vis-à-vis Facebook and Twitter in terms of linguistic research (cf. Lee and Chau, 2018; Matley, 2018).

The current study contributes to filling this research gap by examining how the hashtag #sorrynotsorry functions as a non-apology marker (Bentley, 2015; Kampf, 2009) on Instagram. It presents a content analysis of posts accompanied by #sorrynotsorry, followed by a qualitative analysis of the pragmatic function of the hashtag and the (im-)politeness strategies that are apparent in such posts. It demonstrates that the hashtag is used as part of a self-presentation and audience management strategy that facilitates a level of sanctioned face attack (Bousfield, 2010; Culpeper, 2005; see also Archer and Jagodziński, 2015). Overall, it suggests that posters on Instagram use the hashtag in a “trans-ideological” manner (Hutcheon, 1995, pp. 29–30) to take both oppositional and complicitous stances on norms of appropriateness online. The results add to an understanding of the pragmatic function of hashtags in DMC and shed further light on the strategic nature of self-presentation on SNSs.

2. Instagram and presentation of the self on social media

Social media play a key role in presentation of the self and management of social relationships (Fullwood and Attrill-Smith, 2018; Lee-Won et al., 2014; Rui and Stefanone, 2013a,b). Users of SNSs have been shown to engage in both *acquisitive* self-presentation, intended to generate social approval and positive impressions, such as posting images of one's achievements online, and *protective* self-presentation, designed to avoid social disapproval and negative impressions, such as removing unwanted comments on images (Arkin, 1981; Casale et al., 2015; Lee-Won et al., 2014, p. 414; Rui and Stefanone, 2013b, p. 111). Self-presentation online is thus a highly strategic activity in which self-image is constantly at stake (Lee-Won et al., 2014; Rui and Stefanone, 2013a,b).

Research also suggests that self-presentation on social media exhibits a “positivity bias”, making positive forms of self-presentation more likely than negative ones. Positivity bias arises due to both technical affordances and norms of appropriateness in online communities (Reinecke and Trepte, 2014, pp. 97–98; see also Bryant and Marmo, 2012). The affordances of SNSs offer microposters greater resources to edit messages, present an ideal self, and align themselves with individuals, brands and events (Chou and Edge, 2012; Halpern et al., 2017; Michikyan et al., 2015), all of which contribute to overall positive impression formation (Walther, 2007). Norms in online communities also ‘reward’ positivity: a study by Reinecke and Trepte (2014) showed that positive forms of self-disclosure (revealing positive information about oneself) were more likely to receive reinforcement (in the form of likes or comments) than disclosure of “negative aspects of the true self” (p. 96). Thus, there are indications that positivity – both in terms of presentation of the self and audiences' reactions – has become a normative element of behaviour online.

Instagram is an interesting case in point of the affordances and constraints of self-presentation in SNSs. Instagram is a photo-sharing app that allows users to take photos and post them online, where they can be tagged, liked and commented on. It is one of the major SNSs numbering 800 million users in September 2017 (Statista, 2018), with a strong millennial demographic, including 48.2 million millennial users in the United States in 2016 (E-Marketer, 2016). Instagram provides key affordances for the strategic promotion and marketing of the self, such as filters that allow users to modify photos, giving them greater control over the final image. Hashtags also enable images to be seen by large audiences who are not necessarily followers of the Instagram accounts in question (Dumas et al., 2017, p. 2). Research suggests that Instagram users focus more on forms of individual self-promotion such as selfie posting than on community-oriented behaviour, with one study showing that 24.2% of images posted to Instagram – the largest category – were selfies (Hu et al., 2014; see also Dumas et al., 2017). A further study among US university students documented how Instagram was mainly used for self-promotion, showcasing creativity and increasing popularity among peers (Sheldon and Bryant, 2016).

Nevertheless, despite its affordances for successful self-presentation, there is some evidence that community norms on Instagram encourage excessive self-display and the posting of potentially transgressive content. A growing body of psychological research suggests that activities such as frequent selfie posting on Instagram are correlated with narcissism (Moon et al., 2016; Sung et al., 2016; Weiser, 2015). Sung et al., for example, found that attention seeking accounted for the largest percentage of variance in reasons for posting images (2016, p. 262). Several studies have also examined what might be seen as “inappropriate” content such as funeral selfies (Gibbs et al., 2015; Meese et al., 2015), disaster selfies (Ibrahim, 2015) and holocaust selfies (Hodalska, 2017), suggesting that communities on SNSs such as Instagram develop a “platform vernacular”, i.e. “shared conventions and grammars of communication” (Meese et al., 2015, p. 1820) that are dynamically negotiated over time and which may differ from offline conventions of behaviour. Such research also reflects broader social discourse that the taking and posting of such photographs “constitute self-promoting gambits by the self-absorbed” (Weiser, 2015, p. 477).

Overall, therefore, both the technology of SNSs and norms within online communities simultaneously offer affordances and constraints that require careful navigation by users. Technical features allow self-promotion, yet self-enhancement runs the risk of being seen as self-obsessed. Equally, while there is evidence of different norms of appropriateness on SNSs, such norms are embedded in a broader socio-cultural context that may lead to social disapproval (Meese et al., 2015; Rui and Stefanone, 2013a,b).

3. Impoliteness online

The interplay between technical affordances and constraints on the one hand and newly emerging community norms on the other makes DMC of particular interest for (im-)politeness research. The study of (im-)politeness has seen a shift away from theory-driven ‘rules of politeness’ – second-order or politeness₂ approaches – to research based on more contextualised, first-order or politeness₁ perspectives (e.g. Locher et al., 2015; Mitchell and Haugh, 2015; Shum and Lee, 2013; see Culpeper and Terkourafi, 2017; Kádár and Haugh, 2013). Thus, many contemporary understandings of impoliteness focus more on “the emergence of norms of appropriateness against which interactants make judgments on politeness” (Locher et al., 2015, p. 3) than on linguistic forms that are seen as inherently impolite, suggesting that politeness and impoliteness are dynamic concepts and thus social rather than pragmatic phenomena (Culpeper, 2011, p. 254; Mitchell and Haugh, 2015, p. 209; Ogiermann, 2009, p. 16).

Research based on first-order approaches has shown that various forms of DMC (social networks, online gaming, messaging services, etc.) allow for the renegotiation of politeness norms. A study by Shum and Lee (2013) of posts on two Hong Kong internet discussion forums showed that users were aware of the general “impoliteness” of speech acts such as “vulgar phrases”, but saw them as acceptable online (p. 67), suggesting a different norm of appropriateness compared to FTF communication. Lange (2014) examined comments on YouTube rants, showing that even “profanity-laden” (p. 58) rants were often not judged as inappropriate but were perceived as indicative of “emotional-rhetorical skill” (p. 60). In analysing WhatsApp communication, Dayter (2018) suggests that self-praise, rather than being seen as impolite (cf. Speer, 2012), is accepted as the norm in WhatsApp chats. Other studies (e.g. Hardaker, 2013; Haugh et al., 2015; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2011; Neurauter-Kessels, 2011) have provided evidence that the expectations, beliefs and identities of the participants play a key role in understandings of politeness online (Graham and Hardaker, 2017, p. 786).

Nevertheless, while conceptualisations of impoliteness based on first-order approaches may provide strong models for explaining potentially inappropriate “behaviour” online (Dyner, 2015, pp. 332–333), the explanatory power of second-order approaches should not be neglected. While it is evidently the case that (im-)politeness needs to be seen in context, “the current tendency in the (im)politeness literature of emphasising the context rather than linguistic form risks throwing the baby out with the bath water” (Culpeper, 2011, p. 113; see also; Kienpointner and Stopfner, 2017, p. 79; Leech, 2014, pp. 15–18).

This is particularly true in view of the technical affordances and constraints of SNSs. One constraint of DMC that has a key impact on the assessment of (im-)politeness online is context collapse (Marwick and Boyd, 2011). Context collapse refers to the fact that “social media collapse diverse social contexts into one, making it difficult for people to engage in the complex negotiations needed to vary identity presentation, manage impressions, and save face” (p. 123). Microposters on social media thus have to deal with a number of potential audiences, who may or may not approve of shared information. As a result, users of SNSs have been shown to employ a wide range of audience management strategies such as deliberate vagueness, irony and intertextuality to address specific audiences (Georgalou, 2016; Tagg and Seargeant, 2014) and to balance potential approval or disapproval (Collings, 2014; Matley, 2018).

One of the affordances of social media for disambiguation of utterances and pragmatic work is hashtags (Evans, 2016; Matley, 2018; Page, 2012; Wikström, 2014; Zappavigna, 2015). Hashtags (such as #fitness, #inspirational) are a “form of social tagging that allows microbloggers to embed metadata in social media posts” (Zappavigna, 2015, p. 274). Their primary function is to make content searchable: by being labelled with a particular hashtag, content can be found either via the SNS’s search function or on search websites. However, hashtags can also perform a range of functions including evaluative stance-taking and “metacomment” on posts (Evans, 2016; Giaxoglou, 2018; Zappavigna, 2015; Zappavigna and Martin, 2018). Working from a Relevance Theory perspective (Sperber and Wilson, 2012), Scott (2015, p.14) claims that hashtags can be used to “guide the overall interpretation of the utterance” by suggesting that the content word of the hashtag is relevant to the topic, thus activating relevant background assumptions that are used in the construction of meaning.

One aspect of hashtags that can be analysed from a second-order politeness perspective is their function as meta-pragmatic markers. Some hashtags can be used as illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs, Searle and Vanderveken, 1985, p. 2) to put the illocution of speech acts on record. In examining irony online, Kunneman et al. (2015) showed that users of Twitter employed hashtags such as #not, #irony and #sarcasm to reverse the polarity of utterances, a finding replicated by Sulis et al. (2016). Kunneman et al. (2015) suggest that such hashtags can be seen as “the social media equivalent of non-verbal expressions” to convey sarcasm and irony (507). Similarly, in examining self-praising posts on Instagram, Matley (2018) documented the use of #brag and #humblebrag as a means of placing the speech act of self-praise (literal and ironic respectively) on record with posts that could otherwise be read as mere presentation of information. Matley (2018) suggests that meta-pragmatic hashtags may also be used to legitimise norm-violating behaviour such as self-praise as part of an online self-presentation strategy.

Thus, while it is clear that notions of (im-)politeness in DMC have to be seen primarily in the context of emerging norms of appropriateness, such research can be complemented by second-order analyses of some of the affordances of SNSs such as hashtags whose function arguably allows them to transcend contextual elements.

4. Face and (non-)apologies online

Central to discussions of impoliteness and inappropriateness are concepts of face (O'Driscoll, 2017). The groundwork for theories of face is traceable to Goffman, who defines face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line [that] others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (1967 [1955], p. 5), referring to an assessment of public image that is performed through verbal and non-verbal acts arising out of and within interaction. The legacy of Goffman's work is acknowledged in Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, wherein face is defined as “the public self-image that every member [of a society] wants to claim for himself [sic]” (p. 61). However, as O'Driscoll points out, while Brown and Levinson adopt some of Goffman's ideas, their understanding of face emphasises the notion that face is a characteristic that pertains to a person rather than arising out of interaction (2017, p. 95). As a result of these and other criticisms of Brown and Levinson's influential model (e.g. Eelen, 2001, pp. 50–53; O'Driscoll, 2017; Ogiermann, 2009, pp. 12–17; Watts, 2003, pp. 98–107), studies of face have since revived Goffman's initial conceptualisation and extended Brown and Levinson's model of face to include an appreciation of face as a discursively constructed concept. Thus, a combination of both approaches to face may have greater explanatory power in accounting for inappropriate behaviour online (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2010a,b; Lange, 2014).

Particularly positive face, i.e. the desire that one's positive self-image be “appreciated and approved of” (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 61), has been used in documenting and analysing a range of linguistic behaviour online that can be seen as norm-violating, such as insults, flaming and bragging. Angouri and Tseliga (2010) studied disagreement strategies in a Greek online forum, and documented a range of unmitigated, intentional threats to positive face in disagreements, including insults and taboo language. Flaming has been analysed on message boards by Arendholz (2013) and on YouTube by Helfrich (2014), demonstrating that face-threatening behaviour can continue over long stretches of discourse. Face-threatening acts of self-praise were documented in a Twitter community of ballet students and pre-professional dancers by Dayter (2014). Dayter's study also suggested that positive self statements served to establish solidarity within the group, thus counterbalancing some of the face threat. Overall, research shows that face-threatening acts are relatively widespread online, while also suggesting that users of social media also engage in strategic mitigation of face-threatening behaviour.

One element of face work online is apologies. Apologising online has been examined in a number of disciplines ranging from public relations (Kinsky et al., 2014) to pragmatics (Page, 2014), although linguistic studies of online apologies remain relatively scarce (Dyner, 2015, p. 344). Apologies are seen as “post-event speech acts, in the sense that some kind of offence or violation of social norms has taken place” (Spencer-Oatey, 2000, p. 18; see also Lutzky and Kehoe, 2017, p. 28). The apologisee's acknowledgment of a transgression is an important feature (Kampf, 2009, p. 2258), whereby apologies are “compensatory actions used to restore and maintain social harmony” (Ogiermann, 2009, p. 47). Traditionally, apologies have been examined from the perspective of the benefit to the addressee and the threat to the speaker's face (Holmes, 1990; Olshtain, 1989). However, approaches that view apologies as speaker-supportive and attempting to restore the face of the utterer have also been put forward more recently, particularly within communications science (Ancarno, 2015; Page, 2014). Ogiermann (2009) in particular argues that the face needs of the speaker are central to apologies: “[the speaker's] positive face – the desire to be liked by and share wants with others – is not damaged by the apology but the factor motivating it” (p. 52). From the perspective of corporate apologies on social media, Page (2014) offers evidence that apologies can function as a means of reputation management, thus reinstating the ‘face’ of companies and brands. Overall, it is suggested that apologies may have a beneficial effect on both the speaker by restoring ‘lost’ face and the hearer by offering redress for the offensive act (Ogiermann, 2009, p. 52).

Non-apologies or pseudo-apologies are “rhetorical acts that contain language such as ‘I'm sorry’ or ‘I apologize,’ but fall short of genuine apologies in various ways” (Bentley, 2015, pp. 22–23). They involve “tactics that manipulate the form of apology in order to minimize the offender's responsibility” (Kampf, 2009, p. 2258). Primarily, such non-apologies have been studied in the field of political science. Eisinger (2011) outlines a range of linguistic non-apology strategies used by politicians, such as the use of conditional forms to express a willingness to apologise, while questioning the existence of an offence *per se*, as in “If I offended Arab Americans, I regret my choice of words” (p. 137). Bentley (2015, p. 27) also demonstrates how pseudo-apologies can be used by politicians to dissociate themselves from an offensive act while attempting to appease audiences. Thus non-apologies may also be used in a balancing act of reputation and audience management, parallel to impression management in DMC, as outlined above.

5. Outline of the study and methodology

This study focuses on the pragmatic use of the hashtag #sorrynotsorry as a non-apology marker on the photo-sharing app Instagram. The hashtag #sorrynotsorry is widely used, with 11,676,156 posts using the tag listed on the Instagram search page (<https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/sorrynotsorry/>) on 29 May 2018, while the phrase “sorry, not sorry” – and variant renditions thereof – has entered the popular lexicon, and has gained a certain level of notoriety as accompanying some of the excesses of self-disclosure on social media (Steinmetz, 2014).

I conducted an initial pilot analysis of images tagged #sorrynotsorry on Instagram in February and March 2016 based on a convenience sample of 251 posts using Instagram's search function. Subsequently, I gathered a larger sample of all posts tagged #sorrynotsorry in the period from 4 April to 28 July 2017 (500,010 items) using Picodash, an Instagram search engine. I then took a random sample of 600 items, from which I eliminated all posts not in English, spam posts or ones containing other uses of “sorry not sorry” (or similar) such as references to song titles, leaving a total of 512 posts. In an initial quantitative

content analysis, I categorised the visual content of the images accompanied by the hashtag. In a subsequent qualitative analysis, I examined the pragmatic function of #sorrynotsorry, and categorised a range of (im-)politeness strategies used with the hashtag. Through random sampling of a large data set I thus aimed to gain a representative selection of posts using #sorrynotsorry. Equally, a triangulation of methods allowed for a more in-depth qualitative analysis of the function of the hashtag in the context of a representative assessment of the content of the posts.

In conducting the study, I addressed the following research questions:

1. Which types of visual content are tagged #sorrynotsorry on Instagram?
2. What pragmatic function does the hashtag #sorrynotsorry fulfil?
3. What face work do users of Instagram engage in when posting images tagged #sorrynotsorry?
4. Which emergent norms of appropriateness are apparent in the textual and visual discourse of posts tagged #sorrynotsorry?

In the analysis that follows, I demonstrate that #sorrynotsorry is used as an IFID that functions as a non-apology marker. I also show how Instagram users employ a range of both face aggravation and mitigation strategies when using the hashtag #sorrynotsorry. I suggest that the hashtag is used as part of an overall self-presentation and audience management strategy that allows for a level of sanctioned face attack. Overall, I argue that #sorrynotsorry is used as a “trans-ideological” (Hutcheon, 1995, pp. 29–30) meta-pragmatic hashtag that allows users to take both complicitous and oppositional stances on norms of appropriateness online.

6. Analysis of posts labelled #sorrynotsorry

From a ‘folksonomic’ or first-order politeness perspective, the hashtag #sorrynotsorry (and the phrase “sorry, not sorry”) is broadly understood as referring to insincere apologies, as evidenced by definitions online: “When you’re supposed to apologize for something, but you’re not really sorry at all” (datalounge.com) or “sorry but not really sorry” (tagdef.com). Other definitions denote an explicit lack of concern for other people’s feelings such as “If you’re offended (by something I said/did/omitted), that’s your problem” (datalounge.com) or “kiss my ass” (tagdef.com), or offer gendered definitions of “bitchiness” (urbandictionary.com). Thus first-order understandings of the term generally emphasise its role as a non-apology marker with a face aggravating function.

Similarly, from a second-order politeness perspective, #sorrynotsorry can also be seen as a non-apology marker. The syntactic structure of the hashtag can be read in two ways: (1) “I’m sorry that I’m not sorry”, i.e. “I apologise for the fact that I do not apologise [for the content of my post]” or (2) “I’m sorry/I’m not sorry”, i.e. “I apologise/I don’t apologise [for the content of my post]”. Both of the above readings can be seen as involving simultaneous face threat mitigation and aggravation, or positive politeness and positive impoliteness strategies respectively, directed both towards the viewers of the post (the “hearer”) and the poster (the “speaker”) (Ogiermann, 2009, pp. 52–55). From a speaker perspective, the “sorry” element enacts an apology for the content of the post, mitigating the threat to the positive face of the speaker (Ogiermann, 2009, p. 52). From a hearer perspective, the apologetic “sorry” element mitigates the face threat to the viewer of the post (due to its potentially inappropriate nature) by seeking redress for the offence (Ogiermann, 2009, p. 54; see also Kampf, 2009). Conversely, the non-apology element (“notsorry”), as an expression of explicit lack of concern for the face of the addressee, can be read as a form of face aggravation towards the audience as it indicates that the poster does not care about their feelings (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 67). Additionally, it may in turn be face-threatening to the poster, as the “notsorry” element goes beyond mere withholding of an apology to communicate a refusal to apologise and lack of sensitivity to the audience’s face wants (Cashman, 2008, p. 258; Ogiermann, 2009, p. 52).

Interestingly, therefore, from both a first-order and second-order perspective, the function of the hashtag #sorrynotsorry is underdetermined: it simultaneously offers mitigation and aggravation of the face threat posed to both speaker and hearer. It can therefore be read as an IFID that encodes both an apology and a non-apology for the transgressive act.

6.1. Content analysis

As outlined above, apologies are “post-event speech acts, in the sense that some kind of offence or violation of social norms has taken place” (Spencer-Oatey, 2000, p. 18). Thus the acknowledgment of a transgression is an important feature of apologies (Kampf, 2009, p. 2258). A content analysis of the posts was conducted to examine which types of images were seen as potentially transgressive by Instagram posters using the #sorrynotsorry tag. Table 1 below shows the distribution of the content of the posts in the sample.

As Table 1 shows, the most common subject matter of posts labelled #sorrynotsorry consists of photos of the poster themselves, either selfies or ones taken by others (28.52%). This corroborates the finding by Hu et al. (2014) that selfies form the largest proportion of Instagram images, suggesting a focus on individual self-promotion. The predominant use of #sorrynotsorry with selfies may be indicative of an awareness that they may be seen as a narcissistic form of self-presentation (Bergman et al., 2011; Moon et al., 2016; Senft and Baym, 2015).

Table 1

Types of images accompanied by #sorrynotsorry.

Category	Number	Percent
Selfies/images of the poster by others	146	28.52%
Text-image/memes	99	19.33%
Food/drink	43	8.40%
Self and others	37	7.23%
Landscapes/cityscapes	31	6.05%
Other person(s) only	30	5.86%
Animals/pets	30	5.86%
Media (magazine/TV/music etc.)	13	2.54%
Vehicles	13	2.54%
Art	10	1.95%
Fashion items/accessories	9	1.76%
Celebrities	9	1.76%
App/game screenshots	8	1.56%
House interiors	7	1.37%
House exteriors	7	1.37%
Miscellaneous	20	3.90%
Total	512	100%

The desired effect of a dick pic vs The
actual effect of a dick pic

**Fig. 1.** Meme posts labelled #sorrynotsorry.

The second most common category, text-image/memes, involves images that have either been captioned by the poster or found online and reposted (19.33%). The content of such posts is primarily what might be deemed politically incorrect or potentially offensive: recurrent discourses include sexual, drug-related and religious references as well as insults and expletives as illustrated in Fig. 1. The predominance of such content with #sorrynotsorry also suggests that it is used to indicate that the content may be potentially inappropriate to the audience, while simultaneously marking it as acceptable to the poster as part of an overall audience management strategy (Georgalou, 2016, see also Section 6.2 below).

The third largest category of images with #sorrynotsorry is food and drink. This also corroborates Hu et al.'s (2014) finding that food images constitute a substantial proportion of images posted on Instagram (10%). The fact that food images often occur with the hashtag may suggest an awareness among posters that food is a topic that is connected to health-related choices and behaviour, key elements of lifestyle that are central to presentation of the self among young people (Holmberg et al., 2016; Houts et al., 2006).

Overall, therefore, the analysis suggests that there is an awareness among Instagram users that certain content may be inappropriate, coupled with a simultaneous violation of such norms of appropriateness. Such “double discourse” of showing an awareness of norms of appropriateness while simultaneously transgressing them has been documented for both FTF and DMC (Dayter, 2014; Matley, 2018; Speer, 2012), and is an initial indication that users of SNSs engage in norm-violating behaviour while using hashtags as a mitigation strategy to take a reflexive stance on the face-threatening act (Matley, 2018). It is also illustrative of how hashtags can be employed as a linguistic means of indexing identities by displaying evaluative orientations to posted discourse (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, pp. 594–598).

6.2. Presentation of information with #sorrynotsorry

One common pragmatic strategy with images in the sample is to “merely” present textual information accompanied by the hashtag #sorrynotsorry, as illustrated by examples 1–3.¹

1. So I think my soulmate is CARBS 🍕🍷🍷🍷🍷 #sorrynotsorry #mojos #lasagna @[username] Tried out the new Scallop Primo Pizza loaded with baby scallops, kani, basil strips and parsley flakes [image of dishes arranged on a table]
2. A p e r o | #apero #cheers #wine #rose #beach #spritz #picoftheday #sunset #corsica #favone #dinner #nighout #justmarried #inlove #summer #sunnyday #sorrynotsorry #frenchgirl #france #holidays #mediterraneansea [image of two glasses of wine in front of a beach sunset]
3. Bad hair day #sorrynotsorry [selfie]
4. I look angry but my hair's on point, so #sorrynotsorry #greathairday #ellentracylipstick #restingbitchface #selfie [selfie]

As outlined previously, one feature of SNSs is context collapse (Marwick and boyd, 2011). Thus the posters face a number of potential audiences, for whom the shared information may be either positively or negatively valued. For an audience who potentially disapprove of the post, such as a health-oriented community in 1, the “sorry” component can be read as a face mitigation strategy, reducing the potential offence documented by the post, such as eating high-carb low-nutrition (HCLN) food.² However, from a speaker perspective, it can also be seen as an attempt to restore the positive face of the poster for the ‘inappropriate’ post (Ogiermann, 2009, pp. 52–55). Simultaneously, the “notsorry” element explicitly conveys a lack of concern for the audience's feelings and is thus a face-aggravation strategy both for the audience and the poster (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 67; Cashman, 2008, p. 258). However, for those viewers for whom the information is positively valued, while the “sorry” element may be less relevant, the “notsorry” component, i.e. explicitly not apologising for content that is positively valued in a community, may have a face-enhancing function.

This double-edged function of #sorrynotsorry is particularly apparent in posts in the category of text-image/memes discussed above. For those viewers who may find the reference to terrorism or “dick pics” inappropriate (Fig. 1), the apologetic “sorry” component acts as a face-mitigation strategy, reducing the offence of the post. Equally, it is also face-mitigating towards the speaker, in an attempt to restore their positive face (Ogiermann, 2009, p. 52.). The “notsorry” element, conversely, is face-aggravating to both parties, suggesting the poster does not care about the audience's feelings. Again, for those who do not object to the content of the post, the “sorry” element is less relevant, while the “notsorry” component has a face-enhancing or community-forming function for the poster (Dayter, 2014; Scott, 2015).

Thus, the hashtag allows for a balancing act of strategies regarding inappropriate content in terms of both audience management and self-presentation. It allows posters to perform different forms of face work to multiple audiences, mitigating or aggravating face threat depending on the importance of the audience for the poster. The hashtag equally allows for both protective self-presentation, fending off disapproval by distancing the poster from the offensive act (Kampf, 2009;

¹ The microposts are presented with the original spelling, including errors. Usernames and hashtags that may reveal identities have been removed.

² Interestingly, photos of HCLN food constitute the vast majority (67.7%) of food images posted on Instagram according to a study by Holmberg et al. (2016, p. 126).

Bentley, 2015), as well as acquisitive self-presentation by explicitly not apologising for the ‘achievements’ of the poster, such as enjoying a romantic sunset in 2 or having “on point” hair in 4.

6.3. Reference to norms of appropriateness

A substantial number of the posts in the sample (17.5%) make reference in the textual discourse accompanying images to norms of appropriateness, as shown in 5–10.

5. Best random car spot from my Japan trip. I might have trasspassed to get pictures 😊 #sorrynotsorry [image of a sports car on a parking lot]
6. I made a total stranger take this picture of me 😊 #shameless #sorrynotsorry [image of poster in tourist location]
7. Quiet time and dinner poolside. Yes, those are pajamas. Yes, it's 4:00. #sorrynotsorry #macandcheese #thebestigotrightnow [image of a bowl of macaroni and cheese on poster's knee]
8. I seriously can't get enough of her! Im sorry (but not really) to any of you that get bothered by me posting so many pictures of her, but there are people that dont get to see her but want to, so Facebook is how it happens!! #sorry-notsorry #iloveher #hashtag #pictureoverload #pictureseveryday #myheart [composition of baby photos]
9. #sorrynotsorry about all the flower pics. It's the most wonderful time of the year. #poppy #poppieswillmakeyousleep [image of flowers]
10. Sorry I can't stop posting pictures of tomatoes. #psyche #sorrynotsorry #delicious #gorgeous #amazing #love #summer #organic #somuchfun #earthmomma #momlife #biodynamic #urbanfarmer #gardentotable #gardening #csa #virginia #heirloom #growfoodnotlawns #instagarden [image of multi-coloured tomatoes]

The discourse shows an awareness of the content's potentially ‘transgressive’ nature, referring to behaviour in both offline and online settings. Violation of social norms, such as trespassing on property or imposing on strangers, is referenced in 5 and 6. Online practices are also referenced: in particular, the perceived inappropriateness of repeatedly posting images on Instagram, especially selfies, is a recurrent discourse in the sample, with 7.8% of posts making explicit reference to “photo spamming” as in 8–10. These meta-pragmatic references on the one hand document emergent norms themselves (such as the inappropriateness of selfie spamming), and, on the other hand, through their reflexivity, act as a face-mitigation strategy (Speer, 2012), the “knowingness” of which can also be seen as a protective self-presentation strategy (Matley, 2018; Rui and Stefanone, 2013a,b). This mitigation of the face threat is also evidenced by the apology offered in example 10 (“Sorry I can't stop posting pictures of tomatoes”), while 7, particularly through “Yes” as a turn-beginning discourse marker (“Yes, those are pajamas. Yes, it's 4:00.”), defensively pre-empts criticism by the audience. Nevertheless, all the examples acknowledge a transgression of some form which the “notsorry” element of the hashtag aggravates. Here the hashtag takes on a dual function as both mitigation of the transgression and aggravation thereof by explicitly not apologising for the post, as also illustrated by the explicit further non-apology in 8. (“Im sorry (but not really)”).

Thus the posts provide evidence of a balancing act between apology and non-apology, face mitigation and face aggravation. Clearly, this strategy allowing for a “dual reading” of the intent of the speaker may also have a ludic function. Some elements of the posts such as the hashtag #shameless in 6, whose reference to the concept of shame can be read as hyperbolic and thus ironic (Kunnehan et al., 2015), and the winking face emoji in 5, indicate a playful element in the posts. Equally, the referenced “transgressions” range from illegal acts to ones that are at most interactionally risky such as imposing on strangers. Thus the posts may also be read as banter or “mixed messages”, utterances that are “incongruous on at least one level of interpretation or generate a sense of interpretive or evaluative dissonance” (Culpeper et al., 2017, p. 324). The evidence above reinforces the interpretation that the function of the hashtag complements this strategic ambiguity between serious face work and a ludic reading: it is here that the underdetermined nature of the hashtag functions as a “trans-ideological” (Hutcheon, 1995, pp. 29–30) irony marker, allowing users to take both complicitous and oppositional, sincere and playful stances on norms of appropriateness. As such it also functions as an identity marker, creating a playful ambivalence in the poster's position towards the discourse in terms of the intended implicature and shifting between genuineness and artifice (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005).

6.4. Face aggravation strategies

Explicit lack of concern for other people's feelings is a recurrent theme in posts labelled #sorrynotsorry, as 11–13 illustrate:

11. I'm 97% sure you don't like me but I'm 100% sure that I don't care 🌸👉 #girlsJustWantToHaveFun #smiles #sorry-NotSorry #thisGirlTho♥ #noWorries #JustGrooving #iphone 😊 [image of self and others]
12. Haters are going to hate. Thing is I don't care the more haters the better #sorrynotsorry #suckitupbuttercup #mylifemybusiness #peopletalk #smalltownproblems [Meme reading “Fellas, if you got 20 haters, you need 40 of them mother fuckers before summer time”]

13. Or I really just don't care what you have to say to be honest #sorrynotsorry #noshorttermmemory #longtermmemory #onpoint #idgaf #byesies [Meme reading "I don't mean to interrupt people, I just randomly remember things and get really excited."]

As well as being indicative of a recurrent discourse of individualism and self-centredness throughout the sample (also in the hashtags #mylifemybusiness in 12, #idgaf in 13), these posts all explicitly express a lack of concern for the audience's feelings (e.g. "I'm 97% sure you don't like me but I'm 100% sure that I don't care" in 11). Following [Spencer-Oatey \(2002\)](#), these can be read as instances of face-aggravating behaviour that attack the broad sociality rights of the audience. The posts challenge the equity rights of the addressee, namely the right to be treated fairly by others ([Spencer-Oatey, 2002](#), p. 540), as indicated by the lack of reciprocity in 13 ("I really just don't care what you have to say"). They also attempt to dissociate the speaker from the audience, which can be seen as a challenge to the association rights of the audience, the belief that "we are entitled to association that is in keeping with the type of relationship" (p. 541), as in the broad affective dissociation (lack of shared feelings and concerns) in all examples, particularly 11. As [Dyrel \(2015\)](#) points out, face-threatening utterances can take two main forms, ones that are "unmitigated, in contexts where mitigation is required" and those with "deliberate, [sic] aggression, that is with the face-threat intentionally exacerbated, 'boosted', or maximized in some way to heighten the face-damage inflicted" (p. 330). Thus here the "notsorry" element of the hashtag can be also seen as complementing the 'boosted' face threat and impoliteness.

Several posts also contain insults, as 14–15 illustrate.

14. I will never fucking understand people like this. If this is you, do us all a favor and go fuck yourself. And I pray you end up forever alone #RantOver #SorryNotSorry #GoFuckYourself #ExcuseMyLanguage #IDontCare #ByeFelicia ♡ [meme featuring the quote "Why hurt a girl who never hurt you?"]
15. Let's see how many of you mother fuckers unfollow me for this. Prudes!!!! #twink #instagay #iggay #pleaselike #photooftheday #selfie #gay #gayboy #like #14l #comment #follow #f4f #boydirectioner #gayboyproblems #gays-tagram #calvinklein #underwear don't care. #sorrynotsorry [selfie of poster in underwear]

Here the posts contain explicit insults, with the conditional "If this is you" in 14 including the potential viewership in the directive "go fuck yourself", as well as the hashtags #GoFuckYourself and #ByeFelicia,³ while "let's see how many of you mother fuckers unfollow me for this" in 15, an example taken from the data for the pilot study, combines insult with explicit lack of concern for the feelings of the audience ("don't care"), even ostensibly relishing the prospect of losing Instagram followers due to the 'offensive' nature of the post. Such insults are clearly face-aggravating behaviour directed at the positive face of the audience, attacking quality face, the "fundamental desire for people to evaluate us positively in terms of our personal qualities" ([Spencer-Oatey, 2002](#), p. 540).

Within the context of such obvious face aggravation, the dual role of the hashtag #sorrynotsorry in terms of both mitigating and aggravating face threat outlined above may seem to be epiphenomenal to the face attack of the post. Additionally, in contrast to the purported positivity bias of social media, here posters seem to be engaging in negative self-presentation that clearly transgresses norms of appropriateness and politeness. In both the above, however, there are recurrent elements of face mitigation and protective self-presentation. In example 15, the hashtag #pleaselike, although hidden away in the mass of hashtags, can be seen as a mitigation strategy, an attempt to enhance the positive face of the poster, and to avoid social disapproval through protective self-presentation ([Lee-Won et al., 2014](#); [Rui and Stefanone, 2013a](#)). This combination of face aggravation and face mitigation creates a double discourse in which the trans-ideological role of #sorrynotsorry allows for ambiguity regarding the stance of the poster towards the (in)-appropriateness of the post.

7. Conclusion

As Graham and Hardaker point out ([2017, p. 793](#)), the nexus of identity, impoliteness and relational work in online communities remains an under-researched area. By combining first-order and second-order approaches, this article contributes to research on (im-)politeness in social media in a number of ways. The study highlights that #sorrynotsorry acts as an IFID that is used as part of a trans-ideological strategy, allowing users to take both oppositional and complicitous stances on norms of appropriateness in online communities. It also documents the emergence of "platform vernaculars" on SNSs such as Instagram ([Gibbs et al., 2015](#); [Meese et al., 2015](#)) and contributes to the understanding of how impoliteness may be legitimised in certain communities of practice or "genres" of discourse ([Dayter, 2014](#); [Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2010a,b](#)) and the role that hashtags play therein. However, the limited scope of this study has not allowed it to examine responses to the content of #sorrynotsorry posts, and thus research into comments on such images would add to an understanding of the community-forming function of impoliteness online.

This study also shows that the interplay between self-promotion, face aggravation and community-orientation involves a delicate balancing act in which hashtags play a key role through their meta-pragmatic and ludic reflexivity. The ironic non-

³ "Bye Felicia" is a dismissive phrase commonly used on social media, referencing a scene from the comedy film *Friday* (1995, dir. F. Gary Gray).

apologetic nature of such Instagram posts and the function of the hashtag therein reflect Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) notions of both the indexicality and relationality principles of language and identity, particularly the oscillation between genuineness and artifice that irony involves.

Furthermore, while countering Leech's (1983, p. 105) claim that impoliteness is a marginal phenomenon, the study points to an intriguing contradiction: Why are users of social media potentially offensive, particularly if they want people to like and follow their accounts? One answer may be found in the psychological literature, linking Instagram use with a lack of empathy (Scopelliti et al., 2015) or with grandiose narcissism, which may lead posters to ignore potential criticism of their online behaviour (Ksinan and Vazsonyi, 2016), reflected in the discourse of self-centredness evident in some of the data in this study. A further answer is a pragmatic one, in that there may be a ritualised element to some of the face threat in such posts. Similarly to ritual bragging and insults documented in both DMC and FTF settings (e.g. Dayter, 2014; Kuiper, 1994), the sanctioned face attack of #sorrynotsorry posts can be seen as an ironic game that indexes an identity as a member of an online in-group (Evans, 2016; Graham, 2015; Lee, 2005).

More broadly, the study offers evidence that hashtags are "a crucial meaning-making resource" on SNSs (Lee, 2018, p. 2). Social tagging offers key affordances for identity, self-presentation and interaction on social media, where knowingness and reflexivity are central to new media literacies.

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David Matley works at the English Department of the University of Zurich. He completed his doctorate in Applied English linguistics at the University of Tübingen, Germany, in 2011, published as *Exploratory Grammar Learning in a Multimedia Environment* in 2013. His research interests include second language acquisition, language and the media, and the pragmatics of social media. He is currently conducting research into the pragmatics of presentation of the self on Instagram and norms of appropriateness online.