‘So many “virologists” in this thread!’

Impoliteness in Facebook discussions of the management of the pandemic of Covid-19 in Sweden – the tension between conformity and distinction

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This paper embarks on a functional analysis of impolite language use in discussions about the response to the pandemic of Covid-19 on the official Facebook page of the Swedish national public television broadcaster in the spring of 2020. Having combined the existing models of impoliteness (Culpeper 2016) with the Appraisal theory (Martin and White 2005) in a both quantitative and qualitative investigation, the study finds remarkable differences between supporters and opponents of the Swedish tactic in terms of enactment of value orientations categorized as different attitudes within the Appraisal framework. More specifically, opponents tend to voice more subjective and affectual sentiments, whereas supporters generally derive their attitude from the Swedish institutional norms and cultural standards, resulting in more judgement. As the study concludes, these findings are related to the inherent dichotomy of the Swedish welfare state paradigm, which integrates the concepts of both state and individual citizen liability.

Keywords: impoliteness, Appraisal theory, attitude, functional analysis, social conflict, Covid-19

1. Introduction

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced the outbreak of a global pandemic of a disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), labeled as Covid-19. In response, most countries worldwide, implemented unprecedented interventions such as closure of schools and national lockdowns to hamper the transmission. However, following WHO’s

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official statement that "there is no one-size-fits-all approach to managing cases and outbreaks of Covid-19",[1] in the spring of 2020, the Swedish government decided on a laissez-faire tactic based on public self-restraint and individual responsibility rather than formal lockdowns and legal sanctions. While such a non-interventionist approach has a long tradition in Sweden and is certainly consistent with the valued concept of individual liability and self-regulation as intrinsic to social solidarity and trust (Nygren and Olofsson 2020), the strategy drew significant international attention, criticism, and even explicit condemnation (in May 2020, Standard Ethics lowered Sweden's ethics rating for not having complied with WHO's recommendations on Covid-19). In contrast, the public debate in Sweden at the time was quite coherent, albeit not one-sided. Overall, the concerns raised by critics of the government's approach would have been dismissed as overly alarmist, uneducated, and even populist; however, while several prominent epidemiologists explicitly claimed the superiority of the Swedish tactics and attributed the measures implemented elsewhere to "overreaction",[2] the strategy was also stridently criticized by prominent researchers, journalists, and public figures. These tensions eventually resulted in significant schisms in Swedish public opinion. Polarization has been especially noticeable on social media, which has become not only a battleground but also a weapon for discrediting opposing viewpoints and undermining opponents' credibility.[3]

Needless to say, polarized ideologically charged discussions on social media are frequently rife with verbal strategies that violate the norms of appropriate social behavior (or even civility), create an atmosphere of negative emotion, and attack the participants' self-image and/or social identity – often referred to as 'impoliteness' (e.g., Culpeper 2011). While traditionally viewed as non-cooperative or competitive communicative behavior (Kienpointner 2018) that disrupts the process of 'relational work' (i.e., forming interpersonal bonds in interaction; Locher and Watts 2008), in the online context, impoliteness has been identified to function as an intended and desirable feature of the user's self-representation and/or expression of solidarity/group alignment as people bond around the shared value systems and seek detachment from 'others' (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al. 2013; Graham 2015; Kleinke and Bös 2015; Andersson 2021).

The current study intends to gain further insights into this process through the investigation of impoliteness arising from different value systems between

1. WHO's interim guidance, retrieved on 30.04.2020.

2. For instance, BBC Newsnight, retrieved on 25.10.2020.

3. While the Swedish government did change the strategy and imposed more restrictions towards the end of 2020, the opinion polarization on social media was still noticeable at the time of the paper's submission, in the spring of 2021.

groups in discussions about the official response to Covid-19 on the Facebook site of the Swedish public television broadcaster, Sveriges Television (SVT), in the spring of 2020 (i.e., during the "first wave" of the pandemic). As language and society stay in reciprocal relationships, the paper contends that impoliteness in the data can be analyzed through the lens of the social experience of the crisis – also known as 'collective emotion' (Durkheim [1912] 1995). Collective emotion refers to feelings and attitudes that arise as a result of people's identification with social groups that share the same value system (Sullivan 2015) and is one of the key factors that underpin group membership, according to Durkheim (regardless of its polarity value). By combining quantitative approaches with a qualitative content analysis, the study investigates impoliteness as a type of evaluative attitude arising in relation to the socially constituted communities of shared values and beliefs connected with those views (Culpeper 2011). As will be argued in the following, the social conflict surrounding the Swedish response to the Covid-19 pandemic can be seen as the by-product of the norms and value systems shared in Swedish society.

The analysis will be carried out through the lens of Appraisal theory (e.g., Martin and White 2005), a branch of Systemic Functional Linguistics (henceforth SFL; e.g., Halliday 1994) devised to explore how the linguistic expression of attitude (i.e., emotions, evaluations, value positions) functions in the rhetorical endeavor towards alignment and formation of communities of shared values (Martin and White 2005). Consequently, the resonance between interpersonal language resources (e.g., attitude) and their social environment – including sociometric factors like group membership – will be the natural focus of the appraisal analysis. While research combining pragmatics with systemic approaches is not common, the paper follows the idea that SFL can be complementary to pragmatic interpretation because both fields share an interest in meaning, function, (social) context, and language users (Butler 1988). The relevance of the Appraisal theory to the analysis of (im)politeness has, however, been demonstrated in prior empirical studies – including both the high-stakes context of academic discourse (Khosravi and Babaii 2017) and the setting of online communication, where the system of Attitude has proven effective in the description of the process of forming community bonds (García 2014). The present paper intends to further contribute to the discussion on how explicitly connecting the pragmalinguistic (e.g., lexis) and sociopragmatic (e.g., group membership) aspects of language use can enhance the 'ecological' understanding of (im)politeness by adding a functional dimension to data interpretation. To this end, the study focuses on two specific research questions:

RQ1: What are the quantitative differences in impoliteness communicated by supporters and opponents of the Swedish approach to Covid-19 in terms of the Appraisal system of Attitude?

RQ2: How does the system of Attitude enrich our interpretation of the difference between the two positions and their impoliteness expression in the data?

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 describes the cultural and political background of Sweden. Section 3 discusses the theoretical and empirical foundations of impoliteness and appraisal research. Section 4 provides an overview of the data and procedures. Section 5 analyzes and discusses both quantitative and qualitative findings, and Section 6 summarizes and concludes the study.

2. Collectivism and distinction in Sweden – The source of the social conflict

While the defining characteristics of Scandinavian cultures are often believed to be epitomized by *Jantelagen*, a set of tacit norms that stress the value of modesty and conformity to the larger collective as superior to personal independence and individual goals (Triandis and Genfald 1998), as research indicates, cultural idiosyncrasies in Scandinavia are not uncommon. The relationship between collective thinking and individualism is especially complex in Sweden, where a remarkable tension exists between the social norms of conformity and the collective ideologies on the one hand, and the typical self-perception of the Swedes as autonomous, individualistic, and self-sufficient on the other (Daun 1991; Heinö 2009; Jansson 2018). The duality of Swedish culture has been demonstrated in cross-cultural psychology research, which indicates that while the Swedes tend to be individualists within the nuclear family, they often exhibit collectivist mentalities and consensus in the public sphere (Daun 1991; Heinö 2009). This is particularly true of established public institutions and authorities, which are treated with unparalleled trust in Sweden (Allik and Realo 2004; Realo et al. 2008).

This cultural dichotomy has also been argued to underlie the Swedish concept of the welfare state, referred to as *folkhemmet* ('people's home') – the ideal of a collective and equal state providing social and economic security to all citizens while also shaping 'the modern human' as an independent individual accountable for her work upholding the system (Jansson 2018). This multifaceted concept of an exemplary state is also regarded as the original foundation of 'Swedish exceptionalism', which is reflected in the country's self-perception as a distinct role model in many areas (Dahl 2006; Jansson 2018). Sweden's approach to the pandemic, based on individual responsibility rather than legal sanctions, has therefore been

described as an expression of the traditional exceptionalism and distinction by many Swedish pundits and public intellectuals.[4]

Nonetheless, in the investigated context, this problematic cultural dissonance has been perpetuated by the engagement and empowerment of ordinary people on social media, as well as the viralization of certain cultural codes (cf. Vladimirou and House 2018; Andersson 2021). One relevant example is the term *ättestupa* (a ritual gerontocide in Nordic prehistoric times), used in relation to the failure of the state to protect the residents of elderly care homes from the spread of the virus. The function of *ättestupa* in the data clearly echoes both the idea of *folkhemmet* and the principle of reciprocity underlying the Swedish social contract (i.e., "do your duty, demand your right"; Kjørstad 2017), which opponents claimed was broken when the once dutiful citizens were not provided with proper care. In contrast, the term frequently used by supporters of the approach is *Svärigevänner* (i.e., friends of Sweden; correct spelling: *Sverigevänner*), which was once used to refer to foreigners fascinated with Sweden and its culture but has begun to be deployed sarcastically to refer right-nationalistic criticism of Sweden's political and economic situation. Since the word is purposefully misspelled, its referents appear uneducated and too narrow-minded to comprehend the complexities of the role of individual liability in the free democratic system (Nygren and Olofsson 2020). These observations suggest that the attitudes underlying impoliteness in the current data are rooted in the complex relationship between collectivism and *folkhemmet* ideologies on the one hand, and the desire for distinction on the other. The demarcation line runs between those who criticize Sweden's response to the pandemic, thus breaking the consensus on exceptionalism, and those who believe in the superiority of the tactic – in line with the consensus on trusting the established institutions on a par with individual responsibility.

3. Background

3.1 The attitude system of appraisal

Appraisal is a method of investigating and explaining how language is used to evaluate, encode attitudes, create textual personas, and regulate interpersonal relationships. Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation are the three domains that make up the system. Graduation includes the means to modulate the interpersonal impact, force, or volume of attitude (e.g., hedges), whereas Engagement – resources to negotiate and position the attitude across text (e.g., authorial stance).

4. Article retrieved on 18.11.2020.

The current analytical focus is Attitude, which represents the values by which speakers pass judgments and associate emotional/affectual responses with participants and processes (Martin and White 2005).

The subsystem of Attitude is divided into three semantic domains: Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation. All of them encode emotion; however, Affect pertains to the feelings of the individual speaker, whereas Judgment and Appreciation are said to express 'institutional feelings' in terms of shared community values (White 2011). This is illustrated in Figure 1 below:

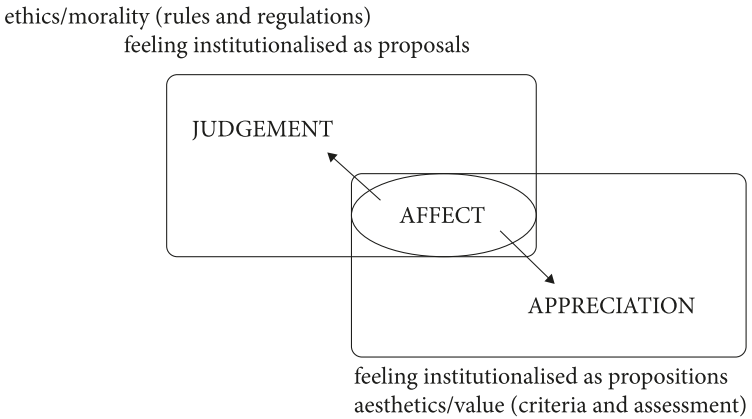


Figure 1. Attitude system in the Appraisal theory (reproduced from Martin and White 2005)

Each of the three domains can be realized as an explicit ('inscribed') or implicit ('evoked') attitude; they can also be expressed as a negative or positive polarity. However, since the current study focuses on impoliteness, the examined attitudes will be regarded as innately negative (cf. Miller 2006 on positive loadings only). Finally, since both personal and institutional feelings can be of various kinds, the system enables additional semantic subcategorizations of each attitude (e.g., judgement of ethics; see Table A1, Appendix 1). While space does not allow for a comprehensive account, an outline of the Attitude system is provided below, along with examples from current data (based on Martin and White 2005; White 2015):

Affect (the domain of emotion)

Attitudinal meanings categorized as Affect are communicated via reports of the speaker's emotional responses. For instance:

(1) *Jag får utslag av Tegnell.*
'Tegnell[5] gives me a rash.' [Affect: dissatisfaction; exp.][6]

The personalized negative assertion (Culpeper 2016) 'give a rash' is a token of negative affect towards the target based on the implication of an emotional process undergone by the speaker. However, since all Appraisal categories allow for a certain degree of grammatical flexibility, Affect can also be expressed as a 'quality' of another entity (e.g., a sad girl) or the speaker's commentary (e.g., Sadly, this is the case).

Judgement (the domain of ethics)

In this domain, attitudes are centered on the socio-cultural standards of acceptable behavior and morality. Evaluations are strongly influenced by the values and ideologies of a given group. At the level of social practice, the category of Judgement is divided into two major types: personal judgements (relating to 'social esteem') and moral judgments (relating to 'social sanction'; Martin and White 2005; Table A1, Appendix 1). For instance:

(2) *Han försöker rädda ditt och andras liv, medans du gnäller och hamstrar toalettpapper.*
'He is trying to save lives, while you are just whining and hoarding toilet paper.' [Judgement: normality; exp.]

Based on the explicit criticism ('cranky/hoard'), the example targets the addressee's[7] social esteem and thus is an assessment of how the target "measures up to social expectations" (White 2015, 23).

Appreciation (the domain of aesthetics)

Attitudes are reworked in this domain as the value of artefacts, states of affairs, and objects, including humans – if viewed as entities rather than volitional actors (e.g., pretty girl). Evaluations are based on the qualities/effects or social significance/consequences of the appraised phenomena (Martin and White 2005). (3) below evaluates both the nature and the effects of another poster's point:

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5. The Swedish state epidemiologist.

6. In the following, the attitudes (including the subtypes) and the type of impoliteness will be provided in this way for each example (exp. = explicit; impl. = implicational impoliteness; see Section 3.2 below).

7. While the first clause in this case also conveys Judgement, it is not an instance of impoliteness.

(3) *Dåligt försök att vilja göra en billig poäng.*
'Poor attempt to score a cheap point.' [Appreciation: valuation; exp.]

However, note that since the NP *poor attempt* is a judgement of a process (and thus human behavior) rather than an assessment of an entity (i.e., *cheap point*; see White 2015), such utterances are considered to represent two distinct attitudes (i.e., Judgement and Appreciation).

While all the examples discussed above involve individual words or phrases that carry an attitudinal assessment, Attitude is often conveyed by utterances/propositions that depend on the perception of the situation in evaluative terms (White 2015):

(4) *Jag ser att du tillhör Sveavägen 68.*
'I see you belong at Sveavägen 68.' [Judgement: propriety; impl.]

Although the sentence appears to be neutral on the surface, because 'Sveavägen 68' is the address of the Swedish Social Democratic Party's Stockholm headquarters, the poster flouts the maxim of manner with the intention of passing a moral judgment on the interlocutor's political leaning. This implicature is heavily reliant on the sociocultural experience shared by the participants, from which evaluation always emerges (Hunston 2000). Attitude disambiguation can therefore be argued to rely on the same principle that underpins the interpretation of impoliteness, which is based on a shared scheme of beliefs related to cultural norms and knowledge about the world (Culpeper 2011). While cultural experiences differ between individuals and groups even within the same culture, resulting in differences in evaluations of what is moral, acceptable, expected and, consequently, (im)polite, the shared scheme facilitates the retrieval of implicature and decoding the intended message in a situated context (Culpeper 2011).

3.2 Combining impoliteness and Appraisal

Another important reason why the Appraisal framework is conducive to studying impoliteness is the intrinsically evaluative nature of the phenomenon. According to Culpeper (2011), impoliteness is a type of culturally based attitude that is frequently used to enact status, social structure, and shared systems of values in the social world. Further, Watts (2003, 9) claims that: "the model of impoliteness can never be stripped of its evaluative clothing", whereas Haugh and Culpeper reason as follows (2018, 229):

> "(im)politeness is a matter of triggering and/or formulating particular evaluation (cf. Eelen, 2001), specifically, an interpersonal attitude that is positively or negatively valenced".

Arguing that (im)politeness resides in a set of relatively stable evaluative meanings ranging from adjectival forms to modality, the authors propose a middle ground approach in which both the role of participants' assessments of impoliteness and related 'societal struggle' pursued in post-modern approaches (e.g., Watts 2003) and a theoretically grounded analyst's perspective focusing on form-function relationships are equally valued (Culpeper 2016; Haugh and Culpeper 2018). Having said that, the present study will primarily involve the analyst's perspective on evaluative language resources associated with specific rhetorical objectives, which may in turn activate subjective attitudinal positions in the recipient (Martin and White 2005).

The said evaluative language resources will be identified as impolite using Culpeper's (2011, 2016) model, rooted in the idea that certain socioculturally-determined linguistic means routinely achieve specific discursive goals. The model distinguishes between two major types of impoliteness: explicit and implicational. Explicit impoliteness stems from 'conventionalized impoliteness formulae' (i.e., items conventionalized for a particular context of use; Culpeper 2016), such as 'cheap point' in (3) above, and is assumed to be interpreted based on a general implicature of the recipient's experience of similar contexts. In contrast, implicational impoliteness, entails "an understanding that does not match the surface form or semantics of the utterance or the symbolic meaning of the behavior" (Culpeper 2011, 17) and necessitates a particularized implicature derived from the specific context (Culpeper 2016). A relevant example is (4) above ('I see you belong at Sveavägen 68'), which requires a specificized implicature for proper disambiguation. The model is reproduced in Table 1 below, along with examples of bottom-up impoliteness formulae.

Table 1. Impoliteness categories and bottom-up formulae (after Culpeper 2011, 2016)

Impoliteness category	Bottom-up formulae
Explicit	– insult [you idiot; you're a pig; she's a bimbo]
	– pointed criticism [that's rubbish]
	– condescension [that's childish]
	– unpalatable questions [why are you like this?]
	– dismissals [get lost]
	– silencers [shut up]
	– negative expressives [fuck off]
	– threats [I'll kill you]
Implicated	– sarcasm
	– mimicry (echoic irony)
	– innuendo (insinuation)
	– (pseudo)aphorism (intertextuality)

While further categorizations of impoliteness are possible, and (3) could be described as 'pointed criticism' in accordance with Culpeper's (2016) model, the current study only offers a broad picture of explicit and implicated impoliteness in the data (see Section 5.1) thus leaving potential correlations between the Attitude categories and the bottom-up impoliteness formulae for future research. However, the formulae have proven useful for guiding the process of assigning a given utterance to a specific category of Appraisal, because some utterances are better classified as other types of interpersonal/evaluative language use (i.e., Engagement/Graduation) rather than Attitude. This question is covered in further depth in Section 4.2.

Nonetheless, the concept of impoliteness as a type of evaluative language use not only corresponds to the SFL view of language as a strategic meaning-making resource in the social world (Halliday 1978), but investigations of evaluative meanings can offer a diagnostic for describing the relational identities that manifest in text (Etaywe and Zappavigna 2021). As pointed out in the literature, evaluation can be used to establish and maintain social relationships (Watts 2003; Martin and White 2005). According to the current study idea, analyzing impoliteness in terms of Appraisal will better illustrate the cornerstone of its production as a manifestation of the socio-ideological split between the opposing groups in the data at hand. The following is an example of the synergistic explanatory power of the framework:

(5) *Varför älskar jag bara att diskutera med foliehattar?*
'Why do I just love to discuss with tin foil hats?'
[Affect: disinclination; impl.; [Judgement: capacity; exp.]]

While the presence of the metaphor 'tin foil hat' – in social media culture commonly associated with undesirable characterological/intellectual features – leads to the interpretation of (5) as a negative evaluation, the overall function of the utterance is what Martin and White (2005, 110) refer to as a 'pseudo question' (subsumed under the dialogistic subsystem of Engagement). Consequently, the Appraisal framework assumes that this pragmatic act serves the purpose of both negotiating and enacting the speaker's value orientation in relation to socially determined value positions of relevant social subjects (White 2015). The undeniable advantage of the functional approach is that this act can be both described and classified as a specific way of adopting a stance, intersubjective positioning, and expression of evaluation within a comprehensive and systematic model of language use.

Having said that, due to the paradigmatic axis of speech functions[8] within SFL, which precludes more than one illocutionary force in an utterance (Butler 1988), the correct disambiguation of the complex illocutionary act involved in (5) may be problematic within the Appraisal framework. As the negative judgement imbricated within the scope of the utterance is opposite to the surface form of the affectual expression ('I just love'; cf. Page 2003), the aforementioned disambiguation becomes an eclectic process, bootstrapped to a pragmatic inference, which enables the implicature of the intended speech act(s). As a result, while the phrase 'tin foil hat' may be interpreted as inducing a generalized implicature based on the experience of similar contexts (i.e., explicit impoliteness; Culpeper 2016), the correct interpretation of the utterance as impolite is contingent on the cancellation of the implicature of actually loving the interlocutor, which renders the surface request for information a rhetorical question (and yields sarcasm). Thus, the Appraisal framework can add to the description of the socio-cultural dimension of impoliteness, but it can only be complementary to the existing models of the phenomenon based on implicature interpretation.

3.3 (Im)politeness and Appraisal – Previous research

Given its sensitivity to social context, the Appraisal framework has been applied to a variety of fields at the intersection of pragmatics and: L2 acquisition (Ryshina-Pankova 2019), computer-mediated-communication (e.g., Zappavigna 2018), intercultural communication (Cordeiro 2018), narrative analysis (e.g., Page 2003), and, most recently, corpus studies of terrorist discourse (Etaywe and Zappavigna 2021). However, research combining (im)politeness theory and Appraisal is still limited.

Babaii's (2011) analysis of evaluative language in scientific book reviews is thus worthy of mention. While not explicitly combining (im)politeness with Appraisal, the study found sarcasm, mockery, and blunt criticism in this ostensibly objective genre – particularly in the context of judging the author's competence ('capacity'), honesty ('veracity'), and personal choices ('propriety'). As the author concludes, these findings could be attributed to the genre's fairly confrontational nature, which inevitably involves both positive and negative evaluation.

The Appraisal framework was explicitly coupled with the theory of impoliteness in a corpus study of reply articles in applied linguistics by Khosravi and Babaii (2017). After assuming that judgement is inherent in both politeness and impoliteness, the authors focus on this specific subsystem of Attitude (as particularly conducive to power negotiation and possibly even conflict) and examine

8. Comparable to speech acts (Taverniers 2011).

instances of Judgement in accordance with Bousfield's (2008) model of impoliteness, which consists of two overarching strategies: off-record (indirect) and on-record (explicit) impoliteness. The study discovered a preference for on-record impoliteness in the data, which was most frequently realized via Judgement of 'capacity' (competence). When the frequency of Judgement subcategories was considered, no difference was found between on-record and off-record impolite comments. As the paper concludes, the findings can be seen as an illustration of academic conflict, where evaluative language in general, and Judgment resources in particular, govern the communicative strategies of impolite verbal behaviour.

Finally, García's (2014) investigation of the domain of Attitude on a British Facebook networking site of university friends, is another paper coupling politeness theory and Appraisal. According to that study, the contextual features of the medium (e.g., interactional orientation) prompt the production of positive affectual utterances and appreciation, which are then exploited for the purpose of the construction and maintenance of rapport and positive face. Consequently, unlike in the aforementioned investigations of academic discourse, Judgement was not the most frequent attitude in the data. The postings turned out to be pervaded with Affect, commonly deployed as a positive politeness strategy for the construction of common ground, fulfillment of the addressee's needs, and management of interpersonal relations. While the interest in the positive effects of evaluative language is clearly different from the current focus, both studies touch upon the significance of shared values in online communication; however, in García's (2014) paper, this question is approached from the perspective of a communal value system contributing to the maintenance of interpersonal relations, whereas in the current study, shared values are thought to serve the purpose of both affiliation with those thinking alike and disaffiliation from 'others' (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al. 2013; Andersson 2021).

4. Methodology

4.1 Material

The data consist of discussion threads beneath 35 news articles published on the official Facebook site of SVT between March 1 and May 31, 2020. The collected articles concern only the internal situation in Sweden (e.g., the government's decisions); reports from other countries have been disregarded – unless related to Sweden (e.g., comparison of the Norwegian *vs.* Swedish approach to elderly care). Postings in languages other than Swedish (mostly English, Danish, and Norwegian) were discarded.

The total number of harvested posts was 12,399 (mean per article: 354.2) at the time of retrieval (June 2020), which yielded a sample of 792 attitudes (388 by Supporters and 404 by Opponents)[9] in 400 posts (206 by Supporters and 194 by Opponents). What has potentially influenced this outcome is the medium type – the participation rules on SVT Facebook platform are clearly defined and the site is closely monitored by the owner. The discussions therefore tend to maintain a civil tone. Another reason is the problematic aspect of sampling and quantification of language phenomena in multi-participant discussions, which is recurrent contributions by the same individuals (see Andersson 2021). Since observations derived from such data are not independent, potential statistical significances will be unreliable. Furthermore, given the current RQ1, recurring rants by the same posters or sideshow conversations may be representative of individual preferences/*ad hoc* conflicts between a few individuals rather than general group tendencies. The representative aspect, in contrast, is the shared and recurring attitudes expressed by different group members in their statements. To balance the sample and avoid the aforementioned statistical bias, it was decided to collect only one post per user (the procedure can also be seen as a way of sample randomization). As a result, the study unit becomes the individual post, which represents a distinct individual (poster).

Needless to say, one post is not necessarily tantamount to one attitude (or one type of impoliteness, for that matter). This means that the same person is very likely to have contributed to more than one instance of attitude in the data (the mean ratio for Opponents is 1.8 and for Supporters is 2.0) and, more importantly, to more than one instance of the same attitude type (the mean ratio of Judgement in Supporters' postings is 1.2), which can skew the statistical results. For the interested reader, the mathematical solution to this problem is provided in Appendix 2, while the statistical results are presented as straightforward z-tests in the following.

4.2 Coding for impoliteness and Appraisal

The posts have been annotated according to the three subsystems of Attitude: Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation (Section 3.1). Since prior research (Fuoli 2018; Zappavigna 2018) has noted a lack of consensus on the identification, categorization, and unitization of Appraisal resources, the analysis follows Taboada and Carretero (2012) and considers coordination of several instances of the same attitude (sub)type as one instance (e.g., He is stupid and ignorant [Judgement:

9. The terms 'Supporters' and 'Opponents' will be used in the following to distinguish between the groups supporting and opposing the Swedish approach to the pandemic.

capacity]). Juxtapositions of different attitude (sub)types, in contrast, are treated as separate spans (e.g., He is stupid and dishonest [Judgement: capacity + veracity]; see Table A1, Appendix 1). Further, in line with Martin and White (2005; see also Taboada and Carretero 2012), modifications of attitude expressions by words that could serve as independent evaluations[10] have been annotated as Attitude (e.g., stupid coward [Judgement: capacity; tenacity]), whereas modifiers with a mere intensifying function (e.g., damn coward [Judgement: tenacity]) have been discarded, as they are instances of Graduation rather than Attitude. Thus, while both 'stupid' and 'damn' would be classified as 'insult' according to Culpeper's (2016) model, it appears that different realizations of the same impoliteness formula may have different functions on the Appraisal view.

This principle also applies to another formula, which is dismissals (e.g., Get lost!; Culpeper 2016; Table 1 above). Dismissals are traditionally communicated through simple imperatives, which in the Appraisal framework belong in the Engagement system – as a means of negotiation rather than expression of attitude in the dialogic exchange (Martin and White 2005). Modalized formulations of imperatives, in contrast, are regarded as parameters for organizing the subcategories of Judgement (Table A1, Appendix 1), grounded in the speaker's subjectivity, and assisting her expression of attitude toward the value system of interlocutors. As a result, modulations of obligation, such as in (6) below, can be effectively interpreted as Judgement, whereas modality – as a carrier of attitude (Martin and White 2005):

(6) O: *Tegnell, du får avgå, tack!*
'Tegnell, you may/should quit, thank you!' [Judgement: propriety; impl.]

Indeed, as the asymmetry in power relationship, social distance, and degree of imposition between a high official and an ordinary internet user (Brown and Levinson 1987) blocks the implicature of a polite request conventionally conveyed by the Swedish auxiliary *få*, the utterance does become a lexicalized appraisal of the target's professional ethics (i.e., 'propriety' or perhaps also skills, i.e., 'capacity'). What (6) also illustrates is how inscribed/evoked attitude and explicit/implicated impoliteness frequently coincide – as the generalized implicature of a request is blocked, the particularized implicature of an impolite dismissal emerges, allowing the correct interpretation of the evoked negative attitude.

Finally, the corpus was annotated using the UAM Corpus Tool (O'Donnell 2008), which includes a built-in and editable Appraisal annotation scheme that allows for changes to the level of detail. The main change to the scheme for the purposes of this article concerns the general category 'appraised' (i.e., who

10. For instance, an adjectival complement of a copula.

is being evaluated), which originally included two interpersonal categories: 'self' and 'other'. However, because this study is concerned with intergroup communication, the original categories have been replaced with Kleinke and Bös's (2015) system of intergroup rudeness and group membership demarcation in online discussions, which is reproduced in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Types of intergroup impoliteness online (reproduced from Kleinke and Bös 2015)

Type I	**Type II**
Majority *vs.* minority (e.g., the Swedes *vs.* the immigrants)	Minority *vs.* majority (outside forum) (e.g., the participants *vs.* the healthcare system)
Type III	**Type IV**
Ingroup *vs.* outgroup (within forum) (e.g., the supporters *vs.* the opponents of the Swedish response to the pandemic)	Ingroup *vs.* outgroup (outside forum) (e.g., the participants *vs.* the inhabitants of Stockholm)

Types I and II are based on Kienpointner's (1997) concept of hierarchical impoliteness: Type I refers to strategies used by majority groups to denigrate members of specific outgroups, whereas Type II refers to minority groups using rudeness for social self-defense and political criticism. Types III and IV, which are extensions of the system developed specifically for online intergroup communication, are concerned with the formation of non-hierarchical groups in which social identity is formed and assessed by comparing the ingroup to relevant outgroups. As Kleinke and Bös (2015) argue, the construction of the respective in-and outgroups is accomplished through impoliteness, resulting in a bias portraying the outgroups as inferior.

5. Results and discussion

5.1 Quantitative differences between supporters and opponents of the Swedish approach to the pandemic

To answer RQ1, an overview of the quantitative categorizations of the data is provided in Table 3 below.

There are differences between supporting and opposing the Swedish approach to the pandemic and the most commonly expressed attitude. Whereas no significant difference between the groups was found for Appreciation ($z = 0.04$;

Table 3. Distributions of attitude categories among supporters and opponents

	Affect	Judgement	Appreciation	Totals
Supporters	51 (12%)	235 (61%)	102 (26%)	388
Opponents	131 (33%)	176 (43%)	97 (24%)	404
Totals	**182**	**411**	**199**	**792**

$p < .0.9$), there was a difference for Judgement ($z = 5.05$; $p < .001$.). However, as shown in Table 3, while Judgement is a very frequently produced attitude among both groups (the mean values: 0.63 for Supporters and 0.45 for Opponents; ±0.02), the means for Affect differ very conspicuously between Supporters (0.11 ± 0.01) and Opponents (0.30 ± 0.02). Therefore, the most vital difference between the groups, appears to be Opponents' very significant predilection to produce Affect ($z = 7.1$; $p < .000$.).

However, in contrast to the aforementioned study of attitude at the Facebook site of university friends (García 2014), in the current data, Affect is regarded to serve the purpose of *ad hoc* contemporaneous affiliation and disaffiliation with relevant value orientations (in ideologically charged discussions – most commonly negative ones; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al. 2013; Andersson 2021) rather than that of forming community bonds. Hence the marked presence of Judgement in the corpus, which is consistent with the studies that show that group affiliation and cohesiveness in ideological discussions online are frequently achieved through impoliteness targeting the out-group members' positive face (e.g., stigmatizing description; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al. 2013; Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014). Judgement appears to be particularly well suited for this purpose as a type of assessment related to ethics and social norms.

The question at this point is whether the observed distributions of Attitude are related to appraisal of any specific groups (recall Table 2 in Section 4.2). Overall, as shown in Figure 2 below (see Table A2 in Appendix 1 for detailed frequencies), while both Supporters and Opponents are most engaged in attacking the outgroups within the forum (i.e., each other; Type III; 67% of the 388 attitudes by Supporters and 48% of the 404 attitudes by Opponents), the proportion of the attitudes that target 'majority outside forum' (e.g., the healthcare system; Type II) is significantly higher for Opponents than Supporters (30% *vs.* 4%; $z = 9.7$; $p < .000$). Both Type I and Type IV impoliteness, in contrast, yield relatively lower proportions in both groups, owing to the fact that these particular intergroup tensions (e.g., the Swedes *vs.* the immigrants) are probably less relevant in the analyzed context.

This picture only partially matches the study by Kleinke and Bös (2015), who found that while many postings in English and German discussion threads tar-

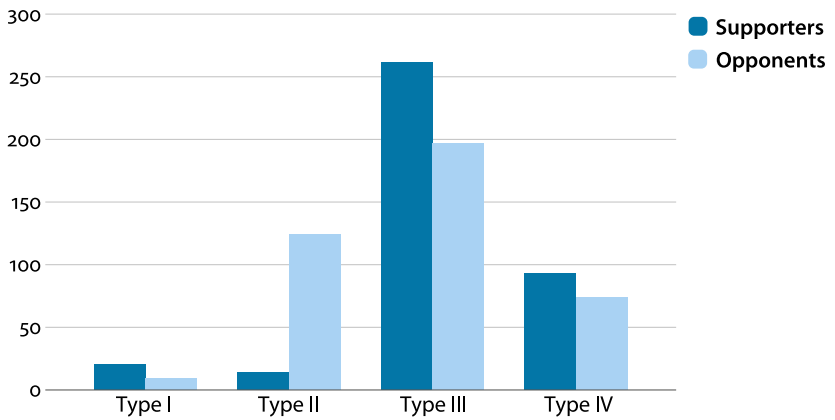


Figure 2. Targets of impoliteness among supporters and opponents

geted the outgroup within the forum, the majority also had a venting function attacking socially distant targets (Type II) in both fora. Although cultural factors cannot be ruled out, the discussions in the said study revolve around an external institution (the Catholic Church), whereas the current findings illustrate the context of a specific social conflict, mutual antipathy between two opposing groups, and the related scale of polarization in public discourse. Hence, for instance, the highly significant difference in Type II impoliteness between the two groups, who clearly differ in their sentiments towards public institutions and authorities.

Finally, Table A1 (Appendix 1) shows the proportions of inscribed *vs.* evoked attitudes, which are nearly equal among Supporters (52% and 48%, respectively) but show a preference for the inscribed type among Opponents (59% *vs.* 41%; $z=3.6$; $p=.003$). Since the proportions of inscribed and evoked attitude are assumed to correspond to the frequencies of explicit *vs.* implicated impoliteness and their distributions across the three Appraisal categories (Table 4 below), the high frequencies of explicit impoliteness within the Affect category – significantly more frequent among Opponents – contribute to the proportions of inscribed attitude in this group. The remaining distributions of explicit and implicated impoliteness across the two other Attitude subsystems appear to be quite equal, which could be due to the participants' individual preferences, context type, and the platform – as previously stated, the SVT Facebook page is closely monitored, so users may frequently choose to disguise impoliteness in an implicated formula, such as sarcasm.

Table 4. Distributions of explicit and implicated impoliteness over the three attitude categories

	Affect		Judgement		Appreciation	
Impoliteness type	**Explicit**	**Implicated**	**Explicit**	**Implicated**	**Explicit**	**Implicated**
Supporters	43 (84%)	8 (16%)	106 (45%)	129 (55%)	53 (52%)	49 (48%)
Opponents	106 (81%)	25 (19%)	84 (47%)	92 (53%)	47 (48%)	50 (52%)
Totals	**149**	**33**	**190**	**221**	**100**	**99**

5.2 The functional view on the difference between supporters and opponents of the Swedish approach to the pandemic

The purpose of the following section is to shed light on the differences between the two positions in discussions of the Swedish approach to the pandemic in terms of the three subsystems of Attitude and to demonstrate how the functional facet of Appraisal theory can add to the interpretation of sociocultural phenomena contributing to impoliteness in the data. The content analysis of several instances of impoliteness generated by both groups will also show how the same type of attitude can be mobilized to express different value orientations. All the following proportions are based on the tables to be found in Appendix 1.

5.2.1 *Judgement*

As indicated in Section 5.1, Judgement turns out to be eagerly issued by both Opponents and Supporters in the data. For Supporters, this specific attitude functions as a 'technocratic' ground to positioning oneself toward opposing values. As a result, in this group, judgement frequently targets those who, allegedly, lack knowledge, competence, and experience (i.e., 'capacity') to criticize the Swedish response to the pandemic:

(7) S:[11] *Förjävligt vad många "virologer" som inte ens klarar av att tvätta händerna!*
'Damn, so many "virologists", who are not even able to wash their hands!'
[Affect: anger; exp.; Judgement: capacity; exp.]

While conflict and dispute should be avoided or reduced in accordance with Swedish cultural standards, such behaviors are commonly used to express the speaker's authority in some way (ethos in the Aristotelian sense), according to Ilie (2004). What the utterance thus demonstrates is not only polarization of views,

11. S – Supporter; O – Opponent in the following.

but also a moralizing component, where the overt attack on the target's intellectual disposition (emphasized by the quotation marks implying incompetence) can be seen as the rhetorical function of lecturing the audience (Ilie 2004; e.g., endorsing the Swedish model equals trust in science).

In the current data, challenging the interlocutors' 'capacity' (and thus their right to speak up) accounts for a significant portion of all Judgements issued by both groups, but it is significantly more common among Supporters (55% S *vs.* 43% O; $z = 2.4$; $p = .001$; Table A1). This observation reflects the general attitudes in Sweden that value formal education and documented skills, as exemplified by the slogan behind the government's response to the pandemic: "we follow the science". Endorsing the model, in contrast, equals uninformed complacency, which should be condemned – frequently through Judgment directed at Supporters.

The next example illustrates a judgement of 'propriety', the attitude subtype that is substantially more common among Opponents (30% O *vs.* 10% S; $z = 5.2$; $p < .001$; Table A1) and aims to demonstrate the group's moral superiority. The utterance targets the chief epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell:

(8) O: *Doktor Tegnelle.* [Judgement: propriety; impl.]

Based on the functional concept of 'coupling', i.e., "a combination of meanings across semiotic dimensions" (Martin 2000, 164), (8) may be interpreted as a fusion between the interpersonal and ideational (world-experience related) meanings (Macken-Horarick and Isaac 2014). The obscured version of the target's name, explicable by the maxim of manner, affords the intended evaluative interpretation, which is entrenched in the culturally shared knowledge of Doctor Josef Mengele's sordid experiments during the holocaust. Thus, while in the spring of 2020, the phrase was serving as the offence *du jour* towards the chief epidemiologist on the SVT Facebook site, as impoliteness in the current data yields intergroup rather than interpersonal effects, what the poster performs is an act of disaffiliation from the supporters of the Swedish tactic and their ethical values. Aside from the associated impoliteness, the effect of a moral judgement has also been achieved.

5.2.2 *Affect*

Affect was found to be significantly more common among those who opposed the Swedish response to the pandemic than among those who supported it. The sentiments of the broken consensus of the welfare state underpin the affective postings in this group, yielding fear, distrust, and anger:

(9) O: *Herregud! Man blir förbannad att inte svenska folket ser igenom sosseriet och deras otillräcklighet!*
'OMG! One gets pissed that the Swedish people do not see through the lefties and their insufficiency!'
[Affect: anger; exp.; Judgement: normality; Judgement capacity; exp.]

Opponents' affective utterances are frequently directed at the system and its institutions (24%; Type II impoliteness; Table A2), as in (9). Supporters, in contrast, are generally dissatisfied with the lack of formal qualifications and understanding of the role of individual liability among in-forum interlocutors (67%; Type III impoliteness; Table A2), as shown in (7) above. While both (7) and (9) reverberate the distinctive idea of the Swedish welfare state, their orientation toward different targets demonstrates the unwillingness of the groups to recognize what they have in common and thus the aforementioned social divide. The function of Affect is clearly to mark disaffiliation with the outgroup – interestingly, in both cases, conveyed via less subjective strategies than self-mentions (the generic pronoun 'one' in (9) and the comment adjunct 'damn' in (7)), which may reflect a reluctance to emotive self-disclosure in the context of intergroup conflict (cf. Page 2003). The judgment embedded within the scope of both posts confirms that group identification is frequently associated with positive face damage to the outgroup (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al. 2013).

5.2.3 *Appreciation*

Appreciation was found to be the least prevalent attitude among both groups, which is understandable given that impoliteness stems from normative rather than aesthetical values in the process of a social conflict (see Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2013). This also explains the Judgement proportions in the data. However, much as positive appreciation can satisfy interlocutors' positive face needs (García 2014), negative appreciation can lead to (dis)affiliation with relevant groups via positive face damage; for example, implicitly targeting interlocutors via evaluation of the products of their skills/behavior (68% of Supporters' posts; Type III impoliteness; Table A2):

(10) S: (*Nu får du) foliesofie kandidathattexamen.*
'(Now you get) a degree in conspiracy theory.' [Appreciation: reaction; impl.]

(10) is a creative departure from the existing communicative templates (demonstrated to be generally associated with impoliteness; Culpeper 2005, 2011) involving the Swedish term *filosofie kandidatexamen* ('Bachelor of Arts'), and the phrase *foliehatt* (i.e., 'tinfoil hat') nested within its scope (i.e., *filosofie* → ***folie**sofie; kandidatexamen* → *kandidat**hatt**examen*). Since the post is a response to another

interlocutor's theory on the allegedly man-made nature of the coronavirus, it was coded as a negative evaluation of that utterance's quality and/or impact (i.e., 'reaction'). Importantly, because the role of humor in attitude expression has been purposefully left out of Appraisal theory (Martin and White 2005), (10) exemplifies the aforementioned supplementary role of the framework in assigning a functional dimension to the particularized implicature of "mockery and amusement at the expense of the target" (Dynel 2012, 174), which in online interactions often functions as a form of exploitative strategy reflecting the shared values of specific groups, reinforcing in-group bonds, and resulting in value positioning of the poster towards the outgroup(s) (Vladimirou and House 2018; Andersson 2021).

In contrast, a sizable proportion of Opponents' Appreciation is directed at the system, the authorities, and the paradigm of the lost welfare state (43%; Type II impoliteness; Table A2):

(11) O: *Svenska vården påminner om Bananrepublik.*
'Swedish healthcare resembles Banana republic.'
[Appreciation: valuation; exp.]

The subsystem of Appreciation provides a telling illustration of the split between the two groups; however, interpretation of impoliteness may involve further, contextually retrievable (particularized) inferencing, implying a judgement of the interlocutor's capacity in (10), and (possibly) a dissatisfaction stance in (11). While the current study did not allow for double coding of potential embeddings (cf. Page 2003), future research could certainly explore the role of thus evoked attitude in correct disambiguation of impoliteness.

6. Conclusion

This paper examined impoliteness in Facebook discussions about the official response to the Covid-19 pandemic in Sweden. The study addressed the question of a potential difference between supporters and opponents of the approach from the perspective of socioculturally determined value positions and the participants' efforts to enact, negotiate, and demonstrate their allegiance to specific values by combining the existing socio-pragmatic model of impoliteness (Culpeper 2011, 2016) with the Appraisal theory (Martin and White 2005). A related theoretical and methodological question was the added value of the functional framework to the description of impoliteness issued by the two opposing positions.

As indicated in Section 5.1, the key difference between the two groups is their (dis)inclination to express Affect and the disparity in the most frequently produced attitude, i.e., Judgement, which is preferred by Supporters. The interpre-

tation of this result is related to the warp and weft of the Swedish concept of *folkhemmet*, the distinct midway point between socialism and capitalism that, however, also underpins the social divide. Since the concept encompasses both the aspect of responsibility of the welfare state for an individual and that of individual liability for the welfare state, the inherent polysemy of the ensuing social consensus is the likely vehicle of the sentiments of distrust and disappointment in Opponents' posts, as opposed to the 'technocratic' criticism and normative judgment pervading Supporters' utterances. Consequently, Supporters' reduced use of Affect and preference for Judgement strengthens their ideological determination and increases their antipathy toward the opposing group, whereas Opponents' strong tendency to voice emotion reinforces their dissatisfaction with the *status quo* and increases their aversion toward the opposing group (cf. Etaywe and Zapavigna 2021).

Nevertheless, it can be argued that the Appraisal system of Attitude did facilitate pinpointing the crux of this difference in a more effective manner than a mere analysis of impoliteness. As only few significant differences between how explicit and implicated impoliteness is deployed to convey specific attitudes were identified, each formula can be viewed as serving the general purpose of damaging the target's social identity – such as gaining power, lecturing or entertainment – can be achieved via an explicit insult (cf. Ilie 2004; Culpeper 2011). While previous research has addressed these functions of impoliteness in terms of the speaker's motives (e.g., Kienpointner 1997; Culpeper 2011), they can all be further described in terms of the interplay of interpersonal meanings and social relations. As an intrinsically social approach, the Appraisal theory offers a model of consolidation of these potential functions and means of their realization into a comprehensive infrastructure of language use in the social world (including lexicogramatical resources for enacting identities and relations, such as modality in (6)). In the current study, Appraisal has certainly enabled us to highlight the difference between the two positions – not only in terms of the offensive language deployed to mark and negotiate different value positions but also, more broadly, in terms of attitude – a specific aspect of evaluation at the heart of impolite language use.

On that note, considering the multifaceted nature of impoliteness, it is perhaps unsurprising that certain formulae do not fit neatly into the Attitude system (recall Section 4.2). One example is the previously mentioned case of dismissals expressed using imperative constructions. In the current corpus, this formula was frequently used by Supporters towards foreigners who were critical of the Swedish response to the pandemic; for instance: 'Just move back to Finland, if the Swedish tactic is so terrible!'. While this utterance serves the primary purpose of emphasizing the boundaries between the groups and negotiating the speaker's interpersonal space, and thus – will be viewed as an instance of Engagement in the

Appraisal framework (cf. Martin and White 2005), given its clearly evaluative character towards the interlocutor's value positioning, it could be argued that it does involve an embedded attitude (e.g., anger, dissatisfaction, or perhaps judgement; cf. (11)), which can be worked out in this particular context (cf. Culpeper 2016). Given that attitude can be expressed in a variety of ways and account for a wide range of behaviors, this discussion suggests that further research could certainly explore the idea of coupling the notion of impoliteness with the remaining subsystems of Appraisal. While the intrinsic density of the framework's very paradigm may be an obvious limitation, moving beyond individual models of description and combining different approaches may be not only a useful but also necessary step towards embracing the eclectic and polychromic nature of impoliteness. Owing to its recognition of principled matching of functions with specific language choices in context, Appraisal theory is arguably a viable perspective to add to the tools available to study the phenomenon.

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Appendix 1

Table A1. Subcategories of attitude system including distributions among supporters and opponents

Attitude type		Classification of attitude	Supporters	Opponents
Affect		Un/happiness (anger, sadness, love)	30 (59%)	56 (43%)
		Dis/satisfaction (pleasure, respect)	17 (33%)	30 (23%)
		In/security (trust, anxiety, fear)	1 (2%)	32 (24%)
		Dis/inclination (non/desire, hope)	3 (6%)	13 (10%)
		Total	**51**	**131**
Judgement	Social esteem	Normality (how special?)	15 (6%)	12 (7%)
		Capacity (how capable?)	128 (55%)	76 (43%)
		Tenacity (how well disposed?)	57 (24%)	28 (16%)
	Social sanction	Veracity (how honest?)	11 (5%)	7 (4%)
		Propriety (how ethical?)	24 (10%)	53 (30%)
		Total	**235**	**176**
Appreciation		Reaction (do I like/approve it?)	15 (15%)	31 (32%)
		Composition (is it easy to follow/does it hang together?)	24 (24%)	13 (13%)
		Valuation (is it useful/worthwhile?)	63 (63%)	53 (55%)
		Total	**102**	**97**
Explicitness		Inscribed	202 (58%)	237 (59%)
		Evoked	186 (48%)	167 (41%)
		Total	**388**	**404**

Table A2. Attitude categories targeting different groups

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4	Total
Affect					
Supporters	4	0	34	13	**51**
Opponents	3	31	62	35	**131**
Judgement					
Supporters	14	13	156	52	**235**
Opponents	5	53	87	31	**176**
Appreciation					
Supporters	1	3	70	28	**102**
Opponents	1	42	48	6	**97**
Total	**28 (4%)**	**142 (18%)**	**457 (57%)**	**165 (21%)**	**792**

Appendix 2

As discussed in Section 4.1, while sampling one post per user reduces the potential statistical bias associated with multiple contributions of attitude by the same individuals, the problem of multiple attitudes (often of the same subtype) within one post persists. To account for this issue in an unbiased manner (while maintaining the post as a unit of statistical analysis), each post has been mathematically treated as a triple of weights representing the relative frequencies of the three Attitude types adding to 1. As a result, a post with only one attitude type was counted as one whole unit (i.e., 1), whereas a post with multiple attitudes was counted as a sum of fractions of one unit. Consider Example (9) (repeated here as (i)), which contains one instance of Affect and two instances of Judgement:

(i) *Herregud! Man blir förbannad att inte svenska folket ser igenom sosseriet och deras otillräcklighet!*
'OMG! One gets pissed that the Swedish people do not see through the lefties and their insufficiency!' [Affect: anger; exp.; Judgement: normality; Judgement capacity; exp.]

This post has been analyzed as a sum of two fractions (i.e., 0.33 for 1x Affect and 0.67 for 2x Judgement, which equals one whole unit (1)).[12] For standard errors of estimates, and in testing for statistically significant differences, the uncertainty in the estimated frequencies must be evaluated. It can, however, be assumed that the weighted data extend binomially distributed binary data (0–1) in such a way that the approximate normal distribution of the estimates holds also for the weighted data, and the conventional sample standard deviation for the weighted data applies and extends the specific one for the binary data. As a result, the standard errors (±*s.e.*) of the estimates, calculated in the standard way, will be valid, and statistical tests can be carried out as straightforward z-tests.

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12. This has been calculated for all data by means of a standard Excel formula.

Biographical notes

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