

Evaluating Offense: Appraisal Resources and Impoliteness in Football Fandom Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how impoliteness is linguistically realized through appraisal resources in online football fandom discourse. Previous studies have largely classified impoliteness strategies but have paid less attention to the evaluative resources through which impoliteness is constructed. Drawing on impoliteness and appraisal theories, the analysis focuses on Liverpool fans' replies to a tweet by Trent Alexander-Arnold following his transfer. Using a qualitative discourse-analytic approach, the study examines how evaluative meanings are constructed through Attitude, Graduation, and Engagement, and how they contribute to the production of impoliteness. The findings show that impoliteness is predominantly realized through negatively inscribed Judgement (propriety), in which the player is evaluated as disloyal or morally deficient. These evaluations are frequently intensified through Graduation (Force) and are often presented as collectively endorsed through contractive Engagement resources. The study contributes to impoliteness research by showing how appraisal resources systematically construct offensive meanings in online football fandom discourse.

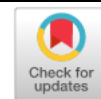
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INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have reconfigured public discourse into a real-time, evaluative arena where users continuously negotiate stance, identity, and affiliation (Avci et al., 2025; Yau et al., 2020). Among these platforms, X has become a salient site for football fandom, where reactions to matches and transfer decisions are articulated through affectively charged language. Within these digital communities, fan responses extend beyond descriptive commentary to involve explicit affective positioning (Biri, 2023), moral evaluation (Koa, 2026), and the linguistic policing of loyalty (Lindström, 2021). Such interactions frequently manifest as verbal aggression (Cleland, 2014; Lindström, 2021; Pegoraro, 2010), which serves a dual function: it operates simultaneously as a site of conflict and as a resource for social bonding and the reinforcement of in-group values (Babatunde et al., 2026; Souza et al., 2014).

Given the prevalence of hostility in these contexts, online fan discourse is increasingly examined through the lens of impoliteness theory (Andersson, 2024; Babatunde et al., 2026; Lu & Liang, 2024), which conceptualizes offensive communication as communicative practices oriented toward face-attack and social disruption (Culpeper, 1996, 2011). Research on computer-mediated communication suggests that digital affordances, such as anonymity, scalability, and reduced normative constraints, facilitate more direct and intensified forms of face-attack compared to offline settings (Bae, 2016; Bernstein & Gomila, 2025; Coppolino Perfumi et al., 2019; Dynel, 2015; Rösner & Krämer, 2016; Wijayanto et al., 2017). Empirical studies in sports and political domains consistently highlight the use of sarcasm, ridicule, and mock politeness to marginalize those perceived as violating communal norms (Çakmak, 2026; Elsayed & Hollingshead, 2022; Igaab & Wehail, 2023; Kader et al., 2022; Taylor, 2015; Wang &



Taylor, 2019). However, much of the existing research remains merely taxonomic, prioritizing the classification of impoliteness strategies while underexamining the underlying linguistic mechanisms of evaluative meaning-making.

To address this limitation, Appraisal Theory provides a fine-grained framework for examining how evaluation is linguistically realized (Mori, 2017; Read & Carroll, 2012). By conceptualizing evaluation through the systems of Attitude (affect, judgement, appreciation), Graduation (intensity), and Engagement (dialogic positioning), appraisal analysis shifts the focus from identifying that offense occurs to explaining how it is constructed (Martin & White, 2007). While this framework has been successfully applied to political and media discourse to demonstrate how language structures ideological alignment (Alhuthali, 2024; Aljuraywi & Alyousef, 2022; Luo et al., 2022; Sun & Liu, 2023; White, 2025), its application to online football fandom remains limited. Likewise, although studies of football fandom have documented hostility, loyalty, and identity negotiation, they have rarely examined how appraisal resources linguistically construct impoliteness in these interactions. Consequently, the relationship between the interpersonal function of face threats and the specific attitudinal, gradational, and engagement resources through which they are realized remains insufficiently examined in naturally occurring football fandom discourse.

This theoretical intersection becomes evident during high-profile player transfers, where loyalty, identity and belonging are publicly contested. A prime example is the transfer of Trent Alexander-Arnold to Real Madrid, which elicited intense, hostile reactions from Liverpool supporters. In this context, reply threads on X function as sites for articulating moral judgments and linguistically marked aggression (Garre-León, 2025; Sikorskii & Carrió-Pastor, 2026). These interactions provide an empirically rich context for examining how perceived violations of loyalty are transformed into offensive evaluations and how such evaluations contribute to processes of alignment, disalignment, and symbolic belonging within the fan community.

Accordingly, this study aims to address this gap by examining the linguistic realization of impoliteness in football fandom discourse, integrating Culpeper's impoliteness theory and Martin and White's appraisal framework. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) How is impoliteness realized through appraisal resources in Liverpool fans' replies to Trent Alexander-Arnold's post? (2) Which appraisal resources are most frequently employed in the construction of impolite meanings? (3) How do these evaluative resources contribute to the construction of fan alignment and disalignment in the context of perceived betrayal?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative discourse-analytic approach in which Appraisal Theory Martin & White (2007) served as the primary analytical framework, and Culpeper's impoliteness theory Culpeper (1996, 2011) provided the pragmatic framework for identifying offensive communication. The integration of these frameworks enabled analysis at two complementary levels: impoliteness theory was used to identify the pragmatic function of potentially offensive utterances, while Appraisal Theory was used to examine the discourse-semantic resources through which negative evaluation, intensification, and interpersonal positioning were constructed.

The dataset comprised 100 English-language replies posted on X in response to Trent Alexander-Arnold's post published on 28 May 2025, following Liverpool's 2024/2025 Premier League victory parade and amid confirmation of his transfer to Real Madrid. Data were collected over a two-week period, from 28 May to 11 June 2025. Purposive sampling was employed to identify replies relevant to the transfer context and containing evaluative positioning toward the player. Replies were manually screened from the publicly visible reply thread on X, where responses are algorithmically ordered according to platform visibility and user engagement. From this pool, 100 replies meeting the inclusion criteria were purposively selected for analysis. Replies were included when they directly addressed or evaluated

Alexander-Arnold and explicitly or implicitly referenced his departure. Posts consisting solely of GIFs or images, unintelligible content, unrelated material, or spam were excluded. The individual reply constituted the primary unit of analysis, while coding was conducted at clause and phrase levels where multiple or embedded evaluative meanings occurred.

Analysis proceeded in two interconnected stages. First, utterances were examined for impoliteness based on their contextual function as face-attacking or socially devaluing acts, including negative personal evaluation, dismissal, ridicule, hostility, and exclusion. References to loyalty, betrayal, or club membership were not treated as inherently impolite; rather, their function was determined by how they positioned and evaluated the target within the interactional context.

Second, identified evaluative instances were coded using the Appraisal framework. Attitude was classified as Affect, Judgement, or Appreciation, with Judgement further differentiated into relevant subcategories such as propriety and capacity. Graduation was analyzed in terms of Force, referring to the scaling of evaluative intensity, and Focus, referring to the sharpening or softening of category boundaries. Engagement concerned the dialogic positioning of propositions as monoglossic or heteroglossic. Collective-reference resources, particularly first-person plural forms such as *we*, were additionally examined as markers of group positioning rather than automatically classified as heteroglossic resources.

Coding was conducted iteratively, with instances repeatedly compared across categories to maintain consistency between theoretical definitions and contextual interpretation. Because individual replies could contain multiple appraisal resources, co-occurring resources were coded separately and subsequently examined as recurring configurations, such as Judgement combined with Force or collective positioning. Frequencies were used descriptively to identify dominant patterns rather than as inferential statistical measures. The qualitative analysis then examined how these configurations contributed to the construction of impoliteness, moral evaluation, and alignment or disalignment within the fan community.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Realization of Impoliteness through Appraisal Resources

Impoliteness in the dataset was realized through the interaction of appraisal resources rather than through isolated offensive expressions. Across the 100 replies, offensive meanings were primarily constructed through Attitude, particularly negative Judgement, and were frequently reinforced by Graduation and Engagement resources. While individual replies varied in linguistic form, most combined negative evaluation with intensification and interpersonal positioning to express disapproval toward Alexander-Arnold.

Table 1. Appraisal Resources Realizing Impoliteness

Appraisal System	Category	Linguistic Realization	Representative Examples
Attitude	Judgement (propriety)	<i>traitor, snake, rat, disgrace, betrayed</i>	"go away, traitor" (22), "you are a disgrace ..." (25), "betrayed his boyhood club" (61)
	Judgement (capacity)	<i>can't defend, TEMU defender, better actor than defender</i>	"better actor than a defender" (14), "TEMU defender" (63), "can't defend" (100)
	Affect	<i>glad you're gone, we don't care, you'll be missed</i>	"glad we don't have to deal with..." (11), "We don't care about you" (53), "You'll be missed" (56)
	Appreciation	<i>stupid saga, bullshit</i>	"I didn't react to your whole stupid saga" (88)
Graduation	Force	profanity, capitalization repetition, intensifiers	"fuck off" (6), "Zero empathy. Total narcissism." (42), "👊👊👊" (85)
	Focus	Category sharpening	"It was a celebration between LOYAL players & LOYAL fans." (2), "Not a Liverpool legend in my book" (64)

Engagement	Monogloss	Categorical assertions	"It wasn't a send off." (1), "The club is bigger than the player." (50)
	Heterogloss	Alternative positioning or concession	"Thanks for the amazing memories... unless you return to Anfield..." (48)
Collective Positioning	Group identity	First-person plural (<i>we, our, us</i>)	"We don't forgive you." (84), "We were celebrating the PL trophy..." (10)

Judgement emerged as the most prominent appraisal resource. Supporters predominantly evaluated Alexander-Arnold's character and conduct through expressions associated with betrayal, loyalty, and integrity, while evaluations of footballing ability occurred less frequently. Graduation further intensified these evaluations through profanity, repetition, capitalization, and emphatic lexical choices, whereas Engagement and collective-reference resources positioned these evaluations as either categorical assertions or shared community stances. Representative examples include "go away", "traitor", "you are a disgrace", and "we don't forgive you", all of which combined negative evaluation with interpersonal positioning to reinforce opposition toward the player.

Distribution of Attitude Resources

The distribution of Attitude resources demonstrates a clear predominance of Judgement, particularly propriety, over other evaluative categories. Of the 100 coded replies, 60 primarily realized Judgement of propriety, followed by 20 instances of Judgement of capacity, 15 instances of Affect, and five instances of Appreciation.

Table 2. Distribution of Dominant Attitude Types

Attitude Type	Subtype	Freq.	Representative Examples
Judgement	Propriety	60	"traitor" (22), "disgrace" (25), "betrayed his boyhood club" (61)
	Capacity	20	"can't defend" (100), "better actor than defender" (14)
Affect	Negative / Positive	15	"Glad we don't have to deal with you" (11), "we don't care" (53), "you'll be missed" (56)
Appreciation	Negative	5	"stupid saga" (88), "bullshit" (88)

Note. Frequencies represent the dominant Attitude category coded for each reply. Individual replies may contain additional co-occurring appraisal resources.

Judgement of propriety was primarily realized through lexical items that questioned Alexander-Arnold's loyalty and integrity, including "traitor", "snake", "rat", "betrayed", and "disgrace". These expressions evaluated the player as violating expectations associated with club commitment rather than merely criticizing his transfer decision. By contrast, Judgement of capacity targeted his footballing competence through expressions such as *can't defend*, *TEMU defender*, and *better actor than a defender*. Affect occurred less frequently and included both hostile reactions (e.g., "we don't care about you") and supportive responses (e.g., "you'll be missed"), while Appreciation was limited to negative evaluations of the transfer episode itself, such as "stupid saga" and "bullshit".

The predominance of propriety Judgement indicates that supporters evaluated the transfer primarily as a matter of moral conduct rather than sporting competence or emotional reaction, establishing negative moral evaluation as the principal pattern within the dataset. This predominance suggests that supporters interpreted Alexander-Arnold's departure not merely as a professional career decision but as a perceived violation of shared expectations of loyalty and belonging within the Liverpool fan community. This interpretation is examined further in the Discussion.

Intensification through Graduation Resources

Graduation resources were frequently employed to amplify the intensity of negative evaluations rather than introduce new evaluative meanings. The majority of instances involved Force, which strengthened appraisal through profanity, capitalization, lexical repetition, intensifiers, and repeated emojis. Focus occurred less frequently and functioned by sharpening category boundaries, presenting identities and social roles as unequivocal rather than negotiable.

Table 3. Distribution of Graduation Types

Graduation Type	Realization	Representative Examples
Force	Profanity	"Fuck off" (6, 7, 75, 80, 99), "cunt" (98), "motherfucker" (11)
	Intensifiers	"Zero empathy. total narcissism" (42), "forever be remembered" (61)
	Repetition	"👊👊👊" (85)
	Capitalization	"NOT", "YOU", "LOYAL" (2, 17, 27)
Focus	Category sharpening	"LOYAL players & LOYAL fans" (2), "Not a Liverpool legend" (64), "Your city is Madrid" (72)

Force was predominantly realized through profanity directed at the player, including expressions such as *"fuck off"* and *"cunt"*, as well as orthographic emphasis through capitalization and repeated emojis. These resources strengthened existing negative evaluations without changing their interpersonal meaning. Focus, in contrast, emphasized categorical distinctions by constructing clear boundaries between loyal and disloyal supporters. Expressions such as *"LOYAL players & LOYAL fans"*, *"Not a Liverpool legend"*, and *"Your city is Madrid"* presented group membership as fixed and mutually exclusive rather than open to negotiation.

Engagement and Collective Positioning

Engagement resources and collective positioning contributed to how supporters presented their evaluations as shared rather than purely individual perspectives. Monoglossic statements predominated, expressing evaluations as unquestionable facts, whereas heteroglossic resources appeared less frequently through concessive or contrastive formulations. In addition, first-person plural expressions such as *we*, *our*, and *us* consistently represented a collective supporter identity and were analyzed separately as markers of group positioning.

Table 4. Engagement and Collective Positioning

Engagement Type	Realization	Representative Examples
Monogloss	Categorical assertion	"It wasn't a send off." (1, 17, 57), "The club is bigger than the player." (50)
Heterogloss	Concession / alternative positioning	"Thanks for the amazing memories... unless you return..." (48), "Hate and love you at the same time" (78)
Collective Positioning	First-person plural references	"We were celebrating the PL trophy" (10), "We don't forgive you" (84), "We don't care about you" (53)

Monoglossic engagement was characterized by direct assertions that rejected Alexander-Arnold's interpretation of events, particularly repeated statements that the parade *"wasn't a sendoff"*. Heteroglossic resources appeared in replies acknowledging positive contributions before introducing criticism, as illustrated by comments thanking the player for his service while simultaneously expressing disappointment with his departure. Collective positioning was realized through repeated first-person plural references that represented supporters as a

unified voice. Expressions such as "*We were celebrating the PL trophy*" and "*We don't forgive you*" transformed individual evaluations into claims presented on behalf of the wider fan community.

Recurring Evaluative Configurations

Rather than occurring in isolation, appraisal resources frequently co-occurred within individual replies. The most common configurations combined Judgement with Graduation, while others integrated collective positioning to present evaluations as shared by the wider supporter community. These combinations produced more complex evaluative meanings than individual appraisal resources alone.

Table 5. Recurring Appraisal Configurations in Impolite Replies

Appraisal Configuration	Function	Representative Examples
Judgement (propriety) + Force	Intensified moral condemnation	"Go away, traitor" (22), "You are a disgrace... Go, you traitor" (25)
Judgement (capacity) + Force	Intensified criticism of ability	"Better actor than a defender" (14); "can't defend" (100)
Judgement + Focus	Boundary construction	"LOYAL players & LOYAL fans" (2); "Not a Liverpool legend" (64)
Judgement + Collective Positioning	Shared moral evaluation	"We don't forgive you" (84); "We don't care about you" (53)

The most frequent configuration combined Judgement of propriety with Force, in which accusations of betrayal were reinforced by profanity, intensifiers, or emphatic lexical choices. Other replies combined moral evaluation with Focus to sharpen distinctions between loyal supporters and the departing player, while several integrated first-person plural references to construct criticism as a collective rather than individual stance. These recurring combinations demonstrate that appraisal resources operated together to produce coherent evaluative patterns across the dataset rather than functioning as isolated linguistic features.

Patterns of Alignment and Disalignment

Supporters adopted three broad evaluative orientations toward Alexander-Arnold: disalignment, alignment, and mixed positioning. Disalignment was the dominant pattern, whereas supportive and ambivalent responses occurred considerably less frequently. These orientations reflected differences in how supporters evaluated both the player's previous contributions and his decision to leave the club.

Table 6. Patterns of Alignment and Disalignment

Orientation	Linguistic Features	Representative Examples
Disalignment	Moral judgment, exclusion, criticism	"traitor" (22), "disgrace" (25), "betrayed his boyhood club" (61)
Alignment	Gratitude, appreciation, support	"Thank you so much ..." (24), "well done King" (31), "best of luck Trent" (94)
Mixed Positioning	Simultaneous appreciation and criticism	"Hate and love you at the same time" (78), "disappointed ... but thank you" (87), "Thanks ... unless you return ..." (48)

Disalignment was primarily expressed through accusations of betrayal, repeated rejection of the player's interpretation of the parade, and exclusionary labels such as "*traitor*", "*rat*", and "*snake*". In contrast, aligned replies emphasized gratitude for Alexander-Arnold's contribution to Liverpool and wished him success in Madrid. A smaller group of replies combined appreciation with disappointment, acknowledging his achievements while criticizing the circumstances surrounding his departure. These responses demonstrate that although hostility predominated, supporters did not respond uniformly to the transfer.

Collectively, these descriptive findings show that impoliteness was consistently realized

through recurring appraisal patterns. The following discussion interprets these patterns in relation to moral evaluation, supporter identity, and the regulation of community membership.

Discussion

The findings indicate that impoliteness in this dataset is not only expressed through isolated insults, but is systematically structured through appraisal configurations, most notably the dominance of negatively inscribed Judgement (propriety), intensified through Graduation, and frequently presented as collectively endorsed through Engagement. These patterns suggest that offensive discourse in this context operates as an evaluative practice grounded in shared norms of loyalty and belonging.

Realization of Impoliteness through Appraisal Resources

The findings demonstrate that impoliteness in football fandom discourse is systematically constructed through evaluative meaning rather than through isolated offensive expressions alone. Negative evaluations of the player are realized predominantly through Judgement, particularly propriety and capacity, and are further strengthened through Graduation and positioned dialogically through Engagement. This configuration indicates that the offensive force of the replies derives not simply from recognizable insults or face-attacking expressions, but from the interaction of evaluative resources that assign negative social value to the target. Such a pattern is consistent with research showing that digital impoliteness is constructed through multiple and often overlapping linguistic resources, including negative evaluations of personal qualities, direct attacks, confrontational disagreement, conventionalized impoliteness formulas, lexical choices, and orthographic manipulation (Agbaglo, 2024; Harb, 2021; Rhee, 2023; Tawfik, 2024; Thompson & Agbaglo, 2025). Viewed through Appraisal Theory, however, these resources can be understood not merely as different strategies of offense but as components of a broader evaluative process through which social meanings are assigned to the target.

The predominance of Judgement is particularly significant because the attacks are directed primarily toward the player as a social actor rather than toward the transfer as an event. Expressions such as '*traitor*' and '*disgrace*' and references to betrayal evaluate character and conduct, while attacks on defensive ability evaluate competence. This pattern parallels evidence from other forms of online discourse in which negative evaluations concentrate on socially consequential dimensions of character, including propriety, truthfulness, capacity, and seriousness (Thompson & Agbaglo, 2025). The present findings nevertheless reveal a more pronounced focus on propriety: 60 instances were categorized as propriety Judgement, compared with 20 instances of capacity, 15 of negative Affect, and only five of negative Appreciation. This distribution suggests that the transfer was discursively construed primarily as a question of moral conduct rather than professional competence or personal emotion.

This distinction is important for understanding the relationship between impoliteness and evaluation. Although impoliteness theory conceptualizes offensive communication in terms of face attack and socially inappropriate behavior (Culpeper, 1996, 2011), the present analysis indicates that the force of such attacks depends substantially on the type of social value being invoked. Judgement resources allow supporters to transform dissatisfaction with a professional decision into assessments of who the player is and what his conduct signifies. Research employing judgement analysis similarly demonstrates that evaluative language can construct socially approved or disapproved identities by attributing qualities associated with morality, credibility, competence, and social worth (Lee et al., 2024; Thompson & Agbaglo, 2025). Therefore, impoliteness in the present context operates through a process of evaluative personalization: the transfer itself becomes evidence from which broader conclusions about loyalty, integrity, and legitimacy are drawn.

The relatively limited occurrence of Affect further supports this interpretation. Although the transfer clearly generated emotionally charged responses, supporters more frequently evaluated the player than explicitly represented their own emotional states. Anger,

disappointment, or resentment were thus often reformulated as moral Judgement. This differs from digital sport contexts, where fan discourse may be dominated by affective resources such as joy, pride, trust, disappointment, or excitement (Peng & Bach, 2025; Zhao & Jin, 2025). The contrast indicates that the distribution of appraisal resources is closely related to the social meaning attributed to the triggering event. Where sporting events such as victory and defeat invite affective reactions, a perceived act of betrayal is more likely to activate Judgement because supporters interpret the event against expectations of appropriate conduct. The dominance of propriety in this dataset is not merely a quantitative feature but evidence that impoliteness is organized around a perceived violation of a moral relationship.

Evaluative Dominance, Intensification, and the Moral Regulation of Loyalty

The predominance of negatively inscribed Judgement of propriety suggests that loyalty functions as the principal evaluative norm through which the player's transfer is interpreted. Rather than evaluating Alexander-Arnold primarily as a footballer, supporters evaluated him as a moral actor whose decision was judged against shared expectations of loyalty, belonging, and commitment to the club. The repeated lexicalization of betrayal, disloyalty, and disgrace positions departure not simply as an occupational decision but as a breach of obligations associated with club membership, local attachment, and supporter expectations. Football fandom has long involved forms of identification that exceed ordinary consumer preference, with commitment to a club incorporated into social identity and everyday belonging (Chiweshe, 2024; L. Davis, 2015). Within such communities, evaluations of players can consequently become moralized when their actions are perceived as inconsistent with the symbolic obligations attached to membership. Contemporary research further shows that fan communities operate as collective spaces in which shared events are interpreted through moral and symbolic frameworks that can reaffirm or reconfigure communal identity (Oreg & Frankenburg, 2025). The present findings extend this perspective by showing that such moral regulation is linguistically observable in the systematic predominance of propriety Judgement.

From this perspective, terms such as '*traitor*' and '*disgrace*' do more than express hostility. They classify the player in relation to an implicit normative order in which loyalty is treated as an expected attribute of legitimate membership. Moral evaluations in digital discourse frequently serve as boundary maintenance, as evaluations of appropriate and inappropriate conduct simultaneously articulate the standards against which community membership is judged (J. L. Davis & Love, 2018; Ferenčík, 2017). The replies in the present dataset similarly construct an implicit contrast between the loyal member and the disloyal outsider. This is particularly visible in expressions contrasting "LOYAL players & LOYAL fans" with the departing player, or denying him the status of a Liverpool "legend." Such evaluations do not simply describe behavior retrospectively; they redefine the target's symbolic position within the community.

Graduation strengthens this process by regulating the intensity with which negative Judgement is expressed. Profanity, repetition, capitalization, intensifiers, and category sharpening amplify evaluative force, making condemnation more categorical and less negotiable. Studies of digitally mediated discourse have similarly shown that evaluative intensity is produced through combinations of lexical, typographic, and pragmatic resources, including swear words, expressive punctuation, graphic emphasis, repetition, and other forms of linguistic amplification (Peng & Bach, 2025; Rhee, 2023; Tawfik, 2024). These features are particularly consequential in environments where written discourse lacks conventional prosodic cues, because textual and semiotic resources can perform functions analogous to emphasis, volume, and emotional force in spoken interaction.

In the present dataset, however, intensification is closely tied to moral evaluation rather than operating independently as emotional amplification. Expressions such as total narcissism, repeated rat emojis, capitalization of LOYAL, and profanity strengthen already negative assessments of character and conduct. Graduation does not merely make an utterance "more offensive"; it increases the categorical strength of the underlying Judgement. This distinction is theoretically important because it suggests that the intensity of impoliteness

emerges from configurations of appraisal resources. Negative Judgement identifies the alleged social violation, while Force amplifies its severity and Focus sharpens categorical boundaries such as loyal/disloyal or legend/not a legend. The findings consequently support a scalar understanding of digital impoliteness in which offense is intensified through the accumulation and interaction of evaluative resources rather than determined solely by the presence of conventionally offensive lexical items.

This configuration also helps explain why perceived betrayal generates particularly strong reactions. Research on highly identified sports fans indicates that social media can intensify emotional expression when individuals strongly identify with their team and fellow supporters (Abdallah & Arth, 2026). The present analysis suggests that such identification influences not only emotional intensity but also the evaluative structure of hostility. The stronger the normative significance attributed to loyalty, the more readily a professional decision can be interpreted as a moral transgression and subsequently intensified through linguistic resources. The interaction between Judgement and Graduation thus reveals how collective expectations are converted into overt verbal aggression: supporters first construe the behavior as normatively wrong and then amplify that evaluation to mark the perceived seriousness of the violation.

Alignment, Disalignment, and the Discursive Regulation of Fan Membership

The findings further demonstrate that impoliteness serves a relational function that extends beyond the individual target. Engagement resources, particularly categorical assertions and collective pronouns such as *we*, allow speakers to position negative evaluations as collectively shared rather than merely personal. Statements such as “*we don’t forgive you*” and “*we don’t care about you*” construct a collective speaking position from which the player is evaluated and excluded. The discourse, therefore, produces two simultaneous relational movements: disalignment with the departing player and alignment among those claiming membership in the fan community.

This dual process is consistent with evidence that antagonistic digital discourse can generate solidarity precisely through the construction of opposition. Insults, challenges, negative evaluations, and other confrontational practices may distance an out-group or disfavored target while simultaneously consolidating common ground among participants who share the same stance (Agbaglo, 2024; Georgalidou et al., 2020; Upadhyay, 2010). Similar dynamics have been identified in sports fandom, where perceived identity threats can produce collective responses that stigmatize or degrade a formerly valued figure while reaffirming the distinctiveness of the supporter group (Sanderson, 2013). The present findings show that Appraisal Theory provides a linguistic explanation for this apparently paradoxical process: the same evaluative act can simultaneously realize interpersonal exclusion and communal affiliation.

Engagement is particularly important in this process because categorical assertions reduce dialogic space for alternative interpretations. Claims that the celebration “*wasn’t a send off*,” that “*the club is bigger than the player*,” or that the player is “*not a Liverpool legend*” present contested evaluations as if they were established communal truths. The frequent deployment of *we* further authorize these evaluations through an implied collective voice. Rather than saying only “*I do not forgive you*,” the formulation “*we don’t forgive you*” allows an individual speaker to claim a broader constituency. Collective positioning of this kind is central to digital identity formation, where shared discourse practices, symbolic expressions, and stance affiliations enable dispersed users to perform membership in imagined communities (McGlashan, 2020; Oreg & Frankenburg, 2025).

The coexistence of disalignment, alignment, and mixed stances also indicates that fan identity is not entirely homogeneous. While hostile responses dominate, supportive and ambivalent replies demonstrate competing interpretations of what loyalty requires and how a departing player should be evaluated. Contemporary research on digital sport discourse similarly suggests that online audiences form stance-based affiliation groups whose emotional and evaluative trajectories vary according to whether users position themselves in support of

or opposition to a particular actor or team (Han et al., 2026). The presence of statements combining affection and disappointment in the current dataset is especially significant because it demonstrates that moral condemnation does not necessarily erase prior identification. Instead, supporters negotiate tensions between appreciation of past contribution and condemnation of present conduct.

More broadly, the exclusionary expressions found in the dataset—such as denying him legendary status, redefining his city as Madrid, or contrasting him with “loyal” players and fans—show that impoliteness participates in the regulation of symbolic membership. Digital fan identities are continually constructed through discourse, shared symbols, linguistic practices, and performances of affiliation or distance (Boots & Toffoletti, 2025; McGlashan, 2020; Pérez-Sabater & Maguelouk Moffo, 2019). In the context examined here, negative evaluation functions as a boundary-making resource in which supporters linguistically relocate the player from an established in-group position toward that of an outsider.

These findings suggest that impoliteness in football fandom should be understood as a structured evaluative and relational practice. The integration of impoliteness theory and Appraisal Theory demonstrates a sequentially related set of functions: Judgement identifies and moralizes the perceived violation, Graduation calibrates and intensifies its severity, and Engagement positions the resulting evaluation within relations of collective alignment and disalignment. This configuration helps explain why apparently individual insults can perform broader social functions. They evaluate conduct against communal norms, intensify condemnation of perceived violations, foster solidarity among those who claim a shared position, and regulate the symbolic boundaries of belonging. The contribution of the present study lies not simply in identifying which impoliteness strategies occur in football discourse, but in demonstrating how the evaluative architecture of impoliteness connects linguistic offense to the moral and relational organization of digital fandom.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how impoliteness is realized through Appraisal resources in Liverpool fans’ responses to Trent Alexander-Arnold on X following his decision to leave the club. The findings show that offensive discourse is systematically constructed through evaluative language, with negative Judgement of propriety predominating. This indicates that the player’s departure is primarily construed as a moral violation of loyalty. Graduation intensifies these evaluations, while Engagement positions them as individual or collectively shared stances. These resources work together to moralize the perceived violation, amplify its severity, and construct alignment and disalignment. Collective positioning through “we” and categorical assertions reinforces solidarity while distancing the departing player. By integrating Impoliteness Theory and Appraisal Theory, the study demonstrates how Judgement, Graduation, and Engagement systematically construct impolite meanings in online football fandom. The study is limited by its small dataset, single transfer event, English-language responses, and single-platform focus. Future research should examine different clubs, contexts, languages, and platforms to determine whether similar appraisal patterns occur more broadly.

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