

# On the Morality of Taking Offence

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## 1. Introduction

It has now widely accepted that impoliteness might on occasion be a hearer-generated perception not necessarily in line with the speaker's actual intention (see, e.g., Tayebi, 2016, 2018). Therefore, understanding the "participants' understandings and perceptions" is an endeavour which requires further attention (Kádár and Márquez-Reiter, 2015, p. 256). As Parvaresh and Tayebi (2021, p. 112) argue, this endeavour "would require us as analysts to pay more attention to the hearer's role" in the offence taking process.

In light of the foregoing argument, and given the undeniable role that the hearer plays in evaluations of impoliteness (Eelen, 2001; Kádár and Haugh, 2013), it would be beneficial to investigate in more detail those occasions during which the hearer takes offence at the language (or conduct) of others. However, this is not an easy endeavour for at least three important reasons (cf. O'Driscoll, 2020):

- (i) One would not normally have access to the states of mind or inner thoughts of other people to determine whether they would evaluate certain language or behaviour as being offensive.
- (ii) A wide range of response options is available to the hearer when confronted with potentially offensive language or conduct (Dobs and Blitvich, 2013).
- (iii) We are not necessarily offended "when confronted with rude talk or conduct" but we may well be offended "without being the target of impolite talk" (Tayebi, 2016, p. 1).

Consequently, it is not surprising that few studies have investigated the factors behind the taking of offence. However, it has been demonstrated that the taking of offence generally leads to the offeree offering an explanation, known as "moral talk" (Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2019, p. 197), as to why the taking of offence has occurred (Haugh, 2013; Kádár and Fukushima, 2018; Kádár and Márquez-Reiter, 2015). In computer-mediated communication (e.g. Twitter), such moral talk, technically referred to in pragmatics as being part of 'metalinguage', is the most easily accessible to the researcher because, due to factors such as anonymity and the likelihood that users are hard to trace, interactants have an unprecedented opportunity to talk freely about their thoughts, experiences and emotions (see Zappavigna, 2016). Indeed, data pertaining to computer-mediated communication provides the researcher with a unique opportunity to investigate the occasions when people not only take offence but also provide, implicitly or otherwise, an explanation for their taking

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of offence<sup>2</sup> (Parvaresh, 2019; Parvaresh & Tayebi, 2018; Tayebi, 2016), technically referred to as the ‘sanctioning’ of the offence. In this connection, hashtags, i.e. “keywords [...] preceded by the “#” sign” (Recuero et al., 2015, p. 2), are also particularly useful because they enable people to fulfil a wide range of important functions, such as expressing and highlighting their own personal feelings and stances (Zappavigna, 2016).

By drawing on a corpus of Twitter posts in English featuring *#offended*, this study seeks to provide an answer to the following research question: Are morally informed norms at work when so-called offendees register their feelings of being *offended*?

The structure of this paper is as follows. In Section 2, I will provide an account of what offence and the taking of offence actually mean, thereby paving the way for a definition of the latter. In Section 3, I will explain how social media could create an ideal setting for so-called offendees to express their feelings of being offended. This will be followed, in Section 4, by an account of how the current study was conducted. The findings of the study will be summarised in Section 5. In Section 6 conclusions will be made and suggestions for further research will be provided.

## 2. Taking offence, expectations and norms

It has long been known that we often take offence “too often and too easily” (Barrow, 2005, 266). In addition, we sometimes take offence in situations where the language or conduct we are faced with is not markedly impolite or offensive (see, e.g., Haugh, 2013; Tayebi, 2016; Parvaresh & Tayebi, 2021). Part of the complexity of the ‘taking of offence’ appears to lie in the undeniable fact that, by undergoing socialisation, we form certain expectations and consequently tend to evaluate what we see in light of these expectations (see Kádár, 2017a; Tayebi, 2016). In this regard, it has been argued that the judgments we make concerning the degree of offence are often established according to the “norms and expectations” we have formed and acquired over time (Locher and Watts, 2008, p. 78).

As far as ‘norms and expectations’ are concerned, Tayebi (2016) demonstrates that they have both a cognitive and a relational base (cf. Locher and Watts, 2008). The cognitive base consists of the expectations that the interactants have formed through experience. On the other hand, relational expectations are formed “on the basis of the relational histories among the people involved in an interaction” (Tayebi, 2016, p. 15). Evidently, we tend to take offence at what we view to be a “lack of realisation of expectations” (Tayebi, 2016, p.15). As further noted by Spencer-Oatey (2011, p. 3566; see also Spencer-Oatey and Kádár, 2016), any language or behaviour that breaches (normative) expectations “is perceived as marked and can be noticed in several ways”, including “as inappropriate and perceived negatively”. File (2018, p. 69), by drawing on Kiesling (2006, p. 265), notes that this means that our “evaluations are subject to expectations regarding the way actors adopting certain social roles should talk [or behave]”.

In light of the above, it would therefore appear that society is, in a way, tied to a system of “obligations that defines and organises the proper — good, right, virtuous — relations among individuals and groups in a community” (Davis, 2008, p. 17; cf. Kádár, 2017a, b).<sup>3</sup> Each of us,

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<sup>2</sup> In this study, I consider such *explanations* or *reasons* to be the metapragmatic manifestations of *evaluation* (cf. Davies, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> I am cognisant of the fact that these norms are negotiable (see Parvaresh, 2019, for a discussion).

as a member of society, carries a “socially constructed set of understandings” of this order (Domenici and Littlejohn 2006; cited in Culpeper, 2011, p. 38). These expectations are rule-governed (Garfinkel, 1964; see also Goffman, 1981) in the sense that ‘not everything goes’, and research shows that we develop our own understanding of these moral norms (Parvaresh, 2019). Garfinkel (1964, p. 225) calls these expectations the moral order, which he defines as “normal courses of action-familiar scenes of everyday affairs, the world of daily life known in common with others and with others taken for granted” (Garfinkel, 1964, p. 225). In this respect, Arundale (2021, p. 5) notes that our evaluations of im/politeness, which arguably form the basis for taking offence, are “emergent” phenomena “as participants orient to and reason with respect to the moral order of their interaction”.

In view of the above argument, it appears that what lies at the heart of taking offence appears to be an alleged, or rather perceived, *transgression* (Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2019; Márquez-Reiter and Haugh, 2019). Transgressions involve “a breach of some form of (perceived) moral, social or legal code that can be variously referred to as an affront, fault, infraction, infringement, misdeed, misdemeanour, offence, sin, wrongdoing and so on” (Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2019, p. 198). While the legal aspects of transgression are worthy of attention, “much of the day-to-day arbitration of alleged ‘offensiveness’ does not rely on formal regulation or law at all. Instead, it is a matter of adaptation by individuals and groups to tacit conventions governing communicative behaviour” (Durant, 2010; cited in Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2019, p. 199).

Accordingly, and in line with the idea expressed by Jay (2000) and developed by Culpeper (2011, pp. 205–206), that being offended “produces a state of emotional arousal” which increases “the likelihood that they will retaliate in kind”, and motivated by the idea that offence is, amongst other things, “a complex moral emotion occasioned by (perceived) transgressions” (Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2019, p. 198), in this paper, by following Culpeper (2011) and Haugh (2015), offence and the taking of offence are defined as follows:

- *Offence*: An emotionally bad feeling created by what is perceived to be a transgression of (social) expectations and (moral) norms.
- *Taking offence*: If someone takes offence at what is said or done, they feel emotionally bad, often because they believe it has transgressed their (social) expectations and (moral) norms.

The taking of offence typically involves two key activities, *registering* and *sanctioning* offence (Haugh, 2015):

*Registering* offence encompasses an affective stance, that is, indicating a negative emotive state of “feeling bad”, which includes displeasure, annoyance, hurt, anger, and so on [...]. *Sanctioning* offence encompasses a moral stance, that is, a moral claim of a prior transgression, affront, misdeed and such like on the part of another participant. (Haugh, 2015, p. 38; italics added)

As the above definition demonstrates, sanctioning offence is a process by which interactants “ground” (Haugh, 2015, p. 39) their moral claims that particular actions or language is

deemed, or rather could be, 'offensive'. This includes alluding to and invoking a wide range of sociocultural norms and expectations (Tayebi, 2016) with a view to *legitimising* (Haugh, 2015) claims of offence taking. The below example, taken from diary report data in which a number of informants have discussed instances when they have felt offended, serves to further clarify this point:

- Last week when I asked the secretary to call another company and provide them with certain information she yelled at me and said; "My hands are tied, I do not have the time to call them now." I was very offended. She shouldn't have talked to me like that. I am her superior. (adapted from Tayebi, 2016, p. 11)

In this excerpt, the informant, an 'executive manager', has elaborated on, i.e. sanctioned, how and why he was offended by his secretary. In other words, in this excerpt, the offence taker has sanctioned his taking of offence by grounding it in the notion that his expectation to receive a certain "level of respect due to his superior position in the workplace" (Tayebi, 2016, p. 11) was not met.

As the above example clarifies, while *registering* an offence does not necessarily lead to its *sanctioning*, research has shown that on many occasions the interactants actually do sanction the offence (Horgan, 2019; Kádár and Márquez-Reiter, 2015; Parvaresh & Tayebi, 2018; Tayebi, 2016). As Kádár et al. (2019) note, from the hearer's perspective, even the most aggressive forms of language appear to be constantly interpreted according to a number of expectations relating to what is right or wrong, permissible or impermissible and so on. In fact, there is now an abundance of research confirming that interactants typically appeal, either explicitly or implicitly, to these norms when confronted with any language or conduct that they deem offensive (Kádár 2017a; Parvaresh, 2019). In a typical research paper, it is impossible to examine the entire gamut of expectations that interactants draw on, and therefore the current study is primarily concerned with expectations that appear to be anchored in morality and the moral order of society.

### 3. Social media, moral aggression and the registration of offence

We typically spend hours, on a daily basis, consuming the information that pops up on our electronic devices and/or interacting with others virtually, often through social media platforms (e.g. *Instagram*, *Twitter*). Such Internet-based forms of communication have brought with themselves immense *social* and *psychological* risks (see, e.g., Tartari, 2015). As for social risks, research findings have convincingly revealed that, by being hooked up to our electronic devices, we might run the risk of (a) 'losing out socially' (Khan et al., 2014, p. 618), or (b) being exposed to all sorts of language aggression or even coercion and abuse (see, e.g., Chiang & Grant, 2019; Mishna et al., 2018). When it comes to psychological risks, one could think of issues such as 'depression', 'stress' and 'fatigue' (Alsehaima & Alanazi, 2018) typically associated with excessive social media use.

For all their risks, Internet-based forms of communication have also brought immense benefits, such as free, rapid and uncensored dissemination of information (Khan et al., 2014). Indeed, some social media platforms are so "fast-moving" that our engagement with the content shared on such platforms may, on occasion, be 'ephemeral' as we might be "doing a number of other things at the same time" (Bouvier, 2020, p. 10). However, while the fast-

moving flow of information on social media (e.g. on Twitter) might sometimes involve “an affective flow of outrage, as well as fun and enjoyment, at the expense of an evil other” (Bouvier, 2020, p. 10), it could provide us as analysts with a unique window into how people tend to “document and share their own moral capital” (Bouvier, 2020, p. 10). Such free and affective outbursts, usually made in the form of complaints, might be less frequent in face-to-face communication. As Vladimirou et al. (2021, p. 53) note, due to various reasons such as *de-individuation* (cf. Blitvich, 2015), “many users feel licensed to [...] voice opinions or complaints that they would be less willing to express in face-to-face contexts.” Such opinions and complaints might lead to escalation, but they provide an opportunity both for the analyst as well as for the researcher to gain access to people’s experiences of what could be called ‘moral aggression’ (Kramer and Messick, 1998; cited in Vladimirou et al., 2021, p. 62):

The term moral aggression has been used to refer to the intense negative reactions individuals sometimes experience when they have been treated in an unjust, unfair, or untrustworthy fashion...The notion of moral aggression reflects a basic intuition about the phenomenology of injustice: People often have very limited tolerance for other people or groups who are perceived to be dishonest or untrustworthy, especially when they believe that they themselves or the group to which they belong are engaging in more cooperative, trustworthy behaviour. (Kramer & Messick, 1998, cited in Vladimirou et al., 2021, p. 62)

In light of the preceding argument, it has been argued that on social media people “present themselves in a particular way and align (or disalign) with others through the stances they take towards a particular idea, object or person” (Tagg et al., 2017, p. 44). On social media, taking offence could therefore be conceptualised as “a way of expressing oneself and positioning oneself in relation to others and the way they are positioning themselves” (Tagg et al., 2017, p. 44).

In the case of taking offence, such reflexivity provides us with a unique opportunity to explore, at first-hand, the connection between being *#offended* and the most frequent explanations or reasons underlying it. Furthermore, on many occasions, the language used on social media platforms such as Twitter is intended to be read by large and rather diverse audiences (Barnes, 2018), and users tend to resort to language which a wide range of people can understand and relate to. In the case of *#offended*, this feature could potentially result in a greater number of explicit references to wider social and societal norms.

#### 4. Data and methodology

As noted above, this study seeks to provide an answer to the research question: What morally informed norms and expectations do so-called offendees most frequently refer to when registering their feelings of being offended? This study relies on a corpus of Twitter posts featuring *#offended* to obtain an answer to this question.

A meritorious feature of this study is its reliance on the use of hashtags. Hashtags are not just a visual phenomenon, but one which serves to *enact* “the following social relation: Search for me and affiliate with my value!” (Zappavigna, 2011, p. 789). Indeed, as Zappavigna (2011, p. 804) observes:

The expansion of typographic meaning potential seen in hashtag usage on Twitter is the beginning of ‘searchable talk’. Hashtags are used to mark potential targets of evaluation and to render these as metadata that may be found by other users. Hashtag usage on Twitter is an example of leveraging one [of] the essential affordances of New Media: the affordance of the database to render information searchable and to make visible relationships that would not otherwise be recognizable. (Zappavigna, 2011, p. 804, original emphasis)

Accordingly, it stands to reason to argue that hashtags could “perform multiple discourse functions of stating facts and opinions while conveying a plethora of emotions” (Lee & Chao, 2018, p. 27).

The data I have used for this study is, therefore, based on a corpus of English Twitter posts marked *#offended*. These tweets had been posted by various individuals and were collected by the researcher himself using Twitter Archiver software. All the tweets collected for the study were in the public domain and open access. It should, however, be noted that while all the tweets compiled were in English, I was not able to assign a particular society to each tweet collected; as a corollary of this, the current study does not intend to make any specific claims about which particular society, or group, these norms may or may not belong to.

Regarding the analysis, while in theory all hashtags fulfil a ‘textual’ function by facilitating an online search, upon further scrutiny it was revealed that as far as the collected corpus was concerned, the hashtag in question, i.e. *#offended*, served to perform either an *experiential* or an *interpersonal* function. This has been described below:

- Experiential or topic-making *#offended* which serves to indicate that the tweet is about offence;
- Interpersonal or evaluative *#offended* which indicates personal stances towards prior interactions. (motivated by Zappavigna, 2018, p. 41)

As such, and in order to narrow the focus of the study and to achieve its aims, particular care was taken to include only those hashtags which performed an experiential function. In other words, tweets which did not involve the evaluation of certain types of “behaviour-in-context” (Culpeper, 2011, p. 72) were manually excluded from the corpus. Accordingly, a tweet such as example [1] was removed from the corpus and a tweet such as example [2] was kept in the final corpus for later analysis:<sup>4</sup>

[1]  
I just want to say to anyone I may have *#offended* yesterday, get ready you’re going to be offended again today. 😊👍

[2]  
Just found out my family has a group email that I’m not a part of... *#offended*  
*#butnotreally*

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the tweets included in this paper have not been edited and are therefore exactly the same as the original tweets (including both grammar and spelling).

In the first tweet, besides facilitating the textual functions of searching and identification, *#offended* appears to mainly highlight the topic of the tweet. However, the second tweet, appears to have “much more to do with adopting particular attitudinal dispositions” (Zappavigna, 2016, p. 13) by enabling the speaker to take a stance<sup>5</sup>.

As such, the corpus under investigation encompassed tweets in which (a) the interactants adopted, explicitly or otherwise, an evaluative stance to indicate why they had taken offence, and (b) *#offended* had been used to perform an interpersonal function. The final corpus consisted of 453 tweets, out of a total of approximately 8,000, that were posted by 315 different individuals (or Twitter IDs). These were tweets in which (claims of) feelings of being *#offended* were accompanied, either explicitly or implicitly, with some sort of moral talk. For the purpose of the current study and motivated by recent literature on impoliteness and offence, *evaluative stance* is defined as feelings, or rather claims, of having felt, for example, “indignation, outrage, disgust, [or] disbelief” (Tileagă, 2012, p. 69) caused by a violation of moral boundaries and norms such as those found in tweet [2] above.

The corpus was then qualitatively analysed with a view to establishing any recurrent themes and patterns. In pursuit of this aim, I was particularly influenced by the idea that, as part of their interactional competence, interactants possess some sort of “collective knowledge about how to coordinate diverse moral values” (Parvaresh, 2019, p. 83). This knowledge underlies the evaluative stance they take and enables them “to adapt the morally informed knowledge to new contexts” (Parvaresh, 2019, p. 84). This view has its roots in the Moral Foundations Theory (e.g. Haidt, 2012) which argues in favour of the presence of a number of “intuitive or emotional bases” for moral judgments which enable interactants to engage in “deliberate reasoning processes” (Graham et al., 2011, p. 368) about, for example, why they think something is right or wrong. A ‘directed content analysis’ of the data was therefore adopted in which codes were “derived from theory or relevant research findings” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1286).

Table 1 below summarises the ‘moral foundations’ which drove the qualitative analysis together with their relevant (im)politeness concepts:

**Table 1:**  
**Moral foundations and their possible links with (im)politeness concepts (adapted from Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021, p. 63)**

Higher level moral norms	(Im)politeness concepts
Loyalty/Betrayal: Concerns related to obligations of group membership, such as loyalty, self-sacrifice and vigilance against betrayal.	Ingroup/outgroup (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Leech, 2007)

<sup>5</sup> I am aware of the fact that while an example such as [2] “proffers, in part at least, the grounds for taking offence”, the user in question may have construed the “conduct that is open to evaluation as ‘impolite’ as not actually ‘impolite’ because it involves an ‘unintended slip’ by a cultural other” (Haugh and Kádár, 2017, p. 621, original emphasis). This is particularly evident in the use of *#butnotreally*.

Authority/ Subversion: Concerns related to social order and the obligations of hierarchical relationships, such obedience, respect and the fulfilment of role-based duties.	Power (e.g. Brown and Levinson, 1987; Leech, 2007; Spencer-Oatey, 2008)
Care/Harm: Concerns for the suffering of others, including virtues of caring and compassion.	
Fairness/Cheating: Concerns about unfair treatment, cheating and more abstract notions of justice and rights.	Equity rights (Spencer-Oatey, 2008)
Sanctity/Degradation: Concerns about physical and spiritual contagion, including virtues of chastity, wholesomeness and control of desires.	

It should also be noted that, due to the elusive nature of moral values, in the current study a quantitative investigation was not pursued.

## 5. Findings

That “ordinary moral judgments are emotional in nature” has indeed been confirmed “again and again, in every study of what goes on in the brain during moral judgment” (Prinz, 2006, p. 30). All the same, the current study aims to investigate the different moral judgments which can potentially lead to the taking of offence. As the findings of this study will reveal, perceived transgressions of the various moral norms provide the basis for the sanctioning of offence by the offence taker. In the following sections, I will first discuss how such perceived transgressions of offence typically unfold and then explain some of the moral norms which underpin them.

### 5. 1. Taking offence and perceived transgressions

In light of the proposed research question, as far as the analysis of the data is concerned, it appears that the sanctions accompanying *#offended* are framed primarily as a sense of moral responsibility in the face of the observed language, behaviour or conduct that has allegedly breached the expected norms. In this respect, the findings of this study reveal that, in most cases, interactants tend to portray themselves as responsible (i.e. moral) individuals in contrast to others who have allegedly done something wrong. This involves the interactants, either explicitly or implicitly, attributing a *wrongdoing* to others (Knobe, 2010; Malle et al., 2014), in the sense of breaching the right (i.e. the *moral*) way of doing “patterned”, expected, actions (i.e. the *order*) (Domenici and Littlejohn, 2006; cited in Culpeper, 2011, p. 38). As shown by the data, these sanctions involve judgments of, for example, peculiar language or conduct when one would normally expect a more ‘normal’ course of affairs (Garfinkel, 1964, p. 225). By way of illustration, let us consider the following example:



[3]

Thanks for insulting the institution with the highest graduation rate of all 14 PA state schools @DrPhil where my son (physician) and daughter (PhD student + masters from UNT. . .sound familiar) attended. Why not say "Midwestern State" Phil? #whodat #apologizenow #offended

This tweet was posted in the aftermath of what was known as the College Admissions Bribery Scandal in the United States. A number of high-profile individuals tried to influence decisions regarding undergraduate admissions at a number of high-ranking American universities. The above tweet explicitly addresses the television personality Phillip Calvin McGraw, the host of the popular television show Dr. Phil. In an earlier interview when commenting on this scandal, Dr. Phil had said, "I think it's bragging rights for them and they don't want to be the one parent that says, 'Well, yeah, my kid's going to, you know, Slippery Rock.'" <sup>6</sup> It is evident that the person posting tweet [3] has taken offence at Dr. Phil's words, as evidenced by the explicit use of *#offended*. However, a closer look at the tweet in question reveals a great deal about this particular instance of offence taking.

To begin with, the above user has managed to express his frustration in a seemingly civil manner by adhering to expected patterns of behaviour, i.e. the moral order. The tweet starts off by expressing thanks, possibly as a result of the undeniable fact that the content of the tweet might be considered to be an 'interpersonally sensitive activity' which could pose "threats to the face needs of one or more interactants" (Mosegaard Hansen and Márquez Reiter, 2018, p. 1). At the same time, the fact that the object of 'thanks', i.e. Dr. Phil, is the person being criticised in the tweet, the expression of thanks is no doubt ironic. The user then goes on to provide evidence and some form of benchmark for the grounds of the offence [i.e. 'the highest graduation rate of all 14 PA state schools'], which helps to minimise signs of subjectivity on the part of the user, while at the same time focusing attention on the idea that, despite its successes, Slippery Rock has been questioned. Having provided some objective benchmarks, the user goes on to claim that his children, who are portrayed as immensely successful – one a physician and one a PhD student with a masters from UNT – have graduated from the same university that Dr. Phil is questioning. In the eyes of this user, the fact that both his children, who are apparently very successful individuals, attended Slippery Rock University for some of their education is sufficient motivation to feel bad, i.e. offended, about Dr. Phil's comments on the university. This is followed by a complaint couched in the form of a suggestion, i.e. 'Why not say "Midwestern State" Phil?', in which the offence taker wonders why Dr. Phil has not mentioned Midwestern State University as an example of a lesser ranked university.

The inclusion of Midwestern State University in the tweet is significant because this is the institution from which Dr. Phil himself graduated. An offence has been caused here by Dr. Phil choosing Slippery Rock out of all the academic institutions available, while ignoring the university that he himself attended. In other words, it is the presence of a wide range of names (i.e. choices) from which he could have chosen, but he chooses Slippery Rock, that causes the offence, particularly for those people who have either attended this institution

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<sup>6</sup> This story can be found at: <https://pittsburgh.cbslocal.com/2019/04/28/slippery-rock-university-dr-phil/> (last accessed 2 December 2019)

themselves, or have family/friends who are alumni or current students. It is in this context that the question of deliberate or purposive action, or choice, becomes important. Such presumption of deliberate or purposive action, which is not perceived as the ‘right’, i.e. moral, way of doing things, is not necessarily an “a priori mental state” of the offence causer, but rather a “post facto participant resource that emerges through interaction” (Haugh, 2008, p. 104). Motivated by such a presumption of deliberate or purposive action, which breaches the normative expected behaviour (the moral order), the above person also feels obliged to declare that Dr. Phil is responsible for this offence, and thus asks him to apologise, i.e. #apologizenow, for what he has said and the alleged offence he has caused.

As the above message demonstrates, although this user has been offended by what has been said because it could be taken as (intentionally) insulting those who have, over the years, graduated from this academic institution, i.e. Slippery Rock, including his/her own children, he alludes to right forms of politeness and presents himself as a moral being. As the above excerpt clarifies, the observed behaviour/language has breached the ‘orderly’, or rather ‘right’ way of doing things and, as a result, it has evoked “moralising reflections” on the part of this user (Kádár et al., 2019, p. 8).

To further explain so-called perceived transgressions of the moral order, consider another example taken from the corpus:

[4]

Absolutely disgusting scenes, wolves fans chanting wanker at snodgrass when he was taking the corner. I’m extremely offended by this gross masturbophobic behaviour and demand the premier league take action #wolwhu #offended #disgrace #takeaction

Example [4] is centred around the ‘disgraceful’ behaviour displayed by Wolverhampton football fans. More precisely, chanting rude words such as ‘wanker’ at Robert Snodgrass, a West Ham United player, has been deemed by this user to be ‘gross masturbophobic behaviour’ and a #disgrace. For this user, the observed behaviour (i.e. chanting rude words such as ‘wanker’ at Robert Snodgrass) breaches expected norms (i.e. the moral order) to such an extent that its condemnation has been sanctioned in the strongest possible terms, i.e. through the use of the negative evaluator ‘disgusting’. The severity of the behaviour as well as the offence taken are further evidenced by the use of vague intensifiers (Zhang & Parvaresh, 2019) such as ‘absolutely’ and ‘extremely’, which serve to enhance the user’s negative stance towards the negatively evaluated, i.e. transgressive, behaviour in question. Reading between the lines, this user is also pointing out his moral expectation that the bad behaviour in question would soon ‘stop’; something which, contrary to expectations, did not happen. Consequently, such negatively perceived behaviour has led to the moral evaluation that it is behaviour against which officials need to ‘take action’, as the behaviour in question is perceived to contravene expected norms of, for example, sportsmanship. The suggestion that the Premier League needs to take action against such condemnable behaviour seems to be rooted in the idea that there is a right way of doing things (i.e. taking legal action) against such a wrongdoing.

A perceived transgression of the moral order is also seen in yet another revealing example:

[5]

@O2 your Clifton down staff are racist and horrible. A 2 minute pickup turned into a 30 minute interrogation after presenting my passport!! Requesting my debit cards and sh\*t👤. I doubt they do that to all customers. #Offended

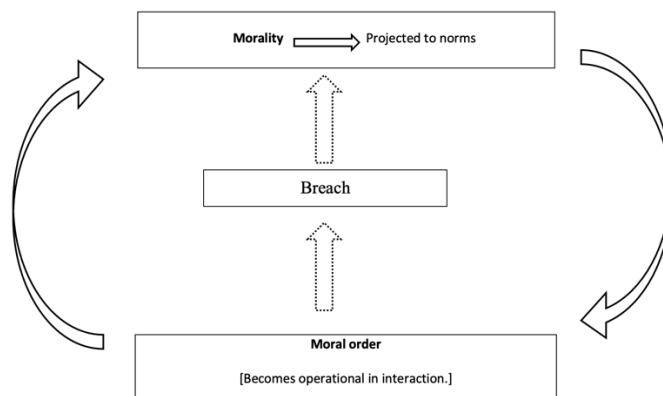
The above person appears to have been offended by the behaviour of a member of staff at an O2 branch. O2 is one of the main British telecommunications service providers. This person is offended because he/she feels that, because of his/her nationality and/or race, he/she has been subjected to racist behaviour, which this person ‘doubts’ they would do to ‘all customers’. In other words, the user is accusing O2 staff at this particular branch of ‘racism’, a morally condemnable act. The user then goes on to provide an explanation as to why he/she believes that the observed behaviour is questionable. As the user explains, ‘A 2 minute pickup turned into a 30 minute interrogation after presenting my passport’. On close examination of this tweet, one is able to trace the perceived clash between how things are expected to be (i.e. a fairly straightforward interaction) and how things have actually turned out to be (i.e. ‘a 30 minute interrogation after presenting my passport’), thus changing the status of the event from ‘taken-for-granted’ to salient. The moral order of a relatively simple and routine ‘2 minute pickup’ has been disrupted due to what is perceived to be a morally condemnable act of racism. It is also worth noting that in example [5] the user attempts to abide by expected norms (i.e. the moral order) by using the word sh\*t instead of its typical spelling.

As the above examples reveal, besides drawing attention to the fact that the user in question is allegedly experiencing, for example, a ‘feeling bad’ emotional state, the *#offended* serves to provide the user with the opportunity to offer an explanation as to why they are experiencing these feelings. In this respect, and as the above examples have clarified, *#offended* may be accompanied by explicit or implicit references to what users appear to consider a transgression, i.e. a breach of the expected moral order and related expectations. As explained above, this involves the user, or rather the offence taker, explicitly or otherwise, *blaming* others based on their own “evaluative” reactions (Alicke et al., 2015, p. 804).

### 5. 2. The moral roots of blame attribution

As mentioned above, sanctioning an offence may involve the perceived transgression of an expected pattern, also known as the moral order of a society. Indeed, these perceived transgressions may lead offendees to blame others for, for example, breaching the expected norms. As discussed above, these attributions of blame are (a) usually “affect-laden” (Greene and Haidt, 2002, p. 517), as evidenced by, for example, the use of emotionally loaded words such as ‘disgusting’ in example [4] above; and (b) typically followed by a “reason” (Graham et al., 2011, p. 368) strategy, which is used by the person who has been offended to provide warrants for his/her offence taking. As far as the current study is concerned, and as far as the above-cited examples have revealed, while warrants for the taking of offence vary greatly across individuals, there seems to be “a number of common [moral] values which underlie their decisions and behaviour” (Parvaresh, 2019, p. 80). In other words, while the above examples demonstrate that offence taking could be instigated when the moral order is breached, as the current study shows, and in line with previous research (e.g. Parvaresh, 2019), it is unlikely that it is where the offence taking is grounded. In this respect, while it could be argued that certain expected patterns of behaviour and/or obligations (i.e. the moral order) are definitely at work when one takes offence, as the current study shows, the taking of offence is rooted in a number of “higher-level” moral norms (Gouldner, 1960; cited in

Culpeper and Tantucci, 2021, p. 149). Figure 1 is a graphical representation of the relationship in question:



**Figure 1: Morality and the moral order (adapted from Kádár et al., 2019)**

As depicted in Figure 1, the moral order *mediates* (Culpeper and Tantucci, 2021, p. 149) between our evaluation of certain behaviour and moral norms. In the following I will further demonstrate, with the help of a number of revealing examples, how a number of seemingly higher-level moral values seem to underlie the “assignment of blame” (Parvaresh, 2019, p. 80). What the below examples serve to demonstrate is that taking offence is rooted in a set of higher-level moral values (Parvaresh, 2019, p. 104; Kádár et al., 2019) which are mediated by (the breach of) expected patterns of behaviour, i.e. the moral order (cf. Culpeper and Tantucci, 2021).

a. Degrading behaviour/language could cause offence: As far as the data in this study is concerned, the attribution of blame may be formed on the basis of the general feeling that undue or untimely references have been made to sex, sex-related objects, nudity or bodily functions. The following is an example:

[6]

Airbnb do not see a problem with their hosts keeping porn on open display all 30 boxes if it. Full refund refused #Airbnb #porn #offended.

Accompanying the statement in example [6] is a picture<sup>7</sup> of what is described in the tweet as the allegedly wrong and/or transgressive behaviour of ‘openly displaying’ pornographic DVDs in a rental property. Evidently, the person posting the above tweet has been *#offended* and has asked Airbnb, the company through which he booked the accommodation, for a full refund.<sup>8</sup> In the case of this tweet, the behaviour in question, i.e. displaying pornographic CDs

<sup>7</sup> Arguably, the presence of the picture (i.e. multimodality) has augmented the ‘affective’ stance expressed via the tweet. While in the corpus under investigation very few pictures/images were found, the multimodal aspects of tweets and their relation to expressions of ‘affect’ certainly warrant a study in their own right.

<sup>8</sup> The request for a refund has apparently been declined, a behaviour which could possibly cause further offence to this interactant. This is exactly where taking offence intersects with such notions as rights and obligations, i.e. the moral order.

in rental properties, has been deemed by this particular user to be wrong, or at the very least questionable, as it conflicts with, or rather breaches, (moral) expectations pertaining to, say, profanity (#porn). This is indicated by the use of the explicit #porn, which the above user seems to disapprove of, as well as the explicit *claim* that ‘displaying pornographic DVDs in guest accommodation’ is a ‘problem’. This is in line with recent research on the topic which has confirmed that some people, due to a wide range of factors such as a “high attachment to religious beliefs and norms” tend to “depict pornography use as reprehensible” or morally transgressive (Lewczuk et al., 2020, p. 2). Reading between the lines, in the case of this user the fact that the host in question has normalised the use of a product which is apparently associated with, for example, ‘profanity’ by openly displaying not just one but ‘30 boxes of it’ has certainly added to the offence being taken.

In light of example [6] above, and based on the analysis of the corpus under investigation, it could also be claimed that taking offence is best viewed as a clash between competing ‘epistemic’ statuses (Heritage, 2012), in that whoever claims to have more knowledge about these norms, that is, whoever thinks he/she has a more advanced epistemic status, feels entitled to be offended (Parvaresh & Tayebi, 2018).

b. Deceptive language/behaviour could lead to offence: As far as the findings of the current study are concerned, the feeling of being the target of deceit, untruthfulness and insincerity may form the backbone of the attributed blame and the claims of offence taking. For further clarification, consider the following example:

[7]<sup>9</sup>

Some people just don’t have a sense of humor and have to STEAL other people’s jokes. #hurt  
#offended

In the case of tweet [7] above, there appears to be a rather explicit warrant for the taking of offence. Specifically, the offence, which has been registered by posting #offended and the related feeling of being emotionally #hurt, seems to have been taken at what has been described as *stealing*, a condemnable act grounded in deception, other people’s jokes to compensate for the lack of a sense of humour. In other words, the tweet in question provides an evaluation of preceding behaviour as morally questionable. In this context, it could safely be argued that stealing (someone else’s joke) is an example of a transgression of a morally desirable value such as honesty and/or fairness. As such, this user is referring to a desirable moral rule of conduct within Tweeter and beyond. The fact that ‘steal’ has been written in capital letters further attests to its salience in the perception of transgressive behaviour in the above context. Arguably, what has caused this person offence appears to be based on a feeling of being *cheated* (Haidt, 2012, p. 159), in the sense that someone has stolen a joke from another person, an endeavour which the above user clearly disapproves of.

c. Double-dealing could lead to people taking offence: On other occasions, the sanctioning of an offence involves attributing blame that is grounded on the feeling that other people have put personal, self-centred interest above the interests of the group to which they belong, i.e. the collective interests of the group, the cost of which is the betrayal of the concerned parties’

interests. As far as the data examined in this study is concerned, this also includes placing too much emphasis on one's group interests at the expense of the interests of related groups. This is illustrated in examples [8] and [9].

[8]

I'm flabbergasted by the arrogance of the this 77 year old billionaire who believes if he throws enough money at smulchy ads, he can be President. He has no faith in you and me or the rest of America to think for themselves. #offended #MichaelBloomberg

[9]

Some adults make decisions for self-gratification even when they go against the best interest of children. BUT WHY?? #puzzled #offended #smh

Evidently, in example [8] the user has been #offended, or rather is claiming to have been #offended, by what has been reported as the infidelity of Michael Bloomberg, a famous American businessman, in regard to the collective interests of America or the American people ('you and me' or 'the rest of America') by narrowly focusing on the pursuit of self-interest ('to think for themselves'). The tweet in question provides an evaluation of Michael Bloomberg's allegedly morally condemnable behaviour. The behaviour in question refers to the act of throwing 'money at smulchy ads', a behaviour which has led this user to evaluate him as one who displays 'arrogance', an undesirable attitude which involves exaggerating one's own importance. The user in question then elaborates on what is expected of a president, i.e. to represent all the country's citizens and not just a select group of people.

Similarly, the user in example [9] has taken offence because some *adults* have placed too much emphasis on their own group-based interests at the expense of ignoring other related (sub)groups of people (*children*). In other words, by using a generic statement, this user provides an evaluation of, or rather complains about, the behaviour described as making 'decisions for self-gratification', i.e. putting self-interest first at the expense of betraying the children's best interests.

What is particularly noticeable in these tweets is how the perceived transgression, or rather wrongdoing, has invoked such negative feelings as 'flabbergasted' and 'puzzled'. The user in [8] has gone so far as to use the #smh which, as an abbreviated form of "shaking my head", is used "to express disappointment or disbelief in the face of what's perceived as glaringly obvious stupidity or extremely [sic] obliviousness" (Heinzman, 2019, paragraph 2).

d. Harmful language/behaviour could cause offence: Another moral affective valence of #offended pertains to attributions of blame which are grounded on the premise that the health and welfare of others, be it humans or animals, have not been maintained or protected, i.e. their pain has not been felt. The following example is revealing:

[10]

2019 everybody. #offended [Retweeting the below]

*What @BBC presenters say matter. Irresponsible of @mrdanwalker to praise "bacon cheeseburger" on Football Focus today. Even if you dont care about animal cruelty, you*

*should care about the effect of livestock industry on climate change and promoting known carcinogens. #GoVegan*

As far as the (re)tweet in example [10] is concerned, it would appear that the user has felt #offended by what is described as the wrongdoing of not caring about the potentially harmful and negative impact that the 'livestock industry' has on 'climate change'. For this particular user, both the BBC in general, and Dan Walker, a presenter on the popular TV show BBC Breakfast, in particular, are expected to refrain from doing things that could harm the environment and, consequently, mankind, something which they have allegedly failed to do, thus causing this user to have felt, or rather claim to have felt, #offended. What is noticeable is that, for both the person who has written the original tweet and the person re-tweeting it, the parties in question have not adhered to what is expected of them. Consequently, the tweet directly addresses the BBC to remind them that these types of issues are important, with a view to getting them to act accordingly, as BBC presenters are expected to 'care about the effect of [the] livestock industry on climate change and promoting known carcinogens'.

e. Contempt towards traditions and authorities could lead to taking of offence: In some cases the attribution of blame appears to have been formed on the basis of the general feeling that due deference has not been paid to traditions, the authorities, etc. This encompasses a wide range of people, behaviours and events. To further clarify this point, let us consider the following example:

[11]

Fuck I was soo offended by a comic for the first time! Watching @bertkreischer call his 13 point Grateful Dead hat a "John Mayer hat". The lightning bolt has been part of GD lure since before John. How disrespectful learn your history machine!! #Gratefuldead #Offended #cancelbert

Beginning with an impolite expression of surprise (i.e. *fuck*), which serves to demonstrate high levels of frustration, the user in example [11] has claimed that he has taken offence when reading a 'comic' because the comedian to whom the tweet is primarily addressed, i.e. Bert Kreischer, has called what apparently looks like a 'Grateful Dead hat', a 'John Mayer hat'. The level of offence experienced was apparently rather significant, as further evidenced by the use of the vague intensifier 'so'. According to this user, the 'lightning bolt' on the hat in question should have provided Bert Kreischer with enough evidence to name the hat correctly. This lapse, be it intentional or otherwise, has been perceived by this user as 'disrespectful', because he apparently admires and respects this particular rock band. This user experiences a feeling of what could be described as contempt, i.e. not having or demonstrating due respect for others, towards Bert Kreischer, which has led this user to remind him that he should 'learn' his 'history machine', presumably with a view to paying more 'respect' to the band that this particular user appears to idolise. It is also important to note that in tweeting the above statement, this user also intends to showcase his superior epistemic historical knowledge of the topic in question, thereby paving the way for some sort of entitlement to, and justification for, taking offence.

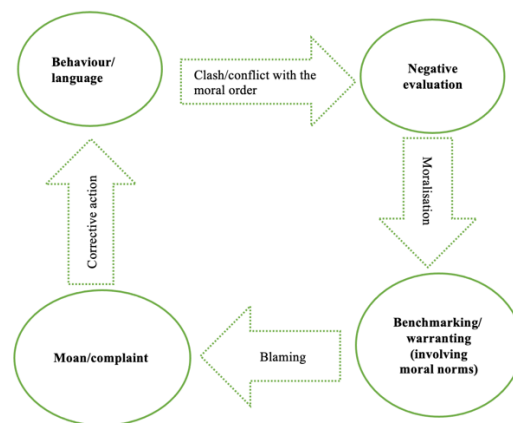
## 6. Discussion and conclusion

Without doubt, we can cause offence to other people, either intentionally or otherwise, and other people can take offence. To investigate how interactants sanction their taking of offence, in this paper I used social media data obtained from Twitter which had been tagged *#offended* by the users themselves. The hashtag in question and the sanctioning of offence which were explored in this study have helped to shed further light on the ways interactants “imagine [...] a particularly complex set of contextual variables as they design their posts” (Tagg, Seargeant and Brown, 2017, p. 4). By using data which had been tagged *#offended* by the interactants themselves, this study was able to focus on the relevant sanctions on which the taking of offence was allegedly based.

While the exact nature of the mechanism that determines how and why we take offence has yet to be thoroughly investigated, the current study further confirms the notion that the warranting or sanctioning of an offence involves the perceived clash between observed and expected behaviour/language. In other words, it appears that the state of being *#offended* is generally the result of what the offence taker judges to be a conflict between his/her morally informed expectations and what is displayed by others (cf. Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2018). As the study shows, when a person takes offence, he/she tends to attribute some form of blame to the person who has allegedly caused the offence. As the current study has demonstrated, interactants achieve this by constantly anchoring their sanctioning of *#offended* in what has been portrayed as both (a) an *assumed* and (b) an *abstract* (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2000; cited in Kádár et al., 2019, p. 7) ability to decide what is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, what is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ and what is ‘permissible’ or ‘impermissible’, amongst other things. As far as the data under investigation is concerned, the interactants’ perception of moral norms is often an *assumed* ability, as it is based on the tacit assumption that all interactants are expected to behave morally, unless proven otherwise. Their perception of morality is an *abstract* ability, for while it is rigidly bound to a number of recurring moral norms, it is only when moral norms are breached that users may “appeal” to such seemingly “binding” moral norms (Kádár et al., 2019, p. 7).

In light of the foregoing discussion, it could be argued that morally informed norms continue to exert a huge influence on the taking of offence, often through various “interactionally constituted moral orders” (Parvaresh & Tayebi, 2018, p. 93). As far as the current study is concerned, when interactants perceive certain language/behaviour breaching these norms, they may take offence. This can be explained in Figure 2:





**Figure 2: The taking of offence processes**

As Figure 2 illustrates, the observed behaviour/language becomes *salient* (Kádár et al., 2019) as soon as there is some form of perceived clash, or rather conflict, between how things are expected to be (i.e. the moral order/familiar scenes) and how things actually are (i.e. a breach of the moral order). Consequently, the moral order *may*<sup>10</sup> become operational, thereby triggering negative feelings, such as those pertaining to *being offended*. Such negatively evaluated behaviour/language may then lead to moralisation, whereby offendees indulge in providing a set of benchmarks (also known as warrants) against which such a negative evaluation has been made. These warrants are often couched in, and projected onto, moral norms. These norms, which have in the eyes of the offence taker been breached, lay the groundwork for attributions of blame which are typically couched in the form of a complaint or moan about the behaviour in question, presumably with a view to causing some remedial action on the part of the person who has caused the offence.

All in all, as I have tried to clarify in this paper, a number of expectations are at work when interactants perceive certain behaviour as being morally transgressive, which could result in them engaging in a so-called ‘blame attribution’ game (cf. Malle et al., 2014). While this paper has shed some light on a number of morally informed expectations which are at the heart of this process, further research is needed to explore the various aspects of the multi-faceted phenomenon of taking offence. The future researcher might be interested in pursuing this line of inquiry further by using extensive online and face-to-face communication corpora. Additional research is also required to determine how interactants actually feel when they are offended. For example, future researchers might be interested in determining the connection between *feeling bad*, as well as other negative feelings, and the taking of offence. Ideally, this line of inquiry should be complemented by further experimental studies. Investigating the role of diachronicity in taking offence, or rather how taking of offence may evolve across various online feeds, could potentially form another area for further research (cf. Vladimirou et al., 2021). Another area worthy of further investigation is to establish what exactly we take offence at. Is it at what has been said/done or at the person who has allegedly caused the offence? Answering this question is not an easy endeavour, and requires the differences between the extremely complex phenomena of saying and implicating to be taken

<sup>10</sup> Indicated by the dotted lines.

into consideration, particularly in the causing/taking of offence, and ideally from a theoretical perspective.

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