Fragile men and fishy arguments

Attributing and disputing offence in
online interaction

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What happens when someone tells you that you are offended, even though
you do not feel offended yourself? Contested attributions of offence provide
an interesting testing ground for how one's feelings of offence can diverge
from how offence is displayed in interaction. In this paper, we consider the
phenomenon of attributions of offence to ask on what grounds a speaker
can be labelled as offended, even when the speaker does not claim any
feelings of offence, as well as to what extent a speaker can deny being
offended, when appearing to, indeed, be offended. We present a case study
of an interaction from Twitter (X) stemming from an instance of failed
humour, exploring the linguistic cues that people rely on when judging
others to be offended. We find that disputes regarding offence are not
actually necessarily to do with one's feelings at all but instead relate to
whether someone's emotional involvement is perceived to be a barrier to
their objectivity and argumentative strength.

1.   Introduction

Offence-taking and offensive language are increasingly becoming not just popular
topics in research but also pressing issues in society (e.g. Butler 2024; Matamoros-
Fernández and Rodriguez 2022). However, despite a growing body of literature,
there has been limited systematic research into the ways offence and offence-
taking is experienced and communicated across various settings and forms of

interaction (Haugh et al. 2022).[1] In this paper, we aim to enrich theoretical under-standings of offence and offence-taking by focussing on how 'offendedness' is assigned during interaction, and how these assignments are challenged and nego-tiated. We label these assignments 'contested attributions of offence', namely, instances in which someone is labelled as 'offended' and that they subsequently attempt to deny. Specifically, we explore what kinds of linguistic cues allow both analysts and participants to interpret a segment of talk as expressing 'offended-ness', and we examine the extent to which someone identified as 'offended' can reject that label, even when there appears to be evidence suggesting otherwise.

To do this, we present a case study of a network of Twitter (now known as X) interactions stemming from an instance of failed humour, examining the linguistic behaviour of the alleged offendee to ask whether it warrants the co-participants' attributions of offence and/or the offendee's attempts to deny being so offended.[2] As we will see, the distinction between feeling offended and taking offence is not always a clear-cut business, with participants' own metapragmatic expressions of 'being' or 'getting' offended being underdetermined as to which they orient to. As such, contested attributions of offence open up questions regarding (i) what exactly is attributed to the allegedly offended party, an emo-tional state, linguistic behaviour, or both, and (ii) how we can reconcile the theo-retical notion of offence-taking with participants' own perspectives in light of the latter commonly involving diverging understandings.

2.   Offence and offence-taking

Pragmatic work on offence developed out of politeness research, and particularly out of extensions of the field that focused on inappropriate linguistic behaviour. Scholars in this line of research often use the term 'offensive' as a synonym of or portmanteau for 'impolite', 'rude', or 'verbally aggressive', and tend to associ-ate offence with face-threats or face-damage (e.g., Bousfield 2007, 2008; Culpeper 1996, 2005; Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann 2003; O'Driscoll 2020). Haugh et al. (2022, 118) contrast approaches which conceive offence as 'interpersonally transgressive conduct' with more recent work which views offence as '(perceived) moral transgressions' (e.g., Kádár 2017; Parvaresh and Tayebi 2018). At the core of the latter is the assumption that social practices are governed by a 'moral order', that is, "the socially standardized and standardizing, 'seen but unnoticed',

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1. One symptom of this issue is that even researchers will analyse linguistic data as instances of someone being 'obviously offended' without discussing what evidence led to that conclusion.

2. Readers are advised that the interaction includes content of an explicit and sexual nature.

expected, background features of everyday scenes" (Garfinkel 1964, 226), against which evaluations of (im)politeness or offensiveness are made (e.g., Haugh 2015a; Kádár and Haugh 2013). However, relational-interpersonal transgressions and moral-societal transgressions are not mutually exclusive: the former can be based on wider societal norms and expectations and, conversely, the moral order is grounded in social relations (see also Kádár and Haugh 2013, 60–73).

Associating offence with transgressions naturally lends itself to viewing both 'causing offence' and 'taking offence' as social actions. Following work in interpersonal pragmatics (e.g., Haugh and Sinkeviciute 2019, 4–8; Haugh et al. 2022, 119), 'giving' or 'causing' offence involves verbal or non-verbal conduct by one party that is perceived or treated as an offensive transgression by another party. Treating another's conduct as an offensive transgression amounts to the social action of 'taking offence', that is, "'claiming'/'indicating' that (some)one is offended" (Haugh and Sinkeviciute 2019, 4), or at least "the conduct of another party [being] construed as transgressive" (Haugh et al. 2022, 119). In other words, taking offence is a public display that is recognisable to co-present parties. This is "in and of itself distinct from any feelings of offence a participant may or may not experience" (Haugh 2015b, 37), since 'feeling offended' corresponds to a subjective emotional state that is not accessible to co-participants.

So, participants may feel offended without displaying their offence; reversely, participants may take offence through a purely performative act that has no corresponding affective motivation. But note, of course, that the act of taking offence *can* involve the display of feelings and emotions, whether or not one actually experiences those feelings or emotions. This is what Haugh (2015a; 2015b) calls 'registering offence': taking offence by expressing a negative affective stance. This is separate from what he calls 'sanctioning offence', which is to take a moral stance: "a moral claim of a prior transgression, affront, misdeed and such like on the part of another participant" (Haugh 2015b, 37; see also Haugh and Sinkeviciute 2019).[3] Both registering and sanctioning offence, however, constitute an "orientation on the part of participants to the moral order" (Haugh 2015a, 286).

Various researchers have discussed ways that interlocutors can employ linguistic resources to take offence, either explicitly or implicitly, by expressing an affective and/or a moral stance. On the one hand, explicit offence-taking can be achieved through metapragmatic comments such as 'that's offensive' (e.g., Sinkeviciute 2017; Tayebi 2016), or explicit expressions of negative affect such as insults, ill-wishes, and threats (Parvaresh and Tayebi 2018), in line with what Culpeper (2011, 223) calls affective impoliteness: "the targeted display of height-

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3. For a discussion of different notions associated with, and approaches to, morality in discourse, see Haugh and Márquez Reiter (2025).

ened emotion, typically anger, with the implication that the target is to blame for producing that negative emotional state". On the other hand, a significant body of research addresses various social actions which can construe some action or conduct as a moral transgression in more implicit ways (see Haugh and Sinkeviciute 2019 and Haugh et al. 2022 for overviews), such as accusations (Garcia 1991; Haugh and Sinkeviciute 2018), admonishments (i.e., warnings or reprimands, Kádár et al. 2021), blamings (Márquez Reiter and Haugh 2019; Pomerantz 1978), complaints (Drew 1998; Haugh 2015b; Schegloff 2005), criticisms (Haugh 2015b; Morris 1988; Pillet-Shore 2016), denunciations (Garfinkel 1956; Günthner 1995), and reproaches (i.e., expressions of disapproval, Günthner 1996), all of which can be captured under the umbrella term 'moral criticisms' (Malle et al. 2014). But even social actions such as requesting, through which someone discontinues an action or advice-giving, are hearable as implicit moral stances if they construe the addressee as 'at fault' for some transgression (Baxter-Webb 2025; Shaw and Hepburn 2013). Moreover, work in the ethnomethodological and conversation-analytic tradition has demonstrated that interactants routinely hold each other morally 'accountable', i.e., responsible, for what they can be taken to be doing and meaning (see e.g., Garfinkel 1967; Garfinkel and Sacks 1970; Heritage 1988). This often takes the form of participants orienting to a need for, or directly eliciting, accounts, i.e., explanations or justifications for prior talk, thereby subtly orienting to a moral transgression. Overall, discursive and interactional moralising practices involve negative evaluations of people, their beliefs, or their conduct (see e.g., Haugh and Márquez Reiter 2025) which can range in their degree of explicitness (see e.g., Haugh 2015a, 280–286; Haugh and Chang 2019).

It is important to note that analytical frameworks premised on turn-taking in face-to-face (dyadic) interaction do not map exactly to online multi-party conversations, because of the polylogal nature of the latter (Marcoccia 2004; see also Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014 on online conflict sequences). Since online interactions are shaped by medium-related affordances, namely asynchronicity and complex (nested/networked) non-linearity (see also Pluwak 2023), participants are able to address and directly respond to any part of an unfolding conversation. In doing so, participants create splits and bifurcations, which give rise to a branched structure of interaction, as opposed to a straightforward linear turn-by-turn structure. Studies of online polylogues on platforms like YouTube (e.g., Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014; Lorenzo-Dus et al. 2011) draw particular attention to non-linearity, especially in cases of conflict: adjacent turns may interact with non-adjacent turns, so not fitting neatly with prior offensive-versus-defensive classifications, and thus "blur[ring] the categories of recipient and witness as conflict responders" (Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014, 27). But despite the polylogal nature of entire online multi-

party interactions, we expect that individual contributions that respond to an immediately prior turn will behave as per face-to-face linear interaction in terms of the social actions they perform, and specifically, we assume that participants will make use of the same kinds of linguistic resources for offence-taking in poly-logal interaction irrespective of the specific timestamp of the prior turn.

Our goal in this paper is to offer a complementary perspective to the quickly growing understanding of offence and offence-taking. Rather than looking how people 'take offence', we focus on how 'offendedness' is attributed in interaction, namely, how people claim that others are offended, as well as how these attributions are contested and negotiated, in order to address the following questions:

–   What kinds of linguistic evidence license a stretch of talk, both to the analyst and to co-participants, as an instance of 'offendedness'?
–   To what extent can an alleged offendee deny 'being offended' in the face of evidence to the contrary?

By 'attributions of offence' or 'offence attributions' we mean explicit other-evaluations (as opposed to self-disclosures) of a participant as 'being offended'. Such attributions pertain to both taking offence and feeling offended.[4] In other words, we contend that someone seeming or appearing offended, as evidenced by some verbal or non-verbal behaviour that can be interpreted as offence-taking, is liable to being perceived to be feeling offended. However, we find that denials of offendedness need not be about contesting one's feelings at all but can be a strategic move to position oneself as immune from emotional involvement that might cloud one's rationality.

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4. Participants may also be evaluated as and called out for taking offence without actually feeling offended. In such cases, we may see attributions of *pretend* or *faux* offence.

3.   Data and methodology

In this paper, we present a case study of contested offence attributions in the context of humorous exchanges, examining a specific interaction which occurred on the social media platform Twitter (now X) between April 29, 2022 and May 1, 2022.[5]

In line with standard practice (Townsend and Wallace 2016), the usernames of ordinary posters have been redacted in order to preserve anonymity, using adapted versions of posters' display names to label different authors in our examples. We have chosen relevant gendered pronouns based on our assumptions from their display names and profile information (see also Dynel and Poppi 2020, 62–64). Obvious typos have been corrected for readability, as our focus is on the content of what the posters write, not on the way it is typographically produced (unless this is deemed relevant to the meaning, such as the use of capital letters for emphasis). This also reduces traceability of the original tweets, enhancing our anonymity protection measures.[6]

It should be noted that in Twitter interactions (as in other online polylogal interactions), branching and crossing response lines are common. However, unlike in other social media comment sections (such as YouTube), the timelines of unfolding interactions are rather different insofar as the platform is set up so that only recent posts receive engagement by users. Most active conversational threads (outside of long-lasting hashtag campaigns) tend to unfold and largely conclude within a short window (often 24–48 hours), lacking the diachronic element that is noted on YouTube and similar platforms (Pfeffer et al. 2023). So, as mentioned in Section 2, although much of the extant literature on offence and offence-taking handles face-to-face interaction, we contend that the linguistic resources one can employ to display one's offence can be equally used in digitally mediated interaction.

Finally, given the sensitive nature of the topic at hand, it must be stressed that the inclusion of the posts in the following discussion is not to cast judgement on the attitudes presented, but merely to discuss the metapragmatic insights they offer.

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5. The interaction in question was identified through an 'advanced search' of the word 'joke' in combination with any of the following terms: rude, offensive, offend, inappropriate, censor, cancel, snowflake, PC, correct, racist, sexist, ableist, and phobic. The initial search was restricted to English language posts from May 1 to May 2, 2022.

6. There was only one instance of hashtag use in the analysed interaction, which has been removed to reduce traceability.

Our analysis focuses on one specific nested sub-thread in response to an original post by Maya, reproduced in (1).

(1)   Maya: whenever a guy is like "I actually LOVE eating pussy" it's like okay dude...pick me much?

As we see in (1), Maya makes a joke about men performing oral sex on women by subverting the common 'pick me' format, which usually targets women as the butt of the joke. This post received 326 comments (as of April 16, 2023), one of which was from Kev, reproduced in (2).

(2)   Kev: Usually depends on if I'm in the mood for fish. Or how clean they look tbh

It was this comment that received several critical responses, including a reply from Lauren, who posted a screenshot of Kev's profile photo, accompanied by the statement (3).

(3)   Lauren: I am actually not convinced you have spoken to a woman ever

It is this comment from Lauren which prompted the nested sub-thread we are interested in here, in which participants negotiated the (in)appropriateness of Lauren's comment vis-à-vis Kev's "mood for fish" comment. Of these, we are particularly interested in the oppositional interaction between one male user (MT), the target of several offence attributions, and three female participants (Lauren, Julia and Silent), the latter two of whom make the offence attributions to MT.

Following Lauren's post in (3), our target interaction consists of 45 posts by six interactants, which are nested up to 26 levels down from Maya's initial post. Since Twitter interactions can contain numerous nested sub-threads, as is the case in our example, the social media platform does not necessarily display comments in a chronological order due to the polylogal nature of online interaction. This is because participants can respond to any part of a conversation, so rather than a neat turn-by-turn interaction that is typical of face-to-face interaction, the resulting conversation gives rise to a branched structure (see Figure 1).
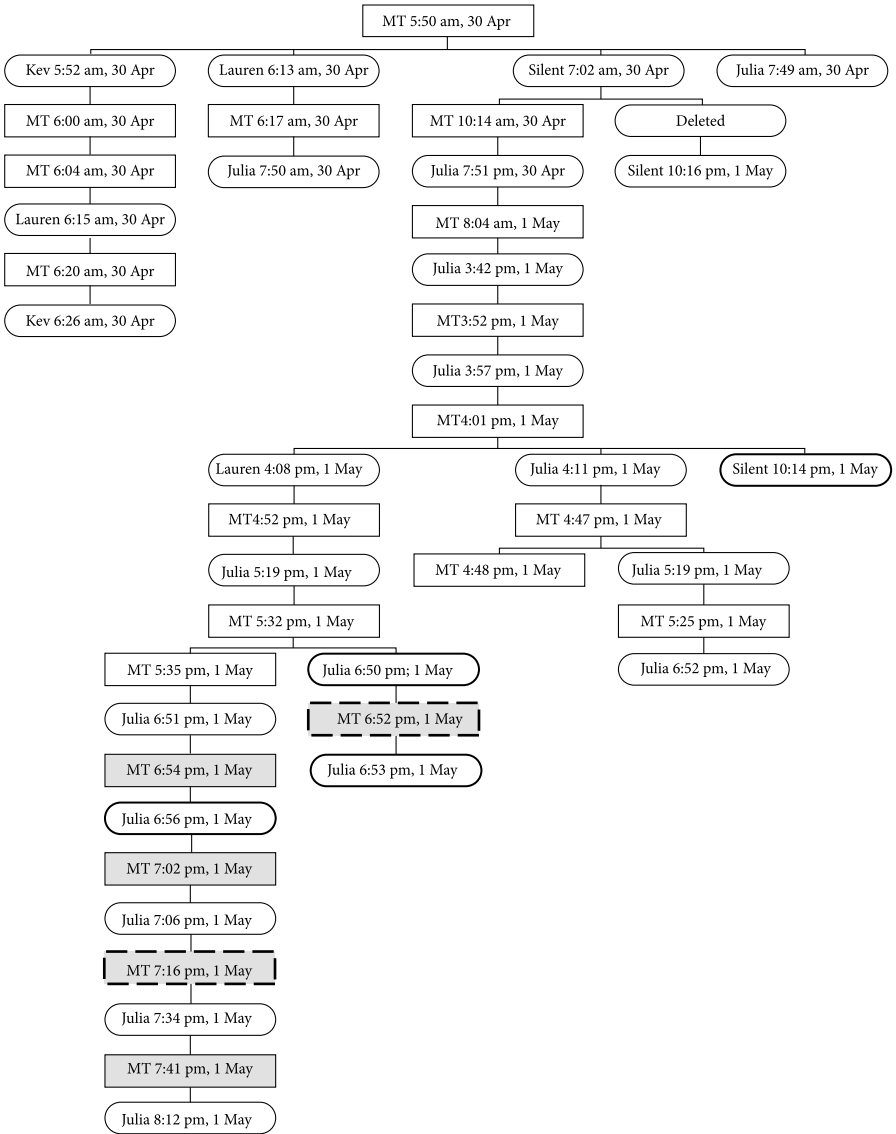
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                                    MT 5:50 am, 30 Apr
        ┌──────────────────┬──────────────────────┬──────────────────────┐
  Kev 5:52 am, 30 Apr  Lauren 6:13 am, 30 Apr   Silent 7:02 am, 30 Apr   Julia 7:49 am, 30 Apr
        │                     │            ┌──────────────┴──────────────┐
  MT 6:00 am, 30 Apr    MT 6:17 am, 30 Apr   MT 10:14 am, 30 Apr        Deleted
        │                     │                    │                      │
  MT 6:04 am, 30 Apr    Julia 7:50 am, 30 Apr  Julia 7:51 pm, 30 Apr   Silent 10:16 pm, 1 May
        │                                           │
  Lauren 6:15 am, 30 Apr                       MT 8:04 am, 1 May
        │                                           │
  MT 6:20 am, 30 Apr                           Julia 3:42 pm, 1 May
        │                                           │
  Kev 6:26 am, 30 Apr                          MT3:52 pm, 1 May
                                                    │
                                               Julia 3:57 pm, 1 May
                                                    │
                                               MT4:01 pm, 1 May
        ┌───────────────────────┬───────────────────┴──────────────┐
  Lauren 4:08 pm, 1 May     Julia 4:11 pm, 1 May          Silent 10:14 pm, 1 May
        │                          │
  MT4:52 pm, 1 May           MT 4:47 pm, 1 May
        │                 ┌────────┴─────────┐
  Julia 5:19 pm, 1 May  MT 4:48 pm, 1 May  Julia 5:19 pm, 1 May
        │                                   │
  MT 5:32 pm, 1 May                     MT 5:25 pm, 1 May
   ┌────┴──────┐                            │
 MT 5:35 pm,  Julia 6:50 pm;            Julia 6:52 pm, 1 May
  1 May       1 May
   │             │
 Julia 6:51    MT 6:52 pm, 1 May
  pm, 1 May      │
   │           Julia 6:53 pm, 1 May
 MT 6:54 pm, 1 May
   │
 Julia 6:56 pm, 1 May
   │
 MT 7:02 pm, 1 May
   │
 Julia 7:06 pm, 1 May
   │
 MT 7:16 pm, 1 May
   │
 Julia 7:34 pm, 1 May
   │
 MT 7:41 pm, 1 May
   │
 Julia 8:12 pm, 1 May
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Figure 1. Nested interaction structure[7]

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7. Other-attributions of offence directed at MT are indicated by bold outlines, MT's posts after those attributions are shaded in grey, and MT's contestations are indicated by bold, dashed outlines.

As the timeline is crucial for understanding the evidence on which a given metapragmatic evaluation is based, we also provide an overview of the chronological order of events in our data in Table 1.

Table 1. Chronology of offence-taking, offence attribution, and contestation

April 30 5:50am–May 1 4:48pm	MT produces 15 posts in the interaction concerning the (in)appropriateness of Lauren's comment vis-à-vis Kev's comment
May 1 6:50pm	Julia produces 1st attribution of offence directed at MT
May 1 6:52pm	MT contests Julia's 1st attribution
May 1 06:53 pm	Julia produces 2nd attribution of offence directed at MT
May 1 6:54pm–7:02pm	MT does not respond to 2nd attribution. MT contributes two more posts to the interaction
May 1 7:06pm	Julia produces 3rd attribution of offence directed at MT
May 1 7:16pm	MT contests Julia's 3rd attribution
May 1 7:41pm	MT contributes one further post to the interaction
May 1 10:14pm	Silent produces 4th attribution of offence directed at MT

As this timeline shows, MT contributes 15 posts to the interaction in multiple sub-threads to various users, including Lauren and Julia, before Julia makes her first attribution of offence to MT. After MT contests this attribution, Julia immediately makes her second attribution. This time, MT does not respond; instead, he contributes two more posts elsewhere in the sub-thread, leading to Julia's third attribution. MT once again contests and makes one final contribution to the interaction. The following, fourth attribution by Silent constitutes the end of the sub-thread.

In the subsequent analysis, we take advantage of the interactants' (discrepant) metapragmatic assessments of MT's linguistic conduct to examine the evidence available to the offence attributers for their claims. Specifically, our examination of MT's posts was guided by the research on offence-taking discussed in Section 2. We examined the data for evidence of MT construing his co-participants' conduct as interpersonal or moral transgressions by (i) registering his offence through negative affective stances; and (ii) sanctioning offence through moral stances on the conduct of his co-participants (see Haugh 2015a; 2015b). These could be achieved either explicitly or implicitly via a range of linguistic resources. We therefore analysed MT's posts for the following:

Negative affective stance:
–   Metapragmatic comments (e.g., Sinkeviciute 2017; Tayebi 2016)
–   Insults, expressions of ill-wishes and threats (Parvaresh and Tayebi 2018)
–   Other displays of negative emotion via impoliteness strategies (Culpeper 2011)

Moral stance:
–   Metapragmatic comments (e.g., Sinkeviciute 2017; Tayebi 2016)
–   Social actions constituting moral criticisms (Malle et al. 2014)
–   Social actions which construe the addressee as at-fault for some moral transgression, such as advice-giving (Shaw and Hepburn 2013) or requests to discontinue some conduct (Baxter-Webb 2025)
–   Orientations to talk as in need of accounts (e.g., Garfinkel 1967; Garfinkel and Sacks 1970; Heritage 1988)
–   Explicit or implicit negative assessments (e.g., Haugh 2015a; Haugh and Chang 2019) which orient to a moral transgression

We then move to consider MT's alternative self-assessments of his conduct and feelings in order to assess the validity of his contestation of his offence and the extent to which he has plausible deniability. In this discussion, we return to the issue of feeling offended versus taking offence, acknowledging that although one's linguistic behaviour may indicate one's offence, it cannot substitute for one's actual feelings.

4.   Linguistic evidence for offence-taking: Moral and affective stances

Our analysis starts from (4), in which we see MT offer a direct response to Lauren's comment and (apparent) attack on Kev's physical appearance in (3), defending Kev's previous "mood for fish" comment by invoking the argument that consent is as important for men as it is for women. This comment leads to three sub-threads that MT interacts in.

(4)   5.50am MT: But he's right. It's on both parties to be presentable and fuckable. Sex should be a two way thing and if hygiene gets in the way of that, a man has every right to say no just like a woman.

The first sub-thread is reproduced in (4a), starting with Kev's comment on MT's post, stating that Lauren "doesn't realize that looks aren't everything".

(4a) 5 5.52am Kev: She doesn't realize that looks aren't everything. Sometimes you have to be somewhat likeable

6 6.00am MT: I'm not even sure the person behind that account understands sex at all. They just want that sweet ratio. A man has every right to refuse sex and doesn't have to act like pleasuring women is something above their general well-being.

7 6.04am MT: And in my experience women gravitate towards men who say no or don't act desperate.

8 6.15am Lauren: women are gravitating towards NEITHER of you not because of your looks but because you are insufferable and misogynistic

9 6.20am MT: You're the only one who is talking about looks here.

Kev's comment prompts two explicit negative evaluations (Haugh and Chang 2019) which achieve moral criticisms (Malle et al. 2014) from MT in turn 6: the first targets Lauren for not "understanding sex at all", while the second accuses her of being motivated by "just want[ing] that sweet ratio", i.e., wanting more likes with her profile picture post than Kev received with his initial "mood for fish" response to Maya's joke. The remainder of this and MT's subsequent post in turn 7 further defends Kev by reiterating his argument about consent. This constitutes an implicit negative assessment (Haugh 2015b) of Lauren's comment in (3) about Kev as, one, motivated by superficial reasons (that "looks [are] everything") and two, uninformed (not understanding that men have "every right to refuse sex"), thereby implicitly registering his offence.

Lauren responds to MT's posts in turn 8, retracting her previous (implicitly communicated albeit strongly inferable) attack on Kev's physical appearance by claiming that both Kev's and MT's lack of interest from women is "not because of [their] looks", but due to their attitudes as "insufferable and misogynistic". MT produces a negative evaluation (Haugh and Chang 2019) and moral criticism (Malle et al. 2014) by responding that Lauren is "the only one who is talking about looks here" (despite the fact that Kev had mentioned looks in his previous post in turn 5). This positions MT as someone who is against superficial judgments and, consequently, as morally superior to Lauren, again, charging Lauren with having committed a moral transgression and sanctioning her post as offensive.

In (4b), Lauren starts a new sub-thread by commenting on MT's initial post in (4).

(4b)   5 6.13am Lauren: the OP has absolutely NOTHING to do with either of
                          those things. The creator made a post punching up by
                          using a "pick me" joke that is commonly made at women's
                          expense. Then captain cheese dick here responded by
                          punching down by using a common joke made about
                          women's hygiene.[8]
       6 6.17am MT: Stop being sexist towards men. We have a say in our sex
                          life too. Maybe if you stopped being so bitter, people,
                          including men by the way, would actually like you.

Here, Lauren argues that Kev's initial 'joke' was not, as MT claims, about consent,
but rather a case of "punching down by using a common joke made about
women's hygiene". MT responds to this with several orientations to moral trans-
gressions. First, he demands that Lauren "[s]top being sexist towards men". This
request to discontinue her conduct (Baxter-Webb 2025) together with the pre-
supposed negative assessment (Haugh and Chang 2019) of Lauren as "being sex-
ist" attributes blame to Lauren, construes her conduct as a transgression, and
sanctions her for it. This moral stance is arguably complemented by an implicit
negative affective stance: in demanding that she "stop being sexist", MT displays
negative emotions, i.e., his being upset, at Lauren's alleged sexism. This is bol-
stered by MT's next statement that if Lauren "stopped being so bitter, people,
including men by the way, would actually like [her]". Here MT makes an explicit
negative assessment (Haugh and Chang 2019) of Lauren's person ("bitter") and
also presupposes that people do not like her, both constituting cases of conven-
tionalised impoliteness (Culpeper 2011) through which negative affective stances
are displayed. Although these assessments do not explicitly refer to moral trans-
gressions (assuming that being bitter and not being liked are not moral issues),
their occurrence immediately after having sanctioned Lauren's offence makes
them hearable as MT registering his offence.

    Soon after, Silent joins the interaction, also with a response to MT's initial
comment in a further sub-thread.

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8. As pointed out by one anonymous reviewer, the participants in this interaction are
negotiating not only what is offensive (and why) and who is offended, but also what counts as
a 'joke' and 'joking'. The relationship between (claims of) non-seriousness and offensiveness
within this data would be interesting to explore, but such an analysis would go beyond the
scope of this paper.

(4c)   5   7.02am   Silent: Yeah but he didn't say it quite like that. Hygiene is everything. But using fish to describe pussy deserves this put down

    6   10.14am   MT: Does a well-kept and clean vagina have a fishy smell?

    7   7.51pm   Julia: He implied every vagina does. That's the point.

    8   8.04am   MT: Where did he imply that?

    9   3.42pm   Julia: The discussion is about people who like eating pussy and he said "depends if I'm in the mood for fish". He didn't say "depends if she smells like fish". The other sentence was a separate statement, it's a period not a comma so it doesn't complete the first one.

    10   3.52pm   MT: But why do YOU think that a well-kept vagina smells like fish?

    11   3.57pm   Julia: I don't. That is why it's offensive to people with vaginas when people say these things. You're so close to getting it…

    12   4.01pm   MT: But if you don't, why do you assume he thinks differently than you? He didn't say every vagina smells fishy so I don't perform cunnilingus on them. But even that statement is ridiculous and not worth getting offended for it. What insecurity does his sentence poke at here?

Like Lauren, Silent challenges MT's claim that Kev's joke was about consent and hygiene, stating that Kev "deserves this put down" by Lauren. MT's response does not engage with Silent's arguments but instead asks whether "a well-kept and clean vagina [has] a fishy smell". Julia responds with a metapragmatic comment that Kev "implied every vagina does". Although Kev did not explicitly state that all vaginas smell like fish, by crediting him with having implied such an interpretation, Julia holds Kev normatively accountable for having made such an interpretation available (Elder 2021a). This sparks the beginning of a multi-post argument in which MT challenges the female participants' interpretation of Kev's joke as problematic.

First, we see MT producing implicit negative assessments (Haugh 2015a) by orienting to Julia's conduct as in need of an account (Garfinkel 1967; Garfinkel and Sacks 1970; Heritage 1988). This is achieved by questioning why Julia 'assumes' (turn 12) that Kev thinks vaginas smell like fish, implicating Julia is wrong to make such an assumption. While assuming, as a cognitive process, cannot constitute a morally transgressive action, acting based on one's assumptions can.

Next, MT continues to point out that, irrespective of whether Kev made a generalisation about all vaginas, his comment is "not worth getting offended for". This construes Julia's "getting offended" as an overreaction. While, on the surface, this may look like MT being supportive by giving advice, this action can indeed constitute an implicit negative assessment and moral criticism of her reaction because advice-giving may construe the advice receiver as 'at fault' (see Shaw and Hepburn 2013). The final part of his post, "What insecurity does his sentence poke at here?", further frames Julia's interpretation of Kev's post as stemming from some insecurity, presumably regarding her own body, even though Julia never mentioned any such concern. Like the 'advice', this might be interpreted as an expression of concern or sympathy, but in light of the negative assessment of Julia's previous post as "ridiculous", more likely functions as another implicit moral criticism that Julia's arguments stem from her own insecurities. The characterisations of Julia as insecure and acting in a ridiculous way are therefore furthermore hearable as insults (Culpeper 2011) and therefore as negative affective stances towards Julia.

MT's post in turn 12 sparks two further sub-threads. The first is created by Julia, who responds to MT in (5a).

(5a) 13 4.11pm Julia: ?? Because he does think differently. If you can't read just say that. We are rightfully tired of people making this "joke" and you aren't going to gaslight us into believing we shouldn't be. Until you have a vagina, stay in your lane.

14 4.47pm MT: Why do you want to dictate what another person thinks? Why does it matter what I have between my legs?

15 5.19pm Julia: You want to dictate how we should feel about something that you don't even have or experience. Let that sink in. The irony.

16 5.25pm MT: Notice how I never said anything about what you should feel. I said it's not worth getting offended by it. I'm acknowledging that you are offended, that is why I'm asking questions. I hope this shines light on the toxicity of your attitude.

17 6.52pm Julia: Why is it not worth getting offended? What about men who get offended when women say y'all don't know how to wash yourselves at all? When was the last time you had a vagina of your own and why do you think your opinion is relevant?

Julia's response to MT in turn 13 reveals that she does indeed not interpret MT's remarks about insecurity and her getting offended as displaying concern for her. Instead, she frames Kev's 'joke' as a microaggression (Elder 2021b) that continuously and harmfully targets people with vaginas and accuses MT of trying to "gaslight" his female co-participants "into believing [they] shouldn't be [rightfully tired of people making this 'joke']". Once again, MT challenges the way Julia views Kev's 'joke' and implicitly expresses moral criticism of her verbal conduct. His 'unpalatable question' (Culpeper 2011) in turn 14, "Why do you want to dictate what another person thinks?" not only expresses an implicit negative affective stance but also holds Julia morally accountable for her interpretation of Kev's 'joke'. This also applies to the question "Why does it matter what I have between my legs?", which challenges the relevance of Julia's prior command, "Until you have a vagina, stay in your lane" (turn 13), again criticising her for having raised the issue. As he did earlier in (4b), MT targets his co-participants' sexism against men, but this time in response to Julia's attempting to instate rules for interactional conduct.

Julia counters MT's response in turn 15 by stating that "you want to dictate how we should feel about something that you don't even have or experience". Here, 'you' can be viewed as referring to MT as a direct response, but arguably also as plural to also include Kev. Meanwhile, 'we' can be seen to refer to the females in the interaction (Julia, Lauren and Silent) but can equally be extended to women more broadly. However, as we see from MT's response in turn 16, he hears Julia's response as a direct accusation against him, pointing out that he "never said anything about what you should feel". He then returns to framing Julia as being offended, restating that "it's not worth [it]", "acknowledging that [she is] offended", and arguing that his "asking questions" is motivated by him wanting to understand this offence. MT's final statement explicitly evaluates Lauren's "attitude" as "toxic", which conveys moral criticism (Malle et al. 2014) and sanctions her interactional behaviour as offensive. Julia, in turn, implicitly agrees that she is, indeed, offended, or at least, that Kev's post was offensive.

Meanwhile, MT's post in turn 12 of (4c) leads Lauren to respond in a second sub-thread, (5b).

(5b)   13 4.08pm Lauren: you've strayed away from the original discussion, or
                        rather, the original problem here. The original post was
                        NEVER about what he responded to. His response used
                        women's health and "preference" as an excuse to make us
                        the butt of a long running joke — that was the entire
                        problem

14 4.52pm MT: He made a silly joke. He wasn't saying anything about
                   your stinky vagina please don't get so offended.

15 5.19pm Julia: This joke got old at least 50 years ago. You are entirely
                   missing the point.

16 5.32pm MT: What was the point? That he shouldn't joke about stuff?
                   Because if you see past the bad joke he said that he likes
                   to decide whether or not he engages in cunnilingus. And
                   got criticized for his looks and also got made fun of his
                   experience with women.

17 5.35pm MT: And I only defended him because what he said has merit
                   based on experience with women. Therefore the idea that
                   cleanliness plays a part in sex is legit. I did not even get
                   into the fact that he got criticized for his looks. The
                   penguin profile pic was toxic, not him.

Here, Lauren argues that MT is ignoring "the original problem", namely that Kev's "response used women's health and 'preference' as an excuse to make [women] the butt of a long running joke", again making reference to the microaggressive nature of this joke (Elder 2021b). MT responds in turn 14 by defending Kev's post as "a silly joke" which "wasn't saying anything about your stinky vagina". On the one hand, "your stinky vagina" presupposes Lauren to 'have a stinky vagina', constituting an insult (Culpeper 2011) which can be hearable as expressing a negative affective stance and registering offence (Haugh 2015b). On the other hand, by embedding it within negation, it can be read as 'Kev wasn't saying you have a stinky vagina', entailing that Kev was not making a generalisation about all vaginas. This latter interpretation absolves Kev from having committed a moral transgression and hence supports his plea to Lauren to not "get so offended".

In response, Julia echoes Lauren's argument that Kev's joke plays on a common misogynistic attitude and that MT is "entirely missing the point". MT, in turn, continues to 'miss the point', perhaps on purpose, asking whether the issue is that "[Kev] shouldn't joke about stuff". He then goes on to claim that "if you see past the bad joke", Kev was in fact making a valid argument ("that he likes to decide whether or not he engages in cunnilingus"). Finally, MT returns to construing Lauren's conduct as morally transgressive, albeit by means of a passive construction so without explicitly attributing blame, via the statement that Kev "got criticised for his looks and also got made fun of his experience with women", thereby expressing moral criticism and sanctioning her for those actions. In turn 17, MT once more reiterates his claim that Kev was criticised for his looks and explicitly

evaluates Lauren's post containing a photo of Kev as "toxic", again construing her conduct as a transgression and sanctioning her actions through this moral stance.

Two further sub-threads lead on from MT's criticisms in (5b). In (6a), we see Julia respond to MT's post in turn 16, making two explicit attributions of offence.

(6a)   17 6.50pm Julia: She "just made a joke" about his profile picture, why are you getting offended on his behalf???

        18 6.52pm MT: I'm not getting offended at all. I defended his point of view and found the response [of Lauren] quite toxic.

        19 6.53pm Julia: No you are clearly offended on his behalf because someone made a joke about him. What is so toxic about her joke?

In turn 17, Julia echoes MT's argument about Kev, countering his criticisms of the female participants by stating that Lauren "'just made a joke'", and hence questioning why MT is "getting offended on his [Kev's] behalf". But unlike Julia above who acknowledged that it *was* worth getting offended over Kev's post, in turn 18, we see MT contesting this offence attribution ("I'm not getting offended at all") and restating his alternative assessment that he "defended his [Kev's] point of view". In addition, he reiterates his evaluation of Lauren's post as "quite toxic" and, thereby, his moral stance. Julia, in turn, does not accept MT's account, instead immediately repeating (and upgrading) her offence attribution by stating that MT is "clearly offended on his [Kev's] behalf because someone made a joke about him". She follows up by questioning MT's evaluation ("What is so toxic about her joke?"), to which MT does not respond.

At the same time as interacting in the sub-thread (6a), MT and Julia continue the interaction from (5b), giving us a second sub-thread in (6b).

(6b)   18 6.51pm Julia: So you think every single vagina is unhealthy? (Also, again, you must have missed the part where showers don't really matter to him)

        19 6.54pm MT: No, I think that he has experience and should not be criticized for his looks. And that he can choose whether or not he wants to perform oral sex and this doesn't make him any less experienced.

        20 6.56pm Julia: It wasn't criticism it was just a joke, you know. As for his experience, it might be different if he started actually caring about showers. He wouldn't have to be in the mood for fish every time he performs oral. Crazy, I know. Showers. Wow.

21 7.02pm MT: Going after him specifically and him making a slightly offensive joke is not the same at all. And don't tell him what to do with his body. It's on both sides to take a joke and also be empathetic with one another. Retortion, especially this kind, is destructive to the argument.

22 7.06pm Julia: Her joke was only slightly offensive why are you so offended? Him making a tired misogynistic joke and her make a silly joke *once* about him is not the same at all. And don't tell women they smell if you can't be bothered to shower and have them do the same before sex.

23 7.15pm MT: You just want to shout at someone without listening. I never said any of those things. I tried to be empathetic and have a conversation with you. Why are you trying to make this into a fight? You make yourself look really bad right now.

24 7.34pm Julia: I wasn't saying you did, it was a general "you". This isn't a fight I'm just trying to show you that your arguments go both ways.

25 7.41pm MT: Ok in this case you said the same thing. That the two jokes are not the same. You didn't show me anything you just agreed with me. One is a dumb joke and the other is a dumb joke ON SOMEONE SPECIFICALLY as a response. Can you see the problem?

Julia starts by questioning MT's defence at the end of (5b) in which he attributes to Kev "the idea that cleanliness plays a part in sex", asking if he thinks "every vagina is unhealthy". MT responds by once again defending Kev in turn 19 with an explicit statement of what he perceives to be the moral norm ("he […] should not be criticized for his looks"). Although the attribution of blame is achieved implicitly, it is strongly inferable that it refers to Lauren's original post given the previous discussion and its repetition throughout the thread to this point.

Julia again defends Lauren's post as "just a joke" rather than criticism (turn 20), before moving to comment on Kev's experience, suggesting that his 'fish' comment indicates that he does not care "about showers". MT makes further explicit negative evaluations (Haugh and Chang 2019) in turn 21: he first juxtaposes Lauren's conduct of "going after him [Kev] specifically" with Kev making a "slightly offensive joke", implicating his stance that it is only the former that is morally reprehensible. But he then moves to command Julia not to "tell him [Kev] what to do with his body". This charges Julia with wrongly suggesting that Kev should concern himself with his own hygiene issues by "caring about showers".

Like the 'stop' imperative we saw in (4b), this command is an appeal to discontinue her conduct (see Baxter-Webb 2025) which sanctions Julia's perceived transgression as a moral issue. Additionally, it is also hearable as indicating his being upset with Julia for supposedly "tell[ing] him [Kev] what to do" hence implicitly registering offence with a negative affective stance. MT's subsequent statement that "[i]t's on both sides to take a joke and also be empathetic with one another" implicitly positions MT as morally superior to "both sides": Kev, on the one hand, and Lauren, and presumably by extension, Julia, on the other. Evaluating Julia's kind of "retortion" as "destructive to the argument" again explicitly evaluates and criticises (Haugh and Chang 2019; Malle et al. 2014) her interactional conduct and presents MT as a superior communicator.

In turn 22, Julia maintains her assessment of MT as being offended and produces her third attribution, alongside an imperative: "don't tell women they smell if you can't be bothered to shower and have them do the same before sex". Rather than engaging with the issue of whether or not he is offended, MT chooses to respond to the latter part of Julia's post. His claims that Julia "just want[s] to shout at someone without listening" and that he never "said any of those things" positions MT as a rational and reasonable interactional participant versus Julia as an emotional and unreasonable one. This is further emphasised by his 'unpalatable question' (Culpeper 2011), "why are you trying to make this into a fight", which makes relevant an account (Garfinkel 1967; Garfinkel and Sacks 1970; Heritage 1988), as well as the explicit evaluation (Haugh and Chang 2019) that she is "making yourself [herself] look really bad right now". While the first part of MT's post conveys a moral stance directed at Julia's conduct, the final sentence is an example of MT (ostensibly) expressing concern regarding Julia's public persona. This, in turn, matches his self-assessment as "[trying] to be empathetic and have a conversation". In turn 24, Julia contests MT's assessment of her trying to fight and argues that she is "just trying to show [him] that [his] arguments go both ways". MT, however, maintains that Julia's point is not valid and that "the two jokes [by Kev and Lauren] are not the same. [...] One is a dumb joke and the other is a dumb joke ON SOMEONE SPECIFICALLY as a response" (turn 25). Like in previous posts, MT conveys a moral stance by constructing a comparison that construes Lauren's conduct as transgressive. This is made more explicit by his reference to there being a "problem" in the final sentence, which, from the overall interactional context as well as the capitalisation of "on someone specifically" in this post, is strongly inferable as referring to Lauren's initial selfie post.

Finally, another participant, Silent, joins the interaction by commenting on MT's earlier post from the end of (5c), although chronologically after all the other posts.

(7)   13   10.14pm   Silent: We're not assuming he thinks differently. He SAID it
                        himself. Why are you rooting for a guy with the worst
                        possible jokes about eating fish. Is this 1992?
                        You're offended. We were laughing...at him. Because he
                        asked for it.

Silent's comment received one response that was deleted by the time this interaction was retrieved, together with the information of who replied. We, therefore, do not know whether, or if so how, MT responded to this attribution.

To summarise, although MT never explicitly refers to his female co-participants' conduct as 'offensive', while acknowledging Kev's joke was "slightly offensive", his posts contain several linguistic features which match the practices for offence-taking outlined in Section 2, both before and after the offence attributions.

1.   He construes the following as sanctionable moral transgressions by means of a range of linguistic resources (advice-giving and requests to discontinue which treat the addressee as at-fault, orienting to conduct as in need of accounts, and positioning himself as a moral authority):
     –   Lauren's post containing a photo of Kev as:
         –   'sexism against men'
         –   'criticising' and 'making fun of' Kev because of his looks
         –   'toxic'
         –   'going after' Kev
         –   non-understanding of consent ("a man has every right to refuse sex")
         –   motivated by superficial reasons ("you're the only one talking about looks")

     –   Julia telling Kev what to do with his body
     –   Julia's 'destructive retortion'
     –   Julia's 'shouting without listening'
     –   Julia's trying to turn the interaction into a 'fight'
     –   Lauren targeting a specific person in a joke (via contrast with general jokes)
     –   Julia holding Kev accountable for misogynism and a microaggression (by 'assuming' and 'dictating' what Kev thinks)
     –   Julia's sexism against men regarding rules of interactional conduct ("why does it matter what I have between my legs")
     –   Julia's interactional conduct based on her 'toxic attitude'

–   'Both sides' (Kev and Lauren/Julia) not being 'empathetic with one another'
–   Julia's unreasonable conduct (contrasted with his own conduct as reasonable)

2.   He accompanies some of these moral stances with negative affective stances via insults, unpalatable questions, and orientations to conduct as upsetting, thereby implicitly registering his offence by:
    –   Evaluating Lauren as 'bitter' and presupposing that she is disliked
    –   Evaluating Julia's interpretation of Kev's post as 'ridiculous'
    –   Presupposing Julia's insecurity regarding her own body
    –   Implicitly presupposing that Julia has a 'stinky vagina'
    –   Demanding Lauren 'stop' being sexist against men
    –   Commanding Julia not to "tell [Kev] what to do with his body"

We can therefore conclude that, on the basis of his linguistic behaviour, MT does take offence, in the social action sense, at a number of his co-participants' actions, normatively licensing the attributions of offence to him.

5.   Alternative assessments: The fuzzy nature of metapragmatic terms and strategic denial

While our conclusion that MT's offence-taking licenses the female participants' assessments as such, recalling the interaction in (6a) (reproduced here), it does not match MT's own evaluation as he attempts to deny being offended.

(6a)   17 6.50pm Julia: She "just made a joke" about his profile picture, why are you getting offended on his behalf ???
       18 6.52pm MT: I'm not getting offended at all. I defended his point of view and found the response [of Lauren] quite toxic.
       19 6.53pm Julia: No you are clearly offended on his behalf because someone made a joke about him. What is so toxic about her joke?

In this section, we take a closer look at MT's claim that he is not offended, the potential he has for plausible deniability, and the validity of his alternative metapragmatic assessments of his own linguistic behaviour.

Within the field of interpersonal pragmatics, the issue of participants' divergent understandings has received considerable attention with respect to (im)politeness. Not only is there regional and cultural variation as to how social actions are achieved and/or evaluated (see e.g., Schneider and Placencia 2017;

Sifianou and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2017), but there is also inter-individual divergence across participants within a specific cultural or social group as well as intra-individual inconsistency (see e.g., Kádár 2013, 125–129, 212–214). At the point of Julia's first offence attribution in turn 17, MT has expressed several implicit and explicit moral and affective stances which, from the analysts' perspective, construe his co-participants' behaviours as morally transgressive. Even if we assume that implicit stances license one's denial claims, it is difficult to deny what has been explicitly communicated (Sternau et al. 2017, see also Elder 2024). There is, however, one factor which (potentially) supports MT's denial attempt, namely the equivocality of the term 'being offended' from a lay perspective. Put differently, we ask: when a participant attributes offendedness to another participant, what exactly is (taken to have been) attributed?

As outlined in Section 2, we can distinguish two aspects of 'being offended': feeling offended as an emotion and taking offence as a social action, with the latter being the object of study in linguistic analyses. As lay expressions such as 'getting' or 'being' offended (as the attributions phrase it) are underdetermined, they may orient to either or both aspects. MT might, therefore, reasonably take Julia's offence attribution in (6a) above to mean at least one of three things:

a. Why are you feeling offended?
b. Why are you taking offence (i.e., behaving as if you are feeling offended)?
c. On what grounds is your offence licensed?

Since MT's only explicit contestation in turn 18 above repeats Julia's copula verb, claiming that he is not "getting offended", his response does not disambiguate which meaning he infers, and it is this indeterminacy that may license his denial attempt (Elder 2024). Arguably, as his linguistic conduct evidences his offence-taking, he cannot convincingly deny he is displaying offence. However, as we, as analysts or co-participants do not have access to one another's mental states, he may be more licensed to deny his feeling offended. Indeed, the few affective stances that MT expresses are all produced implicitly, and hence any corresponding negative feelings, such as anger, upset or frustration, that might signal his feeling offended, could be contested.

However, irrespective of MT's actual feelings, it has to be emphasised that participants' display of (divergent) understandings may also be strategic. Talking about (im)politeness, Haugh (2015a, 61) points out that "both speakers and hearers have their own distinct and often independent interests in regard to how they evaluate talk and conduct". With regard to our data, it may be in MT's interest to avoid being held as offended for Lauren's profile picture post in order to 'win' the argument that her post was more problematic than Kev's post which was merely a 'joke'. That is, MT may not only want to deny feeling offended but also behav-

ing in an offended way in order to set up a contrast between his own interactional conduct and that of his female co-participants. Indeed, while he denies getting offended himself, he explicitly attributes offence to Julia in (4c) and (5a) and to Lauren in (5b). Note that neither Julia nor Lauren deny their offence, and moreover, Julia even contests MT's assertion that Kev's post is not worth being offended about in (5a). The question is, then, how far do MT's self-assessments regarding his own interactional conduct support his claim that he is not offended?

Throughout the interaction, we see MT attempt to present himself as a sympathetic communicator whose behaviour is constructive to the discussion. Even before Julia's first offence attribution, MT provides a positive self-evaluation in (5a), imploring Julia to "notice" that he "never said anything about what you [Julia] should feel" before stating that he is "acknowledging that [she is] offended, that is why [he is] asking questions". The use of "acknowledge" presupposes Julia's offence (which, although it could be inferable, has also not been explicitly stated), makes the negotiation on offence explicit, and also as an explicit performative, absolves him from being accused of insensitivity. The motivation for his "asking questions" then positions MT as wanting to better understand why Julia is offended, and hence as sympathetic to her feelings and willing to engage with her point of view.

This apparently sensitive behaviour is immediately contrasted with his exposing Julia's attitude as "toxic", thereby positioning Julia as a hostile communicator. However, in doing so, he also casts doubt on his attempt to construe himself as understanding. In fact, rather than being motivated by genuine concern, a closer look at his prior "questions" reveals an extended effort not only to challenge the validity of his co-participants' inferences from Kev's initial 'joking' post (i.e., the inference that all vaginas smell of fish) but also to assert that even an explicit statement to this effect would not be "worth getting offended for" (4c). As we saw in (5a), Julia describes MT's endeavour to minimise the offensiveness of Kev's post as an attempt at "gaslighting", already invalidating his subsequent claim to sympathetic and constructive conduct.[9]

The sympathetic/hostile contrast is further invoked by MT just after Julia's third offence attribution, as seen in turn 23 of (6b). As discussed in the previous section, here MT does not explicitly respond to the claim that he is offended, but instead he responds with an evaluation of his own conduct as "trying to be empathetic and have a conversation", versus Julia's allegedly wanting to "shout at someone without listening" and "trying to make this into a fight". Setting up a contrast

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9. Note that, at this point in the interaction, MT has not only already evaluated Lauren's conduct as "sexist" but has also expressed implicit negative affective stances, including via ad hominem attacks in (4a).

between having a 'fight' versus having a 'conversation', he positions himself as a rational communicator wanting to engage in controlled interaction absent from confrontation or heated exchange. Julia, by contrast, is construed as someone who is driven by emotions.

Earlier in the exchange, we also saw a more implicit version of this rational versus emotional contrast. At the end of (5b) before Julia's first offence attribution, he describes his conduct as "defending" Kev. While defending something or someone necessarily involves defending against, MT can be seen as construing himself as reasonable and non-hostile. First, he frames his actions as primarily in support of Kev rather than in opposition to his female co-participants. Second, he presents his motivation for defending Kev as based on reason and rational arguments, not emotions ("what he said has merit based on experience with women. Therefore, the idea that cleanliness plays a part in sex is legit"). And third, he explicitly asserts that he "did not even get into the fact that [Kev] got criticized for his looks", thereby denying having engaged in any morally and/or emotionally motivated opposition. Overall, in presenting himself as sensitive, non-hostile, rational, and unclouded by emotion, he sets up the grounds for his later denial that he is offended, which, by definition, involves an oppositional attitude or stance directed at some perceived transgressive behaviour.

However, despite these self-assessments, as we saw in the previous section, MT did explicitly and implicitly construe his co-participants' behaviour as morally transgressive. In particular, despite claiming that he did not "get into" Lauren's 'joke' as being based on Kev's appearance and hence trying to absolve himself from any charges to the contrary, simply mentioning it as something he might get into reveals his moral-affective state regarding that issue. In fact, this attitude is made explicit at the end of his post, in which he describes Lauren's profile picture post as "toxic". We see the same pattern of interaction after Julia's first offence attribution in (6a). MT's explicit offence contestation ("I'm not getting offended at all") is supported by positioning himself as presenting rational arguments and "defending [Kev's] point of view", before immediately repeating his moral stance that Lauren's post was "toxic".

To summarise, there is a stark discrepancy between what MT says he is doing on the one hand, and what he is actually doing, from a theoretical perspective as well as from his co-participants' perspectives, on the other. Despite attempting to position himself as a sensitive and rational communicator, his conduct is interpretable (and interpreted by the recipients) as oppositional and motivated by a moral-affective state. Although participants can have genuine disagreements about metapragmatic evaluations based on diverging individual understandings of individual terms (e.g., is something 'rude' or 'impolite', is it a 'discussion' or an 'argument'), MT's self-assessments suggest that this is not the case in our data;

instead, the combination of his at times ostensibly neutral moralising talk (e.g., "it's on both sides to take a joke and also be empathetic with one another"), denial of oppositionality on his part, and construal of his conduct as rational and reasonable serves to (possibly deliberately and strategically) conceal MT's offence-taking in an attempt to position himself as having the moral high ground vis-à-vis the co-participants he is targeting.

MT's persistent, yet unsuccessful, efforts to this end may also be motivated by wanting to avoid being criticised for taking offence. As Haugh and Sinkeviciute (2019, 197) point out, "reporting about transgressions, and the responses of others to those offences, creates opportunities for moralising or moral talk, that is, (dis)affiliating with (shared) moral values (Bergmann 1998; Luckmann 1995), as well as for positioning the moral self vis-à-vis others (Douglas 1970; Garfinkel 1956)". Such moral talk hence means that offendees themselves are "open to moral judgment by others" (Haugh and Sinkeviciute 2019, 206) and that they may be "held morally accountable for this taking of offence" (Haugh 2015b, 37). As a competent interactant who is apparently *au fait* with the social discourses he engages in (e.g., toxicity, toxic feminism, sexism against men, shaming appearances), it can be assumed that MT is aware of this routinely observable relationship between offence-taking and moral values. In fact, it is exactly by problematising his co-participants' taking offence at Kev's post that he himself engages in such moralising talk, casting moral judgements on his co-participants. And this contextual factor, in addition to the previously discussed moral and affective stances that he expresses, we suggest contributes to MT's interactional conduct being hearable (and heard) as taking offence.

6. Concluding remarks

In this paper, we have addressed the question of what exactly is being attributed when a speaker attributes offendedness: is it feelings of offence, a linguistic display of taking offence, or both? As we have discussed, one of the theoretical and methodological challenges of answering this question is due to the fact that lay expressions of 'taking offence' are underdetermined, which arguably affords the alleged offendee a degree of plausible deniability. We finish here with a general theoretical and methodological discussion of the use of etic (i.e., theoretical) and emic (i.e., participants' own) concepts in pragmatics research, and how far each can take us in our understanding of interactional behaviour.

In interactional pragmatics, analysts attempt to devise etic notions based on emic observations. But even when based on an emic perspective, any derived etic theory or definition is necessarily more rigid than the diverse ways in which

lay, emic expressions are used by ordinary speakers. Indeed, the reason why we attempt to devise such etic concepts is exactly because emic ones are dynamic, in constant dispute, open to diverging interpretations, and hence open to genuine contradictory metapragmatic evaluations.

The case of offence attributions is particularly revealing in this regard because of the dual nature of being offended as an emotional state and as an observable social action. As analysts, we look for evidence of the latter based on specific criteria: in our case, by looking for evidence of moral and affective stances that construe some prior act as transgressive. However, as we discussed in Section 2 and as have seen in our data, moral transgressions themselves are often implicitly identified via various social actions, such as accusations, reprimands, blaming, complaints, criticisms, and so on: "what Malle et al. (2014) collectively term moral criticisms" (Haugh et al. 2022, 119). But of course, these social actions also occur outside of offence-taking projects. This leaves us with a methodological question: when and how do we distinguish these social actions as evidence for offence-taking, and when do we not? More specifically, to what degree does an (alleged) offendee have to express moral and affective stances for their conduct to be hearable as offence-taking and for such an attribution to be resistant to plausible deniability?

In the case of lay participants' offence attributions, the difference between offence as a feeling versus a social action is not necessarily acknowledged, let alone articulated. Moreover, since emotions are subjective, someone else's feeling can only be inferred from their conduct. This allows alleged offendees to contest offence attributions pertaining to affect, and even, as we saw in our example, to behaving like someone who is offended. It is this latter aspect that is particularly revealing regarding the way offence is negotiated: whether or not an individual considers themselves to feel offended, what can matter to participants is the attribution of offence itself, as being held as offended can be seen as one's emotional involvement barring one's objectivity and argumentative strength.

Our observations from this case-study open up several directions for further research. First, expanding the empirical scope beyond one interactional network would allow for a comparison of how offence attributions are negotiated across different contexts of (online) discourse. Larger data sets could reveal whether the dynamics observed here, particularly the interplay between moral-affective cues, offence attribution, and plausible deniability, hold more generally, or whether they are contingent on the affordances of specific platforms and communities. Another dimension that warrants further exploration is the role of salient contemporary discourses in shaping the context of such interactions: in our case, participants seem aware of (and contextually drawing on) social and ideological debates on sexism/sexist humour, the feminist versus misogynistic angle, as well as the

broader discourse on the 'limits' of humour. Incorporating this angle, future work could further interrogate the metapragmatics of causing offence, offence-taking, and offence-attribution in non-serious frames (i.e., contexts where humour, sarcasm and other loose/nonliteral use of language involves reduced or suspended speaker commitment and contestable speaker accountability) within an analytical framework that combines the critical discourse approach and the interactional approach, examining the interplay between micro-interactional elements and ideological and affective dimensions.

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