Taking it too far

The role of ideological discourses in contesting the limits of teasing and offence

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While teasing can cause offence, participants on television variety or game shows are generally expected to tolerate it. In this paper, we examine comments posted on YouTube in response to reports of a leaked recording of a television host in Taiwan swearing at and insulting a guest who teased the host about his "inability to take a defeat". In so doing, we examine both the perceived limits of teasing (i.e. what is considered allowable and what goes too far), and the perceived limits of taking offence in response to teasing (i.e. what ways of indicating offence are considered allowable and what goes too far). We conclude that instances where there are disputes about whether taking offence is warranted by the teasing in question provides us with a useful lens to examine the role ideological discourses play in (re-)constituting the underlying moral fabric of social interaction.

Keywords: teasing, offence, morality, metapragmatics, broadcast media, digitally-mediated communication, Mandarin Chinese

1. Introduction

It is well known that teasing can cause offence. Yet taking offence when teasing is framed as jocular or playful is itself also considered potentially transgressive. Claims to have been offended by teasing are thus almost invariably contested (Sinkeviciute 2017a, 2017b). A common claim that emerges in such cases is that someone has taken things too far, that is, they have breached some kind of presumed moral limit or boundary with respect to what is considered 'normal' conduct. These discursive disputes about whether or not the teasing in question has gone too far or the taking of offence in response to the teasing is warranted provide a useful window into the underlying moral fabric of social interaction.

The presumed limits to teasing and the taking of offence in response to teasing are, of course, are contextually bound, and so afforded and constrained with respect to particular modes or genres of interaction. Teasing and other forms of jocular verbal aggression in television gameshows and variety shows, for instance, have been argued to be a common strategy used to entertain viewing audiences (Culpeper 2005). Indeed, there are genres of television, such as fly-on-the wall documentaries and reality shows that appear to be premised on engendering conflict talk as a form of "spectacle" for the viewing audience (Culpeper and Holmes 2013; Lorenzo-Dus 2009). Teasing that goes 'too far' can be exploited to generate such conflict. However, television variety shows do not always seek to seed conflict for its entertainment value. The question facing participants in the latter contexts is what is the normatively expected response to (ostensibly) jocular forms of teasing? For the most part, participants are generally expected to tolerate such bouts of teasing, or even join in with the subsequent laughter that is being directed at them (Sinkeviciute 2017a). If participants do take genuine offence, such responses are generally suppressed by the participants in the moment and only surface in subsequent "backstage" discussions (Sinkeviciute 2017b). Instances where participants do take immediate offence to teasing in genres in which they are expected to go along with the teasing are rare, perhaps because they are usually edited out before broadcast by the producers of the show. Therefore, if such incidents do surface they offer an opportunity for considerable public debate about whether the teasing and taking of offence was indeed taking things too far, especially when recordings of the incident in question are distributed through major social media platforms.

In this paper, we examine just such a case. A recording of a television variety show host swearing at and insulting a guest who teased the host about his "inability to take a defeat" was leaked to the Taiwanese media, and subsequently generated significant debate on major social media platforms in Taiwan about the incident. The affordances of such platforms means we have ready access to public responses to the incident, which enables us to gain insights into lay observer understandings (Haugh 2018) of both the perceived limits of teasing (i.e. what is considered allowable and what is treated as going too far), and the perceived limits of taking offence in response to teasing (i.e. what ways of indicating offence are considered allowable and what are treated as going too far). This allows us to examine, in turn, the ways in which ideological discourses or belief systems are invoked and contested in debating these limits. We define ideological discourses, following Verschueren (2012), as frames of interpretation bearing on social reality that are commonsensical, habit-based, and unquestioned. These frames consist of interlinked sets of presuppositions and inferences that are immanent to discursive rationales that are perpetuated as ideological discourses. The relevance of ideo-

logical discourses for the analysis of the perceived limits of teasing and offence is that these limits are discursively grounded in moral claims that are presumed to be unassailable social facts by those making those claims. Yet the way in which these limits clearly are contested indicates that such claims are drawing on multiple, conflicting frames of interpretation.

We begin our paper by first briefly reviewing the ways in which teasing, offence and morality are inextricably interlinked. We next describe, in section three, our dataset and the approach we used in analysing it. We summarise the circumstances of the teasing, what led up to it, the response of the host to it, as well as our approach to analysing a corpus of comments we harvested from Youtube, in which members of the public posted comments after viewing the leaked recording. We then discuss, in section four, the results of our analysis of these online comments, and the various ideological discourses that are invoked by those commenters to warrant evaluations of the respective conduct of the parties involved. We conclude that because teasing is a recurrent practice on these kinds of television variety shows, instances where there are disputes about whether taking offence is licensed by the teasing in question, as well as about the way in which offence has been taken, provides us with a useful lens for examining the role ideological discourses, and their contestation, play in (re-)constituting the underlying moral fabric of social interaction.

2.   Teasing, offence and morality

Teasing involves playful or jocular mocking jibes directed at others. While teasing may be construed as amusing or entertaining for (at least some), it invariably involves a serious subtext (Drew 1987). One of the main actions accomplished through teasing is criticising others (Haugh and Pillet-Shore 2018). Criticism is a morally implicative action as it involves pointing out some kind of fault (i.e. weakness, failing, misdemeanour or mistake) for which a party is presumed to be responsible, and expressing disapproval of that fault (Pillet-Shore 2016). However, because criticisms delivered through teases are framed as ostensibly non-serious, taking offence at teasing can itself be treated as a moral transgression (Haugh 2016).

Taking offence is also a vehicle for moral criticism, as it involves holding another party accountable for some kind of moral transgression that is treated as grounds for expressing moral indignation (Haugh 2015). One may implicitly take offence by complaining, criticising, reproaching, blaming, denouncing, accusing and so on (Haugh and Sinkeviciute 2019), or more explicitly take offence through canonically impolite actions, such as swearing at or insulting the offence-

causer (Parvaresh and Tayebi 2018). Just like teasing, however, the way in which one expresses moral indignation is itself open to moral evaluation (Haugh and Sinkeviciute 2019). Moreover, although it is generally assumed that offensive behaviour licenses the reciprocation of offensive behavior (Culpeper 2011), there are nonetheless presumed to be limits on what forms of impoliteness are licensed by particular transgressions. Teasing and the taking of offence are thus inextricably linked, as both can serve as vehicles for moral criticisms. These moral criticisms serve, in turn, as a key means by which members (re)affirm perceived "common moral ground" in both private and public life (Günthner 1995).

There has been work on how morality is discursively realised for some decades now (e.g. Bergmann 1998; Jayyusi 1991; Luckmann 1995). While a detailed review of different approaches lies beyond the scope of this paper, we note that there are two broad approaches to theorising morality that are relevant to pragmatics. On the one hand, we can attempt to specify the *content* of the moral grounds that underpin evaluations of (im)politeness or offence with respect to a set of defined "moral foundations" (Spencer-Oatey and Kádár 2016; Spencer-Oatey and Xing 2019), "rights and obligations" (Kádár 2017), "injunctive norms" (Kádár 2020), or "interpersonal expectations" (Culpeper 2011; Tayebi 2016). On the other hand, we can remain agnostic about specific moral claims - given they are potentially infinite - and instead specify focus on the *practices* by which transgressions are construed as (im)politeness or offensive (Haugh 2015), premised on the assumption that morality is immanent to social interaction (Garfinkel 1967; Rawls 2010). These two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but it remains to be seen whether the epistemological and ontological assumptions that underpin them can indeed be reconciled (Kádár 2020).

One key issue facing those studying moral disputes, then, is whether to use a theory, such as moral foundations theory (Haidt and Kesebir 2010), to analyse the roots of moral disputes, or to focus on the practices by which participants and observers discursively shape and dispute moral conduct (Bergmann 1998; Luckmann 1995). One framework that allows us to examine both has been developed by Davies (2018), who distinguishes between three inter-related dimensions of interpersonal evaluation: classifications, assessments, and rationales. A classification involves assigning some conduct or person into a group or category, an assessment involves positioning that classification with respect to a (positively or negatively) valenced scale, while a rationale concerns the moral grounds invoked to warrant those classifications or assessments (Davies 2018, 131–133). An important feature of this framework is that rationales mediate between classifications and assessments, on the one hand, and the underlying 'moral order', the "taken for granted" or "'seen but unnoticed, expected, background features of everyday scenes" (Garfinkel 1967, 34–36) with respect to which we define what is "nor-

mative", and so "moral", on the other. Davies (2018) thus advocates an essentially bottom-up approach to analysing the moral order, as she does not attempt specify the moral grounds themselves within the model itself. This relative neutrality is important, as it allows a bottom-up account of the rationales that participants themselves invoke when assessing the conduct of others and in contesting those assessments (Haugh and Chang 2019).

In sum, then, a key focal point of this study is to consider the ways in which the commonsense, lay observer view of morality as a set of predetermined moral values is invoked by members when discursively contesting the limits of teasing and the taking of offence in a public, broadcast television setting, specifically, a television variety show in Taiwan. We do so through examining the different ideological discourses that are invoked by those members as the moral grounds for making those assessments in online comments posted in response to the leaked footage on YouTube.

In the following section, we outline the dataset and our analytical approach in more detail.

3.   Data and method

3.1   Data

The main aim of our analysis was to examine online responses to an incident between the host and a guest on *Tiancai chong chong chong* (天才衝衝衝, lit. 'Genius Go Go Go'), a game-based variety show involving win-lose activities that has been broadcast since 2005 in Taiwan. In September 2017, a guest, Tang, teased one of the co-hosts, Xu, about his inability "to take a defeat" (輸不起, lit. 'can't afford to lose'). Xu angrily responded to this teasing by insulting and swearing at Tang, and the latter eventually apologised. Production of the variety show was stopped at the point. However, this segment, which was edited out and was not broadcast when the episode aired a month later, was subsequently leaked to the media by one of the production personnel. Notably, the leaked footage only included swearing and insults by Xu, as well as complaints and admonishments directed at Tang through which Xu showed he had taken offence, but did not include the actual teasing of Xu by Tang that led to the conflict.[1] The leaking of

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1. In decontextualizing (Gruber 2019) Xu's enraged response by not including the teasing that occasioned it in the first place in the leaked recording, it appears likely that the person(s) who leaked the footage were aiming to cast Xu in a more negative light in the eyes of the general pub-

the recording of this incident was followed by reactions from the parties involved, most notably Tang's Facebook live-streaming three days later, in which he accused Xu of insulting not only him, but his mother (as some of the formulaic swearing expressions Xu used involve reference to Tang's mother). Xu subsequently publicly apologised for his use of "inappropriate" language (Kádár et al. 2018). Tang responded, in turn, by publicly stating that he would not take any legal action, thereby tacitly accepting Xu's apology.[2]

The main focus of our analysis, however, is not on the perspective of the participants in this particular incident, or the processes of decontextualisation and recontextualisation of the incident through posting and reposting across different forms of (social) media (Gruber 2019), but rather on the ideological underpinnings of the metapragmatic comments made by observers of it who viewed media reports about the incident online. We collected 2,487 comments that were made in response to ten different YouTube videos.[3] These included media reports on the original incident (7 videos), Tang's subsequent accusation (1 video), and Xu's public apology (2 videos). These media reports prompted evaluations of Xu's outburst, Tang's teasing of Xu prior to the outburst, Tang's proposed legal action, and Xu's subsequent apology. Our analysis of the comments focuses only on metapragmatic discussions about the original incident, namely, evaluations of the host's outburst and the guest's teasing that occasioned the outburst. Although some of the videos reported on subsequent developments, many of the comments responding to the latter three videos were still centred on the original conflict. We acknowledge that these later developments may well have influenced evaluations of the original incident, but determining the extent of this influence lies beyond the scope of this study. Our focus here is not on whether people's evaluations change in response to reports of a series of related events (although they likely do), or on the way in which media reports can shape public opinion, but rather on the rationales invoked to justify their assessments of teasing and taking offence as moral breaches. Our aim was to identify the different ideological dis-

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lic (and some media reports attest to that claim). Further speculation about exact motivations of those leaking the footage, however, lies beyond the scope of this paper.

2. It is worth noting that in Taiwan one can sue another person for "public insult".

3. As these comments on YouTube have been made by persons who are not readily identifiable (i.e. they include only text comments and nicknames), are publicly accessible (i.e. without requiring membership of a particular online community), and concern a topic of public concern reported in the broadcast media (i.e. about the behaviour of two celebrities on broadcast television), we are treating these comments as having entered the public domain (Bolander and Locher 2014). One limitation this anonymity confers upon our analysis is that we are not able to examine the extent to which different assessments correlate with different identities (e.g. age, gender etc.).

courses invoked by the Taiwanese respondents as moral grounds for making their own assessments, and contesting the assessments of others, with respect to the conduct of the host (Xu) who took offence, and the conduct of the guest (Tang) whose teasing occasioned that offence.

While we do not have access to specific demographic information on the commenters, as the posts were made anonymously, it is worth noting that Taiwan society has a very high proportion of its citizens online. In 2019, 88.8% of the population were regularly accessing the Internet, including more than 90% of those aged 12–54, and YouTube is one of the most highly frequented video-sharing platforms (Taiwan Network Information Centre 2019).

3.2   Analytical approach

As noted in the previous section, we elected to examine the YouTube comments using the framework for analysing evaluations proposed by Davies (2018). However, although Davies (2018) makes a three-way distinction between classifications, assessments, and rationales, she places greater emphasis on the distinction between assessments and rationales, and argues that it is latter that lies at the core of argumentativity, that is, the way in which evaluations of (im)politeness are open to contestation (Eelen 2001). Davies (2018) also notes that a classification may not always be explicitly made. For that reason in our analysis of the YouTube comments we focused specifically on the assessments of conduct or persons made in those comments, and the rationales that were offered to justify those assessments.

We began our analysis of the 2,487 comments we collected through a constructivist grounded theory approach to content analysis (Charmaz 2000). The rationales provided by the respondents, either in their written comments or in the interviews, were first independently identified and coded in an open-ended fashion by two authors of this paper. These initial results of this first round of coding were then compared by all three authors and grouped with respect to the assessments being made, and the ideological foundations of the rationales that were found to underpin those assessments. We did not attempt to comprehensively code every single comment in our dataset, however, as our aim was to identify the role of ideological discourses and how they are invoked to justify assessments about the limits of teasing and taking offence. Instead, our coding proceeded until we reached "analytic saturation", that is, the point where we encountered "similar instances over and over again" (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 61), and no additional comments could be found in dataset that allowed us to further refine the three broad areas of ideological contestation we identified.

In the following section, we report on the findings of that analysis.

4.   The role of ideological discourses in construing teasing and the taking of offence as moral breaches

Our particular focus was on assessments made by the observers of the interaction between the host and the guest, rather than on assessments the two participants themselves made in the course of that interaction (Dynel 2014), or subsequently to it, as we noted in the previous section. As is often the case in online interactions in which observers are posting responses to media reports on platforms such as YouTube, the assessments made about the conduct of the variety show host (Xu) and the guest (Tang) were highly polarised (Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014). Three types of assessments that were recurrently made were: (1) the host had gone too far in the way he took offence (i.e. through swearing at and insulting the guest), (2) the taking of offence by the host was warranted because the guest had gone too far with his teasing of the host (i.e. it was taken as genuinely insulting the host), and (3) both the host and guest went too far in their taking of offence and teasing, respectively. The first two sets of assessments appear to foreground the behaviour of host or guest, while the latter appears to foreground assessments of the host or guest as agents responsible for that behaviour. However, it became clear in the course of our analysis that since assessments of conduct imply assessments of the person's responsible for that conduct, and vice-versa, the rationales underpinning those assessments invoked by the lay observers merge assessments of conduct and agents for all practical intents and purposes. In the course of our analysis the moral grounds that were invoked to justify these assessments were found to draw from three main ideological discourses: (1) discourses on intergenerational discord, (2) discourses on moral character, and (3) discourses on moral culpability. These discourses were themselves subject to dispute, as it became apparent they each invoke different sets of contested cultural beliefs.

4.1   Discourses about intergenerational discord

The most salient set of rationales manifested through the YouTube comments revolved around discourses of intergenerational discord. The YouTube comments in our data revealed highly polarised stances toward the incident with respect to that discourse.[4] Some observers aligned themselves with the guest and claimed

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4.   It is worth noting that Xu is not only older than Tang, but is also much more established than Tang in the entertainment business, and so he is considered to be Tang's senior. Tang, like many other younger entertainers in the business, addresses Xu as *Naige*: *Nai* is part of Xu's first name, and *ge* is a respectful address term literally meaning 'elder brother'.

that the way in which the host had taken offence went too far, arguing that elders/
seniors sometimes take too much license, while others aligned themselves with
the host and argued that the way in which he took offence was warranted on
the grounds that the teasing went too far, as younger, more junior people should
always show respect to their elders and seniors. These competing beliefs about
generation and seniority are represented in Figure 1 below.

Assessment	The offence-taking went too far	vs	The teasing went too far
Rationale	Elders/Seniors take too much license		Youngers/Juniors should show respect

Figure 1. Competing discourses on intergenerational discord

The underlying rationale that elders/seniors take too much license is well
illustrated by the frequent occurrence of the expression *yǐlǎomàilǎo* (倚老賣老),
which literally means 'leaning against one's seniority and selling one's seniority'.
Yǐlǎomàilǎo is an idiom commonly used to show disapproval of elders or seniors
who are perceived to be acting as overly entitled and acting as if they can do what-
ever they want simply because of their age or seniority.

Example (1) below shows how the author of the comment makes reference
to the host's use of the expression *jìnglǎozūnxián* (敬老尊賢), which means to
'respect your elders and venerate the wise', when he was berating the guest. They
first refute the host's claim that the guest's teasing wasn't respectful, and then
assess the host as acting in an overly entitled manner (*yǐlǎomàilǎo*).[5]

(1) [Wen Kaicheng]
不是不敬老尊賢, 是你根本倚老賣老阿
(It's not [the guest] didn't respect his elders and venerate the wise, it's you who
are being *yǐlǎomàilǎo*)

Note that both *jìnglǎozūnxián* and *yǐlǎomàilǎo* are common expressions concern-
ing seniority, yet the former is usually used to describe - or to encourage culti-
vation of - positive and respectful behaviour on the part of younger or junior
members, while the latter expresses disapproval of elder or senior members' per-
ceived sense of entitlement. We can see, then, how the host calling for respect
to be shown to seniors (*jìnglǎozūnxián*) when admonishing the guest appears

5. Four character idioms, of which these are both examples, are very common in Chinese. Like
idioms in other languages, they are used to construe moral claims as commonsense, and thus
tacitly assume the moral stance invoked by that idiom is not open to contestation.

to have triggered responses that, while still centred on the issue of seniority, counter this admonishment by accusing the host of acting in an overly entitled way (*yǐlǎomàilǎo*).

Example (2) also centres on the idiomatic expression *yǐlǎomàilǎo*, but offers a more developed rationale as to why the observer thinks an assessment of the host as going too far is warranted.

(2)　[Eating Huang]
看節目的都知道, 徐乃麟愛酸愛罵其他來賓, 從從只是用同樣的效果對他, 就叫做白目? 不是倚老賣老不然是什麼? 尊重是用在對方也尊重自己的人身上, 仗著自己年紀大就可以隨便問候別人母親, 我就不相信以後你小孩被其他長輩問候老母的時候, 你還怪你孩子自己嘴巴白目.
(People who watch the show all know that Xu Nailin [the host] likes teasing and scolding other guests. Tang [the guest] was simply treating him the same, but he got blamed for being *báimù* [insensitive, clueless]? Isn't he just being *yǐlǎomàilǎo*? Being respectful is about respecting others and oneself. You can't swear at another person's mother just because you are older. I don't believe that you would blame your kid for being *báimù* [insensitive, clueless] if your kids were sworn at by other elders.)

In this excerpt, Eating Huang explains why they think the host's behavior should be regarded as overly entitled (*yǐlǎomàilǎo*). According to Huang, the guest was simply treating the host the way the host treats others, but Tang got blamed for being *báimù* (白目, lit. 'white eyes'), which metaphorically refers to someone who is regarded as insensitive or clueless (because they do not realise they have done something wrong). This apparent double standard is claimed to be proof of the host's sense of entitlement. Central to the rationale invoked in excerpt (2), then, is the belief that respect should be mutual and should not be limited to being directed at those who are older or more senior.

While the expression *yǐlǎomàilǎo* is frequently used in discourses on elders or seniors taking too much license and being overly entitled, there were nevertheless similar comments about age or seniority that do not make use of this particular expression. Some such comments focused on the responsibility of elders or seniors to act as role models for younger or junior people, and claims that the host did not measure up, as shown in (3) below.

(3)　[Xu Manjun]
年齡增長智慧必須增長, 越有能的人, 越不囂張跋扈. 為老不尊最可惡, 最該撻伐. 自己人就要是非不非, 黑白倒置嗎?
(The older the wiser. The person who has more ability should be less domineering. It's most detestable when elder ones are not respectful. They should

be condemned the most. Can you not distinguish right and wrong just because they are your *zìjǐrén* [own people]?)

This comment reveals the belief that elders or seniors are expected to be wiser and more capable than their younger or junior counterparts. Therefore, elders or seniors who do not show appropriate respect for others should be condemned. The term *zìjǐrén* (自己人, lit. 'self person') here refers to the fact that both the host and the guest are celebrities in the same entertainment business. The commenter argues that while people in the same industry might be regarded as "insiders" (*zìjǐrén*), who are therefore licensed to taking teasing somewhat further than one might with "non-insiders", it is nevertheless still important to be able to distinguish between what is right and wrong, and respect one's elders.

A similar rationale can be identified in excerpt (4) as well.

(4) [Yanqin huashao piqibao]
    這人品和脾氣, 唉, 敬老尊賢, 還講得出口, 要人家敬老, 啊你的尊賢呢, 連人家媽媽都請出來, 遊戲, 就要歡樂的玩啊, 因為一句 "輸不起" 就大罵開怒, 嘿, 這只是玩笑啊, 度量也太小, 遊戲輸了, 就加把勁啊, 人家也沒說錯好嗎, 嗯現在這才是他真實的樣子. 真丟臉. 還長輩前輩呢, 不配做榜樣.
    (His personal character and temper, sigh, how could he utter, "respect the elder and venerate the wise"? [You] ask the other to respects their elder, but where is the wise to venerate? You swore at his mum. It's just about having fun when playing games. You got furious because of being told, "you can't take a defeat". Hey, that was only a joke. [The host] has such limited accommodation. If you lost in the game, you have to try harder. I don't think what [the guest] said was incorrect. This is [the host's] real character. Shameful. He is not qualified to be an elder or a role model.)

In excerpt (4), the commenter negatively assesses the host's call for Tang to "respect the old and venerate the wise" (*jìnglǎozūnxián*), stating that the host does not possess the wisdom necessary for one to be venerated. The host's temper and character are challenged, and the commenter concludes that the host did not deserve to be respected as a senior because he did not act as a proper role model for the younger guest.

However, while many comments criticised the host, many other comments criticised the guest for not knowing his place and for being disrespectful, and argued that because of that, the host's taking of offence in the way he did was warranted. In excerpt (5), for instance, the commenter not only criticises the guest, but extends this criticism to younger people in general.

(5) [Vitas Ng]
    現在的小朋友太白目, 玩大了也不認錯, 重点是虫虫不分尊卑. 你們明白嗎? 看來是不明的一群后生.

(Nowadays younger people are very *báimù* [insensitive, clueless]. They don't acknowledge their mistakes even if they have caused trouble. The key is Tang [the guest] doesn't distinguish between seniors and juniors. Do you understand? It seems to me there are a bunch of juniors who fail to understand [this].)

According to this commenter, not only the guest, but the younger generation at large, do not respect their seniors and are not sufficiently humble, as they are insensitive and clueless (*báimù*).

The commenter in Example (6) takes a slightly more nuanced stance in observing age and seniority is important both from an ethical and pragmatic point of view. This comment lays blame on both sides (a discourse we explore later in Section 4.3), but focuses more on the guest's responsibility for starting this conflict.

(6) [Yifan Zhang]
知錯能改善莫大焉的乃哥，但是從從也要反省，因為我覺得雙方都有錯。而從從如果你夠聰明就不應該惹惱可能會怒罵你的前輩，如果從從真是這樣子孝順的話，演藝圈也是很注重倫理，你就乖乖的嘴巴不要太酸。
(It's a great virtue to correct what you have done wrong, *Naige,* but *Congcong* [the guest] also needs to reflect on himself because I think both parties have made mistakes. However, *Congcong* [the guest], if you are smart enough, you should not offend your senior. If you really have filial piety, the entertainment industry also emphasises ethics, and you should be *guāi* [well-behaved] and not speak so sharply.)

The rationale advanced here is that from a pragmatic perspective, observing seniority is important so that younger people avoid getting themselves into trouble. The commenter also invokes ethics (*lúnlǐ*) in claiming that if the guest cares so much about being a well-behaved, obedient (*guāi*) son - which here alludes to the guest's subsequent complaint on Facebook that the host insulted his mother - he should also observe ethics in the entertainment business, and so be a well-behaved, obedient (*guāi*) junior as well. What underpins this discursive rationale, then, is the assumption that those who are younger or juniors show respect by being *guāi* ('well-behaved', 'obedient').

Based on the discussions above, we can identify the following rationales that are drawn upon in contesting different assessments of the conduct of the host and the guest:

I.   Elders/Seniors take too much license
   a.   Respect should be mutual

    b.   Elders/Seniors should be wiser than youngers/juniors and be role models for them

II. Youngers/juniors should show respect to their elders/seniors
    a.   It is ethical to acknowledge seniority
    b.   It is pragmatic to acknowledge seniority

When assessing the behavior of the host and the guest, then, the commenters draw on competing discursive rationales to justify their assessments. What is important to note, however, is that these rationales draw, in turn on more pervasive ideological discourses that go beyond the particulars of this particular event. The different assessments made about the host and guest taking things too far reflect ongoing contestation of the value of age and seniority in a society where traditional ethics and modern values co-exist. Distinguishing between seniors and juniors has long played an essential role in traditional Chinese culture, in which younger/junior people are expected to be obedient, respectful, and reserved. However, in recent years younger generations have been encouraged to express themselves and their individuality (Huang 2014). The metapragmatic discussions about the incident between the host and guest on that television variety show thus create a discursive space where different ideological beliefs about age and seniority contest with, and shape, each other. What lies at the heart of this ideological dispute is the different way in which the age-old discourse of intergenerational discord is framed (Kienpointner and Stopfner 2017, 73): either as one in which younger/junior people do not demonstrate appropriate respect to their elders/senior, or as one in which elder/senior people are overly entitled and do not show mutual respect (Su 2019).

4.2   Discourses about moral character

While the discourses of intergenerational discord we discussed in the previous section have already touched on the moral value placed on age and seniority, the set of rationales we explore here in this section involve more specific discourses on moral character. While some of the commenters claimed the host, Xu, went too far in the way he took offence and negatively assessed his moral character, other commenters claimed that Tang's teasing went too far and negatively assessed Tang's moral character, as illustrated in Figure 2.

    In Example (7), we can observe a rather direct and succinct assessment of the host (as well as the television show itself). The host is assessed as *méi pǐn* (没品, lit. 'without character'), meaning he lacks appropriate *pǐnxìng* (品性, 'moral character').

Assessment	The offence-taking went too far		The teasing went too far
Rationale	The host lacks moral character	vs	The guest lacks moral character

Figure 2. Competing discourses on moral character

(7) [yu zhe Pang]
没品! 原本就不好看还没品
("Lack of moral character! The show is no good, let alone [the host, who] lacks moral character.")

However, while the claim that the host lacks moral character (*méi pǐn*) is empha-sized through repetition, it is not entirely clear what reasoning has led the com-menter to make this assessment.

The comments in Examples (8) and (9) provide more explicit rationales for their respective assessments. In Example (8), the commenter justifies the claim that the host lacks (good) moral character by referring to the way in which the host insulted the guest, while Example (9) connects it with 'low EQ'.

(8) [Yuyuan Cheng]
這樣罵人真的很沒品、還好本來就不是很喜歡這個人
([The host] really shows his lack of moral character by scolding people like this. I don't like this person for a start)

(9) [Lin Xiulian]
曾國城你不要跟徐乃麟合作主持了、很多你的節目只要有徐乃麟我從五年前我就不看、早已發現徐乃麟的品格不好看一個人從平時的行為你們很多遊戲節目我看徐乃麟的EQ表現很不好、切記切記你不要被拖累
(*Zeng guocheng* [Xu's co-host] you'd better stop co-hosting [the show] together with *Xu Nailin* [the host]. I stopped watching the program when you [started] hosting together with *Xu Nailin* five years ago, after I discovered *Xu Nailin*'s lack of moral character. A person's [character] is determined by one's behav-iour in normal times. I have seen *Xu Nailin*'s EQ is very low in many of these game shows. Bear in mind! Don't get encumbered [with this].)

Notably, the post in Example (9) is framed as advice to the co-host of the show, Tseng, that he distance himself from the other host, Xu, because of Xu's question-able moral character and conduct.

The above examples show that a lack of moral character is presumed to be connected with verbal aggression and poor control of emotions (Su 2019). The importance placed on the verbal aspect of moral character can be observed from the recurrent use in our dataset of the term *kǒudé* (口德, lit. 'mouth virtue'),

which means here adhering to morality in one's speech. In Example (10), for instance, the host's response is negatively assessed, not because he insulted his guest, but because the insult was extended to the guest's mother (as some of the swearing involved reference to his mother's sexual status). This is construed as crossing a line and lacking in 'morality in speech' (*kǒudé*).

(10)   [Cai Junfu]
剛好乃哥不吃這套就爆走了 不過 罵人還是留點口德... 罵從從OK 扯到人家母親就OVER了
(*Naige* [the host] couldn't take his [guest's] tease and so flew into rage. However, it's better that [the host] remember to maintain morality in his speech...It's okay to scold at *Congcong* [the guest], but referring to his mum is over [the line])

The concept of 'morality in speech' is connected to one's overall moral character. However, the very fact that there is a specific term referring to verbal aspects of morality seems to indicate that 'morality in speech' (*kǒudé*), often to do with controlling one's verbal behavior and refraining from verbal aggression and bad-mouthing others, is seen as an especially important behavioral manifestation of moral character.

While the above examples involve assessments of the moral character of the host in a more general sense, others focus on morality concerning professional ethics (that is, moral character with respect to his specific role as host on the show). In Example (11), the commenter negatively assesses the host on the grounds that his behaviour could disrupt production of the show and have a negative impact on all the entertainers and personnel involved.

(11)   [Tony Zong]
那應該等節目錄完好好談啊？一點品德都沒有，中斷節目罵人知道影響了所有錄影的藝人跟幕後人員嗎？把大家情緒都毀了後面怎麼錄？
(So [the host] should wait until the show to finish and then talk properly with [the guest]. [He is] so lacking in moral character. Did he realise that the progress of airing among all the celebrities and staff was interrupted by his scolding?)

In other words, letting out one's own rage at the expense of time and feelings of others is construed as unprofessional.

Likewise, in Example (12), the host is also criticised for his lack of professional demeanour, and argued to therefore not be qualified to be the host of that television show.

(12) [SAK R]
可以回加拿大…過退休生活,當一個主持人,拿不出該有的風度,也不用當
了,準備拒看這節目了.
([The host] can go back to Canada to retire. A host who cannot show profes-
sional demeanour should quit the job. I am ready to stop watching the show.)[6]

The above comments demonstrate how the host was assessed as lacking moral
character by the commenters. Yet the guest was assessed by other commenters
as lacking in moral character as well, although in somewhat different terms. The
most common criticisms revolved around claims that the guest was insensitive
and clueless (*báimù*), along with his tendency to "cross the line" (*cǎi rén dǐxiàn*,
踩人底線, lit. 'step on other's bottom line'),[7] and "bitingly teasing" others (*suān
rén*, 酸人, lit. 'sour [to] people'), as we can see in Example (13).

(13) [Minutes 85]
我同意 可能乃哥處理方式不佳 但是唐先生最近上節目根本都在酸人踩人
底線只是這次踢到鐵板 事出必有因 只能說自己白目
(I agree that the way the host handled this situation is not appropriate, but the
guest always teases others in the show and crosses the boundaries. It's just he
got jinxed this time. There is no smoke without fire. I can only say he's too
báimù [insensitive and clueless])

Notably, all three of these negative assessments, *báimù* ('insensitive, clueless'),
suān rén ('bitingly tease others'), and *cǎi rén dǐxiàn* ('crossing the line'), involve
criticisms that presuppose there are boundaries that people have a moral obliga-
tion to know they should not cross.

  Example (14) nicely summarizes this line of criticism in arguing the host's
admonishment of the guest was warranted because the teasing targeted a "sore
point".

(14) [Nietzsche lunatic]
有的人说话没有分寸 老说别人的痛处 应该被教训一下
(Some people speak without care in always targeting the sore points of others.
They deserve to be admonished)

Notably, this criticism is not just directed at the guest in relation to this particular
incident, but generalised through an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz 1986)

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6. The reference to retiring in Canada alludes to the (well known) fact that the host has rights
to permanent residence in Canada.

7. Yu (2016, 110) notes that "morality" in (Ancient) Chinese was conceptualised as regulating
conduct within set moral boundaries (lit. squares and circles), and thus to "cross the line" refers
to breaching those presumed moral standards.

to his behaviour in general, and others like him who lack 'morality in speech' (*kǒudé*).

In sum, the following rationales for negative assessments of the moral character of the host and guest, respectively, emerged in the course of our analysis:

I.   The host lacks moral character
   a.   The host lacks morality in speech
   b.   The host manages his emotions poorly
   c.   The host lacks professional ethics

II. The guest lacks moral character
   a.   The guest lacks morality in speech
   b.   The guest crossed the line through his teasing
   c.   The guest is insensitive and clueless

Once again we can see that when assessing the behaviour of the host and guest, the commenters offer discursive rationales that draw, in turn, on broader ideological discourses on moral character (*pǐnxìng*) that go beyond the particulars of this event. As we have noted, both the host and guest are negatively assessed as lacking in moral character, especially with respect to a claimed (lack of) morality in their speech (*kǒudé*). In this case, however, there is somewhat of an asymmetry in the way which ideological discourses around moral character are deployed. In the case of the host, it is only his behavior that is targeted, while in the case of the guest the negative assessment is broadened to other people who lack morality in their speech, thus tacitly invoking the discourse on intergenerational discord in which younger or junior people are held to be insensitive and clueless (*báimù*). What lies at the heart of this discursive dispute about whether the host or the guest took things too far is the way in which the same ideological discourse, in this case about moral character (*pǐnxìng*), can be deployed to warrant different, seemingly contradictory assessments. While the commenters appear to agree on the value of maintaining moral character (*pǐnxìng*), they differ in their evaluations of how it applies in this particular case.

4.3   Discourses on moral culpability

In the previous two sections we have discussed the way in which both the host and guest were criticised by commenters for their behavior. However, discursive disputes about these assessments became apparent across these posts, as the moral grounds offered to warrant those assessments, and the more pervasive ideological discourse they invoke, themselves became contested. In some cases though, the host and guest were not simply criticised for their behaviour in "going too

far" with either their taking of offence or teasing, respectively, but were blamed for the conflict that arose between them. In some comments, the guest was held to be at fault for starting it by going too far with the teasing. In other comments, both the host and the guest were held to be equally at fault on the grounds that they both went too far with their offence-taking and teasing, respectively. Underpinning these discursive rationales, however, are more pervasive ideological discourses on the moral grounds for assigning culpability for conflict. On the one hand, there is the view that it is primarily the person whose actions started the conflict who is to blame. On the other hand, there is the view that it is inevitably both parties that are at fault, because it always take two to quarrel. These competing discourses on how we assign moral culpability for conflict are summarised in Figure 3.

Assessment	Both the offence-taking and the teasing went too far	vs	The teasing went too far
Rationale	It takes two to quarrel		The guest started it

Figure 3. Competing discourses on moral culpability

In Example (15), blame is succinctly assigned to the guest for being the one who went too far with his insensitive and clueless (*báimù*) teasing.

(15)   [yuann Chen]
　　　白目在先吧。
　　　(The *báimù* [insensitive, clueless] one was first)

The rationale being offered here is that it was the guest who is to blame because he was the first to go too far.

In Example (16), it is argued that not only is the one who first provokes another party to blame, in this case the guest, but this warrants, in turn, the host's admonishment of the guest.

(16)   [g120262002]
　　　先撩者賤 被罵剛剛好而已
　　　(The person who provokes first is despicable. He deserved to be scolded.)

However, in other cases commenters laid blame for the conflict equally on both parties on the grounds that both of them went too far, as seen in Example (17).

(17)   [jack K]
　　　一個嘴巴不管好，一個性格很暴躁，兩個人都沒很好。
　　　(One is bad mouthing and the other is bad-tempered. Neither are good.)

In Example (18), the commenter assigns culpability to both on the grounds that *yīgè bāzhang pāi bù xiǎng* (一個巴掌拍不響, lit. 'one hand cannot make a clap'), meaning it takes two to quarrel.

(18) [Han Mingyan]
兩邊本來就都有不對 玩笑開過頭 好笑當有趣 一個巴掌拍不響
(Both have faults. Tang's [the guest's] tease crossed the line, and he treated that as funny. It takes two to quarrel)

Example (19) invokes a similar rationale that neither is innocent in this conflict, as both went too far.

(19) [Chen Zhongxian]
被罵的要反省啦 大家也不要一面倒 問候人家長輩固然不對 影片的前段為何沒出現 被罵的也不是什麼好東西!
(The one who was scolded needs to reflect on himself. Everyone should not just stand on the side of Tang. Although it is not correct to swear at someone's parent, the one who was scolded is also not a good guy, as we don't see the footage where the tease took place.)

Notably, the commenter here also observes that the leaked footage was one small segment of a chain of events, and calls attention to the unseen prior interaction that led to the host's outrage.

We can summarise the rationales underlying the online discussions about moral culpability as follows:

I.   The guest is to blame
      a.   The guest started it

II.   Both the host and the guest are to blame
      a.   Both parties went too far
      b.   It takes two to quarrel

Once again we can see that when assessing the behaviour of the host and guest, the commenters offer discursive rationales that draw, in turn, on broader ideological discourses on moral culpability for conflict that go beyond the particulars of this event. Similar to the discursive contestation around moral character we earlier examined, however, there is somewhat of an asymmetry in the way which ideological discourses around moral culpability are deployed. It is only the guest who is held to be solely to blame for the incident on the grounds that he was the one who started it. The opposing ideological discourse is that it always takes two to quarrel.

5.   Conclusion

We have seen that there can be considerable variation in how the taking of offence in response to teasing is evaluated by the broader public. Close examination of these kinds of discursive disputes provides us with a window into the way in which the rationales that are used to warrant different assessments draw, in turn, on different ideological discourses that are shaped, perpetuated and contested through this kind of metapragmatic commentary. In the course of our analysis we identified three key ideological discourses that were invoked by commenters: discourses on intergenerational discord, discourses on moral character, and discourses on moral culpability. In examining discursive disputes about whether the host went too far in the way he took offence or the guest's teasing went too far, it has become evident that these different assessments reflect broader ideological tensions in contemporary Taiwanese society. Whether these ideological tensions can be mapped to particular demographics within Taiwanese society is something that could be explored in future research. Such research could further explore not only how the relevance of such discourses in warranting particular morally-charged assessments may be contested, but the way in which the cultural beliefs that underpin these ideological discourses may themselves also be contested.

While the ideological underpinnings of (im)politeness and offence have long been noted, much of this work has focused on how (im)politeness is ideologically linked to culture (Eelen 2001), gender (Mills 2003), social class (Mills 2017), or age (Kienpointner and Stopfner 2017). There has, however, been surprisingly little attention paid to the links between ideological discourses and the moral grounds that warrant such evaluations. What has become clear in the course of our analysis is that not only do commenters invoke different ideological discourses to warrant their assessments, but the same ideological discourses can sometimes be adopted to drive contradictory assessments, reflecting the fact that the ideological foundations of morality are inherently contestable within a particular society. There is no one-to-one relationship between the moral grounds on which people make assessments about whether someone has gone too far in teasing or taking offence, for instance, and those assessments themselves. Attempts to taxonomise aspects of the moral order as a set of rights and obligations or moral foundations can therefore only take us so far in the analysis of offence, especially as such attempts do not offer an explanation of how the same sets of moral values or moral foundations can be invoked to warrant seemingly contradictory assessments.

What is perhaps more important to appreciate in analysing the underlying moral fabric of social interaction, then, is that what counts as right or wrong, good or bad and so on, is not only worked out through discursively, but is imma-

nent to that very discourse (Garfinkel 1967; Rawls 2010). As Jayyusi (1991), notes, moral values "are not locked into the heads of persons, not secreted in a hidden place in the actor's subjectivity, to be made available only at the decision of that actor. Rather, they are given, rendered, displayed, and made visible and ascribable on the basis of the actors' actions and discourse" (p.243). However, while morality is an inherently discursive phenomenon, this does not mean that it arises in a vacuum. Ways of interpreting and evaluating the conduct of others, and ourselves, can become reified through discourse, developing over time into ideological discourses. These ideological discourses are treated by observers as if they have an objective reality in and of themselves (Kádár and Haugh 2013, 200), and in this way come to play a role in the ongoing contestation of what counts as right and proper, and thus wrong and improper, conduct. This paper thus represents a modest attempt to further our understanding of the critical role these ideological discourses play in shaping, perpetuating and contesting the inherently moral fabric of social interaction.

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