



Morality, aggression, and social activism in a transmedia sports controversy

Patricia Bou-Franch

Universitat de València, IULMA/Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Alemanya, Facultat de Filologia, Traducció i Comunicació, Avda. Blasco Ibáñez 32, 46010, València, Spain



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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the interconnections between morality, aggression, and social activism are discursively articulated in two data sets: a face-to-face sport controversy and a corpus of evaluative online comments in response to reports of said controversy. The study adopted a combined transmedia, critical, and intersectional perspective that revealed the divergent interpretations of the controversy as an aggression that threatened the moral or a case of activism in defense of the moral. Thus, competing moral and social frameworks were found to lie behind social division and suggested the need for intersectional awareness and critical views on the complex and unstable distinctions between causing and taking offence and between the roles of transgressor/offender and victim/offended.

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1. Introduction

With 23 Grand Slam tennis victories, among many other titles, Serena Williams is a phenomenal athlete. She is also an activist, committed to fighting social inequality in different ways. During her long professional career, she has entered disputes with umpires and referees, that is, those 'responsible for calling the score and upholding the rules of tennis'¹. This paper investigates one such dispute that took place during the women's finals of the 2018 U.S. Open. During the match, Williams challenged the referee's calls in the belief that they were unfair. This was described as 'the most controversial U.S. Open final ever staged'².

This sport controversy was widely reported and commented on traditional and social media. While some reports and comments centered on William's emotional reaction and viewed it as a transgression, others took sides with the athlete and interpreted her protests as social activism. This article specifically investigates the offence-morality interface by examining the metapragmatics of the controversial interaction and the discursive evaluations of the mediated controversy in a corpus of online comments from a newspaper. This study takes a critical, intersectional approach in examining the morality-offence interface, and a transmedia perspective on evaluative processes, which considers the development of contemporary social stories. In particular, the transmedia perspective brings diversity and intertextuality to the fore and poses further analytical issues, such as the struggle about what actions and whose actions in a controversy lead to moral evaluation and offence. This, in turn, reveals the ideologically diverse and fuzzy boundaries between moral aggression and social activism, and suggests the

E-mail address: patricia.bou@uv.es.

¹ <https://www.lta.org.uk/workforce-venues/officiate-tennis/become-an-official/becoming-an-umpire/>.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2018/sep/09/serena-williams-us-open-tennis-final-2018-game-penalty-naomi-osaka>.

need to critically consider the complex and fluid distinction between causing and taking offence and to problematize the roles of transgressor/offender and victim/offended.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on morality, the moral order, offence, and evaluation, and formulates research questions. Section 3 contains the methodology, which provides information on the corpus, methods, and analytical procedure. Next comes the analysis of the on-court controversy (section 4), and of the corpus of online comments, organized around several thematic categories (section 5). In section 6, the results of the analysis are discussed in the context of previous research and concluding remarks are provided in response to the questions raised.

2. Morality, offence, and evaluation

This paper explores the interconnection between offence and morality in interaction. The following entry for offence in the *Oxford English Dictionary* provides a useful starting point:

A breach of law, rules, duty, propriety, or etiquette; a transgression, sin, wrong, misdemeanour, or misdeed; a fault

In this view, an offence involves different forms of transgressive behavior that may be related to institutions – as the terms *law*, *rules* or *sin* suggest – and/or to non-institutional (unwritten) social norms and conventions – as the terms *propriety*, *etiquette*, or *wrong* indicate. Institutional or not, rules and norms reflect the dominant morality in society, as sociopragmatic research has underlined (Culpeper, 2011, p. 37). Participants in social interaction are expected to conform to certain rules and social norms and are, therefore, morally bounded (Goffman, 1967). Breaches of such rules and norms can be the source of offence. Offence has been addressed in pragmatics in relation to impoliteness and conflict. A prolific line of research has focused on causing offence through impoliteness strategies and (non)-conventional formulae (e.g., Culpeper, 2005, 2011; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2011; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2010). However, the link between offensive actions and triggering conflict is far from straightforward (Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014). Haugh and Sinkeviciute (2019), for instance, argue it is important to establish an analytical distinction between the causing of offence and the taking of offence. For these authors, taking offence involves a moral emotion; it is a social practice that comprises two aspects: (i) a subjective negative affective state, which is not open to discursive scrutiny, and (ii) a negative evaluation or stance, i.e., ‘moral claim of a prior transgression, affront, misdeed and such like on the part of another participant’ (Haugh, 2015, p. 2) that indicates that offence has been taken. The latter is intersubjective and, therefore, can be discursively examined, even though indications of offence-taking can be realized with different degrees of explicitness.

Pragmatics scholars interested in offence and conflict agree on the key role of morality, even though this notion has only recently received careful attention (Culpeper, 2011; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Kádár, 2021; Haugh, 2013; Kádár, 2017; Kádár and Haugh, 2013; Kádár and Marquez-Reiter, 2015; Kádár et al., 2019; Parvaresh and Kádár, 2019; Parvaresh and Tayebi, 2018; Marquez Reiter and Orthaber, 2018; Davies, 2018). Morality has been addressed in scholarly thought across different disciplines with little agreement so far on theoretical tenets (Haidt, 2008; Hiltin and Pinkston, 2013). The group-oriented approach developed within Moral Foundation Theory (e.g., Haidt, 2012; Haidt and Joseph, 2004) has been particularly influential (Culpeper, 2011; Kádár, 2017; Kádár et al., 2019). This view conceives of morality as including a plurality of moral systems, defined as ‘interlocking sets of values, practices, institutions, and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate selfishness and make social life possible’ (Haidt, 2008, p. 70). The violation of moral principles – which draw on systems of care, fairness, authority, loyalty, and purity – causes evaluations of moral aggression (Haidt, 2012; Haidt and Joseph, 2004). Importantly for this paper, this theory connects morality and moral diversity with communities and social division (Haidt and Joseph, 2004, p. 64; Haidt et al., 2003).

The notion of morality, however, has been considered too general as an analytical tool (Parvaresh and Tayebi, 2018, p. 93), and the notion of the moral order has been preferred instead as a ‘specific instantiation of morality’ (Parvaresh and Kádár, 2019, p. 1. Also, Culpeper, 2011; Davies, 2018; Graham, 2018; Kádár and Haugh, 2013; Márquez Reiter and Orthaber, 2018; Parvaresh and Tayebi, 2018, among others). The moral order is manifested in patterns of personal actions grounded on socially constructed interpretations of what is ‘right and wrong, good and bad’ (Domenici and Littlejohn, 2006, p. 7).

Within pragmatics, the relationship between offence and morality has been differently treated. Culpeper (2011), for instance, integrates morality and the moral order within a sociocognitive framework of ideology (Van Dijk, 2008). He argues that morality is ‘moulded not only by social norms but by broader belief systems or ideologies concerning social organization’ (p. 38). Moral values are thus understood as important elements of ideology (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Kádár, 2021; Hiltin and Pinkston, 2013, p. 321). For their part, Haugh (2013) and Kádár and Haugh (2013) pay attention to the participants involved in making moral evaluations, including those for whom certain actions are offensive, and thus propose a reformulation of Goffman’s (1981) participation framework. Kádár and Haugh (2013) further identify three interrelated layers of the moral order of relevance in metapragmatics, i.e., localized, group and societal norms. Another perspective is found in the work of Kádár (2017), who draws from the notion of rituals. These are viewed as interactional phenomena through which the moral order is restored, reinforced, and challenged (Kádár and Márquez-Reiter, 2015). Finally, Parvaresh (2019) poses a form of moral competence which he dubs the Basic Morality Perspective (BMP) i.e., ‘the moral predisposition which interactants possess’ (p. 79), which is activated in discourse comprehension and allows for the interactional analysis of moral values. Despite their different approaches, all studies give evaluative practices center stage, as they lie at the intersection of morality and the moral order, on the one hand, and (offensive) social actions and meanings, on the other (Haugh, 2013; Kádár and Haugh, 2013; Márquez-Reiter and Haugh, 2019).

This paper, then, takes an evaluation-centered, metapragmatic approach (Kádár and Haugh, 2013) to explore the morality-offence interface in a sports controversy in which the challenging actions of an athlete were variously interpreted either as acts of moral aggression or acts of social activism. Moral aggression has been generally discussed in terms of transgressions that threaten the moral (Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2019) while social activism is understood as a defense of the moral. Activism is an increasingly visible phenomenon among (sports) celebrities that deserves further attention (Ellcessor, 2018; Tsaliki et al., 2011) in sociopragmatic studies. Activist causes and values are morally loaded in that advocacy is related to socio-political and ecological activities for the promotion of social justice (Ellcessor, 2018). In view that the social (sport) controversy under analysis was interpreted both as moral aggression (a threat to the moral) and as social activism (a defense of the moral), the general objective of this study is to analyze how the interconnection between morality, aggression and social activism is articulated in interaction. In line with this, the following specific research questions were formulated:

- RQ1. How are morality, aggression, and social activism discursively realized in a social conflict, i.e., a controversial interaction?
- RQ2. How is the controversial interaction evaluated?
- RQ3. What are the interactional implications of diverging evaluations of the same action?

3. Methodology

In order to address the research questions above, the analysis focused on a case study of the sports controversy between tennis player Serena Williams and the chair umpire Carlos Ramos during the Women's final of the 2018 U.S. Open. This story began on-court and continued with a post-match interview and multiple reactions across social media. The analysis involved two stages during which, two data sets of the corpus were scrutinized from critical, intersectional, and transmedia perspectives. A critical perspective places the emphasis on ideology and social inequalities (Van Dijk, 2006). Intersectionality is a critical framework that provides an understanding of 'the lived experiences of those who are marked by race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and other identity markers' (Tredway, 2020, p. 1565; see also Collins, 2004). And a transmedia perspective involves paying attention to the unfolding of contemporary stories 'across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole' (Jenkins, 2006, p. 95–96).

During the first stage of the study, a data set comprising the central exchanges of the controversy came under scrutiny. The social actions performed by participants were examined paying particular attention to the metapragmatic comments that would help establish a relationship between morality, aggression, and activism (Kádár and Haugh, 2013; Verschueren, 2000), thus addressing the first research question (RQ1).

During the second stage, the study drew from a corpus of 1939 digital comments posted in response to two newspaper articles from the *New York Times* which took different stances on the story. This media output was chosen because it is based in New York, where the U.S. Open takes place, and it is a national broadsheet of worldwide readership so many comments and reactions were expected. The first³ article was a report by Ben Rothenber titled "For Serena Williams, a Memorable U.S. Open Final for the Wrong Reasons" (*New York Times*, 9/09/2018). The story discussed the event as breaking the expectations that the final would be remembered as a celebration of William's victory, career, and comeback after birth, and focused on the code penalties and on William's emotional response. The second⁴ article was an opinion piece by Dr Salamishah Tillet titled "Serena Williams's Gift to Naomi Osaka, and Women, at the U.S. Open" (*New York Times*, 10/09/2018). The main point of the story is clearly summarized in the story's own byline: "Rather than remain silent, she insisted on being heard. Rather than contain herself, she used her rage for the countless women silenced by sexism and racism." All the comments posted in response to these two articles were manually compiled. Of these, the first 150 comments from each story (n = +25,000 words) comprised the second data set that was subjected to qualitative scrutiny.

The type of interaction in the online data set is polylogal, i.e., with multiple commenters as vicarious participants, who can be classified as third-party (Kádár, 2017) or metaparticipants (Kádár and Haugh, 2013, p. 269) in the unfolding transmedia story (Bou-Franch, 2021). The polylogal interactions unfolded in a networked manner (Bou-Franch et al., 2012; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2011) and, importantly for this study, the type of comments in this type of polylogues have been reported to index structure and reinforce 'presumed moral orders ... that are thus implicitly presented as the basis for proper social conduct' (Davies, 2018, p. 125).

The bottom-up analysis of the data relied on previous research on evaluation, morality, and offence (section 2). Davies (2018, p. 130) has recently argued for the need to problematize the notion of evaluation and to distinguish its 'classificatory, assessing, and argumentative elements'; for her, it is the latter, the rationales underlying classifications and assessments, that provide information on beliefs about the moral order. This division was considered in the study, which consisted of a qualitative thematic analysis that 'involves letting categories and themes "emerge" ... from the data through researcher interpretation, rather than being strictly determined in advance' (Paulus and Wise, 2019, p. 162; Braun and Clarke, 2006). It is

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/09/sports/tennis/serena-williams-sexism-us-open-.html>.

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/10/opinion/serena-williams-tennis-usopen.html>.

important to note that the use of “emerge” (within inverted commas in the original) does not mean that the analyst was passive during the scrutiny. On the contrary, the themes were actively identified and organized by the analyst (myself) in ways that would be relevant to the research questions. During the first detailed reading of the comments, they were numbered and one of two letters was assigned to each comment, thus identifying them as coming from the newspaper report that views the final as memorable (M) or the opinion piece that argues that Williams’ protest was a gift to women (G). In addition, and even though the comments are posted in a public space that can be searched freely, without previously registering on the site, all of them were anonymized in compliance with the ethical recommendations of good practice in digital research issued by the AOR, namely, the Association of Internet Researchers (Markham and Buchanan, 2012; Page et al., 2014). Incidentally, (extracts from) the comments are reproduced below as found, without corrections or modifications. The next step in the analysis involved re-readings to identify the different codes that emerged in the evaluative comments. The codes were later collated into themes and the targets of personal evaluations were further identified. While some comments were short and focused on one theme, others invoked several themes, all of which were coded and computed (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The qualitative scrutiny allowed to explore how the controversy was evaluated (RQ2) and to assess the interactional implications of divergent evaluations (RQ3).

4. The controversy

During the U.S. Open tournament final between Serena Williams and Naomi Osaka, the former was at the center of a heated dispute. The umpire penalized Williams for three code violations. The first one was an official warning for coaching, i.e., receiving instructions from a player’s coach from the stands. Referees tend to follow the convention of giving an unofficial or ‘soft’ warning for coaching. However, in this case, the call was official; Williams took offence and told the referee: “I don’t cheat to win, I would rather lose.”⁵ Sometime later, Williams smashed her racket and the referee called a point penalty. Williams faced the umpire in relation to the first call, which she took as a personal offence, as can be observed in the following metapragmatic comment, in which she demands an apology and explicitly claims the moral high ground in relation to her identity as a mother:

“... You owe me an apology, you owe me an apology. I have never cheated in my life. I have a daughter and I stand for what’s right for her and I have never cheated”

On another between-games brief exchange, Williams continued with her demand, and conflict escalated:

“For you to attack my character, something is wrong. It’s wrong. You attacking my character, yes you are. You owe me an apology. You will never ever ever be on another court of mine as long as you live. You are a liar ... When are you going to give me my apology? ... How dare you insinuate I was cheating. You stole a point from me, you’re a thief too.”

The tennis player clearly took offence at the referee for the calls and made her case in terms of right and wrong, i.e., in moral terms (Domenici and Littlejohn, 2006), while she accused the referee of an unfair personal attack of her character, which she classified using ‘wrong’, a metapragmatic label/evaluator (Culpeper, 2011; Kádár and Haugh, 2013). Williams, thus, expressed her moral indignation (Moulinou, 2014). As her indignation increased, she again demanded an apology, issued a threat, and insulted the referee by calling him a liar and a thief. At this point, the referee called another breach of the rules of tennis, verbal abuse, and penalized Williams with a game. When the player realized she had been taken a game, she called the Tournament Referee, a higher-ranking official and also ‘guardian of the Rules of Tennis’ and made explicit, emotionally charged moral claims about the unfairness of the calls, which she attributed to the fact that she is a woman:

“This is not fair, this has happened to me too many times. This is not fair ... To lose a game for saying that, it’s not fair. How many other men do things? There’s a lot of men out here who have said a lot of things. It’s because I am a woman, and that’s not right.”

The morally loaded debate turned into one of lack of fairness and gender inequality, with an explicit analogy (Moulinou, 2014) between her case and similar cases involving male players; whatever the male players did, however, was left unspecified, and only referred to in vague terms. Williams ultimately lost the match to Naomi Osaka. The victory ceremony was tense, with the stadium audience jeering and booing in protest. During the post-match interview that followed, the athlete elaborated on her earlier words and claimed to have been advocating for gender equality and for other things, which were left unspecified:

“I’m here fighting for women’s rights and for women’s equality and for all kinds of stuff. For me to say ‘thief’ and for him to take a game, it made me feel like it was a sexist remark.”

Williams expressed moral indignation through her claims to lack of fairness in the referee’s treatment of her and showed she had taken offence at the referee’s calls. The referee, for Williams, was the offender, and his actions were interpreted as a breach of morality principles of fairness (Haidt, 2012). Williams actions are a good example of the multifunctionality of language (Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014) as they express the taking of offence and, simultaneously, the causing of offence

⁵ To see the full transcript <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/tennis/2018/09/09/serena-williams-us-open-2018-final-umpire-row-unfolded-said/>.

which, in this case, led to a breach of the rules of the game. In this sense, Williams' actions, as mentioned earlier, were classified as verbal abuse which, according to the 2018 Rule Book of the Women's Tennis Association (WTA)⁶ 'is defined as any statement about an official, opponent, spectator or any other person that implies dishonesty or is derogatory, insulting or otherwise abusive', that is, social actions contrary to social norms and conventions associated to morality principles of authority and respect (Haidt, 2012). The referee's actions were morally loaded since officials are regarded as the 'guardians' of the rules, who 'enforce them to ensure a match is played in a spirit of fair play'⁷. For the referee, then, Williams was the offender, and his calls, as rituals of game regulation, were designed to restore the rules of the game, that is, the normative flow of the event (Kádár, 2017, p. 196). In sum, Williams constructed the referee's calls as moral aggressions – 'not fair'/'not right' – and the referee interpreted Williams' challenging actions as normative moral transgressions/aggressions against the localized rules of the game and of fair play. In addition, Williams constructed herself as fighting for women's equality and 'for all kinds of stuff', in defense of the moral, i.e. as a social activist. Therefore, morality, aggression, and activism, were talked into the interaction (Svahn and Evaldsson, 2013).

Given the importance of the championship, the controversy was broadcast on television channels globally, reported in newspapers internationally, and reproduced, shared, and discussed on social media; the sports controversy became, therefore, a transmedia story characteristic of the culture of technological convergence (Jenkins, 2006). This transmedia story soon developed into a discussion of race, gender, and aggressiveness, one of mediatized intersectionality vis-à-vis aggression (Maegaard et al., 2019), as we will see next, even though racial discrimination was not explicitly mentioned by Williams.

5. The online comments

The event did not leave the larger audience indifferent and the analysis of online comments seemed appropriate for the further exploration of morality in connection to aggression and activism, especially because 'reporting about transgressions, and the responses of others to those offences, creates opportunities for moralizing or moral talk' (Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2019, p. 196). The thematic analysis of the comments yielded four main categories (see Table 1):

1. Personal evaluations
2. Discrimination: Sexism and racism
3. Media: Newspaper and journalist(s)
4. Rules and rule-enforcement

Table 1

Frequency of occurrence of themes and subthemes i.e., targets of personal evaluations.

Themes	Freq
1. Personal evaluations	601
Target of evaluations	
1.1. Williams	353
1.2. Umpire	26
1.3. Authorities	14
1.4. Audience	26
1.5. Newspaper commenters	182
2. Discrimination: Sexism and racism	115
3. Media: Newspaper and journalist(s)	84
4. Rules and rule enforcement	13

The most frequent thematic category that emerged in the data was personal evaluations. These included different targets which were mostly negatively evaluated. This thematic category was split to account for the recipient of the assessment. The targets, with percentages in brackets out of all personal evaluations in the data set, were Williams (59%), other newspaper commenters (30%), the umpire (4%), the audience at the stadium (4%), and authorities (2%). However, there was some overlap between personal evaluations and the other thematic categories. For instance, theme #2, Discrimination, was discussed in relation to Williams and the referee, but also concerned all the participants in the event, and even the world of tennis and society, more broadly. Theme #3, Media, involved assessments of the articles, the newspaper, or the media in general, but sometimes it also included evaluations of the journalists themselves. Finally, theme #4, Rules and rule-enforcement, was sometimes, but not always, discussed in relation to the referee. Despite the overlap of categories, the four themes were subjected to separate, but related, scrutiny.

⁶ <http://wtfiles.wtatennis.com/pdf/publications/2018WTARulebook.pdf>.

⁷ <https://www.itftennis.com/en/growing-the-game/officiating/>.

The next section discusses and illustrates the four thematic categories and identifies representative discourse patterns employed in the evaluations.

5.1. Personal negative evaluations

Personal evaluations were mostly negative, and Serena Williams was the most frequent target. Commenters' criticisms centered on Williams' personal and professional identities. Regarding the former, commenters classified her character and conduct using several metapragmatic labels and evaluators such as "insufferable" (M27) "boorish" (G35), and "rude", "lacking in respect" and "decorum" (M108, M119, G137), and argued her behavior was a mark of "privilege and entitlement" (G73). Commenters' main reasons for taking offence at Williams were related to her personality and her claims regarding sexism and motherhood. This is clearly observed in discussions of her emotional reaction which is classified as a "nasty temper tantrum" (M42); the athlete was often compared to an irresponsible child and her personality and lack of control were considered morally wrong, a fault of her character:

- (1). I have always admired Serena but what I saw during this match was the unspoken heartbreak of an athlete who never seemed to develop any adult coping skills, and who needs to come to grips with the fact that her time in the sun is fading quickly (G37)

Example (1) constructs Williams' actions in terms of lack of maturity and emotional control and, using the time adverb "never", the text underlines the persistence of this negative feature of her personality over time. The comment ends prescribing behavior (Culpeper, 2011), i.e., suggesting Williams should realize her glory days are over. This commenter, thus, takes offence at William's actions and assigns her the offender role.

Commenters also expressed indignation at William's use of her identity as a mother to claim moral authority:

- (2). @Name, '04, '07, '13 Yes, indeed. "I have a daughter" is going to become the most famous and memorable line ever used by a tennis player arguing against an empire. Not unlike the famous "It doesn't fit" line used by O.J. Simpson at his trial back in June 1995 (G143)

In example (2), the commenter is dismissive towards Williams and belittles (Culpeper, 2011) her motherhood claim using a disproportionate analogy (Moulinou, 2014) which compares her reference to being a mother with O. J. Simpson's trial, when the defense lawyer requested the jury to acquit the defendant based on weak evidence.⁸ The commenter, thus, views Williams' intended association between being a mother and a high moral standing as a false and meaningless excuse. Through this dismissive comment, Williams' claim is considered offensive and therefore, she is assigned the offender role.

Her professional identity, on the other hand, came under game-related criticisms that classified the tennis player as "unprofessional" (G55) and a "sore loser" (M145). Commenters highlighted the lack of professionalism of actions like berating the referee, which was perceived as excessively inappropriate on-court ranting.

- (3). ... As someone who plays tennis (and went to Berkeley); the ranting and raving approach is simply unfair to her opponent and the spirit of good sportsmanship. Don't be fooled (G6)

The comment in (3) contains an initial disagreement with a previous user which is not shown in the example. To make their case strongly, this commenter self-constructs an expert identity (Kampf and Katriel, 2017) that claims moral and epistemic authority to condemn and accuse Williams of being unfair to both her opponent and the spirit of the game. The commenter ends issuing a prescriptive imperative (Culpeper, 2011) aimed at influencing a previous user (and possibly, like-minded others) who evaluates Williams in positive terms (see also example (4), below). By contradicting the previous user and simultaneously criticizing Williams, this comment suggests that offence was taken at both, who become, in this sense, the offending parties.

In constructing Williams' actions as offensive for the referee and the opponent, commenters argued that 'great athletes don't act like that' (M145), thus associating a professional tennis identity with specific normative behavior and denying Williams' identity as a great professional. Less frequently, though, commenters also defended Williams' position:

- (4). @G18 I have never seen Serena get very angry over loosing. I have only seen her get angry when she thought she was being unfairly treated. All the tennis players I have heard speak have said the first and third warning were prejudicial (G19)

The user in (4) contradicts Williams' portrayal as a 'sore loser' in a previous comment, and presents her, instead, as the (repeated) victim of unequal treatment. This view is supported by the last statement, in which the commenter appeals to the authority of other athletes. Thus, in this case, Williams is the victim and would have the right to be offended, while the referee becomes the perpetrator of the offence, the wrongdoer.

The second most frequent target of personal evaluations in the data includes other newspaper commenters. In contrast to studies that claim there is no interaction among commenters (Davies, 2018), in my data set commenters frequently disagreed with each other, thus engaging in interaction. The use of the initial '@Name' addressivity device (Bou-Franch et al., 2012;

⁸ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/law/educational-magazines/if-it-doesnt-fit-you-must-acquit>.

Herring, 1999) in over one third of the comments ($n = 114$) provides evidence of commenters' explicit replies and interactional engagement. Commenters disagreed over giving credit to Williams (as in example 3, above), over the fairness of rules and rule enforcement and, more generally, they criticized each other about the solidity of their arguments, as in the following exchange of consecutive comments:

- (5). 1. Frankly, every word she uttered yesterday reminded me of a certain orange narcissist, with apparently the same crowd behind her (M148)
 2. @148 You were spot on until you felt the need to put a Trump slam in the mix. Really, the tennis crowd — particularly those enjoying and supporting Serena's churlish behavior in the face of authority— are rather unlikely to be Trump supporters... (M149)
 3. @149 The Trump reference was actually meant to indict the crowd, who seemed to side with her because she is Serena, which seems quite Trumpian to me (M150)

In (5.1), the commenter uses exaggeration ('every word') and metaphorical putdowns ('orange narcissist') (Márquez-Reiter and Orthaber, 2018) to criticize Williams' behavior and that of her fans, through an analogy with Trump and his supporters. The following comment, (5.2), recognizes the reference to Trump and contradicts the previous user criticizing the comparison involving William's supporters. In addition, this commenter classifies her behavior using the negative label 'churlish'. In the third comment of this exchange, the first user provides a clarification that is critical of the stadium audience. This exchange, then, shows how users engaged in interpersonal interaction and (negatively) assessed each other's comments and, in this case, resolved misunderstandings.

A common disagreement pattern among commenters consisted in formulating accusations regarding lack of knowledge of tennis, thus reinforcing their own epistemic authority:

- (6). You clearly don't know the game of tennis — nor Serena's history (G48)
 (7). @1 Please, do you even watch Tennis (G8)

After a user argued that Williams only gets nervous when she receives unequal treatment (4, above), the commenter in (6) seems to take offence and responded by accusing him of ignoring the sport as well as Williams' history. Comment (7) employs a disagreement marker and then poses an uncomfortable question (Culpeper, 2011, 2016) that implies that a previous commenter ignores the rules of the game. In both cases, the comments are multifunctional and contain a negative assessment of the previous commenters and of Williams. This could suggest that for these commenters, the source of the offence comes from both fellow commenters and the tennis player, who are thus positioned as the offending parties.

Much less frequent were the assessments of the audience at the stadium, and of the umpire. Users took offence at the behavior of the crowd (see 5.3, above), which was classified as an 'ignorant and angry crowd of supporters' (G107). The crowd was criticized for booing during the match and the awards ceremony, bringing the winner to tears and to issue an apology over her victory.

- (8). I'm sorry, I didn't feel for one second that I was seeing Serena's "greatness". And I certainly didn't feel she was giving Osaka a bigger victory by her actions. Osaka ended up winning a U.S. Open in tears amidst an angry, booing crowd (G95)

Comment (8) begins with a token apology for the disagreement with the journalist and follows with the expression of negative affective stance (Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2019) towards the tennis player. The argument for the disagreement further underlines the winner's bitter victory due to the behavior of the audience. The conduct of the audience and the newspaper article, therefore, were considered offensive.

The umpire, too, was negatively evaluated as making arbitrary decisions, being authoritarian and having a 'history of conflicts' (G27).

- (9). The initial warning against Serena was ham-handed. The umpire should have just cautioned the coach. Penalizing her a game for calling him a thief was Ramos letting his personal feelings taint a Grand Slam final. The booing of him by 20,000 fans showed clearly whose side they were on. The right one. Hers. (G101)

Comment (9) argues that the referee's first call was inadequate before prescribing what should have been done and sentencing that the referee's emotions drove his calls. In addition, unlike in example (8), this user endorses the behavior of the crowd which is constructed as the argument of the majority. This commenter, thus, defends the athlete and the crowd, the offended victims, and places the referee in the offending role. However, support of the referee in the data was twice as frequent. The following example, for instance, contains a disagreement, a vehement defense of the referee, who is portrayed as following the rules of tennis, and an implication that Williams was to blame:

- (10) ... Calling an umpire a "liar" and "thief" violates the rule against impugning the honesty of an official. There is no controversy about Ramos. He treated her per the rules. Ms. Williams knew them ... (M76)

In sum, comments like (9) positioned the referee in the role of offender while comments like (10) viewed him as the victim, since his honesty was questioned. In addition, the latter comment assigns the offending role to Williams.

A final, less frequent subtheme of personal evaluations pertained to authorities, a group that includes tennis officials, institutions, and former players:

- (11). Serena's track record of poor sportsmanship is indisputable. I am most disappointed by figures like Billie Jean King herself tweeting "support ... (M148)

Commenters took offence at the authorities that supported Williams and justified her behavior (M65). Example (11), for instance, expresses a negative affective-moral stance (Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2019) towards former player B. J. King because she stood by Williams despite, they argue, the latter's history of similar conduct. In these cases, the role of offender is simultaneously assigned to the authorities and to Williams.

5.2. Discrimination: Sexism and racism

Sexism and racism constitute the second most frequently discussed theme in the evaluations under analysis. Even though Williams only put forward gender as the reason for unequal treatment, commenters took an intersectional stance (Collins, 2004) from the beginning, and discussed discrimination, a morally loaded action, in terms of both sexism and racism (Harrison et al., 2019). Opinions as to the existence of discriminatory practices in the event were highly divided, as the following explicit statements show.

- (12). ... There was both systematic racism and sexism demonstrated. Regardless, Serena was going to be beaten (M148)
 (13). ...No racism or sexism here. Just a broken rule (G11)

Comments that classified the event as fair and devoid of discrimination were slightly more frequent than those that regarded it as discriminatory. Comments in support of the former view mainly blamed Williams for her protests and further argued that inequality was used as an excuse, and that the referee's calls were fair (see example 15.1). The athlete was portrayed as doing a 'disservice to feminism' (M97) and to the winner, who was 'also a woman and also a woman of color' (G5). In contrast, comments that espoused the view that there was indeed discrimination during the event mainly blamed the referee, the sport itself, and society at large. They argued that (white) male players are not usually penalized for similar actions – as in "'t is also true that men are treated differently' in M51) and highlighted the history of biased treatment of Williams, the history of sexism in tennis (example 14, below), and the pervasiveness of sexism and racism in society and globally ('Anti-Blackness and misogynoir is global and prevalent in everything colonialism touches' in M57). A few comments argued that it was the winner who had been discriminated against (example 15.4). Some of these topics emerge in the following examples:

- (14). ...This does not mean that Serena's behavior was acceptable. However it certainly means that the umpire was way out of line ... The men are given extra warnings. In this case Carlos Ramos cheapened the match when he chose to enforce the rules that magically don't apply to (mostly white) men. Serena was guilty of Playing While Black. Nothing more (G128)

In (14), the commenter morally condemns Williams' social conduct although the referee's decision to penalize her for coaching was considered biased along racial and gender lines and, therefore, offensive to Williams. Through a comparison with white male players, this commenter intensifies criticism of the referee, the offender, before closing with an antiphrasis - which ironically underscores the pervasiveness of racism in tennis - and a vehement aphorism.

In the exchange of consecutive comments in (15), gender bias is invoked in a discussion of rule-breaking and 'civil' behavior:

- (15). 1. ... when you break rules, don't get mad when you get caught - and penalized. There are civilized ways to fix an unfair system ... (G58)
 2. @G58 "civilized", what a rare concept these days. (G59)
 3. @G59 Yes sir, there are civilized ways to Oh please. She's been civilized; where did it get her? Women have been civilized, taken the high road, bowed down ENOUGH! AND, Where did it get any of us? ... The system doesn't work for women. (G60)
 4. @ G60 Sure didn't work for Ms Osaka, the recipient of Serena's hissy fit. (G61)

The commenter in (15.1) grounded their position on the fairness of the umpire's calls and held Williams responsible for what was presented as an inappropriate emotional meltdown. Nevertheless, this user acknowledged that the rules of tennis may be unfair and suggested being civilized when trying to challenge them. This comment triggered interesting reactions. The commenter in (15.2) found civility alien to contemporary society while the user in (15.3) provided an emotionally charged response (Márquez-Reiter and Orthaber, 2018) that argued how being civil is not enough to change the *status quo*. The latter underlined the ubiquity of inequality in the country and portrayed women as civil and reasonable. The use of the inclusive 'any of us' suggests this commenter took personal offence at the previous comment. This commenter concluded with a vehement closing to the effect that, despite civility, '[t]he system doesn't work for women'. Thus, sexism is constructed as pervasive and systemic, and Williams as the target of a sexist offence. This view is countered in comment (15.4), which claims the tournament winner was the real victim of, in this case, what was seen as Williams' offensive actions.

Talk of Williams' 'emotional breakdown' (M63) was very frequent in the data. In this regard, a common discussion constructed Williams' behavior as anger and centered on the trope of the angry black woman in American society (Harrison et al., 2019; Prasad, 2018), and on whether her anger was righteous. Some comments defended the right of black women to express

their anger, and considered that Williams' anger was righteous and, therefore, justified and deserving of communal support. Under this view, she was attributed the role of victim (of the referee and of society in general) and, therefore, was placed in the offended role.

(16). A black women getting justifiably angry was just too much for this male and apparently society. We have a long way to go for equality (G49)

The commenter in (16) explicitly mentioned that William's anger was justified and denounced that the referee and society are intolerant of angry black women. Society is seen as far from true equality. This argument, however, was countered in the data:

(17). None of these actions involve race or gender, and this is not about an Angry Black Woman getting her due. ... Serena Williams didn't free herself of constraint Saturday. She, as she has too often in the past, freed herself of self control (G49)

Example (17) denies discriminatory treatment and any relationship between the event and the angry black woman trope. After contradicting the view defended in the article that hosts the polylogue, this commenter issued an accusation that held Williams responsible for the controversy due to her (historical) lack of control. For this commenter, hers was not "justified anger" and she was viewed, therefore, as the offending party.

Finally, other comments argued that irrespective of the right (or lack thereof) of women to get angry, the key issue was one of appropriateness:

(18). @G28 Leaving aside the question of whether women are "allowed" to get angry generally, ask if anger was the most appropriate response to this situation. (G30)

In example (18), the commenter questioned the social appropriateness of angry reactions and therefore invoked morally related social norms.

5.3. *Media: Newspaper and journalist(s)*

Another theme found in the reactions to reports of the sports controversy referred to the media, in general, and the *New York Times* in particular, which were accused of being significantly 'soft on Serena' (M66):

(19). I'm disappointed in the NYT coverage of this as some legitimate controversy or dispute. Serena owes her fans an apology and Naomi most of all for tarnishing this match for her own selfish reasons (M132)

The commenter in (19) expressed a negative emotion towards the newspaper for giving credit to the controversy thus indicating that offence was taken. The example ends contradicting the newspaper portrayal through a prescriptive meta-pragmatic comment that states what would be an appropriate course of action for Williams: to apologize to her fans and to the winner of the tournament. This would reinstate what this commenter views as morally right within this social situation (Márquez Reiter and Orthaber, 2018; Sinkeviciute, 2018). Moreover, in suggesting an apology to others, the idea that offence was taken is reinforced and, in this sense, the newspaper and Williams were positioned as offenders.

More specifically, commenters criticized the article that argued that Williams' protest was a gift to all women; this was classified as 'ridiculous' (G117) for its 'absurd' claim that Williams' behavior involved a righteous expression of anger. In line with this, the author of the article, Dr. Tillet became the target of both negative evaluations and, with far less frequency, of positive evaluations (examples 20 and 21, respectively).

(20). Oh, no, Ms. Tillet: Serena Williams gifted no one with her latest in a continuing series of unsportsmanlike outbursts (G141)

(21). Yes! Yes! A black woman must have a right to express her anger! Yes! ... Yes! Thank you, Salamishah Tillet! (G114)

The commenter of (20) explicitly contradicts Dr Tillet's opinion and provides an unmitigated negative evaluation of the event (Neurauter-Kessels, 2011), putting the blame back on Williams. In contrast, the commenter in (21) aligned with Dr Tillet's position emphatically, through repetition of the initial affirmative adverb followed by what was worded as a moral obligation and a social right that should be upheld. The commenter ended this turn with an expression of gratitude towards the author of the article. This user not only showed support for Dr Tillet, but also believed that Williams had expressed her righteous anger. In relation to offence, this view presents Williams as a victim of the referee's behavior, while the previous comment, (20), presents her as the wrongdoer.

5.4. *Rules and rule-enforcement*

In discussing the controversy, tennis rules and rule-enforcement also came under criticism. The rule of coaching was a frequent target. While some users considered this rule 'absurd' (G31) and argued that players are penalized for the actions of their coach, others viewed it as 'relative' (G3) in its application and called for consistent application and for greater penalties in case of violations.

- (22). This is a great article. They should have consistent treatment of all players. I'm really proud of Serena (G64)
 (23). But if the penalties were much stiffer and involved big money, then perhaps we'd see less of this (M6)

This was an important theme, since whether rule-enforcement was seen as inconsistent or not (examples 22 and 23, respectively) tended to be used as an argument for the positive or negative evaluation of Williams and the referee, and therefore, for the assigning of blame and the wrongdoer or victim roles. Comment (22) advocated for greater consistency in the application of the rules, thus siding with the newspaper article that hosts the interaction ('great article'), implicitly criticizing referees (offenders) through a statement that presupposed that not all players are treated equally, and praising Williams (offended). In contrast, example (23) is implicitly critical of Williams (offender) and calls for greater penalties to avoid behaviors like hers. These comments differently assign the role of offender to referees and Williams, respectively.

6. Discussion

This section discusses the findings of the analyses of the controversy (section 4) and the online reactions (section 5) triggered by news reports of the conflictual event. The aim of the analyses was to delve into the complex interconnection between morality, aggression and social activism as they are reflected in discourse.

The analysis of the controversy revealed that morality, aggression and social activism were talked into the interaction (Svahn and Evaldsson, 2013) through a combination of discursive resources like explicit moral claims, metapragmatic labels, and social actions like disagreements, threats, accusations, and insults. In addition, there was an explicit denunciation of sexism which was later followed by a discursive (re)construction of previous actions as a fight for equality. The analysis of online comments, in turn, revealed vicarious participants in the story employed similar social actions like blaming, accusing, insulting, criticizing, and disagreeing although the recipients of such actions were more diverse than in the case of the controversy. Additionally, there were denunciations of discrimination in terms of both sexism and racism. These actions were performed using the language of aggression to express indignation and/or cause offence, identified in the literature on impoliteness (Culpeper, 2011; Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2019; Márquez-Reiter and Orthaber, 2018; Moulinou, 2014). Recurrent patterns in the online data included disproportionate analogies, metaphorical putdowns, uncomfortable questions, and the expression of negative emotions, among others. The use of prescriptive metapragmatic comments was frequent in both data sets. These often aimed at reinstating what users considered to be appropriate behavior and at moralizing about what should, or should not, be or have been done during the event or what any of the individuals/institutions involved should do in the future. This is in line with previous research on morality and impoliteness that has highlighted the important functions of restoring communal order and of moralizing in situations of social conflict (Culpeper, 2011; Kádár, 2017). In this case, moralizing was oriented to preserve divergent communal orders of different social groups, as discussed below.

The analysis of evaluation in online comments underscored the pervasiveness of negative evaluations and how the online polylogue became a site of social division and moral contestation. The thematic analysis revealed great variability. The thematic category of Personal evaluation was the most frequent in the data set. All participants in the sports controversy and (meta)participants in the newspapers' articles and comments sections became the object of evaluation. However, evaluations were not restricted to the on-court controversy or to the online deliberation; evaluations went beyond these spatial and temporal boundaries and brought in individuals and actions from different interactions in space and time. Regarding social space, evaluations included intertextual references to Twitter, other newspapers and even television commentary. Regarding time, historicity played a role in commenters' assessments (Graham 2007; Kádár and Haugh, 2013) that drew from the previous behaviors of the main participants in the controversy. Additionally, historicity was also relevant in discussions of discrimination, rules, and media, and the evaluations initially expected to be limited to the controversy and the newspaper articles, went beyond their topical, spatial, and temporal limits, and included evaluations of the system, contemporary media, and discrimination in the world of tennis and in U.S. society. The theme of discrimination was particularly salient and introduced a debate on racism, which was not explicit in the on-court controversy.

The classificatory and argumentative functions of evaluative discourse were further examined. The rationales underlying these have been claimed to provide evidence of beliefs about moral orders and to carry important ideological weight (Davies, 2018; Verschuere, 2000). The beliefs and voiced social expectations vis-à-vis morality found in the data, however, contained contradictory rationales on a par with the divergent ideological frameworks that emerged in the analysis. The study found commenters (dis)affiliating with each other and thus forming social groups in conflict (Van Dijk, 2006). In this sense, online comments functioned to reaffirm in-group expectations, challenge out-group expectations and to reinstate what is socially and morally (including emotionally) right for each group. Therefore, the study provided evidence of diverging moral beliefs, social expectations, and ideological alignments. Moral diversity (Haidt and Joseph, 2004, p. 64; Haidt et al., 2003; Van Dijk, 2006, 2008) and multiple social frameworks, thus, became salient in the online data set (Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014). These, in a way, reflect the social division pervading contemporary society.

In this sense, it became important to consider the interrelationship between the evaluative comments within different themes. Two trends were identified in the data. On the one hand, commenters who viewed discrimination in the referee's actions tended to minimize the weight of social norms of conduct regarding Williams' protests, associated to moral expectations of hierarchy and respect, and to place greater prominence on social and moral values of equality and fairness. Thus, commenters represented her as a victim in the offended role and assigned the referee the role of the offender or wrongdoer. In

these comments, the identity of Williams as advocate of social justice, i.e., as a social activist, emerged, and thus confirmed the identity she had constructed for herself during the on-court exchanges and the post-match interview. In contrast, commentators who considered there was no discrimination in the referee's calls placed greater emphasis on the breach of social norms of conduct on the part of Williams, and thus on social and moral values of respect. In these circumstances, the referee was assigned the offended role, and Williams was constructed as the wrongdoer or moral transgressor/aggressor (see also, [Spencer 2012](#)).

Research has argued that evaluative discourses in cases of conflict and offence are sites where metapragmatic voicing or 'the metapragmatic articulation of moral principles' takes place and that such moral principles may even take precedence over social ones ([Kádár and Márquez-Reiter, 2015](#), p. 249; [Kádár, 2017](#)). However, this study revealed that, rather than considering that there is a tension between the moral and the social, both are essential to any social group and that different groups will emphasize different moral values and social conventions on occasions. The co-existence of diverse ideological alignments, therefore, carries different moral and social principles, explains divergent interpretations and provides evidence of the fact that there is not just one communal moral order in a particular communicative event.

Morally loaded social division, thus, lies behind interpretations of Williams' actions as aggression or activism. Research in disciplines like sport studies, sociology, women's studies, and political science has explored the relationship between discrimination and black female athletes in general, and more specifically, the Williams sisters. These scholars argue that the study of this relationship needs to be grounded on intersectionality and should consider the history and sociocultural milieu of tennis. Regarding intersectionality, Williams's gender, race, and working-class origins cannot be separated from each other ([Collins, 2004](#); [Prasad, 2018](#); [Tredway, 2020](#)). Tennis, on the other hand, was formed in an upper-class and white milieu and has traditionally excluded people of color ([Blaec, 2018](#); [Spencer, 2004](#); [Tredway, 2020](#)). Unlike the few black female players that preceded them, the Williams sisters refused to adapt to the uses of white players and breached the unwritten social norms surrounding tennis – e.g., hair or outfits of choice. Their rejection to comply with white traditions alongside their racial and working-class origins suggest they do not belong in the tennis world ([Collins, 2004](#), p. 135). Scholars argue that partly due to this estrangement, public disagreements between Serena Williams and tennis officials are viewed as excessively aggressive in comparison to similar disputes involving white (male) players. For Tredway, this is because Williams 'is not viewed as possibly the greatest tennis player to have ever played the sport, but as a Black woman and Black women are perceived to be violent' (2020, p. 1564). This perception seems to be reflected in the discussions of Williams' emotional outburst, discrimination, and the trope of the angry black woman in the data.

While aggressiveness plays an important role in any sport ([Sznycer, 2010](#)) and is therefore expected ([Kádár et al., 2019](#)), viewing Williams solely as aggressive is seen by intersectional scholars as instances of white racism, i.e., the lack of critically thinking about race and therefore accepting the 'dominant White norms and privileges' ([King, 1997](#), p. 128, in [Spencer, 2004](#), p. 116). This view, therefore, fails to acknowledge systemic racism in Tennis and the hyper-surveillance of Williams ([Tredway, 2020](#)). Social division along intersectional lines, thus, needs to be considered in examining online debates like the one under scrutiny, as this explains the contradicting portrayals of Williams as an aggressive moral transgressor, on the one hand, and as a social activist advocating for social justice and equality on the other.

Furthermore, the diverging evaluations of the same actions have complex interactional implications regarding the causing and taking of offence. As research has shown, offence can be taken at any action – any arguable, in [Hutchby's \(2001\)](#) terms – irrespective of whether the intention was to cause offence, and any action can simultaneously reveal the taking of offence at a previous action while, in turn, causing offence ([Bousfield, 2007](#); [Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014](#); [Culpeper, 2011](#); [Culpeper et al., 2003](#)). This poses a challenge to the analytical distinction between causing and taking offence and has implications for the distinction between the interactional roles of offender/wrongdoer and offended/victim, as discussed above. As offence-taking is an interactional accomplishment ([Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2019](#)) that may bring into the interaction the causing of offence, the variation and fluidity in the construction of interactional roles around offence within the same interaction become salient. Thus, metaparticipants with different moral beliefs and social expectations took offence at different actions and participants in the sports controversy, and therefore assigned the roles of offender/transgressor and offended/victim differently. This is related to the fluidity of identity construction, which far from being fixed, encompasses 'temporary and interactionally specific stances and participant roles' ([Bucholtz and Hall, 2005](#), p. 592).

7. Conclusion

This paper set out to explore the relationship between morality and offence through an investigation of the complex interconnections between morality, aggression and social activism in discourse. To do so, a corpus comprising two data sets was compiled and analyzed: the first included the controversial on-court interactions between tennis player Serena Williams and the officials during the women's finals of the 2018 U.S. Open alongside extracts from Williams' post-match interview, and the second data set consisted of digital comments posted in reaction to newspaper reports of said controversy.

In view of the paradoxical interpretations of the same actions, by different individuals, as moral aggression or social activism, i.e., as a threat to, or a defense of, the moral, three research questions were formulated. The first question addressed the discursive realization of morality, aggression, and social activism in the controversial on-court interaction of the first data set (RQ1). The study found that these were realized through a combination of discursive resources that included (i) explicit moral claims and metapragmatic labels, (ii) social actions like disagreements, threats, accusations,

and insults, (iii) the explicit denunciation of sexism, and (iv) the discursive construction of previous actions as a fight for equality.

Regarding how the controversy was evaluated (RQ2) in the online comments, the analysis revealed that most evaluations were negative and, thus, the interaction evolved into a site of social division and moral contestation. Vicarious participants in online comments employed similar resources to those found in the controversy. Denunciations of racism were an additional recurrent social action which was not explicitly made in the first data set. In both cases, the language of impoliteness and conflict was used. In all, the study revealed that morality, aggression and social activism were talked into the interactions. Moreover, negative evaluations discussed mainly the behavior of Williams and other commenters (personal evaluations) and discrimination in terms of both racism and sexism. Other less frequently discussed themes included newspaper reports and journalists, and rule (enforcement). Such discussions further included negative evaluations of contemporary media, discrimination in the world of tennis and inequality in U.S. society. Thus, participants in the online polylogue contributed to advancing the initial controversial story through their comments, which mainly took the form of conflict.

In this sense, the study revealed the discursive formation of conflicting social groups with diverging ideological frameworks of moral beliefs and social values. Two important conclusions in this respect were derived. The first suggests that morality principles do not take precedence over social ones but combine differently for different social groups. The second conclusion claims, given the evidence, that there are different communal orders for different social groups and that these may come together (and clash) within a particular communicative event. Restoring the communal order, therefore, will mean different things for different people.

In all, the controversy, and especially Williams, was evaluated, broadly, in two contradicting ways. Some interpretations represented Williams as an aggressive transgressor that threatened the moral while others constructed her as a social activist in defense of the moral, who advocated for social justice. The present study underlined the need to examine and explain social division along intersectional lines.

Social division and divergent evaluations of the same actions had specific interactional implications which were interrogated in the final research question (RQ3). It was argued that differing interpretations pose a challenge for the analytical distinction between taking and causing offence and, in turn, underline the variability and fluidity in the assigning of the interactional roles of transgressor/offender and victim/offended.

The present study has contributed to sociopragmatic research into offence and morality by adopting a transmedia approach to investigate the unfolding of a controversial event that includes face-to-face and mediated interactions. It has also gained insights into ongoing social division and moral diversity in contemporary society by drawing from a critical, intersectional approach. The combination of transmedia, critical and intersectional perspectives constitutes an innovative framework in sociopragmatics; the present study has shown its important explanatory potential regarding the interconnections between morality and offence in society. Future research should continue to explore other ways of combining methods, perspectives and techniques to advance our knowledge in this area.

As a final remark, social division regarding the controversy under scrutiny permeated institutions and individuals. On an institutional level, the Women's Tennis Association and the Tennis Association voiced their support of Williams and expressed their concerns about sexism in tennis – race was never mentioned. For their part, the International Tennis Association endorsed the referee's position and did not acknowledge discrimination. On an individual level, this paper has provided evidence of competing moral beliefs and ideological alignments. Whether Williams' actions were a case of an emotional outburst that led to moral aggression and socially inappropriate behavior, a case of defense of social justice and activism, or both, remains a matter of interpretation. After all, social activism constitutes a communicative activity in which 'concepts such advocacy, conflict, and transgression' play a central role (Ganesh and Zoller, 2012, p. 69). The complex, intertwined relationship between morality, aggression and activism found in the discourse suggests that further research is needed on their interactional articulation and sociopragmatic functioning.

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