(i-COME'20)
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA 2020

ENGLISH PROFANITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA: LINGUISTIC PREFERENCES AND REASONS FOR USE

Noraziah Mohd Amin (a)*, Mohamad-Noor Salehhuddin Sharipudin (b),
*Corresponding author

(a) Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pulau Pinang (UiTMCPP), Permatang Pauh, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia, noraziahm@uitm.edu.my
(b) School of Multimedia Technology and Communication,
College of Arts and Sciences, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok, Malaysia, mnsaleh@uum.edu.my

Abstract

Language evolves over time depending on how it is used because of changes of its speakers' perceptions and preferences. As many teenagers and young adults nowadays are provided with more access to voice their opinions and feelings as well as more platforms for discussions due to the availability of numerous social media, they have become bolder in expressing their views virtually such as in the use of swear words. In order to unravel the issue of swear word use on social media among the youth, a study was conducted with the aims to determine how and why Universiti Teknologi MARA, Cawangan Pulau Pinang (UiTMCPP) students use English swear words on social media. 100 students from this university were recruited to be the respondents of the present study. This study employed a descriptive analysis of data and the data is presented mainly in the forms of percentages, mean and standard deviation values. It was revealed that the majority of the students prefer using language mechanics when swearing on social media and spelling swear words in full rather than using shortened forms. Besides, most of the respondents agree that UiTMCPP students use swear words on social media to intensify their feelings. It can be concluded that UiTMCPP students do use English swear words on social media and that there are emotional and psychological reasons for using such words.

Keywords: English swear words, linguistic preferences, social media

1. Introduction

The terms, "taboo words" and "swear words" are used interchangeably by Jay (2009a) to illustrate the vocabulary of offensive emotional language. Swearing loosely defined is the use of offensive or taboo words to convey the speakers' emotions and communicate their feelings to others (Jay, 2009a). According to Jay (2018), swearing is a normal practice that has made its way into all types of technology for human communication. This is most probably true as according to Anderson and Jiang (2018), in 2018, three online channels other than Facebook namely, YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat are used by a vast majority of America's youth aged 13-17. Besides that, 51% of teens reveal that they use Facebook. The share of teens who engage on Twitter and Tumblr are largely comparable to the share of those who did so in the 2014-2015 survey. It is not surprising that online communication includes the use of swear words and impoliteness (Jay, 2018). Jay (2018) claims that the use of swear words online is considered a function of moral order apart from interpersonal characteristics of users such as their ages where younger users are more likely than older users to use swear words and social composition of the website (e.g: confrontational and male dominated more likely as compared to homogeneous friendly websites).

In terms of the linguistic perspective, apart from correctly spelled words such as "fuck" or "ass", the lexicon discovered by these researchers, Wang et al. (2014) also encompassed different variations of swear words such "a55", "@$$", "$h1t", "b!tch", "bi+ch", "c0ck", "f*ck", "l3itch", "p*ssy" and "dik". Based on the discovery of these variations, the present research was aimed at examining the linguistic use and alterations of the English swear words by the respondents. According to Holgate et al. (2018) vulgar terms are used in language for a variety of different purposes, that range from the display of hostility to the signalling of group identification or the informality of the conversation. Swearing is considered by Jay (2009a) as "a rich emotional, psychological, and sociocultural phenomenon" (p. 153). Based on such claims, the present study intends to investigate the factors of using English swear words on social media among the respondents from a few viewpoints, either psychological or emotional. Besides, the study also aims at discovering how the use of swear words could possibly affect the respondents. Anderson and Jiang (2018) report that 95% of adolescents have access to a smartphone and 45% of them reveal that they are online almost continuously. Thus, the present study focuses on the opinions of UiTMCPP students who are teenagers regarding their peers' use of swear words on social media.

1.1. Swearing Terms and types of Swear Words

According to Thelwall (2008), initially, the closely related word, "curse" was used to mean a wish or demand for something negative to occur. However, the term is now equivalent with "swear". Similarly, blasphemy has primarily religious roots, but now it has a meaning associated with swearing (Thelwall, 2008). Other synonymous words are "foul", "bad", "vulgar", "coarse" or "Billingsgate" language; "obscenity"; "oath"; "expletive"; "naughty" or "rude" words (Thelwall, 2008). It may be possible to believe that swear terms are related to harsh-sounding or some other collection of sounds that we can in some way, identify as unpleasant (McEnery, 2006).

Taboos in the form of linguistic expletives such as swear words, typically concentrate on sex, excretion, and everything else that has a sacred place in the community's belief systems (de Klerk, 1991).

Thelwall (2008) argues that the types of insulting words have changed over time. For example, there has been a reduction in religious connotations but an increase in sexual ones. Nowadays, swearing tends to make reference to taboo subjects such as the ones related to religion, sexual acts, sexuality, genitals and sexual characteristics; defecation; race, ethnic group or nationality as well as political affiliation (Thelwall, 2008). Swear words of taboo words as preferably used by Jay (2009a) in English are focused primarily on sexual references (e.g: "blow job", "cunt") and on the things that are deemed profane or blasphemous e.g: ("goddamn", "Jesus Christ"). Jay (2009a) also points out that taboo word can include scatological references and disgusting objects (e.g: "shit", "crap", "douche bag"); names of animal (e.g: "bitch", "pig", "ass"); ethnic, racial or gender insults (e.g: "nigger", "fag", "dago"); offensive words to perceived psychological, physical, or social deviations (e.g: "retard", "wimp", "lard ass"); ancestral references (e.g: "son of a bitch", "bastard"); substandard vulgar words (e.g: "fart face", "on the rag"); and also insulting slangs (e.g: "cluster fuck", "tit run"). Swear words can range from mildly offensive one (e.g: "damn", "fart") to very offensive ones (e.g: "cunt", "nigger"), as indicated by word-scaling and autonomic-arousal research (Jay, 1992; Janschewitz, 2008; Jay et al., 2008).

1.2. The Reasons for Using Swear Words and their Effects

According to Baruch and Jenkins (2007), swearing may serve as a manifestation and signification of solidarity. Baruch and Jenkins (2007) explain extensively the functions of using swear words by classifying swearing into a few categories, namely: 1) Social swearing which is used conversationally for the purpose to help identify interpersonal relationships; 2) Annoyance swearing which provides a mechanism for releasing stress and tension (Montagu, 2001) and it replaces primitive aggression in the form of physical actions (Jay, 1999). In a study conducted by Muhanović et al. (2018), male and female users were discovered to have used swear words equally for the reason of being humorous. On the other hand, women used swear words more than men for the intention of presenting exaggeration. On the other hand, males were reported to swear more when they were feeling angry or when they were attempting to be assertive apart from when they were being disrespectful or insulting a person. Swear words are one of the frequently used linguistic signs for emotional manifestations in online conversations (Kwon & Gruzd, 2017).

Kwon and Gruzd (2017) claim that generally, profanity has an impact on people's impressions. The study of DeFrank and Kahlbaugh (2018) discovered that the use of profanity contributed to a less positive impression of the speaker's overall impression, intellect, trustworthiness, anger-proneness, deviance, politeness, offensiveness, aggressiveness, and likability. The use of profanity led to the notion that the user of profanity was more upset, less reliable, less smart, and more non-conformist as compared to those who did not use profanity. Using offensive words in conversations with friends can contribute to a number of pleasant social effects including the promotion of social cohesion, the production of childhood and adult humor as well as catharsis, and the use of self-deprecation and sarcastic irony to encourage harmony (Jay, 2009b). Thus, Jay (2009b) argues that the idea of the use of offensive words universally can cause harm cannot be justified.

1.3. The Reasons for Using Swear Words and their Effects

The use of swear words does not only take place in face-to-face communication, it also occurs on social media. Derogatory terms have been quantitatively analyzed on social media and in online communities (Cachola et al., 2018). With regards to using swear words on social media, the study conducted by Wang et al. (2014) involving 51 million tweets and about 14 million users revealed that curse words occurred on Twitter at the rate of 1.15% and about 7.73% of all the tweets in the collection of these researchers contain curse words and this implies that one out of 13 tweets comprises curse words. Also, it was found in this study that the most popular swear word is "fuck", which accounts for 34.73% of all the swear word occurrences, and this is followed by "shit" (15.04%), "ass" (14.48%), "bitch" (10.34%), a racial related word, "nigga" (9.68%), "hell" (4.46%), "whore" (1.82%), "dick" (1.67%), "piss" (1.53%), and "pussy" (1.16%). The study performed by Cachola et al. (2018) discovered that on average, the vulgar tweet percentage per user is 3.332% for male Twitter users and 3.060% for female ones. In the Twitter corpus containing one million tweets developed by Gauthier et al. (2015), 5.8% of the male users' tweets consisted of at least one swear word as compared to 4.8% of the female users' tweets. In a study of Muhanović et al. (2018), it is inferred that the use of taboo words is encouraged and motivated by the context. Both female and male Facebook users used more swear words on the Facebook pages of female and male celebrities, suggesting that both males and females, in general, seem to feel bolder and more influenced to use swear words when posting comments on the same gender. A study on 40,000 registered MySpace users by Thelwall (2008) revealed that the U.K. male MySpace users (0.23%) had a marginally higher proportion of swear words compared to the female MySpace users (0.15%), while the U.S. male MySpace users (0.3%) had a significantly higher amount of swear words than the female MySpace user (0.2%).

2.   Problem Statement

In the study conducted by DeFrank and Kahlbaugh (2018), it was discovered that profanity speakers had weaker impression scores on a variety of factors, including overall perception, intellect, and trustworthiness. Despite this fact, the amount of the use of profanity in communication increased significantly in the last few decades (DuFrene & Lehman, 2002). Peterson (2000) argues that swearing has now become so normal and prevalent in mass media that it has become almost a modern norm and has essentially lost its capability to shock. Nevertheless, Wang et al. (2014) claim that only a few attempts have been devoted to exploring swearing on social media. Besides, according to Holgate et al. (2018), to date, there has been no empirical study conducted on the types of use of profanity words. Jay (2009b) argues that swearing is a normal practise, particularly prevalent on a university campus. To the researchers' knowledge, there is a lack of studies on this topic involving UiTM Cawangan Pulau Pinang (UiTMCPP) students. Due to this, it is not clear if the use of English swear words on social media is prevalent among UiTMCPP students and thus, this justifies why the present study was conducted.

3. Research Questions

The study was performed to seek the answers to the following questions:

▪ How do UiTMCPP students use English swear words on social media?

▪ Why do UiTMCPP students use English swear words on social media?

4. Purpose of the Study

This study was conducted to investigate basically the use of English swear words among UiTMCPP students. Thus, the objectives of the study are as follows:

▪ To discover how UiTMCPP students use English swear words on social media.

▪ To investigate why UiTMCPP students use English swear words on social media.

5. Research Methodology

The present study used a descriptive and quantitative study design by employing a questionnaire survey on the perception of the UiTMCPP students about the use of English swear words on social media.

5.1. Respondents

100 UiTMCPP students aged between 18-23 years old participated in this study as the respondents. The respondents' demographic details such as their gender, age and fields of study were gathered, but such information was not the variable investigated in this study.

5.2. Instrument

The questionnaire contained 15 items and consisted of two parts which were Part A and Part B. Part A was about how UiTMCPP students use English swear words on social media, while Part B was related to why students of UiTMCPP use English swear words on social media. Some of the items were developed by adapting the results of the study by Rassin and Muris (2005). Each item of the questionnaire was measured mainly in the form of percentages in terms of the respondents' levels of agreement or disagreement with the statements, and those levels were represented by a 5-point Likert scale as follows: Strongly disagree= 1; Disagree= 2; Undecided= 3; Agree= 4; and, Strongly agree= 5. The questionnaire was answered by using an electronic platform which was Google Form.

6. Research Results

6.1. Research question 1: How do UiTMCPP students use wear words on social media?

In response to Research Question 1, the data from item 1-13 was analysed (Table 1). Based on the findings, the majority of the respondents, 53% (response options: agree, 45% + strongly agree, 8%) admit that they believe UiTMCPP students use language mechanics when using English swear words on social media (item 1). Slightly less than half of the respondents, 42% (response options: agree, 33% + strongly

agree, 9%) believe that UiTMCPP students using capital letters for the English swear words used on social media (e.g.: "FUCK" instead of "fuck") (item 2). Most of the respondents, 40% (mean= 3.36. SD= 1.11) agree that UiTMCPP students spell English swear words on social media in full (e.g.: "fuck" instead "fk") (item 3). A large majority of the respondents, 49% (mean= 3.69, SD= 1.02) agree that UiTMCPP students spell English swear words on social media in Malay (e.g.: "fak" instead of "fuck", "dem" instead of "damn") (item 4). Half of the respondents, 51% (response options: agree, 33% + strongly agree, 18%) think that UiTMCPP students use more than one English swear word in a single post (item 5). Most of the respondents, 47% (mean= 3.60, SD= 1.13) believe that UiTMCPP students use animal names for swearing on social media (item 6). A large number of respondents, 60% (response options: disagree, 33% + strongly disagree 27%) disagree that UiTMCPP students using sex position for swearing (e.g.: "doggy") on social media (item 7). Almost half of the respondents, 45% (response option: agree, 31% + strongly agree, 12%) claim that UiTMCPP students use genital organs for swearing on social media (item 8). Almost half of the respondents, 46% (response options: agree, 32% + strongly agree 14%) have the idea that UiTMCPP students use the word "god" for swearing on social media (item 9).

Table 1. The results of the ways UiTMCPP students use English swear words on social media

No.	Items	Mean	Standard deviation (SD)	Response options				
				SD %	D %	U %	A %	SA %
1	I usually see my UiTMCPP friends use language mechanics (e.g.: !,@,#,$,%,^,&,*) when using English swear words on social media (e.g.: "f**k" instead of "fuck")	3.19	1.16	9	24	14	45	8
2	I usually see my UiTMCPP friends use capital letters for the English swear words on social media (e.g.: "FUCK" instead of "fuck".)	3.19	1.02	3	26	29	33	9
3	I usually see my UiTMCPP friends spell the English swear words on social media in full (e.g.: "fuck" instead "fk").	3.36	1.11	3	26	17	40	14
4	I usually see my UiTMCPP friends spell the English swear words on social media in Malay (e.g.: "fak" instead of "fuck").	3.69	1.02	4	10	18	49	19
5	I usually see my UiTMCPP friends use more than one of English swear words in a single post.	3.36	1.17	5	23	21	33	18
6	I usually see my UiTMCPP friends use animal names for swearing (e.g.: "pig", "dog", "bitch") on social media.	3.60	1.13	4	19	10	47	20
7	I usually see my UiTMCPP friends use sex positions for swearing (e.g.: "doggy") on social media	2.37	1.19	27	33	23	10	7
8	I usually see my UiTMCPP friends use genital organs for swearing (e.g.: "dick", "pussy", "asshole") on social media.	2.97	1.28	13	32	12	31	12
9	I usually see my UiTMCPP friends use the word "god" for swearing (e.g.: "god damn it", "fucking god") on social media.	3.15	1.23	9	27	18	32	14

6.2. Research question 2: Why do UiTMCPP students use swear words on social media?

Regarding the responses to research question 2 posed, the data from question 10 to 15 were analyzed (Table 2). Based on the data that was collected, 37% of the respondents agree (strongly agree, 9% + agree, 28%) that UiTMCPP students use swear words to dishonor other people (e.g.: "slut") (item 10). Besides, 45% of the respondents (strongly agree, 12% + agree: 33%) agree that UiTMCPP students use English swear words to degrade someone on social media (e.g.: "black skin", "fat") (item 11). 39% of the respondents (mean= 3.42, SD= 1.07) agree that UiTMCPP students use English swear words on social media to make themselves look cool and awesome (item 12). 50% of the respondents (mean= 3.83, SD= 0.88) believe that UiTMCPP students use English swear words on social media to intensify their feelings (item 13). 77% of the respondents (strongly agree, 33% + agree, 44%) agree that UiTMCPP students use English swear words on social media because of their habits (item 14). 57% of the respondents (mean= 4.03. SD= 0.89) claim that UiTMCPP students use English swear words on social media because of peer pressure. 55% of the respondents (strongly agree, 12% + agree, 43%) believe that the UiTMCPP students use English swear words on social media because they want to fit in a group (item 15).

Table 2. The results of the reasons for UiTMCPP use swear words on social media

No.	Items	Mean	Standard deviation (SD)	Response options				
				SD %	D %	U %	A %	SA %
10	I think my UiTMCPP friends use swear words to dishonor other people on social media (e.g.: "slut").	3.13	1.01	3	27	33	28	9
11	I usually see my UiTMCPP friends use English swear words to degrade people on social media (e.g.: "black skin", "fat").	3.15	1.18	8	26	21	33	12
12	I think my UiTMCPP friends use English swear words on social media to make themselves look cool and awesome.	3.42	1.07	5	15	27	39	14
13	I think my UiTMCPP friends use English swear words on social media to intensify his/her feelings.	3.83	0.88	1	7	21	50	21
14	I think my UiTMCPP friends use English swear words on social media because of his/her habits.	4.03	0.89	1	5	17	44	33
15	I think my UiTMCPP friends use English swear words on social media because they want to fit in a group.	3.42	1.07	8	9	28	43	12

7. Conclusion

Based on the results of this study, there are some points that can be discussed on the use of English swear words among UiTMCPP students on social media. Most of the respondents believe that UiTMCPP students prefer spelling English swear words on social media in Malay. This is maybe due to most of the students of UiTMCPP prefer using swear words without wanting to show the words clearly on social media. Furthermore, most of the respondents agree that students of UiTMCPP use swear words on social

media to intensify their feelings. This is possible because the students want to express their feelings in words that can send the "message" loud and clear to their audience, thus using swear words. This can be considered as something positive as the students can perhaps help ease their emotional burden by using swear words. As Jay (2009b) points out, offensive words might represent harm, but not all offensive words are harmful. Also, most of the respondents agree that the frequent use of swear words on social media is because of the external influences, such as peer pressure or the pressure to look cool and awesome. This is presumably because UiTMCPP students feel the need to follow their friends' behavior or look "good" to fit in a group. Overall, this research can prove that UiTMCPP students generally do use swear words, and this is in line with the claim by Jay (1992) that swearing occurs in all age groups, but the incidence of swearing increases in teenage years and decreases thereafter.

Acknowledgments

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