

The Perception among Islamic Studies Students on the Usage of Swear Words and Offensive Language

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ABSTRACT

Swearing and using offensive language in almost all social contexts is deemed inappropriate and is usually frowned upon. However, with the advancement of technology and the proliferation in the usage of social media, it has allowed the netizens to express their thoughts and feelings freely without adhering to social conventions and this means people are using more swear words and offensive language than before. Therefore, this study aims to find out how university students in the Islamic studies discipline perceive the usage of swear words and offensive language in English. This study is conducted among 50 students from the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Civilization, Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor. This quantitative research utilizes questionnaire as the instrument to elicit responses from the respondents regarding their perception of the issue studied. The results from the study show that (1) the students are familiar with swear words and offensive language in English, (2) they find the swear words offensive, (3) they have a negative perception about the usage of swear words and offensive language, and (4) they do use swear words and offensive language in English but it is not considered normal among the students.

Keywords: Swear Words, Offensive Language, Islamic Studies Students

INTRODUCTION

“That if gold ruste, what shall iren do?”- Geoffrey Chaucer

According to Baudin and Paramasiwam (2014), politeness, ethics, and appropriate use of language in communication are important in society. Swearing, specifically, is not encouraged as it makes people sound bad, harsh, and impolite. However, today, the use of swear words in daily life and everyday conversation is rampant among teenagers and adults alike. Baudin and Paramasiwan (2014) also report that Stenstrom (1995) through the analysis of taboo words in The Bergen Corpus of London Teenager Language confirmed that teenagers swear more than adults.

Furthermore, in today’s age of information technology, the amount of exposure that these teenagers can get through the use of technology especially social media will most likely influence the way they speak and behave.

Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor (KUIS) is a higher learning institution that provides tertiary education in various disciplines including Islamic studies, management studies, education and Information Technology (IT). The main aspiration of the university is

to promote Islamic values among the students and staff members as well as to integrate mainstream education with revealed knowledge. One of the emphases in the teaching of Islam is with regard to moral values or virtues. One is not regarded a faithful in one does not have moral virtues.

According to Al-Qaradawi (2010), there is a link between moral virtues and faith. To be a believer (a Muslim) one has to be among other things, be mindful of one's word. In the Quran, Surah Al Mu'minun verse 23 Allah S.W.T says:

“Believers must (eventually) win through - those who humble themselves in their prayers, *who avoid vain talk*, who are active in deeds of charity, who abstain from sex, except with those joined to them in the marriage bond or (the captives) whom their right hands possess – for (in their case) they are free from blame, but those whose desires exceed those limit are transgressors”.

Also according to Al-Qaradawi (2010) that there is the Hadith of the prophet Muhammad S.A.W that reminds us of this. The prophet says:

“He, who believes in Allah and in the day of judgement, should support the bond of kingship. He, who believes in Allah and in the day of judgement, *should either speak well or remain silent.*”

Jay (2000) as cited in Jay (2005) says that a review of personality and language research indicates that reliable correlations exist between cursing and religiosity and those with high sex attitude. Jay (2005) explains that people with high religiosity and those with high sexual anxiety tend to be offended by profanity and sexual slang.

So, this study is intended to find out what students of religious studies think about with regard to the use of swear words and offensive language, and also to find whether or not there are occurrences where Islamic Studies Students who use swear words/offensive language especially in English.

The objectives of this study are therefore as follows:

- 1) To investigate whether Islamic Studies students are familiar with swear words and offensive language in English.
- 2) To investigate which of the swear words and offensive language that the students find offensive.
- 3) To study the student's perceptions about swearing or the use of offensive language.
- 4) To find out whether or not Islamic Studies' students use swear words or offensive language in English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews all the related literature with regard to the research topic. Definitions, classifications and past studies are highlighted in order to ensure the topic is understood in a comprehensive way.

Categories of Swear Words and Offensive Language

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010) the noun 'swear word' refers to a rude or offensive word, used, for example, to express anger. It is also synonymous with the word 'expletive'.

Meanwhile the noun 'swearing' refers to rude or offensive language.

'Swearing' (noun) too has several synonyms such as: bad language, strong language, cursing, blaspheming, blasphemy, profanities, obscenities, curses, oaths, expletives, swear words, cussing (informal), effing (informal), blinding (informal), four-letter words (informal) and imprecation (formal) (Oxford Paperback Thesaurus, 2001).

According to Schippers (2013) swearing is an interesting aspect of language, one that involves both emotional and linguistic expression. It exists in most people's repertoire, but is also accompanied by a certain degree of taboo.

Gati (2014) when discussing the classifications of swear words has referred to Ljung (2006), Anderson & Trudgill (1990) and Jay(1992). Ljung (2006) makes classifications of swear words as follows: religious, scatological, genital, intercourse, sodomy and mother. While, Anderson & Trudgill (1990) classify swear words into sex, religion, bodily functions, ethnic groups, food, dirt and death. And finally, according to Jay (1992) swear words can fall into any of these classifications: cursing, profanity, blasphemy, taboo, obscenity, vulgarity, slang, epithets, scatology, insults and slurs.

Huges (2006) states that swearing now includes so many varied and developed forms that some broad distinctions need to be made. In terms of mode, we swear by higher forces or somebody; we swear that something is so; we swear to do something; we swear at something or somebody; and we swear simply out of anger, disappointment, or frustration. The different modes can be re-termed by various terms such as: asseveration, invocation, imprecation, malediction, blasphemy, profanity, obscenity, and ejaculation (meaning "exclamation").

Mercury (1995) meanwhile says that there are some nuances in the meanings of cursing, profanity, blasphemy, taboo or obscenity, vulgarisms and expletives.

Mercury (1995) further elaborates that Jay (1992) provides clear, useful definitions for the many terms used to label offensive language. Jay points out that pragmatic distinctions can be made because each curse event is coherent in that it fulfils specific types of needs and intentions of the speaker and listener. Table 2.1 below shows categories of offensive language. According to Jay (1992) although there are other categories of offensive language, the ones listed below are the most common among native speakers.

Table 2.1 Definitions for the Terms Used to Label Offensive Language According to Jay (1992) as cited in Mercury (1995)

No	Types of Offensive Language	Definitions and Pragmatics Distinctions
1.	Cursing	These expressions act like verbal assaults where a speaker targets a specific individual, group, or thing and clearly wishes harm, pain, or other evil consequences on him, her, or it. Generally, curses are proscribed by the churches and society in general for this very reason, so curses such as <i>eat shit</i> and <i>die!</i> are considered to be powerfully threatening utterances.
2.	Profanity	These expressions are described as using religious terminology in a profane, secular or indifferent manner. There is no intention on the speaker's part to denigrate God or anything associated with religion. Rather, the speaker may be expressing his or her emotional reaction to a certain stimulus. Examples in this case would be <i>Jesus Christ! let's go; we're late</i> as it is or <i>Good God! he's ugly!</i>
3.	Blasphemy	Blasphemous expressions, on the other hand, are a deliberate use of

		religious terminology to denigrate God, religious icons, and religious institutions. Blasphemy can provoke strong reactions where speakers labelled as blasphemers can be ostracized or mortally threatened. For example, Salman Rushdie continues to remain in hiding from potential assassins because Islamic clergy labelled him a blasphemer.
4.	Taboo or obscenity	All obscene language is taboo language because these expressions are restricted in some way for their use in public. These restrictions exist explicitly for example, television network censors who govern language on television or implicitly like when parents use euphemisms to describe sexual body parts or body processes when talking to their children (Jay, 1992 quotes Arango, 1989). As such, then, taboo words are not supposed to be spoken anywhere, anytime. Of course, though, everyone hears so many of such words like <i>fuck</i> , <i>damn</i> and <i>son of a bitch</i> in public places (i.e., on the streets), but they are socially frowned on and thus taboo.
5.	Vulgarisms	Generally, these are expressions that are crude, raw, and from off the streets. Vulgar language is used to debase or devalue the thing or individual referred to or described. <i>I have to take a crap</i> and <i>Wow, look at her tits!</i> are just two colourful yet vulgar utterances that would in some contexts be regarded as insensitive, distasteful, and offensive (Jay, 1992 quotes Carpenter, 1988).
6.	Expletives	These are interjections that are clearly emotionally charged (i.e., <i>Shit! Balls!</i>). Not addressing anyone specifically, speakers use expletives to release their frustrations and vent their emotions. Often they are reflexive reactions to something that has unexpectedly happened to the speaker. For instance, what would one say after having stubbed a toe?

Reasons for Swearing

Uhlman (2015) explains that taboos or swears are most often employed to connote various emotions, from anger and frustration to joy and surprise. Uhlman (2015) cites Jay (2009) who explains that the main reason for swearing is one can achieve a myriad of personal and social goals with them including emotional communication to a degree that non-taboo words cannot convey.

Garner (1999) learns from a study conducted on black American teenage males that there are numerous reasons identified as reasons why they use profanity as follows:

1. They are very angry; to express my feelings.
2. They have been disrespected (dissed)
3. They need to show strength or power
4. They need to make someone know they are serious and to gain respect
5. They are excited or just kidding around.
6. They are describing or elaborating on a topic
7. They are rapping, shucking or jiving
8. That is just the way they talk
9. They are frustrated
10. It's just an expression
11. It helps them to gain or maintain some control in their lives

Stapleton's (2003) study reveals the reasons for swearing, as reported by the female and male respondents (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.2 Reasons Why Men and Women Swear (Stapleton, 2003)

Reason	No of Women	No of Men	Total	Examples
Humour/storytelling	15	13	28	When you are telling a good story and want to get a laugh
To create emphasis	13	11	24	It helps to get your message across
Anger/Tension release	10	10	20	It's like when you are really pissed off-a sort of release
Habit	4	14	18	It's just something I do I'm not even really aware of it anymore
It's normal/expected	2	16	18	Everybody curses these days - it would be more unusual if you didn't.
To show intimacy/trust	12	0	12	I think it shows that you have a fairly close relationship
To cover fear/vulnerability	6	5	11	It's like a defensive term to cover up how you really feel.
Part of personality	6	0	6	It's just something people know me by
To shock	2	1	3	It's really effective if the other person doesn't swear at all - it's the shock factor, I suppose

Stapleton (2003) also shows from the study conducted that women and men do refrain/ avoid themselves from using certain expletives for certain reasons. This is illustrated in Table 2.3 below.

Table 2.3 Reasons Why Men and Women Refrain/ Avoiding Using Certain Expletives (Stapleton, 2003)

Reason	No of women	No of men	Total
Sexist/offensive	15	8	23
Gives negative impression	15	7	22
Inappropriate in certain company	10	10	20
Shows a limited vocabulary	10	2	12
Feel uncomfortable	12	0	12
Don't want to appear sexist	0	7	7

Meanwhile, Table 2.4 shows the answers of the respondents when they were presented with a list of common expletives and asked to judge each one of the to be 'obscene'. Significant number of female respondents find the words *cunt*, *fanny* and *tits* to be offensive. Meanwhile, none of the male respondents consider the words *tits* and *wanker* to be obscene. Also, none among both female and male respondents find the word *pricks* to be offensive.

Table 2.4 Numbers of Women and Men Who Judge Each Expletive to be 'Obscene' (Stapleton, 2003)

Expletive	Derivation	Women	Men
Bitch	Ancestral	2	2
Bastard	Ancestral	5	3
Shit/ shite	Scatological	4	4
Arse	Scatological	4	2
Fuck	Sexual Act	8	7
Screw	Sexual Act	5	4
Shag	Sexual Act	4	3

Bollocks	Sexual Anatomy	5	4
Pricks	Sexual Anatomy	0	0
Cock	Sexual Anatomy	8	5
Cunt	Sexual Anatomy	15	8
Fanny	Sexual Anatomy	14	6
Tits	Sexual Anatomy	10	0
Wanker	Masturbatory	1	0

Swearing and the Use of Swear Words among Teenagers and Adults

According to Baudin and Paramasivam (2014), female Malaysian teenagers swear quite regularly and they do it as a tool to deal with daily life affairs. Among the favourite swear words among the female teenagers studied are: *shit* and *damn*, followed by *bitch*, *fuck* and *bullshit*. Swearing gives these female teenagers an outlet to deal with their negative feelings because it lets off the steam when they are experiencing negative emotions such as anger and frustrations. They also use swear words in positive circumstances especially as a way to display solidarity among themselves or just to fit in with the group. However, they hardly swear when they are with their male friends and strangers, and seldom with parents and teachers.

Uhlman (2015) reports that college-age women use a variety of swear words frequently and creatively. Among the swear words frequently used by the observed participants are: *bitch*, *shit*, *fuck*, *damn*, *hell*, *motherfucker*, *piss*, *asshole*, *dick* and *bastard*, with *fuck*, *shit* and *damn* being the top three words frequently used. Based on this study, it is also found out that the participants use swear words in both same gender (female-female) and mixed-gender (female-male) contexts.

In a cross analysis between three sources: Jay (1992), Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBC) and Corpus of Contemporary American English, Gati (2014) discovers that the most common swear used are religion (*hell & God*) and bodily functions/parts (*shit & fuck*). From this analysis it is also found out that women do not swear as much as men, and women swear less in mix-sex constellations. Besides that, it is also learned that the main function of women's swearing is to communicate an expression of anger, surprise or as an interjection.

Also, Gati (2014), through the analysis, found in Jay's (1992) study, there are fifteen swear words that recorded the highest frequency: *God*, *shit*, *fuck*, *hell*, *goddamn*, *ass*, *asshole*, *piss*, *Jesus*, *idiot*, *bitch*, *jerk*, *suck*, *heavens* and *damn*. Meanwhile, from the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBC), Gati (2014) discovered ten most recurring swear words by women: *God* (35%), *shit* (29%), *fuck* (9%), *bitch* (7%), *hell* (5%), *piss* (4.4%), *jerk* (3.5%), *idiot* (3.5%), *heavens* (2.6%) and *asshole* (0.9%).

The Cursing Habits and Religiosity

According to Jay, King and Duncan (2004) cited in Jay (2005), the religiously raised child who has heard and read many positive emotional statements about God will be positively conditioned to this world. Religious parents forbid the use of profanity in the home. Meanwhile, Jay (2000) says that a child who is reared in a home filled with profanities will learn less positive reactions to religious words and concepts.

Jay (2005) adds that religious people will become conditioned to think of profanities as 'bad' words. They will not utter them or do not want others to utter them. Other words are 'good' words. 'Good' words are non-profane, non-obscene, those that do not offend or attack religion. Religious training and practice creates social tensions within a culture about the behaviours and thoughts that must be inhibited.

Jay (2005) further explains that restrictions on words originate in part from religious ceremonies and sacred texts of for example Bible and Koran. Words are defined as 'bad'

through religious doctrine, Old Testament law, Islamic or other religious laws, or when religious authorities declare words and thoughts as forbidden.

METHODOLOGY

This section discusses the methodology used in this research. The population, instrument and data collection as well as analysis procedures are explained.

Population and Samples

This study was conducted among Islamic Studies students of Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor (KUIS). Random sampling was utilized for the purpose of this research whereby 50 students from different Islamic studies programmes were randomly chosen to fill out the questionnaire forms.

The respondents were made up equal number of male and female students (25 respondents of each gender).

Instrument

The research instrument used for this study is questionnaire.

The questionnaire is divided into 2 sections. Section A is the section meant to elicit respondents' demographic information while section B requires the respondents to answer questions regarding the level of offensiveness of swear words and offensive language, their perception of the usage of swear words and offensive language and whether or not swear words and offensive language are used by the respondents. The items (questions, answer choices etc.) used in section B are based on items used by previous researchers in their respective studies.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

This section discusses the findings or results of the research according to research objective and questions. They are reported in tables, figures, and texts which directly answer the research questions.

Students' Familiarity with Swear Words and Offensive Language

Table 1 shows whether or not Islamic studies students are familiar with swear words and offensive language in English. Based on this table, the students are familiar with most of the words that they were asked to identify except for words like *shag*, *bollocks*, *fanny*, *prick* and *wanker*.

Table 1: Students' Familiarity with Swear Words and Offensive Language

No.	Swear Words/ Offensive Language	Familiar (%)	Not Familiar (%)	Total (%)
1	Shag	40	60	100
2	Bollocks	40	60	100
3	Fanny	40	60	100
4	Prick	46	54	100
5	Wanker	46	54	100
6	Cunt	60	40	100
7	Cock	66	34	100
8	Tits	72	28	100
9	Screw	82	18	100

10	Piss	88	12	100
11	God	98	2	100
12	Goddamn	98	2	100
13	Fuck	100	0	100
14	Hell	100	0	100
15	Asshole	100	0	100
16	Ass/ Arse	100	0	100
17	Bitch	100	0	100
18	Jesus	100	0	100
19	Bastard	100	0	100
20	Shit/Shite	100	0	100
21	Idiot	100	0	100
22	Jerk	100	0	100
23	Suck	100	0	100
24	Heavens	100	0	100
25	Damn	100	0	100

Level of Offensiveness of Swear Words and Offensive Language

Table 2 illustrates the kinds of swear words and offensive language that the students find most offensive. Based on this table, the students find the words *asshole*, *bitch*, *fuck*, *Jesus*, *hell*, *bastards*, *God* and *tits* to be the most offensive. Meanwhile, the words *idiot*, *jerk* and *heavens* are considered to be not offensive.

Table 2: Level of Offensiveness of Swear Words and Offensive Language

No.	Items	Not Offensive (%)	Less Offensive (%)	Very Offensive (%)	Extremely Offensive (%)	Not Familiar (%)	Total (%)
1.	Asshole	12	0	24	64	0	100
2.	Bitch	12	4	22	62	0	100
3.	Fuck	10	8	22	60	0	100
4.	Jesus	14	18	12	56	0	100
5.	Hell	16	14	20	50	0	100
6.	Bastard	12	24	14	50	0	100
7.	God	30	10	8	50	2	100
8.	Tits	6	10	6	50	28	100
9.	Ass/ Arse	12	14	26	48	0	100
10.	Shit/Shite	10	22	22	46	0	100
11.	Goddamn	10	18	26	44	2	100
12.	Cock	6	2	18	40	34	100
13.	Screw	24	12	10	36	18	100
14.	Cunt	6	4	16	34	40	100
15.	Piss	22	28	8	30	12	100

16.	Wanker	4	0	14	28	54	100
17.	Bollocks	4	0	10	26	60	100
18.	Fanny	6	4	4	26	60	100
19.	Suck	28	32	14	26	0	100
20.	Damn	28	34	12	26	0	100
21.	Prick	6	4	12	24	54	100
22.	Shag	6	0	12	22	60	100
23.	Idiot	28	36	14	22	0	100
24.	Jerk	32	28	18	22	0	100
25.	Heavens	50	26	8	16	0	100

Students' Perception towards Swearing and the Use of Offensive Language

Table 3 shows what the students think about the people who swear and use offensive language. A significant number of the respondents thought that people who swear and use offensive language to be rude and annoying.

Table 3: Students' Opinions about People Who Swear and Use Offensive Language

No.	Students' opinions	Percentage (%)
1	Rude and annoying	36.1
2	Crude/ not educated	20.9
3	Emotional	20.9
4	Straightforward and honest	19.8
5	Cool	2.3

Table 4 below meanwhile indicates the reasons why people swear and use offensive language. Many of the respondents said that it was due to habit, and this is followed by anger/ tension release, part of personality and it was normal/ expected.

Table 4: Reasons Why People Swear and Use Offensive Language

No.	Reasons why people swear/ use offensive language	Percentage (%)
1	Habit	20.3
2	Anger/ tension release	19.9
3	Part of personality	14.4
4	Normal/ expected	11.9
5	Humour	9.8
6	To create emphasis	8.9
7	To shock	6.4
8	To show intimacy/ trust	4.2
9	To cover fear/ vulnerability	4.2

On the contrary, Table 5 shows why people refrain from swearing or using offensive language. Two top reasons as indicated by the respondents are: 'it is prohibited by religion' and 'it leaves negative impression on one's character'.

Table 5: Reasons Why People Refrain from Swearing or Using Offensive Language

No.	Reasons why people refrain from swearing/ using offensive language	Percentage (%)
1	Prohibited by religion	19.7
2	Negative impression of one's character	19.1
3	Not wanting to appear offensive	18.1
4	Don't like to swear/ do not feel comfortable to swear	16.4
5	Not to make other people feel uncomfortable	15.8
6	It makes people think that one is not educated	10.9

Whether or Not Islamic Studies Students Use Swear Words or Offensive Language in English

Table 6 shows where the students are normally exposed to swear words and offensive language. Most of the students indicate that they mainly come across with swear words and offensive language on social media.

Table 6: Platforms Where the Students Come across Swear Words and Offensive Language

No	Platform	Percentage (%)
1	Social media	34.5
2	Movies	21.8
3	Everyday interactions	16.9
4	Songs	14.1
5	TV or radio programmes	11.3
6	Anime/ manga	0.7
7	Friends	0.7

Table 7 meanwhile indicates whether or not Islamic studies students use swear words or offensive language. Majority of the respondents overwhelmingly said 'yes' that Islamic studies students do use swear words and offensive language.

Table 7: Whether or Not Islamic Studies Students Use Swear Words or Offensive Language in English

No.	Response	Percentage (%)
1	Yes	76
2	No	24

However when asked whether it was normal for Islamic studies students to use swear words or offensive language, majority of the respondents said 'no' (see Table 8).

Table 8: Whether or Not It is Normal for Islamic Studies Students to Use Swear Words or Offensive Language in English

No.	Response	Percentage (%)
1	Yes	32
2	No	68

CONCLUSION

The conclusions that can be made based the findings discussed in the above section are as follows:

- Islamic studies students are familiar with swear words and offensive language in English.
- The students find words like: asshole , bitch, fuck, Jesus, hell, bastard, god and tits to be extremely offensive.

- The students have a negative perception towards the use of swear words and offensive language
- There are Islamic studies students who use swear words and offensive language in English but this occurrence is not normal.

These conclusions also address the research objectives stated in the introduction section of this paper.

We also see that the conclusions are in line with Jay's (2000) finding, as cited in Jay (2005), that there are reliable correlations that exist between cursing and religiosity and those with high sex attitude whereby people with high religiosity and those with high sexual anxiety tend to be offended by profanity and sexual slang.

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