

Vituperative Language:

A Study of Gendered Perception of Linguistic Boundaries for Gender

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Abstract

This quantitative descriptive inquiry explores the social, behavioral, and discursal aspects influencing the use of abusive language by male and female graduates. The theoretical framework applied in this study is Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity which asserts that language behavior is shaped by social expectations, norms and practices. A Google Form is filled from 60 respondents from both the genders approached via purposive sampling technique. The data analysis in form of frequencies reveal that men are generally perceived to use abusive language more often than women mainly in situations of anger. Males perceive abuser normal and prefer to respond in the same way. The study suggests that strong social expectations tend to make women shun abusive language to fulfill the expectations. Because of imposition of social norms set on communication by society, men and women are frequently perceived differently for surpassing the linguistic boundaries. The study provides significant insights into linguistics, anthropology, psychology, and sociology by investigating how male and females perceive abusive language in everyday life.

Keywords: Gender, Abusive Language, Language Performativity, Social Norms

Introduction

Language is a tool of communication through which we convey our feelings to others. It is an influential medium that represents a person's social identity, cultural expectations and interpersonal relationships. Language is not just in words; it extends beyond words encompassing social, behavioral, and emotional facets in its span. It marks speaker's identity, feelings, engagements and interactions in community. Language in its numerous forms particularly belittling someone by using vituperative (informal verbosity) and insulting remarks has gained substantial attention in sociolinguistics, chiefly in terms of gender-based linguistic variations. The thrashing feature of language for expressing anger, hatred, and disliking can convey myriad mental states in various contexts. Abusive language has a long history that dates back to Middle Ages, demonstrating changes in its diffuse practices over ages (Montagu, 2001).

The debate of gender-based linguistic variation is initiated by Robin Lakoff (1975) who proposed that women's language is typically more courteous and constrained by social norms. However, men are offensive in use of language to express their masculinity leaving social repercussions for women who use rude language. Judith Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity is also pertinent here for elucidating gender-based differences in the use of language where the 'doing

of gender' is executed with social and linguistic practices imposing the females to use polite language to mark their identity of femineity.

Gender-based differences in everyday conversational settings, especially in social and cultural contexts, have received little attention in previous studies which mostly concentrate on aggression, online communication, or general language behavior. Less research has been done on exploring how social judgment affects and how abusive language is perceived by males and females. To fill this gap, therefore, this study focuses on how gender-based perceptions and societal expectations affect language behavior (particularly abusive language) across gender.

Significance of the Study

In order to investigate abusive language, this study integrates sociolinguistic and gender-based viewpoints with anthropology. The study offers a comprehensive understanding of how abusive language functions as a component of doing gender by utilizing Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Additionally, the study provides participants' viewpoints and actual experiences are given a voice, which makes the findings socially relevant and relatable. It intends to give insights into the societal factors influencing the use of abusive language. The objectives are to quantify the frequency of abusive language, explore the situations in which it is employed, and find out behavioral differences for perception of and reaction to abusive language between male and female students.

Research Questions

Q1: How often do both genders use abusive language in daily conversation?

Q2: Which situation is more compelling for both the genders to use abusive language?

Q3: Does the presence of opposite gender influence the speaker to use abusive language?

Q4: What is the perception about the Abuser among male and female graduates?

Q5: What type of perception and reaction are linked with use of abusive language?

Literature Review

Maltz and Borker (1982) posit that men and women are socialized and developed in different subcultures; that's why they convey their emotions, frustration in different ways and have variant communication patterns. Several studies on sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics illustrate that males are likely to use more direct, explicit and abusive language. The pattern of their language is commonly determined by the societal norms of identity, status and power. Social standards associate femininity to polite etiquettes and sentimental inhibitions, and are likely inclined toward less direct or emotionally expressive forms of criticism. Jennifer Coates (1993) reported that gender-based variations in language are socially shaped and influenced by societal standards instead of biological aspects.

Robin Lakoff (2004) points out that females in various societies are taught to be well-mannered and often face difficulties related to social position and power relationships. Krishnaya and Bayard (2001) reported that males are inclined more towards the use of abusive language than females in varying contexts. Similarly, Akhtar (2023) came up with the findings that 109 (48.44%) foul words were used by women and 116 (51.55%) abusive terms by men. This demonstrates that men speak foul language more frequently than women do. Both men and women refrained from using "profanity" and "vulgarity".

In a study by Foote and Woodward (1972), students were asked to come up with as many vulgar and mostly objectionable terms as they could. Male students produced 50% more of these words than females. Other studies also show that men are more likely to use stronger abusive words; whereas women are more likely to use milder ones (Bailey & Timm, 1976; McEnery, 2005; Kaur & Khurana, 2023b). Fagersten (2007) studied offensive language used among Florida University

students. According to the study's findings, "nigger" is the most offensive term, and students also use the rude term "fuck." Additionally, he said that the context in which poor language is used determines how offensive it is.

Literature reveals that when men are around women, they tend to use fewer coarse words (Bayard & Krishnayya, 2001; Coates, 1993) and reserve the use of foul language for male-dominated social contexts. Men are more likely than women to curse when feeling frustrated or angry; while women are more likely to see foul words in anger as a sign of losing control and recognize that swearing could potentially strain their relationships with others (Bird & Harris, 1990). Johnson and Lewis (2010) found that the professions associated with coarse words are dominated by men. However, little research has been done on exploring how social judgment affects perception of abusive language by males and females. To fill this gap, this study explores how gender-based perceptions affect language behavior (particularly abusive language).

Research Methodology

This study uses a quantitative descriptive research design to examine how students' use of abusive language varies by gender, and social situation. This quantitative research enables the researchers to gather numerical data and statistically examine patterns and frequencies.

Research Tool

The research tool employed for data collection is an online questionnaire. The questionnaire is structured in a way to ensure that the respondents could answer it conveniently. This tool is helpful to gather authentic data on social perspectives, gender-based perceptions and common use of Abusive language in conversations. As the questionnaire is close-ended and has multiple choices, the participants can select answers with respect to their beliefs and experience. The questionnaire is formulated to explore (a) the frequency of abusive language and its societal implications as (b) situational use, (c) presence of opposite gender, (d) perception of abusers, (e) reaction to abusive language. An online google form carrying five questions with MCQ's is shared with the college and university students at different social media platforms.

Sample

The sample includes the students from different educational institutions like colleges and Universities. These students come from a variety of social and academic backgrounds, which contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of language use across genders. Convenience sampling technique is employed to select the students on the basis of their availability and comfort to take part in the study. The sample consists of 60 undergraduates (30 males and 30 females). The participants are informed about the questionnaire link via academic networks and social media. The survey is voluntarily completed by participants. The participants are assured of the confidentiality of their answers.

Theoretical Framework

Judith Butler's (1990) model of Gender Performativity guides this study in explaining gender-based variations in the use of abusive language. This theory suggests that language use constitutes a habitual social practice that acts to perform and regulate gender identity. In this framework, male and female students are expected to give opinion about the use of abusive language in different contexts and at different rates due to different social norms with respect to abusive language. This study is grounded on the theoretical framework of gender performativity to explore the situations that trigger the use of abusive language, peer influence and perceptions of social judgment for both genders.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data is carried out through descriptive statistics which includes frequency counts. The selected options are tabulated reflecting frequency of behavioral variation of male and female respondents for the given situation. To elucidate the variation, numerical data is supported with the visual representation in form of bar graphs.

Results and Discussion

Responses to every question are displayed in individual tables and bar graphs. The tabular and graphical analysis of data provide insights about distinct gender differences regarding frequency of using abusive language, situational use, presence of opposite gender, perception of abusers, reaction to abusive language.

Frequency of using Abusive Language

Table 1: Frequency of using abusive language in Females and Males

Frequency of using abusive language	Females	Males
Never	12	5
Occasionally	10	8
Sometimes	8	12
Always	0	5

Table 1 indicates that the females opted the answer NEVER with highest frequency 12 in the data; the option ALWAYS is selected by none of the female respondents that again reflects non-preference of female respondents for abusive language. However, the male respondents opted the choice SOMETIMES with highest frequency 12 in the data. Moreover, they also preferred the option ALWAYS, though with least frequency, yet it marks their inclination for using abusive language. No doubt, Males also opted for NEVER with same frequency, still their preference for ALWAYS carries significance. The first two options in the questionnaire indicate least preference for abusive language which are mostly opted by female respondents; while the last two options indicating high orientation for abusive language are linked with the male respondents in the data.

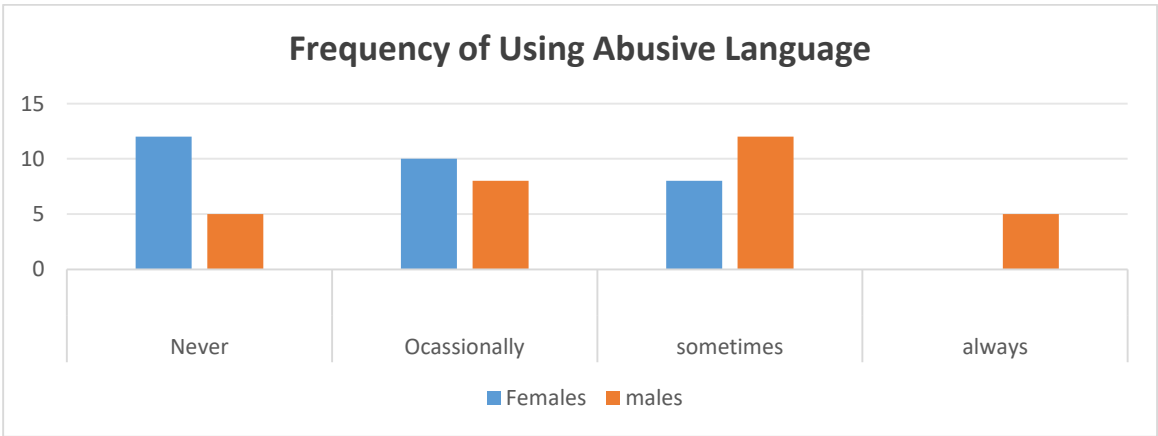


Figure 1: Illustration of Frequency of Abusive Language in Females and Males

Situation Stirring use of Abusive Language

Question No. 2 inquires about the situations arousing the use of abusive language. The following table illustrates the variation in sentimental/emotional perceptions for linguistic choices of both the genders.

Table 2: Situations stirring use of abusive language in Females and Males

Situations Stirring use of Abusive language	Females	Males
Anger	22	17
Humor	7	4
Argument	0	2
Casual Conversation	1	7

The above given table manifests gender differences for use of abusive language in different social, emotional, and discursal situations. It shows that anger stirs the users of both the genders to use vituperative language. though frequency of their preference varies, yet both the genders perceive that emotional state of anger causes use of abusive language. the female respondents perceive that humorous situations can also relate to abusive language. However, the male respondents link casual conversation with abusive language as the second most preferred category.

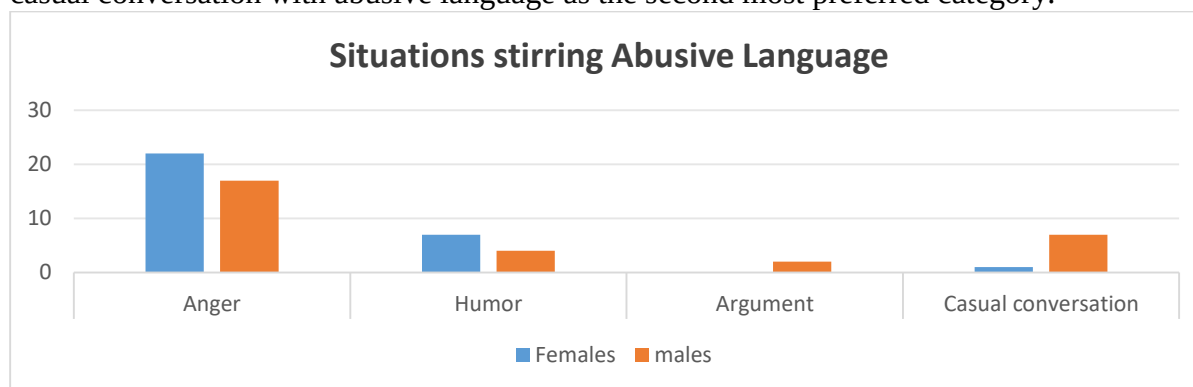


Figure 2: Illustration of Situations stirring Abusive Language

Influence of Opposite Gender on Use of Abusive Language

Situation no. 3 deals with the influence of the opposite gender on use of abusive language. The data related to this question provide insight whether the presence of opposite gender has any role in use of abusive language. It carries three options with Yes, No, and Might be.

Table 3: Influence of Opposite Gender on Use of Abusive Language

Presence of opposite gender	Females	Males
Yes	22	23
No	4	5
Maybe	4	2

The respondents from both the genders agree that the presence of both the genders has significant impact on the use of abusive language. both the genders opted this option with highest frequency in the data.

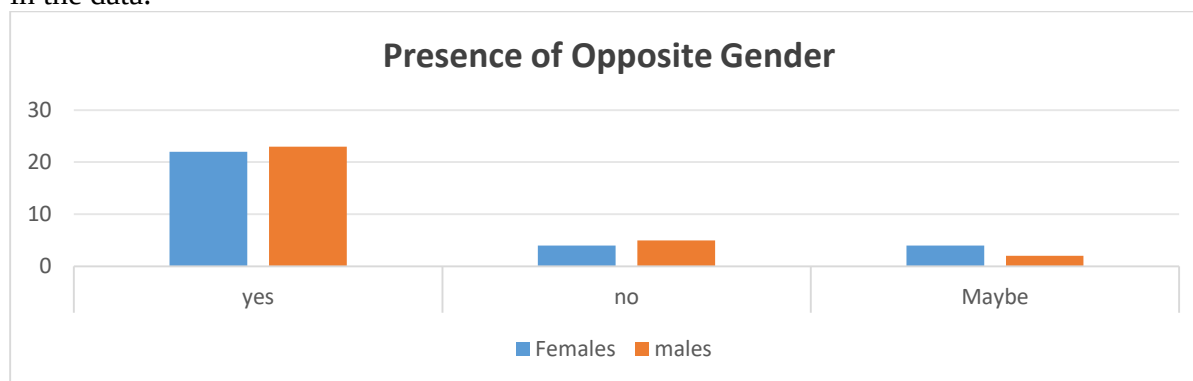


Figure 3: Influence of Presence of Opposite Gender on use of Abusive Language

Perception about Abuser

Question no. 3 elicits responses regarding perception about an abuser among male and female graduates. The responses are distributed among five categories starting from funny to ill mannered. The following tabular representation aptly shows distributional variation among the participants.

Table 4: Perception about Abuser among female and male graduates

Perception about Abuser	Females	Males
Funny	3	3
Aggressive	3	3
Normal	1	7
Immature	6	8
Ill mannered	17	9

The above given frequencies indicate that the females opted for the category of ILL - MANNERED for the abusers with the highest frequency. Males agree with the females for opting the same category for the abusers; however, the frequency is not as high as is of females. The second most preferred category for the abusers is preferred as IMMATURE by both the genders. The most striking feature of the data is the third most preferred category opted for the abusers is NORML for the male respondents. The bar graph given below visualizes the difference in perception of males and females about abusers in the data.

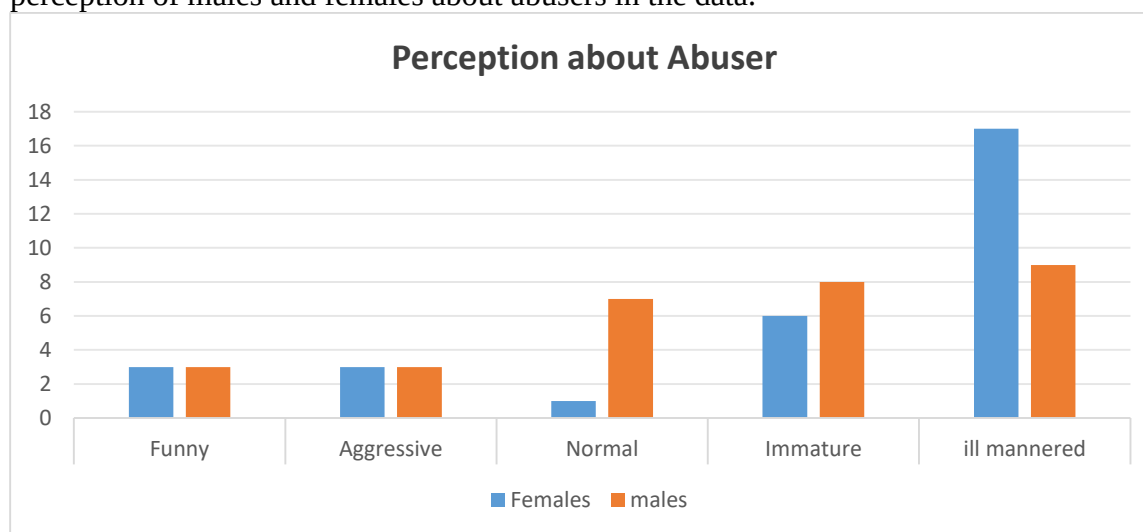


Figure 4: Perception about Abuser in Males and Females

Reaction to Abusive Language

The last part of the questionnaire is related to reaction to abusive language. This part carries for different attitudinal responses ranging from ignoring to respond with similar language.

Table 5: Reaction to Abusive Language

Reaction to abusive language	Females	Males
Ignore it	18	14
Feel offended	8	6
Report/Complain	4	0
Respond with similar language	0	10

The above given Table 5 gives a clear picture of the discorsal reactions of the participants to abusive language. This tabular display reflects that both the genders prefer to ignore abuse with highest frequency. Significant difference in discorsal reactions is observed regarding the last category RESPOND WITH SIMILAR LANGUAGE among the male graduates. None of the female respondents opted this category making it the least preferred category for females.

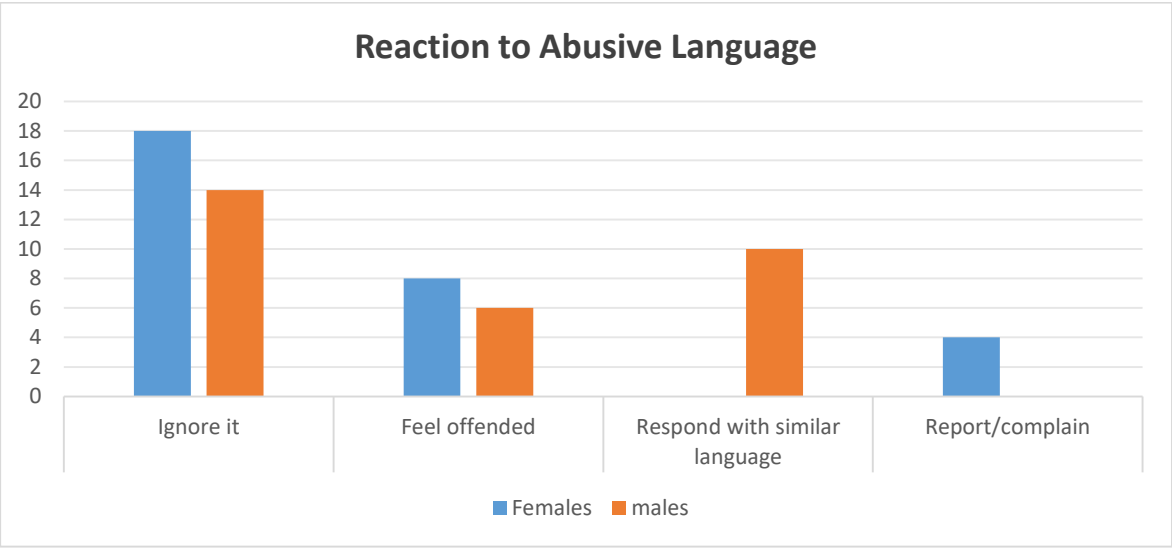


Figure 5: Illustration of Reaction to Abusive language

Conclusion

The study offers a comprehensive understanding of how abusive language functions as a component of doing gender by utilizing Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Additionally, participants' actual experiences are given a voice, which makes the findings socially relevant and relatable. It gives insights into the frequency of abusive language, the situations in which it is employed, and behavioral differences for perception of and reaction to abusive language between male and female students.

This study witnessed that the females NEVER like to use abusive language. However, the males use abusive language SOMETIMES as well as ALWAYS (as third most preferred category contrary to females who overlooked this option completely). So far as the use of abusive language in different social, emotional, and discorsal situations is concerned, ANGER stirs the users of both the genders to use vituperative language. No societal imposition is observed regarding the social, emotional, and discorsal situations except that the male respondents link CASUAL CONVERSATION with abusive language as the second most preferred category. The presence of opposite genders is sensed equally by both the genders for use of abusive language. Strikingly, the males perceive abusive language NORML and prefer to RESPOND WITH SIMILAR LANGUAGE contrary to females who are never socially supposed to behave in the same way.

The findings of the study reflect that social norms play an important role in shaping attitudes toward abusive language. Society is more judgmental toward females for following linguistic boundaries. These findings support the ideas presented in Judith Butler’s theory of Gender Performativity (1990) where “Gender is not something one is, it is something one does,” (p. 25) as respondents appear to adjust their language according to social expectations, gender roles, and the presence of different audiences. This study affirms Butler’s stance by exploring that men use abusive language as a sign of their masculinity and social repercussions restrict women to be polite, decent, and courteous in their linguistic behaviors.

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