

AN ANALYSIS OF GENDER AND SWEAR WORDS: A CASE STUDY OF IRANIAN COMMUNITY ON INSTAGRAM

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between language and gender has been the subject of discussion and investigation for many years, with the goal of understanding the societal norms and expectations of gender. This article aims to explore the relationship between gender and the swear words in the comment section of Iranian celebrities Instagram accounts. This study found that each gender tends to post swear words in comments of the same gender celebrity. This research also discovered that female users tend to auto-censor strong swear words and are more likely to body-shame the content creator, while men are more open to posting strong swear words.

KEYWORDS

Swear Words, Gender, Instagram, Body Shame, Iran

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a social construction produced within a society wherein gender is constructed in relation to personal characteristics and under the power dynamic [1]. Studying language in the context of gender not only allows us to recognize how language defines, constructs, and reproduces gender identity but it also allows us to realize the role of gender in language construction [2]. To study language within a society, we should utilize critical discourse analysis that helps us to criticize and analyze the discourse in social structures. CDA, thus, reveals how social structures are related to social patterns, discourses, and relations and allows researchers to treat such patterns in a critical way and to understand the relation of language and gender [3].

This paper focuses on the relationship between swear words, a very important feature of language, and gender to confirm the previous studies on language and its role in gender identity. More specifically, it explores how and why women and men use swear words on Instagram in the comment section of five Iranian celebrities' pages. It also reveals certain patterns of social behavior exist around users of this social media. Men tend to use strong swear words and women tend to auto-censor when using strong swear words and more likely to use body shaming or comment on the look or voice of the celebrity. Furthermore, the study shows that there is a gender alignment among content users and content creators, whereby men share comments on men's post, while women are more engaged with female celebrity posts. This establishes a relatively a social community where the language of users affects others. If a user initiates swear words, it tends to provoke others to do the same.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the features that make human beings distinctive is the ability to use language and communicate with others. However, the use of swear words as an aspect of failure in appropriate communication has been discussed by Jay and Janschewitz [4]. They argue that communicators sometimes cannot communicate appropriately, and thus they fail to satisfy their individual, practical, and social needs. Consequently, swear words are used as a sign of this failure. They discovered by studying thousands of recorded examples of swearing that swearing has never been followed by any form of corporal attack. So, they argue that swearing is either polite or impolite and used under any emotional condition [4]. In their study, they examined how native and non-native English speakers assume swearing offensive under what circumstances. The result showed that learning when, where, and to whom to swear takes time [4]. Schippers in their study argues about the richness and innovation of swearing “The language of swearing is rich in diversity, and to a certain degree innovative in word choices and usage, and productive in derivation and compounding” [5].

There are various categories of swear words in terms of functions and motives. Jay proposed a classification of bad language as cursing, profanity, blasphemy, taboo, obscenity, vulgarity, slang, epithets, insults and slurs, scatology, and swearing [6]. Related to the last category, Jay and Janschewitz claim that people use swearing words to express emotions [4]. They also propose categorizing swearing into four categories to give a clearer distinction: Expletive swearing, abusive swearing, humorous swearing, and auxiliary swearing. Expletive swearing is a type of swearing that does not address anyone and is used to show personal emotion like *sh*t*, *da*n*, *h*ll*; abusive swearing is used to address someone and often includes name calling such as *go to h*ll*, *God da*n you*; humorous swearing is used to address others but it is not as offensive as abusive swearing, it might cause bitter laughter like *eat my *ss*, and auxiliary swearing does not address anyone but yet has bad words like *this fu**ing thing* [7]. A study by Lakoff [8] shows two types of strong swear words and weak swear words, the former is used to hurt someone having an offensive essence while the latter is not as rude as strong swear words. Both of these two types and humorous swearing from Jay’s categorization are used in our study.

3. METHODOLOGY

The data for this study was a corpus from the content section of the Instagram application. Instagram is the most popular entertainment/social media application in Iran partly because it has not been filtered yet like other social media applications. According to Social Media Stats Islamic Republic of Iran Website, the recent data in June 2023 indicates that around 59% of Iranians use Instagram, compared to a filtered app like Twitter with only about 7% of users [9]. Instagram provides authentic language data and allows the researchers to have access to the community of the followers of each page. This enables scholars to find behavioral patterns, shared interest, common social class by a close study on each page’s content and its followers. The data in this study was collected from five different Instagram pages owned by Iranian celebrities, three of them female the other two male, with thousands to millions of followers and hundreds of comments on each post. The pages are selected as follows: Pouyan Mokhtari (male blogger/singer), Mr. Taster (male food blogger), Neda Yasi (female blogger) Sahar Ghoreyshi (blogger/actress), Donya Dadrasan (female singer). These pages receive comments in Farsi and this study analyses 50 comments containing bad language on one of the most liked or seen posts of the content creators.

The way that the data was collected is by reading through 50 comments containing bad language on one post. Further, the comments were classified according to the users’ gender. This was done

through careful consideration of the following factors: whether their profile was real or fake, the number of followers and followings they had, the number of posts they had made, the description in their bio section, and the pronouns they chose to be called by. Swear words were categorized based on their type into body-shaming words, strong swear words containing sexual or genital-related meaning, weak swear words such as *stupid*, or *shit*, and humorous/disrespectful swear words such as “*ahang-e ghashangiye makhsoosan oonjaha ke to nemikhooni*” (in English : *This is a beautiful song but only when you don't sing it*) (a female commentor on Pouyan Mokhtari’s page).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As obvious from Table 1, there is a clear pattern of male users predominantly commenting on male celebrity pages. Mr. Taster's page, for instance, received 41 comments from men and only 9 reactions from women, indicating a substantial gender-based difference. Conversely, on Donya Dadrasan’s and Sahar Ghoreyshi’s page, reactions including bad language from women are more than men, with 36 and 32 comments, respectively. These findings are in line with Muhanovic, Babic and Latic who found that pages with more swear words from female users were the ones of female celebrities _ Niki Minaj and Miley Cyrus_ thus, women find the courage to use swear words in these pages [10]. The study by Fakhri Jdetawy also demonstrated that most people are likely to swear around the listeners of the same gender [7].

Although the data for Pouyan Mokhtari and Neda Yasi’s pages shows a narrower gap between swear words shared by men or women users, it still suggests a tendency for users to comment on the pages of the same gender. Men are more likely to comment on Pouyan Mokhtari’s page and women tend to comment on Neda Yasi’s page.

Table 1. Number of Comments Containing Swear Words from Female or Male Users.

| Gender | Donya Dadrasan | Sahar Ghoreyshi | Neda Yasi | Pouyan Mokhtari | Mr. Taster |
|---------------|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| Male | 13 | 18 | 23 | 29 | 41 |
| Female | 36 | 32 | 27 | 21 | 9 |

Another important finding is that the nature of disrespectful comments varies from men to women. More specifically, as evident in Table 2, men are more likely to use strong swear words having sexual connotations or containing genital area names, 68 comments, while women tend to auto-censor when using strong swear words as exemplified by a comment from a female commentor on Sahar Ghoreyshi’s page: “*Maro chiz_e khodet farz kardi, Sahar*” in English (*you assume us you th*ng*). In this stance, the word “thing” is a euphemism for a certain male anatomy, which the female user chooses to censor. It is noteworthy that the choice of disrespectful language differs based on the commenter's gender which reveals different discourse behavior of male and female users.

Table 2: Number of Comments Containing Swear Words Classified by their Type

| Gender | Body shaming | Humorous swear words | Weak swear words | Strong swear words |
|---------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| Male | 13 | 18 | 23 | 29 |
| Female | 36 | 32 | 27 | 21 |

Furthermore, female users are prone to body shame or voice shame the celebrity with a total number of 47 comments compared to men whose body-shaming comments are 15 in the five

pages studied. While weaker swear words and humorous insults show a smaller difference between women's and men's tendencies in social media, it is still apparent that male users tend to share weaker swear words than women and women have a higher probability to use humorous swear words than men. Our findings confirm the study done by Fakhri Jdetawy who found that females tend to be 'super polite' and avoid using swear words but if they want to do so, they prefer the milder ones, while men are more likely to use strong swear words [7]. The study by Muhanovic, Babic, and Latic on the Instagram pages of five American celebrities showed that women swear in comments out of exaggeration while men do so out of anger [9]. While in our study, the different nature of swearing by women and men commentators shows the cultural difference between these two communities of social media users in the US and in Iran. Women Instagram users in Iran are found to be excessively concerned about appearance; therefore, they tend to be body shamers.

5. CONCLUSION

This study showed that both women and men swear on social media but the type of swearing and the context in which the swear words are shared are different for both genders. More specifically, men were found to comment on profiles where the same-gender community exists, while females were found to do so in a community of female users on a female celebrity page. Furthermore, the results have shown that women tend to body shame, give opinions on look, voice, hair color, or clothing of the celebrity and use more of a humoristic language that does not have genital-related words inside. Conversely men were found to use both weak and strong swear words, whether sexual ones, on social media.

The differentiation of swear words based on gender implies the existence of societal norms and expectations regarding language use for men and women. By employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in this study, we uncovered how swear words play a role in shaping different identities for men and women. Numerous factors might contribute to the tendency for men to use stronger swear words. One such reason is that men are often perceived as more dominant and assertive, facing fewer repercussions for their use of strong language. On the other hand, women are commonly expected to be polite and demure, leading them to self-censor their language more frequently. Additionally, our research using CDA shed light on the issue of women body shaming other women, indicating an internalized misogyny that pressures women to conform to specific beauty standards in order to gain acceptance.

The scope of the study could be broadened to non-binary social media users and creators, as well as considering other demographic factors such as age, level of education and the commentators' living environment. The platform itself had some limitations such as the prevalence of numerous fake accounts. Despite carefully selecting real users, leveraging Natural Language Processing approaches to acquire a larger and more precise data corpus would enhance the study's accuracy.

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