Malay Linguistic Taboos: A Study on Social Acceptance and Gender Differences

Homam Altabaa- Farah Athira Fadzir

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Homam Altabaa,[1] Farah Athira Fadzir[2]

Abstract

The phenomenon of linguistic taboo has not been fully explored in Malay society. This paper attempts to bring this phenomenon into focus by investigating it in terms of social acceptance and gender differences. It examines the Malays' perceptions of the concept and the use of linguistic taboos to express emotions. The paper also identifies and analyses which of the chosen categories of taboo words are deemed highly offensive and which are not. Besides that, it scrutinizes the extent to which there is a correlation between gender communication stereotypes and the use of taboo language. The study employs a qualitative approach where the researchers interviewed four respondents who study at the International Islamic University Malaysia. The data collected shows that linguistic taboos are accepted as a norm to express emotions, provided they do not offend the listeners. The results showed that among the studied categories of taboo words, the sexual act category is the most offensive while the death category is the least offensive. These findings make it clear that the ways these linguistic taboos are treated are conditioned by the culture and norms of the society. The study also dispelled the widely cited proposal by Robin Lakoff (1973) that women use politer forms of language. The findings indicate that it is acceptable for women nowadays to use linguistic taboos.

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INTRODUCTION

Malay language or 'Bahasa Malaysia' is recognized as the Malaysian official language and is known as the mother tongue of the Malay people. Malaysia is a multiracial, multicultural, and multilingual society as it consists, mainly, of three major ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. Each of these ethnicities has a different structure of languages and functions that everyone must respect. People have their ways of expressing ideas, feelings, and emotions due to their unique quirks and traits via language. Chaika states that once people use language, they also unveil or disguise their identities, characters, and background during social contact without realizing that they are unconsciously doing it.[3] Any language variation chosen by communicators will confirm one's identity.[4] Masitha mentions that some people may choose to express certain feelings through language that has a strong meaning when they are sad or angry[5]. Thus, they will employ certain kinds of words deemed inappropriate, such as taboo words. People use taboo words to swear as a viable method to express their situation or feelings.

Jay defines taboo words as something forbidden to be mentioned by a set of people, depending on their cultural norms.[6] It is worth noting that different cultures or societies have various degrees of acceptance of taboo words. The use of linguistic taboo can be seen in any society and employed by individuals in society at some point. Taboo words carry negative connotations that might hurt the listener's feelings. The usage of that language can be heard uttered in society today, and its status is shifting as a socio-linguistic norm of society. Zahra mentioned that the usage of taboo words has become more prevalent due to the evolution of taboo words itself, whereby words that were rated as taboo in the past culture may not be in the present.[7] In relations to culture, society has had higher expectations of women. Women
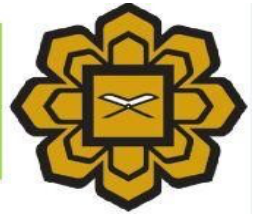
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[3] Chaika, Elaine. *Language: The Social Mirror*. Newbury House Publishers, Inc., 1982.

[4] Masitha, Pujiana. "Sociolinguistics Analysis of Taboo Language in Internet Meme." *Seminar Nasional Kajian Bahasa Dan Pengajarannya (KBSP) IV*, 2016, pp. 505–512.

[5] Masitha, Pujiana. "Sociolinguistics Analysis of Taboo Language in Internet Meme." *Seminar Nasional Kajian Bahasa Dan Pengajarannya (KBSP) IV*, 2016, pp. 505–512.

[6] Jay, Timothy. *Why We Curse: A Neuro-psycho-social Theory of Speech*. Benjamins, 1999.

[7] Zahra, Samadi. *Macro and Microcontextual Taboo Words in Iranian Pre and Post Revolution Movies*. 2015. University of Malaya, Master's thesis. *Students Repository,* http://studentsrepo.um.edu.my/5405/

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have always been expected to behave appropriately and use standard forms of language.[8] Meanwhile, men are tolerated for using vernacular forms of language compared to women,[9] as Holmes highlights. Holmes's argument shows that it is acceptable for men to use taboo language without being judged as harshly as women when using the same language. Current studies indicate that women challenge such restrictions and use taboo language whenever they wish and based on the context in which they are used.[10] In general, the idea of gender stereotypes in the taboo language used may have evolved over time.

The researchers believes Malay linguistic taboos are understudied in Malaysia. The shortage of studies motivates her to conduct this research as it may help her understand better the use of Malay taboo words' usage among the native speakers. It is observed that Malays tend to employ taboo language when expressing their emotions or communicating information to the listeners. Therefore, this study analyses the Malays' perceptions of the use of linguistic taboos to express emotions. Besides that, it examines their degree of acceptance of a few linguistic taboos existing in Malay society. It also explores gender expectations on the usage of taboo words between men and women. In short, this study aims to a) analyze respondents' views on the use of linguistic taboos, b) explore the differences between categories of taboo words in terms of acceptance from the respondents, and c) determine what made the use of taboo words interrelate with gender expectations among Malays' speakers.

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[8] Klerk, Vivian D. "How Taboo are Taboo Words For Girls?" *Language in Society*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1992, pp. 277–289. doi.org/10.1017/s0047404500015293

[9] Holmes, Janet. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. 4th ed., Pearson Education, 2013.

[10] Gauthier, Michael, and Adrien Guille. "Gender and Age Differences in Swearing." *Advances in Swearing Research: New languages and new contexts*, edited by Kristy Beers Fägersten and Karyn Stapleton, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017, pp. 137-156.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

TABOO WORDS AS BAD LANGUAGE

The word "linguistic taboo" has different meanings and scopes based on cultural settings. Davis reports that none of the research conducted on taboos answered the main question of what makes some utterances 'bad language'.[11] Brown adds that definition of bad language socially varies because people may interpret it as a grammatical error or a form of emotional expression, like swearing.[12] The language of a society is a product of its culture. According to Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams, the beauty or filth of language would be judged by the ear of the hearer as well as the "collective ear of society".[13]

Taboo is one of the categories of bad language. Aside from taboo, the categories include cursing, swearing, blasphemy, profanity, obscenity, vulgarity, slang, epithets, scatology, insult, and slur.[14] AmirAhmad and Rangriz remark that many taboo words heard today belong to these bad language categories.[15] In a sense, these categories can be subsumed under the general umbrella of taboo. In general, bad language is harmful and distasteful,[16] as Allan and Burridge stated. However, they also agreed that using bad language is a feature of human communication that will never diminish. In fact, the content of bad language itself is changing perpetually in adapting to the current world context.[17]

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[11] Davis, Hayley. "What Makes Bad Language Bad?." *Language & Communication*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1989, pp. 1-9. doi.org/10.1016/0271-5309(89)90002-5

[12] Brown, Keith. *Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics*. 2nd ed., vol. 1, Elsevier Science, 2005.

[13] Fromkin, Victoria, et al. *An Introduction to* Language. 10th ed., Wadsworth, 2014, p. 321.

[14] Jdetawy, Loae F. "The Nature, Types, Motives, and Functions of Swear Words: A Sociolinguistic Analysis." *International Journal of Development Research*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2019, pp. 27048–58.

[15] AmirAhmad. Jafari B., and Samaneh Rangriz. "Taboo Language and Norms in Sociolinguistics." *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2019, pp. 75–83.

[16] Allan, Keith, and Kate Burridge. *Forbidden Words: Taboo and The Censoring of Language*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

[17] Jdetawy, Loae F. "The Nature, Types, Motives, and Functions of Swear Words: A Sociolinguistic Analysis." *International Journal of Development Research*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2019, pp. 27048–58.

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Masitha explains that it is human nature to express emotional states via speech in any condition.[18] Employing taboo words would provide an opportunity to achieve satisfaction in expressing emotions effectively. It must be noted that the factors that can influence people to use taboo language are varied. Some may use it to express their aversive emotions, excitement, disappointment, sadness, or usually insult or hurt the addressee's feelings. Other possible reasons would be to strengthen one's argument, for humorous purposes or whenever encountering shocking events, and finally, merely representing one's bad habit. Using taboo words to express any state can present a pattern of behaviour. This behaviour is sometimes disregarded by others,[19] although they are fully aware of its inappropriateness.

CATEGORIES OF TABOO AND THE CURRENT DEFINITION OF LINGUISTIC TABOO FOR THIS STUDY

Taboo language has a few categories, and its acceptance depends on society since they share the same moral values and cultural norms in their social institution. Such categories include death, religion, sex, excrement, menstruation, body parts, and disease.[20] According to Hughes and Fershtman, Gneezy, and Hoffman, race and food also have taboo values in some cultures.[21] These taboo categories are also often used to express various emotions. For example, people may use the category of sex to degrade or insult someone or mock other races by making a racial slur, which is socially unacceptable in most cultures. Meanwhile, Hughes mentions that taboos change from "strictly forbidden" to "grossly impolite" or "offensive".[22] Taboo is part

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[18] Masitha, Pujiana. "Sociolinguistics Analysis of Taboo Language in Internet Meme." *Seminar Nasional Kajian Bahasa Dan Pengajarannya (KBSP) IV*, 2016, pp. 505–512.

[19] Wardhaugh, Ronald. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. 5th ed., Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

[20] Estrich, Robert M., and Hans Sperber. *Three Keys to Language*. Rinehart, 1952; Rassin, Eric and Peter Muris. "Why do women swear? An exploration of reasons for and perceived efficacy of swearing in Dutch female students." *Personality and Individual Differences*, vol. 38, no. 7, 2005, pp. 1669-74. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2004.09.022; Pinker, Steven. *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature*. Penguin Books, 2007.

[21] Hughes, Geoffrey. *Encyclopedia of Swearing The Social History of Oaths, Profanity, Foul Language, and Ethnic Slurs in the English-speaking World*. M.E. Sharpe, 2006; Fershtman, Chaim, et al. "Taboos and Identity: Considering the Unthinkable." *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics*, 2011, pp. 139–64. doi.org/DOI: 10.1257/mic.3.2.139

[22] Hughes, Geoffrey. *Encyclopedia of Swearing The Social History of Oaths, Profanity, Foul Language, and Ethnic Slurs in the English-speaking World*. M.E. Sharpe, 2006, p. 464.

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of the bad language category, and according to Ljung, its overuse might cause it to have less effect.[23] In other words, people have been using taboo words too frequently, which has caused them to carry less weight than before. In short, linguistic taboos go through change, including their degree of offensiveness, as the world moves forward.

GENDER STEREOTYPES IN THE USE OF TABOO LANGUAGE

Traditionally, society often expects women to use a kind and polite language while men's is relatively simple, firm, and arrogant.[24] Such expectations are known as gender stereotypes since there is a generalized view made by society. On average, Knyazyan states that it is common to acknowledge that men will use stronger expletives than women.[25] She then posits the existence of double standards in improper word usage by summarizing that men look tough and powerful while women appear uncivilized and improper whenever they use strong expletives. Women end up stereotypically framed as the language guardians and must behave courteously. Thus, society expects them to use less assertive language as taught since childhood and not to use dirty words.[26] Accordingly, taboo language should not be used by women since society perceives the language as aggressive and forceful that belongs in men's language domain only.[27] In short, gender stereotypes limit women's speech in expressing their emotions via taboo language.

Nevertheless, women in the current times are going against the typical stereotypes expected of them in conversation. They have started using taboo words to express their diverse emotions whenever they wish. Historically, Trudgill mentions women tend to use appropriate language and employ a standard form of speech as they are more status-conscious than men

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[23] Jdetawy, Loae F. "The Nature, Types, Motives, and Functions of Swear Words: A Sociolinguistic Analysis." *International Journal of Development Research*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2019, pp. 27048–58.

[24] Dong, Jinyu. "Study on Gender Differences in Language Under the Sociolinguistics." *Canadian Social Science*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2014, pp. 92–96. doi.org/10.3968/4602

[25] Knyazyan, Anna. "Male and Female Profanity in English Anecdotes." *Armenian Folia Anglistika*, vol. 2, no. 16, 2017, pp. 27-37.

[26] Lakoff, Robin. "Language and Woman's Place." *Language in Society*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1973, pp. 45–80.

[27] AmirAhmad. Jafari B., and Samaneh Rangriz. "Taboo Language and Norms in Sociolinguistics." *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2019, pp. 75–83.

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and aim to be better than men in any speech community.[28] Klerk also reveals that the theory of women who are always concerned with politeness by avoiding non-standard words such as taboo now need reconsiderations as "female linguistic habits do not match commonly held perceptions".[29] Furthermore, she claims that women now know taboo words, are familiar with them, and use them whenever they want. Ultimately, Stapleton's study displays that "the stereotypes of the tough-talking male and the pure, never-swearing female are false".[30] Nowadays, young women no longer subscribe to language expectations imposed by their cultures, which grants them the freedom to use taboo language.
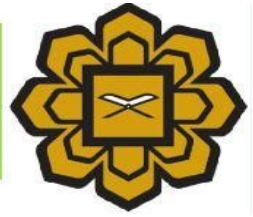
METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

The qualitative method was employed to achieve a holistic picture of the intended goal of research. In general, the application of qualitative techniques will identify the underlying themes from the data and later explicitly describe the phenomenon.[31] Instead of analyzing the tabulated data in the findings, qualitative models deal with the richness of words and sentences since this research aims to capture the respondents' views on the concept of taboo language, their perspective regarding their acceptance of a specific category of taboo words, and gender differences when using such words. This research used open-ended and semi-structured questions through in-depth interviews to capture the interviewee's stance or perspectives. The flexibility of semi-structured questions allows the researcher to control and adjust the ordering of interview questions based on the interview context and flow. The instrument used for this interviewing was Zoom, an accessible video telephony software program. This study's primary data source was native speakers of Malay who live and were raised in Malaysia. The respondents are undergraduate students from the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and majoring in Bachelor of English Language and Literature (BENL). The sample

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[28] Trudgill, Peter. *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*. 2nd ed., Penguin Books, 1983.

[29] Klerk, Vivian D. "How Taboo are Taboo Words For Girls?" *Language in Society*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1992, p. 288. doi.org/10.1017/s0047404500015293.

[30] Coates, Jennifer. *Women, Men and Language: A Sociolinguistic Account of Gender Differences in Language*. Pearson Education Limited, 2004, p. 98.

[31] Ismail, Sheikh Ahmad. *Doing Qualitative Research for Beginners: From Theory to Practice*. Partridge, 2017.

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size consists of four respondents: two males and two females. The researcher used the purposive sampling style to find respondents since it is a convenience sampling method to gain a deep understanding of the subject matter under the study. This research was undertaken on Malay students from Malaysia since the researcher is coming from this cultural domain. Therefore, she is familiar with the culture and norms of the Malays. After the interview, the data obtained from respondents were analyzed qualitatively according to the study's research questions and objectives. The study adopts a descriptive thematic analysis to explore explicit and implicit meanings within the textual data. According to Dawson, he explains thematic analysis is "highly inductive, that is, the themes emerge from the data and are not imposed upon it by the researcher".[32] For this study, some of the emerging themes are based on theoretical frameworks highlighted earlier. The researcher used computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, ATLAS.ti, to reduce the workload and mistakes compared to manual data analysis.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

THE INTERPERSONAL FUNCTION FRAMEWORK

In investigating respondents' views of employing taboo words, the researcher adopted the interpersonal function framework to answer the first research question. One way to analyze the respondents' perceptions in applying taboo words is through Yao and Wei's framework, named Interpersonal Function,[33] one of Halliday's Metafunction theory branches. This framework was applied to better understand in which context that respondents use taboo words since this type of language should be avoided in conversation.

Thus, the framework produced by Yao and Wei helped the researcher to examine in which context respondents employed taboo words as exhibited below. There are four main themes under this framework. Nevertheless, this study is focusing on the two types of themes only in analyzing the data.

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[32] Dawson, Catherine. *Introduction to Research Methods: A Practical Guide for Anyone Undertaking a Research Project*. 4th ed., Oxford: How to Books, 2009, p. 119.

[33] Yao, Zhao and Wei Zhang. "Interpersonal Function of the Linguistic Taboo." *International Conference on Economy, Management and Education Technology*, 2016, pp. 1960–63.

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a. **To relieve spiritual tension**

Negative emotions will lead any individual to use taboo words instead of stifling their feelings. It is one of the ways of releasing the build-up of stress, especially when facing unpleasant situations.[34]

b. **To reveal the relationship**

The language users in the conversation are not separated as individuals since they are members of a social group. Language serves as a symbol of a group's identity, which is one of its functions. The adherence and transgression of linguistic taboos can reveal the relationship between language users in communication.[35]

THE SCALAR SYSTEM

For the second research question, the researcher adapted the scalar system developed by Dewaele, who explored his participants' views on whether the idea of swearing and taboo words in their second languages carry the same emotional impact as in their first language.[36] However, the researcher adapted Dewaele's scale in investigating respondents' degree of tolerance of taboo words for this study. Adapting his instrument allowed the researcher to modify its use to fit the current research setting. Respondents rated each category of Malay taboo words based on this scale of offence: "does not feel strong, little, fairly, strong, or very strong".[37] This five-point scale of offence was used to investigate respondents' acceptance of the category of each taboo word. There are ten categories of Malay taboo words: animal, racial, death, religion and faith, genital organs of males and females, physical disability, sexual act, intellect-based terms, and bad luck.

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[34] Yao, Zhao and Wei Zhang. "Interpersonal Function of the Linguistic Taboo." *International Conference on Economy, Management and Education Technology*, 2016, pp. 1960–63.

[35] Yao, Zhao and Wei Zhang. "Interpersonal Function of the Linguistic Taboo." *International Conference on Economy, Management and Education Technology*, 2016, pp. 1960–63.

[36] Dewaele, Jean-Marc. "The Emotional Force of Swearwords and Taboo Words in the Speech of Multilinguals." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, vol. 25, no. 2&3, 2004, pp. 204–22

[37] Dewaele, Jean-Marc. "The Emotional Force of Swearwords and Taboo Words in the Speech of Multilinguals." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, vol. 25, no. 2&3, 2004, p. 211

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WOMEN'S LANGUAGE MODEL

Finally, following the respondents' responses from the first and second research questions, the researcher then examined what made the usage of taboo words linked with classical gender communication stereotypes. The researcher applied Robin Tolmach Lakoff's model, entitled Women's Language (WL), to answer the last research question. The model has enabled the researcher to analyze the possibility of whether women are still known as the guardians of language who always use polite, powerless, correct, or cooperative styles of speaking, or these patterns have twisted otherwise.
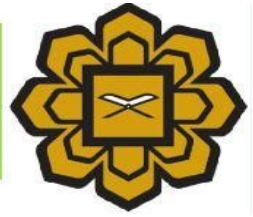
RESULTS AND FINDINGS
ANALYSIS 1

i. Perceptions on the Use of Taboo Language

Based on the data transcription, the practice of taboo words is perceived as fine for Sofea and Amin but not for Maryam and Mohamed in general. The latter refrained from using taboo words because it causes them to feel unpleasant, as stated from the response below:

> *"I didn't use that much of taboo words because it just sounds very harsh and very unpleasant to hear."* (Maryam)

Meanwhile, the former takes the practice of taboo words as trivial, and Amin even *"encourage"* its practice. As for Sofea, she sees the basis of linguistic taboo as *"natural"*. Sofea later added that this type of language allows the speakers to express their emotions instead of suppressing them. This action will also alarm the listener not to dismiss the affected person's feelings as he understands taboo words addressed to him while being present in that context. Her opinions are stated below:

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"...all these taboo words, they exist for a reason. ...the result of these taboo words to show how much emotions they're holding in… if a person who does not use it, suddenly uses it, they will create more impact. So basically, I think it's necessary in the sense that it really helps people to understand what's going on." (Sofea)
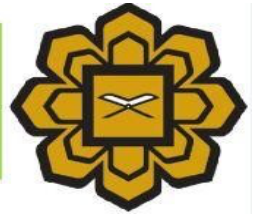
Taken together, despite the respondents' different views on taboo language, the study found that all respondents unanimously agreed this language is considered unacceptable when the main intention of using it is to disrespect or hurt others' feelings. Points are exhibited in the following:

"... if you are using it to downgrade people so like to personally attack someone, then it's not okay." (Maryam)

As these comments reflect, taboo words have negative connotations. Intent to offend or insult people through taboo words is seen as improper by the respondents. Nonetheless, this also indirectly indicates that linguistic taboos are only tolerable in certain contexts. It is proven when all respondents admitted they use Malay taboo words in private or informal settings because they are well aware of the consequences they may receive if they use them publicly. Amin highlights that:

"Privately and informal. There is no setting in which you can say curse word, in a formal setting that, that's just wrong. If you use a curse word in a formal setting, is there something wrong with you." (Amin)

Generally, all respondents' answers illustrate that the usage of taboo words has become part of their vocabulary. Hence, they are very critical with whom and when they use it to avoid misunderstanding or discomfort to the hearers. Each respondent shared an almost similar answer whereby they prefer to use the language with the people they are comfortable with, such as their peers and siblings.

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THE INTERPERSONAL FUNCTION FRAMEWORK

i. To relieve spiritual tension

Only one out of the three respondents would use English taboo words when she is mad or disappointed instead of using the Malay version as seen from the data transcription. The reason behind this is that English taboo words sound less harsh compared to Malay ones. Thus, Malay taboo phrases are used when she is feeling delighted, not upset:

"... if I'm angry, I will usually prefer to use English taboo words because English taboo words sounds less harsher than Malay." (Maryam)

Meanwhile, the excerpts below showcase this interpersonal function of taboo words from other respondents. Their responses appear that a taboo language is a tool for them to employ whenever frustration or anger fills the atmosphere.

"... maybe because of frustration. ...Of course, you feel like you want to let it out right by at least by saying these words help you to relieve yourself." (Mohamed)

ii. To reveal the relationship

Language users could be very particular with whom they employ taboo words in showing their acquaintance and intimacy. In this study, all respondents depict their choices of the human circle when using Malay taboo words as seen in the following:

"I'm using taboo words, with the people that I'm close, close with, they are less likely to judge me because they know me personally and what kind of person I am." (Maryam)

"I say it with around my friends because some people say that, well, clarity is a mirror of people's closeness to you, right? So, whenever you use those words is because you are very comfortable with them, you know, they won't judge you for using them." (Sofea)

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The dialogues showed that some of the respondents did not specify with whom they used taboo words. However, they emphasise that being surrounded by the people they are comfortable with is crucial as it allows the communicators to express their feelings using taboo words without hesitation. This behaviour shows the acquaintance and intimate relationship both parties possess.

ANALYSIS 2

Analysis two presents differences between particular categories of taboo words in terms of acceptance by the respondents. The ten categories are themes for this section.

i. Animal

"Babi" (pig) and *"anjing"* (dog) are two types of animals known as taboo in Malay's society. These two phrases are used as an example for the category of animal. Respondents' views towards this category are presented in the table below.

Table 4.1: Animal Category

Scale of Offence	Excerpts
Strong	*"Why would you associate people with an animal like yeah it is not nice because it's basically just downgrading people. ...I think it's because of the characteristics that the animal hold, that makes it strong when it is being used to a person"* (Maryam)
Very strong	*"... "babi" and "anjing" are both animals which are considered "haram" (forbidden)... But if once you associate people with those two haram animals, then it becomes really extreme. That's why I find it really very strong."* (Sofea)
Does not feel strong	*"Animals are just animals. They're actually cute. I don't really see as an insult. ....I mean, sure, we can't touch them, nor we can eat them,... It doesn't really bother me at all does not feel strong at all."* (Amin)

Table 4.1 presents the data of respondents regarding their stands on the category of animal. Three out of four respondents classified this category as 'strong', while the other said

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otherwise, 'does not feel strong'. Associating the animal category with humans is unacceptable, as stressed by Maryam, Sofea, and Mohamed. It is because expressing emotions using animals towards people shows the act of downgrading the status of humankind with the animal. For Amin, the animal category is not taboo since he defined the examples as *"cute"*. The status of pig and dog is impure and forbidden to be eaten in Islam. Nonetheless, Amin did not take such points to classify the animal category as 'strong.'

ii. Racial

The researcher used the phrase *"keling"* and *"paria"* as examples for the racial category. These two terms originally refer to an Indian class in Malaysia, but people use them as curse words. Respondents' views towards the category are shown as follows:

Table 4.2: Racial Category

Scale of Offence	Excerpts
Very strong	*"... when you use taboo words that is associated with a certain group of people or certain certain people, like in this case, it associates with the Indian is very much a strong taboo words, ...it is very, I would read this as a racial slur."* (Maryam)
Very strong	*"I think that can be personal as well, because it happens a lot to me. Since I was little, "keling" and "paria" have been used a lot of times to insult me. So it is more personal to me because of my skin color,..."* (Sofea)
Fairly	*"... something that you cannot change, that something that you're born with. It something that you can never change and you don't have any power over it. You can't control your race,..."* (Amin)

Three of the respondents condemned the use of this category as 'very strong' due to several reasons. One of the reasons is mainly to avoid racism since it would result in negative consequences like Maryam specified. Referring to Sofea, she is deeply affected by these words due to insults made by the people solely because of her skin tone. Lastly, Amin marked this category as 'fairly' unlike the rest because he focuses on the fact that the words

itself, *"keling"* and *"paria"*, reflect a person's irreversible identity. The words represent an identity if it is not used as an insult.

iii. Death

Death is a disturbing topic for some people. Nevertheless, the scale of offence for this category is between 'fairly' and 'little' only as rated by the respondents. *"Mati"* and *"mampus"* (refer to death) are examples of this category. The following are the excerpts voiced by the respondents:
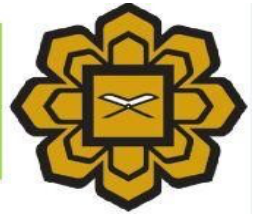
Table 4.3: Death Category

Scale of Offence	Excerpts
Fairly	*"I think we use "mati" or "mampus" when we want to exaggerate things, right. We wants to express the intensity of something… It's very normal. And I think almost everybody uses it, like use that kind of phrase."* (Maryam)
Little	*"Because I use it a lot. Yeah, I mean, like we say things like "pergi mampus", "baik kau mati je" (go die) things like that. We say it everyday. In a way, it does not mean that we want that person to die. We just stating our hate or our anger towards that person."* (Sofea)

Four of them mentioned that the category of death is commonly used by the people and even themselves when expressing themselves. Hence, it leads them to rate the category as not very strong, ranging from 'fairly' to 'little'. For Maryam, she would use it as a sentence enhancer, while Sofea would direct these taboo words towards the people that annoyed her. Next, Mohamed rated it as 'little' because he often heard and saw the usage of these taboo words in social media. Respondents' explanations are varied since it is based on their point of views.

iv. Religion and Faith

Religion and faith are a taboo topic. In this study, the researcher takes the common words related to the religion and faith category that is often used by Malay speakers when expressing themselves, which are *"kafir"* (disbeliever) and *"haram"* (forbidden). Overall, expressing

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emotions using words from religion and faith is seen as inappropriate by most of the respondents:
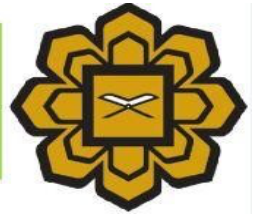
Table 4.4: Religion and Faith Category

Scale of Offence	Excerpts
Little	*"... they are very common terms that we as a Muslim usually use. ...And there are also the terms that are repeatedly used in the Al-Quran right? ...It depends on the context, ...if the terms are being used to label someone in a harsh way then automatically it'll be very strong."* (Maryam)
Strong	*"... I still considered as strong because when it comes to hurting people using those words. ...So you are saying it with the intention that you are dismissing that person from the religion itself that's why I find it very offensive. ... that's not your job."* (Sofea)
Very strong	*"For religion, there's like, only God can judge us. ...Because, who are you to label someone "kafir" or "haram" or you know, it just sounds so not nice to the ears and also it programs people to be so judgmental,..."* (Mohamed)

Based on the quotations above, Maryam described these religious terms as common phrases because Muslims use them. Aside from that, these lexicals also can be found in the holy scripture, Al-Quran. These are the main reasons she rated this category as 'little' because she looks at this category being used in the right context. Meanwhile, the remaining respondents found that expressing emotions using terms from religion and faith is unacceptable because language users will often use the words to label someone else.

v. Genital Organs (Female)

Human sexual organs are considered taboo in many cultures. Two words under female genital organs are used as examples for this paper: *"pukimak"* and *"pantat"*. Both words refer to the private parts of women. The number of respondents that agreed on this category as 'very strong' in terms of offensiveness level surpassed the one that saw it as 'little'. This statement is displayed as follows:

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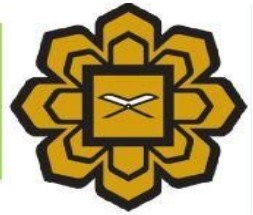
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Table 4.5: Genital Organs (Female) Category

Scale of Offence	Excerpts
Very strong	*"... genital organs is something that is taboo to say at the first place, ...I think if you if you use it in a taboo way in a cursing way like, in your category in your example, it has become very strong because it's like downgrading the purity of the genital parts."* (Maryam)
Little	*"Yes, it sounds harsher than just animals and like bad luck. It's not it's not as bad as it could be, it is just "Okay", "alright." It's a little bit offensive, but it's not to the point where I feel offended to it."* (Amin)

Maryam, Sofea, and Mohamed marked this category as 'very strong' for different reasons. Maryam states that employing words from women's reproductive systems to express feelings is equal to degrading the quality of women's private parts. Meanwhile, Sofea relates the offensiveness of using such words with the Malay culture that view this topic as sensitive. She noted that those who take this category lightly are categorized as disrespectful and uncivilized. As for Mohamed, he highly regards women's status as a mother. Therefore, hearing those words will only make him feel unpleasant. In general, their responses show displeasure to anyone who uses this category. Unlike Amin, he did not see this category as strongly offensive, making him rate it as 'little' only. Although he acknowledges the severity of this category, he told the interviewer that he is fine with it.

vi. Genital Organs (Male)

Among the sexual terms (male) from the list for respondents' references are: *"kote"*, *"buto"*, *"lancau"* (or lanjiao is a penis: Chinese term). These terms are referring to the men's private part. For this section, Maryam and Amin generalised their responses similar to women genital organs. Thus, their responses can be read from Table 4.5. Comments on the table below portray respondents' perceptions regarding men's genital organs:

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Table 4.6: Genital Organs (Male) Category

Scale of Offence	Excerpts
Very strong	*refer Table 4.5 (Maryam)
Strong	*"I find it a strong instead of very strong because I think men freely use them instead of women with their genitals, you see, that's it. So it is more normalized, it is more familiarized in our society,..."* (Sofea)
Little	*refer *Table 4.5* (Amin)

According to Mohamed and Amin, words relating to genital parts are probably the most commonly used among males. Mohamed did mention this category as 'strong' to a certain level. Nevertheless, after observing the taboo words under this category being used mostly by his gender, he disclosed that this category is not too offensive. If the words are used during a quarrel, their status will turn harsh instead of moderate. In short, the male respondents did not find the degree of this category as very highly offensive. Sofea still affirms male genital organs as strongly offensive, although the usage of any words related to male private parts have become normalized and familiarized in Malay society. For Maryam, she insisted on rating this category as 'very strong' regardless of gender because genital parts have the quality of being pure that others should not lower their status.

vii. Physical Disability

The word *"cacat"* refers to handicapped when translated. This word was used as an example for the category of physical disability. Half of the respondents stress that this category has a 'strong' offensiveness level whilst the rest state it as 'fairly' only. Their responses are represented in the table below:

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Table 4.7: Physical Disability Category

Scale of Offence	Excerpts
Strong	*"... the word "cacat" has become insensitive and sounds harsh to be compared with "orang kelainan upaya" (persons with disabilities) because when you use the word "cacat" it's like a clearly trying to segregate the OKU people with the normal people which clearly very unpleasant…"* (Maryam)
Fairly	*"...something that you cannot change, that something that you're born with. It something that you can never change and you don't have any power over it. ...you can't control your physical disability."* (Amin)

According to Maryam and Sofea, they found this category is really 'strong' because it involves the feelings of innocent and fragile people. Maryam asserted that *"cacat"* carries a negative connotation as it directly labels someone with a disability, which sets them apart from normal human beings. Meanwhile, Sofea explained her stand by saying physical disability is not what people wish for when they are born into this world. Thus, using the word *"cacat"* is taboo because whenever the speakers use it to talk about someone or hurt their targeted listeners, it will also offend disabled people when they hear it. Next, Mohamed and Amin rated this category as 'fairly' for different reasons. Mohamed rated this category this way because he admitted using the terms related to disability towards his brother, who behaved differently. However, Mohamed does feel guilty labelling someone using such terms. As for Amin, he puts this category as moderate because he highlights the actual meaning of the word *"cacat"* itself, a condition that God fates.

viii. Sexual Act

The sexual act category gained the limelight among the rest from the list because all respondents concurred that this category belongs under the stream of 'strong' in terms of offensiveness level. Sexual topics have been categorized between 'strong' and 'very strong' by the respondents. The examples of the words that are listed under this category are *"rogol"* (rape), *"melancap"* (masturbate), *"seks"* (sex), *"pelacur"*, *"bohsia"*,   and

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"sundal" (those three terms refer to a prostitute). The excerpts in the following uncover respondents' comments in regard to this category:

Table 4.8: Sexual Category

Scale of Offence	Excerpts
Very strong	*"Because it's the word that usually people, it just sounds very aggressive, because its labeling people. Basically it is labelling people and it's just downgrading people like if you wanted to say "bohsia" and also "sundal.""* (Maryam)
Strong	*"I just find those words really, they can be traumatizing like "rogol" or rape, it is a very traumatizing word. ...And you know how our society actually delineates anything involve sex and virginity, as taboo right? ...It's very offensive, it's very triggering, I guess is because of society."* (Sofea)

Some of the taboo words from the examples refer to someone that offers sexual intercourse illegally. Hence, Maryam and Mohamed stated that employing such words towards others unrelated to the title is improper. For Sofea, she described her stand in general that the habit of expressing oneself using sexual topics is deemed disgraceful since the Malay culture itself is against this practice. Meanwhile, Amin emphasized that there is no right situation for people to use these words for entertainment because some of the terms are associated with derogatory bases. Altogether, using taboo words related to the sexual category for labelling or expressing one's state of mind is strictly erroneous and displeasing.

ix. Intellect-based Terms

The lexicals *"bodoh"*, *"lembab"*, *"bangang"*, *"bengap"* are examples for this category which refer to the slow learners. Intellect-based terms' category received various offensiveness ranges, from 'strong', 'fairly', to 'little'. All in all, each of the respondents shared their comments as demonstrated below:

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Table 4.9: Intellect-based Terms Category

Scale of Offence	Excerpts
Strong	*"I would usually think that everything that you say would go back to you, will return back to you. ...But if you if you use it like as a like to to express excitement or in a very positive way, that it's okay I think. ...but if you use it to actually downgrade people to really call out people stupid, that is not okay."* (Maryam)
Fairly	*"I put it as 'fairly' because I watch, I witnessed a lot of students actually struggling with their studies and teachers or educators around them say it in their face "why you so stupid?" ...Because I witnessed that firsthand how much does words could hurt people when it was very intentional. ...It's normal but it's still offensive when it's used intentionally to talk about somebody's intellectual ability."* (Sofea)
Little	*"I know some people will get extremely triggered by this. But I feel like it's, its okay. It's not It's not like, I do not take offense to it."* (Amin)

Maryam's personal belief made her stick to her decision to rate it as 'strong', even though she would still use this category when expressing excitement. Meanwhile, Sofea's personal experiences influenced her choices in rating this category as 'fairly' instead of 'little' though she also employed intellect-based terms' taboo words at some time. Next, Mohamed compared the act of overusing taboo words, changing the status of those words to become normal to be used and sounds less harsh. Thus, it led him to mark this category as 'little' only, indicating intellect-based terms have become normalized due to overuse by the people. For Amin, he explained his decision on rating this category as 'little' because he does not feel offended dealing with this category personally. In a general sense, although this category comes with different ranges of offensiveness, all respondents did profess that the terms under this category are not highly offensive, depending on the context that they preferred to use it.

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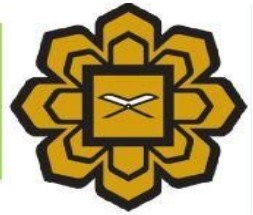
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x. Bad Luck

Finally, the bad luck category is the last theme from the list. *"Sial"* is used as an example of Malay taboo words for this category, which refers to bad luck. This category presents each level of offensiveness from the respondents with their explanations:

Table 4.10: Bad Luck Category

Scale of Offence	Excerpts
Very strong	*"It contradicts with the noble Malay values and culture. ...Through the usage of the word "sial" for example, it enhances the degree of bad luck as to be damned and that's why it sounds very harsh which is why, I rated it as very strong."* (Maryam)
Little	*"Because I use it a lot."* (Sofea)
Fairly	*"I think it's because of overuse of it. ...um my family really there are times when we use it. So at that time, my family were like, you cannot really use it. So that's why I think because of my upbringing, that's why I label it higher on the fairly, fairly scale..."* (Mohamed)
Does not feel strong	*""Sial" pun is just like something that we kind of learn, it just happens naturally so and people use it daily, I guess I can hear a lot of people saying that daily so it does not feel that strong."* (Amin)

Sofea and Amin highlighted the frequent usage of the word *"sial"* has made them categorize this category with a lower degree of offensiveness. Sofea often used it, while Amin always found people who utter the word. Likewise, in Mohamed's case, he did mention that the word *"sial"* is overused, which makes it not sound offensive. However, his upbringing shaped his mind to see the bad luck category as 'fairly' instead of 'little'. In contrast with Maryam, she reckoned this category as highly offensive because it is against the Malay values and culture. She also mentioned that using "sial" will only worsen any bad situation when the speaker uses the word.

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ANALYSIS 3
WOMEN'S LANGUAGE MODEL

Lakoff's framework is used as a guideline to seek respondents' perspectives about the idea that women have fragile nature when using language. One of the linguistic features from WL that this study focuses on is "(Super) Polite statement, e.g. avoidance of strong taboo words."

i. (Super) Polite statement e.g., avoidance of strong taboo words

　　　Women in communication use a few linguistic features, and one of them uses super polite forms of language, which means the absence of strong taboo words. Based on the interview, all respondents did point out common social expectation of women in communication. An example is as follows:

　　　"*... most women would usually use a weaker taboo words right, because women　are more sensitive to their self image. ...If a woman use a lot of taboo words, it　just doesn' look nice on a woman. I think it is also again, because of gender　expectation　because women are not expected to use taboo words, women are　expected to be polite, and taboo words doesn't align with politeness.*" (Maryam)

　　　Based on personal beliefs, Maryam and Mohamed found the usage of taboo words by women to be discomforting, while Sofea and Amin do not feel bothered by it. Nevertheless, respondents' comments exhibited the traditional idea that politeness is expected in women's speech. According to Maryam, she mentioned that women tend to employ weaker taboo words due to self-image and the influence of society that shaped them to speak using standard language most of the time. Her answer is similar to Sofea's that pointed to society's expectation of their gender when it comes to the rules of using language. Mohamed also stated about the concept of traditional gender roles, whereby women are expected to speak in a high manner to be compared with men. Meanwhile, Amin was quite furious at the belief that women shall speak respectfully because each gender deserves to speak using any speech patterns. Amin indirectly acknowledges that this type of communication stereotype is rooted in the traditions of the Malay society.

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i. Women Against Double-Standard in Communication

Gender stereotypes often limit women's speech as they have been taught to use polite language since they are little. Nevertheless, women in the present times are going beyond the traditional rules expected of them. The statement is proven based on the data collected from the respondents:

> *"... women today are more bold compared to woman before and they think that women can also do what men can. ...Women are using a lot of taboo words, especially on social media, because they think that they can be just as aggressive as men."* (Maryam)

It is deduced from what has been said above that women nowadays use taboo language more. Maryam and Mohamed stated that social media allows women to be expressive and use taboo terms frequently. Maryam mentioned that women today are bolder, which led them to use such language. Nonetheless, for Mohamed, such practices look improper if women use taboo words in the public domain. For Sofea, she approves of the use of taboo words by women as she believes this use is related to gender equality. She stated that women should be granted the right to use taboo language the same way men do. Even Amin commented that women today are going against the outdated expectations of society.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

RESEARCH QUESTION 1
What are the respondents' perceptions of employing taboo words?

Results from analysis 1 illustrate the differences of perspectives regarding the use of taboo language among the respondents. Despite the differences in their stands, all respondents agreed that employing taboo words in insulting form to hurt the addressee is inappropriate. Their answers are in line with an argument made by Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams, where the beauty

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or filth of language is determined by the ear of listeners or collective society.[38] Individuals are familiar with their language's obscene words and the societal contexts in which they are desired, acceptable, banned, or downright risky to use. Every society has its set of taboo words. Following this, the Malays' norms see the act of using any kinds of taboo words to insult or hurt someone's feelings as improper. They know the meanings of each Malay taboo word that has been learned since early life and understand its social limits. Therefore, using taboo words in an uncivil manner is condemned and perceived as unacceptable in Malay taboo-speaking cultures.

According to respondents' answers, they only used Malay taboo words in private or informal settings. This result matches those observed in earlier studies that taboo subjects are the topics in which the words or the expressions are socially and culturally not spoken directly in public space.[39] Respondents' choices showed their awareness of the severity of using taboo language since it carries various negative connotations. To avoid offending the listeners' feelings, the speaker shall not utter taboo words in the public setting.

In spite of that, linguistic taboos are part of human language that could satisfy the need of users to express their diverse emotions.[40] Based on the respondents' perceptions, most of them agreed to use Malay taboo words as part of their coping mechanism when the feelings of anger and frustrations surrounded them. This finding is in agreement with Yao and Wei's study which showed that taboo language is used in a context to relieve pent up emotions.[41] It gives them the feeling of satisfaction and could leave them feeling energised when they use taboo words.[42]

Other than that, all respondents used Malay taboo words among the people they are close to and comfortable with. This finding corroborates Yao and Wei's ideas, who suggested that taboo language can also be employed in a context to reveal relationships between language

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[38] Fromkin, Victoria, et al. *An Introduction to* Language. 10th ed., Wadsworth, 2014.

[39] Akmajian, Adrian, et al. *Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication*. MIT Press, 2001; Brown, Keith. *Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics*. 2nd ed., vol. 1, Elsevier Science, 2005; Wardhaugh, Ronald. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. 5th ed., Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

[40] Masitha, Pujiana. "Sociolinguistics Analysis of Taboo Language in Internet Meme." *Seminar Nasional Kajian Bahasa Dan Pengajarannya (KBSP) IV*, 2016, pp. 505–512.

[41] Yao, Zhao and Wei Zhang. "Interpersonal Function of the Linguistic Taboo." *International Conference on Economy, Management and Education Technology*, 2016, pp. 1960–63.

[42] Masitha, Pujiana. "Sociolinguistics Analysis of Taboo Language in Internet Meme." *Seminar Nasional Kajian Bahasa Dan Pengajarannya (KBSP) IV*, 2016, pp. 505–512.

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users.[43] Exchanging thoughts and feelings using taboo words is part of the communication process that shows the speaker and listener acquaintance and intimacy.[44] When both parties can loosely employ taboo words among themselves, it also manifests that a successful communication process occurred because both understand the message addressed without feeling offended.[45]

All in all, the views on the practice of linguistic taboos in the Malay's societal context is permitted on certain occasions, depending on the context and situation in which they are used.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2

What are the differences between particular categories of taboo words in terms of acceptance from the respondents?

There were ten categories of Malay taboo words analysed previously: animal, racial, death, religion and faith, genital organs of males and females, physical disability, sexual act, intellect-based terms, and bad luck. The in-depth interviews conducted with 4 BENL students showcase the different degrees of acceptance towards some of the ten categories. A possible explanation for this might be that it was based on their personal beliefs and experiences, as well as the situational context that led them to label some of the categories differently.

Nonetheless, the study found that the most offensive categories from the list are those which are associated with sexual terms. The finding was in line with the claim made by Wong, Kwong, Wah, and Nasruddin and Lomas that anything related to sexual topics is stamped as taboo in most societies.[46] Meanwhile, the category of death is considered acceptable to be used when expressing emotions. It is mainly due to overuse that makes the taboo meanings weaker

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[43] Yao, Zhao and Wei Zhang. "Interpersonal Function of the Linguistic Taboo." *International Conference on Economy, Management and Education Technology*, 2016, pp. 1960–63.

[44] Gamble, Teri K., and Michael Gamble. *Communication Works*. New York: Random House, 1984.

[45] Pearson, Judy C. *Gender and Communication*. W.C. Brown Publishers, 1985.

[46] Wong, Li-Ping, et al. "HIV/AIDS-Related Knowledge Among Malaysian Young Adults: Findings From a Nationwide Survey." *Journal of the International AIDS Society*, vol. 10, no. 6, 2008. doi.org/DOI: 10.1186/1758-2652-10-6-148; Lomas, Peter. "Taboo and illness." *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, vol. 42, no. 1, 1969, pp. 33-39. doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8341.1969.tb02054.x.

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and diminishes its effect.[47] The finding suggests that people are becoming more familiar with the taboo terms due to overuse and feel that using any taboo words related to death is normalised. Above all, the list of the categories revealed a few topics that are still seen as taboo by some, such as animal, racial, religion and faith, genital organs from both genders, and physical disability.

RESEARCH QUESTION 3
How does the use of taboo words correlate to gender expectations in Malay society?

Analysis 3 presented the expectations against women from the Malay society to use polite forms of language. This result matched with the claim made by Lakoff that mentioned super polite forms as part of the linguistic features of women.[48] Women are taught to speak in a ladylike manner and not harshly like men do.[49] Using bad language such as taboo words could lead to criticizing women for being unfeminine or aggressive. Furthermore, taboo words are reckoned as aggressive and belong to men's language domain.[50] Hence, women are discouraged by the members of the Malay community to use them.

Nevertheless, Lakoff's arguments on women's speech that are patently inferior to men are refuted in this contemporary period. The finding demonstrated that women in Malay society are going against the linguistic features attributed to them. This finding was also consistent with the results of previous studies.[51] These studies highlighted that women's linguistic habits

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[47] Fershtman, Chaim, et al. "Taboos and Identity: Considering the Unthinkable." *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics*, 2011, pp. 139–64. doi.org/DOI: 10.1257/mic.3.2.139; Jdetawy, Loae F. "The Nature, Types, Motives, and Functions of Swear Words: A Sociolinguistic Analysis." *International Journal of Development Research*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2019, pp. 27048–58.

[48] Lakoff, Robin. "Language and Woman's Place." *Language in Society*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1973, pp. 45–80.

[49] Dong, Jinyu. "Study on Gender Differences in Language Under the Sociolinguistics." *Canadian Social Science*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2014, pp. 92–96. doi.org/10.3968/4602; Knyazyan, Anna. "Male and Female Profanity in English Anecdotes." *Armenian Folia Anglistika*, vol. 2, no. 16, 2017, pp. 27-37.

[50] AmirAhmad. Jafari B., and Samaneh Rangriz. "Taboo Language and Norms in Sociolinguistics." *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2019, pp. 75–83.

[51] Klerk, Vivian D. "How Taboo are Taboo Words For Girls?" *Language in Society*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1992, pp. 277–289. doi.org/10.1017/s0047404500015293 ; Stapleton, Karyn. "Gender and Swearing: A Community Practice." *Women and Language,* vol. 26, no. 2, 2003, pp. 22-33; Gauthier, Michael, and Adrien Guille. "Gender and Age Differences in Swearing." *Advances in Swearing Research: New languages and new contexts*,
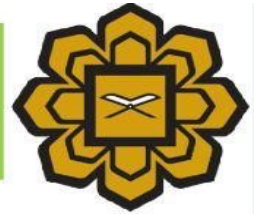
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to be polite in using language no longer match commonly held perceptions by society. In summary, these results show that although women are still expected to use standard forms of speech, linguistic taboos are not exclusively for men.

CONCLUSION

This study attempts to contribute towards a better understanding of social acceptance and gender differences in the usage of taboo words in the Malay culture. Throughout the study, it can be concluded that using taboo language to express emotions is accepted, provided it does not involve humiliating or offending someone else. It shows that although there are a few categories of taboo words deemed offensive to be uttered candidly, there are a few among the ten categories that are negotiable to be used. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the usage of Malay taboo words is only acceptable in certain occasions, domains, and contexts. Hence, being mindful before using taboo words is crucial to maintain social harmony and stability in the Malay community. Finally, the finding of this study illustrated that it is acceptable for women nowadays to use taboo words, although outmoded stereotypes against them still exist in the Malay societal context.

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edited by Kristy Beers Fägersten and Karyn Stapleton, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017, pp. 137-156.

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