



The Social Meanings of Profanity Use: The Contextual Uses of Abusive Language in the Digital Sphere among Youths

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Abstract. This study investigates the use of profanity among teenagers on social media using the Textual Framing Framework, focusing on linguistic, cultural, and sociolinguistic dimensions. Data from selected online posts were analysed using AntConc to identify word frequency, thematic patterns, and framing categories. The findings reveal that profanity is commonly used as a means of emotional release, conflict expression, rebellion, and humour, with bonding being the least observed theme. Linguistic framing highlights code-switching, phonetic respelling, and abbreviation as common forms, while cultural and sociolinguistic framing show how traditional values of sopan santun are gradually replaced by casual and expressive speech. Anonymity emerged as the main factor encouraging bolder language use without social accountability. The study concludes that profanity among youths reflects both linguistic creativity and declining cultural restraint, calling for digital guidance within Education 5.0 and IR 4.0 to foster responsible online communication.

Keywords: AntConc, Profanity, Education 5.0, IR 4.0, Digital

1 Introduction

Language reflects the existence of human beings. The importance of this is undeniable, and it is an identity of thought, culture, and values that have shaped societies for centuries. It has to be preserved; look into as the utmost unique characteristic that we should uphold. Without language, courtesy, respect, and the traditions of harmonious interaction, and social norms cultivated over generations that have contributed to the dignity of human relationships, and the stability of civilised life would be affected drastically. Social media has transformed the way we communicate and share information, breaking down barriers and connecting people from all corners of the world. Although social media has facilitated communication and connecting people from different parts of the world, it has also created a space for negative experiences for many. The act of belittling someone's language skills by using derogatory and humiliating language at someone who is thought to be illiterate is known as an insult. However, using such language and profanity in general has been accepted as the standard among internet users.

This is common on social media, where anonymity makes users feel safe and gives them the courage to use abusive language. Technology has made it easier to post online because there is no accountability to anyone in person. The internet has made it faster. Teenagers sometimes use certain types of words that are considered abusive,

which could transform into a built-in handicap instead of a way to grow. Many of them are using profanity to hide their destructive behaviour, which is making parents, teachers, and society more afraid. When teenagers use words carelessly or violently, it can hurt relationships, make disagreements worse, and damage the very humanity that language was designed to strengthen. What is particularly concerning is that linguistic profanity appears to be a prevalent phenomenon in societies that highly value native-speakerism. Even though it can have damaging effects, not much has been done to address this problem. As [4], stated, in Malaysia, for example some individuals including teenagers are so accustomed to language shaming that they may not even be aware of how harmful their behavior can be.

Online profanity and abusive language among teenagers are visible and is discussed rigorously nowadays. However, the use and perceptions of profanity among them remain under-explored. Contextual and social significances are deemed crucial for education, digital literacy, and online moderation regulations, indicating when profanity is damaging versus when it functions as harmless peer interactions. This study investigates how teenagers use language to define themselves within peer groups and larger digital cultures, in addition to expressing emotions. The integration of corpus-based frequencies with framing analysis adds to the body of knowledge by demonstrating how patterns of identity, influence, and emotional expression in online teenagers' communication. A small-scale corpus has been analysed using AntConc and textual framing framework. The research paper analyses the following research questions:

1. What forms of profanity are evident in teenagers' social media postings, and how are these linguistically framed?
2. How does anonymity or identity display influence the textual framing of profanity in teenagers' online interactions?

Based on the description above, this study examines the social implications and applications of profanity language among teenagers in digital contexts. Its aim is to determine the language forms adopted and teenagers' perceptions and rationalisations of them. Understanding these patterns and communicative functions is crucial for enhancing our comprehension of profanity's role in social media interactions and for developing strategies to foster positive and respectful online communication. Teenagers must be made aware of the dire consequences of using such profane language, and they should not hide behind anonymity as a motivation to do so.

2 Literature Review

Textual framing framework is adopted in this paper to examine cultural, linguistic, and social meanings and the anonymity of profanity use among teenagers on social media. This framework works to capture how teenagers perceive cultural norms and digital practices to normalise, if not to challenge, the notions of respect and politeness as viewed traditionally. The focus is on lexical choice, interactional context, and perceptual justifications; profanity is analysed as a framing device that serves as a social signal to reflect humour, conflict, and emotional release while linguistically reframing it through the use of slang, abbreviations, and emojis— one of the multimodal markers. Anonymity reframes social rules, in which it changes how profanity is perceived and used. The once unacceptable in a classroom may become casual online.

This framework is built on three theorists: Ethman, who defines framing as selecting certain aspects of reality to make them more noticeable, which applies directly to profanity use: the same word can be framed as humour, stress relief, or insult depending on context. [1] stated that frame analysis highlights interactional cues to guide interpretation, while Tannen, shows discourse style that influences whether speech is read as playful or confrontational online [2, 11].

In recent years, the widespread use of social media in Malaysia has brought with it the unfortunate rise of language profanity especially among teenagers. With the anonymity that the Internet provides, offenders are able to attack individuals without fear of recognition, leading to devastating consequences for their victims [12]. Teenagers are hiding behind the façade of being unknown to freely use language that comes with profanity as they like to express their emotions on topics to their interest. Emotions also play an important role in the use and evaluations of swearing behaviour. [10] argues that “swear terms not only consist of words that express notions that are otherwise forbidden, but they are also used in a way that makes the hidden and controlled emotions of the speaker-performer discernible”. This is especially risky as it could be habitual and create another phenomenon among youngsters of being disrespectful and lack no concern over sensitive issues[5]. Although Malaysians may practice different religious rituals or hold different ideologies, they still pay attention to being appropriate and polite in communication to respect each other's differences, a vital concern for those living in this multicultural country. In no small measure, *budi* (virtue/politeness) helps govern the rules of communication, but the term is nuanced, carrying with its multiple meanings derived from the cultural context. Traditionally, respect, care for other people's emotion, politeness and language use are among the criteria measuring a *budi bahasa* (man of culture). *Budi bahasa* (man of culture) is incorporated in the principles articulated in the *Rukunegara* [7].

A person's social identity is significantly affected by these interactions. Therefore, it is imperative to exhibit acceptable respect, use appropriate language, and maintain politeness when communicating on social media. It could have a substantial influence on our interactions with others and our perceptions of them. However, it is important to practice appropriate etiquette in order to efficiently deal with these dynamics.

Online platforms allow teenagers to switch between identifiable and anonymous communication spaces, and this affects how profanity is framed. Studies show that when teenagers are subjected to the use of profanity, they become more polarised and less trusting in their online communication [9]. It has been reported the frequent use of such language, including its deployment in online context to convey anger and frustrations but also to draw attention [8]. These behaviours have implications for social norms, user behaviour, and productivity. It is considered as a taboo, relates to vulgarity and disrespect in Malaysian context. However, it has recently become more common on social media platforms and is even deemed as a normal way of communication among friends and people they know. In Malaysian culture where the use of polite and respectful language is highly valued, the presence of abusive and profane expressions in context remains socially unacceptable. Malaysian laws also prohibit the use of abusive language in public use physically or online [3]. This is supported by NASCA (2012) emphasising in Malaysia there is legislation which deals with the protection of cyberspace users is the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998. It provides a regulatory framework to cater for the convergence of the telecommunications, broadcasting and computer industries, with the aim of pushing

Malaysia as a major global centre and hub for communications and multimedia information and content services. Hence, the frequent and constant depictions of abusive language on social media in Malaysia provoke questions as to why people are opting to use profane language despite its offensive nature.

In analysing the dataset for this research, the identification in classifying the profanity used will determine the rationalisations of the word used in the Malaysian social networking sites as well as the role they play in a given cultural setting. The lexical categories observed include insults targeting intelligence or character (e.g. bodoh, bongok), animal terms, excrement or bodily waste terms (e.g. taik), blasphemous or religiously inappropriate expressions, and sexual or explicit references, often in English (e.g. fuck). Other categories consist of name-calling through negative epithets, racial or ethnic slurs, euphemistic substitutes or softened forms, and profanity used in bonding or joking among peers. In addition, profanity appears as a means of emotional venting, particularly in contexts of anger and frustration. In research done, it was mentioned that there were 49 Malay and 22 English swear words as well as phrases. The most common swear words among Malaysian youth identified from both tweets and interviews are 'bodoh' for the Malay language and 'fuck' for the English language. From the analyses, among the functions of expressing emotions, insulting others, making jokes and expressing solidarity, the highest occurrence is in insulting others [6].

3 Methodology

A mixed-method approach integrating quantitative corpus analysis with qualitative interpretation was the approach used to investigate the prevalence of abusive language among teenagers that have strong educational backgrounds. This study employed the use of AntConc, a corpus analysis software applied in linguistic research, to analyse patterns of profanity used among teenagers in social media posts and lexical variations. This analysis focused on word frequencies and list functions to identify linguistic patterns and derive thematic categories. Percentile distributions were used to determine the top-ranking abusive words used among teenagers. The capacity to efficiently analyse small to medium-sized datasets deliver transparent results is significant. Hence, the datasets are dependable for objectively assessing language usage and can uncover linguistic patterns or signs that may be overlooked by manual analysis.

50 social media posts from telegram confession groups on topics discussed were selected from two leading universities in Malaysia in this study. Telegram confession groups offer a semi-private, anonymous, and unfiltered communication space unlike public social media like Instagram or twitter hence, the best platform to analyse the naturalistic use of profanity as linguistic and emotional resource. It is text-dominant and asynchronous which is suitable for discourse and lexical analysis unlike Tiktok or Instagram which prioritise audiovisual. The data were collected between 28 September to 10 October 2025 during the orientation and first week of a new semester for both universities. During this time, it often produces high levels of emotional and social interaction as students adapt to new environments, routines and peer networks. Students took this opportunity by using the platform to express excitement, anxiety, and frustration through candid and often profane language.

AntConc outputs, which include concordance lines and collocates, were interpreted using the textual framing framework. The software's word list, concordance and collocate functions were used to identify the frequent profanity use, linguistic features and recurrent word associations. This is relevant in this study to be able to distinguish themes including code-switching, phonetic respelling, alphabet repetition, and truncated words as well as frames, including aspects such as cultural framing, linguistic evolution, sociolinguistic implications, and the influence of anonymity aligned with textual framing framework. AntConc results were then cross-checked with manual thematic coding to ensure the lexical clusters accurately representing the communicative frames and cultural meanings thus providing a balanced and credible approach to explore linguistic behavior in the nowadays digital sphere. Diagram 1 visually summarise the steps involved in the collection of data, processing, analysing, and thematic interpretation as the overall methodology process in this study which outlines the integration of quantitative corpus analysis using AntConc with qualitative interpretation using textual framing framework.

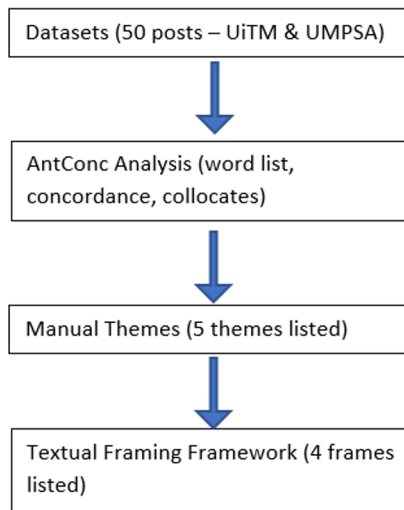


Fig. 1. Mixed Method Analytical Process

4 Results

This study identified five themes: emotional release, conflict, rebellion, humour, and bonding. The Textual Framing Framework, which includes cultural, linguistic, sociolinguistic, and digital shifts, aligns with the themes that demonstrate that the profanity used by teenagers is of social significance in linguistic practice, as evidenced by cultural adaptation and emotional expression. Table 1 shows the frequency and percentile of the themes used among teenagers, and the textual framing framework examines the lexical choices, tone, structure, and context that influence interpretation. However, the dynamics of digital interaction also have an important role to play. This study identifies the analysed posts that reflect challenges to social norms within the community.

Table 1. Frequency and Percentile of Thematic Categories in Teenagers' Social Media Posts

No	Themes	Frequency	Percentile (%)	Textual Framing Framework
1	Emotional Release	27	54	Linguistic & Sociolinguistic framing
2	Conflict	27	54	Sociolinguistic framing & anonymity
3	Rebellion	18	36	Cultural & Linguistic framing
4	Humour	8	16	Linguistic, Sociolinguistic & Cultural framing
5	Bonding	2	4	Cultural & Sociolinguistic framing, and anonymity

5 Findings

This study investigated the percentile distribution as shown in Table 1 to reflect a clearer understanding and ranking of profanity use, highlighting that emotional and confrontational expressions dominate teenagers' digital communication.

The most frequent themes were Emotional Release and Conflict, each appearing 27 times (54%), indicating that profanity was often used to vent emotions or express disagreement. For example, “memang anjing sial betul MPP uitm semangat ni... bagitahu la orang atasan tu babi, ... FAKYU, ... taik ko.” Another example “abende babi ni tkde grindr ke ... sial, ... barua, ... bodoh, ... fakyu”. In these sentences, the words “FAKYU” and “fakyu” expresses anger or irritation but softened through phonetic respelling. The user avoids direct profanity while keeping its emotional force. In linguistics, it shows phonetic respelling and orthographic adaptation typical of online spaces while sociolinguistic, it reflects casually or humorously among peers. This can be perceived as anger that is expressed safely within social norms even with the use of capital letters. Teenagers often use such modified profanity more freely when their real identity is hidden, as anonymity reduces fear of social or disciplinary consequences. This linguistic behaviour illustrates how identity concealment (anonymity) enables bolder and less restrained expression, allowing users to maintain emotional intensity without direct accountability. The frequent occurrence of the word *fuck* and its variants, such as *FAKYU*, in the present dataset aligns with the findings of [6], who identified *fuck* as the most commonly used profanity among teenagers in digital discourse. The use of the words “anjing sial” and “babi” in the Malay language demonstrates profanity used equivalent to animal use. The most commonly used are anjing(dog) and babi (pig) and its variant shown in the post such as “gila babi”, “annoying babi”, “babi anak dengan mak sama penyunda!” has evolved into common markers of emotional intensity and peer-group communication among teenagers. Traditionally considered highly offensive, these terms have undergone recontextualisation in sociolinguistic, where repeated use in casual digital contexts reduces their original taboo value. Phrases such as *gila babi* and *annoying babi* are now used to express frustration, surprise, or emphasis rather than literal insult. Among peers, this shift reflects linguistic normalisation in which profanity functions as a shared social code that conveys attitude and familiarity. The evolution of these words highlights how teenagers reshape language boundaries, transforming once-severe insults into everyday expressions of emotion, which have become socially acceptable

and the reconstruction of their identity within their digital interactions reflects both resistance to authority and adaptation to the once traditional norms practiced.

The theme Rebellion appeared 18 times (36%), showing teenagers' tendency to challenge social or linguistic norms through creative expression. Expressions like "yang jual sweat and smelly panties/bra ada x", "Nak isap divk", and "Hi any t or b? Jom fun ada port" were openly discussed. These expressions used of profanity reflect the teenagers' boldness in the disguise of vulgarity to bypass filters or signal taboo indirectly. Teenagers use online shorthand for identity ("t/b" for top/bottom) and local slang ("ada port") that reflects sexual openness and digital-group communication norms. coded word ("divk" for "dick") reflects teenagers' bold but restrained expression in digital spaces. The deliberate substitution of v for c indicates an effort to conceal direct profanity while still conveying the same meaning. This linguistic behaviour represents what Goffman describes as frame management, where users shape their expressions according to social expectations and perceived audience reactions [2]. It also aligns with [5]'s view that swear terms reveal "hidden and controlled emotions of the person speaking," suggesting that profanity functions as an outlet for self-expression rather than mere vulgarity. In this sense, rebellion among teenagers is not only linguistic but as a personal freedom in which language becomes a stage for testing emotional boundaries or an exploration under the safety of online anonymity. This phenomenon reflects a shift away from traditional Malaysian values of politeness (*sopan santun*) and restraint in speech. Teenagers today use language that earlier generations would have considered shameful or disrespectful. This change suggests a cultural loosening of linguistic taboos, where Western influence, social media, and peer acceptance reshape what is considered acceptable expression. The digital environment promotes openness and immediacy, weakening long-held norms of modesty and speech decorum. In this context, profanity marks a cultural transformation where being direct or bold in language replaces the older ideal of being shy and well-mannered.

Humour was observed 8 times (16%), suggesting that profanity was occasionally framed playfully to build rapport or lighten tone. Expressions such as "Cringe gila babi smpp tahun lepas", "... tkde akai ... gampang betul", and "Awek noty l ada x ...". These expressions were used jokingly to tease or express embarrassment as well as to build peer connection. Playful profanity among teenagers reflects a misplaced sense of maturity and belonging. Many uses profanity and abusive language to appear confident or socially aligned with peers, assuming that such talk signals boldness and open-mindedness. Teenagers often mistake vulgar expression for social strength, normalising speech that undermines the very courtesy and self-control once valued in Malaysian culture. The acceptance of profanity as humour exposes a desire to fit in among peers, where being loud or offensive is equated with being relatable, and restraint is unfairly seen as weakness or simplicity. Sociolinguistically, humour arises from tone, relationship between speakers, and context—the same phrase could sound offensive to outsiders but friendly within a peer group. This reflects Tannen's view that conversational style and shared background guide how meaning and intention are interpreted in interaction [11]. The term "*noty*" (from "naughty") softens the sexual undertone and turns it into casual teasing rather than serious propositioning. These suggestive or taboo expressions are normalised through informal language and peer familiarity. Culturally, it also reflects the influence of globalised youth slang, where English phrases add a sense of modernity and social ease. Such humour expressions work as a bonding device, in which flirtation is framed as a shared joke rather than open indecency.

The least frequent theme, Bonding, occurred only 2 times (4%), showing that profanity was rarely used explicitly to strengthen relationships. Though humour looks as if it is for bonding purpose, in truth, this behaviour reveals a form of immature conformity, where it replaces genuine individuality. Among students in higher learning institutions, such conduct is troubling. Many hides behind the comfort of online anonymity, using humour as a mask to justify profanity and indecent expression. What is framed as playful interaction is, in reality, a careless display of poor judgement and moral decline. The need to appear bold or entertaining among strangers has led some students to abandon the civility expected of educated individuals. This misuse of language reflects not freedom of expression, but a lack of discipline and self-respect, revealing a concerning weakening of values within academic environments that are meant to nurture intellect and integrity. Culturally, this trend weakens the values of well-mannered and well-behaved individuals who are expected to become the intellectual assets of the nation. The contrast is evident when compared to earlier generations, when communication was shaped by respect and restraint rather than by the aggressive influence of technology and social media. What was once guided by modesty and thoughtful expression has now shifted toward impulsive, attention-seeking language that reflects declining cultural and moral discipline among today's youths.

The findings of this study addressed both research questions. For Research Question 1, which explored the forms of profanity commonly used by teenagers on social media, the analysis identified frequent use of both English and Malay swear words such as *fuck*, *babi*, *sial*, and their creative variations like *FAKYU* and *gila babi*. These expressions were linguistically framed through code-switching, phonetic respelling, repetition, and mixed-mode language, reflecting how profanity has evolved into a normalised feature of youth online discourse. Besides reflecting linguistic evolution and normalisation of taboo words, cultural normalisation of taboo language is evident too in this research. From a sociolinguistic view, such expressions show how profanity functions as a shared social code for emotional release, rebellion, and humour. The bonding function appeared least frequently, indicating that profanity is rarely used to strengthen relationships but rather to assert identity and peer alignment.

For Research Question 2, which examined how anonymity or identity display influences the textual framing of profanity, the results showed that teenagers tend to use stronger and bolder expressions when their real identity is concealed. Anonymity enables linguistic experimentation and emotional release, while identity display encourages moderation and humour-based framing. This distinction highlights how digital context shapes the tone, frequency, and intention behind profanity use among teenagers.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study applied the Textual Framing Framework to interpret how profanity among teenagers and young online users reflects evolving linguistic, social, and cultural meanings. The findings indicate that profanity is not used randomly but strategically framed through tone, lexical choice, and context. Linguistic framing revealed creative manipulation of language through code-switching, phonetic respelling, repetition, and abbreviation, showing how digital users reshape traditional boundaries of acceptable speech. Cultural framing further illustrates the weakening of long-held values of *sopan santun* and restraint, replaced by expressive and open

language influenced by global media. Sociolinguistic framing highlighted how profanity functions as a social tool to project attitude, build peer acceptance, or assert identity within digital communities. The themes of emotional release, conflict, rebellion, humour, and bonding demonstrated that profanity has become a marker of online youth identity rather than pure indecency.

Anonymity also emerged as the key factor in this study enabling aggressive and uninhibited expression. Hidden identities allow teenagers to escape social accountability, resulting in language that is bolder and less filtered. The textual framing of these expressions demonstrates how digital interaction reshapes moral and communicative boundaries. Profanity, therefore, operates not only as emotional release but as a reflection of weakened cultural restraint, highlighting the need for renewed awareness of respectful discourse in online spaces, particularly among students in higher learning institutions.

In preventing the misuse of profanity, proper guidance for young users is essential. Such efforts must be integrated into Education 5.0 and aligned with the values of IR 4.0, promoting responsible digital communication while fostering creativity and critical thinking. By addressing the issues highlighted through the textual framing analysis particularly the cultural, linguistic, and sociolinguistic dimensions, educators and policymakers can help control the potential harm reflected in these frames. The goal is not to suppress expression but to cultivate ethical awareness, digital discipline, and respectful engagement among teenagers navigating an increasingly open and technologically driven communication space. However, this is the gap of the research. There is a lack of integration between digital communication practices and educational models such as Education 5.0 and IR 4.0, which aim to build responsible and ethical digital citizens. Although many studies have examined online communication and language behaviour among youths, research focusing on profanity through a textual framing perspective remains limited, particularly within the Malaysian cultural context. Previous works have often emphasised linguistic patterns or psychological motives, overlooking how framing mechanisms in linguistic, cultural, and sociolinguistic shape meaning, intention, and social interpretation of profanity. Moreover, the influence of anonymity in intensifying aggressive or uninhibited language use has not been sufficiently linked to these framing processes.

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