"What the F—": Taboo Words in the TV series *Sex Education*

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the functions of taboo words used by male and female characters in the first season of the TV series *Sex Education*. Azzaro's (2005) and Allan & Burridge's (2009) functions of taboo words were employed to identify and classify the use of taboo words in the TV series. There were 114 utterances of taboo words in the TV series. The most common function is swearing, or expletive expression (53.51%), followed by insults or abusive expression (29.82%), and the least used functions are the expression of social solidarity (11.40%) and stylistic choice (5.26 %). In regards to gender, both males and females use taboo words at nearly the same frequency. In fact, 58 out of 114 taboo words and expressions were used by female characters and 56 by male characters. Moreover, with respect to age group, young characters or teenagers in Sex Education appear to use taboo words more frequently than adult characters. Overall, 83 out of 114 taboo words and expressions were used by teenage characters and 31 by adult characters. In addition, there are frequency differences in the use of taboo words in four specific gender and age groups. Those groups are young males, adult males, young females, and adult females. The findings of this research provide valuable insights into the various functions of taboo words in the TV series.

Keywords: *age, functions, gender, taboo words, TV series.*

INTRODUCTION

Language is an essential tool for human beings. People use language to deliver information, ideas, and feelings. As stated by Allan and Burridge (2006), language is used as a weapon against enemies and as a release valve when we are angry, frustrated, or hurt. Some people may use utterances or expressions that are related to taboo words to express their emotions, like fear, anger, hate, jealousy, excitement, and so forth. Taboo words convey negative emotions and promote social harmony (Jay, 2009).

These days, the use of taboo words to express offensive and explicit references to people is becoming more common in society. In 2021, the BBFC (British Board of Film Classification, 2021) reported that the use of strong language has increased among people in the UK over the last five years. People are increasingly using taboo words related to vulgarity, profanity, and derogatory language in both private and public settings.

Jay (2009) argues that both speaker gender and age affect taboo word choice and frequency. Men use taboo words more frequently in public and tend to use more offensive terms than women (Jay, 2009). However, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013) claim that women are increasingly using more taboo words today than before. In addition, according to a study

from BBFC (2021), compared to men, women are 19% more likely to use taboo words now than they were five years ago.

The use of taboo words is not limited to specific age ranges (Thelwall, 2008; Jay, 2009). BBFC (2021) found that there is widespread acceptance of taboo words and their use, particularly among younger people. It is also reported that people under 35 years are significantly more likely to admit to using taboo words on a regular basis (BBFC, 2021).

The increasing phenomena of taboo words also appear in art/work created by humans. There are numerous works such as movies, television series, dramas, sitcoms, and the like in which people gain information and entertainment. This research deals with the functions of taboo words by males, females, young, and adults in *Sex Education*. The series talks about things that are considered taboo in British society, and it is worth analyzing due to the occurrence of taboo words in it. In other words, *Sex Education* is a good source to discover various functions of taboo words in conversation, as this study aims to enlarge the body of research on taboo words.

Based on the aforementioned explanations, the current study has two objectives, namely (1) to identify and to classify the character's utterances in the TV series *Sex Education* which contain taboo words using Azzaro (2005) and Allan & Burridge's (2009) functions of taboo words and (2) to describe taboo words usage in male, female, young and adult utterances and the possible shift in the use of taboo words according to the gender and age of the speaker.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Investigations on taboo words have been conducted in many different fields of study, such as behavioral science (Downes et al., 2021; Downes, 2022), neuroscience (Van Lacker & Cummings, 1999; Sulpizio et al., 2019), translation studies (Robati & Zand, 2018; Abdelaal & Al Sarhani, 2021), psycholinguistics (Christianson et al., 2017; Tuft et al., 2018), and politics (Cavazza & Guidetti, 2014; Montiel, Uyheng, & Leon, 2021). Moreover, there are several studies that use gender and age as the social variable.

McEnery (2006) examined taboo word forms and their scale of offense in the spoken British National Corpus (BNC) and Lancaster Corpus of Abuse (LCA). The results of the study show that males prefer stronger word forms while females prefer weaker taboo words. Regarding the speaker's age, McEnery (2006) found that teenagers are more likely to use taboo words than other age groups. A similar study was also conducted by Jay (2009) in examining taboo word types based on the speaker's gender and age. The findings of the research revealed that men use taboo words more frequently in public and tend to use more offensive words than women. The findings also highlighted that teenagers are the main users of taboo words.

In contrast to McEnery (2006) and Jay (2009), some studies have revealed that taboo words represent a common linguistic practice that is equally used by males and females in everyday conversation (de Klerk,1991; Stapleton, 2003; Gauthier & Guille, 2017). Therefore, contrary to what has long been believed, women do not use taboo words less frequently than men, nor do they use a significantly different register.

In addition, there have also been a few studies on the functions of taboo words within the context of daily conversation (Stapleton, 2003; Kapoor, 2016; Nodoushan, 2016) and mass media (Thelwall, 2008; Wang et al., 2014; Kurniawati & Hardjanto, 2019; Amin & Sharipudin, 2021). Those studies indicate that taboo words serve various functions in real life and mass media platforms.

Previous studies have focused more on the various types of taboo words and the degree of offensiveness. There are a few studies on the functions of taboo words. In addition, the number of research that centers both on gender and age differences in media has not been commonly conducted. This present research attempts to contribute to research on the functions of taboo words uttered by male, female, young and adult speakers in TV series.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In general, there is no consensus on the definition of taboo words. English has many other terms with

which to define and describe taboo words. Goddard (2015, p. 192) states that "there is seldom any sustained effort to define the terms or to differentiate between them". Thus, the literature on taboo words employs labels that include swear words (Hughes, 2006; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Jay, 2009; Ljung, 2011; Mohr, 2013), curse words (Jay, 2000; Thelwall, 2008; Goddard, 2015), bad language (Allan & Burridge, 2006; McEnery, 2006), to name but a few. Although there is a slight distinction between these terms, some experts use them interchangeably.

Jay (2009) defines taboo words as sanctioned or restricted on both institutional and individual levels based on the assumption that saying a taboo word will cause some harm. Moreover, Azzaro (2005, p. 2) suggests that taboo words refer to social and psychological areas of meaning connected to cultural taboos proposed by Jay (1992, 2000). Azzaro (2005) classifies taboo words semantically into five references: mental, physical, religious, scatological, and sexual.

Azzaro (2005) also categorizes taboo words based on their functions, such as swearing or expletive expression and insult or abusive expression. Swearing means any word or phrase with an unpleasant connotation and is mostly used to release emotions. According to Azzaro (2005), swearing is mostly characterized as a result of a situation generating the emotion of anger, annoyance, fear or under pressure, pain, frustration, shock, and so forth (e.g., *Fuck!*, *Shit!*, *and Jesus Christ!*).

Insults are disrespectful utterances that attack the interlocutors verbally, which, when used in a conversation, is likely to offend (e.g., *asshole*, *bitch*, and *idiot*). The speaker aims to use taboo words aggressively as a weapon against the hearer. Insults are considered more harmful than swearing because they are directed at a specific person or thing (Azzaro, 2005). He also argued that insults or abusive expressions can also appear as self-deprecation.

The latest theory of functions of taboo words was proposed by Allan & Burridge (2009). The categories are expressions of social solidarity and stylistic choice.

Allan & Burridge (2009) state that the expression of social solidarity is the use of taboo words to demonstrate in-group solidarity (particularly when directed at outsiders). Taboo words go beyond what is acceptable in society, and they help to define the gang (Allan & Burridge, 2006). Therefore, this taboo word usage is common among close speakers who interact frequently.

The stylistic choice is the use of taboo words as the marking of attitude to what is said (Allan & Burridge, 2009). Speakers may choose a taboo word to express a specific attitude toward what is being said; this could be exasperation, disapproval, and so on (Burridge, 2020). To put it in another way, it works to make an utterance more vivid.

Specifically, this present study combines Azzaro's (2005) and Allan & Burridge's (2009) theories of the functions of taboo words to better understand the functions of taboo words in TV series.

Furthermore, different gender and age will cause the diversity of languages (Jinyu, 2014). Traditionally, men tend to normalize vulgar conversation more than women. Jay (1992) states that men are more likely to swear in public and use more offensive words than women. McEnery states that women prefer 'weaker' taboo words that are less offensive, while men prefer 'stronger' ones (2006, pp. 29-30).

Speaker age is another linguistic variable that influences the pattern of taboo language usage. At present, younger people seem to use taboo words more frequently than older people (McEnery and Xiao, 2004). They come across it more frequently and are less bothered by it.

METHODS

The data gathered are utterances produced by the characters in the first season of *Sex Education,* which contain taboo words. The first season was released on January 11, 2019. It has eight episodes and runs from 47 to 53 minutes each. The episodes were downloaded from Netflix, and their transcripts were downloaded from https://8flix.com/.

To collect the data, an observation was conducted by highlighting taboo words in the transcript and watching the series with the English subtitle while taking notes of the utterances, time stamps, context, and information about the characters' gender and age. Later, the data were

checked for their meaning according to *Collins Online Dictionary* and *Oxford English Dictionary* to ensure they belong to taboo words. Furthermore, taboo words were carefully analyzed using Azzaro's (2005) and Allan & Burridge's (2009) function of taboo words. The overall results are presented in a table. Azzaro focused on analyzing the two primary functions of taboo words: swearing or expletive expressions and insults or abusive expressions in mass media, especially movies. In addition, Allan & Burridge explored the functions of taboo words (expletive function, abusive function, social solidarity expressions, and stylistic choices) in written and spoken data in Australia and New Zealand. Thus, combining the two theories of Azzaro and Allan & Burridge allowed for a better understanding of the functions of taboo words.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In total, 114 occurrences of taboo words were found. They were classified according to Azzaro's (2005) and Allan & Burridge's (2009) functions of taboo words. The frequency of the functions of taboo words is presented in the following table, followed by a discussion on each usage.

Table 1 The frequency of the functions of Taboo Words in the TV series

No.	Functions	Tokens	%
1.	Swearing or expletive expressions	61	53.51
2.	Insults or abusive expressions	34	29.82
3.	Social solidarity expressions	13	11.40
4	Stylistic choices	6	5.26
	Total	114	100.00

The Functions of Taboo Words

Swearing or expletive expression

Swearing or expletive expression is the use of taboo words in intensely emotional situations such as anger, annoyance, frustration, fear, or when the speaker is under pressure, pain, and shock. A significant number of swearing or expletive expressions was found in the TV series, as they are 53.51% of the total occurrences of the functions of taboo words (61 out of 114 total tokens).

Azzaro (2005) states that swearing is emotive language, which functions as an emotional outburst of the speaker's feelings. The following example demonstrates the use of taboo words, such as swearing or expletive expressions, to relieve anger.

(1) 00:17:13,765 → 00:17:16,245 (S1.E06.M.Y.1)

Context: Eric and the school jazz band are having some practices. Eric feels depressed because of his problems with his family and Otis. So, he always makes mistakes during practice. One of the members shouts that Eric is wasting everyone's time. So, Eric tells them that he will leave, but their teacher is against it. Mr. Hendricks tries to stop Eric from leaving the exercise room.

Mr. Hendricks: "Eric, come back here"

Eric: "Don't <u>fucking</u> touch me!"

Eric could not handle the situation anymore. He left the room, but Mr. Hendrick held his right hand. He was not in good condition, so he said rude words to his teacher. Eric utters the taboo word to show his anger as the situation becomes tense between him and his band members, along with the coach. Thus, the speaker used taboo words to release his negative feelings through swearing.

In another context, swearing or expletive expression was realized when the speaker was confronted by something unexpected or unpredictable. The taboo words are uttered as soon as the speakers undergo a particular emotion. An example of swearing or expletive expressions, when the speaker is shocked or surprised is illustrated below.

(2) 00:29:50,165 → 00:29:54,445 (S1.E01.M.Y.1)

Context: Aimee is waiting for Adam in his room. When Adam comes in, she greets him lovely. Adam is shocked to see her in his room. Later, he asks her to get out of his room.

Aimee: "Hello, lover."

Adam: "Ooh! <u>Fuck</u>! How did you get in? You've
gotta go."

Adam did not expect Aimee to be in his room
because his parents would punish him if they knew
that Aimee was there. Adam's parents did not know
that he had a girlfriend. The word "fuck" is an
expletive expression used by Adam to show his
surprise when he sees Aimee in his room. It is
considered a swearing or expletive expression as the
word expresses the speaker's emotion. The speaker's
act is an automatic reaction as he is undergoing a
certain emotion, in this case, shock.

Insults or abusive expression

The number of occurrences of insults or abusive
expressions in the TV series is 34 out of 114
utterances of taboo words, comprising 29.82 % of all
of them. Insults or abusive expression is the use of
taboo words to address another person or thing
offensively. Generally, it is used to mock or offend
the addressee instead of establishing a connection
between the speaker and the addressee, as shown in
the following example.

(3)   00:33:09,805 → 00:33:11,165 (S1.E07.F.Y.2)

*Context: Ola and Otis are in the music room. Ola asks
Otis if he dated Maeve or not. Otis answers no and
explains that Maeve is like a lion to him, and he is a
kangaroo which means it is impossible for him to get
her. He later explains that Ola is kind of a goat or cat.
Then, Ola feels offended by Otis' explanation.*

Ola: "Okay, I'm a skinny house cat, and she's a lion."

Otis: "Oh, no. Maeve is unattainable, and you're..."

Ola: "You're not a kangaroo, Otis. You're an
<u>arsehole</u>."

Collins Online Dictionary defines "arsehole" as
an unpleasant or stupid person (Arsehole, n.d.). It is
considered offensive to call a person "arsehole". The
word *arsehole* is an insult used by Ola aimed at Otis.
The speaker used the word to express her anger and
annoyance towards the hearer as he behaved
stupidly. Ola thought Otis's illustration of his
relationship was stupid. She felt annoyed and called
Otis an *arsehole*.

Another form of insult or abusive expression is
self-directed abuse or self-deprecation. According to

Azzaro (2005), abusive expressions are tantamount to
deliberate insults to others or even to oneself. Self-
directed abuse is the humiliation of oneself. Below is
an example showing the use of taboo words which
belong to this category of insults:

(4)   00:33:16,765 → 00:33:18,485 (S1.E07.M.Y.2)

*Context: In the music room, Otis shares his story
about his relationship with Maeve. Otis tells Ola that
Maeve is a lion and Ola is a goat for him. After
hearing Otis' explanation, Ola leaves him alone.
Then, Otis realizes that he was wrong and he regrets
saying all those silly things to Ola.*

Otis: "Oh, no. Maeve is unattainable, and you're ..."

Ola: "You're not a kangaroo, Otis. You're an
arsehole."

Otis: "Ola! I mean..."

Otis: "<u>Fucking idiot</u>."

The phrase "fucking idiot" is an abusive
expression toward oneself. The phrase is uttered by
Otis directed at himself as he thinks he has behaved
in a stupid way. Otis realized that Ola was angry
because he called her a goat. The taboo words are
used to humiliate the speaker as a result of his guilt
and shame. Thus, *fucking idiot* is a self-directed
abuse.

Expression of Social Solidarity

There are 13 occurrences of expression of social
solidarity in the TV series *Sex Education*. It makes up
11.40% of the total taboo word usage. Using taboo
words in a social context is to gain peer solidarity and
social cohesion. In social settings, taboo words are
usually used to facilitate in-group communication
and, in the process, solidify social ties between the
group members (Jay, 2000). Taboo words as
expressions of social solidarity, as illustrated in the
following example.

(5)   00:07:50,925 → 00:07:57,005 (S1.E02.M.Y.3)

*Context: Adam sees his best friend, Kyle, in the
school hallway, and he approaches him. Adam greets
him, but his best friend tells Adam that he cannot be
friends with Adam anymore.*

Adam: "Good morning, <u>ass bandit</u>!"

Kyle: "Sorry, Adam. Mum says I can't hang out with you anymore."

Oxford Learners Dictionary defines "ass bandit" as a male homosexual or a gay man (Ass bandit, n.d.). In the conversation above, the taboo word "ass bandit" is uttered between close friends. The word "ass bandit" is used by Adam to greet his best friend, Kyle. The hearer, Kyle, is not offended by Adam. It can be seen through his response after Adam calls him "ass bandit". The speaker used the taboo words without intending to shock or insult the hearer, but he used them simply as a friendly greeting. Therefore, the speaker's use of taboo words is considered an expression of social solidarity.

The following example is another expression of social solidarity in the series, which indicates the social ties between the speaker and the hearer.

(6)   00:14:08,685 → 00:14:11,205 (S1.E05.F.Y.3)

Context: *Otis calls Maeve, and she answers with a greeting. Otis tells her something related to their mission to help solve Ruby's problem.*

Maeve: "What's up, dick stain?"

Otis: "Tom lied. He has a phone."

The phrase "dick stain" is an expression of social solidarity. Maeve used taboo words to greet Otis on the phone. The speaker called the hearer "dick stain" because they are close friends. Thus, the taboo words *dick stain* serve as an expression of social solidarity to show the strong bond of friendship between the speaker and the hearer.

Stylistic choice

The stylistic choice is the least commonly used function of taboo words in *Sex Education*. In particular, stylistic choice in the series was realized through the use of words such as bloody and fuck. There are only six occurrences of stylistic choice or only 5.26% in total.

The following example demonstrates the use of taboo words as a stylistic choice.

(7)   00:28:17,805 → 00:28:19,365 (S1.E03.F.A.4)

Context: *Maeve, Sarah, and a girl are waiting for*

their turn in abortion room. They wear the hospital gown and are ready to be treated. However, they all look nervous. Sarah tries to calm them by giving her hands to them. Both Maeve and the girl refuse to hold Sarah's hand but Sarah takes their hand quickly. In the end, they are holding each other's hands.

Sarah: "It'll be alright. I promise. Just take my bloody hand."

The phrase *bloody hand* is not the hand that is covered by blood or is bleeding. From the example above, the speaker used the taboo word "bloody" to strengthen the word "hand". The taboo word "bloody" is a marker used by Sarah to emphasize her sentence.

Sometimes, in stylistic function, taboo words were employed to show excitement towards something, as demonstrated in the example down below.

(8)   00:21:29,285 → 00:21:34,125 (S1.E08.M.A.4)

Context: *Maeve and Sean have small talk. Maeve tells Sean that her teacher wants her to apply for the Aptitude Scheme at school. Sean is laughing and answers it casually.*

Maeve: "My teacher wants me to apply for the Aptitude Scheme at school."

Sean: "What, so soon you'll be hangin' out with a bunch of fucking virgins talking about astrophysics and shit?"

The taboo word "fucking" emphasizes Sean's utterance without the intention to shock, simply as a marker of exuberance. The speaker used taboo words to enliven his utterances. Therefore, the taboo expression *fucking virgins* is considered a stylistic function category.

Gender and Age Differences in Taboo Words Usage

This section discusses taboo word usage according to the speaker's gender and age. The first part discusses the gender differences in taboo words used in the series. The second part discusses taboo word usage based on the speaker's age group.

Gender differences in taboo word usage

According to Lakoff (1973), women and men communicate differently in terms of the linguistic objects they choose and the frequency with which they use them (p. 49). The investigation focuses on the frequency of taboo word usage to answer the question if there are any gender differences in the use of taboo words in *Sex Education*. Figure 1 reports the main result, the frequency of taboo word usage by gender.

Figure 1. The distribution of four functions of Taboo Words by Gender

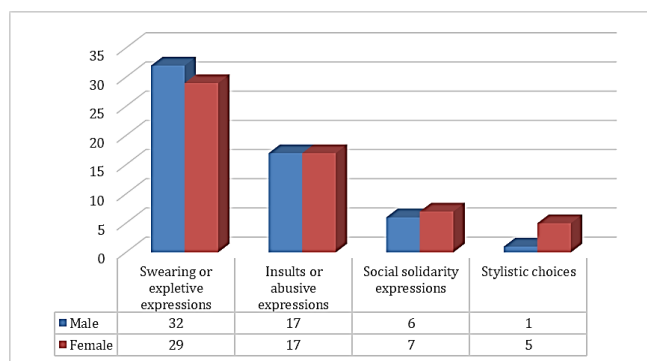|	Swearing or expletive expressions	Insults or abusive expressions	Social solidarity expressions	Stylistic choices
Male	32	17	6	1
Female	29	17	7	5

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the functions of taboo words according to gender in the first season of the British TV series *Sex Education*. Overall, 58 (50.88%) out of 114 taboo words and expressions were used by female characters and 56 (49.12%) by male characters. Significant gender differences were not found in the use of taboo words in *Sex Education*. Both genders, male and female, use taboo words at nearly the same frequency. Males and females use taboo words as insults or abusive expressions at the same frequency. Two categories of the function of taboo words, expression of social solidarity and stylistic choice, show a slight prevalence of taboo word usage by female than male characters. In contrast, male characters prevailed in using taboo words in swearing or expletive expressions.

The results also show that female characters do not clearly show the expected feminine characteristics of politeness in their speech (Lakoff, 1973; Brown, 1980; Holmes, 2013; Coates, 2015), as the female characters in *Sex Education* do not avoid taboo words and expressions. In addition, these findings show an increased presence of taboo words used by women. Thus, the stereotype that women use fewer and weaker taboo words is not proven in

this research, as women in the series use taboo words at the same rate as men.

A chi-square test was performed to examine the difference between male and female characters in using taboo words. The density of taboo words usage by male characters is 0.27%, whereas for female characters is 0.45%. The difference between the two groups is 0.18%.

Table 2 Frequency of taboo word usage by gender

Value	Male	Female	Total
Observed value	56	58	114
Expected value	57	57	114

The chi-square test result indicated that the difference between male and female characters in the use of taboo words is considered to be not statistically significant ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 0.035$, $p = 0.851$).

Age differences in taboo word usage

Taboo words are part of people's vocabulary and vary in frequency and age group profile. Figure 2 shows the frequency of taboo word usage by two different age groups, which are young and adult, in the series.

Figure 2 The distribution of the four functions of taboo words by age group

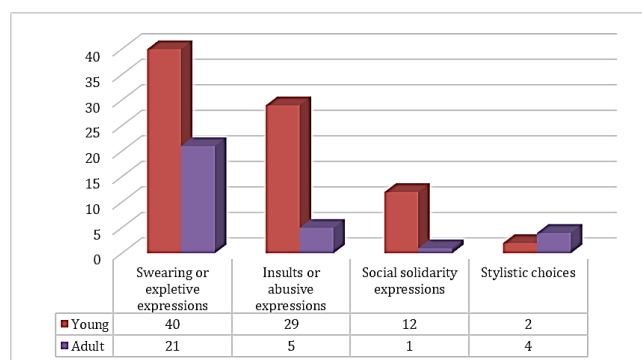|	Swearing or expletive expressions	Insults or abusive expressions	Social solidarity expressions	Stylistic choices
Young	40	29	12	2
Adult	21	5	1	4

Figure 2 presents the distribution of the use of taboo words among two different age groups in the series. Overall, 83 out of 114 taboo words and expressions were used by teenage characters and 31 by adult characters. Young characters or teenagers in *Sex Education* appear to use taboo words more frequently than adult characters. Swearing or expletive expression, insults or abusive expression, and expression of social solidarity were mostly employed by young characters in the series, while on

the contrary, adult characters tend to use taboo words as a stylistic choice. In *Sex Education*, the difference in the frequency of taboo word usage across two different age groups, namely young and adult, is numerically significant. This finding supports McEnery and Xiao's (2004) argument that young speakers use taboo words more often than other age groups.

The density of taboo words usage by young characters is 0.34%, whereas that for adult characters is 0.32%. The percentage density of taboo word usage in the two groups is not far different. The difference between the two groups is only 0.01%. The significant difference between young and adult characters in the use of taboo words is calculated using the chi-square test below.

Table 3 Frequency of taboo word usage by age groups

Value	Young	Adult	Total
Observed value	83	31	114
Expected value	57	57	114

The result of the chi-square test indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between young and adult characters in the use of taboo words ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 23.719$, p $= 1.114$).

Taboo words based on gender and age groups

This part discusses the classification of four functions of taboo words according to four specific gender and age groups. Those groups are young males, adult males, young females, and adult females. The analysis of each group is illustrated in the following four figures.

Figure 3 The distribution of the four functions of taboo words by adult males and young males
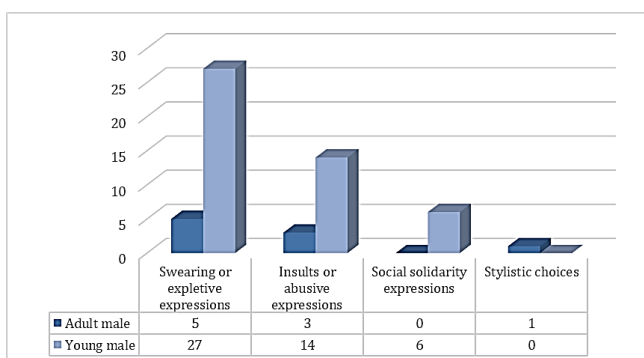

	Swearing or expletive expressions	Insults or abusive expressions	Social solidarity expressions	Stylistic choices
Adult male	5	3	0	1
Young male	27	14	6	0

Figure 4 The distribution of the four functions of taboo words by adult females and young females

	Swearing or expletive expressions	Insults or abusive expressions	Social solidarity expressions	Stylistic choices
Adult female	16	2	1	3
Young female	13	15	6	2
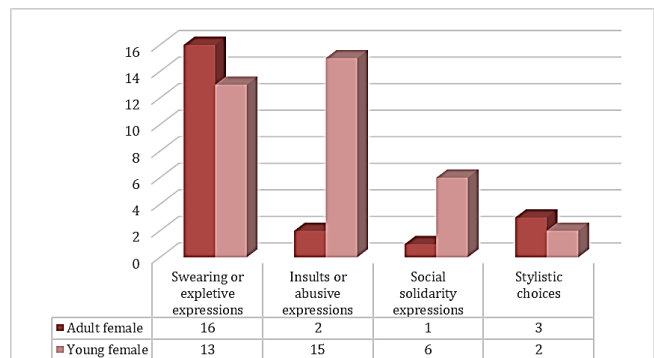
Figure 5 The distribution of the four functions of taboo words by adult males and adult females

	Swearing or expletive expressions	Insults or abusive expressions	Social solidarity expressions	Stylistic choices
Adult male	5	3	0	1
Adult female	16	2	1	3
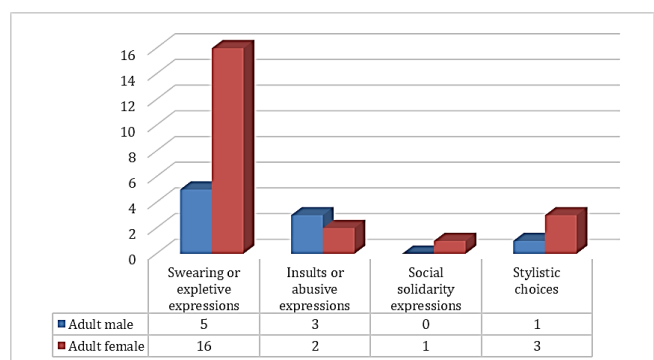
Figure 6 The distribution of the four functions of taboo words by young males and young females

	Swearing or expletive expressions	Insults or abusive expressions	Social solidarity expressions	Stylistic choices
Young male	27	14	6	0
Young female	13	15	6	2
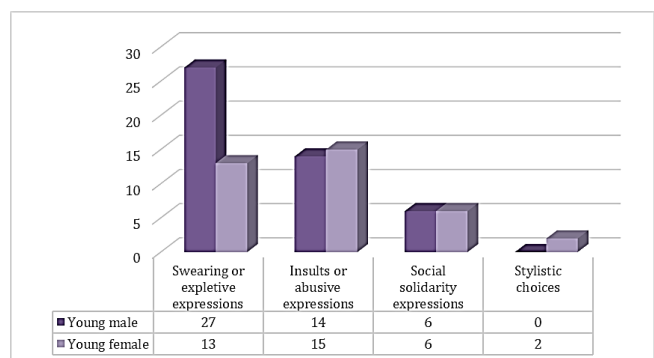
Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6 show the distribution of the four functions of taboo words in four specific gender and age groups. The differences in the frequency of the functions of taboo words in each group were significant. From the table above, the use of taboo words in young males is higher than in young female and adult male groups. Furthermore, the distribution of the four functions of taboo words in the adult female group is lower than in young females but relatively higher than in adult males.

To conclude, there are variations in the functions of taboo words by four specific gender and

age groups in the first season of *Sex Education*. In addition, swearing or expletive expressions became the most used function in young males, adult males, and adult females. Meanwhile, young females tend to use taboo words as insults or abusive expressions more than the three other functions.

CONCLUSION

This study aims at investigating the functions of taboo words in the TV series *Sex Education*, particularly the first season of the series. From the series, four functions of taboo words were identified in 114 utterances. The most commonly used function is swearing or expletive expression, followed by insults or abusive expressions. Meanwhile, the least used functions are the expression of social solidarity and stylistic choice. Overall, the characters tended to swear to express certain emotions.

In regard to gender differences, this study found that both male and female characters use taboo words but with variations in frequency. The difference between male and female characters in using taboo words is considered to be not statistically significant. According to the findings, female characters in *Sex Education* do not avoid taboo words and expressions. Therefore, this present research confirms the argument that women do not use taboo words less frequently than men and taboo words are used equally in men's and women's utterances (de Klerk, 1991; Stapleton, 2003; Gauthier & Guille, 2017) as opposed to McEnery (2006) and Jay's (2009) claim that women use taboo words less than men do.

In relation to age differences, the result shows that teenagers or young speakers use taboo words to a greater extent than adult speakers in the series. The difference between the two groups is also statistically significant. Thus, the current findings approve that taboo words are used more regularly by younger speakers than by adults, as previously suggested by McEnery & Xiao (2004), McEnery (2006), and Jay (2009).

In terms of four specific gender and age groups, the results revealed variations in the functions of taboo words by four groups: young males, adult males, young females, and adult females. The

differences in the frequency of the functions of taboo words in each group were significant.

Despite the strong points, the current paper has its shortcomings. It should be noted that the findings of this study do not provide an in-depth examination of taboo word usage in real life. The current study also incorporated only a relatively small number of taboo words in *Sex Education* as the TV series is currently producing new seasons. Therefore, the analysis may not represent the use of taboo words in the TV series *Sex Education*. Thus, further studies are needed to analyze taboo words in the following seasons of *Sex Education* and compare them with the present study. Furthermore, it would be possible to investigate the relationship between the characters with regard to specific social groups.

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