

5-1-2019

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### Recommended Citation

Knirmschild, Jacqueline (2019) "The Gender Differences in Perceived Obscenity of Vulgar, Profane and Derogatory - Language Usage among U.S. University Students," *The University of Mississippi Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 3 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/umurjournal/vol3/iss1/4>

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# The Gender Differences in Perceived Obscenity of Vulgar, Profane and Derogatory - Language Usage among U.S. University Students

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## Abstract

With the Access Hollywood video of Donald Trump and the “This Pussy Fights Back” response by women, societal standards toward gender-specific language and appropriate conversation topics have become center-stage in our society. The concept that “boys will be boys” normalize vulgar conversations between men, whereas women who “swear like sailors” are seen by society as unprofessional, to have bad manners, limited vocabulary and to be seeking attention or “trying to be like one of the boys”. Such stigmas, although aim to make the perspectives of so-called “unladylike” women obsolete and invisible, may actually end up doing the complete opposite by attracting more attention. That attention, however, often translates into shock; not an actual understanding of her argument. On the flip side, when men use profanity or speak of vulgar topics, no one is outraged because it’s just “locker room talk”.

Through quantitative data acquired from surveying over 400 students, and qualitative data acquired from interviews with ten students, this paper will examine the disparities between what is considered taboo discussion subjects and language for males and females. The perceptual survey asked students to rate the level of obscenity of various words and phrases and whether such a level is affected by a male or female speaker.

## Background

English-speaking men and women are increasingly using vulgarity (explicit and offensive references to sex or bodily functions), profanity (“swear words”) and derogatory language (terms used to insult others) in a range of private and public settings.

## Objective

To examine gender differences in frequency, acceptability and motivation of vulgarity, profanity and derogatory language usage among U.S. university students.

## Methods

A perceptual survey of U.S. university students (n=409) and oral interviews (n=10) of U.S. university students is used to examine gender differences in frequency, acceptability and motivation of vulgarity and profanity usage.

## Results

While gender differences in the frequency and motivation of vulgarity and profanity usage were small, all participants considered instances of speakers using female-descriptive derogatory terms to be much obscener than instances of speakers using male-descriptive derogatory terms. For example, a woman calling another woman a ‘cunt’ was considered 6x obscener than a man calling another man an ‘asshole.’

## Conclusions

Perceptions that female-descriptive derogatory terms are significantly obscener than male-descriptive derogatory terms suggest that the English language represents a culture of misogyny and sexism. Female-de-

scriptive derogatory terms, such as ‘whore’ and ‘slut,’ also refer to sexuality, whereas male-descriptive derogatory terms, such as ‘dick’ and ‘douche,’ refer to character, which suggests that female promiscuity is considered obscene.

## Introduction

There has been a general increase in the use of profanity (“swear words”) by English speakers in public and private settings (IPSOS, 2006). A study of 1,001 adults found that 74% frequently or occasionally use profanity in public, and 67% are a lot or somewhat bothered by others’ profanity-usage (IPSOS, 2006). In broadcasting media, 9 out of 10 programs contained at least one obscenity, and most television programs contain risqué language approximately once every five minutes (Kaye & Sapolsky, 2004, 2009). And with the Access Hollywood tape of Donald Trump, debate has sparked over the acceptability of “locker-room talk” (NY Times, 2016). In response to Trump’s remark, “Grab ‘em by the pussy,” the rally cry of “This pussy grabs back” emerged for female rage and gained popularity at the 2017 Women’s March (The Guardian, 2016).

The role and implications of gender in profanity usage has been heavily researched (Johnson & Lewis, 2010). Men have been found to generally use stronger profanities and women to use milder ones (Lakoff, 1973). According to Lakoff (1973), there is a double standard in vulgar language usage, with women being scrutinized more. In the following decades, more researchers found support for Lakoff’s conclusions (Rasmussen & Moley, 1986 and de Klerk 1991). Selnow (1985) also found that females perceive profanity-usage as less appropriate in a range of settings, except in mixed-gender interactions.

However, as gender roles change, females' profanity usage and perception are changing as well – with less differences between genders in perception of obscenity usage (Johnson & Lewis, 2010). Even studies from over twenty years ago show that American and South African women were using derogatory language in increasing numbers and in frequencies equivalent to men (Risch 1987, de Klerk 1992). Within an Irish pub community, little difference was found between the men and women's "everyday" profanity usage (Stapleton, 2003). Stapleton (2003), however, also found that men believed that certain profane words, especially words to describe female anatomy, are more acceptable for male speakers. Braun & Kitzinger (2001) also found that males are able to list significantly more genitalia terms than females.

Using a large dataset of U.S. college students, this study will examine whether there is evidence for a double standard in the acceptability of vulgarity (explicit and offensive references to sex or bodily functions), profanity ("swear words") and derogatory language (terms used to insult others) usage. This study will also build upon previous research regarding gender differences in the frequency and motivation of vulgarity, profanity and derogatory language usage.

In addition, this study attempted to explore how U.S. college students understand "locker-room talk" and the resultant backlash against Trump's comments in the form of the "this pussy grabs back" rallying cry. The survey, however, only include one question on this topic, which is null because it assumed that participants knew what the phrase referred to.

It was expected that results would follow trends from previous research; with women who use vulgarity, profanity and derogatory language to face more scrutiny, and with little difference between the frequencies

of male and female vulgarity, profanity and derogatory language usage.

In regard to the obscenity of different speaker contexts, it is expected that situations in which men use derogatory terms to describe females will be perceived as the obscenest.

In regard to gender differences of motivations behind obscene-language usage, it was expected that the results would match Stapleton's (2003) findings, with females cursing in order to show intimacy/trust and males in order to fit into gender norms and out of habit. It was also expected that both genders would curse more around their own gender, and that "fag" and "cunt" would be the most avoided words and that "fuck" would be the most frequently used word.

### Methods

In this study, a Google Forms survey was used that recycled some questions from Stapleton's (2003) questionnaire. Participants were selected through convenience sampling from the University of Mississippi and Ohio State University in group messages, social media and class email lists. Participants were asked to "take part in a linguistic study on profanity." Student participant responses totaled 409: 286 (70.1%) of which were female and 122 (29.9%) of which were male. The grade levels of responders were relatively even with 30.8% freshmen, 24.4% sophomores, 18.6% juniors and 26.2% seniors. 54.8% of responders were OSU students and 45.2% were UM students.

A copy of the survey is located in the Appendix. Questions were all multiple choice, check-all-that-apply or fill-in-the-blank. Participants were asked why they curse, who they curse in front of and the curse words that they refrain from using and the curse word that they use most frequently.

Participants were also asked to judge

the obscenity of vulgarity, profanity and derogatory language-use in a range of contexts. Participants were provided with two sets of 12 situations, totaling to 24 situations. The first set of 12 include situations with only male speakers. 5 of these male situations comprise of a male speaker using a derogatory and/or vulgar term to describe a female, 3 comprise of a male speaker using a derogatory and/or vulgar term to describe another male, and 4 comprise of a male speaker using profanity for other purposes, such as anger and exclamation, not directed at another person. The second set of 12 include situations with only female speakers. 5 of these female situations comprise of a female speaker using a derogatory and/or vulgar term to describe a male, 3 comprise of a female speaker using a derogatory and/or vulgar term to describe another female, and 4 comprise of a female speaker using profanity for other purposes, such as anger and exclamation, that is not directed at another person. A flaw in the survey was that the male and female situations were not counterbalanced. Participants responded to the 12 male speaker situations first and then the 12 female situations.

Participants were also asked, "are certain curse words more acceptable for men than for women?" A flaw in the survey was that participants were not asked if there are certain curse words that are more acceptable for women than for men.

And finally, participants were given the option of doing a follow-up interview in which they were asked to explain each of their answers further. 69 (17.2%) of respondents were interested in doing the one-on-one interview, but ultimately only 10 ended up being interviewed: 4 males and 6 females. In the 10 follow-up interviews, which took about 15-20 minutes, the participants were asked to elaborate on each of their survey answers.

### Results

Data is rounded to 0 decimal points for simplicity.

Figure 1: Percentages of males and females who use profanity

	Yes	No
Males (n=122)	95%	5%
Females (n=286)	94%	6%
Total (n=409)	94%	6%

Figure 2: Percentages of males and females who curse more around the same gender

	Males (n=122)	Females (n=286)	All (n=409)
Yes	62%	32%	41%
No	38%	68%	59%

Figure 3: Gender differences in reasons to curse (n=409)

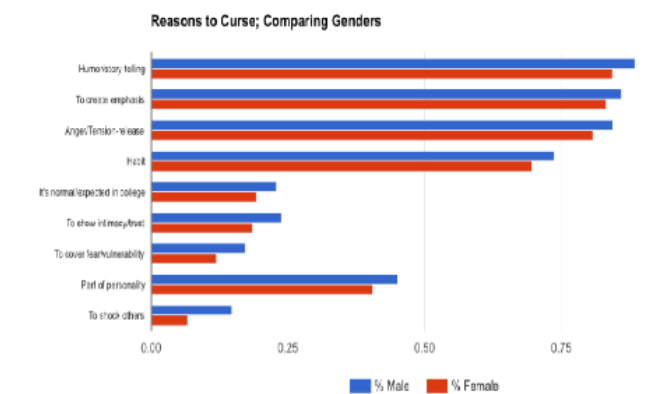


Figure 4: Male-speaker situations

Situation in which the male is cursing	Percent of male responders saying yes, it is obscene (n=122)	Percent of female responders saying yes, it is obscene (n=286)	Total percent of responders saying yes, it is obscene (n=408)
A male telling his male friend in private that a female they know is a cunt.	65%	63%	64%
A male telling a group of male friends that a female they know is an asshole.	11%	9%	10%
A male telling his girlfriend in private that she's a whore.	79%	84%	82%
A male telling a group of male friends in private that he's "going to get pussy" that night.	51%	63%	59%
A male telling his male and female friends at the dining hall that a girl is a slut.	59%	65%	64%
A male at a party telling another male that he's a dick.	11%	12%	12%
A male, during a lecture class with 50+ students, audibly call another male a douche.	46%	50%	50%
A male saying that a girl has big tits in front of his college professor.	92%	90%	94%
A male saying "he has to take a piss" in front of his friend's parents.	86%	85%	85%
A male saying "hell" in front of his parents.	11%	9%	10%
A male walking down the street, tripping and exclaiming "fuck" loud enough for those around him to hear.	40%	27%	33%
A male saying "crap" in front of your university's chancellor.	31%	28%	30%

Figure 5: Top six male-speaker situations considered obscene

Most obscene	Everyone (n=408)	Females (n=286)	Males (n=122)
1	A male saying that a girl has big tits in front of his college professor.	A male saying that a girl has big tits in front of his college professor.	A male saying that a girl has big tits in front of his college professor.
2	A male telling his girlfriend in private that she's a whore.	A male telling his girlfriend in private that she's a whore.	A male telling his girlfriend in private that she's a whore.
3	A male telling his male and female friends at the dining hall that a girl is a slut.	A male telling his male and female friends at the dining hall that a girl is a slut.	A male telling his male and female friends at the dining hall that a girl is a slut.
4	A male telling his male friend in private that a female they know is a cunt.	A male telling his male friend in private that a female they know is a cunt. (Tie)	A male telling a group of male friends in private that he's "going to get pussy" that night.
5	A male telling a group of male friends in private that he's "going to get pussy" that night.	A male telling a group of male friends in private that he's "going to get pussy" that night.	A male telling a group of male friends in private that he's "going to get pussy" that night.

Figure 6: Female-speaker situations

Situation in which the female is cursing	Percent of female responders saying yes, it is obscene (n=286)	Percent of male responders saying yes, it is obscene (n=122)	Total percent of responders saying yes, it is obscene (n=408)
A female telling her female friend in private that a male they know is a douche.	11%	14%	12%
A female telling a group of female friends in private that another girl is a cunt.	66%	64%	65%
A female telling her boyfriend in private that he's an asshole.	76%	77%	76%
A female telling a group of female friends in private that she's "going to get dick" that night.	52%	60%	51%
A female telling her female and male friends at the dining hall that a boy is a prick.	76%	75%	75%
A female at a party calling another girl a whore.	74%	65%	68%
A female, during a lecture class with 50+ students, audibly calling another female a bitch.	76%	71%	75%
A female saying that a male has a big cock in front of her college professor.	95%	88%	91%
A female saying she "has to take a piss" in front of her friend's parents.	85%	80%	81%
A female saying "hell" in front of her parents.	10%	16%	11%
A female walking down the street, tripping and exclaiming "fuck" loud enough for those around her to hear.	28%	41%	32%
A female saying "crap" in front of the university's chancellor.	28%	37%	31%

Figure 7: Top six female situations considered obscene

Most obscene	Everyone (n=408)	Females (n=286)	Males (n=122)
1	A female saying that a male has a big cock in front of her college professor.	A female saying that a male has a big cock in front of her college professor.	A female saying that a male has a big cock in front of her college professor.
2	A female, during a lecture class with 50+ students, audibly calling another female a bitch.	A female, during a lecture class with 50+ students, audibly calling another female a bitch.	A female, during a lecture class with 50+ students, audibly calling another female a bitch.
3	A female at a party calling another girl a whore.	A female at a party calling another girl a whore.	A female saying she "has to take a piss" in front of her friend's parents.
4	A female telling a group of female friends in private that another girl is a cunt.	A female telling a group of female friends in private that another girl is a cunt.	A female at a party calling another girl a whore.
5	A female telling a group of female friends in private that another girl is a cunt.	A female saying she "has to take a piss" in front of her friend's parents.	A female telling a group of female friends in private that another girl is a cunt.

Figure 8: Male and Female Situations Compared

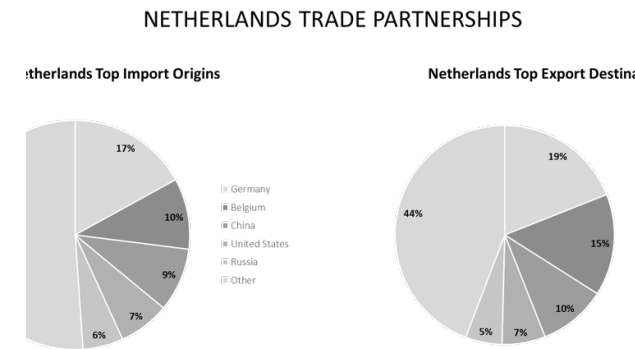


Figure 9: Gender Differences in Situation's Obscenity

Type of situation	Male Version	Female Version	Total % of people thought male version was obscene	Total % of people thought female version was obscene
Male mixed sex name calling	A male telling his male friend in private that a female they know is a cunt.	A female telling her female friend in private that a male they know is a douche.	64%	62%
Male same sex name calling	A male telling a group of male friends that a male they know is an asshole.	A female telling a group of female friends in private that another girl is a cunt.	10%	62%
Boy/girl friend name calling	A male telling his girlfriend in private that she's a whore.	A female telling her boyfriend in private that he's an asshole.	82%	62%
Male/female get sex act	A male telling a group of male friends in private that he's "going to get pussy" that night.	A female telling a group of female friends in private that she's "going to get dick" that night.	56%	61%
Male sex name calling	A male telling his male and female friends at the dining hall that a girl is a slut.	A female telling her female and male friends at the dining hall that a boy is a prick.	64%	62%
Public same sex name calling - party	A male at a party telling another male that he's a dick.	A female at a party calling another girl a whore.	12%	62%
Public same sex name calling - lecture	A male, during a lecture class with 50+ students, audibly calling another male a douche.	A female, during a lecture class with 50+ students, audibly calling another female a bitch.	60%	75%
Male/female public confession	A male saying that a girl has big tits in front of his college professor.	A female saying that a male has a big cock in front of her college professor.	94%	94%
Male/female saying in a joke	A male saying "he has to take a piss" in front of his friend's parents.	A female saying she "has to take a piss" in front of her friend's parents.	89%	84%
Male/female saying "hell"	A male saying "hell" in front of his parents.	A female saying "hell" in front of her parents.	10%	11%
Male/female saying "fuck"	A male walking down the street, tripping and exclaiming "fuck" loud enough for those around him to hear.	A female walking down the street, tripping and exclaiming "fuck" loud enough for those around her to hear.	31%	32%
Male/female saying "crap"	A male saying "crap" in front of your university's chancellor.	A female saying "crap" in front of the university's chancellor.	31%	31%

Figure 10: Profane Words Used Most Frequently by Both Genders

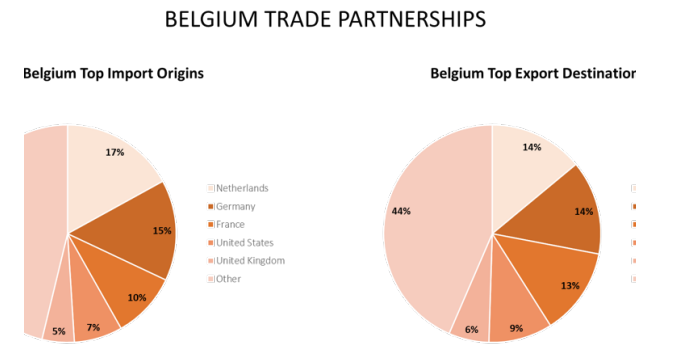


Figure 11: Profane Words Used Most Frequently by Males

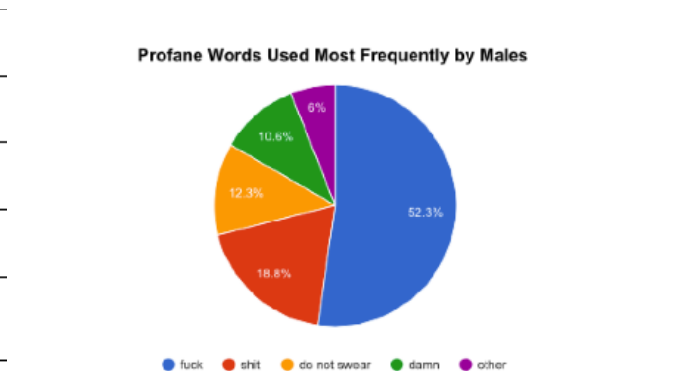


Figure 12: Profane Words Used Most Frequently by Females

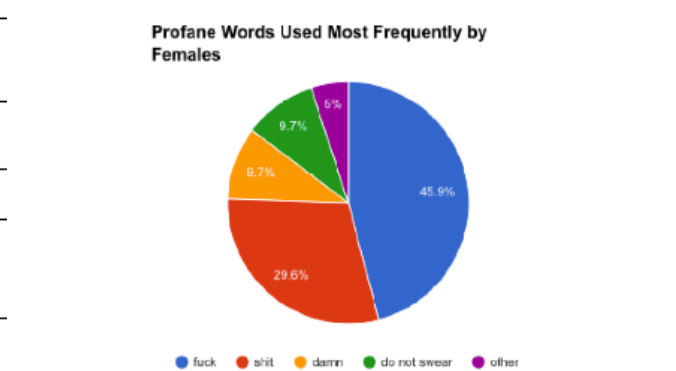


Figure 13: Gender Differences in top 10 most profane words

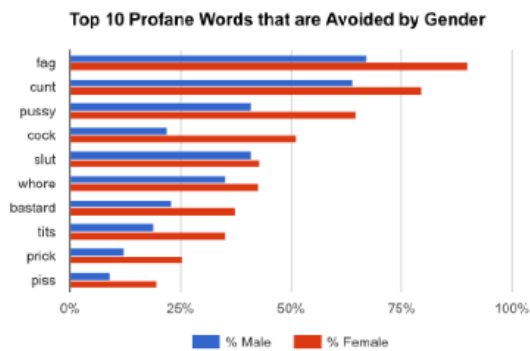
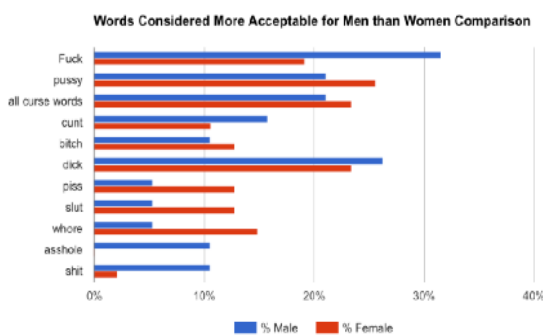


Figure 14: Percentages of males and females who responded that certain curse words are more acceptable for men than women

	Everyone (n=409)	Males (n=122)	Females (n=286)
Yes	20%	21%	19%
No	80%	79%	81%

Figure 15: Words Considered More Acceptable for Men than Women Comparison



Discussion

Figure 1 shows that the large majority, 94%, of students in this study use profanity and both genders use profanity equally and for similar reasons, which correlates with previous research (Klerk, 1992). Males and females in the study mainly reported using profanity for the same reasons: humor/story-telling, to create emphasis, anger/tension-release and habit (Figure 3).

The second survey question “do you

curse more around the same gender?” is problematic because if a respondent answers ‘no,’ it is unclear whether or not they curse more around the opposite gender or because they curse equally in front of men and women. More nuance could be added to this question in a future survey. Data represented in Figure 2 shows that males in the study are nearly twice as more likely to curse around the same gender than females, which actually goes against Stapleton’s findings that women are more likely to use cursing to show intimacy/trust with other women, whereas men are not. The fact that only 32% of women said they curse more around other females is surprising and greatly contradicts Stapleton’s findings that females use cursing for solidarity purposes and intimacy. A few female interviewees said that the gender wasn’t as important as comfort level. A flaw in this data collection was the phrasing “to show intimacy/trust” because in a follow-up interview with a female, she said she had no clue why someone would use profanity in an “intimate” setting. She thought “intimacy/trust” meant sexual/romantic intimacy, which is not what was intended. It would have been better to instead write, “to show comfort level/trust.”

Figure 5 shows that there are no major differences between the genders in regard to which male-speaker situations are the obscenest. Everyone agreed, by a large majority, that “a male saying that a girl has big tits in front of his college professor” is the obscenest. The qualitative data from the follow-up interviews showed that the formal context of the situation is a big issue: discussing a female’s body parts in front of an authority figure is perceived as immature and unprofessional. A boyfriend calling his girlfriend a whore was a close second in levels of male-speaker situation obscenity. Interviews showed that the directness of the insult is uncalled for; some even thought of the

situation as emotional abuse. One female said it’s the most offensive because someone you care about is insulting you. A male calling a female a slut in front of male and female friends at the dining hall was the third most obscene male-speaker situation, once again, due to the public context of the situation. Ultimately, in this data set, the variable of social setting had the strongest impact on perceptions of obscenity.

Figure 4 shows that males and females in this study were, for the most part, in agreement about which male-speaker situations are obscene. There were a few differences, however, of 10% or more that are worth noting. A higher percentage of females found “A male telling a group of males’ friends in private that he’s ‘going to get pussy’ that night” to be obscener than males did. A follow-up interview with a female supported previous findings that men use more derogatory terms for both male and female genitals than females (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001). She said, “it’s more acceptable for a guy to call our vagina a pussy.” A higher percentage of males found “a male walking down the street, tripping and exclaiming “fuck” loud enough for those around him to hear” to be obscener than females did. This is interesting because it may suggest that females are accustomed to hearing males curse in public and do not think it is a big deal – yet, males still seem to feel this pressure to censor their language in public, especially around women and authority figures, who could be walking on a public sidewalk. A male interviewee confirmed this supposition by saying, “You have to be respectful in front of women and parents.”

Figure 7 shows that there are no major differences between the genders in regard to which female-speaker situations are the obscenest. Everyone agreed, by a large majority, that “a female saying that a male has a big cock in front of his college professor”

is the obscenest, which shows that the variable of social setting has a strong impact on perceptions of obscenity. In a follow-up interview, a male said that he thought the “big cock” situation simply sounded “ridiculous” and didn’t think anyone would ever actually say that. Changing the word from “cock” to “dick” might have altered the results because “cock” is less common in American vernacular. It would also be interesting to duplicate these phrases in a more private setting and examine obscenity perceptions to isolate the words from the social setting. “A female, during a lecture class, calling another female a bitch” is the second most obscene, once again due to the public context. A male interviewee said, “that’s private stuff that you should solve on your own, not bring to the lecture hall.” Despite the context, it was still surprising to see a situation with the word “bitch” so high on the obscenity chart because many interviewees felt that “bitch” has been reclaimed by women and is thus not as obscene as “whore” or “cunt.” If the context were more informal, perhaps a female calling another female a bitch would not be considered quite as obscene.

Figure 6 shows that males and females in this study were, for the most part, in agreement about which female-speaker situations are obscene, with the exception of “a female saying she ‘has to take a piss’ in front of her friend’s parents.” Males ranked “a female saying she ‘has to take a piss’ in front of her friend’s parents” as the third most obscene female situation, whereas females ranked it as the fifth. A female interviewee said that her parents would be a bit surprised if she said she had to take a piss, whereas if her brother said it, they wouldn’t find it unusual. “Taking a piss” is a male phrase, she said, because it sounds very vulgar and masculine. This comment is interesting because it suggests that vulgarity is associated with masculinity. Males think a female say-

ing “take a piss” is obscener than female to female name-calling, whereas females think the opposite. This suggests female disdain for insulting other females. A female interviewee said that she doesn’t think a woman should put down another woman in any situation. There were also a few more gender differences, of 10% or more that are worth noting. A higher percentage of females found “a female telling a group of female friends in private that another girl is a cunt” to be obscene, which supports the notion presented in the female follow-up interviews that “cunt” is the worst possible insult for a female. A higher percentage of females found “a female telling her female and male friends at the dining hall that a boy is a prick” to be obscene, which suggests male insensitivity to name-calling. A higher percentage of females found “a female at a party calling another girl a whore” to be obscene, which supports the common notion presented in the female interviews that females “really don’t like the word ‘whore.’” The word ‘whore’ insults a female’s sexual activity, which many females said is rude and not the same as saying ‘bitch’ or ‘asshole,’ which both insult the character of the person. More males found “a female walking down the street, tripping and exclaiming “fuck” loud enough for those around her to hear” to be obscene, which may suggest that these males subscribe to traditional ideals of a “ladylike” woman.

The gender differences in the perceived obscenity of similar situations in which the speaker’s gender is isolated is shown in Figures 8 and 9. Each situation has similar social contexts and similar derogatory, and/or vulgar/profane used, but the gender of the speaker is inversed, which shows significant disparities in perceived obscenity. Figure 8 and 9 show that regardless of the speaker’s gender, using derogatory terms to describe females is, by far, considered the obscenest form of profanity. Derogatory terms to de-

scribe females are perceived as much more obscene than derogatory terms to describe males. Specifically, males describing females as a “cunt” is considered 5x obscener than a woman describing a man as a “douche.” One female respondent actually left a comment, which helps to explain these results:

“some of the ‘comparable’ questions between males and females do not have comparable curse words. Although the situation is the same, “cunt” and “douche” are not comparable curses. This could lead to a problem of people comparing the severity of curse words instead of comparing males and females. So, I suggest you revise accordingly.”

Derogatory terms to describe males that are comparable to “cunt” and “whore” may not exist. One female interviewee said that “manwhore,” “fuckboy” and “womanizer” were the only terms she could think of that might even be remotely comparable; however, she said that they are still not as severe as “cunt” and “whore” because in society, it is more expected and normal for males to sleep around. A woman calling another woman a cunt is also 6x obscener than a man calling another man an asshole. Such a contrast between “cunt” and “asshole” reinforces the severity of the word “cunt.” A female interviewee said “cunt” devalues a person to just their genitals. A boyfriend calling his girlfriend a whore is 3x obscener than a girlfriend calling a boyfriend an asshole. This shows that derogatory terms for females shame her sexual choices, not her actual character. Men calling woman a slut is 3x obscener than a woman calling a man prick. A female calling another female a whore is almost 6x obscener than a man calling another man a dick. These results may suggest that it is important to respect women and therefore

using derogatory terms to insult women is extremely obscene. A male interviewee said, “you should treat women with more respect than guys.” A female calling another female a bitch is 1.5x as obscene as a male calling another male a dick. Many of the interviewees said that they thought “bitch” has been reclaimed by females and is now on the same level as dick or asshole. Yet, the quantitative results would suggest otherwise. According to the data collected in this study, “bitch” is becoming less obscene than “whore” or “cunt,” which suggests that reclaiming the term is removing the stigma. One female interviewee, however, said that theoretically females could reclaim all of the derogatory terms used to describe them, but considering the current social climate, another word will just pop up – or perhaps, another meaning will come around. One male interviewee said the curse word he uses most frequently is “bitch” because he calls his guy friends bitches all of the time – he said he’s only ever called a girl a bitch maybe once. An example of when he’d call his friend a bitch is if he tells his guy friend to open a beer and then he doesn’t want to drink it. So, although, females have, in a way, reclaimed the word “bitch,” a new meaning related to weakness may have developed.

The qualitative data supported quantitative findings that female-descriptive derogatory terms are obscener than male-descriptive derogatory terms. A female said, “dick is more of a joke and it’s in the context of a jerk but whore is sexually explicit.” Another female said, “Some words are not just meant to express anger/discontent, some are meant to devalue her as a person and that is why they are worse – you’re not just pissed off at her, you’re attempting to devalue her as a person.” One male said he didn’t even learn the word “cunt” until 2 or 3 years ago. A male interviewee said calling a female a “bitch” simply means you don’t like her,

whereas “whore” and “cunt” are sexist because you’re reducing her to a sexual object. Another male said that a guy can insult a girl in more severe ways than a girl can insult a guy. A female interviewee said even if people were to use terms such as “manwhore,” “womanizer” and “fuckboy” more frequently to describe male sexuality, “a guy wouldn’t take it as seriously because the way society views the world, for guys it’s about conquests but for girls the more they sleep around, the more they’re considered ‘used.’”

Figure 10 shows that “fuck” is the most frequently-used word in the data-set, which may be due to its versatility since it can be used as noun, adjective and verb. Figures 11 and 12 show that females use “shit” more and “fuck” less than males. A female interviewee said she uses shit because it’s “not as intense as fuck and it’s more socially acceptable.” Figure 13 shows that both genders reported avoiding using the term “fag,” which suggests an aversion to insulting gay people. “Cunt” is the second most avoided because as mentioned earlier, it is considered to be the obscenest curse word. Figure 13 also shows that higher percentages of females refrain from all words; especially, “cock,” “tits,” “prick,” “piss.” Also, more females avoid using the word “pussy” than males, supporting previous research that males feel it is more acceptable for males to use profane words that describe female body parts than females (Stapleton, 2003). Figure 14 shows that the majority of participants did not think certain curse words were more acceptable for men than women which is not what was hypothesized. This finding, however, may hint at progress toward gender equality in profanity and vulgarity usage. Males considered “fuck” far more acceptable while females considered “piss,” “slut” and “whore” more acceptable. The fact that males think it’s more acceptable for males to say “fuck” may suggest that cursing is

an expression of toughness and masculinity. Females thought it is more acceptable for males to say “pussy,” “slut” and “whore,” which supports previous research (Stapleton, 2003).

### Conclusion

This study found that male and female perceptions of vulgarity and obscenity are not as different as expected. The U.S. college students in the study largely agreed upon reasons to curse, levels of obscenity of various situations, the most frequently used curse word, curse words to refrain from using and the fact that there are not curse words that are more acceptable for men than women. Males and females in this study have similar perceptions of what is obscene and what is not – the only major difference is that 19% more females than males thought a female calling another female a whore was obscene. Perhaps, this suggests that since males are not frequently referred to as whore or cunt, they are not as familiar with the degradation of these derogatory terms as females are.

The most significant finding was the contrast between perceived obscenity of female-descriptive derogatory terms and male-descriptive derogatory terms. When situations were duplicated with identical social contexts and similar derogatory terms used, situation in which the speaker was calling another female a name were always considered obscener. For example, a woman calling another woman a “cunt” was found to be 6x obscener than a man calling another man an “asshole.” Qualitative data also supported the notion that male-descriptive derogatory terms equally as obscene to “whore” and “cunt” do not exist in the English language. The severity of “whore” and “cunt” suggest the negative stigma attached to female promiscuity. This finding presents a

deeper question: are sexual choices inseparable from character? People often said that “bitch” and “asshole” are used when angry at someone for an action, which represents their character, and is not as obscene as words like “whore” and “cunt,” which are used to describe sexual choices.

To improve this study, examples of each reason to curse could have been included, as Stapleton did in her survey. This would avoid confusion over the “intimacy/trust” reason. The situational descriptions should have also remained exactly constant – there were times when the identifier “girl” was used instead of “female.” The question “do you curse more around the same gender?” was also problematic because if a respondent answers ‘no,’ it is unclear whether or not they curse more around the opposite gender or because they curse equally in front of men and women. More nuance could be added to this question in a future survey. The male-speaker and female-speaker situations also could have been counter-balanced so that participants would not have any test-bias.

Future studies could seek to isolate the specific curse word from the social (public or private) context. It is difficult to know if respondents were making their decisions based on the social context or actual curse word; however, it is also essentially impossible to get rid of the context because it is too open-ended to ask if “a female saying fuck” is obscene or not. One male interviewee said that he never takes profanity to an extreme level where he actually has to monitor himself, except when drunk. Perhaps adding the variable of alcohol could produce differing results, because intoxicated speech is less inhibited.

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Appendix

Profanity Survey Script

This is research for my presentation at the Sarah ISOM Center's 17th Annual Gender Conference.  
\*Required

(Q1) Are you male or female? \*  
- Male  
- Female

(Q2) What grade are you in? \*  
- Freshman  
- Sophomore  
- Junior  
- Senior

(Q3) Where do you go to college? \*  
- University of Mississippi  
- Ohio State University

(Q4) What is your hometown? (please write city and state) \*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

(Q5) Do you use profanity? \*  
- Yes  
- No

(Q6) If answered yes to last question, why do you curse? (select all reasons that apply to you)  
- Humor/story-telling  
- To create emphasis  
- Anger/Tension-release  
- Habit  
- It's normal/expected in college  
- To show intimacy/trust  
- To cover fear/vulnerability  
- Part of personality

- To shock others

(Q7) Do you curse more around people of the same gender as yourself? \*

- Yes
- No

(Q8) Is the phrase "This Pussy Grabs Back" obscene? \*

- Yes
- No

(Q9) Are there any curse words you try to refrain from using? (check all that apply and if you refrain from words not on the list, please write in the last option)

- Shit
- Fuck
- Damn
- Bitch
- Crap
- Piss
- Dick
- Cock
- Pussy
- Asshole
- Fag
- Bastard
- Slut
- Douche
- Cunt
- Whore
- Tits
- Ass
- Hell
- Prick
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

(Q10) Which curse word do you use most frequently? (If you don't curse, leave blank)

\_\_\_\_\_

(Q11) Check which situations are obscene. \*

- A Male telling his male friend in private that a female they know is a cunt
- A male telling a group of male friends that a male they know is an asshole
- A male telling his girlfriend in private that she's a whore
- A male telling a group of male friends in private that he's "going to get pussy" that night
- A male telling his male and female friends at the dining hall that a girl is a slut
- A male at a party telling another male that he's a dick
- A male, during a lecture class with 50+ students, audibly call another male a douche
- A male saying that a girl has big tits in front of his college professor
- A male saying he has to "take a piss" in front of his friend's parents
- A male saying "hell" in front of his parents
- A male walking down the street, tripping and exclaiming "fuck" loud enough for those around him to hear
- A male saying "crap" in front of your university's chancellor

(Q12) Check which situations are obscene.

- A female telling her female friend in private that male they know is a douche
- A female telling her boyfriend in private that he's an asshole
- A female telling a group of female friends in private that she's "going to get dick" that night
- A female telling a group of female friends in private that another girl a cunt
- A female telling her female and male

- friends at the dining hall that a boy is a prick
- A female at a party calling another girl a whore
- A female, during a lecture class with 50+ students, audibly calling another female a bitch
- A female saying that a male has a big cock in front of her college professor
- A female saying she "has to take a piss" in front of her friend's parents
- A female saying "hell" in front of her parents
- A female walking down the street, tripping and exclaiming "fuck" loud enough for those around her to hear
- A female saying "crap" in front of the university chancellor

(Q13) Are certain curse words more acceptable for men than for women?

- Yes
- No

(Q14) If you answered yes to the last question, which words are more acceptable?

\_\_\_\_\_

(Q15) Would you be interested in doing a more in-depth one-on-one interview?

- Yes
- No

(Q16) If you answered yes to the last question, what is your e-mail address?

\_\_\_\_\_