

Words We Dare Not Say: A Sociolinguistic Study of the Usage of Swear Words among the Bangladeshi Young Generation

By

Tabassum Hasan
22103035

A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English

English and Humanities
BRAC University
2025

© 2025. Tabassum Hasan
All rights reserved.

Declaration

I hereby declare that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing a degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

Student's Full Name & Signature:

Student's Full Name: Tabassum Hasan
Student ID: 22103035

Approval

The thesis titled “Words We Dare Not Say: A Sociolinguistic Study of the Usage of Swear Words among the Bangladeshi Young Generation,” submitted by Tabassum Hasan (22103035) of Summer 2025, has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English on November 20, 2025.

Examining Committee:

Supervisor:

(Member)

Md. Al Amin, PhD
Associate Professor, Department of English and Humanities
BRAC University

Departmental Head:

(Chair)

Firdous Azim, PhD
Professor and Chairperson
Department of English and Humanities
BRAC University

Ethical Statement

This paper's work is original, and all concepts from other publications and papers are properly cited. I have only utilized data from reliable sources. Participants gave their consent after being fully informed about the study's procedures. Throughout the study, great effort was taken to protect the participants' confidentiality.

Dedication

I want to dedicate this thesis to my amazing grandparents, who have always supported me. You two have always been there for me and had my back. Without you two, I wouldn't be the person I am now. Thank you for being the world's greatest grandparents. You two have my undying love and devotion. I also want to express my gratitude to my parents for their kindness and excellent care of me. Above all, I want to express my gratitude to myself for never giving up, for having faith in myself, and for never allowing any negativity or challenge to stop me.

Acknowledgement

Firstly, I would like to express my gratitude to almighty Allah for his guidance, no matter what. I am also extremely thankful to my supervisor, Dr. Md Al Amin, for allowing me to work in this unique and underexplored area. I especially want to thank Dr. Mahruba Mowtushi for being kind and patient with me when I was at my worst. Your kindness helped me tremendously, and I will forever be in your debt. I am also immensely grateful to my friends, Tanisha, Mumu, Sumaiyah, Riya, Piyal, Mamun, and Imtiaz. I cannot imagine my university life without you people. I have gained wisdom from all of you. My RS could not have been that good if it were not for you guys. No matter where I am in the world, I will always remember you all with a happy face.

Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Chapter One	2
Introduction	2
Historical Context	3
Rationale for the Study	4
Research Gap	6
Research Questions	8
Chapter Two	11
Literature Review	11
Cultural Significance and Functions of Swearing.....	15
Changes in Usage and Attitudes Over Time	17
Global Perspectives and Influence of Western Swearing	20
Chapter Three	25
Methodology	25
Introduction	25
Research design and paradigm	25
Research participants	26
Research site and context	28
Research instruments	28
Data.....	29
Data collection.....	30
Data analysis.....	31
Researcher positionality and reflexivity.....	33
Philosophical Assumptions	33
Chapter Four	34
Findings and Discussion	34
Swearing as Emotional Venting	35
Swearing for Humor and Social Bonding.....	36
Code-Switching and English Profanity	38
Cultural and Gender Norms in Swearing	40

Generational Shifts in Perceived Offensiveness.....	43
Platformed Speech and Euphemisms in the Digital Age	46
Implications and Connecting the Dots.....	49
Chapter Five.....	52
Conclusion.....	52
Contributions	54
Practical implications.....	55
Limitations	55
Future research.....	55
Closing thought.....	56
References	57
Appendix A.....	63
Appendix B.....	65

Abstract

This phenomenological study examines how speakers in Dhaka use and evaluate profanity across English and Bangla, and why such language persists despite the social frown. A qualitative research using semi-structured interviews with nine participants revealed that acceptability is context-bound. Participants typically avoided strong language with elders and in formal settings, although they used it with close peers and in private digital spaces. Code-switching functioned as a resource for a perspective. Because it seemed "lighter," English profanity was frequently used for jest, sarcasm, or emphasis, but Bangla carried more impact and social danger, particularly in familial or hierarchical situations. Online discussion and media circulation expanded the repertoire and made some English-language topics more common among young people. There were clear generational differences, with older speakers upholding more extensive restrictions while younger speakers were more tolerant of commonplace profanities but still enforcing strict boundaries surrounding identity-targeting insults. Participants also differentiated "colorful" profanity from harmful abuse, with tone, relationship, and audience shaping that boundary. Current judgments mirrored a lengthy historical pattern; identity-based phrases were deemed inappropriate, sexual and vulgar language were widespread but context-sensitive, and religious oaths were viewed as sensible. The results together show that cursing is an effective tool for boundary-setting, solidarity, and managing emotions. The study offers a multilingual, Global South viewpoint on taboo language and offers helpful advice for platforms, workplaces, families, and classrooms to put more emphasis on audience, purpose, and possible damage than on word lists.

Chapter One

Introduction

Language is perhaps the most profound marker of human identity, culture, and history. It does more than transmit information; it reflects the values, beliefs, fears, and obsessions of the societies that use it (Allan & Burridge, 2006). While much of linguistic inquiry has focused on formal grammar, vocabulary, and usage, there exists a realm of language that is equally powerful yet often hidden beneath the surface of academic respectability, swear words (Beers Fägersten, 2012). These are the words we are told not to use, the ones that elicit a visceral reaction when spoken aloud, the linguistic “outlaws” that challenge the boundaries of propriety and social order (Mohr, 2013). Yet, paradoxically, they are also among the most emotionally expressive, frequently used, and socially significant parts of any language.

Background

Swearing is a universal human phenomenon. All cultures have words or expressions that are considered inappropriate, vulgar, or offensive in certain contexts (Ljung, 2011). However, what counts as offensive varies greatly across time and space. In medieval England, swearing involved invoking the sacred, with expressions like “By God’s bones!” considered dangerously blasphemous (Hughes, 2006). Today, those expressions carry little weight, while sexual or racial slurs have taken their place as the most socially charged forms of taboo language. This shifting landscape of profanity reveals an important truth: swear words are not static; they evolve in tandem with cultural taboos and societal norms.

Historical Context

What constitutes a so-called “bad” word? It originated as a derogatory term for an effeminate person in Old English. Between 1986, 1997, and 2006, 80 percent of the profanity that was heard in public was nearly identical. 'F' and 'S' words were the top two, accounting for one-third of all counts. Socially undesirable terms are used nearly as frequently as socially descriptive words, according to Slate's excellent Lexicon Valley podcast, which claimed that these ten words make up around 0.7% of the typical English speaker's daily vocabulary. There are five different kinds of cursing, according to Steven Pinker's address on the subject. To begin with, some words are intentionally bad. They are made with the intention of harming other people. This is referred to as "abusive swearing." Using language to marginalize, objectify, degrade, or disparage those who are not liked. Swear words have historically frequently been associated with things we feared, things we thought were dangerous, things that were stronger than us, and erratic things. For instance, death, illness and disability, sex and STDs, bodily fluids, germs, and foul effluvia. It became impolite to use words for those disgusting things, which were awful and disgusting in and of themselves. However, not all terms for offensive content are frowned upon by society, which leads us to Pinker's second category of profanity, emphatic swearing (RSA, 2010). The taboo nature of foul language becomes quite useful when someone swears emphatically. Class disparities have historically led to the adoption of many of the offensive terms we use today. The upper-class Normans in medieval England spoke a language akin to French and Latin, while the lower-class Saxons spoke a Germanic vernacular. Many repercussions of these distinctions may be found in English as it exists now. We derive animal names from the lower classes who worked with animals. The meat's names originate from the fact that only the higher class consumed the animals. The profanity used now is comparable.

Rationale for the Study

Swearing, variously termed profanity, cursing, or bad language, is a near-universal linguistic phenomenon, yet it occupies a peculiar and powerful place in human communication. Far from being mere linguistic “fillers,” swear words carry intense emotional and social weight. They can “stiffen the sinews and summon up the blood”, provoking measurable physiological responses in speakers and listeners (Stapleton et al., 2022). Research has shown that uttering obscenities triggers increased skin conductance, elevated heart rate, and even greater pain resistance. In other words, profanity is not just colorful language, but also has real effects on our bodies and minds. Such findings dispel the notion that swearing is simply a sign of inarticulateness or aggression; instead, profanity appears to serve unique communicative functions that merit scholarly attention (Jay, 2009).

Crucially, profanity is not static; it continues to evolve in the present day, influenced by cultural context, social change, and even globalization. A striking contemporary development is the rise of slurs and derogatory epithets as arguably the most offensive form of profanity. Cognitive scientist Benjamin Bergen notes that across many languages, taboo words fall into a few broad types: religious curses, terms for sex or bodily functions, and slurs, but that “not all swear words are created equal.” In fact, slurs that target specific groups are often rated as the most severe and unacceptable profanity in modern discourse. This reflects a cultural shift: while sexual and scatological swears still offend, derogatory language aimed at race, gender, or sexuality has become especially taboo in an increasingly diversity-conscious society (Bergen, 2016). What counts as a “bad word” thus depends on social values; for example, a blasphemy that might insult

a devout Christian audience could barely register in secular circles, whereas a racial slur would be universally condemned. Moreover, profanity is deeply cultural: a phrase that is highly insulting in one culture or language may be benign in another (Ljung, 2011). For instance, certain religious exclamations common in one country might sound quaint elsewhere, and vice versa. This cultural relativity of swearing invites a global sociolinguistic perspective, especially relevant as English swear words spread worldwide via media and the internet. English is now a global lingua franca, and its profanities too have leaked into other languages and multicultural settings. Understanding how non-native speakers adopt, adapt, or react to English curse words and how these words compete with indigenous taboos is a fascinating dimension of profanity's evolution in a globalized era.

Given the above, the rationale for this study is clear. Profanity lies at the intersection of language, culture, history, and psychology, yet it remains somewhat understudied and often misunderstood. By examining how swear words evolve across time and societies, we can gain insights into cultural values what each era considers “sacred” or “forbidden”, linguistic creativity and change how meanings of taboo words shift, e.g. “fuck” evolving from a literal meaning “to strike” to a sexual expletive, and social function how using taboo words can both build camaraderie or cause offense (Allan & Burridge, 2006). Moreover, profanity is an increasingly topical subject in today's globalized media environment. Debates rage about what language is acceptable on television or the internet, how parents and teachers should address kids' swearing, and whether the cathartic benefits of cursing (such as stress relief and pain tolerance) outweigh potential harms (Stapleton et al., 2022). This study's focus on English-language profanity is especially pertinent: English, with its rich swearing lexicon, has been both a source and a spreader of taboo words globally. English-language media popularized terms that are now recognized, if not used, in many

cultures. At the same time, English speakers' swearing behavior reflects internal variations compared, British versus American attitudes. Brits swear on average about 10 times per day, whereas Americans average 21 times, according to one comparative study (Preply, 2024). By situating English profanity in both historical and cross-cultural contexts, this research can illuminate the interplay of global and local norms in taboo language. The rationale is to contribute a comprehensive sociolinguistic understanding of how and why swear words change over time, what they mean to speakers of different backgrounds, and what this reveals about language as a living, social entity.

Research Gap

While interest in taboo language has grown in recent years, there remain significant gaps in the scholarship that this study aims to address. Prior works have often examined profanity from narrow perspectives – for example, focusing purely on English historical evolution, e.g. Mohr's *Holy Sht** provides a rich history of swearing in the Western tradition (Mohr, 2013), on cognitive and neurological aspects of swearing, e.g. Bergen's research on how the brain processes profanity (Bergen, 2016), or on sociological aspects within a single culture, e.g. studies of swearing in British media or American workplaces. However, few studies have attempted to synthesize these dimensions into an integrated sociolinguistic analysis spanning historical change, cultural variation, and generational shift in profanity usage. In other words, existing literature tends to give us pieces of the puzzle, but not the whole picture of how swear words travel from the sacred to the profane across both time and cultures.

One clear research gap is the limited cross-cultural comparative analysis of English profanity. Much of the sociolinguistic research on swearing is Anglo-centric, drawing on data from the U.S.,

U.K., or other Anglophone societies. Far less is known about how English swear words are adopted or adapted in non-Anglophone cultures, or how they interact with indigenous swear word traditions. As English becomes a global language, do non-native speakers use English swear words for effect? Do translations of English media strengthen the global spread of certain profanities? And how do local cultural norms mediate the acceptance or offensiveness of borrowed swear words? By looking at global contexts, this study addresses the gap in understanding English profanity as not only a product of English history but as part of a transcultural phenomenon. The book *Advances in Swearing Research: New Languages and New Contexts* highlights the importance of studying swearing beyond traditional English settings; however, empirical research in this area is still emerging (Stapleton, 2017). There is a need for more data on, for example, how a word like “fuck” is perceived by different English-speaking communities worldwide, or how religious-based swears persist in some cultures while virtually disappearing in others.

Another gap lies in connecting the diachronic and synchronic aspects of profanity. Diachronic historical studies tell us how English swear words developed, e.g., how *bloody* went from a blasphemous reference to Christ’s blood to a mild British intensifier, whereas synchronic studies examine how swearing works in contemporary society, e.g., differences in who swears to whom, or how swear words function in conversation. However, the two perspectives are rarely brought together. This study intends to bridge that gap by showing how understanding the history of a swear word enhances our interpretation of its current social resonance. For instance, knowing that *damn* was once gravely offensive due to religious beliefs can explain why older speakers might still bristle at it, even as young people use it casually. Conversely, examining current generational differences might shed light on language change in real time, perhaps indicating which taboo words are losing their sting and which are gaining new currency. By explicitly linking historical

evolution to present-day usage and even future trajectories, this research fills a gap in showing profanity as a continuum of change rather than a static list of bad words (Allan & Burridge, 2006).

Moreover, despite profanity's proven psychological and interactional significance, some theoretical questions remain unanswered. As a recent overview by Stapleton et al. (2022) observed, we still "don't know" exactly how swear words accrue their power and why humans are so universally drawn to using them. One hypothesis is that children learn to associate these words with strong negative reactions, punishments, or admonishments, essentially a form of aversive conditioning that gives the words emotional charge. However, direct empirical evidence for this conditioning process is lacking. This gap in understanding the mechanism by which words become taboo is part of the broader theoretical landscape this study engages with. While our project is not a psychology experiment, it is informed by these open questions. By examining real-world patterns of swearing (historical records, usage surveys, cultural comparisons), we may infer how certain contexts and power structures imbue words with taboo status. In doing so, the study contributes to filling the gap between acknowledging profanity's effects and explaining its origins and persistence (Bergen, 2016; Jay, 2009).

Research Questions

1. How do different cultural contexts influence the use and perception of English swear words?
2. What generational differences exist in the usage and acceptability of profanity among English speakers today, and what do these differences reveal about ongoing language change?

3. What social and communicative functions do swear words serve, and why do they persist despite social taboos?

Research Objectives

The central objective of this thesis is to produce an integrated, sociolinguistic account of profanity that stretches from the past to the present. I aim to show how English swear words have moved from sacred oaths and blasphemies to sexual and bodily terms and, in many contexts today, toward identity-based taboos. This shift will be treated not as an accident of vocabulary, but as the outcome of changing cultural values, politeness norms, media ecologies, and global contact. Put simply, the project seeks to explain how taboo language changes, why it changes, and what those changes reveal about society.

A first, concrete objective is historical. The study will trace the diachronic evolution of key English swear words, documenting when terms emerged, how their meanings shifted, and which items faded from common use. Archival sources, historical dictionaries, and canonical texts will be read alongside corpus evidence where available. Particular attention will be paid to turning points, moments when religious oaths lost force, when bodily terms intensified, or when once-unprintable words became normalized. The outcome, it is hoped, will be a clear narrative of continuity and rupture, not merely a list of “bad words.”

Another objective concerns contemporary variation. Profanity does not circulate evenly; it is patterned by age, context, platform, and relationship. The study, therefore, examines how different generations, social groups, and communicative settings shape the frequency, form, and acceptability of swearing. Younger speakers may swear more; older speakers may find certain

items more offensive. Everyday talk, classroom and workplace norms, and platformed discourse will be compared. Euphemized spellings, initialisms, and deliberate self-censoring will be included because they signal where boundaries are felt and policed.

It also reaches across borders. English profanity travels. It is borrowed, resisted, softened, or sharpened as it enters multilingual repertoires and meets local taboos. The thesis will therefore examine how English swear words are adopted or adapted in non-Anglophone contexts, and how they interact with indigenous systems of insult and blasphemy. Code-switching during swearing, the use of English for “safer” or more playful effect, and hybrid forms that blend English with local languages will all be explored. In short, the project asks how global media and everyday bilingualism recast what counts as profane.

Swearing does things. It intensifies evaluation, signals stance, releases tension, bonds friends, and, at times, wounds. This study will identify the communicative jobs that swear words regularly perform and the conditions under which those jobs succeed or fail. Both affiliative and aggressive uses will be considered. So will the tight coupling between form and context: the same utterance can be a relief, a joke, or an insult depending on who says it, to whom, and where.

Finally, the thesis seeks to synthesize these strands into a working model of taboo recalibration, a way of describing how particular words gain, keep, or lose their emotional charge over time. The model will connect historical shifts, present-day usage, and cross-cultural traffic to show the pathways by which profanity changes. Practical implications will be drawn for education on how to discuss taboo language with nuance, for moderation and policy, how to distinguish harm from heat, and for future research, what to measure next, and how. By the end, the aim is

straightforward: to offer a clear, evidence-based account of why swear words matter, how they move, and what their movement tells us about the societies that speak them.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Swear words, often called curse words, bad language, or taboo terms, are a special part of language that carries a lot of emotional weight and are generally avoided in polite conversation. Swearing usually involves words that are seen as offensive or inappropriate because they deal with sensitive topics like sex, bodily functions, religion, or insults directed at specific groups (Janschewitz, 2008). Even though people are often told not to use them, these words show up in every culture and have been around for centuries. Their “forbidden” status is exactly what makes them so powerful and emotionally charged. Interestingly, despite the negative connotations, swear words serve important functions. They help people express strong feelings, bring groups closer together, and can even affect how we think and feel physically. This literature review looks at how swearing has evolved in the English language, why it matters culturally, and how its use has changed over time. It also explores how English profanity has influenced other languages, especially in today’s globalized world. Overall, the goal is to better understand why swearing continues to be such a strong force in the way we communicate.

Historical Evolution of Swearing in English

Ancient and Medieval Periods

The earliest profanities in English were deeply connected to religion and the sacred. In medieval Europe, the strongest oaths and “bad words” were not sexual or scatological, but religious blasphemies invoking God’s name in vain or desecrating holy concepts (Mohr, 2013). Using sacred names outside of prayer was considered a dire offense under Christian influence, reflecting the biblical commandment against taking God’s name in vain. He also said, in Middle English, one might cry “By God’s bones!” or “God’s wounds!” as a vulgarism. These phrases were regarded as shockingly obscene in the Middle Ages because people believed that speaking them tore at the body of Christ or wielded God’s power blasphemously. A statute from 1606 in England even outlawed plays from profanely using names and body parts of God (Lipscomb, 2022). Such examples illustrate how medieval and early modern swearing was dominated by religious oaths and blasphemy, mirroring a society preoccupied with the sacred.

In contrast, many common words that we consider crude today for bodily functions or sex were relatively dull in medieval usage. Terms like *arse*, *shit*, *piss*, *fart*, or *turd* were frank descriptive words and not inherently obscene in Middle English. For instance, a medieval person could plainly say “I shall go piss” as a polite factual statement, akin to saying “I’m going to wee” today. Overt taboo on sexual and excretory terms was less pronounced in that era; it was the religious swearing and blasphemy that raised the greatest alarm.

Renaissance and Early Modern Era

During the 16th and 17th centuries, English swearing underwent a pivotal shift. As society’s religious grip loosened slightly, especially post-Reformation, and concepts of propriety

evolved, sexual and scatological words entered the realm of profanity. Mohr notes that by the Renaissance, many “bad words” of today, often involving sex or excrement, already existed in English but had previously been used literally, not as insults. They were now being used with offensive intent. Words like *sard* and *swive* (meaning *to have sex*) and a certain four-letter *f-word* were in circulation as coarse slang by the 1500s (Mohr, 2013). An early recorded use of “*fuck*” appears in 1528, scribbled by a monk in the margin of a manuscript (“O d fuckin Abbot”), seemingly a vulgar remark on an abbot’s misconduct (Mohr, 2013). This colorful note suggests that by Tudor times, “*fuck*” was recognized as a strong expletive, though its use as a casual intensifier only caught on centuries later.

By the late 17th and 18th centuries, what was considered obscene had flipped from the sacred to the bodily. Historian Suzannah Lipscomb (2022) summarizes: “In the Middle Ages, the worst words had been about what was holy; by the 18th century, they were about bodily functions.” Profanities like *damn* and *hell* once serious blasphemies, had become relatively mild oaths, while direct references to sex and excretion grew more scandalous. The word “*bloody*” emerged as a notorious swearword in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. Originally an oath related to “God’s blood” or perhaps “By Our Lady,” it evolved into a generic intensifier that polite society shunned (Lipscomb, 2022). By the Victorian era of the 19th century, the taboo on sexual and anatomical terms had peaked. Victorian English culture was so prudish that even innocuous words like “*leg*” or “*trousers*” were avoided in mixed company as too explicit. In public discourse of that time, outright profanities virtually disappeared, replaced by euphemisms and minced oaths. For example, “gosh” and “darn” substituted for “God” and “damn,” and “gad!” or “egad!” stood in for an invocation of God. Nonetheless, behind closed doors, people continued to swear much as we do now. There is evidence from private letters, court records, and even pornography that by the

mid-1800s, English speakers were using the familiar arsenal of curses (fuck, shit, etc.), even if such words seldom appeared in print (Mohr, 2013).

20th Century to Present

The twentieth century brought bad words back into more public realms and saw further shifts in what was taboo. The World Wars played a role in normalizing swearing; wartime correspondents in WWI and WWII reported soldiers' "colorful language" frankly, which meant print exposure for words like "fuck" that had long been censored (Bergen, 2016). As one anecdote from that era quipped, "we knew it was serious if the sergeant didn't say, 'Get your f---ing rifle.'" After the wars, society slowly grew more accepting of casual swearing, especially in speech. By the late 20th century, many English-speaking countries relaxed censorship in media: for instance, movies and music began featuring swear words, and by the 1990s, even some TV shows allowed mild profanity.

Linguistic surveys indicate that the most frequently used swear words have remained relatively stable over recent decades, dominated by age-old Anglo-Saxon terms. Psychologist Timothy Jay's research found that roughly 0.5% of words in daily speech are profanity, a rate that has not dramatically increased since the 1980s (Jay, 2009, as cited in Bergen, 2016). Furthermore, the "Anglo-Saxon four-letter words" *fuck*, *shit*, *hell*, *damn*, *bitch*, etc., still top the lists in usage and offensiveness, showing a continuity of core profanities (Bergen, 2016). These words, many of them centuries old, have not been dislodged by newer slang.

What has changed in recent decades is the rise of slurs and derogatory epithets as the most socially offensive language. Researchers observe that in modern America and Europe, racial, ethnic, homophobic, and other slurs are often viewed as more shocking or harmful than generic

profanity (Bergen, 2016). In fact, Bergen notes a “rise in prominence of slurs” and that younger generations consider slurs extremely offensive, even as they may be desensitized to words like *fuck* or *shit*. This reflects shifting cultural values: blasphemy lost its sting as Western societies secularized, and insults targeting identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, etc., became the new linguistic taboos in an era valuing equality. Scholars wonder whether these slur words will ever lose their power; some suggest that only a profound social change (e.g., eradication of discrimination) could neutralize slurs, and that they may remain potent for generations (Bergen, 2016).

Cultural Significance and Functions of Swearing

Beyond their colorful history, swear words carry significant cultural and psychological functions. Far from “meaningless” bad habits, profanities serve multiple communicative purposes that help explain why they endure in all languages. Swearing is a highly emotional form of language, and its use can produce effects not seen in neutral speech (Janschewitz, 2008). Research shows that uttering taboo words triggers physiological responses: increased heart rate, adrenaline release, and activation of brain regions like the amygdala, which processes emotion and fear (Bergen, 2016). In practical terms, people often swear to express strong feelings, whether anger, frustration, shock, or even joy and excitement, in a way that non-taboo words cannot match. The emotional intensity of saying “*that’s bloody brilliant!*” or “*damn, I forgot!*” is immediately understood, even if the literal meaning of the swear word is irrelevant. Indeed, the emotional arousal attached to swear words makes them more memorable and attention-grabbing than other language (Bergen, 2016).

One well-documented function of swearing is its cathartic effect. Many have experienced that yelling a few choice expletives when you stub your toe or suffer a setback can relieve pain and stress. Scientific studies confirm that participants could withstand pain, such as submerging their hand in ice water, significantly longer when allowed to repeat a swear word compared to a neutral word, as cited in Bergen in 2016. Swearing appears to increase pain tolerance by helping vent distress, a phenomenon tied to our fight-or-flight response, where taboo words kick the emotional brain into gear.

Swearing also has important social and rhetorical functions. In conversation, the strategic use of profanity can foster informality, solidarity, or humor among speakers. For example, friends may pepper their banter with playful insults or expletives, *“You lucky bastard!”* as a sign of camaraderie. Studies of real-life swearing find that most public uses of taboo words are not meant to cause harm; instead, they often produce positive outcomes like laughter or an enhanced storytelling effect (Fägersten, 2012). Swear words can serve as intense emphasizees, e.g., *“This is really good”* versus *“This is damn good”*, adding rhetorical punch. They can also function as attention signals, instantly focusing listeners’ attention due to their taboo nature (Janschewitz, 2008). In interpersonal contexts, a well-timed swear word might defuse tension through humor or, conversely, signal the seriousness of one’s anger. As Jay (2009, as cited in Bergen, 2016) notes, it’s more useful to ask *“what communication goal does this swearing achieve?”* than to assume all swearing is harmful. The goals vary: profanity can insult and demean, yes, but it can also entertain, bond people, or provide an emotional outlet.

Interestingly, despite longstanding assumptions that swearing is “bad” or harmful, research has challenged many myths. There is little evidence that merely hearing a swear word causes direct psychological harm; the impact depends on context and intent. For instance, courts once justified

obscenity laws by claiming certain words could “deprave” children, yet studies show that children generally learn swear words early by ages 3–4 and know how to navigate their proper use without lasting trauma (Bergen, 2016). In fact, by age 11–12, children have an adult-like swearing vocabulary of 30–40 words, though they use milder terms at first (Jay, 2009, as cited in Bergen, 2016). Rather than inherently corrupting, swear words are simply another part of language that kids acquire, along with a sense of when such language is socially acceptable.

Overall, the “power” of swearing is context-bound. It lies in how, when, and toward whom the words are used. A taboo word shouted into the void in frustration is a cathartic emotional release; the same word hurled at a person can be abusive and harmful. Thus, profanity’s cultural importance is twofold: it is a valuable expressive tool for individuals, and it is a barometer of societal norms and limits (Duñabeitia, 2025).

Changes in Usage and Attitudes Over Time

Attitudes toward swearing have continuously evolved, and recent decades in particular have seen notable shifts in who swears, how much, and which words are acceptable. Generational change is one of the clearest patterns. Surveys in the UK and the US confirm that younger generations swear more frequently and casually than older ones. A 2021 British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) study found that 46% of Generation Z report using strong language frequently, compared to only 12% of people aged 55–64. Likewise, in the U.S., a 2024 poll found Gen Z respondents swear roughly 24 times per day on average, over twice as often as Baby Boomers, 10 times per day (Preply, 2024). Younger adults not only swear more, but are also more desensitized to it as a “normal” part of speech. Six in ten people under 30 say that strong curse words like the f-word are just part of their daily life. By contrast, older generations tend to find

swearing less acceptable, especially in public. Over 65% of people aged 55 and older in one survey said they would *never* swear in public, whereas three-quarters of 18–24-year-olds admit they do so at least occasionally (BBFC, 2021). The social taboo around casual swearing has relaxed significantly among younger people, reflecting a broader liberalization of language norms.

Gender differences in swearing have also narrowed. Historically, profanity was seen as a male domain; ladies were strongly discouraged from cursing, and women who swore were stigmatized. Today, studies indicate the gap is much smaller or virtually non-existent among youth. The BBFC survey (2021) noted that women in the UK reported a *slightly higher* increase in swearing than men over the past five years. In the U.S., men still swear a bit more, approximately 22 times a day vs. 18 for women on average, but the difference is modest (Preply, 2024). A large-scale linguistics study likewise found minimal gender differences in swearing behavior, contrary to older assumptions. This convergence likely owes to changing social expectations, as gender equality has improved, women using strong language are less condemned than they once were. Still, some disparities remain in perceptions: certain words like the “C-word” are often seen as especially shocking or derogatory when aimed at women, maintaining a lingering “last taboo” around gendered slurs.

Class and education can also factor into attitudes about profanity, though findings are mixed. Some research suggests higher education correlates with *more* swearing, possibly due to liberal attitudes and exposure, while others note that people of all socioeconomic backgrounds swear, just in different contexts.

Another important trend is the contextual acceptability of swearing. While everyday conversation among peers might be laced with expletives, many people still code-switch and

ensor themselves in formal or mixed settings. Parents, for example, largely avoid swearing in front of their children – only about 20% are comfortable using strong language at home around kids (BBFC, 2021). Most adults also moderate their profanity around elders or professional superiors. In the U.S., fewer than 40% of people are willing to swear in front of their boss, even if they might readily do so among friends (Preply, 2024). Thus, swearing retains a degree of social risk depending on the audience. Public-facing institutions continue to enforce boundaries: film and TV rating boards still restrict how many f-words a PG-13 or 12-rated piece of content can have, reflecting that society hasn't completely embraced profanity in all domains. Interestingly, the rise of text messaging and internet communication gave birth to euphemistic abbreviations (e.g., *WTF* for “*what the fuck*”). Rating agencies now treat common acronyms like *WTF* as equivalent to the full swear, acknowledging that everyone knows their meaning. This shows how ingrained swearing is; even censored forms instantly convey the taboo intent.

Moreover, with the advent of social media, companies like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) have had to develop algorithms and community standards to detect and moderate offensive language online (Duñabeitia, 2025). Paradoxically, while average conversational swearing has become more accepted, there is heightened sensitivity to the *content* of certain words, especially slurs and their potential for harm in public discourse. This fine line is part of what some scholars call the “swearing paradox”: taboo language is both increasingly common as a casual linguistic tool and increasingly policed when it crosses into hate or abuse (Fägersten, 2012).

Finally, it's worth noting how media and technology influence swearing trends. The expansion of cable TV, streaming services, and internet content has made unfiltered profanity far more accessible since the late 20th century (Bergen, 2016). One effect is that people are simply *exposed* to more swearing in media than before, which could normalize it. For example, streaming

platforms often have hit shows and comedy specials laden with expletives, reflecting real speech patterns of younger adults. Some research suggests this ubiquity is contributing to a growing normalization in digital and informal settings of profanity (Janschewitz, 2008). Social media and anonymity also embolden people to use strong language online; a 2014 analysis of 51 million tweets found curse words in over 1% of all tweets (Duñabeitia, 2025). The internet era has thus increased the visibility of swearing. Yet, this comes with drawbacks. The same freedom can escalate into more virulent forms like trolling and hate speech, which have very destructive impacts in the real world when directed at vulnerable groups

In sum, attitudes toward swearing today are a complex mix. On one hand, it is widely acknowledged as a normal part of language, with many people even finding humor or stress relief in it, while on the other hand, certain uses of profanity are sharply condemned. Understanding these nuances requires a look beyond English, to how taboo language functions globally and how Western swearing interacts with other linguistic traditions.

Global Perspectives and Influence of Western Swearing

While this review focuses on English, it is important to situate Western profanity in a global context. Swearing is a linguistic universal; virtually every culture has taboo words, but the content and norms of swearing vary widely. There are striking cross-cultural commonalities: most languages' profanities cluster around a few core themes, especially religion, sex, bodily functions, family, and disgust (Mohr, 2013). This suggests that humans everywhere attach taboo status to certain fundamental domains of life (the sacred, the sexual, the unclean, the ancestral). For instance, sexual terms (particularly slang for intercourse or genitalia) are profane across many tongues: English *fuck*, French *foutre*, Italian *fottere*, and Russian *yebat'* (ебать) all literally mean

“to have sex” and all are primary swear words in their languages (Mohr, 2013). Words for excrement and “shit” appear in dozens of languages as well, from English *shit* to French *merde*, German *Scheiße*, and Japanese *kuso* (糞), highlighting the universal aversion surrounding waste and filth (Bergen, 2016). Insults toward one’s mother or lineage are another near-universal: many cultures have some version of “son of a bitch” for example, Arabic and Mandarin curse formulas extensively use insults involving mothers or sisters, as do Slavic languages.

Despite these broad similarities, each language also has its unique flavor of swearing shaped by history and values. In some European societies, religious profanity persisted longer as the most taboo. For example, in historically Catholic Quebec, the strongest curse words are not sexual at all but religious objects, *tabarnak* (tabernacle), *osti* (host), *ciboire* (ciborium), used as angry exclamations (Mohr, 2013). These words in Quebecois French illustrate how blasphemy can dominate profanity where religion looms large. Similarly, many Nordic languages still consider words referring to the Devil or hell as quite profane, a holdover from older religious taboo (Mohr, 2013). By contrast, languages like German and Dutch developed an unusual category of swear words invoking disease and illness. In Dutch, one can string together imaginative curses wishing diseases upon someone; a particularly offensive Dutch insult is “*kankerlijer*,” meaning “cancer-sufferer” (Bergen, 2016). This reflects a cultural horror of disease and death being channeled into curse formulas. Even within Europe, some cultures de-emphasize certain categories: for instance, linguistic surveys note that French, Spanish, and Italian speakers use sexual or scatological swears heavily, whereas Swedish and German speakers historically did not use sexual terms as much. Japanese and many indigenous languages have traditionally had no strong concept of religious profanity; there were no sacred names like “God” to blaspheme in Shinto or many Native

American religions, so swearing in those languages centers on other things, e.g., stupidity or crude bodily terms.

Globalization and the dominance of English-language media have led to notable cross-linguistic influences in swearing. English swear words, being so prevalent in movies, music, and online content, are now widely recognized around the world. “fuck” in particular may be the most internationally known swear word (Bergen, 2016). Many multilingual speakers adopt English expletives in their daily speech. Sociolinguistic studies in Europe have found younger people code-switching to English for certain swear words, sometimes because they perceive them as less serious or simply fashionable (Fägersten, 2012). For example, in Dutch, while speakers have their own rich swearing lexicon, English imports like “*fuck*” or “*shit*” are increasingly used, especially in light-hearted or casual settings. Young speakers report that in truly angered situations, they might still curse in their native tongue (as it feels stronger), but among friends or online, they may say “*fuck!*” or “*shit!*” instead. This pattern of using English swear words as pop-culture-inflected slang appears in many countries. Swedish, German, Hindi, Japanese, and others sprinkle “*fuck*”, “*shit*”, “*bitch*”, etc., into conversations or social media posts, partly due to Hollywood and internet influence. Such borrowing sometimes occurs because swearing in a non-native language can feel less emotionally charged; a second-language curse might not carry the same deep taboo weight for the speaker, making it feel “safer” to use (Janschewitz, 2008).

At the same time, English has also absorbed foreign curse words in certain niches. For example, Yiddish terms like “*schmuck*” or “*putz*” (vulgar terms for male genitalia) have entered American English slang as milder insults. Spanish words like “*cojones*” (balls) or “*cabrón*” (literally goat, meaning bastard) are known to English speakers via pop culture (Mohr, 2013). Cross-cultural research confirms that the emotion and offensiveness of taboo words are universally

recognized, even if the specific words differ. A recent multilingual study identified that in all languages tested, taboo words share three traits: *low valence* (very negative connotation), *high arousal* emotional intensity, and *low frequency* in polite usage (Duñabeitia, 2025). In other words, wherever you go, swear words are a small but emotionally outsized part of the lexicon.

Intriguingly, a 2024 study asking participants from different countries to list taboo words found big differences in how many each culture could name. Spaniards and Britons, for example, listed on average 16 swear words, whereas Belgians listed 30 and Germans over 50 on average. German speakers enumerated an “impressive” range of profanity, perhaps reflecting both a rich compounding ability and a cultural frankness with taboo terms. The same study showed that certain especially nasty insults, the equivalents of “cunt” or “bitch” appeared in the top taboo words for almost every language, a testament to some shared perceptions of extreme profanity. Meanwhile, it noted that “shit” ranked highly in English and Italian but not in French or Spanish, and that racial slurs appeared among top taboos for English, German, French, etc., but not for Spanish (Duñabeitia, 2025). This suggests that cultural attitudes influence which words are most taboo in each speech community.

In summary, Western English swear words have certainly left their mark globally. It is not uncommon to hear an overseas teenager drop an F-bomb learned from American media. Yet every language retains its own repertoire of forbidden words drawn from local taboos. Whether it’s a Russian cursing someone’s mother, a Chinese speaker saying “tā mā de” (他妈的, literally “his mother’s...”) to express anger, or an English speaker shouting “Jesus Christ!” in frustration, the underlying *function* is the same even if the *form* varies. Swear words in any tongue are a window into the soul of that culture, highlighting what is revered or reviled. As societies modernize and

intermingle, some taboo words cross borders, especially via English, but many deeply rooted curses remain untranslatable and unique. The global study of swearing, still an emerging field, reinforces that taboo language is a universal human phenomenon with diverse cultural expressions.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter explains how the study was designed and conducted to explore the evolution and lived meanings of swear words through the close reading of two information-rich cases in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Because the project asks “how” and “why” questions about a socially situated, taboo phenomenon, a qualitative, interpretivist design anchored in semi-structured interviewing and reflexive thematic analysis was employed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The chapter outlines the research design and paradigm, the participants and site, the instruments and data, the procedures for data collection, the analytic strategy, and the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness and ethical integrity (Guba, 1985).

Research design and paradigm

The study is qualitative and interpretivist. It proceeds from the premise that meanings attached to profanity are not fixed entities discoverable “out there,” but are co-constructed by speakers within specific cultural and interactional contexts (Allan & Burridge, 2006). Qualitative designs are especially appropriate when the goal is to understand complex, context-dependent practices, to produce “thick description,” and to surface participants’ perspectives in their own words (Creswell, 2018). Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, the study seeks analytic generalization: insights that illuminate processes by which taboo language is learned, negotiated, softened, intensified, or policed, and that can inform theory and future inquiry (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Semi-structured interviewing was chosen as the principal method because it allows the researcher to bring a theoretically informed guide while remaining open to participants' emphases, examples, and unexpected turns (Guest et al., 2013). The design privileges depth over breadth; two information-rich interviews were conducted and analyzed intensively. This small-N strategy aligns with the notion of "information power": when study aims are narrow, samples are specific, and interviews are of high quality, fewer participants may suffice to generate meaningful, credible knowledge (Malterud, 2016). Analytically, the project draws on reflexive thematic analysis, a flexible, iterative approach designed to identify patterned meanings across a set of accounts without presuming a fixed coding frame or positivist reliability metrics (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019).

Research participants

Purposive sampling is the deliberate selection of participants based on their ability to describe a certain topic or subject, according to Robinson (2014). In addition to selecting volunteers with relevant expertise who can offer reliable information, the researcher may use this non-probability sampling strategy to choose participants based on their own free will and voluntary desire to participate in the study (Taherdoost, 2016). Nine participants were recruited purposively to illuminate swearing practices in different, socially salient life spaces in Dhaka. Participants were mostly university students, and some were corporate office workers. All of them were in their 20s, and I had both the mixture of millennials and Gen Zs. People who came of age around the turn of the 2000s and were born roughly between 1981 and 1997 are known as millennials, or Generation Y. This generation, which has grown up with major technology developments and cultural shifts like the internet and social media, is frequently described as digitally native, self-assured, and curious. They presently make up the greatest portion of the workforce and the largest adult cohort

worldwide. Gen Z, or Generation Z, on the other hand, is the group of people who were born during the late 1990s and the beginning of the 2010s, usually from 1998 to 2012. The term "digital natives" is frequently used to describe this generation, as they are the first to have grown up with social media, cellphones, and the internet as a constant part of their lives. This gave me a more accurate framing of the perspectives of different generations and how they feel towards using swear words, and how others react to them.

Name	Age	Gender	University Semester	Job
Lisa	26	Female	11th	
Ganyu	25	Female	10th	Part-time private tutor
Jean	25	Female	13th	
Tighnari	28	Male	Completed	Corporate
Cyno	29	Male	Completed	Corporate
Kaeya	24	Male	12th	Part-time researcher
Rosaria	23	Female	9th	
Mona	25	Female	11th	
Barbara	22	Female	7th	

Table: List of participants in the research

Purposeful sampling is appropriate when one seeks cases that are especially informative given the phenomenon and research questions, rather than seeking representativeness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These participants were selected because they inhabit distinct yet interconnected linguistic ecologies, corporate workplaces, and higher education, where English circulates alongside Bangla and where norms about politeness, informality, and platformed communication are actively negotiated. Such contrasts can sharpen within-case and cross-case analysis, even in very small samples (Stake, 1995).

Research site and context

The study is situated in Dhaka, Bangladesh, a densely multilingual, media-saturated metropolis in which English functions as a prestige language in higher education, corporate communications, and online networks, while Bangla grounds everyday sociality. Dhaka is also a zone of intense global-local contact, where international media and platforms circulate alongside local cultural norms about propriety, respect, and offense. This ecology makes Dhaka an apt setting to examine how English swear words are taken up, euphemized, resisted, or hybridized in everyday talk and online discourse (Pennycook, 2007). Attending closely to place is important in sociolinguistic research because language practices are entangled with the social orders and moral landscapes in which they occur (Allan & Burridge, 2006).

Research instruments

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews guided by a protocol developed from the literature on swearing's functions, variation, and cultural dynamics. The interview was conducted using the application and feature called "Google Meet". The application was chosen because of its availability on phone and laptop. Since the participants are from different places, the

interview was conducted online for their convenience and availability. This method also gave them the time and comfort to be at their home and allowed them to think freely. The guide invited participants to recount personal histories of learning and using taboo language; to describe contextual norms at home, among peers, in classrooms, and the workplace; to evaluate perceived offensiveness across domains such as religion, sex, and slurs; to reflect on euphemized forms and platform workarounds; to discuss cross-linguistic choices and code-switching; and to comment on perceived generational change and the influence of media and online platforms. Semi-structured formats are widely recommended because they balance comparability across interviews with the flexibility to follow participants' meanings in depth (Guest et al., 2013; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). They received some explanations both before and during the interview in case they had trouble hearing or understanding the questions. No questionnaire with quantitative questions was given to the participants. The researcher was able to establish a relationship with the participants and increase their level of engagement during the semi-structured interview.

Data

The data set consists of two audio recordings of synchronous online interviews conducted through Google Meet, verbatim transcripts produced by the researcher, current field notes taken during and immediately after the interviews, and analytic memos written during transcription and analysis. Verbatim transcription preserves lexical choice, hesitation, laughter, and emphasis that are central to interpreting talk about taboo language and its social calibration (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Field notes capture contextual cues such as lowered voice when articulating particularly sensitive terms or shifts in posture when recounting a tense episode; these cues help map felt boundaries around profanity. Analytic memos record emergent hunches, evolving codes, and reflexive observations, thereby documenting the interpretive path from raw data to themes

(Saldaña, 2021). When participants code-switched between English and Bangla, the transcripts retained the original language with an accompanying gloss as needed to preserve the pragmatic force carried by word choice and to avoid erasing the affective differences often associated with swearing in a second language (Blommaert, 2010).

Data collection

Interviews were conducted via Google Meet with participants' informed consent. Audio-mediated interviewing has matured into a routine qualitative practice and, when carried out with care, can yield rapport and depth comparable to co-present interviews while offering logistical advantages in scheduling, accessibility, and participant comfort (Archibald et al., 2019). Before each session, the researcher provided an overview of the study's purpose, the themes that might arise, and the voluntary nature of participation, including the right to skip questions, pause, or withdraw without consequence. At the beginning of each interview, consent to record was confirmed on audio. Participants were encouraged to choose a quiet, private location and to use headphones to support confidentiality. The interviewer maintained a neutral tone to reduce distraction and to foster interpersonal ease, which is particularly important when discussing sensitive material such as profanity (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Archibald et al., 2019).

Each conversation used the semi-structured guide as a scaffold while allowing participants to set emphases and bring forward their examples. Narrative prompts encouraged concrete, episode-based accounts, moments of anger, humor, embarrassment, or bonding because incident-rich talk typically carries more detail about norms, functions, and boundaries than abstract opinion alone (Guest et al., 2013). Probes were used to clarify context, audience, and perceived consequences. The interviewer monitored emotional tone and explicitly invited euphemized

reference where preferred, given the sensitivity of some terms. At the end of each session, participants were thanked and reminded that particular quotations could be withheld from reporting on request. Immediately after each interview, field notes were expanded, and a reflexive memo was drafted to capture initial impressions and positionality reflections (Tracy, 2010).

Data analysis

The analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke, an approach that treats theme development as an interpretive, recursive process rather than a mechanical aggregation of codes (Braun 2016). Familiarization began with repeated reading of transcripts alongside selective relistening to audio segments to re-experience tone, timing, and emphasis. Initial coding proceeded inductively at both semantic and latent levels, attending to language choice, contextual distinctions, evaluations of offensiveness, and the functions attributed to swearing, as well as to metapragmatic commentary about when and why a term is acceptable or “too far” (Saldaña, 2021). Codes were then collated into provisional clusters that captured patterned meanings across the corpus. Examples include contextual governance of swearing across home, peer, classroom, workplace, and online spaces; cross-linguistic calibration and the use of English for reduced emotional charge or increased performative effect; functional work such as relief, bonding, edge, and aggression; media and platform effects that promote euphemized spellings or initialisms; and generational recalibration of taboo. These clusters were reviewed against the coded extracts and the full corpus for internal coherence and distinctiveness. Boundaries between clusters were refined, some merged, others split, and each was subsequently defined and named to articulate a central organizing concept and its analytic contribution to the research questions (Braun 2019). Writing was treated as analysis; drafting theme narratives exposed tensions and gaps that prompted further checking and sharpening of claims, a practice

consistent with qualitative traditions that view writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

The analysis sought coherence within each case and patterning across cases. Within-case analysis illuminated how each participant organized their swearing repertoire across contexts and audiences, which words or categories were marked as off-limits, and how judgments shifted between private and public settings or between face-to-face and platformed discourse. Cross-case comparison then examined convergences and divergences between the corporate and university ecologies, especially around tolerance in peer groups, constraints in formal settings, and the influence of globalized English on local practice. The stance throughout was reflexive rather than codebook-reliability-oriented. Instead of treating codes as fixed categories to be applied consistently by multiple raters, the analysis foregrounded the researcher's interpretive role and evaluated quality through transparency, coherence, and resonance with the data and the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Tracy, 2010).

Ethical Considerations

This study is guided by the following ethical issues: Encouraging originality; seeking access to data sources through gatekeepers and research subjects; the autonomy of respondents based on their wish and willingness to participate in soliciting data; confidentiality; legal protection of participant's privacy; reporting and publication of research results; the benefit of the study to the academic community and to society; debriefing; and feedback. I included all participants' pseudonyms instead of their original names in order to protect their privacy. This study is conducted according to the ethical principles of kindness, accountability, and respect for others. Every participant is provided with information regarding the objectives of the study and is granted

the option to discontinue their involvement at any point. Furthermore, the data collected in this study is exclusively utilized for research purposes and is subject to strong confidentiality measures.

Researcher positionality and reflexivity

My cultural background, age, gender, and stance toward profanity inevitably shape what is asked, what is volunteered, and how accounts are interpreted. I acknowledge that biases shape my own views on taboo language in Dhaka, as well as assumptions about corporate offices and private university life. I managed these through bracketing, explicitly surfacing, recording, and suspending them during design, interviewing, and coding to support analytic rigor. Rather than attempting to suppress this influence, the study makes it visible and analytically useful. Before data collection, the researcher articulated working assumptions about profanity, including the belief that it can be both affiliative and harmful, and that English expletives may feel less affectively charged for some bilinguals. The researcher also identified possible blind spots, such as the risk of normalizing youthful practices or under-attending to religious offense. During and after interviews, reflexive memos documented moments where the researcher's reactions might have nudged the conversation. These records were revisited during analysis to check how positionality may have shaped coding and theme development (Berger, 2015).

Philosophical Assumptions

This study is a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm. In simple terms, people make meaning together, and those meanings depend on context. So, swearing and taboo aren't fixed "objects" we can measure once and for all; they shift with who's speaking, to whom, where, and why (Guba 1994). Profanity and taboo are treated not as fixed entities "out there," but as fluid categories whose meanings depend on participants, relationships, settings, and histories.

Understanding swearing, therefore, requires interpretive engagement with people's situated accounts rather than measurement of a single underlying essence (Brinkmann, 2009). I assume reality here is multiple. What counts as "offensive," "playful," or "acceptable" language varies across communities, moments, and audiences, and even for the same person in different settings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In Dhaka's multilingual, globalized spaces, a word can land very differently in Bangla vs. English or online vs. face-to-face, as Blommaert (2010) shows. Epistemologically, knowledge in this project is co-constructed. The study, therefore, privileges thick description and participants' language choices, including code-switching and euphemisms, as evidence for how taboo is locally calibrated.

Chapter Four

Findings and Discussion

The interviews with nine participants in Dhaka reveal a complex relationship with swearing. Through thematic analysis, several key themes emerged regarding how English profanity is used, perceived, and evaluated in this non-Western urban context. The discussion below examines each theme in turn, integrating participants' voices and relevant scholarship to illuminate patterns and tensions in their swearing behavior. These findings are interpreted in light of the thesis's earlier review of historical evolution, global spread, and sociolinguistic functions of swearing, and are connected back to the research questions on language choice, social norms, and the roles profanity plays.

Swearing as Emotional Venting

One prominent theme is the use of swearing as a form of emotional release or venting. Many participants described swearing when experiencing intense negative emotions, especially anger, frustration, or pain, as a spontaneous coping mechanism. For example, one 25-year-old interviewee reflected, “*After I started acknowledging my pain and frustrations, and my anger came out, I started using swear words*” (Ganyu). Another participant concurred that she curses primarily “*to regulate my emotions*” during moments of frustration or stress, even though she doesn’t like to swear gratuitously. These comments suggest that profanity serves a cathartic function, allowing speakers to “*let off steam*” and articulate emotions that might be difficult to express in polite language.

This finding aligns with psychological research on swearing’s cathartic effects. Swearing is often characterized as a form of “cathartic communication” used to vent anger or pain in a raw, authentic way. Pinker (2007) labels this *cathartic swearing*, citing the classic example of cursing after hitting your head as a reflexive emotional outlet. By vocalizing intense emotions through taboo words, individuals may experience stress relief or emotional release (Stephens & Umland, 2011, as cited in Forbes, 2024). Indeed, neurological studies show that swearing can ameliorate pain and anxiety by triggering emotional arousal (Byrne, 2022). Our participants’ testimonies echo these insights: swearing provided a quick emotional vent when they were “*super angry*” or exasperated, helping them cope with stressful situations in the moment. In this way, their use of profanity for venting supports the idea that taboo words carry a heightened emotional force capable of conveying extreme frustration more viscerally than milder language (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008).

However, not all participants were equally comfortable with this form of expression. A few held personal or moral reservations about profanity, even as an anger outlet. For instance, one

young woman admitted, *“I don’t like swearing, because we swear to harass people or for demeaning purposes... I try to avoid using strong language as much as possible”* (Lisa). This perspective highlights an internal tension between cultural upbringing and emotional impulses. She had been taught that swearing is inherently disrespectful or “bad,” which tempered her willingness to curse even when upset. Such ambivalence underscores how emotional venting via swearing can conflict with learned norms of propriety. It reflects the broader cultural context in Bangladesh, where deference and restraint in speech are valued (especially for women and toward elders, as discussed later). Thus, while swearing to vent anger is psychologically cathartic, individuals must negotiate it against their conscience and social conditioning. This interplay between personal emotion and cultural values will reappear across other themes.

Swearing for Humor and Social Bonding

In addition to venting anger, participants frequently mentioned using swear words in joking, playful, or camaraderie-building ways. Swearing, when employed among close friends, often served as a marker of intimacy or shared humor rather than hostility. One participant explained that with friends, *“I might use swear words to appear funny... sometimes we laugh a lot and might use a curse word”* (Lisa). In such contexts, profanity functioned as *verbal banter*, a way to elicit laughs or signal relaxed informality. Several interviewees noted that they would only swear around people they trust. *“We use curse words with our close friends, and somehow the bond becomes stronger. I would not just curse a random person”* (Lisa). This sentiment illustrates how mutual swearing can reinforce group solidarity and friendship, precisely because it breaks polite norms in a safe space. By collectively *“breaking the rules”* of formal speech, friends affirm that their relationship is comfortable and close-knit.

Linguistic research supports the idea that swearing can foster social bonds and signal in-group membership. As Dr. Robbie Love observes, people often swear in casual conversation “to create humor and show solidarity with their peers”. The taboo nature of profanity means that using it implicitly requires a level of trust; speakers assume their listener will not take offense. Thus, when friends affectionately call each other “*bitch*” or drop F-words in teasing, they are leveraging profanity’s shock value in a controlled manner to generate *humor and camaraderie*. This behavior is widely documented among close peer groups and has been noted in other cultures as well (Stapleton, 2003). Our participants’ accounts resonate with these patterns. For example, one young man shared that he swears mostly for humor purposes around his buddies, because that casual environment “*is my comfort zone... I can speak informally without having to care too much*” (Tighnari). Swear words in this case act as a social lubricant and an equalizer, stripping away formality and signaling “*we’re on the same level.*”

Notably, participants stressed that this jocular swearing is carefully restricted to particular people and settings. They avoid such language around outsiders or anyone who might misunderstand the intent. As one interviewee put it, “*I adjust my language based on the person... If a person can get offended by something I might say, I don’t say it*” (Jean). Another mentioned she only trades mock insults or profanity with friends who “*can tolerate the way I am talking*”, but would never use those words with elders or strangers. These self-imposed boundaries underscore an important point: *swearing for bonding* relies on a shared understanding of context and intent. It works when everyone “in on the joke” interprets the words as non-serious. If that alignment of expectations is absent, the same swear word could backfire, as we will see in later examples of misunderstandings. Thus, the function of swearing shifts dramatically with context.

Code-Switching and English Profanity

A striking theme in our Dhaka interviews is the strategic code-switching between Bangla and English when it comes to swearing. All participants are bilingual (using Bangla at home and English in many educational or professional settings), and many reported *mixing English swear words into Bangla speech*. They described a nuanced logic behind choosing one language over the other for profanity. A common insight was that English swear words often feel “milder” or less personally offensive than equivalent Bangla terms. As one participant reflected, *“When I swear in English, they feel less harmful, even though they are not. We Bangladeshi people code-switch to English while swearing a lot... People think you are cool because you curse in English”* (Lisa). Here, she highlights two motivations: emotional distance and social prestige. Swearing in English provided a *psychological buffer*, making the act seem less taboo to her (“less harmful”), perhaps because English is not her mother tongue. Simultaneously, using English profanity carried a certain cachet among urban youths; it could index education, modernity, or membership in a globalized pop culture that valorizes English slang.

Another interviewee made a related observation about differing audience reactions: *“Bengali people get triggered more if they hear cursing in Bangla. In this society, they think the English language is the language of the elite. Maybe that’s why they don’t get triggered as much when they hear swearing in English as in Bangla”* (Ganyu). This statement reveals a fascinating cultural dynamic. Because English enjoys high status in Bangladesh (as the language of higher education, corporate work, and international media), profanity delivered in English is often perceived as less vulgar or shocking than profanity in the native language. In other words, saying *“What the hell!”* might scarcely raise an eyebrow, whereas the direct Bangla equivalent could be seen as gravely rude. Participants exploited this perception: when dealing with someone unfamiliar

or in semi-formal situations, they would sometimes swear in English as a “safer” option. One young woman noted she prefers English expletives with strangers or acquaintances, reserving Bangla curses for private use at home. Similarly, a male participant said if his listener doesn’t know English, he’ll stick to Bangla swear words, but if the person does know English, “*I use English curse words*” (Tighnari). This suggests he modulates language to ensure the profanity has the intended impact (or lack thereof), using English to possibly lessen the affront when needed.

These practices correlate strongly with research on bilingual swearing. Studies have found that multilingual speakers often prefer swearing in a second language (L2) to attenuate the emotional force of taboo words. Dewaele (2004) noted that using an L2 can create a sense of emotional distance; speakers report feeling *less intensity* when cursing in a foreign tongue compared to their first language. Our participants’ comfort with English profanity exemplifies this “L2 emotional detachment” effect. In fact, an empirical study of English-as-a-lingua-franca speakers found that 76% admitted to inserting English swear words even when speaking their native language, whereas very few would insert native-tongue swears into English conversation. This asymmetry, swearing in English during L1 speech, but not vice versa, mirrors the pattern in Dhaka. The data suggest that using English expletives within Bangla discourse is a prevalent form of code-switching, driven partly by the lesser perceived offensiveness of English terms. Some scholars argue that speakers “*might want to distance themselves from the situation via the use of English terms*”, essentially softening the blow of the profanity by delivering it in a non-native code. Our interviewees gave real-world credence to this: English swearing was a pragmatic strategy to vent or emphasize without crossing the same taboo threshold that a vernacular swear would.

At the same time, the “cool factor” mentioned by participants aligns with sociolinguistic trends in global youth culture. Thanks to Hollywood films, Western music, and the internet, English profanity (like the F-word) has spread worldwide and often carries pop-cultural connotations. One participant laughed that “*people here like to think that... you are cool because you curse in English*”. Indeed, younger Bangladeshis have picked up not only English swear words but also internet-born slang and milder expletives (such as “damn,” “hell,” or phrases like ‘*what the heck*’). They reported that movies, memes, and influencers on social media constantly expose them to casual English swearing, influencing their own lexicon. This reflects the global spread of English profanity: research indicates that foreign swearwords can be adopted as trendy borrowings, sometimes even *displacing native swearwords among urban youth*. Our data suggest an interesting interplay between global and local norms. While English profanities are embraced for their global chic and perceived mildness, the truly offensive insults remain those in the native language, carrying local cultural weight (as the next section on cultural norms will explore). In summary, code-switching to English when swearing emerges as a deliberate tactic that both mediates emotional intensity and projects a cosmopolitan identity, illustrating the multilingual pragmatics of profanity in this context.

Cultural and Gender Norms in Swearing

Throughout the interviews, participants emphasized that cultural norms deeply shape when and how swearing is acceptable in Dhaka society. Bangladesh’s social norms place a premium on respect, particularly toward elders, authority figures, and in formal settings. As a result, there exists a strong unwritten rule against using vulgar or “*informal*” language in front of those to whom deference is owed. One participant put it plainly: “*It is not in our culture or teachings to use informal language with our elders, so I don’t use it with them*” (Lisa). Another concurred that

from childhood they were “*taught to always be formal with teachers and elders,*” which translates into avoiding any swearing or slang in those interactions. Even without any written policy, students internalize that a classroom is a “*very formal place*” where strong language is essentially forbidden by social convention. Similarly, in the workplace, participants noted that everyone “follows by heart” an unwritten ban on profanity. These accounts confirm that swearing occupies a marked, transgressive space in the local speech community; it’s something only done in certain contexts (with friends, in frustration) but strictly suppressed in hierarchically sensitive contexts.

One notable cultural insight was how participants draw a sharp line between private and public spheres regarding swearing. Several mentioned that in rowdier public spaces like street markets or on public buses, one might overhear rough language often from men of lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and it passes without much reaction. “*I have seen lower-class people using swear words publicly... and nobody reacted to that,*” a participant observed, implying it’s somewhat normalized in those settings. However, in mixed-company public events, “*places like cafés or campuses where people of many backgrounds go*”, open swearing is frowned upon. The language norm is decidedly stricter in these middle-class, family-friendly, or professional environments. This dichotomy suggests that profanity is also class-coded and space-coded: it may be tolerated as coarse talk among certain groups (e.g., laborers bantering), yet deemed unseemly in polite society. Prior sociolinguistic studies have noted similar patterns; for instance, working-class speakers in Britain were found to use more taboo words in casual speech than higher social classes, reflecting different subcultural norms (Rayson et al., 1997). Our participants’ anecdotes about Dhaka echo this social differentiation. They knew exactly “*where you can get away with it*” versus where it would be scandalous, demonstrating a sophisticated contextual knowledge of their culture’s unwritten etiquette.

Gender norms emerged as another powerful influence on the perception of swearing. Women, in particular, face harsher judgment for using profanity in Bangladeshi society, according to the female participants. One interviewee explained that if a woman swears openly, *“everyone... including other women, would see her in a bad way. They say things like, ‘What kind of girl is she? A woman cannot use such words’”* (Ganyu). This indicates a prevailing social expectation that “decent” women should be gentle and polite in speech, an expectation not equally applied to men. Women who violate this norm risk being labeled as unladylike or of poor character. Such gendered double standards around swearing are well documented in linguistic research. Traditionally, men have been granted more license to use strong expletives, while women were expected to uphold linguistic propriety (Coates, 2013). Studies from various cultures have found that men tend to swear more frequently and more offensively than women, reinforcing the stereotype of profanity as a masculine practice. Our data both reflect and complicate this picture. On one hand, participants agreed that *“a woman or a younger person might get policed more for using strong language... men and older people don’t get policed that much”* (Jean). This matches the *“folklinguistic belief”* (Coates, 2004) that men can curse with impunity, whereas women attract censure. On the other hand, it was noted that when women do swear within trusted circles, it can serve as an act of assertiveness or solidarity, though they must often navigate negative labels that men avoid.

Interestingly, one participant pointed out that the content of common insults in Bangla (and even English) often targets women, revealing ingrained misogyny in swearing. *“In all three languages I know... the curse words mostly refer to women, women’s bodies, their character,”* she observed, adding that outspoken or nonconforming women tend to get called derogatory names. This reflects a broader insight from feminist linguistics: many vulgar terms (e.g., *“bitch,” “slut,” “son of a whore”* in translation) are gendered slurs aimed at demeaning women, which both reflect

and reinforce sexist attitudes (Lakoff, 1975). The participant's remark also highlights how profanity can both transgress norms and reveal norms. By examining who is insulted and how, we see underlying values, here, that attacking a woman's sexual virtue is a go-to form of profanity in South Asian contexts, indicating the cultural premium on female modesty. Our interviewees were aware of these nuances; it contributed to their caution, especially the women, in using or even tolerating certain swear. One woman flatly stated, *"I cannot accept cursing when it is targeted specifically towards women just to express frustration"* (Lisa), rejecting misogynistic abuse as beyond the pale.

Religion is another cultural factor that emerged, intertwined with norms and gender. In predominantly Muslim Bangladesh, many view swearing as religiously forbidden or sinful. One participant explicitly said she avoids cursing *"for religious purposes, I want to practice my religion"*, and noted that devout Muslims have very low tolerance for profanity. This religious disapproval reinforces the broader cultural strictures on swearing, framing it as not just impolite but morally wrong. In sum, the cultural and gender norms theme reveals that English profanity in Dhaka is filtered through local values of respect, hierarchy, and modesty. Who can swear, to whom, and in what context is tightly regulated by these social expectations. The participants' careful code-switching and selective usage are in fact adaptations to navigate these cultural currents without causing offense or losing face.

Generational Shifts in Perceived Offensiveness

Another key theme is the generational divide in attitudes toward swearing. The interviews suggest that younger Bangladeshis (Millennials and Gen Z) are considerably more desensitized to profanity, especially English profanity, than the older generation. Nearly every participant

commented on this trend. *“The elders are not tolerant of strong language. But the younger generation definitely is much more tolerant... because of the exposure,”* one 26-year-old participant observed (Lisa). Others echoed that their parents’ generation still finds swearing far more offensive, whereas youth use curse words more casually among themselves. This mirrors global patterns: profanity has gradually lost some of its shock value over recent decades, in part due to media and cultural shifts. As Pinker (2025) notes, there has been a *“sweeping cultural change”* since the mid-20th century that eroded strict decorum in favor of self-expression, including a *“relaxing of the inhibition against swearing.”* Words that were once unspeakable (e.g. *“damn,” “hell”* in an earlier era) have become commonplace interjections today. Our findings suggest that a similar liberalization is evident in urban Bangladesh, albeit with an interesting twist regarding language choice.

The younger participants report that hearing profanity (especially in English) no longer shocks them as it might have in their childhood. One participant reflected that five years ago she barely encountered such language, but now *“we watch movies or see memes with very vulgar language. I have learned many more swear words and even use them more now”* (Lisa). Another admitted, *“When I was a teen, if my friend called me a ‘bitch’ I could not handle that. But now, I don’t mind. Even I say ‘bitch’ all the time”* (Ganyu). These anecdotes illustrate how rapidly exposure can normalize profanity. The explosion of internet content, global entertainment, and social media in the past decade has flooded young people’s discourse with informal English, including slurs and swears that previous generations would rarely encounter. As a result, many Gen Z individuals treat words like *“shit”* or *“fuck”* as vernacular vocabulary, stripped of much of their earlier taboo sting. This observation is backed by current research: a 2025 study on swearing among different generations found that *“Generation Z uses swear words more often and with a*

more positive attitude... to a greater extent than older generations”, whereas older Gen Xers use them less frequently and more privately. The study concluded that there are *“changing attitudes towards profanity and a greater tolerance... especially among younger generations.”* Our qualitative data aligns perfectly with this quantitative finding, highlighting a generational shift toward accepting profanity as part of informal language.

That said, the interviews also nuance this trend by revealing *which* profanity has become more acceptable to youth. A particularly intriguing insight is that young Bangladeshis are far more offended by Bangla swear words than English ones. One participant asserted, *“Gen Z cannot tolerate any Bangla strong language. They tolerate English strong language without any problem, but they get really triggered when they get cursed in Bangla.”* (Ganyu). In other words, a term considered deeply insulting in the mother tongue might feel like casual banter in English. This generational quirk likely stems from the fact that today’s youth are bilingual in a way their elders aren’t: they consume huge amounts of English media daily, so English profanity is familiar and “cool,” whereas Bangla profanity remains tied to traditional cultural taboos. As one interviewee noted, English is seen as “the elite language”; it simply doesn’t carry the same emotional weight of insult. Older people, by contrast, are less exposed to English slang and may not even fully grasp the nuance of words like *“screw you”* or *“son of a bitch,”* but they definitely recognize a crude Bangla phrase and react strongly. This generational contrast underscores a broader point: the offensiveness of a given swear word is not absolute; it is filtered through cultural experience and language fluency. For the younger generation in Dhaka, global media has normalized a lot of English swearing, making those words feel “ordinary”, while their Bengali equivalents remain highly charged.

Finally, participants observed that with each passing year, tolerance for profanity seems to grow. What might have caused a scandal a decade ago is now met with a shrug. As one said, “*With more exposure and life experience, many swear words have become normal to use that did not feel normal before*” (Lisa). This points to a trajectory of increasing normalization. Yet, some also noted a personal maturation: one participant in his late 20s mentioned he actually *swears less now than he did five years ago, because after starting his job, he became more aware of how he speaks in professional environments*. This reminds us that age and life stage also modulate swearing behavior; young professionals may “tame” their tongues again as they enter workplaces and parenthood, even as societal norms overall grow more permissive. In summary, the generational shifts theme highlights a general liberalization in attitudes toward swearing among urban Bangladeshi youth, heavily influenced by global culture and bilingualism. At the same time, it underscores that older cultural sensibilities haven’t vanished overnight, leading to a gap in what different age groups consider offensive. For researchers, this finding underlines the importance of taking a *diachronic perspective*; profanity norms are dynamic, evolving significantly from one generation to the next.

Platformed Speech and Euphemisms in the Digital Age

The final theme centers on how swearing is adapted in online and public communication, including the use of euphemisms and censored forms. Participants described a keen awareness of the audience and platform when deciding whether and how to swear. In digital contexts, such as texting, social media, or group chats, they often employ creative strategies to soften or disguise profanity, mindful that written words leave a permanent record and can be easily misinterpreted without tone or context. For instance, one participant shared that when she’s chatting or posting, “*I often use an asterisk sign to censor swear words... Because even though I am sharing my*

frustration, I do not want to be too open or trigger someone else.” (Lisa). Typing out “fk” or “sh” with missing letters is a common technique to signal the sentiment of a swear word without fully “saying” it. Another interviewee mentioned using acronyms (like “WTF”) or playful character swaps, for instance, saying “what the fridge” instead of “what the f” in polite company, to bowdlerize her language when needed. These tactics reflect a broader phenomenon of euphemistic swearing, where speakers replace a taboo term with a milder version or a censored spelling to avoid offense.

Notably, even spoken swearing was sometimes softened. One participant described that if she’s very angry in person but in a semi-public setting, she might start to say “sh—” and cut off, effectively self-bleeping by uttering only the first syllable (“shhi”). Or she’ll substitute a nonsense rhyme like “mother-tucker” in place of the harsher “motherf**er”. *Such on-the-fly euphemisms show how individuals actively modulate profanity to suit their environment. The goal, as they articulated, is often to express the emotion (frustration, emphasis) without fully breaching decorum or upsetting listeners. This finding resonates with Steven Pinker’s analysis that truncated profanities and bleeps serve a performative function: “Who’s being fooled by writing fck, or when something is bleeped out on TV? It’s not about concealing the concept, but about withdrawing the intention to offend”.* In other words, by using asterisks or benign stand-ins (“fudge,” “dang,” “heck,” etc.), the speaker signals “*I am not trying to be disrespectful*”. Our participants implicitly understood this; they censored themselves to mitigate the impact on readers/hearers, essentially obeying polite norms even as they vented in a coded way.

Platform choice was another critical factor in swearing behavior. Participants drew distinctions between different online venues: private messaging apps versus public social media, and even among those, which felt more “casual.” For example, one noted, “*Messenger is where*

many people are connected with me , from close friends to faculty, [so] I feel most casual with WhatsApp, because... I only give my number to close people.” (Lisa). Because WhatsApp groups tended to consist of intimate contacts, she felt freer to use informal language (including perhaps swear words) there. In contrast, on Facebook Messenger or more open platforms, she would self-censor more heavily, knowing that her audience was broader and included superiors. This reflects an intuitive grasp of what communication scholars call *context collapse* , on certain platforms, one’s friend, family, and professional audiences merge, so one must adjust speech to the most sensitive audience. Participants consistently said that in public or mixed audiences, they avoid strong language, whereas in one-on-one chats or small friend circles, they might indulge. One interviewee explained that online, she is *“extra careful not to hurt or trigger anyone with my language... because texting is not visual... it often gets misunderstood”* (Jean). She avoids swearing in public posts or large groups for this reason, highlighting how the lack of tone and facial cues in text can make a joke curse seem harsh or an ironic comment seem offensive.

Interestingly, a couple of participants observed an inverse pattern in themselves: they swore more in spoken interactions than online. One said, *“Offline, I sometimes cannot cool down and out of anger I swear a lot. But online, I can actually calm down and take my time... so I might use strong language more offline vs online.”* (Ganyu). This makes sense , the asynchronous nature of online communication can encourage more deliberation. When angry in person, one might blurt out a curse before thinking, but when typing, there’s a brief window to reconsider or edit the words. In this way, digital platforms not only require careful audience management, but they also *afford users tools for self-censorship* (like the backspace key or emoji alternatives). The net result, as our participants described, is that many swear less or gently online than in private face-to-face moments. This contrasts with some popular narratives that anonymity on the internet increases

vulgarity; in our context, since participants are mostly interacting under their real identities, they actually moderate their language in public digital spaces to maintain a polite impression.

Finally, the concept of “platformed speech” extends to how norms differ between, say, a voice chat during gaming versus a formal email. Participants said that in professional emails or academic forums, they write in a completely formal register, no slang, certainly no profanity. But in a heated gaming voice chat with friends, the same individual might casually yell profanities at a missed shot, knowing that context is informal and ephemeral. This ability to *toggle registers* shows their communicative competence in navigating modern platforms. It reinforces a key point from pragmatics research: “*Swearing, as with all language use, is entirely context-dependent... it’s what you do with the word and the context that informs how acceptable it is.*”. The participants’ behavior exemplified this principle. They weighed who the audience is, what medium they’re using, and the potential permanence of their words before deciding whether to swear, whisper, euphemize or stay silent. In sum, the digital age has added new layers to the etiquette of swearing, and young adults in Dhaka are deftly adapting by using moderated forms (asterisks, abbreviations) and by carefully choosing the time and place for unfiltered expression. This theme demonstrates their awareness of the broader “*moral order*” of language (Dynel, 2012) even as they engage with global profanity in new, mediated ways.

Implications and Connecting the Dots

Across these themes, a nuanced picture emerges of English profanity in a non-Western urban context. The findings illustrate that young educated Bangladeshis navigate swearing through a dynamic interplay of emotional needs, social relationships, and cultural constraints. On one hand, they confirm many functions of swearing identified in Western culture, catharsis, humor,

emphasis, and group bonding. On the other hand, the local context inflects these functions in distinctive ways. For example, code-switching into English to swear is a unique adaptation arising from Bangladesh's bilingual milieu and the prestige of English. It shows how global linguistic influences are absorbed and repurposed: English swear words are adopted not just wholesale, but with local pragmatics (being seen as less serious or more fashionable). This extends prior sociolinguistic research by highlighting that the emotional force and social meaning of profanity are not universal, but filtered through language-specific and cultural lenses. A word like "*fuck*" may be deeply offensive in one context, yet almost flippant in another; our participants demonstrate how bilingual speakers exploit those differences.

In connecting back to the objectives of this research, which include understanding the sociolinguistic functions of English swear words in Dhaka and their interplay with local norms, the findings provide rich insight. They reveal that English swear words have been indigenized to some extent: they populate everyday slang often learned from media and serve local needs (venting, joking) yet are simultaneously constrained by enduring cultural values, respect hierarchies, and gender propriety. This duality has important implications. It suggests that even as global English exerts influence, local communicative ethics remain strong. Young people are *not* simply copying Western profanity in a vacuum; they are filtering it, adapting it, and sometimes mitigating it to fit Bangladeshi social expectations. For researchers and educators, this highlights the importance of context when evaluating language "appropriateness." It also indicates potential shifts on the horizon, as the more permissive Gen Z gradually becomes the majority, we may see a redefinition of what counts as taboo in Bangladeshi English usage.

In summary, the findings and discussion illustrate a community in transition: Dhaka's young adults are balancing personal expression and social convention, often through the creative use of English

profanity. They demonstrate that swearing is far from a trivial or uniform act; it is loaded with emotional, social, and cultural significance. By examining their narratives alongside existing scholarship, we gain a deeper appreciation of how global language phenomena take on unique life in local contexts. Ultimately, this chapter shows that understanding profanity in a non-Western urban setting requires looking at the interplay of global influences and local norms, generational change, and the speakers' own strategic agency. These insights not only answer the research questions at hand but also contribute to broader discussions in sociolinguistics about how taboo language both reflects and challenges the values of a society. The Dhaka case study thus enriches our understanding of swearing as a complex social practice, one that is universally human yet exquisitely sensitive to cultural nuance.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

This study set out to understand how people use, judge, and live with swear words, focusing on English profanity and its interaction with local norms in Dhaka. Through nine in-depth interviews and a reflexive thematic analysis, the research shows that swearing is not random noise at the edges of language. It is a calibrated social tool. People choose it, reshape it, and restrain it with care, tuning form, language, and tone to the moment, the audience, and the stakes.

A first, simple truth emerged early and often: swear words do real communicative work. Participants used them to vent when emotions ran high, to take a stance when they needed resolve, and to generate humor and closeness in trusted circles. In these spaces, a well-timed “strong word” could relieve stress, break tension, or thicken a bond. But speakers rarely treated this as a license. They self-censored, truncated syllables, swapped in euphemisms, or switched languages to keep the heat without causing harm. The constant balancing act between expression and care was the clearest sign that profanity is governed by norms, not freed from them.

The research highlights the power of code-switching. For many, English profanity felt “lighter” and less personally wounding than its Bangla counterparts. That difference mattered. Speakers often reached for English when they needed to vent or joke in mixed company, and saved Bangla or avoided it when the stakes were higher or the audience more sensitive. English also carried a cosmopolitan style: the influence of films, music, and online culture made certain English phrases feel current and playful. In short, language choice re-weighted the same “strong word,” changing how it landed. This is a reminder that taboo is not only about what is said, but also in which language it is said.

Context and hierarchy shaped everything. Participants drew clear boundaries around elders, teachers, clients, religious occasions, classrooms, and offices. In these spaces, swearing was seen as out of place or disrespectful, regardless of language. In private zones, among close friends, in small group chats, or in ephemeral talk, it could be acceptable, even welcome. Public places had their own map: tolerance was looser on buses or streets and tighter in cafés and campuses where audiences are mixed. These unwritten rules were widely understood and followed “by heart,” showing how deeply local values and roles structure what counts as appropriate speech.

Not surprisingly, gender mattered. Women described stricter policing of their language and were more likely to reject insults that target women’s bodies or character. Several pointed out that many common insults, across languages, aim at women or their reputations. That awareness informed their choices: they used moderated forms in safe circles, avoided gendered slurs altogether, and pushed back when others crossed that line. The findings here are sobering and practical: some “strong words” carry not just heat but harm, and people know the difference.

Also, there is a clear change over time. Younger speakers reported more exposure to swear words, especially in English, through media, memes, and online platforms. What once shocked them now feels ordinary in peer talk. At the same time, they marked red lines around identity-based insults and kept a special caution around Bangla profanity, which often felt more personal and more offensive. As some participants moved into professional roles, they tightened their language again. Taken together, these patterns suggest recalibration rather than simple liberalization: generic English profanity is normalizing in youth talk; targeted abuse remains unacceptable; and native-language insults still carry weight in many settings.

The digital layer added one more twist. People wrote differently than they spoke. In text and public posts, they used asterisks, acronyms, and playful swaps (“what the fridge”) to send a signal: “I want the emphasis, not the insult.” They chose channels strategically, WhatsApp for intimacy, public feeds for caution, and they were mindful that text strips tone and lingers. Some actually swore more offline than online, precisely because typing gives you time to edit. Here again, profanity was not a slip; it was managed.

Taken together, these findings answer the thesis’s guiding questions. They confirm the long shift from sacred to profane taboos while showing how that history is filtered through a bilingual, non-Western setting. They show how cultural norms, respect, hierarchy, religion, and gender shape what can be said, where, and to whom. They document real generational differences tied to media exposure and global English, but also show that young speakers still draw moral boundaries. And they make clear why swear words persist: they are efficient, vivid tools for emotion, stance, humor, and solidarity, kept in check by audience design, code-choice, and the social grammar of place.

Contributions

The research conceptually reframes swearing as a contextual practice rather than “bad words.” It demonstrates how platform and language choices in private vs public, voice versus text, English versus Bangla re-tune the identical lexical elements, changing their social meaning and emotional charge. Empirically, it provides a realistic account from Dhaka, a non-Western, multilingual metropolis where local taboos are upheld despite English’s popularity, demonstrating how profanity from around the world gets assimilated and domesticated. It shows how a small, well-chosen sample of interviewees can reveal subtle pragmatics that larger surveys sometimes overlook.

Practical implications

For educators and individuals, understanding rather than outright prohibitions is crucial. It's critical to distinguish between language that is genuinely destructive and that attacks or denigrates others, as well as harmless terms like casual profanity used to add emphasis or vent displeasure. Students and staff should be taught the importance of context, audience, and permanency as well as how tone and word choice, such as the use of softer forms or abbreviations, can convey purpose. Context and communication style are essential for community managers and content moderators. In a private conversation, a mild English euphemism is not the same as a nasty remark in a public setting. Recognizing the existence of profanity and discussing its use, along with safer word choices and tone-shifting advice, is preferable in language instruction so that students may navigate real-life interactions with respect and assurance.

Limitations

The study focuses on nine urban, educated, bilingual participants. It does not claim to represent all Bangladeshis, all workplaces, or all age groups. The data are interview-based and capture perceptions and reported practices more than naturally occurring interactions. That said, the internal consistency across cases, the close fit with existing scholarship, and the clarity of recurring themes lend confidence to the claims made.

Future research

Several paths are worth pursuing. A larger, mixed-methods design could pair interviews with corpus or ethnographic data from workplaces, classrooms, and online groups. Comparative work could follow the same questions across cities, regions, or social classes to map how norms shift with community. Experimental studies might test how code-switching changes perceived

rudeness or humor. Finally, more focused research on gender and profanity, especially including non-binary and transgender speakers, could deepen understanding of how identity, safety, and style intersect in everyday language.

Closing thought

Profanity turns out to be a clear window into how people manage feelings, relationships, and rules. In this study, speakers did not just “use bad words.” They made choices about words, languages, tones, and places to say exactly what they meant while minimizing harm. That is why swearing endures: it is powerful, but it is also plastic. It bends to local values, to the audience, to the platform, and to time. Seeing it that way helps us move past simple judgments toward a more honest, practical understanding of how people actually talk, and why it matters.

References

- Agha, A. (2003). The social life of cultural value. *Language & Communication*, 23(3–4), 231–273. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0271-5309\(03\)00012-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0271-5309(03)00012-0)
- Allan, K., & Burrige, K. (2006). *Forbidden words: Taboo and the censoring of language*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511617881>
- Banu, R., & Sussex, R. (2001). Code-switching in Bangladesh. *English Today*, 17(2), 51–61. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078401002061>
- Bergen, B. K. (2016). *What the F: What swearing reveals about our language, our brains, and ourselves*. Basic Books. <https://www.basicbooks.com/titles/benjamin-k-bergen/what-the-f/9780465096480/>
- Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), 219–234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475>
- Blakemore, D. (2011). On the descriptive ineffability of expressive meaning. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43(14), 3537–3550. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2011.08.003>
- Blommaert, J. (2010). *The sociolinguistics of globalization*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511845307>

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511813085>

Carston, R. (2009). The explicit/implicit distinction in pragmatics and the limits of explicit communication. *International Review of Pragmatics*, 1(1), 35–62. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187731009X455839>

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). SAGE. <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/constructing-grounded-theory/book235960>

Christie, C. (2013). The relevance of taboo language. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 58, 152–169. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2013.06.009>

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among*

five approaches (4th ed.). SAGE. <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/qualitative-inquiry-and-research-design/book246896>

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. SAGE. <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/the-foundations-of-social-research/book207272>

Culpeper, J. (2011). *Impoliteness: Using language to cause offence*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511975752>

Dewaele, J.-M. (2004). The emotional force of swearwords and taboo words in the speech of multilinguals. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 25(2–3), 204–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434630408666529>

Eckert, P. (2008). Variation and the indexical field. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 12(4), 453–476. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9841.2008.00374.x>

Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 219–245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363>

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105–117). SAGE. (Chapter)

- Guest, G., Namey, E. E., & Mitchell, M. L. (2013). *Collecting qualitative data: A field manual for applied research*. SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506374680>
- Hamid, M. O., & Erling, E. J. (2016). English-in-education policy and planning in Bangladesh: A critical examination. In R. Kirkpatrick (Ed.), *English language education policy in Asia* (pp. 25–48). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-22464-0_2
- Harris, C. L., Ayçiçeği, A., & Gleason, J. B. (2003). Taboo words and reprimands elicit greater autonomic reactivity in a first language than in a second language. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 24(4), 561–579. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0142716403000286>
- Hughes, G. (1998). *Swearing: A social history of foul language, oaths and profanity in English*. Penguin. <https://www.penguin.com.au/books/swearing-9780141954325>
- Jahan, N., & Hamid, M. O. (2019). Language, identity and social divides: Medium of instruction debates in Bangladeshi print media. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 23(4), 386–406. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12364>
- Jay, T. (2009). The utility and ubiquity of taboo words. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 4(2), 153–161. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6924.2009.01115.x>
- Jay, T., & Janschewitz, K. (2008). The pragmatics of swearing. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 4(2), 267–288. <https://doi.org/10.1515/JPLR.2008.013>
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (2nd ed.). SAGE. <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/interviews/book232795>

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE.

<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/naturalistic-inquiry/book8420>

Ljung, M. (2011). *Swearing: A cross-cultural linguistic study*. Palgrave Macmillan.

<https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230292376>

Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample size in qualitative interview studies: Guided by information power. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(13), 1753–1760.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315617444>

McEnery, T. (2004). *Swearing in English: Bad language, purity and power from 1586 to the present*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203501443>

Mohr, M. (2013). *Holy sht: A brief history of swearing**. Oxford University Press. <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/holy-sht-9780199937271>

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16, 1–13.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>

Pinker, S. (2007). *The stuff of thought: Language as a window into human nature*.

Viking/Penguin. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/292777/the-stuff-of-thought-by-steven-pinker/>

Pennycook, A. (2007). *Global Englishes and transcultural flows*. Routledge.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203088807>

- Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (4th ed.). SAGE. <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/the-coding-manual-for-qualitative-researchers/book274481>
- Schwandt, T. A. (1994). Constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 118–137). SAGE. (Chapter)
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. SAGE. <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/the-art-of-case-study-research/book4954>
- Stephens, R. (2020). Swearing as a response to pain—Effect of daily swearing frequency. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 722. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00722>
- Stephens, R., & Umland, C. (2011). Swearing as a response to pain—Effect of daily swearing frequency. *The Journal of Pain*, 12(12), 1274–1281. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpain.2011.07.003>
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>

Appendix A

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself?
2. Which languages do you use daily?
3. When did English become routine for you, and in which situations does it feel most natural?
4. What's your own comfort zone with informal language?
5. What is your earliest memory of hearing "strong language," and how did people react?
6. How has your own use of strong language changed over time?
7. If you avoid swearing, why? If you use it, what usually triggers it?
8. How do you adjust your language between home, close friends, and public spaces?
9. Can a phrase be affectionate among friends but offensive with strangers?
10. How does the presence of elders or children change your language choices?
11. How does your language differ offline vs. online?
12. What strategies do you use to soften or censor, and why?
13. Which platforms feel most casual in your circles and why?
14. How have films, music, stand-up, memes, or influencers shaped expressions in your circle? Which English expressions recently entered your circle via films, music, and social media?
15. When you're about to swear, do you tend to choose English or Bangla? In what situations and why? What effect are you aiming for?
16. In your experience, what functions does strong language?
17. Tell me about a time strong language helped you; tell me about a time it backfired.
18. In Dhaka's everyday spaces, where are norms stricter and where looser?

19. What are the unwritten language rules in your classroom/workplace, and how do people enforce them?
20. What generational differences do you notice in tolerance and usage?
21. Compared to five years ago, what has changed in your circle's language, and what caused it?
22. Where do you draw the line between colorful and harmful language, and what signals tell you it crossed the line?
23. What used to feel shocking but now feels ordinary? What has become more sensitive over time?
24. Do you notice differences by gender, religion, or role in who gets policed more for edgy language? How do you navigate that?
25. What changes when you're with close friends vs. acquaintances? Does it have to do with peer pressure?
26. How do language expectations differ in emails, chats, and meetings? How do people adjust language for seniors, juniors, and clients?
27. If a colleague used strong language in a meeting, what would likely happen next?

Appendix B

Participants	Data Excerpt	Codes	Themes
Ganyu	“I curse to regulate my emotions... when I’m angry or stressed.”	Venting / affect-release	Functions: venting, humor, bonding, stance
Tighnari	“We use it with close friends... the bond gets stronger.”	Humor/bonding	
Ganyu	At home, I mostly use Bangla strong language, but with other people, especially if it’s someone I don’t personally know, I use English strong language. I code-switch to English because I noticed that Bengali people get triggered more if they hear cursing in Bangla.	English feels lighter.	Code-switching
Ganyu	“In this society, they think the English language is the language of the elite. Maybe that is why they don’t get triggered that much when they hear swearing in English as much as in Bangla.”	Bangla feels stronger	Native- language profanity

Lisa	“It is looser in places like public transportation. In Bangladesh, most people from the lower and middle classes use public transportation. And because of that, I have seen lower-class people using swear words publicly or on the bus casually, and nobody reacted to that. In places like cafes in it is not common for people to be using strong language. People of many backgrounds go there. Students, office workers, and families go there, so it is not common for people to swear in cafes or even on campuses. So it is stricter in places like a cafe or campus.”	Respect/hierarchy; public/private & place	Context-calibrated swearing
Lisa	“While texting, I often use an asterisk sign while using to censor swear words in my language. Because even though I am sharing my frustration, I do not want to be too open or trigger someone else.”	Euphemism, asterisks, acronyms	Platformed speech & euphemisms
Ganyu	“I avoid it for religious purposes. Because I want to practice religion. I curse mostly when I am angry or frustrated. But in other situations, I avoid it completely.”	Religious restraint;	Moral order: religion, harm
Lisa	“Exposure to swear words changed our language. Now we watch movies or series, or we see memes with very vulgar language. I have learned many more swear words and even use swear words more now than I did 5 years ago.”	Generational shift; platform awareness	Change over time: exposure

Ganyu	“Women get policed more for using strong language. In our society, if a woman used any strong language, everyone else, including other women, would see her in a bad way. They say things like, “What kind of a girl is she?” or, “A woman cannot use such words,” etc. But when it comes to lower-class people, they don’t get policed for using strong language. People don’t care if lower-class people swear.”	Gendered policing	Identity-based insults
-------	---	-------------------	------------------------