

Discussing the Undiscussable: Taboos and Euphemisms in Linguistic Discourse

Jelige: invert

Tartalomjegyzék

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Introduction to Euphemisms and Taboos in Language: Unveiling the Veiled

Language is a fundamental tool for communication, and it is a rich tapestry of words, phrases, and expressions that reflect the intricate facets of human culture, society, and psychology. “Human behavior is not governed only by rational decision-making. Societies often have shared values and standards of acceptable behavior that members of the society are encouraged to follow.” (Fershtman, Gneezy, Hoffman, 2011. p. 139.) Many words and expressions are viewed as taboos, for example, words describing sex, private body parts, death, or illness. „Taboo refers to a proscription of behavior for a specifiable community of one or more persons at a specifiable time in specifiable contexts.” (Allan & Burrige, 2006. p. 11). “Taboo is an ethnographic concept. Taboo denotes a ban appearing in the sphere of public life at different levels of human development.” (Muminov, 2021. p. 866). A taboo is a “ban or inhibition resulting from social custom or aversion” (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2000). Multiple studies conducted in multiple language communities (e.g., Hongxu & Guisen, 1990; Leach, 1964, 1976; Pound, 1936; Steiner, 1956 Frazer, 1922; Frykman & Lofgren, 1987; Grimes, 1977; Hall, 1959;) show that linguistic taboos are a universal phenomenon, meaning that they are present in every culture, every speech community, however it manifests differently depending on a multitude of variables. These variables are the situation, who we are talking to, or our intentions in the sense that do we want to be polite, use neutral language, or be straight-up rude, we can choose to address taboo topics directly, or we can sugar-coat the situation by using certain euphemisms.

The word „euphemism“ has been defined by the online Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant” (2012). So, euphemisms are linguistic strategies employed by many to soften communication and to be able to talk about taboos in a socially acceptable way. Interestingly, the term euphemism is not widely known despite being used by almost everyone, even without noticing. It is important to mention that swear words can also be put under the same category, making it an interesting subtopic to investigate. Linguistic taboos influence the emergence of swearwords because they often stem from them, making them an effective tool to express protest, anger, and dissatisfaction. As Mahmoud A. Al-Khatib mentions in his 2010 research paper, “Even though all taboo words contribute to the creation of swear words, they form a hierarchical array concerning their negative influence on the target person.” (p. 450.) However, this highly varies from culture to culture and even from person to person. Certain swearwords will have different effects on different people, for example for me, swearwords that stem from sexual taboos are a lot more offensive than swearwords that stem from religion because I am not religious; I did not grow up in a religious community, but this can be different for people from different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, in this research paper, I will explore the significance of taboos and euphemisms in various linguistic contexts, hopefully shedding light on the underlying social and linguistic norms and values surrounding this fascinating topic.

Literature Review

Taboos in Language: Identifying Cultural and Social Boundaries

This research will focus on exploring a spectrum of societal taboos that are often regarded as sensitive and, therefore, are approached with caution in public discourse. The investigation will investigate multiple taboos, including sex, private body parts, sexuality,

gender, illness, death, religion, politics, money, grief, mental health, race, violence, addiction, weight, relationship issues, height, abortion, aging, abuse, smell, menstruation, and disability. The intention is to analyze the web of cultural, social, and individual factors that contribute to the tabooization of these topics. As said by Allan and Burridge in their book titled 'Forbidden Words: Taboos and Censoring of Language,' „Taboos arise out of social constraints on the individual's behavior where it can cause discomfort, harm or injury.” (2006. p. 1.) The origin of the word taboo is Tonga, and it is a borrowing meaning “forbidden behavior, in particular, behavior believed to be dangerous to certain individuals or the society as a whole.” (Burridge, 2006. p. 455.) The first researches that was compiled on the topic of taboos was ethnographical and anthropological researches; the linguistic aspect came in later. This implies that taboos are dependent on geographical and social space. In some contexts, these taboos have a stronger meaning because they have direct and dangerous consequences.

However, western societies are a bit milder:” Typically, they rest on traditions of etiquette and are therefore set by social parameters such as age, sex, education, social status, and the like.” (Burridge, 2006. p. 456.) This means they are avoided because they either feel embarrassed or offended in certain circumstances, but there is mild or even no consequences for using them. What we have to take into consideration is the style, the register, and the social environment. An example of a very common taboo and its origin would be anything concerning the genital organs of humans. As Allan and Burridge (2006) say, “those of women are usually more strongly tabooed than those of men, partly for social and economic reasons, but ultimately because they are the source of new human life.” This aspect introduces a biological perspective, suggesting that societal attitudes toward reproduction and the control of reproductive capabilities may contribute to the intensified taboo. Interestingly, multiple swear words stem from these taboos concerning human genitalia and reproduction, especially in Hungarian we like to play around with a multitude of those, used in very rude and offensive ways, but they are also present in the English language. The presence of offensive terms indicates the sensitivity and societal discomfort surrounding these topics. “Besides its semantic nature and its sociolinguistic variation, the expression of linguistic taboo is also crucially determined by situation-dependent pragmatic factors that determine what is offensive and what is not, often in terms of face protection and threat.” (Allan and Burridge, 2006. p. 34) The extent of words' offensiveness hinges entirely on pragmatic factors like the relationship between the speaker and listener, the social and physical context, and the choice of words and tone of voice. It is important to note that due to the immersive sociocultural variation regarding taboos, there is no such thing as an absolute taboo. These taboos are not static, they change over time, just as any other aspect of language and society does. As Allan and Burridge stated, taboos arise from social constraints that can cause discomfort or harm. (2006)

Euphemistic Strategies: Dissecting Linguistic Devices and Techniques

Euphemisms are used when we want to talk about a taboo topic in a socially acceptable way. As Burridge (2012) says, “In this primary function, euphemisms are verbal escape hatches created in response to taboos.” (p.67.) Some frequently used euphemisms are ‘pass away,’ which is used to talk about the taboo topic of death, or ‘making love’ for the notion of sex. However, there are countless examples of euphemisms in the English language. We need to know about the underlying linguistic strategies that govern the creation of euphemisms. “The many different linguistic devices used in the formation of euphemisms fall into three

overarching mechanisms: analogy (generalization of forms to new situations), distortion (modification of forms) and borrowing (incorporation of forms from elsewhere).” (Burridge, 2012, p. 72.) An example of a euphemism created by analogy is saying ‘horizontal refreshment’ referring to intimacy. The analogy is made between the horizontal position and the idea of refreshing or engaging in a pleasurable activity. We can differentiate between multiple types of analogy-based linguistic strategies when creating euphemisms, for example, metaphors, whole for part, or part for whole substitutions. An example of a euphemism that is also a metaphor is “bite the dust.” This phrase is often used to describe someone who has died, and the metaphor involves the image of a person falling to the ground or battlefield, symbolized by biting the dust, as a way of expressing the end of life. An example of a euphemism using whole-for-part substitution is ‘putting bread on the table.’ This phrase is often used as a euphemism for earning a living or providing financial support. Here, ‘bread’ represents the entire spectrum of one's income and resources, emphasizing the broader aspect of sustaining a household rather than just focusing on the literal act of putting bread on the table. An example of a euphemism using a part-for-whole analogy is ‘hired gun.’ This phrase is often used to refer to someone who is hired for their expertise or services, especially in a professional or mercenary context. Here, ‘gun’ is a part representing the entire person, emphasizing the specific skill or role the individual plays rather than focusing on their overall identity. Another way of creating euphemisms is distortion, which involves shortening acronyms, initialisms, and ellipses. Other techniques that are highly productive with neologisms and the emergence of social media and self-censorship involve phonological remodeling, affixation, blending, reduplication, alliteration, and rhyming. (Burridge, 2011). Examples of shortening include ‘geriatric’ to ‘geri’ or ‘gynecologist’ to ‘gyno.’ Saying ‘SA’ instead of ‘sexual assault’ or ‘NSFW,’ which stands for ‘Not Safe for Work.’ This acronym is commonly used to label content, usually online, that is explicit, inappropriate, or contains mature themes, indicating that viewing such content may not be suitable in a professional or public setting. A case of ellipsis would be using senior, derived from senior citizen, which is a euphemism, so we have this very interesting case of creating a euphemism from another euphemism. In this case, we are doing this because saying senior has a more positive connotation to it than senior citizen. (Burridge, 2011) Phonological remodeling is when you adjust the pronunciation of words such as saying ‘heck’ instead of ‘hell,’ ‘gosh’ instead of ‘god,’ or ‘gyat’ for ‘god damn.’ An example of blending is example is ‘bromance,’ which is a blend of ‘brother’ and ‘romance.’ This term is used to describe a close, non-romantic friendship between two men. ‘Oldster’ and ‘Oldie’ are euphemisms created by affixation, ‘prime timer’ is created by reduplication, and ‘denture daddy’ is created by alliteration, both meaning an old person. (Burridge, 2011) The third category is creating euphemisms for internal and external borrowing. External borrowings often come from Latin or Greek, and internal borrowings come from slang and jargon, which often can be traced back to Latin or Greek such as medicalese.

Navigating Language: Unravelling the Roles of Taboos and Euphemisms in Communication

As I previously stated, taboos arise from a societal constraint, and they vary from culture to culture and from situation to situation. Humans tend to avoid these taboos in speech by avoiding naming them directly. We do this to minimize the offensive effect and to not disturb the harmony of communication. Many of the taboos present in contemporary Western society ultimately stem from etiquette traditions delineated by culturally sensitive social parameters like age, gender, education, and social standing. While some individuals may still believe in the possibility of metaphysical harm resulting from the transgression of religious sensitivities, the

avoidance of taboo words in today's English is not driven by a fear of physical harm. Instead, these words are typically censored on a specific occasion to prevent the speaker from losing face by offending the sensitivities of the audience. Most people consistently self-censor their language and behavior, consciously or unconsciously choosing from various alternatives based on the context. These taboos are often observed in private but are most stringent in the public domain, where euphemism is considered polite, and the use of offensive language (dysphemism) violates social conventions. (Burridge, Allan, 2006) It is important to state that there are multiple different views of euphemisms, and it is a central problem in Modern English. Many linguists say that the phenomenon of taboos is linked to euphemisms, by saying that euphemisms emerge in languages because of the need to talk about taboo topics without being offensive. "Accordingly, some linguists see the source of taboos in prejudice and deny the existence of "genetic ties" between modern euphemisms and taboo. On this account such euphemisms have been named by linguists as superstitious." (Arif, 2015. p. 152) As we can see we have two very conflicting views about the ties between taboos and euphemisms, in this research paper I will consider that there is a connection between taboos and euphemisms.

Accordingly, there are conflicting views about the roles of taboos and euphemisms. Allan and Burridge, for instance, refer to euphemisms as "deodorizing spray and perfume" (Allan & Burridge, 1991). This refers to the role of euphemisms as something that makes language more pleasant. This is reflected even in the name 'euphemism' which originally comes from Greek, from 'eu' meaning good and 'pheme' meaning speaking, so euphemism means good speaking. Others say that euphemism is "the morality of rhetoric." (Lutz, 1987) In these instances euphemisms are considered something great, something useful, and they are treated positively both in a linguistic and in a social aspect. They serve a specific purpose in social discourse by allowing participants to express themselves in situations involving taboos, or by saving face. However, some linguist argues that using euphemisms have a negative effect on communication because they "hide seemingly simple and straightforward words behind deceptive or overly complex ones" (Lacone, 2003). According to this the use of euphemisms can hinder communication therefore leading to misunderstandings. Euphemisms also can serve as potent tools for shaping and, at times, manipulating the perceptions of listeners or distorting their understanding of information. This tactic is prevalent in public speeches, official documents, media, and various other communication channels. For instance, euphemisms play a persuasive role in advertising. Some airlines employ euphemistic terms to categorize passenger compartments, creating a more enticing image. Instead of straightforward designations like "first class," they opt for terms such as "deluxe" or "premium class." Similarly, the conventional "second class" is rebranded as "first class," while the traditional "third class" undergoes a transformation into "business class" or "tourist class." (Samoškaitė, 2011)

Historical Perspectives: Tracing the Evolution of Euphemistic Language

Due to their nature, most euphemisms are doomed to be short lived. They come and go, the euphemisms that are normal for us to use would have been out of place fifty years ago, similarly, our kids and grandkids will use different euphemisms as we do. Language is not static it is always changing. However, there are some common reasons why euphemisms must 'retire', the most common one is pejoration, which means that the meaning turns into something negative over time. (Burridge, 2012) The process of contamination is taunting euphemisms, this refers to the process of all euphemism becoming tainted over time, meaning that the word

will gain a negative connotation, and this will undermine the euphemistic properties of the word. This process is described by the Law of Semantic Change, coined by Allan and Burridge, which states that "Bad connotations drive out good." (1991. p. 22) The once 'innocent word' transforms into something as objectionable as the word it replaced, leading to its subsequent rejection. Consequently, taboo areas of language consistently result in a continual narrowing and degradation of meaning. (Pinker, 1997) As an example, the term "senile," originally denoting "belonging to old age" since the 1600s, was once used in contexts like Samuel Johnson's dictionary entry, which mentioned 'a senile maturity of judgment.' However, over time, the word underwent a deterioration in its connotations. Except for specific medical conditions like senile dementia, it has now taken on a dysphemistic tone. A different fate waiting for euphemism is routinization. This means that the frequent usage diminishes the novelty of expressions, turning them into mundane language. This is especially evident in areas like insults, swearwords, and slang, where their impact weakens over time. Face-saving euphemisms lose their effectiveness, and flamboyant expressions no longer command attention as they once did. (Burridge, 2012) Some euphemisms quickly fade before becoming unfit for use. Cultural and slang-based euphemisms are especially prone to rapid obsolescence. Wear and tear lead to metaphorical links breaking, burying imagery, and stripping expressions of their impact. This process benefits face-saving euphemisms but hinders those aiming to provoke, amuse, or define a group.

The turnover in euphemisms occurs not only due to erosion but also because routine and semantic-pragmatic loss render expressions inconspicuous. This dynamic reflects the ongoing tension between routinization and creativity in language evolution. Although the lifespan of most euphemisms is rather short, there are some longer-living euphemisms. To understand the lifespan and the evolution of euphemisms it is important to have a look on euphemisms that are present for a longer period. An amazing example in this case is the euphemisms regarding bad smells. It is interesting to note that the English language has a lot more negative expressions regarding smell than positive, and very few neutral ones. For bad smell we have euphemism as old as 1130-year-old, 'stench' was first recorded in 893. But 'stink', 'smell', 'odor' are all old euphemisms for bad smell that are still in use today. "The longer the word has been in the language to refer to smelling, the more offensive its connotations; in short, the older the word, the more offensive the smell (stink and stench being the foulest). (Burridge, 2012. p. 81)

Other euphemisms have remarkable durability over centuries, such as "to sleep with" for "have sexual intercourse" since the 10th century, "to lose" meaning "be deprived (of someone) by death" since the 12th century, and expressions like "pass away," "deceased," "departed," and "no longer with us" for "dead" since the 15th century. But what is the key to their success? McGlone, Beck & Pfiester's survey links familiarity to perceived politeness in euphemisms. Common expressions like "go to the bathroom/restroom" and "pass away" are rated higher for politeness than less familiar ones. Despite their politeness, lesser-known euphemisms like "powder one's nose" aren't widely used. The enduring popularity of phrases such as "go to the bathroom/restroom" and "pass away" is due to their high level of abstraction, allowing them to reference taboo topics discreetly. Similarly, the terms "age," "aged," and "aging" remain inconspicuous, and comparing them to "elderly" introduces ambiguity with the term "somewhat aged." (2006) However this is a rare phenomenon, and most euphemisms are not at all long lived, but looking at these handful of expressions that managed to stick around we can have an interesting insight of how language change and language preservation in the case of euphemisms works.

Digital Dilemmas: Exploring Self-Censorship in Social Media

Self-Censorship is an interesting phenomenon, which is getting more and more attention as the popularity of social media platforms grow. As it was mentioned in the study done by Das and Kramer “We found that 71% of the 3.9 million users in our sample self-censored at least one post or comment over the course of 17 days, confirming that self-censorship is common.” (2013) These social media platforms require users to follow their community guidelines. These guidelines include regulations on swearing, banning of certain words that are considered taboo, these are mainly sex, death and self-harm related, and much more, but these vary from platform to platform. It is a complex phenomenon that involves individuals consciously or unconsciously regulating their language to conform to societal norms, avoid backlash, or adhere to platform guidelines. This form of censorship often arises from the desire to maintain a certain online persona, fit into social groups, or prevent negative consequences such as online harassment or account suspension. Users still want to talk about topics such as sex, death or self-harm, even though the community guidelines are against it, so they must be creative.

Self-censorship can be understood as a form of euphemism, as both involve modifying language to navigate social sensitivities and avoid potential offense. Euphemisms replace direct expressions with more acceptable terms, while self-censorship entails altering or omitting speech to conform to perceived societal norms. In both cases, the communicator adjusts their language to align with audience expectations, thereby mitigating negative reactions. Research indicates that individuals often engage in self-censorship by employing euphemistic language to obscure potentially objectionable content. For instance, a study on social media behavior found that users frequently use character replacements or euphemisms to self-censor, aiming to evade censorship or adapt to platform culture (Feshbach, 2013). This practice demonstrates how self-censorship and euphemism intersect as strategies for managing expression in sensitive contexts. Furthermore, the concept of "political correctness" illustrates the relationship between self-censorship and euphemism. In public discourse, individuals may rely on euphemistic language to self-censor, thereby avoiding expressions that could be deemed politically incorrect or offensive (Loury, 1994). This reliance on euphemism serves as a mechanism for self-censorship, enabling individuals to navigate complex social dynamics without attracting criticism.

There are multiple tactics to self-censorship, for example the choice of words or modifying certain words. Users may refrain from using certain words or expressions deemed offensive, controversial, or against community standards. This often leads to individuals employing euphemisms or less explicit language to convey their message while minimizing the risk of backlash. In other cases, users come up with new spellings for words, such as writing ‘sex’ as ‘shmecs’, ‘Sewerslide’ for suicide, ‘k1ll, and d1ck for kill and dick. ‘naht zee’ for nazi, ‘lessbean’ for lesbian, or ‘grape’ for rape. It can also involve using initialisms such as ‘BDE’ which stands for ‘Big Dick Energy’ or ‘BFFR’ for ‘Be Fucking for Real’. Certain euphemisms were created because of social media, and some got popular because of it, for example ‘off’ or ‘unalive’ for ‘killing someone’. The research done by Feshbach (2023), which surveyed Tumblr, Twitter and TikTok found the following about the different self-censorship tactics. Tumblr respondents mostly reported no censorship, with a small percentage using various tactics such as asterisk replacements. Twitter users showed a more even spread of tactics, including asterisk replacement, symbol or number replacement, and phonetic and non-phonetic X-phemisms. TikTok users mostly engage in self-censorship, with a prevalence of non-phonetic

X-phemisms. Users selecting 'No' were less likely to choose another response, suggesting less overlap. This could be because those choosing 'No censorship' are less likely to self-censor. However, 'No' did appear alongside other responses, possibly indicating rare instances of self-censorship. So, as we can see, there is some variation among different social media sites, but they also share a lot of common aspects as well, and they are providing us with an interesting and new perspective on taboos and euphemisms.

Taboos and Power Dynamics: Exploring Language as a Tool of Social Control

Power dynamics in society play a significant role in shaping language use. Those who hold power often have a strong influence on the establishment and maintenance of social norms, including linguistic norms. This impacts the way we speak in different situations. Let's think about it: do you speak the same way to your close friend as you do to your boss? Or do you speak the same way to your mother as you do to your teacher? Most people would say no because that is the societal norm. Research in sociolinguistics and cognitive sociolinguistics focusing on taboo has consistently demonstrated, as initially proposed by López Morales in his early works (1990), that the use of linguistic taboo is influenced by factors such as age, gender, educational attainment, social class, and the specific context in which it occurs. Broadly speaking, the insights provided by sociolinguistic studies indicate that informal registers tend to employ more direct or dysphemistic expressions, a tendency observed among the middle and upper classes, middle-aged individuals, and men. In contrast, lower social classes and women tend to favor indirect or euphemistic expressions. (1990) In contexts where there is a power imbalance, individuals or groups with less power may use euphemisms to navigate sensitive topics without directly challenging those in positions of authority.

In polite discourse, power dynamics can affect the choice of euphemisms. Speakers lower down the ladder (or who cannot get on it at all) may use euphemisms so as not to offend or test in a direct manner those above them, thereby maintaining politeness and face-saving. As the results of the research carried out by Mancera shows the choice of expressions in question and individuals' perceptions of them are shaped by the communicative context and aligned with established sociocultural norms. In situations characterized by close relationships with the interlocutor, such as those suggested earlier as informal, there is a partial relaxation of prohibitions stemming from factors like embarrassment, fear, or propriety. (2018) Those in positions of power may use taboos to maintain social order and control, while marginalized groups may challenge or subvert taboos as a form of resistance. The expression of taboos involves discussion in terms of communicative situations. According to the perceptions given by informants, people can talk about concepts and things involving sex, religion or death, scatology. However, such discussions are deemed inappropriate in semi-formal or formal contexts. This observation reflects the subjects' sociolinguistic awareness and highlights the varying degrees of taboo associated with these concepts and realities, as well as the use of direct, non-neutral linguistic expressions. However, it is important to note that this is not entirely universal and there is difference from culture to culture, but this difference manifests itself in the product, but the underlying principles are rather similar. (Mancera, 2018)

Research Questions and Data Collection

Research Questions

I asked two research questions to investigate the topic of taboos and euphemisms. I was interested in the social factors and how they manifest in different situations, as well as the different linguistic strategies that are used in the creation of euphemisms. My two research questions were the following:

- How do power dynamics within societies influence the use of taboos and euphemisms?
- What roles do social media and digital communication play in shaping the use of euphemisms and the perpetuation of taboos in contemporary language?

Data Collection

The questionnaire was designed to collect data about the general attitude towards taboos and euphemisms. It collected data about how comfortable people feel in certain situations to talk about different taboo topics. It also collected data about how people feel about euphemisms, how often they use them and how conscious they are about them. The motivation that drives the usage of euphemisms was also surveyed in the offline and online word as well. The questionnaire also has a section about the effects of social media, and what are the people feelings about it. These questions were supported by a background questionnaire, which had questions about age, education, social media use, culture, and religion because, as the literature review showed us, these are all important factors that contribute to our attitude and actual speech. In total the questionnaire consisted of forty questions, from that twenty questions were part of the background questionnaire, which allowed me to have a complex picture about the socio-economic status, and the linguistic and geographical background of the surveyed people, which was crucial for answering the research questions, especially the first one. The other twenty questions were focusing on the general attitudes and opinions about the issue as well as the self-perception of the public in relation to the issue of the use of taboos and euphemisms. Questions from six to ten were focusing on power dynamics, answering the first part of the first research question, with the help of the background questionnaire. Questions five, and questions from twenty-seven to thirty and thirty-nine were asked to answer the second part of the first research questions. Questions twenty-five and twenty-six and questions from thirty-one to thirty-eight were designed to answer the second research question the sampling method was a convenience sample, the questionnaire was administered online, via google forms, and I was looking for a sample of at least a hundred people, in the end one-hundred and forty-four answers were registered.

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

A total of 144 individuals responded to the questionnaire, and their demographic profiles are outlined below. The respondents' ages were categorized into three groups: 18-23, 24-43, and 44-59. Most participants (65.3%) fell within the 18-23 age bracket, followed by 30.6% in the 24-43 age group. Only 4.2% of respondents were aged between 44-59.

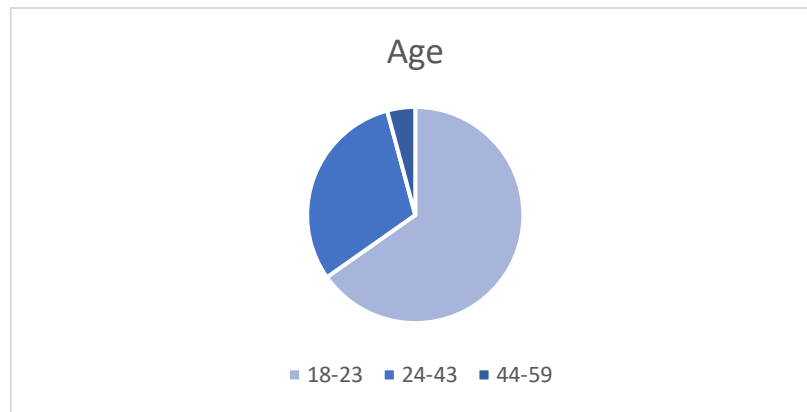


Chart 1. Age of the Participants

Female respondents constituted the largest proportion of the sample, accounting for 75% of participants. Male participants comprised 22.2% of the sample, while individuals identifying as other represented 2.8%.

2. What Gender do you identify as?

144 válasz

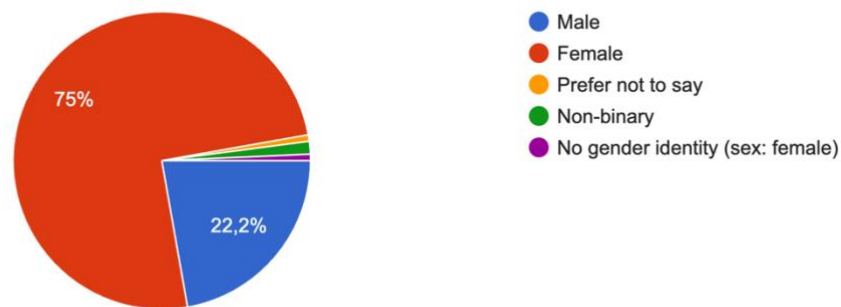


Chart 2. Gender of the Participants

The participants' geographical origins were diverse. A majority (52.7%) hailed from Hungary, with smaller proportions originating from Western Europe (13.89%), Asia (9.7%), the Middle East (7.6%) Eastern Europe (5.6%), America (4.2%), Africa (1.4%), and Australia (0.7%).

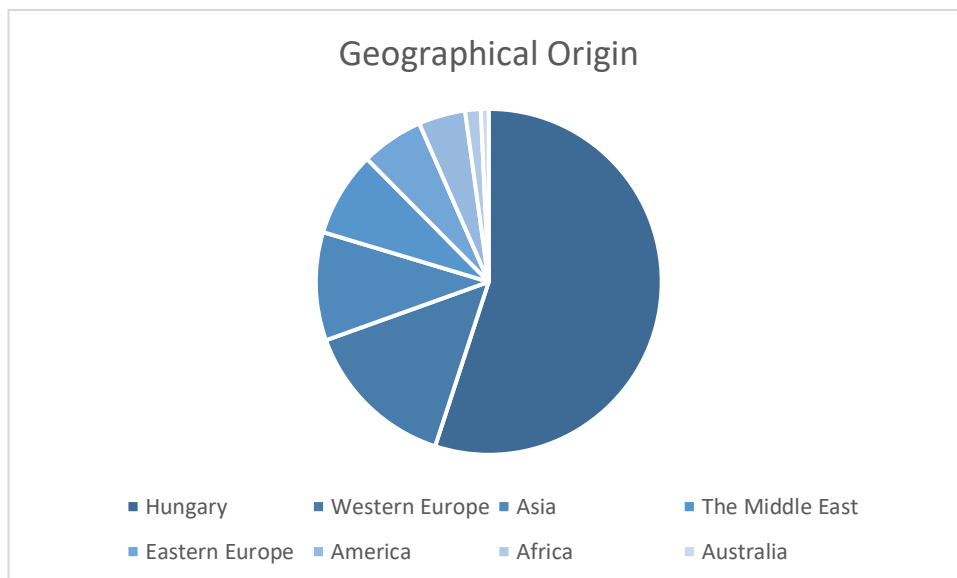


Chart 3. Geographical Origin of Participants

Regarding religious affiliations, nearly half of the participants (48.6%) reported no religious affiliation. Among religious respondents, 33.3% identified as Christian, 9% as Muslim, and 3.5% as Buddhist. Other affiliations included Hellenic polytheism, Paganism, and Agnosticism, each reported by a single respondent.

12. What is your religion, if any?

144 válasz

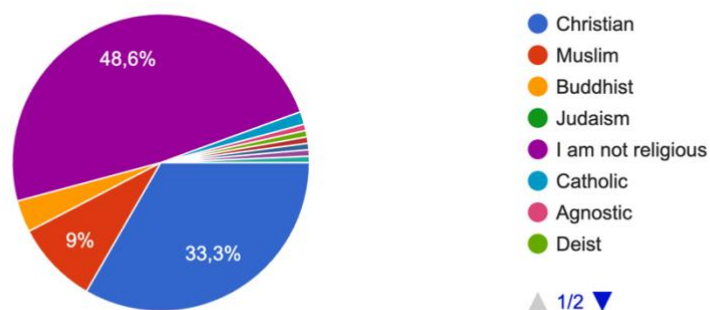


Chart 4. Religion of Participants

Most participants (63.9%) currently reside in the same country and region where they were born and raised. However, 36.1% have relocated to different areas.

At home, the most spoken language among participants was Hungarian (50%), followed by English (16.7%), Arabic (8%), and various other languages spoken by smaller proportions of respondents. A significant proportion (41.7%) reported proficiency in three languages, while 41.7% spoke two languages, 11.8% spoke four or more languages, and 4.9% spoke only one language.

21. How many languages do you speak?

144 válasz

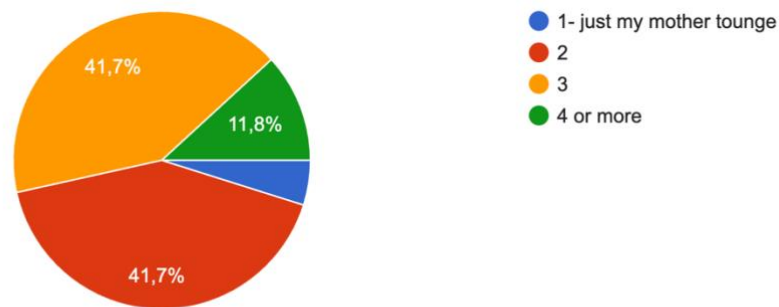


Chart 5. Languages

Results and Discussion

The Role of Power dynamics

As I mentioned earlier, power dynamics plays a huge role in shaping human communication, so I wanted to survey how it manifested itself in the use of taboos and euphemisms. Questions 6-10 were meant to unravel this, where I asked the participants how comfortable they feel discussing certain taboo topics with their friends, co-workers and/or schoolmates, someone you just met, teacher and/or boss, and family. These are situations where the power relations are vastly different.

What people consider taboo topics showed some variation across different cultures, however there were some topics that were considered taboos more universally. These topics were sex (69,5%), private body parts (68,8%), sexuality (61,1%), mental health (54,9%), and abortion (52,1%), while the rest varied greatly.

5. Can you list some specific taboo topics that you are aware of in your culture?

144 válasz

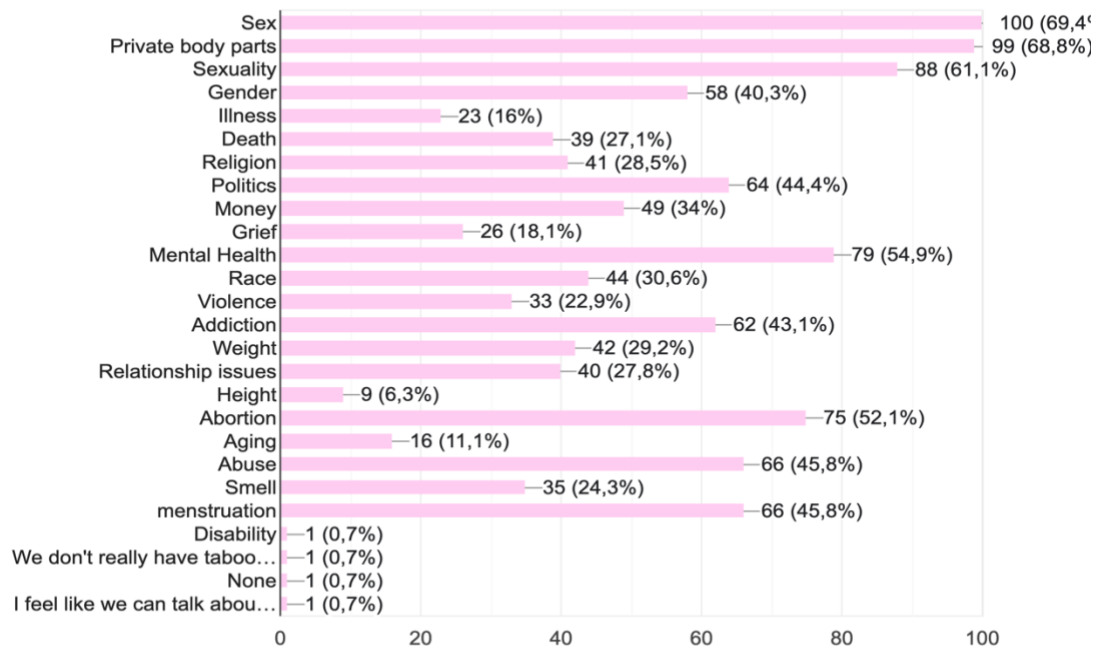


Chart 6. Taboo topics

	Friends	Co-workers or Schoolmates	Stranger	Boss or Teacher	Family
Sex, sexuality, private body parts, gender	3.71	2.5	1.99	1.76	2.66
Illness, Mental health, death and grief	3.93	2.96	2.37	2.62	3.42
Religion, Race	3.99	3.04	2.57	2.55	3.68
Politics, Money	3.68	2.67	2.32	2.41	3.63
Violence, addiction, abuse	3.86	2.8	2.45	2.27	3.31
Relationship issues	4	2.76	2.31	2.14	3.04
Height, weight, smell	3.81	2.82	2.5	2.26	3.52
Abortion	3.86	2.81	2.41	2.09	2.29
Ageing	4.25	3.62	3.04	2.79	3.8
Menstruation	4.1	2.81	2.24	1.97	3.4
Average	3.92	2.88	2.42	2.23	3.28

Table 1. Result of the Questions about Power dynamics

As it was expected most people reported that they feel quite comfortable talking about taboo topics with their friends. When examining the comfort levels of participants in discussing taboo topics with friends, the data reveals a generally high level of comfort across all topics. The average comfort rating with friends is 3.92, the highest among all groups. Notably, topics such as aging (4.25) and menstruation (4.1) are the easiest to discuss, reflecting a sense of

openness and acceptance in close, personal relationships. Similarly, sex, sexuality, private body parts, and gender (3.71) and abortion (3.86) also receive relatively high ratings, indicating that even sensitive or controversial subjects are more comfortably shared with friends than with others. Illness, mental health, death, and grief (3.93), as well as violence, addiction, and abuse (3.86), are also rated favourably, suggesting that friends provide a supportive environment for discussing personal challenges and difficult experiences. In contrast to more formal or distant relationships, friends clearly serve as a trusted space for the exploration of taboo subjects, allowing for a level of comfort that is not as readily found in other social contexts. This highlights the importance of close, personal bonds in facilitating open dialogue about sensitive issues.

The answers to question seven varied significantly when asked about co-workers or schoolmates, the data shows a generally lower level of comfort compared to friends. The average comfort rating with coworkers is 2.88, which is significantly lower than that with friends. Topics such as sex, sexuality, private body parts, and gender (2.5) and menstruation (2.81) are particularly uncomfortable, reflecting the professional boundaries that exist in most workplace environments. Illness, mental health, death, and grief (2.96) also show relatively low comfort levels, suggesting that personal struggles and sensitive health matters are typically not shared in work settings. The discomfort increases with subjects like abortion (2.81) and politics and money (2.67), indicating that even in more familiar workplace relationships, discussions of highly personal or controversial topics are often avoided. These results suggest that while coworkers may offer a certain level of familiarity, workplace norms and professional boundaries limit the openness with which taboo subjects are addressed. Overall, the data underscores the idea that conversations in the workplace are generally kept at a more formal and impersonal level, with taboo topics being largely avoided in favor of more neutral discussions.

Discussing taboo topics with someone you just met seems like a huge taboo, most people reported that they are very uncomfortable with it, therefore the most prominent answer was 1. The data shows the lowest levels of comfort across all topics, with an average rating of 2.42. This suggests that participants are highly reluctant to engage in discussions about taboo subjects with individuals they do not know well. Topics such as sex, sexuality, private body parts, and gender (1.99) and abortion (2.41) are particularly uncomfortable, indicating that highly personal or controversial subjects are generally avoided in encounters with strangers. Similarly, topics like menstruation (2.24) and violence, addiction, and abuse (2.45) also show very low comfort levels, further highlighting the reluctance to discuss sensitive issues with unfamiliar individuals. Even less intimate topics, such as height, weight, and smell (2.5), are met with discomfort, reinforcing the idea that strangers are not typically seen as appropriate conversational partners for taboo subjects. This data reflects a general cultural norm of reserving deeply personal or controversial topics for more familiar and trusted relationships, with conversations with strangers remaining polite and superficial. The results clearly indicate that participants feel most at ease keeping taboo discussions confined to their closest social circles, avoiding such topics in interactions with unfamiliar individuals.

The same question was asked about their boss or teacher as well, not surprisingly the most frequent answer was still, the data reveals similarly low comfort ratings, with an average of 2.23. This suggests that participants are particularly hesitant to engage in discussions about taboo subjects in a professional setting, especially with a superior. Topics such as sex, sexuality,

private body parts, and gender (1.76) and abortion (2.09) are among the most uncomfortable to discuss, highlighting the strong professional boundaries that typically exist between employees and bosses. Discussions around menstruation (1.97) and violence, addiction, and abuse (2.27) are similarly avoided, suggesting that deeply personal or sensitive issues are rarely shared with a superior. Even topics like politics and money (2.41) show low levels of comfort, reflecting the risk of potential conflicts or misunderstandings in professional settings. The low comfort ratings across all taboo topics with bosses emphasize the formal nature of the employee-boss relationship, where personal matters are typically kept separate from work-related discussions. This data underscores the importance of maintaining professionalism in hierarchical work environments, where taboo subjects are generally regarded as inappropriate for conversation.

With family, sex, sexuality, private body parts and gender are strong taboo topics, Illness, mental health, death and grief, religion and grief, politics and money, height, weight and smell, and ageing, seem to be not taboo topics in most of the instances. The data shows a moderate level of comfort, with an average rating of 3.28. While this is lower than the comfort levels with friends, it is still relatively high compared to coworkers, strangers, and bosses. Topics such as aging (3.8) and illness, mental health, death, and grief (3.42) are the most comfortably discussed with family, indicating that these sensitive subjects are often seen as easier to address within the familial context. Similarly, sex, sexuality, private body parts, and gender (2.66) and violence, addiction, and abuse (3.31) are also more readily discussed with family than with others, though there is still a notable level of discomfort. Topics like abortion (2.29) and menstruation (3.4) show a mixed response, with some taboo subjects being more difficult to discuss openly within the family, especially those that might carry cultural or generational stigmas. However, overall, the data indicates that family members, being trusted and familiar figures, provide a supportive environment where many taboo topics are more likely to be discussed, even if there are still some areas of hesitation. This suggests that while families may serve as a relatively open space for addressing sensitive issues, certain topics may still be considered too uncomfortable or inappropriate depending on the family dynamics and cultural context.

The highest comfort level is observed with friends (3.92), followed by family (3.28). Coworkers (2.88), strangers (2.42), and bosses (2.23) show progressively lower comfort levels. These differences can be attributed to several factors, including the nature of the relationships, social norms, and professional boundaries. The most significant factor influencing comfort levels is the intimacy and trust inherent in the relationship. Participants feel most comfortable discussing taboo topics with friends because these are typically individuals with whom they share personal experiences, emotional support, and mutual understanding. According to research, close relationships like friendships foster a sense of safety and openness, making it easier to discuss sensitive issues (Berscheid & Walster, 1978). Family also provides a relatively supportive environment, although it may still be subject to generational or cultural taboos, which could explain the slightly lower comfort rating compared to friends. Family members often share deep emotional bonds, but the hierarchical structure within families and potential cultural taboos may influence the willingness to discuss certain topics (Friedman et al., 2015).

In contrast, coworkers, bosses, and strangers are more likely to be perceived as part of formal or public spheres, where discussions of personal or sensitive topics are typically avoided. The workplace environment is designed to maintain professionalism and avoid personal entanglements, which discourages the sharing of taboo subjects. Research has shown that

workplace communication is influenced by professional boundaries that prioritize task-focused interactions over personal disclosures (Kram, 1985). For example, discussing topics like sex or abortion may be viewed as unprofessional or inappropriate, which can lead to discomfort. Coworkers may still share a certain level of comfort, but they do not have the same level of trust as friends or family, leading to a lower comfort level in discussing taboo topics.

Similarly, discussing taboo subjects with a boss is viewed with even greater hesitation. Bosses are seen as authority figures, and participants are likely to avoid personal discussions due to concerns about professionalism, judgment, or potential career repercussions (Ashford & Black, 1996). The hierarchical nature of the boss-employee relationship creates an additional layer of social distance that makes taboo topics especially uncomfortable.

The lowest comfort levels are observed when participants are asked to discuss taboo topics with strangers. The lack of any established relationship or shared history creates significant social distance, making personal conversations particularly uncomfortable. Additionally, cultural expectations often dictate that we reserve discussions about sensitive topics for people we know well and trust (Goffman, 1959). This social distancing is reinforced by norms that discourage revealing personal information to people who do not share close emotional connections.

The differences in comfort levels can largely be attributed to the nature of the relationships involved. Friends and family provide a more intimate and supportive environment, encouraging open conversations about taboo topics, though family dynamics may still introduce some discomfort. Conversely, coworkers, bosses, and strangers are subject to social and professional boundaries, leading to greater discomfort when discussing sensitive issues. The results underline the importance of trust, intimacy, and relationship dynamics in shaping our willingness to engage in difficult or taboo conversations.

I was interested in what does these answers depend on, because I had answers from a wide range of people, from different parts of the world, speaking different languages, coming from vastly different socio-economic statuses, and covering a wide range of age. For this I used a correlation test, which showed that age, education, gender, religion, English proficiency and what other languages does the participants speak has nothing to do with their perception of power dynamics and taboos. However, birthplace, ethnicity, native tongue, where did they grew up what language do, they speak at home plays a huge role in the perception of this topic. Therefore, we can conclude that the role of power dynamics in the use of taboo topics is a phenomenon related to culture. One would expect that we would have a correlation with religion as well, but we do not. Why? It is most likely since my sample consisted of mostly atheists, and the ones who reported to be religious were the minority and different religions were so scattered in my sample that correlation was not found. In the case of religion, the sample is unfortunately not representative.

Questions 27, 28, 29 shed lights on the people's general attitude toward the use of euphemisms.

27. How do you feel about the use of euphemism when discussing taboo topics? (As a reminder a euphemism is for example to use 'pass away' instead of 'die')

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Chart 7. Use of Euphemisms

The significant proportion of participants (54.2%) expressing mixed feelings points to a broader ambivalence in society about how euphemisms function. On one hand, they serve as a tool for maintaining social decorum, especially when addressing culturally sensitive topics such as death, illness, or bodily functions. On the other hand, their potential to obscure meaning or create ambiguity can lead to frustration, as seen in the 13.2% who find them unnecessary and confusing. The 31.9% of respondents who view euphemisms as necessary likely see them as indispensable for navigating socially delicate conversations. For instance, euphemisms are often preferred in professional, diplomatic, or public settings where direct language might be perceived as harsh or inappropriate. This perception aligns with the idea that language is a tool for fostering social harmony, especially when addressing topics that could evoke discomfort or controversy. The isolated comment from one participant provides an interesting middle ground. Their perspective highlights those euphemisms, while sometimes practical, can also appear superficial or overly polite. This comment reflects a pragmatic view: euphemisms might soften directness but are not always essential and can sometimes be perceived as a veneer for uncomfortable truths.

28. How often do you use euphemisms (1 being I never use them and 5 being I use them all the time)

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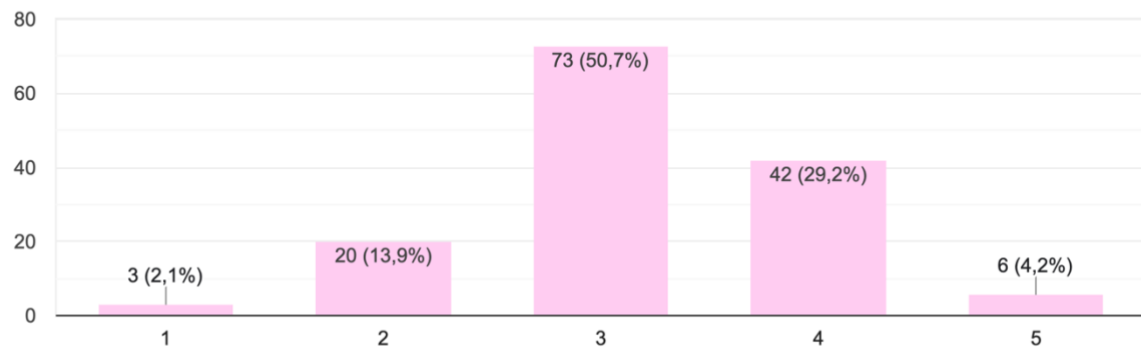


Chart 8. Frequency of Euphemism usage

These results suggest that, while participants exhibit a generally neutral stance on the frequency of euphemism use, there is a subtle inclination towards their acceptance and regular use. The prevalence of "3" as the most common response indicates that many people neither entirely embrace nor avoid euphemisms, suggesting that their use is situational and context dependent. The significant proportion of participants choosing "4" (29.2%) further tilts the overall attitude towards a positive view of euphemisms. This trend might reflect an underlying recognition of their practical utility in everyday communication. Euphemisms often serve as a social lubricant, allowing individuals to navigate potentially awkward or sensitive conversations without causing offense or discomfort. The lean towards a more positive attitude could also be influenced by cultural norms or social expectations, where avoiding direct language is often seen as a sign of politeness or tact. For example, in professional environments or interpersonal relationships, euphemisms may be viewed as a necessary tool for maintaining harmony and avoiding confrontation. However, the relatively high percentage of neutral responses (50.7%) also points to a level of ambivalence. This could stem from a balance between appreciating the function of euphemisms and recognizing their potential drawbacks, such as diluting clarity or masking uncomfortable truths.

29. When deciding whether to use a euphemism or direct language for a taboo subject, what is your primary consideration?

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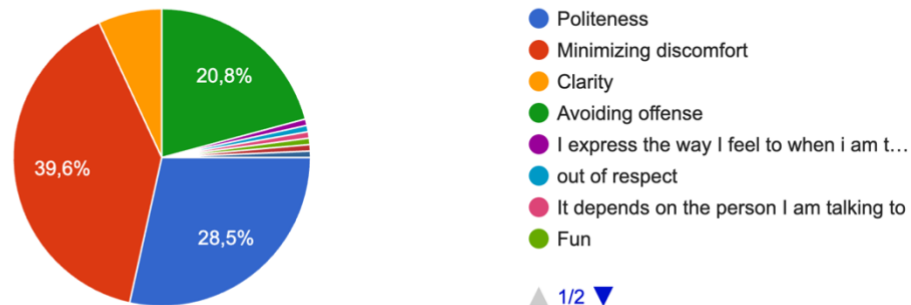


Chart 9. Considerations for Euphemism usage

The responses to this question highlight the wide range of motivations behind the use of euphemisms, with the most common goals revolving around social dynamics. The fact that 39.6% of participants prioritize minimizing discomfort suggests that euphemisms are primarily seen as tools for easing communication in potentially sensitive or awkward situations. This aligns with the idea that people often use euphemisms to maintain harmony and reduce tension when addressing taboo topics. Politeness, cited by 28.5%, further underscores the social function of euphemisms. This reflects the cultural and interpersonal norms where being considerate and courteous is valued, particularly in formal or unfamiliar settings. Similarly, the 20.8% who aim to avoid offense demonstrate an awareness of how direct language might unintentionally harm others. Together, these responses indicate that euphemisms are often employed with the listener's emotional comfort and social expectations in mind. Interestingly, only 6.9% of participants reported clarity as their primary goal, suggesting that euphemisms are not typically associated with precision in communication. This reinforces the notion that while euphemisms may soften communication, they often sacrifice directness for the sake of diplomacy or tact. The diverse range of responses under the "other" category adds depth to the findings, illustrating how personal context, relationships, and situational factors influence the decision to use euphemisms. For instance, the mention of using euphemisms around children reflects a protective instinct to shield younger audiences from harsh realities. On the other hand, the response about using euphemisms selectively with people in positions of power points to their strategic use in maintaining professional relationships or managing power dynamics.

The answers for question 30 "Do you believe that euphemisms sometimes can be more offensive than using direct language when discussing taboos?" shows that 13,2% said "sometimes", 44,4% answered "yes" and 32% reported "no" and 9,25% said "it depends on the circumstances" and 3,5% answered "maybe". However, some of the answers did not only constitute of this, but some of the participants also added some comments and reasons, which can give us some insight and extra context. One of the participants stated that "Sometimes we use them in a way that we don't even realize their og meaning / or how it may have a different interpretation in the given context, conversation, and hence it may create this problems, may be offensive (but i think it is mostly unintentional)" highlighting how we can unintentionally hurt

people while other participants stated that in the case of euphemisms about particular demographics can be an issue, such as “Yes. When people use a euphemism do talk about a particular demographic, I believe this is usually because they believe it is a bad thing to be. For example, referring to a fat person as “large” or a person with a disability as “special”.”, or in the case of “Yes, for example calling gypsy people roma when they're two different ethnicities.”. Other participants highlighted that it depends on the context, for example “I generally feel that it is used for distancing ourselves from the topic which can be beneficial for both speaker and listener. I had never encountered a setting when it was offensive. But it can also, depend on many factors, such as intention, perception or the degree of euphemism. For instance, if it is too poetic and doesn't fit the context, it can be offensive, but if its considerate and you use it wisely, there won't be a problem.”.

In question 39 participants were asked to write some euphemisms that they frequently used, the most common themes were euphemisms for death, sex, mental and physical health, substances, socioeconomic status, and Race and ethnicity. Most used euphemisms were the ones relating to death, for example "Pass away," "No more with us," "Deceased," "Gone to a better place," "Travelling to the other world". Euphemisms relating to sex were also mentioned frequently, for example the euphemisms "Make love," "Doing it," "Action," "Adult fun times," "Lower body part," "Sheet acrobat,". Euphemisms related to mental and physical health also came up multiple times, for example " "Time of the month," "Feeling under the weather," "Having issues," "On the stresses"

The Role of Social Media

Most people nowadays use some kind of social media platform, only 1 of the participants reported that they do not use any social media platforms.

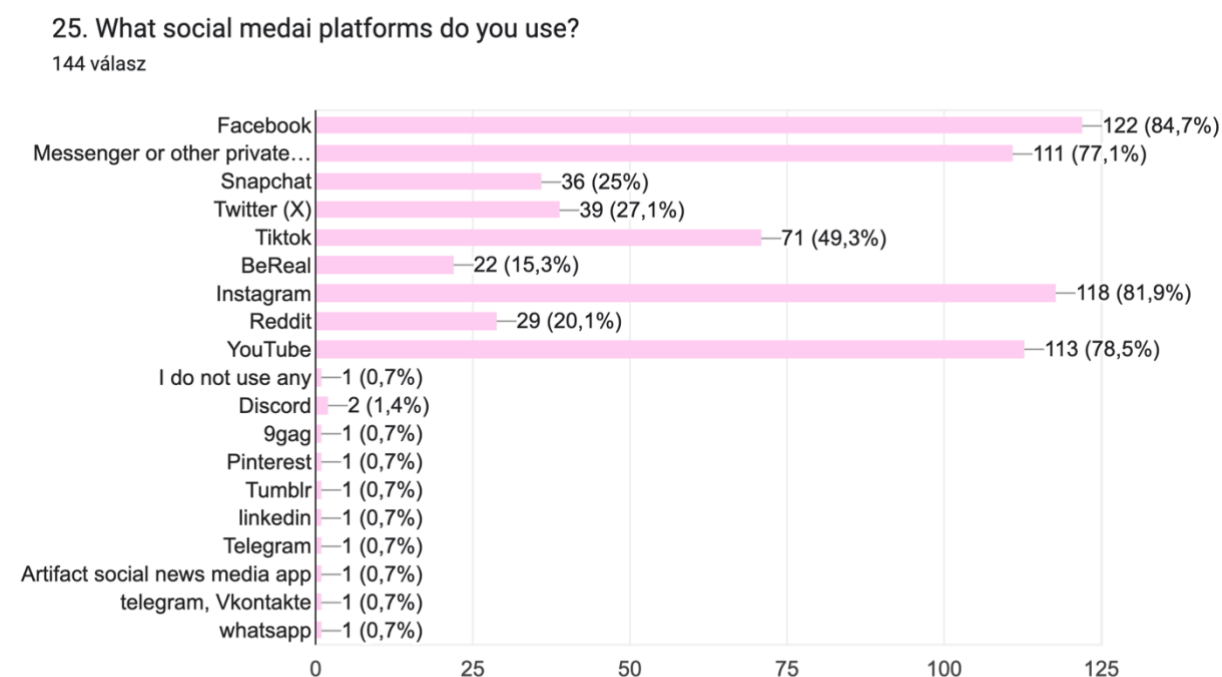


Chart 10. Social Media Platforms

Facebook and Instagram are the 2 most popular social media sites according to the survey, 84,7% of the participants use Facebook and 81,9% uses Instagram. YouTube and Messenger are also very popular with 78,5% using YouTube and 77,1% using Messenger. TikTok is also somewhat popular with 49,3% of the participants using it. 69,4% of the participants reported that they use any kind of social media multiple times a day, and 26,4% said that they use it daily. Correlation showed that the answers depended on mostly age, and week correlation was shown with gender as well.

26. How frequently do you use social media platforms?

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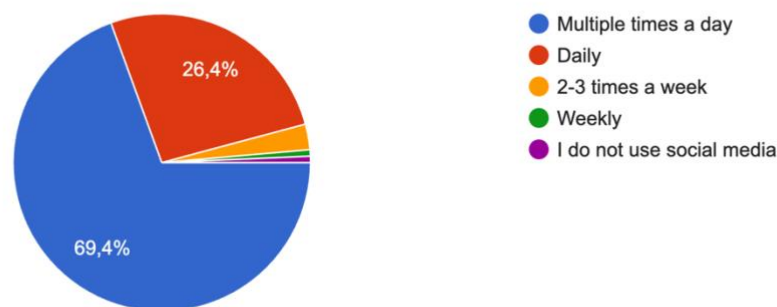


Chart 11. Frequency of Social Media Usage

31. Do you think media and popular culture influences the way people talk about taboo topics and use of euphemisms?

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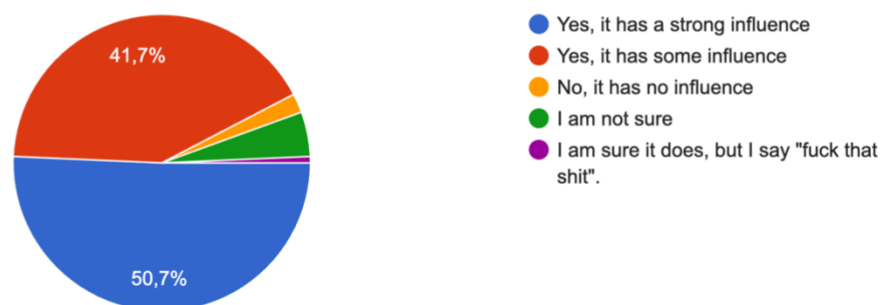


Chart 12. Effect of Social Media on Euphemism Usage

The overwhelming majority of participants (92.4% combining "strong influence" and "some influence") agree that media and popular culture play a significant role in shaping how people approach taboo topics and the use of euphemisms. This finding highlights the powerful influence of societal narratives, trends, and norms propagated through various forms of media. Media and popular culture often set the tone for what is acceptable or taboo in public discourse. For example, television shows, movies, and advertisements frequently introduce euphemisms to address sensitive subjects such as death, illness, or social issues in a way that appeals to a broad audience. These euphemisms often become part of everyday language, subtly guiding

how people discuss these topics in their personal lives. Additionally, the media's portrayal of taboo subjects can either normalize or stigmatize certain euphemisms. For instance, comedic shows might use euphemisms humorously, making them more socially acceptable, while serious dramas might employ euphemisms to convey sensitivity. These portrayals impact how individuals perceive and adopt language choices in their own conversations. The 50.7% who feel that media has a "strong influence" may view media as a dominant force in shaping cultural norms and attitudes, particularly given the widespread consumption of digital content. Social media further amplifies this effect, as euphemisms and phrases can quickly spread and gain popularity through memes, viral videos, and online discussions. Meanwhile, the 41.7% who believe media has "some influence" might recognize other factors, such as personal upbringing, education, or cultural traditions, as equally important in shaping attitudes toward taboo subjects and euphemism use.

32. How comfortable do you feel discussing taboo topics in online forums, social media, or other digital platforms? (1 being very uncomfortable and 5 being completely comfortable)

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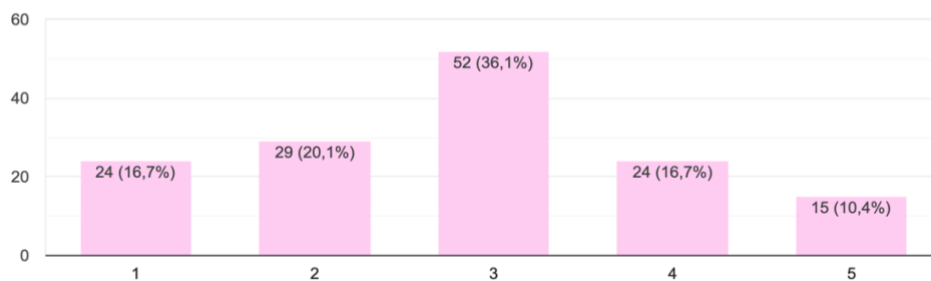


Chart 13. Discussing Taboos Online

The bell curve distribution of responses, with a slight tilt towards discomfort (1), suggests a wide range of comfort levels when discussing taboo topics in digital spaces. The centrality of "3" as the most frequent response (36.1%) indicates that many participants feel moderately comfortable, likely depending on the context of the discussion, the platform being used, and the perceived anonymity of the environment. The tilt towards "1" highlights a significant proportion of individuals who are hesitant to engage in such discussions online. This discomfort could be attributed to several factors, including the fear of judgment, misunderstanding, or backlash from other users. The public and often permanent nature of digital communication may also discourage open discussions about sensitive topics, as participants may worry about the potential personal or professional consequences of their statements being misinterpreted or resurfacing in the future. On the other hand, the presence of individuals at the higher end of the scale (closer to 5) reflects the empowering role that digital platforms can play. Some participants may feel that the anonymity and reach of online forums allow them to express thoughts on taboo subjects more freely than in face-to-face interactions. These spaces can provide opportunities for support, education, and advocacy around sensitive topics, contributing to a sense of comfort for those who actively participate in such discussions. The overall bell curve, however, suggests that most respondents approach online discussions about taboo topics with caution. Factors such as the tone of the platform, the audience, and the participant's personal experiences with online communication likely play a role in shaping their comfort level. This finding emphasizes the complex relationship between digital platforms and

taboo discourse, where anonymity and reach can either empower or inhibit open communication, depending on individual and contextual factors.

33. Have you observed any differences in the way people discuss taboos online compared to in-person conversations?

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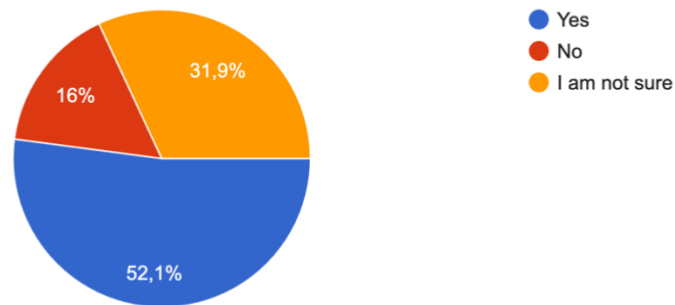


Chart 14. Discussing Taboos online and In-Person

Most respondents (52.1%) believe that there are notable differences between how taboo topics are discussed online versus in person. This perception likely reflects the distinct dynamics of communication in digital spaces. Online platforms often provide anonymity and distance, which can encourage people to discuss taboo subjects more openly or bluntly compared to face-to-face interactions. This freedom, however, can also lead to less considerate or more polarized discussions, as social cues like tone and body language are absent in text-based communication. The 16% of respondents who think there is no difference might view communication as fundamentally consistent, regardless of the medium. They may believe that personal values, cultural norms, and individual comfort levels dictate how taboo topics are addressed, regardless of whether the conversation takes place online or in person. The 31.9% who are unsure highlight the complexity of this issue. Their uncertainty could stem from experiencing both similarities and differences depending on the platform, audience, or context of the discussion. For instance, while some online spaces foster candid and supportive dialogue about taboo subjects (e.g., forums or private groups), others may discourage such discussions due to the risk of judgment or negative feedback. These findings emphasize the impact of context and medium on how taboo topics are approached. Online communication can amplify voices and provide safe spaces for discussions that might not occur in person, but it can also introduce challenges like misunderstandings, trolling, or a lack of accountability. Meanwhile, in-person interactions often rely on established trust and social norms, which may either inhibit or encourage open dialogue about sensitive topics.

The answers of the participants who reported to think that there are differences in online and I person conversations showed some common themes. One of these themes is anonymity and openness. Anonymity allows individuals to express opinions and discuss taboo topics more openly and boldly without fear of personal repercussions. This sense of security provided by anonymity encourages people to share thoughts they might otherwise suppress in face-to-face interactions. For instance, many respondents mentioned that “people talk bravely when they're anonymous” and “People feel less vulnerable to being attacked.” This anonymity is seen as a shield that fosters a more open dialogue. The online environment, especially in anonymous

contexts, fosters more direct and unfiltered communication. Respondents noted that “They are more straightforward online” and “People are usually braver online.” Without the immediate social consequences of in-person interactions, people are more inclined to express themselves candidly. While anonymity encourages openness, platform-specific censorship and algorithms influence the language used. Respondents highlighted that due to social media algorithms and the fear of content getting banned, people started using terms such as “unaliving” and “grapist.” Additionally, “community guidelines in social media have forced people to over-censor themselves.” Users often employ creative euphemisms to bypass filters while still discussing sensitive subjects. Cultural norms significantly impact how people use euphemisms and discuss taboos. For example, a respondent from the Philippines noted, “As I live in the Philippines... people have the tendency to be averse to people who have no filter.” Others observed that in English-speaking forums, “people are often a bit more careful” due to the dominant American culture. This suggests that cultural background influences the degree of openness and the use of euphemisms in online discussions. The anonymity and relative safety of online spaces provide a supportive environment for discussing personal and sensitive issues such as mental health. Respondents mentioned that “People are more open to talk about their mental health online” and “People are more at ease when they talk about mental health issues online.” The comfort of privacy in online spaces enables individuals to share experiences and seek support without the fear of judgment from their immediate social circle. Anonymity can also lead to more aggressive and offensive language. Several respondents noted that “They are much more violent” and “elders tend to be more aggressive online.”

35. Do you think the anonimity provided by the internet encourages people to discuss taboo topics more openly?

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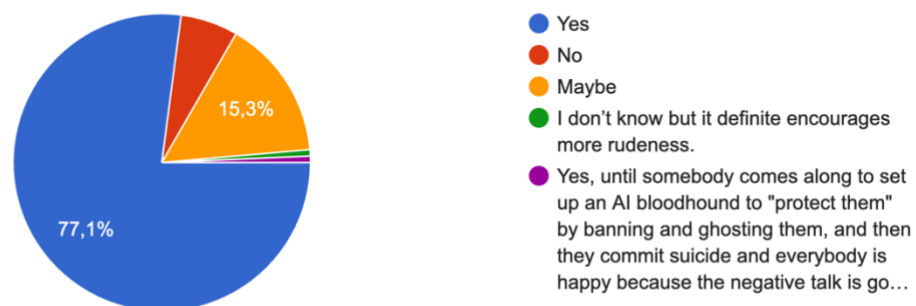


Chart 15. Effect of Anonymity

The overwhelming agreement (77.1%) that internet anonymity encourages people to discuss taboo topics more openly underscores the significant role anonymity plays in fostering candid communication. The absence of identifiable information provides users with a sense of security, reducing the fear of judgment, social repercussions, or personal backlash. This freedom can create opportunities for open dialogue, particularly on sensitive issues such as mental health, sexuality, or controversial societal topics. However, the small but significant portion of respondents who disagreed (6.3%) and those who were uncertain (15.3%) suggest that anonymity alone is not universally seen as a facilitator of open discussion. These participants might consider other factors, such as the tone of the platform, moderation policies,

or the nature of the audience, as equally important in determining whether taboo topics are discussed openly. The unique responses provide further nuance to this conversation. The comment about anonymity encouraging more rudeness highlights a well-documented drawback of online anonymity: the "disinhibition effect." While anonymity can enable open discussions, it can also embolden individuals to engage in unkind or aggressive behavior, detracting from productive dialogue.

36. How often do you notice the use of euphemisms in online discussions about taboo subjects? (1 being I never notice it and 5 being I notice it all the time)

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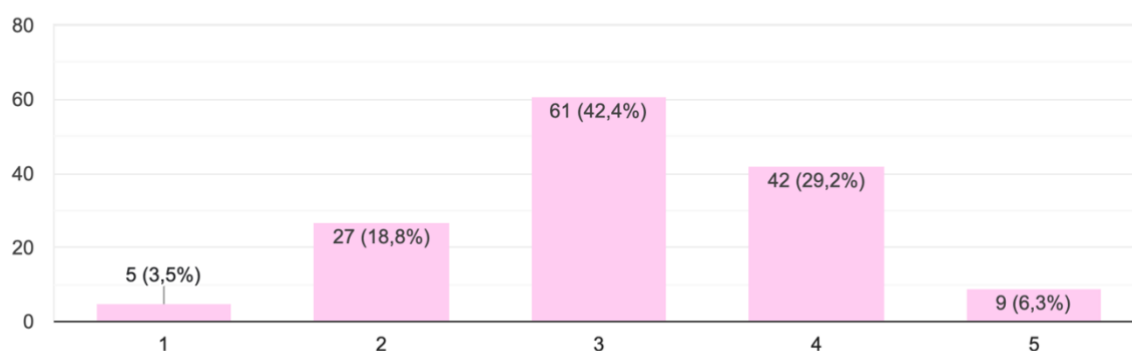


Chart 16. Frequency of Noticing the Use of Euphemisms

About how conscious people are about using euphemisms, the answers showed that they are somewhat conscious about it, as the most frequent answer for the question “How often do you notice the use of euphemisms in online discussions about taboo subjects? (1 being I never notice it and 5 being I notice it all the time)” was 3, with 42.4% of the participants choosing that. However, the attitude is tilted more towards the positive side, as only 18.8% chose 2, while 29.2% chose 4. Additionally, only 3.5% answered 1, while 6.3% answered 5. The distribution of responses suggests that while many participants are moderately conscious of the use of euphemisms in online discussions about taboo topics, there is a noticeable lean towards greater awareness. The high percentage choosing "3" (42.4%) reflects a balanced, situational awareness where euphemisms are recognized when they are particularly noticeable or relevant. The gradual increase in responses from 2 to 4, combined with the relatively low percentage for "1" (3.5%), indicates that most participants are at least somewhat attuned to euphemism use. This trend implies that euphemisms are a noticeable feature of online discourse for a significant portion of people, particularly in discussions of sensitive or controversial subjects. The 6.3% who chose "5" – indicating they notice euphemisms all the time – might reflect individuals with a heightened sensitivity to language, perhaps due to personal interests, professional background (e.g., linguistics, communication), or active engagement in online forums where euphemisms are prevalent. Conversely, the small percentage of respondents who chose "1" (3.5%) or "2" (18.8%) suggests that for some, euphemisms may blend seamlessly into conversations, going largely unnoticed. This lack of awareness could stem from familiarity with certain euphemisms, making them feel natural rather than deliberate or distinctive.

37. In your opinion, do you think people use euphemisms more frequently online then in face-to-face conversations when adresssing sensitive subjects?

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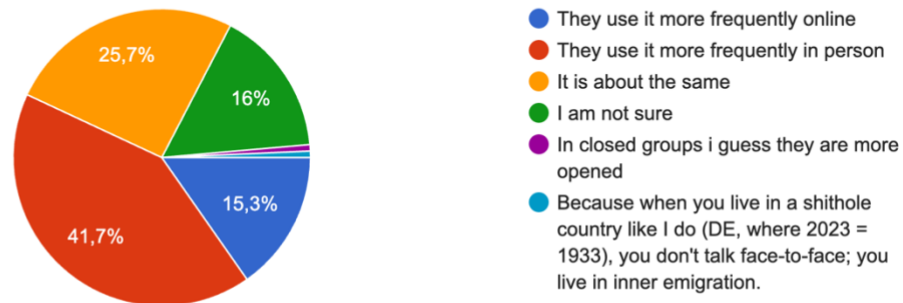


Chart 17. Use of Euphemisms Online and In-Person

The results suggest that participants perceive euphemisms as more commonly used in face-to-face interactions compared to online communication. The 41.7% who believe euphemisms are used more in person may associate this with the nuanced dynamics of in-person conversations, where social cues, tone, and immediacy play a significant role. In face-to-face settings, people might feel a stronger need to maintain politeness, avoid discomfort, or adhere to social norms, all of which encourage the use of euphemisms. By contrast, only 15.3% of participants thought euphemisms are used more online. This could reflect the perception that online communication, while offering some degree of anonymity, is often less formal and more direct. The absence of immediate social feedback (such as facial expressions or tone) may lead to more straightforward language, reducing the perceived need for euphemisms. The 25.7% who believe euphemism use is about the same in both contexts highlight the idea that euphemisms are a universal tool for navigating sensitive topics, regardless of the medium. These participants might view the use of euphemisms as more dependent on the subject matter or the individual's communication style rather than whether the conversation occurs online or offline. Finally, the 16% of respondents who were unsure point to the complexity of this issue. The choice to use euphemisms likely depends on multiple factors, including the topic of discussion, the audience, and the platform's culture. For instance, professional online settings or forums with strict moderation may encourage euphemisms, while informal or anonymous platforms might discourage them.

38. In your opinion, how do online community guidelines or platform policies influence the use of euphemisms in discussions about taboo topics?

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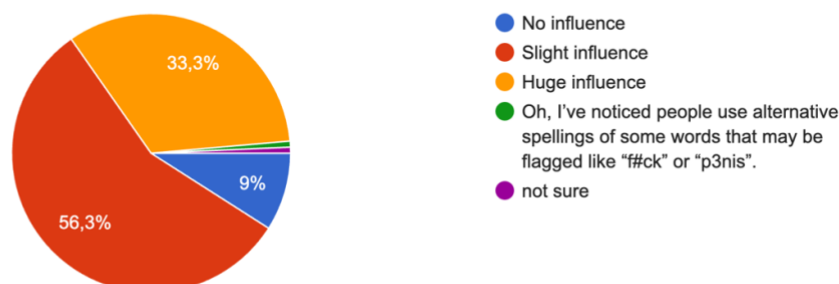


Chart 18. Effect of Online Community Guidelines

The findings reveal a strong consensus that online community guidelines and platform policies significantly influence the use of euphemisms in taboo discussions. With a combined 89.6% of participants acknowledging either "some influence" or "huge influence," it is clear that platform rules play a key role in shaping how people communicate about sensitive topics. Community guidelines often dictate what language is deemed acceptable, with algorithms and moderators enforcing these standards. This can encourage the use of euphemisms or creative alternatives to bypass restrictions, as highlighted by the unique response about using alternative spellings like "f#ck" or "p3nis." Such strategies illustrate how users adapt their language to navigate censorship while maintaining their intended communication. The 9% who believe guidelines have no influence likely perceive users as primarily driven by personal preferences, social norms, or the nature of the topic rather than platform policies. They may feel that euphemism use is a more universal linguistic tool, not significantly altered by external enforcement. The strong correlation between these responses and the social media platforms participants use adds nuance to the discussion. Different platforms have varying levels of policy strictness and enforcement. For example:

- Platforms like Twitter or Reddit may allow more direct language in certain spaces, while heavily moderated platforms like Facebook or TikTok might encourage users to rely on euphemisms to avoid content removal.
- Anonymity or leniency on platforms like Reddit could reduce the need for euphemisms, whereas strict, public-facing platforms might increase their use to maintain compliance.

In the last question, I asked for any other comment people had and I got some very interesting and insightful answers. One respondent emphasized the importance of acknowledging that euphemisms play a crucial role in achieving certain goals within the workplace. They noted that effective communication often involves acting in ways that foster a productive and harmonious environment. Euphemisms are seen not as superfluous but as strategic tools that can enhance workplace efficiency. Another interesting point raised is the generational difference in communication styles. The observation was made that Generation Z tends to communicate more directly compared to older generations (Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Y). However, the use of "kind words" or euphemisms remains important in specific scenarios, such as when dealing with individuals with unstable mental capacities or when

speaking to superiors, such as a boss. Additionally, a respondent shared a personal cultural insight, noting their tendency to discuss taboo topics in English rather than their native Arabic. This was attributed to feeling less discomfort and weirdness when addressing sensitive subjects in a language different from their mother tongue. Lastly, one individual stressed the importance of clear and direct communication in their work environment, advocating against side speaking and emphasizing the need for straightforwardness.

Conclusion

The questionnaire showed that sex, private body parts, sexuality, mental health, and abortion are almost universally considered taboo topics. The comfort levels for discussing taboos varied based on relationships, as was expected. With friends, people reported high comfort levels, for Co-workers and /or schoolmates participants reported a moderate comfort level, for strangers and Boss/ teacher majority of the participants indicated low comfort levels, while with family they indicated mixed comfort, with higher comfort levels for illness, mental health, death, and grief. These findings highlight the consistency in what society deems inappropriate or sensitive across different mediums.

The questionnaire shows that people tend to have mixed feelings about using euphemisms, while almost 32% of the participants reported that they think euphemisms are necessary. Half of the participants reported using euphemisms sometimes showing a neutral attitude, however the curve is slightly tilted towards the more positive side. The primary consideration for using euphemisms was minimizing discomfort. The use of euphemisms is driven by a desire to minimize discomfort and maintain politeness. This is consistent with the social need to navigate sensitive conversations without causing offense or distress.

Based on the results of the questionnaire, comfort levels change significantly based on the relationship dynamics, suggesting a strong influence of power dynamics in discussing taboos. Factors such as birthplace, ethnicity, native language, and home language significantly affect perceptions of taboo topics, indicating that cultural background plays a crucial role. This reflects a broader social hierarchy where power imbalances shape communication patterns, therefore making power dynamics a significant factor in the perception and use of taboos and euphemisms today.

The questionnaire responses indicated that sex, private body parts, and mental health are frequently mentioned taboo topics across diverse cultures. These taboos often lead to the use of euphemisms to maintain politeness and avoid discomfort. For example, terms like "passed away" instead of "died" and "down there" instead of specific body parts were common in both the questionnaire and the corpora. The results of the questionnaire revealed that the answers were dependent on the participant's birthplace, the current county they live in, and the language/languages that they are speaking, indicating that the social, geographical, and linguistic factors are a key element of the use of euphemisms and talking about taboo topics.

The medium of communication significantly influences how taboos and euphemisms are navigated. Online platforms, characterized by anonymity and specific policies, create a unique environment for discussing sensitive topics. The questionnaire responses indicated that people feel more open to discussing taboos online due to the anonymity provided by digital platforms. However, this openness often comes with increased aggression and the presence of

censorship, as platform policies regulate what can be said. In contrast, in-person communication, lacking the veil of anonymity, tends to be more restrained and polite.

Limitations and Possibilities for Further Research

Limitations

The majority of my participants were females, from Hungary, between the ages of 18 and 24. This demographic concentration limits the generalizability of the findings to broader or more diverse populations. Factors such as cultural background, gender, and age play significant roles in how taboos and euphemisms are perceived and used, which may differ across other groups. The use of a questionnaire relies on self-reported data, which is subject to biases such as social desirability and self-censorship. Participants may have avoided discussing certain taboos or euphemisms due to discomfort or fear of judgment, which could affect the validity of the data. The study primarily focused on participant perceptions rather than conducting a detailed analysis of how taboos and euphemisms are used in real-world texts or interactions. Without examining actual social media content, the findings remain somewhat abstract.

Possibilities for Further Research

This study opens several avenues for future research to deepen the understanding of how taboos and euphemisms evolve and interact with social media and power dynamics. A corpus-based linguistic study could provide a more comprehensive view of how taboos and euphemisms are used in real-world communication. By analyzing large datasets from social media platforms, we could identify patterns, trends, and the impact of platform-specific norms on language use. Future studies could expand the demographic scope to include participants from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Comparative analyses could reveal how cultural norms influence the perception and use of taboos and euphemisms across different societies. Social media platforms differ significantly in their user base, content moderation policies, and communicative styles. Future research could explore how these factors shape the use of taboos.

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