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The Function of Taboo Expressions in Nicki Minaj's Song Lyrics

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Abstract

The societal phenomenon of taboo terms is commonly expressed in song lyrics. This research focuses on the function of taboo expressions in the song lyrics of Nicki Minaj, a singer who is known to use such expressions. The first objective of this analysis is to determine the types of taboo expressions found in Minaj's songs. Secondly, the researchers examine the function of these expressions in the song lyrics. Four of Minaj's songs are presented in the data: "Superbass," "Megatron," "Barbie Tingz," and "Anaconda." This research employs descriptive and qualitative analysis, as well as the theoretical frameworks provided by Battistella (2005) and Wardhaugh (2021). The findings demonstrate that vulgarity is the most frequent form of taboo expression in Minaj's song lyrics, while the main function of these phrases is to attract attention. These songs indicate more than simply linguistic qualities; they also offer a thorough understanding of the social setting. This study fills a gap in the literature on taboo expressions in song lyrics by revealing the function and types of taboo expressions employed by a well-known singer. This research has the capacity to enlighten future research on the usage of taboo expressions in music, and the broader cultural consequences of such language implication.

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Introduction

The diverse range of language encompassing elements, like grammar, dialects, and spelling serves as a powerful tool for communication. It allows individuals to not only convey information but also express emotions and thoughts (Kim, 2020; Sharma, 2017). Moreover, this linguistic diversity plays a role in shaping one's identity, educational background, and societal standing (Hazen, 2002; Holmes & Wilson 2017). It is important to acknowledge that this variation extends to the realm of language which is often utilized to express intense emotional states such, as anger, desperation, frustration, and deep disappointment (Holmes & Wilson 2017).

Language variation, an aspect of the field of sociolinguistics encompasses not only grammar, vocabulary, dialects, and spelling but also plays a significant role, in shaping

human interactions and connections (Kim, 2020). This variation is a part of communication. Can be observed from a sociolinguistic perspective through two main dimensions; geographical and social. Geographical variation refers to differences in language usage based on regions while social variations encompass choices influenced by factors such, as social class, gender, and age. These distinctions provide insights particularly when it comes to defining one's identity, educational background, and societal standing (Holmes & Wilson 2017).

Language variation has an impact, on academic settings. Individuals can express their social identities, develop connections, and navigate power dynamics in interactions by using linguistic variations (Holmes & Wilson 2017). Similarly, language variation can express educational and intellectual status in academic settings, allowing individuals to establish their competence and authority (Holmes & Wilson, 2017; Pavlenko, 2001). Language variation, nevertheless, is not without difficulties, as it may be vulnerable to societal judgments and biases, resulting in adverse effects for people who employ non-standard or taboo language.

Taboo language in sociolinguistics refers to words and phrases that are objectionable or improper in particular circumstances (Trudgill, 2000; Zenner et al., 2019). This kind of language is usually employed in informal contexts and might cause shame or insecurity in some people (Allan & Burridge, 2008; Battistella, 2005). In sociolinguistics, taboo language is a category of words and phrases that might be regarded as offensive or inappropriate in particular contexts (Trudgill, 2000). Such language is frequently used in informal situations and has the potential to cause shame or insecurity in some people (Allan & Burridge, 2008). It is thus critical to understand the complexity of taboo language in social circumstances, as well as the role it plays in influencing our interactions and views.

According to Trudgill (2020), taboo language is determined by social and cultural standards and is liable to change throughout time. The usage of taboo language can indicate a wide range of attitudes and emotions, such as humor, rage, or disrespect (Suha & Sudarwati, 2021). The consequences of using such language can vary depending on the cultural and social circumstances in which it is employed. As a result, research into the underlying elements that determine the usage of taboo language and the effects it has on social relationships is critical.

Based on Allan and Burridge's (2006) study, the utilization of taboo language does not always signify a lack of linguistic skill or knowledge. Rather, employing taboo language can be a way of establishing one's identity and expressing support for a specific group. As a result, it is critical to recognize the social and cultural factors that influence the usage of taboo language in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of the role of language in society. Such insights can help us navigate social interactions more effectively and build a greater understanding for the diversity of linguistic practices in various circumstances.

This study aims to analyze taboo expressions in the song lyrics of Nicki Minaj's *Superbass, Megatron, Barbie Tingz,* and *Anaconda*. The researchers utilize a sociolinguistics approach to identify the types and functions of these expressions (Asmidah et al., 2021; Lubis et al., 2020). The first objective of this research is to determine the types of taboo expressions used in the selected song lyrics. The second objective is to analyze the function of these expressions within the context of the songs.

In sociolinguistics, several scholars question the repercussions of taboo language. Some claim that using taboo words can lead to a harmful and unpleasant environment (Allan & Burridge, 2008). Other people on the other hand, believe that it assists people to express their emotions and points of view (Jay, 2009). Regardless of one's point of view, it is apparent that taboo language is widely employed in many societies.

Several studies have been undertaken to investigate the usage of taboo language in music, with particular emphasis on rap music. According to the findings of these studies,

taboo words are frequently employed to convey dissatisfaction with cultural conventions and to symbolize freedom and independence (Allan & Burridge, 2008). Furthermore, researchers discovered that the use of such terminology in rap music is directly linked to African-American culture and is used to demonstrate solidarity with African-Americans as well as to fight oppressive structures (Allan & Burridge, 2008).

The first previous study aims to investigate the use of taboo words in the song lyrics of Rich Brian (Putri & Barnabas, 2019). The study has three main objectives: to categorize the types of taboo words, to understand their function, and to interpret their meaning within the context of these songs. The most frequently occurring category is ”obscenity”, and regarding their function, these taboo words are most commonly used to demonstrate contempt and to mock authority. From a sociolinguistic perspective, it can be found that Rich Brian’s use of taboo language is more reflective of Western culture.

The second study examines the use of taboo words in Blink 182’s song lyrics, specifically “Enema of the State” album (Sari, 2015). The study has two main objectives: to identify the different types of taboo words and to determine how often they occur. The methodology followed Maleong’s procedures of data analysis, encompassing steps from transcription to drawing conclusions. The results show that 33 are taboo words and 2487 are non-taboo words out of 2520 words. The researcher concludes that the use of taboo words in this album indicates a shift in their acceptance or popularity within the music industry.

The last previous research focuses on the examination of taboo words that are used in the song lyrics of Snoop Dogg’s “More Malice EP” album (Ernes & Wiwoho, 2022). The purpose of this research is to examine the types of taboo words in this album, determine the most common type, understand the meaning of taboo words, and define their function. Obscenity is the most commonly used forbidden word in this album, with the connotative connotation dominating. As a result, their main function is to draw attention.

This study is significant because it has the potential to add to the existing literature on taboo expressions in music (Lubis et al., 2020). This research will provide insights into the forms and functions of taboo phrases employed by a well-known musician, which will help to influence future research on the application of taboo expressions in music and their cultural consequences. This study will also emphasize the significance of language variation in conveying identities and feelings.

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Methodology

In the analysis of the data, the researchers used a sociolinguistic approach thus accounting for the social context of language use (Holmes & Wilson, 2017; Perdhani et al., 2021; Wardhaugh, 2006). This approach is aimed at examining the social and cultural influences behind the use of taboo expressions in song lyrics. As a result, research can provide a more in-depth assessment of the type and purpose of taboo expressions contained in the selected songs. (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Hughes, 2015; Trudgill, 2000).

To analyze the data, the researchers employ the qualitative descriptive method. The first is reviewing existing research on taboo words in song lyrics specifically for the classification and functions that researchers have previously identified (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Flick, 2018; Silverman, 2016). Following the data collection, which in this study is limited to the lyrics of Nicki Minaj's songs: *Superbass, Megatron, Barbie Tingz,* and *Anaconda*. Next is to perform data analysis, the researcher uses a sociolinguistic approach to identify the types and functions of taboo expressions in the selected song lyrics. (Denzin

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et al., 2023). The final step is presenting the results. The data is grouped based on the types and purposes of taboo expressions and is explained using the theories discussed in this article (Miles et al., 2014).

To analyze the data, the researchers apply several theories related to the sociolinguistics approach which are taboo words. Battistella's (2005) theory is used to identify the types of taboo expressions used in song lyrics, which include profanity, obscenity, vulgarity, and epithets. Wardhaugh's (2021) theory is also used to show the functions of taboo words, which are creating attention, provoking a violent confrontation, endearing, and showing contempt. By applying these theories to the data, it can provide a comprehensive analysis of the types and functions of the taboo expressions used in the Nicki Minaj's song lyrics (Lubis et al., 2020; Zenner et al., 2019).

Results and Discussion

This research provides data on the types and functions of taboo words in the lyrics of Nicki Minaj, with a particular focus on her songs like Superbass, Megatron, Barbie Tingz, and Anaconda. The findings of the analysis are presented in Table 1. (Battistella, 2005).

Table 1. The Types of Taboo Expressions

No.	Function	Frequency
1	Epithets	36
2	Vulgarity	38
3	Obscenity	10
Total		**84**

The Types of Taboo Expressions in Nicki Minaj's Songs

The data presented in Table 1 shows that the most frequent type of taboo expression in the selected songs is vulgarity, with a frequency of 39 times. This is followed by epithets, with a frequency of 36 times, and obscenity, with a frequency of 10 times. In total, the number of frequencies for all types of taboo expressions is 85. The results of the analysis of the lyrics of Nicki Minaj's songs uncovers three types of taboo words. These include epithets, vulgarity, and obscenity, each with distinct characteristics and implications (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Jay, 2009).

The words "epithets" are the types of slurs, such as 'bitch', 'damn', and 'hoe'. It refers to race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender (Battistella, 2005). There are some epithets that the researchers found. In *Superbass* songs are 'hoe' and 'niggas'. Below are the examples of the lyric:

Datum 1
And yes you'll get slapped if you're lookin' **hoe** *(Superbas)*

Datum 2
Entrepreneur **niggas** and the moguls *(Superbas)*

According to the lyric above, the word 'hoe' refers to a woman who works as a prostitute. Whereas, in the datum 2, 'niggas' in refers to a race of African-Americans so that it can be known as the taboo word that categorized in Epithets (Spears, 2021). The use of these words can be seen as offensive and derogatory, perpetuating negative stereotypes and marginalizing certain groups (Hughes, 2015).

The researchers also found the word 'bitch' in *Megatron's* song lyrics and in *Barbie Tingz*'s song lyric. Whereas in the *Anaconda*'s song lyric, the word 'dumb' is one of the taboo words that is found in that song lyric. Below are examples of the lyric:

Datum 3
Bitches-bitches be talkin' shit, but they ain't got a pot to piss in *(Megatron)*

Datum 4
Let's be real, all you **bitches** wanna look like me *(Barbie Tingz)*

Datum 5
I'm on some **dumb** sh *(Anaconda)*

The word 'bitch(es)' refers to versatile and can convey various emotions through the way it is spoken. In these lyrics, the emotion is anger. Meanwhile, "dumb" means lacking intelligence (stupid). The use of such words can be harmful as they are often offensive and derogatory,

reinforcing negative stereotypes and marginalizing specific groups. This fosters prejudice and discrimination, making individuals feel disrespected and excluded. It hinders progress toward inclusivity, tolerance, and understanding, highlighting the importance of promoting respectful language for empathy and unity.

The word "vulgarity" on the other hand, refers to words that crudely characterize sexual meaning (Battistella, 2005). Although vulgarity and obscenity are often grouped together, vulgarity is considered less intense than obscenity, which is more obvious in inciting lust. In the songs analyzed, the researchers found several examples of vulgarity, including 'squeeze', 'ass', and 'pussy' in *Megatron*, and 'dick', 'anaconda', and 'butt' in *Anaconda*. Below are examples of the lyric:

Datum 6
I put the **squeeze** on him *(Megatron)*

Datum 7
That **ass** clappin' on the D, Hercules on him (brrt) - (*Megatron)*

Datum 8
He said it's my **pussy** (yup, it might be) – *(Megatron)*

Datum 9
My **anaconda** don't want none unless you got buns, hun *(Anaconda)*

Datum 10
Oh my gosh, look at her **butt** *(Anaconda)*

The word 'squeeze' in the lyric means an act of fellatio. The meaning of 'that ass clappin' on the d' refers to the sexual act which resulting an audible and clapping sound. The word 'pussy' here means a rude word for a vagina. Meanwhile, the meaning of anaconda here is a large big penis. The use of such explicit and offensive language, particularly when referring to sexual acts in a derogatory manner, can indeed be seen as objectifying and degrading. It reduces human sexuality to crude and simplistic terms, stripping away the complexity, intimacy, and respect that should accompany discussions about sex and relationships.

Meanwhile, the word "obscenity" involves the use of words that incite lust and are related to sex-differentiating anatomy or sexual and excretory function (Battistella, 2005). The researchers identified several examples of obscenity in the analyzed songs, including 'motherfuckin' and 'eff' in *Superbass*. Moreover, 'fuck' and 'muthafuckin' are found in *Megatron*, *Barbie Tingz*, and *Anaconda*. Below are examples in the lyrics:

Datum 11
He a **motherfuckin'** trip, trip, sailor of the ship, ship *(Superbass)*

Datum 12
Somebody please tell him who the **eff** I is *(Superbass)*

Datum 13
I **fuck** him like I miss him *(Megatron)*

Datum 14
Had to **fuck** up the bitch, man, **fuck** the bitch *(Barbie Tingz)*

The meaning of *motherfuckin'* in this lyric is an offensive slang word used to express strong exclamation of certain feelings. *Eff* is another word for fuck. Fuck in **datum 13** means having sex with someone, besides fuck in **datum 14** means to damage someone. The use of these words can be seen as highly offensive and crude, promoting explicit and graphic sexual behavior (Hughes, 2015; Jay, 2009).

In summary, there are several examples of forbidden words in Nicki Minaj's song lyrics, including epithet, vulgarity, and profanity. These words can be offensive and derogatory, reduce sex to crude and simplistic terms, and encourage overt and sexually explicit behavior. These findings highlight the importance of understanding the social and cultural factors that lead to the use of taboo terms in music, especially those related to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality (Putri & Barnabas, 2019). Therefore, the findings in this study affirm the previous studies in which the taboo expressions used in the songs as the object of these studies have a function to express displeasure and criticism on a certain societal condition conveyed by the singers through their songs' lyrics.

The Functions of Taboo Expressions in Nicki Minaj's Songs

In this study, we investigated the functions of taboo language used in the lyrics of Nicki Minaj's songs. To do so, we turned to Wardhaugh's (2006) theories, which suggest that taboo expressions can serve various functions in communication (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Jay, 2009; Wardhaugh, 2006). These include creating attention, provoking violent confrontation, endearing, and stating contempt. By applying these theories, we sought to gain a deeper understanding of the role that taboo language plays in popular music and its broader cultural implications.

Table 2. The Function of Taboo Expressions

No.	Function	Frequency
1	Stating contempt	30
2	Creating attention	20
3	Endearing	6
4	Provoking violence confrontation	2
Total		**58**

The analysis revealed that the most frequent function of the taboo expressions in Nicki Minaj's songs was stating contempt, occurring in 30 instances. This function is evident in lines such as "You a stupid hoe" in *Superbass* and "Bitch, I'm the bomb, like tick tick" in *Megatron*. Another example from the data such as on the lyric's lines in *Barbie Tingz* "Face so pretty bitches wish they could slice me" and "Oh my gosh, look at her butt" in *Anaconda*. The use of taboo expressions to convey contempt can be seen as a form of verbal aggression, often employed to insult and demean others, particularly those perceived as inferior or threatening. As a result, in comparison to previous studies, the taboo expressions employed in songs' lyrics demonstrate the singers' desire to criticize a specific society and situation by conveying their critiques and communicating various emotions based on a particular event that happened through their music.

The function of stating contempt through the use of taboo language aligns with previous research on verbal aggression and power dynamics in communication (Infante & Rancer, 1996). As suggested by Wardhaugh (2006), taboo expressions that used to convey contempt are also able to serve as a means of asserting power and dominance in social interactions. This behaviour of power assertion is parallel to the function of language, particularly in contexts such as popular music where performers are expected to project a persona of strength and authority.

Thus, the analysis of the functions of taboo language in Nicki Minaj's songs highlights the prevalence of stating contempt as a primary function. This research implies that the use of taboo language in popular music serve as a means of verbal aggression and power assertion. As suggested by Firth (1996), this study reminds the need for further research on the role of taboo language in popular culture and its broader implications for communication and social dynamics.

The analysis of the taboo language's function used in the lyrics of Nicki Minaj's songs revealed the prominent use of expressions that create attention. This function was the second most common, with a frequency of 20 instances. Examples of this function include lines like "I'm in the back, looking righteous" in Barbie Tingz and "My anaconda don't want none unless you got buns, hun" in Anaconda. The function of creating attention through the use of taboo language aligns with the broader role of popular music in contemporary society. Popular music often serves as a site of cultural conflict and negotiation, where artists push against established norms and challenge dominant social structures (Frith, 1996). The use of taboo expressions in Nicki Minaj's music can be seen as a form of artistic expression that challenges existing norms, while also serving the practical purpose of capturing and holding audience attention

This finding has significant implications for the purpose of taboo language in popular culture and the impact it has on social environment. The use of taboo language in popular music can function as a means of challenging and subverting dominant power structures, while also allowing for the expression of individuality and creativity. However, it is important to consider the

potential negative consequences of the use of taboo language, especifically regarding the reinforcement of negative social stereotypes.

The analysis of the functions of taboo language in Nicki Minaj's songs revealed two less frequent functions, namely endearing and provoking violent confrontation (DeNora, 2000; Wardhaugh, 2006). The former was observed in six instances, such as the expression "My love is very special" in *Megatron*, and “Niggas gettin' more cheese, kissy face” in *Barbie Tingz* which can be viewed as a means of expressing affection or admiration also to show the racist behaviour. The function of endearing through the use of taboo expressions aligns with the broader role of music in conveying emotions and creating connections between artists and their audiences. As stated from DeNora (2000), music is a means of expressing and sharing emotions, with listeners often seeking out music that resonates with their personal experiences and emotions. The use of taboo language to convey affection or appreciation also shows the racist behaviour can be seen as a form of emotional expression that resonates with audiences who may be actively seeking such emotional connections.

On the other hand, in the example the last two functions are "And yes you'll get slapped if you're lookin' hoe" in *Superbass*, and in *Megatron* “Bitches-bitches be talkin' shit, but they ain't got a pot to piss in” can be seen as a means of issuing threats in others. Therefore, the function of using taboo language with intention of provoking violent confrontation is more concerning due to its potential negative social consequences, particularly in terms of reinforcing harmful social stereotypes and power dynamics. These findings highlight the significance of considering the broader implications of using taboo language in popular music and the potential for such language to perpetuate harmful social norms. It also underscores the need for further research into the complex interactions between language, power, and social dynamics in popular music (DeNora, 2000)

Although Nicki Minaj's lyrics frequently employ taboo expressions to express contempt and gain attention, a more comprehensive analysis requires a larger data set and an understanding of context. By examining the sociolinguistic features of these songs, one can see that these expressions frequently serve as indicators of social dynamics, influencing power relations, privilege, and cultural significance. For example, in the song "Anaconda," which explores themes of body autonomy and femininity, taboo expressions are used to challenge societal expectations and objectification. Similarly, in "Superbass," a song with expressions of romance and ambition, language is employed to both captivate and critique. These expressions serve as sociocultural commentaries, reflecting the current trends of Minaj's audience and the complicated social fabric they represent. Therefore, the importance of taboo expressions goes beyond their auditory impact and involves a deeper interplay between language and society, enhancing our understanding of linguistic choices in music and culture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research has shed light on the types and functions of taboo words in Nicki Minaj's song lyrics. The analysis reveals that there are three types of taboo words, namely, epithets, vulgarity, and obscenity. Epithets are slurs that refer to race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender. Vulgarity, on the other hand, crudely characterizes sexual meaning, while obscenity incites lust and involves sex-differentiating anatomy or sexual and excretory functions. Among these types, vulgarity emerged as the most frequently used type of taboo words in the songs.

Moreover, the research found that there are four functions of taboo words in the lyrics of Nicki Minaj's songs: creating attention, stating contempt, endearing, and provoking violent confrontation. Creating attention is the most dominant function used in the songs. The analysis showed that the use of taboo words is intended to provoke attention to the listener. The research contributes to the sociolinguistics field by providing a comprehensive understanding of the use of taboo words in contemporary music.

It is noteworthy that the deployment of taboo vocabulary in musical compositions is a time-honored tradition. Nonetheless, the current investigation offers a novel outlook on how musicians incorporate taboo lexicon in their lyrical compositions to communicate messages, express sentiments, and elicit emotional responses. The results of this inquiry hold substantial ramifications for musicians, songwriters, and lyricists, as well as language educators and learners. The examination accentuates the necessity of comprehending the application of taboo vocabulary in music and their purposes, especially within the context of modern-day society, where music has a notable influence on the language and behavior of juveniles.

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