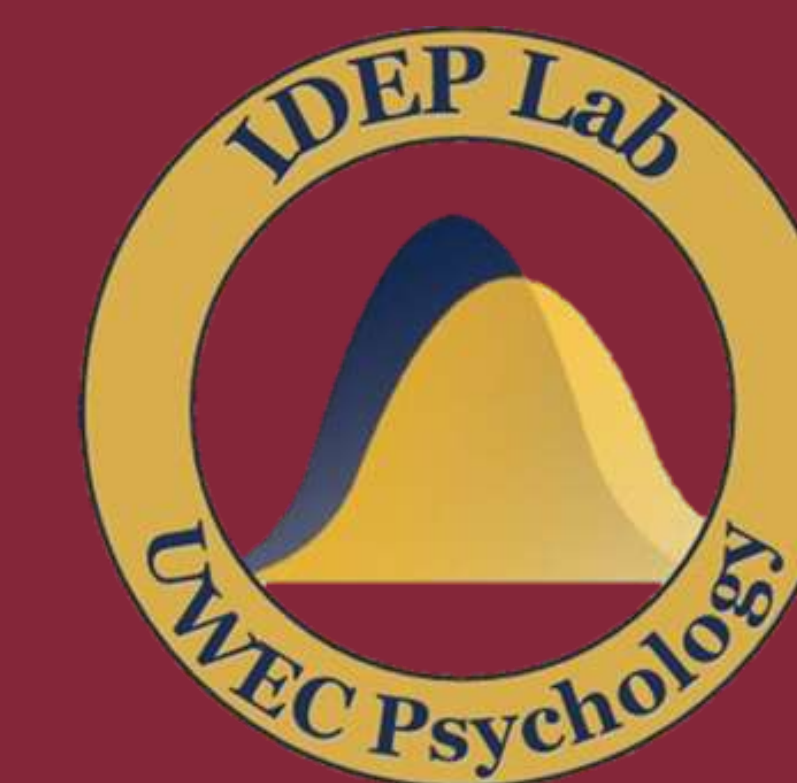




# (DON'T) DROP THE F-BOMB: PERSONALITY JUDGMENTS OF MEN AND WOMEN WHO SWEAR

Yan Lin Lee, Carly Murray, Dana Strothenke, and April Bleske-Rechek  
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire



## INTRODUCTION

People display aspects of their personality through everyday behaviors. Personality traits manifest themselves in people's music preferences, vocational choices, leisure activities, clothing and accessory choices, exercise habits, and even the way they use language. For example, individuals who are highly agreeable and extraverted tend to smile and laugh a lot.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps in implicit awareness that others' behaviors are expressions of their personality, people judge others' personality traits on the basis of their observations of others' behaviors and the environments in which they observe them. People do this with considerable accuracy, even when judging based on as little as a photograph.<sup>2</sup>

In the current research, we investigated people's first impressions of men's and women's personality traits as a function of the way they use language – specifically, their use of taboo language (i.e., swear words). Limited research suggests that people who swear frequently are perceived by others to be disagreeable and impulsive, as well as crude and uncultured.<sup>3</sup>

Drawing from past research on personality and language use<sup>3</sup>, sex differences in swearing frequency,<sup>4</sup> and the negative emotional valence attached to many taboo words,<sup>5</sup> we hypothesized that *people would form more negative first impressions of...*

- (H1) ...people who swear than of people who do not swear.
- (H2) ...women who swear than of men who swear.
- (H3) ...people who swear around strangers than of people who swear around friends.

## METHOD

A total of 365 college students at UWEC participated as part of a voluntary classroom activity. The scenario and subsequent questionnaire were in paper-and-pencil form. We removed 6 participants for failing to respond to  $\geq 3$  items from different personality traits, leaving 359 participants (146 M, 212 W, 1 undisclosed) in the final analysis.

Using a 2 x 2 x 2 between-subjects experimental design, all participants read a hypothetical scenario in which they were told to imagine overhearing someone telling a story to a companion about their afternoon at work. In the scenario, we manipulated (1) type of language (taboo or non-taboo); (2) sex of storyteller (male or female); and (3) relationship of companion to the storyteller (friend or stranger). The story included either 5 high-frequency taboo words (*shit, hell, assholes, fuck, damn*) (taboo language condition) or 5 negatively valenced or neutral non-taboo words (non-taboo language condition).

After reading the scenario, participants rated the scenario on several aspects as a validity check. For example, they rated the scenario on the degree to which it was appropriate and offensive. We expected that those who read the story involving taboo words would rate it as less appropriate and more offensive, and they did.

Finally, participants gave their first impressions of the storyteller's personality traits by rating a series of characteristics on a 5-point scale. The ratings were then used to create composites for 16 personality traits. Because each trait had only 2-4 items, we did not expect to find high inter-item reliability. As expected, the mean Cronbach's  $\alpha = .58$  (range = .15-.81).

## MATERIALS

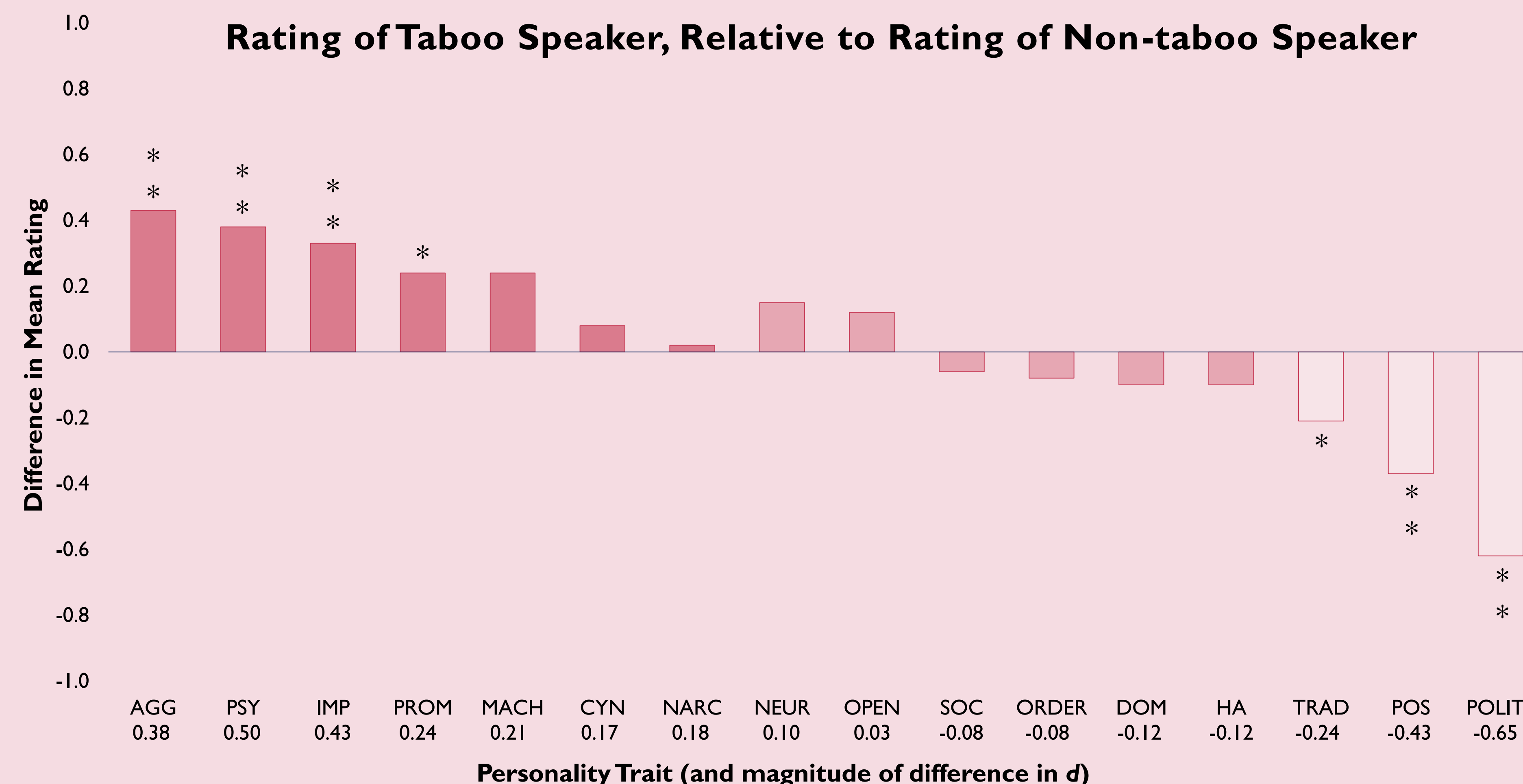
Each participant read 1 of 8 hypothetical scenarios generated from the 3 independent variables: (1) type of language (taboo or non-taboo), (2) sex of storyteller (male or female), and (3) relationship of companion to the storyteller (friend or stranger). Below, we show how the scenarios differed in their use of taboo vs. non-taboo language. The words in parentheses are the non-taboo parallels of the taboo words.

"So I was at work the other day, which is always stressful. You never know how crazy it's gonna be. I had a lot of **shit (stuff)** to do, but the managers weren't supposed to be coming in until after the lunch rush. Everyone knows that they can be **assholes (schmucks)**, but I figured as long as I had everything done by the time they got there, I'd be okay. They've never yelled at me before, because I can usually get my stuff done in time, but I've seen them lose it on some other people. Anyways, I guess I lost track of time and then a lot of customers came in at once so I never even got to get started on that work I was supposed to have done. To top it off, I got **fucked (cheated)** over by my coworker who left me at the counter by myself. So, there I was at one o'clock, still behind the counter thinking "**what the hell (what)!**" just waiting for my bosses to walk in and embarrass me in front of everyone else. I had done none of my work! And then they did come in, and saw that nothing was done... But instead of yelling at me, they blamed my coworker. It ended up pretty **damn great (great)!**"

## RESULTS

Prediction	Personality Trait	Taboo Language M (SD)	Non-taboo Language M (SD)	p	95% CI
<b>Taboo &gt; Non-taboo</b>	Aggressiveness (AGG)	2.99 (1.16)	2.56 (1.07)	<.001**	0.20, 0.66
	Psychopathy (PSY)	3.54 (0.76)	3.16 (0.77)	<.001**	0.22, 0.54
	Impulsivity (IMP)	3.34 (0.76)	3.01 (0.78)	<.001**	0.17, 0.49
	Promiscuity (PROM)	2.51 (1.02)	2.27 (1.04)	.027*	0.03, 0.46
	Machiavellianism (MACH)	3.18 (1.16)	2.94 (1.20)	.052	0.00, 0.49
	Cynicism (CYN)	3.54 (0.86)	3.45 (0.85)	.345	-0.09, 0.26
<b>Taboo = Non-taboo</b>	Narcissism (NARC)	3.56 (0.88)	3.54 (1.01)	.812	-0.17, 0.22
	Neuroticism (NEUR)	3.04 (0.88)	2.90 (0.79)	.102	-0.03, 0.32
	Openness (OPEN)	2.48 (0.66)	2.36 (0.72)	.090	-0.02, 0.27
	Social Closeness (SOC)	3.40 (0.72)	3.45 (0.70)	.433	-0.21, 0.09
	Orderliness (ORDER)	2.74 (0.98)	2.81 (0.98)	.469	-0.28, 0.13
	Leadership Dominance (DOM)	2.01 (0.88)	2.11 (0.86)	.255	-0.29, 0.08
<b>Taboo &lt; Non-taboo</b>	Harm Avoidance (HA)	2.73 (0.78)	2.83 (0.85)	.252	-0.27, 0.07
	Traditionalism (TRAD)	2.63 (0.83)	2.84 (0.88)	.022*	-0.38, -0.03
	Positivity (POS)	2.30 (0.86)	2.66 (0.86)	<.001**	-0.55, -0.19
	Politeness (POLITE)	2.09 (0.90)	2.70 (1.00)	<.001**	-0.81, -0.42

As shown above (mean ratings) and below (effect sizes), analyses revealed support for our first hypothesis that participants exposed to the swearing storyteller would judge him/her more unfavorably than would participants exposed to the non-swearing storyteller. The effect of taboo language on impressions of the storyteller's personality was consistent across sex of storyteller and relationship between storyteller and listener, however, thus revealing no support for our second and third hypotheses.



## DISCUSSION

Taboo language is memorable<sup>6</sup> and carries emotional weight.<sup>5</sup> Although research suggests that people differ quite widely in the frequency with which they swear (swear words appear to comprise anywhere between 0 and 3% of day-to-day word-usage<sup>7</sup>), little is known about (1) how people judge those who swear, and (2) how people who swear (or use swear words of varying degrees of severity) differ from those who don't swear (or use only low-severity swear words).

To begin to study these gaps in the scientific literature on language and personality, we generated a realistic story in which a male or female storyteller either swore several times or not at all while chatting with either a good friend or stranger. Our results showed a relatively consistent pattern that cut across sex of storyteller and who they were talking to: The swearing storyteller was perceived as *more aggressive, psychopathic, impulsive, and promiscuous*; and as *less traditional, positive, and polite*. The analyses revealed no other consistent main effects or higher order interactions. For example, we predicted that people who swear around a stranger would be judged more negatively than would those who swear around a friend, and that a swearing female would be judged more negatively than would a swearing male. Perhaps our college student participants were accustomed to hearing both male and female peers swearing in various contexts, and so did not differentiate. But if college students are desensitized to swearing, some of the effects we did observe should not have surfaced. For example, we should not have observed an effect of swearing on ratings of politeness and aggressiveness.

Some literature in gender and communication studies suggests that swearing is an expression of social power,<sup>8</sup> and hence is condoned among men more than among women.<sup>9</sup> Contrary to this suggestion, neither men nor women in our sample rated the swearing storyteller as higher than the non-swearing storyteller in leadership and dominance, and neither sex judged the female who used taboo language more negatively than the male who used taboo language.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In the future, we intend to take our interest in personality and language in two specific directions. First, building off of others who have used recordings of people's natural language use to demonstrate that people who swear frequently tend to be more disagreeable and impulsive than other people are, we would like to investigate links between personality traits and the *types* of swear words that people use. The swear words used in the current study were quite common, relatively low in severity, and fell into religious, excretory, and sexual domains.<sup>5</sup> We speculate that people who report a willingness and tendency to use low-frequency swear words, particularly those in the sexual domain that are perceived as both severe and defaming (e.g., *cocksucker, cunt*), will score particularly high in aggressiveness and impulsivity – as reported both by themselves and close peers. Some previous research suggests that women swear in public less often than men do,<sup>10</sup> and we speculate that this difference is magnified in the sexual domain, where women's use of sexual taboo words might signal a level of sexual promiscuity or crudeness most women are either implicitly or explicitly unwilling to send.

Second, we plan to investigate the first impressions people have of those who use more severe and defaming forms of taboo language. We predict that the more severe and defaming the words people use, the more negative others' judgments of them will be.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is supported by the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at UWEC. We thank the faculty and staff who welcomed us into their classrooms for student participation in this study: Ezra Zeitler, Ryan Weichelt, Stacy Thompson, and Jamie Browning.

## REFERENCES

- Funder, D. (2010). *The personality puzzle* (5th ed.). New York: Norton.
- Naumann, L., Vazire, S., & Gosling, S. (2009). Personality judgments based on physical appearance. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 35, 1661-1671.
- Mehl, M., Gosling, S., & Pennebaker, J. (2006). Personality in its natural habitat: Manifestations and implicit folk theories of personality in daily life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90, 862-877.
- Ginsburg, H., Ogletree, S., & Silakowski, T. (2003). Vulgar language: Review of sex differences in usage, attributions, and pathologies. *North American Journal of Psychology*, 5, 105-116.

- Pinker, S. (2007). *The stuff of thought: Language as a window into human nature*. New York: Viking.
- Jay, T., Caldwell-Harris, C., & King, K. (2008). Recalling taboo and non-taboo words. *American Journal of Psychology*, 121, 83-103.
- Mehl, M., & Pennebaker, J. (2003). The sounds of social life: A psychometric analysis of students' daily social environments and natural conversations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, 857-870.
- deKlerk, V. (1991). Expletives: Men only? *Communication Monographs*, 58, 156-169.
- Burgoon, M., Dillard, J., & Doran, N. (1983). Friendly or unfriendly persuasion: The effects of violations of expectations by males and females. *Human Communication Research*, 10, 283-294.
- Jay, T. (2009). The utility and ubiquity of swear words. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 4, 153-161.