
Taboo Language in Political Discussions in X (Twitter)

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Abstrak

The study examined the use of taboo language in political discourse on X (Twitter). The objectives of the study are to: (1) identify the Malay and English taboo words used in political discourse on Twitter, and (2) analyze the function of using Malay and English in political discourse on X. The descriptive study involved the collection of posts from X using the search words “politics” from 1 June 2022 to 31 August 2022 and with geotagging for “Malaysia”. A total of 126 tweets containing 202 posts with taboo words were identified. The analysis showed that the most common type of taboo words is insult and slur (59), followed by cursing (50) and epithets (49). There were less words on obscenity (14), vulgarity (13), slang (9), and scatology (8). No taboo words related to profanity and blasphemy were found. For the function of taboo words, the main function is discrediting other people or ideas (108). The X user used taboo words for other functions less frequently, namely, catharsis (46), strong interpersonal identification (39), attention-getting (7), and provoking of violent confrontation (2). A bigger range of taboo words in English was found for vulgarity and scatology but more taboo words in Malay were found for insult and slur, curse words, epithets, obscenity, and slang. The findings indicate respect for religious and ethnic sensitivities through the absence of blasphemy and profanities.

words: X (Twitter); taboo words; politics

A. INTRODUCTION

The Internet and social media have become new platforms for political conversations. During elections, social media is widely used for campaigning. Politicians can reach a large audience because of the rapid distribution of information via platforms such as Twitter (Yaqub et al., 2017). Features such as hashtags, reposts, and replies facilitate the rapid circulation of posts. The growth of social media and widespread familiarity with digital platforms among Malaysian youths is reflected in rising internet adoption. The number of internet users in Malaysia reached 34.9 million in January 2025, increasing by 417,000 (+1.2%) from 2024 (DataReportal, 2025). Social media is widely used to exert influence in politics in Malaysia (Alivi, 2025). X is a platform that presents alternative news to those who are politically interested (Nguyen, 2011). X is a valuable site for studying political discourse because of the two-way interaction. The platform

allows the voters to show their support and share their thoughts. Researchers can study political talk and spontaneous reactions to political events in everyday digital interaction.

Politicians have used profanity as a tactic in political communication (Cavazza & Guidetti, 2014). The experimental study conducted in Italy involved 110 adults aged 20 to 68 years found that a political candidate's use of expletives closed the gap with the public but the use of profanity decreased the perceived persuasiveness of the message. The stimuli were four variations of fictitious 15-lines blog post about unemployment, two of which contained swear words. Male and female names were used for the politician. Cavazza and Guidetti (2014) found that the public's response was similar regardless of gender, educational level, political activity, or self-reported political leanings. A study in Indonesia (Rahmah et al., 2025) showed that top government officials use taboo language in social media. Their analysis of Indonesian X users' response revealed a new type of taboo language, that is, insults to intelligence. Some X users felt that it is appropriate to use taboo words to express criticism, anger and disappointment but other X users found it offensive but a normal behaviour.

In Malaysia, researchers have concentrated on shaming language in political discourse in social media platforms (e.g., Zulkifli & Bakar, 2024) and hate speech (e.g., Zamri et al., 2023) rather than taboo language. A particular aspect of taboo language in online political discourse that has received some attention is slurs, particularly racial slurs. For instance, Imraq et al.'s (2025) analysis of political tweets showed some refrain from weaponizing racial slurs and Malaysians were inclined towards using neutral alternatives out of respect for other ethnic groups. Therefore, since there is lack of studies on taboo language in online political discourse in Malaysia and little is understood about it, it is important to identify if certain types of taboo words are more frequently used, and for what purposes when talking politics.

The study examined the use of taboo language in political discourse on X (Twitter). The objectives of the study are to: (1) identify the Malay and English taboo words used in political discourse on Twitter, and (2) analyze the function of using Malay and English in political discourse on X.

B. METHOD

The descriptive study involved the analysis of political discourse in X written by Malaysians from 1 June 2022 to 31 August 2022. The selection criteria were: (1) the posts are on political issues in Malaysia, and (2) the posts are written in English or Malay. Altogether, 126 tweets on political discourse were identified in the three-month period, and 202 taboo words were identified for further analysis.

Two analysis frameworks were employed for the study. For categories of taboo words, Jay's (1992) model was used. Jay (1992) goes beyond forms and links taboo categories to the user's context such as religious groups and teenagers.

Table 1. Categories of taboo words based on Jay (1992)

Category	Definition	Example
1. Epithets	Epithets are words that relate to something prohibited in connection with race, gender, ethnicity, etc. Epithets are uttered either intentionally as a radical action to attack someone or unintentionally in moments of anger.	<i>Shit!</i> <i>Damn!</i> <i>Hell</i>
2. Profanity	Profane words are uttered with words taken from a religious context but not to defame God. Profanity is uttered due to annoyance and frustration.	<i>Jesus Christ,</i> <i>I'm tired of t-</i> <i>his!</i>
3. Vulgarity	Vulgar words deal with sexual and excretory of humans, including private organ of the human body and functions. Vulgar words are used to humiliate the target person.	<i>Bullshit</i> <i>Fool</i> <i>Kiss my ass</i>
4. Slang	Slang are words used within particular groups of members like teenagers, musicians, drug users or athletes, and it identifies them.	<i>Pimp</i> <i>Dweeb</i> <i>Cupcakes</i>
5. Insult and slur	1. People may use slurs to verbally attack someone in terms of racial, ethnic, or social in nature and may imply or stereotyping or prejudice of the speaker. 2. Insult may involve the physical, mental or psychology qualities of the target.	<i>Animal</i> <i>imagery: Pig,</i> <i>Dog , Jackass</i> <i>Social</i> <i>deviations: Wh</i> <i>ore, Homo,</i> <i>Slut</i>
6. Scatology	Scatology words refer to human waste products or processes of human beings. These words are often used by children when they are toilet trained. Adults may use the same referent or substitute it with other term.	<i>Poo poo</i> <i>Crap</i> <i>Shit</i>
7. Blasphemy	Blasphemous words are used to attack religious figures or authorities. Blasphemous expressions are offensive but may be funny to non-believers.	<i>Screw the</i> <i>Pope</i> <i>The church</i> <i>can stick their</i> <i>new fund</i> <i>drive</i>
8. Obscenity	Obscene terms are strong feeling words that are associated with sexual, excretory function, human anatomy. In the context of uttering taboo words of obscenity is defined as rough or rude manners.	<i>Fuck</i> <i>Motherfucker</i> <i>Cunt</i>
9. Cursing	Curses are harsh words, used with the intent of causing harm to others, as an expression of dissatisfaction, rage, or even madness. Condemning people is also a part of taboo curse.	<i>Eat shit and</i> <i>die</i> <i>Damn</i> <i>Son of bitch</i>

Analysis of functions of taboo words was guided by Liedlich’s (1973) model. The model links taboo usage directly to communicative intent (e.g., aggression, humour, solidarity), making it suitable for interpreting the interactional purposes of taboo language in political discourse.

Table 2. Functions of Taboo Words based on Liedlich (1973)

Function	Meaning
1. Attention getting	People use taboo words in their conversations when they want to get attention from the public.
2. Discredit	People express their disbelief about numerous things that they perceive do not meet the public standards by using taboo words to attack the mental construction of their targets.
3. Provoking of violent confrontation	When someone utters taboo words, he or she may have an intention to provoke a certain response such as violation or anger from others.
4. Endearment	People use taboo words to improve intimacy between the speaker and the hearer who are close to each other, particularly in informal interactions.
5. Strong interpersonal identification	People may use prohibited words to develop a form of strong interpersonal identification to express the type of persons they are. These taboo words are used by people to identify the true character of a person or to define the personality of someone from their point of view.
6. Catharsis	People may use offensive language in order to express their extreme anger and frustration, as a form of therapy for the speaker’s psychology, especially when they are angry or dissatisfied.

The data collection period was established from 1 June 2022 until 31 August 2022. A search was made on X using the advanced search tool using the search word “politics” and the posts were geotagged for “Malaysia”. The advanced search tool was used to filter tweets and find tweets that were posted within the data collection period. Tweets fulfilling the selection criteria were screenshot and compiled.

The X posts were analyzed using the nine categories of taboo words outlined by Jay (1992) and the functions of taboo words outlined by Liedlich (1973). The words were listed, and the frequencies and percentages were calculated.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Types of Taboo Words in X posts on Politics

Table 3 shows the frequency of types of taboo words analyzed based on Jay (1992). Altogether 202 taboo words were identified from 126 X posts on politics, and the top three types of taboo words were insults and slurs, curse words, and epithets. Profanity and blasphemy related to religion were not used at all. The X users avoided disrespecting religious figures because religion is one of the three sensitive issues in Malaysia, referred to as 3R (race, religion, and royalty). These issues can incite unrest in the country, and individuals can be charged. Table 3 also

shows that there were more taboo words in English for vulgarity and scatology but more taboo words in Malay for insult and slur, curse words, epithets, obscenity, and slang.

Table 3. Frequency of Types of Taboo Words (N=202)

Category	English posts Frequency	Malay posts Frequency	Total
Insult and slur	9	50	59
Curse words	5	45	50
Epithets	1	48	49
Obscenity	6	8	14
Vulgarity	8	5	13
Slang	1	8	9
Scatology	5	3	8
TOTAL	35	167	202

Note: shaded boxes show higher relative frequency

In the category of epithets, Malaysian users were more comfortable using taboo Malay words than English words. Only one English epithet was used, that is, “dumb” and used only once, compared to 42 Malay epithet words: *gila* (22), *sial* (10), *jahanam* (5), *tolol* (2), *bahlul* (1), *lembab* (1) and *bingai* (1). In Excerpt 1, the X user said in Malaysia, it is not permissible to feed dogs, not permissible to touch dogs, and eating pork is definitely not permissible. What is permissible is the Malay politicians scamming the Malays themselves. He/She said that riding on religion, riding on politics, all the same, and Malaysia is condemned because of all these scams, or politicians who lie and cheat.

(1)



As for vulgarity, there were more English taboo words (8) than Malay taboo words (5). The most frequently used vulgar English word was “ass” (4), followed by “bullshit” (2). The equivalent Malay word for ass is *punggung* but it is the polite version. The vulgar word is *pantat* is sometimes used but not in the dataset analyzed. The least used vulgar English words were “asshole” (1) and “suck” (1). The only Malay vulgar word was *kencing* (urine, used 4 times). Malaysian X users may be more comfortable using English vulgarity words as they sounded lighter and the cultural distance may make them seem less offensive.

The slang category had more Malay taboo words (8) and only one English taboo word was identified, which was “mob of scum”. The most frequently used Malay slang is *kantoi* (3), followed by *bodopiang* (stupid, 2). One tweet used *kantoi* to refer to a politician was caught red-handed in the misuse of power, a shameful situation. In Excerpt 2, the X user said that Malaysia is already owned by a gang and if people were to expose the gang, they would have to see the gang. The other Malay slang words were used once each: *maleh*, *palatao*, and *pantek*. Malaysian X users may be more used to using Malay slang words.

(2)



For the category of insult and slur, there were more Malay taboo words (n =50) than English taboo words (n=9) used in the X posts analyzed. The Malay word “*babi*” (pig) was used 13 times, and expresses anger at the stupidity of someone. Pigs are not religiously clean for Muslims to consume as food and to touch, and using this word on individuals is a real insult. The second most used insult or slur is “*anjing*” (dog) which carries a similar connotation to “pig” because dogs are also unclean to Muslims. In Excerpt 3, the X user said that the animal government is like dogs and pigs who establish political parties and deceive the Malaysian citizens.

(3)



Other Malay insults and slur are: *perompak* (robber, 5), *macai* (political lackey, 4), *meleis* (overly nationalist Malay, 4), *penyamun* (pirate, 3), *penyanggak* (swindler, 2), *katak* (frog, 2), *sampah* (rubbish, 2) and *politikus* (political rat, 2). The other Malay insults and slur are used only once: *lebai* (poor), *ularmak* (mother’s snake), *betina* (female), *kambing hitam* (female goat), *iblis* (devil), *beruk* (bear), *level lembu* (level of a cow), *gila* (crazy), and *najisku* (my shit).

The word *gila* (crazy) is used to emphasize an extreme point in their posts without using the adjectives “very” or “most”. X users used *gila* the most to show their disbelief in the current political condition and to discredit the politicians.

In different cultures, the animals considered stupid are different. In English, the most common insult and slur is “stupid” (5), the others being “frog”, “stupid cow”, “stupid gov” (stupid government) and “thieves” which were used once each. Excerpt 4 shows a post that said that there are so many big thieves in Malaysia, referring to politicians who siphon the money from the natural resources for themselves, and Malaysia ends up not among the wealthy nations in Southeast Asia. It is interesting that the English version is “stupid cow” while the Malay version is level *lembu* (level of a cow), *kambing hitam* (black goat), and *beruk* (bear). Cows are not considered wise because they are led by farmers to the field to eat grass.

(4)



In Malaysia, politicians are compared to animals like frogs and rats. *Katak* (frog) refers to politicians who jump from one political party to another for self-gain. *Politikus* (political rat) is interesting because it is a word coinage by social media users to refer to unscrupulous politicians, much like rats. In Excerpt 5, the X user says the country will be damned because of politicians who take bribes and there should be laws against such behaviour. There is a commonality between Malay and English insults and slur, that is, referring to unscrupulous characters as thieves, *perompak* (robbers), *penyamun* (pirates), and *penyanggak* (swindler).

(5)



Next, for the category of scatology, there were five English and three Malay figurative words for faeces. Among the English words, “shit” was used two times, and the others were used once: “smells like shit”, “pile of crap”, and “shit hole”. Scatology expressions convey a strong emotional tone of anger. The Malay words *taik* (2) and “*najis*” (1) convey dissatisfaction with politicians.

For the category of obscenity to express extreme emotions, there were more Malay taboo words (8) than English (6). The top obscene Malay word was *butoh* (penis, 5), and the other words referring to the vagina were used only once: *lancau* (penis), *palancau* (despicable person), and *jubo* (buttocks or anus). As for obscene words in English, “fuck” and “fucked up were used twice while “dick” and “dick head” were used once each. The obscene words focussed on the male private part and the sex act.

In Excerpt 6, the X user said that Malaysian politics smells like faeces, and Malaysia functions like a toilet. This is a strong, possibly offensive criticism of Malaysian politicians, who to him are insensible and injudicious.

(6)



Finally, the X users used more curse words in Malay (45) than English (5). The top curse word in Malay is *bodo* or *bodoh* (stupid), used 23 times, followed by *mampus* (perish, 8), *bangsat* (bastard, 6), and *bangang* (stupid, 4), and *sampah* (rubbish, 2). The other curse words were used only once: *hanat* (damn annoying), *mangkuk* (bowl). In Excerpt 7, the X user is not sparing in his/her words in referring to the Malaysian government as the stupid government which punishes individuals for doing the right thing, and that includes whistleblowing to expose underhanded deals. The English curse words was topped by “damn” (3). “Fool” and “stupid” which carried the same meaning of stupidity as *bodo* and *bangang* was used only once each. The X users criticised politicians for being stupid and having a low level of thinking. The X users used the curse word *bangsat* (bad) on politicians who do not have the credibility to lead. The bigger range of curse words in Malay showed that the X users were more used to the Malay culture than the English culture.



Function of taboo words used in political discourse on X

Table 4 shows the functions of taboo words in 126 X posts written by Malaysians. The analysis based on Liedlich (1973) shows that the same taboo word can have different functions depending on the context of use. Therefore, the posts were read many times to determine the purpose of the use.

Table 4. Function of Taboo Words

Function	Frequency	Definition	English Example	Malay Example
Discredit	108 (35.5%)	People express their dissatisfaction or dislikes about numerous things that they perceive do not meet the public standards by using taboo words to attack the mental construction of their targets.	Stupid, Ass, Shit, Damn, Fuck up, Pile of crap, Dick, Dick head, Smells like shit, Fuck, Mob of scum, Stupid cow, Stupid gov, Dumb, Asshole, Suck, Bullshit	<i>Gila, Babi, Sial, Bangsat, Bodo(h), Sampah, Meleis, Macai, Cilaka, Mampus, Kencing, Jahanam, Politikus, Anjing, Tolol, Bodopiang, Iblis, Mangkuk, Najis, Pantek, Bahlul, Lancau, Lebai, Beruk, Najisku, Ularmak, Bingai, Level lembu, Taik</i>
Catharsis	46 (22.8%)	People may use harsh language as a type of therapy for the speaker's psychology, particularly when they are upset or frustrated.	Ass, Fuck, Fool, Thieves, Stupid, Damn, Fucked up, Frog	<i>Butoh, Babi, Bodo(h), Gila, Mampus, Bangang, Anjing, Sial, Hanat, Bengap, Palancau, Jubo, Betina, Taik, Maleh, Pergi mampus, Jahanam</i>
Strong interpersonal identification	39 (19.3%)	Used by people to create a strong interpersonal identification to express what kind of persons they are. People also use taboo words to determine a person's genuine character or to characterise someone's characteristics from their perspective.	Stupid, Bullshit	<i>Bodo(h), Gila, Perompak, Penyamun, Penyangak, Katak, Kencing, Cilaka, Bangang, Bengap, Anjing, Palatao, Kambing hitam</i>
Attention getting	7 (3.5%)	People use taboo words in their conversations when they want to get attention from the public.	Shit hole	<i>Kantoi, Bodo(h), Jahanam,</i>
Provoking of violent confrontation	2 (0.99%)	When someone expresses taboo words, he or she may want to provoke a certain reaction from others, such as violation or madness.		<i>Lembab, Jahanam</i>
Total	202 (100%)			

The main reason for using taboo words in political discourse on X is to discredit individuals, occurring 108 times or 35.5%. The X users attacked certain politicians and discredited others for stealing money from the nation's coffers using obscenities, scatology, and insults and slurs.

In close to a quarter of the X posts analyzed (22.8%), taboo language was used for catharsis. The X users likened politicians to thieves, frogs, dogs and pigs, and in the process of doing this, they vented their anger. X users used *bodo(h)* in their post because they have characterised the politicians for having low level of thinking. Their labelling extends also to the public who supports certain parties. Using harsh language serves as a type of therapy for the speaker's psychology.

Next, taboo language was used for strong interpersonal identification, mostly to label the politicians with undesirable characteristics. The *butoh* (penis) may be uttered accidentally as during typing, the users were too emotional and they could not control their frustration. The word *pergi mampus* is used to curse someone to die, and this is very strong language considering the spiritual dimension. One of the X users used *pergi mampus* to refer to one of political parties in Malaysia.

Some uses of taboo language (3.5%) appear to be for getting attention. In Excerpt 8, the X user targeted Saravanan, a politician, who he/she said should be taught till he is out of the Malaysian political scene.



(8)

Finally, taboo language in political discussions is hardly used to provoke violent confrontations. Most probably the usage of *lembab* in an X post is to provoke an instant action by related party. Meanwhile, the word *jahanam* was used to indicate that the country will be ruined by those involved with corruption.

Discussion

The study on the use of taboo language in political discourse on X shows that the most common category of taboo words used is insult and slur and the most common function is to discredit individuals. Two key findings are discussed.

First, the present study showed that insult and slur, curse words and epithets are far more frequently used than obscenity, vulgarity and slang in political discourse. The results contradict a past study (Hirmawan & Haryanto, 2021) who showed that obscenity topped the list of taboo words. The difference is due to the genre as their study was on the dialogues in the film, "A Few Less Men". The film is a 2017 Australian adventure comedy about men going to the Blue Mountains to attend a wedding, but a friend falls off the cliff but survives. Comedies use crude

humour, swearing and insults whereas political discourse on X is evaluative. X users in Malaysia are usually affluent and professionals (Ngu, 2025). Since they are educated, it is considered extreme already for them to label people as stupid. The most used taboo word is *bodo(h)* with a frequency of 23. This word is a curse word, and *bodo(h)* accounts for almost half of the total number of curse words (50). However, specific comparisons of taboo words could not be made as Hirmawan and Haryanto (2021) did not list specific taboo words in their results but only provided the category name in the results.

Endearment, profanity and blasphemy were absent in the online political discourse studied. Endearment is more in the realm of movies, as Hirmawan and Haryanto (2021) found that it is the top category of taboo language. Cavazza and Guidetti's (2014) study which was on politician's use of taboo language found that swear words can be seen positively or negatively, depending on the electorate. However, their study was experimental and the researchers intentionally incorporated swear words into the script to study the effect on people. The present study, in contrast, collected naturally occurring data from X in order to study authentic political discourse. In the Malaysian context at least, swear words avoided religious connotations although there were vulgarities, particularly "ass", "bullshit" and *kencing*. The present findings confirm Imraq et al.'s (2025) findings that Malaysians who comment about political matters in X use minimal racial slurs to be respectful of other ethnic groups. Taboo language is used for strong interpersonal identification but not explicitly dealing with religious characteristics. The nearest it got was references to pigs and dogs, which alludes to Islam but these were categorized as insult and slur, or as epithets, following Jay (1992). The X users insulted certain politicians and their supporters using animal imagery to attribute the animal qualities to the target of their insult such as stupid like cows. Epithets are words that relate to something prohibited in connection with race, gender, ethnicity (Jay, 1992) such as Muslims are prohibited from eating pork. As far as the present study is concerned, where Malaysians X users are concerned, endearment, profanity and blasphemy are not natural to online political discourse; but insult and slur, cursewords and epithets are.

Second, the most common function of taboo language is to discredit people, and *gila* topped the list of words for discrediting people. *Gila* or crazy works effectively to discredit people as it portrays the target individual as out of his/her mind. In Rahmah et al.'s (2025) study conducted on Indonesian politicians showed that they use taboo language to express criticism and anger, sometimes at opponents. The present study extends this finding by showing that audiences – not just politicians – use taboo language to attack others. This shows that taboo language is a shortcut for negative evaluation, and turns political disagreements on issues into personal inadequacies.

In the process of using Liedlich's (1973) model of functions of taboo language, we found that two functions could not be effectively used for text analysis, that is, catharsis (using harsh language as therapy) and attention getting. These two functions require knowledge of the writer's intention which can only be studied using interviews for introspection. In the present study, we were also not able to identify whether taboo language was used to provoke violent confrontations because the words were studied as single posts. Studying action and reaction is only possible if conversation threads are analyzed and it would reveal whether certain taboo words provoke strong reactions.

D. CONCLUSION

The study shows that taboo language is used in online political discourse in a social media platform, X. The type of taboo words most commonly used is insult and slur and the top word is *gila*. The most common function for using taboo language is to discredit individuals. The study also showed that vulgarity and scatology expressions were mostly in English while insult and slur, curse words, epithets, obscenity, and slang were mostly in Malay.

The findings on the wide usage of taboo language on social media will be relevant to the policy-makers in Malaysia. The Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission can control offensive taboo language that may disrupt national security. For instance, the TikTok application has a word filter system that takes down and deletes any videos that contain any words that are prohibited on the platform (Silberling, 2021). The findings are also relevant to the Ministry of Education as moral education textbooks can include a module on avoiding taboo language and increasing euphemism for less abrasive conversations on sensitive issues.

The present study has produced new findings on the dominant use of taboo language for discrediting others in online political discourse. However, there is a limitation in that functions of taboo language usage are inferred from the posts. Because of this, catharsis, attention getting and provoking violent reactions cannot be effectively deduced. Future studies should incorporate interviews to understand the social media users' intentions and perspectives when talking about politics and other issues on social media, particularly their considerations, if any, in language choices. There is also a need to understand how taboo language use might differ across social media platforms due to the different demographic profiles of users. In Malaysia, Facebook appeals to users more than 35 years old, TikTok users are usually aged 25-40, Instagram attracts online shoppers, and X users are mostly professionals (Hashmeta, n.d.). The use and the function of taboo keep changing, and new types and functions of taboo words may emerge in the future. All these studies will lead to a better understanding of how taboo language functions as a resource for political positioning in digital communication.

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