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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Pragmatic Functions of Swearing Among Female Najdi Arabic-Speaking EFL Students**

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**| ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the use and possible pragmatic functions of swear words among 55 Saudi female undergraduate students from the Department of English Language and Literature at Qassim University. The data were collected using a questionnaire addressing the frequency of swearing, contexts of use, interlocutors' influence, language choice, and the possible pragmatic functions of swearing. The participants reported mainly using swear words in informal, emotionally charged situations, such as when expressing anger, frustration, or joking with friends, while they avoid swearing in formal and religious contexts. Najdi Arabic, the participants' first language, is the dominant language of swearing due to its greater emotional power. Some participants also reported frequently swearing in English, possibly reflecting media exposure and social expressiveness. While some participants reported consistently using swear words regardless of the interlocutor's gender, others moderated their use in accordance with cultural politeness norms. The participants generally considered men's swearing as harsher, more frequent, and more socially tolerated than women's, which differs from previous research. The findings demonstrate that swearing is a culturally mediated practice through which Saudi female EFL students negotiate their identity, emotions, and social norms. The study concludes with a recommendation to conduct future studies on swearing, including participants of different ages and from different regions in Saudi Arabia, to compare their use of swear words.

**| KEYWORDS**

EFL students, female, Najdi Arabic, pragmatic functions, swearing

**| ARTICLE INFORMATION**

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## **1. Introduction**

Swearing has become a common social feature of everyday interactions and social media communication, with speakers using taboo words to express emotional states (Jay, 1992, 2000). Swear words are used to convey emotion rather than literal meaning (Jay & Danks, 1977). As a socially situated speech act, swearing could be interpreted as rewarding, punitive, or neutral, depending on the sociocultural context within which it occurs (Fägersten, 2012). Swear words have several pragmatic functions, including abusive, expletive, social, and stylistic uses (Allan & Burrige, 2009). These pragmatic functions are most associated with informal contexts (Fägersten, 2012; Stapleton, 2003). Previous research has addressed speakers' motivations for swearing (Staley, 1978) and variation across gender and age groups (Oliver & Rubin, 1975).

The relationship between gender and swearing has been subject to debate. As a result of changes in women's social roles, traditional views of women's language use have increasingly been challenged (Coates, 2015; Darvishi, 2023; Lakoff, 1973). Most of the previous research has focused on Western, English-speaking societies. Therefore, there is a significant research gap on women's swearing practices in the Arabic-speaking world, which has distinct sociocultural and linguistic norms. Although a limited number of studies (e.g., Bayoumi, 2017) have addressed the issue, further investigation is needed.

The present study addresses this research gap by investigating the swearing practices of female undergraduate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in Saudi Arabia, an under-researched demographic. It seeks to contribute to the research literature by exploring swearing among EFL learners in a non-Western context and examining how Arabic-speaking students switch between their native language and English when conveying emotion. The study will focus on the frequency and pragmatic functions of swearing and compare the findings with those of previous studies. The findings will highlight the sociolinguistic patterns of swearing among Saudi female EFL students and reveal the relationship between language, gender, and culture. In addition, the analysis will draw on sociolinguistic and pragmatic theories to understand swearing as a social practice.

Based on the aims of the study, it will address the following research questions:

1. How often do Saudi female EFL students use swear words?
2. In which contexts do Saudi female EFL students tend to use swear words?
3. Does the gender of the interlocutor affect Saudi female EFL students' use of swear words?
4. To what extent do Saudi female EFL students vary their use of swear words depending on the language they are speaking and which factors affect that?
5. What are the social and pragmatic functions behind Saudi female EFL students' use of swear words?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Women and Swearing**

Historically, rigid gendered norms shaped by cultural ideologies of femininity have influenced patterns of swearing and taboo language. Coates (2015) observed that expectations for women to speak in a polite, refined manner have shaped beliefs regarding appropriate female language. Rather than reflecting women's language use in practice, these expectations reflect prescriptive norms about how women ought to speak.

Coates (2015) also linked gendered views of swearing to the medieval courtly tradition, in which ideals of "gentility" were contrasted with "vulgarity." Such a distinction is also evident in early modern literature. For instance, in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, the character Hotspur ridicules Lady Percy for her mild oaths, comparing them with the stronger swearing used by aristocratic men. Coates (2015) argued that this illustrates how swearing is shaped not only by gender but by social class. She further suggested that this contributed to the development of gendered linguistic taboos that continued to shape linguistic attitudes well into the twentieth century. Similarly, Robin Lakoff, in *Language and Woman's Place* (1975), argued that in the socialization process, women are taught to avoid strong expletives, tending instead to use euphemisms and milder expressions such as "Oh dear." She suggested that women could be characterized as experts in the use of euphemisms. This perspective reflects broader stereotypes of women's speech as indirect, not very explicit, and emotionally restrained. Coates (2015) reexamined Lakoff's framework to show how it is consistent with cultural prescriptions of femininity.

Similarly, in 1922, Otto Jespersen argued that women's presumed avoidance of "coarse expressions" influenced the development of language. Coates (2015) critically revisited these claims, showing that they reflect embedded cultural ideals of womanhood rather than objective accounts of women's language use.

Recent studies of digital communication platforms, such as WhatsApp, have shown that women express emotions such as anger, solidarity, and emphasis through diverse swear words in digital and online interactions (Kurniawanti & Damanhuri, 2022).

Diachronic linguistic studies have challenged Lakoff's claim that women are more likely to use euphemisms. For instance, Kapron-King and Xu (2021) analyzed English corpora and found negligible gender differences in euphemism use over time. Thus, the empirical evidence does not support the assertion that women are inherently more inclined to use euphemistic language.

Evidence from non-English-speaking contexts also indicates changing linguistic patterns in the gendered use of swear words. Sociolinguistic studies on Iranian and Iraqi Arabic speakers have identified generational shifts in swearing practices. Khaleqi and Imani (2023) found that although traditional norms continue to have an influence, younger Persian-speaking women increasingly use taboo words more freely in informal settings. These findings suggest that traditional gender norms are evolving.

In summary, recent empirical research has challenged earlier claims that women swear less frequently than men. Women's use or avoidance of swear words should not be viewed as biologically determined or an inherent feature of women's language. Rather, it reflects social norms, situational contexts, and power structures. Recent research has demonstrated how women's speech both navigates and reshapes cultural expectations surrounding femininity.

## **2.2 Pragmatic Functions of Swearing**

Swearing can be understood as a form of verbal aggression that performs various pragmatic functions, including the regulation of taboo subjects (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). Speakers frequently use euphemisms to discuss sexuality in mixed social contexts because explicit sexual slang is generally considered offensive (see Allan & Burridge, 2007). In this way, swearing functions as a marker of social boundaries and contributes to the maintenance of conversational comfort.

Contextual variables also influence the pragmatic force of swearing. Jay and Janschewitz (2008) observed that swearing is more acceptable in informal or relaxed environments, such as student dormitories, but it is less acceptable in more formal settings such as offices or classrooms. Therefore, swearing can signal solidarity and informality, whereas in formal contexts it is often regarded as inappropriate.

Moreover, swearing can be used to emphasize a point, attract attention, convey authority, express humor, establish group membership, and foster friendships (Baruch et al., 2017). This type of swearing is classified as social (Kapoor, 2016).

Social status and power may also shape patterns of swearing. Jay and Janschewitz (2008) found that occupational prestige shapes perceptions of swearing. People in higher-status occupations (e.g., professors, doctors) are generally expected to swear less than those in lower-status roles. This suggests that swearing can reflect social hierarchies and expectations associated with different social roles.

Interpersonal relationships also influence swearing. Jay and Janschewitz (2008) suggested that offensive language used among close friends is perceived as more credible and hurtful than the same expressions used by opponents (Jay, 1981; Martin et al., 1996). In terms of gender, men generally swear more frequently and offensively than women; both men and women are less likely to swear in mixed company than in same-sex interactions (Jay, 1992; Jay & Janschewitz, 2006). Swear words also serve rhetorical purposes, such as adding emphasis or conveying intensity, particularly in storytelling. Coates (2015) and Gomm (1981) noted that narratives with taboo language are viewed as more emotionally vivid and engaging. Overall, both men and women adapt their use of swear words to the context, modifying their language to align with prevailing social norms and expectations (Coates, 2015; Gomm, 1981).

Eckert's (2008) concept of indexicality explains how linguistic features, including swear words, come to carry social meanings. For instance, the perception that men's swearing is "harsher" is not arbitrary; rather, it indexes social categories (such as masculinity or modernity) within the local context.

In conclusion, swearing patterns are shaped by both cultural and linguistic variation. Jay and Janschewitz (2008) observed that perceptions of what is considered offensive vary across communities. Similarly, research on multilingualism has shown that taboo language carries greater emotional weight in a speaker's first language compared to languages learned later (Dewaele, 2004).

## **2.3 Politeness Theory**

In examining swearing as a linguistic practice, the study will shed light on politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), which argues that speakers use linguistic strategies to maintain their own "face" (self-image) and that of their interlocutors. Swearing can be regarded as a Face-Threatening Act (FTA) because it has the potential to damage the positive or negative face of either the speaker or listener. In the present study, participants' tendency to moderate their language when interacting with certain individuals (e.g., women or older people) or in particular contexts can be interpreted as a face-saving strategy. This linguistic practice aimed to reduce the threat of an FTA, avoid offense, and maintain social harmony.

## **2.4 Code-Switching and Swearing**

Since this study examines how female EFL students switch between two languages in using swear words, code-switching should also be considered. Building on research into the emotional force of taboo words among multilingual individuals (Dewaele, 2004, 2008), this study adopts the Code-Switching as a Pragmatic Shield framework. It also incorporates the concept of the Second Language as an Exemptor from Sociocultural Constraints (ERLC) (Gawinkowska et al., 2013). Multilingual speakers may strategically use their L2 for taboo expressions, using it as a buffer to express intense emotions or violate taboos without incurring the full emotional or cultural cost of using the L1. Thus, it is a sophisticated pragmatic tool for navigating cultural restrictions.

## **2.5 Previous Studies**

Oliver and Rubin (1975) reported that women's use of swear words varied according to marital status. In contrast, Bailey and Timm (1976) found that men used strong expletives far more frequently than women. Similarly, Selnow (1985), in a study of sex differences in perceptions toward and uses of profanity, reported that women tend to consider profanity as less socially acceptable and therefore use swear words less frequently.

However, De Klerk (1992) questioned the assumption that women are inherently more conservative in their language use, revealing that younger and socially liberal women frequently used swear words within peer-group or same-sex interactions in the same way that men do.

Recent studies have questioned traditional stereotypes of swearing and gender. For instance, Stapleton (2003) and Fägersten (2012) investigated swearing during shared social practices and found that both men and women frequently used strong language, particularly in informal, peer-based communities. Similarly, Bayard and Krishnayya (2001) reported that women in several countries used expletives more often than men during structured dialogue. Moreover, corpus-based studies, such as Newman et al. (2008), have shown that although men swear more, the gender gap is narrowing.

Based on Lakoff (1973), Coates (2015) noted that although women may avoid swearing in public or formal contexts, their language choices are often shaped more by the situational context than by gender norms. In addition, Stapleton (2003) found that women used swear words in all-female groups to foster solidarity and reinforce group identity.

Recent research has examined intercultural and digital contexts. For example, Darvishi (2023) found that among Persian users of Instagram, women were more likely to use euphemisms or censor their profane language; in contrast, men used stronger, sexually explicit language more openly. However, women were also observed to employ body-shaming language, particularly when talking about female celebrities. Mofarrej and Al-Haq (2015) examined euphemisms related to death in Jordanian society, focusing on three social variables, including gender. They found that men and women only differed in their use of expressions when attempting to soften the painful impact of someone's death. In another study, Bayoumi (2017) analyzed the swearing practices of upper-class Egyptian female university students and found that although women swore less frequently than men, the degree of offensiveness in their language was similar. Rather than rigid gender norms influencing their use of swear words, situational factors played more of a role, such as intimacy, humor, or anger.

In a study investigating changing attitudes among Saudi women toward euphemistic and taboo language, Alqahtani et al. (2022) examined how cultural, social, and generational changes shape their linguistic choices. The study included 253 Saudi women divided by age into two groups: younger women (aged 18 to 29) and older women (aged 30 to 59). Most participants were from the cities of Abha and Khamis Mushayt in the southern region of Saudi Arabia. A closed-ended, multiple-choice questionnaire was used to assess participants' use of, and attitudes toward, taboo language in everyday situations. The findings showed that although discussions of sensitive issues continue to be dominated by euphemistic language, younger women are increasingly willing to use taboo language; this indicates a gradual generational shift in sociolinguistic behavior. Factors such as exposure to global media, greater internet use, and evolving societal norms were identified as contributing to this sociolinguistic change. However, women from both age groups generally considered explicit or taboo language to be culturally inappropriate, particularly in family or formal contexts. Alqahtani et al. (2022) suggested that while traditional norms still strongly shape language practices in Saudi Arabia, younger generations are increasingly negotiating these norms in new ways; this reflects a tension between established cultural values and modern influences.

In summary, these studies demonstrate that contrary to traditional gender expectations, women's use of swear words is variable, complex, and dependent on the context. Factors such as cultural background, social objectives, and digital environments shape how and why women swear. These findings highlight the need to move beyond static models of "women's language" toward more dynamic, context-sensitive approaches.

## **3. Method**

### **3.1 Participants**

The data were obtained from 55 Saudi female undergraduate students enrolled in the Department of English Language and Literature at the College of Languages and Humanities, Qassim University. Participants were randomly selected and were all aged 18 or older. Undergraduate students were chosen as the sample for this study because swearing is particularly salient within this age group in everyday interactions and serves diverse pragmatic functions. The female EFL students represent a community of practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991), defined as a group of people who share a common concern or passion and develop expertise through regular interaction. This framework is used to examine the participants' linguistic behavior, treating the students' use of swear words as a socially negotiated linguistic practice within their local context (Stapleton, 2003). It allows for the analysis of how group membership, shared experience, and local norms—rather than only broad societal gender roles—shape the social acceptance and use of taboo language.

### **3.2 Data Collection**

The data were collected using a digital questionnaire adapted from Bayoumi (2017). Additional items were included to ensure that the questionnaire addressed the study's research questions. The first section comprised two questions and was

designed to collect demographic information. The second section included 10 questions and explored the participants' frequency of swearing and the contexts in which it occurs. The third section consisted of five questions investigating the pragmatic functions of the participants' use of swear words. Multiple-choice, yes/no, and open-ended questions were included, allowing participants to justify their answers if needed.

The questionnaire was chosen as the research instrument for several reasons. First, because the researcher was not present during administration, participants may have felt more comfortable expressing their views (Meadows, 2003). Additionally, the questionnaire facilitated data collection from as many participants as possible (Meadows, 2003). Furthermore, questionnaires offer other advantages, such as saving the researcher's time and effort and enabling faster, more direct data processing (Dörnyei, 2003).

A pilot study was conducted to assess the reliability and validity of the designed questionnaire, involving five students. During follow-up interviews, the students were asked to evaluate the clarity of the questions, the suitability of the response options, and the overall structure of the questionnaire. The pilot study results confirmed that the questionnaire was clear and appropriate, and no revisions were needed before it was administered to the full sample.

### 3.3 Procedures

After explaining the main purpose of the study, the questionnaire was administered to the participants. Data collection took three weeks to obtain responses from the number of participants needed for the study.

Quantitative descriptive statistics were used for data analysis. For responses to closed-ended items, Microsoft Excel was used to produce frequency distributions, percentages, and comparative tables. These analyses reveal the most frequent swearing practices, the contexts in which they occur, and their common pragmatic functions.

Participants' responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed to reveal their justifications for using swear words. This qualitative analysis complements the quantitative results, providing a deeper understanding of the underlying motivations and contextual factors that shape the participants' language practices.

## 4. Results

This section provides a detailed analysis of the data, with each subsection corresponding to a specific research question.

### 4.1 Frequency of Swearing Among Saudi Female EFL Students

The first research question focuses on participants' frequency of swearing. The results indicate that swearing is a recognizable part of students' everyday language, though its reported frequency differed among the participants. As shown in Figure 1, the largest group (42%) reported swearing rarely, while 29% indicated that they swear occasionally. A smaller proportion (13%) stated that they usually swear, and 7% reported always swearing. Only 9% of participants reported that they avoid swearing. These findings suggest that although the extent of swearing differs among the participants, complete avoidance is uncommon.

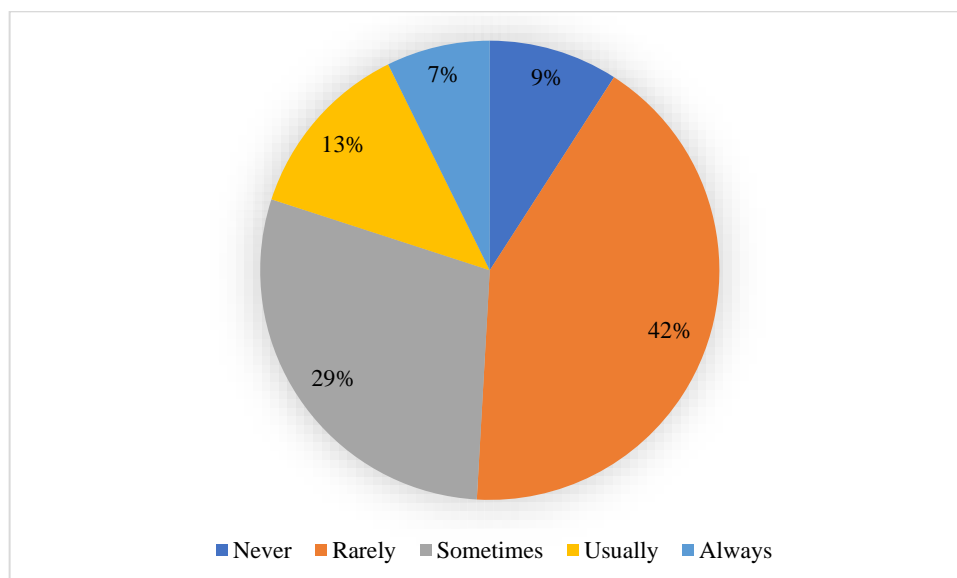


Figure 1. How often do you use swear words or expressions in daily life?

### 4.2 Contexts and Situations for Swearing

The second research question addresses the context in which swearing is used. Table 1 presents the findings.

Table 1. In which situations do you use swear words?

	Situation	Percentage
1	When angry or frustrated	74.5%
2	In humorous or playful conversations	34.5%
3	To emphasize a point or reaction	10.9%
4	With close friends	43.6%
5	On social media or messaging apps	23.6%
6	In academic or professional contexts	1.8%
7	I do not use swear words	14.5%
8	Other (please specify):	
	When gaming or gossiping	1.8%
	While gaming	1.8%

Table 1 shows that, as reported by 74.5% of participants, the most frequent context for swearing is to express anger or frustration. Swearing in interactions with close friends is also frequent (43.6%), followed by its use in humorous conversations (34.5%).

Swearing on social media or messaging applications was reported by 23.6% of participants, which could reflect less restrained language use encouraged by anonymity. Swearing to emphasize a point is less frequent (10.9%), while it is rare in academic or professional contexts (1.8%), reflecting participants’ awareness of appropriate language norms. A few participants mentioned gaming as a situation in which they swear.

Figure 2 presents the participants’ language preferences when swearing. Most participants (70.9%) reported using their first language, Najdi Arabic, while 60% also indicated swearing in English, their foreign language. A smaller proportion (21.8%) reported swearing in Modern Standard Arabic, and only a few reported using other languages to swear, such as Korean (1.8%) or Turkish (1.8%). These findings indicate that although participants reported swearing in English and other languages, they used Najdi Arabic most frequently for this purpose, which demonstrates its strong cultural and emotional significance.

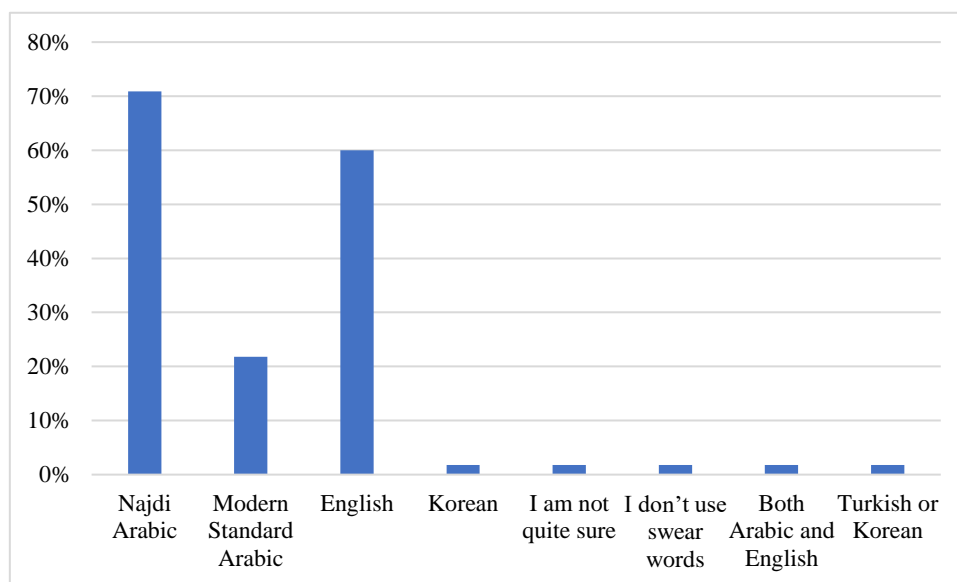


Figure 2. In which language(s) do you typically swear?

### 4.3 Influence of Interlocutor Gender

#### 4.3.1 The Effect of Interlocutor Gender on Swearing Practices

The third research question examines whether the participants’ use of swear words is affected by the interlocutor. Figure 3 shows that the majority of participants (67.3%) reported that their swearing habits do not change based on the gender of the interlocutor. However, 18.2% acknowledged that the gender does influence their use of swear words, and 14.5% stated that it does affect their swearing occasionally.

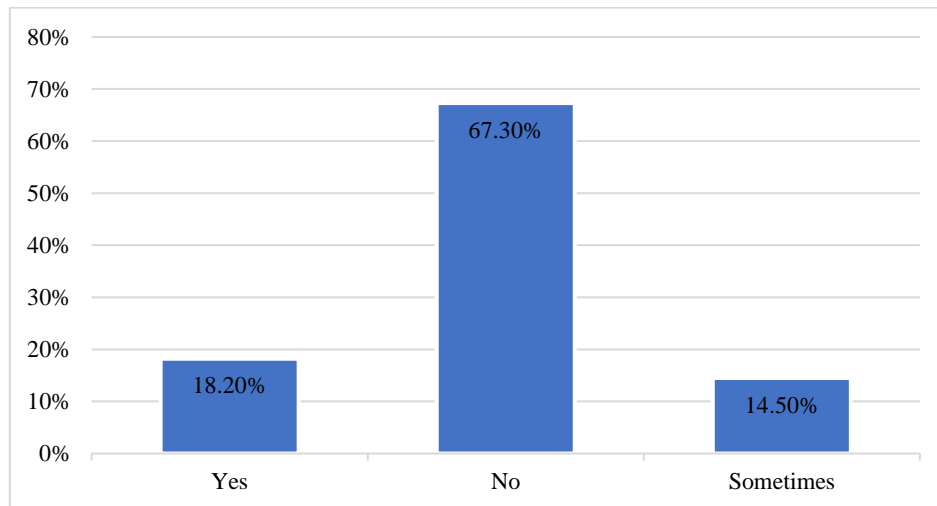


Figure 3. Does the gender of the interlocutor affect your use of swear words?

The participants gave various reasons regarding whether the interlocutor's gender influenced their swearing, including social norms and cultural expectations. Many participants indicated that they deliberately avoid using strong or offensive language around women as a sign of respect, while they feel freer to employ harsher or more casual language with men. Several also noted that women are generally perceived as more sensitive to swearing than men.

Some participants emphasized that the context, group dynamics, and personal comfort influence their use of language. Several reported using swear words more openly with close friends or siblings while avoiding them in the presence of strangers, older people, or children. Others reported adjusting their word choice depending on the level of formality, with milder or softened language used in more respectful settings. A small number of participants rejected gender as a factor, insisting that they "insult everyone equally."

Overall, gender interacts with the cultural values of politeness, respect, and appropriateness, prompting many students to strategically adjust their swearing behavior. Rather than reflecting static gender roles, the findings support understanding gendered language as a locally negotiated practice within the students' CoP.

#### 4.3.2 Perceptions of Gender Differences in Swearing

As illustrated in Figure 4, the majority of participants (78.2%) indicated that men and women swear differently, only 3.6% of the participants responded they do not, and 18.2% responded that they were not sure. Thus, these results suggest that most participants view swearing as a gendered practice, with a handful of participants rejecting this idea and a small proportion expressing uncertainty.

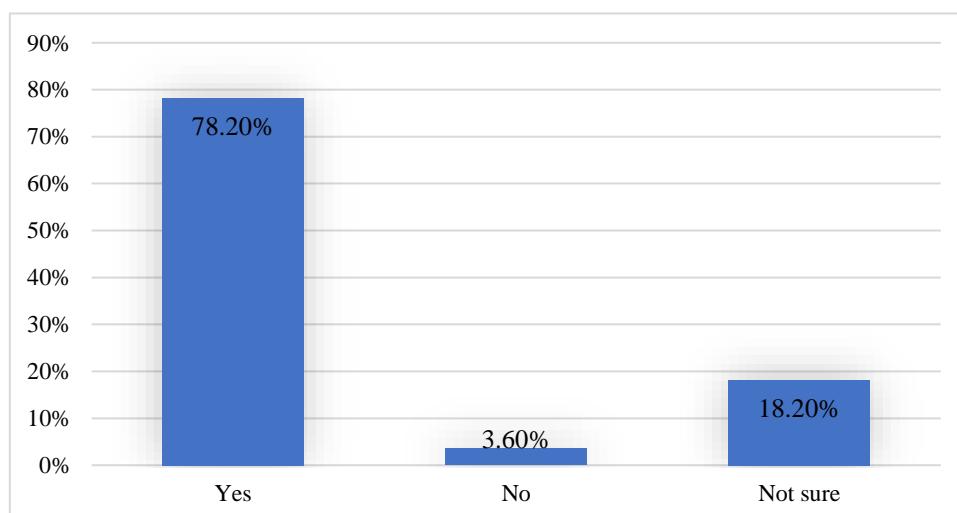


Figure 4. Do you think men and women swear differently?

Many participants who responded "Yes" to the question of whether men and women swear differently noted that men swear more frequently and aggressively, often across a variety of settings. One participant said: "Men often speak harshly and use hurtful words when swearing, unlike women who tend to use softer language." Another added: "Men swear in a

very disgusting and dirty way ... while women tend to say short swear words and not that directly." Thus, men's swearing is perceived as more intense, harsher, and less restricted by the context. This aligns with the concept of indexicality (Eckert, 2008), in which swearing is associated with "masculinity" and "aggression".

As one participant observed, "Men usually swear more and use aggressive language, mostly because society has historically been more accepting of men expressing anger." Another participant provided justification for her answer by stating that women rarely use swear words that are as vulgar as those used by men. Such responses reflect the influence of cultural and social norms on the participants' views: women are viewed as more polite, while men are socially permitted to use stronger language.

The participants also pointed to differences in the style and purpose of swearing. Men's swearing was frequently associated with dominance, humor, or peer bonding, whereas women's swearing was portrayed as more cautious and emotionally expressive.

In summary, the participants generally perceived men's swearing as more frequent, more socially tolerated, and harsher in tone, while women's swearing was viewed as more polite, milder, less frequent, and more restricted by cultural expectations.

#### **4.4 Language Choice and Variation in Swearing**

The fourth research question investigates whether participants adjust their use of swear words across different languages, as well as the factors that contribute to this variation. As shown in Figure 5, the findings reveal a split among participants: 36.4% reported using different swear words in Arabic and English, a similar proportion reported not doing so, and 27.3% reported sometimes switching between Arabic and English swear words. This demonstrates that the participants' swearing behavior is diverse rather than homogeneous.

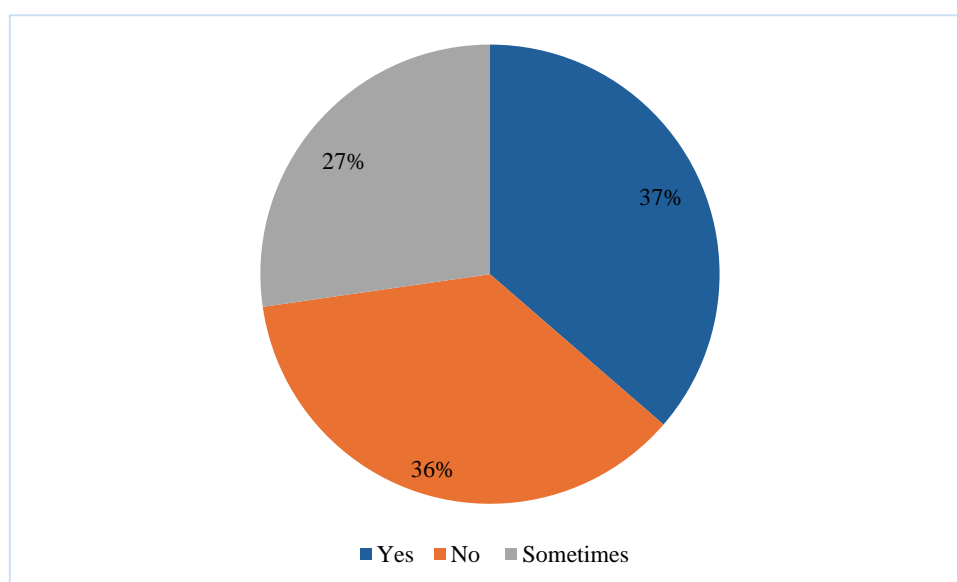


Figure 5. Do you use different swear words depending on the language you are speaking?

Qualitative responses collected from the open-ended questionnaire items asking the participants about the reasons behind their choices help explain these differences. Many participants described Arabic swear words as "too harsh," leading them to favor English swear words, which they perceived as softer and less offensive. One participant noted that "sometimes saying swear words in Arabic feels so bad so I change to English to make it less harsh." This suggests that swearing in the L1 has a stronger emotional impact, whereas using English (L2) creates emotional distance.

Several participants reported that they avoid swearing in Arabic out of concern about offending older members of their community. They reported that using English expressions would be less likely to be noticed or considered offensive, allowing them to navigate cultural constraints. One participant explained: "Some bad words, I prefer to say them in English when I speak Arabic, because I don't want anyone who is older or Arab to understand what I am saying."

The participants' responses also highlighted differences in swearing norms across different languages. They often referred to Arabic swear words as metaphorical, frequently drawing on animal imagery or culturally specific insults, whereas they perceived English swear words as having a distinct stylistic character. Several participants noted that a swear word that is highly offensive in Arabic may be relatively mild in English, and vice versa.

Some participants reported that swearing in English is a humorous act. For them, English offers a creative means of expressing frustration or fostering camaraderie without the cultural or emotional intensity associated with Arabic swear

words. This indicates that swearing in a foreign language can serve not only pragmatic and affective purposes but also identity-related and social functions.

In summary, the findings suggest that the participants' swearing behavior varies depending on the language used, though this variation is not consistent across individuals. Swearing is not simply a transfer of vocabulary between languages but is a pragmatic and culturally situated practice that evolves with foreign language learning. Participants also reported using swear words referring to animal likeness, mental states (such as stupidity) and lack of hygiene and, in some cases, expressions related to praying to Allah to end the life of their listener.

#### 4.5 Pragmatic Functions of Swearing

The final research question addresses the pragmatic functions of swearing among participants. Table 2 shows that the most frequently reported pragmatic function was expressing anger or frustration (83.6%); this shows the primary role of swearing in releasing strongly negative emotions. Other common functions included expressing surprise or shock (43.6%) and alleviating emotional tension or stress (32.7%), indicating the role of swearing as a release mechanism in emotionally charged situations. Participants also identified other possible functions such as humor or entertaining others (27.3%), emphasizing strong feelings and opinions (27.3%), and expressing sarcasm (25.5%). Less frequently reported but still notable functions included confronting or challenging someone (16.4%) and strengthening group connection or bonding (12.7%). However, 18.2% of participants reported that they do not swear, reflecting the ongoing influence of cultural and social norms.

Table 2. When you use swear words, what purposes do they serve?

	Purposes	Percentage
1	Expressing anger or frustration	83.6%
2	Creating humor or entertaining others	27.3%
3	Emphasizing a strong feeling or opinion	27.3%
4	Expressing surprise or shock	43.6%
5	Strengthening group connection or bonding	12.7%
6	Relieving emotional tension or stress	32.7%
7	Confronting or challenging someone	16.4%
8	As part of sarcasm or playful teasing	25.5%
9	I do not use swear words.	18.2%

Figure 6 shows participants' responses to whether swearing helps them express themselves more effectively in certain situations. The findings illustrate that 53% responded "No," 16% "Yes," and 31% "Sometimes." Participants who answered with "Yes" emphasized that swearing serves as a means of expressing intense emotions, including anger, frustration, stress, or pain. Examples given by the participants included swearing after failing an exam or when experiencing physical discomfort, such as after stubbing a toe. Others highlighted its role in humor or as a means to be taken more seriously in conversations. Several participants associated swearing with cultural or religious contexts, noting that strong language can convey seriousness when attempting to persuade others.

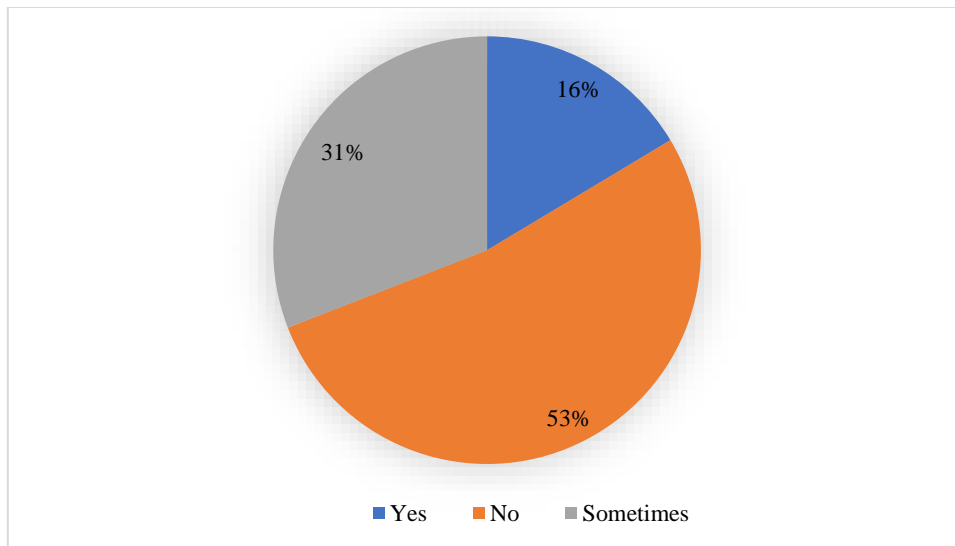


Figure 6. Do you feel that swearing helps you express yourself more effectively in certain situations?

When asked about whom they would swear in front of, most participants indicated that they primarily use swear words in intimate and informal settings. Only 16.4% of the participants reported swearing in front of family, while nearly none did so in front of strangers (1.8%) or colleagues (0%). A further 14.5% reported never swearing in front of anyone, indicating personal restraint or adherence to strong cultural and social norms. Overall, the findings suggest that swearing is largely confined to close peer relationships, where it has higher social acceptability and carries fewer negative consequences. In contrast, it is avoided in formal or public settings.

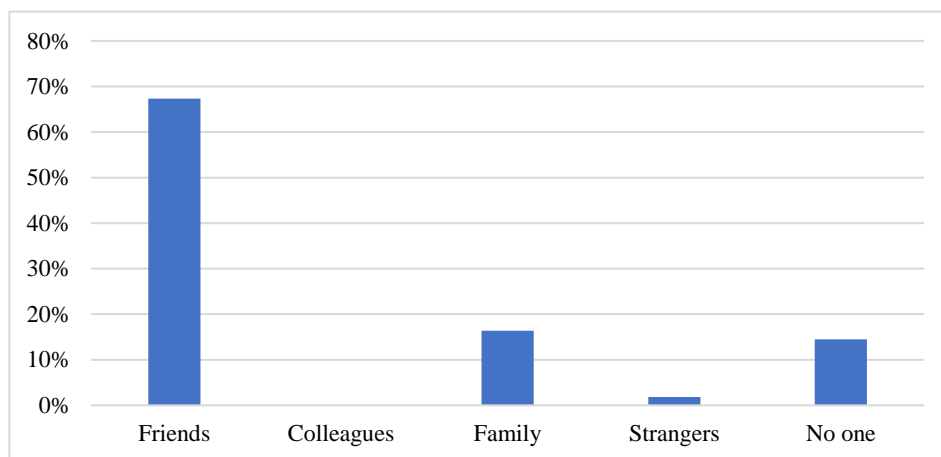


Figure 7. In front of whom are you most likely to use swear words?

Table 3 presents participants' responses concerning the contexts in which they avoid using swear words, revealing distinct patterns of social and contextual sensitivity. Participants reported most frequently avoiding swearing in interactions with instructors and teachers (94.5%) and in formal or religious settings (89.1%). This reflects strong adherence to social norms of politeness in contexts associated with authority and institutional power. Family interactions also led to substantial avoidance (76.4%), indicating the influence of close relational norms on language use. In contrast, the avoidance of swearing was lower with male peers (58.2%) and on social media platforms (43.6%), suggesting that peer and online environments may allow for or even encourage more casual and expressive language. Only 5.5% of participants reported not avoiding swearing in any context, indicating that most participants adapt their language to social expectations.

Table 3. In which settings do you avoid using swear words?

	In which settings do you avoid using swear words?	Percentage
1	Around family	76.4%
2	With teachers and instructors	94.5%
3	In formal or religious settings	89.1%

4	With male peers	58.2%
5	On social media	43.6%
6	I do not avoid swearing	5.5%

## 5. Discussion

The findings of the study provide a comprehensive overview of the swearing practices employed by Saudi female EFL undergraduate students. This section interprets the results in relation to the existing literature.

Swearing is a recognizable aspect of the participants' daily linguistic practices, as complete avoidance was not reported by most participants. This agrees with Bayoumi (2017), whose female participants used swear words, in some cases at higher levels than in the current study. Among the female EFL students in this study, a CoP seems to have collectively negotiated a norm in which the use of taboo language is an accepted practice, thereby challenging prescriptive gendered models of language use (Coates, 2015; Stapleton, 2003).

As indicated by contextual analysis, swearing is largely triggered by emotional states, especially anger or frustration. Participants commonly swear in informal settings, such as among peers or on social media, while they avoid swearing in academic or professional contexts. This pattern of language use reflects their awareness of appropriate language norms. These findings are consistent with Bayoumi (2017), whose participants avoided swearing on the university campus. It also aligns with Jay and Janschewitz (2008) and Khaleqi and Imani (2023), who found that swearing occurred more often in informal and emotional settings rather than in formal situations.

Although a minority of students reported that the interlocutor's gender influences their swearing behavior, most considered their swearing habits as consistent regardless of the interlocutor's gender. This may reflect the normalization of swearing in certain social contexts. However, the small number of participants who do consider the interlocutor's gender points to underlying sociocultural sensitivities in gendered communication. This practice is consistent with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, in which language moderation functions as a face-saving strategy to mitigate the risk of committing an FTA.

The findings also highlighted the role of the interactional context and the interlocutor's identity. Participants reported that they often adjust their swearing behavior based on the interlocutor and which language the interlocutor understands. For example, some reported using English swear words with bilingual friends or while playing online games, while reserving Arabic for family interactions or in local contexts. These practices demonstrate how participants use specific code-switching strategies, tailoring their swearing to suit both the audience and context.

The perception that men and women swear in different ways highlights the role of indexicality (Eckert, 2008), whereby swearing conveys social meanings linked with "masculinity" and "aggression." As a result, swearing by men is perceived as harsher but is also more socially tolerated. These findings align with those of Alqahtani et al. (2022) and reflect broader societal expectations regarding gendered language use in many societies. While the current study focuses on perceptions of swearing and Alqahtani et al. (2022) examined attitudes toward taboo language, both studies point to how Saudi women negotiate linguistic norms within a framework of enduring cultural values. However, the current findings contradict Jespersen (1922), who noted that fashionable women now swear as much as men, and Bayoumi (2017), whose female participants reported swearing like males do.

The participants' preference for using Najdi Arabic when swearing indicates its cultural and emotional weight. Dewaele (2004, 2008) reported similar findings, with swear words carrying greater emotional weight in a multilingual speaker's L1 than in a subsequently learned language. However, English use for swearing was reported at a significant level (60%), which can be explained by it having an expressive function in informal contexts, as well as the influence of English media. The participants perceived English swear words as "softer" or "less offensive," which indicates that swearing in a second language (L2) creates emotional distance. On the other hand, the participants considered swearing in their L1 as harsher. These findings support Dewaele's (2004) suggestion that swearing in a first language (L1) is viewed as more forceful and offensive than in a second language (L2). These findings are consistent with Bayoumi (2017), who reported that 61% of participants swore in both Arabic and English, yet 87% relied on Arabic for offensive swearing; this suggests that Arabic has greater emotional intensity than English.

When the participants were prompted to provide examples of swear words or expressions they use, nearly all of them mentioned terms referencing animal likeness, which supports Bayoumi's (2017) findings.

Furthermore, the results indicate that the L2, English, functions as a pragmatic tool for creating emotional distance and employing euphemisms. It serves as a pragmatic shield to express frustration without bearing the full cultural weight associated with swearing in the L1, which is a finding that is consistent with Gawinkowska et al. (2013).

Regarding the most common pragmatic functions intended by the participants when swearing, anger and frustration are the most common. Bayoumi (2017) similarly reported that expressions of anger and aggression accounted for the highest percentage of swear words, reflecting the role of swearing as a release mechanism in emotionally charged situations. Other possible functions were expressing surprise or shock and relieving emotional tensions; these findings also align with Bayoumi (2017). These types of swear words are categorized as social swearing (Kapoor, 2016).

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that participants' swearing is not random but constitutes a socially regulated practice, influenced by contextual appropriateness, pragmatic functions, and cultural norms.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study examined the swearing practices and pragmatic functions of 55 Saudi female EFL students, all of whom were native speakers of Najdi Arabic. A digital questionnaire was used to collect the data. The findings reveal that swearing is highly context dependent, occurring most often in informal, emotionally charged situations and within close peer relationships. While the participants occasionally swore in English, Najdi Arabic (their native language) remained the dominant language for swearing, reflecting its stronger emotional resonance.

This research contributes to the sociolinguistics literature, particularly language and gender and cross-cultural pragmatics. By focusing on a previously under-studied demographic, the study challenges and refines existing theories of women's language use. It shows that although some traditional gendered linguistic expectations persist, these norms can be renegotiated. The analysis conceptualized swearing as a practice negotiated within a CoP, drawing on politeness theory to explain strategic adjustments in language use. The findings on code-switching between a native language (L1) and a foreign language (L2) when swearing illustrate the emotional and pragmatic functions of bilingual swearing. Furthermore, the study employed indexicality to interpret the social meanings of gendered swearing and introduced the notion of the L2 as a "pragmatic shield" to explain the strategic use of English to create emotional distance. Swearing is not a means for expressing negative emotions but also a tool for constructing social identity, fostering in-group solidarity, and navigating complex sociocultural norms within a specific CoP.

This study has several limitations that point to directions for future research. Focusing solely on female undergraduate EFL students from the Najdi region limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader Saudi population. Thus, expanding the sample to include participants from other regions of Saudi Arabia in future studies would offer a more comprehensive understanding of how regional and dialectal variation influences swearing.

Expanding the scope of the study would enable a more comprehensive analysis of the sociocultural and linguistic variables that influence this complex communicative act throughout the Kingdom. Future research should adopt a comparative approach by examining the swearing practices of both male and female participants, thereby enhancing the significance and applicability of the findings.

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