

Types and Functions of Taboo Words in *The Babysitter: Killer Queen*

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Received 14 May 2025; Revised 19 November 2025; Accepted 25 November 2025

Abstract

This study examined the use of taboo words in *The Babysitter: Killer Queen* (2020), a horror-comedy film, focusing on the types and the functions of taboo words used by teenage characters. For types of taboo words, the researchers used the framework from Battistella (2005), and for the functions, the analysis was based on those presented by Wardhaugh (2006). The data revealed 92 occurrences of taboo words in the film, and the results showed that the most common type found is obscenity, followed by epithet, vulgarity, and profanity, respectively. The main functions of taboo language included showing contempt, drawing attention, being provocative, reacting with disbelief, and intensifying the meaning or feeling. These findings reflected the rebellious attitudes of the teenage characters who used strong language to express defiance and exaggerate emotions in extreme situations. However, there was no use of taboo language to mock authority, suggesting the characters focused more on surviving chaos than directly challenging authority.

Keywords: taboo, types of taboo words, functions of taboo words

Introduction

Taboo is a social or cultural prohibition or restriction on certain actions, behaviors, words, or topics that are considered inappropriate, offensive, or forbidden in a particular society or community. Taboo words often arise from deeply held beliefs or cultural norms, and violating them can result in social disapproval, shame, or even punishment.

Taboo language, although considered inappropriate, is frequently found not only in casual conversation but also in various types of media, such as movies, TV, books, music, and other online social media platforms. In addition, the use of these words in the media seems to change through time, like society's values and norms. In other words, what was once seen as inappropriate may be considered acceptable and can be used openly in public now.

In movies, taboo language serves as an important tool for shaping how audiences perceive characters, humor, and key themes. While it may be seen as offensive and forbidden, taboo language is commonly used to provoke specific reactions or to enhance storytelling, adding depth or tension to the narrative. This frequent use of taboo language in films has led to significant linguistic discussions and research on its impact and function.

However, despite the growing body of sociolinguistic research on taboo language in media, there remains a notable gap in studies that specifically examine how teenage characters use such language to construct identity and navigate emotional intensity. Much of the existing literature centers on adult speakers or general populations, overlooking the unique linguistic patterns and expressive strategies of adolescents in fictional narratives. How teenage characters use taboo language—whether to enhance humor, express individuality, or create realistic interactions—has not been explored in depth.

In addition, while there have been studies on taboo language in various cultural and cinematic contexts, there is also a lack of studies specifically focusing on its use in contemporary horror-comedy films. In other words, the horror-comedy genre—known for its exaggerated emotional stakes and blend of fear and humor—has received limited attention in linguistic analyses, even though its heightened scenarios often amplify the use of taboo expressions.

These gaps highlight the need for further analysis of taboo language in contemporary horror-comedy, especially in relation to humor and social dynamics.

Thus, this present study aims at analyzing the use of taboo language used by teenage characters in a movie titled *The Babysitter: Killer Queen* (2020), a sequel to the 2017 horror-comedy *The Babysitter*. The plot of this movie follows a character named Cole Johnson, who is a teenager haunted by the traumatic events from the first film. This movie was chosen because it is a notable example of a modern-day film that embraces taboo language that serves to establish a sense of humor and to portray teenagers' interactions. It offers a timely lens into how modern youth employ strong language in extreme contexts, reflecting evolving norms around profanity and emotional expression. This study addresses these gaps by analyzing the types and functions of taboo words used by teenage characters in the film, contributing to a deeper understanding of youth language in contemporary media.

Review of Related Literature

Taboo language has interested researchers for decades, and there are a number of studies that explored it within different cultural and cinematic contexts. Aspects that have been focused on include its types, its functions, and its social implications, as well as its role in reflecting and challenging cultural norms.

For example, Indrayasa et al. (2018) analyzed the types, functions, and meanings of taboo words in a movie titled *Dirty Grandpa*. In this study, the researcher categorized taboo words based on Jay's (1992) framework, and to analyze functions, Liedlich's (1973) framework was employed. The results revealed that taboo words are used in the movie to create attention, to discredit, to provoke violent confrontation, to show endearment, and to create strong interpersonal identification. However, the study does not offer the frequency of each type and each function. For meanings of taboo words, the researcher claimed to use Leech's (1981) framework, but the information regarding this was not included in the study.

Similarly, Serti, Sulatra, and Santika (2023) also conducted research using their observation and documentation method to explore the practical use of taboo words in the crime-drama film titled *American Gangster* in order to find the types and the functions. In this study, the researchers classified taboo utterances based on Battistella's (2005) and Wardhaugh's (2006) theories. The results show that all types of taboo words—epithets, profanity, vulgarity, and obscenity—are found; vulgarity is found to be used most frequently while obscenity is used the least. In terms of their functions, the words are used in the movie for four functions, which are to show contempt, draw attention to oneself, to be

provocative, and to mock authority, respectively. The researchers also noted that the use of taboo words is based on the culture, psychology, and social condition of the user.

In addition to the studies mentioned above, Haroon and Arslan (2024) conducted research using qualitative methods and content analysis to identify types of taboo language in *Fight Club* (1999) using the theoretical framework developed by Jay's (1992) classification system, in which taboo words were classified into ten types (epithets, profanity, blasphemy, obscenity, cursing, taboo, vulgarity, slang, insult and slur, and scatology). The result showed that vulgarity, insults, and profanity are intentionally used in the movie to show resistance and revolt against social norms. The researchers concluded that this linguistic feature highlights the intricate relationship between language, culture, and social dynamics.

It can be said that even though these studies provide some insights into taboo language in movies, they still have limited exploration of how taboo words function in other genres of movies, especially in horror-comedy movies. In addition, none of these studies focused on teenage characters as users of taboo words.

Thus, as *The Babysitter: Killer Queen* is a contemporary horror-comedy film that features frequent use of violent language by its teenage characters, this movie can offer a unique case for analysis. Examining taboo words used in a film of a different genre and era from the studies mentioned above might offer valuable insights into shifting societal norms and cultural attitudes toward language.

The objectives of this study are to identify and categorize the types and the functions of taboo words used by teen characters in *The Babysitter: Killer Queen*. The research questions are as follows.

1. What types of taboo words are found in *The Babysitter: Killer Queen*, and which type is used the most frequently?
2. What do the taboo words found in the movie function?

Research Methods

1. Data and Data Collection

This study employs qualitative methods and content analysis to explore the use of taboo words in *The Babysitter: Killer Queen* by focusing on dialogue and interactions of characters. To collect the data, the movie script was transcribed, and then taboo words were identified and verified using the Oxford Dictionary to confirm their status as taboo.

2. Data Analysis and Statistical Techniques

To categorize taboo words into types, taboo words were categorized based on a framework adapted from Battistella’s (2005) classification system of offensive language, which divides taboo language into the four types—profanity, obscenity, epithets, and vulgarity—as shown in Table 1. It should be noted that even though Jay’s (1992) framework seems to be more detailed (as there are more types), Battistella’s classification seems to offer clearer definitions for each of the types. In other words, this theoretical framework was chosen as it provides a clearer and more comprehensive approach to analyzing the different forms of taboo language. However, as Battistella (2005) stated, “the distinction between vulgarity and obscenity is primarily a matter of degree and prurience” (p. 72). Hence, to make data analysis in this study consistent, vulgarity in this study refers to words or expressions that are related to sexual and excretory organs while obscenity refers to the activities involving those organs, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Types of Taboo Words, Their Definitions, and Examples

Types	Definitions	Examples
Profanity	Cursing related to religion in a way that shows a lack of respect for God or holy things	-damn -goddamn
Epithets	Offensive language that refers to race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality, and may also refer to appearance, disabilities, or other characteristics	-bitch -fag -raghead
Vulgarity	Words or expressions related to sexual anatomy	-pussy -titty
Obscenity	Crude words related to sexual activities or excretion	-fuck -fucking

In terms of functions of taboo words, this study utilized Wardhaugh’s (2006) framework, which provides four functions of taboo: to draw attention to oneself, to show contempt, to be provocative, and to mock authority. This framework was chosen as it offers a useful lens for understanding why characters use taboo words in specific contexts, particularly in a film that emphasizes humor, rebellion, and conflict, like *The Babysitter: Killer Queen*.

After categorizing taboo words into their types and functions, the frequency of each type was counted in order to be compared and discussed.

Findings and Discussion

The data revealed 92 occurrences of taboo words in the movie. Drawing from Battistella’s (2005) classification system, the frequency of taboo words in the movie can be delineated into four distinct types, and obscenity is the type that appears most frequently, with 61 occurrences, followed by vulgarity, epithets, and profanity, respectively—as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Types of Taboo Words Found in Babysitter: Killer Queen

No.	Types	No. of occurrences	Percentage	Samples
1.	Obscenity	61	66.4%	Fuck that guy. She's not into him.
2.	Vulgarity	14	15.2%	Why aren't you wearing a shirt, you cunt ?
3.	Epithets	12	13%	Yes! But I am Fortnite Nation, bitch . Woo!
4.	Profanity	5	5.4%	God damn . Slow down. Save some for the fishes.
Total		92	100%	

Obscenity, such as “*fuck*” and “*shit*”, is the most frequent type to appear, possibly because these words can highlight the horror-comedy tone and add humor to the movie. Obscene words also convey a sense of rawness that matches the rebellious and youthful energy of most of the characters—teenagers. For example, the word “fucking” was often found added in conversations, as shown in these samples.

“I just want a fucking scream.”

“Don’t you fucking dare! On three! Don’t you fucking dare!”

Similarly, even though taboo words of vulgarity, such as “*pussy*” and “*cunt*”, are used less frequently, they still contribute to the film’s crude humor. They were used less when compared to obscenity, possibly because the primary tone of the movie is more about wild chaos.

On the other hand, epithets (such as “*whore*” and “*bitch*”) appear less frequently. This may be because these words carry a more serious and harsh tone than other types of taboo words. Thus, these words are normally used to attack specific groups of people and may be perceived as overly aggressive or offensive, making them less suitable for the film's comedic context.

Lastly, profanity (such as “*goddamn*”) may be used the least because this type is typically employed to express frustration or emphasize more serious or dramatic moments. In a horror comedy, where humor, action, and exaggerated scenarios dominate, the use of it may not fit in the contexts like the other types.

However, it is quite surprising that the results of this study seem different when compared to previous studies. To begin with, in the 1999 film *Fight Club*, profanity was found to be the most frequently used (Haroon & Arslan, 2024), and in *American Gangster*, vulgarity is the type that was found the most (Serti et al., 2023). The underlying reason can possibly be the changes in the language use through time, or it can be because the main characters in these films are not teens, unlike those in *The Babysitter: Killer Queen*.

In terms of the functions of the taboo words found in the movie, the data revealed various functions of all 92 occurrences found. As shown in Table 3, while there are four functions proposed by Wardhaugh (2006), only three (to show contempt, to draw attention to oneself, and to be provocative) are present in the film. The functions that were found to be the most frequently used in the movie are to show contempt, to draw attention to oneself, and to be provocative, respectively. However, there are also two additional functions—to react with disbelief and to intensify the meaning—found in the movie, although not as frequently as the first three types. While taboo words can be used in order to mock authority, this function is not present in the movie.

As the film reflects teenage rebellion, it is not surprising that taboo words are used to show contempt and to draw attention to themselves the most. Teen characters also often use taboo words to be provocative—to challenging the situations or their peers. This mirrors teenagers’ use of taboo words as a way to cope with their feeling of frustration against someone or something, believing that it can express the feeling better than conventional words (Peranging-angin et al., 2022).

For example, in the movie, a teenage character uses a taboo word of vulgarity, “*pussy*”, to provoke anger from another character who is trying to escape from their blood

ritual. According to Wardhaugh (2006), a taboo word functions effectively when its response aligns with the speaker's intention; thus, as the character reacts to the provocation, this must be considered effective for this function.

Table 3

Functions of Taboo Words Found in Babysitter: Killer Queen

No.	Functions	No. of occurrences	Percentage
1.	To show contempt	45	48.9%
2.	To draw attention to oneself	20	21.7%
3.	To be provocative	11	12%
4.	To react with disbelief	10	10.9%
5.	To intensify the meaning	6	6.5%
6.	To mock authority	0	0%
Total		92	100%

On the other hand, when the characters in the movie use taboo words to react with disbelief and to intensify or exaggerate their emotions in extreme situations, it helps to add humor and tension to the film, such as when a character in the movie used a taboo word of obscenity like “*fuck*” to react with disbelief when seeing a human disappear.

Despite the differences in the types of taboo words found the most, the functions of these words seem similar when compared to Serti, Sulatra, and Santika’s (2023) study of taboo words in *American Gangster*—where most of the taboo words were used to show contempt (50.8%), to draw attention (30.5%), and to be provocative (13.5%). However, in *American Gangster*, taboo words were sometimes used to mock authority, but this function seems missing in *The Babysitter: Killer Queen*. This is possibly because of the plot of the movie, but it may also suggest that teenage characters are more focused on surviving the chaotic situations around them rather than on challenging authority figures directly.

Overall, these crude languages can make the film disturbing but funny, which is typical for this genre of movies. By using socially inappropriate language, the film intensifies its chaos and humor, which is central to the horror-comedy genre's appeal.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, taboo words featured in *The Babysitter: Killer Queen* were used to strengthen the horror-comedy tone of the movie. The type of taboo words that was found the most is obscenity, with 61 occurrences out of 92, or almost two thirds of the taboo words found in the movie. It is believed that the crude language helps to add humor to the movie and to make the movie portray chaos, which is the style of this genre. In the movie, taboo words also serve several functions, mainly for the speakers to show contempt, to draw attention, and to be provocative, reflecting the rebellious nature of the teenage characters. However, some of the taboo words were also used to help the speakers react with disbelief and to intensify the meanings for feelings, adding senses of humor and tension to the movie. Overall, the use of taboo language in the movie mirrors the film's tone and the teenage rebellion. This analysis of cinematic dialogue provides empirical data supporting the notion that taboo language is a highly functional and contextualized feature of screenwriting aimed at characterizing adolescent rebellion and heightened emotional states.

The findings show that taboo language functions as an index of youth identity and resistance, with teenage characters using strong lexical choices to mark group membership and emotional stance. This supports sociolinguistic accounts of language as a social resource shaped by age, context, and narrative role.

In terms of pragmatics, taboo words in the film perform clear illocutionary roles such as expressing contempt, drawing attention, provoking, signaling disbelief, and intensifying emotion, underscoring that pragmatic force depends on situational context rather than literal word meaning. The results therefore reinforce context-sensitive models of speech acts and stance-taking.

It can be said that this study moves beyond a simple cataloging of instances, establishing a link between cinematic portrayal, functional pragmatics, and the broader sociolinguistic representation of youth language in contemporary popular media.

For better understanding, comparing taboo words used in different genres of movies, those used by people from different age ranges, or those used in movies from different periods are recommended for further study.

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