

#Cursing Study: 10 Lessons About How We Use Swear Words on Twitter

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The history of swearing dates back to at least the Anglo-Saxon days, which means that Twitter has only been around for a smidgen of the time that humans have been leveling verbal filth at one another. But Twitter—which provides a constant stream of raw data about how we communicate with each other—is also giving academics new opportunities to study that old, old habit.

At a [conference about social computing](#) held this week, three researchers from Ohio's Wright State University presented a paper on the subject of cursing, analyzing more than 50 million tweets to find out how much Twitter users curse, when they curse and what types of users are most drawn to four-letter words. As with [any research on Twitter](#), the results come with caveats—like the sample not being completely random and certain attributes for users being unknown. That said, here are 10 takeaways from [the study](#) led by PhD researcher Wenbo Wang, with results drawn from some 14 million users:

People curse a lot on Twitter.

Using a carefully selected list of 788 swear words—ranging from standard *f*ck* to Internet-y @\$\$—the researchers found that Twitter users curse at a rate of 1.15%, twice the normal rate found in other studies. That might sound small, but that's more than we use first person plural pronouns, like *we*, *our* and *ourselves*. [Researchers have estimated](#) that people typically curse from about 0% of the time (Tipper Gore) to 3% of the time (Chris Rock on a roll).

The most common curse word used on Twitter is the f-bomb.

The f-bomb accounts for nearly 35% of all cursing on Twitter, followed by *sh*t*, *ass*, *bitch*, *n*gga*, *hell* and a long string of other things that make grandmothers lose their hair. This should come as little surprise given studies showing that [people use 10,000 racial slurs per day](#) on Twitter and [widgets](#) showing the many places in the world where people are dropping f-bombs on Twitter right this very moment.

People mainly curse on Twitter when they are not smiles times.

The researchers developed algorithms to assign seven emotions to tweets, practicing the flawed but developing science of “sentiment analysis.” They found that people most often cursed when they were sad (21% of cursing tweets) and angry (17%). But people did also use them to express love (7%), as in “I f*cking love you, man.”

The most popular time to curse on Twitter is after dinner.

Analyzing the time stamps on tweets, adjusted for the users' time zones, the researchers found that cursing takes off around 5 a.m. and rises throughout the day, hitting its peak at 9 p.m. They also found that there is no hour when people aren't fouling up the Internet. “People curse all the time throughout the day,” they write, though there are lulls during lunch time. (Bless you and your soothing ways, sandwiches.)

People curse less on Twitter after hump day.

The researchers analyzed random samples of tweets sent out over four weeks and found that there are “relatively high cursing ratios on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays,” after which ratios decrease until Saturday and then start rising again on Sunday. There can be something damnably oppressive about the work week being just on the

other side of bedtime.

Retweets contain the most curse words.

Previous research, the authors note, has found that “profane comments are more popular or more widely read than non-profane comments” on social media. Retweets won this dubious popularity contest compared to tweets they categorized as “starters,” those one writes with the intent of starting a conversation; updates, messages mentioning no one with no particular expectation of response; mentions, tweets referring to someone without expecting a response; and replies.

Twitter users swear more in more “relaxed” environments.

Complementing previous research, the study found that people are more likely to speak like a sailor when they’re at places like a personal residence than a place of work. The researchers determined where people curse the most by meshing Foursquare data with the latitudes and longitudes on tweets to which users added a location. Cursing while traveling was the least popular, which may come to a shock to anyone who has engaged in air travel since Pan Am’s glory days.

Men tweeting at men are most likely to curse.

Using data from the U.S. Census Bureau listing the most popular girls’ and boys’ names in the U.S., the authors assigned a gender to the users and analyzed how much they curse in various conversations. Previous studies have also shown that people tend to curse more in “same-gender contexts” like being out with the ladies or the boys. Men were much more likely to use the f-word overall; females were much more likely to use the word *bitch*, perhaps while trying [to reclaim it](#).

The only people who curse less than the most popular Twitter users are the least popular Twitter users.

Other studies have shown that the higher someone’s social ranking, the less likely they are to utter words you can’t say on television. This one found that to generally be true; the “top 1%” of users, with an average following of about 68,000 users, cursed less than every other group except the most lonely 10%, who had an average of 2.3 followers.

***Slut* is a term of endearment on Twitter.**

Looking at that follower-based social ranking, the researchers found that cursing tweets containing the word *slut* were most likely to be directed at the top 1%, where celebrities reside. This, they posit, “is because some fans like to call celebrities *slut* regardless of their gender for fun” and present an eloquent example: “@Harry_Styles,” it begins, “slut drop on my follow button.”

This is an edition of Wednesday Words, a weekly feature on language. For the previous post, [click here](#).