



DOI: 10.2478/linpo-2020-0012

Gender-related differences in the use and perception of verbal insults: the Bosnian perspective

Džemal Špago

Džemal Bijedić University of Mostar
Dzemaal.Spago@unmo.ba

Abstract: Džemal Špago, *Gender-related differences in the use and perception of verbal insults: the Bosnian perspective*. The Poznań Society for the Advancement of Arts and Sciences, PL ISSN 0079-4740, pp. 81-94

The paper explores potential gender-linked differences in the use and perception of insulting language among Bosnian university students. The respondents were asked to provide one-word answers to four questions about the worst male-directed and female-directed insults, and about one-word descriptions of a male and female person who they view as the most detestable. The results indicate that the male and female respondents have a similar perception of the worst male-directed (*lack of masculinity*) and, to a lesser extent, female-directed insults (*sexual looseness*). Surprisingly, insults of homosexual nature, as well as those pertaining to being unethical and physically unattractive were rarely mentioned. The results also reveal significant gender-of-insulter differences in the use of offensive words in reference to the most disliked person, as well as the tendency by the respondents of both genders to avoid using those insults that they perceive as the harshest.

Keywords: verbal insults, slurs, gender-related differences, Bosnian context

1. Introduction

Although they can be used for other purposes, such as social bonding¹ or even praising the addressee when used among friends (Mateo & Yus 2013), verbal insults² are most

¹ Such use of insulting language is known as appropriation, and it relates to those otherwise insulting expressions being used in a non-derogatory way among members of the same group they target (for instance, the word “nigger” being used by black people) (for a detailed account of appropriation, see Bianchi 2014).

² In addition to verbal insults, we can also speak about non-verbal ones, which relate to certain actions that might offend someone (Gabriel 1998; Janicki 2015; and others). In this paper, the term “(verbal) insult” is used in a broad sense, as a general name for all types of verbal insulting content. Among different types of insulting language, slurs (words like “nigger”, “kike”, “faggot”, etc., which denigrate others based on their race, religion, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and the like) stand out as a particularly notable type. Some researchers (for instance, Hedger 2012) point out that their content is purely expressive, i.e. it expresses the speaker’s negative attitude towards the target, but it doesn’t “make a truth-apt contribution to the semantic content” (Hedger 2012: 78). Conversely, Croom (2014) argues that it often includes both an expressive and

commonly associated with verbal exchanges which are “perceived, experienced, constructed, and at times intended as slighting, humiliating, or offensive” (Gabriel 1998: 1331). In spite of the fact that some words or expressions (*fool, bastard*, etc.) are typically used to humiliate or offend someone, the interpretation of insults is always highly context-dependent, since, as noted by Janicki (2015: 74), any verbal content can be interpreted as insulting in some context. While insults typically give rise to negative emotions (Janicki 2015; Cruz 2019) and cause some psychological pain on the part of the addressee, their level of harshness often varies, as some types of insults are perceived as less or more offensive than others either by all, or by specific groups or individuals (Kremin 2017). Even though they are present in all languages, insults are often culture-dependent and not equally represented across different languages and cultures, as, due to cultural varieties and constraints, some languages contain less or more insulting content than others (Mateo & Yus 2013).

The study of insults proved to be an interesting topic for researchers (both linguists and psychologists) as numerous studies have been done in different languages focusing on various aspects of insults, and specific contexts in which they occur (see Cruz 2019). One of the interesting perspectives from which insults can be explored is the gender perspective, i.e. potential gender differences in the use and perception of insulting language³. Although this aspect of the study of insults has also received significant attention, the exploration of gender differences in different cultural backgrounds leaves room for further research.

The goals of this paper are the following: (i) to explore potential differences and similarities in the use of different kinds of insults between male and female speakers of Bosnian based on their one-word description of the most despicable male and female person they know; (ii) to examine what kinds of insults are perceived as most offensive to men and women by male and female speakers of Bosnian, and what gender differences, if any, can be noted in this regard.

2. Background

An interesting study of gender-related differences in the use of verbal insults was undertaken by Preston and Stanley (1987), involving 164 American college students. The respondents were asked to write down the worst insult a member of each gender can say to a member of the same and the opposite gender, and then valid answers were classified into seven types of verbal insults (worthless, emotionally inadequate, sexually inadequate,

descriptive component (for a detailed account of slurs, see Nunberg 2018; Ashwell 2016; Saucier et al. 2014). Other types of insulting language include ethnic/social terms used as insults (for a detailed account, see Castroviejo et al. 2020), denigrating epithets, expressive expletives, etc. (for a detailed account, see Cruz 2019).

³ Gender differences in the use of language in general have been studied extensively over the past several decades. Although some researchers suggested that no significant differences exist between the way men and women use language, numerous studies confirmed such differences including the use of (tag) questions, directives, polite expressions, etc. (for an overview, see Newman et al. 2008).

promiscuous, homosexual, failing to perform traditional gender roles, dishonest/unethical). The results indicated that no (significant) gender differences exist between the male and female respondents in regard to the provided answers (both groups used similar vocabulary, mostly gross and taboo words). However, the study showed that different types of insults are considered as most insulting to different genders: when directed at women, the worst insult was from the category of *promiscuous* (followed by *unethical*), whereas the worst insult directed at men belonged to the category of *homosexual* (followed by *unethical*), especially if it came from other men⁴.

In a similar research conducted among 416 American college students, Harris (1993) ascertained that verbal insults deemed as most insulting to both genders were predominantly of a sexual nature, with those referring to promiscuity being predominantly attributed to women, and those that relate to sexual inadequacy and homosexuality being more commonly attributed to men. Additionally, she concluded that verbal insults which relate to worthlessness or cowardice were particularly insulting to men.

After investigating gender differences and sexism in the use of slang among 60 American college students, Grossman and Tucker (1997) reported that sexual and derogatory slang words which describe women outnumber those that describe men.

In another study among American college students, James (1998) collected gender-linked derogatory terms used to describe men and women, and found out that those which relate to promiscuity and physical attractiveness are more often associated with women, and those that belong to the categories of being unethical, weak or inconsiderate are more often used to insult men.

Bendixen and Gabriel (2013) conducted a study among 505 Norwegian university students in which the respondents were asked to rate, based on their harshness, offered clusters of insults classified under seven categories (promiscuous, sexual objectification, homosexual, unethical/dishonest, stupid, cowardly, physically unattractive). The results showed that insults which relate to promiscuity, homosexuality, sexual objectification and physical unattractiveness were marked as particularly offensive when directed towards women, whereas the most offensive insults directed at men belonged to the categories of homosexuality and physical unattractiveness. Interestingly, insults related to being cowardly were marked as the least offensive even to men.

In a male-only study that focused exclusively on insults directed at men, Saucier et al. (2014) conducted two surveys⁵ among male respondents from Kansas (96 and 94 respondents, respectively). The first group provided examples of insults that men find offensive, and the other one described how they would react if such insults were hurled at them. Dividing collected insults into seven categories (general personality, intelligence, homophobic, feminine, ethnic, physical, bravery), the authors found that insults which men most commonly find offensive relate to worthlessness (general personality), followed by intelligence, homophobic and feminine slurs. However, the second group reported that

⁴ In women-to-men insults, being called *unethical* was found to be the worst insult to men, followed by *homosexual* and *worthless* (Preston & Stanley 1987: 216-217).

⁵ The research included four surveys altogether, but for the purpose of this paper we just focused on the first two.

homophobic and feminine insults are perceived as particularly offensive, as there is a stronger possibility that such insults would elicit a physical response from the insultee than the other types of insults.

Slaaten and Gabrys (2014) conducted a research among 921 Norwegian adolescents about gay-related name-calling, and confirmed that homosexual insults are more often directed at boys. Furthermore, the results showed that the single most common reason for gay-related insults directed at boys (selected by 40.2% of the respondents) was “a response to the violation of gender norms”⁶ (p. 31). Conversely, the most common reason for using gay-related insults directed at girls (selected by 20% of the respondents) was a reaction to disliked or stupid behavior.

A number of studies also explored gender differences in the use of expletives. In their study of the use of expletives among New Zealand university students, Bayard and Krishnayya (2001) concluded that, while male students tend to use somewhat stronger expletives, gender differences were not significant in this regard. On the other hand, while examining a gender differentiated corpus of about 90,000 words of spoken Irish English, Murphy (2009) found that the use of the expletive “fuck” is considerably more common among male than among female language users.

3. Methodology

An anonymous online survey was conducted among 192 respondents (71 male and 121 female), all of them students from different Departments/study programs at Džemal Bijedić University, southern Bosnia-Herzegovina. The vast majority of the respondents (94%) belong to the age group of young adults (18 to 25 years old).

In addition to questions about their age and gender, the respondents were asked to provide one-word answers to four questions: (1) what they believe is the worst men-directed insult; (2) what they believe is the worst women-directed insult; (3) and (4) – to think of a male and a female person, respectively, who hurt/offended them most, or who they find, for any reason, the most despicable to them, and then use a single word to describe each of them⁷. The first two questions were asked in order to explore what kinds of insults are perceived as most offensive to men and women, and whether any differences in the perception of insults exist between the male and female respondents. On the other hand, answers to questions (3) and (4) were expected to offer an insight into what kind of insults respondents would actually use to describe the most detestable male and female person, and whether any gender-linked differences can be noted in this regard.

⁶ Based on this finding, they conclude that “gay-related name-calling is more commonly associated with the endorsement of male norms than with anti-gay attitudes and behaviors” (Slaaten & Gabrys 2014: 31).

⁷ Here are the survey questions in Bosnian: 1) *Možete li napisati jednu riječ koju smatrate najvećom uvredom za muškarca?* 2) *Možete li napisati jednu riječ koju smatrate najvećom uvredom za ženu?* 3) *Zamislite mušku osobu koja vas je povrijedila ili uvrijedila više nego bilo ko drugi, ili koju iz bilo kojeg drugog razloga smatrate vama najomraženijom osobom - kojom biste rječju opisali tu osobu?* 4) *Zamislite žensku osobu koja vas je povrijedila ili uvrijedila više nego bilo ko drugi, ili koju iz bilo kojeg drugog razloga smatrate vama najomraženijom osobom – kojom biste rječju opisali tu osobu?*

The collected answers, if valid⁸, were classified by the author into one of the following ten categories, which were, to a great extent, inspired by those used in the above-mentioned previous studies: *homosexual*, *incompetent*, *mentally inadequate*, *physically unattractive*, *lacking masculinity*⁹/*femininity*, *sexually loose*, *unethical*, *worthless*, *lacking empathy*, and *lacking manners*. Those insults which could not be clearly placed into any of these categories, or which had elements of different categories¹⁰, were marked as “other”. Next, a group of six reviewers (students and members of the teaching staff from the Faculty of Humanities, Džemal Bijedić University, three male and three female reviewers) checked the initial classification individually, and suggested corrections. In cases where more than three reviewers marked a particular example as not belonging to a category it had been initially assigned to, such examples were either reassigned to another category (if there was an agreement about it among the reviewers), or marked as “other” (if there was a difference of opinion among the reviewers).

In line with the findings of the previous studies of gender-related differences in the perception of verbal insults, the following hypotheses have been formed and tested in this research:

1) male and female respondents will have a similar perception of what is considered to be the harshest male-directed and female-directed insults,

2) the worst insults to both genders will be of a sexual nature, and the harshest female-directed and male-directed insults will belong to the categories of *sexual looseness* and *homosexuality*, respectively,

3) insults from the categories of *unethical* and *physical unattractiveness* will also stand out as very insulting to both men and women.

Additionally, the following hypotheses about the use of verbal insults (in reference to a male and female person that the respondents find most reprehensible) have been set:

4) male and female respondents will use similar insults in reference to the most despised person,

5) insults that the respondents of both genders actually use to describe the most despised person to them will be significantly less offensive than those that they perceive as the harshest.

⁸ Answers such as *nisam siguran* /“not sure” or *ne znam* /“I don’t know”, as well as those answers that clearly cannot be considered as insulting (such as *tužna* /“sad”, *tvrdoglav* /“stubborn”, etc.) were disregarded.

⁹ As noted by Saucier et al. (2014), the insulting content that targets lack of masculinity comprises homophobic and feminine insults, as well as those that relate to a lack of courage. However, in this research homosexual insults were analyzed as a separate category, following the pattern of previous studies.

¹⁰ For instance, when used as a man-directed insult, the Bosnian word *konj* /“horse” implies foolishness, lack of manners, lack of empathy, etc.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The harshest women-directed insults

Altogether, 182 valid answers to the question about the harshest women-directed insults have been collected, with 61 offensive words or expressions¹¹ being used by the respondents. Just as expected, and in line with previous studies, the results indicate that verbal insults which relate to sexual looseness are perceived as the worst women-directed insults, with over 55% of the respondents providing an offensive word which belongs to this category as the worst thing one can call a woman. Other insults that also received some attention were from the categories of mentally inadequate, incompetent and physically unattractive, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Classified answers to the question about the worst one-word women-directed insults (all respondents)

	Category	Number of collected responses (total 182) (%)
1.	sexually loose	101 (55.49%)
2.	mentally inadequate	21 (11.53%)
3.	incompetent	18 (9.89%)
4.	physically unattractive	12 (6.59%)
5.	worthless	8 (4.39%)
6.	lacking empathy	8 (4.39%)
7.	unethical	7 (3.84%)
8.	other	7 (3.84%)

An interesting finding is that not a single women-directed insult referring to homosexuality was listed either by male or female respondents, which can be explained by the cultural background, as it is obviously not common (at least for now) among speakers of Bosnian to use women-directed insults which relate to homosexuality.

Two noteworthy gender differences in the perception of the harshest insults directed at women are linked to the categories of sexual looseness and incompetence. Namely, while close to 80% of the male respondents provided an insult associated with promiscuity as the worst thing one can call a woman (and no other category received any significant attention), less than half female respondents (42.73%) listed such insults as most offensive to women. A reason for this discrepancy could be that men generally focus more on women's sexuality, whereas women put focus on different things. On the other hand, women-directed verbal insults associated with incompetence are obviously perceived as much more offensive by the female respondents (16.81% of them provided an insult

¹¹ Out of those 61 women-directed insults, 57 were single words, and 4 were offensive expressions (the respondents were asked to provide one-word insults, but some of them still wrote certain offensive expressions instead). Different versions of the same word (for instance, *pederčina* /“fag” and *peder* /“faggot”) were treated separately in this research.

which falls into this category, whereas not a single example of such insults was supplied by the male respondents), which could be explained by the cultural influence of the past, and the unjustified treatment of women as less competent. Table 2 shows the frequency of occurrence for different types of insults compared between male and female respondents:

Table 2: Classified answers to the question about the worst one-word women-directed insults (male vs female respondents)

	Insults provided by male respondents (65)		Insults provided by female respondents (117)	
	Category	Number (%)	Category	Number (%)
1.	Sexually loose	51 (78.46%)	Sexually loose	50 (42.73%)
2.	Mentally inadequate	3 (4.61%)	Mentally inadequate	18 (15.38%)
3.	Physically unattractive	2 (3.07%)	Incompetent	18 (15.38%)
4.	Lacking empathy	2 (3.07%)	Physically unattractive	10 (8.54%)
5.	Unethical	1 (1.53%)	Worthless	7 (5.98%)
6.	Worthless	1 (1.53)	Unethical	6 (5.12%)
7.	Other	5 (7.69%)	Lacking empathy	6 (5.12%)
8.			Other	2 (1.7%)

Among 61 women-directed offensive words and expressions which were used by the respondents, those that were particularly frequent include *kurva* /“whore” (73 mentions) and *nesposobna* /“incompetent” (16 mentions), with others (such as *drolja* /“slut”, *prostitutka* /“prostitute“, *glupa* /“dumb“, *glupača* /“simpleton“, *ružna* /“ugly”, etc.) being mentioned less than ten times each.¹²

The results from this section only partly confirm the first hypothesis, as some notable differences in the perception of such insults by male and female respondents have been noted. Furthermore, when it comes to women-directed insults, the second hypothesis is confirmed (sexual looseness stands out as the most offensive thing that can be attributed to women), but the third one is not (insults pertaining to being unethical or physically unattractive did not rank high among the collected examples).

4.2. The harshest men-directed insults

In regard to the question about the worst verbal insults directed at men, 179 valid answers have been collected, comprising 80 offensive words or expressions¹³. Counter to our expectations and the results of the above mentioned previous studies among American and Norwegian respondents (Preston & Stanley 1987; Bendixen & Gabriel 2013; etc.), verbal insults of homosexual nature, according to the collected responses, do not stick

¹² The male respondents used 25 different words (the most frequent were *kurva* /“whore”, *prostitutka* /“prostitute” and *drolja* /“slut”), and the female respondents used 36 different words or expressions (the most frequent were *nesposobna* /“incompetent”, *glupa* /“dumb” and *glupača* /“simpleton”).

¹³ There were 76 single words and 4 expressions.

out as the worst thing one can call a man. Likewise, offensive words from the category of being unethical did not rank high among the worst men-related insults. Instead, other offensive terms which question men's masculinity (such as being called *mlakonja* /"wimp", *curica* /"girl", *papučar* /"hen-pecked", *kukavica* /"coward", and the like) outnumber other types of verbal insults perceived as particularly insulting to men, followed by derogatory words or expressions from the category of being mentally inadequate, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Classified answers to the question about the worst one-word men-directed insults (all respondents)

	Category	Number of collected responses (total 179) (%)
1.	Lacking masculinity	52 (29.05%)
2.	Mentally inadequate	39 (21.78%)
3.	Incompetent	24 (13.4%)
4.	Unethical	14 (7.82%)
5.	Homosexual	12 (6.7%)
6.	Worthless	11 (6.14%)
7.	Lacking empathy	10 (5.58%)
8.	Sexually loose	6 (3.35%)
9.	Physically unattractive	4 (2.23%)
10.	Lacking manners	2 (1.11%)
11.	Other	5 (2.79%)

No significant differences between the responses of the male and female participants have been noted regarding the harshest male-directed insults. However, we can still see that the female respondents were less likely to list homosexual insults, and more likely to supply insults which relate to incompetence, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Classified answers to the question about the worst one-word men-directed insults (male vs female respondents)

	Insults provided by male respondents (66)		Insults provided by female respondents (113)	
	Category	Number (%)	Category	Number (%)
1.	Lacking masculinity	18 (27.27%)	Lacking masculinity	34 (30.08%)
2.	Mentally inadequate	15 (22.72%)	Mentally inadequate	24 (21.23%)
3.	Homosexual	8 (12.12%)	Incompetent	19 (16.81%)
4.	Unethical	8 (12.12%)	Worthless	8 (7.07%)
5.	Incompetent	5 (7.57%)	Lacking empathy	7 (6.19%)
6.	Worthless	3 (4.54%)	Unethical	6 (5.3%)

7.	Lacking empathy	3 (4.54%)	Sexually loose	5 (4.42%)
8.	Physically unattractive	2 (3.03%)	Homosexual	4 (3.53%)
9.	Sexually loose	1 (1.51%)	Physically unattractive	2 (1.76%)
10.	Other	3 (4.54%)	Lacking manners	2 (1.76%)
11.			Other	2 (1.76%)

The most frequent men-directed offensive words listed by the respondents included *nesposoban* /“incompetent” (22 mentions), *peder* /“faggot” (11 mentions), and *pička* /“cunt”¹⁴ (11 mentions). Other offensive words (*mlakonja* /“wimp”, *idiot* /“idiot”, *glup* /“dumb”, *papučar* /“hen-pecked”, etc.) were mentioned less than ten times each¹⁵.

While the results from this section confirm the first hypothesis in regard to men-directed insults (male and female participants have a similar view of what counts as the harshest insults directed at men), the second and third hypotheses are not confirmed (homosexual insults were not more frequent than other types, and insults from the categories of unethical and physically unattractive did not rank high).

4.3. Using a single word to describe the most despicable female person

Responding to the request to supply a one-word description of a female person who they find the most reprehensible for whatever reason, 171 participants provided valid responses, using 85 offensive words. The category that stands out in this regard is *lacking empathy*, with nearly half of the respondents listing an offensive word associated with it. Other types of insults that received more attention than others belong to the categories of being worthless and being mentally inadequate. Surprisingly, not a single offensive word from the category of physically unattractive has been mentioned either by male or female respondents,¹⁶ and the category of unethical received very little attention, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Using a single word to describe the most despicable female person – classified responses (all respondents)

	Category	Number of collected responses (total 171) (%)
1.	Lacking empathy	84 (49.12%)
2.	Worthless	28 (16.37%)

¹⁴ When used for men, this word in Bosnian implies lack of courage and masculinity.

¹⁵ The male respondents used 40 words or expressions (the most frequent were *pička* /“cunt”, *peder* /“faggot” and *nesposoban* /“incompetent”), just like the female respondents (the most frequent were *nesposoban* /“incompetent”, *glup* /“dumb” and *idiot* /“idiot”).

¹⁶ Although some offensive words classified under the category of “other” (such as *krava* /“cow”, *kobila* /“mare”, etc.) include elements of physical unattractiveness, they also have elements of other categories (mentally inadequate, lacking manners, lacking empathy, etc.).

3.	Mentally inadequate	24 (14.03%)
4.	Lacking manners	9 (5.26%)
5.	Sexually loose	8 (4.67%)
6.	Unethical	2 (1.16%)
7.	Other	16 (9.35%)

The most significant difference between the responses of the male and female participants is linked to the category of lacking empathy, which received much more attention from the female respondents. Conversely, verbal insults from the categories of mentally inadequate and worthless were more commonly used by the male respondents.

Table 6: Using a single word to describe the most despicable female person – classified responses (male vs female respondents)

	Insults provided by male respondents (61)		Insults provided by female respondents (110)	
	Category	Number (%)	Category	Number (%)
1.	Lacking empathy	16 (26.22%)	Lacking empathy	68 (61.81%)
2.	Mentally inadequate	15 (24.59%)	Worthless	14 (12.72%)
3.	Worthless	14 (22.95%)	Mentally inadequate	9 (8.18%)
4.	Sexually loose	6 (9.83%)	Lacking manners	7 (6.36%)
5.	Unethical	2 (3.27%)	Sexually loose	2 (1.81%)
6.	Lacking manners	2 (3.27%)	Other	10 (9.09%)
7.	Other	6 (9.83%)		

The most commonly used offensive words to describe such a person were *bezobrazna* /“insolent”, *nebitna* /“insignificant” and *licemjerna* /“hypocritical” (10 mentions each), with others (such as *zla* /“evil”, *licemjerka* /“hypocrite”, *krava* /“cow”, *kučka* /“bitch”, *odvratna* /“disgusting”, etc.) being used less than ten times each.

In spite of some similarities in responses supplied by the male and female participants, the results from this section do not confirm the fourth hypothesis in regard to women-directed insults, as a significant discrepancy between the male and female responses has been noted. Conversely, the fifth hypothesis holds, since insults from the category that stood out as most insulting (sexual looseness) were used very rarely in the description of the most despised female person, and the category that received little attention among the harshest female-directed insults (lacking empathy) outnumbered other types of insults in reference to the most contemptible woman.

4.4. Using a single word to describe the most despicable male person

The respondents provided a total of 178 valid responses in regard to this survey question, using 84 offensive words and expressions¹⁷. Similar to the responses which described the most disliked female person, the most frequent insults used in reference to the most despicable male person belong to the category of lacking empathy, followed by the categories of mentally inadequate and worthless. The only significant difference is that male-directed insults associated with the lack of empathy do not outnumber others by a large margin, as it was the case with female-directed ones in the previous section.

Table 7: Using a single word to describe the most despicable male person – classified responses (all respondents)

	Category	Number of collected responses (total 178) (%)
1.	Lacking empathy	53 (29.77%)
2.	Mentally inadequate	42 (23.59%)
3.	Worthless	32 (17.97%)
4.	Lacking manners	15 (8.42%)
5.	Unethical	9 (5.05%)
6.	Lacking masculinity	8 (4.49%)
7.	Sexually loose	2 (1.12%)
8.	Incompetent	1 (0.56%)
9.	Other	16 (8.98%)

A comparison of male and female responses reveals that the most common insults used by the male participants belong to the category of mentally inadequate, whereas the female participants were more prone to using offensive words linked to the category of lacking empathy, as shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Using a single word to describe the most despicable male person – classified responses (male vs female respondents)

	Insults provided by male respondents (67)		Insults provided by female respondents (111)	
	Category	Number (%)	Category	Number (%)
1.	Mentally inadequate	23 (34.32%)	Lacking empathy	40 (36.03%)
2.	Worthless	17 (25.37%)	Mentally inadequate	19 (17.11%)
3.	Lacking empathy	13 (19.4%)	Worthless	15 (13.51%)

¹⁷ They used 81 single words and 3 expressions.

4.	Lacking manners	3 (4.47%)	Lacking manners	12 (10.81%)
5.	Unethical	3 (4.47%)	Unethical	6 (5.4%)
6.	Lacking masculinity	2 (2.98%)	Lacking masculinity	6 (5.4%)
7.	Incompetent	1 (1.49%)	Sexually loose	2 (1.8%)
8.	Other	5 (7.46%)	Other	11 (9.9%)

The most frequent offensive words used to describe a disliked male person were *kreten* /“jerk” (14 mentions) and *nebitan* /“insignificant” (11 mentions), with others (*budala* /“fool”, *konj* /“horse”, *lažov* /“liar”, *gad* /“bastard”, *ološ* /“scum”, *idiot* /“idiot”, etc.) being mentioned less than ten times each.

While the results from this section do not support the fourth hypothesis (the female participants more frequently used verbal insults from the category of lacking empathy, and the male participants more often used those from the category of mentally inadequate), the fifth hypothesis is confirmed (offensive words from the category of lacking masculinity, which was deemed as the most offensive to men, were rarely used, and those from the category of lacking empathy, which ranked low on the list of the most offensive men-directed insults, were used frequently).

5. Conclusion

This study investigated potential gender-linked differences in the perception and use of insulting language among the speakers of Bosnian based on the results of an online survey conducted among 192 university students from Džemal Bijedić University. Following the results of some of the previous studies among American and Norwegian respondents (e.g. Preston & Stanley 1987; Harris 1993; Bendixen & Gabriel 2013; and others), expected results were that male and female respondents would have a similar perception of what counts as the worst men-directed and women-directed insults, and that those would mostly belong to the categories of homosexuality and promiscuity, respectively. Furthermore, insults related to being unethical and physically unattractive were also expected to rank high among the insults perceived as particularly harsh to both men and women.

The results of the present study partly confirmed the first hypothesis in regard to the harshest women-directed insults, as insults from the category of sexual looseness were the most frequent type listed by both male and female participants as the worst thing one can call a woman. However, it has been noted that this type of women-directed insults has received much more attention from male than from female respondents. In regard to men-directed insults, the first hypothesis is confirmed (male and female respondents have a similar perception of what is perceived as the worst men-directed insult).

The second hypothesis (the harshest insults directed at both genders will be of a sexual nature, with homosexual and promiscuous being the worst men-directed and women-directed insults, respectively) is confirmed in reference to women, and, rather surprisingly, rejected in reference to men, since homosexual men-directed insults were listed as the

worst thing one can call a man by less than 7% of the respondents, while other insults that question men's masculinity (*mlakonja* /"wimp", *curica* /"girl", *papučar* /"hen-pecked", *kukavica* /"chicken", etc.) stood out as the worst insults which can be hurled at men. Another unexpected result is that not a single mention of women-directed insults of homosexual nature has been supplied by either male or female respondents.

The third hypothesis (insults pertaining to being unethical and physically unattractive will rank high among the worst men-directed and women-directed insults) is completely rejected, since insults from these two categories were rarely mentioned by the respondents of both genders. The results also indicate that offensive words associated with being mentally inadequate are perceived as very offensive to both men and women (they ranked second among the worst men-directed and women-directed-insults), and insults linked to incompetence were among the top three most offensive types.

Considering the offensive words which the participants used to describe a male and female person who they find the most despicable, the expected results were that there would be no significant insulter-related gender differences, and that the respondents of both genders would avoid using those insults that they view as the harshest. The obtained results do not support the fourth hypothesis (male and female respondents will use similar insults in reference to the most detestable male and female person they know), as the female respondents used offensive words from the category of lacking empathy much more frequently than the male respondents, both in reference to male and female targets. Additionally, the most frequent type of men-directed insults used by the male respondents was *mentally inadequate*. Conversely, the fifth hypothesis (the insults that the respondents actually use to describe someone most despicable to them will not be those that they perceive as the harshest) is confirmed, as insults from the categories of sexual looseness (in reference to women) and lacking masculinity (in reference to men), which are viewed as the most offensive, were rarely used, whereas those from the category of lacking empathy stood out. Two other types of insults that were used more often than others by both male and female participants were from the categories of being worthless and being mentally inadequate.

Exploring gender-related differences in the perception and use of verbal insults among different age groups, as well as among respondents from different social groups, could be a topic of further research in this area.

References

- Ashwell, Lauren. 2016. Gendered slurs. *Social Theory and Practice* 42 (2). 228-239. <https://doi.org/10.5840/soctheorpract201642213>.
- Bayard, Donn & Krishnayya, Sateesh. 2001. Gender, expletive use, and context: male and female expletive use in structured and unstructured conversation among New Zealand university students. *Women and Language* 24 (1). 1-15.
- Bendixen, Mons & Gabriel, Ute (2013). Social judgment of aggressive language: Effects of target and sender sex on the evaluation of slurs. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology* 54 (3). 236-242. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjop.12039>.
- Bianchi, Claudia. 2014. Slurs and appropriation: An echoic account. *Journal of Pragmatics* 66. 35-44. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2014.02.009>.

- Castroviejo, Elena & Fraser, Katherine & Vicente, Agustin. 2020. More on pejorative language: insults that go beyond their extension. *Synthese*. 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-020-02624-0>.
- Croom, Adam M. 2014. The semantics of slurs: A refutation of pure expressivism. *Language Sciences* 41. 227-242. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2013.07.003>.
- Cruz, Manuel P. 2019. Qualifying insults, offensive epithets, slurs and expressive expletives: A relevance theoretic approach. *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* 7 (2). 156-181. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlac.00023.cru>.
- Gabriel, Yiannis 1998. An introduction to the social psychology of insults in organizations. *Human Relations* 51 (11). 1329-1354. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1016946332565>.
- Grossman, Aryn L. & Tucker, Joan S. 1997. Gender differences and sexism in the knowledge and use of slang. *Sex Roles* 37. 101-110. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1025644921272>.
- Harris, Mary B. 1993. How provoking! What makes men and women angry? *Aggressive Behavior* 19 (3). 199-211. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-2337\(1993\)19:3<199:AID-AB2480190305>3.0.CO;2-D](https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-2337(1993)19:3<199:AID-AB2480190305>3.0.CO;2-D).
- Hedger, Joseph A. 2012. The semantics of racial slurs: Using Kaplan's framework to provide a theory of the meaning of derogatory epithets. *Linguistic and Philosophical Investigations* 11 (3). 74-84. <https://philpapers.org/archive/HEDTSO/>.
- James, Deborah. 1998. Gender-linked derogatory terms and their use by women and men. *American Speech* 73 (4). 399-420. <https://doi.org/10.2307/455584>.
- Janicki, Karol. 2015. *Language and Conflict. Selected Issues*. London: Palgrave.
- Kremin, Lena V. 2017. Sexist swearing and slurs: Responses to gender-directed insults. *LingUU* 1 (1). 18-25. <https://linguujournal.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Kremin-2017-Sexist-swearing-and-slurs.pdf>.
- Mateo, Jose & Yus, Francisco. 2013. Towards a cross-cultural pragmatic taxonomy of insults. *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* 1 (1). 87-114. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlac.1.1.05mat>.
- Murphy, Brona. 2009. 'She's a Fucking Ticket': The Pragmatics of fuck in Irish English—an age and gender perspective. *Corpora* 4 (1). 85-106.
- Newman, Matthew L. & Groom, Carla J. & Handleman, Lori D. & Pennebaker, James W. 2008. Gender differences in language use: An analysis of 14,000 text samples. *Discourse Processes* 45 (3). 211-236. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01638530802073712>.
- Nunberg, Geoff (2018). The social life of slurs. In Fogal, Daniel & Harris, Daniel W. & Moss, Matt (eds.), *New Work on Speech Acts*. 237-295. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198738831.003.0010>.
- Preston, Kathleen, & Stanley, Kimberley. 1987. "What's the worst thing...?" Gender-directed insults. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 17 (3-4). 209-219. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00287626>.
- Saucier, Donald A. & Till, Derrick F. & Miller, Stuart S. & O'Dea, Conor J. & Andres, Emma. 2015. Slurs against masculinity: Masculine honor beliefs and men's reactions to slurs. *Language Sciences* 52. 108-120. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2014.09.006>.
- Slaaten, Hilde & Gabrys, Leena. 2014. Gay-related name-calling as a response to the violation of gender norms. *The Journal of Men's Studies* 22 (1). 28-33. <https://doi.org/10.3149/jms.2201.28>.