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A Sociolinguistic Analysis of the Types and Functions of Taboo Words and Vulgar Expressions in Selected Songs by Toni Fowler

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Abstract

This sociolinguistic study analyzes the types and communicative functions of taboo expressions in four selected popular songs by Filipino digital influencer Toni Fowler namely: 'MNM', 'MPL', 'SUS', and 'FF'. Utilizing a qualitative textual analysis, a corpus of 27 identified taboo terms was categorized using Battistella's (2005) structural taxonomy and Wardhaugh's (2006) functional model. Structural findings reveal a predominance of Epithets (f = 10, 37.0%), followed by Obscenity (f = 9, 33.3%) and Vulgarity (f = 8, 29.6%), with a complete absence of religious Profanity (f = 0, 0%). Functionally, terms are concentrated on Drawing Attention to Oneself (f = 16, 59.3%), Showing Contempt (f = 6, 22.2%), and Provoking Chaotic Reactions (f = 5, 18.5%), with no instances of Mocking Authority. The findings demonstrate that taboo language in Fowler's music is strategically deployed for personal self-promotion, verbal aggression, and social dominance, relying heavily on anatomical and character-directed insults rather than sacred or socio-political critique.

1. Introduction and Literature Review

The rapid evolution and proliferation of social media platforms have dramatically restructured contemporary human communication, transforming not only the channels through which language is disseminated but also the socio-cultural boundaries that govern acceptable speech. As digital spaces offer unprecedented platforms for unfiltered self-expression,

conventional societal norms regarding language use are continuously challenged, yielding a pervasive normalization of taboo words and vulgar expressions in everyday public discourse (Suha & Sudarwati, 2021). Sociolinguistics—defined by Wardhaugh (2006; cited in Alfarisi et al., 2019) as the systematic study of the relationships between language and society—provides a vital lens through which to interrogate how social structures, cultural values, and media institutions shape linguistic choices and how, in turn, specialized language codes influence social behavior.

Within popular culture, music serves as a powerful vector for linguistic evolution. Songs, particularly within genres such as hip-hop, rap, and viral pop, frequently incorporate taboo language as an authentic reflection of urban youth subcultures, emotional catharsis, or artistic rebellion (Putri, 2019; Sinaga, 2016). As Cahyani and Setiawan (2019) observe, taboo words have transitioned from guarded, private utterances to mainstream commercial features in films, literature, and digital streaming content. However, the uninhibited integration of taboo language into broadly accessible media raises critical concerns regarding its societal impact. Hornby (2000; cited in Alfarisi et al., 2019) emphasizes that human communities are bound together by shared norms and collective goals; consequently, the widespread exposure of young audiences to highly explicit, vulgar, or offensive language can erode moral standards and alter socio-cultural sensitivities (Jdetawy, 2019).

Gender expectations further complicate the sociolinguistic dynamics of taboo speech. Historically, traditional cultural expectations have discouraged women from utilizing profanity or coarse language, framing such speech as a violation of feminine modesty (Stapleton, 2003; cited in Berowa et al., 2019). When female artists defy these deeply entrenched patriarchal conventions by openly employing graphic sexual imagery and aggressive insults, their linguistic choices evoke intense public debate, highlighting broader gender biases and power dynamics embedded within language (Clemente & Temporal, 2019; Suha & Sudarwati, 2021).

Scholarship on taboo speech reveals a multifaceted functional duality. On one hand, researchers note psychological and communicative benefits: expressiveness of intense emotions such as anger, grief, or frustration (Goldsmith, 2013; cited in Rahmania & Munandar, 2021); building solidarity among peers (Berowa et al., 2019; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; cited in Agol et al., 2023); fostering social trust among tight-knit groups (Edmons, 2017); and even physiological benefits such as increased pain tolerance and stress release (Burton, 2012; Atkins & Kingston, 2009; cited in Rahmania & Munandar, 2021). On the other hand, scholars highlight severe real-world risks: the impairment of emotional regulation skills (Priest, 2018; cited in Suha & Sudarwati, 2021); associations with lower socio-intellectual perception in formal educational settings (Valdesolo, 2016; cited in Berowa et al., 2019); and the breakdown of familial harmony when profane language pervades households (Agol et al., 2023).

To rigorously analyze taboo language, linguists rely on established theoretical taxonomies. Battistella (2005; cited in Sari, 2019; Alfarisi et al., 2019; Puri et al., 2024) categorizes taboo terms into four distinct structural types: (1) Epithets, which encompass slurs, insults, and derogatory labels targeting race, gender, ethnicity, or sexual identity; (2) Profanity, consisting of secularized religious terms that degrade sacred or divine concepts; (3) Vulgarity, involving crude references to sexual anatomy, excretory functions, or bodily processes; and (4) Obscenity, which refers to highly explicit, morally repulsive, or graphic scatological and sexual descriptions strictly restricted from public discourse. Complementing this structural model, Wardhaugh (2006; cited in Alfarisi et al., 2019) outlines four primary communicative functions of taboo speech: (1) Drawing Attention to Oneself, where powerful emotional connotations provoke immediate audience focus; (2) Showing Contempt, where insults assert dominance and demean the listener's self-worth; (3) Provoking Chaotic Reactions, where verbal aggression incites uncontrollable outrage or public debate; and (4) Mocking Authority, where vulgarity expresses rebellion against socio-political institutions or sacred traditions.

Although previous studies have examined taboo language in song lyrics—particularly within Western hip-hop and rap performed by female artists such as Nicki Minaj (Puri et al.,

2024; Sinaga, 2016)—there remains a noticeable lack of sociolinguistic research on how native Tagalog/Filipino taboo expressions are utilized by local female performers in contemporary digital media, for instance in the contemporary Philippine digital landscape, media personality and recording artist Toni Fowler represents a highly controversial and influential figure. Because in the Philippine culture, women are traditionally discouraged from using expletives and vulgarities due to deep-seated cultural expectations regarding gender-appropriate conduct and modesty (Stapleton, 2003; Berowa et al., 2019). Furthermore, existing literature primarily investigates traditional recording artists, leaving an empirical gap regarding digital influencers and vloggers like Toni Fowler, who leverage social media platforms such as YouTube to disseminate songs containing explicit obscenities and vulgarities.

Operating within digital streaming platforms such as YouTube, Fowler's musical releases—characterized by explicit lyrical themes, provocative visual staging, and raw interpersonal drama—frequently generate millions of views while provoking intense national debate. Despite widespread public commentary surrounding her music, empirical sociolinguistic investigation into the precise structural classifications and communicative strategies of her lyrical range remains absent. The present study addresses this gap by analyzing how a local female content creator strategically deploys Tagalog taboo terms not merely for artistic expression, but as a deliberate tool for verbal aggression, power assertion, and commercial self-promotion within a digital attention economy, specifically seeks to answer three core questions: (1) What specific taboo words and expressions are embedded in selected songs by Toni Fowler? (2) How are these terms structurally categorized according to Battistella's (2005) taxonomy? (3) What social functions do these taboo expressions fulfill based on Wardhaugh's (2006) functional model? This research contributes novel empirical insights into the structural types and communicative functions of taboo language within Philippine popular culture and social media music.

2. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative sociolinguistic research design focused on textual and lyrical analysis. Qualitative inquiry is uniquely suited for examining human communication and socio-cultural phenomena in their natural contexts, seeking deep interpretative understanding rather than statistical generalization (Curry, 2024; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Flick, 2018).

The research corpus comprised four widely circulated digital music tracks performed by Toni Fowler: 'MNM' (5.4 million YouTube views), 'MPL' (2.1 million views on Fowler's official channel), 'SUS' (2.6 million views), and 'FF' (862,000 views on a secondary hip-hop channel following the deletion of the original official video). These tracks were selected via purposive sampling based on their high digital viewership, cultural saturation, and heavy concentration of controversial language.

Data collection involved the complete transcription of the official song lyrics, followed by rigorous audio-visual cross-verification against the published music videos. Analytical procedures were guided by dual sociolinguistic frameworks: Battistella's (2005) fourfold structural taxonomy for term categorization, and Wardhaugh's (2006) fourfold functional taxonomy for communicative purpose analysis (Holmes & Wilson, 2017; Korneeva et al., 2019; Perdhani et al., 2021; Puri et al., 2024; Zenner et al., 2019). Each identified taboo expression was extracted, classified, codified, translated into English, and contextualized within the broader narrative of the song.

3. Results and Discussion

Taboo words and expressions can be classified into four categories based on their types and patterns of use. Analyzing these categories facilitates understanding the relationship between such linguistic forms and the personality traits and communicative intentions of individuals who use them. Allan and Burridge (2006, p. 2) and Sinarman and Ferri (2022) note that the

English word *taboo* derives from the Tongan term *tabu*, which gained scholarly attention in the late eighteenth century. Allan and Burridge also reference Radcliffe-Brown, who states that in Polynesian languages, the term means "to forbid" or "forbidden" and may refer to any form of prohibition.

Based on the researcher's analysis of four songs by Toni Fowler, namely "MNM," "MPL," "FF," and "SUS," various types of taboo words and expressions were identified, along with the ways in which they were employed in the songs' lyrics. Table 1 presents the findings on the types of taboo expressions identified in the selected songs. The analysis draws on Battistella's (2005) theoretical classification of taboo expressions and the categorization proposed by Puri et al. (2024).

3.1. Structural Classification of Taboo Words

Applying Battistella's (2005) taxonomy, the 27 identified taboo expressions were classified into four structural categories: Epithets, Profanity, Vulgarity, and Obscenity. Table 1 summarizes the frequency distribution across these categories.

Table 1. ***Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Taboo Words by Structural Category***

Category (Battistella, 2005)	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Epithets	10	37.0%
Profanity	0	0.0%
Vulgarity	8	29.6%
Obscenity	9	33.3%
Total	**27**	**100.0%**

The following are examples of epithet-based taboo words identified in Toni Fowler's songs. These expressions specifically reference race, ethnicity, sexuality, or gender and serve to insult, ridicule, or disparage the targeted individuals (Battistella, 2005, as cited in Puri et al., 2024).

List of Identified Epithet-Based Taboo Words:

E1. *Oh **loko** anong balita ba't mainit*

E2. *Ang sexy-sexy ng 'yong body 'yan ang gusto ko na **milf***

E3. ***Malibog** 'pag lasing*

E4. *Ngiti mong **daks** matsutsupa ka sa tabi*

E5. ***bitch** na peke*

E6. ***Tuta**, kamusta dog food?*

E7. *Karma is a **bitch**, buhay ka pang inuuod Kahit wala kang ama, pukinangina*

E8. *Para sa pera **nagkaputa-puta***

E9. *Pero lalaki daw, **walwal** ay ayos lang sa kanila*

E10. *'Yung iba **nagpalaglag** ba't tawag na dalaga 'kala mo kung sinong mabait*

The lyrical speaker addresses several individuals using derogatory, gendered, and objectifying language. The passage refers broadly to physical appearance, perceived intimate behavior, intoxication, dishonesty, subservience, financial motives, social double standards, and reproductive experience. These references function pragmatically as ridicule, character attacks, moral condemnation, reputational harm, and intensified verbal aggression.

The coded expressions **E1–E10** are used to characterize the individuals addressed or described by the lyrical speaker. Within their respective contexts, these expressions may be perceived as offensive, derogatory, or insulting. Hughes (2015, as cited in Puri et al., 2024) explains that epithets can be harmful and demeaning because they may reinforce negative stereotypes and contribute to the marginalization of particular social groups. Puri et al. (2024) further assert that the use of such expressions may perpetuate prejudice and discrimination, causing targeted individuals to feel disrespected and socially excluded.

Husda et al. (2021) likewise identify cursing as a category of taboo language used to condemn a person, object, or situation. Such language is generally intended to cause emotional

harm through particular words or phrases. In the selected lyrics, these expressions may therefore be interpreted as linguistic devices through which the speaker communicates hostility, contempt, ridicule, or condemnation toward the intended target.

On the other hand, in discussions of vulgar words or expressions exhibiting vulgarity, the term generally refers to coarse language that conveys sexual meanings (Battistella, 2005, as cited in Puri et al., 2024). Although vulgarity and obscenity are often treated as overlapping categories, vulgarity is generally considered less severe than obscenity, which more explicitly evokes sexual desire.

In the songs by Toni Fowler examined in this study, the researcher identified several vulgar expressions carrying sexual connotations that may evoke suggestive interpretations among listeners or readers. These include references to intimate parts of the human body, as well as actions or behaviors that are generally considered inappropriate or offensive in public discourse. To maintain scholarly sensitivity, the explicit examples are not reproduced verbatim but are instead categorized according to their semantic references and pragmatic functions.

To maintain analytical clarity and academic rigor, the identified vulgar expressions were codified as **V1–V8** alongside its corresponding lyrical excerpt to examine its semantic content and pragmatic function.

List of Identified Vulgar-Based Taboo Words:

V1. *Hot mommy'ng malupit* ***sumasarap 'pag may dumidilig***
V2. *Ako na* ***nagpa-suso*** *pero mas mukhang bata*
V3. *Paluin mo ang aking* ***pwet***
V4. ***Masarap na mommy***
V5. *mo at ang* ***yummy mo***
V6. *Gusto ko 'yung* ***nakakapa kong malaki***
V7. *Isampal ko kaya ang* ***suso*** *ko sa'yong mukha?*
V8. *Anong nangyari, boy, sa ibang* ***puki*** *napunta*

The use of explicit and offensive language, particularly when intimate behavior is represented in a degrading manner, may be regarded as objectionable and humiliating. Such language reduces human intimacy to crude and overly simplistic terms, disregarding the complexity, personal boundaries, and mutual respect that should inform discussions of intimate relationships (Puri et al., 2024). Nevertheless, Jay (2009, as cited in Mahayana et al., 2020) argues that taboo language is not used solely to express anger or frustration. It may also perform other communicative functions, including initiating humor, establishing interpersonal closeness, facilitating storytelling, and expressing social commentary.

The final category of taboo language is **obscenity**, which encompasses expressions associated with intimate bodily anatomy and bodily functions and may be intended to evoke sexual desire (Battistella, 2005; Puri et al., 2024).

Several expressions classified as obscene were identified in the selected songs by Toni Fowler. These items include explicit references to intimate body parts and acts, as well as figurative expressions with strongly suggestive meanings. For ethical and scholarly presentation, the nine identified obscene expressions were assigned alphanumeric codes **(O1–O9)** to facilitate systematic categorization, and cross-referencing throughout the analysis.

List of Identified Obscenity-Based Taboo Words:

O1. *'Di mo malalaman kung 'di mo malalasahan sarap ng* ***puking may tahi***
O2. *Pagkatapos kong mag-shot* ***sipsipin mo aking dila***
O3. *'Wag mong subukan* ***buo kitang isusubo***
O4. *Ngiti mong daks* ***matsutsupa*** *ka sa tabi*
O5. ***Ka-ka-kantutan*** *na agad 'di na kailangan ng ligaw*

O6. *Tuluy-tuloy mo na* ***higupin ang aking sabaw***

O7. ***sorbetes na tunaw pumutok sa aking siopao***

O8. *Yun pala lakwacha,* ***Bungang'ay nasa titian***

O9. ***Kinantot*** *ng pangako bigla kang nawalan*

These expressions may be perceived as highly offensive and coarse because they represent intimate behavior in an explicit and graphic manner (Hughes, 2015; Jay, 2009; Puri et al., 2024). From this perspective, obscene expressions may elicit strong negative reactions from listeners because of their degree of explicitness. Compared with vulgar language, obscenity is generally regarded as more severe and less acceptable in formal or public discourse.

The second part of this study examines how the taboo words identified in Toni Fowler's songs were used, drawing on Wardhaugh's (2006, as cited in Alfarisi et al., 2019) theoretical framework. Identifying the ways in which such expressions are employed is an important aspect of the analysis. Consistent with research on verbal aggression and power dynamics in communication (Infante & Rancer, 1996, as cited in Puri et al., 2024), the use of taboo language to convey contempt may constitute a form of verbal aggression. As suggested by Wardhaugh (2006), taboo expressions used to communicate contempt may also function as linguistic resources for asserting power and dominance in social interactions.

This assertion of power is consistent with the social functions of language, particularly in contexts such as popular music, in which performers may construct and project personas characterized by strength and authority (Puri et al., 2024). It may therefore be argued that an individual's use of language, whether in everyday communication or musical expression, is influenced by the social environment in which that individual operates. The language employed may also reflect aspects of the speaker's or performer's persona, lived experiences, beliefs, and cultural background.

Overall, the study indicates that the use of taboo language in popular music may perform communicative functions associated with verbal aggression and power assertion (Puri et al., 2024). Guided by the research questions outlined in the introductory section, the analysis focuses on identifying the types of taboo expressions used in selected popular songs by Toni Fowler and examining their contextual and pragmatic functions.

3.2. Communicative Functions of Taboo Words

Applying Wardhaugh's (2006) functional model, the 27 taboo expressions were analyzed to determine their primary communicative purpose. Table 2 presents the empirical distribution across the four functional categories.

Table 2. ***Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Taboo Words by Communicative Function***

Function (Wardhaugh, 2006)	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Drawing Attention to Oneself	16	59.3%
Showing Contempt	6	22.2%
Provoking Chaotic Reactions	5	18.5%
Mocking Authority	0	0.0%
Total	**27**	**100.0%**

Table 3. ***Taboo Expressions Classified by Communicative Function***

Drawing Attention to Oneself	Showing Contempt	Provoking Chaotic Reactions
Hot mommy'ng malupit sumasarap 'pag may dumidilig	bitch na peke	Oh loko anong balita ba't mainit
Ako na nagpa-suso pero mas mukhang bata	Tuta, kamusta dog food?	'Yung iba nagpalaglag ba't tawag na dalaga 'kala mo kung sinong mabait
Paluin mo ang aking pwet	Karma is a bitch, buhay ka pang inuuod	Isampal ko kaya ang suso ko sa'yong mukha?
'Di mo malalaman kung 'di mo malalasahan sarap ng puking may tahi	Kinantot ng pangako bigla kang nawalan	Yun pala lakwacha, Bungang'ay nasa titian
Ang sexy-sexy ng 'yong body 'yan ang gusto ko na milf	Anong nangyari, boy, sa ibang puki napunta	Pero lalaki daw, walwal ay ayos lang sa kanila
Masarap na mommy mo at ang yummy mo	Para sa pera nagkaputa-puta	
Pagkatapos kong mag-shot sipsipin mo aking dila		
'Wag mong subukan buo kitang isususbo		
Malibog 'pag lasing		
Gusto ko 'yung nakakapa kong malaki		
Ngiti mong daks matsutsupa ka sa tabi		
Ngiti mong daks matsutsupa ka sa tabi		
Ka-ka-kantutan na agad 'di na kailangan ng ligaw		
Tuluy-tuloy mo na higupin ang aking sabaw		
sorbetes na tunaw pumutok sa aking siopao		
Kahit wala kang ama, pukinangina		

These forms of language are evident in many contemporary songs. As shown in the present analysis, songwriters and performers may employ them in different ways and for various communicative purposes. Contemporary music may therefore function as a site of cultural contestation and negotiation, enabling performers to question established norms and challenge dominant structures within society (Frith, 1996, as cited in Puri et al., 2024).

Consequently, the use of taboo words and expressions in Toni Fowler's music may function as a form of artistic expression that challenges established conventions within the music industry. At the same time, it may serve the strategic communicative purpose of attracting and maintaining audience attention. This interpretation is supported by the findings of the present study, in which attracting attention was identified as the most frequently occurring function of taboo language in the selected songs. Such linguistic choices may also contribute to the construction of a distinctive musical persona, thereby differentiating Fowler's work from other contemporary songs. Moreover, these expressions may be interpreted as artistic resources through which emotions and experiences are represented; however, any direct connection to the artist's personal life should be made cautiously unless supported by biographical or interview-based evidence.

Furthermore, the use of taboo words and expressions in popular music may provide singers and songwriters with a means of challenging and subverting dominant power structures within the music industry while allowing them to exercise artistic creativity (Puri et al., 2024). Examining the sociolinguistic dimensions of such songs is also valuable because these expressions often function as indicators of social dynamics and may reflect or influence relations involving power, privilege, and cultural significance (Puri et al., 2024).

The continued use of slang and taboo expressions in song lyrics may be viewed as a sociolinguistic phenomenon, particularly when such language gains acceptance and circulation within society. These expressions are also prevalent on social media platforms and in everyday

communication (Putri & Zakrimal, 2019). Their increasing normalization warrants examination because it may influence listeners' perceptions and patterns of language use.

Among the four songs analyzed, epithets were the most frequent category, with 10 recorded instances, followed by obscenity with nine and vulgarity with eight. The epithets primarily functioned as insulting, mocking, or disparaging descriptions of their intended targets. Expressions categorized as obscenity contained highly explicit references to intimate acts, whereas vulgar expressions involved coarse but comparatively less explicit references to intimate behavior or the human body. No instances of profanity were identified in the selected songs.

In terms of function, attracting attention was the most frequently observed use of taboo language in the selected songs by Toni Fowler, with 16 recorded instances. This finding indicates that taboo expressions function as attention-generating devices that increase audience engagement, stimulate public discussion, and enhance song visibility. Within the commercial context of popular music, the strategic deployment of such language contributes directly to promotional appeal and audience recall.

The second most frequent function was expressing contempt toward targeted individuals, accounting for six identified instances. Within these contexts, taboo expressions communicated ridicule, hostility, and negative evaluation, serving as a linguistic means of representing interpersonal tension and conflict. These expressions operate as linguistic resources through which the lyrical speaker conveys raw emotions associated with lived experiences rather than functioning solely as direct attempts to damage another person's reputation. Nevertheless, their usage can still cause emotional distress or offense to those being addressed.

The third function was eliciting strong or conflicting audience reactions, with five instances. This outcome may be associated with the two preceding functions, namely attracting attention and expressing contempt, both of which can generate controversy, disagreement, and debate among listeners. The use of taboo language may therefore increase audience engagement and the public visibility of the songs. However, the claim that these expressions were deliberately used to generate controversy and increase the artist's popularity cannot be established through textual analysis alone.

According to Husda et al. (2021), listeners who are not directly targeted by taboo expressions may interpret them not as insults or sources of humiliation but as context-dependent forms of entertainment intended to attract audience interest.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This sociolinguistic study demonstrates that the taboo expressions in Toni Fowler's music repertoire are highly structured and strategically deployed. Structurally, her lyrics rely heavily on Epithets (37.0%), Obscenity (33.3%), and Vulgarity (29.6%), while entirely avoiding religious Profanity (0.0%). Functionally, these terms serve primarily to Draw Attention to Oneself (59.3%), Show Contempt (22.2%), and Provoke Chaotic Reactions (18.5%), with no engagement in Mocking Authority (0.0%). Ultimately, the normalization of taboo language in digital music functions as a powerful commercial marketing strategy and an instrument for verbal power assertion, enabling artists to carve out lucrative brand niches within hyper-competitive digital media ecosystems.

Moreover, important limitations of this research must be acknowledged. Primarily, the study analyzed a small corpus of four songs by a single performer. Consequently, the findings reflect the individual linguistic choices and content strategies of one digital influencer and cannot be generalized to the broader landscape of Original Pilipino Music (OPM), Philippine hip-hop, or female songwriters as a whole. Furthermore, as a qualitative textual analysis, this study evaluated lyrical content directly and did not empirically measure audience reception, psychological impact, or behavioral outcomes among youth listeners. Broader societal concerns regarding the normalization of explicit language remain critical avenues for future interdisciplinary research involving audience impact assessments and media psychology.

Based on these empirical insights, the study offers the following actionable recommendations:

1. Enhanced Media Literacy and Parental Mediation: Parents, educators, and community leaders must implement active media literacy programs that educate young listeners on the commercial mechanics and sociolinguistic impacts of explicit digital music, encouraging critical evaluation over passive consumption (Mahayana et al., 2020).
2. Linguistic Responsibility Among Content Creators: While upholding artistic freedom, music artists and digital influencers are urged to exercise heightened ethical awareness regarding the developmental vulnerabilities of their young audience demographics, balancing provocative self-expression with social responsibility.
3. Platform Moderation and Age-Gating Integrity: Digital streaming services (YouTube, TikTok, Spotify) should refine their content classification algorithms and enforce robust age-restriction protocols to prevent unsupervised minors from accessing highly explicit obscenities.
4. Expansion of Sociolinguistic Research: Future scholars are encouraged to expand sociolinguistic investigations into regional Philippine dialects, exploring how taboo language functions across diverse ethno-linguistic communities, underground hip-hop subcultures, and emerging digital platforms.

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