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ENGL 110C

IMRAD Paper: Taboo Words

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## The “N Word”: Who Can Say It?

### 1.0 Introduction

The word "nigga" has been used in the United States for centuries as a way to put down African Americans. The word dates back to 1619 when the first slaves touched down in the ports of Virginia. As time has progressed many African Americans have taken back this word and have used it as a term of endearment. "In the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, the word 'nigga' is described as 'the most offensive and inflammatory racial slur in the English language'" (Rahman, 2011) but is that still true for African Americans today? The N-word has always been a "taboo" word but weaseling out who can say the expression and the feelings that get provoked when certain individuals use the term has made it even more controversial. The purpose of my research is to determine how individuals feel about the usage of the N-word. Many feel as if the word should be completely eradicated and others feel as if the word should continue to be used but only by certain individuals. Knowing if the word is acceptable to be used is important because of how much weight the term holds and the history of it as well. Many arguments are stating that, because everyone cannot say the term, no one should say the word. All words hold tremendous weight to them. There is the old saying that "stick and stones may break bones, but words will never hit me" but words do hurt. A certain word can trigger someone and bring them back to a place that could be traumatizing. Being careful about your choice of words is incredibly important and a skill that should be with all individuals lifelong.

## 1.1 Thesis Statement

This research examines African American women's feelings about the word "nigga" and its usage in everyday language.

## 2.0 Literature Review

In the journal article from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign "The word that you go hmmm: Exploring the relation between African Americans' linguistic ideologies, racial identity attitudes, and usage of the N-word" written by (Dodson 2014). Dodson did a study on African Americans and their usage of the N-word and found that though a whopping 79.9% of participants have used the word "nigga" at a point in time of their lives, 45.1% of participants believe that the word should be completely eradicated. Similarly, the journal article from the Journal of English Linguistics "The N Word: Its History and Use in the African American Community" talks about how there is an ongoing movement within the African American community to ban the use of the word "nigga". But because the word is used as a term of self-reference it will take major efforts for the word to be eradicated (Rahman, 2011). These two articles indicate that though the word is used in everyday language by most African Americans, many individuals wish that the word be eventually eliminated.

These articles show that language in certain communities has lasting impacts and that the meaning of certain terms can change drastically over time. Though many individuals in the black community still use the word, the word still holds an incredible amount of weight to it and because of that, it brings out a mix of emotions on many individuals both of color and white as well. These articles correspond directly with my research because many of the people on my

polls also felt that the term "nigga" should not be used in everyday language and that it made them feel degraded regardless of whose mouth the word was coming from.

### 3.0 Methods

In this section of the research paper, the description of research tools, the selection of participants, and the data collection process will be presented.

#### 3.1 Description of Research Tools

To conduct my research, I did a question-and-answer poll using social media, more specifically, Instagram. Because of the number of followers, I have on my Instagram, I knew that the number of responses would be sufficient enough to draw a conclusion. Social media is a great way to conduct research because it provides you with a massive amount of people all from different backgrounds and all with different points of view.

#### 3.2 Description of Participants

On my Instagram, I have over 900 followers so I knew that the number of responses would be pretty overwhelming and that I would get responses from different kinds of people. White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and many more answered my poll, so I had to sort through what demographic went along with what I wanted to research. Because most of my responses were from college-age black women, I decided that I would focus on this specific group of people. I also wanted to make sure that the individuals I got my results from were not only educated but had firsthand experiences with the word.

### 3.3 Description of Data Collection

On my Instagram story I put out the question "How do you feel when you hear the N-word?" and participants were able to easily tap on the box and respond to that question. On the next slide of my Instagram story, I asked them to elaborate on what feelings and or thoughts are provoked when hearing the term, and like the previous slide, they were able to tap on the box and respond. My Instagram story stayed up on social media for 24 hours and I got around 200 responses. To organize all the responses I received, I set up a folder in my camera roll on my phone labeled "IMRAD Paper: N-Word Results". I then went back to the results on my Instagram story and screenshotted all of my responses I got from college-aged black women and put them in the folder. When sorting through my responses, I selected 5 responses I thought were sufficient enough to conclude.

### 4.0 Results

I asked 10 college-aged black women how they feel when they hear the word "nigga". Here are the results.

Participants	How do you feel when you hear the word "nigga"?	What are the reasons for feeling that way?
Participant A	"Indifferent most of the time"	"I feel like nowadays the word has a different meaning then it used to but I still don't like when white people say it."

Participant B	“Not a fan”	<p>“Because of the history of the word, I just feel like it shouldn’t be said at all. I feel like because other races hear us say it all the time, they feel like they have the right to say it too.”</p>
Participant C	“Angry”	<p>“When said by other black people I am okay because we’ve turned that word into a term of endearment when greeting one another. But I am leaning more towards getting rid of it as a whole because the history behind it is too much to bear. I want to keep the past in the past so we, as a society, can move on for good.</p>
Participant D	“Uncomfortable”	<p>“I think it makes me uncomfortable because I don’t usually say the n-word, but I mean it’s fine if other</p>

		black people say it, but I just prefer not to because of its harsh meaning.”
Participant E	“Okay if black people say it but angry if anyone who isn’t black says it”	“I feel like it is incredibly derogatory if non-African Americans say the word because of the past and slavery but now, I almost feel proud that black people can say the word and not really feel much from it because we have taken the word back and made it our own and gave it our own meaning. It’s empowering.”

Most of the participants had the same understanding of feeling uncomfortable and not wanting any person who isn't African American to say the N-word. 3 out of 5 (participants B, C, and D) of the participants also stated that they try not to say the word because of the history of the word. Participant C stated that she was "leaning more towards getting rid of the word as a whole because the history behind it is too much to bear". Similarly, Participant B stated that she was "not a fan because of the history it holds". Participant D explained deeper that the word "nigga" will forever be a permanent scar on the African American community and every time the

word is used, the wound opens back up. She then went on to say that African Americans, won't let themselves heal. 2 out of the 5 participants stated that they feel indifferent and okay when they hear the word "nigga" as long as it comes from an African American. Both stated that the word doesn't have the same meaning as it used to, so they don't feel anything when they hear the term.

## 5.0 Discussion

The purpose of my research was to determine how young college-age black women feel when they hear the word "nigga". What surprised me the most was the high emotions that sparked throughout all my participants when hearing the N-word. Many individuals automatically said that the word makes them feel uncomfortable which amazed me because of how much I hear the word daily. After conducting my research, I concluded that most college-age African American women prefer not to use the N-word simply because it's just not their favorite word and the story and history behind it but are okay if other black people say it. My research compared to other studies definitely add up regarding not wanting non-African Americans to use the word, but it also corresponds with the fact that many people in the black community believe that the term "nigga" should be completely eradicated because of the emotional scarring that gets provoked when hearing the term. There could potentially be more research conducted with a different demographic and a lot more participants. Doing this would give a much broader view of how the entire African American community feels about the N-word being used. In conclusion, words have a lot of depth, meaning, and significance behind them but who says it has just as much significance as well.





## Work Cited

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### Reflection Paragraph

This paper was definitely one of the hardest papers I have ever written. In most papers I have written, I have had to pick a side rather than writing about something as unique as to how someone feels when they hear a certain word. I was constantly having to go back and rewrite paragraphs because I was stating my perspective on the n-word. I also had a lot of trouble researching how the n-word is perceived by other African Americans. The whole concept of the paper was incredibly interesting because I have never had to think so deeply into words and their meanings and the feelings that they provoke in other individuals. When I first started my research, I wasn't sure how to go about finding my participants and I wasn't sure what demographic I wanted my research to be on. I knew I wanted my demographic to be black and educated because I feel like when you are educated, a lot of your opinions have a lot of thought and facts behind them. So, going with college-aged African American women was an easy choice. Because I didn't take an English course last semester, I feel insanely rusty with just putting words together and collecting my thoughts enough to put them on paper for them to make sense. All in all, this paper was thought-provoking and really interesting to both research and write. Hopefully, the next paper will be a little easier for me to get through and hopefully the process goes a little smoother.