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ARTICLE

Taboo and Sensitive Language in Inclusive Subtitles: Gauging Tolerance Thresholds in a Maltese Context

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ABSTRACT

Malta's localization practices largely rely on inclusive subtitles in English or Maltese, a combined translation–accessibility solution that delivers linguistic, cultural, and sensory access in line with a universalist approach. This article reports an in-depth reception study designed to gauge Maltese viewers' tolerance thresholds for taboo and other categories of sensitive language in inclusive subtitles, with the aim of corroborating or refining local subtitling guidelines. Drawing on clips from US English TV shows streamed on Netflix, respondents compared paired subtitled versions that employed four distinct strategies—attenuation, equivalent impact, omission, and aggravation—across varied genres, contexts, characterizations, and functions of taboo language. The online survey combined immediate reactions with subsequent, more reflective responses; qualitative findings were analyzed alongside demographic variables (age, gender, education, locality). Contrary to expectations derived from earlier work suggesting general acceptance of vulgar expressions, results indicate a clear overall preference for attenuation strategies for expletives irrespective of taboo category or narrative context. Complete omission emerged as the favored approach specifically for blasphemous language. As for sensitive language concerning sexual orientation, race, and mental health, participants initially preferred the less derogatory renditions, though this preference was less pronounced than with other taboo categories. Notably, when respondents were prompted to focus on these sensitive topics and reflect, their responses shifted and became more contemplative, producing subtler and more varied stances. Responses also became more nuanced when participants considered a hypothetical policy on vulgar language in

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Maltese inclusive subtitles. These findings support targeted adjustments to local guidelines, emphasizing attenuation for expletives and omission for blasphemy, while recommending context-aware policies for other sensitive categories.
Keywords: Keywords: Inclusive Subtitles; Tolerance Threshold; Sensitive Language; Taboo Language; Reception Study

1. Approaches to Taboo Language

Taboo language remains one of the most complex and contentious translation issues in media localization and media access workflows. It continues to spark debates and polarize opinions across the industry. While traditional television (TV) broadcasts often tone down or censor such content, streaming platforms increasingly advocate for non-censorship policies, relying only on the use of warning labels[1,2]. The sensitivity to taboo language can vary significantly depending on several factors: medium, target audience, target culture, narrative context and function, the type of product and associated viewer expectations, time of broadcast (if applicable), and more. Moreover, demographic factors such as age, social class, and gender also influence tolerance thresholds to taboo language. For instance, research by the British Broadcasting Standards Commission indicates that people are more accepting of taboo language when uttered by male speakers, as it is conventionally associated with masculine traits[3]. Tolerance thresholds also evolve, adding a layer of complexity to the issue. A recent Ofcom user-centered research[4] found that viewers are now less tolerant of racist or discriminatory language (irrespective of the watershed timing), but generally more tolerant of other offensive language, such as swear words, than they were in the last study in 2010. Ofcom also confirms that the context in which the language is used changes viewers' perspectives.

Subtitling guidelines worldwide have traditionally recommended toning down vulgar expressions in subtitles across languages[5], particularly for traditional media such as TV. This decontextualized recommendation is generally justified by the supposed impact caused by the shift from the oral to the written medium. However, major streaming platforms instruct subtitlers to render expletives as faithfully as possible[1,2]. Over the years, academic research has extensively engaged with the censorship debate[6–10], and the treatment of taboo language in Audiovisual Translation (AVT), offering varying perspectives[11–14]. Tveit[15] argues that swear words serve little purpose in filmic dialogue and should be avoided. Conversely, Ávila-Cabrera[6] contends that attenuating or eliminating taboo words might hinder their intended effect in the narrative context, while Bednarek[7] and Xavier[8] highlight the importance and impact of swearwords on characterization. Strategies for handling such language range from omission and attenuation to negotiation or partial transfer, and in some cases, addition and aggravation[5]. The choice of strategy may depend on various constraints, including space and time limitations, territorial norms or conventions, the client's instructions, in-house guidelines, and possibly the translator's default self-censorship.

The recent trend of integrating inclusion and diversity policies has broadened the definition of taboo language to encompass broader sensitive content and language[16]. In fact, in this context, the term 'taboo language' is used as an umbrella term to encompass vulgar and obscene language, as well as profane and blasphemous expressions. The research also extends to other sensitive issues, including gender identity, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, disabilities, and mental health issues. Ávila-Cabrera's[6] categorization serves as a foundational framework due to its broad approach, which partially addresses these other sensitive topics, and was further adapted to align with the specific objectives of this research. It focuses on the Maltese context, where inclusive subtitles are generally adopted to accommodate a wide range of user needs. This mode integrates translation and accessibility, offering linguistic, cultural, and sensory access in one comprehensive solution, in alignment with the universalist approach[17,18].

Consultation with local experts on the Maltese language and a search for relevant literature revealed a scarce number of publications addressing spoken or written taboo language. In examining local perceptions of spoken vulgar and obscene language, Barbara and Scicluna[19] and Scerri[20] focus on youth communication, while Bellia[21] explores perceptions of offensive language in general. Barbara and Scicluna[19] discuss the common view that vulgar and obscene language imply rude behavior and poor manners, yet they suggest that informal language among youth may serve to create infor-

mality and intimacy. Scerri[20] identifies the use of vulgar and socially unacceptable terms as a distinguishing characteristic of youth communication, contrasting with adult communication. Gender differences are notable, as both studies reveal that vulgar language is more prevalent in male speech. Additionally, Bellia[21] examines attitudes toward vulgar and blasphemous language, finding that Catholics perceive this language as more offensive compared to non-Catholics. Among sensitive topics, homophobic language was deemed the most offensive, followed by racist and then sexist language.

Regarding local AVT research and applied experiments, Taliana[22] (analyzes viewer responses to Maltese inclusive subtitles in the series La Casa De Papel[23]. Given the extensive use of taboo language in the original Spanish version, Taliana discusses the challenges of translating such expressions into Maltese. Taliana notes that while profane language is frequently used in Maltese social settings, its impact is heightened when used in subtitles. Interestingly, Taliana's findings indicate that 84.21% of the 117 respondents (including 12 hard-of-hearing participants) were not disturbed by vulgar and obscene language in subtitles, suggesting a strong tolerance for such content.

The local subtitle guidelines[24,25] currently recommend toning down vulgar language depending on the medium, target audience, and individual narrative context within the audiovisual content, considering its function and relevance to the plot, characters, or circumstance. In the case of free-to-air TV channels, the recommendation is to always tone down vulgar language by seeking similar, though softer equivalents. More flexibility can be applied in the case of feature films in cinema theatres, pay platforms and services, and online platforms in general. Furthermore, the guidelines recommend using up-to-date inclusive language to refer to ethnicity, race, age, mental health disorders, religion, sexual orientation, disabilities, and other related subjects. This applies especially to non-fiction productions. Non-inclusive language can be considered in fictional productions if it serves the plot and characterization, provided it is contextualized and aligned with the original creative intent. Building upon Taliana's experimental research, this study integrates different variables to analyze the reception of subtitles from English into Maltese, the island's official languages, which naturally prompts comparison.

Rationale and Aims of Study

Malta emerges as a burgeoning ground for experimentation in localization and accessibility practices. As mentioned earlier, these mainly encompass the provision of inclusive subtitles[24,25]—a mode integrating translation and accessibility, offering linguistic, cultural, and sensory access in one comprehensive solution, in alignment with the universalist approach that caters to a wider spectrum of viewers[17,18].

These proposed guidelines offer technical and linguistic specifications tailored for both English and Maltese, specifically within a local Maltese context. They employ a user-centered approach informed by various reception studies, which examined aspects such as reading speed, loanwords[26], speaker identification, sound tags, and degree of condensation[27], among others. These studies, which are part of the mission and vision of the Inclusive Arts and Research Lab at the University of Malta, provided valuable insights to further refine these guidelines, making them available to practitioners and stakeholders. This study also adopts a user-centered approach and conducts a reception study on taboo language, a specific element included in the local guidelines. This research methodology has been notably recognized in AVT scholarship by researchers such as Di Giovanni and Gambier[28], Kuscu-Ozbudak[29], Nikolić[30], Szarkowska et al.[31], and Wu and Chen[32], particularly in the realm of subtitling. Moreover, both quantitative and qualitative methods are employed to collect and analyze the data, in line with Saldanha and O'Brien's[33] discussion of research methodologies in Translation Studies.

Local norms and guidelines are still evolving, and adherence to traditional conventions may not necessarily be the most suitable way forward. Drawing from earlier research[22] suggesting the local viewers' high tolerance towards vulgar expressions, this paper presents the findings of an in-depth reception study aimed at gauging tolerance thresholds to taboo and sensitive language in Maltese inclusive subtitles.

The main objective of this research is to corroborate or further shape the local taboo-related inclusive subtitling guidelines[24,25] based on viewer responses. It seeks to explore whether it is necessary to tone down taboo language, in line with the proposed local guidelines and global traditional norms, particularly in conventional media. Furthermore, it seeks to explore whether viewer responses vary according to demographics and participant profile, particularly age,

gender, locality, and level of education.

2. Methodology

The study aimed to analyze viewer responses to taboo and sensitive language and required a practice-based component and a reception study.

2.1. Sample Selection and the Subtitling Process

This stage involved creating inclusive subtitles in Maltese for a series of excerpts, following a specific set of technical and linguistic guidelines. The subtitles were created using Ooona's tools, Create Pro and Review Pro (Ooona). The technical parameters guiding the subtitling process were based on the local inclusive subtitling guidelines [24,25], as stated above.

The excerpts were sourced from US TV shows streamed on Netflix, and included a diverse range of subgenres: crime, psychological thriller, political drama, teen drama, and political thriller. Selection criteria focused on the density of featured taboo language, as well as the variety of contexts, narratives, characterizations, and functions of taboo and sensitive language. All shows included in the study are rated for severe to moderate profanity on IMDb. The sample encompasses two excerpts from *13 Reasons Why* [34]; two from *House of Cards* [35]; three from *Orange Is the New Black* [36]; and two from *Ozark* [37]. Each excerpt was between one and four minutes long. English-language series were deliberately selected to facilitate comparison between the original audio and the Maltese subtitles, taking into account Malta's bilingual context.

The excerpts were presented according to various subcategories of taboo language following Ávila-Cabrera's [6] taxonomy, as illustrated in **Table 1**. He proposes two main categories: the first includes insults, swear words, expletives, and invectives, which he classifies as 'offensive language'; the second encompasses blasphemous words, animal name terms, ethnic/racial/gender slurs, and references to psychological or physical conditions, sexual content, scatology, filth, drug and alcohol consumption, violence, and death, which he refers to as 'taboo language'. This taxonomy was adapted to better suit the purposes of this study and to reflect the specific excerpts selected.

Each excerpt was subtitled twice using different translation strategies. A variety of strategies were experimented with to prompt a broader range of audience reactions. These included attenuation, total or partial transfer (by quantifying and weighing impact), omission or replacement with neutral terms, addition, or aggravation, drawing on Díaz Cintas and Remael [5], as illustrated in **Table 2**. The density of taboo language in each excerpt is indicated in the other tables further on.

Table 1. Adapted taxonomy of taboo language [6].

Category	Subcategory	Examples Drawn from Excerpts
Taboo	Profanity/Blasphemy	• Goddamn • Jesus
Taboo	Scatology/Excrement	• Shitting
Offensive	Vulgarity/Obscenity	• Fuck/fucking • Pair of balls • Motherfuckers • Hard dick • Ass • Turd-bags • Bitches • Cunt-ramming
Taboo	Sexual Orientation	• Fags
Taboo	Race	• Indians
Taboo	Mental Health	• Retarded

Table 2. Overview of applied strategies.

Series	Excerpt	Strategy 1	Strategy 2
Ozark	1 (4.11 min.)	Partial transfer, attenuation	Total transfer
Ozark	2 (1.41 min.)	Replacement with neutral terms, omission	Total transfer
13 Reasons Why	3 (0.47 min.)	Total transfer, addition	Replacement with neutral terms
House of Cards	4 (1.48 min.)	Borrowing in English	Translation in Maltese
13 Reasons Why	5 (2.36 min.)	Shift in vulgar categorization	Attenuation
House of Cards	6 (0.33 min.)	Partial Transfer, attenuation	Total transfer
Orange is the New Black	7 (2.10 min.)	Total transfer, borrowing in English	Omission, attenuation
Orange is the New Black	8 (1.04 min.)	Attenuation, omission, replacement with neutral term	Total transfer, aggravation
Orange is the New Black	9 (1.24 min.)	Total transfer, aggravation	Omission, attenuation, replacement with neutral terms

2.2. Reception Study Design

The reception study was conducted through an online survey incorporating the subtitled video excerpts. The anonymous survey was publicized mainly through social media and further distributed via personal channels to avoid the underrepresentation of a specific demographic group (60+) that was observed during the response collection process. Participants were expected to watch all 9 excerpts, featuring a set of two different subtitled versions for each one. Each set was followed by an average of three questions to gauge their reactions. Respondents were first asked to choose their preferred version (1 or 2) to gather a direct and immediate response. Subsequently, they were asked to reflect and provide more pondered responses to specific questions that guided them to reflect on the function of the taboo language used in each excerpt, while also drawing their attention to contextual elements, plot, and characterization, even though these could also be inferred from the visuals.

Each clip was therefore shown twice to every participant, facilitating the comparison between different strategies. Since respondents watched each video clip twice—gaining familiarity with the context on the second viewing—the strategies for each excerpt were randomly shuffled to minimize order bias. For example, Excerpt 1 might feature attenuation followed by total transfer, while Excerpt 2 might present a more derogatory version first, followed by omission. The survey was conducted using Typeform, which allowed the researchers to disable multiple viewing options. As a result, participants could only watch each version once, minimizing potential bias caused by repeated exposure to the videos. Each set of videos was viewed without any prior information or strategy details. Respondents were initially asked to select their preferred version. They were then guided with additional questions and provided with strategy details, encouraging them to compare and evaluate the two versions, and to reflect on how their opinions influenced their perception of the subtitles presented. In this study, initial reactions were deemed highly significant because they reflect the immediacy of the subtitling experience. The qualitative data collected were further analyzed in relation to the respondents' profiles, demographics, and psychographics, including age, gender, education level, locality, as well as sexual orientation and subtitling viewing habits.

The reception study employed various question formats, including rating scales, matrices, long-answer questions, and multiple-choice questions. The survey questions accompanying each excerpt aimed to gather reactions and responses on the following: 1) What is the local tolerance threshold for vulgar language in Maltese subtitles? 2) Is it necessary to censor language to meet international subtitling standards? 3) Should the local guidelines on vulgar language be amended? 4) Are differences in response due to social status disparities or other demographics or psychographics?

The next section presents the findings and analysis of the reception study, including tables that detail the strategies used in the experiment. These tables outline the context, strategies, and extrapolate some examples from each excerpt and category of taboo or sensitive language. The full questionnaire without the audiovisual content is retrievable online as **Supplementary Materials**, while the full set of Maltese subtitles used for the reception study is provided in **Supplementary Materials**.

This study was conducted under ethics approval code ARTS/2022/00156, granted under the auspices of the Faculty of Arts, University of Malta. All procedures were carried out in accordance with the University of Malta's research ethics policies and relevant national and international guidelines. Participants provided informed consent where applicable, confidentiality and data protection were maintained, and any

potential risks were minimized.

3. Main Findings Drawn from Each Taboo Language/Sensitive Language Category

This section presents the findings based on the analysis of data collected through the reception study. The questionnaire was completed by 265 respondents. An initial section focused on gathering demographic and psychographic data. Age distribution was fairly balanced among 18–24 (80 respondents), 25–39 (69), and 40–60 (88) groups, with fewer participants aged 60+ (28 respondents). Most respondents were from the South of Malta (71.3%). Gender distribution was 62.3% female and 37.7% male. The majority (80.4) identified as heterosexual. Education levels varied, with the largest groups being postsecondary (30.9%) and bachelor's degree holders (27.9%). Maltese was considered the native language for 98.5% of participants and 64.2% of the participants indicated English as their preferred language for audiovisual content. The most widely used means of audiovisual content consumption were social media (182 respondents) and streaming platforms (175 respondents). Drama, crime, and comedy were the top genre preferences. Before being asked about their familiarity with vulgar language in audiovisual products, the audience was first asked whether such language bothers them in everyday conversations: 34.7% declared feeling disturbed when hearing such language and don't use it; 31.7% are not disturbed, but avoid using it themselves; 25.3% are disturbed depending on the degree of vulgarity; and 8.3% use it daily. The viewers were then asked whether they feel offended or bothered when hearing vulgar language in Maltese local productions. 27.5% of the participants are offended by spoken vulgar language in local productions, 24.9% would prohibit written forms of vulgar language on screen, and 21.5% declared having a zero tolerance towards blasphemy. This aligns with previous findings that emerged in Taliana's [22] study who found that 84.21% of the 117 respondents (including 12 hard-of-hearing participants) in his research were not disturbed by vulgar and obscene language in subtitles, suggesting a strong tolerance for such content.

The subsections below are organized according to how the excerpts were presented to the participants, specifically categorized by different types of taboo language. For clarity, each subsection includes a table that briefly summarizes the strategies used—this time alongside the narrative context and incorporating a few terms to exemplify the strategies. These examples are extrapolated from the Maltese subtitles. Due to space constraints, as noted earlier, the full set of Maltese subtitles is provided in **Supplementary Materials**. The tables below are complemented by an analytical overview of the main findings, supported by percentage data.

3.1. Vulgarity and Obscenity

In Excerpt 1 (**Table 3**), 54.3% of the respondents accurately identified the number of vulgarities in the original dialogue. 45.3% preferred the version that omitted some of the terms and toned down others, while 24.9% preferred the fully vulgar version. Terms relating to body parts were considered the most vulgar.

In Excerpt 2 (**Table 3**), despite the explicit nature and function of the expletives in the scene, 44.9% preferred neutral expressions, while 42.3% opted for version 2 and noted that context makes such language more tolerable.

Additionally, as illustrated in **Figure 1**, screenshot-based multiple-choice questions were presented, showing the subtitle options to facilitate a direct comparison of the 'impact' of the Maltese subtitles versus the English audio. Participants had to select one of three responses: English sounds stronger, Maltese sounds stronger, or both sound equally strong. Respondents consistently perceived Maltese vulgar terms as stronger than their English equivalents, even in cases where the Maltese version could potentially be considered a translation 'equivalent'. This could be attributed to the fact that 98% of the participants consider Maltese to be their native language, which aligns with research on the perception of taboo language in bilingual or multilingual individuals [38]. The primary example to showcase this point is the literal translation *Imma mhux bilfors iqumilhom żobbhom* to translate *But his dick ain't necessarily hard.* 66.79% of the participants stated that the Maltese translation sounds stronger, even though it is an equivalent to the English original. These two excerpts also produced findings as to which expletives the participants would rather omit in the translated subtitles, as illustrated in **Figure 2**. The results indicate that żikk *(the hell),* inżeggeg *(screw that)* and bajd *(balls)* are highly tolerated compared to the rest on the list. These insights can be valuable in guiding decisions on how to tone down language if necessary.

Table 3. Translation strategies for vulgarity and obscenity.

Excerpt	Narrative Context	Taboo Expressions in Original	Strategy 1	Strategy 2
1. Ozark	The Langmore brothers used laundered money stolen by their cousin Ruth to purchase two female bobcats.	*fuck* × 6 *fucking* × 4 *balls* × 1 *Goddamn* × 1 *motherfuckers* × 1	**Partial transfer: retained some vulgar language, softened other expressions.** Examples: *xiż-żikk (what the hell), l-ostra (freaking), inżeggeg (screw that), qaħba (bitch), iż-żobb (literal: dick), par bajd (balls), illistra (my goodness)*	**Total transfer: all vulgar language is retained.** Examples: *xiż-żobb (what the fuck, literal: dick), l-ostja (literal: sacred host), inżabbab (fuck that, literal: over my dick), Madonna (Virgin Mary), għoxx (literal: pussy), iż-żobb (literal: dick), il-liba (literal: semen), l-ostja (literal: sacred host), par bajd (balls), ħaqq Alla (Goddamn)*
2. Ozark	As part of a plan to break into the stripping club safety deposit box, the main character applies for a stripping job at the club, in which she is to be interviewed.	*hard dick* × 3 *fucking* × 1	**Replacement with neutral term.** Examples: *mqanqlin (horny)*	**Total transfer: all obscene language is retained.** Examples: *żobb imqajjem (aroused dick), ostja (literal: sacred host)*

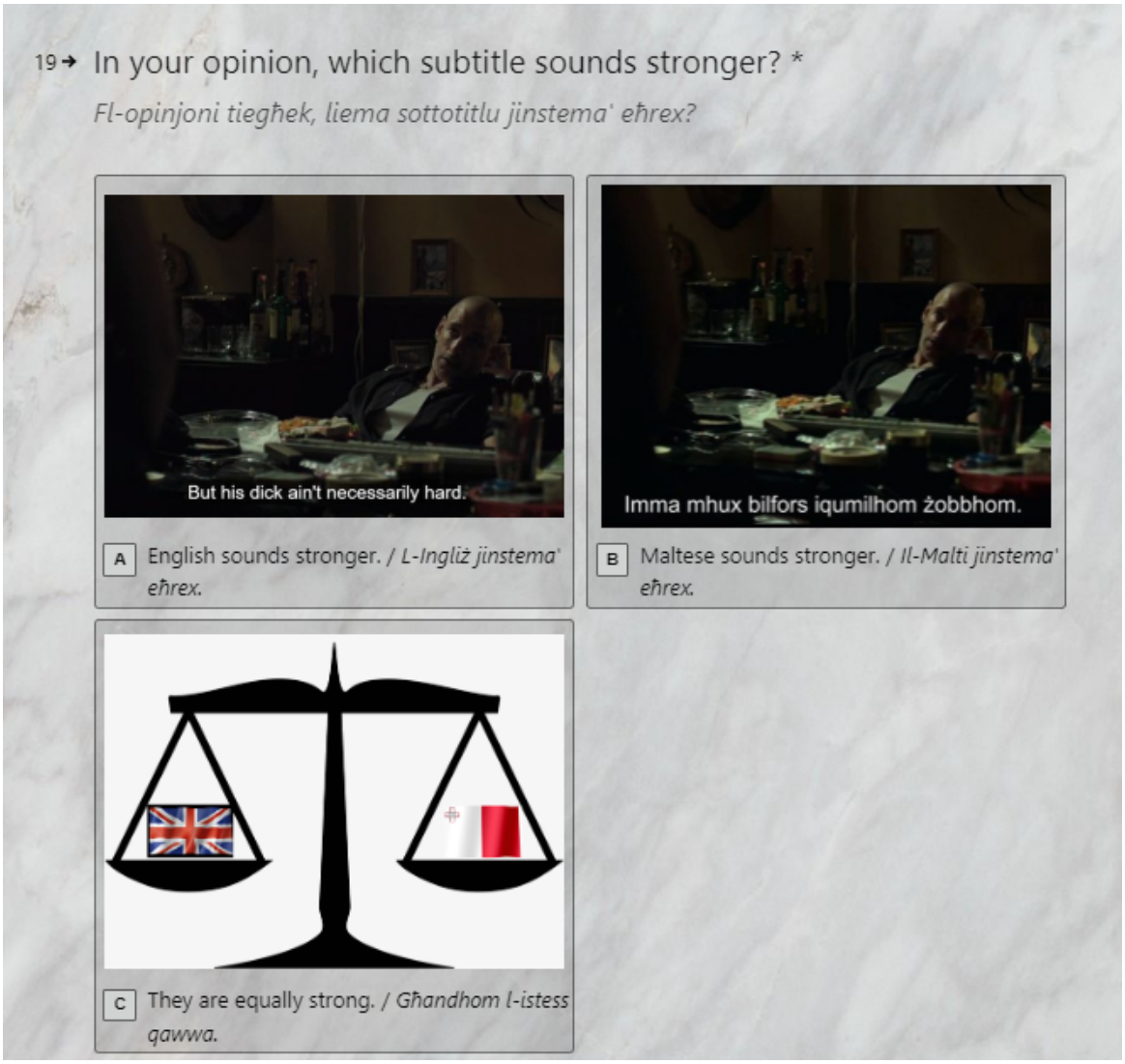

Figure 1. Screenshot-based multiple-choice question.

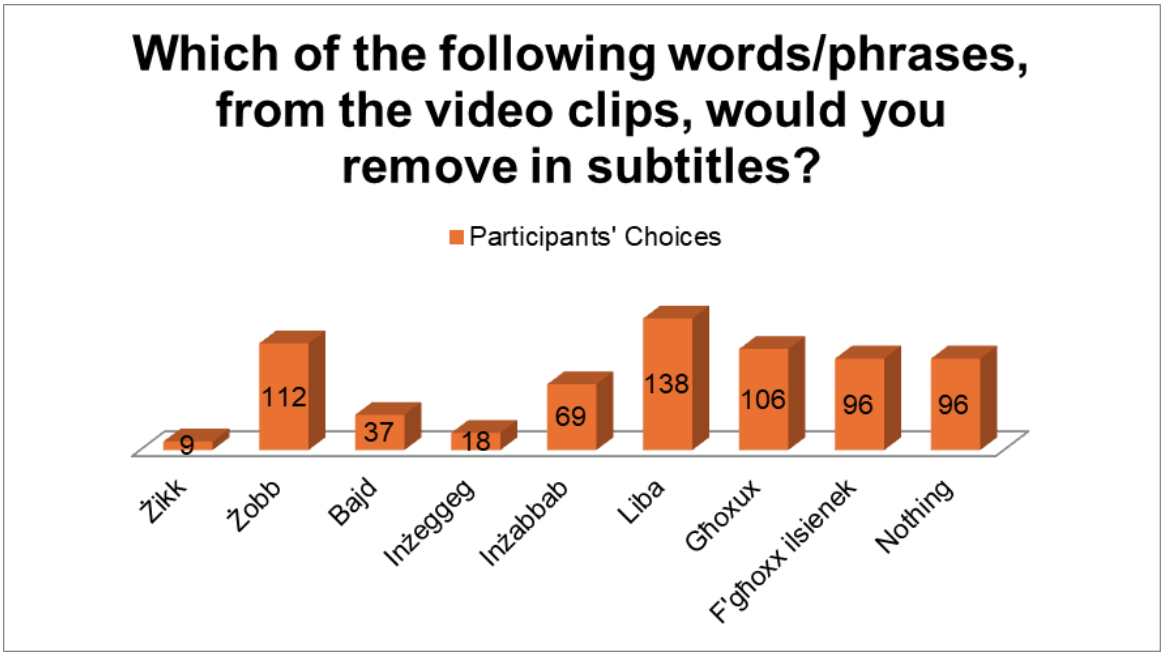

Figure 2. Expletive terms that participants would omit.

3.2. Blasphemy

In Excerpt 3 (**Table 4**), 62.6% of the participants preferred the version that avoided blasphemous language and replaced it with neutral expressions. Reasons included dislike of blasphemy, perception of increased intensity in Maltese (or the addition of *Ostja* to translate *fucking* in version 2), and vulgar term irrelevant to the plot. Those preferring the profane version justified their choice by highlighting the need for authenticity in dialogue.

Table 4. Translation strategies for blasphemy.

Excerpt	Narrative Context	Taboo Expressions in Original	Strategy 1	Strategy 2
3. *13 Reasons Why*	Teenage character getting a fright	*Jesus* × 1	**Retains blasphemous expression and adds another one for naturalness in the target language** Examples: *ħaqq (fuck), Alla (goddamn), ostja (literal: sacred host)*	**Replacement with neutral term** Examples: *Illaħwa (My goodness)*
4. *House of Cards*	Politicians (including the vice president) in conversation, higher register	*fucking* × 1 *goddamn* × 1	**Borrowing strategy, retaining profanity in English** Examples: *fucking, goddamn*	**Translates profanity into Maltese** Examples: *ostja (literal: sacred host), ħaqq Alla (goddamn)*
5. *13 Reasons Why*	Teens reach the top of a hill.	*God* × 1 *freaking* × 1 *fucking* × 2 *fuck* × 1	**Shift from sexual category (fuck) to religious profanity (the sacred host)** Examples: *illalla (My God), tal-ostra/ illostra (freaking), tal-ostja/ illostja (fucking, literal: sacred host), illistja (good heavens)*	**Attenuation by euphemism** Examples: *illallu (Oh my), tal-ostra/ illostra (freaking), illistra (my goodness), illaħwa (dammit)*

In Excerpt 4 (**Table 4**), 31.7% declared that they would have preferred a toned-down version in Maltese, which was not among the options provided. Instead, the subtitles of version 1 retained the English borrowings (*fucking* and *goddamn*), while version 2 adopted Maltese natural-sounding solutions (*ostja: sacred host* and *ħaqq Alla: goddamn*). 28.3% chose the English borrowings, 23% preferred a translation of the profanity into Maltese, and 17% liked both versions equally. Given that the character in the plot was a US vice president, 44.9% felt the language used was disturbing, while

43.8% deemed it functional to the narrative.

In Excerpt 5 (**Table 4**), the toned-down version received higher ratings overall. Euphemisms like *illallu* (deformation of the dysphemism *illalla: My God*) and *illostra* (deformation of *illostja: the sacred host*) were deemed more acceptable than their stronger counterparts: 219 participants found *illallu* acceptable compared to 104 for *illalla*, and 204 participants found *illostra* acceptable compared to only 86 for *illostja*. This implied a shift from sexual content to profanity, potentially intensifying the language. It is likely due to the viewers' extremely low tolerance for religious profanity, despite aligning with natural-sounding Maltese expressions in the given context.

3.3. Excrement

In Excerpt 6 (**Table 5**), 57.4% preferred the version with reduced vulgarity. Interestingly, when viewers were asked how many times the term *ħara (shit)* and *jaħra (to shit)* feature across versions, most participants did not accurately identify the occurrences of the term *ħara (shit)* across versions. 63.8% did not consider *ħara (shit)* a vulgar term in the first place, suggesting preference for the toned-down version was due to other factors. It could be due to another variable present in this example, most likely the use of the term *ser jaħxuna (to fuck us)* in Version 2 as opposed to *ser ifottuna (to screw us)* in Version 1.

Table 5. Translation strategies for excrement.

Excerpt	Narrative Context	Taboo Expressions in Original	Strategy 1	Strategy 2
6. *House of Cards*	Politicians discuss their course of action in colloquial discourse over breakfast.	*shitting* × 3 *shit* × 2	**Partial transfer (Retains some terms and softens others)** **Reduction in occurrences of the term 'shit' and its variants** Examples: *taħra taħtha (shitting herself), tagħmel taħtha (crapping herself), ħara (shit)*	**Total transfer: retains all references to faeces** Examples: *taħra taħtha (shitting herself), ħara (shit)*

3.4. Mental Health

In Excerpt 7 (**Table 6**), 50.6% of participants preferred the Maltese term *sempliċi* (simplistic) over the English borrowed derogatory term *retarded*. This resulted in nearly equal preferences for both terms overall. When participants were directly asked which term they viewed as more insensitive, 77 chose *retarded*, 72 chose *sempliċi*, 61 felt both terms were equally insensitive, and 55 believed neither was insensitive. Importantly, selecting *sempliċi* did not necessarily mean participants regarded it as the least derogatory term; rather, their perceptions of insensitivity played a significant role. This variability highlights the challenges and limitations of relying solely on perception-based judgments when evaluating offensive language in such studies.

Table 6. Translation strategies for mental health.

Excerpt	Narrative Context	Taboo Expressions in Original	Strategy 1	Strategy 2
7. *Orange Is the New Black*	A missing screwdriver causes complications in the female prison. The prison officers' superior orders them to find it.	*retarded* × 1	**Retains derogatory term in English** Example: *retarded*	**Translates a derogatory term using a Maltese euphemistic expression that is softer, though potentially still slightly offensive since it denotes someone who is not particularly intelligent.** Example: *sempliċi (simplistic)*

When viewers were asked, in their opinion, what is to be done in Maltese subtitling when there are sensitive taboo phrases related to mental health in the original version, 47.55% said they preferred more neutral expressions. Overall, the respondents exhibited a low tolerance threshold to phrases and expressions that could be offensive in this category, despite their relevance to the plot.

3.5. Race

The majority initially chose the non-racist version in Excerpt 8 (**Table 7**). 55.1% opted for the non-racist version *(Indjani/Indians)* over the racist version (*Slavaġ skuri/dark-skinned savages*). However, when prompted to reason further, 63.02% felt that racist comments should not be elim-

inated, as they are integral to the character's discourse. It must also be highlighted that 39.6% of respondents were unsure about the meaning of the term *Indjani*. This result is therefore difficult to interpret because almost 40% of the sample report uncertainty about the key lexical item that differentiates the two versions.

Table 7. Translation strategies for race.

Excerpt	Narrative Context	Taboo Expressions in Original	Strategy Version 1	Strategy 2
8. *Orange Is the New Black*	A guard tells the inmates that they are allowed to have a farewell party but there must be no Thanksgiving suicides afterwards.	*turd-bags* × 1 *Indians* × 1	**Attenuation by euphemism and replacement with neutral term** Examples: *żibliet (scums), l-Indjani (Indians)*	**Transfer: idiomatic equivalent expressions** Examples: *żibel (garbage), l-islavaġ skuri (dark-skinned savages)*

3.6. Sexual Orientation

In Excerpt 9 (**Table 8**), 53.6% preferred the more neutral version *(gays)* over the derogatory terms (*pufti/ faggots, ċikkulati/* literally*, chocolate)*. In Maltese, *ċikkulati* has a mocking connotation towards gay men, suggesting that they are too delicate, overly sweet and therefore not masculine enough. When asked a direct question, irrespective of the videoclips and context, 59.6% of the participants said that *ċikkulati* was too homophobic, while 25.7% stated that it was acceptable if it reflected the intention of the plot. 14.7% were unsure. This result differs from the one in the racism excerpt, in which 63.2% of the participants stated that racist comments should be included if they represent the original intention.

Table 8. Translation strategies for sexual orientation.

Excerpt	Narrative Context	Taboo Expressions in Original	Strategy 1	Strategy 2
9. *Orange Is the New Black*	The character asks a colleague whether moustaches are now a sign of being gay.	*gay* × 2 *fags* × 1 *cunt-ramming* × 1	**Aggravation: stronger and more derogatory expressions are used even for neutral terms in the original** Examples: *ċikkulati (pansy, literal: chocolates), pufti (fags), għoxx (pussy)*	**Omission, attenuation, and replacement with neutral expressions** Examples: *gay, straight*

3.7. Guidelines and Potential Norms

The participants were faced with a direct question regarding TV norms and guidelines for subtitles. It was explained to them that TV generally calls for toned-down language, while streaming platforms (e.g., Netflix) encourage faithful rendering of expletives (Netflix, 2022). The participants were asked: "Which policy would you adopt for Maltese subtitles?" 76 participants (28.7%) indicated that they support using toned-down language on TV but prefer no censorship on paid platforms; they emphasized the importance of leveraging each medium to select the most appropriate strategies. 66 participants (24.9%) said they preferred toned-down or omitted expletives due to the stronger impact in written form. 61 participants (23%) expressed that they are not in favour of censoring and toning down, even at the cost of a stronger impact in Maltese. 57 participants (21.5%) would transfer all expletives, avoiding blasphemy. The remaining 3 participants (1.9%) would only omit offensive terms related to mental health, race, and gender. That said, participants generally believe that the decision to retain or eliminate derogatory and offensive language should depend on whether the audiovisual content is broadcast on TV or streamed on paid platforms.

3.8. Intensity

Participants were also asked to rate the impact of a list of words by labelling them as strong (perceived as highly offensive), moderate (potential for offense), and weak (little or no concern). This step was implemented to further understand viewers' perception and possibly provide a user-based reference for subtitlers. **Table 9** provides further insights into the tolerance threshold of the Maltese audience. The most offensive expressions identified include religious profan-

ity, specifically terms like *Ħaqq Alla (Fuck God)* and *Ostja (Sacred host)*, with 242 and 169 respondents respectively, finding them highly offensive—only six people considered *Ħaqq Alla (Fuck God)* mild. Words like *liba (semen)* and *jaħxuna (fuck us)* are regarded as more vulgar than those referring to body parts, such as *għoxx (pussy)* and *żobb (dick)*. Conversely, the term considered the mildest is *żikk (the hell,* euphemism for *żobb* meaning *dick)*, with only four individuals classifying it as strong. Therefore, the general classification suggests religious terms are the most offensive, followed by sexually explicit language, with *żikk (the hell)* being the least offensive.

Table 9. Term rating based on overall average perceived intensity.

Term/Expression	Rating Result	Strong (No. of Participants)	Moderate (No. of Participants)	Weak (No. of Participants)
Żobb (*Dick*)	Strong	130	106	29
Għoxx (*Pussy*)	Strong	138	104	23
Inżabbab (*Fuck that!*)	Moderate	72	138	55
Inżeggeg (*Screw that!*)	Weak	5	76	184
Ħaqq Alla (*Fuck God*)	Strong	242	17	6
Ifottuna (*Screw us*)	Weak	7	77	181
Liba (*Semen*)	Strong	171	78	16
Jaħxuna (*Fuck us*)	Strong	148	96	21
Fucking (Borrowing)	Moderate	55	136	74
Madonna (*Holy Mary*)	Strong	107	100	58
Ostja (*Sacred host*)	Strong	169	69	27
Ostra (*Freaking*)	Weak	8	72	185
Żikk (*The hell*)	Weak	4	50	211

4. Overview of Results across Excerpts and Term Categories

Figure 3 provides an overview and visually illustrates that, for every excerpt, the majority of participants significantly preferred the toned-down or politically correct version. This outcome was unexpected, as it was initially anticipated that the Maltese audience would prefer the vulgar or offensive versions, except in cases of blasphemous comments. It was anticipated that Maltese participants would not be particularly troubled by taboo or offensive language. Previous research suggested that, despite Malta being a Catholic country, its social dynamics have shifted to normalise taboo language[21] and indicated a high tolerance threshold for taboo language even in subtitles[22]. However, the expectation remained that blasphemy would have a lower tolerance threshold due to the nation's conservative roots. Hence, it was expected that most participants would disapprove of blasphemous language on screen.

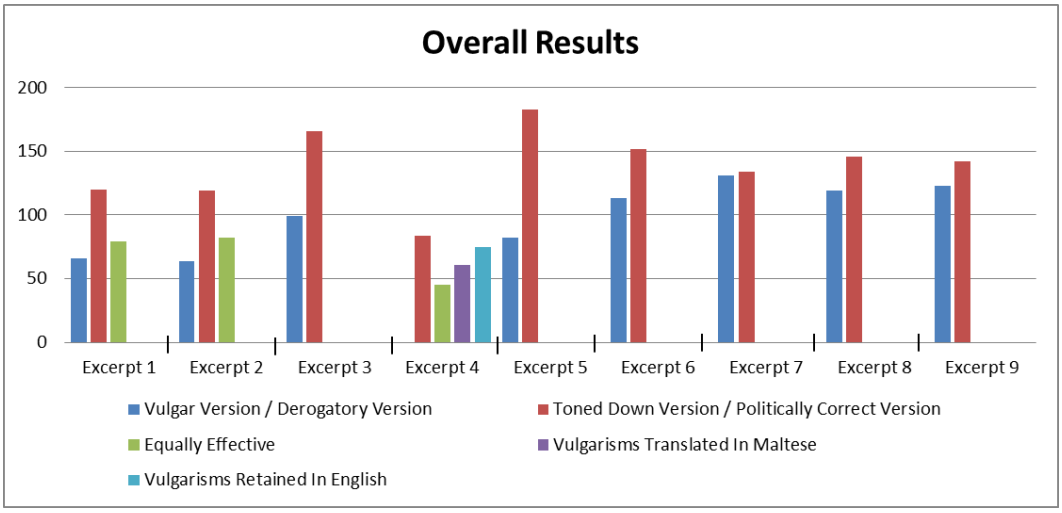

Figure 3. Analysis across all categories and excerpts.

In general, the results also show mixed reactions that emerged, especially in open-ended questions where the respondents could add further comments. Some participants considered the use of Maltese vulgar language in subtitles refreshing, while others felt offended by it. A few respondents, aged 60 and over, chose not to proceed after the first excerpt due to the extensive use of vulgarity in the American English original, as they felt such language was too inappropriate. This was communicated directly to the researchers using the contact information provided, after abandoning the research.

4.1. Emerging Patterns

The study reveals that most participants tend to disregard credibility, spontaneity, and the intended effect of taboo terms, instead focusing on whether they find a subtitle offensive. Fewer participants, on the other hand, noted that screen productions aim to portray real-life situations and to depict people from various social backgrounds. In contexts where vulgarity is expected, such as a stripping interview or a conversation between friends, censored language can appear inauthentic compared to the original. However, as seen in **Figure 3**, the majority of the participants prefer subtitles that steer away from authentic, spontaneous discourse, prioritising sensibility over credibility. This preference is evident even in scenes that typically include vulgarisms, such as fights or moments where characters are frightened. The audience tends to prefer toned-down versions.

Interestingly, when comparing the impact of English phrases to their Maltese translations, participants often perceived the Maltese translations as harsher. This suggests that Maltese tends to be perceived as 'stronger' in conveying vulgar effects, as mentioned earlier.

The study also identified a pattern related to the viewers' shift in perception between their immediate reactions and their answers when their attention was drawn to the context and specific function of vulgar language. Initially, participants often chose toned-down versions, but when presented with specific questions about the context, plot, characterization, or screenwriter's creative intent, they sometimes changed their perspective and acknowledged the function of derogatory language in certain situations. For instance, while participants consistently preferred toned-down language for mental health issues and gender-related slurs, their opinions on racist terms changed when they were made aware that such comments could be a tool for characterization. This highlights the discrepancies between immediate responses to subtitling preferences and replies gathered from oriented questions.

A persistent pattern throughout the study showed that participants generally provided clear-cut answers when evaluating taboo expressions and sensitive language, with attenuation being the preferred approach overall. However, the gap in preference between derogatory versions and their toned-down counterparts was less pronounced for language related to mental health, racial slurs, and discriminatory terms associated with sexual orientation. This suggests that the Maltese audience may potentially be more sensitive to blasphemy and vulgar or obscene language in general, while appearing slightly more tolerant of other sensitive topics—at least within the audiovisual narratives and context examined. This contrasts with the findings of the recent Ofcom study [4], which indicated higher tolerance for vulgar language than for discriminatory and racist language in the UK.

Many participants suggested that the choice should depend on various aspects, including the degree of vulgarity, medium, target audience, and context. Most participants stated they would opt for toning down strategies on TV and no censorship for paid platforms. Therefore, the study's findings corroborate local proposed guidelines on vulgar language in subtitling, which suggest toning down vulgar language for TV broadcasts.

4.2. Demographic and Psychographic Influences

As outlined in Section 2, this study also selected a few of the excerpts to analyse the findings in correlation with various demographic and psychographic factors, as summarized and illustrated in **Table 10**. The research also aims to understand how age, location, gender, sexual orientation, education level, and personal preferences and habits influence tolerance for vulgar language in written form. Further details and more comprehensive tables are available in **Supplementary Materials**.

Contrary to expectations based on previous research suggesting younger people are less offended by verbal vulgarisms [21], this study found that the majority across all age groups preferred toned-down subtitles. However, unlike the younger cohorts, the 60+ age group on average preferred

the non-vulgar versions. While younger groups (18–24 and 25–39) displayed smaller differences in preferences between vulgar and non-vulgar versions, they still favored toned-down language overall. This suggests that written vulgarities are less acceptable across generations, with older viewers being more sensitive to them.

Table 10. Findings in correlation with demographic data.

Age Category	**Excerpt 5 Derogatory Version**	**Excerpt 5 Neutral Version**
18–24	42.5%	57.5%
25–39	36.2%	63.8%
40–60	19.3%	80.7%
60+	21.4%	78.6%
Gender	**Excerpt 5 Derogatory Version**	**Excerpt 5 Neutral Version**
Male	40%	60%
Female	24.9%	75.1%
Education	**Excerpt 5 Derogatory Version**	**Excerpt 5 Neutral Version**
Secondary Level	25.5%	74.5%
Postsecondary Level	26.8%	73.1%
Bachelor's Degree	29.7%	70.3%
Master's Degree	42.3%	57.7%
Doctorate Degree	40%	60%

Analysis of responses based on participants' hometowns revealed interesting regional differences. Participants from the North and Central areas tend to be more accepting of vulgar language, whereas those in the Southern region are more sensitive to such usage. However, it is important to note that 71.3% of the respondents were from the South of Malta, which may have influenced the overall results.

Considering previous research on spoken vulgarities [21], the expected outcome of the study was that male participants would be more accepting of vulgar language than women. Results partially confirmed this, showing that while both genders preferred non-vulgar versions, the discrepancy between preferences was larger among female participants. This suggests that male respondents are generally more tolerant of vulgar language in subtitles. Interestingly, participants did not respond differently to vulgar language based on the gender of the on-screen character using such language, indicating that the nature of the term itself, rather than the speaker's gender, determined responses. This contrasts with the research findings of the British Broadcasting Standards Commission, which are somewhat dated [3], people are more accepting of taboo language when uttered by male speakers, as it is conventionally associated with masculine traits.

The study found that tolerance for vulgarity increased with education level. While participants across all educational backgrounds generally preferred toned-down versions, the percentage difference decreased at higher education levels. Notably, 60% of the participants with doctorate degrees (3 out of 5 participants) preferred the vulgar version in Excerpt 3. This suggests that higher education may lead to a better and immediate understanding of the function and intention behind vulgar language use in the narrative and characterization.

Furthermore, participants' usage and attitudes towards vulgar language in everyday life strongly correlated with their preferences for subtitled versions. Individuals who frequently use vulgar language tend to prefer vulgar subtitles. Conversely, those who stated they avoid or are disturbed by vulgarities in daily life exhibit a lower tolerance for vulgar captions on-screen. This pattern supports earlier findings by Bellia [21], suggesting that daily users of taboo language find it less offensive. Participants who are not personally offended by others using vulgar language, but choose to avoid it themselves, still showed a strong preference for toned-down subtitles.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Contrary to the initial expected outcome, anticipating a high tolerance stance, the main findings reveal a prevalent preference for attenuation strategies regardless of the category of taboo language or the genre, context, plot, characterization, and function. Complete omission was favored for blasphemy. Demographic insights revealed that while most groups pre-

ferred toned-down versions, some diverging patterns emerged. North/Central residents showed a slight preference for more derogatory versions, while South residents strongly preferred toned-down versions. Younger, male, and more highly educated participants revealed a higher tolerance threshold compared to their older, female, and less-educated counterparts. This suggests that social status and background influence attitudes toward taboo language in subtitles. That said, these differences were marginal and emerged only as part of a micro analysis when comparing different demographic groups and they do not alter the overall results of the macro analysis.

As for sensitive language related to sexual orientation, race, and mental health, participants initially preferred the less derogatory version. However, this difference in preference was less pronounced compared to their responses to other types of taboo language. Notably, these outcomes shifted once respondents' attention was directed toward these sensitive topics, leading to more contemplative responses. Similarly, albeit to a lesser degree, results diverge and become more nuanced when viewers are prompted to deliberate upon a hypothetical policy concerning vulgar language within Maltese-inclusive subtitles. Upon reflection, many acknowledged the importance of preserving vulgar language for context, characterization, and intention. Ultimately, most participants favoured toning down vulgar language for TV broadcasts while retaining it for paid streaming platforms. This aligns with global widespread norms as well as the proposed local guidelines and thus supports the need to generally tone down language for specific media and contexts while also remaining considerate of sensitive topics.

This study acknowledges its limitations. It is not exhaustive as it focuses on a selection of expressions, genres, functions, contexts, and language pairs. The short duration of the excerpts limited variation in vulgarities across products, and the lack of context may have affected participants' reactions. Watching video clips twice to compare versions is a different experience from watching content from entertainment, thus, as the role of participants shifted from that of simply being viewers to becoming reviewers and raters of translations. While what might be considered a methodological limitation in one context could also be regarded as an appropriate user-centred approach, given the cultural setting, topic and aim, that is, to inform policies and practices. This focus differs from technical parameters like reading speed, which require a more natural viewing response. Regarding the cultural context, the methodology also accounts for the Maltese population's willingness to engage critically with such matters. Another limitation is that viewers were guided through the strategies used, hence introducing a form of bias; however, the details were provided only after they viewed each set of video clips, with initial preferences recorded before prompting more reflective and critical responses.

Other limitations relate to geographical location. It is important to note that participants from Southern areas were overrepresented. This was due to the online distribution of the survey, which limited control over participant demographics—especially within the 60+ age group—although direct distribution efforts were undertaken to help address this issue.

The lengthy questionnaire was intentional, yielding extensive qualitative and quantitative data from committed participants. That said, choosing and classifying translation strategies and solutions is necessarily subjective to a certain extent since it is based on the researchers' perception, taking everyday language use in local territory and culture as a benchmark, considering personal exposure to the various demographic and psychographic groups involved, and at times resorting to consultation and feedback through personal connections and social media pages.

The study highlights the complex nature of subtitling vulgar language in Maltese for linguistic, cultural as well as sensory access to media content. While immediate reactions often favour toned-down versions, deeper reflection reveals an understanding of the importance of preserving original language in certain contexts. The findings suggest a nuanced approach is necessary, considering factors such as medium, audience demographics, and cultural sensitivities. This research provides a foundation for developing more comprehensive Maltese-inclusive subtitling guidelines regarding the transfer of taboo language. Moreover, it could potentially be replicated in similar territories that are developing their own subtitling guidelines and standards.

Supplementary Materials

The supporting information can be downloaded at https://journals.bilpubgroup.com/files/FLS-12215-Supplementary-Materials.zip.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, K.C. and G.S.M.; research design, methodology and structure, K.C. and G.S.M.; data collection, data curation and analysis, K.C.; writing—original draft preparation, K.C.; writing—review and editing and additional content; supervision, G.S.M.; software and funding acquisition, G.S.M. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

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Informed Consent Statement

Participants provided informed consent where applicable, confidentiality and data protection were maintained, and any potential risks were minimized.

Data Availability Statement

The main supplementary data is provided in the **Supplementary Materials**. The full raw data set is available directly from the authors upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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