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# *Whose "k-word" is it anyway!* : Understanding the discourses used to justify and/or repudiate the use of the word "kaffir" in social media interactions.

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# Abstract

The word "kaffir" has particular histories and meanings in South Africa and has previously led to civil proceedings. In the current study I sought to understand the discourses and discursive strategies used by social media interlocutors to justify and/or repudiate the use of the word and to situate it as (un)acceptable. The study was interested in illuminating the unmediated manner in which social media interactions occur rather than the explanations that people give for the use of the word after it has been used. *Twitter* and public *Facebook* pages and groups were searched for posts that comprised the word "kaffir" in its variant spellings, including the euphemized "k-word". The data was analyzed using discourse analysis. The findings from the study indicate that the discussions around the use of the word "kaffir" generally suggest that it is problematized depending on certain contextual factors like the racial category and age of the persons using the word. The discussions that follow after the initial post about the word "kaffir" highlight South Africa's continuous struggle with race and accusations of racism and "reverse racism"; disagreements over the nature of racism were recurrent in the exchanges. Interlocutors relied on two competing discourses – the Contextualist discourse and the Universalist discourse to justify and/or challenge the (un)acceptability of using the word and to justify and/or challenge attempts to re-appropriate it as a positive self-identifier. The Contextualist discourse was used to argue that factors like age, race and context determine the (un)acceptability of the word. The Universalist discourse was used to justify the use of the word as acceptable and also to challenge it as unacceptable. Proponents of the Universalist discourse argued for the word "kaffir" to be made available to all people, irrespective of their race on the basis that the word was never racist at its inception. On the contrary, opponents argued that the word was racist at inception and therefore any continued used perpetuates racial stereotypes.



**KEYWORDS: "KAFFIR", RACIAL SLURS, SOCIAL MEDIA, LANGUAGE, DISCOURSE**