

Which Words Are Offensive?

Most Groups, Especially African Americans, Find Use Of Some Words In These Situations Extremely Offensive

ROCHESTER, N.Y. – July 11, 2007 – At the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's 98th annual convention this week, a burial was held. It was symbolic, but, nevertheless, the infamous 'n-word' was declared to be buried. As burials like this occur across the country, *The Harris Poll®* confirmed that large majorities of the U.S. adult public find the use of certain terms to be offensive. Despite these feelings, few adults feel that the government should ban the use of such language on television or radio. Most feel that either the broadcasters should set their own standards or the individuals should exercise greater self-monitoring about what is appropriate. Also in response to recent events where well-known personalities such as Don Imus, Michael Richards, Mel Gibson, Isaiah Washington and Rush Limbaugh used questionable language in public, Harris Interactive® designed a special survey to gauge the public's opinion regarding which words and situations were considered offensive.

Before asking for people's reactions to these situations, they were first queried to determine their willingness to participate in the survey. The question was: "Some of the terms we present to you to evaluate in the next few screens you may find offensive. Would you be willing to answer this section or do you want to skip this section?" Nine in ten (89%) said that they would be willing to answer the questions while one in ten (11%) opted to skip the section.

These are some of the results of a Harris Poll of 2,383 U.S. adults surveyed online between May 8 and 14, 2007 by Harris Interactive.

Which Events Found to be Most Offensive

The survey explored which of the following events by celebrities generated the most offense. Almost two-thirds (64%) found radio personality Don Imus' calling Rutgers' female basketball players 'nappy-headed hos' to be offensive with 29 percent saying it was extremely offensive.

- Seven in ten (69%) said that actor/comedian Michael Richards' use of the 'n-word' was offensive (30 percent extremely offensive);
- Six in ten (63%) found actor Mel Gibson's use of Jewish slurs to be offensive (22 percent extremely offensive);
- Over half (54%) felt that actor Isaiah Washington's use of 'faggot' was offensive (18 percent extremely offensive);
- Radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh's reference to Senator Barack Obama as 'Obama Osama' was thought to be offensive by 50 percent (16 percent extremely offensive);
- A lower 37 percent said that politician George Allen use of term 'Maccaca' at political rally was offensive (12 percent were extremely offended).

Similarly, some groups were more offended than others. For example, very large majorities of African Americans were extremely or very offended by Don Imus (88%) and Michael Richards (83%). Two-thirds (66%) of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) adults were extremely or very offended by Isaiah Washington.

What Can Government Do About Offensive Language

Despite the strong negative reaction about the use of certain words, the U.S. adult public has somewhat mixed feelings about what should be done to prevent the use of such language. Just over a quarter (27%) thinks that the government should ban offensive words on television or radio. However, a third (34%) feels that offensive words shouldn't be banned but broadcasters should set their own standards for respectful and appropriate language. Finally, three in ten (30%) U.S. adults feel that the government shouldn't do anything; individuals should self-monitor and screen for what they consider appropriate.

**TABLE 1
WILLINGNESS TO ANSWER QUESTIONS ABOUT OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE**

"Next, we would next like to ask you a few more detailed questions concerning some of these issues. Some of the terms we present to you to evaluate in the next few screens you may find offensive. Would you be willing to answer this section or do you want to skip this section?"

Base: All U.S. Adults

	Total
	%
Yes, I'm willing to answer these questions	89
No, please skip me to the next section	11

**TABLE 2
PERCEIVED OFFENSIVENESS OF TERMS**

"How offensive do you find each term below if it were publicly used by people in the media or in politics (such as radio personalities, movie/TV stars or politicians) and was directed at a person or a group of people?"

Base: U.S. Adults Willing to Answer Questions That May be Found To Be Offensive

	Offensive (NET)	Extremely Offensive	Very Offensive	Fairly Offensive	Not Offensive (NET)	Somewhat Offensive	Not at all Offensive	Decline To Answer
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Nigger	85	53	19	14	13	5	8	2
Faggot	81	45	23	12	19	11	8	1
Ho	72	33	20	19	27	17	10	2
Queer	70	34	19	17	29	15	15	1
Kike	68	39	15	13	19	8	10	13

TABLE 3
FAMILIARITY OF CELEBRITIES USING OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE

"How familiar are you with the following events?"

Base: U.S. Adults Willing to Answer Questions That May be Found To Be Offensive

	Familiar (NET)	Extremely Familiar	Very Familiar	Familiar	Not Familiar (NET)	Somewhat Familiar	Not at all Familiar
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Don Imus' reference to the Rutgers female basketball players as 'nappy-headed hos' on the radio	80	33	23	24	19	11	8
Mel Gibson's use of Jewish slurs after being pulled over for drunk driving in 2006 audio-tape	75	25	23	28	24	15	9
Michael Richards' use of 'nigger' to refer to African Americans at a comedy club in Los Angeles in 2006 videotape	66	21	22	23	33	15	18
Isaiah Washington's usage of the word 'faggot' toward another co-star of the television series Grey's Anatomy in 2007 reported in the media	50	16	15	19	49	16	33
Rush Limbaugh's reference to Senator Barack Obama as 'Obama Osama' on the radio	39	13	11	16	59	18	41
George Allen's use of the term 'Maccaca' in 2006 videotape at a political rally	25	9	7	8	74	11	63

TABLE 4
PERCEIVED OFFENSIVENESS OF INCIDENT

"How offensive do you find the incident?"

Base: U.S. Adults Willing to Answer Questions That May be Found To Be Offensive

	Offensive (NET)	Extremely Offensive	Very Offensive	Fairly Offensive	Not Offensive (NET)	Somewhat Offensive	Not at all Offensive	Decline to answer
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Michael Richards' use of 'nigger' to refer to African Americans at a comedy club in Los Angeles in 2006 videotape	69	30	21	18	28	14	14	4
Don Imus' reference to the Rutgers female basketball players as 'nappy-headed hos' on the radio	64	29	18	17	33	17	16	3
Mel Gibson's use of Jewish slurs after being pulled over for drunk driving in 2006 audio-tape	63	22	21	21	34	19	15	3
Isaiah Washington's usage of the word 'faggot' toward another co-star of the television series Grey's Anatomy in 2007 reported in the media	54	18	16	19	40	21	19	6
Rush Limbaugh's reference to Senator Barack Obama as 'Obama Osama' on the radio	50	16	16	17	43	18	25	8
George Allen's use of the term 'Maccaca' in 2006 videotape at a political rally	37	12	11	15	38	17	21	24

TABLE 5
PERCEIVED OFFENSIVENESS OF INCIDENT – BY DEMOGRAPHIC GROUP
Percentages Saying Extremely/Very Offensive

"How offensive do you find the incident?"

Base: U.S. Adults Willing to Answer Questions That May be Found To Be Offensive"

	Total	White	African American	Hispanic	Men	Women	GLBT
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Don Imus' reference to the Rutgers female basketball players as 'nappy-headed hos' on the radio	47	40	88	59	40	54	48
Mel Gibson's use of Jewish slurs after being pulled over for drunk driving in 2006 audio-tape	43	39	70	42	36	50	51
Michael Richards' use of 'nigger' to refer to African Americans at a comedy club in Los Angeles in 2006 videotape	51	44	83	59	44	57	61
Isaiah Washington's usage of the word 'faggot' toward another co-star of the television series Grey's Anatomy in 2007 reported in the media	34	33	46	37	26	43	66
Rush Limbaugh's reference to Senator Barack Obama as 'Obama Osama' on the radio	32	28	60	40	29	37	46
George Allen's use of the term 'Maccaca' in 2006 videotape at a political rally	23	17	49	30	21	25	36

TABLE 6
ACTIONS GOVERNMENT SHOULD TAKE IF OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE USED IN MEDIA

“Which of the following do you think the government should do if offensive language directed to people of different group is used by public figures in the media?”

Base: All U.S. Adults

	Total
	%
Not ban any offensive words, but broadcasters should set their own standards for respectful and appropriate language on the air	34
Do nothing and let individuals monitor and screen what they consider appropriate for themselves	30
Ban offensive words when used on television or radio	27
Not at all sure	9

Methodology

This Harris Poll® was conducted online within the United States between May 8 and 14, 2007 among 2,383 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents’ propensity to be online.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. Therefore, Harris Interactive avoids the words “margin of error” as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100% response rates. These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris Interactive surveys. The data have been weighted to reflect the composition of the U.S. adult population. Because the sample is based on those who agreed to participate in the Harris Interactive panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.

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About Harris Interactive

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