

Word from the 'Wart'¹

What gets you going? Well, it depends on where on the spectrum? So what's a spectrum? Everything seems to be on one these days.

In my simple mind, a spectrum is a range, like from mild/not serious to insulting/misdemeanor to eye-popping/real serious.

One way to understand range (like Covid and typhoon/storm warnings) is to color code it: red is bad, orange is getting bad, yellow is sort of bad. The charts below show the lists of color-coded synonyms for bad taste, offensive, violation, trespass, insult, displeasure, anger, hard feelings.² Optically, we are all tuned to recognize and react to these colors. What stood out for me is the different lengths of the lists.

Colors matter. Yellow is a particularly troublesome metaphor ... it can get racist like "the yellow peril" to describe Chinese immigration to the US starting the 19th century. Or, for Mandarin speakers, yellow describes all things pornographic. I also learned what I thought is a friendly color like blue, is actually explained as "transnational organized crime at sea,"³ And, of course, much is spun about black and the infamous brown. A popular phrase now is "people of color," which I noticed Asian Americans using for themselves; I don't remember being included as such when I lived in the US.

Synonyms for bad taste, offensive:

SYNONYMS FOR in bad taste

filthy	salacious	coarse	impure	scatological
immoral	shocking	crude	indecorous	shameless
improper	tasteless	dirty	indelicate	smutty
lewd	unbecoming	foul	licentious	undecorous
off-color	unseemly	foulmouthed	malodorous	untoward
outrageous	vile	gross	raunchy	wicked
pornographic	X-rated	ill-bred	raw	
ridiculous	blue	immodest	rough	

SYNONYMS FOR offensive

abhorrent	outrageous	gross	hideous	opprobrious
abusive	reprehensible	repellent	horrid	revolting
annoying	repugnant	biting	impertinent	rotten
distasteful	repulsive	detestable	insolent	stinking
embarrassing	rude	disagreeable	invidious	terrible
horrible	shocking	discourteous	nauseating	uncivil
irritating	cutting	dreadful	odious	unmannerly
objectionable	evil	ghastly	off-color	
obnoxious	foul	grisly	offending	

(please turn over)

¹ 'Wart' is short for Stalwart, which Exactly Foundation's first resident Kevin Lee suggested that for future residences, I should pen a statement as "Exactly Foundation Stalwart" – a label that sounds like too much adult responsibility.

² Thesaurus.com.

file:///Users/zachli/Desktop/OFFENSIVE%20Synonyms:%2082%20Synonyms%20&%20Antonyms%20for%20OFFENSIVE%20%7C%20The%20saurus.html

³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0308597X20300270>

Synonyms for violation, trespass, insult, displeasure



Synonyms for anger, hard feelings



We have all heard of wild animals in Singapore infiltrating residential areas and needing to be eliminated such as wild boars, otters eating priceless koi, monkeys stealing hung laundry, too many birds decorating cars and sidewalks. We often hear many say nature is dirty (to children) and dangerous (bites, dengue). In a recent talk on forests, one panelist recounted a kind auntie approaching her as she lied down on the grass along the Park Connector: “don’t lie on the grass; dogs pee and poo there.”⁴ So where is clean grass to lie down? Well, LaSalle has wide swaths of fake grass so that must be safe ... unless of course, there are bugs that hadn’t been power spray-washed away.

Now in 2022, we can all recount Covid rules and threats of fine, jail, embarrassment, exclusion: not fully vaccinated, not wearing mask when and where required, exceeding pax limits, recklessly throwing away your TraceTogether token, leaking privileged government updates before release date, migrant dorm confinement with >10 other people per room, home-based everything, no serving spoons. Offending and offended just never seem to end in Singapore.

Rules are everywhere. Actually, we can’t any ole how throw away the Singapore flag, did you know that? It has to be “properly” packed and discarded. Like a scary, possessed souvenir that you shouldn’t have bought during your Bali vacation; you will upset the deity if you just chuck it down the rubbish chute. And don’t even think about walking around naked inside your HDB flat or fry *belacan* with gusto or boil innards or fry *bak-chang* rice in your HDB corridor, near your neighbor’s door so as not to stink up your own unit. Remember that incident of air-drying pork slabs on the outside railings or pet dogs forbidden in taxis? And let’s not get started on the dripping, wet mop hanging out the window.

To be honest, all I have written so far pales in comparison to national security breaches, drug trafficking, murder, physical violence, domestic abuse, voyeurism, being radicalized, objectionable religious speak, assembly of one, holding up a sign in public without a permit. Some logic for arrest is clear, some less. And the one accused can be left for years wondering what just happened and why, what’s going to happen next, when is it ever going to end, just which law(s) are “they” using ... who’s “they”? Often, the punishment is mental anguish even before stepping into prison, if it ever came to that.

I am grateful to Marc Nair for being game enough to do this Exactly photography art residency to craft a visual take of what’s offensive in Singapore. As a start, according to him. Although I suspect the un-savories he mentions are shared by many. Hot weather aside (which does not cool tempers), are we Singaporeans special in our views of what pisses us off? I like to think that this project is not about *what* is offensive but *why*? And what do we do about it? Do we / Can we walk up and say “can you stop that?” or “what are you doing?” or “what’s going on here?” We usually don’t bother to engage, our reaction is often likely a pronouncement e.g. at the extreme: the horrid “you need to stop dating her, find your own kind.” On a good day, we go *Side-Eyes* and post it online. On a bad day, we video-record and call the police.

⁴ Angela Ferguson at Ethos Books’ talk, *Treasures from our Forests* 21st May 2022; 1:19:00 mark.
<https://www.facebook.com/ethosbooks/videos/1921186641422360>