

\$\*@^! Effects of swear words in a foreign language in advertising

Lisa Maria Hilti

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Supervisor: Dr. Frank van Meurs

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### Abstract

Today, marketers are challenged to advertise in an increasingly cluttered media space (de Pelsmacker, Geuens & van den Bergh, 2013), which means creative advertising strategies are needed to appeal to consumers. Moreover, taking into account the rise of English as a global lingua franca, marketers also need to decide whether it may be useful to use English in advertisements outside of the Anglophone market. In particular, the emotional intensity with which consumers receive English advertisements when this is not their native language should be considered (Puntoni, de Langhe & van Osselaer, 2008). The present study combined these two current issues and examined a particular shock appeal, namely swearwords, in foreign language advertisements and its effects on consumers' attitude towards the ad, purchase intention as well as perceptions of offensiveness, credibility and honesty. An online questionnaire with fictitious advertisements was used to conduct the experiment, in which 136 native German speakers participated. The findings revealed that swearwords affected participants' perceptions of offensiveness, irrespective of the language of the ad. Since swearwords did not appear to influence participants' responses in any other way, the findings suggest that this shock appeal is not a particularly effective strategy for influencing consumer responses to advertisements.

*Keywords:* Shock advertising, swearwords, emotional intensity, offensiveness

Marketers are faced with a continuous struggle to distinguish themselves from the competition to gain the attention of consumers. One solution to this problem has been to employ the strategy of shock advertising, which aims to purposely offend consumers (Dahl, Frankenberger & Manchada, 2003). An additional issue that has presented itself to marketers in recent years is whether, due to the dominant status of English as a global lingua franca, advertisements should be primarily launched in English around the globe, or whether it might be better to translate them (Puntoni, de Langhe & van Osselaer, 2008). To date, few studies have investigated the use of swearwords as an example of shock advertising (Baker & Broadus, 2014; Westerholm, 2017), and the potential differences that may exist in consumer reactions towards advertisements when swearwords are used in their native language and a foreign language has not been a focus of analysis yet. The present study will address this research gap and investigate what kind of effects swearwords in advertisements can have on consumers when they are in their L1 (German) versus their L2 (English).

### **Theoretical framework**

#### **Shock advertising**

The term shock advertising can be used to describe two kinds of advertisements. Whereas some researchers use the term to describe advertisements for products that may be regarded as offensive in nature, such as contraceptives (Waller, Fam & Erdogan, 2005), others have stressed that the creative execution of an advertisement can also be offensive and transform it into a shock advertisement (Barnes & Dotson, 1990). The present study will focus on the latter dimension, which is more directly related to the choices that a firm or an advertising agency makes about their advertisements (Barnes & Dotson, 1990, p. 62). In general, shock advertising is based on the violation of social norms (Dahl, et al., 2003) and can be achieved in various ways. Dahl et al. (2003), for example, identify seven shock appeals that may be used in advertisements, namely disgusting images, sexual references, profanity/obscenity,

vulgarity, impropriety, moral offensiveness and religious taboos (p. 270). An appeal like this “deliberately, rather than inadvertently, startles and offends its audience” (Dahl et al., 2003, p. 268). One brand that has become known for making use of this strategy is *United Colors of Benetton*. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the brand launched shocking advertisements that showed, among other things, human organs, a new born baby or religious and state leaders kissing (The Guardian, 17 November, 2011). In addition to the private sector, there are also public institutions which have created shock advertisements such as the one seen below by the *German Federal Ministry of Transport* (Bundesverkehrsministerium) (Gasteiger, 18 March, 2008).

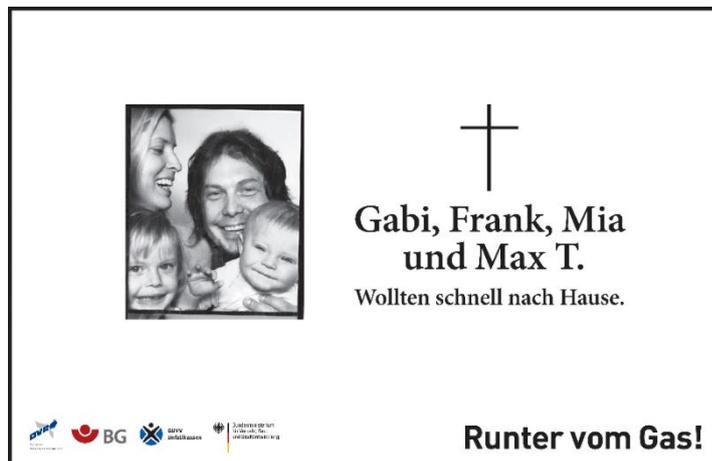


Figure 1. Fake obituary created by the *German Federal Ministry of Transport* for the campaign "Runter vom Gas!" in 2011

Fake obituaries like the one in Figure 1 were created by the *German Federal Ministry of Transport* to highlight the fatal consequences of reckless driving. The phrase “Wollten schnell nach Hause” translates to “Wanted to get home quickly”. In terms of the shocking appeals that Dahl et al. (2003) list, the fake obituary is closest to a morally offensive appeal, as one might ask whether using a reference to death in a public campaign to influence behaviour is appropriate conduct.

Marketers generally hope that shock advertisements will help them differentiate themselves from the competition and gain the attention of consumers (Dahl et al., 2003), but

whether consumers like shock advertisements is not entirely clear. Studies by de Pelsmacker and van den Bergh (1996) and Dens, de Pelsmacker and Janssens (2008) showed that shocking appeals led to more negative attitudes towards advertisements than non-shocking appeals. However, several other studies have demonstrated the opposite effect. Both violence (Söderlund & Dahlén, 2010) and erotic or sexual appeals (Pope, Voges & Brown, 2013; Severn, Belch & Belch, 1990) have been shown to generate more positive attitudes towards advertisements than non-shocking appeals. In Pope et al.'s study (2013), this effect occurred regardless of whether the product that was advertised was a consumer good or a cause-related product (p. 76). This contrasts with other findings that shock advertising is regarded as more acceptable for non-profit than for-profit organisations (Parry, Jones, Stern & Robinson, 2013).

Even though consumers may indicate that they like shock advertisements, research has shown that their emotional response can contradict the attitude that they express. As per definition, shock appeals offend consumers (Dahl et al., 2003), which is also what participants in Severn et al.'s (1990) study indicated. Nevertheless, this did not result in a negative attitude towards the advertisements in their study (p. 20). Thus, consumers may have an ambivalent reaction to shock advertisements, which has been defined as “the simultaneous or sequential experience of multiple emotional states ... that can have direct and/or indirect ramifications on prepurchase, purchase or postpurchase attitudes and behaviour” (Otnes, Lowrey & Shrum, 1997, pp. 82-83).

With regard to how shock advertisements influence behaviour, or purchase intentions, researchers have reported conflicting results. Studies by de Pelsmacker and van den Bergh (1996) as well as Vézina and Paul (1997) showed no effect of shock advertising on purchase intentions. On the other hand, a survey conducted by Phau and Prendergast (2001) suggests that offensive advertisements do have a negative impact on behaviour, as some participants indicated that they would discontinue purchasing items from a brand that adopted this marketing strategy (p. 84). Yet another result was found by Severn et al. (1990), who

documented a higher purchase intention for those who saw a sexual appeal in an ad than a non-sexual appeal (p. 20). Thus, findings for the effect of shock advertisements on purchase intention are inconsistent and, in addition, rather dated because publications that are more recent than 2001 could not be found by this researcher.

### **Shock advertising and the use of swearwords**

Beard (2008) has identified the use of offensive language as the second-most complained about theme in advertisements after images and words that are unsuitable for children (p. 17). Vulgar terms also seem to become more popular for brand names, as Griffiths (2018) has documented. Swearwords are thus an interesting and relevant angle of shock advertising to investigate. Drawing on Dahl et al.'s (2003) argument about norm violation, swearwords can be said to shock because they reference topics that are generally considered taboo in a society (Jay, 2009) and thus not usually openly addressed. Besides the potential to shock, there are other reasons that might motivate the use of swearwords in advertisements, namely emphasis, intimacy/trust, personality, or humour (Mortimer, 2007). Referring to an Australian tourism advertisement that ends with the question "So where the bloody hell are you?", Mortimer (2007) argues that a swearword like "bloody hell" puts emphasis on the slogan and evokes a sense of intimacy with the consumers, which also reflects the laid back personality of Australians (pp. 1596-1597). With regard to humour, Mortimer (2007) gives the example of a Toyota advertisement in which a farmer encounters multiple mishaps with his car. After each incident, he light-heartedly says the word "bugger", which creates a playful atmosphere (Mortimer, 2007, p. 1596).

To date, only a few researchers have investigated the effects of English swearwords in advertising. In their study on swearwords in print advertising, Baker and Broadus (2014) found that swearwords resulted in a more positive attitude towards advertisements if the advertised product elicited an emotional response (in their case, a political magazine) rather than a non-emotional response (p. 102). Westerholm (2017) also investigated the use of

swearwords in advertising but in contrast to Baker and Broadus (2014), he found that participants reacted most positively to the use of a swearword in an advertisement for a coffeehouse (p. 17), a relatively non-emotional product, rather than for a mobile phone service or an insurance company. Participants stated that the swearword *damn* “infused the advertising with humour and confidence” (Westerholm, 2017, p. 19). It should be noted, however, that the participants in both studies were young university students and results might be different if older participants and participants other than students were included, since Mortimer (2007) argues that audience demography could influence the perception of swearwords in advertising (p. 1597).

In order to understand the benefits of swearwords in the advertising context better, the following section will outline what swearwords are and what kind of functions they can serve.

### **Swearwords**

According to Vingerhoets, Bylsma and de Vlam (2013), swearing can be defined as “a form of linguistic activity utilizing taboo words to convey the expression of strong emotions” (p. 287). There is broad consensus that the expression of emotions constitutes one of the main functions of swearing (Andersson & Trudgill, 2007; Jay, 2009; Stapleton, 2010) and the most common ones seem to be anger, frustration, humour, pain, surprise and sarcasm (Vingerhoets et al., 2013, p. 291). However, what can be considered taboo in universal terms is difficult to assess (Jay, 2009, p. 154). People learn whether something is taboo or not during the socialisation process in childhood, which is generally influenced by their culture and the kind of restrictions that powerful authorities, such as religious leaders, impose on a society (Jay, 2009, p. 153).

In addition to cultural differences regarding tabooeness, swearwords also vary in their offensiveness. In a study by Dewaele (2016), native English speakers rated *cunt*, *slut* and *fucking hell* as the three most offensive swearwords and *silly*, *daft* and *comedian* as the three least offensive words out of a list of thirty swearwords that had been drawn from the British

National Corpus (BNC) (p. 120). Swearwords that refer to sex organs or sexual activities therefore seem to be particularly offensive in English but other categories of swearwords that have been identified relate to, for example, religion (*go to hell*), faeces (*shit*), and the family (*son of a bitch*) (Ljung, 2011). Ljung (2011) argues that these five themes can be found in English and 24 other languages, with each language preferring one theme over the other. For example, in contrast to other languages, Germanic languages like English and German still use swearwords that relate to religion, particularly damnation, even though religious swearwords have lost some of their offensiveness (Ljung, 2011, p. 54).

Due to the fact that swearing is most commonly associated with the expression of anger and frustration (Jay, 2009, p. 155), one might intuitively perceive swearing as something inherently bad. Yet, swearing can also have positive effects. Rassin and van der Heijden (2005), for example, have demonstrated that written victim and suspect testimonies were perceived as more credible when they included swearwords. Interestingly, this finding contradicted participants' attitude towards swearwords that was assessed initially, because they reported that the use of swearwords might be a sign of deceit (p. 178). Feldman, Lian, Kosinski and Stillwell (2017) on the other hand, documented that the use of swearwords in Facebook status updates was positively correlated with honesty. They claim that the link between swearing and honesty even holds true on a larger scale, namely the state level: In their research context of the USA, people who used swearwords on Facebook typically posted them from within a state that scored high on a state-level integrity scale, which included criteria such as independent ethics commissions or executive, legislative, and judicial accountability (Feldman et al., 2017, p. 821).

Since the present study focuses on the use of swearwords in advertising, which has gradually become more dominated by the English language (Puntoni et al., 2008, p. 1012), it is also important to consider the consequences of encountering swearwords in a foreign

language such as English. The next section will therefore focus on the differences between the emotional intensity of words in a native versus a second language.

### **Differences in the perception of the emotionality of language in L1 and L2**

Research has shown that people perceive their first language as more emotionally intense than their second language. Broadly speaking, this phenomenon can be explained by the fact that a language “comes to have a distinctive emotional feel by virtue of being learned, or habitually used, in a distinctive emotional context” (Harris, Gleason & Aycicegi, 2006, p. 272), which Harris et al. (2006) refer to as the emotional contexts of learning theory. According to this theory, a person’s first language is more emotional than their second language because it is learned during childhood from their caregivers, which is arguably a “highly emotional context” (p. 273). Since swearwords are typically learnt during childhood and associated with reprimands from caregivers (Jay, 2009, p. 153), the emotionality of swearwords in one’s first language and a second language has become a subject of investigation as well (Dewaele, 2004, 2010).

Dewaele’s (2004) study has revealed that multilinguals typically give higher emotionality ratings to swearwords in their L1 than in any subsequently learned language. For the emotionality rating in an L2 or subsequently learned language, the type of context in which it was learnt (e.g. natural, instructed, or mixed) seems to be especially important, as people who learn a second language in an instructed environment typically do not have the same experience with swearwords as those who learn a second language naturally (Dewaele, 2004, p. 220). These findings by Dewaele (2004) have been corroborated by another large-scale study by the author (Dewaele, 2010) but a subsequent investigation (Dewaele, 2016) did not show the same pattern with respect to the emotionality difference between an L1 and an L2. Non-native speakers of English rated swearwords as more offensive than native speakers of English did, with the exception of the most offensive swearword (*cunt*) (Dewaele, 2016, p. 119). Jay and Janschewitz (2008) also reported that, overall, there was no difference between

the native and non-native English speakers' offensiveness rating of swearwords in their study (p. 280).

The fact that emotionality ratings also concern advertisements has been demonstrated by Puntoni et al., (2008), who discovered in a series of five experiments that participants perceived advertising slogans as more emotionally intense in their L1 than L2. Against the background of an advertising context that has become more English language dominated, they therefore argue that it is worthwhile to take steps into a different direction and address consumers in their first language (p. 1022). However, as they did not include swearwords in their study, it still remains to be discovered whether advertisements that use slogans with swearwords generate the same responses.

### **Research gap**

Even though research has been conducted on the use of swearwords in advertising (Baker & Broadus, 2014; Westerholm, 2017) and on the difference between the emotional intensity of L1 and L2 advertisements (Puntoni et al., 2008), the potential differences between the effects of swearwords in L1 and L2 advertisements have not been investigated yet. The overall research question for the present study is therefore:

What are the effects on consumers' responses towards advertisements when these use swearwords in their L1 or a foreign language?

More specifically, this will be investigated with the following sub-research questions:

- (1) To what extent are there differences between the effects of advertisements with swearwords and advertisements without swearwords on consumers' responses?
- (2) To what extent is there a difference between the effects of an advertisement with a strong swearword and an advertisement with a mild swearword on consumers' responses?

- (3) To what extent are there differences between the effects of advertisements with L1 (German) swearwords and L2 (English) swearwords on consumers' responses?
- (4) To what extent does the context of acquisition of an L2 (English) affect consumers' perceived offensiveness of L2 advertisements with swearwords?

## Methodology

### Materials

In total, 24 fictitious advertisements were created for the study: three different advertisements with a swearword and the same advertisements without a swearword in German and English (see Appendix). A pre-test with nine subjects was conducted to check whether an additional advertisement without a swearword would help to distract participants in the experimental condition from the research goal. However, since the participants complained that the questionnaire was too long, no filler advertisement was included in the final version.

The swearwords that were selected for the advertisements were *damn* (verdammt), *idiot* (Idiot), and *asshole* (Arschloch). Whereas *idiot* and *damn* can be considered swearwords with a relatively low offensiveness rating, *asshole* is a more offensive swearword. In Dewaele's study (2016), *asshole* was considered the sixth most offensive swearword out of the thirty swearwords that native and non-native English speakers had to rank (p. 120). Thus, *asshole* served as a good contrast to the other two mild swearwords and is useful to include because, according to Mortimer (2007), the severity of a swearword might influence the perception of the advertisement it is used in (p. 1597).

The products displayed in the ads were daily, low-involvement products: chewing gum, coffee, and beer. The informal nature of such products pairs well with swearwords, since a number of scholars have indicated that informal settings are generally perceived to be the most appropriate contexts for using swearwords (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Johnson & Lewis, 2010; Kapoor, 2016). Moreover, Westerholm (2017) reported the most positive

reactions towards swearwords in an advertisement for a coffeehouse (p. 17), as opposed to advertisements for an insurance company and mobile phone service. For the swearword condition, the (English) slogans in the advertisements for the chewing gum, coffee, and beer read, respectively, “Freshen up your breath, asshole!”, “Drink your damn morning mood away” and “Don’t be the idiot who shows up empty handed!”. For the control condition with no swearwords, the slogans were replaced with “Freshen up your breath!”, “Drink your morning mood away” and “Don’t be the person who shows up empty handed!”. As in Baker and Broadus’s (2014) study, the advertisements in the two conditions were therefore identical with the exception of the swearword and did not include any real brands or slogans to eliminate the effect of any previously held attitudes. It should be noted that the English advertisements also included product information in German, so that it would be clear that they were intended for the German market.

### **Subjects**

Native speakers of German were selected for the present study because German has not been investigated yet in other studies about swearwords in advertising (Baker & Broadus, 2014; Westerholm, 2017). English was determined as the foreign language to be investigated because of its increased use in advertising (Puntoni et al., 2008) and because the English proficiency levels in German speaking countries such as Germany, Austria and Switzerland have been reported to be very high or high (EF, 2019). Apart from the requirement that participants speak English as a second language, no other requirements were set for the selection of the participants.

A total of 136 subjects participated in the study, of whom 58.1% were female ( $n = 79$ ) and 40.4% male ( $n = 55$ ). One participant preferred not to indicate their gender and another participant identified as ‘other’. The mean age of participants was 28 years ( $M = 28.14$ ;  $SD = 11.83$ ; range = 18-66). The most frequently reported education level was a Bachelors’ degree ( $n = 54$ ), followed by secondary education ( $n = 29$ ), Master’s degree ( $n = 27$ ), vocational

training ( $n = 24$ ) and doctoral degree ( $n = 2$ ). Gender ( $\chi^2 (3) = 1.92, p = .590$ ), age ( $t (133.22) = 0.76, p = .451$ ) and educational level ( $\chi^2 (4) = 4.18, p = .382$ ) were equally distributed between the swearword/no swearword conditions, as well as the German/English conditions: Gender ( $\chi^2 (3) = 2.06, p = .560$ ), age ( $t (133.96) = 0.32, p = .748$ ), educational level ( $\chi^2 (3) = 4.08, p = .396$ ).

Participants reported that their self-assessed English proficiency was above average ( $M = 5.36, SD = 1.04$ ). As expected, their self-assessed proficiency in their mother tongue ( $M = 6.47, SD = 0.96$ ) was significantly higher than in English ( $t (135) = 14.06; p < .001$ ). With regard to swearing behaviour, the participants reported an average level ( $M = 4.02, SD = 1.36$ ) on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*very frequently*). However, they found the use of swearwords generally inappropriate ( $M = 3.69, SD = 1.16$ ) on a scale from 1 (*very inappropriate*) to 7 (*very appropriate*). Participants indicated that they use coffee ( $M = 4.53, SD = 2.21$ ) more frequently than chewing gum ( $M = 3.83, SD = 1.75; t (135) = 2.93, p = .004$ ) and beer ( $M = 3.72, SD = 1.70; t (135) = 3.92, p < .001$ ). The frequency with which they consume chewing gum and beer did not differ ( $t (135) = 0.53, p = .596$ ). The variables self-assessed English proficiency ( $t (132.37) = 0.20, p = .841$ ), self-assessed German proficiency ( $t (127.28) = 0.79, p = .431$ ), swearing behaviour ( $t (132.91) = 0.56, p = .575$ ) and the appropriateness of swearing ( $t (133.56) = 0.83, p = .408$ ) were equally distributed between the swearword/no swearword conditions. The variables were also equally distributed between the German/English conditions: self-assessed English proficiency ( $t (131.21) = 0.33, p = .741$ ), self-assessed German proficiency ( $t (124.27) = 0.48, p = .633$ ), swearing behaviour ( $t (131.68) = 0.60, p = .955$ ), appropriateness of swearing ( $t (133.14) = 0.24, p = .813$ ).

## Design

The study employed a 2 (L1 vs. L2) x 2 (swearwords vs. no swearwords) x 3 (type of advertisement: chewing gum, coffee, beer) mixed subjects design. The language and the swearwords were between-subjects factors and the type of advertisement the within-subjects

factor. In this way, a participant only saw the three ads with or without swearwords and only in German or English.

### **Instruments**

An online questionnaire was created to assess participants' responses to the advertisements.

The full questionnaire, which was administered in German, can be found in the Appendix.

Participants' attitude towards the advertisements was measured using the scale developed by Villegas (2002), which consisted of eight items (e.g. I like this ad) that were measured on 7-point Likert scales (*totally disagree – totally agree*). The reliability of the scale was calculated for all three advertisements separately and was good:  $\alpha = .88$  (chewing gum),  $\alpha = .92$  (coffee),  $\alpha = .93$  (beer). Consequently, the mean of all eight items was used to calculate the compound variable 'attitude towards the ad' for each advertisement. The variable 'purchase intention' was measured using the scale developed by In and Ahmad (2018), which consisted of four items (e.g. My willingness to buy this product is high) that were measured on 7-point Likert scales (*totally disagree – totally agree*). The reliability of the scale was calculated for all three advertisements separately and was good:  $\alpha = .94$  (chewing gum),  $\alpha = .95$  (coffee),  $\alpha = .97$  (beer). Consequently, the mean of all four items was used to calculate the compound variable 'purchase intention' for each advertisement. For the variable 'perceived offensiveness', participants had to complete the phrase "I consider this ad ..." with items ranging from *not at all offensive - extremely offensive* on a 7-point Likert scale (based on Christy & Haley, 2008).

The variable 'source credibility' consisted of two items (The advertiser has expertise in the product advertised, the advertiser is trustworthy) that were measured on 7-point Likert scales (*totally disagree – totally agree*) (adapted from Nan, 2013). The reliability of the scale was calculated for all three advertisements separately and was acceptable for the coffee ad:  $\alpha = .78$  and the beer ad:  $\alpha = .68$ , but questionable for the chewing gum ad:  $\alpha = .60$ . The mean of the two items was used to calculate the compound variable 'perceived source credibility' for all advertisements. Lastly, the variable 'honesty' was measured on a 7-point Likert scale

(*totally disagree - totally agree*) in response to the statement “This ad is honest”.

In addition to indicating their gender, age and education level, participants were asked about the context in which they acquired their English language skills (naturalistic, mixed, instructed; based on Dewaele, 2004). Participants’ self-assessed proficiency in four skills (speaking, writing, reading, listening) in German and English was also assessed. The items were measured on 7-point semantic differentials anchored by *poor – excellent* (based on Krishna and Ahluwalia, 2008). The reliability of the scales was good:  $\alpha = .87$  (German),  $\alpha = .92$  (English). Consequently, the mean of all four items was used to calculate the compound variable ‘self-assessed proficiency’ for German and English, respectively. Participants were also asked to indicate how often they consume chewing gum, coffee and beer (*never – very often*), how often they swear (*never – very frequently*; adapted from Dewaele, 2017) and how appropriate they find the use of swearwords (*very inappropriate - very appropriate*) on 7-point Likert scales.

All questions about demographic variables and other background information were placed at the very end of the questionnaire to avoid suspicion about the research goal.

## **Procedure**

The questionnaire was created with the programme *Qualtrics* and administered online. The personal networks of the ten Bachelor students who worked on the present study were used to recruit participants. The link to the questionnaire was sent directly to prospective participants via text messages or was posted on social media. The sampling method was therefore convenience sampling. The participants were told that the study was conducted for the purpose of a Bachelor’s Thesis at Radboud University in the field of Communication Science and investigated reactions to advertisements. No rewards were offered for participation. The questionnaire took approximately 15 minutes to fill in ( $M = 15.21$ ,  $SD = 10.03$ ). Three participants who took more than three hours were excluded from this calculation. It is likely that they began filling in the questionnaire but then finished it at a later point in time.

### **Statistical treatment**

Repeated measures analyses with language (German, English) and version (swearword, no swearword) as between-subjects factors and the advertisement type (chewing gum, coffee, beer) as within-subjects factor were performed to investigate, for each advertisement, the effects of swearwords and language on participants' attitude towards the ad, their purchase intention, the perceived offensiveness of the ad, the perceived source credibility and the honesty of the ad. A two-way ANOVA with language and context of acquisition (naturalistic, instructed, mixed) as between-subjects factors was conducted for the three ads' average offensiveness rating in each version to examine whether language and context of acquisition affected the perceived offensiveness of the ads.

## **Results**

### **Attitude towards the ad**

A repeated measures ANOVA with the advertisement type as within-subject factor and language (German/English) and version (swearword/no swearword) as between-subjects factors was conducted to investigate participants' attitude towards the advertisements. It showed a significant main effect of advertisement type ( $F(2, 264) = 32.44, p < .001$ ). There was a non-significant main effect of version ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ), a non-significant main effect of language ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ) and a non-significant interaction between version and language ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ). The interactions between advertisement type and version ( $F(2, 264) = 2.95, p = .054$ ), advertisement type and language ( $F(2, 264) < 1$ ), as well as advertisement type, version and language ( $F(2, 264) < 1$ ) were not significant.

Regardless of language and the presence/absence of swearwords, the chewing gum ad ( $M = 2.68, SD = 1.04$ ) resulted in a more negative attitude towards the ad than the coffee ad ( $M = 3.53, SD = 1.16; p < .001$ , Bonferroni correction) and the beer ad ( $M = 3.41, SD = 1.23; p < .001$ , Bonferroni correction). There was no significant difference between the coffee ad

and the beer ad with respect to attitude towards the ad ( $p = .947$ , Bonferroni correction). The results can be seen in Table 1.

### **Purchase intention**

A repeated measures ANOVA for participants' purchase intention also revealed a significant main effect of advertisement type ( $F(2, 264) = 12.99, p < .001$ ). There was a non-significant main effect of version ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ), a non-significant main effect of language ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ) and a non-significant interaction between version and language ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ). The interactions between advertisement type and version ( $F(2, 264) = 1.19, p = .305$ ), advertisement type and language ( $F(2, 264) < 1$ ), as well as advertisement type, version and language ( $F(2, 264) < 1$ ) were also not significant.

Regardless of language and the presence/absence of swearwords, the chewing gum ad ( $M = 2.63, SD = 1.24$ ) resulted in a lower purchase intention than the coffee ad ( $M = 3.01, SD = 1.39; p = .022$ , Bonferroni correction) and the beer ad ( $M = 3.34, SD = 1.60; p < .001$ , Bonferroni correction). The coffee ad also resulted in a lower purchase intention than the beer ad ( $p = .037$ , Bonferroni correction). The results are presented in Table 1.

### **Offensiveness**

A repeated measures ANOVA was also conducted for offensiveness. As the Levene's test was significant for the chewing gum ad ( $p < .001$ ), the significance level was set at .01 for the evaluation of this ad following Pallant (2007, p. 261). The results showed a significant main effect of advertisement type ( $F(2, 264) = 172.15, p < .001$ ), a significant main effect of version ( $F(1, 132) = 12.22, p = .001$ ), and a significant interaction between advertisement type and version ( $F(2, 264) = 3.16, p = .044$ ). There was a non-significant main effect of language ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ). The interactions between version and language ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ), advertisement type and language ( $F(2, 264) = 1.71, p = .183$ ) and advertisement, version and language ( $F(2, 264) < 1$ ) were not significant either.

To investigate the interaction effect in more detail, a repeated measures analysis was conducted for each version (swearword/no swearword) separately with the advertisement as the within-subjects factor. It revealed a significant effect of advertisement type for the ads with swearwords ( $F(2, 130) = 101.27, p < .001$ ) as well as without swearwords ( $F(2, 138) = 71.86, p < .001$ ) on offensiveness. For the ads that contained swearwords, the chewing gum ad ( $M = 6.35, SD = 1.06$ ) was considered more offensive than the coffee ad ( $M = 2.79, SD = 1.87; p < .001$ , Bonferroni correction) and the beer ad ( $M = 3.50, SD = 2.02; p < .001$ , Bonferroni correction). The coffee ad was not considered to be more offensive than the beer ad ( $p = .053$ , Bonferroni correction). For the ads without swearwords, the chewing gum ad ( $M = 5.06, SD = 1.84$ ) was considered to be more offensive than the coffee ad ( $M = 2.27, SD = 1.62; p < .001$ , Bonferroni correction) and the beer ad ( $M = 2.94, SD = 2.06; p < .001$ , Bonferroni correction). The beer ad was also considered to be more offensive than the coffee ad ( $p = .022$ , Bonferroni correction). The results are presented in Table 1.

### Source credibility

For source credibility, a repeated measures ANOVA with Greenhouse-Geisser correction showed a significant main effect of advertisement type ( $F(2, 264) = 25.12, p < .001$ ). There was a non-significant main effect of version ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ), a non-significant main effect of language ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ) and a non-significant interaction between version and language ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ). The interactions between advertisement type and version ( $F(2, 264) < 1$ ), advertisement type and language ( $F(2, 264) < 1$ ), as well as advertisement type, version and language ( $F(2, 264) < 1$ ) were also not significant.

Regardless of language and the presence/absence of swearwords, the credibility of the advertiser of the chewing gum ad ( $M = 3.53, SD = 1.06$ ) was perceived as being lower than the credibility of the advertiser of the coffee ad ( $M = 4.18, SD = 1.20; p < .001$ , Bonferroni correction) and the beer ad ( $M = 4.25, SD = 1.12; p < .001$ , Bonferroni correction). There was no significant difference between the coffee ad and the beer ad ( $p = 1.000$ , Bonferroni

correction) with respect to the perceived credibility of the advertiser. The results are presented in Table 1.

### **Honesty**

For honesty, a repeated measures ANOVA showed a significant main effect of advertisement type ( $F(2, 264) = 11.47, p < .001$ ). There was a non-significant main effect of version ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ), a non-significant main effect of language ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ) and a non-significant interaction between version and language ( $F(1, 132) = 1.09, p = .299$ ). The interactions between advertisement type and version ( $F(2, 264) = 1.17, p = .313$ ), advertisement type and language ( $F(2, 264) < 1$ ), as well as advertisement type, version and language ( $F(2, 264) < 1$ ) were also not significant.

Regardless of language and the presence/absence of swearwords, the chewing gum ad ( $M = 3.94, SD = 1.50$ ) was perceived as being less honest than the coffee ad ( $M = 4.60, SD = 1.38; p < .001$ , Bonferroni correction) and the beer ad ( $M = 4.38, SD = 1.38; p = .010$ , Bonferroni correction). There was no significant difference between the coffee ad and the beer ad ( $p = .309$ , Bonferroni correction) with respect to the perceived honesty of the ad. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of all consumer responses in function of the type of ad (chewing gum, coffee, beer), version (swearword/no swearword) and language (English/German) (1 = negative attitude/low purchase intention/low offensiveness/low credibility/low honesty, 7 = positive attitude/high purchase intention/high offensiveness/high credibility/high honesty)

	Swearword	No swearword	English	German	Total
	<i>N</i> = 66 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>N</i> = 70 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>N</i> = 70 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>N</i> = 66 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>N</i> = 136 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
<b>Attitude ad</b>					
Chewing Gum	2.54 (1.04)	2.80 (1.03)	2.69 (1.07)	2.67 (1.02)	2.68 (1.04)
Coffee	3.62 (1.17)	3.45 (1.15)	3.52 (1.18)	3.54 (1.13)	3.53 (1.16)
Beer	3.56 (1.19)	3.27 (1.26)	3.35 (1.19)	3.47 (1.28)	3.41 (1.23)
<b>Purchase intention</b>					
Chewing Gum	2.50 (1.37)	2.75 (1.09)	2.59 (1.27)	2.68 (1.21)	2.63 (1.24)
Coffee	2.93 (1.40)	3.08 (1.39)	2.89 (1.30)	3.13 (1.48)	3.01 (1.39)
Beer	3.42 (1.64)	3.26 (1.57)	3.34 (1.56)	3.33 (1.65)	3.34 (1.60)
<b>Offensiveness</b>					
Chewing Gum	6.35 (1.06)	5.06 (1.84)	5.79 (1.38)	5.58 (1.88)	5.68 (1.64)
Coffee	2.79 (1.87)	2.27 (1.62)	2.33 (1.77)	2.73 (1.74)	2.52 (1.76)
Beer	3.50 (2.02)	2.94 (2.06)	3.20 (2.08)	3.23 (2.04)	3.21 (2.05)
<b>Source Credibility</b>					
Chewing Gum	3.48 (1.08)	3.56 (1.04)	3.53 (1.00)	4.15 (1.18)	3.53 (1.06)
Coffee	4.26 (1.16)	4.11 (1.24)	4.25 (1.13)	4.11 (1.27)	4.18 (1.20)
Beer	4.30 (0.99)	4.21 (1.23)	4.19 (1.07)	4.32 (1.17)	4.25 (1.12)
<b>Honesty</b>					

Chewing Gum	4.05 (1.55)	3.84 (1.46)	3.83 (1.48)	4.06 (1.53)	3.94 (1.50)
Coffee	4.79 (1.31)	4.41 (1.44)	4.64 (1.20)	4.55 (1.56)	4.60 (1.38)
Beer	4.36 (1.43)	4.40 (1.33)	4.30 (1.37)	4.47 (1.40)	4.38 (1.38)

### Context of acquisition and offensiveness

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether the context of acquisition affected the offensiveness of the English ads in general. The ANOVA was conducted with language and context of acquisition as factors for each version separately (swearword/no swearword). For the ads with swearwords, neither language ( $F(1, 60) < 1$ ), nor context of acquisition ( $F(2, 60) = 1.76, p = .181$ ) had an effect on offensiveness. The interaction between language and context of acquisition ( $F(2, 60) = 1.36, p = .266$ ) was also not significant. The same pattern emerged for the ads without swearwords. There were no main effects of language ( $F(1, 64) < 1$ ) and context of acquisition ( $F(2, 64) < 1$ ). The interaction between language and context of acquisition was also not significant ( $F(2, 64) < 1$ ).

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for the overall offensiveness of the ads in function of context of acquisition, version and language (1= low offensiveness, 7 = high offensiveness)

Offensiveness (overall)	Swearword		No swearword	
	English	German	English	German
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Context of acquisition				
Naturalistic	<i>N</i> = 2	<i>N</i> = 1	<i>N</i> = 1	<i>N</i> = 1
	4.67 (0.94)	5.33 (.)	2.67 (.)	3.67 (.)

Mixed	<i>N</i> = 21	<i>N</i> = 19	<i>N</i> = 26	<i>N</i> = 21
	4.08 (1.00)	4.67 (1.31)	3.24 (1.34)	3.32 (1.62)
Instructed	<i>N</i> = 9	<i>N</i> = 14	<i>N</i> = 11	<i>N</i> = 10
	4.11 (1.18)	3.71 (1.08)	4.09 (1.27)	3.43 (1.53)

### Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine whether swearwords in advertisements affect consumers' responses towards these advertisements and whether this effect potentially differs between an advertisement in an L1 and an L2. Overall, the findings show that consumers' reactions seem to depend more on the overall message and image of an individual advertisement than the language or the presence of swearwords.

Coming back to the first research question that was posed, the findings show that there are only limited differences between the effects that advertisements with swearwords and advertisements without swearwords have on consumers. Neither their attitude towards the ad, nor their purchase intention was affected by the swearwords. The swearwords also did not affect perceptions of credibility and honesty. However, the participants found the advertisements with the swearwords more offensive than those without swearwords, which supports the central argument by Dahl et al. (2003) that shock appeals in advertisements offend consumers. Nevertheless, when looking at how other shock appeals have influenced consumers, such as by eliciting negative attitudes (de Pelsmacker & Janssens, 2008; de Pelsmacker & van den Bergh, 1996) or positive attitudes towards the advertisements (Pope et al., 2013; Severn, et al., 1990; Söderlund & Dahlén, 2010) or by increasing purchase intentions (Severn et al., 1990), the question arises how shocking swearwords actually are. Even though participants indicated that they found the use of swearwords in general inappropriate, it is possible that violent (Söderlund & Dahlén, 2010) or sexual appeals (Severn, et al., 1990) have more potential to affect consumers' opinion and intentions because

they might be more offensive than swearwords. On the other hand, the findings also point towards the possibility that shocking appeals in advertising have become obsolete (Urwin & Venter, 2014) and that marketers may need to adopt new strategies to “break through the myriad of current advertising to make a positive connection with consumers” (p. 212).

Overall, the swearwords only affected how offensive participants found the ad, which is why a difference between the effect of the strong swearword (*asshole*) and the mild swearwords (*damn, idiot*) was only discovered with respect to this variable and not the others. The chewing gum advertisement with the swearword *asshole* was perceived as more offensive than the coffee advertisement that used *damn* and the beer advertisement that used *idiot*. This corroborates Dewaele’ (2016) finding that *asshole* is a relatively offensive swearword and Mortimer’s (2007) suggestion that the severity of a swearword can influence consumers’ perception of the advertisement it is used in. However, the fact that the chewing gum advertisement was also rated worse than the coffee and beer ad on all other dimensions, regardless of whether the ad included the swearword or not, puts the finding about the severity of the swearwords into perspective. Evidently, participants also found the chewing gum ad offensive without the word *asshole*, similar to how they attributed less credibility and honesty to this ad and felt a more negative attitude and a lower intention to purchase this product. Thus, it is probable that the image for the chewing gum advertisement, in which a woman appears to be bothered by a man, and the message that it conveys about bad breath have ultimately taken precedence over the effects of the swearword and the language. The reactions to the coffee ad and the beer ad were more ambivalent. There was no difference between their offensiveness ratings when they included swearwords, but without swearwords, the beer ad was more offensive than the coffee ad. Yet, the coffee ad resulted in a lower purchase intention than the beer ad, regardless of the presence of swearwords. While it is therefore difficult to draw definitive conclusion about whether the coffee ad or the beer ad resonated better with participants, it seems that the effects of swearwords can be outweighed

by the choice of image and the message of the slogan.

With regard to language, no differences were found between German and English ads without swearwords, and German and English ads with swearwords. Even though the slogans with swearwords were the main focus of this study, these findings also show that ‘normal’ slogans in an L1 need not be perceived as more emotional than L2 slogans, which is what Puntoni et al. (2008) reported. The advertisements with swearwords only affected consumers’ responses in terms of the advertisements’ offensiveness, as mentioned previously. However, since neither the ad with *asshole* nor *damn* nor *idiot* received a higher offensiveness rating in German than in English, the findings do not support the claim that swearwords are perceived as more intense in a first language than in a second language (Dewaele, 2004). Rather, the findings are in support of Jay and Janschewitz’s (2008) study, where no difference between native and non-native English speakers was detected with regard to how offensive they found swearwords. They argue that the high proficiency level of the non-native speakers may have diminished the differences between these two groups (p. 284), which could also apply to the participants in this study. Even though their actual proficiency was not assessed, their self-assessed proficiency was above average. An important difference to Dewaele’s (2004) study that should be noted is that Dewaele focused on how participants actively use swearwords, whereas participants in this study were confronted with swearwords in an ad. Therefore, the contradictory result reported here could also be attributed to the nature of the experiment and the fact that participants were not instructed to reflect about the emotional force of the swearwords.

Turning to the context of acquisition, the analysis revealed that this did not influence how offensive participants found the English ads, which also contrasts with Dewaele (2004). In his study, participants who learned an L2 in an instructed setting attributed less emotional force to swearwords in that language than participants who learned an L2 in a naturalistic or mixed setting (p. 217). However, one major limitation of this study which makes the

comparison to Dewaele (2004) difficult, is the fact that only five participants reported that they learnt English in a naturalistic setting, whereas in Dewaele's (2004) study 176 participants reported to have learnt a second language since birth (p. 210).

This study has several other limitations. It only included native German speaking participants, which means that the findings cannot be applied to other language contexts. Future studies should include other languages as well, because reactions towards certain swearwords may differ between native German speakers and native speakers of another language, since not all languages use the same types of swearwords or find them equally offensive (Ljung, 2011). Another limitation of this study is the fact that the image and the message of the slogan seem to have influenced consumer reactions considerably. In future research about the use of swearwords in advertisements, it would be useful to assess participants' reactions to the images and the slogans in a pre-test first, so that the advertisements will not be evaluated differently based on these characteristics. What this study also neglected is to examine the influence of swearwords on other consumer reactions besides attitudes, opinions and intentions. Other studies on shock advertising have, for example, focused on recall measures (Dens et al., 2008; Urwin & Venter, 2014) but an ecologically valid recall measure lay beyond the scope of the experiment. In future studies, the influence of swearwords on participants' ability to recall the advertisements could therefore be investigated.

Despite its limitations, the present study has made several theoretical contributions. The finding that swearwords did not affect consumer reactions with the exception that these ads were perceived as offensive contradicts the previous suggestion that swearwords "may help to improve the average rating of adverts" (Westerholm, 2017, p. 23). However, the study gives some support to Baker and Broadus's (2014) argument that swearwords may be more effective for ads that feature emotional products than non-emotional products (p. 103). Even though emotional and non-emotional products were not compared in this study, it is evident

that the swearwords in the ads for the non-emotional products (chewing gum, coffee, beer) did not affect participants, with the exception that they found the ads offensive. The study also corroborates another aspect of the theory on swearwords in advertising, namely that consumers perceive ads with strong swearwords differently than ads with mild swearwords (Mortimer, 2007, p. 1597). Similar to how *fucking* was perceived as being “out of place” (Westerholm, 2017, p. 23) compared to *damn* or *shit* in Westerholm’s study, the ad with *asshole* received a higher offensiveness rating in this study than the ads with *damn* or *idiot*. This study also offers novel insights about swearwords in advertising because it appears to be the first to combine this shock appeal with the research about the differences between the emotional intensity of an L1 and an L2. Even though previous studies demonstrated that L1 swearwords are typically perceived as more emotionally intense than L2 swearwords (Dewaele, 2004, 2010), the present study indicates that this may not apply to swearwords in advertisements.

In terms of practical applications, this study suggests that swearwords are not a particularly effective shock appeal to influence consumers’ attitudes and opinions about advertisements and advertisers. Even though more research is needed to validate the findings, the study shows that ads with swearwords for low-involvement products only seem to be perceived as offensive by native German speaking consumers, particularly if the swearword is strong. With respect to consumers’ attitude towards the ad, their purchase intention, the advertiser’s credibility and the honesty of the ad, swearwords do not appear to have a positive or negative effect. Similarly, consumer reactions towards ads with swearwords also do not seem to be affected by the language of the ad. Overall, the findings therefore suggest that, if a marketer wishes to launch an advertisement for the German consumer market with a slogan that contains an English or a German swearword, these stylistic choices should not profoundly affect how consumers perceive the advertisement or the advertiser.

## Appendix

Liebe Teilnehmer,

Wir würden uns freuen, wenn Sie an unserer Umfrage zum Thema Werbung teilnehmen würden. Die Bearbeitung unseres Online-Fragebogens dauert ca. **10 Minuten**. Ihre Teilnahme bleibt selbstverständlich **anonym** und die Ergebnisse der Umfrage werden ausschließlich zu Forschungszwecken im Fachbereich Informations- und Kommunikationswissenschaften an der Radboud Universität in Nijmegen (Niederlande) genutzt. Ihre Teilnahme an der Studie ist freiwillig und Sie können die Teilnahme jederzeit beenden.

Die Umfrage besteht aus **zwei Teilen**: Als Erstes werden Sie drei verschiedene Werbeanzeigen zu sehen bekommen, zu denen Sie dann im Anschluss Fragen beantworten werden. Am Ende der Umfrage werden Ihnen Fragen zu Ihrer Person gestellt.

Klicken Sie auf **'Ich stimme zu'**, wenn Sie:

- die obigen Informationen gelesen und zur Kenntnis genommen haben
- sich dazu bereit erklären, freiwillig an der Umfrage teilzunehmen
- mindestens 18 Jahre alt sind

Falls Sie nicht an der Umfrage teilnehmen möchten, verlassen Sie bitte diese Website.

Vielen Dank für Ihre Mithilfe!

Sollten Sie weitere Informationen zu dieser Studie wünschen, kontaktieren Sie bitte [m.holten@student.ru.nl](mailto:m.holten@student.ru.nl)





Bitte lesen Sie die folgenden Aussagen sorgfältig durch und geben Sie Ihre Meinung an.

	Stimme überhaupt nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Stimme eher nicht zu	Neutral	Stimme eher zu	Stimme zu	Stimme völlig zu
Der Inserent hat Erfahrung mit dem beworbenen Produkt	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Der Inserent ist vertrauenswürdig	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Bitte lesen Sie die folgende Aussage sorgfältig durch und geben Sie Ihre Meinung an.

	Stimme überhaupt nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Stimme eher nicht zu	Neutral	Stimme eher zu	Stimme zu	Stimme völlig zu
Diese Werbeanzeige ist ehrlich	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Second Part of the Questionnaire

Bitte geben Sie Ihre Muttersprache an.

- Deutsch
- Niederländisch
- Andere

Bitte geben Sie Ihr Alter an.

\_\_\_\_\_

Bitte geben Sie das Geschlecht an, mit dem Sie sich am ehesten assoziieren.

- Mann
- Frau
- Andere
- Das möchte ich nicht sagen

Was ist die höchste Ausbildungsstufe, die Sie abgeschlossen haben oder derzeit besuchen?

- Grundschule
- Sekundarschulausbildung (Hauptschule, Gesamtschule, Gymnasium)
- Berufsausbildung
- Bachelor Abschluss
- Master Abschluss
- Doktorgrad
- Keine abgeschlossene Ausbildung

In welcher Art von Kontext haben Sie Ihre englischen Sprachkenntnisse erworben?

- Ich habe sie im Alltagsleben gelernt
- Ich wurde unterrichtet
- Eine Mischung aus beidem





Advertisements

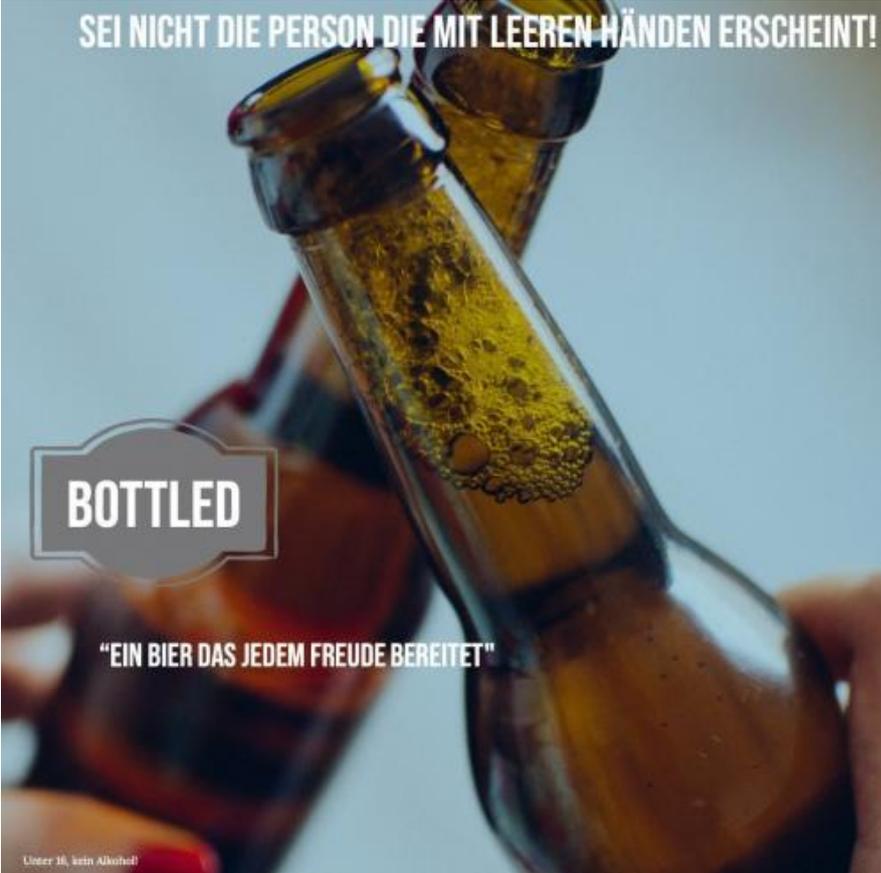












### Statement of Own Work

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Student number: s1041980

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- b. I also declare that I have only submitted text written in my own words
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Signed: L. Hilti

Date: 1 July 2020

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