



# BACHELOR THESIS

## **Group 6- Effects of swear words in a foreign language in advertising**

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Word count: 6.946

# The effect of swear words in advertising in Foreign Languages and the L1

## Abstract

Previous research has already been conducted on effect of shock advertising, the findings showed that shock advertising attracts more attention and can have a positive effect on the perception of the advertisement in the customers mind. However, most of that research focused on the use of visual shock advertising. The current research aims to see how the use of verbal shock advertising, in this case swear words, affects the overall attitude towards the advertisement. Further, the effect on purchase intention, credibility of the advertiser and perceived offensiveness as well as the effect of self-assessed frequency of swearing and the perceived offensiveness of the advertisement was tested. Some research indicated that a second language can make a message or conversation perceived as less offensive, therefore the second language was included in the current study to investigate if this effect could also be seen in an advertising context. As a result, shock advertising would still attract the attention of the customer without the risk of offending them. For the data collection a questionnaire was sent out in which 167 German participants were exposed to three advertisements. Each of the advertisements had four different version (English/German, No swear word/swear word) but each participant was only exposed to one version to avoid a carry-over effect. While advertisements with swear words were found more offensive, findings showed that the perceived offensiveness is not connected to the language used. Advertisements with swear words were perceived more offensive irrespectively of the language. Furthermore, the use of swear words in advertising did not show an effect on the purchase intention or attitude towards the advertisement. The results of this research cannot confirm the positive effect previous studies found on the use of swear words in advertising.

## Introduction

Advertising has constantly changed throughout the years. However, the main goal has always been to attract the attention of the consumer. Therefore, fifty years ago advertisers started using rhetorical figures in advertising like rhymes and metaphors, which could be visual or verbal (

McQuarrie&Philipps, 2013 ). While rhetorical figures are still popular nowadays, there is also a need to find new ways to attract the customers attention, as each customer is exposed to approximately 3,000 advertisements a day (Dahl, et al.,2003). As a result, advertisers have come up with a new way to attract their customers. They break common norms and values to shock the customer expecting that shock effect will attracts the attention of customers, which is called shock advertising (Dahl, et al.,2003). However, while shock advertising seems like an easy way to attract attention, it also entails many risks advertisers need to be aware of (Urwin& Venter, 2014). Violating common norms creates many different emotions in the customer's mind, most commonly anger and disgust, which are then connected with the brand. Therefore, companies had to find new ways that still attract the attention of the customers without offending them. Especially, for verbal shock advertising one possible solution to avoid offending the customers could be the change of swear words to a foreign language instead of using them in the customer's native language. As studies suggest that a foreign language could be seen as less offensive than the native language (Dewaele, 2004). However, this had not been applied to the context of advertising, yet. Therefore, the present research aims to investigate new ways to use verbal shock advertisement more effectively by using swear words in a foreign language to avoid offending the customers in their mother tongue, while still attracting the initial attention.

### Theoretical Framework

Customer orientated shock advertising is defined as the attempt to surprise the audience by violating their norms and values with the goal to attract the attention of the customer (Parry, et al, 2013). This can be done in different ways. The most common way is the use of visuals that display sexuality, violence or indecency (Perry et al, 2013). One of the main examples that illustrates this is “the United Colors of Benneton” campaign from 2003. In their Yves St Laurent advertisement, the United Colors of Benneton displayed the picture of a naked woman on billboards. The advertisement was seen as unsuitable for children and as a result was taken down by the Advertising Standard Authorities (Perry et al, 2013).

Because of this and other examples, Urwin and Venter (2014) suggest that shock advertising needs to be used with caution, as the disgust that is created in the customer's mind can result in a negative brand image. The authors tested the effect of shock advertising on brand attitude and memory recall. The findings show that shock advertising that uses sex is experienced as the most unenjoyable; however, it does have the highest memory recall. Even

though the study by Urwin and Venter (2014) focuses on visual shock advertising, it gives an insight into how shock advertising is generally perceived by customers and provides a guideline on which topics are perceived as more offensive. One common example of the use of verbal shock advertisement are swear words. Although, the study by Urwin and Venter (2014) did not take those into account their study on visual shock advertising might still provide insight on how people react to shock advertising. Eynullaeva and Wooward-Smith (2012) found in their study that neither verbal or visual advertising has an advantage over another and that they evoke the same emotions.

In order to understand the effect, swear words could have on advertising, one has to understand the effect swear words have on customers in their daily life. Dewaele, (2017) argues that even though swearing is socially stigmatised, it is an important part of social interactions. As a result, people who swear more often will be surrounded by other people who swear often and vice versa. This suggests that the effectiveness of swear words in advertising depends on how much the customers swear themselves and that customers who swear more, are will react less offended then customers who swear less. Another, more public, use of swear words has been studied by Scherer and Sagarin (2006). They tested the effect of swear words in political speeches. Political speeches do not advertise a product; however, the aim is to convince an audience. The study by Scherer and Sagarin (2006) provides an explanation of how swear words can influence the emotional bond between the speaker and audience. The emotional bond between a speaker and the audience is created through a feeling of similarity and the evocation of positive feelings (Huebsch, 2020). In their study, Scherer and Sagarin (2006), presented participants an identical political speech but included a swear word in one of the test groups. The results showed that the political speech with the swear word did not show an effect on the perceived credibility compared to the political speech that did not include a swear word. However, a positive effect was discovered on the perceived intensity and the attitude towards the topic when listeners were exposed to the speeches including a swear word. Overall, the study allows for some indications on the positive effect swear words can have on the customer, which raises the question, if the results found by Scherer and Sagarin (2006) will also apply to advertising. One assumption why political speeches could be seen as more credible with swear words then without swear words was the emotional bond between the speaker and the audience. This assumption can be confirmed by the findings by Putoni, et al., (2008), who state that customers have a better attitude towards the product if they have an emotional bond with the brand. Therefore, it could still be assumed that advertising with swear words is seen as more credible then the advertising without swear words.

Previous research by Mortimer (n.d) discussed the effect of swear words in advertising. She identified different reasons to use swear words in advertising (humour, emphasis, show trust, display personality, to shock). However, she also states that it is hard to control, which emotion will be evoked by the advertisement in the end. It is suggested that the product advertised might play a role in the emotions the advertisement evokes. However, the current study wants to investigate if the use of language could help to have more control over the emotions that are evoked by the use of swear words in advertising.

Studies show that a speakers' first language evokes more emotions than the second language (LX) (Puntoni, et al., 2008). This is due to multiple reasons. Firstly, it is suggested that words that are heard more often, create a bigger emotional bond. Another reason for a bigger emotional bond with the L1 is that the L1 and LX are stored in different parts of the brain (Puntoni, et al., 2008). It can be concluded that the link between words are asymmetric to the languages. Therefore, more emotions are associated with the L1 than with the L2. As a result, it is more common to unconsciously translate the LX into the L1 but not the other way around (Puntoni, et al., 2008). Further, it also means that the L1 is perceived stronger than the LX, as a result it could be assumed that swear words in the L1 are perceived more offensive than swear words in the LX. This is in agreement with Dewaele (2004), who also suggests that the L1 is perceived as more offensive. Moreover, Dewaele (2004) suggests that the higher emotional bond with the L1 leads to a preference of the L2 when it comes to swear words, as they are seen as less offensive. However, none of those studies involved the use of swear words in advertising. Therefore, it remains unclear if the L1 is more effective for swear words in advertising as it is more emotional, or the L2 because it is seen as less offensive.

The current study investigates the emotional differences between L1 and LX of swear words in advertising, especially with regards to offensiveness. Moreover, it investigates the effects of swear words in the L1 or LX on customer's purchase intention and attitude towards the brand. In contrast to previous studies, this research aims to answer the question of the effectiveness of swear words in advertising, with the special focus on how the swear words used in different language can be perceived more or less offensive.

The main research question discusses the overall change of attitude the language and use of swear words in advertising could cause;

**R1:** To what extent does the use of swear words in the consumer's L1 or a foreign language in advertising have a different effect on the attitude towards the product? Because attitude is a broad concept, several sub-questions were created in order to further investigate

customer's attitude towards the advertising and its successfulness. Firstly, the researchers attempt to investigate the influence swear words in advertising could have on the purchase intention.

As most advertisements have the goal to get the audience to buy their product, the researchers use purchase attention to measure the successfulness of the advertising;

**R2:** How does the use of swear words, in a foreign language or the L1, in advertising influence the purchase intention of the product?

Further, the perceived credibility of advertising with swear words in a L1 or LX will be researched based on the approach of Scherer and Sagarin (2006). Credibility helps to measure the attitude towards the advertising, however as seen with the political speeches, a higher credibility indicates a higher success of convincing someone, which also applies to advertising ;

**R3:** To what extent does a swear word in the L1 or in a foreign language influence the perceived credibility of the advertisement differently?

Another factor that influences the attitude towards the advertising is the offensiveness. Inspired by Dewalele (2004) and Puntoni et al., (2008), this research attempts to investigate whether a change from the L1 to LX can decrease the perceived offensiveness of the advertising. If one of the languages would be perceived less offensive, it could help researcher to still create shock advertising without creating a negative image in the customer's mind;

**R4:** To what extend does the level of perceived offensiveness differ between swear words in the L1 and a foreign language in advertising.

Lastly, the in and out group theory of Dewalele (2017) will be tested because it indicates that only people who swear themselves, emotionally connect with the advertising that uses swear words. On the other hand, that would mean that people who do not swear will not be affected by advertising with swear words. Therefore, it will be tested how the self-assessed use of swear words will affect the attitude towards advertising;

**R5:** To what extent does the self-perceived use of swear words correlate with the attitude towards advertising with swear words?

## Method

### *Material*









For the present study three low involvement advertisements were created in two different languages (English/ German). For each language there was one version of the advertisement that involved a swear word and one version without a swear words. This resulted in four different versions of each advertisement (see Table 1). For each advertisement there was a German version, to represent the native language, with and without the swear word. Similarly, each advertisement had an English version in order to represent the foreign language. The English advertisements also had two versions, one with and one without swear words. All products used in this study were low involvement products to ensure the level of involvement of customers with the product does not influence their perception towards the swear word. The level of involvement of the products was self-assessed by the researchers based on the definition by Holmes and Crocker (1987). They defined whether a product can be categorised as high or low involvement product is based on how much people think about buying it. Low involvement products, which were used in this study, are products that one does not think much about before buying; the decision is made unconsciously, as purchase is seen as non-consequential or habit (Holmes and Crocker, 1987).

Firstly, participants were exposed to a coffee advertisement, which used “Drink your damn morning mood away”/” Drink your morning mood away” as slogan for the English versions and “Trinke deine verdammte Morgenlaune weg”/ “Trinke deine Morgenlaune weg” for the German versions. The second advertisement presented beer as a low involvement product with the English slogans “Don’t be the idiot that shows up empty handed”/” Don’t show up empty handed”. The German slogans for the same advertisement showed “Sei kein Idiot der mit leeren Händen auftaucht” /”Sei nicht die Person die mit leeren Händen erscheint”. Lastly, gum was used as a low involvement product with the slogan “Freshen up your breath asshole” / “Freshen up your breath” for the English advertisements and “Frische deinen Atem, Arschloch” / Frische deinem Atem auf” in the German versions. The researchers did not conduct a pre-test for the offensiveness of the swear words nor the involvement of the products as they felt confident to estimate that themselves. Even though, the researchers self-assessed that the swear words are ranked low-offensive, advertisements without swear words were used as a control group.





A pre-test with more advertisements as filler advertisements was conducted. With the filler advertisement included each participant was exposed to six advertisements, which made

the questionnaire too long for the participants. Further, the same questions were used for each advertisement which made the pre-test seem too repetitive; therefore, after the pre-test the filler advertisements were taken out in order shorten the questionnaire.

Table 1: Survey advertisements

Advertising	Language	Swear word	No swear word
Coffee	German		
Coffee	English		
Beer	German		
Beer	English		



Gum	German		
Gum	English		

### Subjects

167 Germans participated in the current study, which included 55 men, 79 women, 1 other with English as their LX, filled out a questionnaire about three different advertisements. Participants were aged between 17-66 ( $M = 28.14$ ,  $SD = 11.82$ ). This study did not require the participants to fulfil certain conditions in order to participate. Further, the participants were chosen from different educational background, scaling from a secondary education, vocational training, Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree and Doctoral Degree. On average participants assessed their English skills as good based on four different 7-point Likert scales with a range from very poor (1) to excellent (7) regarding their self-assessed ability for writing, speaking, reading and listening ( $M = 21.45$ ,  $SD = 5.20$ ). The current researchers investigated whether the educational level has an effect on the self-assessed English proficiency, as this would help further research to generalize higher education to higher English proficiency. However, a chi-square test did not show a significant effect of the level of education on the self-assessed language skills ( $\chi^2(68) = 87.23$ ,  $p = .06$ ). A one-way ANOVA did not show a significant effect of the self-assessed English proficiency on the attitude towards the advertisements ( $F(64,71) = .952$ ,  $p = .58$ ). Moreover, participants were asked to indicate their self-assessed frequency of swearing on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1(never) to 7(very frequently), results showed that most of the participants swear sometimes (41) ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 1.363$ ). However, a one-way ANOVA showed that there was no significant effect of the self-perceived swearing on the attitude towards the advertisement ( $F(64, 71) < 1$ ). Lastly, because this study intended to only use low-involvement products, participants were asked how often they use the products displayed in

the advertisements. For all three of the advertisements the participants indicated that they use the product rarely to sometimes (Chewing Gum  $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ; Beer  $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ , Coffee  $M = 4.53$ ,  $SD = 2.20$ ). From those results it can be concluded that the products used in this study are low-involvement.

### *Design*

This study used a 2x2 design with language of slogan (English, German) and the presence of swear words (swear word/ no swear word). In order to avoid a carry-over effect, a between-subject design was used.

### *Instruments*

The questionnaire participants were asked to fill out consisted of two parts.

In the first part, the attitude towards the advertisement, product and the purchase intention as well as the emotional response was measured. Each item was answered on a 7-point Likert scale. The questions were the same for all the advertisements. The first part of the survey was based on Spears and Singh (2004) and eight items were used as a guideline to measure the attitude towards the advertisement. The questions asked were “I like this ad”, followed by “This ad is entertaining” and “I think this ad is useful”. Further, “This ad is important”, “This ad is interesting”, “This ad is interesting”, “this ad is informative”, “I would like to see this ad again” and lastly “This ad is good”. For later analysis the three advertisements are computed together to one variable, therefore, the Cronbach’s alpha was also calculated for all of the three advertisements together. A Cronbach’s alpha with three items was low  $\alpha=.53$ , however with one item deleted (Chewing Gum) the Cronbach’s alpha was good  $\alpha=.68$

The next set of items in the first part of the questionnaire asked the participants about their attitude towards the product, the items again were based on the five items by Spears and Singh (2004) and measured on a 7-point Likert scale. The five items in this study were “I like to use this product”, “This product is useful”, “This product is interesting”. “This product is good” and “I would like to use this product”. Again, the reliability was calculated for the attitude towards the products, also for each advertisement separately. For the attitude towards the chewing gum advertisement alpha was excellent  $\alpha= .90$ . The alpha for the attitude towards coffee was excellent as well  $\alpha=.92$ . And lastly, the alpha for attitude towards beer was also excellent  $\alpha=.92$ .

Subsequently, participants were asked to answer a set of questions about their purchase intention regarding the product, also based on Spears and Singh (2004), with 4 items, based on

a 7-point Likert scale. “My willingness to buy this product is high”, I am likely to buy the product”/I would intend to buy this product”, “I would intend to buy this product” and “I have high intention to buy this product”. For all three advertisements the alpha for purchase intention was excellent (Chewing Gum  $\alpha=.94$ , Coffee  $\alpha=.95$ , Beer  $\alpha=.97$ ).

The perceived offensiveness based on the interview by Beers Fögeersten (2007) and his items to measure the perceived offensiveness. Participants were asked to indicate their perceived offensiveness on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from “I perceive this ad as not offensive” to “I perceive this ad as extremely offensive”. Participants were asked to evaluate the emotional response based on seven items, which were based on a research by Erickson et al. (2001). In this study all of those categories were presented and participants were asked to rate each emotion (happy, excited, irritating, guilty, ashamed, sad) on a 7-point Likert scale. Cronbach’s alpha for the emotional response towards the advertisements was good for all three advertisements (Chewing Gum  $\alpha= .76$ , Coffee  $\alpha= .71$ , Beer  $\alpha= .77$ ).

Lastly, for the perceived credibility participants were asked to rate three items (“I think the advertiser has expertise in the product”/ “I think the product appears trustworthy”/” I find the advertisement honest”) on a 7-point Likert scale. For the Chewing Gum advertisement, the alpha was poor  $\alpha= .60$ . For the Coffee advertisement the alpha was good  $\alpha=.78$  and it was poor for the Beer advertisement  $\alpha=.68$ .

The second part of the questionnaire asked the participants about their demographic. First, they were requested to name their first language, followed by age. Then participants were able to choose between four answers to name their gender (female, male, other, don’t want to say). Furthermore, participants were asked to indicate their educational level (primary education, secondary education, bachelor’s degree, master’s degree, doctoral degree, none of the above) and context in which they acquired English (naturalistic, instructed, mixed (Puntoni, 2008)) with multiple choice question. In the last part of the questionnaire participants were questioned about the recall of the products; they were given an open-ended question in which asked them to name all the products that were shown in the first part of the questionnaire. For the demographics the means and standard deviation were compared. While for the recall the researchers analysed based on two main categories. First, researchers analysed what advertisements the participants remembered based on the key words of the products (Beer, Gum, Coffee) to then further see how many of those products each participants was able to recall.

## *Procedure*

Participants were chosen via a snowball sampling and the questionnaire was posted on social media. There were two different versions of the questionnaire, one for each language used in the experiment (German, English). As the goal of the study was to investigate the difference between the L1 and the LX in advertisement, the ads in the questionnaire were either in the L1 or the LX. In order to avoid a carry-over effect, each participant was only be exposed to one version of the questionnaires. Multicenter sampling was used; first participants were randomly assigned to one of the languages German or English and after they were randomly assigned to either the swear words or no swear words. On the first page of the questionnaire, participants were briefed about anonymity to ensure their honesty about their answers. Moreover, they were informed that they could skip a question any time but could not go back to previous questions. After participants agreed that they understood these conditions, they were presented the first part of the questionnaire. They were able to see one advertisement and the questions at the same time. After completion of the first part of the questionnaire, participants could continue with the second part.

## *Statistical Treatment*

For the first part questionnaire (attitude towards the product/purchase intention/ perceived offensiveness/ perceived credibility) a two-way ANOVA was conducted, for the correlation between the self-assessed frequency of swearing and the attitude towards the advertisement a Pearson's correlation.

## *Results*

### *The Effect of Swear Words in Advertising on Attitude towards the Advertising*

To answer the main research question (To what extent does the use of swear words in the consumer's L1 or a foreign language in advertising have a different effect on the attitude towards the product?) a two-way ANOVA was conducted with swear words in advertising (swear word/no swear word) and language (German/ English) as independent variables and the attitude towards the advertisement as dependent variable. The two-way ANOVA showed no significant effect of language (English/German) on the attitude towards the advertisement ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ). Further, no significant effect was found of the version of the advertisement (use of swear words/ no use of swear words) and on the attitude towards the advertisement ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ). Lastly, the interaction between the language and the version of the advertisement

also did not show an effect on the attitude towards the advertisement ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ). The results of the two-way ANOVA show that neither the version nor the language has an effect on the attitude towards the advertisement and that an interaction between the language and version used is not present (see table 2).

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics Attitude towards the Advertisement

Version	Language ad	Mean	SD	N
Swear Words	English	3.16	0.82	32
	German	3.31	1.13	34
	Total	3.24	0.86	66
No Swear Words	English	3.21	0.86	38
	German	3.13	0.83	32
	Total	3.17	0.83	70

#### *The Effect of Swear Words in Advertising on Purchase Intention*

To determine the effect of swear words in advertising on the purchase intention a two-way ANOVA was conducted with purchase intention as dependent variable and version of the advertisement (swear word/ no swear word) and language (English/German) as independent variables. The two-way ANOVA for the effect of version of the advertisement (swear word/no swear word) was not significant ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ). As well as the effect of language (English/German) on the purchase intention, which also not significant ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ). Lastly, the interaction between the version and language of the advertisement also did not show a significant effect on the purchase intention ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ) (see table 3).

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics Purchase Intention

Version	Language	Mean	SD	N
Swear Words	English	2.84	1.12	32
	German	3.05	1.76	34
	Total	2.95	1.15	66
No Swear Words	English	3.03	0.92	38
	German	3.04	1.07	32
	Total	3.03	0.91	70

### *The Effect of Swear Words in Advertising on the Perceived Offensiveness*

To assess the effect of swear words in a foreign language or the LX on the perceived offensiveness a two-way ANOVA was conducted with the version of the advertisement (swear word/ no swear word) and the language of the advertisement (English/German) as independent variables and the perceived offensiveness as dependent variable. No significant effect was found for the language (English/German) used in the advertisement on the offensiveness ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ). Similarly, the interaction between the language used and the version of the advertisement did not have a significant effect on the perceived offensiveness ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ). However, a significant result was found for the effect of the version of the advertisement (swear word/ no swear word) on the perceived offensiveness ( $F(1, 132) = 12.22, p < .001$ ). The advertisements that used swear words ( $M = 4.21, SD = 3.48$ ) were perceived as more offensive than advertisements without swear words ( $M = 3.42, SD = 4.29$ ) (see table 4).

Table 4          Perceived Offensiveness

Version	Language	Mean	SD	N
Swear Words	English	4.13	1.02	32
	German	4.29	1.16	34
	Total	4.21	1.16	66
No Swear Words	English	3.47	1.35	38
	German	3.42	1.54	32
	Total	3.42	1.43	70

### *The Effect of Swear Words in Advertising on the Perceived Credibility*

The effect of advertisement with swear words in a foreign language or the LX could have on the perceived credibility of the advertiser was determined with a two-way ANOVA. The version of the advertisement (swear word/ no swear word) and the language of the advertisement (English/German) were used as independent variables and the perceived credibility was used as the dependent variable. The effect for the version of the advertisement (swear word/ no swear word) on the credibility of the advertiser was found not significant ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ). Further, the effect of the language used in the advertisement (English/German)

and the perceived credibility of the advertiser was not significant ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ). Lastly, the interaction between the version of the advertisement and the language used, was found not significant ( $F(1, 132) < 1$ ) (see table 5).

Table 5 Descriptive Statistics Perceived Credibility

Version	Language	Mean	SD	N
Swear Words	English	4.08	0.58	32
	German	3.94	0.88	34
	Total	4.01	0.77	66
No Swear Words	English	3.90	0.78	38
	German	4.02	1.00	32
	Total	3.95	0.89	50

#### *Influence of self-assessed swearing on perceived offensiveness*

A Pearson's correlation test was conducted to see whether the swearing behaviour of the participants had influence on their attitude towards advertisements with swear words. Therefore, only the advertisements that included swear words were included in the Pearson's correlation test. The results were not significant ( $r(136) = 1, p = .268$ ). Therefore, it could be concluded that the own use of swear words does not influence the perceived offensiveness of advertisements that includes swear words.

#### Conclusion

From the results of the statistical tests that were conducted a conclusion can be drawn about the effectiveness of swear words in advertising with special focus on the language they were used in. Those results can be used as advice and guideline for advertisers to use swear words in advertising more effectively.

Firstly, the attitude towards the advertising was tested and from the tests it can be concluded that it does not make a difference for the attitude towards the advertisement, whether swear words are used in an advertisement or not. Further, the language used in the advertisement (English/German) did not influence the attitude towards the advertisement in any way. Overall, the only difference that was found in attitude was for each of the advertisements.

Further, it was investigated whether the use of the swear words in the L1 or LX influences the purchase intention. Swear words generally do not have an effect on the purchase intention regardless the use of L1 or LX. Herby, it did not make a difference whether the swear words were used in the L1 or LX, the purchase intention was not influenced. The same results were also found for the perceived credibility. Neither the use of swear words nor the use of a different language affected the credibility of the advertiser.

A significant effect of the use of swear words in advertising was found on the perceived offensiveness. The advertisements that used swear words were perceived more offensive than advertisements without swear words. Additionally, the use of the language did not affect the perceived offensiveness. Neither the L1 or LX was perceived as more or less offensive.

Lastly, no correlation was found between the self-perceived swearing and the perceived offensiveness. This means that participants regardless their own swearing behaviour were equally offended by the use of swear words in advertising.

In sum, it can be concluded that the use of swear words in advertisements does not have an effect on the attitude towards the advertisement. Moreover, no positive effects were found when investigating use of swear words in advertising; participants felt more offended by the advertisements with swear words than the advertisements without swear words. The predicted effect that customers feel less offended when the swear word is used in a LX instead of the customer's L1 could not be confirmed. Overall, the change of the language did not show any effect.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to find new ways to use verbal shock advertising without offending the customer results, while still attracting the initial attention shock advertising aims to create. The results found in this study were partly in agreement with previous studies. However, some of the results revealed novel findings that are opposing to previous studies.

Firstly, it was expected that advertisements with swear words were perceived as more offensive than the advertisements without swear words, as per definition shock advertising breaks the norms by offending the customer (Dahl et al, 2003). Dewaele (2017) and Puntoni et al., (2008) suggested that the use of a LX prevents the customers from feeling offended.



However, this study found that the language that is used in the advertising does not influence the level of perceived offensiveness of swear words. Dewaele (2017) found that most people prefer to swear in their L1 as they rate foreign swear words as more offensive. Dewaele (2017) argues that the context of acquisition influences the perceived offensiveness of swear words. Foreign languages are mostly taught in high school; in education swearing is treated as a taboo-topic, which makes it harder for people to estimate the offensiveness of the swear words. Hence, swear words in a foreign language are mostly rated as more offensive. Even though, Dewaele (2017) states that swear words in a foreign language are more offensive, his findings are in disagreement with the current study because this study could not find any difference between the offensiveness of the two languages. On the other hand, Puntoni et al (2008) found that the foreign language is seen as less emotional than the L1, which is why people rather express feelings in their L1. This means that swear words used in a different language are perceived as less emotional than swear words in the L1. Therefore, it could be assumed that swear words in the foreign language are seen as less offensive; however, the current study shows that even though the LX might be perceived less emotional it does not make an advertisement seem less offensive. This suggests that the emotionality of the L1 or LX cannot be applied to an advertising context and that the context in which the swear word is used is another factor that has to be taken into consideration. Even though, the current study found a difference in the perceived offensiveness for the advertisements with and without swear words, the difference in the perceived offensiveness cannot be explained by the language that is used. Consequently, it shows that emotional connection to a brand is not influenced by the language that is used in the advertising. One explanation could be that this study did not take the context of acquisition into account, which was the main focus of Dewaele (2017). The author states that in a language which was acquired in High School, swear words are perceived more offensive because students are not taught how to use them properly and therefore, overestimate the offensiveness which suggests that if the LX is acquired in the childhood swear words would be perceived less offensive.

Mortimer (n.d) states that shock advertising can have more positive effects beyond the initial attention as it can create a variety of other emotions (humour, emphasis, trust). An explanation for the difference in the findings between the current and Mortimer's (n.d.) study could be the way shock advertising is used. While Mortimer (n.d) used car advertisements and video material in their study the current study used low involvement and verbal material. Another study, which suggests that the context of the advertisements is an important factor is by Urwin and Venter (2014), who mostly used the display of violence and sex for health

campaigns, which encouraged the participants to act in wanted behaviours. Urwin and Venter (2014) also suggest that the context of the advertising could change the attitude towards the advertisement. It could be argued that Urwin and Venter (2014) use high involvement products, as they are about the health of customer (Holmes and Crocker, 1987) and that therefore the shock advertising is more effective.

Another study by Westerholm (2017), also found that advertisements with swear words ranked higher on attitude than the advertisements without swear words, which again is in disagreement with the current study. One explanation for the different findings could be the different products used in the advertisements. In his study, Westerholm (2017) used an insurance company, an energy drink and a phone repair service. It could be argued that the insurance company and the phone repair service are higher involvement products than the ones used in this study, as they are products that are not easily bought and there is mostly a lot of thought behind the purchases (Holmes and Crocker, 1987). The difference between high and low involvement products could explain the different findings for the attitude towards the product. Further, the different perception of the offensiveness of swear words could be explained by the level of offensiveness of the swear words. The current study the swear words were chosen on the basis of the researcher's evaluation, while Westerholm (2017) used Jay's taboo ranking (1992) to ensure that the swear words were not perceived as too offensive, which allows Westerholm (2017) for a more accurate ranking of the offensiveness. As a pre-test on the offensiveness on the swear words has not been conducted, the swear words might be on a different level of offensiveness than the swear words from Westerholm (2017), which could be an explanation for the different results.

Another difference between this study and Westerholm (2017) are the findings for perceived credibility. While Westerholm (2017) finds that the credibility of the advertisement increases through the use of swear words, the current study could not find any change in the perceived credibility. The reason for the different findings again could be the use of low and high involvement products as the attitude towards the products changes with the customer's thought process about the purchase (Holmes and Crocker, 1987); which can also be seen in the study by Dahl, et al. (2003). The authors showed that AIDS campaigns were more credible if swear words were included. AIDS campaigns are not common forms of advertising as they do not try to convince the customer to buy something. However, based on the definition by Holmes and Crocker (1987), they can be defined as high involvement product. This is due to two reasons, first the advertisers try to change the behaviour of the participant and secondly, AIDS campaigns are supposed to stay in the head of the customer. Therefore, the difference in the

perceived credibility could again be explained by the difference between low and high involvement products. If swear words are used in advertisements with high involvement products, it makes the advertiser seem more credible than for advertisements for low involvement products. Related to this, Scherer and Sagarin (2006), investigated the effect of the use of swear words in political speeches and found that the swear word included in the political speech had a positive effect on the attitude towards the topic but not on the perceived credibility. However, the study by Scherer and Sagarin (2006) was not conducted with advertising, which means that a lot of other aspects can play a role in the credibility, as the context in which the swear word is used is different. Therefore, one can assume that the context of the use of the swear word plays a role in the credibility of the advertiser.

When it comes to the effect of self-perceived swearing on the perceived offensiveness the findings were in disagreement with the expectations of the present study. Based on Dewaele (2017) it was assumed that people who swear more are closer to others who swear more. The assumption drawn from that was that people who swear more would be less offended by advertising that includes swear words. However, this study could not find a correlation between the self-perceived swearing and perceived offensiveness of the advertising, which implies that even though the frequency of swearing leads to social grouping it does not influence the perceived offensiveness.

Although the current study aimed to take as many variables into account while investigating the effect of swear words in advertising, with regards to the language used to make the swear word seem less offensive, there were some limitations. Especially, with regards to the context of acquisition as a factor that influences the perceived offensiveness and the attitude towards the advertisement, limitations were found.

The context of acquisition showed to be important because Dewaele (2017) said swear words of languages that were acquired in High School are perceived more offensive than languages that are acquired through other contexts, for example bilingualism. Even though, the current study asked participants about their self-assessed English skills and how they acquired language it has not been taken into further account for later tests. Further, research could take bilingualism into account as well and asked participants about their difference in their swearing behaviour for both languages. Another limitation of the current study was the missing recall test. This was due to several reasons; first, the questionnaire was evaluated as too long by participants. For a recall test, participants would need to be asked to fill out a second questionnaire. However, sending participants a second questionnaire about recall was not possible as the questionnaires did not ask for personal information, therefore it was impossible

to know who filled in the questionnaire the first time.

Moreover, this study showed that it is important to conduct a pre-test about the offensiveness of the swear words or find a scale on which to rate the offensiveness of swear words accurately. The current study did not have such a scale and the researchers decided on the offensiveness of the swear words, which lead to a difference in results between the current study and other studies. More specifically the results differed with regards to the perceived offensiveness of the advertisements, which was perceived lower with swear words that were ranked lower on an offensiveness scale (Westerholm, 2017). Further, with regards to the attitude towards the advertisement some swear words had a positive effect on the attitude (Urwin and Venter, 2014), while this study found no effect. A scale for the offensiveness of swear words could give further indicate whether the strength of a swear word influences the attitude towards the product. Lastly, the perceived credibility was found higher for the low rated swear words (Westerholm, 2017), which cannot be confirmed by this study there is no indication of how the participants would rate the strength of the swear words. Further research should put more focus on the defining the level of offensiveness of swear words. Another, aspect that should be taken into account for further studies is the use of high or low involvement products in the studies. While this study did not find significant results, the study by Westerholm (2017), who used more high involvement products, found a more positive attitude towards the advertisement when swear words were included. The current study tried to use low involvement products only, however, it was again based on the researcher's opinion and not rated by the participants. Therefore, further studies should compare high and low involvement products with each other, as none of the studies used both in their study.

Overall, this study suggests that the use of swear words in advertisement does not have an effect on the attitude towards the advertisement or purchase intention. While the advertisements with swear words had an effect on the perceived offensiveness as they were seen as more offensive, the use of swear words did not change the attitude towards the advertisement and purchase intention. However, this study left out important factors like the context of acquisition, intensiveness of the swear words and the use of low and high involvement products. Further studies should take these limitations into account and do a cross-comparison between the level of offensiveness (high/low) and high and low involvement products. Lastly, further research should take the context of acquisition more into account and conduct research between the different context of acquisitions and whether the offensiveness of swear words differs between the L1 and L2 in different contexts of acquisition, as other studies suggest that the context of acquisition of the LX is an important factor in the perceived

offensiveness of the swear word. In conclusion, swear words used in shock advertising for low-involvement products did not show to have an effect on the purchase intention or attitude towards the advertising. However, while the use of the L1 or LX did not show a difference between the perceived offensiveness it can be concluded that the use of swear words in general, does influence the perceived offensiveness in the customer's mind.

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1- Survey Attitude towards the Advertisement

Please read the following statements carefully and indicate your opinion.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I like this ad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This ad is entertaining	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This ad is useful	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This ad is important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This ad is interesting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This ad is informative	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would like to see this ad again	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This ad is good	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### Appendix 2- Survey Attitude towards the product

Please read the following statements carefully and indicate your opinion.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I like this product	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This product is useful	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This product is interesting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This product is good	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would like to use this product	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### Appendix 3- Survey Purchase Intention

Please read the following statements carefully and rate them.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
My willingness to buy this product is high	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am likely to buy this product	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would intend to buy this product	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have a high intention to buy this product	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

#### Appendix 4- Survey Perceived Offensiveness

Please complete the statement below.

	Not at all Offensive	Not Offensive	Not Really offensive	Neutral	Somewhat Offensive	Offensive	Extremely Offensive
I consider this ad...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

#### Appendix 5- Survey Emotional Response

Please rate the following statements carefully and rate them.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
This ad makes me happy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This ad makes me excited	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This ad makes me angry	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This ad irritates me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This ad makes me feel guilty	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This ad makes me feel ashamed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This ad makes me sad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

#### Appendix 6- Survey Perceived Comprehensibility



Please complete the statement below.

	Difficult to Understand	Fairly Difficult to Understand	Somewhat Difficult to Understand	Neutral	Somewhat Easy to Understand	Fairly Easy to Understand	Easy to Understand
This ad is...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Appendix 7- Survey Perceived Credibility

Please read the following statements carefully and indicate your opinion.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The advertiser has expertise in the product advertised.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The advertiser is trustworthy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Appendix 8- Survey Perceived Honesty

Please rate the statement below carefully and indicate your opinion.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
This ad is honest.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Appendix 9- Survey Demographics Part 1



Q6.2

Please indicate your mothertongue.



☐ German

☐ Dutch

☐ Other



Q6.3

Please indicate your age.



Q6.4

Please fill in the gender you associate yourself with.



☐ Male

☐ Female

☐ Other

☐ Don't want to say

## Appendix 10- Survey Demographics Part 2

What is the highest level of education you have completed or are currently attending?

- ☐ Primary education
- ☐ Secondary education
- ☐ Vocational training
- ☐ Bachelor's Degree
- ☐ Master's Degree
- ☐ Doctoral Degree
- ☐ No finished education

In which type of context did you acquire your English language skills?

- ☐ Naturalistic (e.g. in your family)
- ☐ Instructed (e.g. in school)
- ☐ Mixed

At what age did you learn English?

- ☐ 0-12
- ☐ 12-18
- ☐ 18+

## Appendix 12- Demographics Part 3

Please indicate how you would assess your German/Dutch for the following skills

	Very poor	Poor	Below average	Average	Good	Very good	Excellent
Speaking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Writing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reading	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Listening	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please indicate how you would assess your English for the following skills

	Very poor	Poor	Below average	Average	Good	Very good	Excellent
Speaking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Writing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reading	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Listening	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How often do you swear?

	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Sometimes	Frequently	Usually	Very frequently
I swear...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Appendix 12- Demographics Part 4

Please indicate your opinion about the statement below.

	Absolutely Inappropriate	Inappropriate	Slightly Inappropriate	Neither Inappropriate nor Appropriate	Slightly Appropriate	Appropriate	Absolutely Appropriate
In general, I find the use of swear words ...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please indicate which brands you remember from the three ads that you saw.

Also, do you remember which three products were featured?

## Appendix 13- Demographics 5

How frequently do you consume/use the following products?

	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Sometimes	Frequently	Usually	Very often
Chewing gum	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Coffee	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Beer	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What do you think the aim of this study is?