“Damn good coffee”
Swear words and advertising
Swear words and their role in advertising have been debated for a long time. There has been a general sentiment that the use of swear words should be avoided in ads so they would not appear crass or offensive. Does this sentiment still reflect reality or could swear words be used to good effect in advertising? The aim of the present study is to find out how a number of informants react to the presence of swear words in advertisements, and what their general attitude toward swearing is. An online survey with 54 respondents provided quantitative data, and two group interviews supplemented it with more qualitative information. The study shows that respondents reacted favourably towards adverts with swear words as long as they were not too offensive.

Keywords: swearing, cursing, advertising, offensiveness
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1. Introduction
Advertising comes in many forms, and whether it is written or spoken the message conveyed is affected by many factors. Colours, the location of text and graphical elements (such as pictures), word choice and many other aspects determine whether an advert is successful in delivering its intended message. There has, for example, been a general sentiment that swear words should not be used in advertising, due to the fact that they can be seen as crass or offensive. On the other hand, people are supposedly swearing more than ever (Hopper 2014). Does this mean that swearing might have positive connotations and if so, could it be used in marketing to increase the positive impact of advertisements? According to a study by Baker and Broadus (2014), it may in fact be the case that swear words can be used to great effect in advertising. Would the result be the same in another study similar to theirs?

The aim of the present study is to find out how a number of informants react to the presence of swears in adverts, as well as what their general attitude to swearing is. By using quantitative data collected with a survey and more qualitative data collected from two group interviews I will attempt to gauge the reaction to different swear words in various adverts in order to analyse whether their use may have any noticeable effect in advertising. In particular, the following research questions will be addressed:

1. What role do swear words play, apart from other factors such as design or nationality, in the informants’ assessment of a number of adverts?
2. Does the use of swear words in adverts affect informants’ attitude towards the adverts?

2. Background
2.1 Swears in modern language use
Swears, or curse words¹, are a fairly common phenomenon. According to Jay, “Cursing is the utterance of emotionally powerful, offensive words (e.g., fuck, shit) or emotionally harmful expressions (e.g., kiss my ass, piss off, up yours) that are understood as insults” (Jay, 2000, p. 9). These two categories of swears make up the majority of all profanity, according to him, and thus he concedes that curses are not always meant as insults, but can serve other needs as well, e.g. to express strong emotions or cause an emotional impact on the listener, and the effect can be positive or negative (p. 10). By providing information that reflects the emotional

¹ Note: the terms swears, cursing, curse words, profanity, dirty words and taboo words will be used interchangeably throughout this document.
state of the speaker, swearing may even affect the comprehension process in the listener (Jay 2000, p. 11). This emotional impact will be explored more thoroughly in 2.2.

2.1.1 Offensiveness in context
According to Jay (2009) the perceived offensiveness of taboo words is the primary reason for the (in)frequency of their use. He states that curse words with sexual references and scatological as well as ethnic/racial slurs hold the highest taboo rating. In a study by Kapoor (2014), the link between individuals’ attitudes and swearing was examined according to the following principles:

Reactions to offensive words were explained in terms of an “offensiveness threshold” based on the individual’s sensitivity to profane language. Thus, if a word’s offensiveness score was higher than the individual’s offensiveness threshold, the word would be considered inappropriate and offensive; but if the individual’s tolerance for swearwords were [sic] high, and the word’s offensiveness score did not exceed the threshold, it was not likely to be perceived as offensive. (Kapoor, 2014 p. 260)

Kapoor also states that individuals’ varying levels of tolerance regarding offensive language partly depend on the company and the scenarios they are in. A person will be less likely to use offensive language in the company of colleagues or friends and if the scenario is formal. If the scenario is less formal, however, the frequency of curse words and the threshold for the words’ perceived offensiveness rises.

The offensiveness rating of words has been studied by both Jay and Kapoor (among others). In a study by Jay (1992), 60 words (28 taboo and 28 non-taboo along with 4 “control” words) were rated by 52 college students regarding the frequency with which they believed the words to be used in daily communication among their peers. They also rated the believed offensiveness of these words among the general population (Jay, 1992, p. 141). Jay found that that the swear words he asked about were used more frequently than the non-taboo words and that college students used swear words frequently if the social setting was relaxed. Jay claims, among other things:

That native speakers can estimate word frequency was known from previous research but if one believes that these previous reports using nontaboo words were accurate, then one must accept that these ratings of taboo words are also accurate and that taboo words are used very frequently. (Jay 1992, p. 141)
Jay also noticed that males and females gave the taboo words roughly the same taboo ratings, but that differences were noticeable for some individual words. He suggests that the difference may be due to the laboratory setting of the study, and that males and females might use these words with the same frequency in more natural contexts (Jay, 1992, p. 142; see 2.1.2 for further studies on the differences between female and male swearing).

Table 1 is a partial representation of a summary of Jay’s results, showing the four highest and the four lowest rating words in terms of taboo, as well as three words with average taboo ratings. The frequency ratings range from 1 (“never heard at all”) to 9 (“heard very frequently”), and the taboo ratings range from 1 (“not obscene at all”) to 9 (“the most obscene word imaginable”) (Jay, 1992, p. 141).

Table 1. Frequency and taboo ratings for swear words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>motherfucker</td>
<td>5.52 6.13</td>
<td>5.03 8.56 8.43 8.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cocksucker</td>
<td>3.38 4.52</td>
<td>2.48 8.04 8.17 7.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fuck</td>
<td>7.13 7.78</td>
<td>6.62 7.98 8.26 7.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cunt</td>
<td>4.37 5.09</td>
<td>3.79 7.04 6.65 7.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bastard</td>
<td>5.83 5.30</td>
<td>6.24 6.19 5.65 6.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>asshole</td>
<td>6.83 6.13</td>
<td>7.38 5.88 5.48 6.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shit</td>
<td>8.52 8.30</td>
<td>8.69 5.38 5.57 5.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bitch</td>
<td>7.21 6.57</td>
<td>7.72 5.31 5.39 5.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ass</td>
<td>7.46 6.65</td>
<td>8.10 4.77 4.52 4.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>damn</td>
<td>8.38 7.78</td>
<td>8.79 3.73 3.61 3.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hell</td>
<td>7.48 7.17</td>
<td>7.72 3.40 3.43 3.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Kapoor 2014) carried out a similar study, where 265 participants rated the appropriateness of swear words in different situations. The participants also had to place what they thought to be an appropriate swear word into statements. The words were to be rated as casual-mild, moderate or severe, together with how likely the participants would be to use them (p. 264). The study showed that context was a decisive factor in the acceptability of swear words. Casual settings were more appropriate for swear words, and led to words with a higher taboo rating being uttered (p. 264). It also turned out that men found swear words appropriate in a wider range of situations compared to women, that they used swear words...
more frequently, and that the words they used were of a higher taboo rating (p. 264). It should be noted that Kapoor’s study was multinational, and included a wide variety of nationalities (Indian, American, Singaporean, British, Australian, and Canadian and more) in comparison to Jay’s study that consisted of Americans.

Both Jay’s and Kapoor’s study showed that swear words with higher taboo ratings were perceived as more appropriate in hostile and abusive situations. Words with racist connotations such as nigger or spic or with sexual connotations such as motherfucker had higher taboo ratings than religiously profane words such as damn, hell, etc. (Jay, 1992, p. 143). This coincides with the study by Baker and Broadus (2014) mentioned above, where the participants were more comfortable with the use of milder forms of obscenity, such as damn, hell and shit, in advertisements (p. 103). According to Jay (1992), the reason for such words not having higher taboo ratings than many of his control words may be the frequency of their use. Some swear words are used so often that their impact is lessened by sheer volume (p. 141).

Since the meaning and connotations of words, including the offensiveness of swear words, change over time and with societal and cultural change (Baker & Broadus, 2014, p. 99), repeated investigations into the offensiveness of curse words are necessary for researchers and other interested parties to keep an up-to-date list of obscenity. What the studies show more consistently, however, is that context and company are the greatest factors regarding the acceptability (or unacceptability) of curse words.

### 2.1.2 Men, women and swearing

As suggested above, there is also a marked difference between men and women when it comes to the use of dirty words, where men will frequently use them more often than women (Jay, 1992, p. 169). This mirrors the results of Kapoor’s (2014) study, in which men generally found swear more appropriate than women, regardless of the situation. Jay states that men curse more overall, use a wider range of curses and use curse words with a higher perceived offensiveness (2000, p. 166). He also states that there is a noticeable difference between the genders regarding the words’ tone or provenance: in particular, men use curse words with sexual references more profusely. Furthermore, men and women use swears differently depending on context and company: for example, women are more inclined to use swear words in same-sex company (1992, p. 123). He states that both men and women are more comfortable with swear words in the company of people who are similar to them in terms of background, sex and social status.
Jay also examines the effects of gender-related insults, and what curse words people of different gender use depending on whom they are trying to insult:

- woman to man: bastard, prick
- man to woman: cunt, slut
- man to man: faggot, gay
- woman to woman: bitch, slut

(Jay 2000, p. 169)

These are what Jay calls “fighting words”, i.e. words that when said to the respective recipients may provoke a fight. The use of these insults toward the other gender may not have the same result. (Jay, 2000, p. 170). According to a study by Beers-Fägersten regarding the relationship between speakers, frequency, tone, word choice and reaction to swears, males “do not show a similar degree of discretion in their swearing behavior as the females.” (Beers-Fägersten, 2012, p. 45). The study thus showed similar results to the previously introduced studies by Jay (1992) and Kapoor (2014) in that males were shown to swear more often and use more offensive words regardless of context, age or relationship between speaker and listener. There were also similarities regarding both vocabulary and frequency, with males in opposite-sex interactions using a more sexualized vocabulary. Most noticeably, mixed-sex interactions led to female participants censoring their curses, using shit more often than fucking (Beers-Fägersten, 2012, p. 46).

The understanding that there is a difference in how swears are used in different contexts and that there is a difference in how men and women use swear words is important. It is also important, however, to understand how swear words can convey information on the emotional state of the speaker, and in what ways they do so.

### 2.2 Swears as expressions of emotion

Swears as expressions of emotion and state of mind (see 2.1.1) may be the primary benefit of these words. In present-day English, swear words are commonly used as words of empowerment, enhancing the intended message in various ways. As Jay (1992) states, swear words often contain important information regarding the emotional state of the speaker, and are thus an integral part in infusing speech with a deeper meaning. All curse words do not have the same emotional impact, however, just as they do not carry the same degree of offensiveness (Jay, 1992, p. 143).
Potts’ (2007) view on swear words is that they are expressions of emotion. He explores the characteristics of what he calls expressive content, which encompasses expressions such as honorifics and swear words, and finds common factors, one of which is that they are independent, i.e. have meaning that is separate from the descriptive content (Potts, 2007, p.165). He gives the example “That bastard Kresge is famous” (Potts, 2007, p.168) where the sentence itself has two meanings. The first is the descriptive meaning of Kresge being famous, and the second is the expressive meaning that the speaker feels that Kresge is a bastard. That is to say that swear words alone can carry meaning regarding the emotional state of the speaker or their feelings. Expressives are also nondisplaceable, i.e. their use tells us something of the situation they were uttered in. Potts states that “Expressives cannot (outside of direct quotation) be used to report on past events, attitudes, or emotions […]. They always tell us something about the utterance situation itself” (Potts, 2006, p. 170). Expressive content also has “Perspective dependence”, i.e. it says something regarding the speaker’s (emphasis added) emotional state (Potts, 2006, p. 173). These three points of his are the ones that are of most interest to the present study.

Potts’ claims regarding the independence of expressives coincides with Jay’s statement on the inherent content of swear words. Jay also states that “Swearing is like using the horn on your car, which can be used to signify a number of emotions (e.g., anger, frustration, joy, surprise)” (Jay, 2009, p. 155), much in the way that Potts describes the emotional content of swears. Although Jay focuses on the emotion of anger as expressed through swear words, they may also express other emotions. According to him, swearing can provide more “emotional communication” (p. 155) than non-swears and provide a uniquely heightened level of emotional interest compared to words. For example: Fuck you “conveys a level of contempt unparalleled by nontaboo words; there is no way to convey Fuck you! with polite speech” (p. 155). There is also a scale of emotional impact that differs between swear words: Fuck you shows a higher degree of anger than crap (Jay, 2009, p. 157).

According to Beers-Fägersten, many people swear to express humour or annoyance, and she stresses that the tone of the swear word has a greater effect on the message than the word itself (p. 101). She concludes from a study of hers that there are eight major tones in which swears can be uttered: distressed/desperate, humorous, angry/abusive, emphatic/excited/anecdotal/surprised, supportive, rebellious, sarcastic and serious (Beers-Fägersten, 2012, p.102-108). In the study, undergraduate students were observed during eight weeks in order to collect spontaneous speech acts. Several variables such as setting, the
speakers’ relationship, topic and tone were recorded (p. 27). Each of these tones will briefly be addressed below.

**Distressed/desperate**

This was the most frequent tone to swear in among participants with similar social status and according to Beers-Fägersten it was used to express “stress, frustration or complaints (Beers-Fägersten, 2012, p. 102) Examples include “I’m so fucking freaked out I forgot to take my damn anti-depressant medicine today. (White female to friends, mental health)” (p.102).

**Humor**

According to Beers-Fägersten, humour has a close relationship with swear words. She states that “swearing has been found to be both an embodiment of humor and an enhancement to an already humorous statement or situation” (Beers-Fägersten, 2012, p.103). A humorous tone was used more frequently in her data if there was a difference in social status or social distance. She also states that the offensiveness of swear words is diminished by being couched in humor (p.103). Examples include “Depressed people look at the world through dung colored glasses. Or, for those of you who don’t know French, shit colored glasses. (White male instructor to students; class discussion)” (p. 104)

**Angry/abusive**

In contrast to Jay’s statement on anger being the primary reason for swearing, anger was only the third most common tone of swear in Beers-Fägersten’s study (Beers-Fägersten, 2012, p.104). She states that only 3% of the participants used an angry tone in connection with a spontaneous swear. Examples include “She gave me a fucking ticket for having a broken taillight! (White male to friend, traffic ticket)” (p. 104).

**Emphatic, excited, anecdotal and surprised**

These tones are a part of what Beers-Fägersten calls *social swearing*. Emphatic swearing, according to her, refers to utterances with a tone of insistence, without any annoyance or stress (Beers-Fägersten, 2012, p. 105). Excited and anecdotal tones involve more engagement in an utterance among people of limited social distance, and this occurred when the speaker was explaining something or telling a story (p. 105). An example of this tone can be found in “They turned the lights off and shit. It was motherfucking crazy. (African-American male to friends, party)” (p.106).
Supportive

Supportive tone refers to an *echo* response, made in support of another swear word having been uttered previously, as in “Yeah, he is an asshole. (White female to friend, response to serious swearing)” (Beers-Fägersten 2012, p.107).

Rebellious

Rebellious swearing, according to Beers-Fägersten, is a swearword uttered when the speaker disagrees with or reacts negatively to a situation. She also states that rebellious swearing is emphatic in its nature, with an emotional tendency towards negativity (Beers-Fägersten, 2012, p.107). Example: “I don’t give a damn about the quiz. (White female to classmate, quiz)” (p. 107).

Sarcastic

Sarcastic swearing is “sarcasm peppered with swear words for the purpose of intensification” (Beers-Fägersten, 2012, p.107). Although the tone usually results in provocation and taunting, this tone is used mostly among speakers that are socially close, as in “No shit, Sherlock. (White male to friends, listener’s prior remark)” (p.108).

Serious

Regarding the serious tone, Beers-Fägersten says that “It is neither stress induced [sic] nor a product of a ‘relaxed and happy’ atmosphere. The speaker is neither enthusiastic about his utterance, nor wants to evoke enthusiasm from the listener” (Beers-Fägersten, 2012, p.108). This tone is used mostly among friends. Example: “I feel like shit. (White female to friends, exercise fatigue)” (108).

As Beers-Fägerstens’ (2012) and Potts’ (2007) studies show, swear words, or rather the tone in which they are conveyed, can incorporate a wide variety of emotions.

2.3 Swears in marketing

A study by Baker and Broadus (2014) attempted to examine three hypotheses concerning swear words in advertising:

H1: The presence of swear words in advertisements will have a positive effect on participants’ attitude toward an advertisement. […]
H2: When products that evoke strong emotions are advertised, the use of swear words in these advertisements will have a greater effect on participants’ attitudes toward the advertisements than for products that do not evoke strong emotions. […]

H3: When viewing advertisements containing swear words, men will have a greater attitude [sic] toward the advertisement than women. (Baker & Broadus, 2014, p. 100-101)

The study was based on four fictitious ads containing swear words that were presented to business students, who then answered questions intended to measure the students’ attitudes towards the adverts on a three-item scale. The products advertised were an energy drink, a shampoo, a political magazine and a cell phone. The results of the study supported hypothesis 1 above in the sense that the word shit had a positive effect on the attitude of the participants viewing the advert in question. Hypothesis 2 was supported by a big difference in attitudes to the swear and non-swear versions of the ad for the political magazine, which Baker and Broadus deemed to be the most “emotionally charged product” (2014, p. 102). Hypothesis 3 was not supported, as men and women responded equally to the advertisements with swear words. According to the authors, the results showed that “the more emotion associated with a product, the more successful swear words will be in advertising these products” (Baker & Broadus, 2014, p. 103).

Making practical use of swear words, especially in advertising, can be a difficult task, however. According to Mortimer (2007), swear words may primarily be used for five different purposes: emphasis, intimacy, personality, humour and shock and offense (p. 1597). She states that context and the moderation of contextual factors such as audience demography, warmth, playfulness, product, medium and severity of the swear word influence the intended perception of the advertisement (Mortimer, 2007, p. 1597). She brings up some examples why advertisers would want to employ swear words:

The main reason given was to assist when telling a story or making people laugh, that is, humour, which provides some endorsement for the proposed link between swearing and humour. […] To show intimacy or trust is an interesting area to consider. It is possible that advertisers are trying to communicate with their target audience at the same personal level as a friend or family member might. (Mortimer, 2007, p. 1594)

These two aspects, i.e. humour and intimacy, can be considered to be the primary reasons for employing swear words in advertising.
However, even if the intended audience finds the advertisement with a swear word acceptable, as in the study by Baker and Broadus (2014), there are many pitfalls that must be avoided. Swearing in marketing has long been a taboo, and its use is highly regulated by law. In the UK, the ASA (Advertising Standards Authority) has a set list of rules that all advertising must follow in order to be allowed on TV or billboards. If any advert breaks these rules, the ASA has the authority to remove it from circulation and to issue a non-broadcast code to the agency responsible for the advertisement (Advertising Standards Authority, 2015a). The ASA recommends that swearing be restricted to derivations or allusions, so as to keep the swear itself hidden. The main formal obstacle for anyone wishing to use swears in marketing are these laws, as the use of certain swear words (e.g. cunt, fuck) or their use in certain mass media is strictly prohibited (Advertising Standards Authority, 2015a). However, even though some words are not forbidden categorically, they have to be carefully chosen and monitored. The ASA points out that whether they make a decision on an advertisement being inappropriate or not depends on whether anyone sends in a complaint, and that they do not screen any advertisements on their own initiative. The ASA does not condemn the use of swear words per se, but urges advertisers to be clever and considerate about their use: “Being creative and pushing the boundaries with the use of language in an ad isn’t out of the question. Used in context and targeted carefully, strong language doesn’t automatically mean an ad breaks the rules” (Advertising Standards Authority, 2015b).

Earlier research suggest that context, gender and purpose all affect the offensiveness of swear words, and that nationality may play a part in how they are perceived. People swear more readily among friends and less frequently in the company of strangers, as well as changing how they swear in mixed gender groups. Men swear more often than women and use swear words of higher offensiveness regardless of context, while women have a tendency to censor their swear words. Swear words also carry emotional meaning, which expresses the emotional state of the speaker in ways that words cannot convey. This in turn allows swear words to play a part in marketing by adding emotional weight to adverts. There is, however, a lack of research on how swear words change recipients notions of adverts that contain them, which is what the present study hopes to accomplish.

3. Method
The aim of the study was to find out how a number of informants react to the presence of swears in adverts, as well as what their general attitude to swearing is. The target group included people getting into everyday contact with advertising, as this group is the prime
candidate for advertising itself. The effects of nationality on the acceptability of swear words was not examined, and differences in the way genders react to swear words in adverts was only briefly touched upon. These are important factors that require further study in other reports.

3.1 Procedure

3.1.1 Survey
The data for this study was collected using a survey (see Appendix) that was based on four made up advertisements for equally made up products and services: an insurance company, an energy drink, a smartphone repair service and a coffee shop. All ads contained swear words except the one for the energy drink, which functioned as a control ad without swear words and with a less interesting design. The swear words chosen for the other three ads were damn, shit and fucking. They were rated from mild to moderate-severe on Jay’s taboo ratings chart (see Table 1), with damn having the lowest taboo rating, followed by shit, and fuck having the highest taboo rating of the three words chosen. The word fucking is a different form of the original, fuck, which Jay (1992) used in his study. This may have an impact on the offensiveness rating of the word itself and, in turn, may have an effect on the results themselves.

However, the survey actually contained to two parts, each with a focus on specific aspects of the research questions. Part 1 asked the participants to rate the adverts on a five-point-scale, and indicate which parts of the ads they liked and disliked. Part 2 included questions regarding the participants’ own use of swearing and whether they had ever felt offended by the language used in an advertisement. The participants were also asked to rate several swear words according to their perceived offensiveness on a five-point-scale. The second part of the survey could only be accessed after the first part had been completed, making it hard to change answers retroactively, as well as hiding the true focus of the survey until part 2. In order to get more spontaneously provided data on the participants’ perceptions of swear words in advertising, the survey avoids mentioning the swear words in the ads at the beginning, and delays questions regarding the participants’ views on swearing until the second part. The survey was shared on both Facebook and among students at Mälardalen University, so as to reach as wide an audience as possible.

The survey was completed by 54 respondents of varying nationality during the time it was available on the internet, 29 female and 25 male. The ages of the respondents were as follows: 16-25 (13 answer, 24.1%), 26-35 (26 answers, 48.1%), 36-45 (10 answers, 18.5%),
46-60 (4 answers, 7.4%) and 60+ (1 answer, 1.9%). The survey was done anonymously via Google Forms. No information that could be used to identify participants was required, and no questions aimed at that kind of information.

### 3.1.2 Interviews

More qualitative data was collected via two group interviews, consisting of four women and one man (group 1) and three men (group 2) of Swedish nationality. Both groups got to see the advertisements used in the survey and were asked to point out which one they preferred and why that was. Questions regarding the text, the layout of graphical elements and the language used were asked (in that order), identical to the questions asked in the survey. This was done in order to get in-depth understanding of why the participants feel as they do, and to understand in what way the swear word affects the advertisement. The interviews were held in Swedish, and any quotes have been translated by the author.

Participants in both interviews were shown the adverts in the same order as they appeared in the survey: insurance company, energy drink, smartphone repair service and coffee house. They were then asked to comment on which part of the adverts they liked the most and which one they liked the least, and to explain why they felt that way.

After they had commented on the adverts, they were asked questions on whether they had felt offended by any swear word that they had heard and how often they themselves use such words. As a final question, they were asked if any of the swear words in the ads had caught their attention even if it had not been pointed out. This was done in order to find out if the words had caught the eye of the reader, and whether the reaction to them was positive or negative.

Group interview 1 was approximately 12 minutes long, with 1 male (hereby referred to as M1-1) and 4 female (hereby referred to as W1-1, W2-1, W3-1 and W4-1) participants aged 20-35, while interview 2 was approximately 7 minutes long, with a group of 3 male participants (hereby referred to as M1-2, M2-2 and M3-2) aged 28-35. Interview 1 was conducted in person, and was recorded using a free recording software available on Google Play, Voice Recorder (Version 2.0.8.). Interview 2 was recorded anonymously on Skype (Version 7.35.0.103) with the third party software Xsplit (Version 2.9.1701.1621), in order to help with transcription.
3.2 Ethics
Before the group interview, participants were informed of the ethical aspects of the group interview. Any information gathered would be used for the purposes of this research project only, and participation was completely anonymous.

The online survey was fully anonymous, and any information regarding age, gender etc. was gathered solely for statistical purposes related to this study. No sensitive information was required of the participants.

4. Result & discussion
4.1 Online survey
The survey respondents’ average attitude towards advertising was rated according to a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (dislike them a lot) to 5 (like them a lot). The average result was 3, with 24 individuals (44.4%) choosing that answer, followed by 16 (29.6%) marking 2, 8 (14.8%) marking 1, 6 (11.1%) marking 4 and nobody choosing 5.

4.1.1 Expro Insurance (shit)
The first advert that respondents were asked to rate was for the insurance company, containing the phrase Because shit happens. The first advertisement (Expro Insurance, shit) was rated as moderately good on a five-point scale, with 20 respondents (37%) rating it a 4, followed by 18 respondents (33.3%) rating it a 3, 8 (14.8%) rating it a 2, 6 (11.1%) rating it a 1 and 2 (3.7%) rating it a 5.

Figure 1 shows the outcome for two of the questions that respondents were asked: Which part of the advertisement did you like the most? And which part of the advertisement did you like the least? Respondents were also given the choice of providing their own answer, or comment if they so wished.
As Figure 1 shows, respondents liked the language and picture of the advert the most, while the company logo and the colours received the lowest number of appreciative answers. Respondents disliked the colours and the company logo the most, followed rather closely by the picture. The language received few dislike answers by comparison. Several respondents commented on the language, with one respondent writing that they liked the phrase shit happens.

The positive reaction towards the advertisement can be attributed to both its humorous nature as achieved by the picture and the fact that the humour was enhanced by the swear word. If one accepts that swear words are a means of communicating emotions (as Jay (1992), Potts (2007) and Beers-Fägersten (2012) claim), the swear word here might indeed have enhanced the picture’s humorous nature. A positive result regarding the language, and the phrase shit happens in particular, were within expectations. Not only was the language the most liked part of the advertisement, it was also the part with the lowest number of dislikes. This mirrors part of Baker and Broadus’ (2014) study where there was little to no preference for the advertisements without swear words. Their claim that the use of swear words (when used with careful consideration) won’t hurt advertising campaigns (p. 103) may be reinforced by these results.

4.1.2 Quench (control advertisement)

The second advert that respondents were asked to rate was for an invented energy drink, Quench. It contained no swear words, and served as a control ad. It received the lowest
overall rating on a five-point scale, with 21 respondents (38.9%) rating it a 1, followed by 18 (33.3%) rating it a 2, 13 (24.1%) rating it a 3, and 2 respondents (3.7%) rating it a 4. Figure 2 represents, like Figure 1, the results for two questions.

![Chart showing like and dislike ratings for different aspects of the advert](image)

**Figure 2. Number of respondents expressing like and dislike for the energy drink advert (control)**

Figure 2 shows that respondents rated the colours and company logo as the most enjoyable part of the advert. However, the logo was also the most disliked aspect, apart from the colours. This advertisement was the most commented on, with several respondents remarking on the picture, calling it “too simple” or “dull”. One respondent commented “It’s too simple, nothing catches the eye”.

The control advertisement was designed to be less interesting compared to the advertisements with swear words in order to examine whether swear words themselves affect the likeability of the ad. Unsurprisingly, the lower rating of the control advertisement was due to the simplicity of the design: participants preferred the humorous advertisements with swear words to the plain advertisement without them, which may point to the acceptability of swear words in the public eye.

### 4.1.3 Sempraphone Mobile Service (fucking)

The third advert that the respondents were asked to rate on a five-point scale was for a smartphone repair service, which contained the phrase *Need great fucking service?* It received mediocre ratings: a total of 22 respondents (40.7%) rated it 3, followed by 13
(24.1%) who rated it a 2, 11 (20.4%) rating it a 1, and 4 14.8%) respondents rating it a 4. Figure 3 shows which aspects of the ad the respondents liked/disliked.

![Figure 3](image_url)

**Figure 3.** Number of respondents expressing like and dislike for the smartphone repair service advert *(fucking)*

Respondents liked the picture the most, closely followed by the colours, but tended to dislike the language and the company logo (though sizable shares also *liked* these aspects). This advertisement received a few comments calling it “boring”, and one respondent commented “there is nothing I like”.

The mixed responses that the swear word in this advert triggered show an interesting contrast between the taboorness of the swear word and the humorous nature of the advert. Although Beers-Fägersten claims that the offensiveness of swear words is lower when used humorously (2012, p.103), the perceived offensiveness was still high enough to warrant notice. The reasons for this can be manifold: maybe the advertisement as such was not as humorous as the other advertisements with swear words in them, or maybe the offensiveness of the swear word was so high that humour was not enough to reduce its offensiveness.

### 4.1.4 Dan’s Coffee House *(damn)*

The fourth and final advert that respondents were asked to rate was for a coffee shop, which contained the phrase *just damn good coffee*. It received high marks on a five-point scale, with
29 respondents (53.7%) rating it 4, followed by 12 (22.2%) rating it 3, 8 (14.8%) rating it 5, 3 (5.6%) rating it 2, and 2 (3.7%) giving it a 1.

Figure 4. Number of respondents expressing like and dislike for the coffee house advert (damn)

Figure 4 shows interesting results, as many respondents liked the language as well as the picture, while the most disliked aspect was the colours, followed by the company logo. The advert received positive comments from respondents of the survey regarding its simplicity.

The results for the ad featuring damn exceeded expectations. As Kapoor (2014) noted, the context has a lot to do with the acceptability of swear words. The advertisement itself was praised for its simplicity, which may have allowed the swear word to stand out. The low offensiveness rating of damn may have a lot to do with the high rating of the advertisement. It is probably no coincidence, in any case, that the language in the damn good coffee ad received the highest approval rating of any aspect of any of the adverts.

The final question that respondents were asked to answer in part 1 of the survey was which, if any, of the ads made them interested in the product they advertised. The highest amount of picks went to Dan's Coffee House, which received 42 points, followed by Expro Insurance with 14 points. Sempraphone received 8 points, and Quench received only 3 points.

4.1.5 Respondents’ swearing frequency, offensiveness ratings of swear words and how they relate to the adverts

When asked if they had ever felt offended by the language used in an advertisement, 42 respondents (77.8%) answered no, while 6 (11.1%) answered yes and 6 (11.1%) maybe. They
were asked to rate how they felt about swearing in general on a five-point scale where 1 signified that they liked it a lot and 5 that they disliked it a lot. The question received more positive answers (25 respondents choosing 2 or 1) than negative ones (10 answering 4 or 5), with 19 respondents opting for the neutral 3. Some respondents commented that the concrete swear words had a lot of effect on how they felt about swearing, while others noted that the context was a deciding factor.

Interestingly, the respondents who disliked swearing a lot (5) (regarding attitude toward swear words) rated advert 1 (shit) and advert 4 (damn) quite highly (4-5), with the majority of them also marking the language of the adverts as the part they liked the most. Respondents who answered the question neutrally (3) rated the adverts with noticeable variation, and no discernible pattern could be observed. Respondents that had a positive attitude to swearing (rating 1-2) tended to rate the adverts positively, with a clear preference for adverts with swear words regardless of the words’ offensiveness rating.

When asked how often they swear, 23 respondents (42.6%) answered that they swear “quite often”, 17 (31.5%) answered “rarely” and 14 (25.9%) answered “very often”.

Results show that very few respondents had felt offended by the language used in an advertisement. Whether those instances were due to swear words or other aspects was not examined further, but may be something that deserves further research. Looking back at results from the survey, specifically the answers shown in Figures 1, 2 and 4, many respondents found the language to be the best part of the advertisements. This may point to an increase in the acceptability of swear words, as Baker and Broadus claim (2014, p. 99). It points to those of low offensiveness rating in particular, considering the generally positive reception that advertisements with swear words received.

When asked what they think of swear words in advertising on a five-point scale, the average response given by respondents was 3. Although the results were thus not clearly positive, there was no significant negative backlash against using swear words in this study either, which may reinforce Baker and Broadus’ (2014) theory that swear words do not negatively impact advertising.

The respondents were further asked to rate ten swear words on a five-point scale of offensiveness, where 5 stood for the most offensive and 1 for least offensive. The outcome is presented in Figure 5
Figure 5: Number of respondents rating the offensiveness of swear words from 1 (least offensive) to 5 (most offensive)

The average ratings of the swear words were: damn (1.25), hell (1.48), shit (1.96), fuck (2.61), asshole (2.98), dick (3.07), bitch (3.31), motherfucker (3.68), cunt (4) and faggot (4.29). Male participants also rated the presented swear words as less offensive compared to female participants. The greatest variance can be found in the gendered swears cunt (female average: 4.24, male average: 3.72) and dick (female average: 3.31, male average: 2.8).

The ratings of these swear words closely mirror those presented in Jay (1992; see Table 1 in 2.1.1). Damn and hell were rated as the least offensive of the listed swear words, and much as in Jay’s study the highest rated swear words were slurs and references of a sexual nature. Most importantly, the results show that certain swear words (e.g. faggot, cunt) have a drastically higher offensiveness rating than others.

Finally, respondents were asked to rate the above swear words on whether they felt appropriate or inappropriate to use in advertising. They felt that damn and hell were the most appropriate swear words to use in adverts, had mixed opinions about shit and felt that the rest of the presented swear words were inappropriate.

4.2 Group interviews

Participants of group interview 1 remarked on the adverts containing the words shit and damn, stating that they liked how the swear words infused the advertising with humour and confidence. The participants also liked the slogans the most, and only remarked negatively on the simplicity of the ads (Quench) or the logotype of the fictional business (Expro Insurance).
The swear word that the participants reacted most strongly to was *fucking*, with one participant stating that “it did not belong there, it feels out of place” (W1-1). Another participant stated that *fucking* felt “too strong and vulgar” (W2-1). The most well-liked advertisement was the one for the coffee house, with all of the participants liking the tone that *damn* gave the advertisement. One of the participants stated that “*damn* good coffee, it shows confidence!” (W1-1), while another said that the simplicity was refreshing (W3-1). The second most well liked advertisement was for the insurance company, with participants liking the humorous picture of a man shrugging combined with the text. One participant stated “I like ‘Because shit happens! ’, it feels relatable” (M1-1).

Only one of the female participants had felt offended by a swear word, while the rest claimed that swear words themselves had never felt offensive to them. All of the participants used swear words regularly, with one woman stating that she used them “all the damn time!” (W1-1). When asked whether they had noticed the swear words prior to being informed of the true purpose of the study, the participants answered that the only one they had noticed immediately was *fucking*, and that *damn* and *shit* had not been the focus of the corresponding advertisement to them.

Group interview 2 elicited positive feedback on all advertisements that contained swear words. The humorous nature of *shit* and the accompanying picture of a man shrugging in the insurance advertisement led to the group members laughing out loud. The advertisement for the energy drink was negatively received, with all participants citing the lack of any interesting graphical elements and the plain nature of the textual elements. The participants felt that the language in the mobile service advert (featuring *fucking*) humorous but out of place, with one participant stating “you would never see this in a real advertisement, not in a million fucking years!” (M2-2). The advertisement for the coffee house (*damn*) also got a positive reaction, with one participant stating “that kind of shows a bit of humanity, you know?” (M1-2). None of the participants stated that they had felt offended by swear words, saying that they used swear words themselves very often. The participants noted that the only swear word which had caught their attention at first glance was *fucking*, which one participant commented with “kind of pops out, it doesn’t really feel natural in this ad” (M2-2).

Comparing the result of the group interviews with the Baker and Broadus (2014) study, several similarities can be observed. The advertisements with swear words seemed to have a more positive effect than the control ad with none: *damn* and *shit* were remarkably
well received, and the only swear word triggering negative remarks was *fucking*. Similarly, the swear words in the advertisements caused a great deal of emotions (primarily humour) in accordance with the Baker and Broadus results.

Beers-Fägerstens’ (2012) study on the tone of swear words was similarly echoed in the results. Several participants stated that the humorous tone of the insurance company advertisement made it more likeable. Beers-Fägersten’s claim that humour lessens the offensiveness of a swear word was noticeable with both *shit*, which received a 5.38 offensiveness rating in Jay’s (1992) study, and *damn*, with an offensiveness rating of 3.73. And indeed, the participants of neither group interview in this study found said words offensive or even remarkable; rather, they found them relatable. On the other hand, *fucking* was not as well received and triggered several comments regarding its vulgarity. *Fuck* received a 7.98 offensiveness rating in Jay’s study, i.e. far higher than both *damn* and *shit*. Neither group of respondents found the advertisement featuring *fucking* humorous, and only one respondent in group 2 found the word itself humorous out of context.

Both respondent groups found that the swear words gave the advertisements more relatability, much like Mortimer (2007) theorizes. This occurred primarily through the aforementioned humour, which supports one of Mortimer’s main reasons to promote swear words in advertising. She states that humour and relatability are perhaps the most positive functions of swear words, and that this circumstance should be capitalized on by using swear words in advertising to good effect. (pp. 1594-1595). The results thus appear to support her claim regarding swear words in advertising, as some of the swears appeared to improve the respondents’ attitude toward the advertisement itself.

4.3 Combined results from the survey and interviews

The ratings for the different adverts point to several interesting conclusions, one of which is that context is a crucial factor regarding swear words and their practical use. *Fucking* received the highest offensiveness score of all swear words in the ads, and was also stated to have stood out as ill-fitting (which, admittedly, may be due to the innate offensiveness of the swear word itself). This points to the context directly affecting the acceptability and offensiveness of the word, and would also reinforce Baker and Broadus’ (2014) statement regarding the selection process: one cannot simply use swear words without a clear contextual reason. It is also important to note that *shit happens* and *damn good* are parts of far more conventional phrases than *great fucking*, which may have played a role in softening the perceived offensiveness of the swear words.
Male and female respondents both answered somewhat similarly, although male respondents gave a lower average offensiveness rating for the swear words presented in the survey compared to female respondents. Males were more tolerant regarding swear words in advertising (average rating of 3.04) than female respondents (average rating of 2.79) and male participants also responded that they used swear more often than female participants.

Another interesting conclusion that can be drawn from these results is that swear words by themselves may not result in heavily negative reactions, judging from the very low overall rating of the control advertisement (which contained no swear words) compared to even the lowest rated advertisement with swear words. The control advertisement was also described as dull, simple and boring while the other advertisements received few or no such comments, which could be a result of the swear words themselves (although it may also be due to other factors such as the colours or the humorous pictures).

Respondents noted that the advertisements most likely to have made them interested in the product were for Dan’s Coffee House, with 42 respondents (82.4%) picking it out of the four possible answers. Assuming that the language was the main reason for the advert’s popularity (rather than the popularity of coffee compared to that of insurance, for example), this could answer the first research question asked at the beginning of the study. If swear words could have a positive effect in other similar cases, with well researched and contextualized usage, this could answer the second research question as well.

The advert for the insurance company (fucking) received similar responses in the group interviews as in the survey, namely remarks on the vulgarity of the swear word itself and how it felt unnatural, which might reinforce the hypothesis that the context was ill fitting for the word.

The most interesting results were obtained, once again, regarding the advert for the coffee house (damn). Much like the results for the group interview, respondents enjoyed the language and simplicity the most. Of particular interest are the comments from the group interview regarding the word damn itself: “damn good coffee! It shows confidence”. Perhaps the low offensiveness rating of the word (3.73 for Jay (1992), 1.25 in the current study) was the main reason for this result. The context and tone can also be considered important factors regarding this advert’s popularity: the tone could be classified as exited or anecdotal (Beers-Fägersten 2012, p. 105), as the tone (according to respondents in the group interviews and comments from the survey) was fairly engaging. This could be a reason that the advert was “relatable”, and adds weight to both Baker and Broadus’ (2014) theory of swear words.
making adverts more engaging and Mortimer’s (2007) theory that swear words can be used to communicate as if the sender were a friend of the recipient.

5. Summary & conclusion
The aim of the study was to figure out how a number of informants react to the presence of swears in adverts, as well as what their general attitude to swearing is. To this end an online survey was made, with four made up adverts. Three of these contained swear words (fucking, shit and damn, in the order of their taboo ratings according to Jay (1992)), while one was a control ad without swears. Respondents were asked to rate these adverts, and to describe which parts of the advert they liked the most. The survey also asked respondents to rate how they felt about swearing in general, how often they swore and whether they had ever felt offended by the language used in an advert. Respondents were also asked to rate 10 swear words with respect to their offensiveness, and whether they believed any of the swear words they rated felt appropriate or inappropriate to use in adverts. Alongside the survey two group interviews were held in order to collect additional, and somewhat more qualitative data, one in person and one via Skype.

The results of the survey suggest that swear words may help to improve the average rating of adverts: all of the adverts with swear words received higher ratings than the control advert. Some of the respondents in the group interviews felt that the swear words added relatability to the adverts, and stated that only fucking felt out of place, which may be due to the word’s high offensiveness rating or due to the fact that shit happens and damn good are parts of more recognizable conventional phrases. Interviewees also remarked on how the humorous nature of the adverts worked well together with the swear words. The average response to the ads with swear words across the survey and group interviews was positive, and the adverts with swear words received a higher rating than the control ad. This points to swear words having a positive effect on advertising, as long as they are used in the appropriate context, and chosen with care regarding the tone of the advert as well as the product advertised.

In hindsight, the survey could have had a clearer focus on the respondents’ perspectives on swearing, the nationality of the respondents and how this relates to their answers for the adverts. Perhaps more studies on how respondents from different nationalities react to swear words in the same context would provide new and relevant data. Even so, however, this study has provided a rather clear indication that swear words need not be out of place in advertising.
References


Appendix

Survey Advertising Jim Westerholm

Dear reader, I am writing my bachelor’s thesis on advertising and would like to hear your opinions and thoughts on how you perceive adverts. This brief 5-10 minute survey is going to ask you to rate several made up advertisements.

Note that all answers are left anonymously. Thank you for taking the time in filling out this survey.

Jim Westerholm

*Obligatory

1. Gender *
   Select one.
   - Male
   - Female
   - Other

2. Age *
   Select one.
   - 16-25
   - 26-35
   - 36-45
   - 46-60
   - 60+

3. On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate your opinion on advertisements? *
   Select one.
   1 2 3 4 5

   Dislike them a lot       Like them a lot
4. Rate the following advertisement on a scale from 1-5. *

Select one.

1  2  3  4  5

Dislike it a lot          Like it a lot

5. Which part(s) of the advertisement do you like the most? *

Select any applicable.

- The colours
- The language
- The company logo
- The picture
- Övrigt:
6. Which part(s) do you dislike the most? *
Select any applicable.

- The colours
- The language
- The company logo
- The picture
- Övrigt:

7. Rate the following advertisement on a scale from 1-5. *

Select one.

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8. Which part(s) of the advertisement do you like the most? *
Select any applicable.

- The colours
- The language
- The company logo
- The picture
- Övrigt:
9. Which part(s) do you dislike the most? *
Select any applicable.

- The colours
- The language
- The company logo
- The picture
- Övrigt:

10. Rate the following advertisement on a scale from 1-5. *

Select one.

1 2 3 4 5

I dislike it a lot I like it a lot

11. Which part(s) of the advertisement do you like the most? *
Select any applicable.

- The colours
- The language
- The company logo
- The picture
- Övrigt:
12. Which part(s) do you dislike the most? *
Select any applicable.

- The colours
- The language
- The company logo
- The picture
- Övrigt:

13. Rate the following advertisement on a scale from 1-5. *

Select one.

1 2 3 4 5

I dislike it a lot I like it a lot

14. Which part(s) of the advertisement do you like the most? *
Select any applicable.

- The colours
- The language
- The company logo
- The picture
- Övrigt:

15. Which part(s) do you dislike the most? *
Select any applicable.

- The colours
- The language
- The company logo
- The picture
- Övrigt:

16. Which, if any, of the advertisements would have made you interested in the product? Select any applicable.

- Expro Insurance
- Quench
- Sempraphone
- Dan’s Coffee House

17. Do you have any comments you wish to share regarding the advertising in this questionnaire? Please write them below.
Survey advertising part 2

In this part I would like you to answer truthfully how you feel about swearing, and how often you yourself use them.

18. Have you ever felt offended by the language used in an advertisement? *

Select one.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

19. On a scale from 1-5, rate how you feel about swearing in general. *

Select one.

1 2 3 4 5

I like it a lot I dislike it a lot

20. Do you have any comments on the above question?

21. Do you use swear words a lot? *

Select one.

- Very often
- Quite often
- Rarely
- Never

22. What is your opinion on swear words in advertisement? *

Select one.

1 2 3 4 5

Dislike them a lot Like them a lot
23. Which of these swear words would you rate as the most offensive? Please rate them from the least offensive (1) to the most offensive (5). *

Select one choice per row.

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24. Which of these swear words, if any, do you consider appropriate for use in advertising? *

Select one choice per row.

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Do you have comments on the questions above? Write them here.