

**FCK, WE'RE SORRY: SELF-CONSTRUAL, INTERPERSONAL CLOSENESS, AND  
SWEARWORDS IN BRAND COMMUNICATIONS**

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**Bachelor of Arts (Honors) Business & Management, University of Kent, 2020**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF SCIENCE**

in

**MANAGEMENT (MARKETING)**

Dhillon School of Business  
University of Lethbridge  
CALGARY, ALBERTA, CANADA

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Fck, We're Sorry: Self-Construal, Interpersonal Closeness, and Swearwords in Brand Communications

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Date of Defence: 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2022

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## **ABSTRACT**

When might brands benefit from using swearwords in their communications material? This research theorizes and finds that the effect of a swearword in an advertisement on consumers' attitudes towards the brand is moderated by the consumers' self-construal. When the swearword was present (versus absent), those with an independent self-construal reported stronger interpersonal closeness and resultingly more favorable attitudes towards the brand. In contrast, those with an interdependent self-construal reported weaker interpersonal closeness and less favorable attitudes towards the brand. The study also assessed humour, credibility, and arousal as alternative explanations. The study contributes theoretically to the areas of marketing and psychology. It introduces a new mediator for the swearing effect and extends prior work on the relationship between self-construal and interpersonal closeness. This study also informs marketers by making recommendations for the use of swearwords in their communication material.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

KFC	Kentucky Fried Chicken
BP	British Petroleum
IOS	Inclusion of Other in the Self
FCK	Fuck
FCKH8	Fuck Hate

## 1. Introduction

The rules governing swearwords are messy. Sometimes swearwords are considered offensive and lead audiences to negatively judge the person using them. Indeed, advertisers, politicians, coaches, and even cancer patients can get punished when they use swearwords (e.g., Brown & Schau, 2001; Cavazza & Guidetti, 2014; Howell & Giuliano, 2011; Phillips & Kassinove, 1987; Robbins et al., 2011). For example, the late TV personality Joan Rivers used a swearword in her apology for swearing on TV, leading to a majority negative reaction (Fleeman, 2008; Holmwood, 2008). Similarly, a spokesperson for British Petroleum (BP) used a swearword in a statement on their response to the oil spill crisis, which received an overwhelmingly negative response (Burke et al., 2010; Webb, 2010).

Yet, other times swearwords are considered polite and can improve the relationship between the speaker and listener (e.g., Dynel, 2012; Henry et al., 2014; Kapoor, 2014). For example, the singer Adele has used swearwords during live performances on multiple occasions with more positive than negative results (Ahsan, 2016; Williams, 2021). In addition, the retail company Kmart employed a euphemistic swearword in their “*Ship my pants*” campaign which gained positive reception and went viral online (Heller, 2013). While these examples certainly differ in terms of critical attributes (e.g., transgression severity), they still demonstrate that swearwords may offer some value to brands. Yet, it remains unclear when or why swearwords in brand communications would be received positively or negatively.

This research builds on and extends work in marketing and psychology to develop and test a model of how and why do swearwords in brand communications impact consumers. I theorize and find that a swearword in brand communications can impact the consumers’ attitudes towards the brand. However, the direction of the effect depends on the consumers’ self-construal. Specifically, when a swearword is present (versus absent) in brand

communications, those with an independent self-construal have more favorable attitudes towards the brand, whereas those with an interdependent self-construal have less favorable attitudes towards the brand. This crossover interaction is mediated by the feeling of interpersonal closeness between the brand and the consumer.

This research contributes to marketing and psychology. First, the study contributes to marketing by showing when a swearword in brand communications can have a positive or negative effect on consumers. That is, a swearword can increase the consumers' attitudes towards the brand when consumers have an independent self-construal but decrease consumer attitudes when consumers have an interdependent self-construal. Second, this research introduces a new pathway via which swearwords exert their effects on consumers (i.e., interpersonal closeness). Finally, the study extends recent work in psychology (e.g., Holland et al., 2004; Tu et al., 2021) by introducing a situation in which independent self-construal, rather than interdependent self-construal, increases perceptions of interpersonal closeness, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between self-construal and interpersonal closeness. Overall, this research offers insights to marketers on when to use swearwords in brand communications and highlights when swearing is most valuable.

## **2. Conceptual Development**

### **2.1. Swearwords in Marketing**

Swearwords are offensive words (Jay, 1999) that suggest the speaker feels strongly about the topic under discussion (e.g., “I am so damn sorry”; Lafreniere et al., 2022). Swearwords are deemed offensive because their literal meanings are related to taboo topics (Jay, 2009). In line with this, some consumers may harshly judge people and brands who use swearwords (de Vries et al., 2017; Rassin & Heijden, 2005). For example, DeFrank & Kahlbaugh (2019) found that those who used swearwords were perceived as less intelligent, sociable, and trustworthy. In the same vein, some brands that use swearwords have been shown to cause moral outrage (Griffiths, 2018).

Yet, prior work shows that swearwords can sometimes be helpful to consumers and valuable to marketers (Brown & Schau, 2001; Dahl et al., 2003; Hair & Ozcan, 2018). Swearwords in advertising can violate norms and therefore increase attention and recall (Brown & Schau, 2001; Dahl et al., 2003). Likewise, swearwords in consumer reviews have meanings beyond their lexical sense and therefore improve perceptions of the product and the review (Lafreniere et al., 2022; see also Hair & Ozcan, 2018). The value of swearwords comes, in part, from their unique ability to convey certain information about the speaker (Lafreniere et al., 2022). For example, people who use swearwords may be perceived as honest (e.g. Feldman, 2018; Rassin & Heijden, 2005), rule breakers (e.g., Gitter, 2010; Oppliger & Zillman, 1997), and even funny (Schmid et al., 1998; Allan & Burrige, 2006).

Overall, swearwords can have both positive and negative effects on consumers, but it is unclear what variables can explain this duality. In the next sections, I theorize that swearwords in brand communications are relatable to some consumers more than others.

## **2.2. Swearwords and Interpersonal Closeness**

I predict that, under some circumstances, swearwords in brand communications can increase the consumers' attitudes towards the brand by increasing the consumers' perceptions of interpersonal closeness with the brand. Since a speaker's identity can be marked by their use of swearwords, listeners who value these traits should feel a greater sense of interpersonal closeness. Interpersonal closeness is defined as the cognitive perception of overlap between oneself and another person (Aron et al., 1992). Research has shown that a brand's language use can influence perceptions of interpersonal closeness (Sela et al., 2012). Further, prior work has found that swearwords can increase feelings of solidarity and interpersonal closeness when they are used among factory workers (Daly et al., 2003). Similarly, Baruch & Jenkins (2006) found that swearword use in an office setting enhanced group cohesion during times of stress. In the context of brand communications, given that swearwords can express positivity, humor (Schmid et al., 1998; Allan & Burrige, 2006), and autonomy (Gitter, 2010), consumers who value these dimensions over the potential norm violation may feel particularly close to the brand.

In turn, I predict that greater interpersonal closeness should improve the consumers' attitudes towards the brand. This link is demonstrated in the classic social group literature, which shows that people are favorably biased towards those who are similar in characteristics (e.g., Montoya et al., 2008; Tenney et al., 2009; Launay & Dunbar, 2015). Indeed, Japutra et al. (2014) found that consumers who feel closer to a brand will give stronger recommendations, have greater re-purchase intentions, and even dismiss negative information about the brand. Similarly, Sinha and Lu (2016) found that consumers are more forgiving when the relationship is strong between the brand and consumer even when the brand is at fault for the crisis (see also Hargrave & Sells, 1997; Karremans et al., 2011).

### 2.3. Self-Construal as a Moderator

I posit that the effect of swearwords in brand communications on the consumers' attitudes towards the brand is moderated by the consumers' self-construal. Self-construal refers to the different cognitive representations of self that people hold, these being interdependent or independent (Giacomin & Jordan, 2017). This construct should be effective as a moderator because independent-construal individuals react differently towards social norm violations compared to interdependent-construal individuals (Aron et al., 1991; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). That is, compared to independent-construal individuals, interdependent-construal individuals will not tolerate the violation of norms (Brown & Schau, 2001; Dahl et al., 2003).

*Independent Self-Construal.* When the consumer has an independent self-construal, I expect the presence (versus absence) of swearwords in brand communications to increase perceptions of interpersonal closeness and therefore the consumers' attitudes towards the brand. Here, I rely on the notion that those with independent self-construal value freedom and autonomy over the adherence to societal norms (Kuhnen & Oyserman, 2001; Utz, 2004) and are therefore more likely assess brand messages concerning their own values (Sinha & Lu, 2016). That is, they might consider whether the swearword is offensive to themselves but not in relation to the broader context of society. Further, those with an independent self-construal should feel less concerned about the potential of swearwords to offend others because they are reluctant to punish others for norms violations that they see as illegitimate or repressive (Aron et al., 1991; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Importantly, I do not expect swearwords in brand apologies to offend those with an independent self-construal. Rather, these individuals should feel closer to brands that use non-conforming and humorous language because it aligns with their values. First, swearwords are used to elicit positivity and humour (Schmid et al., 1998; Allan & Burrige,

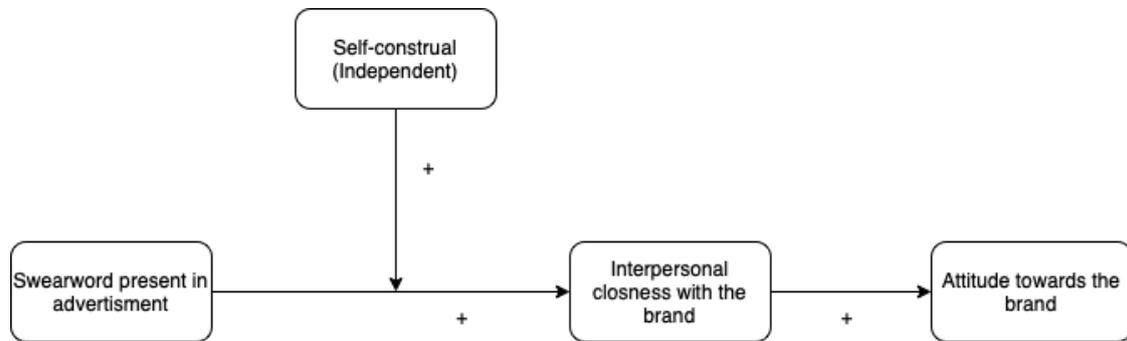
2006) and should therefore align with the independents' values of seeking personal pleasure (Aron et al., 1991). Second, swearwords are 'cool' because they violate norms (Brown & Schau, 2001; Dahl et al., 2003) and should therefore align with the independents' values of being autonomous (Komissarouk & Nadler, 2014).

The effect of such an alignment of values on subsequent consumer behavior is well established in other areas of marketing. For example, Escalas and Bettman (2005) found that individuals with an independent self-construal exhibited different self-differentiation goals, leading these individuals to resonate with brands and products that display independent concepts. Additionally, research shows that trait-congruency has a strong impact on subsequent purchasing behavior and attitudes towards brands as those of an independent construal seek brands and products that display similar characteristics to those they value (Aron et al., 1991; Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007). Thus, the presence (versus absence) of a swearword in brand communications should resonate with the independents' values and therefore lead to a stronger sense of interpersonal closeness between the individual and brand. In turn, this stronger sense of interpersonal closeness should increase attitudes towards the brand in question (Figure 1). Formally,

**H1:** When the individual holds an independent self-construal, the presence (versus absence) of a swearword in brand communications will increase perceptions of interpersonal closeness between the individual and brand, leading to a more favorable attitude towards the brand.

**Figure 1**

*The Effect of Swearwords on Independent Individuals' Attitudes Towards the Brand (H1)*



*Interdependent Self-Construal.* When the consumer has an interdependent self-construal, I expect the presence (versus absence) of swearwords in brand communications to decrease perceptions of interpersonal closeness and therefore lead to negative attitudes towards the brand. Interdependent self-construal leads individuals to value close relationships and to consider social roles as key to their sense of self. As such, interpersonal closeness is generally stronger with interdependent individuals (Holland et al., 2004). However, interdependent individuals are more likely to integrate others' opinions into their own (Aaker & Maheswaran, 1997) and take others' perspectives (Cohen & Gunz, 2002). Due to this, interdependent individuals are significantly less tolerant of others who violate norms or fail to live up to social obligations (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). They are even more likely to put the good of others above their own desires (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Thus, if a brand were to use a swearword in their communications, an interdependent individual should base their assessment of the swearword and therefore the brand on the overarching social opinion – even if they perceived the use of the swearword as humorous or positive.

Consequently, interdependent individuals should feel a weaker sense of interpersonal closeness to brands that use swearwords because relationships are an integral part of themselves, and the norm violation goes against their values by disrupting social harmony and connection. The negative effect on interpersonal closeness should, in turn, result in less

favorable attitudes towards the brand (e.g., Aron et al., 1991). Indeed, prior work shows that consumers with an interdependent self-construal were less forgiving when they had a weaker relationship with the brand (Sinha & Lu, 2016).

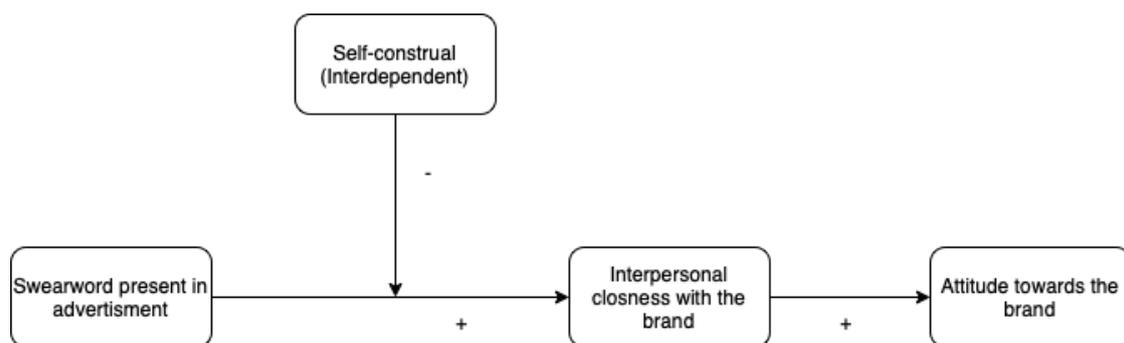
Consistent with this line of reasoning, if a brand did not use a swearword in their communications, those with an interdependent self-construal might have been more accepting. Given that interdependent individuals perceive the world in terms of relationships, they are more likely to pay attention to the social situation when considering another person's behavior (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Thus, they may be more likely to attribute any transgression to something outside of the brand's control. Interdependent individuals are more likely to think that the brand did not intend to cause harm, so they would not be angry at the brand for attempting to maintain harmony by offering an apology (Weiner, 2000).

Overall, the presence (versus absence) of a swearword in brand communications should be particularly detrimental among those with an interdependent self-construal in their attitudes towards a brand (Figure 2). Formally,

**H2:** When an individual holds an interdependent self-construal, the presence (versus absence) of a swearword in brand communications will decrease perceptions of interpersonal closeness between the individual and brand, leading to less favorable attitudes towards the brand.

**Figure 2**

*The Effect of Swearwords on Interdependent Individuals' Attitudes Towards the Brand (H2)*



In sum, the model is as follows: When a swearword is present (versus absent) in brand communications, those with an independent self-construal will feel a stronger sense of interpersonal closeness to the brand and therefore more favorable attitudes towards the brand. However, those with an interdependent self-construal would feel a weaker sense of interpersonal closeness to the brand and therefore less favorable attitudes towards the brand.

### **3. Experiment**

The purpose of this experiment is to provide a causal test of the framework. The experiment followed a 2 (Self-Construal: Independent versus Interdependent) x 2 (Swearword: Present versus Absent) between-subjects design. The stimuli used in the study is based on a real-life advertisement (Mother London, 2018). In 2018, Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) displayed the “FCK” advertisement in the United Kingdom after suffering a chicken shortage crisis leading to the temporary closure of their branches across the country (BBC, 2018; see Appendix B).

This study also tested a few alternative explanations. First, as seen in prior research, swearwords can cause impact arousal which leads to an increase in recall and attention (Brown & Schau, 2001; Dahl et al., 2003). I therefore measured arousal to test its relationship with attitudes towards the brand. Second, credibility was included as an alternative explanation because swearwords can be associated with truthfulness and those using swearwords may be perceived of a higher credibility (e.g., Rassin & Heijden, 2005; Feldman et al., 2017; Hair & Ozcan, 2018). This positive inference could subsequently increase attitudes towards the brand. Third, humour was also measured as prior work has shown that swearwords can be considered funny (Schmid et al., 1998; Allan & Burridge, 2006). This reaction could positively impact consumer attitudes. Finally, forgiveness was also measured as an alternative dependent variable due to the apology included in the advertisement.

#### **3.1. Participants**

Data was collected using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) with a total of 579 participants completing the experiment. Participants were paid with \$1.90 for 15 minutes of participation. A total of 20 participants were removed from the analysis pool as they did not meet the required standards. Participants who answered that they do not eat chicken (the main staple of the KFC menu) were removed (barring two respondents who had explicitly stated

they continue to visit KFC despite not eating chicken to buy vegetarian options). Participants who had engaged in the experiment multiple times were also removed from analysis (in this case only the duplicate data was removed with the first experiment run data of these participants retained). With these exclusion factors, the total data set for analysis consisted of 559 participants. Of these participants 48.7% were female ( $M_{\text{age}} = 40.18$ ,  $SD = 12.3$ ). The reported ethnicities were 78% White, 8.4% Black or African American, 5% Asian, 4.7% Hispanic, Latino or Spanish, 2.5% mixed race, 0.5% American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.4% other, and 0.2% Middle Eastern or North African.

### **3.2. Procedure**

Before proceeding with the experiment, participants were presented with an informed consent page which outlined the use of the data that would be collected as well as the level of participation that would be required from the participants (in relation to the nature of the questions and potential sensitivity of the subject; see Appendix A). Participants were requested to select option “3” to provide consent and simultaneously pass the attention check. If participants selected a number other than “3”, the study was terminated, and an exit message was shown.

After providing consent, participants were given the following scenario, titled “Dining at KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken).” It read, “Lunch time! Imagine you only have time for a short lunch break today. You make the quick decision to grab some fast food at the nearby KFC. Once you arrive at KFC, you find that the doors are locked. It's regular business hours but the restaurant is closed. Oh no! You'll have to go back to work hungry. On the next screen, you will see the poster that was taped on KFC's front door. Please take a moment to look carefully at the poster you are about to see, as you will be asked questions about it later.”

Following this, participants were randomly assigned to either the “FCK” poster in the swear condition or the “KFC” poster in the control condition (see Appendix B). In the swear

condition, participants were shown the original unedited version of the poster advertisement which contained two swearwords. The first swearword was headlined “FCK.” The second swearword was in text: “it’s been a hell of a week.” In the control condition, participants were shown the edited advertisement without swearwords. The advertisement was headlined “KFC” and the text read, “it’s been a devil of a week.” The rest of the text and imagery in the posters remained the same as the original advertisement from 2018 (Mother London, 2018).

The survey then measured overt forgiveness (see Appendix C), interpersonal closeness with the brand (see Figure 3), attitudes towards the brand, attitude towards the advertisement (see Appendix D), humour, credibility (see Appendix E), arousal (see Appendix F), and finally offensiveness (see Appendix G). Next, participants saw another attention check asking what was written in the advertisement with a text box. However, I did not exclude any responses from this attention check. Finally, participants reported their self-construal (Appendix H), gender, age, ethnicity, and if they consume chicken as well as the final attention check (see Appendix I). Upon completion, participants were provided with a randomized number to receive payment on MTurk and an exit message.

### **3.3. Measures**

*Self-Construal.* Self-construal was measured using the 24-item self-construal scale developed by Singelis (1994; see Appendix H). This scale has been used in prior studies and has shown to have strong validity and reliability (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Sela et al., 2011, 2016; Tu et al., 2021). Half of the items measured interdependent construal (12 total). The other half measured the independent construal of participants (12 total). Participants answered on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Results of both independent and interdependent construal were indexed using the sum of their corresponding items. Following this, in accordance with prior research (e.g., Hannover et al., 2006; Tu et al., 2021), an interdependence-independence difference index (IIDDI) was created

to assess the accessibility of self-construal by z-standardizing the two created subscales then subtracting participants' independence scores from their interdependent scores. Resultingly, positive values indicated stronger interdependent self-construal. As such, those with a score above 0 were coded to a value of 1 (interdependent construal) and those with a score below 0 were coded to a value of 2 (independent construal).

*Attitudes.* Attitudes towards the brand and the advertisement were measured using the items from Spears and Singh (2004). The items were measured on a spectrum from -3 to +3, with the data being recoded to values from 1 to 7 for data analysis. These items (see Appendix D) were averaged to calculate an overall attitudes measure ( $M = 5.16$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ,  $\alpha = .978$ ).

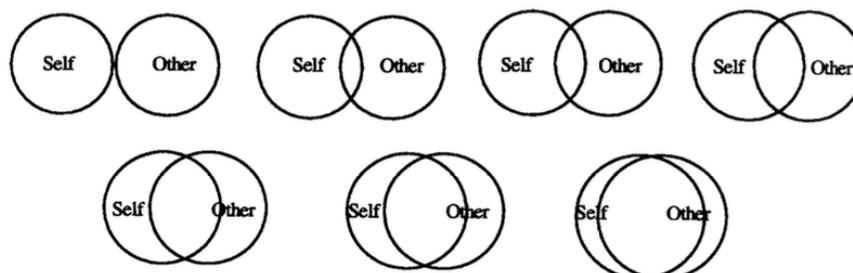
*Offensiveness.* I used two measures of offensiveness as a manipulation check (Lafreniere et al., 2022; see Appendix G). One measured the offensiveness of the swearword to others ( $M = 2.39$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ) and the other measured the offensiveness of the swearword to self ( $M = 1.73$ ,  $SD = 1.382$ ).

*Interpersonal Closeness.* Interpersonal closeness was measured using the 'Inclusion of Other in the Self' visual item by Aron et al (1992; Figure 3) which has been well tested and commonly used in prior research. Participants were requested to select the visual illustration that best represented their relationship between themselves and the brand ( $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ,  $\alpha = .77$ ).

**Figure 3**

*Inclusion of Other in the Self Diagram (Aron et al., 1992)*

**Please circle the picture below which best describes your relationship**



*Overt Forgiveness.* Forgiveness of the brand following the transgression was measured using the well-established and tested Hargrave & Sells (1997) overt forgiveness items (see Appendix C). The items were modified to reflect the marketing context. These items originally measured on an alternative scale were measured on a scale from -3 (strongly disagree) to +3 (strongly agree). These answers were recoded to values 1 to 7 for data analysis purposes ( $M = 5.56$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ,  $\alpha = .85$ ).

*Alternative Explanations.* Multiple alternative explanations were measured including credibility ( $M = 4.95$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ,  $\alpha = .91$ ), coolness ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ), humor ( $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ) (see Appendix E) and arousal (see Appendix F;  $M = 3.84$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ,  $\alpha = .82$ ).

*Attention Checks.* Three attention checks were in the survey. The first was at the informed consent stage where participants were requested to select the number three from the 1 to 7 scale to provide consent and proceed to the survey (see Appendix A). The second attention check asked participants what was written on the advertisement poster. Finally, the third attention check stated, “Most theorists of decision-making recognize that decisions do not take place in a vacuum. Individual preferences and knowledge, along with situational variables can greatly impact the decision process. To facilitate our research on decision-making, we are interested in knowing certain factors about you, the decision-maker. Specifically, we are interested in whether you take the time to read the questions; if not, then some of our manipulations that rely on changes in the questions or instructions will be ineffective. So, to demonstrate that you have read this question, please ignore the question below about what year you were born. Instead, simply write "I love strawberry pie." in that space. Thanks!” below which a text box with the question “In what year were you born” was shown in which participants were required to write the statement requested (see Appendix I). Only the first attention check was used to exclude participants.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

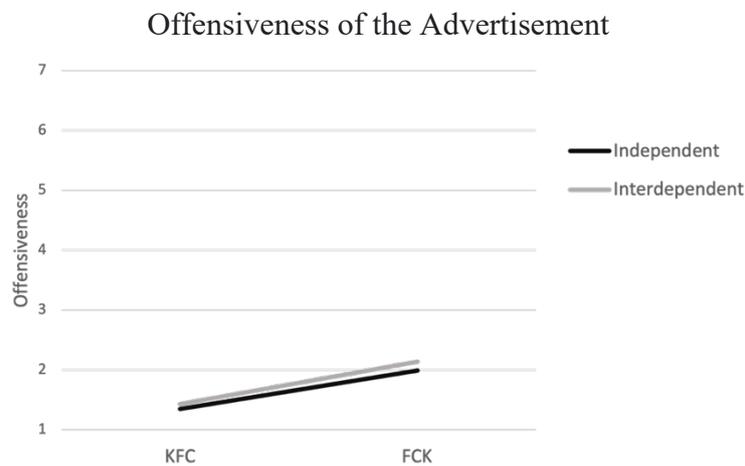
Data was analyzed using the IBM SPSS platform. First, the reliability of the items was tested using Cronbach's alpha, this is a commonly used indicator of internal consistency (Pallant, 2016). A value above .8 would be considered ideal for the study (Cortina, 1993). As the items have been adapted from prior work it was expected that the study would stand in strong reliability. Following this, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to test the developed hypotheses and competing alternative explanations. The ANOVA test shows the existence of any variance between the condition groups. The ANOVA test shows a significant effect (i.e., the differences are seen as significant at a 95% confidence interval), then I assess the difference in values between specific conditions via a t-test. This test displays the difference in mean values and tests the significance of these differences. Finally, a moderated mediation analysis using PROCESS in SPSS (Model 7; Hayes & Preacher, 2013) was conducted to test the full model.

### 3.5. Results

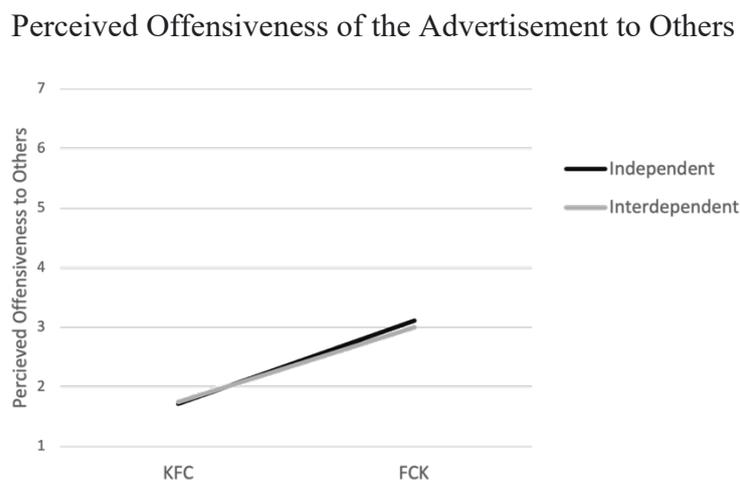
*Manipulation Check.* An ANOVA for offensiveness of the swearword showed, as expected, a significant main effect of the swearword ( $M_{\text{Swear}} = 2.07$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ,  $M_{\text{Control}} = 1.39$ ,  $SD = .978$ ,  $F(1, 555) = 35.328$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .06$ ). Participants found the advertisement to be more offensive with the swearword present (versus absent). The main effect of self-construal ( $F(1, 555) = .98$ ,  $p = .323$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .0018$ ) as well as the interaction effect ( $F(1, 555) = .084$ ,  $p = .773$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .0001$ ) were not significant. In addition, an ANOVA on the perceived offensiveness of the advertisement to most others showed the main effect of the swearword to be significant ( $M_{\text{Swear}} = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ,  $M_{\text{Control}} = 1.74$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ,  $F(1, 555) = 108.06$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .163$ ). The main effect of self-construal was not significant ( $F(1, 555) = .087$ ,  $p = .769$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .0002$ ) and the interaction effect was not significant ( $F(1, 555) = .302$ ,  $p = .583$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .001$ ). Participants had perceived the

advertisement to be more offensive to others when the swearword was present versus absent. This shows that the manipulation of the swearword was effective though the study.

**Figure 4**



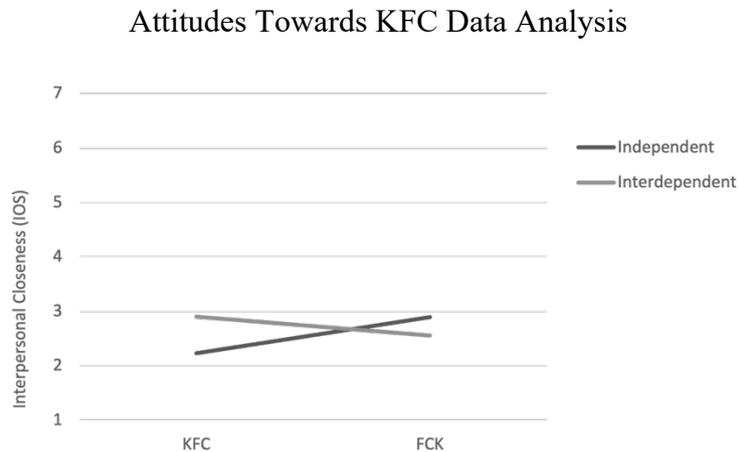
**Figure 5**



*Attitude.* An ANOVA on the attitudes towards KFC showed a significant interaction effect ( $F(1, 555) = 9.3, p = .002, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .017$ ). The main effect of the swearword and the main effect of self-construal were not significant (swearword:  $F(1, 555) = .027, p = .871, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .00004$ , self-construal:  $F(1, 555) = .765, p = .382, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .001$ ) In line with the developed hypotheses, when the swearword was present (versus absent), attitudes towards KFC were more favorable amongst independent individuals ( $M_{\text{Swear}} = 5.27, SD = 1.37; M_{\text{Control}} = 4.93, SD = 1.44; t(555) = 1.97, p = .049$ ; Figure 6), but less favorable amongst interdependent individuals ( $M_{\text{Swear}} = 5.01, SD = 1.52; M_{\text{Control}} = 5.39, SD = 1.23; t(555) =$

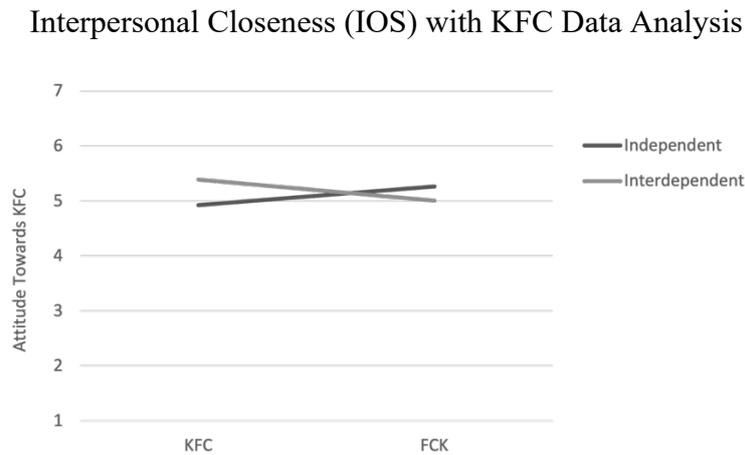
2.35,  $p = .019$ ; Figure 6). These results hold when controlling for the humor aspect of the poster (interaction effect:  $F(1, 555) = 77.15, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .122$ ).

**Figure 6**



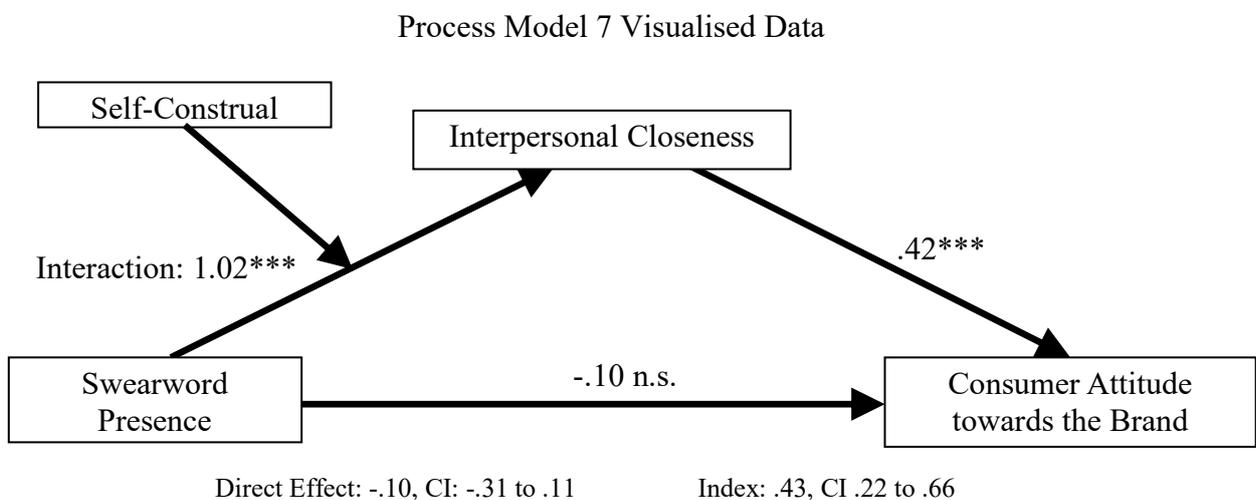
*Interpersonal Closeness.* A full factorial ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect of swearwords on interpersonal closeness ( $F(1, 555) = 2.65, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .03$ ). The main effect of swearword and self-construal were not significant (swearword:  $F(1, 555) = 1.66, p = .198, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .003$ , self-construal:  $F(1, 555) = 1.87, p = .172, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .003$ ). As expected, when the swearword was present (versus absent), those with an interdependent construal had a weaker sense of interpersonal closeness with the brand ( $M_{\text{Swear}} = 2.55, SD = 1.31; M_{\text{Control}} = 2.90, SD = 1.55; t(555) = 2.09, p = .037, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .007$ ; Figure 7), but those of independent construal reported a stronger sense of interpersonal closeness with the brand ( $M_{\text{Swear}} = 2.89, SD = 1.6; M_{\text{Control}} = 2.22, SD = 1.31; t(555) = 3.71, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .002$ ; Figure 7).

**Figure 7**



*Moderated mediation.* A moderated mediation model with interpersonal closeness as the mediator (model 7; Hayes & Preacher, 2013) showed, as expected, a significant index of moderated mediation (Index = .43, SE = .11, 95% CI = .22 to .66). The effect of swearwords on attitudes towards KFC via interpersonal closeness was significant and positive when self-construal was independent ( $\beta = .28$ , SE = .08, 95% CI = .13 to .45) and significant and negative when self-construal was interdependent ( $\beta = -.15$ , SE = .07, 95% CI = -.29 to -.01). The direct effect of swearwords on attitudes towards KFC became insignificant when controlling for the mediator ( $\beta = -.97$ , SE = .11, 95% CI = -.31 to .11; Figure 8), showing full mediation.

**Figure 8**



*Overt Forgiveness.* Overt forgiveness showed no statistically significant interaction effect ( $F(1, 555) = 3.426, p = .065, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .006$ ). The main effect of the swearword and self-construal was not statistically significant (swearword:  $F(1, 555) = .019, p = .890, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .00003$ , self-construal:  $F(1, 555) = .076, p = .783, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .0001$ ).

*Alternative explanations.* Coolness was assessed via ANOVA and showed no statistically significant interaction effect ( $F(1, 553) = 1.8, p = .18, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .003$ ). Both main effects of the swearword and self-construal were statistically significant (swearword:  $F(1, 555) = 6.759, p = .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .012$ , self-construal:  $F(1, 555) = 13.76, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .024$ ).

An ANOVA on credibility showed a significant interaction effect ( $F(1, 555) = 6.998, p = .008, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .012$ ). The main effect of the swearword and self-construal were not statistically significant (swearword:  $F(1, 555) = 3.05, p = .082, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .005$ , self-construal:  $F(1, 555) = .359, p = .55, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .0006$ ). There was no effect of the swearword among interdependent participants compared to the control condition ( $M_{\text{Swear}} = 4.93, SD = 1.32; M_{\text{Control}} = 5.03, SD = 1.34; t(555) = .66, p = .51, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .001$ ). Still, there was a significant effect for independent participants when the swearword was present versus absent ( $M_{\text{Swear}} = 5.16, SD = 1.22; M_{\text{Control}} = 4.66, SD = 1.50; t(555) = 3.00, p = .003, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .016$ ). Therefore, while there is a significant interaction effect, the contrasts do not fully explain the observed effect.

An ANOVA on arousal showed no significant interaction effect ( $F(1, 555) = .784, p = .376, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .001$ ). However, the main effect of the swearword was statistically significant ( $F(1, 555) = 8.14, p = .004, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .014$ ). The main effect of self-construal showed no statistically significant effect ( $F(1, 555) = 1.42, p = .233, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .003$ ).

Finally, an ANOVA on perceptions of the advertisement being funny showed no significant interaction effect ( $F(1, 555) = .156, p = .69, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .0003$ ). The main effect of

the swearword was seen to be significant however self-construal was not statistically significant (swearword:  $F(1, 555) = 29.59, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .05$ , self-construal:  $F(1, 555) = 5.28, p = .022, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .009$ ).

#### **4. General Discussion**

Although swearwords have been used by some high-profile brands (e.g., KFC, BP), it is not yet clear when they will have a positive or negative effect on consumers. The current research fills this gap by developing and testing a model of how and why swearwords in brand communications impact consumers. The results show that, under some circumstances, swearwords in brand communications can increase attitudes towards the brand by increasing interpersonal closeness between the consumer and the brand. Further, I theorize and find that self-construal moderates this effect. Specifically, swearwords in brand communications increase interpersonal closeness and attitudes when the consumer has an independent self-construal. However, they decrease interpersonal closeness and attitudes when the consumer has an interdependent self-construal. These results hold when controlling for the humorousness of the ad. The results of this study additionally support the link between alignment of values and interpersonal closeness. The swearword conveying coolness reflects autonomy and humour, thereby creating the image of the brand being independent. This led independent individuals to feel closer to the brand (Warren et al., 2010) and interdependent individuals to feel less close to the brand. This research also found that independent individuals saw the brand as more credible when the swearword was present (versus absent). While the nature of the interaction on credibility did not fully explain the model, this research supports prior work suggesting that swearwords influence perceptions of credibility (e.g., Rassin & Heijden, 2005; Feldman et al., 2017; Hair & Ozcan, 2018).

#### **4.1. Theoretical and Practical Contributions**

The knowledge developed from this study adds to the existing literature in marketing and psychology. This study builds on prior work showing that swearwords can be useful to marketers (e.g., Brown & Schau, 2001; Dahl et al., 2003). Marketers may benefit from swearwords when the audience has been primed or are found to be in an independent state of construal. This would, in turn, lead to a more favorable attitude towards the brand. The research also communicates to marketers when and where they should not use swearwords: for example, when dealing with a largely interdependent community (Karremans et al., 2011), swearwords in brand communications may negatively affect attitudes towards the brand. Here, this research shows that use of swearwords would not be effective for the most part in gaining a positive reaction since interdependent individuals' construal would feel further distanced from the brand and therefore hold a weaker attitude towards it.

Second, the research extends knowledge on swearwords in marketing by empirically testing a new pathway for the effect of swearwords on consumer attitudes. Prior research shows that swearwords can convey information about the speaker, with implications for consumer outcomes (e.g., Lafreniere et al., 2022). Swearwords can also impact the relationships between employees within workplaces (Daly et al., 2003; Baruch & Jenkins, 2006). Building upon this, this study is the first to empirically test the influence of swearwords on interpersonal closeness between the brand and consumer and the subsequent consumer outcomes (e.g., attitudes towards the brand). Thus, swearwords may have social implications in advertising contexts not only by changing the consumers' perceptions of the brand but also by changing the relationship between consumers and the brand.

Perhaps even more critically, this research contributes towards existing knowledge regarding self-construal by offering a more nuanced understanding of its relationship with interpersonal closeness. Prior work demonstrates that those with an interdependent self-

construal are more likely to view others in closer relation to the self (e.g., Tu et al., 2021). However, the study shows that this perceived relationship is built on an alignment of values. In the current context, because the use of a swearword aligns with the independents' values of autonomy and seeking personal pleasure (e.g., humour), those with an independent self-construal reported a stronger sense of interpersonal closeness with the brand. Thus, this research contributes to psychology by introducing a context in which interdependent individuals would report lower levels of interpersonal closeness and help explain the conditions influencing the relationship between interdependent individuals and others.

Finally, the selection of self-construal as a moderator for this model contributes to research on the acceptance of swearwords across cultures. Prior research suggests that those who are non-native English speakers are less critical of swearwords because they do not understand the gravity of the offence (Jay, 1992). The current study introduces a new factor that moderates the acceptance of swearwords across cultures. It suggests that acceptance may also depend on cultural norms (i.e., self-construal and social norms). This deeper understanding of how self-construal impacts the reception of swearwords informs brands about how swearwords in communications could be received across cultures. This can practically play out when communicating with different cultures as prior work has shown emphasis on independent and interdependent construal characteristics differ across western and eastern societies (Sui et al., 2009) and therefore marketers can gear messages towards certain audiences using or avoiding swearwords.

#### **4.2. Future Research**

There are a few areas worthy of future research. First, though this study tests the effects of the use of swearwords use within brand communications, it would be valuable to research if the effect would be observable in non-profit marketing. For example, the “Fuck Cancer” campaign was positively received raising over \$1 million (Pereira, 2012). However,

the “FCKH8” campaign by a feminist charity did not resonate well with audiences (Dewey, 2014). It may be that the use of swearwords in charity appeals (e.g., <https://www.fuckcancer.org>) may only appeal to those with an independent self-construal. Future research could study the impact of swearwords in these alternative contexts.

Second, future research could test the effect of different forms of swearwords because not all swearwords have the same level of offensiveness (Dewaele, 2016). For example, prior work shows that uncensored swearwords have stronger effects than censored swearwords in word of mouth (Lafreniere et al., 2022). Thus, researchers could assess the impact of euphemistic or censored swearwords in the advertising context. It could be that censored swearwords are less appealing to independents and more appealing to interdependent individuals because they purposely avoid breaking the rules.

Third, it would be valuable to explore the situations wherein swearwords in brand communications would be seen positively by interdependent individuals or negatively by independents. For example, it could be that swearwords directed at people (opposed to the transgression) are offensive to the self and therefore viewed less positively by those with an independent self-construal. Such an understanding would provide further nuance to the value of swearwords in brand communications.

Fourth, while the effect of credibility was significant for independent individuals, it did not explain the effect of swearwords on attitudes for interdependent individuals. Still, this finding supports prior work suggesting that swearwords improve perceptions of the speaker’s credibility (e.g. Rassin & Heijden, 2005; Feldman et al., 2017; Hair & Ozcan, 2018). In the current context, the observed effects on credibility could be explained by the relationship between interpersonal closeness and credibility. Specifically, research shows that consumers typically believe that those similar to them have higher credibility (Binzel & Fehr, 2013). The effect of swearwords on credibility should therefore be explored in future work.

Future studies should also look to directly measure the impact of value alignment for independent individuals. This study's results indirectly support the effect of value alignment on interpersonal closeness and attitudes towards the brands by measuring perceptions of coolness and humor. However the experiment did not include a direct measure of this construct, which should be considered a limitation to this work. Future work could measure value alignment by using a measure similar to that used by Schwartz (1992), who asked participants to report what traits and characteristics they value in that point of time and measured their response alignment with other traits portrayed by the brand.

Delving into the international aspect of construal differences would provide a further wide scale global understanding to the impact of the results of this study. As mentioned, the self-construal differs across societies: Western societies tend to exhibit more independent construal traits compared to Eastern societies (Sui et al., 2009; Li et al., 2006). However, differences can even be seen within the same continental area. For example, Japan and South Korea have shown more independent and interdependent construals respectively amongst students (Park et al., 2017). Therefore conducting a cross cultural experiment could help researchers better understand if some markets are better suited to a swearword communications tactic than others. This research shows that interdependent individuals do not like the use of swearwords in communications as it reduces feelings of interpersonal closeness and therefore attitudes, this may mean eastern societies may negatively respond to such communication tactics though with the malleable nature of construal in modern society and global scale of communications from brands this may not be the case. An example where a brand has faced backlash for a lack of cultural difference consideration can be seen with Pepsodent. They advertised a slogan promising white teeth in both Western and Eastern Asian markets but were met with heavy backlash in the Eastern Asian markets due to cultural

differences (i.e., whiter teeth were not a desirable outcome for that social group; Schiffman et al., 2013).

Finally, future research could examine the impact of differing degrees of transgression severity. This study does not manipulate the severity of the transgression. However, this variable may impact the reception of the swearword within the apology. Prior research has shown that different levels of severity of transgression by a brand have different impacts on the reaction of customers concerning satisfaction, market share and other such areas (Keiningham et al., 2014; Chuang et al., 2012; Riaz & Khan, 2015). This being noted, much research has shown that congruence between the message of the apology and gravity of the situation is key and that where there is a disconnect this can lead to unfavorable outcomes (Wooten, 2007; Joireman et al., 2013; Racine et al., 2018). Swearwords have been shown to demonstrate extreme emotions (e.g., Lafreniere et al., 2022) which could match the gravity of the situation. However, swearwords offer humor and positivity (Schmid et al., 1998; Allan & Burridge, 2006) and may mismatch the gravity of the situation. Thus, it is not yet clear whether swearwords add value to apologies for severe transgressions. These questions await future investigation.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A: Informed Consent

#### Welcome to the Communications in Marketing Study!

Please read the following letter of information carefully before beginning the survey:

#### **Principal Investigators:**

Katherine Lafreniere, Assistant Professor, Dhillon School of Business, University of Lethbridge

Sarah Moore, Associate Professor, Alberta School of Business, University of Alberta

**What is this study about?** You are invited to participate in an anonymous study on the impact of language on consumer behavior during a customer service failure. Through your participation, we hope to better understand how changes in language influence consumer preferences and marketing effectiveness.

**What is expected of you?** The survey asks questions about your feelings and attitudes towards the stimuli as well as demographic information. It will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. You are expected to perform the task in good faith. You will use your human intelligence and independent judgment to answer questions. You will not use robots, scripts, or other automated methods as a substitute for your human intelligence or independent judgment.

**What are the anticipated uses of the data collected?** The responses to the survey will be aggregated and may be published in scholarly presentations and publications.

**What are the risks and benefits of participating?** There are no anticipated risks or direct benefits from participating in this study. However, stimuli may include coarse or offensive language. The primary benefits to participation are enhanced understanding of language and marketing effectiveness. Marketing scholars and practitioners as well as consumers like you will benefit from your contribution to knowledge.

**How will your confidentiality and anonymity be protected?** Participation is voluntary. As with any online survey, neither anonymity nor confidentiality can be completely guaranteed. You will need to provide your MTurk ID for payment, but any identifying information will be erased from your responses after you received payment. The survey is being hosted on Qualtrics and their privacy policy can be accessed at <https://www.qualtrics.com/privacy->

statement. The responses to this survey will be kept on a password-protected computer with restricted access; anonymous data will be retained indefinitely.

**How can I withdraw?** Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled by simply closing your browser. If you choose to discontinue participation, any responses you have submitted will be retained.

**How will I be compensated?** You will receive the payment amount listed on Amazon Mechanical Turk in return for your participation. If you experience technical difficulties or, in good faith, wish to withdraw your participation, please contact the researcher at [lafreniere@uleth.ca](mailto:lafreniere@uleth.ca).

For more information on this study, you may contact Katie Lafreniere at [lafreniere@uleth.ca](mailto:lafreniere@uleth.ca). This research study has been reviewed for ethical acceptability and approved by the University of Lethbridge Human Subject Research Committee. Questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Office of Research Ethics, University of Lethbridge (Phone: 403-329-2747 or Email: [research.services@uleth.ca](mailto:research.services@uleth.ca)).

Sincerely,

Katie Lafreniere and Sarah Moore

To indicate that you have read the questions above and wish to continue with this survey, please select the circle marked three as your response below:

1 (Definitely not) – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 (Definitely yes)

## Appendix B: Poster Stimuli Conditions

Stimuli A – Swear Condition (Original from: Mother London, 2018)



**WE'RE SORRY**

A chicken restaurant without any chicken. It's not ideal. Huge apologies to our customers, especially those who travelled out of their way to find we were closed. And endless thanks to our KFC team members and our franchise partners for working tirelessly to improve the situation. It's been a hell of a week, but we're making progress, and every day more and more fresh chicken is being delivered to our restaurants. Thank you for bearing with us.

Visit [kfc.co.uk/crossed-the-road](http://kfc.co.uk/crossed-the-road) for details about your local restaurant.

## Stimuli B –Control Condition



**WE'RE SORRY**

A chicken restaurant without any chicken. It's not ideal. Huge apologies to our customers, especially those who travelled out of their way to find we were closed. And endless thanks to our KFC team members and our franchise partners for working tirelessly to improve the situation. It's been a devil of a week, but we're making progress, and every day more and more fresh chicken is being delivered to our restaurants. Thank you for bearing with us.

Visit [kfc.co.uk/crossed-the-road](http://kfc.co.uk/crossed-the-road) for details about your local restaurant.

### **Appendix C: Overt Forgiveness Items (Hargrave & Sells, 1997)**

Measured on a scale of -3 (Strongly Disagree) to +3 (Strongly Agree)

1. KFC has taken responsibility for causing me trouble.
2. KFC accepted responsibility for the service failure.
3. KFC acknowledges that they have done things wrong concerning my customer relationship.
4. I believe KFC would not intentionally fail me again because they are now trustworthy.
5. KFC has apologized to me for the service failure they caused in my life.

## Appendix D: Attitude Items (Spears & Singh, 2004)

Items were measured on a matrix format -3 to +3 from one end of the spectrum to the other.

Please indicate your attitude towards **KFC**

Bad	(-3) (-2) (-1) (0) (+1) (+2) (+3)	Good
Negative	(-3) (-2) (-1) (0) (+1) (+2) (+3)	Positive
Unfavourable	(-3) (-2) (-1) (0) (+1) (+2) (+3)	Favourable
Disliked	(-3) (-2) (-1) (0) (+1) (+2) (+3)	Like

Please indicate your attitude towards **the advertisement**

Bad	(-3) (-2) (-1) (0) (+1) (+2) (+3)	Good
Negative	(-3) (-2) (-1) (0) (+1) (+2) (+3)	Positive
Unfavourable	(-3) (-2) (-1) (0) (+1) (+2) (+3)	Favourable
Disliked	(-3) (-2) (-1) (0) (+1) (+2) (+3)	Like

## Appendix E: Alternative Explanation Measures

How would you describe KFC as a brand?

Funny	0 (Not at all)	1	2	3	4	5	6 (Very much)
Spontaneous	0 (Not at all)	1	2	3	4	5	6 (Very much)
Youthful	0 (Not at all)	1	2	3	4	5	6 (Very much)
Fun	0 (Not at all)	1	2	3	4	5	6 (Very much)
Cool	0 (Not at all)	1	2	3	4	5	6 (Very much)
Independent	0 (Not at all)	1	2	3	4	5	6 (Very much)

How would you describe KFC as a brand?

Authentic	0 (Not at all)	1	2	3	4	5	6 (Very much)
Genuine	0 (Not at all)	1	2	3	4	5	6 (Very much)
Relatable	0 (Not at all)	1	2	3	4	5	6 (Very much)
Unpretentious	0 (Not at all)	1	2	3	4	5	6 (Very much)
A straight shooter	0 (Not at all)	1	2	3	4	5	6 (Very much)

## Appendix F: Mehrabian & Russell (1974) Arousal Items

Measured on a scale from -3 to +3 ranging from one end of a spectrum to another.

How do you feel when you read this poster?

Relaxed	(-3) (-2) (-1) (0) (+1) (+2) (+3)	Calm
Sluggish	(-3) (-2) (-1) (0) (+1) (+2) (+3)	Unaroused
Stimulated	(-3) (-2) (-1) (0) (+1) (+2) (+3)	Excited
Frenzied	(-3) (-2) (-1) (0) (+1) (+2) (+3)	Aroused

## Appendix G: Offence Items (Lafreniere et al., 2022)

Measured on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much).

1. Do you find this advertisement to be **offensive**?
2. Do you think **most people** would find this advertisement to be **offensive**?

## Appendix H: Singelis (1994) Trait self-construal items

Answered on a scale of -3 (strongly disagree) to +3 (strongly agree)

### *Interdependent Items:*

1. I have respect for the authority figures with whom I interact.
2. It is important for me to maintain harmony within my group.
3. My happiness depends on the happiness of those around me.
4. I would offer my seat in a bus to my professor.
5. I respect people who are modest about themselves.
6. I will sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of the group I am in.
7. I often have the feeling that my relationships with others are more important than my own accomplishments.
8. I should take into consideration my parents' advice when making education/career plans.
9. It is important to me to respect decisions made by the group.
10. I will stay in a group if they need me, even when I'm not happy with the group.
11. If my brother or sister fails, I feel responsible.
12. Even when I strongly disagree with group members, I avoid an argument.

### *Independent Items:*

1. I'd rather say "no" directly, than risk being misunderstood.
2. Speaking up during a class is not a problem for me.
3. Having a lively imagination is important for me.
4. I am comfortable with being singled out for praise or rewards.
5. I am the same person at home that I am at school.

6. being able to take care of myself is a primary concern for me.
7. I act the same way no matter who I am with.
8. I feel comfortable using someone's first name soon after I meet them, even when they are much older than I am.
9. I prefer to be direct and forthright when dealing with people I've just met.
10. I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects.
11. My personal identity independent of others, is very important to me.
12. I value being in good health above everything.

(Participants were not informed of which items are aligned with which construal)

### **Appendix I: Final attention check item (Agle et al., 2021)**

Most theorists of decision-making recognize that decisions do not take place in a vacuum. Individual preferences and knowledge, along with situational variables can greatly impact the decision process. In order to facilitate our research on decision-making, we are interested in knowing certain factors about you, the decision-maker. Specifically, we are interested in whether you actually take the time to read the questions; if not, then some of our manipulations that rely on changes in the questions or instructions will be ineffective. So, in order to demonstrate that you have read this question, please ignore the question below about what year you were born. Instead, simply write "I love strawberry pie." in that space. Thanks!

**In what year were you born?**

Open answer