

F***G WITH OPINIONS**

**UNDERSTANDING THE IMPLICATIONS OF STRONGLY
OPINIONATED AND PROFANE ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-
MOUTH ON FILM DEMAND**

CARL EPPENS

JESPER FAHLÉN

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Fucking with Opinions: Understanding the Implications of Strongly Opinionated and Profane Electronic Word-of-Mouth on Film Demand

Abstract:

The internet is a gateway to rest of the world. It allows people to express themselves in an unfiltered fashion and share opinions freely. In parallel, online film forums are becoming increasingly influential on film consumers. This study aims to shed light on the effects that strongly opinionated and profane electronic word-of-mouth has on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions towards film, and whether these effects interplay with various mediators and moderators. Two-way ANOVA analyses are conducted on a data set composed of 136 questionnaire respondents, which concludes that a direct effect exists between expressed opinion in a film review quote and a consumer's attitude towards presented film. Additionally, Preacher & Hayes' PROCESS macro is used to perform mediation and moderation tests, in which results establish emotional arousal to be an indirect-only mediator on the said relationship between expressed opinion and consumer attitude. This study is the first in its field to investigate strongly opinionated electronic word-of-mouth and its implications for film demand. Thus, it serves as a basis for further research on the subject.

Keywords:

Film demand; Electronic word-of-mouth; eWOM; Online profanity; Film marketing; Word stimuli

Authors:

Carl Eppens (24053)
Jesper Fahlén (24063)

Tutors:

Magnus Söderlund, Professor, Department of Marketing and Strategy

Examiner:

Patric Andersson, Associate Professor, Department of Marketing and Strategy

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Stockholm School of Economics

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1. Introduction

The internet is a gateway to rest of the world. It is the glue that allows for the expansion of networks – where people on different continents can engage in conversations, as if it is the most natural thing in the world. And not seldom do these conversations entail strong opinions, or even conflict, at risk of being blown out of proportion. Unlike in our offline lives, where there is a personal risk related to the expression of opinions, our online lives constitute a platform on which we can express ourselves a lot more freely. As lab director Molly Crockett says (BBC, 2018):

”What we’ve created online is an ecosystem that selects for the most outrageous content, paired with a platform where it’s easier than ever to express outrage”

Expressing strong opinions is easier nowadays, and research shows that tweets containing morally or emotionally charged words are 20 percent more likely to be retweeted (Brady et al, 2017). We are more exposed to vulgar opinions and language today than ever before. A study conducted in 2013, for example, found that adults used the words ‘fuck’ and ‘shit’ 41 percent more than they did 27 years earlier (Jay & Jay, 2013).

One area in which lively online discussions often take place is within the world of film, where online rating tools and forums let people take part of others’ opinions and assessments. The opinions are often many, as the film industry¹ is an enormous business. In 2018, the aggregated revenue from cinema ticket sales – the global box office – reached \$41.7 billion globally (Variety, 2019). Clearly, there is a lot of money to be made within the world of film. However, film success is not just about delivering movie magic on the big screen. As linguist, director and film producer Maria Johnsen says (Medium, 2019):

“/.../ people wouldn’t know a film exists without marketing. /.../ when a film goes into production, it needs to be advertised like any other product and get an audience excited to see it.”

Since the industry revolves around such massive amounts of money, marketing is a factor that has the potential to make or break a film. In the US, an average PG-13 action film entails a marketing expenditure of as much as \$30 million (Movie Predators, 2019). In light of this, it is of the utmost importance – to all film stakeholders involved – that marketing activities are devised to yield positive, meaningful results. However, the power to influence crowds may be slipping out of their hands, more and more. The electronic, and often profane, word-of-mouth that follows from widespread online

¹ Defined as the market for, and audience of, theatrical films that are screened at cinemas.

discussions and rating tools is becoming increasingly powerful in terms of influence on consumers' purchasing and decision-making patterns regarding film (Chiu et al. 2019).

This study aims to shed light on the effects of certain linguistic choices within the world of online word-of-mouth regarding film. The study will examine the effects that profanity has on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions concerning a film, when used in an electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) setting – both in positively and negatively opinionated frames.

2. Background

2.1. Film as a business

2.1.1. The precarious nature of the film industry

Financing, creating and distributing a film is a huge gamble, in terms of money. The industry is marked by immense budgets, and Pareto-distributed box-office revenues of infinite variance (De Vany & Walls, 1999). Not all films will leave investors and producers financially independent – betting on the wrong film can have grim consequences, with millions of dollars at stake. The vast majority of films fail to make money during their theatrical runs, and the only reason behind the industry's survival is the fact that a small percentage of films generate massive box-office revenues. An even smaller percentage of films reach blockbuster status, raking in hundreds of millions of dollars (Simonton, 2009).

Comparing the film industry to other businesses can be difficult and misleading, as it orbits around an experience good which commercial value to the general public can only be assessed after its large-scale introduction (Chang & Ki, 2005). At this point, a lot of time and resources have been invested towards the success of the film, by multiple stakeholders, hoping to meet the cryptic and unpredictable demands of the public eye. This uncertainty is a contributing factor as to why many film contracts contain some form of contingent compensation that lets film studios avoid large upfront fees (De Vany, 2004).

2.1.2. Handling uncertainty within the film business

Multiple tactics have been deployed in the strive for a perfect success recipe within the world of film, aiming to eliminate the risk that ever so often breaks, rather than makes, a film. A staggering 78 percent of all films lose money, while 6 percent of films account for about 80 percent of the industry's total profits (Reinsdorf & Slaughter, 2009). Any stakeholder involved would want their film to be in those top six percent, which is why they tend to invest millions of dollars into laying the foundation for a success story. A lot of different measures are taken. For example, film creators² try to get hold of the biggest and most impactful industry names, such as A-list actors, famous directors and screenwriters; they try to be accessible through a multitude of distribution channels, aiming to reach all potential customers; also, loads of money are spent on other forms of film promotion, such as posters, trailers, dissemination of critics' reviews and social media (Ulker-Demirel et al, 2018).

² Hereby defined as the teams standing behind the film; this entails investors, producers, entire film crew, distributors and other stakeholders who are involved in the development and success patterns of a film.

However, as much as the film creators would want their promotional activities to yield results, it does not always work out as they hope. The average PG-13 action film in the US allocates \$30 million to marketing expenditures (Movie Predators, 2019). And as stated before, the average film loses money. One of the reasons for this could be the fact that online rating tools and discussions are becoming increasingly influential on consumers' purchasing and decision-making patterns, making eWOM very impactful (Chiu et al, 2019). Previous research has shown that film related word-of-mouth offers significant explanatory power for box office revenue (Liu, 2006). In that sense, it is of high importance for all stakeholders within the film industry to understand the nature of eWOM and its effects on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. Increasing this understanding is a meaningful step towards a less risky film industry.

2.2. The profanity phenomenon

2.2.1. The taboo nature of profanity

The word *profanity*³ has its origin in the mid 16th century, hailing from the latin word *profanus* – ‘not sacred’ (Lexico, 2015). It represented a certain negligence towards religion and religious beliefs. Today, profanity – swearing and cursing – is defined as a linguistic activity that incorporates the use of taboo words (Vingerhoets et al, 2013). As this type of language often refers to something culturally stigmatized, and is used to express strong emotions or attitudes, it often results in greater expressive power (Vingerhoetz et al, 2013).

From a very young age, we are taught that some words are inappropriate. We learn that they display a limited vocabulary, and a lack of class (New York Times, 2017). Benjamin K. Bergen, professor of cognitive science at the University of California, San Diego, says the following (Bergen, 2016):

“The reason that a child thinks the F-word is a bad word is that, growing up, he or she was told that it was a bad word, so profanity is a cultural construct that perpetuates itself through time”

In that sense, the suppression and avoidance of profanity actually contributes to, and increases, its charged nature. Without this kind of censorship, it is likely that most profanity would be regarded as common language. However, the powerful nature of swearing can be utilized in several ways. It is often used in connection with experienced physical pain, as the exclamation of explicit words can boost our tolerance for it (Stephens et al, 2009). Also, it has been shown that profanity can help people communicate emotions more accurately, discrediting the ‘poverty of vocabulary’ myth which claims that swearing occurs as a result of an impoverished vocabulary (Jay & Jay, 2015).

³ Swearing and cursing – the use of traditionally taboo words

2.2.2. Profanity in the modern world

The world is more connected than ever before. The internet has opened up for an entirely new world of information sharing, communication and networking. The little device in our hand is a gateway to the rest of the world, full of information. Before all of this, the media could control large parts of what was communicated to the general public – now, however, we have access to a more accurate picture of what goes on (The Washington Post, 2014). We get to see presidential candidates express themselves clumsily in debates, we can stream reality shows such as Big Brother whenever we want, and we scroll through hot-headed discussions in various social media channels. We are a lot less shielded against the explicit nature of the world today, than ever before. In a 2013 study, it was found that adults generally used the words ‘fuck’ and ‘shit’ 41 percent more than they did 27 years earlier. For children between the ages of 1 and 12, this number was 10 percent (Jay & Jay, 2013). Even between 1997 and 2001, before the social media era became prominent, there was a 58 percent increase in the use of profanity on television, between 8 p.m. and 9 p.m. at night (Baker & Broadus, 2015).

The world is subject to constant change. Language, as a social construction, is a part of this – and so is society’s reaction to it (Cressman et al, 2009). Shakespeare’s creations used to be considered profane; today, they are performed by children in elementary schools. Times change, and people’s way of speaking adapts accordingly. In the interconnected world that we live in, the expression of strong opinions has a lot more leeway, and profanity is not seldom a part of that. As Molly Crockett suggests – we have created a platform where outrageous and profane opinions are expressed freely, and where they tend to be selected over other opinions (BBC, 2018). Tweets that contain emotionally or morally charged words have a 20 percent increased chance of being retweeted (Brady et al, 2017). Strongly worded opinions expressed on the internet seem to become more and more powerful and influential. It would be nothing but reasonable for a film creator to contemplate the potential implications of this – both positive and negative.

2.3. Purpose

The purpose of this study is to empirically investigate how the profane and strongly opinionated language that often transpires within film related eWOM affects the discussed film’s demand, in terms of potential consumers’ purchase intentions and attitudes.

This will be done through the analysis of self-generated data, investigating the implications of profanity in opinionated, film related eWOM. The study sets out to assess the effects that profanity and expressed opinion, in the aforementioned context,

might have on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions through potential mediation from three variables; felt surprise, emotional arousal and perceived credibility.

Furthermore, the study is intended to unveil potential influences that certain moderating variables – film familiarity and gender – might have on the effects that opinionated, profane eWOM has on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions in regard to film.

2.4. Literature review

2.4.1. Research on film success predictors

The risky nature of the film industry has incentivized researchers to identify explanatory variables behind film success. One important contribution on the subject was produced by Dan Keith Simonton from University of California, Davis, in 2009. He wrote *Cinematic Success Criteria and their Predictors: The Art and Business of the Film Industry*, in which he reviews empirical research on the factors underlying the success of feature-length narrative films, examining three major success criteria in the form of critical evaluations, financial performance and movie awards. Thereafter, he analyzes the predictors of these criteria and closes with an interesting discussion about certain psychological aspects that the study sheds light on (Simonton, 2009).

Simonton (2009) further discusses how these success criteria intercorrelate with each other. For example, he clarifies that a study encompassing 1322 films obtained a positive correlation of 0.49 between a composite measure of nominations and awards concerning the best picture title, based on seven organizations, and a composite measure of five film guides' critical evaluations. These relationships were also found to be regulated by a number of predictor variables, which were divided into two categories – production and distribution. The variables within the production category were roughly separated into three factors; budget, screenplay and personnel. These are the main factors that go directly into the creation of the film. In the distribution category, five variables were emphasized; season of release, number of screens, major distributor, marketing expenditures and market competition. This study, however, was predominantly guided by prevailing marketing and economics ideas. It acknowledges the lacking psychological perspective and declares that such considerations could have major implications for the expanded understanding of film success (Simonton, 2009). Social influence is regarded as a critical aspect in this arena. Word-of-mouth assessments possess the ability of creating so called information cascades, in which a number of people make the same decision in a sequential fashion (De Vany & Lee, 2001). The information cascades, in turn, produce snowball effects that render many predictions and preconceived notions on box office revenues unsuccessful (Simonton, 2009). Furthermore, the study states that negative critical judgments tend to have larger impacts on financial outcomes of films than positive judgments, in accordance with Basuroy et al. (2003).

2.4.2. Research on the effects of eWOM on film success

As De Vany & Lee (2001) conducted research on critical factors for cinematic success, they learned that social influence can have meaningful implications for the success of a film. Ts and Nair (2016) expand on this knowledge by investigating the effects of eWOM within social media, on film favorability and visibility. The authors start by discussing the accelerating effect that the internet has had on the impact of word-of-mouth communication, and thereby define eWOM as any positive or negative statement made by former, potential and current customers in regard to a product, or similar, via the internet – in line with the Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) definition. Ts and Nair (2016) further discuss the unprecedented scalability and speed of diffusion that the internet offers, as the electronic version of word-of-mouth involves multi-way information exchanges in asynchronous mode – making it accessible to a large number of people. The authors set out to quantitatively assess the impact of eWOM on favorability and visibility towards promotional content of movies on social media, using a survey method on a sample of 90 students from different professional institutions in Kerala, India. Through a multiple regression analysis, Ts and Nair (2016) find that eWOM positively influences the favorability and visibility of promotional content of movies on social media.

The seemingly persuasive nature of eWOM could be further investigated through the lens of Marie-Odile Taillard's (2001) paper *Persuasive Communication: The Case of Marketing*, which discusses two main principles regarding human communication – to be understood and to be believed. She suggests that both these acts are included in persuasion and relevance theory communication. Furthermore, she argues that a speaker's intention can be categorized into two levels; her informative and communicative intention. To understand a speaker's meaning and to institutionalize it, are two distinguishable processes. In that sense, it is possible for a recipient to understand the meaning behind a message, without actually adopting its ideas or beliefs (Taillard, 2001). Understanding and believing are different in this way. Taillard (2001) also discusses that there are two different strategies that can be deployed in order to convince an audience – ostensive or covert communication. The former is described as a more direct, efficient method in which the speaker clearly states her intention, aiming to make it mutually manifest. The latter strategy incorporates a more discreet way of putting the message across and leaves the interpretation up to the recipient.

2.4.3. Research on online profanity usage

The expansive nature of social media led researchers from Wright University to investigate how the massive online presence affects people's cursing behaviors, in a report named *Cursing in English on Twitter* (Wang et al, 2014). They explain how cursing is a commonality in physical conversations, constituting around 0.5 percent to 0.7 percent of all the words we speak. However, they argue that social media possesses

completely different communication characteristics. They exemplify this using the social media platform Twitter, where messages can be disseminated very quickly through a large, highly connected network of users. The researchers set out to investigate how these characteristics affect cursing behaviors, by conducting an analysis involving around 14 million Twitter users and 51 million tweets. They formulated four research questions:

Q1 (Ubiquity): *How often do people use curse words on Twitter? What are the most frequently used curse words?*

Q2 (Utility): *Why do people use curse words on Twitter?*

Q3 (Contextual Variables): *Does the use of curse words depend on various contextual variables such as time (when to curse), location (where to curse), or communication type (how to curse)?*

Q4: *Who says curse words to whom on Twitter?*

Regarding the ubiquity aspect of Twitter cursing, researchers found that 7.73 percent of all the tweets in the dataset contained curse words, and that the seven most frequently occurring curse words accounted for over 90 percent of all occurrences. The two most common curse words were ‘fuck’ and ‘shit’, with ‘fuck’ accounting for 34.73 percent of all cursing occurrences and with ‘shit’ covering 15.04 percent of these. In terms of the utility question, it was found that cursing on Twitter was closely related to the emphasis of the negative emotions such as sadness and anger, but also to two positive emotions – joy and love. Further, it was concluded that Twitter users tend to practice self-censorship when talking directly to others but curse more in relaxed environments, when not talking directly to other users. Regarding the fourth research question, the authors found that both male and female users curse more in same-gender interactions, but that men generally curse more than women on Twitter.

2.4.4. Research on the effects of profane language

Vingerhoetz et al. (2013) conducted a study on profanity from a biopsychosocial perspective. They investigated why swearing occurs from individuals and what implications (both intra- and interpersonal functions) that follow from swearing, in social settings. The authors describe swearing as: “a form of linguistic activity utilizing taboo words to convey the expression of strong emotions”. From their work, the authors present a number of findings that can be used for future research.

Their interpersonal findings suggest that swearing can inhibit unwanted behavior from its audience, as well as have a negative influence on how positively one’s credibility and persuasiveness come across. However, Vingerhoetz et al. (2013) go on to explain that the perception of swearing is highly contingent on the situation in which it occurs – in an appropriate context, swearing can make a message more persuasive and credible,

as it expresses emotions that make the sender seem more genuine. At the same time, swearing can convey solidarity and enhance group binding. Swearing can also create an informal atmosphere and elicit humor. A negative result of swearing which cannot be ignored, is that too much swearing can lead to loss of image for the speaker and lessen the swearer's social support. Additionally, gender can influence a person's swearing behavior. Swearing has historically been seen as a masculine activity, but today women swear just as much, if not more, than men – contrastingly to what Wang et al. (2014) suggested. Profanity behavior is also influenced by personality; people with high scores on religiosity, sexual anxiety or repression, seem to swear less frequently. In contrast, people with antisocial personality swear more often. The authors highlight one of the key characteristics of swearing being its involvement in the expression of strong emotions. They also emphasize that contextual and personal factors help determine whether an emotion, which can be either positively or negatively appraised, is expressed through the use of curse words. Examples of such factors are; the relationship between the speaker and others in the social context, the formality of the situation, and the public or private nature of the situation.

Findings from the intra-individual functions reveal that swearing, through expressing intense emotions, help produce a catharsis effect. This effect entails that expressing negative emotions may infer tension reduction and aggressive drive reduction. The paper refers to a conducted study where 16 percent of a group of 200 students reported feelings of stress relief after a swearing episode (Vingerhoets et al, 2013).

Another possible effect triggered by swearing, can be found by studying MacKay et al's (2004) study. In their paper *Relations Between Emotion, Memory and Attention: Evidence From Taboo Stroop, Lexical Decisions, and Immediate Memory Tasks*, authors carried out experiments to demonstrate theoretically coherent effects of emotion on memory and attention. In one of their experiments, they argued that taboo words may have triggered surprise among participants, due to the fact that they, as undergraduates, do not normally encounter taboo words in university-sponsored experiments. Building upon this intuition, and by using Vingerhoets et al's (2013) definition of swear words as "a linguistic activity utilizing taboo words", it can be assumed that swear words might trigger surprise effects on the recipient of a message, if the word occurs in an unexpected and unnatural context.

2.4.5. Research on word stimuli

In their paper, *Affective Norms for English Words (ANEW): Instruction Manual and Affective Rankings*, authors Bradley & Lang (1999) conducted an experiment to showcase the affective stimuli different words have. The purpose of the study was to complement the existing research on picture and sound stimuli as well as provide standardized materials that are available to researchers in the study of emotion and attention. The authors originated from a dimensional view of emotion, namely that

emotion can be defined as a coincidence of values on a number of different strategic dimensions. These dimensions are pleasure, arousal and dominance. The experiment subjects were presented with words and rated them for each of the three dimensions. The results show that different words have different impacts on a reader's pleasure, arousal and dominance, thus triggering different emotions.

2.4.6. Research on feelings and judgment

In Pham's (2004) paper *The Logic of Feeling*, he discusses the feelings-as-information's role to judgment and decision making. He argues that the role of feelings may have a larger role in informing judgment and decision making than has previously been assumed in research studies. Pham (2004) presents the idea that there is a direction of attitudes and preferences (if I feel good about something, I must like it) and a strength of attitudes and preferences (the intensity of feelings). People use the valence of their feelings to infer the direction of their attitudes and preferences, and they use the intensity of these feelings to infer the strength of these attitudes and preferences. Thus, not only can feelings trigger attitudes, the feelings can also be amplified to further strengthen attitudes. Further, Pham (2004) posits three important judgmental properties for affective feelings: a) they generally allow for faster judgment to be made, b) they elicit strong interpersonal agreement, and c) they mobilize people's thoughts.

Another study aiming to help our understanding of how emotions come to influence our thinking and judgment, is carried out by Joseph P. Forgas (1995). In his paper *Mood and Judgment: The Affection Infusion Model*, Forgas examines evidence for the role of affective states in social judgements. In addition to this, Forgas (1995) introduces a complementary theory called the affection infusion model (AIM). As the name suggests, the model helps explain the links between affective states and their effects for our thinking and judgment. First, the model identifies different types of judgmental strategies; direct access, motivated, heuristic and substantive processing. Each of these are characterized by different affect infusion potentials. Additionally, AIM assumes that "affective states, although distinct from cognitive processes, do interact with and inform cognition and judgments by influencing the availability of cognitive constructs used in the constructive processing of information" (Forgas, 1995). The model shows that the extent to which affection colors judgments, varies along a processing continuum. Judgments of type heuristic and substantive processing are more likely to be infused, rather than direct access and motivated strategies.

2.5. Hypotheses

This study contributes to preceding research on the understanding of success criteria for film, taking into account the interconnectedness of the modern world as well as the increasingly explicit nature of the internet. In light of the literature, in an attempt to assess the aforementioned matters accurately, six hypotheses have been articulated:

H1a: A positively opinionated statement will have a more positive effect on the consumer's *attitude* towards the film than a negatively opinionated one.

H1b: A statement containing profanity will strengthen the positive effect of a positive opinion on the consumer's *attitude*.

H1c: A statement containing profanity will strengthen the negative effect of a negative opinion on the consumer's *attitude*.

H2a: A positively opinionated statement will have a more positive effect on the consumer's *purchase intention* towards the film than a negatively opinionated one.

H2b: A statement containing profanity will strengthen the positive effect of a positive opinion on the consumer's *purchase intention*.

H2c: A statement containing profanity will strengthen the negative effect of a negative opinion on the consumer's *purchase intention*.

3. Method

This section will provide insight into how the scientific approach was chosen, and why, as well as the configuration of the experiment design. Additionally, the development of stimuli conditions, variable development, data gathering and analysis as well as various limitations are discussed.

3.1. Scientific approach

The scientific approach of this study is based on the findings from previous literature, and thereby on the assumption that strongly opinionated profane language, that transpires within film related eWOM on the internet, can influence the levels of surprise, emotional arousal and perceived credibility among those exposed to it. In turn, this affects their attitudes and purchase intentions regarding the discussed film – possibly with differing results when expressed positively on one hand, and negatively on the other. In order to test the accuracy of the assumption, a deductive approach was adopted in the form of an experimental study, due to its capacity for implicating cause-effect relationships. Furthermore, as the study sets out to investigate the effects of profanity versus non-profanity in both negative and positive frames, a factorial 2x2 design was opted for. The quantitative data collection was designed in accordance with Salhin et al's (2016) recommendations.

3.2. Experiment design

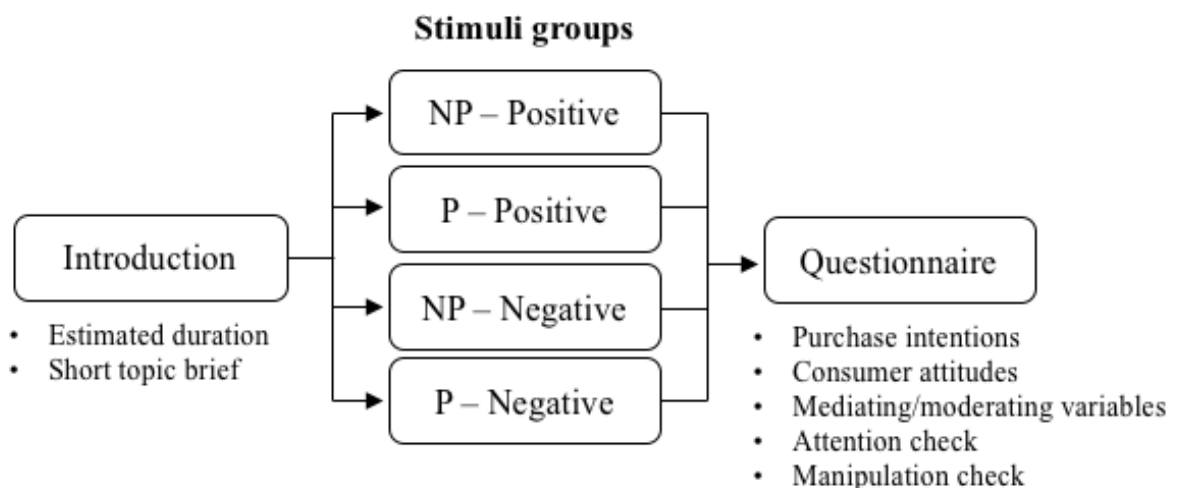


Figure 1. An illustration of the experimental design. The abbreviation *NP* denotes non-profanity while *P* denotes profanity, in positive and negative frames respectively.

The figure displayed above illustrates the general design of the conducted experiment. It was designed as a 2x2 factorial framework (see Figure 2), in which respondents were assigned randomly to the four different conditions. The four conditions each presented the same film but contained different stimuli in the accompanying review quote – the film was either presented in a positive or negative light, either with profane language or without profane language. Before being randomly assigned, and exposed, to one of the conditions, the respondents were presented with the same introductory text. The introduction welcomed the respondents, specified the estimated duration of the survey, and detailed the topic. It explained that the respondents were to be presented with a film poster, accompanied by a short quote from an online film review, on the next page. The text further clarified that the respondent would have to spend ten seconds on the aforementioned page before being able to proceed to the questions. The time delay was implemented in order to prolong stimuli exposure, minimizing the risk of people reading the text hastily or absent-mindedly. The questions that followed after the conditioned stimuli exposure were the same for all respondents and were predominantly presented in a seven-point Likert scale format (Joshi et al, 2015). The questions were designed to capture purchase intentions and consumer attitudes, but the survey also incorporated an attention-checking control question, a manipulation check and questions measuring mediating and moderating variables. See Appendix 2 for the full questionnaire.

3.3. Stimuli development

3.3.1. Delimitations

The film industry is a business in which eWOM has become a central source of information for potential moviegoers' decision-making (Duan et al, 2008). The art of film evokes emotions and opinions that people share across media, making it one of the most popular topics within the world of online word of mouth – review sites in particular (Yeath et al, 2014). At the same time, English dominates the internet. It is the most represented language online, covering approximately 59.1 percent of all websites on the World Wide Web (W3Techs, 2020). Russian, which is second in line, constitutes only 8.3 percent. Since most online communication is composed by the English language, and since film is a popular topic of discussion on the online scene, the authors decided to conduct the experiment in English – and structure the study around the product, or experience good, that is film.

The information that was presented to the survey respondents, in the form of a film poster picture and a review quote, was intended to simulate a situation in which a person is exposed to film related eWOM. The film *Tenet* was chosen since it hasn't been released yet. It has therefore not been seen by the general public, reducing the risk of potential biases – such as the mere-exposure effect (Zajonc, 1968). A preparatory

study that was conducted reinforced the assumption that the film would not be excessively familiar among respondents.

3.3.2. Language manipulation: profanity versus non-profanity

The purely linguistic stimuli differences were guided by Ofcom's (2016) ranking of swear words in order of offensiveness, where the word 'fuck' is regarded as one of the strongest profane terms, and 'shit' is considered to be of medium strength. In light of this, a profane film review statement was constructed, as well as a corresponding non-profane statement, containing words of similar strengths. For the non-profane statement, the word 'absolutely' is intended to correspond to 'fucking', and 'oh my god' is intended as the non-profane alternative to 'holy shit'. The remaining text was left unchanged between the stimuli groups, in order for the authors to be able to, more accurately, derive potential variations in the dependent variable from the linguistic manipulation.

3.3.3. Opinion manipulation: positive versus negative

The second manipulation was conducted in the form of the expressed opinion regarding the film – either positive or negative. In an attempt to eliminate any extraneous variables, in line with Paras D. Mehta's (2015) recommendations, the stimuli variation was kept at a minimum; the word 'loved' was interchanged with the word 'hated', and the word 'not' was added into the negatively charged film review quote. An overview of the different stimuli conditions is shown Figure 2 below. See Appendix 1 for more detailed representations of the different stimuli conditions.

Type of film review quote	Positive	Negative
Non-profane	I absolutely loved this movie. Oh my god, you should definitely go see it!	I absolutely hated this movie. Oh my god, you should definitely not go see it!
Profane	I fucking loved this movie. Holy shit, you should definitely go see it!	I fucking hated this movie. Holy shit, you should definitely not go see it!

Figure 2. An overview of the different review quotes for the stimuli groups

3.4. Variables

3.4.1. Dependent variables

The dependent variables within this experiment are intended to illustrate potential consumers' demand for a film. More specifically, the dependent variables measure **consumer attitudes** and **purchase intentions** towards the film at hand. A significant share of previous research on film has used box office as a measure of demand, i.e. the aggregate revenue from ticket sales. However, it has been found that box office revenue is heavily influenced by budgets and marketing expenditures, giving large film studios significant advantages over smaller ones (Gunter, 2018). As the present authors aim to investigate the effects of varying linguistic forms of eWOM, rather than film studios' own promotional efforts, the dependent variables are confined to consumer attitudes and purchase intentions as measures of demand.

3.4.2. Independent variables

In this study, two independent categorical variables have been selected. The authors have decided on these in advance, in order to reduce the risk of p-hacking as defined by Head et al. (2015). The selected independent variables are:

- Linguistic choice, in terms of **profanity** or **non-profanity**
- Expressed opinion, in terms of **positive** or **negative**

3.4.2.1. Linguistic choice

It is clear that profane language is becoming increasingly present in various online settings, such as discussion forums and social media. Simultaneously, these kinds of discussions, and the word-of-mouth they entail, are becoming stronger predictors of general demand for film, as described by Ts and Nair (2016). The present authors find it interesting to investigate how the cathartic effect of swearing (Vingerhoetz et al, 2013), along with the affective norms of these words (Bradley & Lang, 1999) can influence the film related judgments and feelings of those who are exposed to it – through the stimuli's effect on the factors of emotional arousal, the feeling of surprise and perceived credibility of the sender.

To measure the effects of this linguistic choice – profanity or non-profanity – on film attitudes and purchase intentions, the present authors incorporate various measurements of directly related questions, as well as of the aforementioned mediators into the survey disposition. The questions are designed in 7-point Likert scale format, in line with basic teachings from psychometrics theory (Joshi et al, 2015).

3.4.2.2. Expressed opinion

Similar to the use of profane language, the possibility for expressing opinions is heavily facilitated due to the recent decade's internet expansion. And as Ts and Nair (2016) explain, eWOM is defined as any positive or negative statement made by former, potential and current customers in regard to a product, or similar, via the internet. Further, Wang et al. (2014) found that cursing on Twitter, for example, was closely related to the emphasis of the negative emotions sadness and anger, but also to positive emotions like joy and love. However, Vingerhoetz et al. (2013) highlight the fact that emotions arising as a result of profanity are contingent on contextual factors, such as whether the subject of discussion is positively or negatively appraised by the sender. Therefore, the present authors seek to explore how the expressed opinions within film related eWOM might affect attitudes and purchase intentions as well, and how this interplays with the linguistic choices of senders.

3.4.3. Mediating variables

As the present authors aim to contribute to, and interconnect, theories of word stimuli, profanity and film eWOM, it is of high interest to assess the independent variables' effects on mediators⁴ that intervene between the stimuli and the response – as defined by Baron & Kenny (1986). The investigated mediators have been narrowed down to emotional arousal, feeling of surprise and perceived credibility of the sender.

The discussed literature indicates that profane language in film related eWOM could have potential implications for the experience of the aforementioned mediating factors. Furthermore, theory on the effects of affective states on judgment and thought mobilization indicates that the mediators could have implications on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. Therefore, questions concerning these mediators have been incorporated into the questionnaire, along with the questions that aim to directly capture the effects on the dependent variables.

3.4.4. Moderating variables

The present authors have decided to include two different measures of moderating variables into the questionnaires. Firstly, the respondents' familiarity with the presented film has been taken into account. It is likely that a person who has extensive preconceived knowledge about the film is less susceptible of the manipulation than others. The mere-exposure effect, for example, holds that individuals tend to develop preferences for things they are familiar with (Zajonc, 1968). Further, the authors have incorporated a measure of gender identification, to capture potential moderating effects

⁴ Similar analyses on mediation have previously received critique for being overly simplified (Fiedler et al, 2011).

⁵ Similar analyses on moderation have previously received critique for being overly simplified (Memon et al, 2019).

that this variable might have on the variation in consumer attitude and purchase intention effects. The conflicting implications found in literature findings on gender-based swearing tendencies, makes this measure an interesting subject of analysis (Wang et al, 2014; Vingerhoetz et al, 2013).

3.5. Data

3.5.1. Measurements

This section provides insight as to how the different variables were measured within the questionnaire. A more detailed presentation of these measurements can be found in the questionnaire in Appendix 2. The questions pertaining to each variable were:

Dependent variables

Consumer attitude

- How intrigued are you by the presented film?
 - *Not at all (1) – Very intrigued (7)*
- My general impression of the film is:
 - *Bad (1) – Good (7)*
 - *Negative (1) – Positive (7)*
 - *Boring (1) – Fascinating (7)*
 - *Uninteresting (1) – Interesting (7)*

Purchase intentions

- How willing are you to see the film?
 - *Not at all (1) – Very willing (7)*
- To what extent do you agree with the following statement?
 - I want to see this film
 - *Strongly disagree (1) – Strongly agree (7)*
 - I want to learn more about this film
 - *Strongly disagree (1) – Strongly agree (7)*

Mediating variables

Surprise

- To what extent do you agree with the following statement?
 - I feel surprised
 - *Strongly disagree (1) – Strongly agree (7)*
 - I feel shocked
 - *Strongly disagree (1) – Strongly agree (7)*
 - I feel astonished
 - *Strongly disagree (1) – Strongly agree (7)*

Emotional arousal

- To what extent do you agree with the following statement?
 - I feel emotional
 - *Strongly disagree (1) – Strongly agree (7)*
- I now feel:
 - *Bad (1) – Good (7)*
 - *Negative (1) – Positive (7)*
 - *Sad (1) – Happy (7)*
 - *Offended (1) – Pleased (7)*
- I find the film review:
 - *Negative (1) – Positive (7)*
 - *Cold (1) – Emotional (7)*

Perceived credibility

- I find the film review:
 - *Unconvincing (1) – Convincing (7)*
 - *Unreliable (1) – Reliable (7)*
 - *False (1) – Authentic (7)*

Moderating variables

Familiarity

- How familiar are you with the presented film?
 - *Not at all (1) – Very familiar (7)*

Gender identification

- I identify as
 - *Male/Female/Other*

3.5.2. Distribution and sampling

The final version of the questionnaire was distributed via Qualtrics (2020) on the 23rd of March 2020, when it was published on the present authors' respective Facebook profiles. In that sense, the authors opted for convenience sampling. The questionnaire was also published in Facebook groups, on the 25th, that function as platforms in which students help each other with data collection, by responding to surveys.

The questionnaire was shared along with a text that provided people with a short description of our request, as well as an incentive in the form of a 250 SEK gift card on the Swedish online grocery shopping service, Mathem.

3.5.3. Data pre-processing

On the 15th of April, when the data pre-processing was performed, the questionnaire had received a total of 269 responses with varying completion progresses. The present authors decided to set the cut-off progress percentage at 75 percent – due to the fact that

many of these responses had been answered sufficiently for analysis. The progress cut-off resulted in 3 responses being filtered out, leaving 266 responses.

The next step was to further control the validity of these responses, by investigating whether the respondents had answered the control question correctly. This question was placed at the very end of the questionnaire and was articulated as follows: “This survey is about:”, where ‘film’ was the correct alternative. It turned out that 164 of the remaining 266 respondents had answered correctly, which eliminated an additional 102 respondents. This was a very high number of incorrectly answered control questions – largely as a result of the fact that many of them had simply not gotten to that point in the survey due to incomplete progress. Out of the 164 remaining respondents, 28 people incorrectly answered the manipulation checks. This forced the authors to disregard their responses from investigation, as their inclusion would have had negative implications for the validity of the findings. Thereby, 136 respondents were deemed valid for analysis, constituting the final data set.

The next step in the process was to produce clear and reliable measurements for each of the five variables; felt surprise, emotional arousal, perceived credibility, consumer attitude and purchase intention. The aggregate measurement for each variable was derived by calculating the mean value of all measured scores pertaining to one variable. For example, the mean of the three questions regarding felt surprise, was calculated and computed into a new variable. The same process was carried out for the remaining variables. These aggregated, solidified variables then functioned as the basis for analysis.

3.5.4. Analysis of data

The program used to perform analysis of collected data was SPSS. A two-way ANOVA test was conducted to measure the direct effects between the independent and dependent variables, in accordance to Lærd Statistics’ (2020) guidelines.

In order to verify whether there exist causal effects between variables, through indirect mediating effects, a mediation analysis was carried out. The analysis followed Zhao et al.’s (2010) approaches for establishing mediation effects, which is an extension of Baron and Kenny’s (1986) earlier work on mediation criteria. As Zhao et al. (2010) suggest, the Preacher and Hayes macro, model 4, was used to conduct the test.

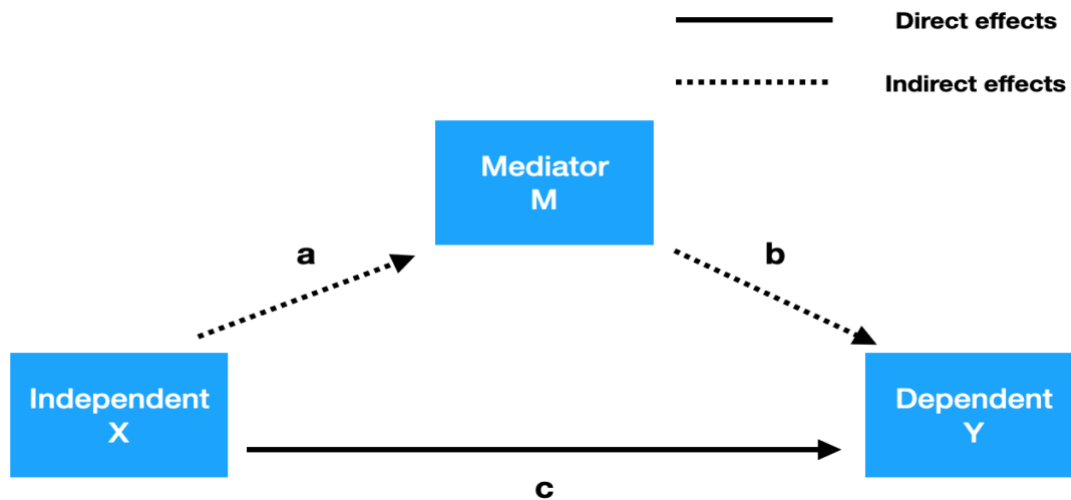


Figure 3. A three-variable non-recursive causal model

Furthermore, to establish potential types of mediation, the decision tree provided in Zhao et al's (2010) study was used (see Appendix 3).

In order to test interaction, or moderator effects, a moderation analysis was performed. This test was also made through the Preacher and Hayes macro, but model 2 was applied. This model allowed for two independent moderators to be tested of their respective interaction effect.

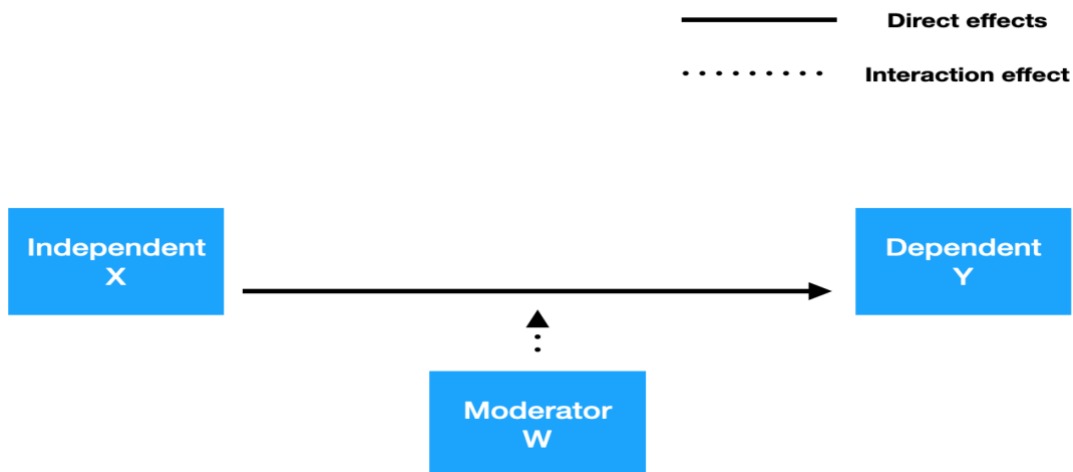


Figure 4. A two-variable causal model, with interaction effect

3.6. Limitations

3.6.1. Validity

Validity, according to Bryman & Bell (2011), is concerned with the integrity of the conclusions that are drawn from a subject of research. Measurement validity shines light on the question of whether the generated measures actually reflect the concept that they are intended to denote, which is of high importance for this study. Preconceived notions about films are potentially interfering factors that can derail or disable clear conclusions about the actual effects of the manipulation. However, measures were taken to avoid this kind of bias when the survey respondents were asked to share their personal familiarity with the presented film.

Another potential disturbance could be that respondents do not pay much attention to the review quote, resulting in insufficient exposure to the linguistic manipulation. The respondents' lack of manipulation exposure would render the questionnaire results rather powerless, which is why manipulation checks were implemented at the end of the questionnaire. The point of this was to make sure that the respondents knew what they had been conditioned with. Further, respondents were required to spend ten seconds on the page containing the manipulation, before being able to proceed to the questions. However, it is fair to assume that a certain number of respondents filled it in rather hastily or carelessly, while still managing to remember the correct answers in the manipulation checks.

As for the poster, one might argue that it, in addition to being quite eye catching in general, contained visual elements that might carry a certain symbolic value due to the COVID-19 pandemic that takes place as this thesis is being written. The poster, which was selected prior to the large outbreak of the aforementioned coronavirus, presents a picture of a man wearing a protective face mask in a setting that is reminiscent of an apocalyptic world. The present authors assume that a portion of the respondents have been exposed to the stimuli without being conditioned by the knowledge of the current pandemic, while others might have been affected by it – potentially making them more averse to the presented film.

Furthermore, the study aims to reconstruct a quite specific eWOM scenario but might not succeed in making it feel entirely natural to respondents. In addition to this, the base of respondents might not be representative of the larger online population that is the main subject of interest for this study, due to the present authors' limited data gathering possibilities.

3.6.2. Reliability

The previous paragraph illustrates a problem that might affect the experiment's reliability as well, which is concerned with the question of whether or not the generated

results from a study are repeatable and whether the measures are consistent (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The fact that the respondent population, to a large extent, is constituted by individuals who have a personal connection to the authors, and where many have Swedish as their native language, could reduce the reliability and replicability of the experiment – this type of convenience sampling risks making the findings insufficiently underpinned for large-scale generalizability.

The linguistic manipulation choices in terms of profanity, and non-profanity, are other factors that could potentially interfere with the significance of the findings. The non-profane adverb alternative ‘absolutely’ was transformed into ‘fucking’ in the profane version of the review quote. Unless these words carry similar weights in terms of expressive power, disregarding the fact that one of them is a curse word, the results might be skewed. Further research on word stimuli would have to be conducted in order to achieve perfectly corresponding linguistic conditions, making the study more replicable.

As for the measurements of the effects on the dependent variables, and on the different mediators, it is fair to assume that there is risk for false positive errors – finding statistical significance in variables that in fact hold no explanatory value. The more variables, the higher the risk of these issues. However, the present authors have made sure to design the survey questions in a fashion that aims to capture all effects more than once – thus reducing the risk of falsely identifying variables as explanatory with statistical significance. For example, the survey included three different questions regarding the respondents’ felt level of surprise, to ensure capturing an accurate level of felt surprise. In order to further reduce the risk of type 1 error, the statistical significance level has been set relatively low – at 5 percent.

4. Empirical results

4.1. Consumer attitude

4.1.1. Direct effects

Table 1. Overview of measured *consumer attitude* means towards presented film

Dependent variable: **Consumer attitude**

Opinion	Profanity	Mean	σ	N
Positive	No	4.18	1.64	30
	Yes	4.30	1.43	32
	Total	4.24	1.52	62
Negative	No	3.50	1.15	42
	Yes	3.74	1.40	32
	Total	3.60	1.26	74
Total	No	3.78	1.41	72
	Yes	4.02	1.43	64
	Total	3.89	1.42	136

Table 2. Overview of two-way ANOVA analysis on *consumer attitude*

Dependent variable: **Consumer attitude**

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	15.13	3	5.04	2.60	0.06
Intercept	2065.20	1	2065.20	1064.51	0.00
Expressed opinion	12.87	1	12.87	6.64	0.01
Profanity	1.14	1	1.14	0.59	0.45
Expressed opinion * Profanity	0.14	1	0.14	0.07	0.79
Error	256.07	132	1.94		
Total	2333.52	136			
Corrected Total	271,195	135			

R Squared = 0.06 (Adjusted R Squared = 0,03)

From these results, a few conclusions can be made – based on the p-values and a significance level set at 0.05. The p-value for *expressed opinion* is 0.01 which indicates that the expressed opinion has a statistically significant effect on *consumer attitude* towards the film. Using the means table (Table 1) to identify group differences, it is evident that a positively expressed opinion about the film leads to a higher average consumer attitude score (4.24 in total) compared to a negatively expressed opinion – which showed a lower average consumer attitude score (3.60 in total). Thus, the hypothesis H1a can be confirmed.

Further, Table 1 shows that there are differences in consumer attitudes between stimuli groups that were conditioned with profane language, and those who were not. The profane stimuli groups seem to demonstrate more positive attitudes, regardless if the opinion is negatively or positively oriented. However, the ANOVA analysis clarifies that there is no statistical significance for these effects. The p-value for *profanity* is 0.45 which indicates that the occurrence of profanity does not have an effect on consumer attitude. In light of this, the hypotheses H1b and H1c can be discarded.

The p-value for the interaction between *expressed opinion*profanity* is 0.790 which indicates that the relationship between *expressed opinion* and *consumer attitude* does not depend on *profanity*. Thus, the main effects of the respective independent variable can be interpreted without considering the interaction effect. Further, the predictors explain 5,6 percent of the variation in the consumer attitude variable which is relatively low, yet still provides sufficient explanatory value.

4.1.2. Mediation effects

The statistically significant direct effect of *expressed opinion* on *consumer attitude* renders a mediator analysis to be carried out. This, to determine whether there exist mediating variables that infer an indirect effect on the relationship between the independent and dependent variable. Using the bootstrap approach (model 4) implemented by Preacher and Hayes (Zhao et al, 2010), to test the indirect effects, the following results were attained:

Table 3. Overview of mediators' effects on the relationship between *expressed opinion* and *consumer attitude*

Direct and indirect effects

Direct effect of X on Y:					
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
-0.27	0.24	-1.13	0.26	-0.73	0.20
Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:					
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI	
Total	-0.37	0.16	-0.69	-0.06	
Felt surprise	0.04	0.05	-0.04	0.17	

Emotional arousal	-0.36	0.13	-0.64	-0.14
Perceived credibility	-0.05	0.08	-0.21	0.12

As Zhao et al. (2010) suggest, the decision rule is that if the 95 percent confidence interval does not include the value zero (0) in its range, the indirect effect is significant, and mediation is confirmed. Observing the table above, the following can be concluded. The confidence interval for *felt surprise* is (-0.04; 0.17), thus this variable is not considered a valid mediator. The confidence interval span for *emotional arousal* as a mediator is (-0.64; -0.14), confirming an indirect effect. Emotional arousal thus serves as a valid mediator. The lower and upper confidence interval limits for *perceived credibility* is (-0.21; 0.12), showing no support for indirect effect.

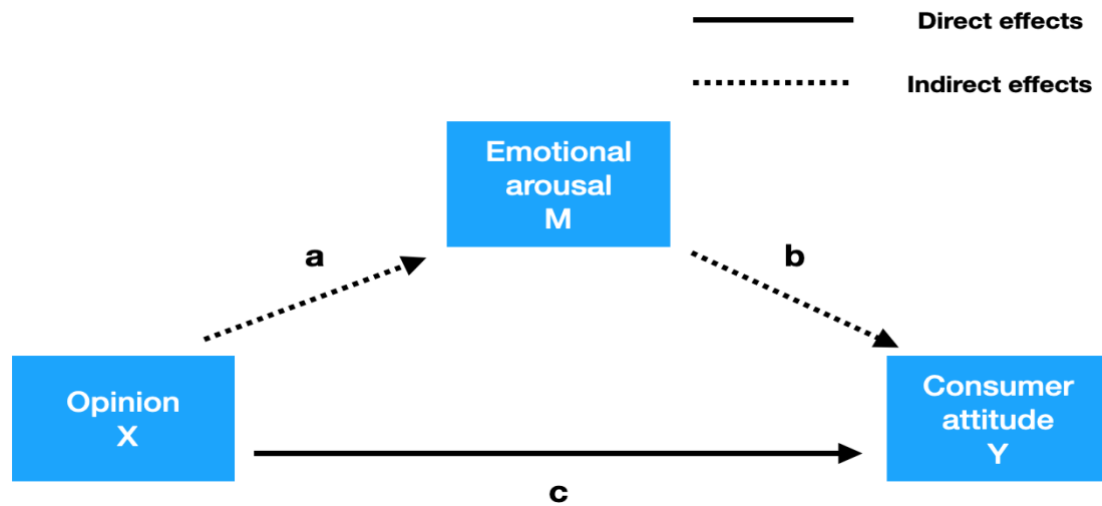


Figure 5. An illustration of the mediating effect of *emotional arousal* between *expressed opinion* and *consumer attitude*

Considering *emotional arousal* being an established mediator, further analysis of the X-M-Y relationship is taken. Again, bootstrap test model 4 was applied with *emotional arousal* being the single mediator. The following result was attained:

Table 4. Overview of the mediating effects of *emotional arousal* between *expressed opinion* and *consumer attitude*

Direct and indirect effects

Direct effect of X on Y:					
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
-0.20	0.23	-0.89	0.38	-0.66	0.25
Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:					
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI	
Emotional arousal	-0.43	0.13	-0.71	-0.20	

Bootstrap results for regression model parameters

Outcome variable: Emotional arousal

	Coeff	BootMean	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Constant	5.05	5.05	0.30	4.45	5.61
Expressed opinion	-0.71	-0.71	0.17	-1.04	-0.37

Outcome variable: Consumer attitude

	Coeff	BootMean	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Constant	1.80	1.81	0.61	4.65	3.08
Expressed opinion	-0.20	-0.21	0.22	-0.63	0.21
Emotional arousal	0.61	0.61	0.12	0.37	0.84

From Table 4, the authors find that the mean indirect effect from the bootstrap analysis is negative and significant ($a \times b = -0.71 \times 0.61 = -0.43$), with a 95 percent confidence interval excluding zero (-0.71; -0.20). Keep in mind, that for the variable *expressed opinion*, positive was coded as [1], and negative was coded as [2]. Thus, for the indirect path, a unit increase in *expressed opinion*, meaning a movement towards a more negatively expressed opinion, decreases *emotional arousal* by $a = 0.71$ units; $b = 0.61$, so holding constant *expressed opinion*, a unit increase in *emotional arousal* increases *consumer attitude* by 0.61 units on a 0 to 1 scale. The direct effect $c = -0.20$ produced in the bootstrap test is not significant $\{p = 0.38\}$. The direct effect coefficient would imply that, holding *emotional arousal* constant, a unit increase in *expressed opinion* (moving towards negative expressed opinion) decreases *consumer attitude* by 0.20. However, this coefficient is not significant.

One factor to observe here is that the direct effect X-Y between *expressed opinion* and *consumer attitude* was statistically supported through the ANOVA test, which did not take any mediators into consideration. However, when analyzing the same causal effect through the bootstrap test, which takes mediators into account, the direct effect is not significant. The interpretation of this seemingly contradictory finding is that the direct effect between *expressed opinion* and *consumer attitude* is predominantly mediated.

By using the decision tree found in Zhao et al's (2010) article, for establishing and understanding types of mediation and non-mediation, it can be concluded that, through a bootstrap test, ($a \times b$) is significant, but c is not significant. Thus, *emotional arousal* constitutes an indirect-only mediator.

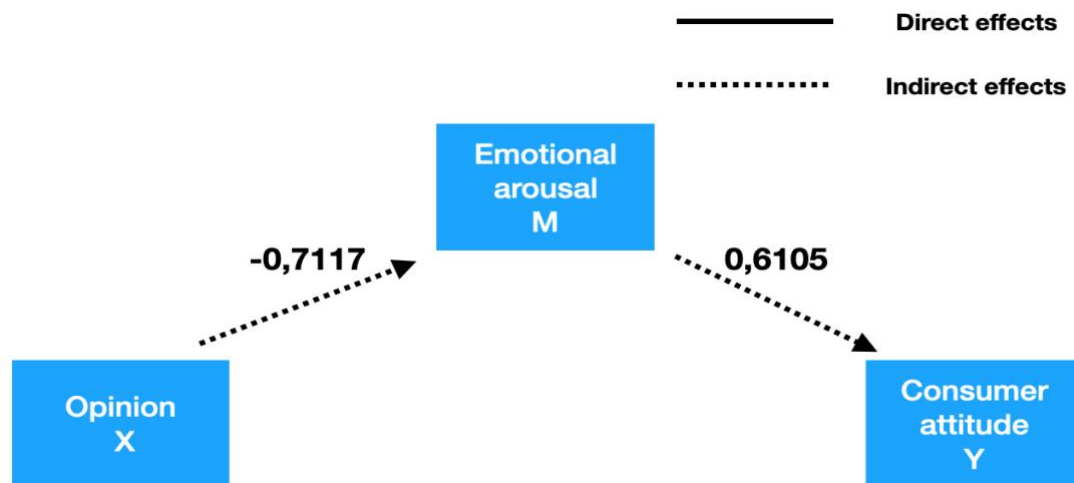


Figure 6. Illustration of *emotional arousal* as an indirect-only mediator between *expressed opinion* and *consumer attitude*

Descriptive statistics for *expressed opinion*, *consumer attitude* and the mediating variables are presented in Table 5 below. Correlations, means and standard deviations are listed between the variables.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics and correlations for mediating variables, *expressed opinion* and *consumer attitude*

Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	σ	N
Expressed opinion	1.54	0.50	136
Consumer attitude	3.89	1.42	136
Perceived credibility	3.81	1.22	136
Emotional Arousal	3.95	1.03	136
Felt surprise	3.59	1.55	136

Correlations

		Opinion	Attitude	Credibility	Emotional	Surprise
Opinion	Pearson correlation	1	-0.23	-0.26	-0.34	0.09
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.01	0.00	0.00	0.28
	N	136	136	136	136	136
Attitude	Pearson correlation	-0.23	1	0.24	0.47	0.26
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.01		0.01	0.00	0.00

Credibility	N	136	136	136	136	136
	Pearson correlation	-0.26	0.24	1	0.34	0.08
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00	0.01		0.00	0.34
	N	136	136	136	136	136
Emotional	Pearson correlation	-0.34	0.47	0.34	1	0.25
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00	0.00	0.00		0.00
	N	136	136	136	136	136
Surprise	Pearson correlation	0.09	0.26	0.08	0.25	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.29	0.00	0.34	0.00	
	N	136	136	136	136	136

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.1.3. Moderation effects

The fact that the two-way ANOVA test resulted in a significant direct effect between *expressed opinion* and *consumer attitude*, when disregarding mediators, inspired a moderation analysis on the relationship between the independent and dependent variable. The moderation analysis includes two independent moderators; *gender identification* and *film familiarity* Preacher and Hayes' (Zhao et al, 2010) process macro (model 2) is used to conduct the test.

Table 6. Overview of moderating effects on the direct relationship between *expressed opinion* and *consumer attitude*

Outcome variable: Consumer attitude

Model Summary						
R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
0,4532	0.21	1.66	6.72	5.00	130.00	.00
Model						
	Coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	4.74	1.40	3.38	0.00	1.97	7.51
Expressed opinion	-0.84	0.83	-1.01	0.31	-2.49	0.80
Gender identification	-0.51	0.77	-0.66	0.51	-2.02	1.01
Int_1	0.27	0.46	0.59	0.56	-0.65	1.19
Film familiarity	0.53	0.25	2.08	0.04	0.03	1.03
Int_2	-0.11	0.16	-0.70	0.48	-0.43	0.20

Product terms key:

Int_1 = Expressed opinion x Gender identification

Int_2 = Expressed opinion x Film familiarity

Test(s) of higher order unconditional interaction(s):

	R2-chng	F	df1	df2	p
X*W	0.00	0.35	1.00	130.00	0.56
X*Z	0.00	0.49	1.00	130.00	0.48
BOTH	0.01	0.56	2.00	130.00	0.57

Using the output presented in Table 6, our analysis, with a 95 percent confidence interval, shows no significant moderation effect for neither *gender identification* nor *film familiarity*. This conclusion is made as none of the interaction effects showed a significant ($p < 0,05$) change in R^2 . None of the interaction effects between *expressed opinion* and the two moderating variables produced significant outcomes.

Table 7 below illustrates descriptive statistics and correlations for the moderating variables as well as *expressed opinion* and *consumer attitude*.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics and correlations for moderating variables, *expressed opinion* and *consumer attitude*

Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	σ	N
Expressed opinion	1.54	0.50	136
Consumer attitude	3.89	1.42	136
Gender identification	1.48	0.50	136
Film Familiarity	1.64	1.44	136

Correlations

		Opinion	Attitude	Gender	Familiarity
Opinion	Pearson correlation	1	-0.23	-0.07	-0.02
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.01	0.42	0.78
	N	136	136	136	136
Attitude	Pearson correlation	-0.23	1	-0.11	0.39
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.01		0.20	0.00
	N	136	136	136	136
Gender	Pearson correlation	-0.07	-0,11	1	-0.24
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.42	0.20		0.01
	N	136	136	136	136
Familiarity	Pearson correlation	-0.02	0.39	-0.24	1

correlation				
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.78	0.00	0.01	
N	136	136	136	136

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.2. Purchase intention

Table 8. Overview of measured *purchase intention* means towards presented film

Dependent variable: **Purchase intention**

Opinion	Profanity	Mean	σ	N
Positive	No	4.08	1.88	30
	Yes	4.47	1.71	32
	Total	4.28	1.79	62
Negative	No	3.90	1.47	42
	Yes	3.89	1.47	32
	Total	3.89	1.46	74
Total	No	3.97	1.64	72
	Yes	4.18	1.61	64
	Total	4.07	1.62	136

Table 9. Overview of two-way ANOVA analysis on *purchase intention*

Dependent variable: **Purchase intention**

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	7.44	3	2.48	0.94	0.42
Intercept	2228.54	1	2228.54	844.96	0.00
Expressed opinion	4.88	1	4.88	1.85	0.18
Profanity	1.20	1	1.20	0.46	0.50
Expressed opinion * Profanity	1.35	1	1.35	0.513	0.48
Error	348.14	132	2.64		
Total	2606.89	136			
Corrected Total	355.58	135			

R Squared = 0,021 (Adjusted R Squared = 0,002)

The analysis regarding the other dependent variable, *purchase intention*, also applied a significance level of 0.05 and the p-values from the associated ANOVA table (Table 9) were studied to draw conclusions. The table clearly illustrates that no statistically significant conclusions can be drawn about the independent variables' effect on purchase intention in regard to the film. This is evident by looking at their respective p-values, where *expressed opinion* obtains 0.18 and *profanity* obtains 0.50. The interaction effect *expressed opinion*profanity* is 0.48 which indicates that the relationship between *expressed opinion* and *purchase intention* does not depend on *profanity*.

Looking at Table 8, it seems like profanity influences the strength of purchase intentions for positively expressed reviews (mean score of 4.08 for no profanity, versus 4.47 with profanity), but no influence on negatively expressed reviews (mean score of 3.90 for no profanity, versus 3.89 with profanity). This indicates that positively expressed profanity might be more potent than negatively expressed profanity in affecting purchase intentions. However, as concluded previously, there is no statistical support for this observation.

Due to there not being any statistically significant direct effects between the independent variables and *purchase intention*, no mediation analysis is carried out. Since neither the *expressed opinion*, nor *profanity*, have any significant effects on purchase intention, any analysis of mediating effects is negligible. The hypotheses H2a, H2b and H2c are all discarded.

5. Discussion

In this section, the present authors will discuss how the findings can be supported by existing literature. The authors will further add their own thoughts to the produced outcomes and contemplate the results' implications for the film industry as a whole – but also how they, potentially, could contribute to filling research voids on the literature on which this study is based on. Additionally, in cases where discord between results and literature exists, the authors will suggest areas for future research in order to provide explanatory value to the disharmony.

5.1. Thoughts on the findings

The results show that the expressed opinion has a significant effect on consumer attitude towards the film. A more positive opinion statement about the film indicates a higher consumer attitude. This is arguably a quite expected result – hearing positive things about something likely makes one perceive that thing more favorably, than something one hears negative things about. When Pham (2004) discusses the feelings-as-information's role to judgment, he says that attitudes have a direction, and that this direction can be manipulated. The opinionated statements could be seen as a way to create and manipulate the direction of readers' attitudes towards presented film; hence, their attitudes point in the same direction as the statement infers. This helps to understand the causal effect finding from a literature perspective. From a business-related film perspective, this finding indicates that positive review quotes on film posters, and within other marketing channels, are justified as useful tools for improving potential consumers' attitudes towards the film. Furthermore, the findings justify that eWOM is an area which film creators should aim to understand, take into consideration and adapt to, in their communication efforts.

Further, Pham (2004) argues that this attitude direction is largely due to the amplified feelings that the statements invoke on readers. The results attained in this study indeed found emotional arousal to be a significant mediator in the relationship between expressed opinion and consumer attitude. More specifically, emotional arousal was found to be an indirect-only mediator. The positively opinionated review quotes seem to successfully evoke positive feelings among the respondents, and thereby positive attitudes towards the film. Conversely, negatively opinionated statements had the opposite effect. With this in background, it could be argued that emotional argumentation is an impactful aspect of film related eWOM. Thus, emotional emphasis in marketing communication regarding film, in general, should not be put aside. It would be interesting to compare and contrast the effects between emotional and informational messaging on consumer attitudes, in future research on film marketing.

When investigating potential moderating effects on the relationship between expressed opinion and consumer attitude, neither film familiarity nor gender identification proved significant. In that sense, no clear conclusions can be made regarding these effects. The present authors noticed that the overall film familiarity measure was relatively low, with a few exceptions. This could probably be explained by the fact that the film is unreleased, and therein unavailable, for the general public. In a way, this is exactly what was intended – as the authors aimed to eliminate potential mere exposure biases; but at the same time, it might have rendered the familiarity measures unnecessarily skewed. It is not impossible that another film, with larger response variance, would have provided different results. A more extensive study, containing multiple films with varying levels of public awareness, could be useful in determining the potential moderating effect of the familiarity measure.

An interesting non-finding was that profanity showed no significant effect on consumer attitude. Given Pham's (2004) argument that feelings and attitudes can be amplified, and Vingerhoetz's (2013) description of swearing as an activity to express strong emotions, one would expect profanity to have an impact on consumer attitude. At the same time, Jay & Jay (2013) states that profane words are becoming increasingly common in our everyday vocabularies, and people's way of speaking changes with time (Cressman et al, 2009). It is possible that the respondents, in this time and age, are so used to the occurrence of strongly opinionated and profane eWOM, that its powerful and taboo nature has been inflated. As Bergen (2016) claims, profanity is a cultural construct which perpetuates itself through time. As profanity has more leeway on the internet today, and is less likely to be censored, it is probable that this construct has weakened. In case that is true, this paper could be considered a contributor to the realization of the fact that people are becoming increasingly numb and impervious to the effects of online profanity. However, Table 3 interestingly, although insignificantly, illustrates that mean attitude scores seemed to be higher among those exposed to profane statements, regardless if the opinion was positively or negatively oriented. In that sense, profanity might not be entirely inflated after all. In light of this, it might be of interest for future researchers on the subject to more deeply and accurately assess the actual reactions that arise due to profanity in today's online climate.

Also, the indication that profanity tends to raise general consumer attitude scores, motivates further research to be conducted on the effects of profanity in market communication. When conducting similar research, the authors suggest including social and ethical perspectives on the implications of such positive findings, which are not treated in this thesis. If marketing decision makers hypothetically possessed knowledge that consumer attitudes benefit from profanity usage, it could be controversial to apply it from a social responsibility perspective. It is likely that film creators' own promotional communication would steer the general theme of public word of mouth – and be spread across the internet. The explicit nature of eWOM, and its large reach, would thus limit the control that film creators have regarding their target segments, and

possibly result in children being exposed to inappropriate profanity. This is arguably problematic. Despite its expanded presence in daily conversations and online settings, could profanity really function as a viable marketing tool? After all, we live in a digital and modernized world where parents have a difficult time controlling what their children are exposed to on the internet. Is it really up to marketing communicators to single-handedly decide if it is worth the risks?

While researching how profanity affects consumer attitudes, one should also take into consideration what such findings might implicate for the film communicator's image, since Vingerhoetz et al. (2013) stated that too much swearing can lead to loss of image for the sender and weaken its social support. This would conflictingly imply that excessive use of profanity in marketing communication could lead to poorer consumer attitudes.

Neither the expressed opinion nor profanity had any significant effects on purchase intention. Taillard's (2001) logic could be an explanatory factor as to why the presented stimuli conditions failed to evoke purchase intentions among respondents. She suggests that it is possible for a recipient to understand the meaning behind a message, without actually adopting its idea or proposed behavior. This is because the two processes are active in the human brain when absorbing a message, and the fulfillment of the former is a prerequisite for the latter. In other words, it is possible for an individual to understand the appeal of a film without actually developing an intention to see it. However, it is possible that the outcomes would be different if the experiment groups were exposed to the stimuli conditions repeatedly, in order to give the processes more time to develop. Another idea could be to articulate the review quotes inside the stimuli conditions differently. These could be relevant areas of investigation for future research.

5.2. The study's shortcomings

One important question that the authors need to ask themselves is how the substantial elimination of respondents during the data pre-processing stage affects the quality of the findings. Several respondents were completely excluded from analysis due to insufficient completion progress or failure to correctly answer the control question. It might have been interesting, or even important, to analyze these responses separately in order to gain additional understanding for the quality of our used data set.

Another potential shortcoming could be traced to the presented stimuli, namely the statement and the poster. It is fair to assume that it does not accurately reflect a realistic eWOM setting in the eyes of the respondents, and thus fails to deliver valid or reliable results. Future research on the subject should actively aim to construct natural stimuli settings that remind respondents of real, film related eWOM scenarios in which they might find themselves on the internet. For example, respondents might normally reside on social media such as Twitter when retrieving information about film online.

Further, it is worth mentioning that all of the mean value measurements of consumer attitude and purchase intention placed between 3.5 and 4.5. This interval constitutes a rather central position on the 7-point Likert scale. The fact that the mean values are so centralized is arguably a factor that renders the results quite insipid. Future research on the subject should focus more deeply on conducting and analyzing pre-studies with varying questions in order to identify the measurements that best capture the intended effects.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to increase the understanding for how profanity and opinionated language in electronic word-of-mouth affect consumers' general purchase intentions and attitudes towards film. The authors conclude that there is a direct effect between expressed opinion and consumer attitude, when no mediators are taken into consideration. When mediators are taken into account, emotional arousal posits an indirect-only mediator on the relationship between expressed opinion and consumer attitude. The positively opinionated eWOM successfully evokes the experience of positive emotions, which in turn leads to a more positive consumer attitude. The opposite relationship is true for negatively opinionated eWOM.

The practical implications from the thesis' findings suggest that eWOM is a valuable media channel for film marketers in terms of assessing consumers' preferences regarding a film. By doing so, the film industry can understand and try to mitigate risks that are otherwise a normality in the film industry. The results further suggest that emotional arguments should be emphasized in film creators' own communication efforts, although the authors propose that this should be researched further by comparing and contrasting against informational arguments.

Additional suggestions for future research include further investigation of the indications that profanity displayed towards a general increase in consumer attitudes, although insignificant. An important aspect to consider in such research would be the social and ethical implications that potential findings could entail, with focus on the uncontrollable nature of the internet and on the fact that unsuitable recipients could be inappropriately exposed to profanity as a consequence. Furthermore, authors suggest that extended research should be carried out to study the potentially inflated effects of profanity usage. Thereto, the authors acknowledge that further research similar to this thesis, could benefit from including films that bear larger public awareness. Finally, this paper suggests reconsidering the articulation of the review quotes, as well as incorporating repeated conditioning, in order to assure that the processing activities which Taillard (2001) refers to are provided with the necessary conditions for fulfilment.

The film industry is a risky business. A few projects make it big, while the majority falls short. In many cases, predictions on the success of a film are shattered on the day of the first screening. Hopefully, this paper provides film creators and industry stakeholders with an increased awareness, and an enhanced understanding, of the crude and fickle word-of-mouth patterns of the public, infusing them with a new grain of hope. Namely, that the fate of their film might not be so f*****g unpredictable after all.

7. Appendix

Attachment 1. The different stimuli conditions for the experiment groups

“I absolutely loved this movie.

Oh my god, you should definitely go see it!”



“I fucking loved this movie.

Holy shit, you should definitely go see it!”



“I absolutely hated this movie.

Oh my god, you should definitely not go see it!”



“I fucking hated this movie.

Holy shit, you should definitely not go see it!”



Attachment 2. Overview of survey configuration and questions

Hello and welcome!

Thank you for participating in our survey! Your opinions are very important for us and for the completion of our bachelor thesis at Stockholm School of Economics.

The survey will only require about 3 minutes of your time, and you have the possibility to remain anonymous. If you have any questions regarding the survey, feel free to contact us at: 24053@student.hhs.se

Thank you again - your contribution is highly appreciated.

Best regards,
Carl Eppens & Jesper Fahlén

On the next page, we will present you with a film poster accompanied by a short quote from an online film review. After 10 seconds on that page, you will be able to proceed to the questions.

Let's go!

How familiar are you with the presented film?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Not at all								Very familiar

How intrigued are you by the presented film?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Not at all								Very intrigued

How willing are you to see the film?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Not at all								Very willing

My general impression of the film is:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Bad								Good
Negative								Positive
Boring								Fascinating
Uninteresting								Interesting

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

I want to see this film

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Strongly disagree								Strongly agree

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

I want to learn more about this film

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Strongly disagree								Strongly agree

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

I feel surprised

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Strongly disagree								Strongly agree

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

I feel shocked

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Strongly disagree								Strongly agree

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

I feel astonished

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Strongly disagree								Strongly agree

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

I feel emotional

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Strongly disagree								Strongly agree

I now feel:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Bad								Good
Negative								Positive
Sad								Happy
Offended								Pleased

I find the film review:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Negative								Positive
Cold								Emotional
Unconvincing								Convincing
Unreliable								Reliable
False								Authentic

Did the reviewer like the film?

Yes

No

Which of the following phrases were used in the review you read?

'absolutely' and 'oh my god'

'fucking' and 'holy shit'

This survey is about:

Literature

Film

Sports

Music

I identify as:

Male

Female

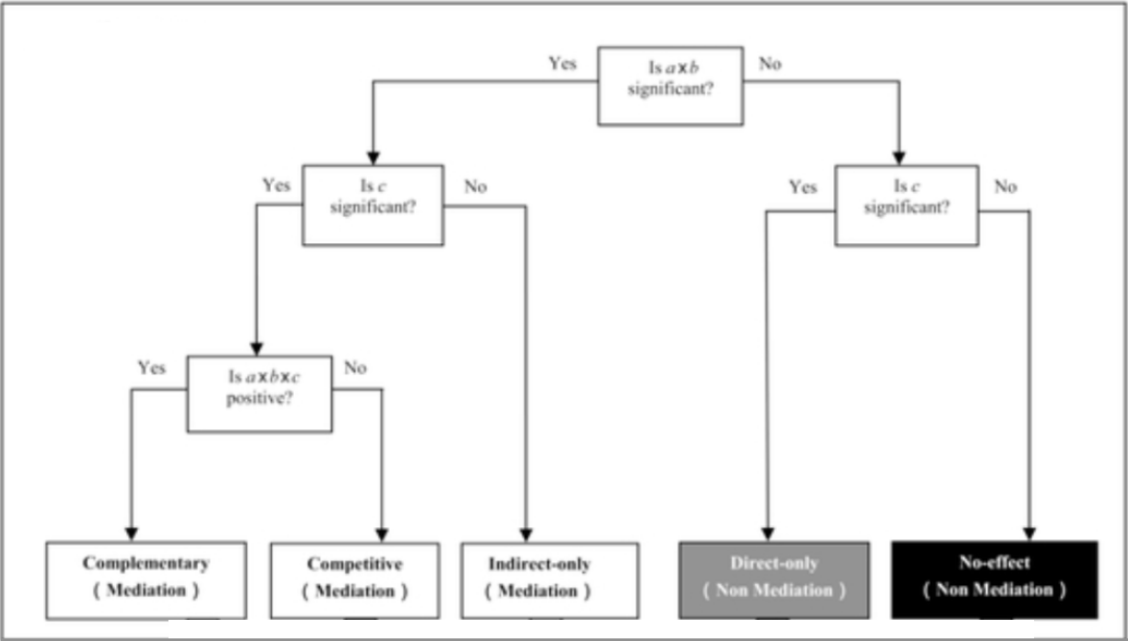
Other

For Swedish respondents:

Skriv in din mailadress i fältet för att vara med och tävla om ett presentkort på Mathem (250 kr)

Lämna fältet tom ifall du vill förbli anonym.

Attachment 3. Decision tree for establishing mediation and classifying type



(Zhao et al, 2010).

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