

Fucks, shits, and twunts:  
A Sociolinguistic Study of the Use of and Attitudes towards Swear  
Words in York

By Tonje Hoff Gjesdal



Master's Thesis in English Linguistics  
Department of Foreign Languages  
University of Bergen  
May 2019



## Abstract in Norwegian

Den følgende masteroppgaven er en sosiolingvistisk undersøkelse av hvilket forhold innbyggerne i byen York i England har til banneord. Dette innebærer både holdninger til og bruken av banneord. Oppgaven undersøker flere forskjellige hypoteser som omhandler forholdet til banneord basert på alder og kjønn, i tillegg til hvordan man oppfatter personer som bruker banneord, hvilke(t) banneord som er mest utbredt og om man endrer språket sitt basert på konteksten man er i. Forskningsdataen ble samlet inn gjennom en online spørreundersøkelse. Denne ble sendt ut til forskjellige grupper og organisasjoner i York, for eksempel idrettslag og studentorganisasjoner, og svarene som kom inn ble videre gruppert og analysert. Fokuset i oppgaven lå på tre forskjellige aldersgrupper, 18–28, 35–50 og 60+, og dataen er basert på svarene fra totalt 38 respondenter fra alle tre aldersgrupper og begge kjønn. De innsamlede dataene viser at de fleste respondentene daglig bruker banneord. Dette gjelder både for kvinner og menn, og for alle tre aldersgrupper, selv om den yngste aldersgruppen har en noe høyere frekvens enn de andre to. I tillegg kan man se at utdanningsnivå ikke har en innvirkning på bruken av banneord. Videre viser dataene at *cunt*, *motherfucker* og *fuck* blir regnet som de tre mest alvorlige banneordene, men at *fuck* og varianter av dette likevel er de vanligste banneordene for respondentene. Dette understreker også hvordan banneord knyttet til sex eller det kroppslige både er sett på som de mest alvorlige banneordene, men at de i tillegg er de mest hyppig brukte banneordene. Andre funn i oppgaven viser at de fleste respondentene ikke bryr seg dersom andre bruker banneord, men at de gjerne er mer negativt innstilt til personer som ofte banner. I tillegg svarte flere at de er bevisst på hvilken situasjon de er i, og at de tilpasser språkbruken sin til situasjonen. Dette var spesielt rundt barn, og flere skrev også at de bruker alternativer til banneord dersom de vil unngå å bruke de faktiske ordene.

Funnene i denne oppgaven gir et innblikk i en stor, men gjerne mer tabubelagt, del av det engelske språket. Slike undersøkelser kan gi deltakerne en mulighet til å bli bedre kjent med og reflektere over sin egen språkbruk. Videre åpner en slik studie opp for en videre diskusjon om hvorvidt stereotyper man gjerne ilegger kvinner og menn eller bestemte aldersgrupper faktisk har feste i virkeligheten, eller om de begynner å bli utdaterte.

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, I would like to say a massive thank you to my supervisor, Kevin McCafferty. Thank you for agreeing to take on my, somewhat, unusual topic. Your guidance, advice, and feedback throughout this process have been invaluable. Secondly, a warm thank you to Dr Beck Sinar at the University of York for your encouragement and advice, and for generally being fucking awesome. To my fellow students, thank you for the quizzes, wine and (perhaps too long) lunch breaks. Also, thanks to the linguistics group, especially Janne and Anja, for very helpful feedback and good company.

Furthermore, I would like to thank my parents. They might not always understand what I am doing, but they have always supported me, and they are always there at the other end of the phone when I need it. I also want to say a huge thank you to Studentkoret Blandede Akademikere (BLAK) for keeping me sane and providing me with much-needed study breaks.

To everyone else, friends and family, thank you for listening to me rant about my thesis and for your encouragements.

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## List of abbreviations

BNC	British National Corpus
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
NCRD	Norwegian Centre for Research Data
NSC	Norwegian Study Centre
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
OFCOM	Office of Communications
UoY	University of York
YUSU	The University of York Students' Union



## 1. Introduction

The word *fuck* is perhaps one of the more commonly used swear words in the English language today and dates back hundreds of years. It is also one of the most versatile swear words that can be used and adapted to many different scenarios. Some people might shout *FUCK* if they stub their toe on the kitchen table, while others might describe an unpleasant person as a *fucker*, underline how good a meal was by describing it as  *fucking amazing* or agree with you by saying *absofuckinglutely*. As McEnery and Xiao (2004) state, '*fuck* is perhaps one of the most interesting and colourful words in the English language today that can be used to describe pain, pleasure, hatred and even love' (McEnery & Xiao 2004:236, my italics). While *fuck* might be one of the most versatile swear words in English, it is certainly not the only one. There is a vast number of swear words out there ready to spice up conversations, shock an audience, or convey a multitude of different emotions.

Whether they are referred to as swearing, cursing, cussing, profanity, obscenity, indecency, vulgarity, blasphemy, expletives, oaths, or epithets; as four-letter, dirty, or taboo words; or as bad, coarse, crude, foul, salty, earthy, raunchy, or off-colour language, these expressions raise many puzzles for anyone interested in language as a window into human nature. (Pinker 2007:325)

As Pinker (2007) states, swear words are an interesting part of a language and can provide insight into beliefs and values of a culture or community. Despite this, these words are, by many, still often considered taboo and not something to be used lightly. In TV and radio, for example, there are restrictions on if, and when, certain swear words are allowed and breaking these restrictions can result in the broadcaster being fined. This emphasises how the relationship towards swear words is a complicated one. The general notion appears to be that swearing is bad, but the constant evolution of swear words and invention of new ways to swear tells a different tale. Living languages are not static, but dynamic, and the position and attitudes toward the words that fall into the 'swear word'-category seem to develop and change with every generation of people. Words that were once heard every day disappear or are replaced by new words and phrases, and, similarly, words that were once considered taboo and were avoided at all cost can now be heard in everyday conversations. Whether the swear words are used as verbs, nouns, adjectives, or adverbs, these are words that many people use

to express different emotions and they are able to adjust the word-form to what they want to express. By doing what this study set out to do, i.e. asking people about their use of and attitude towards swear words, you might encourage them to gain a better understanding of their own language use.

The fact that swear words hold such a strong position in the English language is the basis for this thesis. It is fascinating to see how including a word considered as a swear word in a conversation can alter the meaning and the way people perceive you. Furthermore, it is interesting to see if there are any differences between different age groups or genders, and if certain stereotypes related to these aspects are still true. The thesis will focus on which words people tend to use when they are swearing and how people react to swear words in 2018/2019. What words are considered the worst and how are the people using swear words perceived today? As a future teacher of English, having a greater knowledge of words that are still avoided in most classroom situations might be a very useful tool. It will provide opportunities to, perhaps, discuss these words and how they affect our language rather than just telling someone off for using profanities. By having knowledge of these words that are an important part of any language and people's attitudes towards them, pupils might also gain a better understanding of the English language in general and English-speaking culture.

## **1.1 Thesis structure**

The remaining part of Chapter 1 will introduce different ideas and findings of other researchers in the field of swear words and will be the basis and points of comparison to the findings in this thesis. It will include data from books written for both entertainment and facts, as well as scientific articles. The current study will focus on the use of and attitudes towards swearing in York, whereas none of these books or articles focus on York alone. In addition, many of them report on studies and findings from outside the UK. Findings in these books and articles are, nevertheless, relevant as sources of inspiration and comparison because they revolve around the same subject and often present general stereotypes. Furthermore, Chapter 1 will also present the hypotheses and the background for these. Chapter 2 will focus on the foundation for the present thesis, viz. the online survey. The chapter will look into the different variables that were considered when creating the questions and the elements that need to be evaluated when making an online survey. In addition, Chapter 2 will explain the

distribution process of the survey and look into the potential pitfalls when collecting data this way. In Chapter 3, the findings of the online survey will be presented and discussed. The findings will be discussed in light of the different hypotheses. Additionally, there will be a presentation and discussion of findings that are not predicted in the hypotheses. Some of the words presented in Chapter 3 will be defined using the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) because they are uncommon or because etymology is needed. More familiar words will, however, not be defined due to time and space restrictions. The final chapter, Chapter 4, will draw a conclusion to the research presented here. It will also look into the sources of error and suggest further research that can be done in this field.

## **1.2 The use of swear words**

### **1.2.1 Categories**

When talking about taboo language, there are several ways of categorizing the words and phrases. One example is an observation made by Steven Pinker (2007). He draws on several previous studies when stating that swear words originate from “sex, excretion, religion, death and infirmity, and disfavoured groups” (Pinker 2007:330). The same ideas are backed up by Geoffrey Hughes (1991) who presents the same categories and adds how they display a variety of attitudes from violence to the shocking, casual, or impossible (Hughes 1991:3). An interesting notion is that the actual swear words are not what causes the shock or disgust, it is the concepts they represent. There are several, more polite, words that could substitute the swear words, but for a proper effect, we often go for the words we know will cause more reactions (Pinker 2007:325). If you were asked to think about the swear words you yourself use, or pay attention to the ones used by others, it is most likely that all of them will fall into one of these categories. Some creative souls might even mix words from different categories to create more powerful phrases and expressions. Examples of this can be saying *bloody hell* or *holy shit*, where the speaker mixes the religious aspect with sex or excretion.

The base of swear words in many languages often derive from religion (Pinker 2007:339), and the third commandment in Exodus 20:2–17 states that “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his

name”. Leviticus 24:16 then follows up with the consequences of this action by saying that “anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord is to be put to death”. In the Middle Ages, blasphemous language, literally meaning “evil speech”, was often interpreted as heresy, which in turn was punishable by death (Ljung 2011:59). In times when religion was a large part of people’s lives, taking the Lord’s name in vain or wishing God’s wrath upon someone else was much more serious than what most people, in today’s more secular society, think. In mediaeval times, Christianity was the main religion in Europe and God was, therefore, important. If you then took the Lord’s name in vain, it would mean taking on a great responsibility. You would risk your own salvation and could also be held responsible for all the hardship that might happen in the future (Ljung 2011:60). This was also the case for those swearing by the Devil. As Hell was a large threat and a concern for many mediaeval citizens, saying the Devil’s name might be regarded as just as serious as taking God’s name in vain. Firstly, some believed that swearing involving the Devil could lead to accusations of devil worship or witchcraft, and secondly, people were afraid it could result in the Devil turning up to find the speaker (Ljung 2011:57). Today, this religious swearing cannot be said to have the same consequences as Britain is becoming more secular, especially among the younger generations (*Full story: what does the census tell us about religion in 2011?*, accessed 22 February 2019). In the British National Corpus (BNC), the word *hell* generates 5067 tokens while *Devil* and *Satan* together show 2033 tokens (*British National Corpus* 1994, accessed 31 October 2018). This can be an indication of how people in today’s society do not regard the Devil as such a large threat anymore. People do not appear to be as afraid of the consequences of uttering his name or anything that has to do with him.

The same can also be said for the other end of the scale. A search for *Jesus* in the BNC results in 5453 tokens (*British National Corpus* 1994, accessed 31 October 2018) where the majority of the tokens are used outside a religious context. Again, it is evident that people do not have the same feelings towards the different religious characters and the consequences they were thought to bring. Using *Jesus* as an exclamation appears to be something people do without giving it much thought and so it appears that the word lacks the taboo element it used to have (Ljung 2011:67), removing it from the swear words category. At the same time, *oh my God* only shows 531 tokens while *goddam/goddamn* generates a mere 88 tokens (*British National Corpus* 1994, accessed 31 October 2018). This can be an indication of how, in addition to not being especially sacred anymore, religious words are not powerful enough. If someone happens to stub their toe on the table, exclaiming *Christ almighty* might not give the

same relief as shouting *fuck* or *shit*. This is also visible in the fact that it is possible to use *fuck* as a substitute in previously more celestial expressions. Examples of this is ‘I don’t give a *fuck*’ instead of ‘I don’t give a *damn*’, or ‘for *fuck*’s sake’ instead of ‘for *God*’s sake’. Our use of angry expletives like these are often conventional (Pinker 2007:366). Even though some words are just as taboo as others, we still tend to use the same set of words in the different scenarios. Stubbing your toe or burning your finger might generate other expletives than being cut off in traffic, where the latter could result in name-calling.

In addition to the religious aspect, something that used to have more serious connotations were swear words and profanities connected to death and infirmity. Perhaps used more as phrases or curses, wishing sickness upon someone could be a great offense, and especially in times when they did not have the same health care that we do now. Shakespeare wrote ‘a plague on both your houses!’ (Shakespeare; in Pinker 2007:343) in *Romeo and Juliet* as a serious threat. In times when antibiotics and vaccines did not exist, even the smallest infections and diseases could mean death. Furthermore, it could also mean that the person would suffer greatly before they finally died. Some diseases and infections take a long time to kill a person so if you were unlucky enough to suffer from one of these, you would be in agony for quite some time. Therefore, wishing infirmity and sickness, and most likely death, upon another person is, understandably, very serious. Wanting someone to die, perhaps through serious illness, could also mean that the person would not have time to atone for his or her sins, which again ties in with religion being of great importance. Today, wishing sickness upon someone is perhaps not that common as most illnesses can be cured. As Pinker puts it, ‘I hope you are trapped in a fire and get third degree burns all over your body’ (Pinker 2007:343) is like wishing the plague on someone. Wishing that someone gets cancer is perhaps the closest we get today, and even that is curable in many cases.

Something that is, perhaps, more familiar to people today, is swear words associated with sex and/or excrement. According to Hughes (1991), swearing by different synonyms for faeces is most likely something universal, while sexual swearing is more culture-specific. The latter can be used to emphasize different aspects of sexual relationships, like *motherfucker*, and body parts, especially genitalia, depending on what the culture finds most insulting (Hughes 1991:11). Likewise, it can also be an indication of how a culture or community has

developed. For example, in the BNC, *fuck* and six of its variants<sup>1</sup> generate 4671 tokens, resulting in a frequency in spoken English of 273 per million words (*British National Corpus* 1994, accessed 05 November 2018). Even though it might not be a word you would not use in front of your parents or children, it seems to be quite a common word in the English language. It is a word that has gained a ‘grammatical flexibility’ which allows it to be used in every part of speech (McEnery & Xiao 2004:236). In 2009, Oxford University Press even released a dictionary dedicated to the *f-word*, where they presented several ways of using the word, including definition and etymology (Sheidlower 2009). *Fuck* appears to be one of the go-to swear words for many English speakers, underlining how the sexual category of swear words is quite relevant. This is furthermore evident in how people often use different names for genitalia as insults. *Prick* and *cunt* are often used to negatively describe someone where the latter is perhaps regarded as the worst of the two. Sex and genitals are elements that people might have a better knowledge of than the divine, making it a more relevant category than religion.

In addition to categories dividing the swear words by topic, Pinker (2007) also presents five categories where the swear words are divided by how we swear. These five categories are descriptively, idiomatically, abusively, emphatically, and cathartically (Pinker 2007:350). Descriptive swearing, as in ‘they are fucking’, does not require much thinking, as most people understand what it means. The same goes for abusive swearing, like *motherfucker*. You tend to understand when someone is insulting you. Idiomatic swearing, on the other hand, might be harder for some to understand, especially when it comes to cultural differences. ‘This is shit’ could be literal, if you are pointing to dog faeces on the street. It could also, and probably most often does, mean that something has not gone the way you wished it had or that something is bad. Another example is saying that something is *cocked* up, meaning that it is not how it should be. The literal meaning of the phrase is not in the word so if you are not familiar with the term *cocked* it could be hard to understand the idiom. Lastly, emphatic and cathartic swearing can both be said to underline points, albeit often in different scenarios. Emphatic swearing, e.g. describing something as *bloody amazing* or *fucking awesome*, might be used to emphasize something and these combinations are often used as intensifiers. Cathartic swearing, on the other hand, is a more sudden, unplanned use of swear words. The sudden uttering of swear words due to pain, surprise, frustration, etc. could

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<sup>1</sup> *Fucks, fucker, fuckers, fucking, fucked, motherfucker.*

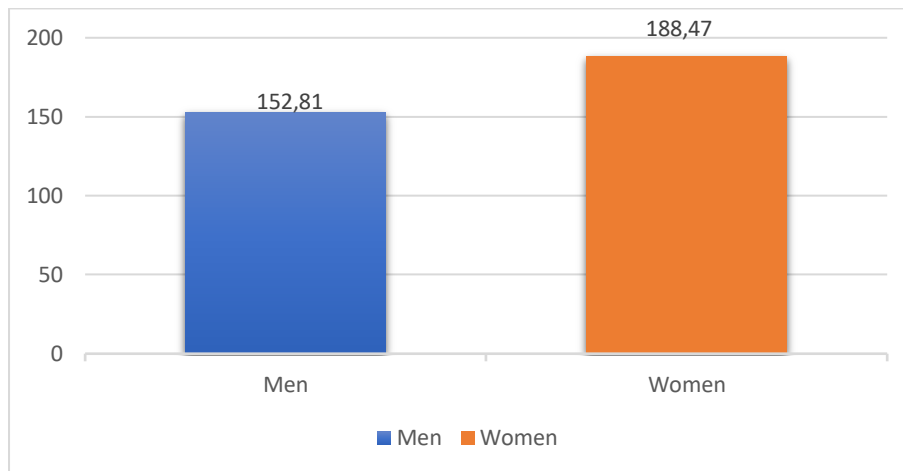


be thought of as releasing tension. As mentioned above, we might shout *fuck* or *shit* if we stub our toe, both of which are examples of cathartic swearing.

### 1.2.2 Human and social factors

When looking at the use of and attitudes towards swear words and profanities, there are several social factors that must be taken into account. In the following, three aspects will be examined further. Firstly, one aspect to consider is the gender of the speaker. The common perception appears to be that men, on average, swear more than women. This is supported in Pinker (2007), Allan and Burrige (2006), and Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003). Furthermore, men are believed to ‘use stronger obscenities’ (Allan & Burrige 2006:78) than women while women will use more euphemisms, e.g. *darn* (DeFrank & Kahlbaugh 2019:129). These statements can be emphasised by some expressions that are still used today, such as ‘locker-room talk’, referring to the male locker-room, and ‘swearing like a sailor’, with “sailor” mainly being thought of as a male occupation. Swearing appears to be a more likely choice in male-dominated arenas (Pinker 2007:352) and it can be expected of a man to use coarse language to display masculinity (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003:70). Similarly, it might be thought of as ‘not ladylike’ if a woman swears (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003:307). Heiko Motschenbacher (2010) talks about the term ‘genderlect’. This is ‘linguistic features that stereotypically index gender’ (Motschenbacher 2010:58). Stereotypically, women have often been thought of as having a cleaner language, with a low frequency of swear words. However, thanks to the wave of feminism in the 1970s and onwards, these stereotypes are slowly disappearing (Pinker 2007:348). Even though it might be more common for men and women to swear amongst people of their own gender (Allan & Burrige 2006:78), it is nevertheless not uncommon for women to swear. This is further supported by findings in the BNC where the frequency of swear words used by men and women are quite similar, with women having a slightly higher frequency (Figure 1.1). According to Emma Byrne (2017), who draws from the findings of McEnery, women are now just as likely as men to use profanities and are not afraid to drop the f-bomb (Byrne 2017:156).

Figure 1.1: Frequency per million for the swear words in part three of the online survey<sup>2</sup>



Another aspect of gender and swearing is the nature of the swear words. As previously mentioned, both *prick* and *cunt* are swear words used to describe others, but the latter often provokes the most negative reactions. Words related to or deriving from genitals are generally thought of as taboo and there is no lack of swear words from either gender, with an estimation of a thousand expressions for *penis* and 1200 for *vagina* in the English language (Pinker 2007:350). Yet, the female-based words and euphemisms are frequently judged ruder than the male ones. This is supported in OFCOM's *Quick Reference Guide*. *Cunt* is categorized in the 'strongest language' section<sup>3</sup>, and it is stated that this word is definitely not allowed on TV or the radio before 9 pm, i.e. before the watershed (see subsection 1.4.5), and barely even allowed after (OFCOM 2016b, accessed 10 December 2018). *Beaver*, *clunge*, *fanny*<sup>4</sup>, *flaps*, and *minge* are all alternatives to *vagina*, and they are all categorized as 'strong language'. These words are not allowed pre-watershed and are 'seen as crude and often derogatory, especially by women' (ibid.). By comparison, *cock*, *dick*, *knob* and *prick* are also marked as 'strong language', but they are all also 'less problematic when used in a humorous context' (ibid.). Apparently, words concerning the female genitals are mainly considered very rude, while words describing the male genitals may be rude, but can also be funny, depending on the context. Some words describing female genitals, like *fanny*, are sometimes used in a humorous context as well, but the general notion appears to be that female-related swear words are not as common in humour as male ones. One reason for this division might be that the female parts are the origin of new life and should therefore be sheltered (Allan & Burridge

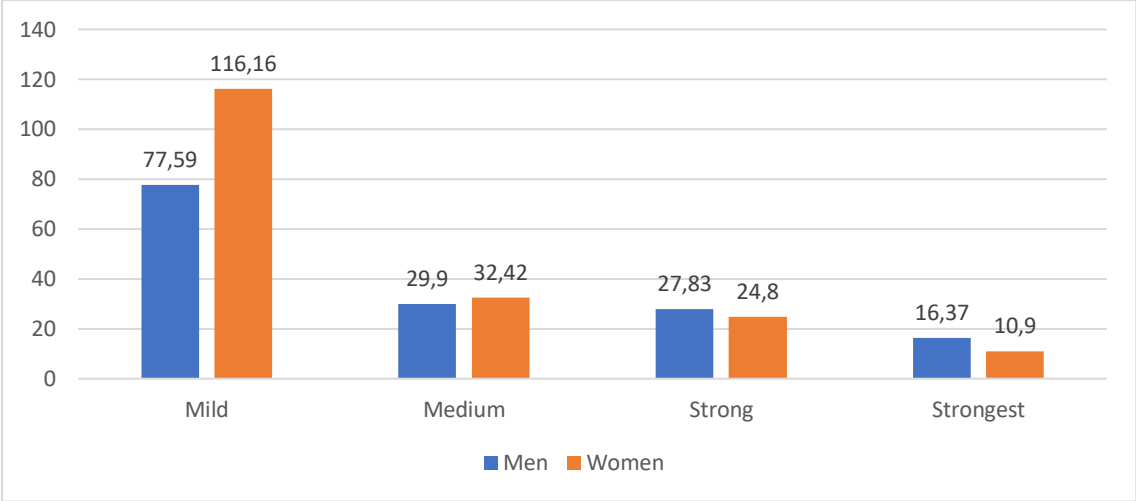
<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>3</sup> See example in Appendix 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Fanny* is different in British and American English, with the word being milder in the latter. In the present thesis, the British categorization of the word is used.

2006:7). In addition, women have often been regarded as the weaker sex, so to be called something that has to do with women could, by some, be considered demeaning.

Figure 1.2: Frequency per million for words in part three of the survey sorted by OFCOM’s categories



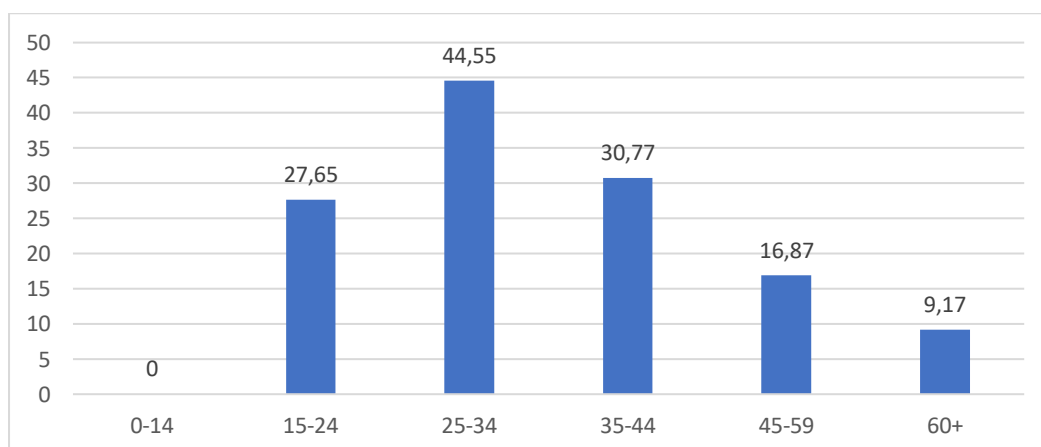
Looking at the two previous paragraphs together and comparing gender and word severity shows that even though women appear, according to the BNC, to use swear words more frequently than men, the swear words used by women are often the ones categorized as ‘mild’ by OFCOM. This is visible in Figure 1.2. The general frequency difference between men and women shown in Figure 1.1 equals 35.66. The frequency difference between men and women for the mild swear words equals 38.57. Words considered to be ‘mild’ by OFCOM are words that are, perhaps, not often thought of as swear words by the general public. Despite the findings in Figure 1.1, Figure 1.2 demonstrates that men are still the more likely gender, if only slightly, to choose the more severe profanities. The reason why women score higher than men is due to their use of mild swear words which, as mentioned, might not even be considered to be swear words. Because the words used by women are not always considered profanities, women might be thought of as not really swearing at all. This could be a reason as to why we still have the stereotypes that we do. The difference in the more severe swear words are, nevertheless, not that great between the genders, something that emphasises the findings of both Byrne (2017) and Pinker (2007). The numbers are generally decreasing in frequency as the severity increases, and men and women alike appear to steer away from overusing the worst swear words.

A second aspect to examine in conjunction with swearing and human factors is sexuality. Following the previous paragraphs, the idea of women being the weaker sex is an interesting aspect when looking into swearing and sexuality. As mentioned, swearing often seems to occur in male-dominated areas. This might be an indication of how swear words are regarded as something masculine. Swearing may show how you are free from societal rules where you have to be careful with what you say, and it could display an aggressiveness one expects to find in a man (Pinker 2007:352). When a man does not fulfil this expectation, he might be called swear words connected to women, e.g. *bitch*, or sexual orientation, e.g. *faggot*, both suggesting that this man does not meet the requirements of a 'real man'. This also underlines how stereotypes connected to gay men and lesbian women are often portrayed. The use of feminine linguistic factors, like vocabulary, by gay men is a stereotype that indicates that they behave like women (Barrett 1997:194). The lack of so-called male traits like swearing, might suggest that a man is gay. Likewise, the existence of swearing in a woman's vocabulary might suggest that she is a lesbian. However, in her research, Birch Moonwomon-Baird (1997) found that, despite stereotypes, people are usually not able to actually hear whether or not a woman is a lesbian based on her speech (Moonwomon-Baird 1997:209). Yet, heteronormativity stereotypes are often still found in different media and may therefore be a part of people's common perceptions of gays and lesbians. This portrayal also provides an idea that gays and lesbians do not fulfil their roles as men and women (Motschenbacher 2010:26). There is, however, not much research to support these stereotypes. As women are now starting to swear as much as men (see Figure 1.1), the idea that every woman who uses swear words is a lesbian is starting to crumble.

Gender is clearly one of the important factors when discussing swear words, but it is not an isolated factor. A third factor connected to swearing and human factors is the age of the speaker, and in previous research, age and gender are often connected. One study, for example, showed that pensioners were more sceptical, with 84 percent being negative towards women who swear, than high-school students (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003:70–71). Likewise, Diane Vincent (1982) has found that there is a difference between older women and men in their swearing pattern, with the latter using it more, while the younger generations are more equal in their swearing rate (Vincent 1982; in Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003:70). Although Vincent's study is fairly old, the general perception today still seems to be that the younger generations, those under 35, both use more swear words and, therefore, also have a more relaxed attitude towards them. This is often supported by statistics in the BNC, where

the age groups 15–24 and 25–34 repeatedly generate a high frequency of the use of swear words per million words (see Figure 1.3 below). We are all products of the time we grew up in (Byrne 2017:15). The men and women who grew up in the 50s and 60s in the age of the housewife will probably have a different view on swearing than those who grew up with the waves of feminism in the 1970s. In addition, England has become a more secular country with people being more indifferent towards religion (Morley & Robins 2001:201). In fact, Christianity has the oldest age profile of the religions, and the number of people under the age of 60 who identify as Christians has decreased over the last few years (*Full Story: what does the census tell us about religion in 2011?*, accessed 19 February 2019). Some might still find celestial swearing<sup>5</sup> taboo, while others do not even know about the ten commandments. Today, many people are more aware of swearing connected to name-calling and slurs than religion or sex (Byrne 2017:15).

Figure 1.3: Frequency per million words for fuck divided by age



### 1.2.3 The use of alternatives

The fact that there are several different categories of swear words also points to the fact that there are many alternatives to choose from when we speak. C.S. Lewis once stated, when talking about sex, that ‘as soon as you deal with it explicitly, you are forced to choose between the language of the nursery, the gutter and the anatomy class’ (Hughes 1991:1). Think of, for example, *fuck*. When talking to a child about the birds and the bees, you do not

<sup>5</sup> Swearing by Jesus, Christ, Mary, or the Holy Ghost, or by the Sacraments, the altar, the chalice etc. (Ljung 2011:51).

describe it as *fucking*. You describe it as *making love* or, simply, *having sex*. If you are at the gynaecologist's office, most of them would not ask you how often you *fuck*, but how often you have *sexual intercourse*. We do not have to use the taboo version of words, but we often do. As mentioned above, some swear words do not generate enough power to express how we feel. The same can be said when thinking about alternatives to swear words. If, for example, you are angry at someone for not picking up after their dog, you might talk about them not picking up their dog's *shit*, not their dog's *poop*. Likewise, you might call someone who scratches your car a *dick* or *wanker*, not a *penis*. Even though these terms might be in the taboo category, they are cleaner alternatives and therefore seem to lack the emotional force that the speaker requires to fully express their reaction (Pinker 2007:352).

As previously mentioned, religion has played a large part in the rise and development of swear words in the English language. The strong position of religion did not, however, stop people from inventing new ways of celestial swearing. One example was making words that sounded similar, e.g. *God* becoming *Cok* or *Cod* (Ljung 2011:58) and thus avoiding taking the Lord's actual name in vain. Another way to avoid breaking the third commandment is by using euphemisms. During the reign of Elizabeth I, parts of God's body became popular oaths and God himself was represented by placing *s* in front of words, e.g. '*snails* or '*sfoot* (Allan & Burridge 2006:15). Some contractions, or aphaesis, like these are also visible today, with for example *Blimey*, which originates from *May God blind me* or, simply, *God blind me* (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *blimey*, accessed 12 November 2018). Even though most of this type of remodelling has gone out of fashion, with a few exceptions, there are still alternatives to swear words that build on the same principle. Some might, for example, use *effing* or *fricking* in order to avoid saying *fucking*. These alternatives do not have such a strong taboo connotation, but we still understand what is meant. When someone wishes to communicate something to a listener or a reader, we expect it to be something coherent. The listener or reader themselves will, most likely, also try to make sense of what is said (Allan & Burridge 2006:16). If you are a fluent speaker of the language, you will probably have no problem understanding that something described as *effing* gross means that it was *fucking* gross.

Feldman et al. (2017) highlight two opposing ideas when it comes to profane language and the use of it instead of alternatives. On one side, people who often swear might be thought of as rude, violent, or even stupid or less educated. This is an idea that could come from the time where the difference in people's class was more prominent. Profane and foul language

was, perhaps, thought of as more typical for the lower or working classes. If you were part of the upper classes, one way of showing this could be through your language. On the other side, people who use profanities are thought of as honest and authentic (Jay 2000; cited in Feldman et al. 2017:816). The latter idea draws on how people who swear appear unfiltered and do not hide how they feel. Imagine that you are talking to someone and they describe someone as *fucking annoying* or exclaim *fuck* or *shit* when you give them bad news. Neither *shit* nor *fuck*, nor other swear words, share a common meaning. What they have in common is their taboo reputation and the fact that they are terms with a high emotional charge (Hughes 1991:21). Yet it is easier to read and understand the other person's actual reaction and feelings towards something when they are unfiltered compared to if they use alternative words or simply say that someone is *annoying* (Feldman et al. 2017:817). Arguably, inserting swear words as intensifiers or using them as exclamations might happen spontaneously and so they feel more sincere.

In a similar and more recent study, DeFrank and Kahlbaugh (2019) examine some of the same ideas as Feldman et al. (2017). The results in the 2019 study suggest that people who often use swear words are considered less favourably. Regardless of gender, people who often use swear words score low on impression ratings, which include 'intelligence, trustworthiness, proneness to anger, deviancy, politeness, offensiveness, aggressiveness, and likability' (DeFrank & Kahlbaugh 2019:136). In the 2019 study, respondents did not always mark the language as profane, but the impressions of those they were asked to rate were, nevertheless, low (*ibid.*). As DeFrank and Kahlbaugh state, this could be because people are not themselves aware of their biases and actual feelings towards swearing (*ibid.*). The study furthermore highlights aspects discussed in subsection 1.2.2 on how men and women perceive swearing. Apparently, men perceived women who swear as offensive, while women perceive men who swear as offensive (DeFrank & Kahlbaugh 2019:137). Women were, however, considered 'more trustworthy and more polite' than men when using swear words (*ibid.*). These findings support one of the ideas presented in Feldman et al., but it also shows how swearing and attitudes towards it appear to constantly change. As the respondents in the studies are not the same, it seems that attitudes towards swearing might also be affected by where you live. Swearing and one's attitude towards it appear to be quite personal and it seems hard to find a common attitude towards those who use profanities and swear words.

### 1.2.4 Previous research on attitudes towards swearing

In 2000, a study of attitudes towards swearing and the importance of context was commissioned by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC) and the Independent Television Commission (ITC). The study was conducted by Andrea Millwood-Hargrave and consisted of group discussions and an in-home questionnaire. Respondents came from all over the UK and represented a variety of backgrounds, e.g. different religions, whether they had children and, if so, the age of their children, different age groups, and different sexualities. The final report was divided into three chapters. The first chapter dealt with swearing in real life and the second one looked at swearing in television programmes. The third chapter, which will not be emphasized further in this thesis, covered advertising. Generally, the study examined how the participants felt towards certain categories of swear words, differences in age and gender, and attitudes towards swearing on television. It also contained a list of 28 swear words that the respondents were asked to rank based on severity. Before presenting the full report, some general findings are highlighted. These findings include how the participants have noticed an increase in swearing, a wish to limit strong language when children are present, a general appreciation for the watershed, the importance of context, and an attitude change towards the different categories of swearing (Millwood-Hargrave 2000:3).

The 28 words the respondents were asked to rank gave the researcher an indication of how different categories of swear words are perceived. Millwood-Hargrave presents a list of 13 categories with examples for each<sup>6</sup>. The least severe categories were baby talk, double entendres<sup>7</sup>, and puns, while the most severe categories were direct abuse, abuse of minorities, and racial abuse (Millwood-Hargrave 2000:8). In addition to the presentation of the 13 categories, the study also presents the full list of the 28 words and how they ranked. The three most severely rated words were *cunt*, *motherfucker*, and *fuck*, while *crap*, *bloody*, and *God* were rated as the least severe (Millwood-Hargrave 2000:9). According to the study, the top three most offensive words were all rated more offensive by women than men. For the remaining words, women were also more likely to rate the word ‘very offensive’ than the men. The female respondents always have higher percentages than the men for this option. In

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix 6 for the full list.

<sup>7</sup> ‘A double meaning; a word or phrase having a double sense, esp. as used to convey an indelicate meaning’ (Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. *double entendre*, accessed 06 May 2019).



conjunctions with attitude, one respondent also stated that ‘...I don’t like women swearing to be honest ... Women and girls swearing. That’s a lot worse than if you hear a bloke swearing’ (*sic.*, Millwood-Hargrave 2000:7). When it comes to age, the older generations found the words more offensive than the younger ones (Millwood-Hargrave 2000:9), even though the differences are rather small as the words are only rated from zero to three. For all of the words that were rated, the oldest age group, in this study respondents 55+ years old, always had the highest percentage for ‘very severe’. These differences between gender and age groups therefore seem to be a reoccurring tendency when it comes to swear words.

Another aspect this study looked at was how swearing and children were connected. It appears that people are very concerned about how swear words and profanities might affect children. According to the study, people are aware that children are often exposed to swearing and profanities, and that they might even use it themselves, but it was not allowed in the house (Millwood-Hargrave 2000:6). One respondent was also quoted stating that ‘if our children sees or hears [swearing] (on the television), then it’s going to think that’s the norm’ (*sic.*, *ibid.*). The protection of children against swearing seems to be very important to many of the respondents. Comparing this to the findings on swearing and gender, it looks like there is a connection between the two. According to the study, parents are more careful with their daughters than their sons (Millwood-Hargrave 2000:7). This is seen in the quote in the previous paragraph and also in another statement where the respondent wrote that ‘...some things I watch more with the 10-year-old than I do with the (older) daughter’ (*ibid.*). Presumably, because of the phrasing, the 10-year-old in this case is a boy. This underlines what is previously discussed in this chapter, namely that people appear to be more sceptical about women and swearing. It also supports the stereotypes of women having a cleaner language and that it is not ‘lady-like’ to swear.

A second study on swearing, with the main focus being on the media, was conducted by The Office of Communications (Ofcom) in 2016. This study shows the public’s attitude towards different swear words and is based on how attitudes may change due to the context and the demographic group the audience belongs to (*Ofcom* 2016a:1). Before presenting this study, there is, however, an important aspect by Ofcom that needs to be presented, namely the watershed. This is a central part of TV and media regulations in the UK. The watershed is a set period of time where programmes that are deemed unsuitable for children may be shown on television. According to Ofcom (2013), the watershed starts at 9 pm and

ends at 5.30 am and comprises a period where children are less likely to watch TV. OFCOM provides an explanation of both what they define as *children* and *unsuitable material*. The first is referred to as ‘people under the age of fifteen years’ (OFCOM 2019:7) while the latter consists of everything from ‘sexual content to violence, graphic or distressing imagery or swearing’ (OFCOM 2013, accessed 22 November 2018). It further states that ‘the most offensive language should not be broadcast before the watershed on TV’ (ibid.) without stating what is regarded as the most offensive language. They do, however, offer a Quick reference guide to offensive language in one of their reports from 2016. This guide is divided between non-discriminatory<sup>8</sup> and discriminatory<sup>9</sup> language and, as briefly mentioned above, each word or phrase is further categorized as ‘mild’, ‘medium’, ‘strong’, and ‘strongest’ language (OFCOM 2016b:5–14)<sup>10</sup>. Only the mild language is always acceptable before the watershed, while medium is potentially unacceptable pre-watershed and the strong and strongest language is completely unacceptable before the watershed.

In the 2016 study, answers were gathered from an online survey, focus groups, and in-depth interviews (OFCOM 2016a:1). It included people from all age groups, from all over the UK and from several different communities, i.e. disabled, LGBT, and ethnic minorities (ibid.). Many of their findings are, perhaps, not surprising, but they are still quite interesting. In a summary of the results, some points include the public’s interest in maintaining broadcasting standards, how the media should reflect normal life, and that context and timing is important when evaluating language (OFCOM 2016a:2–5). Furthermore, a continuous discussion throughout the report, similar to findings in Millwood-Hargrave’s study, is the protection of children. A common perception appears to be that programmes that are likely to be watched by children should be regulated and that it would be unpleasant for families to watch shows with swearing together. One participant states that ‘the role of the watershed is important to regulate what is accessible mostly in my opinion by children ... I do think it is important for society to have this guideline’ (ibid.). Several participants also draw on the importance of having a warning before the show. The warning prepares the viewers, or listeners, for what they might expect in the programme and it gives them the chance to turn it off if they do not like the warning. Some shows warn, for example, against strong language or

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<sup>8</sup> ‘General swear words and body parts’, ‘Sexual references’, and ‘Offensive gestures’ (OFCOM 2016b, accessed 23 November 2018).

<sup>9</sup> ‘Older people’, ‘Religion’, ‘Sexual orientation and gender identity’, ‘Mental health and physical ability’, and ‘Race and ethnicity’ (OFCOM 2016b, accessed 23 November 2018).

<sup>10</sup> See example in Appendix 2.

humour of a sexual nature, and some also add a parental advisory or guidance label. According to the survey, this is something the participants want to maintain.

Something that becomes quite clear through both the research done in OFCOM's report and their Quick Reference Guide is that context is very important to people when judging language. One participant is quoted in the report stating that 'I think context is hugely important. If the context is correct, most words are acceptable' (OFCOM 2016a:18). It is also visible through the evaluation of swear words, like the ones discussed in the previous paragraphs about gender and swear words. Several swear words lose their severity if they are used in the right contexts. Some examples, like *knob* and *prick*, are already mentioned, but also the sign of giving the middle finger to someone is, by OFCOM, regarded as less offensive when used in a humorous context. The ideas of Mary M. Talbot (1998) can further underline the importance of context that OFCOM draws on. She states that the language we use 'depends on *where* it is being used, *why*, *when*, *how*, and, of course, *why*' (Talbot 1998:19, original italics). Our day to day language will most likely change based on who we are talking to and what situation we are in. Answers given in OFCOM's survey suggest that people are protective of children, and so it is highly likely that the language used in front of children is different from the language used in front of friends or colleagues. Similarly, the language you use at work would be different from the language you use at a football match. Portraying characters in a natural way on TV and in films is clearly important to people. Findings in this study therefore appear to underline how the context the characters are in has a great effect on whether or not the viewers think it is acceptable for the characters to swear.

A third study that is relevant is a 2013 master's thesis written at the University of Bergen by Sverre Humberst Hagen. This study is inspired by Millwood-Hargrave's 2000 study and looks at many of the same aspects as the present thesis. Hagen's study also focused on the people of York and examined two age groups, 20–30 and 60+. The study was done through interviews and by having respondents answer questionnaires. The focus of the study was how attitudes towards swearing had changed over the last 50 years and if this related to specific types of swear words (Hagen 2013:39). Similar to the findings of OFCOM, Hagen also found that respondents, in both age groups, focused on context when deciding on the severity of swear words (Hagen 2013:46, 51). If a person hurt themselves, dropped something or it was a humorous situation, swearing was more acceptable. Both age groups also believed that there has been an increase in the use of swear words in recent years, and they all agreed

that this is due to the influence of the media (Hagen 2013:47, 52). According to several of the respondents, there are less restrictions and more use of swear words in different films and TV-shows. In addition, the youngest age group believed that younger generations swear more than the older ones (Hagen 2013:50). This is supported in statements by the oldest age group, where some respondents also believe that there should be less use of swear words both in general and by the younger generations (Hagen 2013:56). The oldest age group also stressed that swear words tend to be more severe if they are targeting a person (Hagen 2013:51)

When it comes to the specific types of swear words, there seem to be both agreements and disagreements between the two age groups. Both age groups agreed that words concerning disability have become less acceptable and more severe (Hagen 2013:50, 54). In regard to racially abusive swear words, most of the youngest respondents stated that they found these words very severe and that they had become more severe over the years (Hagen 2013:48). This is somewhat similar to the opinions stated in the oldest age group. The difference between the age groups, however, was that the oldest age group believed that the racially abusive swear words have not become more severe, but that they are less acceptable (Hagen 2013:52). When discussing sexual terms, the youngest age group stated that they found these words less severe. Because words in this category are more frequently used, they lose some of their severity (Hagen 2013:48). In addition, words connected to bodily functions are, according to the youngest age group, usable in jokes and in comedy (Hagen 2013:49). The older age group, however, found that sexual terms have increased in severity (Hagen 2013:53). Lastly, attitudes towards religious, or blasphemous, swear words were, by the youngest respondents, regarded as less severe than before. Some also stated that they had never regarded such words as swear words (Hagen 2013:49). Interestingly, the oldest respondents were more divided when it came to these words. For some, context was important because of the different religions while others said that they believed these words have become less severe in line with the decline of religion (Hagen 3012:54).

### 1.3 Hypotheses

Based on the theories and findings of the previous research presented above, the following hypotheses were formulated. H1–H3 will examine the respondents' attitudes towards swear words, while H4–H7 concern their actual use of swear words.

**H1: Offence:** Based on Pinker's (2007) different categories, the findings of Millwood-Hargrave (2000), and standards set by OFCOM, the expected response from the participants, both male and female, will be that words connected to the body, i.e. sex and excretions, will be regarded as more offensive than celestial swearing.

**H2: Perception:** In accordance with Feldman et al. (2017) it is expected that people who use swear words will not be regarded in a negative way. Based on DeFrank and Kahlbaugh (2019) it is, however, expected to see a difference in attitudes towards people who sometimes swear and those who often swear. Furthermore, it is expected that there will be a slight difference between male and female respondents, where the female respondents are expected to have a more negative view of people who swear.

**H3: Age and severity:** When ranking word severity, the age of the respondents will, in accordance with Millwood-Hargrave and findings in the BNC, have an effect on their answers. The youngest age group will be more likely to rank the words low in terms of severity, while the oldest age group will have a higher average on severity.

**H4: Gender use and severity:** Based on the tokens in the BNC and Byrne (2017), it is expected to see that both men and women use swear words with little difference in frequency. The words they use are, however, expected to be different. Drawing from the severity rank set by OFCOM, women will be more likely to use the words classified as 'mild' or 'medium', while men will use swear words from all categories.

**H5: Age and use:** The age of the respondents will have an effect on their use of swear words. Based on statistics in the BNC, respondents in the 18–28 age group will swear more than those who are 60+.

**H6: Frequency:** It is expected that the most commonly used swear word(s) will be forms of *fuck* and its derivations, e.g. *fucking*, *fucker*, or *fucked*. These words generate thousands of tokens in the BNC and they can be used in several different ways, e.g. as a verb, an adverb, or a noun, and it is therefore expected that this will be a frequent answer in the questionnaire.

**H7: Context and alternatives:** Based on results from OFCOM (2016), Millwood-Hargrave (2000), and Hagen (2013), the expected finding is that participants will be aware of the context they are in when swearing. Respondents will likely swear in the company of their friends and colleagues, depending on their job, and be more careful when there are children present. Because of this awareness, it is furthermore expected that people will use some alternative swear words, e.g. *effing* or *frick*. Based on Pinker's theory that alternatives are not powerful enough, however, the use of alternative swear words will not be very widespread.

## **2. Methodology**

The present chapter is divided into two parts. Part one concerns the preparation for the research, including decisions about the scope of the survey and the content of and reasons behind the design of the questionnaire used to collect the data. Part two describes the distribution of the survey and how to find and obtain the desired number of participants. In addition, this part also looks into the response rates for online surveys.

### **2.1 Survey and design**

#### **2.1.1 Preparation**

After deciding that the topic for the thesis would be swear words, the next step was deciding where to collect the data. Initially, the plan was to get samples from all over England and compare different cities with each other as well as comparing other factors like gender and age. It quickly became clear that this would be too comprehensive for a master's thesis and instead, I decided to focus on only one city. I do not have many contacts in England, but I knew that the University of York has a unit named the Norwegian Study Centre (NSC). I had previously attended a course named 'Unholy Shit' at the NSC, which inspired the topic for this thesis. I contacted Dr Beck Sinar, the lecturer for 'Unholy Shit', at the NSC and she was very helpful. Because the NSC was one of the few connections I had in England, York became the best alternative when choosing a city. Moreover, York is a city with a rich history and it has played an important part in different aspects of society. Christianity has been a part of York history since the 600s (*History of York: York Minster*, accessed 28 January 2019) and the 2011 UK census revealed that nearly 60% of the population in York still consider themselves Christians (KS209EW 2012, accessed 28 January 2019). In addition, York has been an industrial town due to both railways and chocolate and sweet factories (Hall 1996:49). These are aspects that would hopefully result in a diverse population consisting of people with different backgrounds and beliefs.

Before making and distributing the survey, the question of ethics needed to be addressed. In order to gather data, there needs to be an approval from the Norwegian Centre

for Research Data (NCRD). This is to make sure that the data that is gathered upholds the participants' right to privacy and the rules set by the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Because the data was collected on a secure server and did not gather anything that would reveal the participants' identities, the survey was approved and could be carried out. As so much of our online footprints can be traced these days, it is reasonable that survey participants want to secure their anonymity. Surveys can be used to gather information for third parties or they might even be used, when collecting sensitive information, for identity theft (Manzo & Burke 2012:340). It is therefore understandable that people need reassurance about the reason and legitimacy behind the survey. For some, swearing might also be a sensitive topic, and so it was important to underline to those answering the survey that their answers would be anonymous and that it could not be traced back to them. The survey needed to contain a section where it was clearly stated that I was the only one who would access the answers and that it would not be used for anything except my master's thesis. If the participants felt insecure about their anonymity in the survey, it could be a potential reason for them to not take or finish it.

### **2.1.2 Scope**

After deciding both the topic of the thesis and the city where it should take place, the next step was planning how extensive the research was going to be. The initial plan was to gather as much data as possible, and mainly make the thesis a quantitative study. After some deliberations, however, it seemed that in order to get more interesting findings the best way to go was a combination of qualitative and quantitative research, but with the main focus still being quantitative. This would allow the questions to be both open- and close-ended (Sue & Ritter 2015:56–60) and the results to be a combination of general tendencies and individual examples allowing me to cross-analyse answers. In order to obtain the desired number of participants and not exceed the thesis limit, the scope could not be too large. There needed to be a balance between having enough participants to do a quantitative study and few enough to do a qualitative study. The goal was to have three age groups – 18–28, 35–50, and 60+ – which was an extension of the 2013 thesis consisting of two age groups. The reason for having these three age groups was to, hopefully, be able to look at three different generations. Each age group would also be divided into men and women. Initially, the plan was to have 10 respondents from each gender in each age group, resulting in 60 respondents. Because the



distribution of the survey would be via email, however, this was lowered to five respondents for each gender, making the total 30 respondents. This was because even though the reach of email surveys is vast, it is not easy to get people to forward the survey and to make sure that those who receive it actually conduct it. Had the collection been through face-to-face conversations, it might have been easier to get responses.

### **2.1.3 Questions**

When making the online survey there were several factors that needed to be taken into consideration and every decision made when making a survey will have an impact on the next decision (Sue & Ritter 2015:51). Which questions ought to be included, what platform should be used to make the questionnaire, what should the design look like, and how much time it would take, were some of the key elements that should be addressed. The most important question was the first one: which questions should be included in the survey? The easy thing to do is to fill the survey with everything that might be relevant to your study in order to get as much information as possible. Because making the survey was one of the first things I did, the initial questionnaire included several questions that turned out not to be relevant for the actual study. The problem with including these unimportant questions is that the survey will end up being too long and take too much time, causing the surveyor to potentially lose respondents (*ibid.*). According to some researchers, the recommended length of a survey is no more than 10 minutes (Manzo & Burke 2012:340), and shorter surveys will probably generate more responses than longer ones. Surveys that offer a reward at the end might receive more responses despite them being more than 10 minutes, but as this survey did not do so, the timing ought to be under 10 minutes. In addition to time, adding questions that are not clearly relevant for the thesis could make the questionnaire incoherent and confuse the respondents, causing them to not finish the survey (Sue & Ritter 2015:51).

In order to hopefully make the survey straightforward, the questions were divided into three parts with each part being introduced by a short text. This was done to gather the different subtopics together and make a more coherent survey (Gideon 2012:96) Part one included background information about the responders. This section mainly contained basic questions where the participants had to choose from a set of given answers, or questions that required a short answer. Gender, age group, education level, religion, sexuality, and English

as a mother tongue were all close-ended with pre-made options to choose from. The options for both education level and religion were inspired by the British National Census from 2011 (*2011 Census questionnaire for England*), hoping that the questions would be familiar to responders. In addition, using these options would hopefully make sure that all possibilities were included. The options for age were pre-determined because the thesis is looking into certain age groups, not individual age, and this would make it easier to sort when looking at the collected data. For the questions about gender and sexuality, it was important to make options that would include everyone. This is why both questions have an 'other' option, and why the sexuality question also has a 'prefer not to answer' option. Birthplace and how long the responder had lived in York were open-ended questions, but these questions should also be quite easy to answer. All these demographic questions were placed in the first section of the survey. This might be contrary to what is often done and recommended (Sue & Ritter 2015:69), but it would make it easier to sort out those who did not meet the requirements of the study and therefore did not need further attention. Additionally, going through questions that require little thought might encourage the responders to continue with the survey because they have already answered several questions.

The second section of the survey contained questions connected to the research questions and hypotheses for the thesis. It was introduced with a text telling the respondents that the following questions would ask about their use of and attitude towards swear words. Again, close-ended questions made up most of the section. This was mainly because I did not need too many open-ended questions in order to answer the hypotheses and because it would be much easier to sort the data once I had what I needed. An important part of constructing these close-ended questions was to make sure that the options would cover several possibilities and were exhaustive when necessary (Sue & Ritter 2015:60). When asking the respondents how often they swear, the answers they could choose from were inspired by other surveys on swearing that can be found online<sup>11</sup>. By looking at how others have asked the same question, it was easier to make a comprehensible and exhaustive list. The other open-ended questions also included several possible answers, but they did not need to be completely exhaustive. When asking in what situations the respondents swear, how they feel about people who 'sometimes' or 'often' use swear words, and what the relationship towards swearing was when they grew up, there were several options to choose from and it was possible to choose

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<sup>11</sup> The main inspiration was 'Using swear words', available at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/B3R9WKR>.

more than one answer. In addition, the respondents were also able to fill in their own answers to these questions in a text box if they had something to add. These questions were included to give me an overview of swearing, not necessarily the full picture, and did therefore not need to be exhaustive.

The open-ended questions in part two of the survey were designed to not take too much time, despite the respondents having to write their own answers. The wording of the questions tried to indicate that the answers did not have to be complex. Still, it was stated in the introduction to part two that the answers should only be short explanations of the respondents' thoughts and that the answers did not need to be more than a few sentences. Because swearing might be a sensitive topic for some, it was also stated that respondents could write 'N/A' on any question they felt uncomfortable answering. An introduction like this seemed necessary because if the participants believed they needed to write long answers when faced with text boxes, it might cause them to skip the questions or exit the survey (Sue & Ritter 2015:56). In addition, if participants chose to do the survey on a mobile phone or tablet, the small keyboard could result in incomplete answers or auto correct could make the answers incomprehensible (ibid.). Three of the open-ended questions – which swear words they use most frequently, if there are swear words they do not regard as offensive, and if they use other, similar sounding words to avoid swearing – asked the respondents to simply write down words and did not require full sentences. The fourth open-ended question – if the respondent changes their word-use based on whom they are talking to – might require more thinking. However, because part two of the survey contained questions in the same genre, it would, hopefully, allow the respondents to be in the right mindset and not over-think their answers.

Part three of the survey contained 12 words<sup>12</sup> that the respondents had to rate based on how offensive they regarded the words. The rating was a numerical scale ranging from one to six, where one equalled mild and six equalled severe. This was stated in the introduction. The scale was numerical because that would allow for averages to be calculated when the data was collected which in turn could be a foundation for comparison. It had an even-numbered set of options because I wanted to eliminate the possibility of simply choosing the middle one. The hope was that the respondents would have to think and form an opinion about the words and

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<sup>12</sup> See appendix 1.

what they meant to them (Gideon 2012:100). Because the words could evoke different feelings in the respondents, it was important to have a scale that would reflect this. Even though the difference in attitude towards some words might not be great, the respondents should still have the opportunity to differentiate between them. It was important to find the right balance between too few and too many options (Sue & Ritter 2015:64). Furthermore, the swear words were based on the words used in Millwood-Hargrave (2000) and Hagen's (2013) study and the aim was to choose words that would represent a variety of categories, both in the way they are used and where they stem from. In the survey, the swear words were placed in alphabetical order in the hope that the placement of the word would not affect the answers.

In addition to considering the different parts of the questionnaire and the actual questions, there were other, more general aspects that also needed to be present throughout the survey. Both Sue and Ritter (2015) and Gideon (2012) present lists of different elements that any surveyor should be aware of when making a survey. Both lists focus on how the language used in the survey should be precise and easy to understand (Sue & Ritter 2015:73; Gideon 2012:94). Using full sentences and everyday language without jargon and slang will make the survey accessible to more people and might provide more diverse answers (Sue & Ritter 2015:72). To make the questions easy to understand they should not be double-barrelled, e.g. 'do you consider people who swear dishonest and less educated?', or questions with double negatives (Gideon 2012:96). Questions like these might confuse the respondents or make them answer something they do not actually believe. Furthermore, the questions should not be leading or biased in any way (Sue & Ritter 2015:73; Gideon 2012:97). If the respondents detect the surveyor's own opinion or feel like a certain answer is the right one, they might answer what they think is expected of them and not what they actually think. If this happens, the collected data will not be accurate, and the results might end up being irrelevant.

## **2.2 Distribution and participants**

### **2.2.1 Finding and contacting participants**

Because of the distance between Bergen and York and the need to be efficient, the easiest way to gather data was to create an online survey with a questionnaire and distribute it through emails. This is one of the most common ways of distributing online surveys and most people today have access to the internet and can check their emails regularly (Sue & Ritter 2015:14). There are several other advantages to distributing the survey via emails as well, one of them being the possible reach of the survey. The number of people that can be reached through email is vast and therefore it presents the surveyor with good opportunities for collecting data (Sue & Ritter 2015:15). Furthermore, emailed surveys also allow the participants to take the survey when they have the time. It will always be there in their inbox. A problem might be that the email is sorted into the spam folder instead of the inbox, but that is a risk that the distributor needs to take. For the surveyor, advantages also include a virtually free distribution and the limited technical skills it requires (Sue & Ritter 2015:15–16). There are several companies online who offer different survey-making tools and programmes and the researcher may choose the one that best fits their ideas and skills.

Prior to distributing the survey, it was presented to some of my fellow students and two British friends. According to Gideon (2012), piloting the survey and testing the questionnaire is the first step after designing it (Gideon 2012:94). It allows the surveyor to find out what works and what does not. The next step is to correct and rewrite the questions based on the findings of the previous stage (*ibid.*). A pilot is often done on a sample of participants equal to those who would actually answer the survey, but because of uncertainties connected to how many responders there would be and the timeframe, this survey was piloted in a smaller scale. My fellow students, who were well-informed about my research, were able to look through the questions to see if they were relevant and if the survey was coherent. They also gave feedback about the structure of the questionnaire and how long it took to finish. The feedback given by my British friends dealt more with spelling and the wording of the questions. Combined, the feedback was a great help towards making a better questionnaire. In addition to help related to the questionnaire, some fellow students also helped me draft the text that would accompany the email sent to the organizations. Because people might receive

several emails a day, both the header and the invitation text need to be accurate and appealing (Manzo & Burke 2012:334). The aim was to have a text that included the most essential information, without being too long. It should also be both informal and professional. By saying that the recipients were more than welcome to contact me and signing the email with my name and ‘University of Bergen’, the hope was that people would see that this was a serious project<sup>13</sup>.

Because the survey would focus on three age groups, it was important to find a way to connect with people in all three groups. Firstly, for the youngest age group, 18–28, a good option was to email different student organizations at the University of York (UoY) and ask them to distribute the link to their members. The student union at UoY, YUSU, has its own website with information about all the different student organizations, including their email addresses. There are over 200 organizations in YUSU with different interests, and so I was able to find a varied selection of groups to contact. When selecting groups to send the invite to, I tried to choose a wide variety of interests in the hope that they could represent different views or attitudes. Some groups, however, were chosen because of their interest, e.g. the linguistic society, or because they were all male or all female groups, e.g. sports teams. Secondly, in order to contact the other two age groups, 35–50 and 60+, there were several possibilities. One was to find a list of sports clubs in York (*Community sports club directory*, 2017)<sup>14</sup> and send the survey to them and ask if they could distribute the survey link. When picking the clubs to send the link to, I tried to choose a variety of different sports. I also wanted to stay away from clubs with junior teams as I did not need people under 18 and because junior clubs might have more reservations toward sharing a survey about swearing. Another possibility was to find and contact interest groups located in York on the MeetUp website<sup>15</sup>. This is a website where people can create their own groups to gather people with similar interests. The website allows you to contact the group leaders, which presented another way of distributing the survey. Lastly, Dr Sinar was also kind enough to share the survey link on her Facebook page and encourage people to partake in it<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix 5 for the full invitation text.

<sup>14</sup> See Appendix 3 for example.

<sup>15</sup>

<https://www.meetup.com/find/?allMeetups=true&radius=50&userFreeform=york&gcResults=York%2C+UK%3AGB%3AEngland%3AYork%3AYork%3Anull%3Anull%3A53.9599651000001%3A-1.087297900000669&change=yes&sort=recommended&eventFilter=mysugg>.

<sup>16</sup> See Appendix 4 for the list of organizations and clubs who received the email.

### 2.2.2 Obtaining the desired number of participants

A flaw concerning the choice of participants was that there was no overview of how many members the different organizations had, neither from YUSU, the sports clubs, nor the MeetUp groups. In addition, the invitation did not ask the recipients to answer whether or not they shared the survey with their members or to provide the number of members they have. These two elements made the process of gathering data slightly unpredictable. Even though the number of potential recipients and responders was quite large, the reality was more uncertain. Nevertheless, these elements allowed me to maintain the anonymity of the respondents as I did not know where the answers I did receive came from. The survey programme that was used did show the number of responses to the questionnaire, which allowed for a good overview. As people responded, I was able to follow the progress of the different age groups and genders to see where more responses were necessary. Because the background questions were placed early in the questionnaire, it was easy to check the progress without having to go through the whole form. In addition to looking at the age and gender of the respondents, the background questions also allowed me to check where people came from and how long they had lived in York. Even though the focus was York, it was not required that the respondents were born there. I did, however, choose to eliminate people who had lived in York for less than a year, which mainly meant new students.

After distributing the survey and waiting for responses, it became clear that some age groups and genders were harder to obtain than others. This was the case for men in general and the 60+ age group. I had predicted that the latter group would, most likely, be harder to fill than the others, due to younger generations often using the computer more frequently than the older ones. Because both the YUSU and the York Sports Club Directory had an extensive number of clubs to choose from, I was able to send the survey invitation to more organizations in the hope that I would receive more replies. The second time the email was sent<sup>17</sup>, an extra line was included to ask the recipients to especially encourage male members to partake in the survey after it was clear, through the statistics, that more men were needed to fill the initially desired number. However, this second round of invitations did not produce enough answers either. Luckily, I was able to travel to York at the beginning of January to manually collect the remaining data. While in York, I asked people I sat next to at cafés or

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<sup>17</sup> See Appendix 4 to see when the different clubs received the email (round one or two).

students at the university if they would fill out the questionnaire. I also met with Dr Sinar, who was very helpful and encouraging. With the tip from her to ask people at bus stops to answer the survey while waiting for the bus, I was able to collect the remaining data. The respondents at the bus stop were all 60+ and even though the response from that age group had been low online, most of them seemed genuinely interested in the topic and were more than happy to answer the questionnaire.

After my visit to York, I had gathered the number of participants that I wanted. In total, the survey received 48 responses where 39 respondents took the online survey and nine respondents completed the questionnaire when I visited York. Because the scope was restricted to the three age groups, people who answered that they were either 29–34 or 51–59 were removed alongside those who had lived in York less than a year. This resulted in 38 relevant responses, 15 men and 23 women. The three male age groups and women 18–28 and 60+ all had five respondents, while women aged 35–50 received 13 respondents. Even though the number of participants was uneven, the 13 respondents in the female 35–50 age group were not downsized because the hypotheses and findings did not require the numbers to be even. The ratings in part three of the survey would be based on averages and the presentation of results would be done in percentages.

### **2.2.3 Response rates**

As is evident from the distribution of the email invitations and the responses that were gathered, the response rates to online surveys are not always as great as they could be. This is a concern that has previously been examined by, amongst others, Manzo and Burke (2012). They highlight how people, even though we live in a digital age, appear to be less interested in participating in online surveys and harder to reach for such purposes (Manzo & Burke 2012:327). If a researcher experiences low response rates, it might affect the validity of the research, especially if the non-response is not random (ibid.). If there is a connection between the people who chose not to answer the survey, e.g. education level, gender, or age, the answers the surveyor receives might be biased and not particularly varied. According to previous research, younger generations and people with a higher education level are more likely to answer online surveys than other groups (Padayachee 2016:26). This was somewhat visible through my own survey where the lowest response rate came from those 60+.



Furthermore, interest for the survey topic is also a key part in obtaining respondents (Albaum & Smith 2012:183). It was stated in the email invitation that the survey concerned swear words, which can be a sensitive or taboo topic for some. Therefore, some organizations might not want to distribute such a survey to their members. Lastly, there is also a possibility that the organizations simply do not distribute outside information and invitations to their members. This might be because they have received too much of it in the past (Manzo & Burke 2012:333) or because it can be perceived as unprofessional.

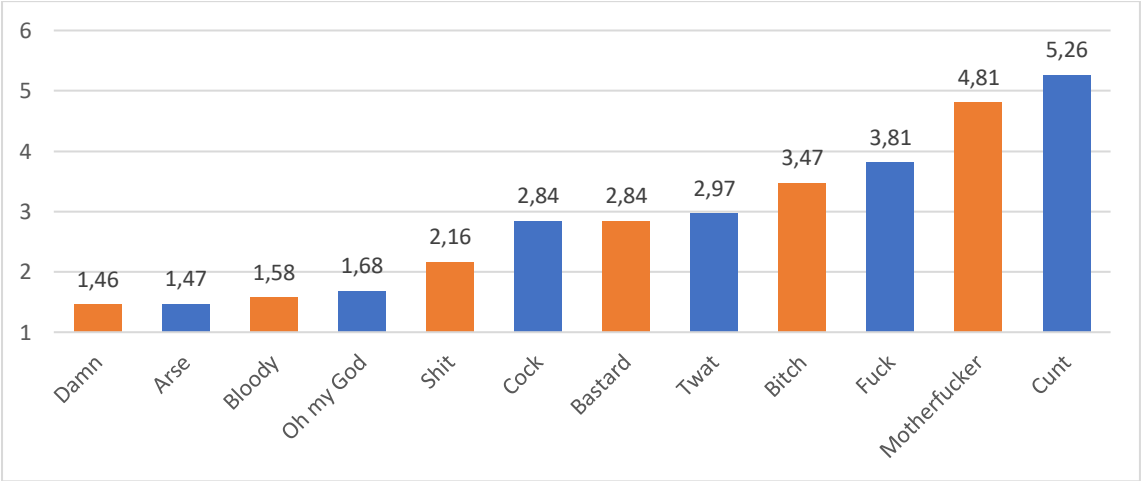
### 3. Findings and discussion

The current chapter will present and discuss the findings of the online survey, which is divided into three parts. Part one presents findings concerning hypotheses H1 to H3, the respondents' attitude to swearing, while part two addresses hypotheses H4 to H8, the respondents' actual use of swear words. The third part addresses findings that were not predicted in any of the hypotheses. All findings are first presented through tables and figures before being described and discussed further. Some findings are also tested for their statistical significance using the Chi-square test. P-values below 0.05 will be considered statistically significant. All quotes from the respondents that are used in this chapter are cited exactly as they were given, unless marked otherwise.

#### 3.1 H1: Offence

H1 stated that words connected to the body, i.e. sex and excretion, will be ranked more offensive than celestial, i.e. religious, swear words. There are twelve words in total, with nine of them related to the body and the rest split between three of Pinker's other categories (see subsection 1.3.1). Figure 3.1 below shows an overall average of the scores given to the 12 different swear words in part three of the online survey where the respondents were asked to rate the words based on how offensive they found them. The ranking was based on a scale from one (mild) to six (severe). The averages are based on both the male and female answers and across age groups.

Figure 3.1: Overall swear word rating for part three of the online survey

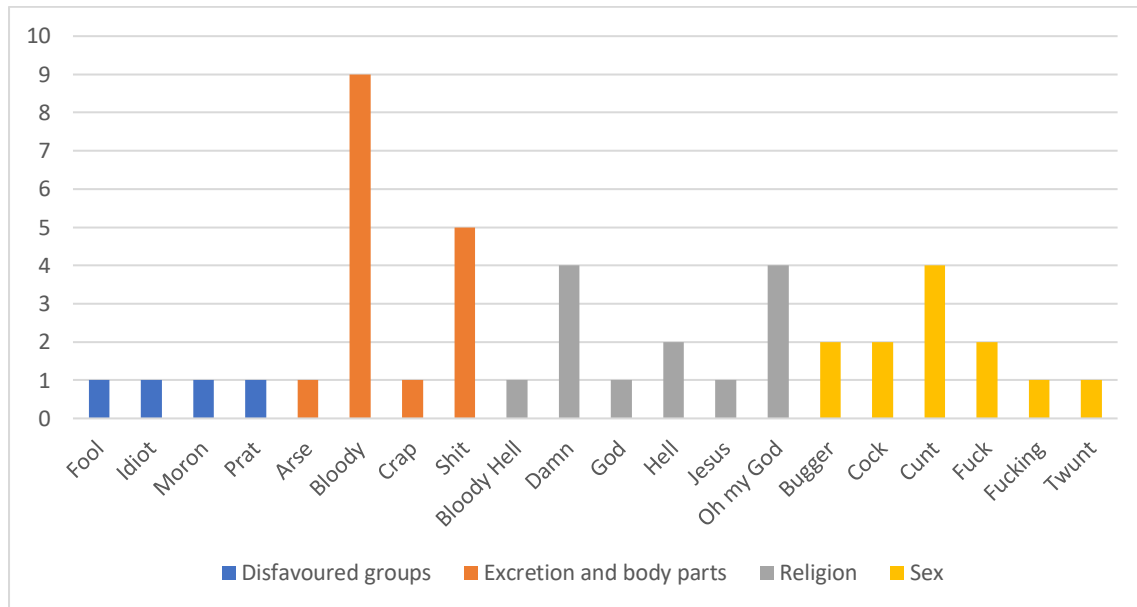


As Figure 3.1 shows, the two celestial swear words, *damn* and *Oh my God*, both have a severity ranking that is low. With a score of 1.46, *damn* is the lowest ranked word of all, and *Oh my God* follows closely with 1.68. By comparison, *cunt* is ranked the worst with 5.26, followed by *motherfucker* with a score of 4.81, both words belonging in the sex category. Alongside the celestial words, however, both *arse* and *bloody* receive rather low rankings, with respectively 1.47, the second lowest ranking, and 1.58. Both of these words can belong in different categories. *Arse* could be placed in both the sex and excretion category, based on the context. For the purpose of simplicity in the following discussions, the excretion category is therefore expanded to also include body parts, making *arse* a part of this new category. Furthermore, *bloody* might be placed as both religion and excretion, based on etymology. A common perception might be to think of *bloody* as a result of either *by our Lady*, referring to Virgin Mary, or *God's blood*, both backgrounds making it a celestial swear word. However, according to the OED, it is unlikely that the origin of the intensifying and taboo word *bloody* derives from either of these religious aspects (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *bloody*, accessed 21 February 2019). It is more likely that the intensifier stems from actual blood or bloodshed (*ibid.*) and *bloody* is therefore placed in the excretion and body parts category.

In Figure 3.1, the five words directly connected to sex are ranked among the most offensive words. In addition to *cunt* and *motherfucker*, there is also *fuck*, with a score of 3.81, *twat*, scoring 2.97 and *cock*, with an average of 2.84. The two remaining words that are ranked the most severe, *bitch*, with an average of 3.47, and *bastard*, with an average of 2.84, are words that belong in the disfavoured group category. *Bitch*, deriving from the name for a female dog, was originally a way of negatively describing a woman (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *bitch*, accessed 21 February 2019), and is therefore placed as a part of disfavoured groups. The four swear words with the lowest rank, *oh my God*, *bloody*, *arse*, and *damn*, all with an average below two, do not belong in only one category. The last word in the bottom half of the list, *shit*, has an average just above two with a score of 2.16 and belongs in the excretion and body parts category. This means that the highest ranked words mainly consist of one category, while the words with the lowest rank are much more divided between categories.

Figure 2.1 below shows an overview of answers given to the question 13 in the survey – ‘are there any words you do not regard as offensive’. The answers are divided into Steven Pinker’s categories, i.e. disfavoured groups, excretion and body parts, religion, and sex.

Figure 3.2: A categorization of answers to ‘are there any words you do not regard as offensive’



Note: the numbers show how many times the words or phrases were mentioned.

‘Are there any swear words you do not regard as offensive’ was an open-ended question and the answers that were given have been divided into Pinker’s categories, including the addition to the excretion category, in order to make Figure 3.2 more straightforward. In total, the respondents gave 45 answers to words that they thought of as non-offensive swear words as many of them answered more than one. The 45 answers resulted in 20 different words and phrases shown in Figure 3.2. The swear words in the figure were given by 23 men and women of all age groups. The remaining 15 respondents answered either ‘no’, meaning that there are no swear words the respondent does not find offensive, or left the question blank. As shown, there were no words concerning death and infirmity and only four mentions of words in the disfavoured group category. *Fool*, *idiot*, *moron*, and *prat* do not have a ranking from OFCOM and might therefore not be regarded as swear words, but they were mentioned by the respondents and are therefore included. Both the disfavoured group and excretions and body parts categories contain four words, but for the latter the four words have been mentioned more than once, making the count higher. Sex, excretion and body parts, and religion make up the majority of the words. Excretion and body parts had 16 mentions of swear words that

people did not find offensive, followed by religion with 13 and sex with 12. The most common word not regarded as non-offensive is *bloody* with nine mentions. *Bloody hell* is also mentioned once, but this is placed in the religion category as *hell* is the main word and *bloody* is used emphatically as an intensifier. The second most frequent word, with five mentions and also in the excretion category, is *shit*. This is followed by *cunt*, *damn*, and *oh my God* with four mentions each.

The rest of the words and phrases mentioned by the respondents as ‘not offensive’ all only generated one or two answers each. For the remaining religious words, *hell* is mentioned twice, while both *God* and *Jesus* are only written once. One respondent did type ‘God, Jesus etc.’ in her response, with the ‘etc.’ perhaps indicating that she generally thought of religious words as not offensive. However, she did not elaborate further on her answer which means that there is no clear meaning behind the ‘etc.’. When it comes to the sex category, *bugger*, *cock*, and *fuck* all have two mentions and *fucking* and *twunt*<sup>18</sup> have one. *Bugger* is a word that may be used both cathartically and abusively, with the latter having connotations to gay men, and could therefore be placed both as a word connected to sex or to disfavoured groups. The origin of the word, however, refers to a sexual act (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *bugger*, accessed 22 February 2019) and it is therefore placed in the corresponding category. Lastly, *arse* and *crap*, belonging in the excretion and body parts category, are both only mentioned once. For the remaining respondents, most of them either answered ‘No’ or ‘n/a’, or left the question blank. One respondent wrote a more detailed answer, explaining that ‘[the words] aren’t swearing if I don’t think they are offensive. But I’m not offended by words like *idiot*, *moron*, *fool*, and some people think that is swearing’ (Male 35–50, my italics).

An interesting observation in Figure 3.1 and Figure 3.2 is the fact that *cunt* is ranked as being the most offensive of the 12 words, and yet there are respondents who answered that they do not regard it as an offensive swear word. The four respondents who stated that they do not regard *cunt* as offensive are one male, aged 18–28, and three females, one from each age group. In addition, three of them, the male and two of the females, gave *cunt* a score of six in the severity ranking, something that is displaying mixed feelings towards the word. One of these three respondents also wrote ‘c—t’ as the answer to ‘are there any words you do not regard as offensive?’. By doing so, she is contradicting herself. The respondent answered that

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<sup>18</sup> Described by the respondents as ‘a polite version of *cunt*’. Appears to be a mix of *twat* and *cunt* and is therefore placed in the sex category.

*cunt* is not an offensive word, at the same time that she, perhaps, does not feel comfortable writing the actual word itself. The last respondent rated it as a three on the offensive scale. There might be several reasons to why these four respondents answered *cunt* as a non-offensive word. Firstly, they might have not taken the survey seriously. A problem with surveys and questionnaires is that the surveyor can never be certain that the respondents answer truthfully. Secondly, there is always the chance that they did not understand the question or did not read it thoroughly. Lastly, there is also an idea that the respondents themselves actually do not regard *cunt* as an offensive word, but they know that, generally, in society, it is still considered very offensive. Although both the rating of the swear words and the question in Figure 3.2 asked the respondents about their own thoughts, it might not always be easy to distinguish between general ideas we think we should follow and what we actually feel. This seems especially relevant for the three respondents who did not regard *cunt* as offensive, but also rated it as a six in severity.

Findings in Figure 3.1 and Figure 3.2 indicate that there is no clear, general difference between Pinker's five categories of swear words. On the one hand, a common aspect between the respondents seems to be that abusive words belonging in the disfavoured groups category are rarely thought of as non-offensive. This supports findings in Millwood-Hargrave (2000) and Hagen (2013) where abusive swear words are rated as severe. On the other hand, the two celestial swear words in part three of the survey, *damn* and *oh my God*, are both rated low, but so are *arse*, *bloody*, and *shit*, words associated with excretion and body parts. There is a clearer division between these two categories and the sex category in Figure 3.1, but in Figure 3.2 words related to both sex and religion show similar mentions. It appears that when the respondents are allowed to freely choose their answers instead of selecting from a given set, the difference between the categories becomes smaller. As mentioned, the respondents might not always be able to distinguish between what they think themselves and what is a general perception in society. The two questions presented through Figure 3.1 and Figure 3.2 are quite different in their design and the mindset of the respondents might therefore be different when answering them. When you have to think about words you use yourself, it is, perhaps, more likely that you will answer freely. When you are presented with a set of answers to choose from, it might be easier to follow the common social perception. Although these questions do give some insight into attitudes towards different swear word categories, the findings cannot be said to fully support the claims made in hypothesis H1 that swear words connected to the body will be regarded as more offensive than celestial words.

### 3.2 H2: Perception

H2 stated that people who often use swear words will not be viewed in a negative way, but that there will be slight differences in the perception of people who ‘often’ and ‘sometimes’ swear and between men and women. Table 3.1 below shows an overview of male and female answers to question 16 on the questionnaire – ‘what is your impression of people who “sometimes” use swear words in their everyday speech?’. Similarly, Table 3.2 will present the answers to question 17 – ‘what is your impression of people who “often” use swear words in their everyday speech?’. The respondents were able to choose more than one option in both questions. All numbers are shown in percentages.

Table 3.1: Attitudes towards people who 'sometimes' use swear words

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Male %</b>	<b>Female %</b>	<b>Combined total %</b>
I don't care	46	43	44
They sound less educated	4	9	7
They sound honest	17	11	13
They sound rude	0	9	5
They sound natural	21	16	19
They sound friendly	8	3	5
They sound angry	4	9	7

Table 3.2: Attitudes towards people who 'often' use swear words

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Male %</b>	<b>Female %</b>	<b>Combined total %</b>
I don't care	35	26	30
They sound less educated	13	18	16
They sound honest	13	3	7
They sound rude	4	21	14
They sound natural	13	3	7
They sound friendly	9	3	5
They sound angry	13	26	21

An overview of the two tables shows that the female respondents are generally more negative towards swearing. This is similar whether the swearing happens ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’. When it comes to attitudes towards people who ‘sometimes use swear words’, the negative answers, ‘they sound less educated,’ ‘they sound rude’, and ‘they sound angry’, all generate 9% in the female answers. By comparison, the male answers are, respectively, 4%, 0%, and 4% for the same three options. Likewise, the male respondents show higher percentages than the females for the positive options. ‘They sound honest’, ‘they sound natural’, and ‘they sound friendly’ all have scores that are 5% or 6% higher in the male answers than in the female ones. When changing the wording from ‘sometimes’ to ‘often’ in the questions, the differences between the genders are still present. Every positive option, ‘they sound honest/natural/friendly’, has 3% of the answers for females in Table 3.2, while the men show percentages of respectively 13%, 13%, and 9%. The negative answers, ‘they sound less educated/rude/angry’, on the other hand, receive respectively 18%, 21%, and 26% with the females, and 13%, 4%, and 13% with the males. These percentages show that there is a difference between the positive and negative options in the female answers for people who ‘often’ use swear words, while the percentages are quite similar for the men.

As both tables show, ‘I don’t care’ is the highest scoring option on both questions. For people who ‘sometimes’ use swear words in Table 3.2, ‘I don’t care’ makes up almost half of the responses alone, with 46% for the male participants, 43% for the females and 44% in total. There is a noticeable difference in percentages for ‘I don’t care’ when comparing the two tables, where, in Table 3.2, male answers make up 35%, female 26%, and the total equals 30% of the answers. This means an 11% difference for men and a full 17% difference for women, while the combined total percentage is 14% lower. In addition, while both genders were fairly similar in percentages and close to the total percentage for ‘I don’t care’ in Table 3.1, there is a more visible difference between all three in Table 3.2. From a 3% difference in Table 3.1, Table 3.2 shows that there is a 9% difference between the genders and a naturally larger gap between genders and the combined percentage.

While both tables had similarities, with ‘I don’t care’ having the highest percentage, the rest of the options show a larger variety between percentages. In Table 3.1, the second highest percentage for both genders is the option ‘they sound natural’. By comparison, the second highest percentage in Table 3.2 is the option ‘they sound angry’. A general tendency appears to be that the negative options, ‘they sound angry’, ‘they sound less educated’, and



‘they sound rude’, have a higher percentage in Table 3.2 than in Table 3.1. For the female respondents, ‘they sound angry’ has a difference of 17 percentage points between the two tables, while ‘they sound rude’ has a difference of 12 percentage points. Both options have higher percentages in Table 3.2. In addition, ‘I don’t care’ has a lower percentage in Table 3.2 than in Table 3.1 for the female respondents. With a 17 percentage points difference, the female respondents appear to be more conscious toward people who often swear. For the male respondents, there is a difference of 9 percentage points for ‘they sound angry’ between the two tables with the percentage being higher for people who ‘often’ use swear words. Similarly, ‘they sound less educated’ has a difference of 9 percentage points for both the male and female respondents. In the male answers, ‘they sound rude’ has 0% in Table 3.1 and 4% in Table 3.2. By comparison, positive options, like ‘they sound natural’ and ‘they sound honest’, both score lower in Table 3.2 than Table 3.1. For the females, these two options differ with respectively 13 and 8 percentage points. For the male respondents, ‘they sound natural’ and ‘they sound honest’ differ by respectively 8 and 4 percentage points.

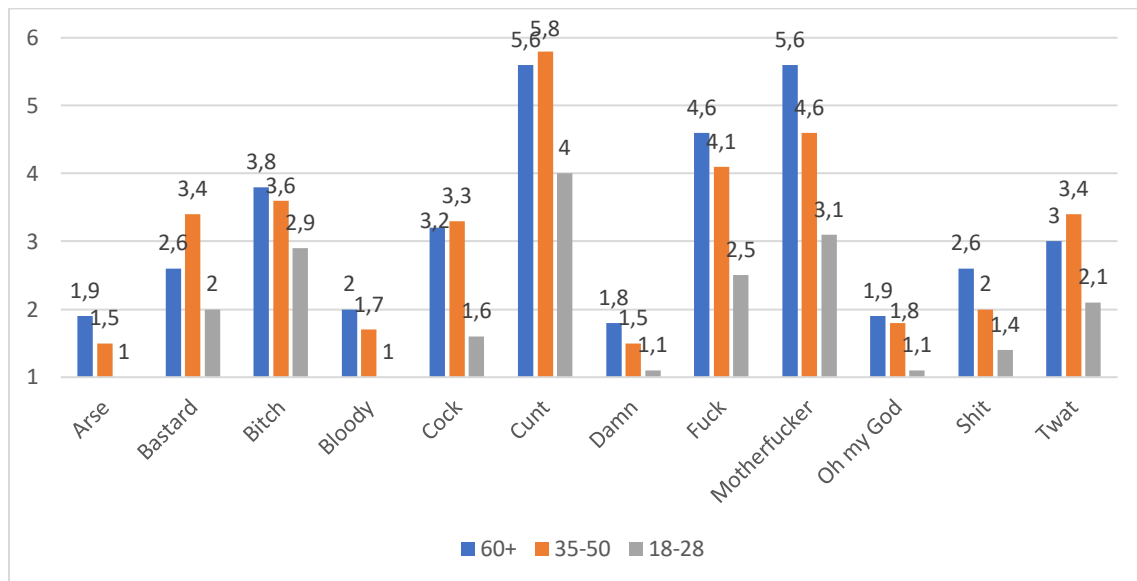
In the research presented by Feldman et al. (2017), it is stated that people who swear could either be perceived negatively as rude and less educated, or positively as honest and authentic. Based on the findings presented in Tables 3.1 and 3.2, it appears that there is no general perception of people who use swear words in their everyday speech. Because there are so many swear words in the English language and people have different opinions on which words actually qualify as swear words, it might be difficult to find a general attitude. The most common answer, however, was ‘I don’t care’. This was across all respondents and can be an indication of how swear words are losing their taboo status. Words that used to be regarded as very rude are now being used so much that they have lost their strength, meaning that swear words might not have a shocking effect on people anymore because they are used to hearing them everywhere. Nevertheless, there appears to be a difference between attitudes towards people who ‘sometimes’ swear and those who ‘often’ swear and between men and women. This is more in line with the findings in DeFrank and Kahlbaugh (2019). People who sometimes use swear words in their everyday speech are viewed positively, while people who often use swear words are viewed more negatively. One respondent answered ‘I don’t care’ about people who sometimes swear, but wrote ‘lower class’ (Female 35–50), which was not a pre-made option, for people who often swear. This is a good example of what DeFrank and Kahlbaugh are discussing when they state that people who often swear are considered less favourably.

There is no clear reason for this divide between ‘sometimes’ and ‘often’, but one reason might be that the old ideas of swearing and vocabulary are still present. It is a common perception that people who use swear words have a limited vocabulary and, therefore, when people often swear they might be perceived as less educated or lazy. Instead of thinking of other words to use, those who often swear might be thought of as only using the same words repeatedly instead of varying their language. Another reason might be that people who often swear seem unable to control themselves. There are certain situations where swearing is more frowned upon than others, and people who do not control their swearing are, perhaps, then perceived as unable to read and adapt to the situation they are in. If you are not able to control your swearing, you could appear unprofessional and, again, less educated. Thirdly, when people who only occasionally use swear words use them, the words might have more impact. If a person who rarely swears uses a swear word or phrase, the emotion they are expressing becomes very clear. If someone swears all the time, it can be hard to distinguish their ordinary speech from feelings that are more intense, e.g. when they are very angry or upset. Furthermore, the difference between male and female respondents might be because of stereotypical gender roles where women are more in contact with children. As a result of this, women might be more aware of the language they use and generally more negative towards swearing. These reasons cannot justify any general attitudes towards people who use swear words in their everyday speech, but they do support the claims stated in hypothesis H2.

### **3.3 H3: Age and severity**

H3 stated that the age of the respondents will have an effect on their answers when ranking word severity and that the youngest age group will have lower averages than the oldest age group. Figure 3.3 below shows the average score given by respondents in part three of the online survey. The respondents were asked to rate 12 swear words from one to six, based on how offensive they found the words. The averages in Figure 3.3, shown above each column, consist of the combined male and female answers in the three age groups.

Figure 3.3: Average scores in part three of the survey divided by age



As seen in Figure 3.3, eight out of 12 words show that the average score is higher among the older respondents. *Arse*, *bitch*, *bloody*, *damn*, *fuck*, *motherfucker*, *oh my God*, and *shit* all have lower averages when moving from the oldest to the youngest age group. However, *arse*, *bloody*, *damn*, and *oh my God* generally have low scores in all age groups, with averages that are not higher than two, so the variation between the averages is not that large. The smallest variation is found in *damn*, where the 18–28 age group has an average of 1.1, the 35–50 age group an average of 1.5, and the 60+ age group an average of 1.8. This means that the differences between the age groups do not exceed 0.4. In the other end of the scale, with a minimum difference of 1.0, is *motherfucker*. For this word, the oldest age group has an average of 5.6, the middle age group an average of 4.6, and the youngest age group has an average of 3.1. There are other words with large differences between the age groups, e.g. *cunt* and *fuck*, but *motherfucker* displays steadily decreasing averages from the oldest to youngest age groups with all differences being large. *Fuck*, on the other hand, has a large difference between 18–28 and 35–50, 1.6, but not between the two older age groups. Likewise, there is a large difference between the 18–28 age group and the other two age groups for *cunt*, but the older age groups have very similar averages with only a 0.2 difference. The Chi square test reveals that the differences between the three age groups and their severity rating are not statistically significant ( $p=0.99$ ,  $\chi^2=5.963$ ,  $df=18$ ).

Compared to the words discussed in the previous paragraph, there are four words that do not have the same decrease in averages between age groups, viz. *bastard*, *cock*, *cunt*, and

*twat*. These words do, however, have the same pattern where the middle age group have rated the words the most offensive. In addition, there is also a pattern in the fact that there is a small difference between the oldest and middle age groups and a rather large difference from the middle to the youngest age group. For *bastard*, for example, the average between the 18–28 and 35–50 age groups show an increase of 1.4, while the difference between the middle and oldest age group is 0.8. This is the largest difference between the middle and oldest age group for the four, previously mentioned, words. For the other three words, the average difference between those aged 35–50 and 60+ is no more than 0.4, which is for *twat*. By comparison, the difference between the middle and the youngest age group is never smaller than 1.3, which is also for *twat*. Furthermore, similarly to the highest averages always being in the two oldest age groups, the lowest averages are always found in the 18–28 age group. *Arse*, *bloody*, *damn*, and *oh my God* have the lowest averages in the figure with either 1 or 1.1 and these are found in the youngest age group. *Cunt* and *motherfucker* are the highest scoring words in the figure and also for the 18–28 age group. However, the averages in this age group are much lower than those of the other two age groups. *Cunt*'s average of 4, for example, is the highest score in the youngest age group, but it is much lower than the highest score in Figure 3.3, which is the 35–50 average for *cunt*. In addition, with an average of 2.9, *bitch* is regarded as almost as offensive as *motherfucker* by the youngest age group. In total, 10 of the 12 words have averages below 3 in the youngest age group. Because the alternatives when rating the words were 1–6, this means that most words are not considered especially offensive by those aged 18–28.

The following figures, Figure 3.4 and 3.5, show the averages given in part three of the survey divided into male and female answers where the first figure represents the male answers and the second figure represents the female answers. Furthermore, both figures are divided by the three age groups.

Figure 3.4: Averages for male answers in part three of the survey divided by age

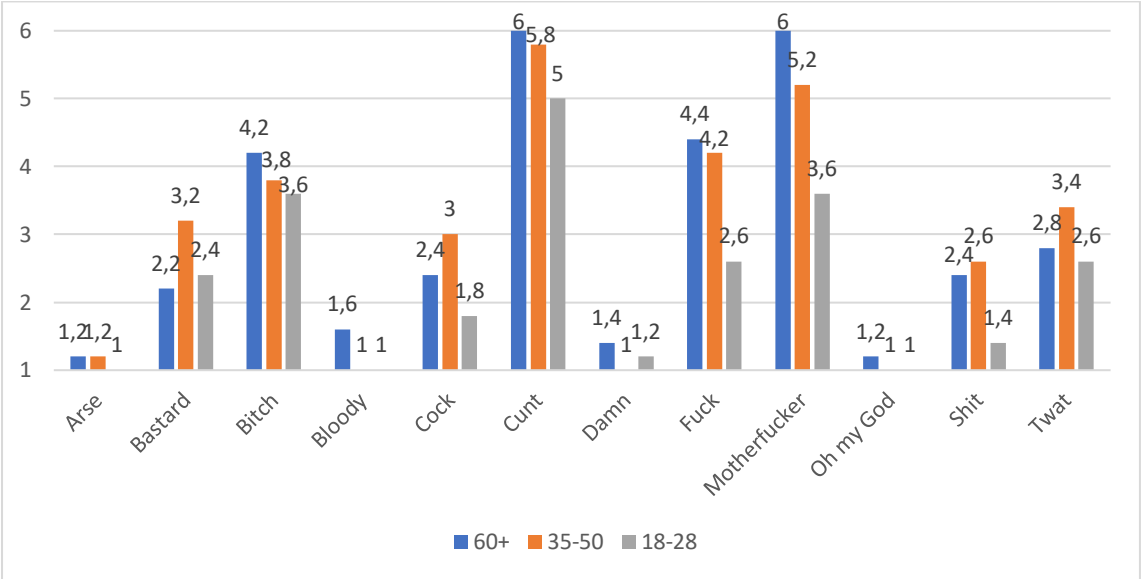
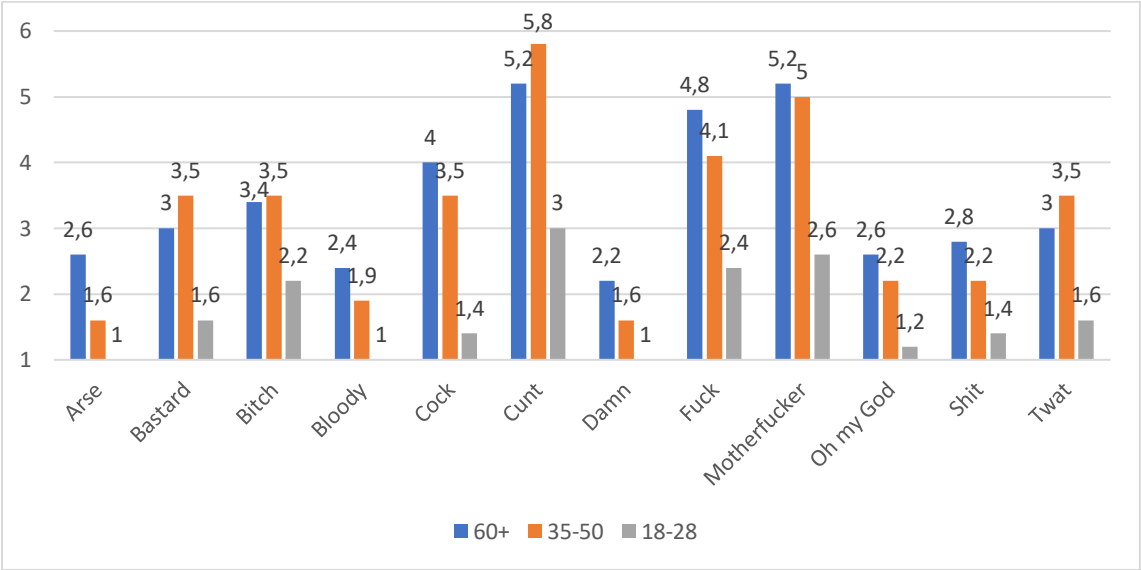


Figure 3.5: Averages for female answers in part three of the survey divided by age



An overview of Figure 3.4 and 3.5 shows that the female respondents appear to have more even averages with several words showing similar scores. The male respondents have averages that vary more between scores from word to word. In Figure 3.4, *arse*, *bloody*, *damn*, and *oh my God* all show very low averages, with no scores higher than 1.6, which is the 60+ average for *bloody*. At the other end of the scale are *cunt* and *motherfucker* where the averages are rather high. These two words have an offensive ranking of 6, the highest possible average, for the 60+ respondents. The same can be seen for the middle age group, where the two words have averages of 5.8 and 5.2, respectively. The exception in the high scores is the

18–28 age group with an average of 3.6 for *motherfucker*, but *cunt* has a high score of 5. The male respondents appear to have clear differences between the twelve words, varying between low and high averages and this might give the impression that the male averages are lower in general. By comparison, Figure 3.5 shows that many words have averages around 2 and the differences between the scores are not as prominent as those in Figure 3.4. The averages are not, however, generally lower for the female respondents. *Cunt*, *motherfucker*, and *bitch* have higher averages for the male respondents, and *shit* and *twat* are very similar in the two figures. Because the words vary between the age groups, it is difficult to state that one gender has generally higher averages than the other.

An interesting difference between the two figures is how, in Figure 3.5, the lowest averages are always found in the 18–28 age group, while there are two cases in Figure 3.4 where other age groups have the lowest averages. In addition, there are some words in Figure 3.4 where the averages are the same for the youngest and middle age groups. For *bloody* and *oh my God*, the two youngest age groups have averages of 1. There are cases of swear words with an average of 1 in Figure 3.5 as well, but this is only found in the youngest age group. In Figure 3.4, *bastard* has a score of 2.2 in the 60+ age group, but a score of 2.4 in the 18–28 age group. This means that the oldest respondents have the lowest average for that word, even though the difference from the youngest age group is only 0.2. This is the only case where the oldest age group has the lowest average. Looking at the same word for the female respondents in Figure 3.5, the middle age group is, like in the previous figure, the group with the highest average, but the lowest score is found in the youngest age group. The second case where the youngest age group does not have the lowest average in Figure 3.4 is for *damn*. Here, the 35–50 age group has an average of 1, while the 18–28 age group has an average of 1.2, which equals a difference of 0.2.

Looking at Figure 3.4, there are both agreements and disagreements between the different age groups. The same words that score low in Figure 3.3, i.e. *arse*, *bloody*, *damn*, and *oh my God*, have low scores across all age groups in Figure 3.4. The four words have several scores of 1, the lowest possible average, across the middle and youngest age groups. Furthermore, *bitch* is also a word with similar scores between the age groups, with averages ranging from 4.2 to 3.6. When it comes to *cunt*, the age groups appear to agree that the word is more offensive than the other words, but there is a difference from the two older age groups down to the youngest age group. However, it is still the highest scoring word for the 18–28

age group and it can therefore be said that there is an agreement in the ranking of *cunt*, despite the difference in averages. Conversely, for the remaining six words, there are more disagreements between the age groups. For *bastard* and *twat*, the highest averages are found in the middle age group. There is a difference of at least 0.6 down to the other two age groups, where the difference is only 0.2. *Shit* and *cock* are also ranked the most offensive by the middle age group, but the averages in the other two age groups are not as similar here as they were for *twat* and *bastard*. Lastly, *fuck* and *motherfucker*, are both rated most offensive by the those aged 60+. For *fuck*, there is little difference between the two oldest age groups, only 0.2, but from the middle to the youngest age group there is a difference of 1.6. This same difference can be seen in *motherfucker*, where the difference, 0.8, is larger between the two oldest age group. The Chi-square test shows that the difference in the offensive ratings amongst the male respondents is not statistically significant ( $p=0.99$ ,  $\chi^2=4.834$ ,  $df=18$ ).

In Figure 3.5, one of the most noticeable aspects is the scores of the youngest age group, those aged 18–28. The females in this age group generally have low scores, including the averages for both *cunt* and *motherfucker*, words that are rated as quite offensive in previous figures and by the other two age groups in Figure 3.5. Eight of the 12 words have averages below 2 in the youngest age group in Figure 3.5, where *arse*, *bloody*, and *damn* all have a score of 1, the lowest average possible. Close to this score is also *oh my God*, *shit*, *cock*, *bastard*, and *twat* where none of the words exceed an average of 1.6. Furthermore, *bitch*, *fuck*, and *motherfucker*, all have similar scores, with averages of 2.2, 2.4, and 2.6, respectively. The highest scoring word is *cunt* with an average of 3. As mentioned, *cunt* is a word that is generally rated very severe, so a score of 3 is rather low compared to other averages for the same word. Because the averages are rather low in this age group, the gap to the other two age groups is often large. The largest difference can be found when examining *motherfucker*. From the youngest age group's score of 2.6 to the 35–50 age groups average with a score of 5, there is a difference of 2.4. This means that the average in the middle age group is almost double the one in the youngest age group. By comparison, there is only a difference of 0.2 between the two oldest age groups. A similar difference can be seen in both *cunt* and *cock*, where the gap between the youngest and middle age group is large and the gap between the middle and oldest age group much smaller. In addition, *bastard*, *bitch*, *fuck*, *oh my God* and *twat* all have averages where the difference from the youngest age group to the second highest average is 1 or more. Conversely, the smallest difference is found in *arse* and *damn*, where the gap from the youngest age group to the middle age group is 0.6.

Examining the two older age groups, it is clear that the averages are more similar compared to those of the youngest age group. Moreover, the tendency is that the oldest age group has the highest averages. The largest difference between the 35–50 and 60+ age groups can be found in *arse*, where it equals 1. The second highest difference is for *fuck*, with 0.7. For the remaining 10 words, the difference in averages between the two oldest age groups is often between 0.4 to 0.6. This is the case for *bastard*, *bloody*, *cock*, *cunt*, *damn*, *oh my God*, *shit*, and *twat*. The smallest differences can be found in *bitch* and *motherfucker*, where they are respectively 0.1 and 0.2. The latter is rated very offensive by both age groups with averages of 5 or more. For the four words where the middle age group has higher averages than the oldest age group, i.e. *bastard*, *bitch*, *cunt*, and *twat*, there are no remarkable differences in averages between the two oldest groups. For *bastard* and *twat*, the difference is 0.5, while it is 0.6 for *cunt*. For the latter, the average for those aged 35–50 is 5.8, which is almost the highest possible average. As mentioned, *bitch* has the lowest average difference, and that is between the two oldest age groups. For all three age groups, the Chi-square tests reveals that the difference in the offensive rating for the female participants is not statistically significant ( $p=0.99$ ,  $\chi^2=4.562$ ,  $df=18$ ).

As the data in Figures 3.3, 3.4, and 3.5 show, there is a clear difference, or change, in attitudes towards swear words from age group to age group. The findings from Vincent (1982) and Millwood-Hargrave (2000) appear to still be relevant, with the youngest generation having a more relaxed attitude towards swear words. Respondents who were 18 years old in 1982 are now almost old enough to be in the 60+ age group. Likewise, those who were 18 years old in 2000 are now old enough to be part of the 35–50 age group. This could be an indication of how attitudes towards swearing are different from generation to generation. However, it is still, most often, the oldest generation that has the highest average ratings for the 12 swear words. This might be an example of how attitudes towards swearing also change with time. When those who are now 60+ were in the 18–28 age group, their language use and attitudes were, perhaps, more relaxed than that of the then 60+ age group at the time, but less relaxed than those who are aged 18–28 now. It appears that attitudes towards swear words can change a great deal with each generation, and this can relate back to what Byrne is saying (see subsection 1.3.2) about how we are products of the time we live in. Millwood-Hargrave emphasises how TV and media is a large part of the youngest generations' lives today. With access to the internet it is, perhaps, more common for younger



generations to hear swearing and profanities, making their attitude towards these words more relaxed. As the three figures show, there is a difference between the three age groups, and if a survey like this is conducted again later, the results might show, based on this and previous research, that the younger generations have an even more relaxed attitude towards swearing.

Another way of examining the findings in the three figures is in connection with age grading. Age grading can be defined as when ‘individuals change their linguistic behaviour throughout their lifetimes, but the community as a whole does not change’ (Labov 1994:84). Another way of saying this is that people change the language they use and their attitude towards it based on their life situation. Based on the averages in the three previous figures, it is clear that there are some changes in attitudes as people get older. As mentioned, some of these changes may be because people are products of the time they live in, but it might also be because people live different lives when they are 18 compared to when they are 60. When people are young, using slang and/or swear words can be a larger part of their everyday vocabulary and they might not be in many situations where a more formal language is required (Tagliamonte 2012:47–48). Furthermore, trying to figure out who you are is something many do when they are growing up, and language use is often part of this. As people get older, many start working and the consequences of their language use might become clearer. As an employee, a more formal language might be required in order to appear professional and continued use of slang and/or swear words could be perceived as improper. In addition, having children can also result in a change in language use for many people, making them more aware of the words they are using. The increased awareness of the words we use could also extend to us becoming more aware of other people’s feelings when we speak. As seen in the three figures, the highest averages for word offensiveness are almost always found in the two oldest age groups and this might therefore be an example of age grading and how attitudes change as we get older and experience different stages of life.

As discussed in Chapter 1, a common perception of swearing and age and gender appears to be that males use more swear words and therefore also have a more relaxed attitude towards these words. Furthermore, it is also believed that those in the older generations will judge swearing more offensive than the younger generations. Looking at the three previous figures, these perceptions are both supported and disproven. Examining the highest averages for word offensiveness in Figure 3.3, they are, in 10/12 words, found in the oldest age group. In addition, the highest averages are normally found in the female 60+ age group, where they

have the highest scores for 7/12 words. The two words that do not have the highest average in the 60+ age groups are found in the female 35–50 age group, meaning that the female respondents have 9/12 of the highest averages. These numbers support the perceptions and stereotypes presented in Pinker (2007), Vincent (1982), and Allan & Burrige (2006) where the older generations and females have more negative attitudes towards swearing. Conversely, an observation in Figure 3.5 that disproves previous perceptions is how the lowest averages are almost always found in the female 18–28 age group. As Byrne (2017) states (see subsection 1.3.2), females are now just as likely as men to use profanities, which is showing a change in women’s attitude towards swearing. The scores in Figure 3.5 where the female 18–28 age group has the lowest average for 11/12 words is an example of how swearing is no longer reserved for the men. Reasons for this might be the continued rise of feminism and equality and campaigns like #metoo which allow women to speak more freely. The findings in the three previous figures show how the claims in H3 are, mostly, supported and that gender does have an impact when rating the offensiveness of swear words with the oldest generation, especially the female respondents, having the highest averages.

#### **3.4 H4: Gender use and severity**

H4 stated that it is expected to see that both men and women frequently use swear words, but that women often use swear words categorized, by OFCOM, as ‘mild’ or ‘medium’, while men use swear words from all categories. Figure 3.6 below shows the male and female results for question 9 in the survey – ‘do you feel like you often use swear words?’. The respondents could choose either ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Figure 3.7 shows the responses to question 10 in the survey – ‘roughly (on average) how often do you swear’. For this question, the respondents could choose between six options and they could only choose one answer.

Figure 3.6: Do the respondents feel like they often use swear words? Divided by gender

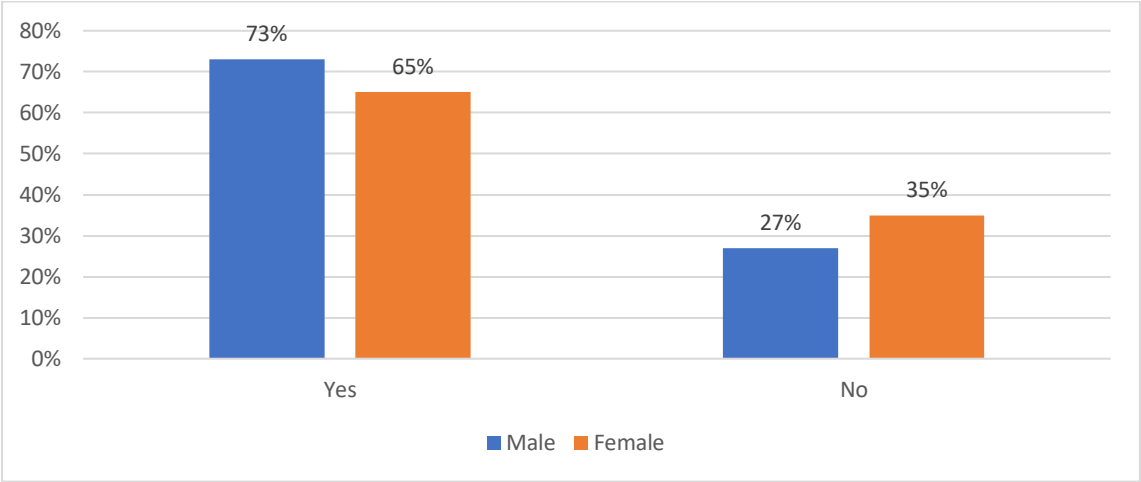
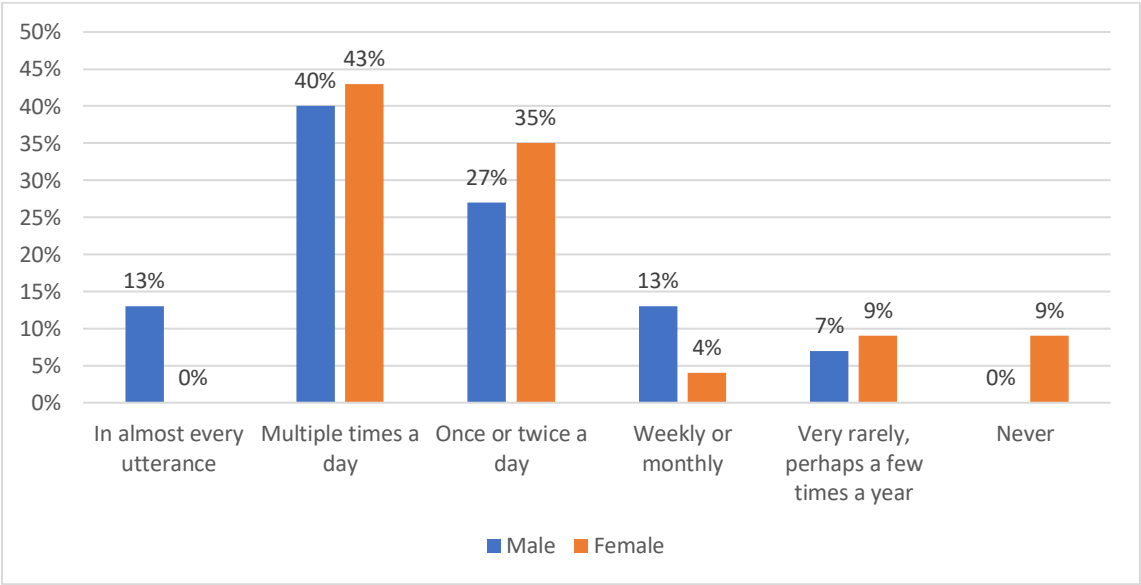


Figure 3.7: Responses to how often the respondents swear



Note: There are more female than male respondents and one answer from a male respondent will have a larger impact on the percentage than a female response.

As seen in Figure 3.6, the difference between the male and female respondents is not that large. When asked if they feel like they often use swear words, 27% of the male participants answered ‘no’, while 73% answered ‘yes’. Similarly, 35% of the female participants answered ‘no’ and 65% answered ‘yes’. This means that there is a difference of 8 percentage points between the genders for both answers. These percentages show that both male and female respondents feel like they often use swear words. Comparing this to Figure 3.7, we can see that the highest percentages for both genders are found in the two answers ‘multiple times a day’ and ‘once or twice a day’, with the highest percentage being in the first of these

alternatives. This shows that there is a correlation between the two questions and that respondents, both males and females, find ‘multiple times a day’ and ‘once or twice a day’ as often using swear words. In the collected data, those who chose ‘yes’, 26 respondents, both males and females, are also the ones who most often chose ‘multiple times a day’, selecting this option 16 times. When it comes to those who chose the alternative ‘once or twice a day’, eight respondents stated that they think this means often using swear words, while four respondents stated that this does not equal often using swear words. The largest differences in Figure 3.7 are found at either end of the figure. There are no female respondents who state that they swear ‘in almost every utterance’ and no male respondents who say that they ‘never’ use swear words. The difference in whether or not the respondents think they often swear is not statistically significant ( $p=0.22$ ,  $\chi^2=1.496$ ,  $df=1$ ), but the difference between men and women in how often they use swear words is statistically significant ( $p=0.00003$ ,  $\chi^2=28.155$ ,  $df=5$ ).

Table 3.3 below shows answers given to question 12 in the survey – ‘which swear words do you use most frequently? Please list at least three’. The male and female answers are divided. Furthermore, the answers are divided into the corresponding category, ‘mild’, ‘medium’, ‘strong’, or ‘strongest’, set by OFCOM. Figure 3.8 shows the percentages of how many times words in each category were mentioned by the male and female respondents.

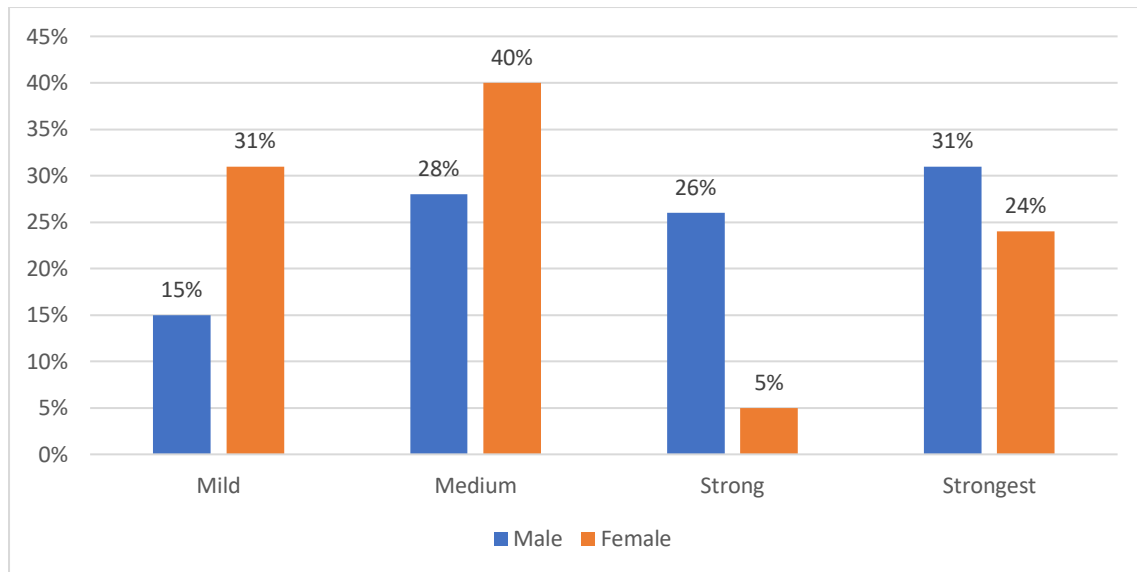
Table 3.3: Categorization of the respondents' most frequent swear words

	<b>Mild</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Strong</b>	<b>Strongest</b>
<b>Male</b>	Arse, Bloody, Bugger, Crap, Oh my God	Arsehole, Bollocks, Piss, Shit(e)	Bastard, Cock, Dickhead, Fanny, Prick, Twat, Wanker	Fuck, Fucker*, Fuckface*, Fucking*, Fuckwit*
<b>Female</b>	Bloody, Bloody Hell, Bugger, Crap, Damn(it), Hell**, Oh my God, Prat**	Arsehole, Bitch, Bollocks, Bullshit, Shit(e)	Bastard, Twat, Wanker	Fuck, Fucking*, Fucktard*, Nigger

\* None of these words are classified by OFCOM, but because they contain the word *fuck*, which is categorized as ‘strongest’, these words are placed in the same category.

\*\*These two words are not categorized by OFCOM and are therefore placed as ‘mild’ as they are apparently not classified as swear words and therefore allowed pre-watershed.

Figure 3.8: The respondents' most frequent swear words divided by OFCOM's categorization



Note: There are more female than male respondents, meaning that one mention of a word will generate a higher percentage in the male responses.

Looking at Table 3.3 above, it is clear that there are several swear words that are the same in both the male and female responses. Comparing the answers given by the respondents, there are nine words mentioned by the male respondents that do not occur in the female row in the table. Of these nine words, *arse* is the only word categorized as 'mild' and *piss* is the only one categorized as 'medium'. The remaining seven words are divided between the 'strong' and 'stronger' category, with four in the first and three in the latter. The three words categorized as 'stronger' are variants of *fuck*, i.e. *fucker*, *fuckface*, and *fuckwit*, and these answers were all given by one male respondent in the 35–50 age group. The 'strong' words that are different from the male to the female responses are *cock*, *dickhead*, *fanny*, and *prick*. Comparing the answers the other way, there are eight words given by the female respondents that do not occur in the male row. Four of these answers, *bloody hell*, *damn(it)*, *hell*, and *prat*, are 'mild' words, while two, *bitch* and *bullshit*, are 'medium' words. The last two words, *fucktard* and *nigger*, are categorized as 'strong'. *Nigger* is included because one of the female respondents wrote 'N word' in answer to the question, and, because of cultural connotations, this is here recognized as *nigger*. The same is the case for the respondent who wrote 'f—k' as one of her answers. A third respondent wrote *twunt* as an answer to her most frequent swear words and explained that this is a 'politer version of C word' (Female 60+). As briefly mentioned above, the word appears to be a compound of *twat* and *cunt*, words that are categorized in two different categories by OFCOM. *Cunt* is classified as 'stronger', but the respondent stated that

it was a politer form. Because of the difficulty of categorizing the word, it is not included in either Table 3.3 or Figure 3.8.

In Figure 3.8 it is evident that the majority of the female swear words are classified as ‘mild’ or ‘medium’ with these two categories making up 71% of the answers. The most frequent words, for the female respondents, in these categories were, respectively, *bloody*, with eight mentions, and *shit(e)*, with 19 mentions. For the male respondents, the ‘mild’ and ‘medium’ categories make up 42% of the answers, meaning that there is a difference of 29 percentage points for these two categories between the genders. The most frequent words in these two categories for the male respondents were *bugger*, with three mentions, and *shit(e)*, with 10 mentions. Comparatively, the highest percentage for the male respondents is found in the ‘strongest’ category. This is largely due to one respondent in the 35–50 age group who wrote *fuck* and four of its derivations. For both the male and female respondents, *fuck* is the word in the ‘strongest’ category that generated the most tokens with 13 mentions by both genders. This is the second most answered swear word, following *shit(e)* with a total of 29. Even though the ‘strongest’ category is the one with the highest percentage for the male respondents, the difference between male and female percentages for this category, 7 percentage points, is the smallest difference in the figure. The largest is found in the ‘strong’ category where there is a difference of 21 percentage points. Even with there being more female than male respondents, there is a total of 14 answers from the male respondents that belong in the ‘strong’ category and only four from the female respondents. The difference between men and women and the categories of swear words they use is statistically significant ( $p=0.00004$ ,  $\chi^2=20.228$ ,  $df=3$ ).

As discussed in Chapter 1, a common perception, supported in Pinker (2007), Allan and Burridge (2006), and Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003), appears to be that women use swear words less frequently than men. As seen in Figure 3.7, however, the difference is not that large. The two most common answers from both male and female respondents are that they use swear words on a daily basis. For the male respondents, 80% answer that they use swear words every day. This is closely followed by the female respondents, where 78% state that they use swear words daily. This small difference of 2 percentage points might go against the previous perceptions that swearing is still a male-dominated trait. Accordingly, these percentages may instead support the claims made, especially by Byrne (2017), that women are no longer afraid to use swear words the same as men. Even though the findings in Pinker

(2007), Allan and Burrige (2006), and Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) are not that much older than Byrne's book, it appears that the connection between gender and swearing has changed over the last 10–15 years. This is also supported through a comparison between Figure 3.8 and Figure 1.2 in Chapter 1, where the numbers are from the BNC from 1994 and show that both men and women have low frequencies of the 'strong' and 'strongest' swear words. The fact that only male respondents answered that they use swear words 'in almost every utterance' and only female respondents stated that they 'never' use swear words, cannot be overlooked as it is something that support the older books and articles. This could mean that respondents in York share similar traits with people in other parts of the world. There are, however, only two respondents for each of these options, showing that the majority of the respondents in this survey are more similar than not. As mentioned in the previous subsection, a reason for the change in swearing and gender might be the continued rise of feminism and awareness of female rights and abilities. Women are, hopefully, able to speak more freely and remove some of the stereotypical female language traits.

Looking at Figure 3.8, however, some stereotypes toward swearing and gender are still supported. While the male responses are more evenly distributed between the different categories, the clear majority of the female responses are sorted as 'mild' or 'medium', supporting the idea of a stereotypical 'clean' female language. This idea can also be supported by the fact that while the female respondents have the highest percentages for the two least severe categories, the male respondents have the highest combined percentages for the 'strong' and 'strongest' categories. There are also two cases when answering their most frequent swear words where female respondents have not written out the word properly. Instead of writing *fuck*, one respondent answered 'f—k', and another respondent wrote that she often uses the 'N word', instead of writing *nigger*. Both words are categorized as 'strongest'. Answering like this could indicate that these women do not mind using the words, but that they are conscious about what other people might think when they do, or that they are more aware of the severity of the word when they write it down. Examining all these factors together, it appears that female language is more 'child-friendly', highlighting the stereotype of the woman as a carer and the one who spends more time with children. As all 'mild' words and most 'medium' words, depending on the context, are allowed pre-watershed and these are, apparently, mainly the types of swear words used by women, this can support the idea that female language is 'cleaner' than male language. In addition, because many of the 'mild'

words are, perhaps, not considered as swear words by some, it adds to the feeling of a ‘cleaner’ language for women.

As briefly mentioned, the largest difference in Figure 3.8 is in the ‘strong’ category where the male respondents have 14 tokens. Three words in this category, *bastards*, *twat*, and *wanker*, are also mentioned by the female respondents, but the male respondents also have an additional four words that are not mentioned by the females. These words are *cock*, *dickhead*, *fanny*, and *prick*, and are all words that are linked to genitals. Most words categorized as ‘strong’ by OFCOM are words concerning sex and different synonyms for genitals, and it appears that the men are more likely to use these words than women. In addition, it seems like the male respondents are more likely to use words connected to male genitalia. *Wanker* has more tokens in the male than female responses, and *cock*, *dickhead*, and *prick* are not even mentioned by the women. There are no clear reasons as to why this is, but one reason might be the fact that male-related swear words are more often used in a humorous context (see subsection 1.2.2). Men may be more likely to use swear words as humour than women, and the male genitals are apparently more related to humour. Another reason might be that sex and genitals are still more taboo in female language than in male. There is more stigma concerning women and sex, and it is, perhaps, still a little frowned upon for women to talk and be open about sex. Steering away from the use of synonyms for, especially, male genitalia might therefore be more natural for women. The general perceptions that can be drawn from these findings do, however, support the claims, made in H4, that women are swearing almost as much and men, but that women also tend to use more swear words from the ‘mild’ and ‘medium’ categories.

### **3.5 H5: Age and use**

H5 stated that it was expected that age will have an effect on the respondents’ use of swear words and that the younger age group will swear more than those who are 60+. Figure 3.9 below shows answers to question 9 in the online survey – ‘do you feel like you often use swear words?’ and is divided between the three age groups. Figure 3.10 shows answers to question 10 in the online survey – ‘roughly (on average) how often do you swear?’, and is also divided between the three age groups.



Figure 3.9 Responses to how often the respondents use swear words divided by age

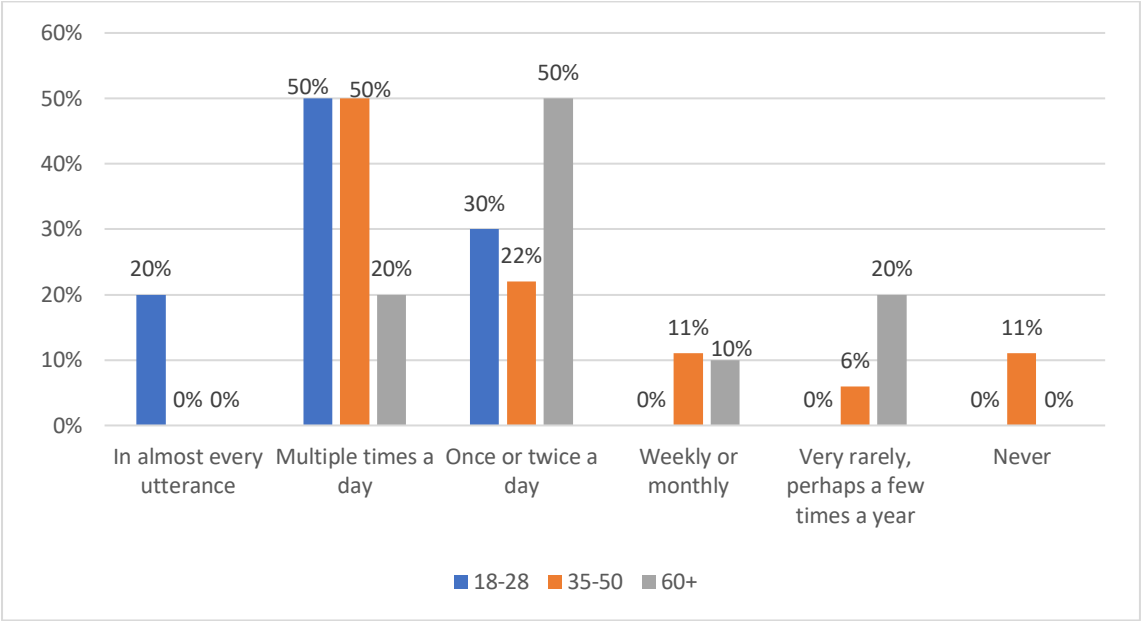
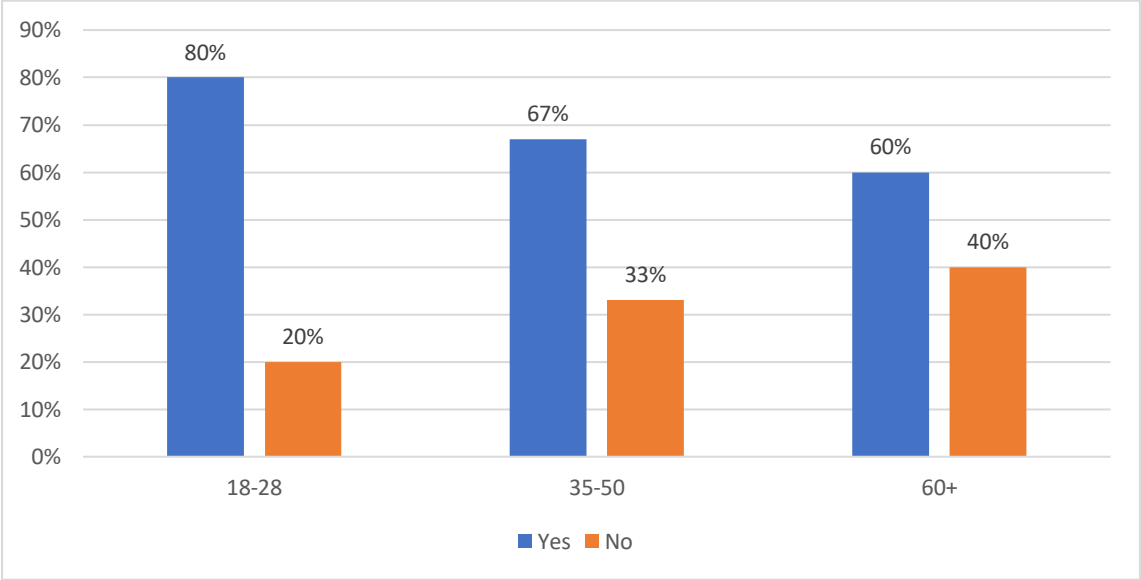


Figure 3.10: Responses to whether the respondents feel like they often use swear words divided by age



As is evident in Figure 3.9, the most popular answers are ‘multiple times a day’ and ‘once or twice day’ where the first option has 50% from both of the two youngest age groups and the latter option has 50% in the oldest age group. In total, all three age groups have at least 70% of their answers in the first three options, with the youngest age group having 100% of their answers in the first three options. This means that the majority of the respondents, regardless of age, swear on a daily basis. Comparing these findings to those in Figure 3.10, there appear to be both agreements and disagreements in what the respondents regard as often using swear

words. All the respondents who answered 'yes' to the question in Figure 3.10 have also stated that they swear no less than 'once or twice a day'. This means that there is agreement across all three age groups that the first three options equal often using swear words and, consequently, that the last three options mean not using swear words often. There are a few respondents who do not agree with this. Four people answered that they do not regard 'once or twice a day' as often using swear words. This includes everyone, 20%, that answered 'no' in the 18–28 age group and one respondent from each of the other two age groups. Nevertheless, all three age groups appear to agree on what is considered often using swear words.

As Figure 3.9 shows, the youngest age group, aged 18–28, only have answers in the first three options, meaning that they all swear on a daily basis. The other two age groups are somewhat more divided between the five remaining options. An interesting observation is the fact that it is the middle age group, those aged 35–50, that have answers in the 'never' option and no one from the 60+ age group. There were two female respondents aged 35–50 that answered that they never use swear words. Conversely, for the oldest age group, the lowest answer was the 'very rarely' option, where 20% of the respondents chose this answer. This is the same number of respondents that chose 'multiple times a day', whereas only 10% in the 60+ age group chose 'weekly or monthly'. This means that the oldest age group did not have any answers in the two extremes. For the 35–50 age group, the responses are more divided between the answers, but the majority is found in the 'multiple times a day' and 'once or twice a day' options. Comparing the two oldest age groups, it is evident that most of them also swear on a daily basis, like the youngest age group, but that the respondents aged 60+ have a somewhat lower frequency. This is visible in Figure 3.9, as 50% of the 60+ age group answered that they swear 'once or twice a day', while the 35–50 age group have 50% of their answers in the 'multiple times a day' option. The difference between the age groups and how often they use swear words is statistically significant ( $p=0.00004$ ,  $\chi^2=37.323$ ,  $df=10$ ).

Figure 3.11 below shows answers to one of the basic questions, question 5, in part one of the online survey – 'what is your religion?'. The respondents could choose from six options or they could choose to fill out the 'other' option. Figure 3.12 represents answers given in question 18 in the survey – 'what was the relationship to swear words when you were growing up? More than one answer possible'. In this question, the respondents were, again,

met with six options and an ‘other’ option where they could fill in their own answer. They could choose as many options as they wanted.

Figure 3.11: The respondents’ religious affiliation

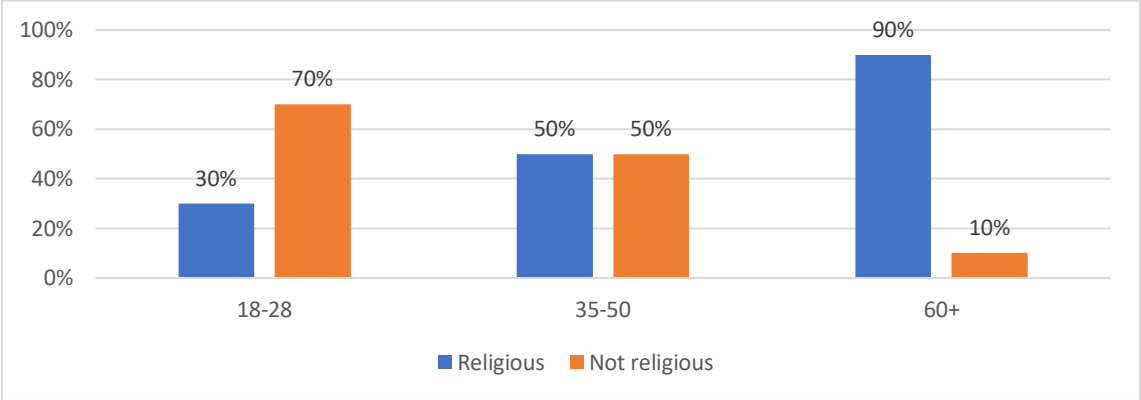
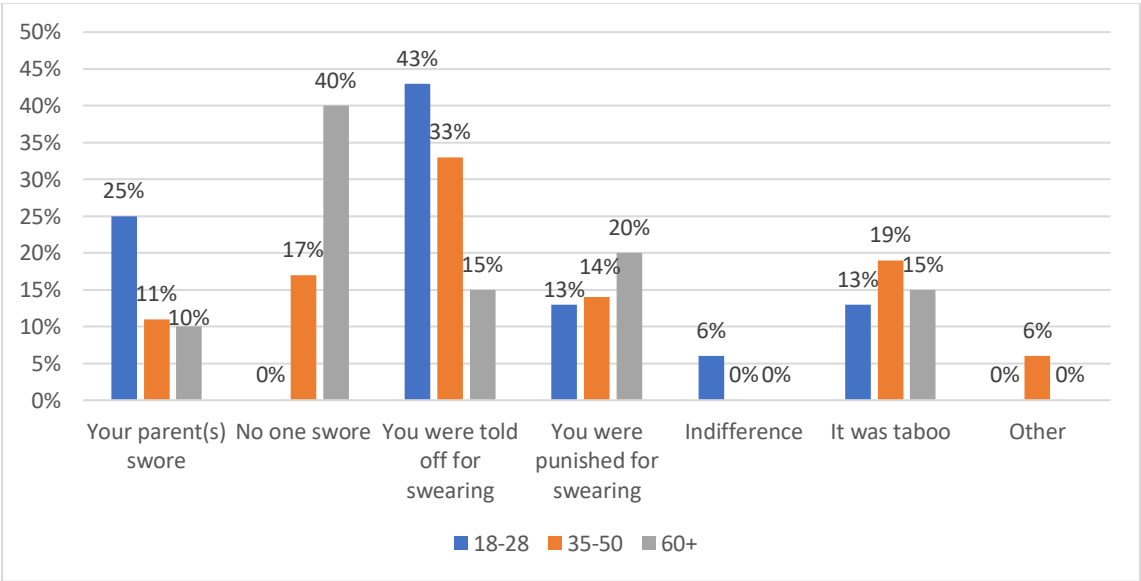


Figure 3.12: The respondents’ relationship to swear words when growing up divided by age



Note: The percentages are calculated based on how many answers each age group gave in total as the respondents could choose more than one option.

The two options in Figure 3.11, ‘religious’ and ‘not religious’ are increasing and decreasing almost inversely to one another and it is clear that some of the differences between the age groups are rather striking. Almost every single respondent in the 60+ age group, 90%, answered that they identify as religious, which in this case meant Christian<sup>19</sup>. Only one male respondent chose the ‘none’ option and this is also the only age group where the ‘religious’

<sup>19</sup> The full option was ‘Christian (Church of England, Protestant, Catholic, any other Christian denominations)’.

option is larger than the 'not religious' option. Comparing this to the 18–28 age group, the answers are quite the opposite. 70% of the respondents in the youngest age group chose the 'none' option. One respondent in the 18–28 age group stated that she moved to York from Poland. This might mean that she has another affiliation to religion than the other respondents, but as the question did not ask the respondents to state their exact beliefs, there is no way to be sure about this. Looking at the middle age group, the distribution of the answers is 50/50. Comparing it to the other two age groups, it is clear that while the difference from the youngest age group is not that big, there is quite a leap to the oldest age group in the percentage for 'religious'. In the 35–50 age group there was also one respondent that checked the 'Buddhist' option. This respondent was the only one in the 'religious' column that did not choose 'Christian'.

As is evident in Figure 3.12, the most popular option, in total, appears to be 'you were told off for swearing'. This is especially clear in the youngest age group where 43% of the respondents chose this as an answer. The second highest percentage for this age group is 'your parent(s) swore' with 25%. Comparing this to the two older age groups, 'your parent(s) swore' was not chosen many times. Two respondents in the 60+ age group chose this option, but the much more common answer for this age group was 'no one swore' with 40%. In addition, this group also has a higher percentage for 'you were punished for swearing' than the other two age groups, but lower for 'you were told off for swearing'. For the middle age group, 'you were told off for swearing' is, again, the most frequent answer. The second highest answer, and also the highest percentage for this option, is 'it was taboo', with 19%, closely followed by 'no one swore' with 17%. This was also the only age group where respondents chose the 'other' option and wrote their own answers. One respondent chose 'no one swore' and 'it was taboo' and also added that 'I have NEVER heard my parents swear and still would not swear in front of them' (Female 35–50). Another respondent chose only the 'other' option and wrote that 'my parents used mild swear words on occasion but generally frowned upon it and I knew I was expected not to swear' (Female 35–50).

As previously stated, all three age groups mainly seem to agree that swearing 'in almost every utterance', 'multiple times a day', and 'once or twice a day' equals often using swear words. Because of the way the online survey was made, however, the respondents might not agree on which words they consider as swear words. If a respondent chose the option 'once or twice a day', he or she might actually swear more than that in the eyes of

other respondents. It all depends on what that respondent regards as a swear word. As previously shown, celestial swear words like *oh my God* and *damn*, or words like *shit*, *bloody*, and *arse* are generally not thought of as especially severe. There is also a difference in attitudes towards various swear words between the different age groups. Consequently, some respondents might not think of certain words as swear words and therefore not take these words into consideration when answering how often they use swear words. Furthermore, someone might use a swear word several times in a row if they, for example, stub their toe. Some respondent could think of exclaiming '*fuck, fuck, fuck!*' as swearing once, other might count it as swearing three times. Nevertheless, the survey only asked the respondents to state how many times they, personally, swear during the day, not to describe what they thought of as a swear word. In addition, because the youngest age group rated the previously mentioned words rather low in terms of severity in Figure 3.3 above, one could argue that the words they actually use are words that are widely recognized as swear words by society in general. The statistics from the BNC presented in Chapter 1 where younger people appear to use swear words more frequently than other age groups are supported in the findings in Figure 3.10 so the connection between swear words and age has, apparently, not changed that much since 1994.

What is also interesting to see in Figure 3.9 is that there are no respondents from the 60+ age group that stated that they never use swear words. For the 10 respondents in this age group, the lowest answer was the 'very rarely' option. According to findings in the BNC (see Figure 1.3), the oldest age group is the one most likely to have a low frequency of swear words. In Figure 3.9, however, the two oldest age groups display similar swearing patterns. Both age groups have around 70% who state that they swear on a daily basis, and around 30% of their answers in the three lowest options. The two female respondents in the 35–50 age group who stated that they 'never' swear also have some of the highest averages in part three of the survey. They both had total averages around 4.5 for all 12 swear words, which is higher than every other respondent, except one, in the 60+ age group. This goes against the findings in the BNC where there is a larger difference between the different age groups. In addition, these findings also deviate from those found by Millwood-Hargrave (2000) and Hagen (2013), where the younger age groups are found to have a higher frequency of swearing than the older age groups. In this study, however, there were more respondents in the 35–50 age group. Consequently, there will be more responses, which means that it is more likely to

receive a wider variety of answers. Because of its size, the middle age group might be more representative of both use and attitudes towards swear words.

Examining Figure 3.11, it is clear that the statements made by Morley and Robins (2001) and the findings in the UK census in 2011 are still relevant. England does appear to be a more secular country and there are not that many in the youngest generation that identify as Christian. Comparing this with the findings in Figure 3.12, it might show how people are products of the time they grew up in, as Byrne (2017) states. With the percentages in Figure 3.12, there seems to be a shift in the use of swearing surrounding the respondents when they grew up. An example is how the youngest age group appears to have been more exposed to swearing than the other two age groups when growing up. This age group is the only group that has answers in the ‘indifference’ option, and they also have the highest percentage for ‘your parents swore’. Going up one age group to those aged 35–50, ‘your parent(s) swore’ has a much lower score. In addition, this age group is also the one with the highest percentages for ‘it was taboo’. This indicates how this generation was less exposed to swearing than the younger one. Examining the oldest age group, they have the highest percentage for ‘no one swore’. This option includes both the respondents themselves and those around them. Looking at the high percentage for this option, it appears that swearing was something one just did not do, and if you ever did, you were more likely to be punished for it than simply told off. Compared to the two youngest age groups, it appears that swearing might have been frowned upon and they were told off for it, but it was not serious enough to be punished for. Examining all of these aspects together, it looks like there were differences in both use and attitude towards swearing from generation to generation. The findings also support the claims made in H5 that age affects the respondents’ use of swear words, and that the youngest age group swears more than those who are 60+.

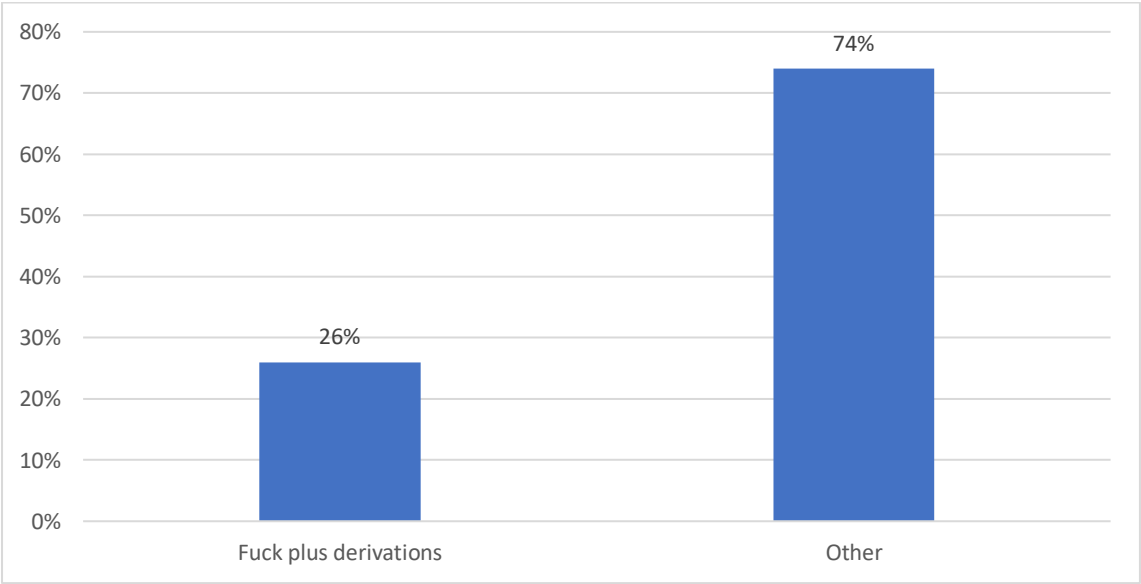
### **3.6 H6: Frequency**

H6 stated that it is expected that *fuck* and its derivations will be the most commonly used swear word(s). Table 3.4 below shows a list of all the swear words given in question 12 in the online survey – ‘which swear words do you use the most? Please list at least three’ – and how many times they were given. Figure 3.13 shows the percentage of how many times *fuck* or one of its derivations was given as an answer to question 12.

Table 3.4: List of the respondents' most frequent swear words listed in alphabetical order

Word	Tokens	Word	Tokens
Arse	1	Fucker	1
Arsehole	4	Fuckface	1
Bastard	4	Fucking	5
Bitch	2	Fucktard	1
Bloody	10	Fuckwit	1
Bloody hell	2	Hell	2
Bollock	10	Nigger	1
Bugger	10	Oh my God	2
Bullshit	1	Piss	1
Cock	1	Prat	1
Crap	3	Prick	1
Damn(it)	2	Shit	29
Dickhead	1	Twat	5
Fanny	1	Twunt	1
Fuck	26	Wanker	5

Figure 3.13: How many times fuck or one of its derivations was given as frequently used swear words



As is evident in Table 3.4, there was no lack of respondents who answered *fuck* or one of its derivations when asked which swear words they use most frequently. In total, there were six different variants of the word. What is also clear, however, is that *fuck*, with its 26 mentions,

was not the most common response. *Shit(e)*, with 29 mentions, was the respondents' most frequently used swear word. Examining the responses also shows that these two words were, more often than not, given together. Twenty-six respondents had both *shit(e)* and *fuck*, or one of its derivations, as their most frequent swear words. By comparison, three respondents answered *fuck* and/or its derivations and not *shit(e)*, while four respondents answered *shit(e)* and not *fuck* and/or its derivations. In addition, the responses also reveal that *fuck* was quite often written as the first word by the respondents when asked about their most frequently used swear words, while *shit(e)* was written first only four times. In total, *fuck* and its derivations appear to be the most commonly used swear words. This is visible in both Table 3.4 and Figure 3.13. Through the table and the figure, it is clear that, in total, *fuck* and its derivations make up just over a quarter of all the swear words alone, with 35 out of 135 tokens. An interesting observation is that one respondent was responsible for five tokens, as he answered *fuck*, *fucking*, *fucker*, *fuckwit*, and *fuckface*, in addition to some other words. For almost all of the other respondents, the most common answer was either *fuck* or a derivation, but not both. This could mean that other respondents also use more varieties of *fuck*, like *fucking* or *fucks*, as well. However, because most of them only wrote *fuck*, it is uncertain if this also includes other derivations.

Compared to the statistics and tokens in the BNC, these responses demonstrate that *fuck* is still a very common word to use when swearing. The fact that *fuck* was often the first word the respondents wrote when answering the question could, for example, indicate that this is the most frequent word used by the respondents. They were not asked to state which single word they use the most or how many times they believe that they use each word, but when *fuck* is the first word that comes into your head when asked this question, it could point towards this being your go-to and most often used swear word. Because of its grammatical flexibility, as stated by McEnery and Xiao (2004:236), it is no wonder that this is a word that many people might go for when swearing. As mentioned, one respondent wrote five different variants of *fuck*. This allows him to use the word in many different situations. Whether it is cathartic, emphatic, abusive, or descriptive, it can be used in several scenarios. *Fuck* is a word that can be combined with other words to create, for example, new insults such as *fuckwit* or *fuckface*, or it can be inserted into words, like in *absofuckinglutely*, to make the word pack a heavier punch. This might also be why *fuck* and its derivations are able to make up one quarter of all the answers by themselves. It seems clear that *fuck*, a word that has been around for several hundred years, still has a prominent place in the English language and that the



predictions made in H6, that *fuck* and its derivations is the most common swear word(s), are supported

### 3.7 H7: Context and alternatives

H7 stated that it is expected that the respondents are aware of the context they are in when swearing. The hypothesis furthermore expected that they will use some alternative swear words, but that this will not be very widespread. Table 3.5 below shows answers to question 15 in the online survey – ‘do you change your use of swear words depending on who you are talking to?’. This was an open question where the respondents could write as much as they wanted to. The responses are grouped together and divided into the most common answers.

Table 3.5: Responses to whether the respondents change their swearing depending on context

Response	Tokens
Yes	28
Around children	13
At work	7
Around parents/family	6
Around people who don't swear	5
Around teachers	2
Around people I don't know	2
In formal situations	1
Around elders	1
No	6

Note: Because this was an open question, one respondent could provide several answers.

Before examining the responses, it is important to note that there were some respondents who did not fill out the answer completely. Five respondents answered ‘yes’ without elaborating and three respondents, including one who had previously stated that she does not use swear words, did not answer the question. When examining the numbers in Table 3.5, it is evident that most of the respondents are aware of their surroundings when using swear words. Twenty-eight of 38 respondents answered positively, stating that they change the way they talk depending on who they are talking to or who is around them. One respondent, for example, wrote that ‘some environments are inappropriate for coarse language’ (Male 35–50).

For 13 of the respondents who answered ‘yes’, this included being around children. It is important to mention that for some of the respondents, ‘around children’ and ‘at work’ meant the same thing, as they were working in education. This was the case for five female respondents in the 35–50 age group. Six respondents also answered that they are likely to change their language around their parents or family members. For some, this meant never swearing and for others this meant using ‘milder swear words in front of [his] parents’ (Male 18–28) or swearing ‘slightly less in front of [her] parents’ (Female 18–28). Regarding the respondents who answered that they change their language around people who do not swear themselves, this mainly meant friends. One respondent answered that she avoids swearing ‘with certain friends who I worry might judge me’ (Female 35–50), while another wrote that he does not swear amongst ‘religious friends’ (Male 18–28).

While some respondents did not fill out the question completely, others were quite elaborate in their answers. The numbers presented in Table 3.5 describe situations where the respondents swear less or not at all. In addition to these answers, some respondents also mentioned situations where they might swear more frequently or wrote detailed answers about how their language use changes. This often meant explaining different scenarios. An example is one respondent who stated that ‘swearing is very commonplace amongst colleagues at work, and in the communities I work. I swear much less at home’ (Female 35–50). Conversely, another respondent answered that ‘I don’t use [swear words] at work ... If I am with my friends or husband I can regularly turn the air blue for comic relief mainly’ (Female 35–50). This latter example seems to represent other respondents as well, as some of them also stated that they often swear amongst friends or people their own age. Furthermore, a third respondent also elaborated on which swear words she might use, writing that ‘I am not offended by the word “cunt” but don’t really use it because so many others are’ (Female 35–50). This indicates that the situation you are in not only dictates whether or not you use swear words, but also which words you use. Consequently, there seems to be a general awareness of the context and surroundings one is in when using swear words. Whether it is situations where you feel less inclined to swear, or situations where you feel comfortable dropping the f-bomb.

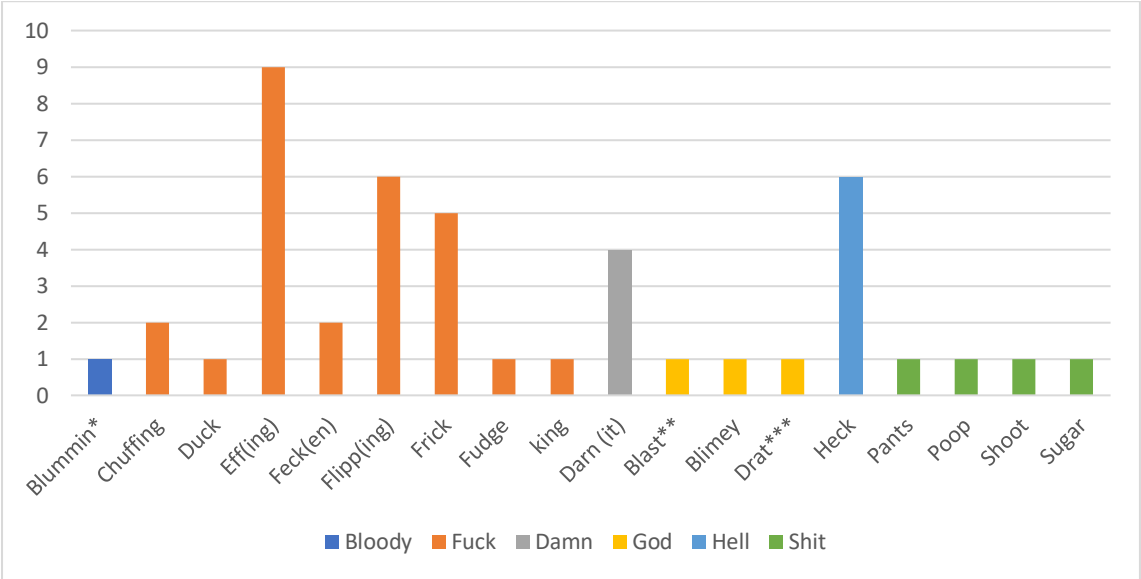
Table 3.6 below displays answers to question 14 in the survey – ‘do you ever use words that sound like swear words ... in order to avoid swearing? If yes, which?’. This table presents the answers and how many times they were given. For simplicity, similar answers are

combined. In Figure 3.14, the answers to question 14 are grouped based on what swear words they have replaced.

Table 3.6: The respondents' alternative swear words

Word	Tokens	Word	Tokens
Blast	1	Flip(ping)	6
Blimey	1	Frick	5
Blummin	1	Fudge	1
Chuffing	2	Heck	6
Darn (it)	4	'king	1
Drat	1	Pants	1
Duck	1	Poop	1
Eff(ing)	9	Shoot	1
Feck(en)	2	Sugar	1

Figure 3.14: The respondents' alternative swear words categorized by what word they have replaced



\*Blummin is a form of *blooming* and replaces *bloody* (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *blooming*, accessed 23 April 2019).

\*\* Blast stems from *God blast* (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *blast*, accessed 23 April 2019).

\*\*\* Drat is an aphetic form of *God rot* (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *drat*, accessed 24 April 2019).

As Table 3.6 shows, the respondents gave 22 different alternatives to swear words given, including the ones that have more than one form. These were given by 26 respondents. Even though the question did not ask the respondents to state when or how often they use alternative swear words, some of them elaborated on their answer. One of the male

respondents stated that ‘I use *heck & shoot* because I want to swear less’ (Male 18–28, my italics) while another said ‘yes. *Chuffing* and *flipping* when kids are present’ (Male 35–50, my italics). As is evident in the table, the most popular answers were *eff* or *effing* which were written nine times in total, followed by *heck* and *flip* or *flipping* with six mentions. Most other words were only given once or twice, meaning that the use of these words might not be that widespread in York. Furthermore, most respondents only wrote down one or two alternative swear words, resulting in the list not being very long. Another simply wrote ‘pretty much all the ones listed’ (Female 35–50), referring to the four examples in the question text, i.e. *frick*, *effing*, *darn*, and *heck*. It is also important to note that of the 38 respondents, 10 of them answered ‘no’ or ‘none’ when asked if they use alternative swear words. One respondent even stated ‘no – when I swear, I swear!’ (Male 35–50). Another respondent also answered ‘occasionally’ (Female 35–50) without giving any further explanation.

In Figure 3.14, the words from Table 3.6 are divided into six categories which represent the swear words that the alternatives have replaced. In total, there were 45 answers to alternative swear words. The smallest category, with only one mention, is the word replacing *bloody*, with the only alternative being *blummin*. This is followed by words replacing *God*, with the three alternatives *blast*, *blimey*, and *drat*. These are words, especially *blast* and *drat*, that most people might not even realize have a celestial origin. They are all aphetic forms of curses, like *God rot* or *God blind me*. *Darn*, replacing *damn*, might be a clearer example of celestial swearing, but with only four mentions, this does not appear to be very common amongst the respondents either. The same can be said for alternatives for *shit*, where, again, there are only four alternatives. *Sugar* and *pants* might not be obvious alternatives to *shit*, but it was stated by the respondents themselves that they use these words instead of *shit*. One wrote ‘*sugar* (instead of *shit*)’ (Female 60+, my italics), while the other one stated that ‘I use *pants* or *poop* to substitute *shit*’ (Female 35–50, my italics). Following *shit* is the alternative for *hell*, namely *heck*, with six mentions, but the clearly largest category is *fuck*. This category has 27 tokens and 11 different words, including the words with different versions. This category also contains the most popular answer, which was *eff* or *effing*. One respondent stated that she uses both *effing* and *'king* and it is unclear if she uses the latter mainly in written form. This is because she chose to include the apostrophe and because the point of the word might be easier to understand if written. However, she did not specify when she uses which word.

An interesting observation when examining the responses and Table 3.5 is that the context and situation awareness is connected to the age of the respondent. It is clear that what stage you are at in life affects your language use. The younger respondents were more likely to censor their language around parents and family members or teachers and lecturers. They were less likely to censor themselves around friends. This is summarized by one respondent who wrote, when asked if he changes his use of swear words, ‘yes – not to lecturers/tutors or parent. But I do swear with friends’ (Male 18–28). Correspondingly, those in the older age groups more often mentioned work and children, and especially the latter. Many claimed that they do not swear in front of children in general and one said that he does not ‘swear in front of [his] children’ (Male 35–50). This could, as previously discussed, also be a type of age grading. As you go through different phases of your life, your language and attitudes will adapt to where you are in life. When you get older and have children of your own, you are, perhaps, more likely to censor your language and make it more child-friendly. The same could happen at work where, to appear more professional, you might avoid using swear words. For those who are younger, children are likely not such a large part of their lives and, therefore, they do not think to write ‘around children’ when asked if they change their language depending on who they are talking to.

Examining the findings in Table 3.5 with those in Table 3.6 and Figure 3.14, it could also seem like there is a small connection between which alternatives the respondents use and when they change their use of swear words. Some of the alternatives given are, perhaps, more child-friendly than others. As mentioned, *sugar* and *pants* are not easy to spot as alternatives to *shit*. In addition, *poop* and *fudge* can be thought of as very mild forms of the words they replace. A reason for choosing these words might, again, be that the respondent is more in contact with children. The respondent who stated that she uses *poop* and *pants* is a female in the 35–50 age group who also says that she works with children. The respondents who answered *fudge* and *sugar* were in the 60+ age group and could therefore be thought of as having had children and perhaps now have grandchildren. Correspondingly, most respondents in the youngest age group either stated that they do not change their use of swear words, or they use words that sound quite similar to their substituted swear word like *frick* and *eff(ing)*. There are, of course, several respondents in the two oldest age groups that use *eff(ing)*, *frick*, or *feck(en)* as well. However, the number of respondents who stated that they do not change their use of swear words is larger in the youngest age group, compared to the two other groups who also have more respondents. This, again, seems to support the assumption that

those who are more likely to have children are also more likely to change their language based on who they are talking to.

As previously quoted from Pinker (see subsection 1.3.4), using alternative swear words might not have the power to express the speaker's full emotion and reaction. The answers to whether or not the respondents use alternative swear words, however, show that 27 of the respondents claim to use one or more alternative swear words. When studying Figure 3.14, the alternatives given do seem to have a common thread. Out of all 45 answers, 27 of them belonged in the *fuck* category. This means that this single category had more responses alone than the other five combined. Comparing the substituted swear words, or categories, with the severity ranking given by OFCOM, *bloody*, *darn*, *God*, and *hell* are categorized as 'mild' and *shit* as 'medium'. *Fuck*, however, is categorized by OFCOM as 'strongest'. In addition, as the averages in Figure 3.1 above show, (*oh my*) *God*, *damn*, and *bloody* are not considered especially severe, while *fuck* is rated as the third most severe word. *Fuck* appears to be a recognized swear word by most people, despite them using it and its derivations frequently (see Table 3.4). This might be the reason why so many respondents choose to use alternatives for this word. Because of its frequent use, it is understandable that people also want to come up with several alternatives for it. It also appears that many of the alternatives for *fuck* are easily recognized as such. It is not hard to understand that *feck(en)*, *frick*, *duck*, and *eff(ing)* are alternatives to *fuck*. By using these similar alternatives, one does, perhaps, not take away too much of the emotional force that is needed when expressing, for example, anger or frustration, making the word powerful despite being a substitute.

In general, it seems like the findings by both Millwood-Hargrave and OFCOM are still relevant. With 28 respondents stating that they do change their use of swear words based on who they are talking to, it appears that the majority of them are aware of the context they are in, e.g. at work or at school/university. The findings furthermore underline how people still seem to be concerned about swearing and children. Thirteen respondents wrote that they mind their language around children, including both men and women in all three age groups. Many respondents also stated, as mentioned, that they do change their use of swear words depending on who they are talking to, without elaborating what that meant. This is understandable for those who filled out the survey by hand while waiting for the bus, as they did not have proper support for writing and less time. Had they filled out the question fully, however, the numbers in Table 3.5 would have been different. Four of the five respondents who did not elaborate on

their answers were in the 60+ age group, while one was 35–50. From previous tendencies seen in the findings, the number of people who change their language around children might have been larger had these five answered the question fully. Furthermore, the majority of the respondents stated that they use alternatives to avoid swearing and with all the different reasons given in Table 3.5, there appears to be a wide awareness of swearing and its consequences. In total, the claims made in H7 are both proven and disproven. The respondents seem to be aware of the context they are in when swearing, but the use of alternative swear words is more common than initially thought.

### **3.8 Additional results**

As previously stated, the third part of this chapter addresses findings that were not predicted in any of the hypotheses. In the following, three different findings will be presented and discussed.

#### **3.8.1 Swearing and sexuality**

Figure 3.15 below shows answers to question 10 in the survey – ‘roughly (on average) how often do you swear?’. The respondents could choose from six pre-made options and the answers are divided by sexuality. Table 3.7 shows answers to question 12 in the survey – ‘which swear words do you use most frequently? Please list at least three’. The answers are divided into the categories set by OFCOM and, again, divided by sexuality.

Figure 3.15: Responses to how often, on average, the respondents swear, divided by sexuality

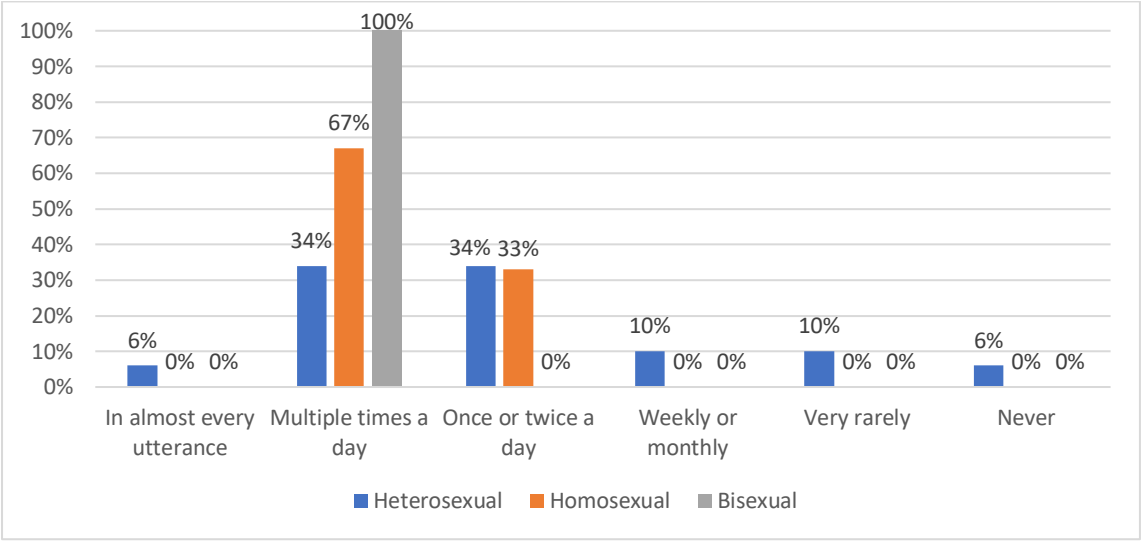


Table 3.7: The respondents' most frequently used swear words divided by sexuality

	Mild	Medium	Strong	Strongest
<b>Heterosexual</b>	Arse, Bloody, Bugger, Damn, Hell**, Oh my God, Prat**	Arsehole, Bitch, Bollocks, Bullshit, Shit	Bastard, Dickhead, Fanny, Prick, Twat, Wanker	Fuck, Fucking*, Fucktard*, Nigger
<b>Bisexual</b>	Bloody, Bugger, Crap	Arsehole, Bollocks, Shit	Twat, Wanker	Fuck, Fucker*, Fuckface*, Fucking*, Fuckwit*
<b>Homosexual</b>	Bloody, Bugger, Crap, Damn(it), Hell	Bollocks, Shit	Cock, Twat	Fuck, Fucking*

\* None of these words are classified by OFCOM, but because they contain the word *fuck*, which is categorized as 'strongest', these words are placed in the same category.

\*\*These two words are not categorized by OFCOM and are therefore placed as 'mild' as they are apparently not classified as swear words and therefore allowed pre-watershed.

Before analysing both Figure 3.15 and Table 3.7, it is important to mention that there were few respondents in the survey that chose the 'homosexual' or 'bisexual' options. In total, only two respondents were bisexual and only three were homosexual. One respondent also chose the 'prefer not to answer' option. He is not included in the figure or in the table. Because of this respondent distribution, it is expected to see that the respondents who chose 'heterosexual' are more spread out across the different options in Figure 3.15. Nevertheless, it



is clear that the majority of all three sexualities state that they use swear words daily. Both respondents who stated that they are bisexual chose the ‘multiple times a day’ option. Two of the homosexual respondents also chose this option, while the last one stated that he swears ‘once or twice a day’. For the respondents who stated that they are heterosexual, ‘multiple times a day’ and ‘once or twice a day’ received the same percentage. These two options are therefore the most popular for all three sexualities. Examining Table 3.7, it is, furthermore, clear that the words the respondents use are very similar, regardless of sexuality. There are more answers in the heterosexual row, but this is most likely because there are more heterosexual respondents. As is evident in the table, the bisexual row has several answers, despite there only being two respondents with this sexuality. This is because one respondent gave 11 different swear words in answers to the survey question. With several similar words across the three sexualities, Table 3.7 displays that sexuality does not really affect which swear words people use.

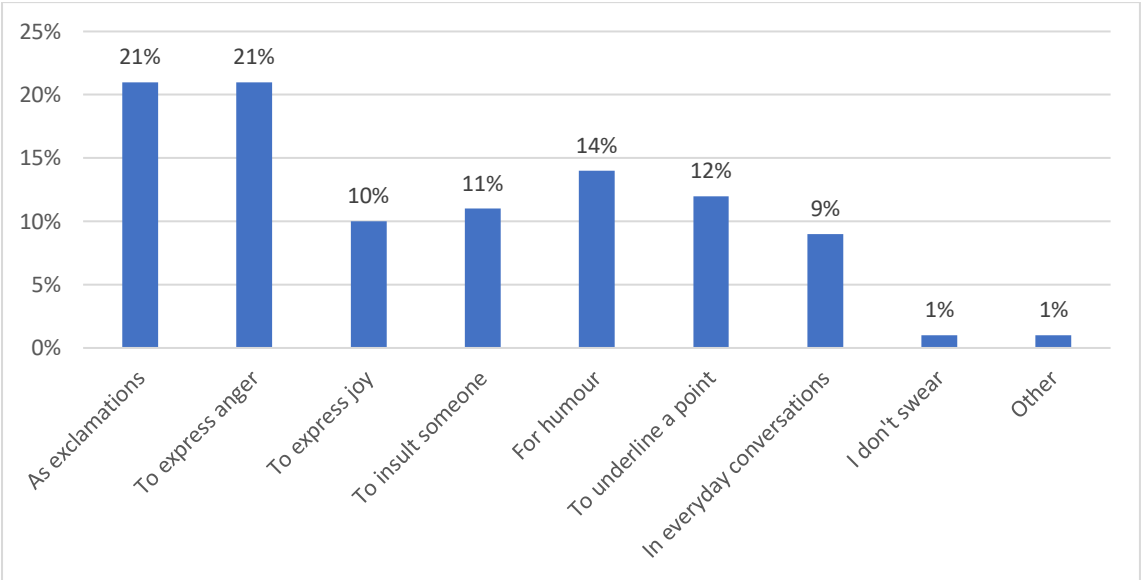
Comparing stereotypes presented in Chapter 1 with the findings in Figure 3.15 and Table 3.7, it appears that the stereotypes are not reflecting reality. Women who use swear words might be thought of as more masculine, as swearing is, or was, perhaps more common in male-dominated areas. Looking at stereotypes often used in films and the media, women with masculine traits are often portrayed as lesbians. The findings in this study, however, show how this does not seem to be the case. The two female respondents who are homosexuals do not swear more than those who stated that they are heterosexual. ‘Multiple times a day’ was the most common answer for the female respondents, regardless of their sexuality. As mentioned, Table 3.7 also shows that sexuality does not affect the swear word vocabulary so there is also nothing in the present study to suggest that lesbians use more severe words than straight women. Similarly, looking at the male respondent who stated that he is gay, he uses the same swear words as those who say that they are heterosexual. He also states that he swears on a daily basis, but he did choose the ‘once or twice a day’ option. This means that he swears slightly less often than the majority of the male respondents, but several other male respondents, who are all heterosexual, chose the same option and some also chose lower options. The stereotype of gay men having a female vocabulary when swearing is, therefore, also called into question. Lastly, there is little difference between the heterosexual and the bisexual respondents in their answers. In general, the number of respondents that chose the homosexual or bisexual options is quite small which makes it difficult to determine

whether or not sexuality has an effect on swearing. The findings could, nevertheless, call into question the established stereotypes of sexuality and swearing.

### 3.8.2 How swear words are used

Figure 3.16 below presents answers to question 11 in the survey – ‘in what situation(s) do you swear? More than one answer is possible’. When answering this question, the respondents could choose from eight pre-made options or choose ‘Other’ and enter their own answers. The respondents could choose more than one answer.

Figure 3.16: Situations where the respondents use swear words



As the figure shows, some of the options might overlap each other, e.g. ‘as exclamations’ and ‘to express anger’ or ‘in everyday conversations’ and ‘for humour’. This means that it is not always easy to distinguish between them, which could have had an effect on the answers that were given. In total, there were 140 answers to why the respondents use swear words. Some respondents chose one or two options, but the majority selected at least three. Seven respondents chose seven options, only leaving out ‘I don’t swear’ and ‘other’. This was the case for many of the male respondents in the two youngest age groups. In addition, one respondent selected seven pre-made options and also added ‘to liven things up/get a reaction’ (Male 35–50) in the ‘other’ option. For the female respondents, the 18–28 group was responsible for several answers as all but one chose at least five options. In general, the

respondents in the 60+ age group tended to choose fewer answers than the other two age groups. Examining all the answers that were given, Figure 3.16 shows that there are no major differences between the nine options. ‘As exclamations’ and ‘to express anger’ are the most common answers, both with 21%. At the opposite end, ‘I don’t swear’ and ‘other’ both only received 1% of the answers. In addition to the previously mentioned comment on ‘other’, the other respondent who chose this option stated that she uses swear words for ‘lyrics to songs’ (Female 18–28). For the remaining five options, there is little variation between the percentages.

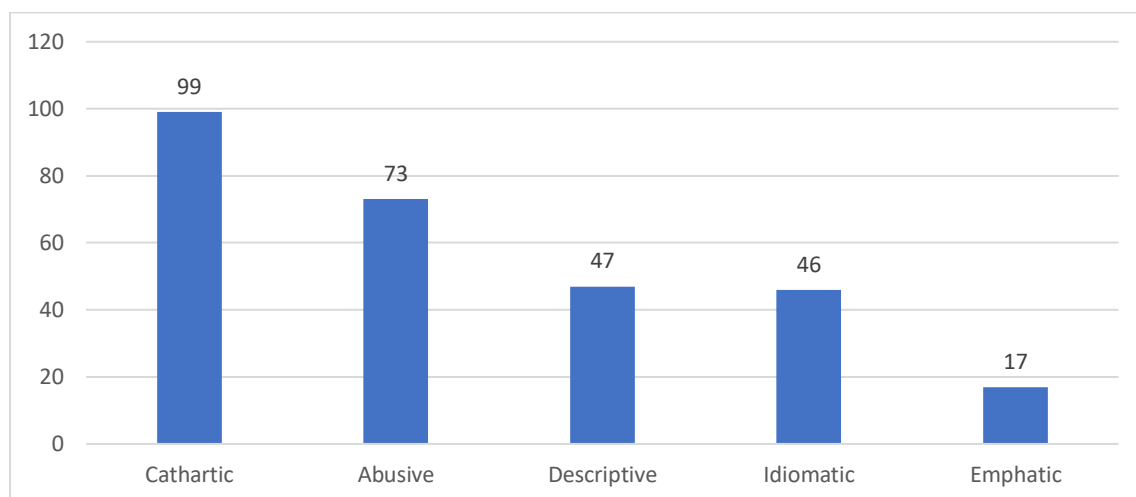
Table 3.8 below shows answers to question 12 in the survey – ‘which swear words do you use most frequently?’. The answers are categorized according to Pinker’s (2007) five categories of how we use swear words (see subsection 1.3.1). The answers are further displayed in Figure 3.17 where the number of responses for each category is presented.

Table 3.8: Categorization of the most frequently used swear words based on Pinker’s categories

<b>Word</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Word</b>	<b>Category</b>
Arse	Cathartic/Abusive	Fucker	Abusive
Arsehole	Abusive	Fuckface	Abusive
Bastard	Abusive	Fucking	Emphatic/Descriptive
Bitch	Abusive	Fucktard	Abusive
Bloody*	Emphatic	Fuckwit	Abusive
Bloody hell	Cathartic/Idiomatic	Hell	Cathartic/Abusive/ Emphatic
Bollocks	Cathartic/Descriptive Idiomatic	Nigger	Abusive
Bugger	Cathartic/Abusive	Oh my God	Cathartic
Bullshit	Cathartic/Idiomatic	Piss	Descriptive/Idiomatic
Cock	Cathartic/Abusive/ Descriptive/Idiomatic	Prat	Abusive
Crap	Cathartic	Prick	Abusive
Damn(it)	Cathartic/Abusive	Shit(e)	Cathartic/Abusive/ Descriptive/Idiomatic
Dickhead	Abusive	Twat	Abusive
Fanny	Descriptive/Abusive	Twunt	Abusive
Fuck	Cathartic	Wanker	Abusive

\**Bloody* is also a descriptive word, but the descriptive use is not a swear word

Figure 3.17: The total number of responses in Pinker's (2007) five categories for using swear words



Note: As Table 3.8 shows, several words can be placed in different categories. In Figure 3.17, these words are counted in both or all categories they can be placed in.

A comparison of the table and the figure reveals that there is a skewed distribution between the categories and the numbers. Figure 3.17 shows that the most common category is cathartic swear words with 99 tokens. In Table 3.8, however, the most common category is words listed as 'abusive'. There are 21 swear words that can be classified as 'abusive' and only 12 as 'cathartic'. The main reason for this distribution is the fact that both *fuck* and *shit(e)*, with 26 and 29 tokens, respectively, are cathartic swear words. In addition, *bollocks* and *bugger* have 10 tokens each and are both categorized as cathartic. Looking at the abusive swear words, *shit(e)*, which can be placed in three categories, is the word with most tokens. This word does have the highest number of tokens overall, but the remaining abusive words do not have as many. *Bugger* has the second highest number of tokens, 10, among the abusive words, but the remaining words are rather low-scoring. Thus, the number of abusive swear words in Figure 3.17 is lower than the cathartic ones. An interesting observation, however, is the fact that the difference between the cathartic and abusive swear words in Figure 3.17 equals the number of tokens that *fuck* has generated, namely 26. This means that had it not been for *fuck* being such a common swear word, the distribution between these two categories would have been exactly the same. The fact that the number of tokens in the two categories would have been the same if *fuck* was removed could indicate that cathartic swear words are very common. This is because there were not that many different words belonging in this category in Table 3.8, but the number of tokens still matched those in the abusive category.

Something Table 3.8 further shows is that there are several swear words that are eligible for more than one category. *Fuck* is already discussed as having many derivations and can, consequently, be used in several different ways. In the table, it is also evident that both *cock* and *shit(e)* are words with many uses. Both words are listed as belonging in four categories, i.e. ‘cathartic’, ‘abusive’, ‘descriptive’, and ‘idiomatic’. For *cock*, an example of the latter is saying that you ‘*cocked* something up’ when you mess something up or do something wrong. For *shit(e)*, an idiomatic use could be saying to someone that they should ‘get their *shit* together’, while an example of an abusive use could be the expression ‘you little *shit*’. Furthermore, there are two words that belong in three categories. One of these words is *bollocks*, which is listed as ‘cathartic’, ‘descriptive’, and ‘idiomatic’. An idiomatic way of using the word is saying that something is *bollocks*, meaning that it is nonsense. The second word belonging in three categories is *hell* which is categorized as ‘cathartic’ and ‘abusive’, and is also further listed as ‘emphatic’. This is because ‘*hell* no’ or ‘*hell* yes’ are sometimes used as replies to questions. For the remaining 26 words, they are listed as belonging in either one or two categories with most of them only being in one. Because swear words change and evolve all the time, however, there might be other uses for the different words that could make them eligible for other categories as well<sup>20</sup>.

Compared to findings by both Millwood-Hargrave (2000) and Hagen (2013), it is interesting to see that abusive swear words are as popular as they are. Millwood-Hargrave found that direct abuse, abuse of minorities, and racial abuse were the most severe types of swear words (Millwood-Hargrave 2000:8). Similarly, respondents in Hagen’s study reported that abusive swear words were often very severe. Here, in Figure 3.16, the ‘to insult someone’ option only received 11%. Looking at the data presented in Table 3.8 and in Figure 3.17, however, abusive swear words make up a great deal of the answers. Even though cathartic swear words had the highest number of tokens, there are still 73 tokens given by the 38 respondents that are abusive. Some of the abusive words are listed, by OFCOM, as ‘mild’ or ‘medium’, meaning that they might not be considered especially abusive. The majority of the words are, nevertheless, listed as ‘strong’ or ‘strongest’ which indicates that when used, the words are meant to be perceived as abusive. In Hagen’s study, many of the abusive words were connected to either disability or race, which is mostly different from the words presented in Table 3.8. The only exception is *nigger*, which was answered once. Millwood-Hargrave,

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<sup>20</sup> Some of the words could also belong in other categories in other variants of English.

however, also included direct abuse as a category and the words in Table 3.8 can all belong in this category. Some words are perhaps more recognized as abuse than others, e.g. *bitch*, *bastard*, and *dickhead*, but the majority of the different words the respondents state that they use are, nevertheless, direct abuses. It appears that the respondents are careful not to use words that are connected to religion, ethnicity, or other minorities, but they are, despite this, not afraid to use abusive swear words.

As mentioned above, some of the options in Figure 3.16 might overlap one another, making it hard for the respondents to fully answer the question. In addition, it might be hard, in general, to pinpoint why you use swear words. One of the lowest percentages is found in ‘in everyday conversations’. When so many of the respondents state that they swear on a daily basis (see Figure 3.10), it is interesting that not more of them have chosen this option. A reason for this could be that some words are so embedded in a person’s vocabulary that they are not actually aware that they are using it. Using swear words as a reaction to bad news or stubbing your toe is, perhaps, something you do not do often, and you therefore become more aware of doing it when it actually happens. Talking to someone and using, for example, *fuck* or *bloody* as a natural part of the conversation might be less noticeable because you are so used to doing it. Another reason might be, as previously discussed, that what someone regards as swear words can change from person to person. Words like *bloody* or *shit* have previously scored low in severity and are not always thought of as swearing. Because of this, some might use them quite frequently in conversations because they know that the other person will, most likely, not be offended by them. Consequently, you swear more in everyday conversations than you think, but you do not realize it yourself.

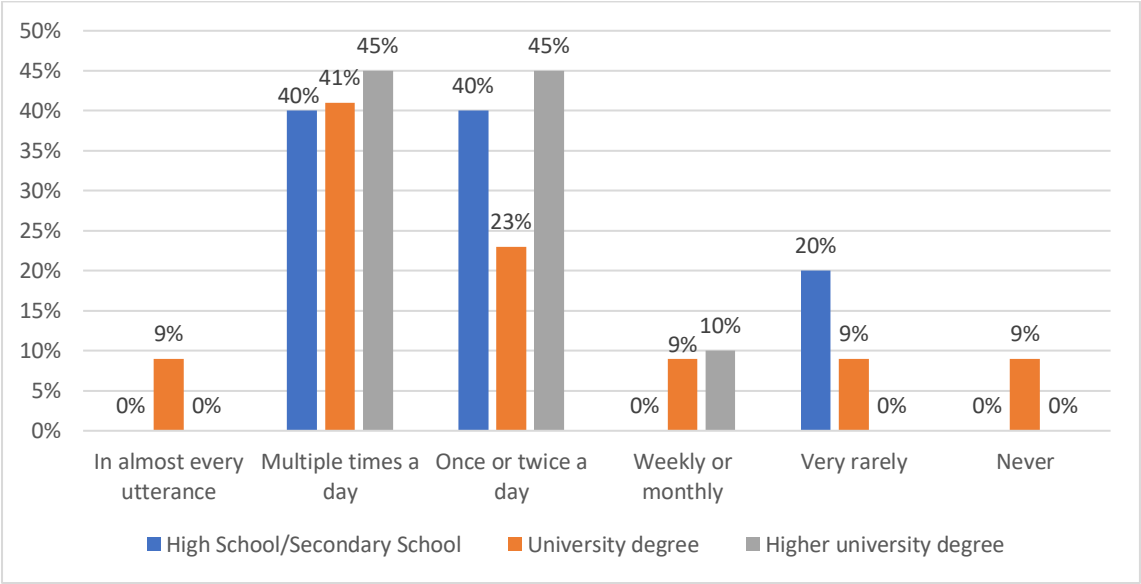
### **3.8.3 Swearing and educational level**

Table 3.9 below presents the answers given in question 3 in the online survey – ‘What is your obtained level of education? If you are currently studying, what level are you at?’. The respondents could choose between four pre-made options or they could choose ‘other’ and fill in their answer. In Figure 3.18, the answers to question 3 are combined with question 10 – ‘Roughly (on average) how often do you swear?’ – where the respondents could choose from six pre-made options.

Table 3.9: The education level of the respondents

Answer	Number of respondents
Primary School	0
High school/secondary school	5
University degree (BA, BSc etc.)	22
Higher university degree (MA, PhD, PGCE etc.)	11
Other	0

Figure 3.18: The education level of the respondents combined with swear word use



Note: Because the respondents only chose ‘high school’, ‘university degree’, or ‘higher university degree’, the remaining two options are removed from the figure for the sake of simplicity.

As Table 3.9 shows, there were no respondents who chose ‘primary school’ or ‘other’. A reason for the high number of respondents with a university degree could be because the online survey was sent to several university groups and organizations. However, because the survey was anonymous, there is no way of telling if the youngest respondents received the invitation through a university group or if they got it from somewhere else. The main response from the 35–50 age group was also that they had a university degree of some sort, except for one who stated that ‘high school/secondary school’ was his level of education. The four remaining respondents who chose ‘high school/secondary school’ were in the 60+ age group. In general, most of the respondents had, or are obtaining, a university degree, either higher or lower. This might also be the reason why there are respondents from this group for

all answers in Figure 3.18. For the other groups, because they are so few, one response more or less can have a large impact on the percentage. Nevertheless, the majority of the answers in the figure are found in ‘multiple times a day’. All three groups have percentages of 40 or more, meaning that this option received almost half the responses alone. For the ‘high school’ and ‘higher university degree’ groups, the percentages are exactly the same in ‘once or twice a day’, while the percentages for the ‘university degree’ group is almost halved for this option. There is no clear reason as to why this option is halved, but it is still the second highest percentage for this group. As a result of the high percentages for these two options, the general observation appears to be that no matter your educational level, you are likely to swear on a daily basis.

In subsection 3.4 above it is stated, based on Figure 3.6 and 3.7, that both the male and female respondents think of ‘multiple times a day’ and ‘once or twice a day’ as often using swear words. Furthermore, Table 3.2 in subsection 3.2.1 shows that 16% of the respondents think of people who often swear as ‘less educated’. Additionally, as discussed in Chapter 1, both Feldman et al. (2017) and DeFrank and Kahlbaugh (2019) present findings from their studies where respondents indicate that people who often use swear words could be considered stupid or less educated. Based on these findings, a general notion seems to be that people who often use swear words are considered less favourably. Yet, the findings in Figure 3.18 present different results. It appears that there is little correlation between the frequency of swear words and the education one has. In general, the respondents state that they use swear words on a daily basis and most of them have, or are obtaining, some sort of university degree. In fact, nearly 100% of those with a higher university degree state that they use swear words every day. Perhaps, in times when higher education was more reserved for the upper classes, swearing might have been more connected with the working class and those who did not get degrees. Now, with over two million students from different backgrounds enrolled in universities in the UK in 2016 (*Higher education student statistics*, 2018, accessed 30 April 2019), it is no wonder that the line dividing swearing and your education is less clear.



## 4. Conclusion

The findings that are presented and discussed in the previous chapter allow some insight into the use of and attitude towards swear words in York in 2018/2019. Most of the hypotheses in Chapter 1 are supported by the findings in the online survey, while some of them are disproven. In general, swear words appear to be an integrated part of people's everyday vocabulary. Men and women in all three age groups have stated that they use swear words on a daily basis and they are also mainly indifferent towards other people who use swear words. The survey responses show that there is a difference in attitudes towards swear words between the three age groups with the oldest age group often having the highest averages. However, the middle age group was also responsible for some of the highest averages, and, in addition, the responses revealed that the youngest, female age group was the group with the majority of the lowest averages. These responses underline how certain stereotypes connected to swearing, e.g. that older generations are more negative towards it and that relaxed attitudes towards swearing are only for men, might not be relevant anymore. In fact, many of the survey responses present answers that break with established stereotypes. In addition to young women having a relaxed attitude towards swear words, the female respondents in general state that they use swear words on a daily basis, just like men, and that they also mainly use the same swear words as men. Women might use more 'mild' and 'medium' swear words and have more reservations towards other people who often use swear words than men, but they are no strangers to the use of swear words. Furthermore, the survey responses reveal that your education level does not affect your use of swear words. There is nothing to suggest that those with higher education swear less than those with little or no education and vice versa.

Moreover, the survey responses also gave an insight into how swear words are used. One aspect is how people seem to be aware of the context they are in and adapt their vocabulary accordingly. This was especially relevant in the presence of children. Another aspect is which swear words the respondents state that they frequently use. Religious swear words are not widely used and most respondents do not think of words in this category as especially severe. Conversely, words connected to sex, excretion, and body parts are regarded as very severe. In the survey, *cunt*, *motherfucker*, and *fuck* were deemed as the three most severe words. While no one stated that they frequently use *cunt* or *motherfucker*, *fuck* and its derivations are the most commonly used swear words among the respondents, despite being

voted the third most severe word. Furthermore, the respondents tend to steer clear of racially abusive swear words, but they do, however, use generally abusive swear words. *Wanker*, *twat*, and *bastard* are all examples of words that some respondents frequently use. The most widely used swear words, however, are the cathartic ones and people seem to often use these as exclamations and/or to express anger. As mentioned, *fuck* is reportedly in frequent use, together with *shit*. In general, based on the responses in the online survey, different swear words are apparently used in all types of situations and contexts, albeit with some restrictions.

Much of the initial data is based on or compared to findings in the BNC. Although the corpus is a very useful tool in a thesis like this, it does come with some limitations. One of these limitations is how the corpus does not always have the age and genders of all the authors and speakers they have collected data from. A search for *fuck*, for example, shows that the word has 1322 tokens (*British National Corpus* 1994, accessed 03 May 2019). A further examination of the distribution of the word, however, reveals that there is a large difference between the total number of tokens and the ones reported in the distribution of the word. For *fuck*, it is not possible to tell the age for one third or the gender of more than half of the speakers or authors. The tokens are, furthermore, described in the BNC as ‘age of author’ or ‘sex of author’, meaning that the spoken tokens are not represented in the distribution overview. The frequencies reported in Chapter 1 might therefore not be 100% realistic, despite being accurate. Furthermore, several of the words in part three of the online survey have more meanings than one. Consequently, when comparing these words to the tokens and distributions in the BNC, the findings might not be completely accurate. An example of this is for *bloody*, where the emphatic use, e.g. ‘stop that *bloody* screaming’, is regarded as swearing, but the descriptive use, e.g. ‘the steak is *bloody*’ is not. Because of the layout of the BNC, it was too time consuming to go through every single token to distinguish the swearing from the non-swearing.

Further sources for error are found in the online survey. This concerns both the design and the distribution. Looking at the design of the survey, there are some aspects that could have been done differently. In part three where the respondents were asked to rate the 12 swear words, for example, there was no way to state that you did not regard a word as a swear word. The closest to this was giving it 1 out of 6. Similarly, some of the questions did not allow the respondents to state what they thought of as a swear word. One question did ask the respondents if there are any swear words they do not find offensive, but this might be an

ambiguous question. Even though there are swear words the respondents do not find offensive, there might also be words that they do not even regard as swear words and therefore do not include. Because the respondents did not have to state what they do or do not regard as swear words, some of the results might have been skewed, e.g. when asking how often the respondents use swear words. A solution to this could have been to also include some in-depth interviews in order to test whether the respondents agreed on what the different questions meant or not. Interviews could also have resulted in more detailed answers from some respondents which could have allowed for even more insight into the attitudes towards and use of swear words.

As mentioned, the distribution of the survey also offered potential sources of error. Even though online surveys can be efficient ways of collecting data, they can also result in skewed results. Because of the way the survey was distributed, there was no control over who the respondents were. This was intentional and allowed the respondents to be anonymous, but it also meant that there were no restrictions for the different genders or age groups. As a result, there are more respondents in the female 35–50 age group than in the others. Another result of distributing the survey via email was the uncertainty of how representative the answers would be. Finding student groups from UoY was very helpful in order to get young respondents, but it also meant that the answers would represent a certain group of respondents. The same problem applies for the sports groups. Even though I tried to select different interests and sports when deciding who would receive the survey invitation, it is difficult to make it 100% representative because it is hard to distinguish them when they all belong to the same groups or organizations. Furthermore, another point to make when problematizing how representative the answers are is that this study is rather small. Again, this was intentional, but it also means that the answers in the study might not represent general opinions. Perhaps more backgrounds and thoughts might have been represented if more of the answers came from people in cafés or at bus stops.

This study has provided answers to several hypotheses, but it has also presented questions that could be addressed if someone decides to do a similar study in the future. Firstly, as seen in subsection 3.8.1, this study did not have many respondents who stated that they are homosexuals or bisexuals. An interesting approach would therefore be to look deeper into swearing and sexuality. Secondly, another idea would be to look into how attitudes towards and use of swearing and different age groups/generations are linked within the same

family. This might be a difficult project carry out, but nevertheless an interesting one. The present thesis looked at both the connection between swearing and age and also at what relationship the respondents had to swear words when growing up. For a future project, it could be fascinating to see if there are any links between the two. Moreover, another aspect to examine is attitudes towards and use of name-calling and slurs. As this seems to be something the respondents avoid and something that people regard as quite offensive, it would be interesting to further investigate thoughts and attitudes towards it. A fourth idea for a future study is to do a similar study to this one, but in another city. York is a northern city in England and it would be interesting to see how these results compare to cities in other parts of the UK, perhaps located further south. Optionally, it is possible to compare these results to findings in a neighbouring city to see if the two show similar attitudes and use. Lastly, a new version of the BNC, the BNC2014, was released not long ago. Because of the timing, I did not manage to use the new version in the present thesis. For a future project, however, this could be a useful source to find new information about attitudes towards and use of swear words, and perhaps compare the old and the new to see the results that may reveal.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Online survey questionnaire

Hi! My name is Tonje and I'm currently writing my master's thesis at the University of Bergen in Norway. In order to do so, I need people to take part in this survey. It should not take more than 5-7 minutes and the answers you provide will be of great importance to me when I write my thesis. If you have any questions you are more than welcome to contact me at [tgj023@uib.no](mailto:tgj023@uib.no). Thank you for helping me out!

This is an anonymous survey. All the information you provide will be treated confidentially. Answers and comments will only be accessed by me and in presentations of the survey, only the statistics will be presented. The answers will not be used for anything other than my thesis and the survey and its answers will be deleted when I finish the thesis.

You are able to go back and revise your answers by pressing **BACK**

1. What is your gender?

Male

Female

Other

2. How old are you?

18-28

29-34

35-50

50-59

60+



3. What is your obtained level of education? If you are currently studying, what level are you at?

Primary school

High school/secondary school

University degree (BA, BSc etc.)

Higher university degree (MA, PhD, PGCE etc.)

Other

4. What is your sexual orientation?

Heterosexual

Bisexual

Homosexual

Transsexual

Prefer not to answer

Other

5. What is your religion?

Christian (Church of England, Protestant, Catholic, any other Christian denominations)

Muslim

Jewish

Hindu

Buddhist

None

Other

6. Where were you born (city, country)?

7. How long have you lived in York?

8. Is English your main first language?

Yes

No

-----

In the following section you will be asked about your use and attitude towards swear words in English. When you are asked to elaborate, please write a short explanation of your thoughts. It does not need to be more than a few sentences and there are no wrong answers. If there are questions you feel uncomfortable answering, please write "N/A". Any answer you provide is valuable to me when I'm writing my thesis.

9. Do you feel like you often use swear words?

Yes

No

10. Roughly (on average) how often do you swear?

In almost every utterance

Multiple times a day

Once or twice a day

Weekly or monthly

Very rarely, perhaps a few times a year

Never

11. In what situation(s) do you swear? More than one answer is possible

As exclamations (pain, surprise etc.)

To express anger

To express joy

To insult someone

For humour

To underline a point

In everyday conversations

I don't swear

12. Which swear words do you use most frequently? Please list at least three

13. Are there any swear words you do not regard as offensive? If yes, which?

14. Do you ever use words that sound like swear words (frick, effing, darn, heck etc.) in order to avoid swearing? If yes, which?

15. Do you change your use of swear words depending on who you are talking to?

16. What is your impression of people who 'sometimes' use swear words in their everyday speech? More than one answer possible

I don't care

They sound less educated

They sound honest

They sound rude

They sound natural

They sound friendly

They sound angry

Other (fill in)

17. What is your impression of people who 'often' use swear words in their everyday speech?

More than one answer possible

I don't care

They sound less educated

They sound honest

They sound rude

They sound natural

They sound friendly

They sound angry

Other (fill in)

18. What was the relationship to swear words when you were growing up? More than one answer possible

- Your parent(s) swore
- No one swore
- You were told off for swearing
- You were punished for swearing
- Indifference
- It was taboo
- Other (fill in)

-----

19. Below is a list of swear words. Please rate these on a scale from 1 (mild) to 6 (severe) based on how offensive you regard the words

Arse	1	2	3	4	5	6
Bastard	1	2	3	4	5	6
Bitch	1	2	3	4	5	6
Bloody	1	2	3	4	5	6
Cock	1	2	3	4	5	6
Cunt	1	2	3	4	5	6
Damn	1	2	3	4	5	6
Fuck	1	2	3	4	5	6
Motherfucker	1	2	3	4	5	6
Oh my god	1	2	3	4	5	6
Shit	1	2	3	4	5	6
Twat	1	2	3	4	5	6

## Appendix 2: Example of OFCOM’s classification system

Cunt	Strongest language, problematic for some even post-watershed. Vulgar, derogatory and shocking for both men and women. Especially distasteful and offensive to women and older participants.
Damn	Mild language, generally of little concern.
Dick	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as vulgar and distasteful by many. Less problematic when used in a humorous context, and generally considered slightly milder than ‘cock’.
Dickhead	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as vulgar and distasteful by many. Less problematic when used in a humorous context.
Fanny	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as crude, particularly by women.
Feck/Effing	Medium language, potentially unacceptable pre-watershed. Often seen as humorous. Older participants more likely to consider the word unacceptable.
Flaps	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as crude and often derogatory, particularly by women.
Fuck	Strongest language, unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as strong, aggressive and vulgar. Older participants more likely to consider the word unacceptable.
Gash	Strong language, generally unacceptable pre-watershed. Seen as crude and often derogatory, particularly by women.
Ginger	Mild language, generally of little concern. Typically viewed as a humorous insult, however more aggression or specific intent to hurt heightens impact.
Git	Mild language, generally of little concern. Typically viewed as a humorous insult.
God	Mild language, generally of little concern when used to express emotion. A concern for older or more religiously sensitive participants when used as an obscenity. Some recognition that this may offend religious people.
Goddam	Mild language, generally of little concern when used to express emotion. Seen as slightly stronger than ‘God’ because it is more aggressive. Some recognition that this might offend religious people.
Jesus Christ	Mild language, generally of little concern when used to express emotion. A concern for older or more religiously sensitive participants when used as an obscenity. Some recognition that this may offend religious people.

### Appendix 3: Example of sport club listings in the Community Sports Directory

FOOTBALL			
Bishopthorpe White Rose FC	Various	bwrfc@hotmail.co.uk	● ●
Carr Vikings JFC	Beckfield Park	Alan Roughton 07593 800098 alanroughon@aol.com	● ●
Copmanthorpe FC	Various	Martin Brooks 07711564377 martindbrooks@mac.com	● ● ●
Dunnington FC	Dunnington & Grimston Sports and Leisure Centre	Karl Hetherington 07731318925 karl.hetherington@hotmail.co.uk	● ● ●
Elvington Harriers FC	Lower Derwent Sports & Social Club	elvington.harriers@yahoo.co.uk	● ●
Fulford Football Club	Fulford School	Graham Souter 07769901914 graham@pressgreen.com	● ● ●
Hamilton Panthers	Little Knavesmire Sports Pavillion, YO23 1FA	Phillip Sanderson 01904 791759 phillip.sanderson4@ntlworld.com	● ●
Haxby Town JFC	Ethel Ward Playing Fields	Neil Thorbinson 01904 761908 nw_thorbinson@tiscali.co.uk	● ●
Heslington FC	Heslington Sports field	John Sellars 01904 421430 johnanthonysellars@yahoo.co.uk	●
Huntington FC	Hopgrove Playing Fields	Simon Jones 07771974501 simon_jones466@hotmail.com	● ● ●

● JUNIORS  
 ● ADULTS  
 ● CLUBMARK

### Appendix 4: List of organizations and clubs that received the survey via email

Round one:

University of York:

1. African Caribbean Society – [acs@yusu.org](mailto:acs@yusu.org)
2. Art society – [artsociety@yusu.org](mailto:artsociety@yusu.org)
3. Band society – [band@yusu.org](mailto:band@yusu.org)
4. British Asian Society – [basyork@yusu.org](mailto:basyork@yusu.org)
5. Comedy society – [comedysoc@yusu.org](mailto:comedysoc@yusu.org)
6. Crime and criminal justice – [crimsoc@yusu.org](mailto:crimsoc@yusu.org)
7. Doctor Who society – [doctorwho@yusu.org](mailto:doctorwho@yusu.org)
8. LGBTQ social – [lgbtqsocial@yusu.org](mailto:lgbtqsocial@yusu.org)
9. Linguistics society – [linguisticsociety@yusu.org](mailto:linguisticsociety@yusu.org)
10. Movie society – [movie@yusu.org](mailto:movie@yusu.org)
11. Supporting women in engineering at York – [swey@yusu.org](mailto:swey@yusu.org)

12. Basketball – [basketball@yusu.org](mailto:basketball@yusu.org)
13. Football (women) – [womensfootball@yusu.org](mailto:womensfootball@yusu.org)
14. Hockey – [hockey@yusu.org](mailto:hockey@yusu.org)
15. Athletics – [athletics@yusu.org](mailto:athletics@yusu.org)

Sports clubs:

1. York & District Indoor Bowls Club – [ydibc@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:ydibc@tiscali.co.uk)
2. Copmanthorpe Cricket Club – [copmanthorpecricketclub@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:copmanthorpecricketclub@hotmail.co.uk)
3. Askham Bryan Cricket Club – [askhambryance@gmail.com](mailto:askhambryance@gmail.com)
4. Heslington Football Club – [johnanthonyseillers@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:johnanthonyseillers@yahoo.co.uk)
5. Forest Park Golf Club – [admin@forestparkgolfclub.co.uk](mailto:admin@forestparkgolfclub.co.uk)
6. Heworth Golf Club – [heworthgc@gmail.com](mailto:heworthgc@gmail.com)
7. York Golf Club – [info@yorkgolfclub.co.uk](mailto:info@yorkgolfclub.co.uk)
8. York Jujitsu Club – [townclub@yorkjitsu.org](mailto:townclub@yorkjitsu.org)
9. York City Knights Ladies (rugby league) – [n.gulliver@yorkcityknights.com](mailto:n.gulliver@yorkcityknights.com)
10. York City Baths Club – [ybcsecretary@gmail.com](mailto:ybcsecretary@gmail.com)
11. Fulford Tennis Club – [jmiddleton.tennis@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:jmiddleton.tennis@yahoo.co.uk)
12. Strensall Tennis Club – [Jhwhitwell@btinternet.com](mailto:Jhwhitwell@btinternet.com)
13. Wigginton Squash and Social Club – [webstermarty@rocketmail.com](mailto:webstermarty@rocketmail.com)
14. Jorvik Warriors (Powerchair football) – [jorvikwarriorspfc@gmail.com](mailto:jorvikwarriorspfc@gmail.com)
15. York Hunters Handball – [yorkhandball@hotmail.com](mailto:yorkhandball@hotmail.com)

Others:

1. NSC: [nsc@york.ac.uk](mailto:nsc@york.ac.uk)
2. North Yorkshire Humanists – [info@nyhg.org.uk](mailto:info@nyhg.org.uk)
3. Ebor Group of Railway Modellers - [Garry.woodward@me.com](mailto:Garry.woodward@me.com)
4. City Screen and Studio Theatre Fan Club – <https://www.meetup.com/City-Screen-Fan-Club/members/?op=leaders>
5. Large Outdoors, Walking Weekends & Adventures – Yorkshire – <https://www.meetup.com/Large-Outdoors-Walking-Weekends-Adventures-Yorkshire/members/?op=leaders>
6. North Yorkshire Humanists – <https://www.meetup.com/North-Yorkshire-Humanists/members/?op=leaders>
7. Live Music in York – <https://www.meetup.com/Live-Music-in-York/members/?op=leaders>
8. York Skeptics - <https://www.meetup.com/York-Skeptics/members/?op=leaders>
9. York LGBT Forum – <https://www.meetup.com/York-LGBT-Forum/members/?op=leaders>
10. York Feminist Book Club – <https://www.meetup.com/York-Feminist-Book-Club/members/?op=leaders>
11. York Lesbian Meetup – <https://www.meetup.com/yorklesbiangroup/members/?op=leaders>
12. York Property Network – <https://www.meetup.com/York-Property-Network/members/?op=leaders>
13. Random Encounter a place for games and geekery– <https://www.meetup.com/Random-Encounter/members/?op=leaders>

14. Free Thinkers Gathering York – <https://www.meetup.com/Free-Thinkers-York/members/?op=leaders>
15. York Code Dojo – <https://www.meetup.com/York-Code-Dojo/members/?op=leaders>

#### Round Two:

##### University of York

1. Astronomy Society – [astronomy@yusu.org](mailto:astronomy@yusu.org)
2. Business, Accounting and Management Society – [bamsoc@yusu.org](mailto:bamsoc@yusu.org)
3. Creative Writing Society – [inklings@yusu.org](mailto:inklings@yusu.org)
4. Game Development Society – [devsoc@yusu.org](mailto:devsoc@yusu.org)
5. Games and Roleplay York Society – [sfandf@yusu.org](mailto:sfandf@yusu.org)
6. Video Game and LAN Society – [fragsoc@yusu.org](mailto:fragsoc@yusu.org)
7. York Student Television – [ystv@yusu.org](mailto:ystv@yusu.org)
8. Softball and Baseball Club – [softball@yusu.org](mailto:softball@yusu.org)
9. Ultimate Frisbee – [ultimate@yusu.org](mailto:ultimate@yusu.org)
10. Polo – [polo@yusu.org](mailto:polo@yusu.org)

##### Sports clubs:

1. York & District Amalgamation of Anglers – [bobh22y@gmail.com](mailto:bobh22y@gmail.com)
2. Ebor Archers – [ray.chaplin@ntlworld.com](mailto:ray.chaplin@ntlworld.com)
3. York Canoe Club – [contactus@yorkcanoecub.co.uk](mailto:contactus@yorkcanoecub.co.uk)
4. Middlethorpe Badminton Club – [gmackenzie2703@gmail.com](mailto:gmackenzie2703@gmail.com)
5. Jorvik Boccia – [jorvikboccia@aol.com](mailto:jorvikboccia@aol.com)
6. York Croquet Club – [yorkcroquet@gmail.com](mailto:yorkcroquet@gmail.com)
7. Fulford Golf Club – [gary@fulfordgolfclub.co.uk](mailto:gary@fulfordgolfclub.co.uk)
8. Pike Hills Golf Club – [secretary@pikehillsgolfclub.co.uk](mailto:secretary@pikehillsgolfclub.co.uk)
9. Osbaldwick Sports Club – [kgckeith@sky.com](mailto:kgckeith@sky.com)
10. Yoga in York – [anna@yogainyork.co.uk](mailto:anna@yogainyork.co.uk)
11. Bishopthorpe Bowling Club – [primes23@btinternet.com](mailto:primes23@btinternet.com)
12. Copmanthorpe Bowling Club – [pertertooze@copmanthorpebowlingclub.co.uk](mailto:pertertooze@copmanthorpebowlingclub.co.uk)

## Appendix 5: The email invitation

Hi there!

My name is Tonje Gjesdal and I am a master student at the University of Bergen, Norway. I am currently writing my master's thesis in English about the attitudes towards and use of swear words in York. In order to do so, I need participants in an online survey I am conducting, and this is the reason why I am sending this email to you. This email address was



listed as contact information for your group/organization and I hope I have reached the right person.

Inserted below is the link to the online survey and my hope is that you might help me find participants by distributing the link to the members of your group/organization. For example by including it in an email, posting it in your Facebook group, sharing it in a newsletter, or any other way of communication you use. The answers are all anonymous.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for your time!

Kind regards,  
Tonje Gjesdal  
University of Bergen

## Appendix 6: Millwood-Hargrave's categorization

