

A Corpus Study Of YouTube Comments  
On Flaming And Formality In Relation To The Affordability Of The Product  
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## Abstract

Computer-mediated discourse (CMD) is the online communication produced by networked individuals and is becoming increasingly important for organisations nowadays. Online user-generated content in CMD has an impact on the reputation of a brand. Hence, researchers have paid attention to the investigation of online behavior. No recent study has examined the relation between the affordability of the product and CMD variation. This study aimed to gain insight in the relation between the affordability of the product and the linguistic styles flaming and formality. Furthermore, the link between flaming and formality was examined. In total, the corpus consisted of 500 YouTube comments that were randomly selected. Chi-square tests were performed to test whether there was any discrepancy in the distribution between a video that represented less affordable products (Samsung vs. Apple) and affordable products (Cola vs. Pepsi). No significant relation was found between the affordability of the product and flaming whereas a significant relation between the affordability of the product and formality showed that the Samsung vs. Apple video contained more formal comments than the Cola vs. Pepsi video. Moreover, the results revealed a significant relation between flaming and formality, which means that impolite comments were commonly seen as informal too. A possible explanation might be that senders of impolite comments do not bother to formulate a formal comment and vice versa. The findings of this study deepen the understanding of language use on YouTube and could help community managers to create a social media strategy.

## Introduction

Today's world is becoming more digitized and technical developments have changed communication processes. A prominent development is the replacement of traditional written language by online communication. Nowadays, computer-mediated communication (CMC) is becoming even more important than face-to-face (FtF) communication (Moor, Heuvelman & Veleur, 2010). For organisations, it is important to know how to cope with CMC. Therefore, online behavior has provided a new domain to investigate (Herring, 2004). In the past, studies on online communication were seen as anecdotal and speculative. However, increasingly more researchers have contributed empirically to the field over the last couple of years (Herring, 2004).

Computer-mediated discourse (CMD) is “the communication produced when human beings interact with one another by transmitting messages via networked computers” (Herring, 2004, p.1). It encompasses various forms of interpersonal communication such as instant messaging, chat channels, e-mail and web discussion boards (Androutsopoulos & Beißwenger, 2008). The investigation of CMD is called computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA).

The quality of user-generated content varies from abusive language to high-quality items (Agichtein, Castillo, Donato, Gionis & Mishne, 2008). The linguistic styles flaming and formality will be investigated in this study. Moor, Heuvelman and Verleur (2010, p.1) examined language use on YouTube and defined flaming as “displaying hostility by insulting, swearing or using otherwise offensive language.” It was found that abusive language appears to be very common in online conversations on YouTube. Their results also revealed that flaming is used to express disagreement and although it is seen as a negative way to abuse others, it appears to be very common. In addition, they showed that users tend to use more swear words and hostile language on social platforms such as YouTube than in oral FtF-interactions. Baron (1984) found a possible explanation for the differences between CMC and FtF interactions. She stated that people might need to compensate the lack of physical presence and non-linguistic context in CMC communication by linguistics styles.

The other linguistic style that will be considered in this study is formality. Cho (1996) considered “the use of lower case in place of uppercase, omission of punctuation, and omission of grammatical function words” as informal. Three main characteristics of a written text that influence formality can be distinguished (Herring, 2004). First, the level of formality of a message depends on the purpose of the medium. For example, e-mail can serve to fulfill informal purposes, which means that the language use may be informal too. Graham (2007) also thought that the expectations of the medium could form the perception on (in)formal

behavior. Second, Herring (2004) believed that the communication purpose conditions linguistic variation. She stated that professional writing may be more formal than other forms of writing, such as creative texts. Third, Herring (2004) stated that it depends on the topic and type of activity (such as flaming or exchanging information) whether (in)formal language is used. 'Fun topics' tend to evoke more informal language than serious topics such as extended debates (Herring, 1999).

In today's world, social media are common forms of CMD on which the above-mentioned linguistic styles frequently occur. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, LinkedIn and Instagram are used to share content and to give opinions on particular subjects (Asur & Huberman, 2010). YouTube is a popular medium and therefore, it is the focus of this study. In order to investigate a particular medium, its technical communication features should be distinguished (Herring, 2007). Androutsopoulos (2006) provided an overview of relevant factors that can play a role in CMD and discussed unique electronic features of various media. On YouTube, users can create an anonymous identity and strengthen their image by using an avatar. Another aspect that makes the medium unique is the multicultural environment: different cultures from all over the world form a diverse setting. Various languages are used and consumers are free to express their opinion in comments.

Within organisations, consumers commonly express their view on purchased products online (Chen, Fay & Wang, 2011). Nowadays, these reviews have a great impact. Chen, Fay and Wang (2011) related review posting behavior to social media strategies. In their view, organisations need to incorporate a social media strategy to manage review posting and to survive in today's world. Popescu and Etzioni (2007) agreed that customer reviews are becoming increasingly important to determine the strategy of an organisation. Chen, Fay and Wang (2011) particularly found that positive user-generated content, such as product reviews, generate a better match between the identity and reputation of an organisation. In this study, YouTube comments are considered as reviews and organisations should know how to manage these comments.

Nowadays, YouTube is commonly used to post comments about rivals. Organisations compete with each other on YouTube in competing marketing campaigns. There are various videos available that show rivalry among competitors such as Mercedes vs. Jaguar, McDonalds vs. Burger King and Nivea vs. Olaz. This study focuses on four established brands that compete in two different sectors. On the one hand, the intense competition between the less affordable brands Samsung and Apple is incorporated in this study. On the other hand, soft drink competitors Coca Cola and Pepsi are incorporated to represent the

affordable brands. The competition between Samsung and Apple is widely discussed nowadays and Cola Cola and Pepsi are the number one greatest business rivalries of all time (Fry, 2013).

The above-mentioned brands can be seen as communities. YouTube is commonly used for community interaction (Siersdorfer et al., 2010). Several researchers have tried to explain CMD variation by investigating contextual factors that play a role in communities. Casaló, Flavián and Guinalíu (2007) showed that community members tend to express themselves in a common language on social media. Herring (2004) described this phenomenon more specifically by stating that “computer-mediated groups develop norms of practice regarding ‘how things are done’ and what constitutes socially desirable behavior.” She even stated that although CMD is produced by “impersonal machines”, it reflects the identities of its users (Herring, 2004,p.11). For example, flaming is prohibited within certain communities (Herring, 2004) and this shows that the members of these communities care about polite language use. Graham (2007) added that members need to be aware of such norms, to be a successful member of a community.

Danet and Herring (2007) also showed that some people do not comply with the norms and tend to get off-topic within community-threads. They found that the use of (im)polite language depends on the extent to which someone is involved in a particular subject: more involved people tend to use more polite language than people that are less-involved. Nishimura (2008) found a comparable relation between (im)polite language use in conjunction with community-hood. He indicated that a strong sense of community seems to correlate with the use of impolite expressions. The above findings suggest that language differences will be found between the two communities in this study (Cola vs. Pepsi and Samsung vs. Apple). It is expected that different communities produce varying comments in terms of flaming and formality.

CMD variation has been studied extensively. Androutsopoulos (2006) investigated various CMD technical features, however he paid less attention to the social situations in which these aspects are embedded. Researchers have not yet attempted to explain how linguistic styles (such as flaming and formality) relate to brand communities within two particular branch industries. Little research has been conducted to test whether the membership of a community influences flaming and formality on social media. Until now, no study has investigated the relation between flaming and formality in YouTube comments. Therefore, this study aims to investigate whether there is a relation between the affordability

of the product and the linguistic styles (flaming and formality) on YouTube. This study also aims to determine if there is any link between flaming and formality.

This study has several implications for society as well as science. On the one hand, it deepens the scientific knowledge of language use on YouTube within brand communities. On the other hand, this study aims at investigating the relation between brand communities and language use. In order to help organisations to understand online behavior and to successfully manage their brand reputation on social media, the following research questions are posed in this study:

- Is there any link between the affordability of the product and flaming on YouTube (1)?
- Is there any link between the affordability of the product and formality of YouTube comments (2)?
- Is there any link between flaming and formality on YouTube (3)?

### **Method**

In this study, a computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) of 500 YouTube comments was carried out. This methodological approach is primarily developed to address human-computer-human interactions such as messages, threads, characters, exchanges and utterances (Herring, 2004). CMDA is not seen as one single method but rather a combination of methods: it provides an approach to language that is seen as a “methodological toolkit and a set of theoretical lenses” (Herring, 2004, p. 342).

### **Materials**

This study was a comparative corpus analysis of computer-mediated materials retrieved from YouTube. Comments of two YouTube videos were used for this study based on the affordability of the product. One video showed the intense competition between Samsung and Apple: the less affordable brands. The other video presented the competition between Coca Cola and Pepsi: the affordable brands. The less affordable products video (Bourdain, 2012) was posted in 2012. In total, 2,584 comments were available in April 2015 that were posted within 2013 and 2015. The video that represented the affordable products (Koong, 2006) was posted in 2006 and included 2,870 comments in April 2015 that were posted between 2009 and 2015.

It should be noted that these numbers exclusively reflect the initial comments. In this number, YouTube does not incorporate threads, which are replies with the initial message.

Above all, non-English and shared comments that did not contain text, were not included in the corpus. Shared comments were not included in the materials in order to make sure that all comments were unique. In total, 250 comments per video were selected by means of random sampling in order to create a representative corpus. An online randomizer (Urbaniak & Plous, 2015) ensured that every comment had the same chance to be selected. Eventually, the corpus consisted of 500 comments that were analysed.

## Procedure

The materials were coded in April 2015 on the basis of three nominal variables that were incorporated in this study: affordability of the product, flaming and formality. The materials were classified by affordability of the product on the basis of the video on YouTube. The 250 comments of the Samsung vs. Apple video represented the less affordable products and the 250 comments of the Cola vs. Pepsi video represented the affordable products. Less affordable products were considered as high-priced products (from Samsung and Apple) whereas affordable products were considered as low-priced products (from Cola and Pepsi). Flaming was defined as the level of impoliteness and formality indicated the level of informal language of a comment. The materials of this corpus study were coded on the basis of the operational terms for flaming and formality. The dimensions will be discussed in combination with examples of YouTube comments from the Coca Cola vs. Pepsi video (Bourdain, 2012) and the Samsung vs. Apple video (Koong, 2006).

**Flaming** could be assigned on two codes: **impolite and neutral**. Impolite was assigned on comments that contained **taboo words, insults and attacks**, for example: “*Ur right. Apple sucks! No one wants to buy their products, their stores are always empty & they’re nearly bankrupt. Apple is lousy!!!* (Bourdain, 2012)” This comment contained the taboo word ‘suck’ and the insult ‘loosy’. This comment was not only seen as impolite, but also informal (that will be operationalised below) because it contained incomplete sentences such as ‘*Ur right.*’, the abbreviation ‘*ur*’ and the symbol ‘&’.

Neutral (flaming) was assigned on comments that did not contain taboo words, insults and attacks, for example: “*I like both, just depends on my mood. :)* (Koong, 2006)” This comment applied to neutral (flaming) as it did not contain any taboo words, insults and attacks.

Formality comprised of three dimensions: informal, neutral and formal. **Informal** was assigned on comments that contained **incomplete sentences, abbreviations, stylistic variation (such as the use of ellipses, emoticons and symbols), words that were misspelled or contained**





## Results

To answer the research questions, three Chi-square tests were conducted in order to determine if there were any relations between the affordability of the product, flaming and formality. The purpose of this study was to examine whether there was a link between the affordability of the product and variation in CMD in terms of flaming and formality. The results are presented in Table 1, 2 and 3 and it should be noted that the sum of percentages was not 100 because the numbers were rounded off to the nearest percent.

First, the link between flaming and the affordability of the product on YouTube was investigated (1). Table 1 presents the results of the Chi-square test and descriptive statistics for flaming in relation to affordability of the product. No significant relation was found between flaming and affordability of the product ( $\chi^2 (1) = 1.2, p = .548$ ). In other words, there was no relation between informal language and the affordability of the product.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for affordability of the product in relation to flaming in YouTube comments (1) (in frequencies and percentages)

Affordability of the product	Neutral	Flaming	Total
		Impolite	
Samsung vs. Apple (less affordable)	189 (76.0%)	61 (24.0%)	250 (100%)
Cola vs. Pepsi (affordable)	193 (77.0%)	57 (23.0%)	250 (100%)
Total	382	118	500

Second, the link between formality and affordability of the product of YouTube comments was examined (2). Table 2 indicates the results of the Chi-square test and descriptive statistics for formality in function of the affordability of the product. A highly significant relation was found between formality and affordability of the product ( $\chi^2 (2) = 16.8, p < .001$ ).

Table 2 shows that the Samsung vs. Apple video evoked more or less the same amount of formal comments (10%) compared to the Cola vs. Pepsi video (7%). However, the Samsung vs. Apple video evoked more neutral (formality) comments (28%) compared to the Cola vs. Pepsi video (14%). In contrast to the Samsung vs. Apple video which evoked less informal comments (62%) compared to the Cola vs. Pepsi video (78%). In other words, the

results indicated that the Cola vs. Pepsi commercial evoked more informal comments than the Samsung vs. Apple commercial.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for affordability of the product in relation to formality (2) (in frequencies and percentages)

Affordability of the product	Formality			Total
	Formal	Neutral	Informal	
Samsung vs. Apple (less affordable)	25 (10.0%)	70 (28.0%)	155 (62.0%)	250 (100%)
Cola vs. Pepsi (affordable)	18 (7.0%)	36 (14.0%)	196 (78.0%)	250 (100%)
Total	43	106	351	500

Third, the link between flaming and formality was investigated (3). Table 3 presents the results of the Chi-square test and descriptive statistics for formality in relation to flaming. A highly significant relation was found between flaming and formality ( $\chi^2(2) = 20.5, p < .001$ ). In other words, formal, neutral (formality) or informal comments were significantly related to whether the comment was considered to be impolite or neutral (flaming).

Table 3 indicates the link between flaming and formality. The impolite comments were seen as less formal (3%) compared to the neutral (flaming) comments (11%). The impolite comments were seen as less neutral (formality) (11%) compared to the neutral (flaming) comments (24%) whereas the impolite comments were seen as more informal (86%) compared to the neutral (flaming) comments (65%). In other words, impolite comments were commonly seen as informal too.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for flaming in relation to formality (3) (in frequencies and percentages)

Flaming	Formality			Total
	Formal	Neutral	Informal	
Impolite	3 (3.0%)	13 (11.0%)	102 (86.0%)	118 (100%)
Neutral	40 (11.0%)	93 (24.0%)	249 (65.0%)	382 (100%)
Total	43	106	351	500

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

As mentioned in the literature review, past studies have investigated impolite and informal language use. Herring (2004) presented three characteristics of a written text that determine the level of formality: the medium purpose, communication purpose and activity type. Moor, Heuvelman and Verleur (2010) discussed flaming and found that CMC interactions on YouTube tend to evoke more impolite language than FtF interactions. Furthermore, studies have investigated the link between language use and contextual factors such as community-hood. Casaló, Flavián and Guinalíu (2007) found that community members tend to use the same language expressions and Herring (2004) agreed that certain groups develop their own view on socially desirable behavior.

However, no study has focused on the relation between the affordability of the product, flaming and formality within YouTube communities. Therefore, the following three research questions were posed in this study: is there any link between the affordability of the product and (1) flaming on YouTube and (2) formality of YouTube comments? It was also examined whether there was any link between the linguistic styles flaming and formality on YouTube (3). The ultimate aim of this study was to examine whether there were relations between the affordability of the product and CMD variation in terms of flaming and formality. Based on previous studies that discussed the link between CMD variation and communities, it was expected that the two communities in this study would produce different comments with regard to flaming and formality.

Nonetheless, no significant relation was found between flaming and the affordability of the product (1), which means that the affordability of the product did not have a significant effect on (im)polite language use. In other words, no significant differences were found between the Cola vs. Pepsi and Samsung vs. Apple communities in terms of flaming. Therefore, it can be concluded that flaming does not occur significantly more often in comments of one of the two communities.

It was shown that communities seem to develop their own way to cope with socially undesirable behavior (Herring, 2004). It was found that flaming is not allowed within some communities. Contrary to expectations, the non-significant relation between the affordability of the product and flaming showed that none of the two communities did significantly use more impolite language than the other community in this study. This suggests that the above-mentioned flaming norm is applicable to one of the communities in this study. In other words, it seems that the Coca Cola vs. Pepsi and Samsung vs. Apple communities do not impose communication norms with regard to flaming. There is a possibility that the community

managers of Coca Cola, Pepsi, Samsung and Apple do not consider how to manage informal language on YouTube.

In contrast to flaming, the results did reveal a significant relation between formality and affordability of the product (2). Results showed that the Cola vs. Pepsi commercial evoked more informal comments than the Samsung vs. Apple commercial. According to these findings, it could be concluded that videos that show affordable products may evoke more informal comments than videos that show less affordable products.

Nishimura (2008) indicated that strong communities tend to use more informal language than groups that do not feel such a strong sense of community. In contrast to the non-significant relation between flaming and the affordability of the product, the significant relation between formality and the affordability of the product shows the association between these variables. To conclude, the present study is in line with the expectation that it might depend on the kind of community whether (in)formal language is used. In this study, it could be possible that some members of the Cola vs. Pepsi community did not bother to post a formal comment because they may felt a stronger sense of community than the Samsung vs. Apple community.

Another significant relation was found between the variables flaming and formality (3). The results revealed that impolite comments were commonly considered as informal too. In conclusion, this could possibly mean that impolite YouTube comments tend to be more informal than polite YouTube comments.

This finding confirms the results of the study of Herring (1999) that showed a relation between the activity type (such as flaming) and formality. She stated that impolite comments are commonly informal too. A possible explanation for the findings of this study is that the senders of impolite comments did not put much effort to formulate a formal comment and vice versa. Another possible explanation might be that it was challenging for the researchers to distinguish between flaming and formality. In other words, an informal comment might also be assigned as impolite. Perhaps, the distinction between the operational definitions was not clear enough to differentiate between the variables.

Past research has shown that it can be challenging to analyse user-generated content because of the variation in quality. Agichtein et al. (2008) for example, considered the ranking of high-quality and low-quality items as problematic. They encountered difficulties to identify slight differences in (non)abusive language in particular. Moor, Heuvelman and Verleur (2010) agreed that linguistic variation was difficult to measure in their study.

The present study is in line with the two studies mentioned above (Agichtein et al. 2008; Moor, Heuvelman & Verleur, 2010) since the operational terms of this study were possibly not strict enough. Although the definitions were based on the methodology of past research (Herring, 2004), it is not sure whether all possible language expressions that could appear in comments were covered in Appendix A (that shows examples of YouTube comments). For example, the researchers did not discuss beforehand how to consider quotations. It was not agreed whether the expression “*apple is shit*” in the following comment needed to be considered as flaming: “*It's funny how all the android fanboys are like apple is shit. If you can't afford something, don't rant about it lol.*” However, the researchers in this study did manage to obtain sufficiently high levels of agreement.

Another shortcoming of this study was that the Coca Cola vs. Pepsi and Samsung vs. Apple video were posted on YouTube in different years. It is also important to bear in mind that YouTube did not show all posted comments in April 2015. The Coca Cola vs. Pepsi video was posted in 2006 whereas the first available comment on YouTube was posted in 2009. Similarly, the video of Samsung vs. Apple exclusively showed comments from 2013 till now, but was already posted in 2012. Since the comments were randomly selected, these discrepancies might have affected the results. The number of (in)formal or (im)polite comments could have changed and the perceptions on the four brands (Samsung, Apple, Cola and Pepsi) may be changed too. For future studies, it is recommended to ensure the corpus is well-balanced. It might be interesting to investigate whether writing styles and brand perceptions change throughout years. In addition, further research could be undertaken to investigate YouTube comments including threads, as it is possible that conversations between YouTube users may affect the results.

Furthermore, the perception on two communities (Cola vs. Pepsi and Samsung vs. Apple) was measured in this study. Other less affordable or affordable products could be incorporated in future studies to see whether the results of this study can be generalised to other high-priced and low-priced products. For example, future investigations could focus on other less affordable products such as cars (Mercedes vs. Jaguar) and affordable products such as cosmetics (Nivea vs. Olaz).

Moreover, this study has exclusively covered flaming, formality and the affordability of the product. In the future, other CMD factors such as identity still need to be further researched as “the field covers a vast array of phenomena” (Herring, 2004, p.13). The innovative world is eventually constantly changing: the field of CMD is never fully established.

This study reveals scientific and societal implications. The results of this study contribute to the scientific knowledge of language use on YouTube and could help community managers of an organisation to understand comments within a brand community. The results created awareness of (in)formal and (im)polite comments that could negatively affect the reputation of an organisation. Moreover, the findings could have important implications for developing a strategy to approach customers. Over time, this strategy will help community managers to successfully manage the reputation of an organisation.

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## Appendix A: Operational terms of flaming and formality with examples of YouTube comments

Flaming indicated the level of impoliteness and formality indicated the level of informal language of a comment.

### Flaming

Impolite	Taboo words	<p>Bourdain (2012)</p>
	Insults and attacks	<p>Bourdain (2012)</p>
Neutral	No taboo words, insults or attacks	<p>Koong (2006)</p>

### Formality

Code	Language aspect	Example
Formal	Complete sentences	<p>Bourdain (2012)</p>
	No abbreviations	<p>Koong (2006)</p>
	No stylistic variation (such as the use of ellipses, emoticons or symbols)	
	No words that were	

	misspelled or contained more (capital) letters than necessary	
Neutral	Complete sentences	 <b>ImyurZero</b> · 1 jaar geleden · als reactie op itsjemmabond Yes they did, first day on the job. It wasn't like it was a threat, they didn't say it in those exact words, but basically that's what they said. Koong (2006)
	No abbreviations and omissions of punctuation	 <b>itsjemmabond</b> · 2 jaar geleden · als reactie op ImyurZero Did they really tell you that? Koong (2006)
	Omissions of punctuation	 <b>The Giant Potato</b> · 1 jaar geleden coke Koong (2006)
Informal	Incomplete sentences	 <b>Eduard Avili</b> · 3 jaar geleden pepsi way better than coke Koong (2006)
	Abbreviations	 <b>Burcey B</b> · 1 maand geleden if theyre gonna appeal to the millenials as they claim on the ad, make sure your phone doesnt look like a bus window. Beantwoorden ·   Bourdain (2012)
	Words that were misspelled or contained more (capital) letters than necessary	 <b>princesskanu</b> · 2 jaar geleden · als reactie op bonered0927 thanks...for comments like this one...i was about to spend my whole freaking three months salary to buy a iphone (yes....i live in a third world country...) and know i have my samsung...AND I LOVEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE IT :) (Bourdain, 2012)
	Stylistic variation (such as ellipses, emoticons and symbols)	 <b>Joey Ryder</b> · 1 maand geleden So apple copyrighted using the headphone at the bottom? Lol then get off our big screens you dumb asses xD Beantwoorden ·   Bourdain (2012)

## **Bijlage A. Verklaring geen fraude en plagiaat**

Aan het einde van het traject inleveren bij het secretariaat tegelijk met de digitale versie van de scriptie op CD-rom.

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Ondergetekende  
[Voornaam, achternaam en studentnummer],

.....

bachelorstudent Communicatie- en Informatiewetenschappen aan de Letterenfaculteit  
van de Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen,

verklaart dat deze scriptie volledig oorspronkelijk is en uitsluitend door hem/haarzelf  
geschreven is. Bij alle informatie en ideeën ontleend aan andere bronnen, heeft  
ondergetekende expliciet en in detail verwezen naar de vindplaatsen. De erin  
gepresenteerde onderzoeksgegevens zijn door ondergetekende zelf verzameld op de in  
de scriptie beschreven wijze.

Plaats + datum .....

Handtekening .....