

The use of profanity by a speaker **generally decreases perceived credibility and trustworthiness**, but context, intent, and audience expectations can lead to **mixed or even positive effects** in certain situations.

1. Introduction

The effect of profanity on a speaker's perceived credibility and trustworthiness is complex and context-dependent. Most research finds that swearing tends to harm impressions of intelligence, trustworthiness, and overall credibility, especially in formal or mixed-gender settings (DeFrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019; Bostrom et al., 1973; Hamilton, 1989; König & Jucks, 2019; Perrault et al., 2021; Westrop et al., 2018). However, some studies show that profanity can enhance perceptions of authenticity, emotional intensity, and even credibility—particularly when used judiciously, in informal contexts, or to express strong feelings (Rassin & Van Der Heijden, 2005; Lie et al., 2023; Lafreniere et al., 2022; Fägersten, 2017; Johnson, 2012). The impact of profanity is also shaped by factors such as the speaker's gender, the relationship between speaker and audience, the type of profanity, and the expectations or norms of the setting (DeFrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019; Bostrom et al., 1973; Cavazza & Guidetti, 2014; Rudisel, 2016; Allard & Holmstrom, 2023; Seiter & Johnson, 2024; Johnson & Lewis, 2010; Johnson, 2012). Thus, while the default effect is negative, there are notable exceptions where swearing can serve as a strategic tool for connection or emphasis.

2. Methods

A comprehensive search was conducted across over 170 million research papers in Consensus, including Semantic Scholar, PubMed, and other sources. The search targeted studies on profanity, swearing, speaker credibility, trustworthiness, and related constructs across communication, psychology, and media studies. In total, 1,015 papers were identified, 723 were screened, 392 were deemed eligible, and the top 50 most relevant papers were included in this review.

Search Strategy

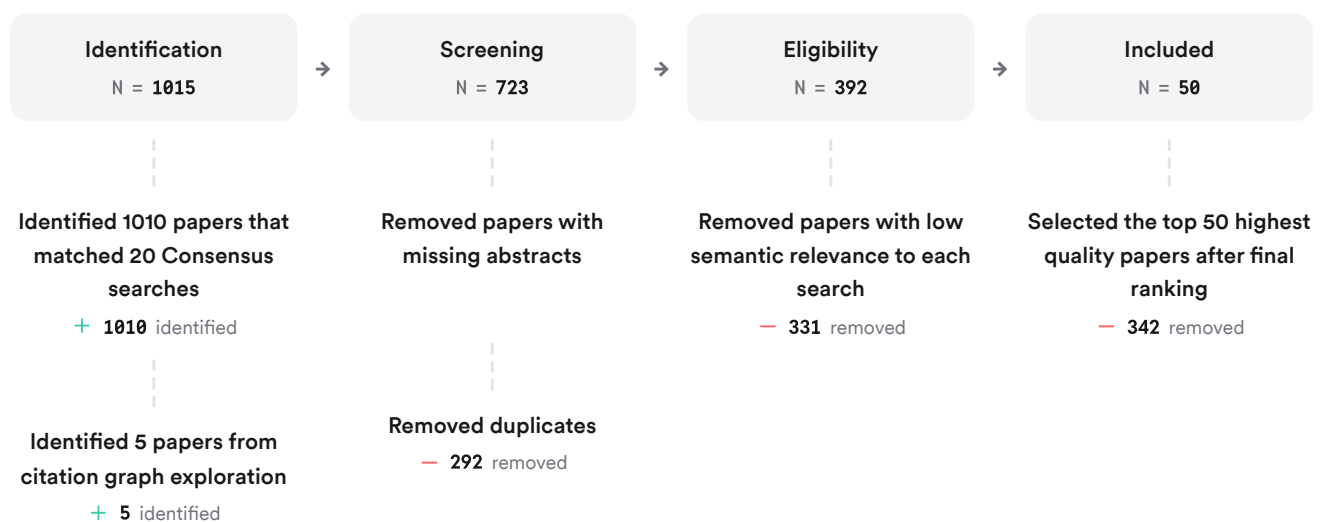


FIGURE 1 Flow diagram of the literature search and selection process.

Eight unique search strategies were used, spanning foundational theory, context and gender moderators, positive/negative effects, and interdisciplinary perspectives.

3. Results

3.1 General Effects: Profanity Reduces Credibility and Trustworthiness

Most studies report that speakers who use profanity are rated lower in credibility, trustworthiness, intelligence, sociability, and politeness (DeFrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019; Bostrom et al., 1973; Hamilton, 1989; König & Jucks, 2019; Perrault et al., 2021; Westrop et al., 2018). This effect is especially pronounced in formal or mixed-gender settings, and when the profanity is perceived as lewd or aggressive (DeFrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019; Bostrom et al., 1973; Hamilton, 1989; König & Jucks, 2019; Cavazza & Guidetti, 2014; Perrault et al., 2021; Nau & Stewart, 2018; Martaindale et al., 2022; Johnson & Lewis, 2010).

3.2 Contextual and Moderating Factors

The impact of profanity is moderated by context (formal vs. informal), speaker gender, relationship to the audience, and the type of profanity used (DeFrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019; Bostrom et al., 1973; Cavazza & Guidetti, 2014; Rudisel, 2016; Allard & Holmstrom, 2023; Seiter & Johnson, 2024; Johnson & Lewis, 2010; Johnson, 2012). For example, swearing in informal or peer-group settings can sometimes foster solidarity or reduce social distance (Fägersten, 2017; Fine & Corte, 2024; Debray, 2023; Fägersten & Stapleton, 2023; Johnson, 2012). In online reviews, profanity can increase perceived authenticity and helpfulness, especially when used sparingly and in low-subjectivity contexts (Lie et al., 2023; Lafreniere et al., 2022).

3.3 Positive and Mixed Effects

Some research finds that judicious or strategic use of profanity can increase perceptions of authenticity, emotional intensity, and even credibility—particularly when the audience perceives the swearing as genuine or contextually appropriate (Rassin & Van Der Heijden, 2005; Lie et al., 2023; Feldman et al., 2017; Fägersten, 2017; Lafreniere et al., 2022; Johnson, 2012). In legal or testimonial contexts, swearing has been shown to increase the believability of statements (Rassin & Van Der Heijden, 2005). In online and entertainment settings, swearing can help build a relatable persona and foster audience engagement (Fägersten, 2017; Lafreniere et al., 2022; Fägersten & Stapleton, 2023).

3.4 Risks and Negative Reactions

Profanity is more likely to backfire in professional, academic, or high-stakes contexts, where it is seen as a violation of norms and can lead to perceptions of incompetence, aggression, or unprofessionalism (DeFrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019; Bostrom et al., 1973; Hamilton, 1989; König & Jucks, 2019; Perrault et al., 2021; Martaindale et al., 2022; Johnson & Lewis, 2010; Westrop et al., 2018). The negative impact is often stronger for women, authority figures, or in cross-gender interactions (DeFrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019; Bostrom et al., 1973; Cavazza & Guidetti, 2014; Allard & Holmstrom, 2023; Perrault et al., 2021; Nau & Stewart, 2018).

Key Papers

Paper	Context	Methodology	Key Results
(DeFrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019)	Conversational Dyads	Experiment	Profanity reduced trustworthiness, intelligence, and overall impression, especially in mixed-gender settings
(Bostrom et al., 1973)	Persuasive Messages	Experiment	Profanity generally decreased perceived credibility, with some gender differences
(Hamilton, 1989)	Obscene Language	Experiment	Obscenity reduced perceived competence, trustworthiness, and sociability
(Rassin & Van Der Heijden, 2005)	Legal Testimony	Experiment	Swearing increased believability of statements, despite self-reported bias against it
(Lie et al., 2023)	Online Reviews	Field & Experiment	Profanity increased perceived helpfulness and authenticity in low-subjectivity reviews

FIGURE 2 Comparison of key studies on profanity and perceived credibility/trustworthiness.

Top Contributors

Type	Name	Papers
Author	Karyn Stapleton	(Stapleton, 2020; Stapleton & Fägersten, 2023; Fägersten & Stapleton, 2023)
Author	Kristy Beers Fägersten	(Fägersten, 2017; Stapleton & Fägersten, 2023; Fägersten & Stapleton, 2023)
Author	D. Johnson	(Johnson & Lewis, 2010; Johnson, 2012)
Journal	<i>Journal of Language and Social Psychology</i>	(DeFrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019; Cavazza & Guidetti, 2014; Hamilton, 1998)
Journal	<i>Journal of Pragmatics</i>	(Stapleton, 2020; Stapleton & Fägersten, 2023; Debray, 2023; Fägersten & Stapleton, 2023)
Journal	<i>Social Psychological and Personality Science</i>	(Feldman et al., 2017; De Vries et al., 2017)

FIGURE 3 Authors & journals that appeared most frequently in the included papers.

4. Discussion

The literature overwhelmingly finds that profanity generally reduces a speaker's perceived credibility and trustworthiness, especially in formal, professional, or mixed-gender contexts (DeFrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019; Bostrom et al., 1973; Hamilton, 1989; König & Jucks, 2019; Perrault et al., 2021; Westrop et al., 2018). This is likely due to social norms associating swearing with lack of self-control, aggression, or disrespect (DeFrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019; Bostrom et al., 1973; Hamilton, 1989; König & Jucks, 2019; Perrault et al., 2021; Martaindale et al., 2022; Johnson & Lewis, 2010). However, the effect is not universal. In some informal, peer, or online contexts, profanity can signal authenticity, emotional intensity, or solidarity, and may even enhance credibility or helpfulness when used judiciously (Rassin & Van Der Heijden, 2005; Lie et al., 2023; Fägersten, 2017; Lafreniere et al., 2022; Johnson, 2012). The impact of profanity is thus highly context-dependent, shaped by audience expectations, relationship dynamics, and the perceived intent behind the language (Stapleton, 2020; Lie et al., 2023; Fägersten, 2017; Lafreniere et al., 2022; Stapleton & Fägersten, 2023; Debray, 2023; Fägersten & Stapleton, 2023; Johnson, 2012).

Notably, the strategic use of mild profanity can sometimes increase the believability of statements or foster a sense of intimacy and relatability, particularly in entertainment or digital media (Rassin & Van Der Heijden, 2005; Lie et al., 2023; Fägersten, 2017; Lafreniere et al., 2022; Fägersten & Stapleton, 2023; Johnson, 2012). However, excessive, aggressive, or contextually inappropriate swearing almost always backfires, leading to negative judgments of competence, trustworthiness, and professionalism (DeFrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019; Bostrom et al., 1973; Hamilton, 1989; König & Jucks, 2019; Perrault et al., 2021; Martaindale et al., 2022; Johnson & Lewis, 2010; Westrop et al., 2018).

Claims and Evidence Table







Claim	Evidence Strength	Reasoning	Papers
Profanity generally reduces perceived credibility and trustworthiness	 Strong	Consistent negative effects in formal/professional contexts	(DeFrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019; Bostrom et al., 1973; Hamilton, 1989; König & Jucks, 2019; Perrault et al., 2021; Westrop et al., 2018)
Context and intent moderate the effect of profanity	 Strong	Informal, peer, or online settings can yield neutral or positive effects	(Stapleton, 2020; Lie et al., 2023; Fägersten, 2017; Lafreniere et al., 2022; Stapleton & Fägersten, 2023; Debray, 2023; Fägersten & Stapleton, 2023; Johnson, 2012)
Profanity can increase perceived authenticity and emotional intensity	 Moderate	Judicious use signals genuineness and strong feeling	(Rassin & Van Der Heijden, 2005; Lie et al., 2023; Feldman et al., 2017; Fägersten, 2017; Lafreniere et al., 2022; Johnson, 2012)
Gender and relationship dynamics influence reactions to profanity	 Moderate	Effects stronger for women, authority figures, or mixed-gender dyads	(DeFrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019; Bostrom et al., 1973; Cavazza & Guidetti, 2014; Rudisel, 2016; Allard & Holmstrom, 2023; Perrault et al., 2021; Nau & Stewart, 2018)
Excessive or aggressive profanity almost always backfires	 Moderate	Leads to perceptions of incompetence, aggression, or unprofessionalism	(DeFrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019; Bostrom et al., 1973; Hamilton, 1989; König & Jucks, 2019; Perrault et al., 2021; Martaindale et al., 2022; Johnson & Lewis, 2010; Westrop et al., 2018)
Profanity in online reviews can increase helpfulness and authenticity	 Moderate	Especially in low-subjectivity, peer-to-peer contexts	(Lie et al., 2023; Lafreniere et al., 2022; Johnson, 2012)

FIGURE Key claims and support evidence identified in these papers.

5. Conclusion

Profanity typically reduces a speaker's perceived credibility and trustworthiness, especially in formal or professional contexts, but can sometimes enhance authenticity, emotional intensity, or relatability in informal or peer-group settings. The effect is highly context-dependent and moderated by audience expectations, relationship dynamics, and the intent behind the language.

5.1 Research Gaps

Despite robust findings, gaps remain in understanding the nuanced effects of profanity across cultures, digital platforms, and diverse audiences. More research is needed on the long-term impact of strategic swearing, the role of intent, and the effects in multicultural or multilingual contexts.

Research Gaps Matrix

Topic / Attribute	Formal/Professional	Informal/Peer	Online/Digital	Gender Effects	Multicultural Contexts
Credibility/Trustworthiness	12	7	6	5	2
Authenticity/Relatability	3	8	7	2	1
Emotional Intensity	4	6	5	1	1
Strategic/Moderate Use	2	4	3	1	GAP
Long-term Effects	1	1	1	GAP	GAP

FIGURE Matrix showing research coverage by topic and study attribute; gaps indicate areas for future research.

5.2 Open Research Questions

Future research should explore the cultural, contextual, and long-term effects of profanity on credibility and trustworthiness, as well as the mechanisms by which intent and relationship dynamics shape audience perceptions.

Question	Why
How do cultural and linguistic norms shape the effect of profanity on perceived credibility?	Understanding cross-cultural variation is crucial for global communication and digital media.
What are the long-term effects of strategic or moderate profanity use on trust and credibility?	Most studies focus on immediate reactions; long-term impacts are less understood.
How does the perceived intent behind profanity moderate its effect on trustworthiness?	Intent may explain when profanity is seen as authentic versus offensive or unprofessional.

FIGURE Open research questions for future investigation into profanity and perceived credibility/trustworthiness.

In summary, while profanity usually harms a speaker's credibility and trustworthiness, it can sometimes enhance authenticity or relatability in the right context, making its effects highly dependent on situational and relational factors.

These papers were sourced and synthesized using Consensus, an AI-powered search engine for research. Try it at <https://consensus.app>

References

- DeFrank, M., & Kahlbaugh, P. (2019). Language Choice Matters: When Profanity Affects How People Are Judged. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 38, 126 - 141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X18758143>
- Stapleton, K. (2020). Swearing and perceptions of the speaker: A discursive approach. *Journal of Pragmatics*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2020.09.001>
- Bostrom, R., Baseheart, J., & Rossiter, C. (1973). The Effects of Three Types of Profane Language in Persuasive Messages. *Journal of Communication*, 23, 461-475. <https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1460-2466.1973.TB00961.X>

- Hamilton, M. (1989). Reactions to obscene language. *Communication Research Reports*, 6, 67-69. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824098909359835>
- Rassin, E., & Van Der Heijden, S. (2005). Appearing credible? Swearing helps!. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 11, 177 - 182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/106831605160512331329952>
- Lie, D., Sung, B., Stankovic, M., & Septianto, F. (2023). How profanity influences perceived authenticity and perceived helpfulness of online reviews: The moderating role of review subjectivity. *Decis. Support Syst.*, 178, 114144. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dss.2023.114144>
- König, L., & Jucks, R. (2019). Hot topics in science communication: Aggressive language decreases trustworthiness and credibility in scientific debates. *Public Understanding of Science (Bristol, England)*, 28, 401 - 416. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662519833903>
- Cavazza, N., & Guidetti, M. (2014). Swearing in Political Discourse. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 33, 537 - 547. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X14533198>
- Rudisel, K. (2016). Perceptions of Profanity on Twitter: Watch Your D@mn Language. **.
- Feldman, G., Lian, H., Kosinski, M., & Stillwell, D. (2017). Frankly, We Do Give a Damn. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 8, 816 - 826. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550616681055>
- Allard, A., & Holmstrom, A. (2023). Students' perception of an instructor: The effects of instructor accommodation to student swearing. *Language Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2023.101562>
- Fägersten, K. (2017). The role of swearing in creating an online persona: The case of YouTuber PewDiePie. *Discourse, Context and Media*, 18, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.DCM.2017.04.002>
- Lafreniere, K., Moore, S., & Fisher, R. (2022). The Power of Profanity: The Meaning and Impact of Swear Words in Word of Mouth. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 59, 908 - 925. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00222437221078606>
- Fine, G., & Corte, U. (2024). Obscenity Factories: Profanity and Community in Workgroup Cultures. *Work and Occupations*, 51, 299 - 324. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07308884241256101>
- Seiter, C., & Johnson, Z. (2024). Death walks into a bar: Humor and profanity in advance care planning messages. *Death Studies*, 49, 557 - 565. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2024.2341873>
- Stapleton, K., & Fägersten, K. (2023). Editorial: Swearing and interpersonal pragmatics. *Journal of Pragmatics*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2023.10.009>
- Perrault, E., Barton, J., Hildenbrand, G., McCulloch, S., & Gyamfi, P. (2021). When Doctors Swear, Do Patients Care? Two Experiments Examining Physicians Cursing in the Presence of Patients. *Health Communication*, 37, 739 - 747. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2020.1865610>
- Nau, C., & Stewart, C. (2018). Effects of gender and verbal aggression on perceptions of U.S. political speakers. *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*. <https://doi.org/10.1075/JLAC.00006.NAU>
- Debray, C. (2023). Swearing, identity and power in professional interaction. *Journal of Pragmatics*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2023.07.002>
- Martaindale, M., Sandel, W., Duron, A., & Blair, J. (2022). @#%\$!: The Impact of Officer Profanity on Civilians' Perception of What Constitutes Reasonable Use of Force. *Police Quarterly*, 26, 194 - 212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098611221111332>
- Hamilton, M. (1998). Message Variables That Mediate and Moderate the Effect of Equivocal Language on Source Credibility. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 17, 109 - 143. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X980171006>
- De Vries, R., Hilbig, B., Zettler, I., Dunlop, P., Holtrop, D., Lee, K., & Ashton, M. (2017). Honest People Tend to Use Less—Not More—Profanity. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 9, 516 - 520. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550617714586>
- Johnson, D., & Lewis, N. (2010). Perceptions of Swearing in the Work Setting: An Expectancy Violations Theory Perspective. *Communication Reports*, 23, 106 - 118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08934215.2010.511401>

Fägersten, K., & Stapleton, K. (2023). Everybody swears on Only Murders in the Building: The interpersonal functions of scripted television swearing. *Journal of Pragmatics*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2023.08.006>

Westrop, S., Nordmann, E., Bruce, G., & Scott, G. (2018). Facebook: Swearing impacts impression formation on social media. ^{**}. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/wvcsa>

Johnson, D. (2012). Swearing by Peers in the Work Setting: Expectancy Violation Valence, Perceptions of Message, and Perceptions of Speaker. *Communication Studies*, 63, 136 - 151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2011.638411>