REIMAGINING SWEARING EFFECTS ONLINE: THE USE OF SWEARWORDS IN NEWS AUDIENCE COMMENTING

K. Hazel Kwon
Arizona State University

Daegon Cho
POSTECH, S. Korea

Background

A provocation of high-arousal emotion such as anger and frustration has become increasingly prevalent in contemporary media culture. Online audience comments to news articles are no exception, with commonplace swearing and cursing. Either explicitly or implicitly, swearing is often considered to be one type of uncivil behaviors with negative connotations. However, attributing negativity to an inherent trait of swearing may be questionable since swearwords can be used not only for malicious intentions but also as a rhetorical function to create an ambience of informality (Cavazza & Guidetti, 2014; Jay, 2009). Therefore, it would be hasty to categorize swearing as an uncivil behavior without investigating its impacts on message recipients' perceptions and responses.

Instead of subsuming it to incivility or any other high-level concepts that connote negativity (e.g. flaming, trolls, etc.), this study reimagines the role of swearing by adapting a neutral definition: An utterance of a taboo word that conveys a high level of emotional arousal (Jay, 2009). This definition helps situate swearing effect within a broader inquiry of political impacts of emotions, which recent studies have found to be contagious through online textual interactions even in the absence of nonverbal cues (Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014).

While the roles of high-arousal emotions have been largely imagined to be detrimental to audiences' discursive participation (e.g., Markus et al. 2000), recent studies have pointed out that such emotions are important impetus to facilitate the spread of political information (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013), to encourage more discursive participation (Castells, 2013) in particular in online sphere. Swearing is one common way of expressing high-arousal emotions, which has not yet been rigorously studied in online public discussion contexts.

The aim of this study is to explore swearing effects on online public perceptions of other audiences' comments, with a focus on swearing effects in interplay with anonymity and

topical difference (political vs. non-political) on the volume of public attention (total votes received by a comment) and perceptional valence (a difference between positive and negative votes).

Methods

The data aggregates two months of user comments collected during a congress election campaign in 2012 from 26 S.Korean news websites, including 83,322 comments written by 24,415 commenters. Considering the difficulty in gaining large-scale swearing utterances in a traditional research setting (Thelwall, 2008), the use of a large scale online data provides a novel opportunity for a more rigorous examination of swearing impacts. A dictionary consisting of 593 strongly explicit swearwords was referenced to classify whether or not a comment includes swearing. These words were the variations of original 319 words designated as offensive by *Nielsen Korea*, one of the largest audience research firms in S. Korea.

Findings

Regression models were performed. About 10% comments included at least one swearword. Political comments include more swearing than non-political topics. Although anonymous comments were perceived more negatively, there was no interaction effect with swearing on public perceptions. Figure 1 presents the comparisons among different conditions based on Anonymity, Swearing, and News Topics, with the outcome variable as the total number of votes. Political news comments tended to receive more votes, indicating high public attention. Also, the swearing effect on audience attention was particularly higher for political than non-political comments, confirming the interaction effect.
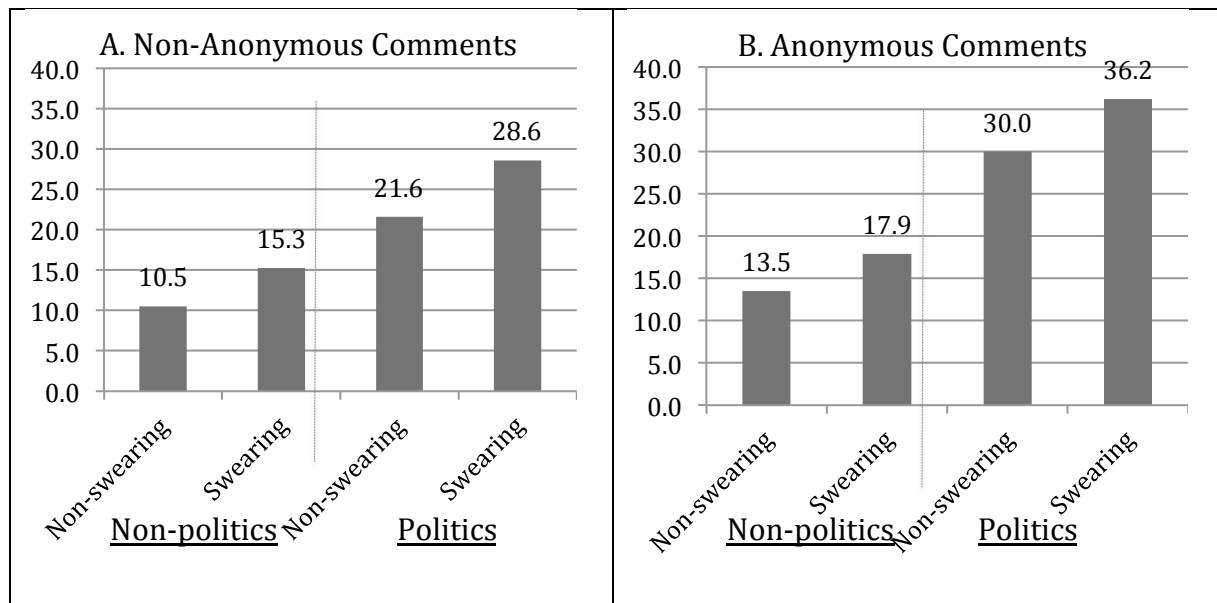

Figure 1. Differences in public attention (N = 83, 322)

Another modeling was performed to predict the perception valence. Results show that swearing comments tended to be perceived more positively than non-swearing. Specifically, the magnitude of the difference between the numbers of positive and negative votes for swearing comments was greater by 3.8 times than for non-swearing. The swearing effect was significantly different between political and non-political comments, confirming the interaction effect, $\beta = -4.06$, $p < .01$. Although swearing political comments were the most positively perceived across all types of comments, the largest swearing effect actually found among the non-political comments. The average gap of perceptions (i.e., the differences between positive and negative votes across comments) between swearing and non-swearing was 10.7 votes in non-political topics, while the gap was much narrower, 6.6 votes, for political topics. Figure 2 presents the comparisons among different conditions based on Anonymity, Swearing, and News Topics, with the outcome variable as the perception valence, of which the greater value means more positive public perception of a comment.
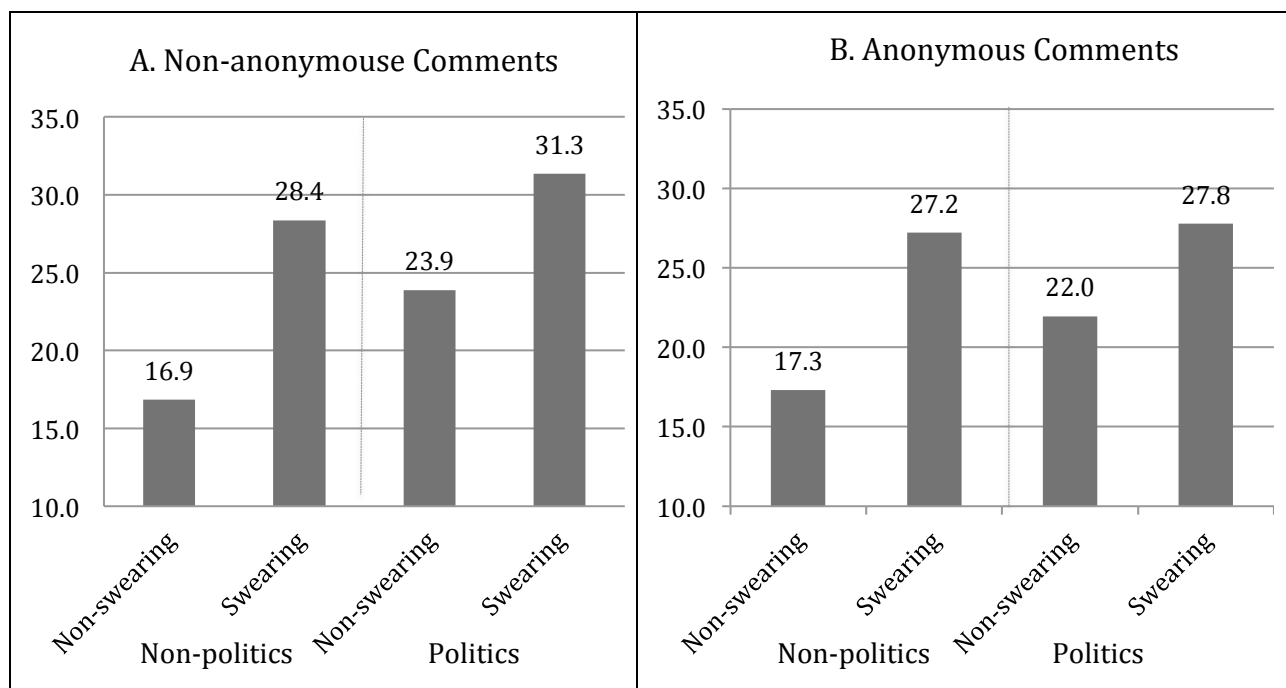

Figure 2. Differences in public perception valence (N = 52,032 excluding zero votes)

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this study provoke two topics for further discussions: First, swearing norms may vary across news topical areas: Swearing in political comments, on the one hand, could have become the norm in audience community and thus not as surprisingly perceived as in non-political comments. Swearing in non-political comments, on the other hand, could be more surprising since it is less normative, but may actually produce positive effects on the readers' perceptions. In other words, swearing in non-political comments could be a more positive violation of communicative expectancy than swearing in political comments (Burgoon, 1993). Some of the comments that we heuristically reviewed were supportive of this argument in that many of swearing

comments were an emotional outburst fused with humors and satires. That is, swearing could be interpreted as a rhetorical tactic that increases informality and witticism.

Second, highly positive valence of political comments in both swearing and non-swearing conditions implies that, by default, online news audiences may be selectively participatory: Audiences are already polarized to some extent, actively showing their support for the likeminded comments to which they are exposed. If swearing culture makes the non-likeminded feel reluctant to read the comments, resulting in the occurrence of discursive interactions only among the likeminded, the greater positive perceptions on swearing political comments could be, in truth, the bi-product of dispiriting holders of different viewpoints from reading the comments. If then, swearing could indeed be harmful to civility, further strengthening the "nasty effect" thesis (Anderson et al, 2014). The causal effect of swearing on political polarization is beyond the scope of this study, warranting future research. Future research could gain granular insights on the relationship between high-arousal emotional expressions and online commenting culture by considering other rhetorical forms of strong emotional utterances beyond swearing.

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