Everybody swears on Only Murders in the Building: The interpersonal functions of scripted television swearing

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Everybody swears on *Only Murders in the Building:* The interpersonal functions of scripted television swearing

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A B S T R A C T

Swearing fulfils a range of interpersonal pragmatic functions and also acts as a distinguishing feature of speakers and contexts. In broadcast media, swearing has traditionally been censored or at least limited in its deployment; although when used, it serves characterization, interactional, and narrative functions. In this article, we consider the Disney+ television series *Only Murders in the Building* (*OMITB*, 2021–), in which swearing is not subject to standard media constraints, due to its provision on a streaming service. Freed from such constraints, *OMITB* is distinctive in its unusually high frequency and dispersion of swearing across characters and contexts. Compared with both real-life and media-based analyses of language use, the swearing in *OMITB* reflects neither real-life nor standard broadcast patterns. In this paper, we investigate how swearing is used by the characters, and what it is 'doing' in the series. In particular, we highlight the role of swearing in affiliation and relationship-building, both between characters in the story world, and between the series and its viewers. Our analysis contributes to understanding the pragmatic functions of media swearing.

1. Introduction

In pragmatics, swearing has been shown to fulfil a range of nuanced interpersonal functions (Beers Fägersten, 2012; Beers Fägersten and Stapleton, 2022; Stapleton, 2010), and also to index contextual and relational features. To the extent that its pragmatic effects (both positive and negative) depend on the potential for hearer offence (Beers Fägersten, 2012; Beers Fägersten and Bednarek, 2022; O'Driscoll, 2020; Stapleton, 2010), swearing is circumscribed in everyday public interaction, with higher levels of swearing typically occurring for specific interpersonal and/or stylistic purposes (rather than indiscriminately); among those who share similar status; and/or among people whose relationship is characterized by low social distance. In broadcast media, the use of swearing is similarly circumscribed (indeed often explicitly censored — see below) and when used, it is for specific purposes such as characterization, interaction, and narrative development (Bednarek, 2018; 2019a; 2019b; 2023). In this paper, we consider an example of a scripted fictional television series in which swearing does not seem to follow these distribution patterns or fulfil these specific functions but rather is ubiquitous and, at least ostensibly, undifferentiated in its application. Hence, we interrogate what swearing is 'doing' in this setting. Our analysis initially investigates the frequency and distribution of swearing in the series, and then addresses the use of swearing in both

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the story world of the series (interactions between characters) and in building a relationship between the series and its viewers. In analyzing the purposes of swearing, we consider both positive and negative pragmatic functions, and we take a particular focus on the interpersonal function of affiliation in different domains. Through this approach, we aim to contribute to knowledge of the pragmatics of media swearing. Importantly, we assert the value of subjecting fictional, scripted material to pragmatic analysis, echoing Beers Fägersten's (2016: 5—6) argument that the language of television, as one of many examples of pop culture-sourced linguistic input and exposure, "is a very real feature of our everyday linguistic lives [and] both represents and influences our ideas about and usage of language and linguistic resources." In the remaining part of this introduction, we outline the key features of the series in focus and situate the empirical and theoretical questions within the pragmatic and media language literature on swearing. We then present the conceptual issues and research questions which form the starting point for the analysis.

Broadcast television was long considered the last bastion of language censorship, encapsulated by George Carlin's "Seven words you can't say on television." Now, over fifty years since Carlin's observation, the seven words, *shit*, *piss*, *fuck*, *cunt*, *cocksucker*, *motherfucker,* and *tits*, have remained robustly off-limits for most network television, with the exception, perhaps, of *shit* and *piss*. The medium of television itself, however, has evolved considerably during this time period, with the advent of cable television, pay-per-view, and streaming services. The shift from network broadcasting with public access supported by commercial advertisements to the paid-access model has entailed an untethering of television from censorship and oversight organizations, such as the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the United States or the Office of Communications (Ofcom) in the UK (Beers Fägersten and Bednarek, 2022). This, in turn, has resulted in more television series featuring such words as *shit*, *piss*, and *fuck*, as well as other swear words (Kaye and Sapolsky, 2001; 2004; 2009). The possibility to include swearing in television dialogue has, on the one hand, allowed for a more authentic portrayal of interpersonal interaction (Bednarek, 2018: 191). On the other hand, the lack of limitations on using swear words may also entail examples of swearing motivated more by freedom from restrictions than fidelity to realistic behavior. Bednarek (2019b: 16) is dubious of swearing as "gratuitous", claiming it serves "multiple functions in service of the televisual narrative," but she also confirms that the cable and streaming context is conducive to a more frequent occurrence of swear words compared to the network television context (Bednarek, 2019b). While the use of swear words on public network television presents its own context for analysis based on restrictions, the lack of regulation and censorship for streaming or cable television services requires a different approach. Indeed, the two contexts illustrate what Bednarek and Caple (2012: 12) identify as a need for linguistic analysis of media language to consider the socio-historical context, or the circumstances in which communication takes place (2012: 20), which include "language-external factors" (i.e., lack of regulation) that may impact upon the use of swear words (Bednarek, 2019a: 3).

In this article, we consider the US American produced, English-language television series *Only Murders in the Building* (*OMITB*)[1] which debuted on August 31st, 2021, on the Hulu streaming network.[2] Billed as a comedy-drama mystery thriller, *OMITB* "follows three strangers who share an obsession with true crime and suddenly find themselves wrapped up in one as they investigate the mysterious death of a neighbor in their New York City apartment building."[3] The death — a suspected murder — prompts the three residents of the "Arconia" to start their own true-crime podcast, but they agree to limit their focus to only murders committed in the building, hence the series's title.

Focusing on the ten episodes of season one, we note that the high frequency of swearing and its distribution across the diverse cast of characters render it a distinguishing feature of *OMITB*, giving the impression that "everybody" in the series swears. However, this is actually not the case (as detailed in section 5). Moreover, there are other series which also feature wide-spread swearing, such that it is similarly salient (see, for example, Bednarek, 2019c; Benz, 2007). Why, then, does it seem like "everybody" swears on *OMITB*, and why should this warrant its own analysis? As to the first question, those series in which swearing occurs highly frequently (e.g., *The Wire*, *The Sopranos, Silicon Valley, Entourage*; see Keaton, 2021) feature characters who populate the same social or professional circles such that they are friends, intimates, and/or close colleagues who interact in a limited social context. In fact, as noted above, swearing has been shown to distinctly characterize interaction among those of close social distance, similar social status, and shared sociodemographic variables (Beers Fägersten, 2012; Beers Fägersten and Pereira, 2021; Stapleton, 2003). However, on *OMITB*, the characters represent (1) a socio-demographically diverse group of (2) strangers of (3) varying social status, such that three basic social conditions for swearing (according to Beers Fägersten, 2012; Beers Fägersten and Stapleton, 2022; Stapleton, 2010) are not met. Swearing, then, is an unexpected outcome of the social situations in which the characters interact, such that its overall presence alone equates with a high frequency.

The fact that swearing occurs in social situations where it would not be expected provides a transition to the question of why an analysis of *OMITB* is warranted. The increasing presence of swearing in telecinematic dialogue (as outlined in section 3) prompts continuous investigation of, on the one hand, how television is evolving as a site for swearing, and on the other hand, how swearing is depicted as an interpersonal behavior. The former can be accomplished by large-scale surveys such as Bednarek (2020) or diachronic studies such as Kaye and Sapolsky (2001, 2004, 2009). However, while these investigations can reveal general trends of swearing across genres on television (Bednarek, 2020), they cannot reveal how swearing may serve

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[1] *Only Murders in the Building* has, at the time of publication, aired its third season on Disney+.
[2] The series is distributed by Disney Platform Distribution and also available on the Disney+ streaming network.
[3] https://www.disneyplus.com/en-gb/series/only-murders-in-the-building/2EfP45PYWY5s.

interpersonal functions, which requires a more qualitative analysis. A focus on one series and the use of swearwords over a full season of episodes can provide the rich context necessary to understand the role of swearing in televised interpersonal interaction. Such a sustained analysis can also reveal how swearing functions both within the story world of the series and in the context of a televisual narrative representing communication between the series and the viewer as ratified listener, i.e., a third party "to whom an utterance is not addressed but is, nonetheless, directed" (Dynel, 2014: 28). Approaching swearing as interpersonal interaction both as it unfolds within the series and mediated to the viewer via scripted, telecinematic dialogue, this article poses the following research questions:

1. What is the frequency of swearing on *OMITB* relative to face-to-face and televisual interaction?
2. How does the frequency of swearing distribute across interpersonal functions in the story-world context?
3. How do the interpersonal functions of swearing within the series interact with televisual narrative functions of swearing?

In section 2, we first review the functions of swearing in telecinematic dialogue before presenting the interpersonal functions of swearing in face-to-face interaction in section 3. After detailing the methodology for the analysis of swear word usage among the characters of *OMITB* in section 4, we present an overview of the cast of characters in section 5, providing an indication of the distribution of swearing among them. We then present analyses of the interpersonal and televisual narrative functions of swearing in the series in sections 6 and 7, putting them into conversation with each other. Finally, we discuss the significance of swearing in *OMITB* with regards to interpersonal pragmatics, taking account of the communicative goals of swearing both among the series's characters and between the series and its viewers.

2. Swearing on television

Given the background of swearing as prohibited, censored, or highly regulated, it is not surprising that occurrences of swearing on television are closely monitored and increasingly constitute targets of research. In a series of studies, Kaye and Sapolsky (2001, 2004, 2009) have found evidence for an overall increase in swearing on prime-time US-American television from 1990 to 2010, with stronger swear words eventually outnumbering milder swear words over the course of this 20-year period. Werner (2021) as well has noted a general increase in swear word usage on television, accompanied by an increasing acceptability of milder swear words (such as *damn* or *hell*) and a decrease in the overall perceived taboo of swearing on television. These shifts in attitudes reflect changes in television culture ushered in by cable, streaming, and other paid subscription services whose programming is not subject to federal regulation. Beers Fägersten and Bednarek (2022: 201) note that, "as restrictions ease and prime time television adopts the linguistic practices of cable and pay television, it appears that milder swear words give way to stronger ones."

Bednarek (2019b) has demonstrated the multifunctionality of swearing on scripted fictional television, with swear words used to "create realism, humor, consistency; to convey ideologies and control viewer emotion; and to contribute to estab-lishing settings, happenings and characters" (2019b: 48). This analysis has parallels with studies of the multifunctionality of swearing in the interpersonal context (as discussed in section 7). As such, it forms one of the two main applications of our own analysis. First, Bednarek notes that restrictions on swearing can compromise realism and that realism, alternatively, can be achieved through swearing; that unexpected or folk-linguistically incongruous swearing creates humor; and that the use of swear words creates consistency when used across episodes and seasons. Second, as an expression of emotion, swearing can be invoked to control or guide the viewer's own emotions with regard to a character or event. Furthermore, not only swearing itself but also talk *about* swearing in television series can convey (character) ideologies of swearing as, for example, inap-propriate or offensive; meta-linguistic comments often reflect "cultural anxieties" about swearing (Bednarek, 2019a: 13). Finally, swear words can be invoked to transport the viewer of a series to a particular place or time, to contextualize a narrative, or to create a character, for example as someone who swears or does not swear. Characterization via swearing furthermore serves to distinguish individual characters of a television series, aligning them with "signature interjections" (Bednarek, 2010: 438) or catchphrases (Bednarek, 2019a; Beers Fägersten and Bednarek, 2022). Swearing on scripted fictional television is thus commonly associated with or limited to particular characters, such that it can fulfill this distinct charac-terization function. Where swearing is frequent or prevalent on a particular series, it nonetheless characterizes similar types of characters (Bednarek, 2015; 2019a; 2019b; Quaglio, 2009).

3. Interpersonal pragmatics of swearing

Swearing has long been associated with particular categories of speakers. While not always borne out by empirical an-alyses of usage, these associations are robust and they strongly influence perceptions of swearing, and hence, to some extent, the linguistic choices open to speakers (Stapleton 2020). In this respect, swearing is typically associated with men, rather than women, younger speakers, working class, or vernacular speech communities, manual occupations, and urban or inner-city speech styles (see Baruch et al., 2017; de Klerk, 1992; Gregory, 2006; McEnery and Xiao, 2004; Stenström, 2006; 2017; Wilson and Wedlock, 2023). In addition, swearing is 'expected' and thus viewed as more appropriate in contexts where there are low levels of formality, a social rather than task orientation, and reduced speaker distance or status differentials (Bayard and Krishnayya, 2001; Beers Fägersten, 2012; Jay and Janschewitz, 2008; Johnson, 2012; Johnson and Lewis, 2010). These

factors all influence the interpersonal pragmatics and, in particular, the interpersonal purposes and effects of swearing in a given interaction.

From an interpersonal pragmatics perspective, swearing fulfils a range of distinctive interactional functions. Many analyses of the outcomes of swearing highlight a distinction between annoyance and social swearing (Ross, 1960; see also Beers Fägersten, 2012; Beers Fägersten and Bednarek, 2022; Montagu, 1967/2001; Stapleton, 2010; Stapleton et al., 2022; Vingerhoets et al., 2013; Wajnryb, 2005; Werner, 2023). The former is cathartic and provides emotional relief at an intra-personal level. Social swearing operates at an interpersonal level and is directed towards the management of identities and social relations. In this interpersonal category, which is the focus of pragmatic analysis, swearing may be used to convey politeness or impoliteness, to offend or to socially bond with others, to construct and manage identities, and to express a wide array of emotions (Beers Fägersten, 2012; Dynel, 2012; Jay and Janschewitz, 2008; O'Driscoll, 2020; Stapleton, 2003, 2010; Vingerhoets et al., 2013). In this paper, we have adapted the taxonomy provided by Beers Fägersten and Stapleton (2022) in order to analyze the main functions of swearing in *OMITB*. This taxonomy is best suited for interpersonal pragmatic analysis, as it describes positive and negative functions, depending on the valence of the intended and resulting interpersonal effects. Namely, we examine swearing as fulfilling the following functions: (1) expressing emotion; (2) causing offence; (3) abusing another; (4) showing aggression (either to an interlocutor or a third party); (5) affiliating in the form of reducing social distance, demonstrating solidarity, or bonding with an in-group; (6) serving stylistic purposes, in particular, creating emphasis; and (7) displaying and managing identities.

As noted in the introduction, the frequency of swearing in *OMITB* reflects neither real-life nor standard broadcast patterns. Our aim, then, is to explore the purposes and communicative functions of swearing on *OMITB*. In the analysis of selected examples, we consider interpersonal functions of swearing in both the story-world and the televisual contexts of *OMITB*, whereby the former accounts for interaction between the characters, and the latter refers to the series as a televisual narrative targeting an audience (see Dynel 2011, 2014 for a comprehensive discussion of the television viewer as ratified listener).

4. Methodology

All ten episodes of the first season of *OMITB* were viewed, transcribed (excluding re-cap sequences), and re-viewed to confirm the transcription. All utterances including swear words were highlighted in the written transcription. For the purpose of analysis, the identification of swear words has followed Beers Fägersten's (2012: 18–19) practice of invoking a core collection, representing the greatest agreement among researchers regarding inclusion in the category of swear word and corresponding to a US-American subset of the list of 'pure' swear words (i.e., unlikely to be considered anything other than swearing) identified by Love (2021: 747): *ass*, *bitch*, *cunt*, *damn*, *dick*, *fuck*, *hell*, and *shit*, and any derivations thereof (e.g., *goddamn* or *fucker*). The swearing utterances were then organized according to episode, swear word uttered, speaker, addressee, and full swearing utterance. Each swearing utterance was then coded for interpersonal function, i.e., (1) emotional expression; (2) causing offence; (3) abusing another; (4) showing aggression (either to an interlocutor or a third party); (5) affiliation in the form of reducing social distance, demonstrating solidarity, or bonding with an in-group; (6) stylistic purposes, in particular, creating emphasis; and (7) displaying and managing identities (Beers Fägersten and Stapleton, 2022). While swearing, in general, fulfils multiple and often overlapping interpersonal functions, our goal was to assign one primary function to each occurrence of swearing in *OMITB*. Inter-author agreement was first achieved on several examples for each function. All remaining swearing utterances were subsequently coded by Author 1 according to these models but confirming any questionable cases with Author 2. For a number of swearing utterances, a secondary function was deemed necessary to indicate. A quantitative overview is provided in section 5; thereafter, qualitative analyses focus first on interpersonal functions in the story world (section 6) and then on the relationship between interpersonal functions and televisual functions of swearing in *OMITB* (section 7).

5. *Only Murders in the Building:* overview and swearing frequency (Research question 1)

In this section, we consider swearing on *OMITB* as a function of variety, distribution across characters, and frequency, showing a variety of swear words used not only by a wide range of characters but also (and as previously highlighted) more frequently than has been observed in studies of either television or real-life contexts. Table 1 provides a general overview of all characters who had two or more speaking turns during season one of *OMITB*. The table indicates each character's name, gender, age range, ethnicity, which episodes they appear in, and how many swear words they used in total; shaded areas indicate no swearing by this character.

Throughout the ten episodes of the first season of *OMITB*, a total of 170 swear words were uttered over 164 swearing utterances. The average number of words spoken per episode totals 3,559, and the average number of swear words used per episode is seventeen, corresponding to 0.48%, or approximately one swear word for every 209 words. This average is in line with Jay's (2009) estimate that swear words account for 0.3%–0.7% of the average speaker's daily use of 15,000–16,000 words,[4] but is higher than Thelwal's (2008) results of swear words accounting for 0.2%–0.3% of online (MySpace) discourse.

[4] It should be noted here that Jay (2009) operates according to a liberal definition of swearing, which results in inflated frequencies, as discussed in Beers Fägersten (2012); Beers Fägersten and Stapleton (2017, 2022).

Table 1
Overview of characters in *OMITB* season 1.

	Character	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Episodes	Swear words
1.	Charles	M	>65	White	1—10	9
2.	Oliver	M	>65	White	1—10	15
3.	Mabel	F	20—35	Latinx	1—10	36
4.	Oscar	M	20—35	Latinx	2, 3, 5——10	18
5.	Teddy	M	>65	Greek-American	2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9	10
6.	Jan	F	35—65	White	3, 6, 4, 8, 9, 10	1
7.	Cinda	F	35—65	White	1, 4, 6, 10	1
8.	Detective Williams	F	35—65	Black	1, 6, 8, 10	27
9.	Stanley	M	35—65	Black	2, 3, 9, 10	
10.	Howard	M	35—65	White	2, 3, 9, 10	4
11.	Tim	M	20—35	Japanese-American	1, 2, 7, 10	2
12.	Theo	M	20—35	Greek-American	3, 7, 8, 9	2
13.	Ursula	F	35—65	Latinx	1, 2, 3	3
14.	Lester	M	>65	White	1, 5, 7	1
15.	Arnav	M	35—65	Indian-American	1, 4, 10	
16.	Will	M	20—35	Black	1, 4, 10	
17.	Uma	F	35—65	White	1, 9, 10	1
18.	Ndidi	F	35—65	Sierra Leonean	2, 3, 9	
19.	Bunny	F	>65	White	2, 9, 10	5
20.	Zoe	F	20—35	White	2, 7	15
21.	Amy	F	35—65	Chinese-American	2, 9	1
22.	Sting	M	>65	White	3, 4	1
23.	Poppy	F	20—35	White	4, 10	
24.	Tavo	M	20—35	Latinx	5, 6	2
25.	Passer-by	M	20—35	White	1	2
26.	Roberta	F	>65	Black	3	2
27.	Mr. Torres	M	>65	Latinx	3	
28.	Anita	F	35—65	White	4	
29.	Lucien	M	20—35	Black	5	5
30.	Vaughan	M	20—35	Black	5	
31.	Kiara	F	35—65	Black	6	3
32.	Silvia	F	35—65	Latinx	6	1
33.	Marv	M	>65	White	8	
34.	Sam	M	20—35	Black	8	
35.	Paulette	F	20—35	White	8	1
36.	Grant	M	<20	Chinese-American	8	1
37.	Pataki	F	35—65	White	9	1

However, the OMITB average is much higher than Love's (2021) findings of swear words comprising 0.18% and 0.13% of the full British National Corpus 1994 and 2014, respectively, and Schweinberger's (2018) observed rate of 0.16% swear words in his corpus of informal, spoken Irish English.[5]

The relative frequency of swearing in *OMITB* can also be expressed in terms of the number of swear words per episode as a duration of time, in comparison to previous measurements. For example, during the period 1990—2001, Kaye and Sapolsky (2004) found that profanities were uttered on US broadcast and cable television programs in 1990 and 2001 between 5.5 and 7.6 times an hour, respectively. In 2009, the authors found that these numbers had increased to an average of 12.6 profanities per hour, topping out at 15 profanities per hour on cable programs (Kaye and Sapolsky 2009). Comparing these measurements to the average 17 swear words per *OMITB*-episode with an average length of 32 min, the extrapolated hourly rate of swearing corresponds to 31.9 swear words per hour. The frequency of swearing in *OMITB* thus corresponds to a rate as high as or higher than the average frequency of swearing in daily speech and notably higher than the average frequency of swearing on television as so far established in empirical research. The high frequency of swearing on *OMITB* as a distinguishing feature is thus supported.

Swearing occurs in every episode of *OMITB*. The most frequent swear words include *fuck* and *fucking* (each used in all ten episodes), *shit* (eight episodes), *goddamn* (seven episodes), and *hell* (six episodes), but the complete list of swear words used includes: *ass(hole), bitch, (god)damn, dick, dickier, hell, fuck (fucker, fucked, fucking, motherfucker, motherfucking, fuckaroonies, fuckwads), shit (bullshit, shitty, shitting, shitball)*. Fig. 1 shows the overall frequency of these twenty-one forms throughout the series's first season.

Overall, the order of frequency reflected in *OMITB* corresponds fairly well to the swear word inventory in Jay (2009) and that which can be observed in the SydTV corpus (Bednarek 2019b: 41). Representing one random episode from the first season of 66 different American network and cable television series, the SydTV corpus reveals the most frequent swear words

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[5] However, due to overt recording methods of corpus compilation, corpus figures may underrepresent swear word usage (McEnery et al., 2000: 50).
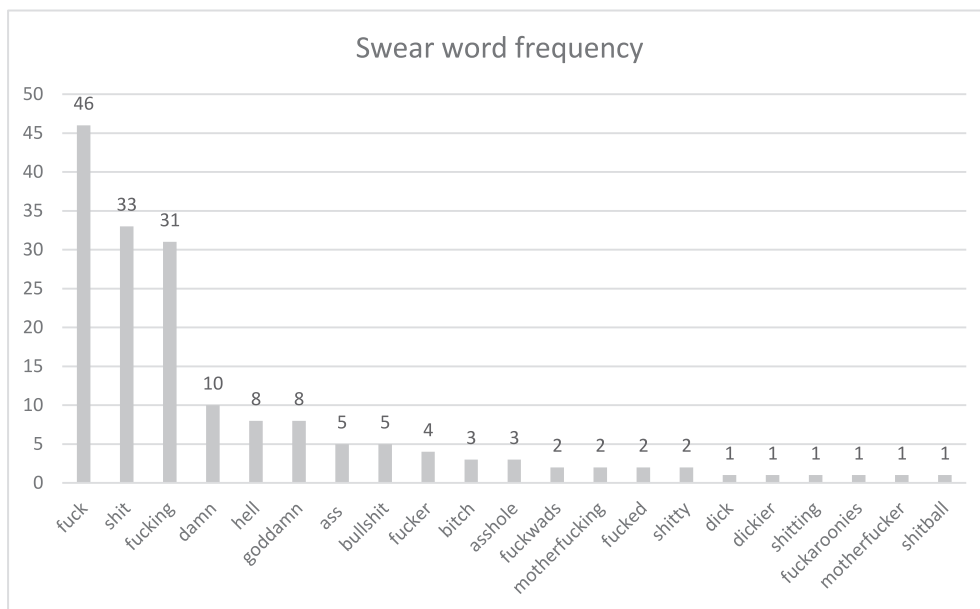
Fig. 1. Swear word frequency in *OMITB*.

to be *hell, fucking, fuck, ass, bitch, bullshit, motherfucker, asshole, damnit, goddamn, bastard, goddamnit.*[6] The relative high frequency of *hell* in the SydTV corpus coincided with the greatest dispersion of this word (occurring in 48 of the 66 series), indicating its use on both network and cable television. Swear words containing the lemma *fuck*, however, were much more limited in their dispersion, occurring in seven (*motherfucker*), fifteen (*fuck*), or sixteen (*fucking*) series and limited to cable programming. In comparison, the high frequency of *fuck, shit*, and *fucking* on *OMITB* underlines the fact that the series has aired on the Hulu and Disney+ streaming services, which are not subject to the same FCC regulations as network television. Notably, although the high frequencies of these specific swear words are predictable, the use of other swear words on *OMITB* reveals great diversity, unmatched by any series represented in the SydTV corpus, thereby further confirming swearing as a distinctive feature of the series.

6. Interpersonal functions of story-world swearing in *OMITB* (Research question 2)

As noted in the official description of the series quoted in the introduction, the three main characters of *OMITB* begin the series as strangers while the remaining cast, with few exceptions, are either also strangers or fellow building residents who are passingly acquainted with one another. With its character diversity and premise of interaction among strangers, *OMITB* does not provide contexts that are immediately conducive to swearing, which predominantly characterizes interaction among interlocutors of close social distance and similar demographics, as presented in section 3 (see also Beers Fägersten, 2012; Beers Fägersten and Stapleton, 2017, 2022). The few interactions between socially close characters depicted on *OMITB* are limited to father-son (Oliver-Will; Teddy-Theo) and domestic partner dyads (Detective Williams-Kiara), as well as one friend group (Zoe, Tim, Mabel, and Oscar). Instead, most interaction is between passing acquaintances or people meeting for the first time and alternately clashing over a death/murder or collaborating on its subsequent investigation. Such a premise in the context of a serial mystery-dramedy such as *OMITB* allows for situations of high tension, absurdity, frustration, fear, or sudden discovery, as well as inter-character conflict or social bonding (or both), all of which can be conducive to swearing for interpersonal purposes. Furthermore, as established earlier, *OMITB* as a streamed series is not subject to FCC regulations (Bednarek, 2019b; Beers Fägersten and Bednarek, 2022), which is most saliently recognized by the occurrence of a range of swear words as an established practice.

On the other hand, as a depiction (albeit fictionalized) of interpersonal interaction between strangers of diverse backgrounds with regard to age, gender, ethnicity, occupation, and socioeconomic status, *OMITB* represents a range of contexts that would also *not* be conducive to swearing as a behavior that most frequently characterizes interactions among interlocutors of close social distance and similar backgrounds. These conflicting conditions warrant a qualitative analysis of the interpersonal functions of swearing in the *OMITB* story world.

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[6] 'God' was listed as the most frequent swear word in the SydTV corpus but is not included in the core list of swear words invoked for this study.
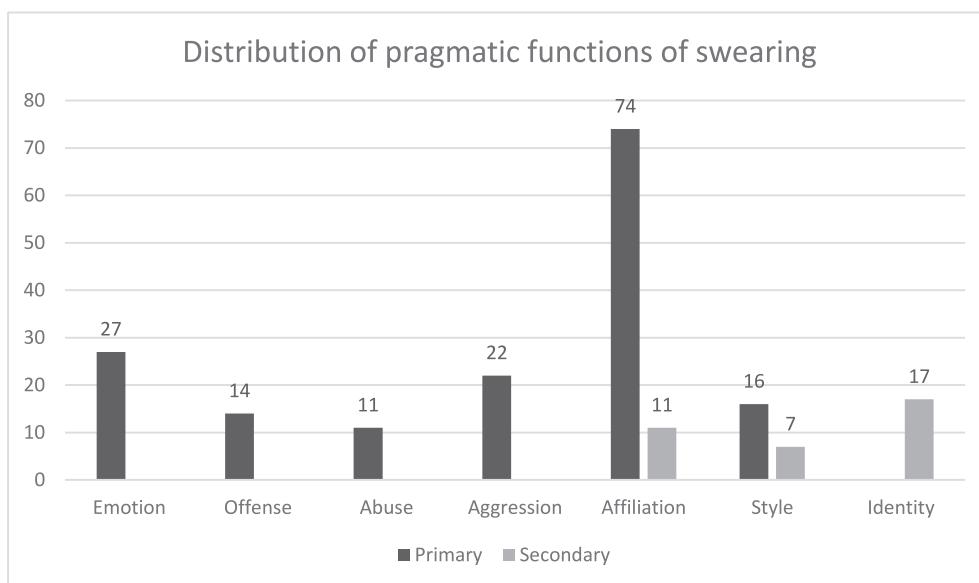
Fig. 2. Distribution of interpersonal functions of swearing on *OMITB*.

Fig. 2 shows that swearing variably fulfils the interpersonal pragmatic functions of expressing emotion, offending, abusing, showing aggression, fostering affiliation, styling, or constructing an identity. Fig. 2 thus indicates a primary function for each swearing utterance (n = 164) and a secondary function for a subset of these (n = 35). As will be shown in section 7.1, these secondary functions are mainly relevant to the analysis of communication between the series and the viewer.

While the function of expressing emotion pertains to communicating an intensity that can be experienced along a scale of positive *and* negative emotions (Stapleton et al., 2022), the functions of offense, abuse, and aggression are overall associated with negatively affecting perceptions of the speaker, compared to the functions of affiliation, style, and identity, which are associated with positively affecting perceptions of the speaker (Beers Fägersten and Stapleton, 2022). Of the 164 swearing utterances, 16% had the function of expressing emotion as the primary interpersonal function, while 29% and 55% fulfilled a negatively associated or positively associated primary function, respectively. Here, it should be noted that the act of affiliating or socially bonding through swearing is the overall most common function of swearing in *OMITB*, accounting for 45% of the primary functions and 31% of the secondary functions. In section 6.1, we illustrate the emotion function so as to distinguish it from negative/oppositional and positive/affiliative interpersonal functions. In sections 6.2 and 6.3, we focus on the role of these latter two in the interpersonal interaction of the *OMITB* story world.

6.1. Emotion

The first occurrence of swearing in *OMITB* illustrates the interpersonal expression of emotion, which conveys "the speaker's emotional state, or [intensifies] the expression" of emotion (Beers Fägersten and Stapleton, 2022: 137). Example (1) thus comes from episode 1, specifically the opening scene, when a passerby on a New York street recognizes and addresses Charles, a former television star.

(1)
    Passerby: Hey, hold up. Wait, are you=
    Charles: =I'm Brazzos.
    Passerby: Oh **shit**, dude! I used to watch that show with my dad when I was a kid! That was his favorite! Wait, what was that thing you always said?
    Charles: This sends the investigation into a whole new direction.
    Passerby: That's it, man! That's it! Oh **shit**! So cool.

In example (1), the swearing utterances convey first the passerby's sudden realization of Charles's identity and then his satisfaction at hearing the familiar catchphrase, but they do not serve any further interpersonal function. Instead, the emotion function concerns unfiltered, unmonitored swearing as a direct reaction. In each of the swearing utterances coded for emotion, the swearing is in reaction to a discovery or revelation, often related to the murder mystery. For instance, in example (2), taken from episode 6, Mabel receives a text message from Tavo, which inadvertently implicates another character in the murder.

(2)
    Mabel: **Holy shit**. Tavo's text. <shows Oscar her phone>
    Oscar: **What the hell**?

In example (2), Oscar's swearing utterance in reaction to the text underlines the nature of emotion swearing as immediate, involuntary, and individual: while Mabel's swearing utterance may prime Oscar to react similarly by swearing, it could not extend to and convey Oscar's reaction for him. The emotion function can thus be understood as less *inter*personal than the other functions, which is further established by scenes where characters who are alone nevertheless voice their emotional reactions to discovery and alarm via swearing.

6.2. Negative/oppositional swearing: offense, abuse, aggression

A total of 47 (29%) of the 164 swearing utterances in *OMITB* were coded as interpersonally offensive, abusive, or aggressive. Choosing to swear is choosing to engage in taboo behavior, which in turn *may* cause offense. As an interpersonal expression of disparagement, abusive swearing has *the intention* of causing offense, directed towards the interlocutor(s). Alternatively, swearing may not necessarily abuse, insult, or cause offense but can still serve to *display* aggression and a negative inter-personal orientation (Beers Fägersten and Stapleton, 2022: 138). While these functions thus differ in significant ways, their corresponding swearing utterances achieved similar interpersonal effects in *OMITB*, namely, to convey interpersonal conflict related either to the series's titular murders or to the protagonists investigating them. Example (3) features a flashback scene from episode 7, in which Zoe has a confrontation with Theo about a ring she has stolen from his apartment.

(3)

Zoe:	I'm such a **bitch**. I'm sorry. Guys used to at least let you keep the ring when they tried to lock you down. I'm so bored with all of this.
Theo:	Maybe you're bored because all you have is touring through other people's lives. Maybe you need to ask what you want for your life.
Zoe:	Don't **fucking** psychoanalyze me. You're very confused about which way the pity flows here. Take your **shitty** ring. **Fucking** take it! **Fuck** you! Get off me!

The last turn of example (3) features four swearing utterances embedded in imperatives, illustrating aggressive swearing ("Don't fucking psychoanalyze me", "Fucking take it", "Fuck you") as well as offensive swearing ("shitty ring"). These utterances convey an interpersonal conflict rendered more acute by the repeated swearing, resulting in a dramatic climax that ends with Zoe's death. Swearing is thus implicated in this scene as a proxy for violent behavior which, in its turn, triggers a physical altercation with fatal consequences.

Further examples of the negative interpersonal functions of swearing in *OMITB* are less lethal, but nonetheless serve distinct antagonistic purposes. Examples (4) and (5) illustrate how swearing is invoked to convey hostility towards the protagonists and their investigative podcast activity. Example (4) comes from episode 1, after police have been called to the murder scene. Charles, Oliver, and Mabel have ignored the barriers to get a closer look, prompting Detective Williams to start questioning them.

(4)

Charles	Look, you're probably just starting your investigation, looking into all the forensics...
Williams	**Goddamnit**. What **fuckin'** podcast are you all hooked on? Huh? I swear to God if I meet one more true crime nut. (.) This is suicide. It's textbook. Residue powder on the hands, evidence of financial stress. We even found a note on his laptop saying he's outta here, which is exactly where you all need to be.
Charles	What if=
Williams	=Nuh-uh, it's not.
Oliver	B-b-but, y-y-you=
Williams	=No, no, no, no, no. It's not. So, go on ahead and enjoy your cute little lives, and be glad that you still have one. You **goddamn** true crime **fucking** numbnuts.

Detective Williams engages in offensive ("Goddamnit"), aggressive ("fuckin' podcast") and abusive ("You goddamn true crime fucking numbnuts") swearing to convey her distaste for and opposition to the meddling of Charles, Oliver, and Mabel as amateur investigators, thus establishing an interpersonal conflict with them. She maintains this stance or interactional position throughout the majority of the first season but eventually pivots to support their activity, which is discussed in section 6.3.

Example (5) comes from episode 9, when the tenants of the Arconia are blaming Charles, Oliver, and Mabel for the negative effects of the murder and the ensuing investigation, which they have publicized via their podcast.

(5)

Stanley:	I've had four clients cancel therapy this week because they're afraid to come here. That lost revenue is on you.
Amy:	My kids are too scared to sleep in their own rooms. So now I share my bed with people who are actively **shitting** themselves.
Oliver:	Well sometimes you do have to make a mess to clean one up.
Charles:	Don't worry, folks. We're done. This is getting way too messy! So, yes, the podcast and the investigations are over. All will be back to normal hopefully soon.
[...]	
Bunny:	It's a little late for that. As per the building's bylaws, if eight or more tenants file complaints against another tenant, they can be evicted. We've already taken action on 10D, but perhaps we should take a vote on 12E and 14C?
Charles:	Wait! What?
Mabel:	You can't evict my aunt.
Bunny:	No. Just you. By a show of hands who here thinks our building would be better off without these three **fuckwads**?

In example (5), Amy's offensive swearing ("actively shitting themselves") takes the form of the literal, denotative usage of "(to) shit", a particularly offensive usage (Beers Fägersten, 2012: 94). Bunny's use of "fuckwads" illustrates abusive swearing: even if she is not directly addressing Charles, Oliver, and Mabel, they are nevertheless present and clearly referred to by the swear word. Throughout the ten episodes, the collective stance of the tenants in opposition to the podcast trio is constructed

via similar negatively aligned swearing utterances, such that a pattern of offensive, abusive, and aggressive swearing serves to index certain characters as antagonists. However, even protagonist Charles notably engages in similar swearing. In example (5), Charles is unnerved by the prospect of eviction and assures the tenants that the podcast activity is over. In example (6), Charles, Oliver, Mabel, and Oscar have shortly thereafter left the tenants' meeting and are waiting for an elevator.

(6)
    Oliver: You know what? It's all gonna be fine once we solve this case.
    Charles: Stop with the **fucking** case.
    Oscar: Whoa, you know what? I'm gonna run errands that are not in that elevator.

Charles's swearing expression serves two distinct purposes. First, as aggressive swearing, it conveys a noticeable change in the key of the conversation. The resulting interpersonal tension is so salient that Oscar, as peripheral to the trio, finds an excuse to withdraw from the interaction. Second, the swearing expression signals Charles's oppositional stance vis-à-vis Oliver and Mabel, partaking in the sort of swearing behavior that has now come to characterize the antagonists. Swearing thereby indexes a shift in interpersonal alignment. Significantly, Charles's swearing expression deviates from the kind of swearing that is otherwise typical of the interaction between the core group of protagonists and their supporters. Interpersonal opposition and alignment are thereby indexed via different swearing practices, the former expressed via offensive, abusive, and aggressive swearing. In section 6.3, we consider affiliative functions of swearing in *OMITB*.

6.3. Positive/affiliative swearing: style and affiliation

Over half (55%) of the swearing utterances in *OMITB* were coded as fulfilling a positively associated primary function. Among the positive interpersonal functions of swearing is the stylistic use of swear words to emphasize a point (Stapleton, 2003; 2010; 2020), a practice common to conversational storytelling (Karachaliou and Archakis, 2015; Norrick, 2012), where swearing signals "a marker of emotional involvement [that] translates to a number of stylistic, rhetorical, and interpersonal effects" (Norrick, 2012: 34). Accordingly, examples of stylistic swearing in *OMITB* accompany expositions or disclosures, such as example (7) from episode 5, where Oscar, suspected of murder, explains to Charles, Oliver, and Mabel what he was doing at the scene of the crime.

(7)
    Oscar: I went up to Tim's place that night. I (.) I don't know what I was gonna do but I wasn't going to kill him. Maybe **fuck** him up a little bit. But the alarm was going off and then (..) and then I heard a **fucking** gunshot.

In example (7), Oscar's swearing both characterizes the storytelling nature of the interaction and reflects his own emotional involvement. At the same time, by episode 5, Oscar has re-established his friendship with Mabel and come to know Charles and Oliver. For this reason, example (7) also illustrates affiliation as a (secondary) interpersonal function. With regard to the affiliative function of swearing, the use of swear words has the potential to mark or even create "an informal, relaxed context wherein social bonds are strengthened, and social distance is reduced" (Beers Fägersten and Stapleton, 2022: 140). The characters of Oliver, Charles, and Mabel start the series as acquaintances or strangers drawn to one another through a shared enthusiasm for a true crime podcast, and they develop a friendship through collaboration on their own podcast. Their diminishing social distance and increasing solidarity with one another are indexed via affiliative swearing, such as that in examples (8) and (9) from episodes 2 and 3, respectively. In example (8), Charles, Oliver, and Mabel are trying to understand what kind of person Tim was. In a flashback sequence, Mabel remembers a confrontation, prompting her to suggest to Charles and Oliver that they view Tim in a negative light.

(8)
    Mabel: What if Tim was a **dick**?
    Oliver: Hm. That's a definite angle. I mean, I wouldn't want him to be **dickier** than Steve Carell in The Office. I-I'd still care if Steve Carell in The Office got murdered. Or would I? Thinking, thinking, visualizing. This is tough.

In example (9), Charles and Mabel learn that Oliver has published, in their view prematurely, the first podcast episode.

(9)
    Charles: So basically you released our podcast, we have no real theories, let alone a prime suspect.
    Mabel: When we have twelve listeners maybe we can worry.
    Oliver: Okay, you know what? I've got this. I'm all over it! Worry not!
    Mabel: And I'm **fucking** worried.
    Charles: I'm so **fucking** worried.

Throughout the series's first season, Mabel is the most frequent swearer and as such, her usage of swear words to a certain extent contributes to her characterization (Bednarek 2019b). As season one progresses, the frequency of swearing by Charles and Oliver increases as they collaborate with Mabel. In examples (8) and (9), Mabel initiates the swearing turns, which can be understood as according to her characterization, but it may also be a pragmatic move to reduce the social distance between these interlocutors of different gender, ages, ethnicity, and class (Beers Fägersten, 2012; Beers Fägersten and Stapleton, 2022; Stapleton 2010). While Mabel's swearing *may* reflect televisual characterization, stylization, or affiliation, swearing by Oliver and Charles in response is decidedly affiliative. Both Oliver and Charles align with Mabel by repeating (and in example (9) also boosting via "so") her swear word or swearing utterance, thereby partaking in echoic swearing (Beers Fägersten, 2012: 120) and showing both approval and ratification of Mabel's swearing.

Nearly half (45%) of the 164 swearing utterances in *OMITB* were coded for such affiliative swearing, but these instances are not limited to the interactions between Charles, Oliver, and Mabel. Example (7) above illustrated affiliative swearing by Oscar,

and examples (10) and (11) below feature additional affiliative interactions. Example (10) is a continuation of example (5) from episode 9, which ended with Bunny eliciting a vote to evict "these three fuckwads."

(10)

Bunny: No. Just you. By a show of hands who here thinks our building would be better off without these three **fuckwads**?
Charles: Hey!
Howard: I for one am actually (.) grateful to the **fuckwads**. Their work might lead to my answer. [...]

Howard's opposition to Bunny's proposition is already indexed by his stance-taking via "I for one" and "actually", but his echoic swearing reflects an appropriation of Bunny's term of abuse, "fuckwads", serving to re-key the conversation from aggressive to supportive. In this way, example (10) is similar to example (6), in that a swearing expression indexes a shift in the key of the conversation, which corresponds to a shift in stance for Howard who, up until this point, aligned with the antagonists. Howard's swearing turn in example (10) asserts his solidarity and affiliation with Charles, Oliver, and Mabel.

A similar shift in stance is illustrated in example (11). While example (4) from episode 1 illustrated Detective Williams' offensive, abusive, and aggressive use of swear words towards Charles, Oliver, and Mabel, her swearing in example (11) from episode 8 reflects her realization that the trio can be helpful to the official investigation. Example (11) begins just after she has instructed them on how to proceed, which Charles has failed to comprehend.

(11)

Williams: So, let's just make sure we keep this tight. Okay? Especially if you're accusing the Deli King? Alright? So, get the who, the how, the why, and the why now.
Charles: Get-get the what and the what?
Williams: See, why would you say what? I never said what. There's no what. It's the who, the how, the why, and the why now. Alright? Make the case. And make sure it's super **fuckin'** tight.

Williams' swearing in example (11) is noticeably different from that in example (4) as she now is aligned with Charles, Oliver, and Mabel, advising them as collaborators. Williams' affiliation is subsequently expressed in the last episode of season 1, when she witnesses Charles, Oliver, and Mabel, suspects of yet another murder in the Arconia, being escorted by police officers out of the building. As they pass her, another swearing turn conveys her supportive stance towards them as she discretely advises, "Don't say a fucking word."

7. Interpersonal and televisual narrative functions of swearing (Research Question 3)

In section 6, we outlined and illustrated how swearing performs different interpersonal functions in the story world of *OMITB*. Patterns of swearing show that negatively and positively valenced swearing distinguish characters in terms of antagonists and protagonists, respectively, or in other words, as characters in interpersonal opposition to or support of the main characters of Charles, Oliver, and Mabel. Such patterning renders any deviations meaningful, such that swearing can be invoked to shift alignment, deployed to assume either a new oppositional stance or a new affiliative stance. As such, interpersonal functions of swearing interact with the televisual functions of swearing "to convey ideologies and control viewer emotion" (Bednarek 2019b: 48).

Additional televisual functions of swearing include contributing to "establishing settings, happenings and characters" (Bednarek 2019b: 48). As a series about making a podcast (a "happening"), *OMITB* invokes this media genre via the recurring feature of voiceover narration. We propose that this voiceover fulfils an affiliative function vis-à-vis the viewer, which is, in part, achieved through the construction of a New Yorker identity linked to swearing (see example 12 below). Thus, swearing serves both to affiliate with the viewer and also to create a contextual framing for the series. In fact, the series's pilot episode commences with a voiceover, a practice repeated in episodes 5, 6, 7, and 10. The inaugural voiceover is by Charles, and in this episode, it is followed by voiceovers by Mabel and Oliver, in sequence, as a way of introducing the series's three main characters. Example (12) comes from *OMITB*'s opening scene, in which Charles is walking down a New York street during the voiceover (vo), before he is approached by the passerby featured in example (1).

(12)

Charles: (vo) Here's a thing I don't get. People who worry about living in a big city because of all the crime. As any true crime aficionado will tell you, it's the boondocks you need to worry about. I mean, let's face it. Nobody ever discovered nineteen bodies buried in the backyard of a fourteen-story apartment building. There's eyes on you all over the place here. And New Yorkers have a special way of communicating. (tips his hat to Uma)
Uma: (**flips him off**)
Charles: (vo) And by special, I mean direct. We're packed in tight and stacked on top of each other like those of us who live (.) at the Arconia.
Passerby: Hey hold up. Wait, are you=
Charles: =I'm Brazzos.

In this tone-setting first scene of the series, the viewer is directly addressed ("you") and at the same time distinguished from the speaker ("I") who identifies as a member of the New Yorker community ("we"), one which is defined by communication style, here called "special" and "direct" and exemplified by the finger-flipping gesture, an equivalent to *fuck you* or *fuck off*. The role of swearing in this communicative style that characterizes New Yorkers is then instantiated by the passerby swearing twice ("Oh shit!"; see example (1) above) when addressing Charles, someone he recognizes from television, but who is nevertheless a stranger. The interpersonal function of identity management in *OMITB* was not judged to have primary salience in any interaction (see section 5), but as a secondary function, it is critical to understanding the high frequency of swearing in the series as function of the fictional setting and characters based on real-life New York and New Yorkers. Swearing has been shown to index group-based identities, social networks, or domains of interaction (Dynel 2012; Stapleton

2010), and the inclusion of swearing in this opening scene illustrates how it contributes to characterization in the context of the televisual narrative.

The series's inaugural voiceover discursively creates an expectation of swearing among the series's cast of New Yorkers — one that is immediately fulfilled by the subsequent scene. Example (13) features this second scene, in which Mabel is walking down a different street during her own voiceover that begins with a swearing utterance.

(13)
    Mabel: New York can be a **fucking** lot. All the eyes on you all the time.

Mabel first reaffirms the New York setting and then achieves discursive cohesiveness through "All the eyes on you all the time" as a callback to Charles saying, "There's eyes on you all over the place here." The use of a swear word in her first spoken line also further establishes swearing as the implied feature of the "special" or "direct" way of communicating that characterizes New Yorkers. Indeed, serving as additional reinforcement of the New Yorker as swearer, the voiceover narrations that begin episodes 5, 6, 7, and 10 introduce and spotlight the characters Oscar, Detective Williams, Theo, and Tim, respectively, all of whom swear. Example (14) is a collection of each voiceover.

(14)
    Oscar: Value. Worth. The price of life. What's the easiest way to know how you fit into the equation? Come to New York. **Shit** just plain costs more in the city. Subway fare is $2.75. The inflation of Hot Cheetos? 99 cents in the Bronx, nearly four freaking dollars in Tribeca. Those joints? Overpriced as **fuck**. (episode 5)

    Williams: We're all born alone. Unless you're a twin or something, but twins creep me the **fuck** out. And don't even get me started on triplets or quadrupla... Whatever the **fuck** they're called. I don't know 'cause that's not my point. My point is we're born alone, spend most of our time alone, then we all go out alone. When I was a kid, there was this show on TV... Herman's Head. You remember this **shit**? (episode 6)

    Theo: People talk way too **fucking** much in this city. (episode 7)

    Tim: Twenty-three seconds. That's the time I spent when I was actually alive with three people on an elevator. [...] So, when someone comes along and reminds you that we all deal with the same **shit**, sometimes you welcome them in, with inhibitions lowered, with arms wide open. (episode 10)

Like those in Episode 1, these voiceovers position the viewer as the direct addressee, much in the same way a podcast would, which is the thematic product of the series. Episode 7 makes this direct address explicit when Theo, who is deaf, breaks the fourth wall, looking directly into the camera while signing his voiceover. In *OMITB*, swearing is thus used not only in interaction between characters in the series, but also in communication with the viewer via the voiceovers, thereby serving interpersonal functions in both the story world and in the televisual narrative. These examples thus illustrate how swearing fulfils the secondary function of identity management, overlapping with the televisual function of characterization. Swearing in these voiceovers, however, can also be considered to perform affiliative interpersonal functions, directly appealing to the viewer as an interlocutor, reducing social distance, and promoting solidarity. We thus propose that swearing for affiliative purposes is not limited to story-world interaction but can extend to the televisual narrative. As such, we further propose that the interpersonal affiliative function be included among the multiple functions of swearing in television series to account for swearing as a distinct televisual strategy to appeal to the viewing audience, as discussed below.

8. Discussion and conclusion

In our analysis, we have focused on the frequency, distribution, and interpersonal functions of swearing, as used in *OMITB*. While Bednarek (2019b) has observed multiple functions of swearing on television, these are generally achieved by swearing being exercised by, and thus clearly distinguishing, only a limited number of characters in a series, in line with a previous argument for the importance of "bad language for the construction of *individual* character identities" (Bednarek 2015: 435, original emphasis). However, as an example of "bad language," swearing in *OMITB* notably does *not* construct individual identities, since nearly all featured individuals swear. Indeed, swearing in *OMITB* occurs so frequently and across such a large swath of people that the impression is that "everybody" swears. In the opening scene, the central role of swearing in the series is both explicitly framed and communicated to the viewer as plausible (Kozloff 2000), paving the way for a high frequency of swearing and cross-character distribution throughout the episodes. In answer to our first research question, we have shown that while swearing does contribute to establishing the setting of New York and the characterization of New Yorkers, both its overall frequency (as presented in section 5) and distribution across a socio-demographically diverse cast of characters of varying social distance and social status run counter to empirical evidence of swearing in face-to-face interaction (as presented in section 2) and in telecinematic dialogue (as presented in section 3), rendering swearing a distinctive feature of the series that warrants investigating.

To answer our second research question, we focused on determining how the frequency of swearing distributes across interpersonal functions in the story-world context, and how interpersonal functions of swearing within the series interact with televisual narrative functions of swearing. We have demonstrated that swearing in *OMITB* patterns according to negatively and positively valenced interpersonal functions, which in their turn correspond to oppositional and supportive stances vis-à-vis the protagonists. Nearly half of all swearing utterances in the series served the interpersonal function of affiliation, further emphasizing the role of swearing in reducing social distance and promoting social bonding among a diverse group of strangers thrust into collaboration. At the same time, the voice-over technique serves to include even the viewer in the mix. Voice-over swearing performs both stylistic and characterization functions but in directly addressing the viewer, swearing in voice-overs emerges as interpersonally relevant, analogously serving the same affiliative functions of

swearing in the story-world context. In answer to our third research question, we have found that the use of swearing by a diverse cast of characters allows the series to appeal to an equally diverse audience, whereby swearing represents an affiliative overture vis-à-vis the audience.

Bednarek (2019b) has found that audiences notice swearing in television series and find it entertaining. Further, the lack of restrictions on swearing in the cable and streaming contexts is conducive to inflated frequencies, perhaps to tap into this added value of swearing (as evidenced in Beers Fägersten and Pereira, 2021; Beers Fägersten and Bednarek, 2022). Indeed, the relatively high frequency of swearing on *OMITB* paired with a non-observance of conversational norms of swearing suggest that it may be experienced as gratuitous or an attention-grabbing gimmick. For this reason, swearing on television must continue to be included in empirical research, so as to observe potential variation in swearing as story-world realism vs. televisual appeal. In other words, if swearing is not used on television to create realism but rather to appeal to a viewership, then research needs to account for such interpersonal and pragmatic purposes.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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