

Commodification of Swear Words in Films: How *The Wolf of Wall Street* Casually Employs Expletives

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Abstract

This essay examines the commodification of swear words in contemporary cinema, with specific emphasis on Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), a film renowned for its prolific use of profanity. The ubiquity of expletives in modern storytelling raises critical questions about their function, value, and impact. What does it signify when profanity becomes a marketable feature of a blockbuster? How does casual profanity contribute to character development, realism, and audience reception? Through close analysis of key scenes and dialogues, this essay interrogates the cultural and economic dimensions of profanity as both an artistic tool and a commodified element that fuels cinematic spectacle. The essay ultimately contends that *The Wolf of Wall Street* does not merely depict profanity as realistic dialogue but transforms it into a consumable aesthetic—one that shapes narrative rhythm, character identities, and the commercial identity of the film itself.

Introduction

Profanity in language is not a modern invention. Across cultures, taboo language has served expressive, social, and emotional functions. Historically, swear words were relegated to informal, private, or marginalized uses. However, the evolution of mass entertainment has shifted their position from the periphery to the centre of cultural consumption. In cinema—especially from the late twentieth century onwards—swear words have permeated scripts, marketing campaigns, and audience expectations. Among the contemporary films that have foregrounded profanity, Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* stands out for the sheer volume, rhythmic deployment, and casual normalizing of expletives. A film based on the memoir of stockbroker Jordan Belfort, *The Wolf of Wall Street* immerses viewers in a hedonistic world of excess, moral ambiguity, and linguistic abandon.

As mentioned before, *The Wolf of Wall Street* exemplifies how profanity has shifted from marked, emotionally charged speech to a form of casual, everyday linguistic currency within popular cinema. Unlike films in which swear words are reserved for moments of extreme anger or conflict,

The Wolf of Wall Street deploys expletives as routine conversational fillers, motivational tools, and expressions of camaraderie. This casualization of profanity reflects both the social environment the film portrays and broader cultural shifts in language normalization.

In the film, swear words are rarely used as direct insults; instead, they serve as linguistic glue, holding together interactions among characters. Jordan Belfort and his colleagues consistently insert expletives into sentences that could otherwise function without them. For example, Belfort's declaration, "I choose rich every f---ing time," does not rely on the swear word for semantic meaning but for emphasis and tone (*The Wolf of Wall Street*). The expletive intensifies the statement while signalling emotional confidence and bravado rather than aggression. Such usage demonstrates how profanity becomes habitual rather than expressive of outrage.

This casual profanity also reflects workplace normalization. The brokerage firm depicted in the film operates as a hyper-masculine environment in which swearing functions as a marker of professional belonging. Employees routinely address one another with expletives in non-hostile contexts, reinforcing group identity and shared values. Linguistic research suggests that frequent, informal swearing within professional groups often serves to reduce perceived hierarchy and foster solidarity, particularly in male-dominated spaces (Eble 15). In *The Wolf of Wall Street*, however, this apparent camaraderie masks underlying power imbalances, as superiors freely use profanity to assert dominance while subordinates mirror the language to gain acceptance.

Furthermore, the film employs casual swearing to sustain narrative momentum. Profanity appears in rapid-fire dialogue sequences where its repetition becomes almost rhythmic. During sales pitches and office banter, expletives operate as verbal punctuation rather than emotional outbursts. Deborah Tannen's work on conversational rhythm emphasizes that repetition and intensifiers shape how speech is received emotionally (Tannen 92). In Scorsese's film, swear words fulfil this role by accelerating speech and maintaining heightened energy without signalling conflict. As a result, viewers become acclimated to the language, perceiving it as background noise rather than transgressive speech.

The casual use of profanity also contributes to moral normalization. By embedding expletives in everyday interactions, the film mirrors how ethical boundaries are similarly blurred in Belfort's world. Profanity becomes part of a broader culture of excess in which illegal activity, exploitation, and moral indifference are treated as routine. When Belfort dismisses concerns about legality or ethics using offhand swearing, the language reflects the ease with which wrongdoing is rationalized (*The Wolf of Wall Street*). This aligns with cultural critiques that argue repeated exposure to normalized transgression can reduce moral sensitivity among audiences (Jay 59).

Importantly, the casualization of swear words in *The Wolf of Wall Street* also serves a satirical function. The film's relentless profanity ultimately becomes excessive to the point of absurdity, encouraging viewers to recognize the emptiness and performative nature of the characters' bravado. What initially appears as confident, rebellious speech gradually reveals itself as linguistic inflation—words stripped of meaning through overuse. As satire theorists argue, exaggeration can expose moral and cultural hollowness (Griffin 157). The casual swearing thus undercuts the supposed power it projects, revealing it as a hollow performance tied to consumerism and ego.

From a cultural perspective, the film's success demonstrates how casual profanity has become commercially viable. Audience familiarity with expletive-heavy dialogue reflects a broader acceptance of such language in entertainment. What once might have shocked viewers now functions as an expected stylistic feature. This normalization supports the argument that swear words in contemporary cinema are not merely expressive tools but commodified elements designed to enhance realism,

edginess, and market appeal (Sconce 48).

In sum, the casual usage of swear words in *The Wolf of Wall Street* represents a significant shift in cinematic language. Profanity operates not as transgression but as routine speech, reinforcing group identity, sustaining narrative energy, and reflecting moral desensitization. Through this casualization, the film illustrates how swear words have been absorbed into the everyday vocabulary of popular culture, transforming taboo language into a normalized and commercially exploitable aesthetic.

The commodification of swear words in popular culture refers to the process through which taboo language—once socially restricted and morally censured—is transformed into a consumable cultural product. Profanity, historically associated with emotional outbursts, social deviance, or marginal groups, now circulates freely across mainstream media, advertising, fashion, music, and film. Within capitalist cultural industries, swear words are no longer merely linguistic expressions but strategic tools that generate attention, authenticity, and profit. As a result, profanity has shifted from being socially transgressive to commercially valuable.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, swear words derive their power from taboo. They violate norms related to religion, sexuality, the body, and authority, thereby producing emotional intensity and shock (Jay 22). However, when such words are repeatedly circulated through popular culture, their shock value diminishes, even as their marketability increases. Popular culture thrives on novelty and boundary-pushing content, and profanity offers an easily accessible means of signalling rebellion, realism, or edginess. This process aligns with commodification theory, which argues that capitalism absorbs forms of resistance and transforms them into saleable aesthetics (Sconce 48).

In contemporary media, swear words are frequently used to construct authenticity. Reality television, stand-up comedy, hip-hop music, and digital streaming platforms rely heavily on profanity to convey “rawness” and emotional honesty. Swearing becomes stylistic shorthand for truthfulness and emotional intensity, particularly in contrast to earlier eras of censorship. Linguistic studies note that audiences often interpret profanity-rich language as more genuine and less scripted, reinforcing its cultural appeal (Biber 107). Thus, profanity becomes a symbolic resource that producers deploy to enhance audience engagement and credibility.

Fashion and consumer culture further illustrate the commodification of swear words. Clothing emblazoned with expletives, slogan merchandise, and luxury brands incorporating profanity into branding exemplify how taboo language is transformed into visual and economic capital. In these contexts, swear words function less as insults and more as stylistic statements—markers of attitude, defiance, or ironic cool. What was once socially unacceptable becomes normalized through repetition and aesthetic framing, allowing consumers to “wear” rebellion without real social risk.

Cinema plays a particularly influential role in this transformation. Profanity in films is no longer confined to marginal or underground cinema; it has become a defining feature of mainstream productions. Films such as *The Wolf of Wall Street* demonstrate how excessive swearing can be integrated into narrative structure and character development while also serving as a marketing hook. The casual deployment of expletives in such films reflects what media scholars describe as the normalization of transgression, wherein audiences come to expect and accept taboo language as part of entertainment (Jenkins 203).

However, the commodification of swear words raises critical concerns. As profanity becomes normalized and commercially exploited, its capacity to challenge power structures or express genuine outrage is weakened. What once functioned as linguistic resistance risks becoming an empty spectacle. Cultural critics argue that when transgressive language is stripped of its social consequences and

repackaged for entertainment, it reinforces existing power dynamics rather than subverting them (Griffin 157). Profanity, in this sense, becomes a performative gesture rather than a meaningful critique.

Moreover, the casual circulation of swear words in popular culture can contribute to linguistic desensitization. When expletives are repeated without consequence, they may perpetuate subtle forms of social harm, particularly when they draw upon misogynistic, homophobic, or racialized language. Timothy Jay warns that while swear words may lose their shock value, they retain their capacity to marginalize and offend within specific social contexts (Jay 59). Thus, commodification does not neutralize harm; it merely obscures it under the guise of entertainment.

In sum, the commodification of swear words in popular culture reflects broader shifts in language, media, and capitalism. Profanity has evolved from taboo speech to marketable aesthetic, functioning simultaneously as a marker of authenticity, rebellion, and commercial appeal. While this transformation enables creative freedom and cultural realism, it also risks emptying swear words of their critical force. Popular culture's embrace of profanity ultimately reveals how even linguistic transgression can be absorbed, normalized, and sold within capitalist systems.

This essay investigates the commodification of swear words in film, aiming to unpack how profanity functions not merely as dialogue but as a cultural product. Specifically, it analyzes how *The Wolf of Wall Street* integrates profanity into its narrative fabric in ways that shape character identity, viewer experience, and the marketable ethos of the film. By considering relevant scenes and direct dialogue examples, this study contends that the commercial and artistic deployment of swearing in the film reflects broader sociolinguistic trends: profanity becomes marketable, normalized, and even aestheticized in mainstream cinema.

Understanding Commodification and Profanity in Film

Before engaging with *The Wolf of Wall Street*, it is necessary to define key concepts: commodification and profanity. Commodification refers to the transformation of goods, ideas, or practices into marketable commodities—objects for sale and consumption in capitalist economies. In cultural terms, commodification often involves turning expressive forms (language, identity, entertainment styles) into products that generate revenue. Profanity, by contrast, is language that violates social norms, often associated with emotional intensity, taboo themes, or subcultural identity (Jay 22).

In film studies, the commodification of language manifests when taboo speech becomes a selling point—featured prominently in advertising, critical discourse, and audience word-of-mouth. As observer Jeffrey Sconce notes, shock value and transgressive speech can attract viewership precisely because they challenge conventional norms (Sconce 48). Thus, films like *The Wolf of Wall Street*, which deliberately amplify profanity, participate in a cycle where swear words operate as both linguistic expression and commercial lure.

While profanity in film has historical precedents (e.g., the gradual use of “damn” and “hell” in Hollywood classics), the contemporary context is distinct: mainstream, widely released films now employ a vast array of expletives, embracing the rawness of everyday speech. This trend correlates with shifts in societal norms, deregulation of film rating systems, and audience appetite for 'authentic' experiences (Biber 107). In the commodification model, profanity is no longer merely a script choice—it is a *brand feature* that contributes to a film's identity.

***The Wolf of Wall Street*: Profanity as Narrative and Aesthetic Device**

Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* is a fertile site for analyzing the commodification of

swear words. Written by Terence Winter and adapted from Jordan Belfort's memoir, the film chronicles Belfort's rise and fall as a stockbroker engaged in rampant fraud, indulgence, and moral decadence. The narrative is propelled not only by excess in wealth and vice but by an unrestrained verbal style. According to some counts, the film contains over 200 instances of the f-word alone, situating it among the most profanity-laden mainstream films (Smith 233).

In this section, key scenes and dialogues will be examined to illustrate how profanity operates on multiple levels: as a marker of character identity, a tool for satire, and a rhythm-setting device that aligns with the chaotic ethos of Belfort's world.

1. Character Identity and Group Dynamics

In *The Wolf of Wall Street*, profanity is integral to character construction. The film's protagonists, especially Jordan Belfort (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) and his associates, use expletives with remarkable frequency. This speech pattern functions as a social signal: it denotes membership in a high-intensity, hyper-competitive subculture.

In one early scene, Belfort addresses his brokerage team with a barrage of swearing: "Let me tell you something. There is no nobility in poverty. I've been a rich man and I've been a poor man. And I choose rich every f---ing time." Here, profanity reinforces Belfort's brash worldview. The repeated "f---ing" intensifies his rhetoric, mirroring the aggressive selling tactics he employs. The choice to punctuate his motivational speech with swearing gives it an edge of authenticity, as though his incentive to succeed hinges on defying decorum as much as earning profits.

This scene not only reveals character traits—ambition, ruthlessness, insecurity—but also establishes profanity as a linguistic badge of belonging to Belfort's circle. Research on group language patterns suggests that shared use of taboo words can strengthen in-group cohesion while delineating outsiders (Eble 15). In the film, profanity becomes part of the vernacular that binds Belfort's crew, signalling allegiance to a countercultural ethos rooted in excess.

2. The Rhythmic Cadence of Dialogue

Beyond character identity, profanity in *The Wolf of Wall Street* contributes to the rhythm and pacing of dialogue. Scorsese uses swear words not merely as content but as a stylistic device that shapes the film's sonic texture. The profanity-laden exchanges give scenes an erratic, unpredictable cadence, mirroring the market volatility and moral turbulence depicted on screen.

Consider the phone-selling montage early in the film, where Belfort trains new recruits:

"Sell me this pen. No, no, no—listen. Sell me this f---ing pen!" "You call yourself a salesman? You worthless f---? Sell me this f---ing pen, now!" Here, profanities punctuate sales instructions, creating a breathless, punchy rhythm that accelerates tension. The repeated "f---" injects a visceral jolt into otherwise mundane sales logic. It transforms a simple exercise into a performance of dominance and urgency. The cadence here is not naturalistic: it is carefully crafted to emphasize power dynamics and emotional intensity.

Linguist Deborah Tannen notes that the prosody of speech—its rhythm, stress, and intonation—shapes meaning as much as lexical content (Tannen 92). In *The Wolf of Wall Street*, profanity becomes a prosodic device that energizes dialogue, aligning verbal expression with the film's kinetic visuals and frenetic editing.

3. Profanity as Satirical Mirror

Profanity in the film also operates satirically, exaggerating the excesses of Wall Street culture to underscore moral critique. *The Wolf of Wall Street* does not endorse Belfort's behaviour; rather, it exposes it through a kind of heightened realism that uses taboo language as both lure and critique.

For instance, in a conversation about ethics, Belfort says: “Ethics? We are not in the business of giving a f--- about ethics! We are here to make f---ing money!” This line—delivered with a flourish of profanity—exposes the moral vacuum at the heart of Belfort’s enterprise. The exaggerated dismissal of ethics, wrapped in shocking language, functions as satire: the audience is invited to recognize the absurdity of a worldview that elevates profit above all else. The humour here is dark, and the profanity serves as a tool that magnifies moral bankruptcy rather than glamorizes it.

Scholars of satire argue that exaggeration—including linguistic exaggeration—is essential to revealing underlying absurdities in social norms (Griffin 157). In this sense, the profane utterance becomes a mirror reflecting the grotesque priorities of a corrupt finance milieu.

4. Audience Reception and Normalization

A key question in discussing commodification is not only how profanity functions within the text but how audiences perceive and consume it. *The Wolf of Wall Street* was marketed, in part, on its reputation for unrestrained language and content. Trailers, reviews, and promotional discussions often highlighted the film’s profanity as a selling point. The casual use of expletives thus becomes part of the film’s brand identity—a marker of edginess that attracts certain viewers.

This phenomenon reflects broader trends in popular culture where taboo content becomes a form of entertainment currency. As media scholar Henry Jenkins observes, transgressive content can generate what he calls “participatory culture,” where audiences take pride in encountering material that pushes boundaries (Jenkins 203). In the case of *The Wolf of Wall Street*, audiences might share memorable profane lines, quote them, or treat them as badges of cinematic bravado.

However, this normalization also raises implications for social attitudes toward profanity. When excessive swearing is packaged, marketed, and consumed as entertainment, it can desensitize audiences to language that was once taboo. The profusion of expletives becomes mundane, no longer shocking but expected. In this context, profanity becomes commodified not just as dialogue but as cultural currency—valuable precisely because it signals an aesthetic of transgression in a media landscape saturated with content.

Dialogue Examples from *The Wolf of Wall Street*

To illustrate how profanity functions concretely within *The Wolf of Wall Street*, the following extended examples highlight the interplay of narrative, character, and linguistic style. These excerpts are drawn from key scenes that exemplify how expletives are woven into the fabric of the film.

Example 1: Belfort’s Sales Training

In a scene where Belfort trains new recruits, the aggressive teaching style is amplified through profanity:

You call yourself a salesman? You worthless f---? I want you to get out there and f---ing sell! Sell your f---ing heart out! Sell until your throat bleeds, and then sell some more! You think I gave a f--- about stocks? No! I gave a f--- about selling!

This passage demonstrates profanity’s role in constructing a hyperbolic atmosphere of competitive zeal. The repetition and placement of expletives function as verbal pressure points that drive emotional intensity.

Example 2: The Boat Speech

Later in the film, when Belfort addresses his team aboard a luxury yacht, he uses profanity to underscore wealth and defiance:

Look at this! Look at this f---ing boat! Nobody in the world gets a boat like this without pissing off half the f---ing world! And I don’t give a f---! Because this is what we f---

ing do! We win! We f---ing win!

Here, profanity accents the spectacle of wealth and frames material success as something worth celebrating without apology. The expletives punctuate both pride and rebellion, shaping audience perception of Belfort's philosophy.

Example 3: Ethical Dismissal

In a heated discussion about legality and ethics:

Listen to me, you ignorant f---! There's lawful, there's unlawful, and then there's f---ing everybody else! We are Wall Street brokers, not monks! We bend rules, we break them, we make more money doing both than anyone else ever has! Ethics? I have no f---ing clue what that word means.

This passage encapsulates the film's thematic interplay of morality and language. Profanity underscores the cavalier dismissal of ethical considerations—a rhetorical strategy that aligns with Belfort's moral detachment.

Profanity and Commercial Success

The Wolf of Wall Street was both a critical and box-office success, grossing hundreds of millions worldwide and earning multiple Academy Award nominations. Critics frequently commented on its profanity, with some lauding its audacity and others critiquing its excess. The sheer density of expletives became part of the cultural conversation surrounding the film, suggesting that profanity itself had commercial value. Promotional materials, media coverage, and audience discussions underscored the film's reputation for linguistic boldness.

The commodification of profanity extends beyond the film text into its marketing ecosystem. Expletive-laden quotes, meme culture, and social media shares contributed to the film's visibility, reinforcing profanity not just as dialogic content but as a memorable branding element.

Criticisms and Counterarguments

While profanity can serve narrative and aesthetic functions, its commodification raises concerns. Critics argue that excessive swearing can desensitize audiences, trivialize serious themes, and contribute to a culture where shock value replaces substantive storytelling. Some detractors of *The Wolf of Wall Street* assert that the overreliance on profanity risks turning language into spectacle rather than meaningful expression.

Furthermore, the normalization of profanity in media can obscure the social and cultural consequences of taboo speech. Linguistic studies indicate that profanity carries social weight, often tied to context, power, and emotional intensity (Jay 59). When such language is commodified for entertainment, its potential to shock, offend, or provoke critical reflection may diminish.

Nevertheless, defenders of creative profanity argue that art reflects social realities. If everyday speech patterns include swearing, then cinema—an art form striving for realism—ought not to sanitize them. The debate ultimately hinges on the balance between artistic fidelity and ethical responsibility in media representation.

Summation

The commodification of swear words in contemporary cinema exemplifies how language evolves within cultural and economic contexts. *The Wolf of Wall Street* stands as a prominent case study in this phenomenon, integrating profanity into its narrative, aesthetic, and commercial identity. Through character construction, rhythmic device, satire, and marketing appeal, profanity transcends mere dialogue to become a consumable cinematic feature.

This essay has argued that *The Wolf of Wall Street* uses profanity not simply to mimic realism but to create what might be called a *profane aesthetic*—a style that aligns with the film’s themes of excess, defiance, and moral ambiguity. Profanity becomes both a linguistic resource and a marketable attribute, illustrating how taboo language can be commodified within mainstream entertainment.

Such commodification carries implications for audience expectations, cultural norms, and the future of cinematic language. As profanity becomes normalized and marketed within film, its power to shock or transgress may diminish even as its commercial value increases. The challenge for filmmakers and audiences alike lies in navigating the tension between expressive freedom, narrative purpose, and the broader social impact of language in cultural production.

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