FLAMING AS VERBAL CYBERBULLYING ON TIKTOK COMMENTS TOWARDS RACHEL ZEGLER AS SNOW WHITE

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Abstract: This study applied the Speech Act Theory by Austin and Searle to analyze verbal cyberbullying on TikTok comments toward Rachel Zegler, who took a role as Snow White and classified it into several categories and subcategories of illocutionary acts. This study utilised a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze linguistic forms of verbal cyberbullying in the data. The data collected through documentation and observation of several contents related to Rachel Zegler. The analysis result shows that the domination of expressive (insulting) acts occurred in the verbal cyberbullying data collected, with a total of 25 utterances (50%). Assertive (stating) acts became the second most dominant with a total of 7 utterances (14%), followed by assertive (asserting) with 4 utterances (8%), assertive (complaining) with 3 utterances (6%) and assertive (criticizing) with 2 utterances (4%). While the least dominant acts were assertive (predicting) and (comparing), directive (requesting/demanding) and commissive (committing), with each having a single utterance (2%). This study reveals that most people used expressive (insulting) acts in doing flaming as a form of verbal cyberbullying on TikTok. This research contributes to raising awareness among digital media users about the importance of the use of appropriate language in fostering constructive criticism and promoting healthier online interactions.

Key Terms: *illocutionary act, speech act theory, TikTok, utterance, verbal cyberbullying*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, TikTok has become a popular public discussion forum for various user groups. TikTok is a platform that contains several short videos and is both quick and open in its character. This platform allows users to easily respond to each other through the comments section of each post. The convenience of commenting is like a double-edged knife; it facilitates not only positive but also negative exchanges of opinion. For this reason, hate speech is often found on the TikTok comments section.

One common form of online violence is verbal cyberbullying, especially flaming, a phenomenon in which users post provocative, insulting, or offensive messages aimed at others.

Experts have identified flaming as a significant manifestation of cyberbullying, a digital behavior that threatens online security and contributes to emotional harm (Coe et al., 2014). Growing concerns about online aggression have encouraged researchers to investigate how language functions as a tool of verbal violence in digital spaces.

The phenomenon of flaming has been widely discussed in studies of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and cyberbullying. Flaming refers to the use of aggressive, hostile, or insulting language in online interactions, often driven by anger, disagreement, or provocation (Kayany, 1998). Early studies on flaming focused on its psychological and social impacts, identifying it as a behavior that undermines civility in digital communication (Lea et al., 1992). With the growth of social media platforms, flaming has become an integral part of online discourse, often observed in comment sections, live streams, and short-form video platforms such as TikTok. Such expressions categories of flaming are usually exacerbated aggressively by anonymity, group polarization, and exposure to controversial content driven by algorithms (Cheng et al., 2018).

From a linguistic perspective, flaming can be analyzed through the lens of Speech Act Theory Searle (1979), which posits that every utterance performs an act, such as asserting, commanding, or expressing emotion beyond its literal meaning. According to the Speech Act Theory by (Austin, 1962) a speech act consists of three inseparable components. Locutionary acts refer to the literal production of words, phrases, and their propositional meaning and what is explicitly said. Illocutionary acts represent the speaker's intended purpose behind the utterance, such as criticizing, insulting, warning, or expressing disapproval. These are the core acts that convey the speaker's intended purpose. Meanwhile, perlocutionary acts are related to the effect of the utterance on the listener, which can include provoking anger, causing embarrassment, intimidating the target, or influencing how others view the person being talked about.

Within this framework, flaming comments can be seen as *illocutionary acts* that perform insults, ridicule, or rejection. Searle's classification of illocutionary speech acts as (1) assertives, (2) directives, (3) commissives, (4) expressives, and (5) declaratives provides a systematic approach for identifying how language is used to construct hostility. For example, an expressive act may convey anger or disdain, while a directive act may provoke or challenge the target. Applying this theory to online discourse allows researchers to uncover how linguistic choices function as tools of aggression and identity positioning within virtual communities (Herring, 2002; Dynel, 2016)

A notable example of online "flaming" occurred in response to the casting of Rachel Zegler as the lead in Disney's live-action adaptation of Snow White. Zegler, as a Latina actress playing a character traditionally portrayed as white, sparked widespread debate and negative reactions across various social media platforms. While some users supported Disney's inclusive approach, others expressed anger and disapproval, often through harsh, sarcastic, or insulting comments. However, little research has specifically examined how flaming manifests linguistically on TikTok comment sections, where multimodal features such as short text, emojis, and hashtags amplify emotional expression and public engagement.

Yus (2023) focused on multimodal features in online insults, showing how emojis and visual cues reinforce illocutionary force in digital communication. On the other hand, Maulidiyah et al., (2021) analyzed the illocutionary acts used by Sherly Annavita in a televised

political debate, also relying on Searle's theory. They found that her speech was dominated by assertive and expressive functions, showing how political communication is highly dependent on taking a stance. Another study by Dewi & Seli (2023) focused on illocutionary acts in cyberbullying comments on Instagram. Although Panjaitan & Ambalegin (2024) have centered their research on expressive illocutionary acts in *The Summer I Turned Pretty* series, by using Searle & Vanderveken and Leech's politeness functions. They identified a variety of expressive acts, with thanking being the most dominant. Lastly, Jannah et al., (2024) analyzed teachers' illocutionary acts in English courses, using Searle's classification as an analytical framework. Their study showed that teachers mostly used directive and assertive acts during teaching and announcements. Even though several previous studies have used the speech act approach, their findings were different. As we can see, declarative sentences appeared most often when users labelled, renamed, or defined others in harmful ways.

Overall, these studies show that illocutionary acts have been explored across a wide range of contexts, such as classrooms, political debates, cyberbullying comments, fictional dialogue, and digital interactions, which mostly use Searle's framework. Together, they highlight how speakers perform intentions such as asserting, directing, expressing, or labelling others depending on the communicative setting. While most studies focus on verbal forms, on the other hand, Yus (2023) adds an important dimension by demonstrating that online environments often rely on multimodal cues, starting from emojis and visual layout, which strengthen or modify the illocutionary force.

Therefore, this study aims to expose the categories of illocutionary acts and their subcategories/functions used by people in performing verbal cyberbullying on TikTok. By employing a cyberbullying perspective, the research seeks to identify how online users construct aggression and hostility through language in digital discourse. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital communication, offering insight into how social media environments shape modern forms of verbal aggression. Ultimately, this work highlights the importance of critical awareness in digital interactions and provides implications for online civility and media literacy.

Despite these contributions, there remains a limited focus on *flaming on TikTok comment sections*, particularly in cases involving public figures or representational controversies. The current study seeks to fill this gap by applying Searle (1979) Speech Act Theory to expose the categories of illocutionary and their subcategories/functions on TikTok comments directed toward Rachel Zegler in response to her role as Snow White.

This approach aims to reveal how speech acts shape digital aggression and contribute to broader patterns of online violence and cyberbullying. Therefore, this research specifically focuses on the illocutionary acts, which represent the speaker's intended function behind a statement such as insulting, mocking, or expressing hatred, as the key to understanding flaming. Unlike locutionary acts, which merely describe literal content, or perlocutionary acts, which depend on the subjective reactions of the audience, illocutionary acts offer a more precise and theory-based way to identify and categorize the aggressive intentions embedded in hostile comments. By focusing on the illocutionary acts, this study can more accurately reveal how users linguistically construct digital aggression and how these verbal strategies contribute to the dynamics of cyberbullying in online discourse.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative-descriptive approach to analyze linguistic forms of *verbal-bullying* on TikTok comments directed toward Rachel Zegler as *Snow White role*. A qualitative design was chosen to describe and interpret users' hostile expressions in their natural context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition, the method used content analysis to analyze all data. Ary et al., (2010) stated that content analysis is a systematic approach used to identify, interpret and draw conclusions from various forms of recorded material, whether in the form of text, images, or videos. Through this approach, authors could understand the social communication, the social representation and the human behavior reflected in digital media. The analysis was grounded in Searle (1979) Speech Act Theory which categorizes utterances into *assertives, directives, commissives, expressives,* and *declaratives,* to reveal how language performs actions beyond its literal meaning.

The data consisted of English comments taken from selected TikTok videos discussing the controversy over Zegler's casting. Comments containing verbal aggression, sarcasm, or provocation were selected purposively (Miles, et al., 2014). Data were collected through documentation and observation of several TikTok videos related to Rachel Zegler, ensuring user anonymity and ethical considerations. Observation sheets were used to classify comments according to speech act theory and linguistic patterns.

Data analysis followed three steps: data reduction, categorization, and interpretation (Miles et al., 2014). Each comment was examined to identify its illocutionary act in expressing hostility. The findings were then interpreted in relation to cyberbullying discourse to reveal how flaming operates linguistically on social media platforms.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

Categories of Illocutionary Acts

This section focuses on the result of analysis of each illocutionary speech acts and its subcategories found in verbal cyberbullying on TikTok. The data analysis reveals four categories of illocutionary acts: assertive, directive, commissive and expressive. The result shows that expressive acts, specifically expressive (insulting), were the most frequently occurring in the data. Conversely, assertive (predicting and comparing), directive (requesting/demanding) and commissive (committing) acts were the least frequently occurring in the data. The details of the analysis result can be seen in the table below:

Table 1. Searle's Five Categories of Illocutionary Acts

No	Searle's Categories of Illocutionary	Subcategories of Illocutionary	Number of Occurrence	Percentage
1.	Assertive	a. Asserting	4	8%
		b. Stating	7	14%
		c. Predicting	1	2%
		d. Criticizing	2	4%

		e. Complaining	3	6%
		f. Comparing	1	2%
2.	Directive	a. Requesting/Demanding	1	2%
3.	Commisive	a. Commiting	1	2%
4.	Expressive	a. Insulting	25	50%
		b. Blaming	2	4%
		c. Deploring	3	6%
TOTAL			**50**	**100%**

1: Expressive (insulting); 2: Assertive (stating); 3: Assertive (asserting); 4: Assertive (complaining)

As presented in Table 1, it can be seen that the speaker tended to use expressive acts, specifically expressive category (insulting), in doing verbal cyberbullying on TikTok with a total of 25 utterances (50%). Assertive (stating) acts as the second most dominant with a total of 7 utterances (14%), followed by assertive (asserting) with 4 utterances, assertive (complaining) with 3 utterances (6%) and assertive (criticizing) with 2 utterances (4%). While the least dominant acts were assertive (predicting and comparing), directive (requesting/demanding) and commissive (committing), with each category having 1 utterance (2%). For better understanding, here are some utterances and the explanation representing each category:

Assertive

In the verbal cyberbullying data found on TikTok, the researchers found that assertive was the second dominant speech act used. The speaker used assertive to assert, describe, or report something they believe to be true. Furthermore, the assertive act category is categorized into several subcategories based on its function, including: asserting, stating, predicting, criticizing, complaining and comparing. The detailed and further analysis of assertives act and its function is presented below:

a. *Asserting*

Utterance: ***"She doesn't have that princess character."***

Locutionary: She doesn't have that princess character.

Illocutionary: Show statement of evaluation or opinion claiming that the person lacks expected qualities.

Classification: Assertive (Asserting).

b. *Stating*

Utterance: ***"Snow black."***

Locutionary: Snow black.

Illocutionary: It's a sarcastic modification of the title "Snow White" that functions as a ridicule disguised as a statement.

Classification: Assertive (Stating).

c. Predicting

Utterance: ***"Snow white and the 7 viewers."***

Locutionary: Snow white and the 7 viewers.

Illocutionary: The speaker is asserting a belief, specifically a sarcastic prediction or statement about the projected failure/low appeal of the movie.

Classification: Assertive (Predicting).

d. Criticizing

Utterance: ***"Her attitude is awful."***

Locutionary: Her attitude is awful.

Illocutionary: The illocutionary force is to criticize her character or behavior, reinforcing a negative portrayal.

Classification: Assertive (Criticizing)

e. Complaining

Utterance: "***She is not fit for snow white.***"

Locutionary: She is not fit for snow white.

Illocutionary: The speaker is asserting a judgment or opinion (a belief) about the actress's suitability for the role.

Classification: Assertive (Complaining).

f. Comparing

Utterance: ***"She's closer to the guy in Shrek than snow white."***

Locutionary: She's closer to the guy in Shrek than snow white.

Illocutionary: conveys sarcastic ridicule and negative evaluation, comparing Rachel with a male character from Shrek, showing appearance through humor and insult.

Classification: Assertive (Comparing).

Directive

Based on the representative data obtained from TikTok, directive acts were identified as the least dominant category of speech acts used in the analyzed comments. Within this category, only one sub-category, that is *Requesting/Demanding,* was identified, represented by a single utterance. This limited occurrence may be attributed to the nature of directives, which influence the hearer's behavior and are frequently realized as imperatives or aggressive commands in verbal cyberbullying contexts. Considering their functional aspect, directives may encompass

various sub-categories, yet only *Requesting/Demanding* emerged in the present analysis. The detailed explanation and interpretation of this finding are presented below:

a. *Requesting/Demanding*

Utterance: ***"Fix the actress."***

Locutionary: Fix the actress.

Illocutionary: A direct command telling the editor of the video to replace the actress.

Classification: Directive (Demanding).

Commissive

Based on the analysis of all verbal cyberbullying data collected from TikTok, commissive was the least dominant act with a single sub-category, that is committing and represented by a single utterance. Commissive act means the speaker commits future action. The focus is on what the speaker promises, threatens, or offers to do. The detailed and further analysis of assertives act and its function is presented below:

a. *Committing*

Flaming: ***"If i saw this movie on a plane id still walk out."***

Locutionary: If i saw this movie on a plane id still walk out.

Illocutionary: Indirectly, the speaker intended to mock the movie by committing future action.

Classification: Commissive (Committing).

Expressive

Expressive was the most dominant acts occurred in the verbal cyberbullying data collected from TikTok. This act expresses the speaker's inner psychological or emotional state, feelings, attitudes, or evaluations toward something or someone. Moreover, there are several sub-categories of expressive act found in the data, that are insulting, blaming, deploring and deploring. The detailed and further analysis of assertives act and its function is presented below:

a. *Insulting*

Flaming: ***"Is her eyes too far apart?"***

Locutionary: Is her eyes too far apart?

Illocutionary: The speaker insult Rachel Zegler by saying her eyes are too far apart.

Classification: Expressing (Insulting).

b. *Blaming*

Flaming: ***"I hate director who choose this girl."***

Locutionary: I hate director who choose this girl.

Illocutionary: The speaker expresses hatred and blaming the director for his/her decision of choosing the girl (Rachel Zegler).

Classification: Expressive (Blaming).

   c. *Deploring*

Flaming: "***Ruined my childhood.***"

Locutionary: Ruined my childhood."

Illocutionary: Expresses disappointment by watching the actress because the netizen hopes that the movie and also the actress can fulfill the expectations of his childhood nostalgia which is Snow White who has white skin as his beauty standard.

Classification: Expressive (Deploring).

Discussions

   In this section, the researcher discusses all the findings to emphasize and clarify the research objective. The objective of the research as mentioned in the previous section is to explore the categories of illocutionary acts and their subcategories/functions used by people in performing verbal cyberbullying, specifically flaming on TikTok. The findings section reveals that verbal cyberbullying (flaming) data found on TikTok can be effectively categorized using Searle (1979) that shows that people used four categories of illocutionary acts, like: assertive, commissive, directive and expressive. Furthermore, the researcher found that most people used expressive (insulting) acts in verbal aggression. This study reveals that this act is mostly used to express the speaker's personal feelings or attitudes, such as anger or disgust toward the actress, by insulting them. Despite that, this study also seeks the locutionary acts to understand the real meaning of each utterance, and this aligns with the theory conducted by (Austin, 1962).

   In the context of verbal aggression on social media, particularly on TikTok, it can be concluded that most people tend to use expressive insulting as the act of cyberbullying. Expressive insulting speech acts are commonly found in flaming on social media platforms, particularly TikTok, due to the platform's interactive nature, users are more inclined to express spontaneous emotional reactions rather than engage in reflective or rational communication. Since expressive speech acts do not require evidence, logical justification, or factual truth, only the speaker's feelings, they become the simplest tool for attacking others. For example, in one video found on TikTok, it can be seen people insult Rachel by saying "She's weird. Weird", "shitty snow", "Is her eyes too far apart?" in comment section. This video shows a clip about Rachel who took a role as a Snow White, but many people express their negative emotions by insult her due to her physical appearance and identity. According to Austin (1962), every utterance consists of a locutionary act (the literal content), an illocutionary act (the action performed through saying), and a perlocutionary act (the effect on the listener). Several examples above shows that those utterances classified as locutionary act, while the illocutionary act is the speaker intentions to insult and mock the victim.

   The findings of this study are in line with the research conducted by Suprihana et al., (2025) in the context of locutionary and illocutionary acts. The research reveals the relevant findings of locutionary acts, categories of illocutionary acts and their functions in verbal data. Also, another study conducted by Jannah et al., (2024) shows similar findings of illocutionary acts and tries to figure out the most dominant of the illocutionary acts. In the context of the source of data collected, this study collected the data that refers to cyberbullying from the comment section on social media, similar to the research conducted by (Dewi & Seli, 2023).

Both studies use Searle's illocutionary act theory in analysis utterances as cyberbullying data on social media. This study provides in-depth analysis of illocutionary acts categories and each subcategory of each function by revealing the most dominant act. Meanwhile, Dewi & Seli (2023) in their study only revealed types of illocutionary acts categories and what is the most dominant illocutionary acts. In summary, the analysis supports the idea that cyberbullying is a linguistic manifestation of verbal aggression, performed through both locutionary and illocutionary acts. Moreover, the researcher classified the data utterances into the categories and sub-categories of illocutionary acts. The researcher found that expressive acts, specifically expressive (insulting), were dominant. Based on the analysis results, it can be seen that people tend to express their feelings and attitudes related to cyberbullying by insulting, blaming and showing disappointment towards the hearer. Therefore, this study reveals how language functions as a tool of power and psychological violence in digital communication.

CONCLUSION

Based on this research, it shows that verbal cyberbullying on TikTok comments directed at Rachel Zegler can be systematically understood through Searle (1979)(Searle, 1979) illocutionary theory, which is presented in 4 categories: assertive, directive, commissive, and expressive. The pattern shows that verbal cyberbullying on social media is largely caused by users' emotional reactions such as anger, disgust, or disappointment. These emotions are ultimately expressed linguistically through insults, accusations, and negative judgments.

Theoretically, these findings confirm the validity of Austin's theory and Searle's derivative theory of Speech Acts, especially in the context of public comments through digital media. This study shows that thoughtful linguistic framing, even in the short format of TikTok comments, can be interpreted and classified into the categories and subcategories of Speech Act theory. This strengthens our understanding of the classification of speech acts in the context being discussed.

In the social implications, the findings show that speech acts in digital media must be used wisely without offending others. Searle's theory reflects that every speech act can be classified as a form of hostility. This raises awareness among digital media users to be more careful in their interactions. Based on this research, future research could also examine the perlocutionary acts by using TikTok comments to broaden the scope of this study.

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