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(IJEPC)**www.ijepe.com**AN ANALYSIS ON HUMBLEBRAGGING LANGUAGE IN
PRINCE SYED SHAHID'S SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS**Hanani Mohamed Hamdan¹, Mazni Muslim², Nurma Abdul Manap³, Aishah Baharudin^{4*}¹ Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pahang Kampus Raub, Malaysia
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DOI: 10.35631/IJEPC.1059055**This work is licensed under** [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)**Abstract:**

Humblebragging is a common practice among social media users, characterised by self-promotion that is disguised as modesty or even complaint. This paper examines the psychology behind humblebragging, including its underlying causes, audience reactions, and effects on social perception and communication. Drawing on attribution theory, social desirability, and impression management, we investigate why individuals engage in indirect self-promotion and how such behaviour is interpreted by others. This qualitative study analyses the frequently used illocutionary points in complaint-based humblebrags and humility-based humblebrags by one Malaysian influencer, Prince Syed Shahid, as observed on social media platforms. Content analysis was employed to extract data from selected Instagram posts and TikTok videos featuring Prince Syed. The study is grounded in Searle's Illocutionary Act Theory and the Complaint- and Humility-based Humblebragging Framework proposed by Sezer, Gino, and Norton. Findings suggest that while humblebragging may appear to be a safer and more socially acceptable method of sharing personal achievements, it often backfires and is perceived as insincere. This research contributes to a better understanding of self-presentation strategies in contemporary digital communication, particularly in a social media landscape where individuals constantly navigate the tension between self-promotion and authenticity.

Keywords:

Complaining, Humblebragging, Illocutionary Act, Self-Promotion, Tactics

Introduction

In today's digital era, social media plays a vital role in how people connect, express themselves, and build their personal brands. One common trend among users, especially influencers, is humblebragging. This occurs when someone subtly boasts about their achievements under the guise of a complaint or a modest remark. Influencers often use this strategy to showcase their success in a way that appears relatable and humble. In Malaysia, humblebragging has gained popularity as a communication tactic, driven by the widespread use of social media and the growing influence of digital personalities.

Malaysia is an ideal environment for influencer content to thrive due to its high rate of social media usage. According to Statista (2024), 88% of Malaysians are active social media users, with Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok being the most popular platforms. Given the intense competition on these platforms, influencers must use creative storytelling and frequent updates to keep their audiences engaged. Humblebragging allows them to highlight their achievements or lifestyles without appearing overly confident, helping them maintain their reputation and retain followers' attention.

Research suggests that people generally perceive either straightforward bragging or genuine humility as more sincere than humblebragging. According to a study by Sezer et al. (2018), audiences may find humblebragging to be insincere or even irritating. For influencers, the frequency and manner in which they humblebrag can significantly influence how they are perceived, especially in a cultural context like Malaysia, where traits such as humility and respect are highly valued. A study by Lim and Omar (2023) on Malaysian influencers found that those who were mindful of how they presented themselves, particularly in their use of humblebragging, were more likely to connect with their audiences and earn their trust.

Many Malaysian influencers share personal success stories to inspire and motivate their followers. They often talk about overcoming challenges, working hard, and building their own careers. These narratives are frequently accompanied by images or posts that reflect success, such as luxury items, vacations, or significant life events, presented in a modest and relatable way. However, if such posts come across as overly staged or inauthentic, followers may become sceptical. A recent study by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC, 2024) found that social media users in Malaysia are becoming increasingly critical and discerning about influencer content. As a result, influencers must communicate more thoughtfully and authentically.

Malaysian social media influencers view humblebragging as an important communication strategy in their effort to balance authenticity with self-promotion. It reflects their attempt to maintain a likable and trustworthy public image. While humblebragging can help build strong connections with audiences, its effectiveness depends on factors such as timing, tone, and cultural sensitivity. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, further research is needed to

better understand how humblebragging influences online trust and the relationship between influencers and their audiences in Malaysia.

Problem Statement

Our society has a long history of boasting, which refers to openly sharing one's achievements with others. It is a human tendency driven by the desire for power, self-esteem, and a sense of connection or belonging. However, boasting has never been considered socially acceptable. While modesty and humility have long been valued in many cultures, humblebragging has become increasingly common on social media in recent years. Humblebragging is a complex sociolinguistic phenomenon in which individuals subtly promote their accomplishments, possessions, or qualities while disguising their self-promotion with expressions of modesty or dissatisfaction (Naganna et al., 2025). The term was first introduced in 2010 by American comedian Harris Wittels, who later wrote a book titled *Humblebrag: The Art of False Modesty* that explored this phenomenon (Wittels, 2012; Naganna et al., 2025). In his work, Wittels compiled and categorized various tweets, highlighting the different contexts in which people humblebrag. Characteristics of humblebraggers often include false humility and self-deprecating remarks (Wittels, 2012; Trivedi & Srinivas, 2019).

Self-promotion has become a common practice on social media. Over the past few decades, individuals' use of these platforms has increased significantly. Studies suggest that the growing desire for popularity among young adults is a major factor driving this trend (Utz, Tanis, & Vermeulen, 2012; Trivedi & Srinivas, 2019). As a result, individuals who seek greater popularity tend to be more active on social media. In today's digital landscape, showcasing one's achievements, often perceived as "showing off," has become a widespread norm.

Given the prevalence of humblebragging on social media, it is important to understand the underlying motivations behind this "showing off" behaviour. While humblebragging has been widely studied in the field of psychology (Naganna et al., 2025), there has been relatively little research from a linguistic perspective (Sharifah Nurul Afifah & Lilisuriani, 2021). In particular, the connection between humblebragging and speech act theory remains underexplored (Sharifah Nurul Afifah & Lilisuriani, 2021). Because boasting is generally frowned upon in Malaysian society, the topic may be under-researched, with few studies focusing on Malaysian braggers or humblebraggers. Examining these areas can provide valuable insight into the linguistic features used by humblebraggers in their social media posts.

This study aims to investigate the psychological and linguistic dimensions of humblebragging, with a particular focus on its underlying motivations, audience reception, and implications for communication and social perception. The research specifically examines the case of Prince Syed Shahid (henceforth Syed Shahid), a Malaysian social media influencer, to understand how indirect self-promotion is employed and perceived by his audience. Through content analysis of selected TikTok videos and Instagram posts, the study seeks to uncover the patterns and functions of humblebragging in his online presence. The growing prevalence of humblebragging on Malaysian social media platforms has prompted interest in how such utterances can be analyzed within the framework of Speech Act Theory, particularly in terms of the speaker's concealment strategies. Accordingly, this research explores the shared illocutionary force present in complaint-based and humility-based humblebrags, contributing to a deeper understanding of their communicative intent and sociolinguistic function.

Literature Review

This literature review addresses five key areas: humblebragging, complaint-based humblebrag, humility-based humblebrag, theories of illocutionary acts, and illocutionary points in bragging.

Humblebragging

Humblebragging, a blend of the words "humble" and "bragging," refers to the act of boasting while disguising it as a complaint or self-deprecating remark. It represents a sophisticated form of self-promotion that often seeks to mask pride with modesty in order to gain recognition, particularly on social media platforms. According to Sezer, Gino, and Norton (2018), the primary motivation behind humblebragging is the desire to appear competent while remaining likeable. The concept has attracted a lot of scholarly interest due to its psychological, social, and linguistic implications, especially in the context of digital self-presentation.

Research suggests that the fundamental motivation behind humblebragging lies in the human desire for acceptance and admiration. Individuals often resort to indirect self-promotional strategies as they struggle to balance the need for social approval with the pursuit of self-enhancement (Leary & Allen, 2011). According to Sezer et al. (2018), this behavior is rooted in impression management theory, which posits that individuals shape their public image by highlighting their achievements in socially acceptable ways. However, this tactic can be counterproductive, as audiences frequently perceive humblebraggers as insincere or seeking validation through manipulation.

Complaint-Based Humblebrag

Complaint-based humblebragging (e.g., "It's so annoying to be over-skilled") is a rhetorical strategy used by individuals to subtly acknowledge personal achievements. This form of humblebragging allows individuals to showcase their accomplishments, advantages, or desirable traits under the guise of expressing frustration or dissatisfaction. The primary objective is to gain respect or social approval while avoiding the appearance of arrogance (Sezer, Gino & Norton, 2018). Theoretically, complaint-based humblebragging operates through indirect illocutionary acts—utterances intended to be understood in ways that differ from their literal meaning (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979). In this context, the complaint not only conveys a sense of distress but also functions as an act of self-promotion, presented in a manner that is perceived as socially acceptable.

Sezer et al. (2018) identify complaint-based humblebragging as the most insincere form of self-presentation, often judged more negatively than straightforward complaining. Among various communication strategies, individuals who employ this tactic are rated lowest in likeability and trustworthiness. Although influencers may use self-deprecating humblebrags to appear modest, such efforts can backfire when perceived as disingenuous. This risk is heightened during times of social unrest or economic hardship, when displays of privilege may appear tone-deaf. For instance, a social media post such as "I'm so exhausted from all these international flights for my photoshoots" conveys a complaint while simultaneously highlighting the speaker's glamorous and successful lifestyle. Such content is frequently observed on visually driven platforms like Instagram and TikTok.

Humility-Based Humblebrag

Humility-based humblebragging refers to the act of subtly highlighting someone's achievements or positive traits under the guise of modesty. According to Sezer et al. (2017),

this strategy is slightly more effective than complaint-based humblebragging but still less effective than direct self-promotion in terms of audience perception. Sangwon Na (2024) further identifies subtypes such as "self-praise plus shift-of-focus" and "self-praise plus self-denigration," both of which can marginally enhance the likeability of a post. From a speech act theory perspective, this form of humblebragging functions as an indirect illocutionary act, in which the speaker's intended meaning is conveyed implicitly rather than through literal expression (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979).

Although the speaker may appear to be making a modest or self-effacing remark, the underlying intention is often self-congratulatory. This nuance is particularly relevant for many Asian content creators, who frequently seek to balance self-confidence with cultural norms that emphasize humility. While such subtle forms of self-promotion may appear appealing, they can be perceived as inauthentic by followers who value transparency. Nevertheless, by framing their achievements as unexpected or undeserved, influencers may enhance their social standing while maintaining social harmony.

Theories of Illocutionary Act

According to Searle's Speech Act Theory (1979), every utterance carries illocutionary force, which refers to the speaker's intended function behind the statement. Understanding how individuals use language to perform actions and convey meaning requires a grasp of illocutionary acts. In the case of humblebragging, the illocutionary intent is typically boastful, while the locutionary form appears as a complaint or an expression of modesty. This phenomenon has been examined from a pragmatic perspective, highlighting how speakers use rhetorical strategies such as modesty or complaint to soften the assertiveness of a boast. In culturally collectivist societies like Malaysia, where modesty is a social expectation, influencers often rely on such strategies to present their accomplishments in ways that align with social norms. However, audiences that are attuned to sincerity and authenticity can detect and reject these disguised self-promotional acts. Illocutionary behaviour in humblebragging, particularly among Malaysian influencers, often involves subtle self-praise conveyed through language that maintains a socially acceptable appearance of humility. For instance, an influencer might say, "I can't believe I won another award..." followed by, "I feel so undeserving." This not only draws attention to the achievement but also preserves a sense of modesty.

The concept of illocutionary acts helps explain how influencers employ subtle, speech-based self-presentation strategies. These statements, whether expressing modest gratitude or humble concerns, function as social actions aimed at managing audience perceptions, maintaining face, and adhering to cultural norms of communication.

Illocutionary Points in Bragging

The intended pragmatic impact of a statement, such as to impress or convey modesty, is known as its illocutionary point. In the context of speech acts, boasting carries an illocutionary force that seeks not only to convey information but also to shape how the speaker is perceived. According to Searle's (1979) theory of speech acts, illocutionary points represent the speaker's intended social function behind an utterance. In the case of boasting, the typical illocutionary goal is self-enhancement, as the speaker aims to gain recognition for their achievements, abilities, appearance, or superiority in a particular domain.

The dual goals of humblebragging, which are to generate praise while appearing humble, create tension that often results in reduced audience compliance and increased perceptions of insincerity (Sezer et al., 2017). In a multilingual Instagram study, Matley (2018) found that humblebrag-related hashtags function metalinguistically by revealing the speaker's self-promotional intent while maintaining linguistic ambiguity. These illocutionary tensions can negatively impact how influencers are perceived, making them appear less trustworthy or more self-serving. This is particularly significant in aspirational lifestyle niches, where such perceptions may damage relationships with audiences and threaten brand partnerships.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, specifically content analysis, to collect and examine relevant data. The focus is on a selection of recent social media content posted by Syed Shahid, also known as Prince Syed Couture, including carefully curated Instagram posts and TikTok videos published between January and June 2025. The selected material primarily highlights his daily activities, personal reflections, and expressions of lifestyle and values. Three TikTok videos have been purposefully chosen for in-depth analysis: (1) Gold and Jewelry Shopping for Raya (20 March 2025), (2) First Day Aidilfitri Attire (31 March 2025), and (3) RM500K for Wife's Living Expenses (5 June 2025). These videos have garnered significant public attention and engagement, each receiving thousands of views, indicating a high level of audience interest.

The study includes a selection of Instagram posts and TikTok videos from January to June 2025, all of which exhibit identifiable instances of humblebragging. The Instagram posts were chosen based on their relevance to the study's objectives, particularly in relation to how humblebragging discourse is employed to construct a public persona. One example is a post dated 2 April 2025, in which Syed Shahid claims to have spent nearly RM1.5 million on Raya clothing for his wife and family, including 30 gowns, 30 handbags, and 30 pairs of shoes. Another post from 20 March 2025 details the purchase of gold jewelry worth several hundred thousand ringgit for his wife in preparation for Hari Raya. A post from 21 May 2025 shows a live recording of him withdrawing a substantial monthly allowance for his wife at a bank. These Instagram posts, along with selected TikTok videos, were analyzed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject's self-presentation strategies, particularly the use of humblebragging. This cross-platform analysis allows for a more nuanced exploration of how digital personas are curated and communicated to targeted audiences.

The study then identifies the illocutionary points embedded within each humblebragging statement and examines their frequency of occurrence. Table 1 presents the analysis of the selected humblebragging expressions, highlighting the specific illocutionary functions they serve. The accompanying sample data sheet enhances the transparency and reliability of the data collection process by offering clear documentation of how each statement was interpreted and categorized.

Table 1: Illocutionary Points in Syed Shahid's Complaint-Based Humblebragging or Humility-Based Humblebragging Statements on TikTok and Instagram

Complaint/ Humility – based Humblebrag	Illocutionary Points Used				
	Assertive	Expressive	Directive	Commissive	Declarative
Tiktok	3	3	1	0	0
Instagram	3	3	1	0	0

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings on Syed Shahid's use of complaint-based and humility-based humblebragging on his social media platforms, specifically TikTok (under the username Prince Syed Couture) and Instagram. The analysis indicates that assertive and expressive acts are the most frequently occurring illocutionary points in both types of humblebragging. In total, five humility-based and three complaint-based humblebrags were identified across three selected TikTok videos and one Instagram post.

Assertive Illocutionary Point

According to the study's findings, Prince Syed Shahid frequently employed assertive illocutionary acts in his complaint-based humblebrags to convey factual information about personal experiences, particularly those involving significant time or financial investment. A clear example can be seen in both his TikTok video and Instagram post dated March 20, 2025, in which he documents the purchase of gold jewelry worth nearly RM980,000 for his wife in preparation for Hari Raya. In the TikTok video, assertive illocutionary force appears both before and after the brag, as demonstrated in the statement: "Oh God, I feel like fainting, spent RM980K shopping at SMS Deen Jeweler after splurging on Raya shopping, that's the price after all the discount for me. Since I bought so much gold this time for Raya, RM980K is very reasonable, but they gave me so many discounts. Thank God, the price difference is substantial. I was surprised by the excellent staff service and was unaware that I had spent about one million ringgit at one store alone."

Here, the speaker expresses physical discomfort ("I feel like fainting") after making a large purchase, while embedding detailed factual information about the transaction. Each complaint-based humblebrag included in the study uses this approach: factual assertions are necessary for the complaint to be meaningful. Thus, acts such as reporting, describing, informing, cursing, and contradicting are linguistically employed to deliver the humblebrag.

In the accompanying Instagram post, the illocutionary act of informing is even more explicit, providing transaction details in a caption format. Notably, the phrase "demam rasa" (loosely translated as "feeling feverish" or "overwhelmed") adds an expressive illocutionary layer, signaling emotional strain. This emotional undertone helps mask the brag, framing it within a more relatable or humble context.

The interplay of assertive and expressive forces in this example illustrates how humblebragging serves a dual discursive function by simultaneously revealing and concealing signs of privilege. It allows the speaker to signal financial or social capital while maintaining social relatability. As described by Searle (1979) and Green (2007), assertive acts commit the speaker to the truth of the proposition, while expressive acts convey the speaker's psychological state toward the

event or claim. This duality underscores how illocutionary dynamics operate in digital humblebragging, particularly within culturally modest contexts like Malaysia.

Apart from the results related to complaint-based humblebrags, the analysis of humility-based humblebrags revealed that Syed Shahid frequently combined expressive utterances, particularly those conveying gratitude or religious devotion, with assertive illocutionary acts. These expressions often frame self-promotional content within a discourse of humility, using verbal acknowledgments of thankfulness or appeals to divine will (Sharifah Nurul Afifah & Lilisuriani, 2021). In a TikTok video posted on 31 March 2025, he states: “This is the special Raya outfit for my beloved wife, a simple garment worth almost RM830K, believe it or not, yes, it’s true because of the fully beaded details and sparkling genuine Swarovski crystals.” He continues, “I never imagined that this year I would be able to own such an outfit, not to brag, but to inform others that, Insha’Allah, if we seek out halal food, Allah will reward us and make our lives easier. Even if just for a brief moment, we can experience a little bit of this world’s paradise.”

In this instance, he combines assertive humblebragging with expressive elements, reinforcing a tone of appreciation by thanking Allah and explicitly attributing success to divine blessings.

Previous research has reaffirmed that tradition and religion are often linked to the foundations of humility. Acknowledging God in various circumstances, regardless of religious affiliation, is commonly seen as a sign of humility (Chen, Huang, Yam & Ju, 2019; Molazem & Branch, 2011; Owns & Mitchell, 2013; Sharifah Nurul Afifah & Lilisuriani, 2021). A notable example is Syed Shahid’s Instagram post on 2 April 2025, in which he revealed spending nearly RM1.5 million on Raya clothing for his wife and family—including 30 gowns, 30 handbags, and 30 pairs of shoes. While this reflects significant wealth and generosity, the post is discursively framed as an act of familial devotion and festive celebration, thereby softening the ostentatious display. Similarly, in a live-streamed post on 21 May 2025, he is shown withdrawing RM125,000 as his wife’s monthly allowance, accompanied by the statement, “This is all I can afford.” Despite the assertive tone, the gesture is reframed through false modesty, portraying it as burdensome rather than boastful.

This blending of assertive and expressive illocutionary acts illustrates how humility-based humblebragging both communicates and conceals power behind a socially acceptable image (Searle, 1979; Green, 2007). These strategies align with Goffman’s (1959) concept of impression management, in which individuals construct public personas that balance self-enhancement with social acceptance.

These results affirm that Syed Shahid’s use of humblebragging is not merely a matter of tone but a deliberate application of illocutionary force to balance societal acceptance with self-promotion. This aligns with the speech act theories of Searle (1979) and Green (2007), as well as Goffman’s (1959) concept of impression management, which highlights how individuals shape their public personas in response to audience expectations and social norms. His use of both complaint-based humblebragging and humility-based humblebragging on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok reflects a nuanced understanding of audience perception. It suggests that presenting wealth and status in a socially acceptable manner is part of a broader self-presentation strategy that humblebragging helps to achieve.

Accordingly, Table 2 summarises the key patterns and strategies identified, providing a clear link between the detailed findings and the broader discussion.

Table 2: Summary of Main Findings

Humblebrag Type	Platform / Instances	Dominant Illocutionary Acts	Illustrative Example	Main Function
Complaint-based	TikTok (2), Instagram (1) – 3	Assertive + Expressive	RM980K gold purchase framed as “I feel like fainting”	Masks privilege as hardship; enhances relatability
Humility-based	TikTok (1), Instagram (2) – 5	Assertive + Expressive (gratitude/religiosity)	RM830K outfit attributed to “Allah’s blessings”	Softens ostentation via piety; aligns with cultural modesty
Overall pattern	Total: 8 instances	Assertive + Expressive	—	Strategic blend of fact and emotion; balances self-promotion with social acceptance

Conclusion

This study investigates the psychological and communicative dimensions of humblebragging, with a particular focus on its underlying motivations, audience reception, and effects on social perception. It specifically examines complaint-based and humility-based humblebragging in TikTok and Instagram video content produced by Syed Shahid (also known as Prince Syed Couture). Guided by Searle’s (1979) Illocutionary Act Theory, the research adopts a qualitative methodology, employing content analysis to examine the data. A total of six videos were analyzed, yielding 14 instances of humblebragging: six assertive, six expressive, and two directive illocutionary acts, distributed across the two humblebragging categories. The findings highlight humblebragging as a strategic discursive practice used to balance self-promotion with social relatability. Thus, the study’s objectives have been met. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on digital self-presentation and offers potential directions for future work in political or entrepreneurial discourse, particularly through linguistic and discourse-analytic frameworks. It is recommended that future studies analyze politicians’ speeches or compare influencer speeches to address existing gaps in the field.

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