

Cyberbullying among Nigerian Undergraduates on WhatsApp: A Speech Act Analysis of Group Chat Interactions

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Abstract

This study investigated cyberbullying within WhatsApp chat groups utilized by undergraduates in Nigeria. Through a Speech Act analysis, it explored how language is used to bully and harass victims in this closed online environment. Speech Act theory by J. Searle served as a framework for the study. Four research questions were formulated to guide the study. Population of the study comprised all the WhatsApp groups of undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Imo State University, Owerri and Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri. The sample size was selected using simple random sampling method. Data for the study was collected through observation and semi-structured questionnaire items delivered through Google Forms. J. Searle's model of speech act theory was used to analyze the data. The findings revealed that cyberbullies leverage a specific repertoire of speech acts to inflict emotional harm and damage the victim's reputation. In addition, the findings revealed a prevalence of assertive speech acts (direct insults), directives (controlling the victim's behavior), and expressives (conveying anger and hostility) in cyberbullying messages. The study also discussed the implications of the findings and finally, recommendations were made for further studies on the topic which encourages higher institutions should organize workshops or training sessions that teach students positive online communication skills, including active listening, respectful disagreement, and responsible online humour.

Keywords: Speech Acts, Whatsapp Chats, Language, Cyberbullying, Social Interactions

Introduction

The rise of digital communication platforms like WhatsApp has transformed the way people interact, especially among young adults. While these platforms provide convenient means of staying connected, they also create new opportunities for negative behaviours, such as cyberbullying. Cyberbullying, characterized by repeated and intentional harm inflicted through electronic means, can have severe psychological consequences for victims. In Nigeria, WhatsApp

is a common communication tool among undergraduates, making it a critical platform for examining the dynamics of cyberbullying. There is no doubt that access to the internet using smart phones has opened up new and exciting opportunities; particularly for young people. It has enable them to seek out social support, explore their identity, develop interpersonal and critical thinking skills, as well as gain educational benefits generated from expansive access to knowledge through social media platforms. More to this advantage is that social media; which is conglomeration of new digital media channels enables people to get connected and share information on personal, general as well as global issues. Consequent to this, the innovation of digital communication and its attendant increase in social interaction has led to the evolution of a good number of social media platforms. Some include WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google, Pinterest, Snapchat, YouTube, among others. Also, with the invention of smart phones, the chances of communicating with others virtually has increased as the tool is available in everyone's pocket. Cyberbullying has emerged as a pervasive and concerning phenomenon within digital communication platforms, particularly impacting vulnerable populations such as adolescents and young adults. This study aims to examine the nature and dynamics of cyberbullying through an innovative lens- a speech act analysis -in the context of WhatsApp chats among Nigeria University students. Speech act theory developed by philosopher J.L Austin and further elaborated by linguists such as John Searle, offers a theoretical framework for understanding the performative aspect of language and the illocutionary force inherent in communicative acts (Searle, 1975). By applying speech act analysis to WhatsApp chat; this study aims to identify the underlying intentions, functions and effects of cyberbullying behaviour among Nigeria undergraduates.

Objectives

This study aims to investigate the nature of cyberbullying in WhatsApp chats among Nigerian undergraduates, with a particular focus on the language used and the underlying power dynamics. By employing speech act theory, the study seeks to identify how different forms of speech acts contribute to the perpetuation of cyberbullying and the ways in which these acts reinforce or challenge power relations, the research aims to investigate the ways in which specific speech acts such as insults, threats, and commands are employed to establish dominance and social hierarchies in online interactions.

Research Questions

The following research questions are considered pertinent for the success of this study.

1. What types of speech acts are most commonly used in instances of cyberbullying within WhatsApp chats among Nigerian undergraduates?
2. What types of cyberbullying are expressed in the identified speech acts used by undergraduates in their WhatsApp conversations?

Literature Review

Cyberbullying

There are usually conceptual issues bothering studies in a new area of interest that need to be resolved and cyberbullying has certainly been no exception. Defining the parameters of cyberbullying (e.g., which communication technologies are involved, how they are used, what is said to whom, and with what effect) has proved somewhat difficult, in part because the methods used to cyberbully are varied. What is more, cyberbullying behaviours may continually change as technology progresses.

Although cyberbullying has no exact definition, however, it has been described as repeated acts of aggression that are carried out through an electronic medium and are characterized by an imbalance of power between bully and victim (Li, 2010). Additionally, this aggression typically involves ignoring others (e.g., not responding to a message), spreading rumours, and/or disrespectful name-calling (Patchin and Hinduja, 2006). According to Willard (2007), Cyberbullying is the use of information and communication technology (ICT), particularly mobile phones and the internet, deliberately to upset someone else. Here, cyberbullying is seen as an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly or over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself. Similarly, Smith et al. (2008) define cyberbullying as willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones,

and other electronic devices. While Hinduja and Patchin (2009) see cyberbullying as any behaviour performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicate hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others.

With the foregoing definitions, the common assumption is that cyberbullying represents a progression or continuation of non-cyber forms of bullying such as traditional face-to-face bullying made possible by ICT. Cyberbullying is viral and repeating in nature. The potential viral nature of cyberbullying makes the factor of repetition problematic to operationalize. An example of why this may be the case is given by Slonje, Smith, and Frisen (2013); they state that one cyberbullying act may readily “snowball” out of the initial control of the bully (p. 26). For instance, an offensive image or video clip of someone posted on a website only once may still reflect the essence of repetition. This is because many people may access the website where the image has been posted and go on to make further comments about the image or even circulate it to others. Therefore, a single aggressive act can result in continued and widespread ridicule and humiliation for the victim being targeted.

Another worrisome nature of cyberbullying is the recruitment and involvement of bystanders in cyberbullying which have been termed “accessories”. Their actions of forwarding hurtful messages or images to others may actively support the original cyberbullying act (DCSF, 2007a, p. 26). Unfortunately, the captivation and recruitment of bystanders in cyberbullying becomes practically impossible to control. Furthermore, the insecurity of not knowing how many people have seen the malicious comments or images usually compounds the misery of the person being targeted. According to Heirman and Walrave (2008), the involvement of a large audience of bystanders is not a new aspect in the bullying context. Research has shown that teenagers carrying out bullying behaviours partially draw motivation for their behaviour out of this audience.

However, unlike cyberbullying, non-cyber forms of bullying are limited in extent to the peers of the local community. Again, Campbell (2005) comments that, with non-cyber forms of bullying, the memory of repeated words and taunts usually fades over time. On the other hand, cyberbullying involves the permanence of the written word or image. Therefore, a youngster may only have one negative cyberbullying experience but may repeatedly revisit the written taunt and re-live the experience which may act like repeated acts of cyberbullying.

Electronic communications have made it possible to carry out bullying behaviours without physical confrontation. Therefore, no longer does the teenager carrying out the bullying have the advantage of being the bigger, the more socially popular, or the more aggressive child in the school (O'Higgins Norman and Connolly, 2011). The power imbalance is more likely to be associated with the fact that agents of cyberbullying can more readily conceal their identities. Furthermore, "the anonymity of being online has empowered those who may not have typically shown aggression in an open forum" (Shariff, 2008, p. 31). This may be an important aspect of power in the online experience; by withholding one's identity, the agent potentially has the upper hand in online communications.

Goodstein (2007) argues that the internet has "democratized" bullying, in that it has provided power to those who would not traditionally have intimidated others. This online anonymity is often referred to as "dissociative anonymity". It is reasonable to say that once teenagers have successfully carried out cyberbullying anonymously and experienced the feeling of power, it is more likely that they will continue to carry out their bullying behaviour online (Kowalski, Limber, and Agatston, 2008). Taking into account the furtive nature of cyberbullying, one could assume that, unlike non-cyber forms of bullying, the negative impact of cyberbullying on young people may be greater. Kowalski et al. (2008) claim that not knowing the person carrying out the

cyberbullying is probably a more distressing experience than actually knowing who the person is. This is because youngsters may end up distrusting all of their peers. This is likely to create emotional stress as well as place a strain on developing and maintaining social relationships (Kowalski and Limber, 2007).

As Willard (2007) explains, online abuse can be vicious for those being targeted as there is no escape, “cyberbullying can be happening, 24/7”. The 24-hour, seven-days-a-week accessibility provided by ICT seems to facilitate cyberbullying behaviour and since the boundaries of cyberbullying are limitless, targets of cyberbullying may experience a prolonged sense of victimization (Brown *et al.*, 2006). What also complicates the potential outcome of cyberbullying is that the young person being targeted is likely to be confronted with an unpleasant message or image, when he or she is alone without direct support from friends or peers (Juvonen and Gross, 2008). The combination of anonymity, the public nature of the cyber incident along the ability to continually harass the person being targeted may be the factors that create an imbalance in power relations (Dooley, Pyzalski, and Cross, 2009). All of these are characteristics of communication in the digital age.

Language: A Tool for Social Interaction

Language and social interaction are intricately interwoven in the fabric of human experience. They form a dynamic and inseparable dance, shaping our thoughts, actions, and understanding of the world around us. Through language, we engage with others, build relationships, and navigate the complexities of social life. At its core, language provides the fundamental tools for

communication. We use words, grammar, and non-verbal cues to convey thoughts, feelings, and emotions, allowing us to share information, negotiate meaning, and establish common ground (Hymes, 1972). Through language, we build bridges between individuals, fostering cooperation, collaboration, and social cohesion.

Again, language is not a static entity; it is constantly evolving and adapting to the social context in which it is used (Goffman, 1967). The way we speak varies depending on the situation, the audience, and the social roles we play. For example, the language used in a formal business meeting will differ significantly from the language used among close friends. This adaptability allows us to navigate diverse social settings and tailor our communication to achieve specific goals. However, beyond simply reflecting social context, language also actively shapes how we perceive and interact with the world around us (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Through the words we choose and the stories we tell, we construct shared meanings and understandings of reality. This shared understanding becomes the basis for social norms, values, and beliefs, ultimately influencing our behavior and social interactions.

Language can also be used to maintain or challenge existing power structures within social groups (Fairclough, 2003). The way we address individuals, the level of formality we employ, and the topics we choose to discuss all carry implicit messages about power and hierarchy. Analyzing language choices can reveal how power dynamics manifest in everyday interactions, influencing how individuals navigate social situations and negotiate their positions within a group.

As a result, language allows us to communicate effectively, fostering understanding and building relationships. Through clear and empathetic communication, we can connect with others on a deeper level, share experiences, and offer support. It is a powerful tool for creative expression. It allows us to share stories, write poems, sing songs, and express ourselves in countless ways. This

creative use of language can bring joy, inspire others, and build a sense of community. When used constructively, language can help us resolve conflict peacefully. By actively listening, expressing ourselves clearly, and finding common ground, we can navigate disagreements and build stronger relationships (Rosenberg, 2003).

However, the anonymity and ease of communication online can embolden some individuals to use language in a hurtful way. Cyberbullies often exploit these aspects of online interaction to target and harass others with negative messages, insults, and threats (Hinduja and Patchin, 2010). Again, the words used in cyberbullying can have a devastating impact on the victim's emotional well-being. Cyberbullying can lead to feelings of isolation, depression, and even anxiety. In extreme cases, it can contribute to suicidal ideation (Graves, 2011).

Language is a powerful tool that shapes our interactions and can be used for both positive and negative purposes. In the context of cyberbullying, language becomes a weapon used to inflict pain and humiliation. The perpetrator's choice of words and the ease of spreading them online can create a hostile environment for the victim.

Theoretical Framework

This section reviews the theory consider relevant to the subject of the research. This theory includes Speech Act Theory (SAT),

Speech Act Theory

The theory of speech Acts starts with the assumption that the minimal unit of human communication is not a sentence or other expression, but rather the performance of certain kinds of acts, such as making statements, asking questions, giving orders, describing, explaining, apologizing, thanking, congratulating, among others. Characteristically, a speaker performs one or more of these acts by uttering a sentence or sentences; but the acts itself is not to be confused with a sentence or other expression uttered in its performance (De Gruyter, 2013).

Speech Act Theory assumes that utterances are actions in themselves capable of producing enormous and far-reaching results or consequences on the hearer (Ezeifeke, 2018). Such acts can affect our whole lives, deny us or restore our freedom, make us committed to a course of action, urge us to carry out a piece of instruction, or change an existing state of affairs. For example, when someone says, I fire you, the act of saying something equals doing something; the mere fact that this utterance is performed under appropriate conditions brings about the fulfillment of the action performed by the utterance on the addressee.

Speech act theory, developed by philosophers J.L. Austin and John Searle, posits that language is not merely a vehicle for conveying information but can also perform actions. Speech acts can be categorised into directives (commands), commissives (promises or threats), expressives (expressions of emotion), assertives (statements of fact), and declarations (statements that change the status of something). In the context of cyberbullying, these speech acts can be used to exert control, intimidate, or ostracize individuals.

Empirical Studies

Previous research on cyberbullying in Nigeria has highlighted the prevalence of this issue among students, with significant implications for their mental health and academic performance.

However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the specific linguistic strategies used in cyberbullying on WhatsApp, particularly among Nigerian undergraduates. Anyanwu, E. C. (2023), researched the role of English language in combating cyberbullying among Nigerian youths. The study was set to highlight the critical role of language in combating cyberbullying. The study used qualitative research approach, using in - depth interviews and focus group discussions to explore how languages play crucial role in shaping attitudes and behaviours towards cyberbullying and that effective communication strategies are essential for preventing and addressing cyberbullying incidents. While this study relates to the present study, however the present study will focus on Whatsapp conversation, and population study comprise undergraduates and not all Nigerian youths.

Critical Stylistic Study of Bullying was conducted by Hameed and Hassoon (2023). The study investigated the concept of bullying in the American novel 'Wonder' by R. J. Palacio from a critical stylistic perspective. The importance of the study was for every ordinary reader to be aware

of the strategies used in bullying others. The study was expected to find answers to the following question: What is the most common type of bullying and the critical stylistic tools that bullies use to convey the concept of bullying in the analyzed data? The study aims to distinguish the most common types of Bullying that bullies use in the selected novel and also identify the critical stylistic tools that are employed by the bullies. The researchers adopted Jeffries's (2010) critical stylistics model to analyze the data under scrutiny. The study reveals that the most common form of bullying found is direct emotional bullying which is experienced by Julian and his schoolmates against the victim. Only eight stylistic tools were found in the five extracts through certain realizations related to the specific contexts in which they are initiated. The study concluded that the notion of bullying is represented through using most stylistic tools but with different ideologies.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, focusing on the analysis of WhatsApp chat logs from Nigerian undergraduates. The data were collected through voluntary submissions from students who had experienced or witnessed cyberbullying. To protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, all identifying information was removed from the chat logs.

The chat logs were analysed using speech act theory, with a focus on identifying and categorising the different types of speech acts used in instances of cyberbullying. The analysis aimed to uncover the power dynamics inherent in these interactions, particularly how certain speech acts were used to assert dominance or undermine the victim's status within the group.

Research Question 1: What type of illocutionary acts are identified linguistic features of cyberbullying used by undergraduates in their WhatsApp conversation?

Based on the result of the observation and survey carried out, the illocutionary acts encoded in the identified linguistic features of cyberbullying used by undergraduates in their WhatsApp conversation are presented in the chart below:

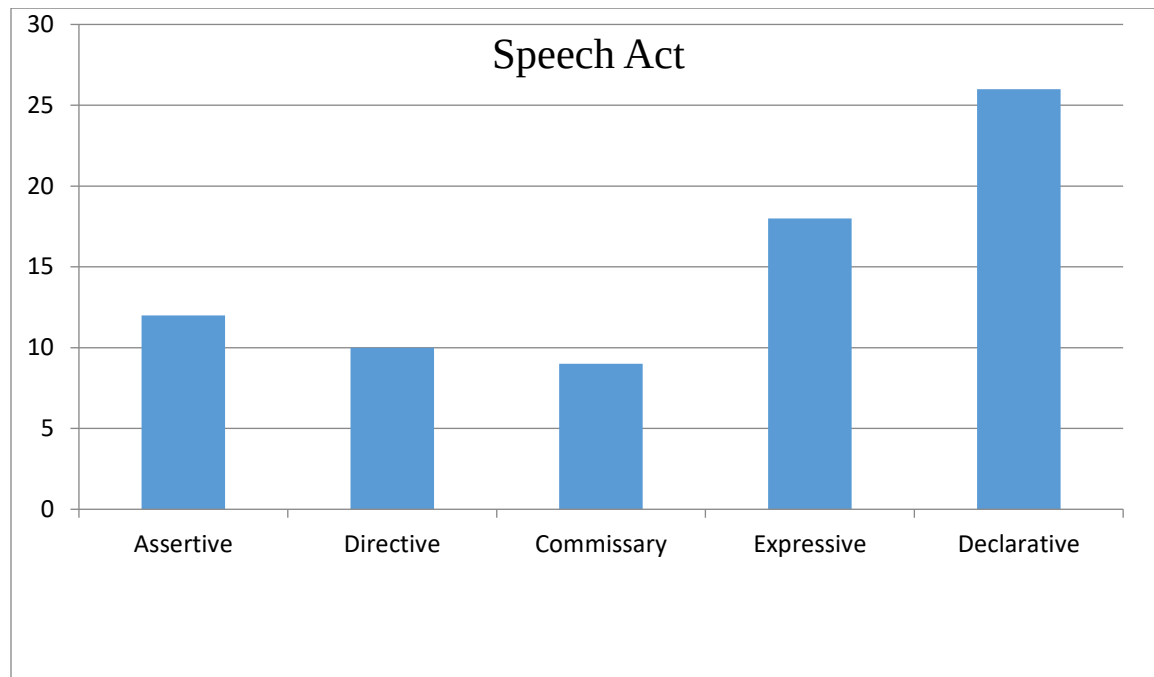


Chart 1: Illocutionary Act encoded in the identified linguistic features of cyberbullying

The chart above shows that declarative is the highest speech act of cyberbullying used by undergraduates in their WhatsApp conversations. There are 26 declarative speech acts found in fifteen WhatsApp groups. Other speech acts of cyberbullying used by undergraduates in their WhatsApp conversations include 12 assertive speech acts, 10 directive speech acts, 18 expressive speech acts, and 9 commissary speech acts.

Sample speech acts encoded in the identified linguistic features of cyberbullying:

Cyberbullies use a variety of speech acts to inflict emotional harm on their victims.

Excerpt 1: *"You're such a loser!"*

This is assertive, stating "You're a loser" as a fact (even if untrue).

Excerpt 2: *"Nobody will ever like you with those clothes."*

The second is a directive, attempting to pressure the victim about their clothing choice ("Nobody will ever like you...").

Excerpt 3: *"Did you guys hear [Victim's name] cheated on their test? What a cheater!"*

The cyberbully employs an indirect commissive by implying the victim cheated ("Did you hear...?"), aiming to spread the rumor.

Excerpt 4: *"Wow, that's so lame. They don't deserve to be in this class."*

The cyberbully uses an expressive to voice their disapproval ("lame") and a verdictive to judge the victim ("don't deserve").

Excerpt 5: *"If you tell anyone about this, I'll post those embarrassing photos of you online."*

The bully uses a threat, a forceful illocutionary act, to silence the victim ("If you tell anyone..."). Here, the bully also uses commissive, implying a future action (posting photos) if the victim disobeys.

Excerpt 6: *"Oh, look who finally decided to join the class discussion. Got something wise to share, Professor (Victim's name)"*

This message uses a heavily layered combination of speech acts. The bully employs sarcasm, a subtype of irony that mocks the victim's participation ("Professor"). There's also an underlying assertive ("Got something wise...") questioning the victim's contribution.

Excerpt 7: *"Hey look, it's (Victim's Name) the fashion disaster!"*

Here, name-calling ("fashion disaster") is used with a directive speech act, pressuring others to join the bullying.

Excerpt 8: *"(Victim's Name)'s profile pic is hideous!"*

Excerpt 9: *"Everyone go like this comment!"*

This is harassment through a directive speech act, pressuring others to join in the bullying by "liking" the negative comment.

Excerpt 10: *"This is what happens when you try to be something you're not"*

Mocking the victim is an expressive speech act, conveying the bully's negative feelings towards them.

Excerpt 11: *"Oh wow, [Victim's Name] got a good grade this time."*

Excerpt 12: *"Must be a miracle!"*

Here, sarcasm is used as an expressive speech act to downplay the victim's achievement.

Excerpt 13: *"You're being way too sensitive. I was just joking when I said that."*

Gaslighting involves a commissive speech act, where the bully denies their wrongdoing and tries to make the victim question their perception.

Excerpt 14: *"Anyone could get an A in that easy class."*

Excerpt 15: *"It's no big deal."*

Downgrading the victim's achievement is a directive speech act, trying to diminish their success.

Based on the results of the chart presented earlier, assertive speech acts as categorized by John Searle's Speech Act theory are speech acts that describe or report a situation. The main purpose is to make a statement of fact or provide information. They can be used to state something that is believed to be true, to describe a situation, or to provide information about a particular subject.

Directive speech acts as categorized by John Searle's Speech Act theory are speech acts that are used to issue orders, requests, or invitations, and the primary purpose of these Speech Acts is to influence the behavior or actions of the listener. Commissary speech acts, as categorized by John

Searle's theory of speech acts, are Speech Acts used to bind the speaker to a future action. The main purpose of the commissary is to make a promise, offer to do something, or make a commitment. Commissive said the lowest of the other speech acts where there were 9 comments from fifteen WhatsApp groups.

Expressive speech acts as categorized by John Searle's Speech Act theory, are speech acts that are used to express the speaker's feelings, attitudes, or emotions towards a particular situation. The main purpose of expressiveness is to communicate the speaker's subjective states, such as feelings of pleasure, sadness, gratitude, or anger. Expressive plays an important role in communication, as it allows the speaker to convey their emotions and attitude to certain circumstances. Declarative speech acts dominate speech act comments in the selected WhatsApp groups. Of the 75 comments, 26 were declarative. According to Loar and Searle (1982), declarative is an important type of Speech Act, since it allows the speaker to bring about changes in the world and establish new realities. Understanding the different types of directions and their purpose can help improve communication by allowing the speaker to choose the most appropriate one the right type of Speech Act for the intended purpose.

Research Question 2: What types of cyberbullying are expressed in the identified speech acts used by undergraduates in their WhatsApp conversations?

The different types of cyberbullying observed in the identified speech acts and WhatsApp conversations of undergraduates are shown in the chart below. The different illocutionary acts that bring about each type of cyberbullying are also discussed.

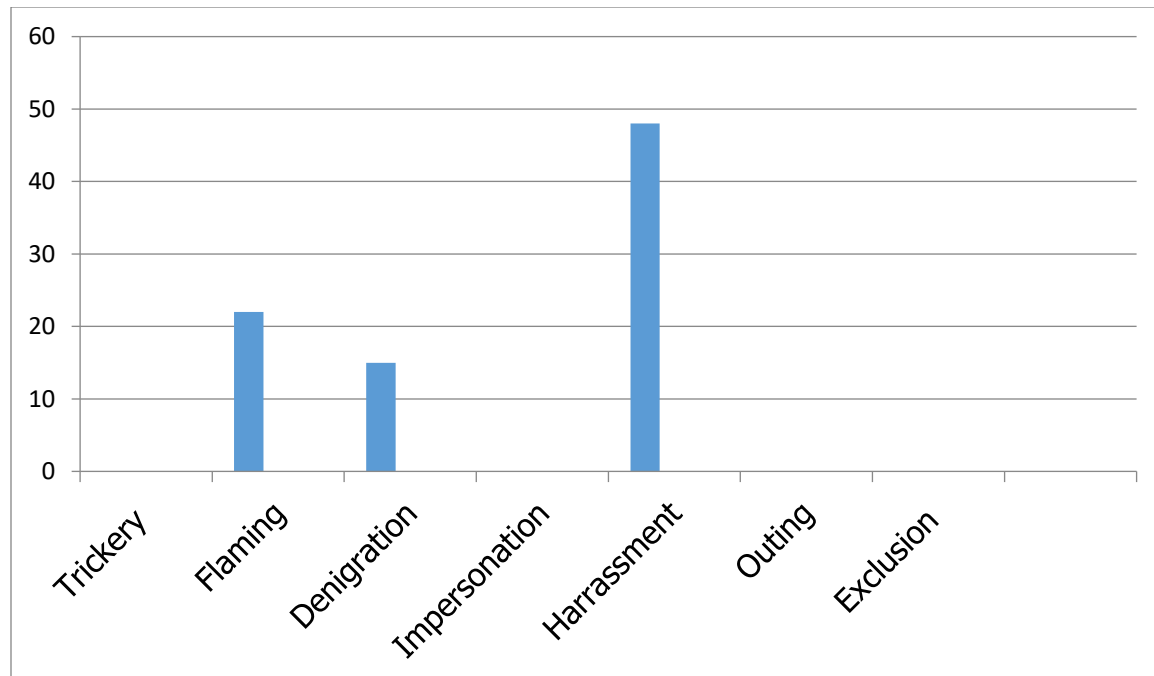


Chart 2: Types of cyberbullying are expressed in the identified illocutionary acts

Excerpt 1: *"You're such an idiot!"*

Excerpt 2: *"How can you possibly believe that?"*

Excerpt 3: *"YOU'RE SO WRONG!!! GET YOUR FACTS STRAIGHT!!!"*

Excerpt 4: *"Of course, you would say that with your horrible taste!"*

Excerpt 6: *"Nobody cares about your opinion anyway!"*

Excerpt 7: *"You're the most annoying person on this platform! Get lost!"*

Excerpt 8: *"No wonder nobody takes you seriously!"*

Excerpt 9: *"Guess you don't have anything intelligent to say."*

Excerpt 10: *"No wonder you can't form decent arguments."*

Excerpt 11: *"Did you hear (Victim's Name) got caught cheating on the test? What a disgrace!"*

Excerpt 12: *"(Victim's Name) is always talking bad about you behind your back. Don't trust them!"*

Excerpt 13: *"Nobody wants to hang out with [Victim's Name] anymore."*

Excerpt 14: *"Look at how successful (a person) is. Why can't you be more like them?"*

Flaming is a form of cyberbullying characterized by the use of extremely negative, aggressive language and personal attacks. Cyberbullies often employ strong assertive speech acts to directly insult and belittle the victim. According to Crystal (2011), flaming frequently involves expressive speech acts that convey the bully's intense anger and hostility. This can manifest in excessive use of profanity, derogatory memes or images mocking the victim's appearance or beliefs, and/or spamming the victim with insults and negative comments. These actions express the bully's emotional state and aim to intimidate and upset the victim. Flaming speech acts often work together to create a cumulative effect. For instance, an assertive insult might be followed by an expressive outburst and a directive. This escalating aggression aims to overwhelm the victim and make them feel worthless and powerless within the online space.

Denigration, which often involves expressive and assertive illocutionary acts is a tactic commonly used in cyberbullying and aims to damage a person's reputation and social standing through malicious gossip, rumours, and negativity. Denigration, a malicious tactic in cyberbullying, aims to dismantle a victim's reputation and social standing through a calculated assault on their character and social connections. Speech act theory, developed by J. Searle, categorizes utterances based on the speaker's intended action within a conversation. Expressives convey psychological states, and denigration often involves expressing negativity or disapproval towards someone. Hence the context of denigration hinges on misrepresentation, where the bully deliberately spreads misinformation to damage the victim's image. This can be seen in the form of spreading rumours, negative labeling, sarcasm, mocking of victims, social sabotage, etc.

Lakoff (2004) opines that the effectiveness of denigration lies in the persistent use of these speech acts. By repeatedly spreading negativity, bullies can create a distorted narrative around the victim.

This can lead to a phenomenon called "negative labeling", where others begin to associate the victim with the negative traits the bully promotes. This creates a sense of social pressure and discourages bystanders from intervening or defending the victim.

Harassment in cyberbullying involves a relentless barrage of unwanted and negative communication aimed at intimidating, upsetting, and controlling the victim. Harassment bullies frequently employ directives, assertive, and expressives to control the victim's behavior and online presence. The relentless nature of harassment is key to its effectiveness. Bullies utilize acts such as sending a barrage of insulting messages, repeatedly tagging the victim in negative posts or comments, and creating multiple fake accounts to continue harassing the victim even if blocked. This repetition bombards the victim with negativity and creates a sense of being overwhelmed and powerless to escape the harassment.

The results of the findings identified three types of cyberbullying expressed in the speech acts used by undergraduates in their WhatsApp conversations. These include flaming, harassment, and denigration. The chart above shows that harassment is the highest form of cyberbullying used by undergraduates in their WhatsApp conversations. There are 48 incidents of harassment found in fifteen WhatsApp groups. Other types of cyberbullying used by undergraduates in their WhatsApp conversations include: flaming which has 22 cases, and denigration which has 12 cases.

Findings

The analysis of the WhatsApp chat logs revealed several key findings regarding the use of language in cyberbullying among Nigerian undergraduates:

1. Directives: Commands and orders were frequently used by cyberbullies to control the actions of their victims. These directives often carried implicit or explicit threats, forcing the victim to comply with the bully's demands under the fear of social exclusion or further harassment.

2. Commissives: Threats were a common commissive speech act, where the bully made promises of future harm, either physical or social, if the victim did not conform to certain behaviours or norms.

3. Expressives: Insults, mockery, and derogatory language were prevalent, serving to belittle and demean the victim. These expressives were often used in a way that reinforced the bully's power while diminishing the victim's self-esteem and social standing.

4. Assertives: Cyberbullies often made false statements or spread rumours about their victims, using assertives to manipulate the perceptions of others in the group. This strategy was particularly effective in isolating the victim and consolidating the bully's influence.

5. Declarations: Some instances involved declarations that changed the social reality for the victim, such as publicly shaming them or announcing their exclusion from the group. These declarations were powerful tools for enforcing social norms and punishing those who deviated from them.

Discussion

The findings of this study explicate the complex interplay between language and power in the context of cyberbullying on WhatsApp. The use of specific speech acts allows cyberbullies to assert control, manipulate social dynamics, and inflict psychological harm on their victims. The analysis highlights the importance of understanding the linguistic strategies employed in cyberbullying, as these strategies are central to the effectiveness of the bully's actions. Moreover, the study reveals the role of group dynamics in reinforcing or challenging the power of the bully. In many cases, the success of the bully's speech depended on the reaction of the group, whether they supported, ignored, or resisted the bully's actions. This finding suggests that interventions aimed at reducing cyberbullying should not only focus on individual behaviours but also address the broader social context in which these behaviours occur.

Conclusion

The study investigated cyberbullying in WhatsApp chats among Nigerian undergraduates. Speech act theory by J. Searle Austin served as a framework for the study. Four research questions were

formulated to guide the study. Population of the study comprised all the WhatsApp groups of undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Imo State University, Owerri and Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri. The sample size of the WhatsApp groups was selected using simple random sampling method. Data for the study was collected through observation and semi-structured interview items delivered through Google Forms. The data collected from the students were analyzed using J. Searle's speech act analysis model. The findings of the study identified the use of abbreviation, irregular punctuation, excessive use of exclamation marks, use of vulgar and/or abusive words as well as overuse of second-person pronouns “you” and “your”. This is used to create a sense of immediacy and direct the negativity towards the victim. The findings also revealed that cyberbullies leverage a specific repertoire of speech acts to inflict emotional harm and damage the victim's reputation. In addition, the findings revealed a prevalence of assertive speech acts (direct insults), directives (controlling the victim's behavior), and expressives (conveying anger and hostility) in cyberbullying messages. Overall, this study highlighted the importance of speech act analysis in understanding the dynamics of cyberbullying within WhatsApp chats.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could expand on this study by exploring the role of cultural factors in shaping the language of cyberbullying in Nigeria. Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine how the dynamics of cyberbullying evolve over time and the long-term effects on victims. Finally, comparative studies across different digital platforms could provide insights into how the features of each platform influence the nature of cyberbullying.

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